

Dr. Leslie Allen, Ezekiel, Lecture 19, Vision of Israel's Rising Again, sign of One People with One King Ezekiel 37:1-28

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This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Ezekiel. This is session 19, Vision of Israel's Rising Again, Sign of One People with One King. Ezekiel 37:1-28.

We come now to Ezekiel 37, and in it, we shall find a vision and symbolic action. The sequence of a vision and a symbolic action reminds us of how the first and second parts of the book began. In chapters 1 through 5, we had Ezekiel's visionary call and commission and the symbolic actions he was to perform.

And then, in the course of 8 through 13, we had the vision of God's glory leaving the defiled temple and more symbolic actions. And I regard chapters 33 to 37 as the ending of part 5 of the book, and in this case, a vision and a symbolic action closes this fifth part as a climactic flourish to Ezekiel's messages of salvation. The vision-related and interpreted in verses 1 through 14 must be the best-known passage in the book and perhaps,, in fact,, the only passage generally known to people.

It has been immortalized by the African-American spiritual dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones. The two earlier visions in the book had negative meanings. In chapters 1 and 2, the vision is a theophany of judgment that matches Ezekiel's call to be a prophet of judgment.

In chapters 8 through 11, his visions focused on the sinful worship at the temple in Jerusalem and God's glory, consequently, stage by stage, abandoning the defiled temple and city to its fate. Now there is a grand positive vision of Ezekiel's prospects, of Israel's prospects of new life given through Ezekiel. Very often, earlier in the book, Ezekiel's messages have taken the form of an extended metaphor and its interpretation.

They remind us of the parables that Jesus told and how he interpreted them. In this case, the vision takes the form of an extended metaphor in verses 1 through 10. Then, the metaphor is explained in verses 11 through 14.

We need to look at verse 11 first of all because that tells us why a particular metaphor occurs in verses 1 to 10. And if we look at the verse 11 and the second half the exiles are saying our bones are dried up and our hope is lost and we are cut off completely. This is the logical starting passage, starting point for the whole passage.

Readers are told why the vision is all about dry bones. The exiles found their experience of exile to be a distressing experience. They had the perception of being as good as dead, barely existing at an intolerably low level of life compared with the good old days in pre-exilic Judah.

The lament prayers in the book of Psalms sometimes talk like that, using death as a metaphor. Psalm 88 and verse 5 says, I am like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand. So, this vision had its roots in a lament of the exiles, especially in the reference to dry bones, in other words, being dead.

The vision empathizes with the exiles in their feelings of devastation and despair, but it also moves beyond to a new hope, the hope of living back in the homeland once more, a transformation to virtual death, to renewed life. First of all, the prophet feels that pressure on his head, the hand of the Lord came upon me, and we've read that often enough, that mysterious pressure which he'd often felt before, and he recognizes it as God's hand, and a clue that God is going to communicate to him in a special way. And here, it's associated with a vision, about which he's to receive a private message in verses 1 to 11, and then he's to be given a public message to pass on to the exiles in verses 12 to 13.

In the vision, Ezekiel is taken out to a broad valley. He brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley, says verse 1. And this is a very similar experience to what he had in 3.22 to 23, that brief vision that we had recorded there. Whether it was the same one or not, this time, he found it full of bones, strewn with human bones; at the end of verse 1, it was full of bones.

It was evidently an old field of battle. This is suggested by verse 9, which mentions and identifies the bones with these slain, the slain one. So, soldiers had died there, but their corpses had been ravaged by birds of prey and wild animals by now, and only dry bones were left, scattered about, stripped of flesh.

God asks Ezekiel a question in verse 3, mortal, can these bones live? The answer's obvious, no. Bones don't live, they're dead and gone, long gone, those lives of theirs. And that's the obvious answer, but the prophet is too polite to say so.

And so, he throws the ball back into God's court, and he says, oh God, you know what the answer to that question is, I'm not going to give it. And so we aren't getting very far at the moment, and it seems that Ezekiel shares in the vision the same attitude that the exiles had of themselves in verse 11. Yes, our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost. We're cut off completely.

But then God lobs the ball back to Ezekiel by giving him a message to pass on to the bones as if they could hear him. In verse 4, he said to me, prophesy to these bones,

they haven't even got any ears now, prophesy to these bones and say to them, oh dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. And so, this is a strange situation indeed.

In fact, as we read on, a miracle is going to take place, and the bones are going to live once more, and they're to be reanimated by God. And verse 5, thus says the Lord God to these bones, I will cause breath to enter you, there's a footnote in the New RSV against that breath, breath or wind or spirit to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath or wind or spirit in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord.

So, there's a laying out of this impossible, miraculous program: These bones were going to go backwards in time, as it were. The clock was to be turned back, and tendons, flesh, and skin would reappear step by step on the bones. Lastly, God would give them breath, and so the process of reanimation would be completed. Ezekiel passes the message on to the bones, surely the oddest message any prophet could ever have transmitted.

So, in verse 7, I prophesied as I'd been commanded. And he waits to see what's going to happen. And amazingly, it works.

Well, it works up to a point. First of all, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. So, first there are these rattling noises as the bones realign themselves into skeletons.

Then, the various parts, the tendons, the flesh, and the skin, are reassembled. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and the skin had covered them. But that was all.

You have bodies, but dead bodies, and still not alive. So, it's obviously going to need a next step. It's a great achievement so far, but they're still dead.

And so, Ezekiel has to do something about it, and there is this second message he's given—Prophesy to the breath, or wind, or spirit. Prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath, or wind, or spirit, thus says the Lord God, come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live.

I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet a vast multitude. Or, as the NIV better says, a vast army because we're thinking of a battlefield and soldiers who have died in battle in the course of the vision. And so, Ezekiel is told to summon breath from the four winds and order it to enter these dead bones.

It needs the aid of the four winds to work, no less than four winds to north, south, east, and west to work this last part of the miracle. And Ezekiel prays, he prophesies in this way, and it happens, they all stood up, this vast army. So, the vision works in the end, and the miracle works in the end, but it's put in two stages, and perhaps we ought to think about that next.

It's a double process of revitalizing the bones, and I suppose that refers to the difficulty of the task. And it also reflects the power, God's great power, his miraculous power, that he could take these two steps. And scholars have also suggested that it reflects God's work of creation in Genesis 2, where God was making a human being out of clay, first of all, and then secondly, he breathes life into it, so that that clay image can come to life.

And so here, if that's so, the creator was at work, but here in a new act of creation. So, the text emphasizes that this life comes from this powerful God, and the vision brings out the role of the prophet, that he is God's necessary agent in transmitting a powerful message of salvation that will come true. And there's the message here that just as in the vision, it came true, so also in his general prophesying, positive prophesying, those promises would come true as well.

We noticed that chapter 36 was remembered by the writers of the New Testament, and we can also ask whether this dramatic vision had any such effect. A passage that we should turn to is John chapter 20 and verse 22, and this is the risen Jesus; he breathed on them and said to them, receive the Holy Spirit. And it does seem that this is a reminiscence of what happened in the vision in Ezekiel 37.

This seems to be an allusion to that promise there that God would put breath or spirit into those bones, and it's an allusion to the breathing upon the slain and to the interpretation in verse 14, I will put my spirit within you. I haven't come to verse 14 yet, but it says plainly, I will put my spirit within you. And so, in the work of the risen Christ, we're invited to see in John's gospel a fulfillment of Ezekiel's vision.

Jesus was acting in tune with the portrayal of God's people, as given in chapter 37 of Ezekiel. And then there seems to be another allusion elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul shows his concern that he'd found resistance to his Christian gospel in the Jewish synagogues he visited on his missionary travels.

If a die-hard Jew like himself had put his faith in Jesus as the expected Messiah, why didn't the Jewish congregations rush to do the same? And Paul found the explanation in his special call, in fact, to be a missionary to the Gentiles. Jewish rejection of Jesus gave Gentiles the opportunity to become Christians, especially the Gentiles' so-called God-fearers who regularly attended synagogue worship. Eventually, Paul maintained in Romans 9-11 that when Gentiles had been reached and had responded, it would

be the Jews' turn again to hear the gospel and now to copy the conversion of the Gentiles.

The Jews would be moved to jealousy by the conversion of the Gentiles. The Apostle used the metaphor of an olive tree standing for God's people. At the moment, the Jewish branches had been pruned away to allow room for Gentile branches to be grafted into the olive tree.

But one day, Paul insisted, the natural Jewish branches will be grafted back into the community of God's people. And what did he say in Romans 11-15? If the rejection of the Jews means the reconciliation of the Gentile world, what will be their acceptance but life from the dead? Life from the dead. I think that Paul had in mind Ezekiel 1-14 and that he carried Ezekiel's vision in his heart as a clue, as an assurance that one day his fellow Jews would see the light and would take the side of Jesus, acknowledge him as their Messiah, the God-given Messiah.

Well, now, we haven't finished with this vision yet because we've got to go back to the interpretation in verses 11-14. 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. Therefore, prophesy and say to them, thus says the Lord God, I am going to open your graves, bring you up from your graves, O my people, and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord when I open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people.

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. And first of all, God acknowledges the lament of his people and here he's giving an answer to their, almost a prayer that they have in their despair.

Well, it's not a prayer, but nevertheless, that lament is being answered here. And they're indeed as good as dead here in exile away from the homeland. But now the message of the Book of Psalms is applied to the situation of exile because we were saying just now that those lamenting prayers in the Psalms complained of death-like conditions of crisis, and they believed that God would deliver from crisis and would give newness of life.

And there are thanksgiving songs in the Book of Psalms that attest to this, such as Psalm 30 in verses 2 to 3. You have healed me, O Lord. You brought up my soul from Sheol, the underworld. You restored me to life.

God could do this for the exiles, taking their despairing lament and reversing their death-like condition in exile by taking them back to the homeland to live. So resurrection is a metaphor for the saving reversal of going back to the land and

enjoying new and vital blessings from God. And now, the exile is viewed as a graveyard.

I will open your graves and bring you up from your graves. This is more in line with the language of the Psalms, speaking of dead people rather than the vision's own picture of the battlefield. Now, we're using more psalm-like language.

But the message is the same: God can give new life when he puts his spirit in the people. The message of chapter 36 is repeated: that new spirit would be my spirit, said 36. And so this breath or wind or spirit is going to be my spirit.

And we have to know that, as I've tried to do by giving those alternative translations in the New RSV when it says breath, we have to know that the same Hebrew word is involved. We also need to know that that same promise was given in 36 and verse 27 of the new spirit, which, in fact, will be God, the gift of God's spirit. And so, this gift of God's spirit here is associated with the return to the land in verse here, as it was in chapter 37.

We move on, and the rest of chapter 37 reads like a fresh literary unit. Indeed, it starts with the word of the Lord came to me. But it's obviously in sequence because, from vision, we move to symbolic action.

And so, there's an overall literary unit in this movement. And the two halves of the chapter very much belong together at this point. Ezekiel is told to carry out a symbolic action.

There have been many symbolic actions earlier in the book, and they've all been negative ones. But this is the only one to be positive. He's to take two sticks, write on them, and hold them together in his hand.

Now, I brought along replicas of these two sticks, and here they are. This is one of them, and it says Judah, etc. This stands for the southern kingdom.

Judah and the other tribes that were associated with Judah in the southern kingdom. But then there was another stick, and he wrote on it something like Joseph, etc. Now, Joseph was the name for two of the tribes back in Genesis.

Joseph had two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, and they were the ancestors of the two biggest tribes in the northern kingdom, Ephraim and Manasseh. And so this stands for the northern kingdom. Long divided, long disunited, and the northern kingdom had been long gone.

But what Ezekiel is told to do is to hold them together in his hand and they look just like one stick. But they only look like one stick in fact. They're still two sticks because in verse 20 it still mentions the sticks, the separate sticks.

But there they are. But now they look like one and that's the point of the symbolic action. The reunion of north and south.

Jeremiah had spoken strongly in that way, and so did Ezekiel too—this ideal of the old twelve tribes rather than the south over against north. And so evidently, Ezekiel was to carry out this symbolic action in public.

We're not told so, but the essence of symbolic action requires that. He would attract attention and stimulate interest in what he had to say. As we've said, symbolic action was an enacted metaphor for a reunited Israel, the coming together of the northern and southern kingdoms.

So, we realized the old ideal once more. And then there's an explanation of this going on in verses 21 and to the beginning of 22. Then say to them, thus says the Lord God, I will take the people of Israel from the nations among whom they've gone and will gather them from every quarter and bring them to their own land.

I will make them one nation in the land on the mountains of Israel, and one king shall be king over them. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms. And we have another thought coming in here.

Yes, the two sticks become one and so one nation under God. That's the first meaning. But the mention of a king and a kingdom, this is something new.

And what seems to be going on here, there's another interpretation of this one resultant stick. It's a reminiscence, it's a symbolic realization or enactment of a scepter, a royal scepter such as a king would carry. And so, one king carrying one scepter and ruling over one kingdom.

And so, this seems to be how it is that you can smoothly move on from one nation to one king. The implication is a further meaning for this stick as really standing for a royal scepter, the symbol of a royal office. Now, one of the traditional duties of the king in Israel was to be the guardian of the people's worship and way of life.

And so, it follows in verse 23 that under this one king, there would be a regulation of the way that they lived, living in the proper way. Verse 23, they shall never again defile themselves with their idols and their detestable things or with any of their transgressions. And through this one nation and one king, I will save them from all the apostasies into which they've fallen and will cleanse them.

And it's through the work of this king who will represent good government that there will be orderly and good lives lived, in fact, by the exiles when they've gone back to the land. And so, as guardian of the people's worship and way of life, Israel's sinful ways would be a thing of the past. The ensuing harmony between God and people would bring about the realization of the two-sided covenant formula.

And it can go on to say at the end of verse 23, then they shall be my people, and I will be their God. There is to be this wonderful and perfect realization of that covenant ideal of the relationship between God and his own people, Israel. We read that covenant formula recently in 36 to 28.

You shall be my people, and I will be your God. So, when we come to it in chapter 37, it is, in fact, a reminder of what we've had in 36. And there are other similarities between 36 and 37.

The second half, if we were to look on to the second half of verse 24, they shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. We had that as a result of gift, the gift of a new spirit and God's spirit. Verse 27, I will make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

And then two, in verse 25, they shall live in the land. Well, that, of course, we read earlier in 36 and verse 28, you shall live in the land that I gave you ancestors. And it seems to be significant that we get these echoes of 36 in 37.

And so, I suggest that what is going on here is that the symbolic action of the one nation and, even more, the royal scepter is meant to be an unfolding of those verses towards the end of chapter 37. And I would want to say also, looking back at that vision earlier on in 37 that we drew attention in passing to the link with 36 I will put my spirit within you, a new spirit I will put within you. This is being realized metaphorically and in a visionary form in 37.

So, in the same way that the first part of 37 is wanting to comment and wanting to explain further the material that we've had in chapter 36. In other words, I'm saying that there's an organic unity between 36 and 37, and that's the reason we're getting the repetition of material in both chapters. Now, lastly, 25 through 28.

They shall live in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, in which your ancestors lived. They and their children and their children's children shall live there forever. And my servant David 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 bless them and multiply them and set my sanctuary among them forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them and I will be their God and they shall be my people.

Then the nation shall know that I, the Lord, sanctify Israel when my sanctuary is among them forevermore. Do you notice that word that kept cropping up? Forever, forever, forever. And it's matched in verse 26.

It is same in the Hebrew but not in English. The everlasting covenant. The covenant to last forever.

And so there is this stress there and the keywords relate to it. A series of forever or everlasting promises. Living in the land, having a Davidic dynasty, enjoying an everlasting covenant and worshipping in God's new sanctuary forever.

These future ideals are hailed as the fulfillment of that two-sided covenant formula: I will be their God, and they shall be my people. But there is something else that we need to know about these last few verses because they set the agenda for what we will eventually read in chapters 40 through 48.

This mention of the temple, the covenant, the king, and the land all these items are going to be picked up and discussed at greater length in chapters 40 to 48. And so, we're getting a little preview in theological terms one might say. We're going to go on to a new vision which will portray them in imaginative and visionary ways.

But here, as I say, the agenda of 40 to 48 is being set out here as a preparation for the material that's going to follow. And we might say, well, how about 38 and 39? Well, those are the chapters that we shall discuss next time.

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