No Rest for the Dead

The Reversal of Death in Ezekiel’s Valley of Dry Bones*

Matthew J. Suriano – College Park

The image of dry bones revived and reconstructed into living, flesh and blood bodies is one of the most dramatic images from the book of Ezekiel. It is also one of the more confounding images in the biblical book. The text is popularly considered to be about the resurrection of the dead, and as such it is tied to various systems of afterlife expectation. Biblical scholars are inclined to read the text in other ways.1 André LaCocque has asserted: “we can dismiss the idea

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1 Some biblical scholars still follow the more traditional line of interpretation, such as Block, “Beyond the Grave,” pp. 113–41, who sees the resurrection of bones as a message of afterlife hope that generally conforms to later Christian concepts of resurrection. He lists four points in support of his conclusion (ibid., pp. 131–41). His first point recognizes that Ezekiel’s concept of the afterlife is conceptualized around the tomb, though he does not see the valley of dry bones as funereal. Yet the points he lists are either general observations or inapplicable, such as in his discussion of putative cults of the dead (ibid., pp. 129–30). A more typical approach among modern biblical scholars is to use source and redaction critical methods to isolate certain verses within the passage that reflect a belief in the resurrection and then date these to the Hellenistic period as later additions. See the review of scholarship in Schöpfirn, “Revivification of the Dry Bones,” pp. 76–80; and Konkel, “Vision of the Dry Bones (Ezek 37:1–14),” pp. 107–10. There are compelling text-critical issues cited by both Schöpfirn and Konkel, which suggest the passage underwent a history of redaction. Yet the tendency to read all references to “resurrection” as later interpolation is problematic for it relies on circular reasoning (all references to resurrection are late because the concept is late). Furthermore, this form of interpretation assumes a concept of resurrection lies behind the imagery in Ezekiel, rather than questioning whether or not the concept is appropriate. The purpose of this present essay is to suggest that the revival of bones is imagined as a revision of the ritual practices associated with burial. One could argue that this was as a
that ‘resurrection’ would have its own raison d’être in... the human aspiration not to fall into nothingness with one’s death.” It is difficult to detach any sense of postmortem belief from this vision, even though the bones serve as a metaphor for a people living in exile. Yet Ezekiel’s reanimation of the dead hardly conforms to traditional Jewish or Christian concepts of resurrection. Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones is not tied to a specific event, such as a day of judgment, nor does it involve the postmortem veting of individuals. In Ezek 37:1–14 the dead form a collective, they are a mass of bones that comes alive to be resettled in the land of Israel. But from where does this image derive? The vision of bones and the opening of tombs is hardly a polemic against Mesopotamian religious practices. But does this prophetic vision instead relate to Ezekiel’s culture? Walter Zimmerli wrote that the imagery has no roots in “older Israelite traditions.” Other biblical scholars have referred to the imagery as weird and absurd, suggesting instead that vision derives from Ezekiel’s imagination. One could say that the vision’s premise is peculiar, even

nascent form of the concept of resurrection, but using later Hellenistic concepts as a starting point for interpreting Ezekiel’s vision is inappropriate.

LaCoque, “From Death to Life,” p. 144. Prior to this statement, LaCoque writes: “Ezekiel 37:1–14 is to be read ‘teleologically’ and reread ‘archaeologically.’ The latter term seems to be meant in the sense of Michel Foucault’s ‘archaeology of knowledge,’ involving the conceptual boundaries that govern systems of knowledge and thought. This archaeological reading hence leads to the recognition that is divinely declared in Ezek 37:13–14, knowledge that Yahweh is the exiles’ deity. While this is a valid observation, my essay seeks to show that archaeology in the plain sense of the term (‘the analysis of material culture’) sheds light on how cultural practices of disposing the dead shaped Ezekiel’s message of hope.

See the discussion in Lewenson, Resurrection, pp. 158–59. Moreover, as commentators such as Cooke (Book of Ezekiel, p. 397) and Eichrodt (Ezekiel, pp. 509–10) have pointed out, the bones serve as a metaphor for a living community rather than the dead. I would add, however, that the living and the dead should not be disentangled in Ezekiel’s message. The complaint in Ezek 37:11 is as much about those that had already died in exile, as it is about the surviving community.

This interpretation is recently found in Strine, “Ritualized Bodies,” pp. 41–57, and Lauenderville, “Threat of Syncretism,” pp. 38–49. Lewenson, Resurrection, pp. 157–58 discusses the possibility of Persian and Babylonian influences on Ezekiel. See the brief discussion in Davis, “Near Eastern Treaty Parallel,” p. 338 (see infra note 4). While one can infer certain cultic practices, the references to dead bodies and tombs are clear and unambiguous throughout Ezek 37:1–14.

Zimmerli, Ezekiel 2, p. 258. To be sure, Zimmerli sees the vision as a response to the exiles’ complaint, which the prophet expands upon.

G. A. Cooke (Book of Ezekiel, p. 397) wrote in his commentary that Ezekiel’s vision of bones coming to life was “weird imagery” intended to show that Yahweh could do things that were otherwise impossible. Michael Fox (“The Rhetoric of Ezekiel’s Vision of the Valley,” pp. 7–8) has argued that the imagery is intentionally absurd, serving as a rhetorical strategy meant to convince a community shaken by the realities of destruction and exile. S. van den Eynde, “Interpreting “Can These Bones Come to Life?” pp. 153–65, has argued that the initial rhetoric of the passage
unnatural, as dead bones become re-fleshed as living bodies. But given that the particulars of the pericope do not conform to later (traditional) concepts of resurrection, and considering the seeming absurdity of the vision, can we say that the imagery lacks any cultural background? I suggest here that the answer is negative. The passage in question is based upon Judean mortuary culture, and the revivification of bones is a reversal of death. Rather than a resurrection event, Ezekiel’s metaphor of Israel as a mass of dry bones is based upon the burial customs that occurred inside a Judean family tomb.

Ezekiel’s image of dry bones is evocative of the transformation of the dead that occurred inside the typical Judean bench-tomb, yet the transition is reworded in spectacular fashion as the bones become re-embodied rather than decayed. The key to understanding how this imagery works is the valley itself, which serves as a collective place for the assemblage of desiccated human remains. The valley, it is argued here, serves as a repository writ large. It emulates a unit inside a typical family tomb where bones were collected en masse. As such, it deploys symbolism embedded in Judean mortuary culture and draws upon inherent themes of family, ancestors, and patrimony. But, again, the idea is the reversal of death, thus the cultural practices of disposing the dead and placing their bones are reversed to produce living, breathing bodies that are to be reapatred. The idea of reversal, juxtaposing the living and the dead, is evident also in the use of the term “rest” (Hiphil, ָלע), which brackets the vision of dry bones. Together, the cultural allusions to mortuary practices and the specific vocabulary combine to form a unique message of hope for a diaspora community.

1. The Valley as Repository

The valley plays an important role in Ezek 37:1–10 as a place of transformation, yet the passage offers few details other than its peripheral location, and the fact that it is filled with bones (Ezek 37:1bβ). The bones themselves are said to be abundant and without flesh, that is to say, “dry” (Ezek 37:2b). Moreover, in the chapter’s first two verses the dead are depicted as a collective. They are an

serves as a narrative strategy of “secret knowledge.” The question posed of the bones elicits an unexpected answer that is concerned not with resurrection but with the life of the exiles. In all of these scenarios, Ezekiel’s vision a creative alternative to the dominant realities of the exile community. To use Walter Brueggemann’s phrase, the pericope comes from Ezekiel’s “prophetic imagination.” I argue here, however, that Ezekiel’s message is a creative form of discourse rooted in his community’s culture.
undifferentiated mass of disarticulated skeletal remains that are gathered to a confined space outside of Ezekiel’s exilic community. As such, the vision of the dead draws upon a particular image from the Judean rock-cut bench tomb. Specifically, it evokes the idea of the repository, a space inside the bench tomb where the disarticulated remains of the dead were collectively stored.

The symbolic force of the valley of dry bones was bound to the cultural meaning of the repository. This symbolism was not founded on an absurd notion, but tied to a cultural ideal that would have resonated among the exilic community. Repositories were important features of bench tombs, which were a common form of burial in the Kingdom of Judah prior to the exile. The burial practices that occurred inside this type of tomb involved an extended treatment of the body beginning with the initial burial of the corpse. The dead body would be placed in the supine position upon a bench carved out of the walls of the cave (or hewn chamber). The treatment that followed involved the removal of the decomposed human remains, and the storage of these remains (disarticulated bones) in a specially carved space inside the tomb’s chamber: the repository. This unit could be a niche cut beneath a bench, or a pit dug into the corner of the chamber. In the few examples of Judean tombs without repositories, the bones of former burials would be gathered on the chamber floor. The study of rock-cut tombs have revealed repositories with multiple interments, up to a hundred or more, secondarily disposed and collectively massed inside.

Ostensibly, the purpose of the repository was the secondary storage of former burials once it was necessary to reuse the benches for newer burials.

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8 Kloner and Davis, “Burial Cave,” p. 108. Exceptions are found in the small number of elite burials located in Jerusalem’s eastern cemetery (Silwan), which were not intended for secondary burials. The remains in these burials, tombs for wealthy and powerful individuals rather than families, were not meant to be disturbed. See for example the warnings found in the Royal Steward’s Tomb inscription.

9 See, for example, the filled repositories found in tombs at Tel Halif and Ketef Hinnom (Jerusalem); Biran and Gophna, “Burial Cave,” p. 152; and Barkay, “Excavations at Ketef Hinnom,” pp. 85–106.
Effectively, though, the repository was a cultural means of creating a collectivity of the dead. This collectivity was transgenerational. Within the repository the recently deceased joined past generations inside the family tomb. In the tomb, the benches and the repository together form a dialectic of space that marks the state of the dead body (corpse versus bones). The transformation of the dead into a collective mass of ancestral bones occurred through this spatial dialectic. The significance of the assemblage of bones as collective ancestors has long been recognized by archaeologists who have associated the use of repositories in Judean bench tombs with biblical idioms for death, such as “gathered to one’s peoples” and “lay down with one’s fathers.” These idioms involve Hebrew verbs that can be used for interment (gather [ḇʾp] and laying down [škb], and combine them with plural nouns that imply kinship (“peoples” [ʾammim] and “fathers” [ʾābōl]). As such, the biblical idioms reveal an ideal in death that involves reunion with one’s ancestors. By extension, this ideal underscores the importance of the family tomb, which is a critical component of a good death in the Hebrew Bible.

The symbolic importance of the bench tomb involves more than just the internal dynamics of burial. Archaeologists have noted that the bench tomb’s shape emulates that of a typical residential structure in Iron Age Judah, the four-room house. Their commonalities included a square plan, and the organization of space into three units (benches and rooms, respectively) surrounding a central chamber. Additionally, and quite importantly, both the bench tomb and the four-room house were multigenerational in function. Extended families of up to three generations or more could dwell in one place. These family tombs were located in cemeteries outside the associated town—what archaeologists refer to as “extramural burial”—and here the Judean bench tombs functioned as houses for the dead adjacent to the settled space of the living community inside the walls of the town.

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10 Suriano, Politics of Dead Kings, pp. 32–49.
11 Suriano, History of Death, pp. 28–34.
13 Suriano, History of Death, pp. 94–95.
14 Suriano, History of Death, pp. 43–45.
Archaeologists have associated the creation of distinct burial sites ("bounded cemeteries") with systems of lineal descent and inheritance. A family tomb could mark patrimony, forming a link between the town and the local countryside. In biblical literature, descent-based inheritance, patrilinial succession, and family tombs are interrelated. Additionally, the practice of extramural burial is consistent with purity laws found in the Hebrew Bible that separate the living from the dead due to corpse impurity. In summary, the tombs that surrounded Judean settlements created an ancestral landscape. They were houses for dead kin, a gathering of bones that marked patrimony. Thus, the description of the great gathering of bones as the "whole House of Israel" in Ezek 37:11 is hardly absurd though its scope is unusual. The image touches upon cultural practices that can be recognized in both Ezek 37:1–10 and Ezek 37:12–14. The exiles' inability to be buried in their homeland meant that they were alienated from their ancestors and dislocated from the divine promises that were once given to these ancestors.

2. A Vision of Death’s Reversal

Ezekiel's vision of the valley of bones has been interpreted in different ways over the years. The motifs of mortuary practices throughout are both implicit in Ezek 37:1–10 and explicit in Ezek 37:12–14. The vision begins with a mass collection of bones (vv. 1–2), evocative of Judean tombs, and this image is explained as the bones of the exiles (v. 11). The text goes on to specifically

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15 The relationship between cemeteries and inheritance can be complicated, see Morris, “Archaeology of Ancestors,” pp. 147–69.
17 Wright, Disposal of Impurity, pp. 115–28. The classic work on the subject in general is Douglas, Purity and Danger, though biblical scholars now draw from her work with caution. See the assessment in Lemos, “The Universal and the Particular,” 236–51.
18 Indeed, as van den Eynde ("Interpreting ‘Can These Bones Come Back to Life?’ pp. 160–61) has shown, the events of Ezek 37:3–14 recall the rhetoric of Ezek 33:10 where the exiles ask: "Our transgressions and sins are upon us, we are rotting because of them. How can we live?" I agree that the point of these passages is to emphasize new life for the exiles, but the use of the Niphal participle 'maqāqān ("rotting") to describe a condition juxtaposed to being alive is clearly a funerary metaphor.
19 Eichrodt (Ezechiel, pp. 507–8) and Schöpflin ("Revivification of the Dry Bones," p. 73) have noted that the bones are decayed. This is precisely the state of the dead inside a Judean repository; desiccated and disarticulated through the natural process of decomposition.

regarding the dry bones, they are the remains of the dead that have decayed. This is precisely the state of the dead, as dry, decayed bones, as they existed inside a Judean repository.
of distinct burial sites and inheritance. A between the town and the sacred inheritance, patrilineal additionally, the practice of and in the Hebrew Bible that security. In summary, the in ancestral landscape. They marked patrimony. Thus, the whole House of Israel in usual. The image touches with Ezek 37:1–10 and Ezek her homeland meant that they from the divine promises that interpreted in different ways throughout are both implicit in this vision begins with a mass mbs, and this image is goes on to specifically complicated, see Morris, on the subject in general is from her work with caution. See 6–51.

Come Back to Life? (pp. 160–61) 33:10 where the exiles ask: of them. How can we live? I for the exiles, but the use of the juxtaposed to being alive is clearly of the Dry Bones,” p. 73) have the dead inside a Judean repository; depiction. have decayed. This is precisely the Judean repository.

reference tombs and burial (vv. 12–13). The explanation given in Ezek 37:11 is that the God of Israel will open up the tombs of the exiles and repatriate them in the Promised Land. The message is that of reburial, yet the imagery reveals an intricate reversal of death as bones come to life. In light of how closely the valley resonates with images of repositories, it is constructive to look at how the revival of the dead itself is a reversal of the ritual practices of burying the dead.

Ezekiel’s vision of bones draws upon the symbolic power of ritual through cultural allusion. Scholars such as Victor Turner, Catherine Bell, and Jonathan Z. Smith have often associated ritual symbolism with concepts of opposition and hierarchy. These concepts can be recognized in the movement of ritual bodies, the construction of space, as well as the process of transition that is charted through ritual action. The mortuary practices that take place inside the Judean bench tomb, which archaeologists refer to as primary and secondary interments, are key to the natural decomposition of the body. Here, ritual action charts the transformation of individual corpses that enter the tomb and their transition into collective assemblages of bones inside the repository. In fact, in one of the early studies of secondary burial practices, Robert Hertz uses the terms “wet” and “dry” to distinguish the primary burial of a corpse from the secondary burial of the decomposed bones. The terms dry and wet can be easily applied to Ezekiel’s vision of bones (Ezek 37:2, w‘immē y‘bešōt me‘ōd) versus bodies (Ezek 37:8). The opposition here is also one of “whole versus broken,” and this is evident throughout the events described in

20 There is a tendency to separate Ezek 37:1–10 from vv. 12–14, for discussion and bibliography see Olyan, “Unnoticed Resonances of Tomb Opening,” pp. 491–92 n. 1. See also Footnote 1.

21 Cooke, Book of Ezekiel, 397 saw the images of exposed bones and the entombed dead as inconsistent though not incongruent. But as Zimmerli (Ezekiel 2, p. 257) and Greenberg (Ezekiel, pp. 744–6) note, v. 11 provides and appropriate transition from one theme to the other. According to Olyan, “Unnoticed Resonances,” p. 492, “Both 37:1–10 and 37:12–14 respond to the metaphors of the saying in v. 11, which suggests the “death” of the people.” I would add two further points. First, in both vv. 1–10 and vv. 12–14 the dead are portrayed as a collective. Given this consistency, the explanation in v. 11 followed by the reference to tombs reveals that the earlier image of a valley of bones was a metaphorical repository for the entire community.

22 Smith, To Take Place, pp. 37–46.


24 Bell, Ritual Theory, pp. 101–104.

25 See references in Footnote 9.

Ezekiel’s vision. A further opposition that can be recognized in both Judean mortuary practices and Ezekiel’s imagery is “inside versus outside,” as the dead bones are placed inside the tomb, and the tomb is set outside the settled space of living communities. Ultimately, the central opposition that serves as the overarching theme for Ezekiel 37:1–14 is “living versus dead,” and all of the other oppositions in the passage are attendant to this theme; together they portray a dramatic reversal of death.

The opposition of “outside versus inside” relates not only to the entombment of the dead but also the placement of the tomb in extramural cemeteries. Ezekiel’s valley is not only outside the exile’s Babylonian settlement, but (importantly) it is far away from their homeland and patrimony. The God of Israel resolves this problem by reviving dead bones, and this action is built upon an opposition of whole versus broken. For Catherine Bell, ritual practice (“ritualization,” in her terminology) could create, control, and organize environments through embodied action in both space and time. Bell’s concept here is useful for examining Ezekiel’s bones and bodies, beginning with his own body. Ezekiel walks around the valley, sāḥib sāḥib, and movement of his body (alive and intact) enacts a boundary surrounding the bones and their collective space.

Whole body/broken bodies is not the only opposition at work here. Regarding Ezekiel’s movement, Casey Strine observed: “By circumambulating the bones, Ezekiel’s body effects another privileged opposition: his promenade creates an inside-outside contrast.” Moreover, the phrase sāḥib sāḥib is redolent of spatial boundaries. This specific location occurs 24 times in the Hebrew Bible (MT), but only once outside of Ezekiel (see 2 Chr 4:3). Of the 23 occurrences in Ezekiel, all but two are found in the prophet’s description of an idealized temple complex (Ezekiel 40–43). In that extensive description, space

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29 The prophet is brought out (‘ṣṣ in the Hiphil), which implies a location outside of, and peripheral to, Tel Abib. The description of movement here is similar to Ezek 3:22, as noted by Greenberg (Ezekiel, p. 742), where Ezekiel is called to go out to a valley. Whether this is the same location as in Ezekiel 37, both described as “the valley” (ḥabbaqqa), is not entirely clear.
30 Bell, Ritual Theory, p. 92.
31 On “bodily movement” in Bell’s theory of ritualization, see Strine, “Ritualized Bodies,” pp. 41–57.
Bell, Ritual Theory, p. 92.
33 I am grateful to Chris Hays for drawing my attention to the use of sāḥib sāḥib in Ezek 37:2 and 40–43.
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See Strine, “Ritualized Bodies,” pp. the use of sāḥib sāḥib in Ezek 37:2 is articulated in very specific terms in order to construct a strict set of boundaries.34 The boundaries of space are defined according to different yet intersecting moieties (to use J. Z. Smith’s term): pure/impure and sacred profane. Ezekiel’s movement is around, and hence outside, the valley of bones which implies a sense of pure versus impure. Ezekiel never enters the valley of bones, and elsewhere in the book where the prophet expresses an acute concern for corpse contamination it is precisely because bones are found inside Jerusalem rather than outside (Ezek 43:7 9).

The most startling movement of bodies is that of the rattling of bones, which become animated and come together to form intact (whole) bodies. The description of this process in Ezek 37:7, and the bones came together, each bone to its counterpart bone” (wattiqbā ʿāsmōt ʿāsem ʿel-ʿāsmō) is one of collective bodies. The gathering of bones finds comparison in 1 Kgs 13:31, where the ideal of collective burial is expressed through the statement, “let my bones rest with his bones” (ʿesē ʿāsmōtayv hannīhū ʾet-ʿāsmōtoy). The account of a prophet burying his fellow prophet in 1 Kgs 13 is a complicated one for reasons that go beyond the purpose of this essay,35 but the underlying theme in this story is an interment ideology that is dependent upon the importance of the family tomb.36 In 1 Kgs 13, the man of God from Judah is denied burial with his ancestors, but his fate is ameliorated by virtue of his burial in Bethel along with the old prophet (who had initially deceived him). In Ezek 37:11, the exiles’ complaint is that they are cut off from their ancestors and their family tombs,37 complaint that their God responds to by reviving their dead bones. The effect is similar in both texts, though the process moves in different directions. In 1 Kgs 13:27 32, the account of the old prophet burying his Judean counterpart is an accurate description of the process of burial. The Judean’s intact corpse is brought to the tomb where it eventually joins the aggregation of bones inside.38 In Ezekiel 37 the ritual action of burial is reversed through the opposition of whole bodies versus broken bones. Just as the dead enter the bench tomb as an intact corpse, eventually to be transformed into disarticulated bones inside the

34 Smith, To Take Place, pp. 47 65.
36 Olyan, “Israelite Internment Ideology,” pp. 605 06.
37 Olyan, “We Are Utterly Cut Off,” pp. 43 51.
38 Indeed, the story of their bones continues in 2 Kgs 23:16 18, when the presence of the Judean’s remains spares the Bethel prophet’s tomb from Josiah’s desecration.
repository, the disarticulated bones in Ezekiel’s valley leave the tomb as intact, living bodies.\textsuperscript{39}

The threat of non-burial, a concern found in biblical literature and Near Eastern treaties, plays an important role in the background of 1 Kgs 13 and Ezek 37:1–10. Proper burial with one’s kin was a cultural ideal, and the inability to fulfill these ideals factors into both biblical accounts. Set against this backdrop, Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones can be seen as an inversion of treaty curses, where the ideal is specifically denied.\textsuperscript{40} Andrew Davis has recently drawn attention to a cogent parallel found in the Esarhaddon Succession Treaty (EST).\textsuperscript{41} In this Assyrian inscription the curse of non-burial is invoked for violating the treaty. The treaty’s imprecatory language closely follows that of the biblical passage in subject (bones) and verb, \textit{taqrriba} (Akkadian) and \textit{wattiqrbu} (Hebrew).\textsuperscript{42} The inversion of imagery in these passages suggests that Ezek 37:1–14 is drawing upon the tradition of treaty curses, which is often seen as a source for metaphors of unfaithfulness in the Hebrew Bible.\textsuperscript{43} The exilic prophet here inverts a known outcome of violating a covenant, the disinterred

\textsuperscript{39} Suriano, \textit{History of Death}, p. 255. To quote Schöpflin ("Revivification of the Dry Bones," p. 73): "In Ezek 37, this order [the fleshly exterior of the human body versus its internal organs] is reverted because the process of decay that could be observed with dead bodies is reversed here." Zimmerlin (\textit{Ezekiel 2}, p. 262) sees the reference to the “slain” (\textit{frūgīm}) in Ezek 37:9 as an indication that the bones had become embodied as corpses at this stage of the vision.

\textsuperscript{40} Davis, "Near Eastern Treaty Parallel," pp. 337–45. According to Davis, the first to draw light on vassal treaty curses as a parallel for Ezekiel’s dry bones was Fensham, "Curse of Dry Bones," pp. 59–60. Scholars such as Greenberg (\textit{Ezekiel}, p. 748) and Schöpflin ("Revivification of the Dry Bones," pp. 68–70) have noted briefly that Ezekiel’s vision generally evokes the image of the disinterred dead, without further discussion of the theme. The description of the bones in Ezek 37:9 as those who were “slain” (\textit{frūgīm}) has further suggested to some that the general image in vv. 1–10 is based on treaty curses. Zimmerlin for instance (\textit{Ezekiel 2}, pp. 261–62), who otherwise resists reading into these verses allusions to treaty curses, admits that the reference in v. 9 might be reminiscent of the violence involved in the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. The use of this term could also serve as an allusion to the exposed mortal remains of Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 39 that are collected for burial in the "Valley of Gog’s multitude." I want to thank Daniel Kahn, who first brought up this point at the conference at Oranim in his comments on my paper. Indeed, the similar imagery of bones in Ezek 37 and Ezek 39 can be paired as promise versus threat, see Stavrakopoulos, "Gog’s Grave," pp. 83–4.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., pp. 341–5.

\textsuperscript{42} The nature of the relationship between Assyrian treaties and biblical literature continues to be debated regarding the implications for dating as well as whether there was any dependence. For different perspectives, cf. Steynmans, "Deuteronomy 28 and Telf Tuyat," pp. 1–13 and the recent challenge to the status quo, along with the thorough review of scholarship, found in Crouch, \textit{Israel & The Assyrians}, pp. 1–13.
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dead, turning the image of bones into a message of hope. This observation is not at odds with the interpretation offered in this essay. The Judean bench-tomb, as a family burial place, was a cultural ideal; burial inside meant a good death. In the cultural practices that underscored this ideal, the treatment of bones was a particular concern. Furthermore, As Davis notes, the destruction of bones was a frequent motif in Assyrian sources. The point of this motif, and the message of the treaty curse, was the denial of a cultural ideal. The parallel between Ezekiel 37 and the EST, however, extend beyond the image of bones coming together. The passage cited by Davis begins by addressing the vassal along with his family in EST § 97, col. vii, lines 638–640:

“You, your women, your sons, your daughters, will not rest nor sleep, and may your bones never come together.”

at-tu-ru MÌ.MES-ku-ru DUMU.MES-ku-ru DUMU.MÌ.MES-ku-ru la ta-mu-ha la ta-
sa-la-la es-mu-te-ku-ru a-na a-he-is lu la i-qar-rî-ta

The bones in this passage refer to the collective dead of the vassal. The reference to different kin at the beginning, and the specific denial of “rest and sleep” (là tanûha là tâsalâla) refers to the bones. This is an allusion to collective burial, and hence, family tombs. The verb “sleep” (salâlu) is used elsewhere in Assyrian sources in reference to the dead, as in the Ashurbanipal inscription cited by Davis.

The Assyrian parallel (EST), however, also uses the verb “rest” (tanûha) in conjunction with sleep in reference to the dead. This compares with the use of the verbal root nwh in Ezekiel 37:1 and 14. Davis dismisses this as a parallel, seeing it instead as a coincidence due to the different stem use.

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45 This interpretation is evident in the full title of Fensham’s article: “The Curse of Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37:1–14 Changed to a Blessing of Resurrection.”
50 Davis, “Near Eastern Treaty Parallel,” pp. 344. The Akkadian verb is in the G-Stem while the Hebrew verbs are Hiphil (C-Stem).
But this root can be used in Semitic languages to refer to the treatment of bones. In Phoenician funerary inscriptions from Kition (KAI 34:5, KAI 35:2), the place of the dead is referred to as the mškb nḥt lʾlm, “restful burial-place forever.” Moreover, in 1 Kgs 13:31, which offers a useful funerary parallel to Ezekiel 37, the root occurs in describing bones resting with other bones inside the tomb. In both passages, 1 Kgs 13:31 and Ezekiel 37:1, 14, we encounter the Hiphil form hinnaḥ. The causative form of the verb involves a subject and object, here a person setting something in place. In 1 Kgs 13:31 it is sons of the old prophet setting his bones with the bones of the man of God. But in Ezekiel 37, the recipient of verbal action differs in each occurrence of hinnaḥ. The subject in both Ezek 37:1 and 14 is God, while the object in these verses is first the prophet Ezekiel and then finally the house of Israel, that is, the peoples who have been revived from the tomb. This particular use of hinnaḥ emphasizes the theme of the vision. The verb is not used of the dead, but instead the living. The act of setting something in place does not refer here to putting bones inside a tomb, but taking people out of a tomb. The God of Israel first places the prophet at the site of the event, where he stands outside the valley of bones and bears witness to their revival. The deity then takes the revived bones, now living peoples, and places them outside the valley-wide repository in the land of Israel. The two occurrences of this verb come at the beginning and end of the vision, Ezek 37:1 and 14, effectively bracketing the description of events. The use of the verb for placing the living, rather than the dead, emphasizes the point of the passage: the reversal of death. The vision uses as its starting point the ultimate phase of mortuary practices, the bones gathered inside a tomb’s repository. But with these bones, the natural process rewinds as the bones are revived and re-fleshed, leaving the symbolic tomb of the valley as intact bodies.

51 In Ezek 37:1 the verb occurs in the third person singular, as a waw-consecutive, with first common singular suffix: “and he (Yahweh) placed me (Ezekiel).” In Ezek 37:14 the verb occurs in the first person singular, as a consecutive perfect, with third plural suffix: “and I (Yahweh) will placed them (the revived people of Israel).” The different tenses, along with the different objects of action, shift the perspective of this passage from the prophet’s experience to the future hope of his message.

52 Greenberg, Ezekiel, pp. 742, 746–7, states that the two uses of the verbs should be distinguished from each other in Ezek 37:1 and v. 14. The first occurrence of hinnaḥ in Ezek 37:1 means “place” or “rest” (something), while the second use in Ezek 37:14 means to “settle” (someone). The nuance differs, though the root and stem are the same. But it is possible to recognize the semantic differences here without dismissing the literary structure formed by using the same verb to begin and end a prophetic vision.
No Rest for the Dead

Now as living peoples these bodies are placed outside their tombs, and far away from the valley of exile. The entire process moves in a direction opposite of traditional Judean mortuary practices that took place inside the family tomb.53

3. Conclusion

Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones is not a traditional resurrection account. Its primary focus is not on describing postmortem existence. Ezekiel’s vision was meant to convey hope to a living community. But this message of new life, one could say, deathless hope, was rooted in cultural practices of disposing the dead. Burial customs in general, and the gathering of bones in particular, played key roles in the imagery used by Ezekiel. This is unsurprising. The afterlife in the Hebrew Bible was conceptualized around the treatment of the dead. The ancestors that remained inside the family tomb stood for the past, and the names of these ancestors were remembered through the divine promises that were once given to them. Biblical passages such as Ezek 37:1–14 drew from the past, through the image of the dead, to point to the future. As Eric Meyer wrote in 1970,54 “If we cannot take Ezekiel’s vision literally we can at least appreciate it either as an eschatological poetic vision of the realization of the potential which the bones of Israel possessed in Sheol or as a dramatic presentation of the return of exiled Israel to the Holy Land such as Moses and Aaron were promised when they were denied burial there.”

Bibliography


53 The mortal remains Ezekiel encounters do not belong to one particular kinship group; these are the whole house of Israel who will one day resettle the land. The wording in Ezek 37:14, that the exiles will be placed “on their own ground” (*admatken*), implies more than return. To quote Stavrakopoulou (“Gog’s Grave,” p. 84): “The theological dynamics of return from exile are thus couched in this text in the terms of a territorial ideology, expressed through the medium of the dead.”


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Alexander Massmann and Christopher B. Hays

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