

THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES
(Ezekiel 37:1-14)

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INTRODUCTION

ORIENTATION AND CONTEXTSignificance of Text

One of the most recognizable passages of the Bible in contemporary culture is that found in Ezekiel 37:1-14. This isn't due to the fact that this passage offered a message of hope and restoration to its original audience, nor is it due to the fact that a foreshadowing of the work of the Holy Spirit can be seen within. Rather, many people recognize this passage because a traditional folk/spiritual song, "Dem Bones", derives some of its content from these verses. Ezekiel's commission to the Valley of Dry Bones, however, has a much deeper meaning than simply giving an elementary lesson in human anatomy.

While the Judean people were living in Babylonian exile, they suffered great mental turmoil "by the terrible loss of temple, city and land" (McConville 83). This turmoil can be glimpsed in the words of Lamentations:

Enemies have stretched out their hands over all her precious things; she has even seen the nations invade her sanctuary, those whom you forbade to enter your congregation. All her people groan as they search for bread; they trade their treasures for food to revive their strength. Look, O LORD, and see how worthless I have become. Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the LORD inflicted on the day of his fierce anger. (Lamentations 1:10-12)

Despite their suffering, though, God brought a message of deliverance through Ezekiel. The Valley of Dry Bones was to be used as a metaphor for the Judean people during their period of exile, and, just as the bones in the valley were restored to life, so too was Judah to be restored to

its land. The breath that gave life to the bones was prophesied to one day give life again to the Judean nation. This text represents the themes of forgiveness and restoration, and it was written to give hope to those who were currently suffering the penalties for their sins.

Historical and Social Setting

“No prophetic book sets the writer, the dates, the places of its contents so distinctly forth as that of Ezekiel does” (Watt 1). The Book of Ezekiel begins by establishing the date that Ezekiel received his commission: “On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin), the word of the LORD came to the priest Ezekiel son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the LORD was on him there” (Ezekiel 1:2-3). The last established date found within this prophetic book can be found in Chapter 29: “In the twenty-seventh year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came to me” (Ezekiel 29:17). These internal dates place the time of Ezekiel’s first prophesy as being 593 BC and the time of his last dated prophesy as being 571 BC (McConville 84-85).

At the time that Ezekiel prophesied, the Judean people were under Babylonian rule, and many, including Ezekiel, had been taken in exile to Babylon. Gordon McConville writes that “Ezekiel’s is the only prophetic book whose sayings and action happen entirely in Babylon” (83). The exile took place in two stages. First, when King Jehoiachin surrendered to the Babylonians in 597 BC, he and many prominent Judeans were taken to Babylon. Second, when King Zedekiah attempted to rebel in 586 BC, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, and all but the poorest of the Judeans were added to those in exile (Cook 1180).

The main audience of Ezekiel is the Judean people living in Babylon in exile (McConville 84). As stated above and shown in the example from Lamentations, they were currently undergoing great anguish. Their entire theological system was being called into

question. Stephen Cook, contributor to the study notes in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, illustrates the source of the anguish as follows: “The exile of the Judean rulers and the destruction of Jerusalem directly challenged this [Zion] theology [that emphasized God’s choice of Jerusalem as Zion, the holy city, and the protection for Jerusalem that resulted from this choice], since they called into question God’s eternal promises to Zion” (1181). It was in this state of anguish that Ezekiel offered his words of hope that we find in Chapter 37.

Ezekiel himself was said to be the son of Buzi, and he was one of the original group of exiles that was taken with King Jehoiachin (Ezekiel 1:1-3). His name means “God strengthens” (Varghese 318). Cook surmises that the reference to “the thirtieth year” (Ezekiel 1:1) is a reference to Ezekiel’s age (1182). According to David and Pat Alexander, editors of Erdmann’s *Handbook to the Bible*, prior to the exile, “Ezekiel was in training as a priest, looking forward to service in the temple like his father before him. Exile in the plains of Babylonia, far from Jerusalem, meant the end of all his hopes” (416). The priestly line that Ezekiel belong to was that of the Zadokites. These priests were the most influential at the time of the exile. They held to the Zion theology referenced above (Cook 1181). Ezekiel had been married, but “his wife died in 587 B.C. as a sign to the people concerning the fall of Jerusalem” (Varughese 318).

As is frequently the case, some scholars call the authorship of the Book of Ezekiel into question. They believe or suspect that this book is the work of not only that prophet but also a school of like-minded followers established by him. This seems to be the stance of Cook, as can be seen in these words: “Ezekiel wrote his prophecies, and his followers edited, expanded, and preserved them, in the sixth century . . .” (1180). Alex Varughese seems to differ, though: “This book in its present form, however, has a balanced structure, uniformity of style and language, and a clear chronological sequence. . . . We regard the entire book as the product of Ezekiel the

prophet” (318). Perhaps a more balanced view is referenced by McConville: “Much current scholarship favours a redaction-critical approach, that is, where a core of the book derives from Ezekiel and this has been gradually expanded into the book that we have today” (85).

Regardless of whether one believes that Ezekiel himself wrote this entire book or one believes some redaction took place, it seems to be universally believed that the entire book ties in closely with Ezekiel himself.

Literary Context

The Book of Ezekiel is one of the prophetic books of the Old Testament. Carol Newsom, contributor to the study notes in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, writes, “The prophet was essentially an intermediary between God and the people, and one of the major functions was that of messenger” (970). Alec Motyer tells us that “the prophets were men raised up by God to . . . call the people back to God and his way” (370). This prophetic role was necessary because the people of Israel “were constantly falling down on their calling and their promises. . . . The nation needed to be recalled again and again to the whole point of their existence” (Motyer 370). In the Christian Old Testament, Ezekiel is situated between Lamentations and Daniel, both of which are additional books dealing with the Babylonian exile.

Ezekiel can be divided into three sections: Chapters 1-24, Chapters 25-32, and Chapters 33-48 (McConville 86). The first section is a condemnation against Jerusalem. This can be seen very graphically in examples such as this: “I will direct my indignation against you, in order that they may deal with you in fury. They shall cut off your nose and your ears, and your survivors shall fall by the sword. They shall seize your sons and your daughters, and your survivors shall be devoured by fire” (Ezekiel 23:25). The second section speaks against foreign nations, as can be seen here: “The word of the LORD came to me: Mortal, set your face toward the Ammonites

and prophesy against them” (Ezekiel 25:1-2). The third section speaks of the restoration of Judah: “Thus says the Lord GOD: On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the town to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt” (Ezekiel 36:33).

The text that will be the focus of this paper is Ezekiel 37:1-14. This passage begins with God bringing Ezekiel to a valley filled with bones, and it concludes with an explanation of what Ezekiel’s experience in that valley represents. The passage preceding this is a prophesy that tells the reader that, despite the sinfulness of the people, God will restore them to their nation. When He does so, the reader is told that He will cleanse the people of their sins. The passage following Ezekiel 37:1-14 is a prophesy declaring that the two nations of Israel and Judah will be reunited.

PRESENTATION OF TEXT

Scripture Passage

Ezekiel 37:1 The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know. ⁴Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.

⁷ So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath:

Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

11 Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ ¹²Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD”. (NRSV)

Text Critical Notes

The Hebrew word “ruah” can be translated as “spirit”, “breath”, or “wind”. All three options are used in this passage. Of these three options and their different usage, Cook writes, “There is a constant word play here” (1234).

Outline of Passage

- I. Ezekiel Prophesizes in the Valley
 - A. Ezekiel is Shown the Valley
 - B. God Commands Ezekiel to Prophecy to the Bones
 - C. The Bones Come Together
 - D. God Commands Ezekiel to Prophecy to the Wind
 - E. The Wind Brings Life to the Bones
- II. God Explains the Prophecy
 - A. Israel will be Restored to its Land

B. Israel will be Restored to its Relationship with God

EZEKIEL PROPHECIZES IN THE VALLEY

Ezekiel begins his account of his experiences in the Valley of Dry Bones by telling his audience that “the hand of the LORD came upon” him (Ezekiel 37:1). This is an expression that is used several times throughout his book. The first occurrence can be found at the end of Ezekiel 1:3: “And the hand of the LORD was on him there”. According to D.G. Watt, this expression “indicates that the thing which was to be done was done in submission to the restraining or the impelling energy of the Lord” (7). This expression used at the beginning of Chapter 37 “denotes the overruling Divine influence” (Watt 393). Ezekiel’s profession that the hand of the Lord was on him as he prophesied is his appeal to the fact that what he is offering his audience is not from him but is rather from God.

With the hand of the Lord upon him, Ezekiel was taken to the valley of dry bones by the Spirit of the Lord. This reference to the “spirit” is the first occurrence of the Hebrew word “ruah” in this passage. In the Old Testament, this word is translated in different places as “spirit”, “wind”, and “breath”. All three variants appear here in this passage. This is the same word that represents the presence of God over the pre-creation oceans in Genesis: “The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2). In this Genesis example, “while a wind from God” can also be understood to mean “while the spirit of God” or “while a mighty wind”. Used here in Ezekiel, ruah reaffirms the authority of God behind Ezekiel’s message, just as the reference to “the hand of the LORD” does.

Cook surmises that “the valley” referenced here refers back to the valley mentioned twice earlier in Ezekiel (1233). Like in Ezekiel 37:1, this first previous reference also mentions the

hand of God having led Ezekiel to the valley: “Then the hand of the LORD was upon me there; and he said to me, Rise up, go out into the valley, and there I will speak with you” (Ezekiel 3:22). This time, the valley was a location where doom was prophesied: “For I assign to you a number of days, three hundred ninety days, equal to the number of the years of their punishment; and so you shall bear the punishment of the house of Israel” (Ezekiel 4:5). The second previous reference to the valley looks back to the first reference: “And the glory of the God of Israel was there, like the vision that I had in the valley” (Ezekiel 8:4). Whereas previously the valley was a location where doom was prophesied, now it is to be a location where hope is prophesied.

The dry bones that fill this valley represent death. The study notes in *Nelson’s NKJV Study Bible* indicate that a state even worse than death should be assumed: “Not only do the bones speak of death, indeed of many deaths, but for bones to be left in the open was an indignity and indecency according to Jewish custom. To leave bodies unburied until the bones were exposed was unthinkable” (1394). Watt elaborates more fully on the state of these bones when he writes, “The skeletons are dislocated and scattered; the bones are very dry and crumbling into dust. Though not actually buried, they are slowly burying themselves in their progressive decay. The evidence of death is complete. It is beyond the power of any known physical law to breathe the ghastly fragments into life” (395). Thus, there is no question that to the logical thinker these bones should be assumed to be beyond the possibility of life.

After God shows Ezekiel around the valley and displays the state of decay contained within, the prophet is asked, “Can these bones live?” Watt writes, “It is beyond the reach of human philosophy to put life into dry bones” (396). The ways of God, though, are beyond the realm of human logic, as the Apostle Paul testifies to much later: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his

ways!” (Romans 11:33). Ezekiel wisely foreshadows this teaching of Paul’s when he responds, “O Lord GOD, you know” (Ezekiel 37:3). Watt writes further: “The prophet had already learned not to limit the power of God. . . . If it can be done and is to be done, Thou alone must do it” (396). Though these bones seemed to be at the height of decay and beyond restoration, the decision to restore them or not rests with God.

Having been shown the valley and the decay, and having partaken in a dialogue regarding the future potential of the bones, Ezekiel is commanded to prophesy to the bones. The process of restoration isn’t something that God does on His own. Rather, He invites Ezekiel to join Him in the process. James Hastings writes, “Then, to our surprise, instead of Jehovah Himself addressing the bones and rousing them to unity and life by His word of thunder, He turns to the prophet, and bids *him* pronounce the magic word” (246). The message that Ezekiel is commanded to give is a message of restoration, a message of new life. Regardless of what seemed impossible on the surface, Ezekiel is told to prophesy that the impossible will take place.

The life that is to reenter the dry bones is to derive from “breath” that God will put into them. This “breath” is the reoccurrence of “ruah”. The picture given here recalls the creation of humanity: “Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7). Just as Adam was given life by the breath of God, so too will the bones be given new life by His breath.

Having been commanded to prophesy, Ezekiel proceeds to do so. As he does, “the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them” (Ezekiel 37:7-8). Through the testimony of the prophet, the restoration process had begun. Hastings writes, “The dry bones stirred at the word of the Lord. . . . Under the urgent preaching of the prophet, [the bones] were stirred to shame at their

condition, and they rallied into at least the appearance of an organized body” (248). By following his divine mandate, Ezekiel was able to bring to the bones the message that was needed to restore them to the appearance of life.

The reforming of the bodies was not enough for them to be given new life, though. Hastings writes, “They were not thereby vitalized or quickened” (248). Cook observes that “life is generated here in two stages” (1233). Beyond just the reforming of the bodies, the breath of God was required to restore them to life. Therefore, God commands Ezekiel to prophesy further, this time to the wind: “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live” (Ezekiel 37:9). Once again, “ruah” appears, this time translated as both breath and wind. Like in Genesis, where even after the original forming of man from the dust Adam still required the breath of God for his life to begin, so too will these reformed bodies require the breath of God in order for their new life to begin.

Once again, Ezekiel prophesizes as he has been commanded, “and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude” (Ezekiel 37:10). Previously he had done all that he could do. Watt writes, “He was powerless to advance the development a single step further” (396). However, when he appealed to the breath and Spirit of God, the final steps necessary to restore the bones to life took place. “Life is the breath of God. Still, under Divine direction, the prophet invokes the help of the life-giving Spirit. A mysterious breath passes over the prostrate forms; they move and leap to their feet. . . . The Spirit . . . can alone raise the dead to life” (Watt 396). Through Ezekiel’s first prophesy, the bones were brought back together and prepared for new life. Through Ezekiel’s second prophesy and appeal to the Spirit, the restored bodies were breathed into by God and given that new life.

Ezekiel had been brought by God to the Valley of Dry Bones. He had been questioned by God as to whether or not life can be restored to these bones. He wisely left the answer to that question to divine providence. God commanded Ezekiel to preach to the bones, and as he did, the bones are brought back together and the bodies restored. God commanded Ezekiel to appeal to the Spirit that new life be given to these restored bodies. Ezekiel made his appeal, and the breath of life enters in. The experiences of Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones have at this point been completed. All that is left now is for these experiences to be explained.

GOD EXPLAINS THE PROPHECY

God begins his explanation to Ezekiel by explaining the metaphors. The bones represent Israel, and their dry and dead state represents Israel's separation from God's favor through their exile. In their state, Israel laments, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely" (Ezekiel 37:11). Cook explains that the phrase "cut off" is "a metaphor for being within the power of death" (1234). Watt explains that "the national state was as hopeless of revival as marrowless bones of reanimation" (394). Through their transgressions, the people of Israel had lost their relationship with God. Without their land and their temple, which were understood to be representative of the covenant relationship between God and Israel, they were on their own and as good as dead.

Ezekiel is once again commanded to prophesy. This time his audience is to be Israel, and he is to use the metaphors provided by his experiences in the Valley of Dry Bones. God will begin by restoring Israel to its land. Their exile is comparable to being in the grave, but God is "going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel" (Ezekiel 37:12). Just as the dry bones were brought together and given new flesh, so too will the people of Israel be allowed to return to their territory. The actual

return of these people to their territory can be seen in Ezra: “The heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites—everyone whose spirit God had stirred—got ready to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD in Jerusalem” (Ezra 2:1). Though the Judeans suffered a period of exile because of their sins, they were eventually restored to the territory that God had promised Abraham.

Even more significant than the promise that Israel would be restored to their land is the promise that Israel would be restored to a right relationship with God. Ezekiel wrote, “I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil, then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD” (Ezekiel 37:14). The Spirit of God living within the people is representative of the new life that comes through a right relationship with God, just as the breath of God given to the restored bodies in the valley was the source of life for the bodies.

The Spirit of God being upon someone in the Old Testament represents that His favor is with that individual, and to have His Spirit removed represents that God’s favor has been removed. This can be seen in the example of King Saul: “When they were going from there to Gibeah, a band of prophets met [Saul]; and the spirit of God possessed him, and he fell into a prophetic frenzy along with them” (1 Samuel 10:10). “Samuel said to Saul, “I will not return with you; for you have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel” (1 Samuel 15:26). “Now the spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him” (1 Samuel 16:14).

When Israel was taken into exile, the people were outside of God’s favor, and His Spirit would not have been with them. Ezekiel’s prophesy states that His Spirit will be returned to the people of Israel, though, and through that restoration new life will begin. Thus, Ezekiel’s

prophesy regarding the Valley of Dry Bones is a prophesy of hope. Despite the suffering and oppression that Israel was suffering in exile, they would one day be returned to their nation, and new life would be offered them as God's Spirit was returned. The joy of the Judean people at their restoration can be glimpsed in the Book of Nehemiah: "Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said, 'Stand up and bless the LORD your God from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise'" (Nehemiah 9:5).

CONCLUSION

SUMMATION

At the time that Ezekiel prophesied, the people of Israel were in exile. They had repeatedly sinned against God, and the loss of their nation was the penalty that was to be paid. Their nation had been promised to them by God through their ancestor Abraham and was symbolic of the covenant relationship maintained between them and God. They failed to uphold their end of the covenant, though, and God allowed them to be carried as captives to Babylon.

The Valley of Dry Bones is symbolic of Israel at the time of exile. Just like the bones, the people of Israel, without their land and covenant relationship with God, were dry, dead, and useless. No power of humanity could restore the bones to life, and no power of humanity could deliver Israel from exile. However, God chose to use Ezekiel to prepare the bones for the new life that He could provide, and Ezekiel's prophetic work was used to prepare the people of Israel for the new life that would be offered to them when God's favor was returned. The breath of God came into the bones and restored them to life, just as the Spirit of God was to be returned to Israel and restore the people to their land and their covenant relationship.

APPLICATION

This passage from Ezekiel provides a great message of hope for any reader, whether Jewish or Christian. Despite the mistakes people make in life and the penalties they suffer because of those mistakes, they are still offered the opportunity to have relationship with God and experience the new life that He provides. People can find great hope remembering that God is in charge and will ultimately offer deliverance. A similar message of hope during suffering can be glimpsed in the words of Habakkuk: “Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation” (Habakkuk 3:17-18).

Looking at this passage from a Christological view, parallels can be seen between what Ezekiel prophesizes and what is offered through the Christ-event. Just as the restored bones and restored nation of Israel required the presence of the Spirit of God for true life, Jesus instructs Nicodemus as follows: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (John 3:5). Ezekiel’s prophesy to the dry bones can be seen as being parallel with John the Baptist’s ministry of preparation. “In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’” (Matthew 3:1-3). Ezekiel’s prophesy to the winds can be seen as being similar to what Jesus taught regarding the Holy Spirit: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you” (John 14:16-

17). The winds answering Ezekiel's appeal and giving the breath of God to the restored bodies can be seen as foreshadowing the day of Pentecost. "And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. . . . All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability" (Acts 2:2, 4).

Just as Ezekiel's prophesy regarding the Valley of Dry Bones contained a message of hope for the Judean people in exile, it contains a message of hope for Christian people today. Sinful humans do not always have to remain in exile from God. They can be restored to a right relationship with Him. They can be filled with His breath. They can be born again and receive His Spirit. A new life is available through God's sanctifying power.

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