



REVIVAL I

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection – Ezekiel 37:1-14 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. (v. 2) He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. (v. 3) He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” (v. 4) Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. (v. 5) Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. (v. 6) I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.” (v. 7) 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. (v. 8) 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. (v. 9) Then he

said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” (v. 10) I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. (v. 11) Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ (v. 12) Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. (v. 13) And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. (v. 14) I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil, then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act,” says the Lord.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The word “revival” stems from the Latin word *revivere* which means “to live again.” This definition implies that something has died. Historically, the Great Awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries were spiritual revivals that sparked new life in “dead” Christians. Revival meetings were prevalent among Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists, and were known for intense emotive preaching, lively singing, ecstatic behavior, and enthusiastic congregational response, which eventually attracted many black slaves because of the connection with their African heritage and forms of dance and song. The main emphasis of these revival services was personal conversion to Christ and, as a result, these revivals played an important role in the large conversion of black slaves to Christianity. The revival crowds swelled because of the presence of blacks. Furthermore, some enslaved and free blacks were given the opportunity to serve as exhorters or preachers to white and black audiences during these revivals, although there was also opposition to having blacks assume this type of leadership role.

“Revival” can refer to a spontaneous outpouring of God’s presence on a people, such as the 1906 Azusa Street revival that sparked the spread of the Pentecostal movement. However, it has mainly become institutionalized among African American congregations as a regular part of the church’s calendar, manifesting perhaps as fall and spring revival services on consecutive nights. The general foci of these services are still on conversion and the renewal of the spiritual life of individuals and communities. Moreover, a strong tradition of powerful preaching, usually from an invited guest preacher, heartfelt singing, and stirring testimonies, persists. Some denominations even have ordained revivalists whose main ministry is to preach in congregations with the intended purpose of stirring revival, bringing a “dead” congregation back to life with the help of God. This liturgical moment suggests that God wants us fully alive!¹

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Ezekiel 37:1-14

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

“Lord, send a revival from the pulpit to the pew.” These earnest words of prayer to God from the mouths of the Holiness-Pentecostal pastors of my youth still resonate in my liturgical memory when I consider the term “revival.” This one word was the theological mantra within the church of my upbringing. It was used to refer to God renewing the spiritual vitality of a community, but

especially of an individual. When the pastor thought the congregation was dying a slow spiritual death, it was time for revival. The desire for revival was aided by revival services, special services with special speakers that were organized with the intended focus on renewing the spiritual life of a congregation. Typically at these services, folks “sang ‘til the power of the Lord came down.” The presence and power of God were evident externally as people clapped, shouted, danced, “fell out,” spoke in tongues, and sang in conjunction with moving music, all pointing to God’s reviving power through the Holy Spirit. One could critique this practice of revivalism as solely focusing on the personal and ecclesial level without any influence on the social realm, thus raising the question, “What is revival really?”

For years, the abovementioned congregation has been in numerical and financial decline as the surrounding community changes, yet a call to *spiritual* revival still rings out. What kind of revival is it if the *physical-material* aspects of a congregation and community are still dying? What kind of revival is it if the whoop overshadows the concrete help given to hurting communities in society? If the work of the Spirit, *the Revivalist*, cannot be limited to one domain, then revival itself encompasses all areas of human life. Revival must be more holistic than traditionally thought if the new life of God is ever to revitalize a dying economy, inadequately-resourced inner city schools, a hurting healthcare system, broken African American families, and neighborhoods ruled by gun violence. The current themes of hope and change in the 2008 presidential primaries are synonyms for a call to sociopolitical revival. Whatever type of revival is needed (personal, ecclesial, social), the Spirit will ignite it. The Spirit of my past and present is the same Spirit whom Ezekiel says can resurrect the lives, hopes, and dreams of a community.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The historical backdrop of this passage is a situation of crisis for the “whole house of Israel” (v. 11), not particular individuals within it. Before this section, Israel was already struggling in its relationship with God by defiling the temple and ignoring the holy nature of God’s sanctuary, causing God to call them a “whore” (Ezekiel 9). Eventually, the glory of God is removed from Jerusalem (Ezekiel 10), indicating the correlation between the death of Israel, which is pronounced in our passage, and the absence of God. This gives God good reason to command Ezekiel to utter a diatribe and denounce the actions of Israel (Ezekiel 1-24). If this is not enough despair, we hear from a Jewish fugitive that the city of Jerusalem has fallen (Ezekiel 33:21), pointing to the historical fact that in 587 BCE, the city of Jerusalem, the cultural, religious, and economic center of Jewish life, fell to King Nebuchadnezzar. Israel is in a multifaceted exile and, because of this, it is no surprise that they say “our hope is lost” (v. 11).

Yet, Ezekiel, the priest and prophet, is called upon to “prophesy to these bones” (v. 4), proclaiming a life-giving word to this community. It is important to realize that 37:1-14 is a part of the restoration discourses in this book which reveal that “trouble don’t last always” for the people of Israel. In fact, this passage points to the full-blown restoration of Israel’s relationship with God in chapters 40-48 where there is a new temple and polity, and the diasporan Jews return to their land while the divine presence returns to the inner sanctuary of the temple. Indeed, the Jewish “clan, king, and cult would one day be revived.”² This suggests an eventual holistic

revival of Israel's cultural and familial relationships, political and institutional structures, and religious systems.

Ezekiel tells his third vision (vv. 1-10), and then explains it (vv. 11-14) when “the hand of the Lord came upon” him (v. 1) as it does with the other vision reports. The lifelessness and hopelessness of Israel is described with stark imagery. It is interesting that it is, “the spirit of the Lord” (v. 1) that brings him to the valley of bones, because it was believed that one could be contaminated by coming into contact with the dead (Num.19:16-18; 2 Kings 23:14, 16; Ezek. 39:15-16). Even a quick reading of this text reveals that the most prominent metaphor is the bones, which express physical and spiritual debility (Isaiah 66:14; Job 21:24). The bones are described as “very many” and “dry” (v. 2), suggesting the vast experience of death by this entire “slain” people (v. 9). Israel is indeed dried up and dead, which is why the “graves” image is used to depict their situation when the vision is explained (vv. 12, 13).

Just as prominent as these images of death is the source of life, specifically the Hebrew word for “spirit,” “breath,” or “wind” (*ruach*). It occurs ten times and is the main theological motif for Ezekiel. When Ezekiel prophesies to the dead bones, it is clear that the “breath” or “spirit” is linked to new life, because wherever he mentions these terms, except in verse 1, he follows it by saying “you shall live” (vv. 5,6,14), or “they may live” (v. 9), or “they lived” (v. 10). The spirit of God is the source of new life and hope, not any human being. Even when the “bones came together, bone to its bone” (v. 7) with sinews, flesh, and skin, there was no life initially (v. 8). There was just an empty shell until the breath or spirit of life was put into these once dead people (vv. 9-10), painting a reenactment of the primal act of creation, when God formed humanity from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). As in Genesis, it is true here—God is the source of life and revival. The many dry bones were “lying in the valley” (v. 2), but because of the spirit of God, the “vast multitude” eventually “stood on their feet” (v. 10).

This visionary occurrence of resurrection (“open your graves” “bring you up from your graves” in vv. 12-13) for the Jewish community, points to the affirmation of the unique power and knowledge of the Lord. God stirs this revival so, “you shall know that I am the Lord.” (v. 6), a phrase repeated more than fifty times throughout the book of Ezekiel. Knowing that the Lord is the only true God had been a problem for idolatrous Israel. Humans do not know everything, but God does which could be one reason Ezekiel responds, “O Lord God, you know” when God asks, “Can these bones live?” (v. 3). Ezekiel's response affirms God's power and knowledge as distinct from limited human capacities, setting apart the divine from a mere “mortal” (vv. 3,9,11). Only God is God, and only God's spirit can bring life out of death (Deut. 32:39).

The overarching message that the dead might live again is full of hope, not only for Israel, but for us; yet, through African American eyes, the stories are not duplicates of one another. The promise to the resurrected Israel that they would return to the “land of Israel” their “own soil” (vv. 12,14) is problematic for peoples of African descent in the United States who are still in “exile” on many levels.³ One might even ask, “Where is home?” for African Americans. Our ancestor African slaves were stripped from their land and separated from their families, never to be reunited again.

On another level, the collective bodily resurrection of Israel alludes to the biblical witness of physical resurrection where the dead can be raised (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:18-37; Luke 24). A physical bodily revival will only occur at the end of time, the eschaton. This is a future hope, because black bodies are still beaten and gunned down through violence, causing spiritual and literal deaths. Moreover, the blood of “slain” ancestral slaves still cry out for resurrection and justice at the end of the age. Right now they are “lying in the valley,” waiting for the breath of God to revive them. The broken, bruised, burned, and branded black body will ultimately be redeemed. This is not to suggest that new life is only possible after death, but it does mean that revival, in a truly holistic sense, has not yet fully occurred.

However, there are glimpses of revival, such as when low-income students are provided educational opportunities that are usually only afforded to wealthy students, or when a formerly incarcerated young man is given another chance to succeed in society through community support. African Americans cannot say, like Israel, “our hope is lost” (v. 11) because the wind of the Spirit is still breathing in our communities; but as we live in the real tension between death and life, we must say like Ezekiel “Lord God, you know” (v. 3), and God knows that when the divine spirit is put within us, we will live.

Celebration

Hope is not lost. Though in the valley of despair or death, God will not leave us for dead but will give us new life and restore our hope. God will put our lives back together again, as was the case with the bones. The Spirit of God will breathe in us and bring us up out of our graves. God says, “You shall live.”

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: “Hear the word of the Lord” (v. 4), a sudden noise, a rattling, and the bones coming together (v. 7);

Sights: Ezekiel in the middle of a valley, a valley full of bones, Ezekiel being led around bones, very dry bones (vv. 1-2), the bones coming together, bones with sinews and flesh upon them, the bones coming alive and standing on their feet (v. 10);

Smells: The stench of “these slain” (v. 9); and

Textures: Feel the “hand of the Lord that came upon” Ezekiel (v. 1), the “dry” bones (vv. 2, 4), the smooth feel of the “sinew,” “flesh,” and “skin” (vv. 6, 8), and grainy soil under your feet (v. 14).

III. Other Sermonic Suggestions

- Use Langston Hughes’ poem Peace, inside bulletins as a thought for the day.

Peace

We passed their graves:
The dead men there,
Winners or losers,
Did not care.

In the dark
They could not see
Who had gained
The victory.

Notes

1. Raboteau, Albert J. Slave Religion: “The Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978. pp. 128-150.
2. See, Callahan, Allen. “Perspectives for a Study of African American Religion from the Valley of Dry Bones.” Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions. 7:1 (2003), p. 52.
3. See, Sanders, Cheryl. Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996.