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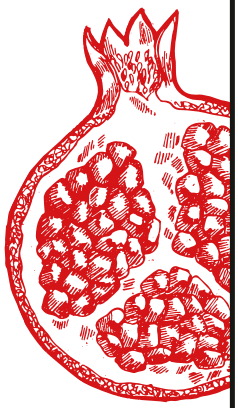

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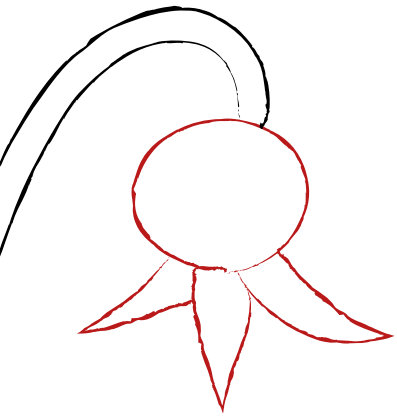

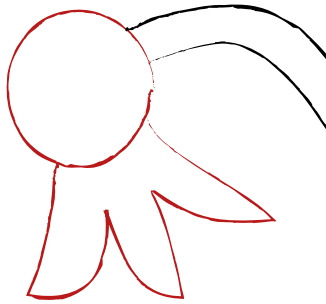

Special Issue: Hope

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"OUR HOPE IS LOST; WE ARE CUT OFF" (EZEK 37:11)

Shawn Zelig Aster

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Abstract

This article explores the historical background to Ezekiel's famous dry bones vision and examines how that vision (Ezek 37:1–14) interacts with the theory of hope that C. R. Snyder formulated in *The Psychology of Hope* (1994). It shows Ezekiel's carefully developed program of encouraging the people to maintain their Judahite identity, oppose the Babylonian Empire's program for integrating exiles, and develop their hope of return to Judah.

Cette contribution cherche à comprendre la situation historique dans laquelle a été composée la prophétie des ossements desséchés en Ézéchiel 37, et les liens entre cette prophétie et les théories de l'espoir du psychologue américain C. R. Snyder. Nous montrons qu'Ézéchiel élabore un programme détaillé qui doit convaincre les exilés judéens à Babylone de maintenir leur identité comme habitant·e·s de Juda, afin de développer un espoir de retour en Juda. Le conflit entre le programme d'Ézéchiel et les décrets de l'Empire babylonien sont clairs, et forme l'arrière-plan historique de cette prophétie.

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"OUR HOPE IS LOST; WE ARE CUT OFF" (EZEK 37:11)

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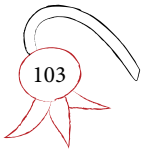


Introduction

More than almost any other prophetic text, the book of Ezekiel frequently narrates direct interactions between the prophet and his audience.[1] The prophet is part of the community of exiles "at Tel Aviv, who dwell on the Chebar canal" (3:15).[2] He is told to perform his prophetic signs "in the sight of the people" (4:12), and the "elders of Judah" appear to be frequent visitors to his house (8:1). While living among these Judahites, Ezekiel seems to maintain contact by means of letters or messengers with the Judahites who remained in Judah. In his relationship with both groups, Ezekiel is a master of dialogue: he listens to

[1] This research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (grant no. 1003-22). All biblical translations are my own.

[2] Based on references in the Zababa-šar-uṣur archive, Laurie Pearce (2014, 77) has located this canal and the exiles' settlement at Tel Aviv in the area of Nippur. For further discussion, see Zilberg et al. 2019.

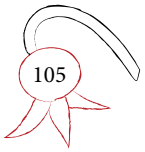
the statements made by his audience and responds to them. It would be more appropriate to call Ezekiel's audience his "interlocutors," because he listens to their statements and replies to them. This is evident in several prophecies, which respond to popular statements made by Judahites both in Judah and in Babylon.[3]

Ezekiel uses these statements of the Judahites as a jumping-off point for the argument that he seeks to make to this population. By starting with a statement made by his audience, he engages them in his response. By citing his audience, Ezekiel's responses force his interlocutors to reflect on their own statements and consider why the prophet disagrees with them.

One clear example of such a prophetic response appears in Ezekiel 11:3, which attributes to the people the statement: "We need not build homes soon; the city is the pot, and we are the meat." The statement is meant to express the people's conviction that they will not be exiled from Jerusalem. The city is compared to an earthenware pot, which frequently breaks when direct heat is applied, but the valuable food inside the pot is never endangered. Similarly, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, in the months leading up to the Babylonian destruction of the city in 587

[3] Zimmerli notes the importance of these sayings for reconstructing "the situation surrounding the prophet" (1979, 36) but does not address the possibility that some of these citations of others' statements in Ezekiel may be invented by the prophet. Admittedly, some of Ezekiel's citations of statements by other nations, such as 36:20, may be invented. But there is good reason to believe that the statements by the Judahites are authentic. In a careful discussion, Moshe Greenberg (1972) shows that the citation of a statement by the Judahites that appears in Ezekiel 18:2 parallels Jeremiah 31:28. The simplest explanation is that both Ezekiel 18:2 and Jeremiah 31:28 reflect authentic statements of Judahites. With regard to other citations of Judahites' statements, I argue below that Ezekiel's subversion of their wording shows an attempt to engage directly with these statements and suggests their authenticity. Greenberg writes: "When Ezekiel cites the reactions of his audience to him and his prophecies, there is no reason to doubt their authenticity. These citations accurately reflect the prophet's knowledge of his environment. These are the opinions and feelings of those who surrounded him, and were cited only in order to oppose them, thus forming the background for his rebukes" (1972, 274).

BCE, are certain that their position is secure. Their conviction is not unreasonable, for in their attack in 597 BCE the Babylonians did indeed exile only a limited portion of the city's inhabitants. Nevertheless, Ezekiel tries to convince the people that things have changed in the ten intervening years and that in 587 Jerusalem's inhabitants are about to face exile. To convince them of this unpalatable reality, he uses language evocative of their own statements, employing the same parable of the meat and the pot but changing the referents: "Your dead whom you have placed inside the city are the meat, and it is the pot, and I will take you out of it" (Ezek 11:7). The people are correct in using the meat and the pot metaphor, but they misidentify their own role in this metaphor and fail to recognize that they will be removed from the city, symbolized by the expendable pot, while those who die in the siege will remain to molder in the destroyed city. The use of the same parable, while changing the referents, is a classic example of subversion; it is effective because it directly engages with the audience's outlook.[4]



Another example of such subversion of popular statements appears in Ezekiel 33:24. As in Ezekiel 11:7, the statement is one made by the Judahites who remained in Judah, but unlike Ezekiel 11:7 this statement postdates the Babylonian conquest of 578.[5] In legitimating their ownership of the land of Judah, the exiles, whom Ezekiel calls "the dwellers in the ruins," use a sort of *a fortiori* argument: "Abraham was only one, and yet he inherited the land. We are many, therefore to us the land is given as an inheritance."[6] In his response, Ezekiel echoes his

[4] See Crouch 2014, 15: "A subversive endeavor must therefore establish its relationship with the entity it intends to subvert; more specifically, however, it must do so in such a way that its audience is able to recognize this relationship."

[5] See Zimmerli (1983, 198), who argues cogently against Martin Noth's attempt to date this oracle prior to 587. Zimmerli further points out that the language of Ezekiel 33:23 proves that the oracle was composed in Babylonia.

[6] Zimmerli (1983, 198) understands the significance of "one" here as indicating "the individual separated from his family." But this understanding undermines the rhetorical effect of Ezekiel 33:24, where the statement "Abraham was one" is clearly contrasted with "we are many." Even in Isaiah 51:2, which Zimmerli cites as support, Abraham's status as "one" is contrasted with the subsequent multiplication of his progeny.

interlocutors' use of the term "inheritance" and questions their identification with Abraham: "Shall you eat with blood? Shall you expect salvation from your disgusting objects? Shall you spill blood? And still inherit the land? You have done abominations! Each of you has defiled the wife of his neighbor! Shall you inherit the land?" (Ezek 33:24–25). Here, Ezekiel engages directly with the claim of the "dwellers in the ruins" that as descendants of Abraham they can lay claim to his inheritance. Ezekiel acknowledges that the land is indeed an "inheritance" but reminds his interlocutors that Abraham only acquired the land as part of his covenant with God. The process of "inheritance" (Heb. מורשה), argues Ezekiel, must involve God as the grantor of said inheritance.[7] God assigned the land to Abraham and continues to assign the land to those who show loyalty to Him through adherence to His laws. Conversely, the remnant who still dwell in the land have shown disloyalty to God and cannot claim the "inheritance."

The Dry Bones Vision as a Response to the Judahites' Statement

But the most famous response of Ezekiel to a citation of the Judahites appears in Ezekiel 37:1–14, where the entire dry bones vision is formulated as a response to a citation of the Judahites in Babylon. Based on comparisons to other popular statements attributed to the Judahites in Babylon, notably Ezekiel 33:10, Walther Zimmerli (1983, 258) argues that the citation of the Judahites in Ezekiel 37:11 accurately reflects the thinking and mindset of those Judahites. The oracle in Ezekiel 37:1–14 therefore cites the Judahite exiles of Babylon and responds to them. It is these exiles, who have been in Babylon for some time, who are both Ezekiel's interlocutors and his audience.[8]

[7] As many have noted, the use of מורשה here is intended to evoke the covenantal language of Exodus 6:8, a covenant in which the Israelites are bound to recognize divine authority.

[8] The specific date of the prophecy is impossible to determine. Zimmerli (1983, 258) places it between the fall of Jerusalem and 572 BCE (the date cited in Ezek

Unlike the passages discussed above (11:7 and 33:24–25), the dry bones vision does not open by citing the Judahites. The passage begins (37:1–9) by describing Ezekiel's visionary experience and his dialogue with God. God opens the dialogue by asking Ezekiel an impossible question, which illustrates the drama of the narrative. Against the background of a valley filled with "very dry" bones, God asks: "Will these bones live?" (37:3). Ezekiel refuses to answer and is then given a prophecy. The structure of the prophecy is significant: it opens with the promise of "spirit" (Heb. רוח), which God will place in the bones (37:5). Subsequent elements in the prophecy include sinews, flesh, and skin (37:6), all of which surround the bones in verse 8. But the bones still do not live. Only when the prophet fulfills a further instruction to prophesy to the "wind" (רוח) and when the "wind" (or "spirit," for the Hebrew words are identical) enters the bones do they finally live in verse 10. Clearly, the wind/spirit (רוח) is the key to answering the initial question, "Will these bones live?" As I explain below, the wind/spirit is a metaphor for hope. But understanding this metaphor requires attention to the divine speech in verses 11–14, which explains the vision.

That divine speech begins by referencing the popular statement of the Judahites in Babylon: "Our bones are dry, our hope is lost; we are cut off" (37:11). As many have noted, that statement of the people links the narrative of the vision in verse 1–10 to the divine speech that explains the vision in verses 11–14.[9] As Zimmerli argues, the divine speech in verses 12–14 expands and explains the popular saying in verse 11. This follows the format noted in the verses discussed above (11:7 and 33:24–25) in which Ezekiel uses popular statements as a basis for an oracle. As in the passages cited above, Ezekiel's citation of a popular statement allows him to create a dialogue with his audience.

Why do the people make this rather strange statement, on which Ezekiel bases his prophecy? Declaring "Our bones are dry" seems to be a reference to death, and the speakers are very much alive. But as

40:1). All we can know for certain is that the oracle reflects the period after the fall of Jerusalem and before Cyrus's impending victory appeared on the political horizon.

[9] See Zimmerli 1983, 257 and citations there; see also Greenberg 1997, 747.

Zimmerli (1983, 262) notes, bones here are a metonymy, as in Psalms 31:11 ("My bones grow weak" and in Proverbs 17:22, which describes how a downcast spirit dries up the bones. Furthermore, the idea of "Our hope is lost" is inconsistent with a series of statements that describe death. The clear purpose of the oracle is not to restore life: the dry bones are palpably a metaphor. Rather, the purpose of the oracle is to restore hope. It is therefore far more logical, and consistent with the tendency in Biblical Hebrew metaphor that Zimmerli (1983, 262) notes, to interpret the phrase "Our bones are dry" not as a reference to death but as a reference to depression.

The source of the depression is clearly articulated in the next stich of the people's statement: "Our hope is lost." Ezekiel 37:12–14 makes it clear that the hope referenced in 37:11 is the hope of a physical return to Judah. All interpreters see 37:11–14 as a literary and compositional continuum, and it is therefore most reasonable to interpret the loss of hope in 37:11 in light of 37:12–14 and to understand the statement "Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost; we are cut off" as a reference to the loss of hope of return to Judah. It is the loss of this hope that causes the people to feel depressed and cut off.

Furthermore, if the bones are a metaphor for the Judahites (as Ezek 37:11 states) and what these Judahites lacked was hope for a physical return to Judah, then it follows that the spirit/wind (רוח) that the bones lacked in order to live stands as a metaphor for that hope of return. The fulfillment of that hope is promised in 37:12–14. Connections between loss of hope and depression are well-known and are most clearly articulated by Viktor Frankl (1962).[10] In psychologist C. R. Snyder's definition, hope has three components, of which the most important is having clearly defined goals that one desires to achieve. Achieving those goals requires two elements: (1) mental willpower, "the mental energy that helps propel a person" (Snyder 1994, 5–6), which subsequent writers call "agency thoughts," because they encapsulate the individual's belief that s/he has the mental power to do what is required; and (2) "waypower," which Snyder defines as "the mental plans that guide hopeful

[10] For empirical evidence for the correlation between high hope levels and the absence of depression, see Feldman and Snyder 2005.

thought … The perception that one can engage in planful thought is essential for waypower thinking" (1994, 7–8).

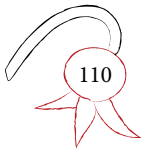
Snyder emphasizes that neither willpower nor waypower on their own suffice to create hope. Both the internal willpower ("agency thoughts") and an assessment of perceived pathways through which one might achieve the stated goals are necessary for hope to exist. Snyder's model is important in understanding how the Judahites with whom Ezekiel interacts lost hope. As I show below, the Judahites had defined goals and agency thoughts (mental willpower) but lacked the perceived pathway toward achieving those goals ("waypower," in Snyder's language). Snyder acknowledges the importance of a realistic assessment of circumstances beyond a person's control to designing these pathways (1994, 10). Subsequent scholarship has argued that "the subjective experience of hope does not depend upon the existence of real, workable pathways to goals, but rather upon a perception that such pathways exist and can be used if desired" (Feldman et al. 2023, 233).

Why Did Ezekiel's Judahites Lose Hope? They Had Defined Goals and Agency Thoughts!

Understanding the role of goals in the concept of "hope" is critical in understanding why the Judahite interlocutors of Ezekiel lost hope. We know of these Judahites' economic circumstances from the corpora of cuneiform texts mentioning Judahites in Babylon as early as the sixth century BCE.[11] These inform us of the relatively good economic situation of the exiles, who engaged in what Anjelika Berlejung (2017) called "social climbing": Judahites occupied economically important positions in Babylon, and gradually became government employees and successful merchants. This "social climbing" was based on a very clear Babylonian policy toward deportees: "They were settled in marginal areas and integrated into the land-for-service sector of agriculture" (Alstola 2020, 7). These marginal areas included the lands

[11] For further discussion, see, for example, Pearce and Wunsch 2014; Waerzeggers 2014; Horowitz et al. 2015; Wunsch 2022.

eventually known as Al-Yahudu, east and southeast of Babylon (Zilberg 2021, 413). Because they were not treated as slaves but as "semi-free persons" (Alstola 2020, 110), whose main obligations were to develop the land they were assigned agriculturally and to remit services to the crown, Judahites were able to advance economically and also develop mutually profitable relationships with the Babylonian administration. Some Judahites became tax collectors for the Babylonian administration (Alstola 2020, 110). Other Judahites became traders, centered in Sippar and "integrated into the commercial sphere of Babylonian society," who benefited from profitable long-distance trade routes (Alstola 2020, 78–91). These traders "were able to make their way into the priestly circles of Ebabbar" (Alstola 2020, 93). The picture emerging from this brief discussion is of a wide range of possibilities for Judahites to benefit from many opportunities for economic advancement in Babylonia and even from a certain degree of social integration.



This does not mean that the Babylonian or Persian administrations aimed to assimilate the exiles fully into Babylonian culture. But the economic success of the Judahites was certainly the result of Babylonian policy, and the cultural integration of immigrants is generally a natural outcome of their economic success. This is nicely summarized by Tero Alstola:

> Natural integration into the surrounding society can be observed on many levels: Judeans found their place in the local economy, no tensions between Judeans and other population groups are evident, and some Judeans were able to find ways to prosper beyond the limits of their plot of royal land.[12]

Therefore, the "hope" that Ezekiel speaks of in 37:11–14 is not connected to the opportunities for economic advancement offered in Babylonia. These opportunities were important for the exiles' survival, but economic advancement was not all that Ezekiel's interlocutors wanted. Their goal, and therefore their hope, was directed in a different direction: that of return to the land from which they had been deported.

[12] Alstola 2010, 163.

This hope seems bizarre in light of the vast gap between the economic opportunities available to the exiles in Babylonia and those in the land that even Ezekiel acknowledges was full of ruined dwellings (Ezek 33:24). In Babylonia, the empire expected the exiles to advance economically, to fulfill economic roles allocated to them by the elites, and to become, if not true Babylonians, at least happy residents of Babylonia.

In conceiving of a return to Judah as a goal, Ezekiel's interlocutors had implicitly rejected this Babylonian program and accepted the view of Ezekiel, articulated in detail in chapters 1–24. Throughout these chapters, Ezekiel strenuously encouraged the exiles to retain their identity as exiles and demanded that they maintain an old and displaced identity, continuing to view themselves as "out of place."

This view is expressed in Ezekiel 4, where the prophet is told first to make an image of Jerusalem, place a siege around the image, and "prepare your face to it" as "a sign to the house of Israel" (4:3). Clearly, the point of this sign is to preserve the sense of displacement among the exiles and to encourage them to continue to think about Jerusalem as their place of origin.

This becomes clearer in the continuation of Ezekiel 4, where the prophet is told to lie on his side and eat measured quantities of bread and water that are cooked on dung. The goal is to force the prophet to identify with the people of Jerusalem, as God explains: "Son of man, behold I am breaking the staff of bread in Jerusalem, and they will eat bread by weight and in worry, and they will drink water in measured quantities and in desolation" (4:16). The goal is not only for the prophet to identify with Jerusalem, but for all the exiles with him to do so. This seems to be implied in 4:17, "That they rot in their sins," which is a formulation that references Leviticus 26:39: "Those who remain among you will rot in your sins in the land of your enemies, and even in the sins of your ancestors in them you shall rot." The exiles must recognize their guilt and admit their sins (Lev 26:40), after which they will be able to return (Lev 26:42–45).

Ezekiel's program of maintaining the exiles' identity as displaced people is expressed even more strongly in Ezekiel 20:3. There, the exiles' elders ask the prophet about what their future holds. Ezekiel's answer is

clear: your future is your past. In 20:5–29, he dissertates on the history of Israel from the Exodus to the monarchy, noting how the Israelites repeatedly disobeyed God. Yet God "acted for the sake of His name" and did not break His covenant with the Israelites. Why, then, would the Israelites think that God would break His covenant with them just because they are in Babylon? In Ezekiel 20:31, Ezekiel expresses astonishment, as if to say "You, Judahites, think that I will tell you your future?" He has already given them a dissertation on their past and argued effectively that their past is their future.

He then responds to the idea that they should become new Babylonians: "That which comes up in your minds, it shall not be, that you say, 'we shall be like the nations, like the families of the earth, serving wood and stone'" (Ezek 20:32). In this verse, Ezekiel equates the imperial program of economic integration with one of religious assimilation to worship the gods of Babylon. He discourages the loss of identity inherent in becoming new Babylonians and demands that the exiles not lose their sense of being displaced because that sense is central to their relationship with God.

The statement of Ezekiel's interlocutors in Ezekiel 37:11, "Our bones are dry, our hope is lost," shows that they have accepted Ezekiel's identity-shaping goals and rejected the program of settling in Babylonia on a long-term basis. They acknowledge that they have had hope; if we accept Snyder's understanding of hope, that means that they have had goals. Their main goal is to return to Judah, and they will never feel at home in Babylonia. They are to see themselves as temporary residents, bent on return, with their identity rooted in a specific place, which they have lost.

In verses such as those cited above, Ezekiel helped the exiles define a goal that they considered realistic: the goal of return. Together with the willpower that Ezekiel's prophecies helped the exiles develop, the exiles now have two of the three elements that Snyder defines as necessary for hope to flourish. But as Ezekiel 37:12–14 makes clear, the exiles say "Our bones are dry, our hope is lost; we are cut off" in 37:11 because they perceive that external circumstances currently prevent them from having a way to achieve the goals they have defined and for which they have the mental energy.

Why Did Ezekiel's Judahites Lose Hope? They Lacked Waypower

In Snyder's elaboration of hope, goals and mental willpower are not enough to create it; hope also requires "waypower," a practical path toward achieving said goals. This was the element lacking for Ezekiel's interlocutors, and this is evident from Ezekiel 37:12–14, which elaborates the pathway toward their main goal: God Himself will lead the Judahites to Judah.

But until this promise was made, the exiles lacked the ability to move toward Judah. Although the community of exiles included upwardly mobile individuals, some of whom held government appointments, they were strictly forbidden to leave Babylon. It might appear that people in such a socioeconomic position would have had the wherewithal to travel throughout the empire. But a recently published document, the Beirut Declaration, shows that the empire was aware of this possibility and took pains to ensure that no exiles left Babylon.

The Beirut Declaration is an Aramaic text found on the antiquities market; Yigal Bloch (2018) showed that it dates from the Neo-Babylonian period, more specifically to the period of Nebuchadnezzar II. It is an imperial decree, written in Imperial Aramaic. It deals specifically with this phenomenon of exiles leaving Babylon and moving northward along the Euphrates.[13] The Aramaic language of the document, its contents, and its relatively large size (nearly 29 by 29 cm, inscribed on stone) suggest that it was destined to deter those living on this route from assisting any exile who tried to leave Babylon and head for the Levant.

The state's deterrence strategy was implemented in a drastic manner. Rather than prohibiting the exiles themselves from leaving, the empire imposed the death penalty on anyone who assisted them:

[13] Bloch (2018, 219–21) shows that the term סלק ("to go up") in the declaration refers to a route following the upstream path along the Euphrates River and then west through the Syrian Desert to Palmyra.

> 1–5. A man, in whose house or city a man who has moved up (Aramaic סלק) from the land of Akkad is found, should not delay but hand him over to a royal delegate.
>
> 5–8. The head of the household in whose house he entered, as well as the city mayor and the delegate who saw him but did not seize him, shall not live.[14]

Death was the fate of anyone who assisted exiles in leaving. Under these circumstances, what chance did the exiles have of getting out of Babylonia and heading to Judah?

The imperial policy that we know about from the Beirut Declaration effectively barred the way home for exiles who had both the goal and the willpower to return to Judah. There is every reason to see this text as reflecting a historical policy barring the route of any exile who wished to return home. The drastic penalties suggest that the empire was committed to enforcing the prohibition on exiles leaving, and the publication of this ban on an Aramaic (rather than Akkadian) stone tablet suggests that it was designed to be publicized not among officials but among the householders to whom it was aimed. Such a prohibition fits well with what we know of imperial policy, which saw the exiles as a vector for the economic development of Babylonia.

Faced with this harsh reality, in which their goals are clear, their willpower strong, but the route to achieving these goals effectively barred, the exiles complain: "Our bones are dry, our hope is lost; we are cut off." In Snyder's language, despite their willpower, they lack the ability to get "there" from "here." Ezekiel's answer (Ezek 37:12–14) to their cry is improbable: God will appear *ex machina* and give the exiles "spirit" (רוח), a metaphor for hope. Bones that lack "spirit" cannot live, but those with "spirit" can rise from the dead:

> (12) So prophesy and say to them: Thus says the Lord God: Look, I am opening your graves and I will cause you to go up from your graves, My people, and I will bring you onto the land of Israel. (13) And you shall know that I am the Lord by My opening your graves and by My causing you to come up from your graves, My people. (14) And I shall insert My

[14] Bloch 2018, 217.

> spirit into you and you shall live, and I shall place you upon your land, and you shall know that I am the Lord who spoke and fulfilled, speech of the Lord.[15]

The promise "I shall insert My spirit into you and you shall live" is clearly meant to negate the people's assertion "Our bones are dry, our hope is lost; we are cut off." The promise refers back to the vision in verses 5–10, which showed that wind/spirit (רוח) is required in order for the bones to live. Only in verses 9–10, when Ezekiel calls on the wind, do the bodies come back to life. Verse 11 explains the meaning of the metaphor of wind/spirit (רוח): the bodies could not live, because the people (for whom the bodies are a metaphor, as shown by verse 11) lacked hope. Their lack of hope is attested by their statement in verse 11: "Our bones are dry, our hope is lost; we are cut off." Their loss of hope prevents them from moving, both in the vision of the dry bones and in the reality of the exiles' inability to leave Babylon. Verses 12–14 solve the problem of the exiles' lack of spirit (רוח) by providing them with hope: God will arrange the way out of Babylon.

Does this prophecy actually provide the exiles with hope? It must have seemed wildly improbable if it was delivered in Babylonia in the mid-sixth century. But historically, several decades later, the Babylonian Empire fell to Cyrus, and the Achaemenid Empire instituted a policy of encouraging exiles to resettle the Levant.[16] Ezekiel's goal in this prophecy is not to solve the exiles' need for a way to reach Judah in the immediate future but rather to keep alive their hope of return. The exiles have set goals, have willpower, and he encourages them to believe that God will solve the problems that they cannot solve: God will remove the imperial policy that barred them from travel to Judah. Ezekiel does not promise a date for this solution but demands that they keep hope alive until such time as God provides the way for them to achieve their goals.

[15] Ezekiel 37:12–14.

[16] Avraham Faust (2021, 350–73) discusses the "Achemaenid Revolution," which led the Persian Empire to encourage the resettlement of exiles in the Levant.

Conclusion

As a matter of historical fact, some of the exiles did maintain that hope: some exiles did leave Babylon and return to Judah in the generations after Cyrus. The precise number of exiles who returned is less important to us here than the mechanism we see for maintaining the hope of return. Applying Snyder's theory of hope to Ezekiel 37 allows us to more fully understand Ezekiel's strategy in response to the Babylonian Exile. First of all, in chapters 1–24 he fights against the empire's attempt to turn the exiles into happy Babylonians by providing economic opportunities and requiring that they remain in Babylonia. Ezekiel demands that they maintain both their view of Judah as their home and their goal of returning there.

Applying Snyder's theory of hope allows us to understand how the vision of the dry bones serves as a capstone of Ezekiel's program. In previous prophecies, Ezekiel successfully convinced the people of specific goals. He instilled in the people the willpower to maintain their ethnic identity, an identity connected to a return to Judah. In the vision of the dry bones, he recognizes the lack of a clear path to achieve that return in the immediate future but argues that this is a problem that God will solve.

In instilling hope in the people, Ezekiel recognizes their statements and interacts with them. By citing their statements, he constructs them as his interlocutors. In this manner, he keeps his readers aware of his interlocutors' opinions, and in 37:11 he informs us that his interlocutors are losing hope because they lack a practical means of achieving the goal of return, despite their willpower.

Faced with this challenge, he argues against the impossibility of returning to Judah. He does not deny the severe penalties that will be meted out to anyone who assists exiles, which prevents the exiles from returning home. But, he argues, there is a divine promise that the exiles will return, so it does not really matter that the empire is not allowing such return right now. The divine promise will be fulfilled at some point, and what the exiles need to do right now is to maintain their hope. The exiles will eventually return, implying that the empire will fall. History

shows that he was right. In this light, the use of the metaphor of רוח/ spirit for hope takes on new meaning. The power of the spirit can keep hope alive even against improbable odds.

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