

## The Restoration of Sodom in Ezekiel Ch. 16



*The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. John Martin. 1852*

*“When I shall bring again their captivity, the captivity of Sodom and her daughters, and the captivity of Samaria and her daughters, then (will I bring again) the captivity of thy captives in the midst of them”. (Ezekiel 16:53 AV)*

*“I will restore their fortunes, both the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters, and the fortunes of Samaria and her daughters, and I will restore your own fortunes in their midst” (Ezekiel 16:53 ESV)*

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*“When thy sisters, Sodom and her daughters, shall return to their former estate, and Samaria and her daughters shall return to their former estate, then thou and thy daughters shall return to your former estate”. (Ezekiel 16:55 AV)*

### Introduction

In Ezekiel 16:44-63 the prophet connects Jerusalem with two other cities, Samaria and Sodom, and the passage speaks of the future restoration of all three, (i. e. “future” from Ezekiel’s perspective), together with their respective “daughters”. The restoration is understood to be “a good thing” for all three. Clearly, such a restoration would be possible for Samaria, representing the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which had been taken into exile under the Assyrians, and also for Jerusalem, representing the kingdom of Judah, which in a very few years would fall fully to the Babylonians, (and many of whose citizens, such as Ezekiel himself, were already in exile), and whose imminent destruction had just been prophesied in Ezek. 16: 35-43. The restoration involved appears to be essentially that of the inhabitants (perhaps, in the cases of Jerusalem and Samaria, in the persons of the *descendants* of the inhabitants—given the time scales involved) rather than a restoration of the “bricks and

mortar” of the cities themselves, as most commentators agree. (However, Jerusalem, after the Exile was subsequently rebuilt—so this could be included as a component part of the prophesied restoration, but the city of Samaria by contrast was not destroyed when the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B. C.)

However, Sodom had, much earlier in Old Testament history, already been completely destroyed with the death of all its inhabitants. How could such a future restoration be possible in the case of Sodom either for the inhabitants themselves, or in the persons of their descendants (for there were none)? This difficulty, is recognised in the commentaries and is met in three main ways as will be described briefly later in this article.

However, there is an additional difficulty regarding the correct translation and meaning of several places in Hebrew text of Ezekiel Ch. 16 and this difficulty too will be discussed later in the article. However, here I would just like to mention one particular translation issue, and that concerns the meaning of the Hebrew expression translated as “bringing again the captivity . . .” (AV) or “restoring the fortunes” (ESV) of v. 53. This is understood to mean that God is turning to the matter of the captivity to “turn the situation around” in the sense of “restoring the fortunes” of the cities. But what is actually involved in this “bringing again the captivity” or “restoring the fortunes” of these cities? Sodom was never taken captive, so the translation “restoring the fortunes” appears to be preferable. E. W. Hengstenberg discusses these verses extensively both in his *Christology of the Old Testament* and in his commentary on Ezekiel, and he understands the expression to mean that God will turn again to the misery of the cities (in order to reverse the situation).

So, we have a number of difficulties—both translational and exegetical - in this passage!

However, in this article, I would like to suggest, very boldly in the light of the history of the translation and interpretation issues (which go right back to the Septuagint and also to marginal notes found in the Masoretic Text of the passage) that these difficulties are not insuperable, and indeed, that in the suggested interpretation proposed in this article, the passage itself contains materials for its own relatively straightforward interpretation! Bold indeed!

In this article, I would like first at the three main ways in which the passage has been understood, then to look at the text, and in particular at its translation difficulties, and then I wish to present a possible alternative understanding with particular regard to the restoration of Sodom.

Readers who wish to know the proposed alternative interpretation of “the restoration of Sodom” straight away might choose to skip over this earlier material and go directly to the section titled “A Possible “Imminent/Historical” Interpretation Regarding Sodom” on page 12.

## The Three Main Interpretations

### 1) Sodom Represents the Gentile Nations

The first of the three ways in which the restoration, in particular of Sodom, is understood is the view that Sodom appears in an “ideal” character, for example representing pagan Gentiles in general, in a typological sense, and the restoration of Sodom points forward prophetically to the inclusion of the Gentiles into a state of acceptance before God through the Gospel. In this interpretation, attention is drawn to the fact that Sodom appears to have fallen into gross sin from a better, earlier, period, and that the concept of “restoration” therefore “works” typologically when this earlier period is seen to correspond in a type-antitype relationship to, for example, the condition of mankind before the Fall, or to the inclusion of the Gentiles within the Noahic covenant. A difficulty with this typological approach is that it involves a different interpretation for Sodom from that for Jerusalem and Samaria since for these latter cities, the prophecy “works” both in the direct, soon-to-be-realised, historical sense in the return from Exile (understood here as involving all Twelve Tribes—a view ably defended by e.g. James Jordan—please see also e.g. Jer. 3:6-24), as well as in the spiritual interpretation relating to the Gospel.

### 2) A Proposed Restoration for the Inhabitants of Sodom After Death

The second approach is a drastic one, and (surprisingly to me) even attracted support from the 19th Century conservative Evangelical scholar E. W. Hengstenberg. This is to propose the possibility of repentance leading to restoration and acceptance before God at the final judgement even for those who are already dead—as a result of, for example, Christ’s preaching to the “spirits in prison” - as described in a particular interpretation of a passage in Peter’s Epistles - in 1 Peter Ch. 3 - and please see also 2 Peter Ch. 2. This interpretation of the “spirits in prison” passage is refuted in Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*.

### 3) Sodom is **Not** Restored, so No Hope for Jerusalem!!

The third way, which is almost a “counsel of despair” is that actually, neither Sodom nor Samaria will be restored, and so Jerusalem cannot expect restoration either! This view is widely, (and surely correctly!) roundly opposed, but such is the perceived difficulty of the passage that even this unlikely, and somewhat desperate, “explanation” has its supporters! It was actually held by John Calvin. However, Ezek. 16:60 speaks of future covenantal hope for Jerusalem, so the “no hope” theory is surely wrong!

(There are also interpretations which attempt to give to Sodom a more specific ongoing existence after its destruction—for example in the Moabites and Ammonites (descended from Lot) - or in the “Canaanite element” of the Israelite population. These possibilities will not be explored in the present article.)

In contrast to these views, it will be suggested in the present article that the restoration of Sodom might plausibly be understood historically using information largely provided within the text of Ezekiel 16:44-63 itself.

## Some Translation Issues

1) šûb šěbît (to restore the fortunes or reverse the captivity/misery) in Ezek. 16:53.

We have already seen that the expression “return to the captivity” or “restore the fortunes” in v. 53 can also be translated as “reverse the misery”. The presence of such differing translations might suggest that we should perhaps be open to a variety of ways of understanding the expression. The expression occurs in Job 42:10 when it clearly refers to the restoration of Job’s original good fortune. All three interpretations in Ezek. 16:53 given above assume that the reversal is always from a “bad” situation to a “good” (or at least a “better”) situation—i.e. a restoration.

[Note: However, a reversing of the fortunes could I suppose in theory also be from a good situation to a bad one, and, if so, then the possibility might exist that the “reversal” may not necessarily be of the same type for all three cities. This possibility does not appear to be supported “philologically” by the Hebrew words used however, nor by the many places where this expression occurs in the OT where the reversal is always back to a better earlier situation. In this article, we will regard all three cities, Samaria, Sodom and Jerusalem as being promised a reversion to a better, earlier state, in verses 53 and 55.]

2) “ . . when you receive your sisters—those who are bigger (older) and those who are smaller (younger) than you . . .” (v. 61).

In verses 59-61, God speaks of His covenant with Jerusalem, and the “sisters” are mentioned in this context. An interesting feature of v. 61 is that the sisters are not named here. Furthermore, the adjectives older and younger are plural. So, this perhaps suggests that the translation should be something like that given by E. W. Hengstenberg:

“And thou rememberest thy ways, and art ashamed, when thou receivest thy sisters, who are greater than thou, to those who are less than thou art, and I give them to thee for daughters . . .”

The NIV is one of a relatively small number of translations that reflect this plurality:

“Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed when you receive your sisters, both those who are older than you and those who are younger. I will give them to you as daughters . . .” (NIV).

The Septuagint also understands v. 61 in this way.

In commenting on v. 61, E. W. Hengstenberg says, “The fact that sisters generally are spoken of here, shews that Sodom and Samaria, in v. 55, are selected as representatives of a numerous class”. I suppose that one could nevertheless maintain that in v. 55 it is *actual* Sodom and Samaria that are spoken of, and that their actual identities are important there, but that in moving to verses 59-61, God, through Ezekiel, is describing a broader class of nations. E. W. Hengstenberg interprets the expression “the *daughters* of Jerusalem” in the Song of Solomon (Song 1:5) as the converted heathen nations.

This interpretation of the use of the plural in the Hebrew for both older and younger sisters in v. 61 thus enables verses 59-61 to be interpreted in a broader sense (e.g. as referring directly to Israel’s influence over the nations in the Inter-testamental Period, or to the Gospel Age) than if only one older sister (Samaria) and only one younger sister (Sodom) are intended in v. 61. The majority of translations seem to understand just these two sisters becoming daughters in v. 61 however.

But what is the relationship between these sisters-who-become-daughters, (whether understood in either of the above ways) and God’s covenant with Jerusalem? This leads us to the final words of v. 61 . . .

### 3) “... and not by thy covenant” (v. 61) (in the light of the discussion in 2) above)

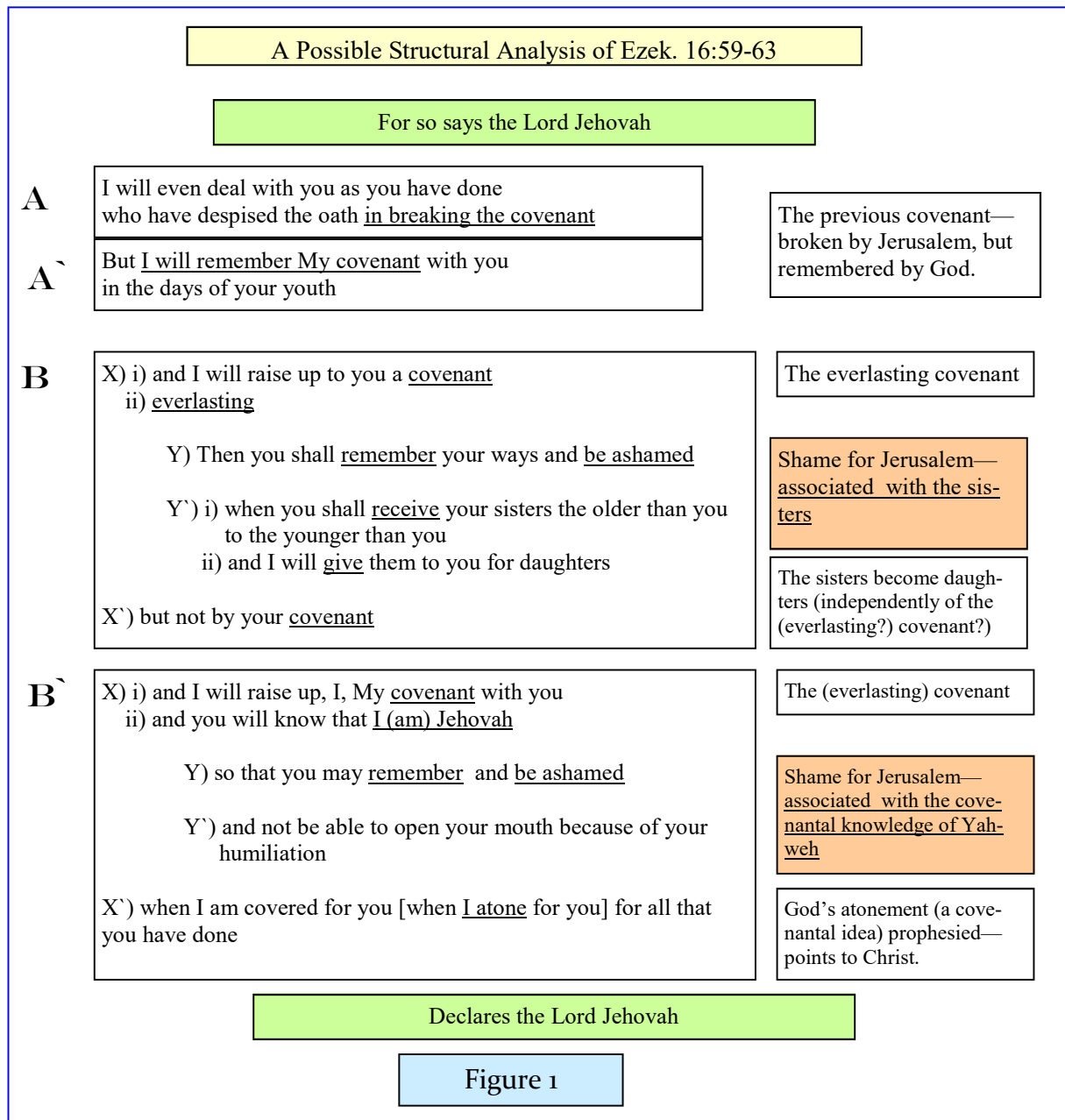
This intriguing expression appears to be capable of some quite different interpretations. On the one hand, the expression is understood to exclude the sisters-become-daughters from Jerusalem’s covenant with God. On the other hand, the sense may be “not apart from thy covenant” - meaning that the sisters/daughters are definitively included in this covenant.)

Another view is that the text infers that there is a covenant in which the sisters/daughters are to be included (i.e. the New Covenant—here called the “everlasting” covenant) but they are not being included in God’s previous covenant with Israel (here called “*thy* (i.e. Jerusalem’s) covenant in the days of thy youth). This is perhaps inferring quite a lot from what is actually contained in the text, but I don’t think it can be ruled out since vs. 60-62 do appear to speak of two covenants. This is the view taken in the notes on Ezek 16:60 regarding the everlasting covenant in the Ligonier *Reformation Study Bible* (ESV Version).

Structurally, this little section of Ezekiel Ch. 16 could be seen to support the view that “thy covenant” in v. 61 is the same as the “everlasting” covenant, rather than the original covenant with Jerusalem “in its youth” (v. 60), although this still leaves open the question of whether inclusion or exclusion for Samaria and Sodom is to be understood.

The proposed structure is indicated in Figure 1 (overleaf) where “and not by thy covenant” is embedded within references to the soon-to-be-established (everlasting) covenant— suggesting that it is this covenant, rather than the earlier “covenant-in-the-days-of-thy-youth”, to which the expression “and not by thy covenant” refers. However, as

already noted, this still leaves open the question of whether Sodom and Samaria are here understood to be included in this covenant. The view in the present article is that they are not being described as included in this passage.



### Some Notes on Figure 1

1) The passage is framed by the two occurrences of “says/declares the Lord Jehovah” which form an *inclusio* (green text boxes in Figure 1).

2) The word “everlasting” in BXii) perhaps corresponds to “knowing Jehovah (Yahweh)” in B'Xii) - the everlasting nature of the covenant corresponding to God's eternal existence and nature as implied by the name Yahweh (Yahweh = I Am Who I

Am).

3) Both B and B' contain information about Jerusalem's shame (orange text boxes in Figure 1). This shame appears, in both B and B' to be linked both to Jerusalem's "sisterhood" (to Sodom and Samaria) and to God's (everlasting) covenant with Jerusalem/Judah. The wording suggests to me however that the emphasis in B is on the "sisterhood", and the emphasis in B' is on the covenant.

4) However, there is a "sisterhood" connection in B'Y' relating to Sodom since the topic of "opening, or rather not opening, the mouth" occurs not only in B'Y' (i.e. verse 63) but also in v. 56. This is actually an ironic connection since in v. 56, Jerusalem was too proud, "in the day of her pride", to "lower herself" by even mentioning Sodom, whereas, in v. 63, Jerusalem is silent for an entirely opposite reason—she is too humiliated and ashamed to speak in the light of God's atonement/covering for Jerusalem! There is possibly a structural connection here too, but I haven't investigated this.

5) Together, B and B' bring home to Jerusalem her degradation on the one hand (by being associated with the sisters-now-become-daughters, and, on the other, the enormous moral distance between herself and Yahweh—the holy God who also, with amazing condescension, makes atonement for her. Jerusalem's mother-daughter relationship with Sodom and Samaria is however, in the view proposed here, a relationship based or predicated upon shame and moral distance from God as opposed to being a relationship *within* the covenant. Hence the "not by thy covenant" in v. 61—at least that is the situation according to the proposed interpretation in this article.

6) In both B and B', references to shame (Y and Y') are "wrapped" within covenant or covenant-associated references (X and X'): structurally, this perhaps emphasises that the (everlasting) covenant is able to "cover" (v. 63) or deal with Jerusalem's sin. Form follows function!

7) Some commentators see the giving of Sodom and Samaria as daughters to Jerusalem as a matter of honour for Jerusalem rather than of shame, and understand "not by thy covenant" to mean "not on the basis of Jerusalem's *keeping* of the covenant" (understood as the Old Covenant) - because they didn't. For example, E. W. Hengstenberg says, "The highest honour is conferred upon Judah by the fact that she receives all her sisters as daughters". The structure shown in Figure 1 however, stresses shame because of the sisters'-become-daughters' inclusion, and honour is not mentioned in this passage. Also, structurally, the covenant referred to would perhaps, as already noted, more likely be the just-mentioned everlasting covenant rather than the Old Covenant.

#### End of Notes on Figure 1

A subtle point with regard to "but not by thy covenant" is that, even if Sodom and Samaria are here not specifically described as included in the (everlasting) covenant (i.e. in this particular passage), this does not necessarily mean that they are excluded from the covenant in reality—rather Ezekiel is here emphasising the covenant with Je-

rusalem/Judah, regardless of other possible beneficiaries. I think this consideration would apply more to Samaria, rather than to Sodom, at least when *actual* Sodom is being considered, because of the difficulty of including *actual* Sodom in the New Covenant.

Commentators are more inclined than translators to see “inclusion” for the sisters/daughters! For example, Christopher Wright in a footnote in his Ezekiel commentary says,

“ . . . It is certainly preferable to read it [the phrase *not from thy covenant*] in a positive inclusive sense, rather than the exclusive sense suggested by the NIV [which translates the phrase as *not on the basis of my covenant with you*], . . . Ezekiel’s whole point is to deny that Israelites have any remaining privilege above and beyond their pagan neighbours”.

D. Block, recognises the difficulty in interpreting the expression, but feels that the view that “Sodom and Samaria will become benefactors [beneficiaries] of this covenant, even though they had no covenantal ties with Jerusalem” best accounts for the words “*thy covenant*”.

However, E. W. Hengstenberg, quoting Johannes Piscator (1546-1625), understands that “not out of this covenant” means, “Not because thou art worthy of such an assemblage of nations, on account of thine observance of the covenant, but of pure favour.”

### Discussion Regarding Sodom—Literal and/or Spiritual Fulfillment?

In the present article, I will be suggesting that whilst God’s giving, and Jerusalem’s receiving, of Jerusalem’s sisters as daughters (v. 61) can possibly indeed point forward to a spiritual, New Covenant fulfillment for the inclusion of Gentile nations, there is also a possible literal, historical fulfillment for actual Sodom and Samaria—a fulfillment which lies outside God’s covenant with Jerusalem/Israel, but which perhaps can be seen as pointing towards the above “spiritual” fulfillment in the way that a type points towards its anti-type. We are perhaps looking here at New Testament teaching on the complicated relationship between the inclusion of Jews and Gentiles in the New Covenant such as is found in e.g. Romans 11:30-32 and Romans 15:8-12. (E. W. Hengstenberg, in his *Christology*, quotes Rom. 11:32 as sharing the same “fundamental thought” as Ezek. 16:53-63.)

We have looked at several interpretations regarding the “restoration of Sodom” in Ezekiel Ch. 16, as well as at some translation issues. A difficulty in interpretation is that Sodom—both the city and its inhabitants - was completely destroyed, and indeed, in the New Testament, (2 Pet. 2:6 and Jude 7) a possible restoration, at least in terms of salvation, for the citizens of Sodom, does not seem to be described. The question arises then whether Sodom *itself* is to be restored in some way, or whether Sodom represents some other entity—such as the heathen nations generally—whose restoration is more readily accounted for in Scripture, and in particular through



Christ and the New Covenant.

This difficulty regarding Sodom is perhaps, though to a lesser extent, also applicable to Samaria since the Northern Kingdom of Israel was not reconstituted as an “entity” after the Exile in the same way as Jerusalem/Judah. However, Hosea, for example, describes restoration for Israel (Israel in the sense of the Northern Tribes) for example using the allegory of Hosea’s wife, albeit after a period of probation, and so does Jeremiah Ch. 3 as already noted. Certainly, the New Testament history of Samaria—both in the Gospel of John and Acts—shows Samaria’s full incorporation into the New Covenant, and the joining of Israel and Judah, represented by two sticks in Ezekiel Ch. 37, is usually interpreted Christologically too (although a fulfillment, at least to some extent, had also occurred after the Exile in the Inter-testamental period. Paul also could speak of the “twelve tribes” in Acts 26:7).

We are thus caught up in profound questions of the interpretation of Old Testament prophecy.

One principle of interpretation of the present passage, mentioned by D. Block, concerns consistency of interpretation. He says,

“Because Ezekiel envisages the restoration of both Jerusalem and Samaria elsewhere (4:4-6; 37:15-22), his announcement regarding these sisters is not entirely strange. However, the promised restoration of Sodom raises several questions. Was Sodom simply being exploited as a rhetorical device, or was the prophet’s prediction to be accepted at face value? Consistency requires that whichever interpretation one adopts, one must interpret the promises of Jerusalem’s and Sodom’s restorations similarly”. (My underlinings S. F.)

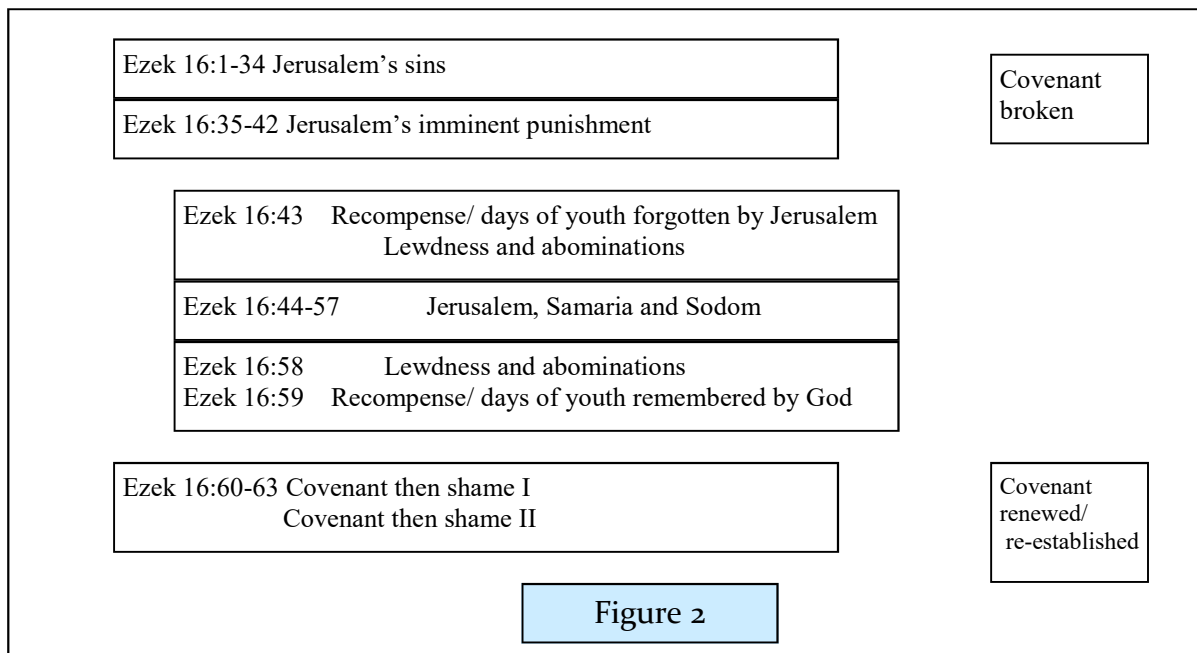
Thus, it may well be that we should look for an “immediate” (“local”) fulfillment in terms of *actual* Jerusalem, Samaria and Sodom as well as at a more distant, Christological fulfillment in terms of Christ and the Church. (The latter fulfillment conforming to the principle, “The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Rev. 19:10)).

I think it is reasonable to expect a soon-to-be-accomplished fulfillment because of the context of the prophecies in Ezekiel regarding Jerusalem’s imminent destruction such as Ezek. 7:8: “Now I will soon pour out my wrath on you . . .” and the parables in Ezek. Ch. 17 which relate to very recent events and to events in the immediate future concerning Judah’s royal family, plus other corresponding examples.

I think that Christopher Wright takes a slightly different approach here. I hope I’ve understood him correctly (please see footnote 44 on p.147 of his helpful BST Ezekiel commentary!) According to my understanding, he sees the prophecy of the restoration of Jerusalem as having i) an immediate historical fulfillment in the post-Exilic rebuilding of Jerusalem as well as ii) transcending this literal fact in the spiritual fulfillment of the messianic age. By contrast, the restoration of Sodom and Samaria are seen as not being literally fulfilled, but, like some other OT prophecies of restoration

which were not literally fulfilled, as being fulfilled in the extension of Israel to include the nations through the New Testament's Gentile mission.

I'm hoping that the interpretation presented in the present article will "work" both literally in the immediate context, and also spiritually in Christ and the Church. To this end, I would suggest that perhaps we can see a transition point around verses 59-60 (please see the very approximate and very partial structural overview in [Figure 2](#) below) where there is a transition from Jerusalem's breaking of the covenant (v. 59) to God remembering this covenant (v. 60a) and establishing an everlasting covenant (v. 60b). The everlasting covenant in v. 60b would point to the Gospel Age, and so I suppose we can suggest two main areas of interpretation for the passage as a whole. In both, aspects of the history of Jerusalem from imminent destruction (587 B. C.) to Israel's incorporation into the New Covenant are presented, but our interpretive question remains as to whether i) Sodom is presented *as* Sodom throughout, or whether ii) Sodom at some point goes from being *actual* Sodom to typologically representing the Gentile nations and their incorporation into the Israel of God in the Church Age (or both).



### Brief Discussion of Some Other Interpretive Issues

#### 1) Sisters or Daughters? (This has been discussed earlier too.)

In verses 44-57, Jerusalem, Samaria and Sodom are described as sisters, but in v. 61, Jerusalem's (unnamed) sisters become daughters. This transition from a "horizontal" relational structure to a "vertical" relational structure could suggest that the sisters are incorporated within Jerusalem, just as the notion of Jerusalem's, Samaria's and Sodom's daughters in vs. 44-56 (as well as Syria's and the Philistines' respective daughters in v. 57) are (presumably) lesser cities dependent on the "mother" city or

region.

The adoption of children (sons and daughters) by Jerusalem is found for example in Isaiah where, Jerusalem, bereaved and forsaken, suddenly finds herself with many (Gentile) children! (e.g. Is. Chs. 54 and 60).

This perhaps suggests that Sodom in Ezek. 16:60-63 might be reasonably understood in a “spiritual”, Christological, interpretation as representing the Gentile nations, (although, paradoxically, not including Sodom itself) in the Church Age and/or the New Covenant people of God. This “positive” view is described by E. W. Hengstenberg as follows:

“The highest honour is conferred upon Judah by the fact that she receives all her sisters as daughters; and she is covered with shame at the thought that she has been honoured in a way so entirely different from what she really deserved.”

E. W. Hengstenberg also quotes Johannes Piscator (1546-1625) as follows:

“Not because thou art worthy of such an assemblage of nations, on account of thine observance of the covenant, but of pure favour”

(Sodom is also, spiritually, identified with Jerusalem in Scripture, and this adds to the multi-faceted relationship between the two cities. e.g. Is. 1:9-10, 3:9, Jer. 23:14, Lam. 4:6, Rev. 11:8).

However, the change from “sisters” to “daughters” for (presumably) Sodom and Samaria in Ezek. Ch. 16 does not appear to be accompanied by any indication of spiritual blessings for the latter. In fact, their transition to “daughterhood” in v. 61 is accompanied by shame for Jerusalem rather than an elevation of Sodom and Samaria. Perhaps we can see here an *inclusio*: Ezek. 16:44-63 begins with the proverb “like mother like daughter” - used in an unflattering way where Jerusalem is the “daughter” - and ends in an unflattering way with Jerusalem, this time as a mother with her daughters. The daughters here appear to have been given to produce shame for Jerusalem—and the closer relationship between mother and daughter than between sisters is used here to emphasise this closeness in character and behaviour. Perhaps then we should see the family relationship as exhibiting the truths that “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23) and “Then what becomes of our [i.e. Jewish] boasting? It is excluded . . .” (Rom. 3:27a).

## 2) Systematic Theology and Biblical Exegesis/Hermeneutics

The turning of the captivity/misery (i.e. the restoration of the fortunes) of Sodom and Samaria) in v. 53, together with their “returning to their former estate” in v. 55 has, as we have seen, been interpreted in Christological terms, and a difficulty has been noted, particularly with regard to Sodom, when interpreting these verses in an immediate, historical context.

I think that systematic theology can perhaps, and with the best of intentions, sometimes “drive” biblical exegesis and interpretation when encountering “difficult” verses and passages (such as the above verses!) When it is not at all clear what a passage is “about”, it is very natural and understandable to try to interpret the passage in terms of what is known from systematic theology, and if a result can be obtained which is consistent with the passage itself, it is often assumed that this systematic theology truth is, perhaps indeed must be, what the passage is teaching.

However, I suggest that this is not necessarily the case. It may be that the passage of Scripture is, in context, emphasising a particular aspect of a Scriptural truth, rather than giving an “exposition” of the “whole” of that truth. The example I like to give is 2 Cor. 8:9: where Paul, in the context of the collection for the saints says that Christ became poor for your (i.e. the Corinthians’) sakes. Here, Paul is presenting a partial truth—Christ actually became poor for all the Elect—but Paul speaks here in a contextually constrained way.

Perhaps in Ezekiel Ch. 16, recognising a historical fulfillment for Sodom has been made difficult by the sort of “assumed” view that, when a “restoration” is spoken of, it must approach the full theological meaning that this wonderful word has in other parts of Scripture, rather than a “contextually constrained” meaning. The situation is perhaps complicated in the present instance since the Septuagint uses the Greek verb related to the noun *apokatastasis* for “will be restored” in v. 55. This word occurs in the expression “the restoration of all things” Acts 3:21 where many commentators believe that this refers to an ultimate eschatological reality (a point of view not supported however in my two volume work, *The Restoration of All Things in Acts 3:21*) This is just a suggestion, and in the next section, I will be tentatively proposing a more limited, “local” meaning which gives a historical fulfillment of verses 53 and 55 of Ezek. Ch. 16 in terms of “actual” Sodom.

### A Possible “Imminent/Historical” Interpretation Regarding Sodom

In Ezek. Ch. 16, there is much that is said about shame, and I suggest this might provide a helpful route for understanding Sodom’s restoration in the local/historical context—i.e. a restoration from a “condition of shame” - a condition which is manifested by being “spoken about with contempt” (or a condition which is so contemptible as to not be spoken about at all!) particularly by Jerusalem (v. 56) as a result of Sodom being judged by God.

Perhaps I could give three examples from other parts of Ezekiel.

In Ezek. Chs 25-32 we have a number of judgements on various nations for being proud and for speaking disrespectfully—typically towards Israel/Judah/the sanctuary etc., when these fell upon hard times (e.g. the Ammonites said “Aha!” when God’s sanctuary was profaned Ezek. 25:3). Also, in Ch. 29, Egypt, and Pharaoh in particular, come under judgement—Pharaoh for his pride (e.g. v. 3), and the nation of Egypt for

being a “staff of reed” to Israel (vs. 6-7).

In Ex. Ch. 31, there is an “Allegory of the Trees” in which Assyria is likened to a proud cedar of Lebanon which is brought down to Sheol, and all the other trees in Sheol—including “trees from Eden” (representing the nations brought down at the same time as Assyria?) – are “comforted” (Ezek. 31:16) because Assyria too has been brought down to the same reduced condition as them. Here, honour and shame, as well as comfort and discomfort appear to be determined on a relative rather than an absolute basis.

Similarly in Ezek. Ch. 32, in a “lamentation” for Egypt, the other nations are languishing in Sheol, and Pharaoh is “comforted” regarding his slain army because their shame is perceived to be lessened when it is shared by all these once great nations.

In both these latter instances the Pharaoh and the nations appear to have the same sorts of “dyadic” personalities as are widely found in these honour-shame cultures. (This personality type—which contrasts with modern Western individualistic personality types - is very greatly concerned with the esteem, or lack of it, in which one is held by others. (Thus, with this “mind-set”, “What I think of myself” is determined largely by “what others think of me”.) It helpfully described in Bruce Malina’s *The New Testament World—Insights from Cultural Anthropology*.)

Here is are two quotations which I recently came across describing that this “mind-set” in the ancient world applied both to men and to cities:

“Just as men and women, in Graeco-Roman society, compared themselves in terms of the honour in which they were held, Jon Lendon argues that precisely the same comparisons of honour were applied to cities” - from Andrew D. Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church*, p. 39, - and he goes on to quote from Jon Lendon as follows:

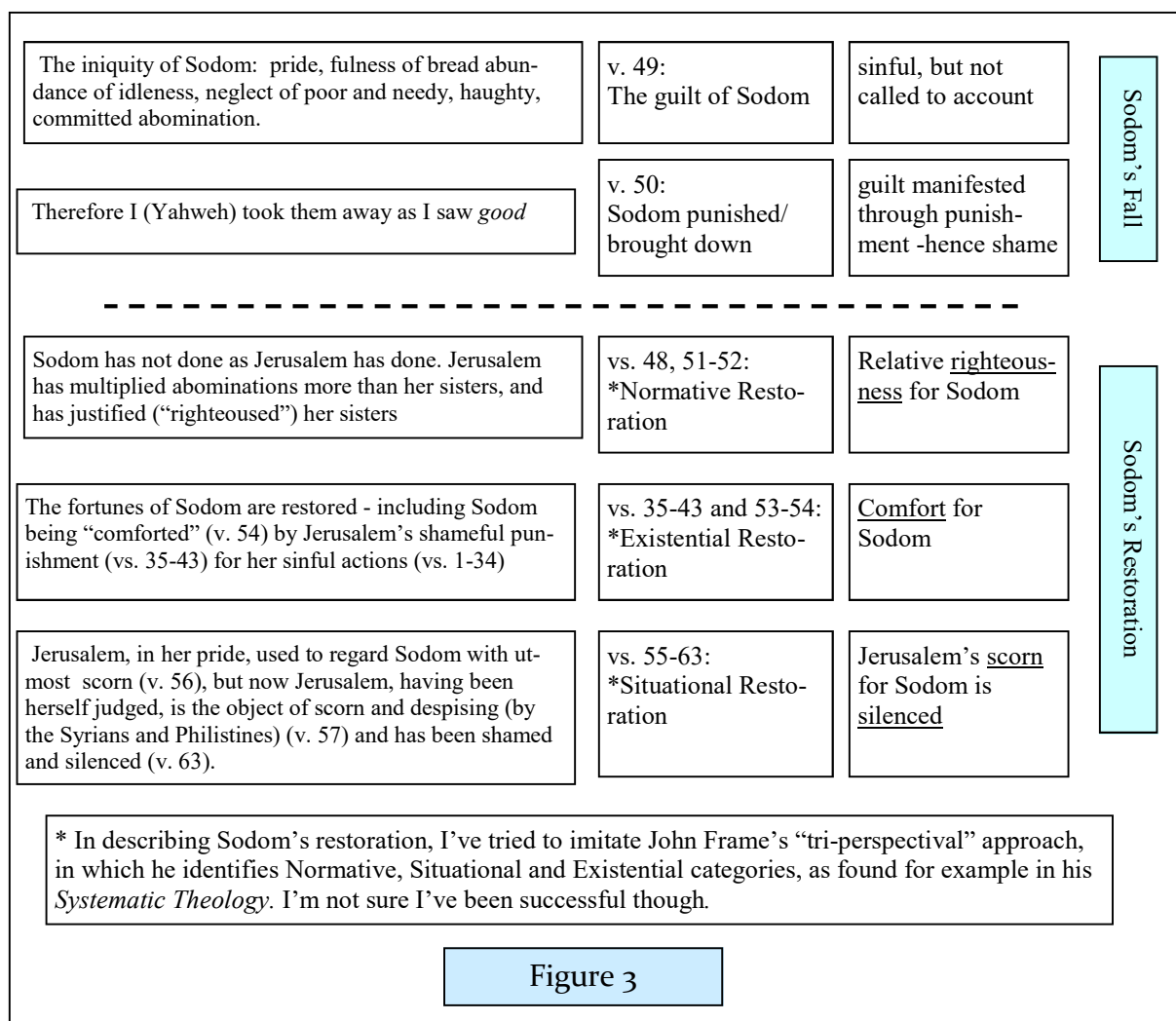
“The key to understanding relations between man and city in the ancient world is the realisation that cities were fully anthropomorphised: they were thought to act just as humans did.” (J. E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour: the Art of Government in the Roman World*.)

Thus, the love of honour produced rivalry between cities in ancient times. Andrew Clarke gives as an example the centuries-long rivalry between Nicomedia and Nicaea as recorded by Dio Chrysostom (c. 40 A.D.—c. 115 A. D.)

It is proposed that Ezekiel Ch. 16, and in particular at the restoration of Sodom, can be viewed as including, *inter alia*, a restoration of honour, as described below.

First of all, we note that the righteousness of Sodom is, at least in Ezek. Ch. 16, a “relative” thing. The guilt of Sodom is described in vs. 49-50, but, because Sodom’s behaviour is not as bad as Jerusalem’s (v. 48), Sodom (and similarly Samaria) appear

righteous, and, Jerusalem because of its terrible behaviour has “intervened” (the Hebrew word *palal* here also means to intercede), in this paradoxical, negative way, on behalf of Sodom and Samaria! Conversely, Jerusalem is to be ashamed and bear its disgrace *because* (v. 52) she has made her sisters appear righteous. It’s a bit like one of those exams where the grades are awarded on a relative, rather than an absolute, basis. There is a sort of “reciprocal relation” between Jerusalem and Sodom in these verses. However, let us first of all look at Sodom’s fall and restoration (Figure 3 below):



Initially, Sodom had “standing” and honour amongst the nations. Then her sin was made manifest through God’s judgement, and, in her resulting loss of status/reputation, particularly in relation to Jerusalem, she experienced shame—shame subsequently ameliorated by Jerusalem’s “fall from grace”

### Sodom “Lives On”

One can ask how Sodom can continue to “exist” (e.g. in the sense of experiencing shame etc.) when she has been destroyed. Certainly her “reputation” aspect lived on,

even though the people themselves were destroyed. But is it just a question of living on through one's "reputation", or is there a more tangible, actual existence to be reckoned with for Sodom? Ezekiel doesn't include Sodom in his "Sheol" sections discussed earlier, but I suppose Sodom could be seen as "living on" in the same sort of way as pharaoh and his destroyed Egyptian army, or Assyria (all of which were seen as inhabiting Sheol) as well as in the "reputational" sense. At any rate, the dead of the nations of Egypt and Assyria are seen within Ezekiel "prophetic world" as "living on" both in Sheol and, in the reputational sense, in the eyes and minds of peoples and nations still alive. An interesting verse in this connection is in God's judgement on Ammon (Ezek. 25:7b—"I will destroy you. Then you will know that I am the Lord". Here, "destroy" is equated with "becoming plunder", "being cut off" and "being made to perish". Despite all this, there was still enough of an existence for Ammon for them to "know that I am the Lord".)

Well, Sodom, as already noted, is not described as descending to Sheol—but rather to being "removed" (Heb. *sur* in the *Hiphil* derived stem) (v. 50). This is rather non-specific compared with "descending to Sheol". However, I think that the ongoing existence of Sodom after its destruction is taught in the New Testament—in fact, the teaching here is even more explicit than Ezekiel's references to Sheol (which may have non-literal, poetic, metaphorical or even ironic aspects in relation to Assyria, and the Egyptians—after all, the "trees of Eden" were also said to descend to Sheol in Ezekiel). Thus, we have Jesus' words in Matthew 11:23-24:

*"And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day."*

*But I say unto you, That it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgement, than for thee"*

It seems to me then that Sodom does have an ongoing existence, and that, compared with, in this case, Capernaum, it has "relative righteousness". This seems analogous to Ezekiel's insistence that Sodom is more righteous than Jerusalem: even though Jerusalem/Judah will be restored, Ezekiel makes it clear that Jerusalem's shame for its own past failings (and what Jerusalem, intrinsically *is* without God's grace) will ensure that it does not thereafter speak against Sodom, but remains silent—a tacit admission of the truth of Ezekiel's original charge.

I have already suggested that "restoration" - in all its aspects - for the three cities is a "relative" term: the cities did not all start "from the same place", and the restoration for each, at least in the "imminent/historical" sense, should them perhaps be understood relative to their respective starting points. In the case of Jerusalem, this included, pre-eminently, Jerusalem/Judah's covenantal status with God—something which Sodom never had.

Samaria perhaps is an "in-between" case since Israel historically departed from Judah, but a restoration, a return, to Judah, and to covenant privileges, is prophesied in

many places in Old Testament prophecy. Samaria is not considered in as much detail in Ezekiel Ch. 16 as Sodom, but Ezekiel reverts to a detailed, and shocking, analysis of the sisters Samaria and Jerusalem in Ezek. Ch. 23, and many of the prophecies of restoration in the latter part of Ezekiel are expressed in terms of Israel which is a “wider” category than Judah alone. (An example is Ezek. Ch. 35 in which God is indignant because of Mount Seir’s (Edom’s) enmity against “the two countries” (v. 10) (i.e. Judah and Israel—the latter being understood as the Northern kingdom)—but in both of which countries “the Lord was there” (v. 10).) The term Israel clearly has several “referents” in Scripture!

This article started out by quoting Ezek. 16:53 and 55. In both of these verses there is the suggestion (depending on the translation) that the restoration of Jerusalem is somehow dependent on, and perhaps even follows, the restoration of Sodom and Samaria. This is certainly the case for the AV translation. Although he does not interpret these verses in the way proposed in the present article, Christopher Wright recognises the likelihood of this “dependence”. For example, he says (p. 147),

“The restoration of Israel will take place alongside the restoration of Samaria and Sodom. In fact, in 16:53 and 55 their restoration is mentioned first, with that of Israel almost as an afterthought!”

I have suggested that there is a “reciprocal” relationship between Jerusalem and Sodom—that Sodom is restored in terms of relative righteousness when Jerusalem is judged, and that Sodom is restored in terms of comfort and reputation when Jerusalem is shamed and silenced. According to this view, Jerusalem, judged, shamed and silenced is *now* in a position to be restored by the “everlasting covenant” of vs. 60-62, but this restoration to the covenant is now accompanied by a suitable sense of shame, and the restoration happens, not by human works, but by God’s atoning mercy (v. 63). What becomes of boasting? It is excluded, and all the glory is God’s.

## Conclusion

I have tried to present an interpretation of the restoration of Sodom in Ezekiel Ch. 16 in a way that sees Sodom as the actual city and people that was destroyed. I do not think that this prevents a simultaneous Christological/New Covenant interpretation in which Sodom has an ideal character, representing Gentile nations. Although he understands the restoration of *actual* Sodom differently, E. W. Hengstenberg recognises such a dual fulfillment for the restoration of Sodom. Many commentators however (e.g. Christopher Wright) see the restoration primarily, or even exclusively, in ideal, Christological and New Covenant terms. Christopher Wright defends this view in an extended footnote on p. 147 of his commentary.

I present the proposed interpretation with much trepidation, recognising that it is rather different from current interpretations, and in the hope that readers with more insight than me will kindly correct this interpretation should it prove to be wide of the mark.