

# Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – September 15, 2019

## [Ezekiel 37:1-14](#) & [Romans 12:1-13](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

*Note: These are NOT from the assigned texts for this week's lectionary, but were chosen thematically for our worship*

### Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

### Commentary on Ezekiel 37:1-14

(From *Homiletics*; “Legos and Bones”, March 9, 2008)

If one mark of the power of a prophetic vision is its ability to spread itself across the spectrum of popular culture, then Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones is the literary equivalent of a neutron bomb. Inspiration for the Negro spiritual “Dem Bones” and source of the arresting hospital hallucination in the PBS cult series *The Singing Detective* — among many other appearances in popular culture — the vision has also nourished an extensive theological literature on the Bible's teachings about the resurrection of the dead. Next to Ezekiel's vision of the chariot with a wheel-within-a-wheel, his vision of the valley of dry bones (37:1-14) is undoubtedly his best-known vision.

Today's lesson is actually a vision (vv. 1-10) and its interpretation (vv. 11-14), a combination that occurs elsewhere in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament (e.g., Jeremiah 32:6-15; Amos 7:7-9; 8:1-3; etc.). It is part of a series of visions and discourses in the book of Ezekiel (chs. 33-39) concerning the restoration of Judah after the Babylonian exile of 587-539 B.C. This vision is remarkable not only for its gruesome vividness, but also because of the radical reversal it represents in the context of Ezekiel's message of Israel's utter destruction because of its unfaithfulness even in exile. The passage is also one of the few passages in the OT from which a notion of resurrection can be adduced (the other being Daniel 12), albeit with considerable distance from the common modern understanding of the term resurrection.

Despite numerous chronological markers throughout the book of Ezekiel (e.g., 1:2; 20:1; 24:1), this particular vision cannot be dated exactly. In broad terms, the prophet worked from 593-571 B.C., and this vision, apparently authentic, certainly dates from that 22-year period. More narrowly, the nearest chronological reference prior to the vision in question (33:21-22) notes the date on which Ezekiel learned of the fall of Jerusalem: January 19, 585 B.C. It would be logical to date this vision of restoration after that event in the prophet's life. As for a *terminus ante quem*, the first of Ezekiel's visions of the restored Jerusalem temple (chs. 40-48, the last major section of the book) is dated to April 28, 573 B.C., and Ezekiel's vision of the restoration of the people of Israel would logically precede his vision of their restored temple, so the current vision may tentatively be dated in the prophet's career between 585 and 573 B.C., at least on the basis of its location in the book of Ezekiel.

The prophetic vision is initiated (v. 1) when the prophet is transported by “The hand of the LORD,” a favorite expression of the prophet to denote spirit possession (1:3; 3:22; 8:1; 33:22). More commonly, the phrase “spirit of the LORD” is used in prophetic literature to denote this state, and it is used by Ezekiel as well (e.g., at 11:5). The

third common expression for spirit possession is “the word of the LORD was/came to X,” which occurs extensively in the prophets, including Ezekiel (3:16). Here, the phrase occurs in combination with the expression, “by the spirit of the LORD,” which is awkward for its redundancy. (Compare the same sort of redundancy in 11:24, where three terms — “the spirit,” “in a vision” and “by the spirit of God” — refer essentially to the same event.) One of the characteristics of late biblical literature is its tendency toward wordiness, a characteristic beginning to become manifest already in the book of Ezekiel.

The Hebrew word translated “valley” here (and at 3:22-23) can also and perhaps better be translated “plain” (as it was in the RSV). Valleys can be narrow as well as broad, whereas plains clearly denote the kind of broad open expanse characteristic of the alluvial plain of Mesopotamia, which is where the prophet is signaling the vision took place. The vision concerns the exiles in Mesopotamia who believe themselves to be destroyed beyond any hope of restoration.

The fact that the hand of the Lord deposited the prophet in a plain that was “full of bones” (v. 1) would have filled Ezekiel, the prophet-priest, with horror, as human remains were ritually defiling for a priest. (For Ezekiel’s concern with his ritual purity, see 4:14; for the defiling power of a human corpse or even partial human remains, see Numbers 19:11-12, 16).

The notation that the bones were “very dry” (v. 2) indicates that they had remained unburied for a long time in the plain, a sign not only of the duration of their abandonment, but also the degree to which the remains had been desecrated. A proper burial was one of the most pressing concerns of an ancient Israelite (and of most peoples in general, ancient and modern), and for bones to remain exposed to the elements long enough for them to become desiccated was a sign of extreme neglect.

The prophet is addressed as “Mortal,” literally, “son of humanity,” the expression by which Ezekiel is known in his book, occurring more than 90 times. Rarely in the Old Testament outside the book of Ezekiel is the expression used as a form of direct address (only at Psalm 90:3, Daniel 8:17, and Micah 6:8), whereas it became, in its Greek form (probably via the Aramaic *bar enosh*), the favorite self-appellation of Jesus in the NT. The Hebrew expression, *ben adam*, means “member of the class of human beings,” and in Ezekiel it emphasizes both the distance between the divine and the human and also the prophet’s role as representative of and intercessor on behalf of those of whom he is a part (expressed also in 33:1-9 in his role as sentinel).

The prophet is confronted with the rhetorical question (v. 3), “Can these bones live?” which he demurely avoids by replying, “O Lord GOD, you know,” saying, in effect, “God knows!” Ezekiel’s answer, however, is more than an artful dodge; it also contains the *Stichwort* “know,” which provides the conceptual and theological unity of the passage.

In the verses immediately following Ezekiel’s answer (vv. 4-6), the miraculous restoration of the bones into fully fleshed human beings is so that Israel “shall know that I am the LORD” (v. 6). In verse 13, when the Lord has exhumed the people of Israel from their exilic graves and brought them back to their homeland, the people “will know that I am the LORD.” And when the miraculous restoration of the people of Israel has been completed with the inspiration of Yahweh’s spirit within them (v. 14), the chosen people “shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act.” The prophet’s vision of the valley of dry bones, therefore, is, like all prophetic revelation, never an end in itself, but it is intended to remind the prophet’s hearers of their religious identity and obligations, expressed in this passage by the verb “to know.” Knowledge of the Lord will restore the broken covenant between Yahweh and his captive people.

But physical restoration is not enough, and the final step in the rejuvenation of Israel is literally the “inspiring” of the spirit or breath or wind of Yahweh into the restored bodies of his people (v. 9), which brings them to life. Until modern times, the presence or absence of breath was the most important indicator of life or death in an individual (cf. Genesis 2:7; Ecclesiastes 3:19; 12:7), and the prophet applies this biological fact metaphorically to the people of Israel. Israel, as Yahweh’s chosen instrument for the beatification of all the families of the earth (cf. Genesis 12:3), does not actually live until it is animated by Yahweh’s spirit.

## Commentary on Romans 12:1-13 (From *Homiletics*, "Don't Change Your God Job!", August 21, 2011)

Romans 12:1-8 is the initial piece of an extended parenthesis that sets out how believers in the church at Rome ought to order their lives in light of "the mercies of God." Paul's methodical exhortation commences in verse 3 and concludes in Romans 15:13. It is also worthwhile to mention that these practical instructions follow Paul's brilliant and rather perplexing theological treatise about the historical and continuing relationship of Israel both to God and the Gentiles (i.e., Romans 9:1-11:36).

As just noted, Paul's lengthy appeal is based on his prior deliberations. Not only does the conjunctive adverb "therefore" in verse one indicate that the following directives flow out of his previous discourse, the next phrase, "by the mercies of God," also appears to connect this passage with the letter's preceding portion despite a word change. More precisely, Paul employed the genitive of οἰκτιρισμός ("mercies") in verse 1, a word routinely translated "mercy," but one that is found less frequently in the Pauline corpus (e.g., cf. Romans 9:15; Philippians 2:1; Colossians 3:12; 2 Corinthians 1:3). In contrast, the more common word for "mercy" in the New Testament as a whole and Paul's letters in particular -- both the noun form (i.e., ἐλεος; cf. Romans 9:23; 15:9) and verb form (i.e., ἐλεῶ or ἐλεῶ; cf. Romans 9:15-16, 18) -- is used in Romans 11:30-32. (Besides the foregoing connections, note that the first two verses of chapter 12 echo what Paul said in Romans 6:1-4, 12-14, 19.)

In view of "the mercies of God," Paul therefore appropriately encouraged the disciples at Rome "to present your bodies [τα σωματα υμων] as a living sacrifice [θυσιαν ζωσαν]" (v. 1). On one hand, this aim undoubtedly entailed a personal response, which is an expected and conventional notion for people steeped in Western thought and democratic principles. On the other hand, to speak solely of the individual's response and omit the corporate aspect would be a disservice to Paul. In other words, given Paul's keen awareness of the communal facets of the Christian faith, it is likely that he was calling the entire Roman church to order its collective life so that it -- in addition to the individual lives -- was "holy and acceptable to God [αγιαν ευαρεστον τω θεω]." This conclusion is further reinforced by the repeated occurrence of the plural pronouns "you [υμας]" and "your [υμων]" in verse 1.

Before moving on, a few additional observations are apposite. First, the phrase, "to present your bodies," indicates that the Christian faith concerned more than just the mind and spirit. Living out "the mercies of God" was not merely an abstract exercise of the mind. For Paul, it also included the material or physical aspect of the human condition. Second, two ancillary comments about the expression "spiritual worship [την λογικην λατρειαν]" at the end of verse 1 might prove valuable. The word translated in the NRSV as "spiritual" is from λογικός, which can also be rendered as "rational" or "reasonable." Furthermore, despite the fact that λογικός is found only here and in 1 Peter 2:2, its etymological connection to λογος, a very common and significant Greek word, is unmistakable.

Following his initial appeal, Paul then employs two imperative verbs in order to amplify his thoughts. He writes, "Do not be conformed [μη συσχηματιζεσθε] to this world [τω αιωνι τουτω], but be transformed [μεταμορφουσθε] by the renewing of your minds [τη ανακαινωσει του νοου]" (v. 2). As the Roman church pursued this end, her members would come to "discern what is the will of God -- what is good [αγαθον] and acceptable [ευαρεστον] and perfect [τελειον]."

At this point it is vital to emphasize that this concept is not some narcissistic preoccupation about the will of God "for me and my life," but how one's life is brought into harmony with God's will (i.e., living, not according to the customs of this age [τω αιωνι τουτω] or as one's own person, but righteously and sacrificially as God's person). Moreover, whereas Paul exhorted the believers at Rome to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice in verse 1, here in verse 2 he instructs them to renew their minds. The last phrase - in combination with verse 1 - further reveals Paul's concept of the whole person, an understanding whose origins categorically go back to the Shema -- that is, God's people love with their entire being -- "heart," "soul" and "might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

After Paul had put forward his opening petition in verses 1-2, he turns to elucidate what presenting their bodies as a living sacrifice and renewing their minds looked like in verses 3-8. As stated at the outset, this endeavor continues through Romans 15:13 and involves a wide range of matters.

By means of "the grace given" to him, Paul makes it clear that an accurate and lucid evaluation of one's gifts and talents is necessary not only for individuals but also for the corporate life of the church. This initial and formative step, by which God's people order their lives and submit them to the rhythm of God's will, flows out of a realistic self-assessment, and is based on the "measure of faith that God has assigned" (v. 3). To that end, Paul exhorts "everyone . . . not to think of yourself more highly [μη υπερφρονειν; literally, 'hyper-think'] than you ought to think [παρ ο δει φρονειν], but to think [φρονειν] with sober judgment [το σωφρονειν | ; articular inf.]" (v. 3).

The connection with verse 2 is easily recognizable because of the emphasis placed on thinking and "sober judgment." Moreover, this particular instruction reverberates with Paul's earlier remarks. For example, Paul urges the disciples not to make any claim about being wiser than they really are (Romans 11:25). Instead, they are to think realistically about their place in God's unfolding and unfathomable mystery (Romans 11:26-36).

Accordingly, if they accept Paul's argument, they will also be able to descry that the church -- though it is one body - - has "many members" with a wide array of gifts from God (v. 4). These gifts, which are for the welfare of the community and serve the needs of others, include: faithful prophesying, ministering, teaching, exhorting, generous giving, diligent leading, and offering cheerful compassion (vv. 7-8).

In sum, Christian living begins with Paul's affirmation, "We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another," and continues with the recognition that whatever gifts God's people have originate with the "grace given to us" (vv. 5-6). For that reason, the proper consideration and utilization of God's gifts are the means by which individuals and God's community offer "their bodies as a living sacrifice" and "discern . . . the will of God."

## Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift and search for these texts!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

## **Reflection Questions on Ezekiel 37:1-14:**

- 1.** For Ezekiel and the people of Judah, this vision spoke to the hope/hopelessness for return and restoration after their defeat and the Babylonian exile. What are the “dry bones” in your life? In the life of your community? Our nation? Our church? Can these bones live?
- 2.** This passage has often found itself in the midst of theological discussions concerning the possibility of resurrection. Putting aside the specificity of that question, we might frame the basic question as whether restoration/resurrection occurs in the way we expect or for which we hope OR if it occurs in surprising / unlooked for ways? Extending the metaphor of the bones – must the dry bones take on the flesh and life they had formerly know? Or are they animated and brought to new life – perhaps altogether different and unlike that which they had previously had?
- 3.** Twice Ezekiel was commanded by God to “prophesy” – to the bones (v.4) and to the breath (v.9). What do you think this means?

## **Reflection Questions on Romans 12:1-13:**

- 1.** What does it really mean to present our bodies as a “living sacrifice” (v. 1)? Or to be “transformed by the renewing of [our] minds” (v2.)?
- 2.** Taking these verses from Paul seriously, what is the proper relationship of the individual and the collective?

**What questions do you have?**

**What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?**