

The Narrative of Election in Ezekiel 16

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Abstract

The concept of Divine Election is often studied through specific lexical terms, namely בָּחַר (*bāḥar*), יָדַע (*yāda*), אָהַב (*’āhēb*), and לָקַח (*lāqah*). However, it can also be illustrated by different metaphors and implied by others. This study maintains that such is the case in Ezekiel 16, where a metaphor illustrates election, and other metaphors officialize and sustain it throughout the chapter. Through these metaphors, Ezekiel 16 narrates election as the governing framework of the entire chapter. Using a synchronic literary-exegetical approach, this study analyzes the narrative development and metaphorical coherence of Ezekiel 16 in its final form, attending to how the text’s form and content articulate the concept of election. The analysis demonstrates that election functions in the chapter as a unilateral divine initiative that precedes and grounds the covenant; that the covenant-lawsuit of vv. 35-52 derives its force from this prior election, since Jerusalem is indicted on terms the election itself created; and that the restoration of vv. 53-63 is possible only because Yahweh’s elective commitment survives Jerusalem’s breach of covenant. In this way, election operates in Ezekiel 16 as the dynamic narrative hinge upon which covenant, judgment, and atonement all turn.

Keywords: Ezekiel 16, election, narrative of election, metaphor, covenant

1 Introduction

Ezekiel 16 continues to spark controversy among those who study the book of Ezekiel. While scholars like Daniel I. Block (Block 2007:459–522), G. A. Cooke (Cooke 1985:159–181),

Moshe Greenberg (Greenberg 1986:270–306), and Walther Zimmerli (Zimmerli 1979:322–353) have provided comprehensive analyses of the chapter,¹ scholarly discourse often centers on its vivid sexual imagery and complex ethical issues (Shields 1998; Day, L. 2000; Day, P. 2000; Koller 2017).² In contrast, the chapter’s construction of the concept commonly termed “divine election” has received less scholarly attention. This theme is developed through the chapter’s allegory, which transitions from metaphorical description to prophetic indictment, and ultimately to promises of restoration.

When scholars approach divine election in the Hebrew Bible, they often focus on explicit lexical terms such as בחר (*bāḥar*) (Killen & Broomall 1975: "Election"; Sohn 1991:45–50; Patrick 1992:435–436; Brueggemann 1997:415–416), ידע (*yāda*) (Killen & Broomall 1975: "Election"; Patrick 1992:438; Pike 2007:38), אהב (*āhēb*) (Patrick 1992:435; Brueggemann 1997:414), and לקח (*lāqah*) (Sohn 1991:11–16; eds. Harris, Archer, Jr. & Waltke 1999:482; Pike 2007:38). However, Ezekiel 16 does not utilize these terms in that context. Instead, it narrates election: Yahweh initiates the relationship, establishes a covenant, transforms Jerusalem, confronts her for breach of contract, and finally offers the prospect of reconciliation. The literary and linguistic elements of Ezekiel 16 portray election as a unilateral act that precedes the making of the covenant. Election also becomes integral to the indictment and to the promises of restoration following Jerusalem’s breach of the covenant. By analyzing the chapter’s narrative development and metaphorical coherence, it becomes possible to describe how election operates within the text.

The purpose of this study is to describe how the election is narrated in Ezekiel 16, laying the foundation for subsequent theological discussion. To do so, this research employs a synchronic literary-exegetical approach, attending to the text in its final form with particular concern for narrative development, metaphorical coherence, and theological progression. This delimitation is deliberate. While Ezekiel 16 has been abundantly examined from historical-critical, redaction-

¹ Put together, these four commentators provide varied foundational insights into Ezekiel 16. Block, on the one hand, defends the chapter’s unity, classifying it as a modified ריב (*rîb*) structured around three sections (vv. 3–43; 44–58; 59–63), and addresses its genre, rhetorical strategy, and theological themes extensively. He engages historical context through the chapter’s own referents, Jerusalem’s pre-monarchic Amorite/Hittite heritage (v. 3) and the political alliances with Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon as the chapter’s “lovers,” framing the exile as the culminating divine judgment on a history of covenant infidelity. Greenberg, similarly, approaches the chapter as an extended metaphor and identifies four types of continuity that unify its three divisions, with “memory” and “shame” as its literary and theological organization. He intentionally brackets tradition-historical and source-critical questions, acknowledging the historical referents of the text while subordinating them to literary coherence. On the other hand, Zimmerli reads the chapter through tradition-history and form criticism, identifying successive editorial layers and addressing its genre, poetic structure, and theological aim. Historical context is structurally determinative in his reading: he dates vv. 44–58 to the period after Jerusalem’s fall in 586 BCE, when comparison with Samaria and Sodom became historically plausible, and regards vv. 59–63 as a possible contribution from Ezekiel’s disciples. For more source-critical and text-critical treatment, including the identification of a popular folktale underlying vv. 3–14 and the compositional dating of the chapter’s sections, see Cooke.

² For example, Linda Day maps the text’s rhetorical structure onto the sociology of domestic violence, reading Yahweh as batterer and noting that the monologue style silences the victim throughout. Mary E. Shields examines how the body rhetoric of the text exposes Jerusalem while protecting Yahweh, constructing the female body as unclean and the punishment as a public lesson directed at women. Aaron Koller argues that the theological difficulties are more severe than commonly acknowledged, the text positions its audience to identify with the victim against Yahweh, reflecting Ezekiel’s deterministic and arguably loveless conception of the divine-human relationship. A contrasting approach but still focused on the sexual imagery is that of Peggy L. Day who applies metaphor theory to argue that most interpreters erroneously literalize the sexual vehicle and thereby misread both the rhetoric and the covenant charge.

critical, and sociopolitical perspectives, the present study does not pursue these lines of inquiry. Rather, it focuses on the narrative logic and metaphorical structure through which the text constructs the concept of divine election. Therefore, nations, figures, and events that appear within the chapter are treated here as elements of the narrative rather than objects of historical reconstruction. The study will be conducted using the Masoretic Text as it appears in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS). Because of the chapter's length (63 verses), only the verses most directly related to election will be examined in detail; the remaining verses will be referenced only as they relate to the subject.

2 The Narrative of Election

Ezekiel 16 is considered a recount of Yahweh's history with his people, and, as such, it is possible to identify elements that fit the framework of election implicit in the story (Sohn 1991:2, 4; Patrick 1992:435). This is done through phrases, imagery, and the narrative itself. Through the extended metaphor, the City of Jerusalem serves as a metonym for the people themselves and as the tenor for the woman (vehicle) (Galambush 1992:4–6).³ Therefore, election in Ezekiel 16 can be said to involve both the people and the city as objects.

Seock-Tae Sohn particularly relates the marriage-covenant in Ezekiel 16:8 as a metaphor for election; he believes that “the covenant is a kind of act which puts the election into legal effect” (Sohn 1991:192). Walter Brueggemann also relates covenant to election, but he defines covenant as the expectation that arises in recognition of the initiatory act (Brueggemann 1997:417). Additionally, Dale Patrick sees the relationship between election and covenant so close that the “conceptual structure associated with one can be transferred to the other” (Patrick 1992:438). While election and covenant are closely related concepts in the Hebrew Bible,⁴ the narrative

³ The metaphor of the city personified as a woman has its roots in ancient Near Eastern tradition. Galambush traces the Old Testament usage to “the ancient Near Eastern understanding of capital cities as ‘goddesses who were married to the patron god of the city’” (Galambush 1992:20), a conception so deeply embedded in Mesopotamian culture as to be virtually invisible within it. By the time of the biblical writers, it had become what Galambush describes as a “dead” metaphor, so ancient and so widely used that its metaphorical status was no longer apparent (Galambush 1992:26). She also notes that in the OT “the metaphor is ‘revived’ by its extension to include aspects of marriage that had not previously been active parts of the metaphor” (Galambush 1992:26); adultery being one of these aspects. Within the OT, the metaphor is implied throughout the Pentateuch but it is first explicitly used by Hosea, who portrays Yahweh as the husband of an unfaithful wife (Hos 2:1-3:5), establishing the foundational prophetic pattern (Schöpflin 2005:110; Davidson 2007:113–117). Then, Isaiah (54:1-8; 62:1-12) and Jeremiah (2:2, 20-25; 3:1-10) develop it further (Galambush 1992:52–53; Schöpflin 2005:110). Ezekiel inherits this prophetic tradition and intensifies it, providing what Greenberg and Schöpflin describes as a full “biography” of the adulterous wife of Hosea and Jeremiah (Greenberg 1986:299; Schöpflin 2005:110). At the same time, he departs from his predecessors by consistently distinguishing idolatry from political alliances in his portrayal of Jerusalem's infidelity. In Ezekiel 16, the metaphor operates precisely because Ezekiel “does not posit that Jerusalem is a woman, but can assume a system of commonplaces already associated with the city's feminine persona, and then shape and extend the metaphor to suit his purposes” (Galambush 1992:23). Additionally, the grammatical femininity of the Hebrew words *עִיר* (*‘ir*, “city”) and *אֶרֶץ* (*‘ereṣ*, “land, earth”) further reinforces this framework within the language itself.

⁴ The election-covenant relationship belongs to a pattern attested across Israel's foundational traditions. Deuteronomy's classical articulation of election establishes Yahweh's sovereign choice grounded in love and commitment: “It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you... but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers... (Deut 7:7-8; ESV). The text uses common lexical terms that express both election and covenant: *אהב* (*‘āhēb*), *בחר* (*bāḥar*), *שָׁבוּעָה* (*šābū‘ā*), and *שבע* (*šāba*). Similar expressions of election based on love are made in Deuteronomy 4:37 and 10:15. As Levenson observes, the special status of Israel in Deuteronomy “rests not

sequence of Ezekiel 16 distinguishes the initial act of divine initiative from the later, more formalized expression of the relationship. As the following analysis shows, before the metaphor of marriage appears, the metaphor of adoption portrays Yahweh's initiative toward Jerusalem. This origin narrative functions as the expression of election, which later becomes the basis for the covenant relationship, the indictment against Jerusalem, and the anticipated restoration.

2.1 Divine Elective Initiative (Ezekiel 16: 1-7)

2.1.1 Verses 1-3b

Verses 1-3b introduce three characters: (1) יהוה אֵלֹנִי ('*ādōnāy yəḥwih*)— the speaker, giver of the oracle, (2) בֶּן-אָדָם (*ben-’ādām*)— the prophet, the one who communicates the oracle, (3) יְרוּשָׁלַם (*yərūšālam*)— the receiver of the oracle. Verse 2 specifies the type of oracle that is being declared: הוֹדַע אֶת-יְרוּשָׁלַם אֶת-תּוֹעֲבֹתֶיהָ (*hōda ‘et-yərūšālam ‘et-tô ‘ābōtēhā*). In Ezekiel, the Hiphil Imperative of יָדַע (*yāda*) frequently introduces forensic accusation (Ezekiel 20:4; 22:2; 23:36) (Bovati 1994:75).⁵ It functions as a rhetorical summons, requiring the prophet to present the arraignment to the accused (Greenberg 1986:273; Block 2007:461-462, 471). In this case, the parties in conflict are Yahweh and Jerusalem. This verse indicates that Yahweh's initial position is that of the accuser in the indictment against Jerusalem.

2.1.2 Verses 3-5

Ezekiel 16:3 begins the allegory of Jerusalem's evolving and devolving relationship with Yahweh, through v. 29. This allegory employs the metaphor of the city as a female persona from birth through the period of the conflict. The story itself serves as the basis for the indictment, tracing the relationship from election to betrayal. Throughout the rest of the chapter, the metaphor and the vocabulary employed for it are maintained as an element of cohesion (Block 2007:464–465), despite changes in text type.

In v. 3, the identity of the Newborn-Jerusalem is linked to her Canaanite heritage. Verse 4 emphasizes the circumstances of her birth through dynamic parallelism, with four negative clauses. The first clause is an active-verb clause; the following three are connected through conjunctive vavs and are passive-verb clauses. Instrumental phrases also front these passive-verb clauses:

לֹא-כָרַת שְׁרָרָךְ 4b

lō’-korrat šorrēk

וּבְמַיִם לֹא-רָחַצְתָּ לְמַשְׁעִי 4c

ūbamayim lō’-ruḥašt ləmiš ‘ī

upon her merits, her strength or numbers or intelligence or honesty, but upon something irrational, a passion, an affair of the heart, not the mind, in short a love” (Levenson 1985:76); cf. Sohn (1991:194); Patrick (1992:435–436). Ezekiel also reiterates the connection between election and covenant in chapter 20, where Yahweh recollects the history between him and the people: “and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: On the day when I chose Israel, I swore to the offspring of the house of Jacob, making myself known... I swore to them, saying, I am the LORD your God. On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of the land of Egypt... And I said to them, ‘Cast away the detestable things your eyes feast on... and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.’” (Ezek 20:5-7; ESV). The lexical choices here differ slightly from Deuteronomy, while בָּחַר (*bāḥar*) remains as the term expressing election, a phrase is repeatedly used to express the covenantal act of “swearing,” וָאֶשְׁבַּע (*wā’ēššā’ yādī*). Additionally, this text recalls the conditions placed upon the people within that relationship, to cast away the detestable things and not defile themselves with idols. As H. H. Rowley summarizes, “The election and the covenant belonged together, so that loyalty to the covenant was essential to the continuance of the election” (Rowley 1964:68).

⁵ Bovati also notes Job 10:2 and 13:23 as examples of this form of the verb used to introduce the accusation.

וְהִמְלִיחַ לֹא הִמְלִיחַ 4d
wəhomlēḥa lō' humlahat

וְהִחְתֵּל לֹא חֲתָלָהּ 4e
wəhohtēl lō' huttālt

The lack of care she experienced is commented upon in v. 5. More than acts, emotions are described: (1) לֹא-חָסָה עָלֶיהָ (lō'-ḥāsā 'ālayik 'ayin), (2) לְחַמְלָהּ עָלֶיהָ (ləḥumlâ 'ālāyik), (3) בָּגְעָה (bəgō 'al napšēk). Verse 5 also contains a passive-verb clause that underlines rejection: וְחִשְׁלָהּ (wattušlākī 'el-pānē haśśādeh). The verb חִשַּׁל (šālak), combined with the indirect object חִשְׁלָהּ (šāde), specifically refers to the exposure of a child in the legal sense of abandonment (Greenberg 1986:275; Malul 1990:100, 105; Bodi 2009:437). Both the lack of care and her exposure to the open field indicate that Jerusalem's parents publicly renounced her; anyone could adopt her (Malul 1990:101; Block 2007:476). This verse also closes an inclusio formed by the circumstantial-temporal clause בַּיּוֹם הַלֵּדָתָא (bəyôm hulledeṭ 'ōtāk), which appears at the beginning of v. 4 and at the end of v. 5. The inclusio stresses the negative context that leads to Newborn-Jerusalem's familial rejection (Malul 1990:111).

2.1.3 Verses 6-7

A change in the narrative progression is introduced by the clause וַאֲעֲבֹר עָלֶיהָ (wā'e 'ēbōr 'ālayik). It is Yahweh's first appearance in the story, and he is immediately positively connected to Jerusalem. Verse 6 can be divided into four consecutive clauses that illustrate Yahweh's favorable actions toward Newborn-Jerusalem:

וַאֲעֲבֹר עָלֶיהָ 6a
wā'e 'ēbōr 'ālayik

וַאֲרָאָהּ מִתְבוֹסֶסֶת בְּדָמַיִךְ 6b
wā'er 'ēk mitbōseset bədāmāyik

וְאָמַר לָהּ בְּדָמַיִךְ חַיִּי 6c
wā'ōmar lāk bədāmāyik ḥāyī

וְאָמַר לָהּ בְּדָמַיִךְ חַיִּי 6d
wā'ōmar lāk bədāmāyik ḥāyī

First, Yahweh passed by Jerusalem, then he saw her in her “bloody” state and acted in favor of her survival, opposite to that of her own family. This verse sharply contrasts Jerusalem's parents' dismissive treatment of her with Yahweh's favor toward her. A repetitive element in three of the clauses is the prepositional phrase “in your blood”; no other element of the pitiful state is mentioned. Repetition also appears as identical clauses (6c and d). This duplication both accentuates the condition Jerusalem was in and strengthens the Qal Imperative חַיִּי (ḥāyī) functioning as a performative (Block 2007:481).⁶ Verse 7 complements the imperative with a Qal Perfect, נָתַתִּיךְ (nəṭattīk), which, in its context, functions as a semantic causative of רִבְבָהּ (rəbābā) and its results.⁷ This function of the verb נָתַן (nātan) is frequently attested in the Hebrew Scriptures.⁸ It is used particularly in Genesis 17:5, 6, and 20 in a similar context, where God tells Abraham he will “make” him into a multitude, exceedingly fruitful, and offers him a covenantal

⁶ Block puts it this way: “he pronounces the sentence of life upon the child.”

⁷ Block and imply suggest the causative force of נָתַן (nātan); Block notes that Jerusalem's survival and maturity are attributed to Yahweh, and Cooper comments that God “cared for” and “made” the nation flourish (Cooper 1994:169; Block 2007:481).

⁸ According to the Logos Bible Software search engine, the verb functions as a semantic causative in the Qal stem, particularly with God as its subject, a total of 107 times. These occurrences have both positive and negative connotations.

agreement.⁹ C. J. Labuschagne also notes that the verb, combined with the preposition *כִּי* (*ke*), carries the meaning “to make like”; he quotes several verses including Ezekiel 16:7 (Labuschagne 1997:783–784).¹⁰ Klaus Koch makes similar remarks in his study of the verb *כִּין* (*kûn*) in the Niphal stem (as it appears in Ezekiel 16:7) and observes that it often “refers... to the result of an action generally denoted by the hiphil or polel” (Koch 1995:90). In this verse *כִּין* (*kûn*) is the result of the causative *נָתַן* (*nātan*). Yahweh “made” her “plentiful like the plants of the open field,” resulting in her growing in number (simile about vegetation), form, and beauty (human-body metaphors) to maturity.

The parents’ lack of care, resulting in rejection and abandonment, is contrasted by Yahweh’s care, resulting in election and adoption. According to Meir Malul’s study of the adoption of foundlings (Malul 1990), four elements in these verses closely parallel adoption conventions of the ancient Near East. These features provide an appropriate framework for describing Yahweh’s initiative. The first element is the phrase “in your blood,” which emphasizes that Jerusalem was in a state fit for adoption (Malul 1990:106–109; Bodi 2009:437). The second element is the imperative of *חַיָּה* (*hāyā*), which, combined with the third element, *נָתַן* (*nātan*), functioning as a causative, results in the fourth element: *רַבָּבָה* (*rābābā*), *רַבָּה* (*rābā*), and *גָּדַל* (*gādal*) (the combination of the three can be understood as “mature growth”). Together, these features reflect the legal assumption of the abandoned child (Malul 1990:111, 113; Block 2007:481).

By contrast, some scholars argue against adoption, election, and even basic care for Jerusalem in these verses. Linda Day characterizes Yahweh as commanding her to live while not assisting her himself, “but merely commands her from afar” (Day, L. 2000:207). Mary Shields goes even further and argues that while some scholars depict Yahweh as a nurturing figure in this verse, it is the opposite:

On the contrary, the imagery itself reveals no tender care, no love, indeed no compassion at all until the girl/woman exhibits the “ornaments of ornaments”: breasts and pubic hair.

In fact, God’s disdain for her is emphasized by the final words of verse 7... (Shields 1998:8)

Similarly, Aaron Koller disputes Malul’s findings and, as an extension, Block’s argumentation based on Malul’s research (Koller 2017:409–410). Koller reasons that there is about a decade between Yahweh’s two appearances (vv. 6 and 8) and that Jerusalem is neither in Yahweh’s presence nor being cared for by him. The logic behind this view is that in v. 8 Yahweh passes by

⁹ “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you [נְתַתִּיךָ, *nətatattîkā*] the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you [וְנְתַתִּיךָ, *ūnatattîkā*] into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant... And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God... This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you... So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant... As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him [וְנְתַתִּיךָ, *ūnatattîw*] into a great nation.” (Gen 17:4-14, 20; ESV, brackets added for specification). This parallel in Genesis 17 also aligns with Ezekiel 16:7 as a precovenantal episode leading to the actual covenant with mutual responsibilities.

¹⁰ Isaiah 41:2; Jeremiah 19:12; Ezekiel 3:9; 16:7; 26:19; 28:2, 6; Hosea 11:8; and Ruth 4:11.

again; therefore, “Yhwh did not care for or nurture the foundling he came across” (Koller 2017:410). Nevertheless, these scholars who argue against Yahweh’s care are yet to explain the function of the verb נתן (*nātan*) in the verse’s context. While v. 8 parallels v. 6 as an introductory formula for Yahweh re-entering the scene, thus suggesting physical absence for an undetermined amount of time between vv. 7 and 8 do not negate the text’s characterization of Yahweh as both rescuer and the active force behind her development at the moment of election.

Furthermore, the dominance of first-person singular verbs in vv. 6-7, coupled with the absence of reciprocal action, establishes unilateral initiative in favor of Jerusalem rather than against her. Verse 7, however, ends in a conflicting statement: even after Yahweh cared for her, the now Lady Jerusalem remained “bare naked.” This portrayal suggests that election (1) is not an end but an initial act and (2) it is grounded not in prior qualification but in divine initiative alone, establishing the relationship independently of Jerusalem’s capacity to respond.

2.2 Covenant Formation and Status Transformation (Ezekiel 16:8-14)

2.2.1 Verses 8-12

As previously mentioned, v. 8 begins with the introductory formula ואָפֶרְסָה עָלֶיךָ וְאַרְאֶה (wā’e ‘ēbōr ‘ālayik wā’er’ēk), signaling the second episode in which Yahweh intervenes in Jerusalem’s favor. Rather than a helpless newborn, Jerusalem is described as living in a “time of love” or “sexual maturity” (Greenberg 1986:277; Block 2007:482). Continuing the narrative’s trajectory established in v. 7, Yahweh now provides for her in that state of nakedness during her time of love. Four consecutive clauses portray Yahweh’s actions: (1) ואָפֶרְסָה עָלֶיךָ (wā’ēprōs kēnāpiy ‘ālayik), (2) וְאַכְסָה עֲרוֹתָהּ (wā’ākasse ‘erwātēk), (3) וְאַשְׁבַּע לָךְ (wā’eššāba ‘lāk), and (4) וְאַבֹּא אֶתְךָ בְּבְרִית אֶתִּי (wā’ābō ‘bibrīt ‘ōtāk).

The first two clauses directly relate to the metaphor of marriage, while the last two use explicit covenantal language. They can be understood as dynamic parallelisms in which the second clause of each pair elaborates on the actions of the first. ואָפֶרְסָה עָלֶיךָ (wā’ēprōs kēnāpiy ‘ālayik) is elaborated by וְאַכְסָה עֲרוֹתָהּ (wā’ākasse ‘erwātēk); stretching the cloak over her is the means by which her nakedness is covered. וְאַשְׁבַּע לָךְ (wā’eššāba ‘lāk) is elaborated in וְאַבֹּא אֶתְךָ בְּבְרִית אֶתִּי (wā’ābō ‘bibrīt ‘ōtāk); swearing is the means by which the covenant is ratified. The metaphorical pair focuses on supplying Lady Jerusalem’s needs, covering her nakedness, and functions as a declaration of marriage (Greenberg 1986:277; Sohn 1991:202; Block 2007:482; Bodi 2009:437; Burns 2016:276). The second pair establishes, in plain language, that the relationship was legalized by swearing a covenant.

The gesture of spreading one’s כַּנָּף (*kānāp*) over a woman is a recognized marriage formula in the Hebrew Bible. Cooke identifies it as “the customary symbolic act” by which a man claimed a woman as his bride, citing Ruth 3:9 as the direct parallel (Cooke 1985:163). He further notes that “marriage as based upon mutual pledges could be described as a covenant,” citing Mal. 2:14 and Prov. 2:17 in support (Cooke 1985:163). In Ruth 3:9, Ruth asks Boaz to “spread your wing (כַּנָּפֶךָ; *kānāpekā*) over your servant, for you are a redeemer” (ESV), a request with “quasi-legal force” affirming the choice of a bride (Zimmerli 1979:340; Duguid 1999:210). D. Bodi notes that in the light of Mari Akkadian parallels, the gesture carries a formal covenantal dimension: citing Kruger (1984:84), he observes that “for a prospective husband to spread the hem of his cloak over his new wife can in fact only indicate symbolically that he is extending his authority over her, and with it also his willingness to undertake her sustenance as is expected from him according to the marriage laws of the Ancient Near East” (Bodi 2009:437). Block similarly notes that according to ancient Near Eastern custom the gesture signified “the establishment of a new relationship and the

symbolic declaration of the husband to provide for the sustenance of his future wife” (Block 2007:482–483). The parallel with Ruth 3:9 confirms the reading of *וְעָלָיו כְּנָפֵי נֶאֱפָרֵשׁ* (*wā’ep̄rōś kənāpiy ‘ālayik*) as a formal marriage declaration, and the covenantal language that follows in v. 8b as its natural legal expression.

As previously mentioned, Sohn suggests that this is the moment of election, given the establishment of the covenant. He comments that,

Since election is Yahweh’s sovereign choice of Israel, Yahweh’s swearing to take Israel to be his is an oath affirming the characteristic divine grace... A legal process was required to make a marriage effective in society... Yahweh took legal action in making Israel his by making a covenant. (Sohn 1991:185).

Sohn takes the clause *וַאֲשָׁבַע לָהּ* (*wā’esšāba ‘lāh*) as an independent event separate from the following clause, *וַאֲבֹא בְרִית אִתָּהּ* (*wā’ābō ‘bibrît ‘ōtāk*). This justifies his argument for election in verse 8 and affirms that election precedes the covenant. However, the linguistic features suggest that these clauses describe the same event, functioning as parallel expressions that highlight different aspects of a single covenantal act.

Walther Zimmerli, on the other hand, considers the whole scene a single event, including the four clauses. As for his view on the election, he states:

Yahweh affirms what v. 7 has described, based on what he himself has seen, and does not shrink from the view that he is waiting until the time is ripe. Then he affirms his choice. The election of the bride takes place under the protection of legal customs, as can also be seen elsewhere. (Zimmerli 1979:339–340).

While Sohn and Zimmerli suggest v. 8 as the moment of election, both arguments indicate election as a logical antecedent to the covenant. That antecedent, however, is already established in the previous scene, vv. 5–6. Nevertheless, this covenant formation, as the commentators recognize, is the moment when Yahweh enters a different type of relationship with Jerusalem.

Just like in the previous section, emphasis is placed on Yahweh’s initiative. For both marriage and covenant, the verbs are strictly first-person singular, and Jerusalem is expressed in the second-person singular, in both the direct and indirect object. The only exception is the result clause that declares: *וַתְּהִי לִי* (*wattihiyî lî*). Here, the verb takes the second-person feminine singular as the subject and the first-person singular as the object; this construction serves to solidify Yahweh’s marital relationship with Lady Jerusalem. Not only can it indicate conjugal possession (Brown, Driver & Briggs 1977:226), but it can also indicate the “human side” of the agreement (Greenberg 1986:277).

Many commentators take this clause, in connection with the divinely initiated covenant, to emphasize a unilateral relationship. Block, for instance, argues that “here the prophet does not envision a marriage of mutual commitment of husband and bride” since “the emphasis is entirely on Yahweh’s initiative: he raised his hand and he entered into the covenant relationship” (Block 2007:483). With this, he highlights Yahweh’s dominance in the passage. Gili Kugler goes even further and says that due to the clause *וַתְּהִי לִי* (*wattihiyî lî*), this relationship was “enforced upon her” (Kugler 2022:7). Haag et al. make a similar argument by appealing to the lack of reciprocal speech or action, emphasizing the asymmetrical nature of the covenant (Haag, Llewelyn & Tsonis 2012:204). Together, these interpretations emphasize the unilateral character of the covenant, highlighting Yahweh’s initiative and the absence of reciprocal participation from Jerusalem.

Other scholars, however, stress that the marriage metaphor inherently introduces expectations of mutuality (Greenberg 1986:278). Lamar Cooper also considers this relationship a mutual agreement; he contrasts it to marriages arranged by parents, “in which the woman had no

part” (Cooper 1994:170). He also points out that it is “reminiscent of Sinai” (Cooper 1994:170), where the people agreed to the covenant Yahweh offered (Exo. 19:1-8). It can be argued that the covenant, while initiated by Yahweh, establishes a relational framework in which fidelity is expected from Jerusalem. Brueggemann likewise understands covenants as implying a response of gratitude and loyalty, even when grounded in divine initiative (Brueggemann 1997:418, 419). These interpretations, therefore, emphasize that the covenant introduces expectations of fidelity, which render Jerusalem accountable within the relationship and warrant the subsequent indictment.

The narrative of Ezekiel 16 supports this latter view. While the covenant clearly originates in Yahweh’s initiative, the context of the marriage metaphor signals the establishment of a relationship in which Jerusalem is accountable for her actions. This represents a different type of relationship from the one in the previous scene. Yahweh’s role towards Newborn-Jerusalem was that of a savior; he initiated contact and acted favorably upon her even when she could not reciprocate, functioning only as a beneficiary. The relationship was one-sided. When she became Lady Jerusalem, however, the relationship was reconfigured. It no longer functions as a one-sided dynamic. Yahweh continues to act as the provider, but the marriage metaphor establishes a relational framework in which covenantal fidelity is expected of Jerusalem. This expectation marks a shift from the previous scene, in which she was entirely passive, an abandoned newborn. Within the covenantal relationship, she now bears responsibility for fidelity. A responsibility that becomes evident later when she deliberately violates the covenant, reinforcing the relational character of the bond. Thus, the covenant does not initiate the relationship but gives it structure, transforming divine initiative into a relational framework in which accountability becomes possible.

Following this marriage covenant, Yahweh acts in Jerusalem’s favor even more than before. In his role as husband, he proceeds to transform his wife from humble beginnings to royalty (vv. 9-12): וְאַרְחָשֶׁק בַּמַּיִם (wā’erhāšēk bammayim), וְאַשְׁטֹף דְּמִיךָ מֵעַלְיָךְ (wā’eštōp dāmāyik mē’ālāyik), וְאַסְכֶּךָ בַּשָּׁמֶן (wā’āsukēk baššāmen), וְאַלְבִּישֶׁךָ רִיקְמָה (wā’albīšek riqmā), וְאַנְעִלֶךָ תָּחָשׁ (wā’en’ālēk tāhaš), וְאַחְבֹּשֶׁךָ בַּשֵּׁשׁ (wā’eḥbašēk baššēš), וְאַכְסֶכָּה מִשִּׁי (wā’ākassēk meši), וְאַעֲדֶךָ עֵדִי (wā’e’dēk ‘edī), וְרָבִיד עַל-גְּרוֹנֶךָ (wārābīd ‘al-gārōnēk), וְאַתֵּן נֶזֶם עַל-אַפֶּךָ (wā’ettēn nezem ‘al-’appēk), וְאַגִּילִם עַל-אֲזְנוֹתֶיךָ (wā’āgīlīm ‘al-’oznāyik), and וְאַתֶּרֶת תִּפְעֶרֶת בְּרֹאשְׁךָ (wā’āteret tip’eret bārō’šēk). This transformation also creates a strong contrast to what was denied to her from birth. She was not washed; now Yahweh washes her and rinses her blood from her; she was not rubbed with salt; now Yahweh anoints her with oils; she was not wrapped; now Yahweh not only wraps her with fine cloths but also provides covering for her feet and jewelry for her adornment. Even more, Yahweh elevates her to royalty by putting a “crown of splendor” over her head.

2.2.2 Verses 13-14

After two episodes of divine, favorable actions (subject: first-person) dominating the narrative, there’s a shift in the verbs’ subjects. Verse 13 focuses on Queen Jerusalem’s response (subject: second-person, feminine, singular verbs) to Yahweh’s provisions within the context of the marriage covenant (Goldingay 2026:238). Yahweh had adorned her; now she וַתַּעֲדִי (watta’dī), adorned herself with all the jewels and fine fabrics; Yahweh put a crown over her head; now she וַתִּשְׁלַחֲהִי לְמִלּוּכָהּ (tišlāḥî limlūkā). Yahweh supplied her needs; she accepted and made use of those provisions, resulting in וַתִּיפִי בְּמָאֵד מְאֹד (wattīpiy bim’ōd mē’ōd). Special attention is given to the “beauty” in v. 14. Jerusalem’s יָפִי (yōpî) had been described in v. 13 with the double use of מְאֹד (mē’ōd), intensifying the verbal form; now, in v. 14, it is characterized as כָּלִיל (kālîl). Verse 13’s verbal clause “you became extremely beautiful” makes her the subject of this inchoative verb.

However, in v. 14, Yahweh reiterates that he is the one to be credited for her “perfect beauty”; it was due to his הָדָר (*hādār*), which he had set upon her. Even for this, divine providence was to be credited.

Carl Gross and Philip C. Stine suggest comparing these verses with Lamentations 2:15, where Jerusalem’s beauty is characterized in the same way (Gross & Stine 2016:331): כְּלִילַת שִׂיאֵמָרוֹ (šeyyō ’mārū kəlīlat yōpî). Another parallel with Lamentations 2:15 is the metaphorical sense in which the city and its inhabitants are depicted through a female persona: בַּת יְרוּשָׁלַם (*bat yərūšālām*). Cooke also draws a connection to Lamentations and adds Ezekiel’s own characterization of Tyre in 27:3 and 28:12 (Cooke 1985:165–166). All instances contain a form of כָּלִיל (*kālīl*) complementing יָפִי (*yōpî*) to describe cities as female characters. Only in Ezekiel 16 is this characteristic a result of God’s actions upon the personified city, reinforcing the idea of Yahweh as the active force behind Jerusalem’s successful development.

2.3 Covenant Breach (Ezekiel 16:15-29)

2.3.1 Verses 15-29

The same beauty that was qualified as extreme and perfect in the previous verses is now identified as the root of the conflict between Yahweh and Queen Jerusalem. וַתִּבְטְחִי בְיָפִיךָ (*wattibṭəḥî bayopyēk*) presents the grounds for her downfall. Here שָׁמֶךְ (*šamēk*) functions as a metonymic expression for יָפִיךָ (*yopyēk*): Jerusalem’s confidence in her beauty, which had made her famous, led her to engage in prostitution. Millard Lind not only recognizes v. 15 as the “fundamental” moment of Jerusalem’s regression, but he also notes that it constitutes a negative response to both election and covenant:

Ezekiel now declares Jerusalem’s abominations, Israel’s negative response to God’s two acts of grace: election (16:6–7) and covenant-making (16:8–14). Jerusalem’s fundamental fault is that she trusted (Heb.: *batāḥ*, 16:15) in her beauty rather than in the One who covenanted with her. (Lind 1996:132)

After the declaration וַתִּבְטְחִי בְיָפִיךָ וַתִּזְנִי עַל־שָׁמֶךְ (*wattibṭəḥî bayopyēk wattiznî ’al-šamēk*), the text proceeds with a series of consecutive actions until v. 29, dominated by the second-person feminine singular. All of which constitute further negative responses from Jerusalem. These can be divided further into smaller sections: vv. 15-19 describe the misuse of Yahweh’s gifts to her in her prostitution; vv. 20-21 reveal the extent of her misconduct, child sacrifices of the children she had borne for Yahweh; vv. 23-26 comment on the effects of these actions over her once perfect beauty, וַתִּתַּעַבְּ אֶת־יָפִיךָ (*wattəta’ābiy ’et-yopyēk*), and the increment of her prostitution, וַתִּזְנֶה אֶת־תַּזְנוּתְךָ (*wattarbi ’et-taznutēk*); vv. 28-29 emphasize her sexual dissatisfaction after her “multiplied” sexual activity. The sequence follows the logic of a forensic indictment: the charge (v.15), supporting evidence (vv. 16-21), the moral ground of culpability (v. 22), and the recounting of prior disciplinary measures (v.27) before the resumption of the offense (vv. 28-29).

Two verses stand out among these, vv. 22 and 27. They do not conform to the pattern established by the consecutive verbs. Verse 22 is particularly relevant to the basis of the indictment against Queen Jerusalem. It interrupts the chain of second-person consecutive verbs by inserting a retrospective evaluative clause centered on זָכַר (*zākar*), thereby orienting the indictment from action to memory. First, it summarizes the main claims of marriage covenant breach: “abominations” and “prostitutions.” Then it turns to describe what she has not remembered: לֹא זָכַרְתִּי אֶת־יְמֵי נְעוּרָיִךְ בְּהִיוֹתְךָ עִרְמָה מִתְבֹּסֶסֶת בְּדָמְךָ הָיִיתִי: (lō’ zākartay ’et-yamē nā’ūrāyik bihāyôtēk ’ērōm wā’eryā mitbôseset bādāmēk hāyît).

Through the expression אֶת־יָמֶי נַעֲרִיךְ (*et-yamê nā'ûrāyik*), Yahweh recontextualizes the narrative by anchoring the indictment in Jerusalem's origin story. He identifies the moment as בְּהִיּוֹתָי עָרֹם וְעָרְיָה מִתְבוֹסֶסֶת בְּדָמָיִךְ הָיִיתָ (*bihayôtēk 'ērôm wə'eryâ mitbôseset bādāmēk hāyît*). This parallels v. 6, when she was first seen by Yahweh מִתְבוֹסֶסֶת בְּדָמָיִךְ (*mitbôseset bādāmāyik*) and elected, וְאָמַר לָךְ בְּדָמָיִךְ חָיִי (*wā'ōmar lāk bādāmayik hāyî*). It also limits the event by stating her condition before the marriage covenant: וְעָרְיָה: עָרֹם וְאֶת (*wə'at 'ērôm wə'eryâ*) (v. 7). The repetition of the imagery of exposure and the blood motif creates a deliberate return to the moment of election. Thus, the indictment is grounded not merely in Jerusalem's actions but in her failure, and even refusal (Gross & Stine 2016:338–339) to remember the divine initiative that established the relationship. The failure/refusal to remember this primary act functions rhetorically as grounds for culpability.

Zimmerli calls this verse a “terminal summary,” and argues that Jerusalem's forgetfulness had been “silently implied in the whole account, while also noting connections to v. 7 and the further references in vv. 39 and 60” (Zimmerli 1979:344). Moshe Greenberg likewise identifies the link to v. 6, but through the Greek versions (Greenberg 1986:281). Block similarly recognizes an allusion to Jerusalem's condition before the covenant. He contrasts her divine rescue from death with her purposeful murder of her own children through child sacrifices; “She who owed her existence to Yahweh's call to life now danced with death” (Block 2007:491). Cooper, on the other hand, interprets the verses as referring to “neglect of the covenant,” which he sees as the “cause behind all the evil excesses presented” (Cooper 1994:172). These interpretations reflect two main approaches: one locating the reference in Jerusalem's pre-covenantal condition, and another grounding it in the covenantal failure. Nevertheless, the linguistic connections point to the election event rather than to the covenant itself, thereby reinforcing the narrative return to Jerusalem's origin as the basis for the indictment. The indictment, therefore, reflects not only moral failure but relational rupture, grounded in Jerusalem's rejection of the very act that constituted her identity as Yahweh's elect.

Verse 27 notes the first time Yahweh took action against Jerusalem amidst her prostitution and lack of repentance. Yahweh וְאֶגְרַע חֻקָּךְ (*wā'egra 'ḥuqqēk*) and וְאֶתָּנַעַשׂ בְּנֶפֶשׁ שְׁאֵי־לִי (*wā'ettanēk bānepeš šōnā'ōtayik*), these actions are narrated as part of the allegory and therefore belong to the recounting of Yahweh's prior responses rather than to the list of Jerusalem's offenses. Within the context of the indictment, they serve as evidence of earlier corrective measures Yahweh took in response to her conduct. Thus, the indictment incorporates not only accusations but also prior attempts at correction, which heightened Jerusalem's culpability by demonstrating her persistence despite divine intervention. However, these actions did not achieve the desired effect of stopping Jerusalem from prostituting herself; vv. 28 and 29 emphasize the persistence of her practices and her שִׁבְעָה (*šib'ā*) after these encounters.

2.4 Legal Indictment and Comparative Accusations (Ezekiel 16:30-52)

2.4.1 Verses 30-35

Verse 30 establishes another break in the text, the end of the allegory and the beginning of one of the comparative sections of the indictment. This first comparative case helps establish one of the specific accusations against Jerusalem. Its introductory particle מָה functions as an interjection used in reaction to Jerusalem's current state; מָה אֲמַלְהָ לִבָּתָךְ (*mā 'āmulāh libbātēk*). Her “weakness” of heart is contextualized to her doings מַעֲשֵׂה אִשָּׁה־זֹנָה שְׁלֹטֶת: (*ma 'āsē 'išā-zōnā šallātet*). Within the election narrative, this signals Queen Jerusalem's moral dissolution. Moreover, v. 31 specifies a reversal that sets Jerusalem apart. While she built her גַּב (*gab*) and רָמָה

(*rāmā*), establishing locations for her prostitution throughout the city, she was not like the other prostitutes (וְלֹא־הָיְתִי כְזֹנָה; *wālō'-hāyîty kazzônâ*), because she rejected the payment. Jerusalem, therefore, inverted the dynamics of prostitution's transactional aspect: built the places, initiated the encounters, yet scorned payment (Zimmerli 1979:345; Dyer 1985:1257).

Verse 32 introduces another metaphorical vehicle to characterize Jerusalem and becomes a key accusation: the adulteress. This vehicle carries implications of initiative and volition; the imagery portrays Adulterous Jerusalem as actively seeking out other partners rather than her husband. Verses 33-34 point out another reversal featuring this metaphorical vehicle: every prostitute receives payment, and every adulteress takes gifts from lovers, but Jerusalem alone gives payment to her lovers and bribes them to come to her. This self-defeating logic is emphasized by Greenberg, who notes that v. 34 does not merely describe Jerusalem as one who acted contrarily but portrays her as “the embodiment of contrariety” (Greenberg 1986:285).

A third reversal can be identified in relation to the marriage covenantal gifts. The identification of Yahweh as “husband” (אִישׁ, *’îš*) in v. 32 directly recalls the marriage covenant and its gifts. These same gifts that had materialized the covenant, Adulterous Jerusalem offered to her lovers (Block 2007:497; Tuell 2012:90);¹¹ thus, becoming the means of her infidelity. She who was Yahweh’s gave herself to strangers, acting worse than a prostitute and worse than an adulteress. The following table aims to capture the structural logic of the comparison between Jerusalem, a prostitute, and an adulteress according to the text:

Table 1. Comparison between Jerusalem, a prostitute, and an adulteress.

Jerusalem	Prostitutes	Adulteresses
Built herself places to pour out her prostitutions.	Establish places for prostitution.	
Did not receive payment.	Receive payment.	Do not receive payment.
Accommodated strangers instead of her husband.	Accommodates customers.	Accommodates strangers instead of her husband.
Bribed men to come from all around. Gave payments to her lovers.	Is solicited.	Solicits men. Gives the payments.

This systematic inversion of everything election and covenant established forms the narrative and theological climax of the indictment before the formal legal proceedings of vv. 36-43. So as v. 35 commanded her, she must now שִׁמְעִי דְבַר־יְהוָה (*šim ’î dābar-yāhwā*).

2.4.2 Verses 36-43

Verses 36-43 constitute the accusation proper, also known as the *Notitia Criminis* (Bovati 1994:62), in between the comparative cases. An inclusio of declarative formulas also encloses the segment; it begins at 36a with כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה (*kō-’āmar ’ādōnāy yāhōwî*) and ends in 43d with נֹאֻם יְהוָה אֶל־נָאֻם יְהוָה (*nā’um ’ādōnāy yāhwi*). The causal particle יַעַן (*ya’an*) immediately follows the first declarative formula; it introduces the accusations and is followed by the apodosis, marked by the particle לָכֵן (*lākēn*), along with the punitive sanctions. The forensic structure can be outlined as follows:

V. 36a – Yahweh commences his accusation.

V. 36b-e – Declarative Accusations.

Vv. 37-42 – Punitive Sanctions.

V. 37 – Witnesses/accomplices.

¹¹ As attested in vv. 15-19.

V. 38 – Criminal Charges.

Vv. 39-41b – Sanctions.

Vv. 41c-42 – Expected outcome of the Judgment.

V. 41c-d – Rehabilitation.

V. 42 – Reconciliation.

V. 43 – Anchoring the accusations in Jerusalem's origin story.

According to the text, יָעַן (*ya'an*) introduces three accusations: (1) הִשָּׁפֶתְךָ הַשֶּׁפֶךְ (*hiššāpēk nāhuštēk*), (2) תוֹעֲבוֹתֶיךָ כָּל-גִּלּוּלִי וְעַל-מִצְבְּהֶיךָ בְּתַזְנוּתֶיךָ עֲרֹמְךָ וּתְגִלָּה (*wattiggāle 'erwātēk bātaznūtayik 'al-mə'ahābāyik wə'al kol-gillūlê tōw'ābōwtayik*), (3) נָתַתְּ אֶשֶׁר בְּנִיךָ וְכִדְמִי לָהֶם: נָתַתְּ לָהֶם (*wəkidmē bānayik 'āšer nātāt lāhem*). The first accusation references v. 15 using the same expression “pouring out” (in v. 15 it appears as וַתִּשְׁפֹּךְ (*wattišpākī*), wayyiqtol, second-person, feminine, singular; in v. 36 it is הִשָּׁפֶתְךָ (*hiššāpēk*), Nifal, Infinitive Construct) of her תַּזְנוּת (*taznūt*), whereas v. 36 it is her נָחֶשֶׁת (*nāhōšet*).¹² The second accusation references v. 8, where a covenant was made through the marriage metaphor of covering her nakedness. The terms כָּסָה (*kāsā*) (v. 8) and גָּלָה (*gālā*) (v. 36) represent opposing actions by contrasting subjects: Yahweh's initiative was to cover, while Jerusalem's was to uncover her עֲרֹמָה (*'erwā*). This uncovering explicitly refers to her annulment of the marriage or to the breaking of the covenant, as attested in Hosea 2 and in ancient Near Eastern documents (Greenberg 1986:287; Block 2007:501; Quick 2023:201). The third accusation references vv. 20 and 21, identifying child sacrifice as the climax of her immorality (Lind 1996:133; Block 2007:489, 491; Bodi 2009:439).

Supplementary to the accusations brought against Jerusalem, Yahweh cites the criminal charges against her in v. 38: adultery and murder. Having established through the previous comparison that Jerusalem behaved as an adulteress, she can be formally charged as such. The first two accusations in the previous verses are summarized in the charge of adultery, and child sacrifice is translated into the charge of murder. Both charges against her are crimes punishable by death,¹³ which is highlighted by the statement וְנִתְּתִיךְ דָּם חֲמָה וְקִנְיָה: (*ūnətatitīk dam hēmā wəqin'ā*). Both קִנְיָה (*qn'ā*) and חֲמָה (*hēmā*) are attributed to Yahweh in the Torah. קִנְיָה (*qn'ā*) appears in Exodus 20:5 and 34:14, and it also describes a husband who suspects his adulterous wife in Numbers 5. חֲמָה (*hēmā*) appears in Leviticus 26:14-46, which portrays the punishments for an unfaithful people who break their covenant with Yahweh.

In line with the restorative logic of the רִיב (*rīb*), the sanctions are not presented as the final objective of the indictment but as measures intended to terminate Jerusalem's misconduct and

¹² The term הִשָּׁפֶתְךָ (*nāhuštēk*) is a hapax legomenon whose meaning is disputed. While the root נָחֶשֶׁת (*nāhōšet*) commonly denotes “copper” or “bronze,” the ancient versions already reflect interpretive uncertainty: the LXX and Vulgate render it literally as “your bronze,” while the Targum Jonathan to the Prophets reads “your shame.” The major lexicons distinguish הִשָּׁפֶתְךָ (*nāhuštēk*) as a separate lexeme with a sexual connotation: BDB suggests “lust, harlotry” (Brown, Driver & Briggs 1977:II. הִשָּׁפֶתְךָ; TWOT: “harlotry” (eds. Harris, Archer, Jr. & Waltke 1999:1350a הִשָּׁפֶתְךָ; HALOT: “female modesty, shame, menstruation” (Köhler *et al.* 1994-2000:6120 הִשָּׁפֶתְךָ; and DCH, “indecent, lust, or menstrual blood” (ed. Clines 1993-2011: [הִשָּׁפֶתְךָ] II [Zimmerli (1979:329–330) proposes emending the preceding verb הִשָּׁפֶתְךָ (*hiššāpēk*) to read as an infinitive of הָשָׁפ (*hāšap*), yielding “you uncovered your shame,” following the Targum. Block (2007:500) and Greenberg (1986:285–286) prefer the Akkadian cognate *naḥšātu*, understood respectively as “abnormal female genital discharge” and “morbid genital outflow.” The context supports a sexual connotation since it is part of the accusation of marital infidelity.

¹³ Adultery: Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22. Murder: Exodus 21:12; Leviticus 24:17; Numbers 35:16-34.

restore the relationship between the parties (Bovati 1994:31). The aim was to rehabilitate and reconcile. Verse 41c-d: וְהִשְׁבַּתְתִּיךְ מִזִּנְיָהּ וְגַם־אֶתְנָן לֹא תִתְנֶי־עֹדֶר: (*wāhišbattik mizzōwnā wəgam-’etnan lō’ tittānī-’ōwd*), anticipates the rehabilitation and v. 42 וְהִנָּחֵתִי חֶמְתִּי בְךָ וְסָרָה קִנְאָתִי מִמֶּךָ וְשָׁקַטְתִּי וְלֹא אֶכְעַס (*wahāniḥōtī ḥāmātiy bāk wāsārā qin’ātī mimmēk wāšāqattī wālō’ ek’as’ōwd*), reconciliation.

Verse 43 not only closes the *inclusio* but also anchors the accusations back to Jerusalem’s youth. It refers to v. 22 when Jerusalem was confronted in the same terms: לֹא־זָכַרְתִּי אֶת־יָמֵי נְעוּרָיִךְ (*lō’-zākarty’et-yāmē nā’ūrayik*). In v. 22, Yahweh used this “forgetfulness” as a basis for the indictment, and now he reuses it as a basis for the accusations. This grounding in the origin story governs the entire legal proceeding. The severity of the judgment in vv. 36-43 is proportional to the election’s exclusivity. Amos 3:2 articulates this principle directly: “You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities” (ESV). As Patrick observes, this passage establishes that Yahweh’s election does not shield the people from judgment but intensifies the accountability that accompanies it; since Yahweh chose his people and revealed his will to them, he holds them especially responsible for their corruption (Patrick 1992:438).

This logic finds its fullest expression in Deuteronomy, where election is grounded entirely in Yahweh’s unilateral love for Israel’s ancestors (Deut 7:6-8), not in the people’s merit. Yet the same covenant that legalizes election expresses its obligations through the blessings and curses in Deuteronomy 28, parallel to those in Leviticus 26. Joel S. Kaminsky characterizes Deuteronomy as perceiving election as “grounded in God’s mysterious love for Israel,” while its whole tone “suggests an Israel chastened by her failures” (Kaminsky 2007:104). Deuteronomy 4:25-31 anticipates the narrative sequence that Ezekiel 16 illustrates: covenant infidelity leading to its appointed consequences. Even after the curses are fulfilled, both Leviticus 26:43-45 and Deuteronomy 4:31 affirm that Yahweh will not forget the covenant with the ancestors. As Kaminsky observes, despite Israel’s failings, “she remains God’s chosen people” (Kaminsky 2007:105). The Deuteronomic structure of election provides the Pentateuchal basis on which Ezekiel’s covenant-lawsuit stands (Day, P. 2000:243).

Additionally, William Klein observes that election in the OT “did not shield Israel against misfortune, political defeat, or the judgment of God,” and identifies Ezekiel 16 as paradigmatic: the depiction of Yahweh’s sovereign choice of Jerusalem in vv. 4-14 is followed by a “catalogue” of her unfaithfulness and the judgment of vv. 35-58 precisely because of that prior election (Klein 1990:29). Keil and Delitzsch have a similar understanding; they note that the chapter removes any “false confidence in the divine covenant of grace” and that Yahweh will punish Jerusalem “notwithstanding its election” (Keil & Delitzsch 1996:123, 129). The indictment does not accuse Jerusalem of generic moral failure. Still, it returns consistently to the election that constitutes her identity (vv. 22 and 43), measuring her conduct against the standard that election itself established through the covenant. The charge of adultery rather than prostitution (vv. 32 and 38), the language of the husband’s קִנְיָה (*qn’ā*) and חֵמָה (*hēmā*) (v. 38), and the רִיב (*riḇ*) structure (vv. 36-43) are all meaningful precisely because the relationship originated in Yahweh’s unilateral choice. Judgment in this narrative is not the negation of election but its necessary consequence: those chosen are held to the measure of what was given to them. Election establishes the relationship; covenant gives it legal structure; judgment responds to its breach on the terms the election and covenant created.

2.4.3 Verses 44-52

The second case comparison is also grounded in Jerusalem’s origins, her blood relatives. This section is introduced by a proverb (v. 44b): כְּאִמָּה בְּתָהּ: (*kə’immā bittāh*). Adulterous Jerusalem is compared to the other women in her family (mother and sisters) who also rejected their husbands

and children. The following table summarizes the comparison between Jerusalem and her family from v. 45 to v. 52, where, once more, Jerusalem is deemed “worse than” (Eichrodt 1970:215; Zimmerli 1979:350; Duguid 1999:214; Odell 2005:195).

Table 2. Comparison between Jerusalem, her mother, and her sisters.

Hittite Mother	Older Sister: Samaria and her daughters	Younger Sister: Sodom and her daughters	Jerusalem
v. 45b – rejected her husband and her children.	v. 45d – rejected their husbands and their children.		
	v. 46b – dwells north of Jerusalem.	v. 46c – dwells south of Jerusalem.	
	v. 47a-b committed abominations.		v. 47c – was even more corrupt.
	v. 51a – did not commit half of Jerusalem’s sins.	vv. 49-50b – their iniquity: 1. Pride. 2. Abundance of food. 3. Undisturbed ease. 4. Did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. 5. Were haughty. 6. Committed abominations.	v. 51b – multiplied her abominations more than her sisters.
		v. 50c-d – Yahweh removed them when he saw it.	
			vv. 51c-52 – justified her sisters through her own abominations.

The table reveals a pattern of cumulative intensification where Jerusalem’s conduct exceeds that of the family members. The basis of each comparison reaches back to the origin’s narrative, as the proverb *כַּאֲמֵה בִּתְּהָה* (*kə’immā bittāh*) suggests. Block notes that the proverb dispels any idealized reading of Jerusalem’s ancestry by immediately characterizing the mother as one who loathed her husband and her children (Block 2007:507). The comparison is not incidental but theological. By returning to the question of origins, the text grounds the accusation not only in what Jerusalem has done but in what she has become. Against that basis, Jerusalem is found to have committed her abominations under conditions of greater privilege, and therefore with greater culpability. Eichrodt points this out when he states that those who “enjoyed the gift of the divine covenant” bear an “incomparably greater” responsibility precisely because of that privilege (Eichrodt 1970:215).

The judicial conclusion of the section is formalized in v. 52. There, the verb פָּלַלְתָּ (*pillalt*) functions as a denominative Piel and carries the sense of “interceding” or “acting as an arbitrator” (Block 2007:510). It also carries an ironic tone, since Jerusalem, through the magnitude of her transgressions, functioned as an unintentional advocate for her sisters’ relative righteousness. Greenberg identifies Jerusalem as “the active subject” who has “made her sisters look more righteous than she,” having “(inadvertently) interceded on their behalf” (Greenberg 1986:289). She did not set out to vindicate her sisters; their vindication is the logical consequence of her own conduct surpassing theirs.

The term קָלִימָה (*kəlimmā*) appears for the first time in this chapter and is repeated twice in v. 52. As Eichrodt observes, it recurs across vv. 52, 53, and 58, and is designed to produce “a subjective recognition of the justness of the sentence” (Eichrodt 1970:215–216). The disgrace in view is not merely social humiliation but the formal outcome of the indictment. What is theologically decisive here is that election functions not as a protection against this verdict but as its premise. Therefore, election both initiates the relationship and generates its consequent expectations of fidelity (Sohn 1991:194). The disgrace she is commanded to bear is not separate from the election narrative but is its direct consequence.

2.5 Divine Restorative Initiative (Ezekiel 16:53-63)

2.5.1 Verses 53-58

Based on the comparison between Jerusalem and her family, it is concluded that she has justified them (v. 52), and this justification carries another narrative consequence: Yahweh announces the restoration of each sister. Verses 53 and 55 establish this restoration in parallel terms, as shown in Table 3:

Table 3. Restoration promises.

	Sodom and her daughters	Samaria and her daughters	Jerusalem and her daughters
v. 53a And I will restore their fortunes	v. 53b. The fortunes of Sodom and her daughters	v. 53c and the fortunes of Samaria and her daughters	v. 53d and your own fortunes in their midst
	v. 55a Your sisters, Sodom and her daughters, will return to their former state	v. 55b and Samaria and her daughters will return to their former state	v. 55c and you and your daughters will return to your former state

The purpose of this announcement is disclosed by the לָמַעַן (*ləmaʿan*) clause of v. 54: Jerusalem is to נָשָׂא (*nāśāʾ*) her קָלִימָה (*kəlimmā*) (v. 54), זִמְמָה (*zimmā*) (v. 58), and תִּוְעֵבָה (*tōw ʿēbā*) (v. 58), and to כָּלַם (*kālam*) (v. 54). Consequently, the restoration of Sodom and Samaria functions within the text not as an independent act of divine mercy but as a narrative device designed to intensify Jerusalem’s shame (Shields 1998:12). Block observes that “Ezekiel’s reason for mentioning Sodom’s and Samaria’s restoration is essentially negative”; the purpose clause clarifies that Yahweh’s aim was for Jerusalem to “bear her disgrace and feel ashamed not only for her actions but also for having caused Sodom and Gomorrah to breathe easier” (Block 2007:514).

Greenberg identifies “memory and shame” as the twin faculties the restoration sequence is designed to produce in Jerusalem, two capacities “this wanton abnormally lacks” that must be “generated in her” (Greenberg 1986:305). The rehabilitation of Sodom and Samaria provides the occasion “for her first experience of shame—really humiliation over having made her disdained sisters look righteous by comparison with her” (Greenberg 1986:306). Zimmerli expresses the theological weight of this dynamic:

In that God, in his righteousness, could not be less gracious to these sinners than to Jerusalem itself, the disgrace of those who were so proud of their election could only be complete when the pure light of the divine grace began to shine over those who were lost. (Zimmerli 1979:352)

So, the restoration of the non-elect becomes the very instrument by which the elect is brought to genuine repentance. Election in Ezekiel 16 is not a guarantee of privilege but the ground on which accountability is most fully reckoned.

2.5.2 Verses 59-63

After Yahweh expresses his intention to resolve the matter through restoration, he presents the logical consequences of Jerusalem's actions before introducing a contrasting declaration of divine remembrance. This is done through a declarative *inclusio* beginning in v. 59a with כִּי כֹה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה (kī kō 'āmar 'ādōnāy yāhwi) and culminating in v. 63e with נָאֻם אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה: (nə 'um 'ādōnāy yāhwi). First, he lays out the logical consequence, v. 59 כִּי כֹה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה וְעָשִׂיתִי אוֹתָהּ כְּאֲשֶׁר (kī kō 'āmar 'ādōnāy yāhwi wə 'āsīti 'ōwtāk ka 'āšer 'āsīt 'āšer-bāzīt 'ālā lahāpēr bārīt). The proposition here is to treat the covenant as void; metaphorically, a divorce. This had already been suggested in vv. 37 and 39 through the public exposure of her nakedness (Zimmerli 1979:346; Bodi 2009:441). Here in v. 59, the terms are expressed through covenantal language rather than through the marriage metaphor. In Block's words, "Jerusalem's contempt... will be answered by the suspension of his own covenant obligations...Yahweh is legally absolved of all responsibility toward her and totally justified in judging her according to the covenant curses" (Block 2007:515–516). These observations converge in presenting v. 59 as the formal articulation of covenantal rupture, expressed in legal terms rather than purely metaphorical imagery.

Then, Yahweh reinforces his intention of a positive resolution through a contrasting addendum introduced with an adversative vav (Block 2007:516): וְזָכַרְתִּי אֲנִי אֶת-בְּרִיתִי אוֹתָהּ בִּימֵי נְעוּרֶיהָ: (wəzākartī 'ānī 'et-bārītī 'ōwtāk bīmē nə 'ūrāyik wahāqimōwtī lāk bārīt 'ōwlām). The narrative presents a sharp contrast between Jerusalem's forgetfulness and Yahweh's remembrance of the days of her youth. While vv. 22 and 43 were limited to the episode of election, v. 60 expands the remembrance to both election and covenant-making. In this way, the chapter frames remembrance as the hinge upon which both judgment and restoration turn, linking the indictment to Jerusalem's failure to remember and the restoration to Yahweh's act of remembering. Establishing that period as the context, Yahweh returns to the beginning (vv. 6-7) and re-engages the foundational moment of the relationship. As a parallel to that episode, Yahweh will intervene on Jerusalem's behalf unilaterally (Block 2007:520), leading to the making of the everlasting covenant. Yahweh identifies the temporal context for the addendum as the moment when, v. 63d: עָשִׂיתִי לָכֶּלֶךְ-אֲשֶׁר בְּכַפְּרֵי-לָךְ (bəkappārī-lāk ləkol- 'āšer 'āsīt).

The Piel Infinitive Construct בְּכַפְּרִי (bəkappārī) is a hapax legomenon in this precise form. According to TWOT, the root כפר (*kpr*) carries overlapping semantic ranges encompassing "to cover," "to ransom," and "to make expiation" in the sacrificial sphere (eds. Harris, Archer, Jr. & Waltke 1999:452–453).¹⁴ Most scholars agree that the primary meaning of the Piel stem is "to wipe

¹⁴ The root's etymology has been contested. Nineteenth-century lexicographers associated *kipper* with Arabic *kafara* ("cover"), describing atonement as the covering of guilt, but TDOT cautions that "the interpretation of *kipper* as 'cover' on the basis of Arabic... is fraught with problems" (Lang 1995:290). TLOT likewise observes that neither derivation has yet led to a "generally accepted result," and notes a telling internal argument against the "cover" reading: in Gen 32:21, Jacob wants to "atone" Esau's face yet immediately states that he wants to see that face, a sequence that TLOT judges demonstrates "the speculative nature of such inferences regarding

away, wipe clean, purge;” the sinner is forgiven because the transgression that “tainted the holy has been ‘wiped clean’” (Moskala 2016:43). Ezekiel’s use of this term here is itself significant: as a priest, he draws on the full weight of priestly vocabulary, and the verb’s distribution across Ezekiel’s temple vision (chs. 43-45) reinforces its cultic precision (Moskala 2016:49). Woudstra identifies the theological importance of this act of atonement for the immediate context (vv. 59-63) and concludes that: “This atonement, this covering, will be the foundation on which the everlasting covenant will rest” (Woudstra 1971:47).

Furthermore, its use in v. 63 is also distinctive in that Yahweh is the grammatical subject of the verb. TLOT classifies Ezekiel 16:63, alongside Dan 9:24, as an “eschatological witness” that brings the principle of divine agency “to its most forceful expression” (Maass 1997:632): the act of atonement requires no priestly mediation and no ritual performance on Jerusalem’s part.¹⁵ This pattern is consistent with what the allegory has established from its opening scene: Yahweh alone initiates, and Jerusalem benefits. Cooper describes the act as God “not overlooking but covering their sin by his marvelous grace” (Cooper 1994:179). Tuell draws out the theological implication: “For Ezekiel, it is God’s action alone that brings salvation... it is always the knowledge of God that makes true self-knowledge possible” (Tuell 2012:97). Jiří Moskala concludes that in this context כפר (*kpr*) encompasses covering, purging, and forgiving sin, but its governing purpose is reconciliation and the restoration of the covenantal bond (Moskala 2016:46). The act of atonement is therefore not the conclusion of the chapter’s movement but its enabling condition, the ground on which the everlasting covenant of v. 60 becomes possible and on which the narrative of election in Ezekiel 16 finds its resolution.

an original meaning” (Maass 1997:625). Since Heinrich Zimmern’s identification of the Babylonian *kuppuru*, meaning “to purify cultically,” both etymologies have been brought into alignment (Lang 1995:289). TLOT further notes that the cleansing associations of כפר (*kpr*) in the Piel form in Leviticus 14:19; 16:18f.; and Ezekiel 43:26 have received less attention than they deserve in the etymological discussion (Maass 1997:625), with the Akkadian cognates *kapāru* (“to wipe off”) and *kuppuru* (“to cleanse ritually”) increasingly favored for understanding the verb’s cultic register (Köhler *et al.* 1994-2000:4384 כפר (Lang 1995:289 ; GHCLOT glosses the Piel as “to cover, i.e., to pardon sin (comp. כָּפַר)” (eds. Gesenius & Tregelles 2003:411), treating the covering and pardoning registers as a single act seen from different angles. BDB clarifies the purpose governing the entire ritual system via Leviticus 16:30, atonement is made “to cleanse you, from all your sins shall ye be clean before Yahweh” (Brown, Driver & Briggs 1977:497-498), so that the covering of sin is simultaneously a purification unto restored covenantal standing. On the specific construction in Ezekiel 16:63: HALOT classifies the Piel with Yahweh as subject and ל as relational marker under the subcategory “God covers for, does not count against” (Köhler *et al.* 1994-2000:4384 כפר (TDOT classifies the same prepositional construction as signifying “when I forgive you all that you have done” (Lang 1995:290); and BDB groups Ezekiel 16:63 with Deuteronomy 21:8 and Daniel 9:24 as the category where “God in his sovereignty may himself provide an atonement or covering for men and their sins which could not be provided by men” (Brown, Driver & Briggs 1977:497).

¹⁵ The divine-subject construction of כפר (*kpr*) in the Piel form occurs only seven times in the Hebrew Bible (Tuell 2012:106). TDOT observes that all such texts deal with situations in which, on account of legal, moral, or religious guilt, the life of the individual or the group is forfeit, so that “God’s act of atonement... relates in each instance to an exceptionally critical situation in which not simply some aspect of human life but its very existence is at stake” (Lang 1995:300). TLOT adds that in this group of texts, human action “is not considered, apparently because it is inconsequential,” and further observes that “the atonement process cannot be fully transparent and rational for the Yahweh worshiper; God remains free to decide” (Maass 1997:631, 633). BDB distinguishes this usage from the priestly ritual pattern by noting that where God is the subject with ל, he provides “an atonement or covering for men and their sins which could not be provided by men” (Brown, Driver & Briggs 1977:497). In Schenker’s analysis as presented in TDOT, divine atonement of this kind means that God “does not insist on full punishment but mitigates it” and that “forgiveness is not purchased by the sinner but made possible by God’s preemptive offer” (Lang 1995:295).

This restoration, grounded in Yahweh's unilateral act, is further shaped by the לָמַעַן (*lāma'an*) of v. 63: the atonement is the means by which Jerusalem will remember (vv. 61a and 63a) and be ashamed of her conduct (vv. 61b and 63b-c). Woudstra observes that Yahweh's "remembering" in v. 60 is more than a mental act: "Remembering in the Old Testament is more than a mere calling to mind. It is tantamount to making the covenant operative again" (Woudstra 1971:29). The verbal form וַיִּקְמֹדְתִי (*wahāqimōwtî*) in v. 60, the Hiphil of קוּם (*qûm*), carries a deliberate double sense: "setting up" that which does not yet stand and "causing to stand" that which already does, so that "the choice of this word for the activity of Yahweh with respect to the covenant serves to stress both the newness of the covenant and its continuity with the preceding covenant" (Woudstra 1971:30). That the Hiphil of קוּם (*qûm*) rather than כָּרַת (*kārat*) is used here emphasizes Yahweh's sovereign ratification of the covenant from his own side. Moreover, the preposition לְ (*l*) of advantage in לָקַךְ (*lāk*) frames the everlasting covenant as a beneficial work directed toward Jerusalem. The everlasting covenant is, therefore, simultaneously a new act and the re-engagement of the bond first established in Jerusalem's youth.

The movement deliberately mirrors the original covenant narrative: Yahweh acts, and Jerusalem's response follows as a consequence rather than a precondition. Within this structure, Woudstra identifies what he calls a "penitential frame of mind" as the fitting posture for Jerusalem before the covenant's renewal: "Shame because of past misdeeds and also because of the excess of God's grace in spite of these misdeeds will characterize Jerusalem as she stands before the LORD of her salvation" (Woudstra 1971:41). Correspondingly, the new covenant extends to Jerusalem's sisters, who enter the covenantal relationship as her daughters. In this way, the chapter concludes by reversing the initial accusatory stance expressed in its opening verses: the same unilateral initiative that constituted Jerusalem as Yahweh's elect culminates in an act of atonement on her behalf. This atonement opened, through an everlasting covenant, the possibility and assurance of restoration and reconciliation.

3 Summary and Conclusion

This analysis shows how Ezekiel 16 develops the concept of divine election. Through its extended allegory, the relationship between Yahweh and Jerusalem reflects essential features of election: divine initiative, the establishment of a covenant grounded in that election, and the pledge of restoration after its violation. In this way, election functions not merely as a theological category but as the narrative foundation that structures the entire relationship.

The narrative opens with Jerusalem depicted as an abandoned newborn, exposed in the open field. The description of abandonment, rescue, and care reflects patterns similar to ancient Near Eastern adoption formulas and portrays Yahweh as the sole initiator of the relationship. This episode of origins provides the narrative expression of election within the chapter. Therefore, election is grounded entirely in divine initiative, independent of Jerusalem's condition or capacity to respond. The relationship then develops through the establishment of a covenant, expressed metaphorically as marriage. In this second episode, Yahweh transforms Jerusalem from a vulnerable child into a bride and ultimately a queen. The covenant formalizes an association that had already begun with Yahweh's earlier intervention. Although the narrative emphasizes Yahweh's initiative, the marriage metaphor also introduces the expectation of relational commitment. This establishes the framework for evaluating Jerusalem's later actions. Election, therefore, precedes the covenant and provides the basis for covenantal responsibility.

The breach of this covenant becomes the chapter's primary conflict. Jerusalem misuses the marital gifts given by Yahweh and engages in conduct described through the metaphor of

prostitution and adultery. The legal accusations that follow not only list immoral behavior but also frame Jerusalem's actions within the context of her divine election. The accusations repeatedly return to Jerusalem's origin (vv. 22, 43), stressing that her failure to remember the moment of divine initiative forms the basis of her indictment. Election, in this narrative logic, does not shield Jerusalem from judgment; it intensifies the accountability that accompanies it. Because Yahweh chose Jerusalem, she is held to the standard that the election itself established. This is the theological logic that governs the severity of the covenant-lawsuit in vv. 36-43: judgment is the necessary consequence of election, not its negation.

Finally, the restoration section features a significant contrast between Jerusalem's failure to remember and Yahweh's own act of remembrance. While Jerusalem has forgotten the circumstances of her election, Yahweh declares that he himself will remember the covenant made in the days of her youth. This remembrance leads to the establishment of an everlasting covenant, grounded in Yahweh's unilateral act of atonement on her behalf. Here, election once again governs the chapter's movement: just as it initiated the relationship, it now moves Yahweh to act toward restoration. In this way, the narrative anticipates Jerusalem's rehabilitation and the renewal of the relationship. This restorative initiative reflects Yahweh's continued commitment to the relationship despite Jerusalem's failure, providing the basis for reconciliation should she respond positively to his initiative. The chapter thus resolves its conflict by returning to the very foundation established at the beginning of the narrative: Yahweh's unilateral action on Jerusalem's behalf.

Taken as a whole, Ezekiel 16 portrays election as the origin of the relationship, the basis of Jerusalem's accountability, and the enduring ground of its restoration. The chapter depicts election as a dynamic and relational reality in which divine initiative establishes the relationship, human agency shapes its course, and divine faithfulness ultimately sustains the possibility of its renewal.

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