

וְאֲנִי לֹא אֶחָדָם עַל-
הָעֵינַיִם הַגְּדוֹלִים אֲשֶׁר
יֵשׁ-בָּהֶם הַרְבֵּה מִמֶּנִּי



Journal of
HEBREW SCRIPTURES



VOLUME 21 | ARTICLE 1

LAURA QUICK

*Art, Aesthetics and the Dynamics of
Visuality in Ezekiel 23*

Articles in JHS are being indexed in the ATLA Religion Database, RAMBI, and BiBIL. Their abstracts appear in Religious and Theological Abstracts. The journal is archived by Library and Archives Canada and is accessible for consultation and research at the Electronic Collection site maintained by Library and Archives Canada.

ISSN 1203-1542 <http://www.jhsonline.org> and <http://purl.org/jhs>

ART, AESTHETICS AND THE DYNAMICS OF VISUALITY IN EZEKIEL 23¹

LAURA QUICK
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

For a tradition known for its aniconism, there are a surprising number of references to the plastic arts in the Hebrew Bible. We might recall the image of God as a sculptor who fashions Adam from the soil of the ground in Gen 2:7.² The golden calf is said to be crafted from earrings taken directly from the bodies of Israelite women and children in Exodus 32.³ And the great statue of Nebuchadnezzar, erected in Daniel 3, looms larger than life in that narrative.⁴ In the case of these latter two images, the statues clearly have a religious function, and the response of the characters in the text is to “bow down” and “pay homage” to the objects.⁵ Relatedly, it has sometimes been claimed that “art” did not exist in the world which shaped the Hebrew Bible.⁶ This

¹ With thanks to Paul Collins, Emma Greensmith, Ekaterina E. Kozlova and Ellena Lyell for helpful conversations as I was thinking about this piece.

² The verb יצר means “to form” or “to fashion”; the related noun יוצר refers to a potter in Jer 18:2–4.

³ The verb used to describe the process of making the calf, צור, means “to cast out of metal,” e.g. in 1 Kgs 7:15, where it refers to the production of two bronze pillars for the decoration of the tabernacle. Though this calf is described as an מטכה, “molten image,” this need not imply that the calf was solid gold; the same term is used in Isa 30:22 for gold plating. Here in Exod 32:4, Aaron uses a חרט, “stylus,” to engrave the gold: it is explicitly a crafted and worked image.

⁴ To this small sampling of visual artifice, we might add the icon parodies of Isaiah 40–48, Jeremiah 10, Pss 115:4–7 and 135:15–17; as well as the descriptions of the dwelling of God in the tabernacle (Exodus 25–32, 35–40), the Jerusalem temple (1 Kings 6–9), and the “future” temple described in Ezekiel 40–48.

⁵ In Exodus 32, the Israelites engage in a number of practices in response to the calf which must be interpreted cultically: a pilgrim’s feast, burnt offerings and peace offerings, “playing” (vv. 5–6), as well as bowing down before it (v. 8). While these are voluntary responses, Nebuchadnezzar requires that all peoples, nations and language groups “*must* bow down and pay homage to the golden statue” (Dan 3:4–5).

⁶ Denying the existence of art and aesthetics in the Hebrew Bible are Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (trans. James D. Martin; London: SCM, 1972), 430; Claus Westermann, “Das Schöne im Alten Testament,” in *Erträge der Forschung am Alten Testament: Gesammelte Studien*, ed. Rainer Albertz and Claus Westermann (3 vols.; Munich: Kaiser, 1984),

relates to a definition of art common in modern Western aesthetics in which a work must be divorced from any contextual function or utility. According to this view, art must be produced for art's sake alone. Since the works of visual culture that have been recovered from the ancient milieu have clear functional contexts, be these religious or otherwise, scholars have found it problematic to approach these remains in terms of "art" or "aesthetics." Yet as Irene Winter has argued, this specific evaluation of art is itself largely a product of eighteenth-century philosophical inquiry, and we must endeavour to instead recover contemporary values and experiences when assessing ancient visual culture.⁷ Clearly many of the visual images that were produced throughout the ancient Near East were supposed to be "visually affective and emotionally affecting," even as they had a practical function.⁸

Thus while we may therefore feel justified in using the term *art* when speaking of the descriptions of crafted objects in biblical literature, it is actually very rarely the case that the Hebrew Bible provides insights into what we might call *aesthetics*: the human response to these artistic endeavours. Characters may bow down to crafted works produced for clearly religious contexts, but their aesthetic response to and judgements upon these works are not preserved for us. One important exception is found in Oholibah's response to the carved images of Chaldean officers in Ezekiel 23. Whereas her sister Oholah sees and engages in sexual activity with real Assyrian warriors, Oholibah is attracted and responds to a work of plastic art:

3:479–97; and James A. Martin, *Beauty and Holiness: The Dialogue Between Aesthetics and Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 9. In contrast, there is a growing body of scholarship which insists upon the existence of art and iconography in ancient Israel, see esp. Othmar Keel, *Jahwes Entgegnung an Ijob: eine Deutung von Ijob 38–41 vor dem Hintergrund der zeitgenössischen Bildkunst*, FRLANT 121 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978); Urs Winter, *Frau und Göttin: Exegetische und ikonographische Studien zum weiblichen Gottesbild im alten Israel und in dessen Umwelt*, OBO 53 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983); Silvia Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder: Nachrichten von darstellender Kunst im Alten Testament*, OBO 74 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987); and Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Göttinnen, Götter und Gottessymbole: Neue Erkenntnisse zur Religionsgeschichte Kanaans und Israels aufgrund bislang unerschlossener ikonographischer Quellen* QD 134 (Freiburg: Herder, 1997).

⁷ Irene J. Winter, "Aesthetics in Ancient Mesopotamian Art," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1995), IV: 2569–80. See further Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria*, Archaeology, Culture and Society (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 13–49; idem, *The Infinite Image: Art, Time and the Aesthetic Dimension in Antiquity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014).

⁸ For this definition of art, see Irene J. Winter, "Defining 'Aesthetics' for Non-Western Studies: The Case of Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies*, ed. Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (Williamstown: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2002), 3–28 (11).

She saw men carved on the wall, images of the Chaldeans carved in bright red, wearing belts on their waists and flowing turbans on their heads, all of them looking like officers, the image of Babylonians whose native land is Chaldea. When she saw them, she lusted after them and sent messengers to them in Chaldea. The Babylonians crawled into bed with her (Ezek 23:14–17).⁹

Previous scholarship has focussed upon the historical realities which informed this metaphorical image of the relationship between Judah and Babylon, in which Judah is personified as God's unfaithful wife.¹⁰ Scholars have discussed the nature of the punishment that Oholibah undergoes as a result of her adultery,¹¹ as well as the "alluring" bodies and "good looks" of the Chaldeans depicted in the passage.¹² But highlighting the *aesthetic* dimensions inherent to Ezekiel 23 underscores interesting and hitherto underexplored features to do with the dynamics of seeing art in this passage. Ezekiel 23 describes a work of visual art and the response of the female viewer upon seeing this object. On the one hand, this is perhaps not surprising in the context of the book of Ezekiel: scholars have often noted the explicit evocation of visuality in this text.¹³ Yet if we place Ezekiel 23 and its carved

⁹ English Bible translations are based on the New English Translation (NET), with alterations where necessary. Verse enumeration follows the Hebrew Bible.

¹⁰ Suggestions for the dating of the chapter range from the mid seventh century BCE to the period just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. For discussion see Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 482–83. On the marriage metaphor, see for example Julie Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh's Wife*, SBLDS 130 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992); Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, "The Metaphorization of Women in Prophetic Speech: An Analysis of Ezekiel 23," *VT* 43 (1993): 162–70; and Holly Morse, "'Judgement was Executed Upon Her, and She Became a Byword Among Women' (Ezek. 23:10): Divine Revenge Porn, Slut-Shaming, Ethnicity, and Exile in Ezekiel 16 and 23," in *Women and Exilic Identity in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Katherine E. Southwood and Martien A. Halvorson-Taylor (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 129–54.

¹¹ For a discussion and critique of the claim that the stripping of the woman connects her to punishment for adultery, see Peggy L. Day, "Adulterous Jerusalem's Imagined Demise: Death of a Metaphor in Ezekiel XVI," *VT* 50 (2000): 285–309.

¹² According to Tracy M. Lemos, the Chaldeans "are soldiers alluring in their officer's dress." See "The Emasculation of Exile: Hypermasculinity and Feminization in the Book of Ezekiel," in *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, ed. Brad E. Kelle, Frank Ritzel Ames and Jacob L. Wright, AIL 10 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011), 377–93 (379). S. Tamar Kamionkowski argues that "Ezekiel goes to great lengths to show that these lovers bear all the standard markers of masculinity: sexual potency and virility, good looks, professional success and physical strength." See *Gender Reversal and Cosmic Chaos: A Study on the Book of Ezekiel*, JSOTSup, 368 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 140.

¹³ See esp. Christoph Uehlinger, "Virtual Vision vs. Actual Show:

images into the larger context of descriptions of visual phenomena in the book of Ezekiel and the Hebrew Bible, we find that the description of the officers is conspicuously underdeveloped. For all of the scholarly discussion of these “alluring” bodies, the text itself does not develop them beyond their colour, belts and headgear. The reader perceives Oholibah viewing the objects but cannot really share in this experience to perceive what she herself observes in them. At the same time, this image of a woman viewing and in particular responding to an artistic object is itself a subversion of larger strategies found in the Hebrew Bible for describing the erotic gaze, where men are most commonly the active agents in viewing and women the passive objects to be viewed.¹⁴

In this essay, I explore Ezekiel 23 as a text about art and aesthetics. As an *aesthetic response* to an artistic endeavour, I argue that the description of Oholibah’s act of viewing must be placed within the larger context of strategies for verbalizing visual phenomena in biblical literature and especially the book of Ezekiel. In so doing, I uncover the role of visual perspectives and especially the dynamics of the gaze that are essential to understanding this passage. And as a *work of art*, the carved Chaldean officers must be understood within larger ancient Near Eastern artistic conventions. These artistic conventions help us to unpack what the ancient audience would have understood Oholibah to have viewed and responded to, and hence are important for properly comprehending her actions and their implications. The convergence of these distinct but related focuses therefore allows us to reassess Oholibah’s act of viewing art and its role in Ezekiel 23.

VERBALIZING VISUALITY IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

The term *ekphrasis* is used by modern scholars to denote a verbal description of a work of art that interrupts the larger temporal

Strategies of Visualization in the Book of Ezekiel,” *WO* 45 (2015): 62–84.

¹⁴ See J. Cheryl Exum, *Art as Biblical Commentary: Visual Criticism from Hagar the Wife of Abraham to Mary the Mother of Jesus* LHBOTS 676 (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 118, n. 3: “The female body is the quintessential object of the look in Western art, and equally popular, it would seem, in literature.” This is in common with the wider ancient eastern Mediterranean. In particular, we might promote Ezekiel 23 as the anti-type to the numerous tales that existed in the ancient Greek world in which a male develops an unhealthy erotic fascination with a female statue. On this motif, see Ruby Blondell, *Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 20–21. On the concept of the gaze in visual cultural studies, see Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 125–62; Margaret Rose Olin, “Gaze,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 318–29; and Gülru Necipoğlu, “The Scrutinizing Gaze in the Aesthetics of Islamic Visual Cultures: Sight, Insight, and Desire,” in *Gazing Otherwise: Modalities of Seeing in and Beyond the Lands of Islam*, ed. Olga Bush and Avinoam Shalem, *Muqarnas* 32 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 23–61.

flow of a narrative. This is in fact different from the way in which the term was first employed in antiquity. The Alexandrian sophist Aelius Theon, who provided the first technical description of ekphrasis in the first century CE, described the phenomenon as “descriptive language that brings the things being demonstrated into sight.”¹⁵ This certainly could be a work of art, but could also include persons, places and events. By providing a thick description of the subject matter, ekphrasis appeals to the senses, utilizing language to try and make the audience visualize the described scene. Though the technical description of ekphrasis does not emerge until the Second Sophistic, these later theorists provided a vocabulary for a literary technique that emerged much earlier than and independently from its explicit theorization.¹⁶ Thus the description of the shield of Achilles, found in Homer’s *Iliad*, is often given as the earliest known example of ekphrasis in ancient Greek literature.¹⁷ Starting from the shield’s centre and moving outwards, the shield is described in painstaking detail, and the visual is therefore rendered in verbal form.¹⁸

Ekphrasis thus describes a rhetorical technique for exploring visuality in verbal media, and scholars of ancient Near Eastern texts have also adopted the term to describe similar strategies of thick description in literature from the wider eastern Mediterranean.¹⁹ In the Hebrew Bible, a number of descriptive texts have been explored in these terms. The *wasf* denotes a type of descriptive poem which takes its name from a genre of Arabic love poetry, but which commentators have also found helpful to describe a phenomenon found in much earlier ancient Near Eastern texts.²⁰ In a *wasf*, body parts are listed and described according to an organising principle that develops its contents *a capite ad calcem*, beginning with the head and proceeding down the

¹⁵ Theon, *Prog.* 11.

¹⁶ Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 2–3.

¹⁷ See Andrew Sprague Becker, *The Shield of Achilles and the Poetics of Ekphrasis* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 2: “This description is at the head of a long tradition of ekphrasis.”

¹⁸ Homer, *Il.*, 18.478–608.

¹⁹ On ekphrasis in Sumerian literature, see J. Cale Johnson, “Demarcating Ekphrasis in Mesopotamia,” *Visualising the Invisible with the Human Body: Physiognomy and Ekphrasis in the Ancient World*, ed. in J. Cale Johnson and Alessandro Stavru (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 11–39. On ekphrasis in ancient Levantine narrative, including Ugaritic epic poetry and the Hebrew Bible, see Cory Crawford, “The Question of Ekphrasis in Ancient Levantine Narrative,” in *Visualising the Invisible with the Human Body: Physiognomy and Ekphrasis in the Ancient World*, ed. J. Cale Johnson and Alessandro Stavru (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 285–320. Crawford defines ekphrasis in the modern sense, as “words about art objects, real or otherwise” (285).

²⁰ See already Wolfram Hermann, “Gedanken zur Geschichte des altorientalischen Beschreibungsliedes,” *ZAW* 75 (1963): 176–96. On the Arabic genre, see Akiko Motoyoshi Sumi, *Description in Classical Arabic Poetry: Wasf, Ekphrasis, and Interarts Theory*, *Journal of Arabic Literature Supplements* 25 (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

body. In ancient Near Eastern literature, the *Göttertypentexte* describe divine cult statues following this principle.²¹ In fact, it has been suggested that the biblical *awašf* may have developed from these earlier descriptions of cult statues in the ancient Near East.²² Thus we might argue that the *wašf* unites the two definitions of ekphrasis, ancient and modern: this literary paradigm for visualizing the body beautiful is informed by a poetic strategy for describing artistic phenomena. The best-known examples from biblical literature occur in the Song of Songs: 4:1–7; 5:11–16; 6:4–7; 7:2–10.²³ Other full or partial lists of body parts can be found in Isa 30:27–28; 32:3–6; Ezek 1:5–13, 26–28; Pss 115:5–7; 135:16–17; Prov 6:12–15, 17; and Dan 2:32–33.²⁴ In each of

²¹ On the *Göttertypentexte*, see Beate Pongratz-Leisten, “Imperial Allegories: Divine Agency and Monstrous Bodies in Mesopotamia’s Body Description Texts,” in *The Materiality of Divine Agency*, ed. Beate Pongratz-Leisten and Karen Sonik, Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Records, 8 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 119–41 (esp. 125–27). In fact, a variety of Sumerian and Akkadian literary genres favour head-to-toe organization for systematic descriptions of the body, both divine and human. For example, the Old Babylonian vocabulary list Ugu-mu (“my skull”) collects together vocabulary relating to the body for use in scribal curriculum. In the Sumerian myth of *Inanna’s Descent to the Netherworld* (ll. 129–60) and the Akkadian version *Ištar’s Descent to the Netherworld* (ll. 42–63), the head-to-toe order is used to reflect upon the progressive loss of the deity’s power. Medical texts also utilize the head-to-toe description as part of healing incantations. Divination texts which draw upon anatomical observation similarly make use of head-to-toe organization. For a discussion of these and other examples, see M. Erica Couto-Ferreira, “From Head to Toe: Listing the Body in Cuneiform Texts,” in *The Comparable Body: Analogy and Metaphor in Ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Greco-Roman Medicine*, ed. John Z. Wee, Studies in Ancient Medicine 49 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 43–71.

²² Wilfred G.E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 353. For biblical examples, see Pss 115:4–7 and 135:16–17. In Song 5:10–16, the description of a male body makes use of stone and metal imagery reminiscent of descriptions of divine cult statues. See recently F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp and Elaine T. James, “The Ekphrastic Figure(s) in Song 5:10–16,” *JBL* 138 (2019): 297–323. Othmar Keel connects the body imagery in the Song to Egyptian statuary. See *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Frederick J. Gaiser (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

²³ For discussion of the *awašf* in the Song, see Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 7C (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 54–58, 67; Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 232, 269–78; and Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 22–24.

²⁴ See Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 353–56. A number of other possible biblical examples are discussed by David Bernat, “Biblical *Wašfs* Beyond Song of Songs,” *JSOT* 28 (2004): 327–49. In the texts from the Dead Sea, we find an Aramaic example of the *wašf* in the description of Sarai from the Genesis Apocryphon. The dignitaries of Pharaoh describe Sarai’s beauty, beginning with her hair and moving downwards. On 1QapGen^{ar} 20 2–6 as a *wašf*, see M.H. Goshen-Gottstein, “Philologische Miszellen zu den Qumrantexten,” *RevQ* 2 (1959–60): 43–51; and followed by Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Genesis*

the biblical *avāšf*, the body parts are described in a movement descending downwards; Song 7:2–10 is exceptional in that the description moves from bottom to top.²⁵ Thus, Song 4:1–7 describes the body of the Beloved, starting with the woman’s head:

Your **eyes** behind your veil are like doves.

Your **hair** is like a flock of female goats

descending from Mount Gilead.

Your **teeth** are like a flock of newly-shorn sheep

coming up from the washing place;

each of them has a twin,

and not one of them is missing.

Your **lips** are like a scarlet thread;

your **mouth** is lovely.

Your **cheek** behind your veil

is like a slice of pomegranate.

Your **neck** is like the tower of David

built with courses of stones;

one thousand shields are hung on it—

all shields of valiant warriors.

Your two **breasts** are like two fawns,

twins of the gazelle

grazing among the lilies.

[...]

Apocryphon of Qumran Cave I (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1971), 119–20.

²⁵ This downward movement is not always truly linear: in Song 4:1–7, for example, the direction develops from eyes to hair to teeth (vv. 1–2). Nevertheless, the directionality is still ultimately descending downwards, and so the poet goes on to describe the Beloved’s neck (v. 4) and breasts (v. 5). The poet might also choose to highlight a particular aspect of the body by presenting it out of order, for example in Song 5:10–16, which begins by describing the male lover’s head and its various features (vv. 11–13), before going on to his arms, abdomen (v. 14) and legs (v. 15). However, the poet ends by interrupting the downward movement with an out-of-place body part: the lover’s mouth (v. 16). This rhetorical strategy allows the poet to connect the lover and his body to conceptions of sweetness, taste and the desires of the appetite: the lover’s mouth is described as **ממתקים**, with the plural form of the noun **מתק**, “sweetness,” functioning as a predicate nominative relative to the singular subjective nominative (**חכו**, “his mouth”), and thus as a plural of intensity: “his mouth is *very* sweet.” By highlighting aspects of taste and sweetness through the focus on the lover’s mouth, the poet can conclude of the lover’s body as a whole that “all of him is desirable (**מחמדים**).”

You are altogether beautiful, my darling!

There is no blemish in you!²⁶

The poet systematically lists and describes the components that make up the Beloved's body, declaring the beauty and perfection of each part: thus he can declare "you are *altogether* beautiful."²⁷ At the same time, the introductory demonstrative particle הַנִּה, "behold," often used alongside verbs of seeing, invites the addressee to *look* at the Beloved's body: with this term, "the poet directs the reader's gaze."²⁸ Extensive description coupled with the explicit instruction to look make these *wasf* strongly visual: a top-to-toe and physically-framed representation of the body draws the visual perspective from head to toe, casting the reader as an observer.²⁹ The *wasf* can thus be understood as a form of ekphrasis, bringing the bodies of the Hebrew Bible into greater relief.

Bodies, then, are a particularly appropriate site for verbalizing the visual. But beyond the *wasf* of biblical literature, ekphrastic techniques are drawn upon to describe other beautiful and desirable objects. According to Cory Crawford, the most detailed descriptions found in the Hebrew Bible—if not all of ancient literature—are those concerning the dwelling of Yahweh in the temple of Jerusalem in Exodus 25–32, 35–40, 1 Kings 6–9 and Ezekiel 40–48. Ezekiel's vision of the future temple in chapters 40–48 is thus replete with "extraordinarily detailed descriptions that ostensibly slow the plot but structure the works in which they are embedded, and more important, exhibit . . . explicit interest in visual representation."³⁰ The use of elaborate description in the book of Ezekiel has been well observed in scholarship, and evaluations of the literary merits of this technique have not always been favourable. The extensive description of Tyre as ship in Ezekiel 27, for example, has been considered "stylistically monotonous and dry."³¹ But recognizing this

²⁶ On the enigmatic body metaphors developed in the Song, see recently Brian P. Gault, *Body as Landscape, Love as Intoxication: Conceptual Metaphors in the Song of Songs*, AIL 36 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019).

²⁷ On the *wasf* as a rhetorical device for demonstrating perfection and totality, see Jacqueline Vayntrub, "Tyre's Glory and Demise: Totalizing Description in Ezekiel 27," *CBQ* 82 (2020): 214–36.

²⁸ J. Cheryl Exum, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 112.

²⁹ On the role of visuality in the body descriptions of the Song, see Elaine T. James, *Landscapes of the Song of Songs: Poetry and Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 118–50; and Exum, *The Song of Songs*, 22–24.

³⁰ Crawford, "The Question of Ekphrasis," 307. See also Mark K. George, "Israelite Aniconism and the Visualization of the Tabernacle," *Journal of Religion & Society* 8 (2012): 40–54, who connects the strategy of thick description in the temple report texts to aniconism: the detailed descriptions of the deity's dwelling allows the reader to visualise something closely associated with God, while at the same time remaining observant of the prohibition on images of the deity. As such, they are an explicit attempt to render the visual in verbal form.

³¹ Georg Fohrer, *Ezechiel*, HAT 13 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1955),

technique as ekphrastic shifts the scholarly evaluation: as Jacqueline Vayntrub has argued, such descriptions exploit the rhetorical function of what she calls “totalizing description,” description that aims at encompassing the whole.³² Ezekiel’s extensive descriptions are also framed around explicit sight language: in the temple vision of chapters 40–48, for example, God instructs the prophet: “Mortal, *look* with your eyes . . . everything that I *show* you, for you have been brought here so that I can *show* it to you. Tell the house of Israel everything you *see*” (40:4). Ezekiel’s use of thick description can thus be understood as ekphrastic, providing a verbal representation of visual phenomena and in so doing bringing both the flawlessly crafted temple (Chs. 40–48) and the “perfectly beautiful” ship (27:3) into sight: “a clear attempt to make the audience see what the prophet saw.”³³

Placing Ezekiel 23 and the description of the crafted Chaldean officers into this context reveals something significant about the larger strategy of this pericope. Though Ezekiel 23 is a text that engages with visual art, its descriptive language is explicitly *not* ekphrastic. The description of these officers develops them only in minimal terms, highlighting aspects of their dress (belts, turbans) and colour (red) but otherwise not developing these descriptions any further. While not all texts about images can be claimed as ekphrasis in the ancient sense, given the larger use of the strategy of ekphrasis in the book of Ezekiel, the silence of the prophet about the appearance of these Chaldean officers is significant. Though elsewhere the audience might be granted access to “see what the prophet saw,” here we cannot see with Oholibah. For all of the scholarly discussion upon the “alluring” bodies and “good looks” of these officers, it is impossible to conclude from the text alone that this is what Oholibah had in sight. Oholibah’s visual perspective is denied to us, and the audience cannot share in her act of viewing.

VISUAL PERSPECTIVES IN EZEKIEL 23

Thus far I have argued that Ezekiel 23 must be understood as a text about seeing art. Yet the text utilizes a strategy of denied visual perspectives so that the audience cannot share in this act of viewing: we cannot collude with Oholibah’s gaze and accordingly have no sympathy or understanding for her subsequent actions. At the same time, this textual strategy also serves to highlight the agency of this female character: through the lens of the text, we observe her looking, desiring and acting upon those desires. By further considering the dynamics of seeing in biblical literature, the unusual agency of this character is brought into greater relief: Oholibah’s gaze must be brought into dialogue with the concept of the male gaze that frames her act of viewing.

The idea of the “male gaze” was first coined by Laura Mulvey, who drew upon the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund

156; cited in Vayntrub, “Tyre’s Glory and Demise,” 221.

³² Vayntrub, “Tyre’s Glory and Demise,” 215–17.

³³ Crawford, “The Question of Ekphrasis,” 311.

Freud and Jacques Lacan to analyse Hollywood films for the patriarchal structures embedded within their visual language. In these films, women are positioned as the passive objects of an active male gaze, both for the male characters on screen and the male audience watching them.³⁴ This structure is not unique to cinema but in fact reflects the positioning of women as objects in works of art more generally.³⁵ Subsequently, scholars of both ancient and modern texts have found this concept helpful to analyse the gendering of the gaze in literature. In biblical studies, a number of related phenomena have been explored in this way: for example, the treatment of naked female bodies in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea,³⁶ or the motif of women bathing in the stories of Bathsheba and Susanna.³⁷ In fact, the use of the *našf* to describe the body of the Beloved might also be understood in this context: providing arguably the most visual representation of a body in biblical literature, the top-to-toe physical frame of these *anašf* constructs beauty as passivity, as being viewed from head to toe.³⁸ While the value for biblical studies of the use of

³⁴ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (1975): 6–18.

³⁵ See esp. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972).

³⁶ Jeremiah 13:26–27; Ezek 16:28–39; 23:28–39; Hos 2:3–10. See Athalya Brenner, "On Jeremiah and the Poetics of (Prophetic?) Pornography," *European Judaism* 26 (1993): 9–14; idem, "Pornoprophetics Revisited: Some Additional Reflections," *JOT* 70 (1996): 63–86; and Mary E. Shields, "Multiple Exposures: Body Rhetoric and Gender Characterization in Ezekiel 16," *JFSR* 14 (1998): 5–18.

³⁷ Sus 1:15–21; 2 Sam 11:2–4. See Exum, *Art as Biblical Commentary*, 117–67; Jennie Grillo, "Showing Seeing in Susanna: The Virtue of the Text," *Prooftexts* 35 (2015): 250–70; Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, "Biblical Bathing Beauties and the Manipulation of the Male Gaze: What Judith Can Tell Us about Bathsheba and Susanna," *JFSR* 33 (2017): 55–72; and Anne Létourneau, "Beauty, Bath and Beyond: Framing Bathsheba as a Royal Fantasy in 2 Sam 11,1–5," *SJOT* 32 (2018): 72–91. This image is shared by a variety of ancient Jewish texts, see also Jub. 33:2–4; T. Reu. 3:11–15. The motif of female bathing attracting the erotic gaze of the male goes all the way back to Mesopotamian precedents, employed in the narratives of Enlil, Enki and Ereshkigal. See Neal H. Walls, *Desire, Discord and Death: Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Myth* (Boston: ASOR, 2001), 21–22, 35; and Gwendolyn Leick, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature* (London: Routledge, 1994), 21–54, 249–53.

³⁸ On the dynamics of the male gaze in the Song, see Donald C. Polanski, "What Will Ye See in the Shulammitte? Women, Power, and Panopticism in the Song of Songs," *BibInt* 5 (1997): 64–81. Song 4:1–7; 6:4–7; and 7:2–10 provide descriptions of a female body through the perspective of her male lover. On the other hand, in Song 5:11–16 the female lover describes the body of the male. While this might appear to be a straightforward subversion of the male gaze in the Song, there are notable differences to the ways in which the male and female bodies are couched in these *anašf*. The descriptions of the female's body are highly erotic. For example, Song 7:2–10 makes use of *double entendre* to craft the woman's body. The poem reverses the typical directionality of the *našf* from head-to-toe, in so doing highlighting the woman's feet,

the gaze as an ahistorical concept has been rightly criticized,³⁹ the studies on the above texts suggest it is nevertheless a fruitful analytical category in order to explore the representation of acts of seeing in biblical literature.

In the biblical texts recalled above, the male gaze upon female bodies is explicitly voyeuristic and the object of the look often becomes the object of sexual desire to be acted upon. Desirability is thus a liability, and a woman's beauty often leads to her sexual appropriation at the hands of the male observer.⁴⁰ Ezekiel 23 would seem to provide a subversion of this trope: as Julie Galambush has argued, the active gaze of the woman in Ezekiel 23 reverses the motif of the woman as a passive object of the gaze in Ezekiel 16.⁴¹ Yet this is no cause for feminist celebration. As Cynthia Chapman reminds us, "[t]o discover whose gaze actually controls this vision, we need only look at the chapter as a whole to realize that it is Ezekiel's gaze, his divinely channelled vision that appropriates and iconically captures both Jerusalem and her Babylonian lovers."⁴² By appropriating the male

often used as a euphemism for genitalia in biblical literature (see e.g. Gen 19:2; Deut 28:57; Judg 3:24; 19:21; 1 Sam 24:3; 2 Sam 11:8; 2 Kgs 18:27; Isa 7:20; Ezek 16:25; Ruth 3:4). As well as feet, the poet also describes the woman's thighs, which could also be used to euphemistically refer to the genitals (Gen 24:2; Num 5:22). The next body part described, the woman's שרר, is a *hapax legomenon*, and there is debate whether it means "vulva" or "navel." In particular, Marvin Pope has connected the lexeme to Arabic *srr*, "secret place, pudenda, fornication." See *Song of Songs*, 617. However, even if we take שרר as "navel," it could be suggested that this, along with the next body part described, the woman's belly, function as a synecdoche of her lower region as a whole. In this case, the metaphor of a belly "like a mound of wheat" could refer to pubic hair. Certainly, spring grass functions this way in Mesopotamian literature. Finally, the woman's breasts are described, and it is only then that the poet moves to describe her neck and face. This imagery is highly suggestive. On the other hand, the male body of Song 5:11–16 is described in terms that recall the plastic arts, thus his head is like pure gold, his eyes like jewels, his arms like rods of gold, his abdomen like polished ivory, and his legs like pillars of marble. Rather than a flesh-and-blood body, Song 5:11–16 seems to describe the male lover in terms akin to a statue, an aesthetic evaluation that privileges male bodies over female and undercuts the erotic potential of this *wasf*. On the differences between the descriptions of the male and female bodies in the Song, see also Exum, *Song of Songs*, 17–22, who concludes that "the poet treats the male and female bodies differently in terms of their availability to the gaze within the poem" (22).

³⁹ Jennifer A. Glancy has argued that since the experience of "seeing" is culturally constructed, it is "transhistorical" to apply this concept to ancient texts. See "Text Appeal: Visual Pleasure and Biblical Studies," *Semeia* 82 (1998): 63–78.

⁴⁰ On the motif of female beauty leading to endangerment, see Michael Avioz, "The Motif of Beauty in the Books of Samuel and Kings," *VT* 59 (2009): 341–59 (351); and James Alfred Loader, "The Dark Side of Beauty in the Old Testament," *OTE* 25 (2012): 334–50 (337).

⁴¹ Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel*, 116.

⁴² Cynthia R. Chapman, "Sculpted Warriors: Sexuality and the Sacred in the Depiction of Warfare in the Assyrian Palace Reliefs and in

prerogative of the gaze, Oholibah's actions are always already intertwined with the norms that prohibit them. Far from empowering her, in a culture where women are most commonly framed as the objects rather than agents of the erotic gaze, her desiring eye magnifies her crimes.⁴³ We might recall Jezebel, who also exploits the dynamics of the gaze when she observes Jehu from the vantage point of her window, subverting a larger trope in which women framed at windows are couched as passive objects for male voyeurism (2 Kgs 9:30–33).⁴⁴ But this is part of a larger strategy in the books of Kings in which the Phoenician princess appropriates masculine characteristics and prerogatives, usurping the masculine power and authority of her husband and as such requiring Yahweh and his anointed prophets and ruler to step in and shut her down.⁴⁵ Ezekiel 23 is thus a subversion of the trope of the male gaze, but not a corrective. The audience recognizes that this woman is acting inappropriately by casting her eyes upon the Chaldean officers—they cannot condone her actions and, due to the denied visual perspective that governs the description of the officers, nor can they collude with them. The woman's gaze is thus both other and othering, as she stands at a remove from the audience of the text.

SEEING “FOREIGN” IN ASSYRIAN ART

On the one hand then, we must recognize that Oholibah's act of seeing the Chaldean officers is essentially masculinizing. As well as her desiring gaze, her subsequent actions also recall masculine behaviours: she sends messengers to the Chaldeans (v. 16). This recalls the actions of David, who after seeing and desiring Bathsheba also sends messengers to the object of his desire (2 Sam 11:4). On the other, as the objects of her erotic gaze, for the Chaldean officers this visual transaction is thus *emasculating*,

Ezekiel 23:14–17,” *Lectio Difficilior* 1 (2007): 1–19 (13).

⁴³ This is in common with the wider ancient Mediterranean. As Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz has shown in her study of women as agents of the gaze in Classical Tragedy, “if women turn a desiring or aggressive eye on the world, they are killed off.” See “Women as Subject and Object of the Gaze in Tragedy,” *Helios* 40 (2013): 195–221. See also the reference to the eyes of the “Strange Woman” in Prov 6:25; cf. 4Q184 1 13.

⁴⁴ On the motif of the woman at the window, see Don Seeman, “The Watcher at the Window: Cultural Poetics of a Biblical Motif,” *Prooftexts* 24 (2004): 1–50. On the dynamics of the gaze in the story of Jezebel, see Francesca Stavrakopoulou, “Making Bodies: On Body Modification and Religious Materiality in the Hebrew Bible,” *HBAI* 2 (2013): 532–53 (539–47).

⁴⁵ On Jezebel's masculine characteristics, see Janet S. Everhart, “Jezebel: Framed by Eunuchs?” *CBQ* 72 (2010): 688–98; Deryn Guest, “Modelling the Transgender Gaze: Performances of Masculinities in 1 Kings 9–10,” in Teresa J. Hornsby and Deryn Guest (eds.), *Transgender, Intersex and Biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 45–80 (68–75); and Hilary Lipka, “Queen Jezebel's Masculinity,” in *Hebrew Masculinities Anew*, ed. Ovidiu Creangă (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2019), 126–50.

couching them as the passive objects of the gaze in terms usually reserved for female characters.⁴⁶ This is a somewhat surprising statement in light of the ways in which these officers have traditionally been understood in the secondary literature. As noted, scholars frequently recall their “good looks” and “alluring” bodies: S. Tamar Kamionkowski thus concludes that “Ezekiel goes to great lengths to show that these lovers bear all the standard markers of masculinity.”⁴⁷ Yet as I have argued, this is in fact explicitly *not* the case: the description of the male officers is conspicuously underdeveloped, and the reconstruction of their alluring hyper-masculinity therefore an interpretation rather than something which is *prima facie* observable in the text. Instead, if we want to unpack the implied dimensions and implications of these officers, we must read them in light of ancient Near Eastern artistic conventions.

This is in fact something which has been well rehearsed in the secondary literature. Already in 1849, Austen Henry Layard was interpreting the carved Chaldean officers of Ezekiel 23 in light of ancient Near Eastern iconography:

The passage in Ezekiel, describing the interior of the Assyrian palaces, so completely corresponds with, and illustrates, the monuments of Nimroud and Khorsabad, that it deserves particular notice in this place. The prophet, in typifying the corruptions which had crept into the religious system of the Jews, and the idolatrous practices borrowed from nations with whom they had been brought into contact, thus illustrates the influence of the Assyrians.⁴⁸

Layard highlights a specific Neo-Assyrian artistic phenomenon that corresponds with Ezekiel 23: the carved reliefs originally affixed to the walls of royal palaces, an iconographic tradition which apparently began after 879 BCE, when Ashurnasirpal II moved his capital city to Nimrud; and found also in Sargon II's (721-705 BCE) palace at Khorsabad; and the palace of Sennacherib (705-881 BCE) at Nineveh.⁴⁹ Yet Ezekiel 23 does

⁴⁶ Other elements of the narrative also make these connections. After engaging in sexual intercourse with the Chaldeans, Oholibah becomes disgusted with them (v. 17). This is reminiscent of the actions of Amnon after raping his half-sister Tamar—his desire turns to hatred (2 Sam 13:15). The text couches Oholibah as a rapist, sending for the Chaldeans to satiate her desire in terms suggestive of the actions of David with Bathsheba, and then subsequently despising her victims like Amnon. The Chaldean officers, then, are couched as rape victims. Yet elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, the victims of rape are always female, and the perpetrators male (Gen 34:2; Num 31:15–18; Deut 22:23–29; Judg 19:22–26; 2 Sam 11:4; 2 Sam 13:1–14).

⁴⁷ Kamionkowski, *Gender Reversal and Cosmic Chaos*, 140.

⁴⁸ Austen Henry Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains: With an Account of a Visit to the Chaldaean Christians of Kurdistan, and the Yezidis, or Devil-Worshippers; and an Inquiry into the Manners and Arts of the Ancient Assyrians*, 2 Vols. (London: Murray, 1849), 2:309.

⁴⁹ On the development of Neo-Assyrian wall reliefs, see Irene J. Winter, “Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative

not describe Assyrian officers, but Chaldean. Thus a Babylonian iconographic tradition is sometimes related to the text instead: Keith Carley, for example, states that “[p]resumably there were wall reliefs in Babylon, as there were in Assyria, impressive in their display of military might.”⁵⁰ While Cynthia Chapman explicitly interprets Ezekiel 23 in light of the Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs, she notes that the image described in the text is of “Babylonian rather than Assyrian military art.”⁵¹ Walther Eichrodt even goes so far as to posit that the reference to the carvings in Ezekiel 23 suggests that the Judean elite may have had “Babylonian-style” military frescoes in their houses.⁵²

Thus the carved images of the Chaldean officers in Ezekiel 23 have been referred to *Babylonian* military art, of the style known from the *Neo-Assyrian* iconographic tradition. There is an obvious imprecision here: as Carley must note, “presumably there were wall reliefs in Babylon.” This relates to the realities of Neo-Babylonian art. Whereas Neo-Assyrian sculpture for the most part consists of two-dimensional carved reliefs, this is not the convention preferred in the Babylonian tradition. Neither wall carving nor the use of narrative large-scale imagery is characteristic of Babylonian art. Instead of wall carvings, Neo-Babylonian artistic conventions in the main rely on moulded polychrome bricks.⁵³ *Babylonian* art is therefore not a good source for the *carved* images described in Ezekiel 23.⁵⁴ Scholars have hypothesized an imagined tradition of Neo-Babylonian wall carvings to refer to Ezekiel 23, of a kind nowhere recovered from antiquity. While André Parrot does relate the text to an extant Babylonian artistic tradition, the paintings from Til Barsip which date to the eighth century BCE,⁵⁵ these images are painted rather than

in Neo-Assyrian Reliefs,” *Studies in Visual Communication* 7 (1981): 2–38; and Julian Reade, *Assyrian Sculpture* (London: British Museum, 1983).

⁵⁰ Keith W. Carley, *The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, CBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 155.

⁵¹ Chapman, “Sculpted Warriors,” 2.

⁵² Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 325.

⁵³ See Astrid Nunn, *Die Wandmalerei und der glasierte Wandschmuck im Alten Orient*, HdO 7 (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 139–41; and Elisabeth Wagner-Durand, “Visual Narration in Assyria Versus ‘Static Art’ in Babylonian – Making a Difference in the 1st Millennium B.C.,” in *Proceedings of the 9th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East*, Vol. 1: *Travelling Images – Transfer and Transformation of Visual Ideas*, ed. Oskar Kaelin et al. (Berlin: Harrassowitz, 2016), 269–80.

⁵⁴ The images are of “men of engravings,” using the term מַחֲקֵה, a passive pual of חָקַק, “to cut, inscribe, engrave.” The same term is used in Ezek 8:10 to describe the images of creeping things, beasts and idols that have been carved into the walls of the Jerusalem temple; similarly in 1 Kgs 6:35 it refers to “the carvings” on the temple walls. As such, it is particular of incised wall art.

⁵⁵ André Parrot, *Babylon en het Oude Testament* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1957), 132.

carved and thus also not a good source for the imagery described in Ezekiel 23.⁵⁶

On the other hand, the carved wall reliefs recovered from Neo-Assyria already referred to by Layard do provide a comparable iconographic tradition to the carved and red-painted officers described in Ezekiel 23: these reliefs were both carved as well as painted, most usually with red as well as black and white pigments.⁵⁷ And certainly Chaldean officers are frequently depicted in this artistic tradition. Why then have scholars preferred to hypothesize a comparable Babylonian source for the imagery in Ezekiel 23? This relates to the ideological dimensions of Assyrian art. Irene Winter has considered these dimensions in detail. She argues that the perception of the visual message encoded in a particular artistic depiction depended upon “the cognitive competence of the audience,” namely their skills in decoding various signs and signals: and in order to facilitate this, Assyrian artists employed conventional techniques which would have been recognized and even expected by their ancient audience.⁵⁸ Crucial to this was the ability of the audience to recognize the ethnic identity of the various figures depicted on the reliefs. Accordingly, Assyrians and non-Assyrians are depicted in conventional, recognizable ways. As well as ethnicity, Assyrian art also conveys and encodes ideas concerning the relative status of its subjects. This governs presentations of Assyrians and non-Assyrians in these remains. Babylonians are often made visibly manifest through their short beards and ringleted hair, while their surroundings depict items such as palm trees, large rivers and islands of reeds in order to denote the geography of southern Babylonia.⁵⁹ At the same time, their status as a non-Assyrian, conquered people is made manifest through visual depictions with demeaning characteristics, in contrast to the presentation of the Assyrian figures.⁶⁰ The foreigners are thus depicted in a

⁵⁶ On the polychromatic wall paintings from Til Barsip, see Yoko Tomabechi, “Wall Paintings from Til Barsip,” *A/O* 29/30 (1983/1984): 63–74; and Pauline Albenda, *Ornamental Wall Painting in the Art of the Assyrian Empire*, CM 28 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 75–128. We might also point towards the bichrome and polychrome murals from Kuntillet ʿAjrud, which are similarly painted rather than carved, as an example of this Levantine artistic tradition. While these murals do depict military scenes such as chariot horses, they lack representations of warrior figures in the style recalled by Ezekiel 23. For a discussion of the military scenes in these murals, see Tallay Ornan, “Sketches and Final Works of Art: The Drawings and Paintings of Kuntillet ʿAjrud Revisited,” *TA* 43 (2016): 3–26 (8–13).

⁵⁷ Reade, *Assyrian Sculpture*, 20. On the difficulties of reconstructing colour in ancient wall art see Nunn, *Die Wandmalerei und der glasierte Wandschmuck*, 238–41.

⁵⁸ Winter, “Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative,” 29.

⁵⁹ Brian A. Brown, “Culture on Display: Representations of Ethnicity in the Art of the Late Assyrian State,” in *Critical Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Art*, ed. Brian A. Brown and Marian H. Feldman (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 515–44.

⁶⁰ On constructions of Babylon as the enemy in Assyrian art and

limited range of contexts: as tributaries, as losers in battle, or as captives and deportees. As Megan Cifarelli has shown, their postures and gestures signal a negative evaluation when understood within the cultural context of Assyrian social norms: slouching, crouching and prostration, characterising them as sinister and strange and in direct contrast to the upright rigidity of the postures of the Assyrians.⁶¹ The Palace of Sennacherib, for example, has a composition which depicts a battle in Chaldea, likely the Assyrian campaign of 700-699 BCE against Southern Babylonia. The Chaldeans, identifiable from their characteristic ringleted hair, are depicted as fleeing from the Assyrians and hiding among the reeds. Bearded males cower alongside women and children. The relentless progression of the Assyrian soldiers upon the fleeing and hiding Chaldeans combine to craft an imperial message. The enemy is feminized: passive, immobile and nude, the Chaldean officers of Neo-Assyrian art are pitiable figures.⁶²

If we assume that the reference to the carved Chaldean officers in Ezekiel 23 is to an image which is both masculine and alluring, the Neo-Assyrian artistic tradition is thus not a good source for the imagery behind the text: Chaldean officers in Neo-Assyrian sculpture are neither masculine nor alluring. Yet as I have argued, there is little in the text itself that necessitates understanding Ezekiel's Chaldean officers in this way. In fact, as the subjects of Oholibah's erotic gaze, these officers are already subject to a process of emasculation. On the other hand, scholars have come up with no good Babylonian precursor as the source behind Ezekiel's carved officers. If the Neo-Assyrian iconographic tradition is thus posited as the inspiration for Ezekiel's wall carvings, very different implications to Oholibah's erotic gaze come into focus.⁶³

literature, see Marc Van De Mieroop, "Revenge, Assyrian Style," *Past & Present* 179 (2003): 3–23.

⁶¹ Megan Cifarelli, "Gesture and Alterity in the Art of Ashurnasirpal II of Assyria," *The Art Bulletin* 80 (1998): 210–28.

⁶² So also Chapman ("Sculpted Warriors," 11), who argues that in depictions of the enemy in Assyrian art, "their sexually exposed and violently penetrated bodies seem clearly feminized through their total passivity and immobility." Similarly, Omar N'Shea describes the enemy soldiers in Neo-Assyrian art as "emasculated, that is, totally subordinated to the hegemonic male's penetrative combat into their territory." See "Empire of the Surveilling Gaze: The Masculinity of King Sennacherib," in *Gender, Methodology and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Agnes Garci-Ventura and Saana Svärd (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2018), 315–35 (317).

⁶³ It is not possible to fully reconstruct the dissemination of Assyrian art to Judah, but Ezekiel clearly assumes his audience is aware of such images. Certainly, Assyrian palace sculpture was disseminated beyond Assyria as demonstrated by iconography from provincial palaces such as Til Barsip in Syria. See Reade, *Assyrian Sculpture*, 23. The ways in which visitors to Assyrian palaces may have received these images has been considered by John M. Russell, *Sennacherib's Palace Without Rival at Nineveh* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). In this con-

“SEEING” THE CHALDEAN OFFICERS IN EZEKIEL 23

As noted, the description of the officers in Ezekiel 23 is fairly minimal. We learn just four things about how these officers looked: they are carved in red; they wear belts upon their waists; they have turbans upon their heads; and they have the appearance of officers. Thus far I have argued that by painting the figures so minimally, the audience cannot collude with Oholibah’s gaze and so they cannot sympathise with her: denied visual perspectives are utilized in an act of othering this character. At the same time, the artistic conventions that stood behind the image of the carved officers, namely the depictions of Chaldeans in Neo-Assyrian wall reliefs, fill in the gaps of Ezekiel’s minimal description: these officers are not hyper-masculine, alluring figures after all. By considering the descriptive elements described in the text, scant as they are, in light of this, we can flesh out our picture of the carved men.

The officers are “carved in red.” As noted, red pigment was common in Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs, and the colour term utilized here, שֶׁשֶׁר, is likely also derived from Mesopotamian contexts, borrowed from Akkadian *šaršerru*, a red clay or paste derived from ochre.⁶⁴ The term only occurs elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible in Jer 22:14, again to describe a decorated wall relief

text, it is worth noting that there was no public-private duality in Assyrian palaces. See David Kertai, “The Assyrian Influence on the Architecture of Hospitality in the Southern Levant,” in *The Southern Levant Under Assyrian Domination*, ed. Shawn Zelig Aster and Avraham Faust (University Park: Eisenbrauns, 2018), 139–61 (141); Melanie Groß and David Kertai, “Becoming Empire: Neo-Assyrian Palaces and the Creation of Courtly Culture,” *Journal of Ancient History* 7 (2019): 1–31. Margaret Odell (*Ezekiel* [Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2005], 302) suggests that Assyrians may have shown foreign emissaries such as Judah their palace reliefs of defeated Chaldeans as a lesson aimed at deterring rebellion. Jer 22:14 describes an attempt to decorate the Jerusalem palace with panels in a style reminiscent of the wall reliefs from Neo-Assyrian palaces; intriguingly these panels are painted in שֶׁשֶׁר, “red,” using a colour term found elsewhere only in our passage describing the carved and painted Chaldean officers in Ezek 23:14. In Ezekiel’s temple vision of Ch. 8, images have apparently been carved into the walls of the Jerusalem temple (v. 10). There has been some scholarly debate on the historicity of these wall carvings alongside the other apostate worship practices described in this chapter. For attempts to reconstruct these practices, see e.g. Susan Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah*, HSM 46 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 40–41; and Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel*, VTSup, 56 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 65–68. But as Nancy Bowen reminds us, Ezekiel 8 is description of a vision, and “[s]ince a vision is only a stylized presentation of reality, tensions and anachronisms are perfectly possible.” See *Ezekiel*, AOTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 44. As such, we do not need to suppose that this text reflects the realities of actual iconography found in the Jerusalem temple—but it certainly suggests an awareness of Assyrian-style wall carvings for both the author and audience of this text.

⁶⁴ See CAD Š₂, 124. While the loanword derives from Neo-Assyrian, there is some debate whether the borrowing came via an Assyrian

although here the relief is “anointed” in red, rather than carved: the context implies some sort of red paint.⁶⁵ In the Neo-Assyrian period, the pigment *šaršerru* was used in ritual contexts, and various wooden and clay figurines of monsters would have their powers activated through the application of *šaršerru* paint.⁶⁶ As Scott Noegel has shown, colour valences come with a range of associations in biblical literature. Offering a semiotic study of seven different terms for the colour red in Biblical Hebrew, Noegel argues that depending on the precise lexical choice and wider textual context, references to red can encode ideas of protection and fertility, as well as death, destruction and defilement.⁶⁷ In particular, in the case of **שָׁרָר** Noegel argues that the context of the term in Ezekiel 23 connects the word to ideas of sexual promiscuity as well as blood.⁶⁸ In light of the ritual use of *šaršerru* in Neo-Assyria, we might also connect Hebrew **שָׁרָר** to apostate

or Babylonian dialect. According to Wolfram von Soden, the loanword is directly from the Assyrian *šaršeru*. See *AHW* 3: 1191. On the other hand, Paul V. Mankowski prefers Babylonian as the source, whence *šaršarru* > **šašarru* > BH *šāšar(r)*. See *Akkadian Loanwords in Biblical Hebrew* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 149. Yet as Jonathan Stökl has demonstrated, since both times the Hebrew **שָׁרָר** is attested in Ezek 23:14 and Jer 22:14 it is in pause, we cannot be sure whether the absolute form of the noun would have been *šāšar* or *šāšer*: “[i]f the former is the absolute form, the loan is more likely to have come via Neo-Babylonian, and conversely, if the absolute form is *šāšer* with the *ē* vowel under the second *šn*, the vocalization would support a derivation via Neo-Assyrian.” See “‘A Youth Without Blemish, Handsome, Proficient in all Wisdom, Knowledgeable and Intelligent’: Ezekiel’s Access to Babylonian Culture,” in *Exile and Return: The Babylonian Context*, ed. Jonathan Stökl and Caroline Waerzeggers, BZAW 478 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 223–52.

⁶⁵ Athalya Brenner, *Colour Terms in the Old Testament*, JSOTSup 21 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), 153. Contra Mankowski (*Akkadian Loanwords in Biblical Hebrew*, 149), who argues that the context does not clarify whether the word represented a colour, a colouring agent or a technique of decoration characteristic of a particular agent.

⁶⁶ Shiyanthi Thavapalan, *The Meaning of Color in Ancient Mesopotamia*, CHANE 104 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 346–47, 471. On the use of *šaršerru* pigment in rituals associated with monsters, see F.A.M. Wiggermann, *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits: the Ritual Texts*, CM 1 (Groningen: Styx, 1992), 54–55.

⁶⁷ The connection of the colour red to ideas of defilement as well as death and destruction is almost universal; in the ancient Greek context, for example, Ruby Blondell argues that the pervasive image of Helen weaving blood-red cloth from Graeco-Roman literature reflects Helen’s self-awareness in causing the destruction wrought by the Trojan War. See *Helen of Troy*, 32, 51, 54, 68, 73, 75–78. In the wider ancient Near East, red cloth was used in the context of funeral shrouds, wrapped around the corpse. See Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 162.

⁶⁸ Scott B. Noegel, “Scarlet and Harlots: Seeing Red in the Hebrew Bible,” *HUCA* 87 (2016): 1–47 (esp. 12). See also Astrid Nunn, who proposes that colours in wall art were associated with particular concepts. See *Die Wandmalerei und der glasierte Wandschmuck*, 238–41.

practices and even monsters.⁶⁹ By carving these officers “in red,” the description in Ezekiel 23 is therefore suggestive of variety of associations. The unusual loanword highlights their alterity, as well as painting the figures as defiled, bloodied and monstrous.⁷⁰

From the officers’ colour, the description moves to their clothing: their belts and turbans. The belts are designated by the term אזור. The “binding or girding of the loins” refers to tucking one’s tunic into a belt, usually in preparation for some physical, militaristic activity.⁷¹ It is therefore particularly appropriate for our Chaldean military men to be belted. On the other hand, it is difficult to assess whether the אזור refers to a belt or to a cloth loincloth: Jer 13:1 describes an אזור made of linen; whereas the same term is qualified by leather in 2 Kgs 1:8. If Ezekiel 23 refers to a loincloth, the text therefore specifies the item of clothing worn upon the most intimate part of the body—and a source of uncleanness through genital emissions (Lev 15:16–18; Deut 23:10–11). The donning of a loincloth could therefore symbolize lowliness, so Sir [MS^B] 11:4: “Do not mock one who wears only a loincloth, do not scoff at a person’s bitter day.”⁷² In Isa 45:1, Cyrus loosens the מתנים or “loincloths” of kings in a metaphor which describes his subdual of the nations. Similarly, in Job 12:21 God loosens the מוֹיָה or “belt” of the mighty. Thus whether the image of the אזור in Ezekiel 23 recalls a belt or a loincloth, either referent connotes ideas of martial dress, but also the potential for military subdual either at the hands of the Israelite God or his anointed king.

⁶⁹ In this context, it is worth noting that John Hartley has stressed that שָׁרֵר is a *technical* lexeme. See *The Semantics of Ancient Hebrew Colour Lexemes*, ANESSup 33 (Louvain: Peeters, 2010), 37.

⁷⁰ The description of bodies painted red is also reminiscent of Herodotus’ characterisation of the Maxyes, who paint their bodies with vermilion (Hdt. 4.191.1). I thank Ellena Lyell for pointing me towards this reference. For Herodotus, this cosmetic application constitutes a clear inversion of male and female roles, and hence characterizes the Maxyes as aberrant. See Michèle Rosellini and Suzanne Saïd, “Women’s Customs Among the ‘Savages’ in Herodotus,” in *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies*, Vol. 2: *Herodotus*, ed. Rosario Vignolo Munson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 213–44 (230). On the cosmetic function of vermilion in ancient Greek sources, see Patricia A. Hannah, “The Cosmetic Use of Red Ochre (*miltos*),” in *Colour in the Ancient Mediterranean World*, ed. Liza Cleland Karen Stears and Gelnys Davies (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 2004), 100–105. There may therefore be additional implications of feminization through this description of the red painted officers in Ezekiel 23; certainly in the larger context of the Hebrew Bible, cosmetic application is gendered, associated with loose women. On cosmetics in the Hebrew Bible, see Laura Quick, “Decorated Women: A Sociological Approach to the Function of Cosmetics in the Books of Esther and Ruth,” *BiblInt* 27 (2019): 354–71.

⁷¹ Katherine Low, “Implications Surrounding Girding the Loins in Light of Gender, Body, and Power,” *JSOT* 36 (2011): 3–30.

⁷² Relatedly, the wearing of a waistcloth is associated with mourning in CTU 1.5.VI.17. This recalls the wearing of sackcloth on the loins during mourning in Gen 37:34; 1 Kgs 20:31–32; Isa 20:2; Jer 48:37; Amos 8:10.

The term טבולים, “turbans,” is a hapax legomenon, but the context renders the interpretation fairly secure: the items are explicitly said to be worn upon the heads of the officers. The adjectival term סרוח comes from the root סרה meaning “to hang over” (Exod 26:12; Ezek 17:6), hence “flowing turbans,” and it is possible the term has been included as a gloss for the unusual טבולים. Elsewhere in the book of Ezekiel, the prophet himself and the Judean priesthood are also said to wear headgear, the פאר otherwise found upon the heads of the Aaronide priesthood (Ezek 24:17, 23; 44:18; cf. Exod 39:28). The Judean prince also wears items of headgear in Ezek 21:31: a מצנפה, a turban; and an עטרה, a crown. The former item is similarly characteristic of priestly dress in Exod 28:4, 37, 39; 29:6; 39:28, 31; Lev 8:9; 16:4; while an עטרה is worn by various Israelite and Judean monarchs, including King David (2 Sam 12:30; Isa 28:1; 3; Jer 13:18; Ps 21:4; Song 3:11; 1 Chr 20:2). In Zech 6:11, an עטרה is placed upon the head of Jehozadak, the High Priest. The choice of the unusual hapax טבולים to describe the headgear of the Chaldeans is therefore significant, contrasting with the proper Judean headgear described elsewhere in the book of Ezekiel and characterizing the officers as foreign and other.

The focus on the clothing of the officers is significant when compared to the descriptions of the other enemy nations that precedes their introduction. Ezekiel 16 also describes the lewd behaviour of personified Judah, but here she is specifically attracted by the large genitalia of her Egyptian lovers (v. 26). But the focus of the description of the Chaldean officers is not upon their *bodies*, but their *clothes*.⁷³ This has led Daniel Block to describe these figures as “splendidly attired.”⁷⁴ But in the larger context of the Hebrew Bible, clothing is only rarely described as having an erotic or alluring appeal.⁷⁵ And as we have seen, the scant descriptions of the Chaldean officer’s dress constructs them rather in relation to ideas of foreignness, defilement, apostasy and even monstrosity. Oholibah is not attracted to the “good looks” of the officers after all—but to something more insidious. In fact, while Margaret Odell stresses that Oholibah has higher aspirations than her sister, lusting after nobility rather

⁷³ And again, this is surprising in the larger context of the book of Ezekiel, where bodies are often graphically described. See Jacqueline E. Lapsley, “Body Piercings Revisited: Piercings and Profanations of ‘Bodies’ and the Character of God in Ezekiel,” in *The Unrelenting God: God’s Action in Scripture: Essays in Honor of Beverly Roberts Gaventa*, ed. David J. Downs and Matthew L. Skinner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 1–24; idem, “The Proliferation of Grotesque Bodies in Ezekiel: The Case of Ezekiel 23,” in *Ezekiel: Current Debates and Future Directions*, ed. William A. Tooman and Penelope Barter (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 377–90.

⁷⁴ Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 745.

⁷⁵ See James Alfred Loader, “Making Things from the Heart: On Works of Beauty in the Old Testament,” *OTE* 25 (2012): 100–114 (113).

than the Assyrian warriors preferred by Oholah,⁷⁶ this is in fact not a straightforward interpretation. The Chaldean figures are designated by the term שלשים, traditionally associated with Akkadian *šalšu/tašlišu*, the third man on a military chariot. However, more recently the term has been understood as a title for a nobleman “of the third rank”⁷⁷—nobility certainly, but not high-ranking officials in the Babylonian court. Crucially, these figures are not said to *be* officers, but to have the *appearance* of them. This is in contrast to their form, which is explicitly specified to be Babylonian. Here the term מראה designates the abstract appearance of the figures, whereas דמות refers to something more exact. These two terms are utilized elsewhere in the book of Ezekiel in a similar sense:

The *appearance* (מראה) of the wheels and their construction was *like* gleaming jasper; and the *form* (דמות) of one was their four . . . (1:16).

Above the platform over their heads was something *like* the *appearance* (מראה) of sapphire, having the *form* (דמות) of a throne (1:26).⁷⁸

These Chaldean “officers” are thus not necessarily high ranking officials after all. They may have the appearance of them—but looks can be deceiving. Ezekiel leaves us with only one concrete referent: they are Babylonian in form and, in the context of the Neo-Assyrian artistic conventions explored above, all of the implications that come along with this. Thus in every aspect of the scanty description of the carved Chaldean officers, the interpretation that Oholibah had been beguiled by their alluring good looks is undercut. Informed by Neo-Assyrian artistic conventions for depicting their Babylonian enemies, instead Oholibah seems to have been attracted to weakened, shamed figures.

CONCLUSIONS

In this essay, I have attempted to understand Ezekiel 23 as a text about art and aesthetics. As a text about *seeing* art, I have argued that Oholibah’s gaze upon the carved Chaldean officers must be understood within the context of strategies for verbalizing visual phenomena in biblical literature. In so doing, I have highlighted the denial of her visual perspective: the audience observes Oholibah viewing the art object but cannot observe along with her. We cannot collude in her vision and therefore she is entirely other from us. At the same time, placing her gaze within larger strategies of seeing in biblical literature demonstrates the gendered dynamics behind this visual transaction. By casting an erotic eye upon the carved officers, Oholibah appropriates the

⁷⁶ Odell, *Ezekiel*, 302.

⁷⁷ Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 745.

⁷⁸ For a discussion of the interplay of this terminology in the wider context of the book of Ezekiel, see Jill Middlemas, “Exclusively Yahweh: Aniconism and Anthropomorphism in Ezekiel,” in *Prophecy and Prophets in Ancient Israel: Proceedings of the Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Day (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 309–24.

male prerogative of the erotic gaze and is hence further stigmatized. And as a text about seeing *art*, I have explored Ezekiel 23 in light of ancient Near Eastern artistic conventions. Due to the realities of the Neo-Babylonian tradition and in contrast to a number of other commentators, I have unpacked the carved Chaldean officers in light of Neo-Assyrian iconographic remains. In so doing, I have recovered a very different image of these military men. While the description of the men in Ezekiel 23 itself is fairly minimal, by recalling Neo-Assyrian military art, the image of the officers recalls ideas to do with emasculated and weakened figures. And this is borne out in Ezekiel's own description, every element of which seems to undercut their appeal and allure: these carved men are instead painted as foreign, diminished, even monstrous.

The dynamics of the visual transaction between Oholibah and the carved Chaldean officers are therefore essential for understanding Ezekiel 23. Whereas the Assyrian lovers of her sister are at least worthy opponents of the Israelite God, praised as upholders of the cosmic order in Ezekiel 31, Oholibah's lovers fail to reach these standards.⁷⁹ We might note in this context that whereas I have argued that the Chaldean officers should be understood as emasculated and unattractive figures, the Assyrian warriors are explicitly said to be **בחורי חמד**, “desirable young men” (v. 6, 12). Their clothing is **תכלת**, blue (v. 6).⁸⁰ In the ancient Levant blue and purple dyes could only be produced in Phoenicia, and hence became a symbol of wealth and trade.⁸¹ In the context of ancient Near Eastern wall art, Astrid Nunn has argued that blue pigment was understood to have a protective function.⁸² The colour also recalls the Priestly vestments described in Exodus 28–29, some of the most opulent clothing described in Scripture: garments explicitly made “for glory and for beauty” (Exod 28:3). The Chaldean officers thus contrast sharply with the appearance and attire of Oholibah's former Assyrian lovers. This second act of adultery is graver than the first. Ezekiel 23 denies us Oholibah's visual perspective, thus othering her from the audience. At the same time, the gaps which this narrative leaves the audience to fill in about the looks and appearance of these carved men provide an additional act of othering. Oholibah commits adultery against her rightful partner Yah-

⁷⁹ See Odell, *Ezekiel*, 303.

⁸⁰ In v. 12, further items of the Assyrians' dress are described: they are clad in **מכלול**, of uncertain meaning. The Greek translation seems to understand the lexeme as a corruption of **תכלת**, and hence another description of blue-coloured clothing. However, when the same word appears in Ezek 38:4, the Greek translates the term as **θώρακας**, “breastplates,” and this is followed by many modern translations of Ezek 23:12 (see e.g. ESV, NET, NRSV, etc.). Thus the Assyrians are likely described in terms of their military dress: the description couches them as masculine warriors.

⁸¹ Lloyd B. Jensen, “Royal Purple of Tyre,” *JNES* 22 (1963): 104–18.

⁸² Nunn, *Die Wandmalerei und der glasierte Wandschmuck*, 239–41.

weh—and her choice of lovers is perverse and incomprehensible. Judah is depicted as a sadistic female, sexually aroused by male defeat and debasement. These textual strategies ultimately work together to magnify Oholibah's crimes, which in this context become far worse than her sister's earlier transgressions.