

Ezekiel 37: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Ezekiel chapter 37 Thus says the Lord God to these bones, Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live, and I will lay sinews upon 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.

So I prophesied as I was commanded, and as I prophesied there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone, and I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them, but there was no breath in them.

Then he said to me, Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God, Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.

So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. Then he said to me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, Our bones are dried up, and our hope is last. We are indeed cut off.

Therefore prophesy and say to them, Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people, and I will bring you into the land of Israel.

[1 : 4 6] And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land.

Then you shall know that I am the Lord. I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord. The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, take a stick and write on it, for Judah and the people of Israel associated with him.

Then take another stick and write on it, for Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and all the house of Israel associated with him. And join them one to another into one stick, that they may become one in your hand.

And when your people say to you, Will you not tell us what you mean by these? Say to them, Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am about to take the stick of Joseph, that is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel associated with him.

And I will join it with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, that they may be one in my hand. When the sticks on which you write are in your hand before their eyes, then say to them, Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from all around, and bring them to their own land.

[3 : 0 1] And I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. And one king shall be king over them all, and they shall be no longer two nations, and no longer divided into two kingdoms.

They shall not defile themselves any more with their idols, and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. But I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them.

And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules, and be careful to obey my statutes.

They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever.

I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land, and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore.

[3 : 59] My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore.

Ezekiel chapter 37 is one of the most memorable and powerful chapters in the entire book. It describes a vision of national resurrection through the prophetic word and spirit of God.

Ezekiel is a witness and participant in this vision, as he was earlier in the vision of the glory vacating the temple, and the judgment upon the city of Jerusalem back in chapters 8 to 11.

Much as in that earlier vision, Ezekiel is here transported by the spirit of the Lord to the visionary location. The location of the vision seems to be known to Ezekiel, and likely also to his hearers, as it is described as the valley.

The valley is littered with dry and whitened bones, presumably it is the site of a great slaughter. The Lord leads Ezekiel around among the bones, enabling him to get a sense of the great number of them in their state, bleached and dried by the sun.

[5 : 02] As the burial of corpses was a matter of great concern, this mass of bones suggests the occurrence of some awful calamity some time past. In verse 9 we discover that the bodies are bodies of the slain.

This is the site of a massacre. The vision to this point is one of death and of its finality. The Lord now proceeds to make Ezekiel a more active participant in the vision.

He has witnessed the immense number of the scattered bones, and the fact that they had been there for a long time. However, now the Lord asks him whether he believes that the bones can be restored to life, something that is clearly utterly beyond the realm of natural possibility.

Ezekiel knows that such a restoration is within the Lord's power, so he does not deny the possibility when asked concerning the bones by the Lord. Nevertheless, none of the signs look promising.

The Lord then instructs Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, directly addressing them with the word of the Lord. A very strange act indeed. The Lord declares his intent to cause breath to re-enter the bones, so that they can live once more.

[6 : 09] The resurrection of the bones will involve a dramatic recreation of the bodies of the dead bones, reassembling them with sinews and flesh, covering them with skin once more, and then breathing life into them.

Nothing short of a new creation event is taking place here. This would also serve to prove the sovereignty and faithfulness of the Lord. Ezekiel obeys the Lord's commandment, and as he does so, he witnesses a dramatic sight.

The bones start to rattle and then reassemble themselves, each bone to its connecting bone. Before he has almost had the time to register it, the bones had sinews and were clothed with flesh and skin.

However, despite this dramatic reassembling, the bodies remain dead. Ezekiel is instructed to perform a second act of prophecy. This time he prophesies not to the bones, but to the breath or spirit, summoning it from the four winds to breathe into the reassembled corpses.

We should here recall the original creation of man, when the Lord fashioned the man's body from the earth, and then breathed into him the breath of life. As he prophesies to the breath, the reassembled corpses are reanimated, restored to life.

[7 : 20] They rise to their feet, and a once vanquished army is restored to its full strength. The meaning of this remarkable and dramatic prophetic vision is given in verses 11 to 14.

The bones represent the entire house of Israel, not just those slain by the Babylonians. The people had suffered death as a corporate entity, ceasing to exist as their own nation.

While unburied dead bodies of individual Judahites had littered the ground, as foretold by prophets like Jeremiah, the bodies here stand for the entire nation, which had itself been destroyed.

The remnant of the house of Israel, languishing in exile, now regarded themselves as being beyond hope of restoration. They considered themselves to be akin to the dead bones of the vision, scattered like the bleached bones of a great host in the valley of the nations, or, as the imagery of verse 12 moves to, as skeletons buried in tombs and graves.

The Lord promises to open their graves and raise them up from them. So resurrected, they would be brought back to the land of Israel. In the previous chapter, the Lord had spoken of the restoration and renewal of the house of Israel that he would accomplish in verses 24 to 28.

[8 : 32] I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses.

And from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers. And you shall be my people.

And I will be your God. It is the gift of the spirit in particular that gives life to these dead bones, restoring them to vitality and action on behalf of the Lord. Here in chapter 37, a similar declaration of divine intent as in the preceding chapter is made.

However, it is presented in terms of the dry bones and buried bodies imagery. And here, the dramatic character of what the Lord is accomplishing in the restoration of Israel is made more apparent.

[9 : 35] This passage, although it refers to a symbolic resurrection of a dead nation, also expresses something of a deeper hope concerning life after death and the Lord's power to release his people from the clutches of death.

It has long been read in a way that recognized a more general literal resurrection as one aspect of its horizon of fulfillment, even if not its primary or immediate one.

Indeed, many early readers understood it to refer to literal resurrection, not merely speaking metaphorically of a remarkable national restoration. Resurrection starts to come into more view as a doctrine from the exilic period onwards.

We already see hope of resurrection in the book of Job, for instance. However, these earlier expressions of resurrection hope have relatively little to go on. The fact that the Lord would decisively overcome death as a great enemy is a truth that becomes apparent gradually, although the form that this would take remains tantalizingly vague.

We see resurrection most clearly in passages such as Daniel chapter 12, verses 2 to 3. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

[10 : 47] And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever. However, many years previously, we already find statements such as those of Isaiah chapter 26, verse 19.

Your dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy. For your Jew is a Jew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead.

And then also in Hosea chapter 13, verse 14. I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol. I shall redeem them from death. O death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting?

Compassion is hidden from my eyes. The prophecy of Ezekiel chapter 37 is an important step in the development of resurrection hope of the people of God. In verse 15, a new prophecy begins.

Like several other prophecies in the book, it's a prophetic sign act. A dramatic performance that accompanied with a verbal statement would serve to communicate the divine will. As in the case of the other prophetic sign acts that Ezekiel performs, the meaning of the act is not immediately apparent.

[11 : 56] Rather, he is instructed to explain it to the people, who will ask him what is meant by it. The house of Israel, after the reign of Solomon, was split into two separate nations, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

The northern kingdom had fallen to the Neo-Assyrians around 722 BC. Large numbers of the Israelites were deported by the Assyrians, and other peoples were mixed in with the remnant that remained in the land.

The leading tribe of the northern kingdom was Ephraim, who had received the firstborn blessing from Jacob, or Israel, in Genesis chapter 48. In Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph had been granted two tribal portions, instead of the single portion received by the other tribes.

So really, Joseph was the leading tribe of the north. The northern kingdom, of which the Transjordanian tribes were also a part, could be referred to as Ephraim or Israel, as Ephraim was the son that particularly continued Israel's own name.

Here, though, the northern tribes are referred to by the name of Joseph, Ephraim's father. The royal tribe ended up being Judah, which was the leading tribe of the southern kingdom, and the tribe from which David arose.

[13 : 07] After the secession of the northern tribes, Benjamin remained with Judah. There were also Simeonites as an enclave population within Judah, along with many Levites. After the fall of the northern kingdom, the southern kingdom of Judah would also have contained some refugees from the north.

There seemed to have been some remaining enclaves of Israelites remaining in the territories formerly belonging to the northern kingdom too, in addition to colonies elsewhere in the Assyrian Empire. History has left us with little evidence of dealings between these Israelite colonies and Israelites in the southern kingdom.

However, as Marsha Greenberg observes, we see Josiah carrying out reforms in Samaria in 2 Kings chapter 23, evidencing a continued sense of the unity of the house of Israel and Judah, and at least some of the population then living in Samaria under Assyrian rule.

In 2 Chronicles chapter 34 verse 9, again during the reign of Josiah, remnant populations of faithful northern Israelites donated to the repairs of the temple. Jeremiah also mentioned northern Israelites coming south to worship in Jeremiah chapter 41 verse 5.

In the Samaritans and other populations, we see a continuation of some sort of worship of the Lord, also syncretistic in many cases. Ezekiel's prophecy is one of the repairing of the once divided kingdom.

[14 : 28] As Daniel Block observes, there are several possible interpretations of the type of wood being joined. They might be two trees, shepherd's rods, or regular pieces of wood.

The two pieces of wood he joins are seen by some to refer to the royal scepters of the two kingdoms. The problem with this reading is that there is no joining of two dynasties. The dynasty that rules is the Davidic dynasty of the south.

The two pieces of wood might also remind us of the twelve staves that are used to symbolise each of the tribes in Numbers chapter 17. Block makes the case for them being wooden writing boards, which would make more sense of the fact that he wrote on both of them.

He fills out that possible interpretation by proposing that the writing boards might have stood for registers of names, as important texts were recorded on wood. He also argues that Ezekiel might have recorded the text of this prophecy on them when he was finished.

Block substantiates this hypothesis by observing that the interpretation divides in two, with a break likely in the middle of verse 24, and two iterations of the covenant formula, they shall be my people and I will be their God, in verses 23 and then again in verse 27.

[15 : 38] If they were writing boards, Block writes that they would have been joined together using hinge pins or leather cords. Alternatively, if they were just regular sticks, they would likely have been spliced or tied together.

Connecting the two sticks or boards together in his hand, while he was holding them in the sight of the people, Ezekiel was to give the interpretation. According to Block's understanding, the first half of the prophecy would have referred most especially to the northern tribes of Joseph.

The promise here is that the people are going to be restored in their unity. They're going to be gathered together from among the nations. They are going to be restored to their own land. The bond between the divided people will be restored, and the bond between the people and the land from which they have been divided will also be restored.

They would be established not just as dwellers within the land, but as those who will exercise dominion within it, as the people will live as a nation once more on the mountains of Israel.

They won't be two divided nations, but a single nation ruled over by one king. Morally and spiritually they will be restored. They won't defile themselves anymore with idolatry.

[16 : 45] The Lord will purify and cleanse them, and deliver them from their stubborn rebellion. They will have a faithful shepherd, a man after the Lord's own heart, to rule over them, David his servant.

As in the preceding chapter, the Lord is going to deal with the heart problem of his people. As he deals with that heart problem, they will walk in his rules and obey his statutes. And all of this will lead to blessing within the land.

They will know security, they will remain there and not be removed from it, their life will continue in blessing from generation to generation, they'll be fruitful and multiply, and the Lord's presence will be with them.

The Lord's dwelling in the midst of his people, in a way that marks them out as his own people, is one of the great promises of the covenant. I will be their God, and they will be my people. The promise of the restoration of David's rule is also at the heart of this prophecy.

We might recall chapter 34, verses 23 to 25, The promise of the covenant of peace reappears in this chapter.

[18 : 07] A question to consider, how might Christians see the prophecies of this chapter fulfilled in Christ and the church?