

# EZEKIEL

## Segment 15

### Ezekiel 37: Valley of Dry Bones

#### The Vision (Ezekiel 37:1-10)

37:1-2 God drops Ezekiel off in a valley of dry bones. As a Jew, and especially as a priest, Ezekiel would have an aversion to the uncleanness resulting from touching a corpse (Numbers 19:11-13). Remember Jesus' story about the priest and Levi passing on the other side of the half-dead Samaritan?

37:3 After getting struck dumb, shaving his head, lying on his side, cooking over dried cow excrement, and suffering the death of his wife, Ezekiel knows how to answer God.

37:4-10 Here Ezekiel's vision portrays resurrection as a full reversal of death as well as a recapitulation of the first human's creation (Genesis 2:7).

#### The Interpretation

37:11-14 I am aware of the three theories about this vision: it refers to (1) the return from exile, (2) the reestablishment of Israel in twentieth century, or (3) the Kingdom yet to come. Daniel Block points out that "The rabbinic commentaries frequently interpreted this passage as a prophecy of the eschatological resurrection in the messianic age."<sup>1</sup> I agree with this last interpretation—the vision represents actual resurrection—because that is what the interpretation says: "Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel" (37:12). The vision of dry bones is not to be taken literally, but it is a picture of a truth given in the interpretation. Bones won't literally fill a valley; after all, the bones are in graves at present. However, the truth of this vision is as clear as day—God plans to bring His people back to life so they can enter their land and enjoy a right relationship with Him forever. This is not some individual judgment at death but a corporate restoration to happen on the last day (John 5:28-29; 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:23-25).

The Hebrews looked on the human as a unity, a *nepes hayya*, constituted by the infusion of divine life-breath into the physical form (Gen. 2:7). At death, which was viewed as the divine sentence for sin (Gen. 2:17; 3:19), the physical matter and life-giving breath are divorced, and the *nepes* dissolves (Job 34:14-15; Ps. 104:29; Eccl. 3:18-21; 12:7). It follows then

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<sup>1</sup> Block, p. 389.

that any hope of victory over death and a beatific afterlife would require a reunion of the divorced components, which is exactly what happens in Ezek. 37.<sup>2</sup>

In order to appreciate how unusual this idea is, let's consider some other ancient ideas about the afterlife.

### Ancient Ideas about the Afterlife

**Egyptian:** At death, the soul goes to the kingdom of the dead where it must recite secret formulae from the Book of the Dead. Judgment involves the demon Ammit devouring an unworthy soul, whereas the good would live on in the Fields of Yalu and accompany the sun on its daily ride. Only those who could secure embalming and a sarcophagus had a way into the afterlife.

**Greek:** On death, Hermes takes the dead soul to the shores of the river Styx in the realm of the god Hades. Charon, the ferry-man, brings the deceased across the river. Based on how someone lived, he or she would go to Elysium (paradise for the good and heroic), the Asphodel Fields (for people who did as much bad as good), the Punishing Fields (for the mediocre bad), or Tartarus (a place of torment by hot lava or the rack).

**Norse:** The soul stays in the body until released through decay or cremation. It goes to one of four places: Valhalla (where warriors who die in battle join Odin in Asgard), Folkvangr (a great meadow where Freyja reigns), Hel (a place where those who are neither good nor bad go to reunite with loved ones), or Niflhel (punishment for those who break oaths or commit wickedness).

**Zoroastrian:** Zoroastrians are dualists who believe that matter itself is a corruption. At death, Ahirman, the evil god, enters the body and contaminates it, whereas the immaterial spirit escapes to remain in the vicinity for three days and nights and suffers anxiety from the recent separation. The angels Vohuman and Mithra prepare an account of good and evil the person committed. Once Daena leads the soul into the spiritual world, it must cross a Bridge of Judgment. Good souls enter a paradise, and evil ones a realm of punishment.

**Buddhist:** At death, the person reincarnates based on the qualities of that one's actions (karma) to higher or lower forms of life. For Buddhists, the soul is not eternal, and believing so is a prime consequence of ignorance. When one succeeds in eliminating desire, delusion, and ignorance, he or she can escape the cycle and cease existence.

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel Chapters 25-48* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 386.

Hindu: After death, an immortal soul reincarnates, based on one's deeds. Eventually one can escape the cycle by improving his or her karma over many lifetimes and enter a state of perpetual disembodied bliss.

Taoist: A goal for Taoists is to achieve immortality through breathing techniques (meditation), sexual practices, physical exercises (yoga), purified metals ingestion (gold), and moral living with the goal of eliminating impurities and demons from their bodies to increase their soul's energy.

What did the serpent tell Eve in the garden? The serpent said to the woman, "You surely will not die" (Gen 3:4). Yet, each of the faiths described above, along with many modern Jews, Christians, and Muslims, believe that death is no more than the separation of the soul from the body.

Isaac Asimov, the prolific twentieth century author, well expressed his confusion over the popular options:

Imagination has never managed to build up a serviceable Heaven, however. The Islamic Heaven has its houris, ever available and ever virginal, so that it becomes an eternal sex house. The Norse Heaven has its heroes feasting at Valhalla and fighting each other between feasts, so that it becomes an eternal restaurant and battlefield. And our own Heaven is usually pictured as a place where everyone has wings and plunks a harp in order to sing unending hymns of praise to God.

What human being with a modicum of intelligence could stand any of such Heavens, or the others that people have invented, for very long? Where is there a Heaven with an opportunity for reading, for writing, for exploring, for interesting conversation, for scientific investigation? I never heard of one.

If you read John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, you will find that his Heaven is described as an eternal sing-along of praise to God. It is no wonder that one-third of the angels rebelled. When they were cast down in Hell they *then* engaged in intellectual exercises (read the poem if you don't believe me) and I believe that, Hell or not, they were better off. When I read it, I sympathized strongly with Milton's Satan and considered him the hero of the epic, whether Milton intended that or not.

But what is *my* belief? Since I am an atheist and do not believe that either God or Satan, Heaven or Hell, exists, I can only suppose that when I die, there will only be an eternity of nothingness to follow. After all, the Universe existed for 15 billion years before I was born and I (whatever "I" may be) survived it all in nothingness.

People may well ask if this isn't a bleak and hopeless belief. How can I live with the specter of nothingness hanging over my head?

I don't find it a specter. There is nothing frightening about an eternal dreamless sleep. Surely it is better than eternal torment in Hell or eternal boredom in Heaven.<sup>3</sup>

Abrahamic Faiths: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Rastafarianism believe in a physical afterlife. These all stem from what the prophets, like Ezekiel, said.

### Ezekiel's Portrait of the Age to Come

God will bring people out of their graves and into their land (37:12). He will reunify Israel and Judah into one nation with one Davidic king over them (37:22, 24). No longer will His people defile themselves with idolatry or any transgressions (37:23). He will save and cleanse them from all their backslidings and sins so that they will be His people, and He will be their God (37:23). His people will walk in His rules and enjoy an everlasting covenant of peace (37:24, 26). God will set His sanctuary in their midst forever (37:27). All the nations will know that it is Yahweh who sanctifies His people (37:28). He will care for His people like a good shepherd his flock (34:11-15). He will cause justice to reign (34:16). He will bless the land so that the trees yield their fruit and the earth yields its increase (34:27). No longer will His people go hungry or suffer the insults of the nations or have any reason to fear (34:28-29). In that day, they will know that He is Yahweh their God with them and that they are His people (34:30).

Ezekiel assumes that earth is the setting for all of the prophecies of his book. He never lets on that God will whisk His people away from here to inhabit a celestial city. He never even mentions singing praise to God, much less doing only that for all eternity. In fact, Ezekiel makes it sound like life will go on much as it does now with two main differences: (1) no longer will bad things happen like hunger and idolatry, and (2) people will enjoy a restoration of their relationship with God as well as prosperity. He does not specifically mention reading, writing, exploration, conversation, or scientific investigation, but these are all part and parcel of the human experience, and we have every reason to think they will continue in the age to come.

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<sup>3</sup> Isaac Asimov, *I. Asimov* (New York: Random House 2009), ch. 108.

# EZEKIEL

## Segment 16

### Prophecy against Gog – Last Day Invasion of Israel

#### **Ezekiel, Chapter 38**

Some commentaries suggest that chapters 38 and 39 are the sixth and final prophetic utterance given to Ezekiel in one night (Ez 33:22). This would have occurred the night before exiles returned with news of Jerusalem's destruction. Ezekiel 33:21 gives a reference of the twelfth year, fifth of the tenth month. The night before, Ezekiel's mouth was opened, and he was no longer speechless. These six prophetic utterances are thought to be distinguished by the phrase "...the word of the LORD [Yahweh] came to me" and are as follows:

1. Ezekiel 33:23-33 – The land will be made desolate. They will know that a prophet is in their midst.
2. Ezekiel 34:1-31 – Ungodly rulers will one day be replaced by good rulers with David as their prince.
3. Ezekiel 35:1-36:15 – God will judge Mt. Seir and Edom. God will restore the mountains of Israel.
4. Ezekiel 36:16-37:14 – God will restore the people of Israel to the land; there will be a resurrection from the dead.
5. Ezekiel 37:15-28 – The nation of Israel will be reunited under one king.
6. Ezekiel 38:1-39:29 – In the last days, there will be an invasion of nations, but God will deliver His people, and the nations will know that Yahweh is God. The fortunes of the house of Israel will be restored.

If this is true, then the night before the news arrived of the destruction of the Temple, destruction of the city, and devastation of the land, Ezekiel received this incredible revelation of hope for God's people.

#### **Gog, Chief Prince of Meshech and Tubal**

Ezekiel 38:1-7

"Gog" is called the chief (Heb - *rosh*) prince of Meshech and Tubal. These nations, called Meshech and Tubal, are of the "land of Magog." According to Genesis 10:2, Magog, Meshech, and Tubal were all sons of Japheth. It is most commonly believed that these people settled in the area around the Black Sea. Today, the countries of Ukraine, Russia, and Georgia occupy these lands. Other nations will join themselves with Gog. These nations and the possible modern day equivalent are Persia (modern day Iran), Ethiopia, Put (modern day Libya),

Gomer (modern day Ukraine), Beth-togarmah (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Eastern Turkey).



#### Ezekiel 38:8-17

God will “summon” these nations. “He will put hooks into their jaws and draw them out” (verse 4) to a re-gathered Israel, now “living securely” in the land “in the center of the world.” This describes the nations invading the land of Israel in “the last days.” This is the final battle and destruction of the nations. A similar picture is given in the book of Revelation (Revelation 16:12-16). In the sixth bowl judgment, nations of the world are summoned to war for the battle of Armageddon. There will be a massive army that will invade the land of Israel “like a cloud” to cover the land.

#### Ezekiel 38:18-23

God’s judgment will be poured out on Gog and upon the nations of the earth. Similar references to these judgments are found in the book of Revelation when the seventh bowl is poured out (Revelation 16:17-21).

## The Invaders are Defeated

Ezekiel 39:1-16

Gog and his troops will fall on the mountains of Israel. God will send fire upon Magog. This is Yahweh's Day. It is coming, and it shall be done. The nations will know that God is Yahweh, the Holy One in Israel. The people of Israel will make fires using the weapons of warfare as fuel. This will last for seven years! All the slain will be buried in a great valley to be called the Valley of Hamon-gog (the multitude of Gog).

Ezekiel 39:17-20

The carnage from this battle will be a feast for the birds of prey and beasts of the field (verse 4). A similar description of the battle is given in the book of Revelation (Revelation 19:11-21). This is the end of the age, the final battle before the millennial Kingdom of God.

### **Yahweh will Restore the Fortunes to Israel**

Ezekiel 39:21-29

God will set His glory among the nations, and the house of Israel will know that Yahweh is their God from that day onward.