

## ***Introduction***

This paper will present an exegetical study of Ezekiel 37:1-14, *The Valley of the Dry Bones*. The original reading of the text will be established to highlight any problems with the source of the text and to decide which translation will be used in the study. The outline and structure of the passage will be determined and the relations of this passage to larger contexts within the Book of Ezekiel will be established. The genre and forms used within the passage under study will be ascertained. Words will be gleaned from the text and analyzed to provide a deeper understanding of this passage. The date, authorship, and coherence of the pericope will be ascertained to assess the unity of the text. The historical and social backdrop that provides a material context for the passage will be identified. The message that was intended for the original audience will be uncovered and this principle will be applied to the context of our world today.

## ***Textual Analysis***

The following versions and translations of the Old Testament were used to complete the source study of this passage: The Message (MSG), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the New International Version (NIV), the English Standard Version (ESV), New King James Version (NKJV), the Contemporary English Version (CEV), the New Living Translation (NLT), and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). All versions and translations used the Masoretic Text (MT) as the basis for their translation of this passage from Ezekiel. All used the Septuagint (LXX) in some cases, though there is no evidence that this was the case for this specific passage.

There were very few footnotes offered for this passage in any of the versions or translations used. The most common footnote referred to the use of *rûah* as referring to

“*Spirit*”, “*Breath*”, or “*Wind*”. All texts struggled with which word to use and chose to use the word, Spirit. There are several style differences (i.e. flesh versus muscle, tendons versus sinews), but none of these words are considered problematic. The only phrase that is problematic is the use of “*son of man*” in reference to the prophet Ezekiel in all versions and translations, except by the NRSV which uses the term “*mortal*”. There are no footnotes available to deal with this difference, though the terminology difference is well known and much discussed by critics of the NRSV.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of this concern, the NRSV will be used to complete this exegetical study.

### **Structural Analysis**

The Book of Ezekiel in its current form appears to be a work that was carefully edited and reworked into a clearly outlined structure:

- A. Editorial Structure: 1:1-3
- B. Account of Ezekiel’s call: 1:4-3:27
- C. Oracles of doom against Judah and Jerusalem: chapters 4-24; delivered between 597 BCE and the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE
- D. Oracles against foreign nations: chapters 25-32
- E. Oracles predicting the restoration of Judah and Jerusalem: chapters 33-39; delivered after 587 BCE
- F. Ideal sketch of the restored community: chapters 40-48, delivered after 587 BCE<sup>2</sup>

There are no explicit historical references in this passage, yet verse 14 makes reference to Yahweh placing the people of Israel on their own soil which suggests that they are not currently on their own soil. This implies that the people of Israel are in exile and that they are going to return to their soil to live. This places the context of this passage in the Babylonian exilic period. There are no references to make clear where

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur L. Farstad, “The New Revised Standard Version: A Review,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 3:2, Autumn 1990 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.faithalone.org/journal/1990ii/Farstad.html>; internet; accessed December 1, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Henry Jackson Flanders Jr., et al. *People of the Covenant: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 415-416.

the valley mentioned in the passage is located or whether the bones are in fact those of a dead Judean army.

This passage follows a passage that contains an oracle of judgment against Israel that seems to explain the exile of Israel and then sets up the oracle of hope in the pericope under study. The passage is basically broken into two parts: The vision report – 37:1-10; and the salvation oracle to fellow exiles<sup>3</sup> with the vision disputation – 37:11-14.<sup>4</sup> It is typical in Ezekiel for the vision report to be followed by an explanation.<sup>5</sup> This is the third of four vision narratives in the Book of Ezekiel (3:22-27; 8-11, 40-48)

The passage begins with the Hand of Yahweh Revelatory Formula in verse 1 and is contained by the Prophetic Word Formula in verse 15 which forms an inclusio for the passage. A second inclusio is also formed by Yahweh placing Ezekiel in the valley in verse 1 and then placing the people of Israel on their land in verse 14<sup>6</sup> The fact that “divine utterance is more predominant than prophetic utterance” is unique to Ezekiel among the prophetic writers.<sup>7</sup>

According to Block a chiasm exists within the text also:

- A Ezekiel is inspired by the divine Spirit (*rûah*) and relocated in a death valley (vv. 1-2).
- B Ezekiel is instructed to prophesy over the bones so that they may revive; he does so and the predicted revival occurs (vv. 3-10)
- C The preceding vision is interpreted and the following explanation anticipated (v. 11a).
- C The following explication is anticipated (“behold ... therefore”), and the preceding vision is given idiomatic focus (v. 11b).

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<sup>3</sup> Ronald M. Hals, *Ezekiel*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, Volume XIX (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 268.

<sup>4</sup> Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, *Ezekiel 37:1-14, “Mortal, Can These Bones Live?”*, The New Interpreter's Bible, ed. Leander E. Keck, Volume VI (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 1497.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, ed. James Luther Mays (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 170.

<sup>6</sup> Darr, 1502.

<sup>7</sup> David L. Petersen, *Ezekiel: Introduction*, The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, ed. Wayne A. Meeks, (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 1223.

B' The national meaning of the miraculous resurrection is divinely explained (vv. 12-13).

A' Israel is resuscitated through the divine Spirit and relocated in its ancestral homeland (v. 14)<sup>8</sup>

In verse 11 the readers learn that the valley of bones, their death and resurrection, are akin to—or represent—the people of Israel. This acts as a turning point in the passage that takes the readers from an abstract, though startling vision of dry bones, to the people of Israel being returned to the land that was covenanted to them by God, including those who are already dead in their graves.

### ***Form Analysis***

The pericope under study is considered a Prophetic Vision Report that is contained within an entire work classified as a Prophetic Book. The report is further broken into the report of the vision (vss 1-10) and then the interpretation or explanation of the vision (vss 11-14). The pericope is bounded by a Hand of Yahweh Revelatory Formula, “The hand of the LORD came upon me” (37:1) and by a Prophetic Word Formula found in 37:15, “The word of the LORD came to me.” The pericope represents a first person account of a vision. The entire prophetic vision report is presented as an allegory to explain the situation of the Judean people in exile and the hope that Yahweh offers them in a new creation through the restoration to their land.<sup>9</sup>

A lament of sorts of the Israeli people is offered by Yahweh to Ezekiel in verse 11:

*Our bones are dried up,  
And our hope is lost;  
We are cut off completely<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, eds R.K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 371-372.

<sup>9</sup> Hals, 271.

<sup>10</sup> Darr, 1501.

Ezekiel is commissioned to prophesy three times in this passage; first to the bones in verse 4 (“Prophesy to these bones”), then to the breath in verse 9 (“Prophesy to the breath, prophesy mortal”), and finally to the people of Israel in verse 12 (“prophesy, and say to them”). In each case God commissions Ezekiel to prophesy and this is followed by a description of Ezekiel’s prophesying and then by the resulting action in the vision. The messenger formula (“Thus says the Lord GOD”) appears in verses 5, 9, and 12 introducing the actions that God intends to take.

A recognition formula (“I am the LORD”) is found three times in this passage in verses 6, 13, and 14 which in each case is tied to an action by God that will make his presence obvious to those who witness these actions. Prophetic proof sayings (that includes the use of “Therefore” and “I will”) are found in verses 5, 12, and twice in verse 14. This formula is used by God to make an announcement, describe an intervention, and offer a purpose for the intervention. A conclusion formula is used in verse 14 to end the prophetic report (“you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act”). All of the formulae present in this passage are consistent with the typical patterns of prophetic vision reports, within a prophetic book, especially within the Book of Ezekiel.

### **Word Analysis**

The word mortal is used in the NRSV instead of the phrase “son of man” which is used in most other versions and translations of the Old Testament. The phrase that appears in the Hebrew text is *bēn ādām*. This phrase begins with *bēn* which is translated into many different words, one of which is son. The word *ādām* which also has several translations, one of which is man. Son of man seems to be a very logical translation. The NRSV translates this phrase as mortal because this phrase is also

often translated as human or human being. The translators decided to translate this phrase as mortal to capture the human nature of the person being described and also eliminating any gender bias in the phrase, “son of man.”

This phrase is used three times in the passage under study and seems to work well in the first instance as it offers the stark contrast between the power of God and the human ability of Ezekiel. Otherwise, it seems only to be used in Ezekiel as a replacement for his name. The phrase “son of man” is used very sparingly otherwise (i.e. Daniel 8:17) in the entire Old Testament. For some reason, God refuses to name Ezekiel by his name throughout the book of Ezekiel. The term mortal is used ninety-three times in the book of Ezekiel.

The words spirit, breath, and wind are used somewhat interchangeably through the Hebrew word *rûaḥ* within this passage. The word is used in different forms with different meanings with the predominant meaning relating to the Spirit of God. It is argued by many people that the word *rûaḥ* is directly related to the term *n<sup>e</sup>šāmâ* which is found in Genesis 2:7 to describe the breath of life that God breathes into Adam to initiate life.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the word *‘esem* translated to the word bones in this passage is also related to Genesis 2:23 regarding the phrases “bone of my bones” and “flesh of my flesh” also referring to the initiation of human life.

The word *nābā* found in this passage to refer to prophesy and prophesied appears predominantly throughout the books of the prophets, particularly Jeremiah, Amos, Joel, and Zechariah. The word represents the messages or revelations that the prophets communicate on behalf of God. The term *qeber* is used within this passage

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<sup>11</sup> Darr, 1500

for the terms grave and graves. The word is used throughout the Old Testament to represent also tomb and burial place or site. The term is specific to the place where human remains are kept and in this passage are used to identify those Israelites who have already died and yet are part of the people of Judah in exile.

### ***Coherence and Composition***

There is no consensus among scholars as to the dating of the book Ezekiel, its authorship, or the unity of the material in the current book. Many scholars have suggested that the passage begins in an awkward manner suggesting that it may have contained a date reference at some point that was removed.<sup>12</sup> The strongest support currently seems to be in favour of the book being written primarily in the exilic period yet heavily redacted by Ezekiel and then his followers.<sup>13</sup> The passage under study here appears to fall into this category quite well as some signs of redaction have been identified, though it is well argued that it was created and even written during the period of exile.<sup>14</sup>

The book seems to have three distinct sections; chapters 1-24 (the prophecies of the impending fall of Jerusalem and Judah) which concludes with the introduction of a fugitive announcing the fall of Jerusalem; chapters 33-48 (the messages of consolation and hope after the fall of Jerusalem) which begin with the mention of the arrival of the fugitive; and chapters 25-32 (the prophecies of doom against foreign nations) which seem to split the story unnaturally.<sup>15</sup> There is no direct evidence to conclude that this

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<sup>12</sup> Keith W. Carley, *The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel: A Commentary*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 248.

<sup>13</sup> Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel*, Supplements to Vestus Testamentum, eds. J.A. Emerton, et al., Volume LVI (New York: E. J. Brill, 1994), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Hals, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Hals, 3.

apparent editing was done by someone other than Ezekiel, but it is strange that this sequence of prophecies is present in the book's final form.

There is a strongly held belief that there was an "addition of harmonizing glosses" made to chapters 40-48.<sup>16</sup> It is believed that the poetic verses contained with chapters 25-32 are original to Ezekiel, whereas the prose in these same chapters is likely material added by disciples of Ezekiel.<sup>17</sup> In the passage under study, verses 12 and 13 are considered additions to the original text intended to extend the new life of the people of Israel to those who had already died. These verses are not present in LXX<sup>18</sup>

Ezekiel was believed by many to have been among the Zadokite line of priests.<sup>19</sup> This affiliation may have affected his prophetic theology and coloured his language and the emphasis that his prophesying took. In the passage from chapter 37, Ezekiel demonstrates how he sees God as the ultimate power—even to the point of re-creating the dead—such that Ezekiel is never called by name, but as Mortal, and he is led safely around the dead bodies without fear of ritual impurity. He also describes in his vision that he was transported to the valley by God.<sup>20</sup> Ezekiel uses themes and images from Isaiah and Jeremiah<sup>21</sup> and specifically from Jer 8:1-2 regarding the images of bones<sup>22</sup>

Regardless of the apparent redaction and editing of the passage, it is believed to be authentic to Ezekiel in its origins and thus the message that was intended is still valid and useful. This passage (among many in the book), though written to offer hope to the people of Israel who were in exile in Babylon, offers a message that is also timeless.

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<sup>16</sup> Duguid, 58-59

<sup>17</sup> Jackson, 415-416.

<sup>18</sup> Carley, 248, 250

<sup>19</sup> Bruce Vawter and Leslie J. Hoppe, *A New Heart: A Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel*, International Theological Commentary, eds. Frederick Carlson Holmgren and George A.F. Knight (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 18-19.

<sup>20</sup> Ezek 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*

<sup>21</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48*, World Biblical Commentary, Volume 29 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), xxi.

<sup>22</sup> Blenkinsopp, 171.

As a vision report, this passage is not intended to be historical in nature. The intended message is that God is the creator and thus can create whenever and however he wants to, even resurrecting the Israelite people from the dead—nothing is beyond his capability.

### ***Thematic, Social, and Historical Background***

The people of Judah were exiled from their homeland with no evidence that they would return again in their lifetime. It is likely that by the time Ezekiel shares this vision of hope with the people, they were aware that Jerusalem had been devastated and their temple of worship had been razed. They were despondent not only that they had lost their homes, their way of life, and their homeland, but that the only place that they believed God existed, in their Temple, was lost to them forever. They likely believed that they had been abandoned by God permanently and that no hope existed for them or for their descendents. It is also probable that they believed that the covenant with God had been broken.

The words that God shares with Ezekiel in verse 11 support this conclusion:

*Our bones are dried up,  
And our hope is lost;  
We are cut off completely<sup>23</sup>*

This deep lament illustrated the extreme sadness and dejection experienced by the exiles (and perhaps those living in Jerusalem and the rest of Judah). It also illustrates why God felt it necessary to communicate tremendous hope to his people through Ezekiel as he did through the vision that was shared in chapter 37.

Ezekiel was an old-world prophet and a bridge for the exiles to their Temple worship cult. As one in a line of priests, Ezekiel had the tradition, the language, and the

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<sup>23</sup> Darr, 1501.

authority to bridge the gap that existed for the exiles. Their religion and their God were lost to them and Ezekiel offered a unique presence to help them through this difficult period.<sup>24</sup> Ezekiel had gained a reputation sharing oracles of immense doom that had, for the most part, materialized and this credibility made it possible for him to preach of the hope of restoration of land of Judah.

### ***Interpretation and Application***

The big idea<sup>25</sup> of this passage is representative of Ezekiel's theology and perspective on God. I am reminded of the passage from Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." In Ezekiel's vision for the exiles, the power of Lord GOD, guided by the love and grace of God, takes his disobedient people when they are at their lowest, re-assembles them and breathes new life into them. Then, in an exceptional turn of grace, God reminds them of his covenantal promise to them and fulfills it once again by returning them to their homeland in Jerusalem.

God has no bounds in love and mercy and the power of God is limitless. This is a God of life; a God of unconditional love. The vision acts as a reminder that God will never abandon his people. The interpretation makes clear that faith that is dead can always be brought back to life and that God will always be there to support that re-creation and power it with the breath of the Holy Spirit.

I think that it is wrong to make the easy and logical leap that Ezekiel intended his audience to see this vision and oracle as an expression of individual resurrection. As Christians reading backward in time, it seems so clear to us that we should see this

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<sup>24</sup> Allen, xxi.

<sup>25</sup> Haddon W. Robinson. *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 33.

story as a foreshadowing of the resurrection of Christ and our own promise of resurrection.

There is no doubt that this passage offered people who felt they lacked any semblance of hope, the promise of a miraculous future. Who can read this passage and not see that if God can bring long-dead, dried, detached, and inanimate bones back to life, then he most certainly has the power to regenerate or re-create a faith that is severely wanting? This is a far cry from individual resurrection.

I cannot help but think of so many churches that are struggling today because the faith in their people is dead like the dry bones in the valley. They cannot see how they and their congregation can ever be revived. Just like the people of Judah who were disobeying God's commands and thus breaking their covenant with God, through selfishness and a lack of love toward the poorest and weakest among them, our congregations have become similarly de-railed in their faith. The abominations that Ezekiel spoke of were not a characteristic that was the sole purview of the exiled people of Jerusalem.

Many churches today can also see themselves in the same mirror. Though hope may be lost in these assemblies of God's people, the breath of new life is available to them at any time. All that is required is to realign the bones of love and compassion, assemble the sinews and flesh of unconditional love, cover themselves with the skin of the universal church of God, and open their nostrils to receive the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit to bring new life to their desiccated carcasses. God never abandons us, we only turn away. We as his people need only to turn back to God to be able to receive the breath that reanimates our dried up and disconnected souls.

**Conclusion**

This paper presented an exegetical study of the pericope from Ezekiel 37:1-14. The original reading of the text was established, and the limited problems with the text were determined. The outline and structure of the passage was determined and the relations of this passage had to the balance of the Book of Ezekiel were established. The genre and forms used within the passage were ascertained. Words were gleaned from the text and analyzed to provide a deeper understanding of this passage. The range of understanding of the date, authorship, and coherence of the pericope was ascertained to demonstrate the unity of the text. The historical and social backdrop was identified to provide the context for the passage. The principle that was intended for the original audience was uncovered and the application for this principle was made to our current context.

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ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

STUDENT'S NAME: Jeff S. Ward

ASSIGNMENT: Major Assignment - Exegesis Paper: Ezekiel 37:1-4

COURSE: KNB1006HF – Old Testament Introduction

PROFESSOR'S NAME: Dr. Brian P. Irwin

- I read the passage at least three times
- I revised this paper at least once
- I spent at least seven hours on this paper
- I started work on this paper at least fourteen days ago
- I have tried hard to do my best work on this paper
- I have proof-read the paper at least twice for grammar and punctuation
- I asked at least one other person to proof-read the paper
- I ran the paper through a spelling check