

## Ezekiel 37:1-14 – Resurrection Revisioned!

Matthew P Anstey, 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent, 2008

### Introduction

If someone off the street came up to you and said, “What does the resurrection mean?”, what would you say?

Most of us would probably say, “It’s all about life after death.”

Tonight I hope to share with you a different sort of answer, an answer that begins with Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones...

### Retelling the Vision

<sup>1</sup> *The hand of Yahweh came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of Yahweh and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. <sup>2</sup> He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.*

A valley full of bones. Dry bones.

Parched bones, picked clean by vultures and hyenas, bleached and barren. Cursed bones.<sup>a</sup>

Not even corpses or skeletons, just bones flung around helter-skelter.

Bones mean *death*. A valley full of death.

A jagged white blanket of death, thrown over a silent landscape.

Hardly an inspiring vision.

<sup>3</sup> *Yahweh said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?”*

Can anything overcome death? Can life come from death? Is there any hope for these bones?

*I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.”*

Ezekiel is dumbfounded. He doesn’t know. Only Yahweh knows.

<sup>4</sup> *Then Yahweh said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, ... I will cause spirit<sup>b</sup> to enter you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup> I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin,... and you shall know that I am Yahweh.”*

Ezekiel is to speak directly *to the bones*. But how can bones hear? They’re just bones!

But Yahweh is unperturbed – “Listen up, bones, you’re going to live, and then you’ll know that I am Yahweh!”

So Ezekiel prophesied as he had been commanded.<sup>c</sup> It began with a whimper. Just a rattle, a tiny tinkling, a clatter here, a clunk there, and then **whooshka**, bones going crazy, every direction imaginable:

feet to shins to thighs to hips to spines to skulls

And then ligaments and cartilage and muscles and skin and hair – complete humans ... almost.

Ezekiel is then told to address the very Spirit of God,<sup>d</sup> to *command* it to come from the four corners of the earth and to breathe upon these bones.

The spirit rushes into them, they stand proud, alive and kicking, a vast crowd.<sup>e</sup>

*What a vision! But what on earth does it mean?*

Yahweh spells it out in verses 11-14. It is carefully structured in three sets of three. Let me read it out this way:

- <sup>11</sup> *“Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say,*
  1. *‘Our bones are dried up,*
  2. *our hope is lost;*
  3. *we are cut off completely.’*
- <sup>12</sup> *Therefore prophesy, and say to them, ...:*
  1. *I am going to open your graves, and*
  2. *bring you up from your graves, O my people; and*
  3. *I will bring you back to the land of Israel. <sup>13</sup> And*
    - *you shall know that I am Yahweh ... <sup>14</sup>*
- 1. *I will put my spirit within you, and*
  2. *you shall live, and*
  3. *I will place you on your own land; and*
    - *you shall know that I, Yahweh, have spoken and will act.”*

Can you see the threefold pattern?

1. Our bones are dried up > I am going to open your graves and put my spirit in you
2. Our hope is lost > I will resurrect you and you shall live
3. We are cut off completely > I will bring you back to Israel and place you in your own land

This pattern highlights the central purpose of resurrection: *In their return from exile and restoration to socio-economic life, Israel shall know who Yahweh truly is*. Israel shall become once again Yahweh’s friend.

## Ezekiel’s Vision of Resurrection

What an incredible vision<sup>f</sup> of resurrection! Let’s think about it further, as it has four dimensions.

### 1. Resurrection overcomes death

For Israel, death and life are not simply *biological* realities, but *social* realities. To be alive is “[to live] within a flourishing and continuing [family]<sup>g</sup> that dwelt in a productive and secure association with its land.”<sup>h</sup>

To die, therefore, was to fail to flourish, to be cut off from family and friends and land.<sup>i</sup>

Exile was a form of death.

Resurrection for Ezekiel is *not* about eternal life after biological death. Rather, it is about socio-economic life overcoming socio-economic death.

Resurrection overcomes death in all its forms.

### 2. Resurrection recreates the world

In the vision, Israel is created not out of thin air, but out of *their own dead bones*. Ezekiel adapts the creation language of Genesis: “The LORD God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.”<sup>j</sup>

*This world, no matter how dead and lifeless and futile, contains everything God needs to re-create new life.*<sup>k</sup>

Resurrection re-creates this world from its very own bones, from its own carnage.

### 3. Resurrection is the free gift of the Spirit

The words “spirit” and “bones” dominate. God takes the bones, the dust of the earth, but the Spirit gives life.

The contrast between Spirit and bones signifies the Israel’s *inability* to save itself from death and God’s *free gift* of life, given without reserve.

If all we have is bones, what can bring life? Not repentance, not conversion, not the scriptures, not prayer. No, only the Spirit of God.

If you read the previous chapters of Ezekiel you’ll see why. Israel, just like us, has been the worst of all sinners, constant in their violence and faithlessness.<sup>l</sup>

Resurrection is the excessive, unconstrained, unprecedented gift of the Spirit of God.

### 4. Resurrection creates a community who are God’s friends

Verse 11 reads, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel.”

The work of the Spirit is to create a whole people, not a collection of unrelated individuals.

The Israelites had no conception of the self constituted by the inner depths of one’s soul.<sup>m</sup> Instead, the self is deeply embedded in a social setting, relatively transparent and undefined with respect to social boundaries. The self is ‘authentic’ precisely in *its dependence upon other people*, and *not*, as we would say, *in being true to itself*.<sup>n</sup>

So resurrection is not about *you* as *you*, but about you *as dependent on something much bigger and more significant, God's people*.

It is God's people, *as friends restored from exile*, who are the light to the world, not individuals within it.

Resurrection creates a community who are God's friends.

So, what does resurrection mean? Here's Ezekiel's answer:

***Resurrection is the re-creation of God's people on earth, by the Spirit, out of the carnage of this world, so that together as God's friends they may overcome death in all its forms and be restored to the life promised in creation.***

This is a mouthful, but there is a biblical shorthand for this: God's restoring justice, or God's righteousness. *The resurrection implements God's restorative justice.*

## The New Testament Vision of Resurrection

Well, the question is, is Ezekiel's answer still true for the church? Or is resurrection in the New Testament simply eternal life after biological death?

I would like to suggest that the Gospel writers and Paul both agree profoundly with Ezekiel. Yes, they extend the resurrection to include life after biological death, but they retain the emphasis on *the re-creation of this world*.<sup>o</sup>

Think about each dimension.

1. The resurrection of Jesus **overcomes death in all its forms**: biological, but also the death of homelessness, climate change, drug addiction, social dislocation, violence – *these are all forms of death*.
2. The resurrection of Jesus **re-creates Jesus** from his very own dead bones. God even retains the wounds in Jesus' hands. God doesn't create Jesus Version II, from scratch. God does not need to destroy this world to re-create new life.
3. The resurrection of Jesus is **the free gift of the Spirit**. Romans 1:3-4 says that Jesus is declared to be the Son of God *through the Spirit by his resurrection*.
4. The resurrection of Jesus **creates a community of God's friends**, namely, the church. Through baptism, we die in Christ so that together as Christ's body we implement God's resurrection agenda.

Remember that the shorthand word for this agenda is *God's restorative justice, God's righteousness*. The Gospel proclaims God's righteousness precisely because it reveals that God participates unconditionally in the life of this world. God is committed without reserve to the fulfilment of creation's promise, the promise of wholeness and *shalom*.<sup>p</sup>

When God *saves* us, it is so we can be fully *responsible*, fully *authentic*, fully *participating* in the project of creation, which is being re-created by the Spirit in our seemingly bone-dry world.<sup>q</sup>

- It is not about *our removal from history and physicality* but *our plunging into history and embodiedness*, into the specific context where God's Spirit places us.
- It is not a waiting around for the annihilation of this world, but a working together with God for its renewal
- It is not a "Get-out-of-Earth-Free Card". It is instead an invitation to roll the dice and keep on playing.

Hence the resurrection entails that ethics and aesthetics – justice and jazz – are *intrinsic* to the Christian life, and not something we begrudgingly do on the way to heaven.

### A Vision Worth Sharing...

So, if someone off the street came up to you and said, "What does the resurrection mean?", what would you say *now*?

I would suggest that the answer, "It's all about life after death," is "an epic adventure in missing the point,"<sup>r</sup> if you mean life in heaven after biological death.

If you're brave, you could try Ezekiel's answer: *Resurrection is the re-creation of God's people on earth, by the Spirit, out of the carnage of this world, so that together as God's friends they may overcome death in all its forms and be restored to the life promised in creation.*

Alternatively, you could go for the shorthand, *Resurrection means that God's restoring justice is at work in the world.*

If that doesn't work, I'd try one last word, a word of hope to all the dry bones of life: *Resurrection means that "this world is beloved of God and must not be abandoned."*<sup>s</sup>

Amen.

## Notes

<sup>a</sup> Compare *Ezekiel*, Hermeneia p. 259 Wolff. For Israel, corpses left in the open are cursed, so these are cursed bones.

<sup>b</sup> The NRSV uses “breath” in many places, whereas the Hebrew uses *spirit* (ruach) throughout. This is important to retain.

<sup>c</sup> <sup>7</sup> *So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.* <sup>8</sup> *I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.*

<sup>d</sup> <sup>9</sup> *Then Yahweh said to me, "Prophesy to the spirit [breath], prophesy, mortal, and say to the spirit [breath]: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O spirit [breath], and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."*

<sup>e</sup> <sup>10</sup> *I prophesied as he commanded me, and the spirit [breath] came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.*

<sup>f</sup> The Talmud calls it a *mashal*, a parable. (see Levenson, *Resurrection and the restoration of Israel*)

<sup>g</sup> “kin group” in Levenson

<sup>h</sup> P. 155 *ibid*, Jon Levenson

<sup>i</sup> The death of an individual person is not a problem so long as the family name lives on. This is why childlessness and barrenness are so dreaded, because the family name will die out.

<sup>j</sup> Genesis 2:7

<sup>k</sup> Creation can be renewed without destroying this world..

<sup>l</sup> Levenson summarises, “[Israel’s history] is a long an unremitting history of rebellion against their God and immoral behaviour and perversion of the lowest order. They have been the rankest of idolaters from early on ... yet their God’s commitment to restore and repatriate them remains steadfast.” P. 164 *ibid*.

<sup>m</sup> For modern readers like us, this idea that our identity is constituted by the group is hard to fathom, but fathom it we must.

<sup>n</sup> Summary of De Vito, *OT Anthropology*, CBQ, 1999, as cited in Levenson, *ibid* p. 112.

<sup>o</sup> This is particularly the case in my view in Romans. NT Wright has developed extensively the idea that Jesus signals Israel’s return from Exile. See his *Jesus and the Victory of God*. See also the important work by my colleague Thorwald Lorenzon, *Resurrection and Discipleship*.

<sup>p</sup> John Douglas Hall, “the cross of Christ marks, in a decisive and irrevocable way, the unconditional participation of God in the life of the world, ... the commitment of God to the fulfilment of creation’s promise.” *The Cross in Our Context*, p. 35.

<sup>q</sup> John Douglas Hall puts it this way: “God calls us as creatures to a life of extraordinary responsibility, and ‘salvation’ implies reclaiming that responsibility.” P. 247 *ibid*. Also p. 108 “Justification is the righting of the human person so that he or she will behave humanly – will become, so to speak, himself or herself.”

<sup>r</sup> James K. A Smith, said in relation to something completely different, if my memory doesn’t fail me!

<sup>s</sup> JDH, p. 220. *Ibid*, said there in relation to the message of the cross.