



The Book of Ezekiel Ezekiel, Part 3

The Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones

Following the heart transplant episode in Ezekiel Chapter 36, we now have another vision. As we have seen before, whenever Ezekiel has a vision, it is never a pleasant experience for him. His language of affliction engages with Mesopotamian ideas of illness and anatomy, in which his physical experiences are like maladies, almost demons and evil spirits invading his bodily space.

This vision now in Chapter 37 is perhaps the most famous section of the whole Book of Ezekiel and is surely one of the most well-known episodes in the entire Hebrew Bible. In this vision, the prophet is led out to a valley full of dry bones, dry to emphasize that these remains are dead and have been so for a long, long time. Ezekiel is given the ridiculous command to prophesy to the bones; remembering what we know about biblical prophecy, that it is always done with a mind to change something about the audience in the present, what possible use could there be in prophesying to bones long dead?

Clearly, this narrative is building on the language of reconstituting the body of Israel as we have seen in previous chapters. This is indicative of a kind of political theology which envisions the state as a human body, with all the parts of a body we would expect: a heart, a spirit, bones, sinews, flesh, and so on. Also at play here is the idea that, in the ancient world, bones were something that one could consult, even if such a thing were technically prohibited. For someone to go and inquire something of bones is not a practice that would have seemed completely bizarre, but the idea of prophesying to them is very strange.

This is all not too dissimilar to the heart of stone from previous chapters. Like the dead bones, a stone heart cannot actually perform the intended function of a heart - it is neither animate nor living, unlike a flesh heart. These narratives and visions are playing in the same metaphorical world and must also to some degree be borrowing imagery from the traumatic experience of what living through exile and destruction might have felt like to the people who survived it.

As this vision progresses, and the bones come together and knit new sinew and tendons, and they are covered once again in flesh. It becomes a new creation of the body, a sort of reverse desiccation. This imagery resonates with the burial practices of ancient Israel, who were very familiar with how bodies withered, leaving the dead out to decompose and collecting the bones later. Ezekiel's audience would know what that looked like, and now, it is happening here in reverse. Once again, Ezekiel is party to a visceral, strange, haunting image.

Restoration for God's Sake

YHWH makes it clear through this vision in Chapter 37 that he intends to restore Israel - but why? It is certainly not on account of the people. Rather, as is key to Ezekiel's entire message, it is for YHWH's sake, so that Israel can be a witness to and a manifestation of God's glory, power, and reputation. This chapter is truly a microcosm of the whole book: Ezekiel never has a positive regard for Israel, and he never expects they could be restored due to their own repentance, as is the case in other prophetic works such as the Book of Isaiah. YHWH will bring back Israel so that he himself does not diminish - it has little to do with the people themselves.

This might feel like a challenging sentiment to read - indeed, the Book of Ezekiel rarely shies away from challenging themes, as is apparent in some of its more problematic or difficult imagery. In Chapter 23, we see the personification of Samaria and Jerusalem as two wanton sisters, named Oholah and Oholibah, respectively. They are YHWH's wives, and they are depicted as unfaithful in very explicit terms, and not for the first time in the Book of Ezekiel (see also Chapter 16). The marriage metaphor here in Ezekiel is interesting because it's not just the personification of Israel as God's disobedient wife, with God as the cuckold, but it is also the comparison and juxtaposition of the two wives together, with one used as a cautionary tale for the other.

Samaria is named Oholah, meaning "her tent," or more liberally "her shrines," and both names here have the element of tents in them. On the one hand, this is a relatively common onomastic feature, but on the other, Ezekiel uses these names to great effect in this chapter. There is the idea of sexual contact happening in the marriage tent, and also the tent as the site of illicit sexual contact. Jerusalem is named Oholibah, meaning something like "a tent is in her," or perhaps, and this is a very deliberate play on words by Ezekiel, "my tent is in her." The grammar is deliberately ambiguous - it could refer to Jerusalem as the site of YHWH's temple, or it could refer to Jerusalem as the site of illicit sexual activity. This is a clever way of juxtaposing the two "wives," the two nations who are lusting after Assyria and Babylon respectively, by saying that actually they are the same, and thus their fate will be the same. The only way for Jerusalem to be saved is if the name Oholibah becomes a possessive suffix, not just "a tent" but "my tent," YHWH's tent.

Despite the unsettling imagery, this is also a small showcase of Ezekiel's literary genius. This prophetic work is one of the most literary of the prophetic texts; it has a distinct written-ness to it, evidenced by the presence of clever wordplay that works only on the grammatical level, and thus is less effective when spoken orally. The density of its imagery and its strange rhythms lend the work a sense of poetry which again summons the priestly literature of the Pentateuch and its influence, lending a deeply literate sensibility to this work.

Utopia in the Book of Ezekiel

This all brings us at last to the very end of the Ezekiel, to the most priestly part of the most priestly book. We find here the hope of restoration for Israel in the blueprints of a new temple. The description here clearly draws upon and describes the Tabernacle material from Exodus - it is incredibly detailed, and often difficult to read in the same way that Exodus and Leviticus can be, due to its laborious specificity and deeply technical measurements. The detailing not only of the

architectural blueprints, but also of the expected sacrificial rites, is partaking of a purely priestly sensibility, as many of the specifics in this section of Ezekiel can be found only here and in the priestly source.

Is this temple with its sacrificial cultic practices ever meant to play out in reality? It doesn't really appear that way - this is a wonderfully utopian text, and it is even presented to the reader as such. In many ways, it is the polar opposite of what we find in the Pentateuch with the description of the Tabernacle. Through deep, intense description, one is describing what came before the Temple, in the mythological past; and the other is describing what will come after the Temple, in the eschatological, utopian future. It is a marvelous bookending of the priestly material, and also a profound recognition of the temple's absence.

The worldview of the priestly source, as expressed in the Hebrew Bible through the Book of Ezekiel and the Pentateuch, is exclusive and exclusionary. It is closed - compare this to another biblical text, for example, in Second Isaiah, in which one reads how all the nations of the world will come to Jerusalem and become worshippers of YHWH. The priestly material has no interest in this universal and unifying view of the world; it tells us something about Ezekiel's audience, those he is trying to persuade with his visions, that he uses language they would not only be intimately familiar with, but completely sign on to.

His vision shows that something new will be built to replace the temple, but the "new" is really just getting back to the original. It calls back to before the first temple, back to the Tabernacle, back to the camp in the wilderness in Israel's mythical past. It all plays into Ezekiel's main message - Israel is completely irredeemable, and what they really need to do is start over again, back at square one.