

THE CALL TO REPENTANCE
ORACLES OF SALVATION
EZEKIEL 33-37

**¹The word of YHWH came to me:
²Son of man, speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take one of their number as their sentinel; ³and if the sentinel sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the horn and warns the people; ⁴then if any who hear the sound of the horn do not take warning, and the sword comes and takes them away, their blood shall be upon their own heads. ⁵They heard the sound of the trumpet and did not take warning; their blood shall be upon themselves. If they had taken warning, they would have saved their lives. ⁶But if the sentinel sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any of them, they are taken away in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at the sentinel's hand.**

⁷So you, son of man, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. ⁸If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. ⁹But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

In chapter 3, as we were being prepared for the oracles that threatened punishment in the years leading up to the siege and fall of Jerusalem, the prophet was spoken of as a sentinel (see 3:17-20). We refer the reader to the commentary there especially in regard to the word translated 'warn' (נִזְהָר) in this passage. We suggested there that 'enlighten' would be a better translation. What the prophet sees and then communicates to others involves much more than warnings.

As we are being prepared for the oracles of salvation that belong to the period after 587, the role of the prophet is once again in focus, and we return to the theme of the prophet as a sentinel.

There are points of contact between this oracle and that in chapter 18. However, the concern here is not with personal or collective responsibility, but rather with the mission of the prophet (compare Jeremiah 6:17; Habakkuk 2:1; Isaiah 21:6ff). His responsibility is to be attentive to God's word and to convey it to the people. If he fails to do this (to see and to enlighten, as the verb נִזְהָר states), he fails as a prophet. If, however, he speaks out and people refuse to listen, they must bear the responsibility and the consequences.

This oracle still warns of judgment, but as something which YHWH is holding back. The focus here is on enlightening the people as to who YHWH is and on YHWH's desire that they live. This is a call to 'turn from their ways' (verses 8 and 9), and so 'save their lives' (verse 5).

The dreadful experience of the siege of Jerusalem and its devastation at the hands of the Babylonian army, as well as the experience of being in exile, could leave the exiles with a feeling of despair: 'how can we live?' YHWH declares on oath and in unusually passionate language, that he takes no pleasure in the death of those who have been unfaithful. His only desire is that they repent and live.

Verse 12 underlines the truth that what matters is what people decide to do now. The fact that they have been righteous in the past is not something that guarantees life. They must continue to choose what is right. In the same way the fact that they have been unfaithful in the past does not exclude them from life. They can live if they choose now to change their ways. No one is excluded from YHWH's desire that we live.

This is spelled out in verses 13-16, which repeat what was said in chapter 18 verses 21-24. The accent here lies on the repentance that is possible for the sinner.

For verses 17-20 see 18:25-30. Here, too, the focus is on life that is being offered to the sinner because of YHWH's desire that we live.

This is summed up in verse 20: 'I will judge all of you according to your ways.'

¹⁰Now you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?" ¹¹Say to them, As I live, says the Lord YHWH, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

¹²And you, son of man, say to your people, The righteousness of the righteous shall not save them when they transgress; nor will the wicked fall because of their wickedness when they turn from their wickedness; nor will the righteous be able to live because of their righteousness when they sin.

¹³Though I say to the righteous that they shall surely live, yet if they trust in their righteousness and commit iniquity, none of their righteous deeds shall be remembered; but in the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. ¹⁴Again, though I say to the wicked, "You shall surely die," yet if they turn from their sin and do what is lawful and right — ¹⁵if the wicked restore the pledge, give back what they have taken by robbery, and walk in the statutes of life, committing no iniquity—they shall surely live, they shall not die. ¹⁶None of the sins that they have committed shall be remembered against them; they have done what is lawful and right, they shall surely live.

¹⁷Yet your people say, "The way of the Lord is not just," when it is their own way that is not just. ¹⁸When the righteous turn from their righteousness, and commit iniquity, they shall die for it. ¹⁹And when the wicked turn from their wickedness, and do what is lawful and right, they shall live by it. ²⁰Yet you say, "The way of the Lord is not just." O house of Israel, I will judge all of you according to your ways!

The fall of Jerusalem

²¹In the eleventh year of our exile, in the tenth month, on the fifth day of the month, someone who had escaped from Jerusalem came to me and said, "The city has fallen."

²²Now the hand of YHWH had been upon me the evening before the fugitive came; but he had opened my mouth by the time the fugitive came to me in the morning; so my mouth was opened, and I was no longer unable to speak.

This oracle, dated 587, records the news of the fall of Jerusalem reaching Ezekiel in exile. Note the word 'our' in the expression 'eleventh year of our exile' (verse 21). The occasion appears to be the arrival of a new batch of refugees.

This news vindicates Ezekiel's dire warnings. People are more likely to listen to him now, and the fall of Jerusalem opens up a new phase of his ministry – a phase in which he no longer needs to warn of punishment (that has happened), but is inspired to speak of YHWH's desire to forgive. As we have just seen in the previous verses, YHWH does not want to punish. He wants to forgive. The call, therefore, is to repent and so enjoy the life that YHWH is offering his people. Ezekiel's mouth is opened to announce salvation, as we will see.

Ezekiel hears what some of those back in Jerusalem are saying. Having survived the siege and the subsequent slaughter and exile, they remember the promises YHWH made to Abraham, and they think they have been spared to inherit the land (without any regard to their behaviour; compare 11:14-15).

‘Eat over blood’ (verse 25), as in Leviticus 19:26, is a form of divination. They are ignoring their commitments under the covenant. Verse 27 describes the state of unrest and violence that prevailed after the conflagration of 587. It appears that everyone is out for himself, neglecting the justice required by YHWH.

YHWH’s promises are made unconditionally. They express who YHWH is. But to receive the blessings promised by YHWH is conditional on keeping the covenant.

It is important that this message is underlined before we hear the oracles promising salvation and restoration.

Fellow exiles are keen to hear what Ezekiel has to say from YHWH. They enjoy listening, but – and this pains Ezekiel – they show no interest in doing what he is calling them to do.

²³The word of YHWH came to me: ²⁴Son of man, the inhabitants of these waste places in the land of Israel keep saying, “Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are many; the land is surely given us to possess.”

²⁵Therefore say to them, Thus says the Lord YHWH: You eat over blood, and lift up your eyes to your idols, and shed blood; shall you then possess the land? ²⁶You depend on your swords, you commit abominations, and each of you defiles his neighbour’s wife; shall you then possess the land?

²⁷Say this to them, Thus says the Lord YHWH: As I live, surely those who are in the waste places shall fall by the sword; and those who are in the open field I will give to the wild animals to be devoured; and those who are in strongholds and in caves shall die by pestilence. ²⁸I will make the land a desolation and a waste, and its proud might shall come to an end; and the mountains of Israel shall be so desolate that no one will pass through. ²⁹Then they shall know that I am YHWH, when I have made the land a desolation and a waste because of all their abominations that they have committed.

³⁰As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls, and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to a neighbour, “Come and hear what the word is that comes from YHWH.” ³¹They come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear your words, but they will not obey them. For flattery is on their lips, but their heart is set on their gain. ³²To them you are like a singer of love songs, one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; they hear what you say, but they will not do it. ³³When this comes—and come it will!—then they shall know that a prophet has been among them.

¹The word of YHWH came to me: ²Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord YHWH: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. ⁵So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. ⁶My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.

⁷Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of YHWH: ⁸As I live, says the Lord YHWH, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep;

⁹therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of YHWH: ¹⁰Thus says the Lord YHWH, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.

Speaking of rulers as ‘shepherds’ is found in Sumerian, Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Egyptian writings. An added relevance for Israel is the fact that David was a shepherd.

The oracles of chapter 34 offer a retrospective glance over the whole history of Israel. A constant theme is that the rulers have looked to the benefits of their position for themselves, but have failed to care for their flock (compare Jeremiah 23:1-8).

Verse 5-6 speak of the sheep being ‘scattered’. This has a special relevance from the fact that Ezekiel is directing his oracle to those who are experiencing exile in Babylon.

In verse 6 YHWH speaks of ‘my sheep’. Genesis 49:24 and Psalm 80:1 speak of YHWH as ‘Shepherd’ (see also Isaiah 40:11; Psalm 23 and 77:21).

The judgment is declared in verses 9-10. YHWH will remove the sheep from the self-seeking control of their rulers.

The oracle moves from YHWH's disgust with the shepherds to his personal determination to look after the sheep which he has under constant and caring surveillance.

They are suffering exile, caught up in the punishment inflicted by YHWH, the 'day of clouds and deep darkness' (verse 12).

They have been punished for their sins. Now YHWH is going to gather them from the lands of exile and take them home to their own land and care for them as their shepherd.

Verse 16 summarises what has just been said and, by speaking of 'justice', forms a link with the following verses.

¹¹For thus says the Lord YHWH: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹²As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord YHWH.

¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

YHWH their shepherd

¹⁷As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord YHWH: I shall judge between animal and animal. To the rams and he-goats: ¹⁸Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? ¹⁹And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?

²⁰Therefore, thus says the Lord YHWH to them: I myself will judge between the fat animals and the lean ones. ²¹Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, ²²I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

²³I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴And I, YHWH, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, YHWH, have spoken.

The focus moves from the self-serving shepherds, to the fact that within the flock itself there are those who grasp power to abuse and dominate the weaker animals. The stronger animals are the ‘rams and he-goats’ (verse 17), the ‘fat animals’ (verse 20), who are the object of the prophet’s criticism.

YHWH will see that justice prevails. The accent is not on punishing the greedy, but rather on YHWH’s determination to deliver the weak from the power of the strong.

It is likely that Ezekiel 34 draws inspiration from Jeremiah 23. Verses 23-24 refer back to the earlier section (23:1-15) where the focus was on the shepherds. In regard to verse 23, it is worth quoting from the Jeremiah scroll.

I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says YHWH. The days are surely coming, says YHWH, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “YHWH is our righteousness.”

– Jeremiah 23:4-6

Behind this ‘Messianic’ promise lies the guarantee given to David in 2Samuel 7:12-17 that his dynasty would last forever – a guarantee that was especially important in post-exilic Judah (see Zechariah 3:8; 6:12; compare Jeremiah 30:9).

In verses 25-30 there is no mention of shepherds and sheep. The focus is on YHWH's faithfulness to his covenant commitments (see 16:60), and his liberating his chosen people from fear and from the 'yoke' (verse 27) under which they have been labouring.

'Wild animals' (verse 25) were instruments in YHWH's judgment (see 5:17; 14:15.21; 33:27). Their banishment is a promise of peace and the lifting of anxiety. The covenant of 'peace' is described in verses 26-27 (compare Ezekiel 37:26; Isaiah 54:10).

Everyone will see the special relationship which YHWH has with Israel (verse 30).

Returning to the image of 'sheep' verse 31 summarises the essence of the covenant:

They will be my people and I will be their God.

– Ezekiel 11:20 and 14:11

²⁵I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely. ²⁶I will make them and the region around my hill a blessing; and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. ²⁷The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall know that I am YHWH, when I break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them. ²⁸They shall no more be plunder for the nations, nor shall the animals of the land devour them; they shall live in safety, and no one shall make them afraid. ²⁹I will provide for them a splendid vegetation so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the insults of the nations. ³⁰They shall know that I, YHWH their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord YHWH.

³¹You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God, says the Lord YHWH.

¹The word of YHWH came to me: ²Son of man, set your face against Mount Seir, and prophesy against it, ³and say to it, Thus says the Lord YHWH: I am against you, Mount Seir; I stretch out my hand against you to make you a desolation and a waste. ⁴I lay your towns in ruins; you shall become a desolation, and you shall know that I am YHWH.

⁵Because you cherished an ancient enmity, and gave over the people of Israel to the power of the sword at the time of their calamity, at the time of their final punishment; ⁶therefore, as I live, says the Lord YHWH, I will prepare you for blood, and blood shall pursue you; since you did not hate bloodshed, bloodshed shall pursue you. I will make Mount Seir a waste and a desolation; and I will cut off from it all who come and go.

⁸I will fill its mountains with the slain; on your hills and in your valleys and in all your water-courses those killed with the sword shall fall. ⁹I will make you a perpetual desolation, and your cities shall never be inhabited. Then you shall know that I am YHWH.

¹⁰Because you said, "These two nations and these two countries shall be mine, and we will take possession of them," – although YHWH was there – ¹¹therefore, as I live, says the Lord YHWH, I will deal with you according to the anger and envy that you showed because of your hatred against them; and I will make myself known among you, when I judge you. ¹²You shall know that I, YHWH, have heard all the abusive speech that you uttered against the mountains of Israel, saying, "They are laid desolate, they are given us to devour." ¹³And you magnified yourselves against me with your mouth, and multiplied your words against me; I heard it. ¹⁴Thus says the Lord YHWH: As the whole earth rejoices, I will make you desolate. ¹⁵As you rejoiced over the inheritance of the house of Israel, because it was desolate, so I will deal with you; you shall be desolate, Mount Seir, and all Edom, all of it. Then they shall know that I am YHWH.

Mount Seir (see also Genesis 36:8-9 and Deuteronomy 1:2; 2:1) refers to the mountainous regions to the east and west of the Arabah settled by Edom.

The oracle against Edom which was included in the section on the oracles against the nations (see 25:12-14) was directly related to the gloating of Edom over the destruction of Jerusalem in 587.

Here we have a later oracle that reflects on Edom's part in the violence against Judah. It was during the exile that Edom occupied land just to the south of Judah.

The oracle is included here to provide the context for the promise of salvation to Israel that we find in the early part of chapter 36.

Verses 10-15 make it clear that the exiles have heard that Edom is encroaching on YHWH's land, the land of the 'two nations' (Judah and Israel). There is no way that they will not go unpunished for this.

Verses 1-3 recall the gloating of Judah's neighbours at its devastation in 587 (see, for example the scoffing of Ammon in 25:3 and of Tyre in 26:2).

YHWH's judgment (verses 4-7) threatens these neighbours (with a special mention of Edom, verse 5) that 'the nations all around Judah shall themselves suffer insults'(verse 7).

¹And you, son of man, prophesy to the mountains of Israel, and say: O mountains of Israel, hear the word of YHWH. ²Thus says the Lord YHWH: Because the enemy said of you, "Aha!" and, "The ancient heights have become our possession," ³therefore prophesy, and say: Thus says the Lord YHWH: Because they made you desolate indeed, and crushed you from all sides, so that you became the possession of the rest of the nations, and you became an object of gossip and slander among the people; ⁴therefore, O mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Lord YHWH: Thus says the Lord YHWH to the mountains and the hills, the watercourses and the valleys, the desolate wastes and the deserted towns, which have become a source of plunder and an object of derision to the rest of the nations all around; ⁵therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: I am speaking in my hot jealousy against the rest of the nations, and against all Edom, who, with wholehearted joy and utter contempt, took my land as their possession, because of its pasture, to plunder it. ⁶Therefore prophesy concerning the land of Israel, and say to the mountains and hills, to the watercourses and valleys, Thus says the Lord YHWH: I am speaking in my jealous wrath, because you have suffered the insults of the nations; ⁷therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: I swear that the nations that are all around you shall themselves suffer insults.

Israel will be restored

⁸But you, O mountains of Israel, shall shoot out your branches, and yield your fruit to my people Israel; for they shall soon come home. ⁹See now, I am for you; I will turn to you, and you shall be tilled and sown; ¹⁰and I will multiply your population, the whole house of Israel, all of it; the towns shall be inhabited and the waste places rebuilt; ¹¹and I will multiply human beings and animals upon you. They shall increase and be fruitful; and I will cause you to be inhabited as in your former times, and will do more good to you than ever before. Then you shall know that I am YHWH. ¹²I will lead people upon you — my people Israel — and they shall possess you, and you shall be their inheritance. Never again will you make them childless.

¹³Thus says the Lord YHWH: Because they say to you, “You devour people, and so have made your people childless,” ¹⁴therefore you shall no longer devour people and never again make childless your people, says the Lord YHWH; ¹⁵and no longer will I let you hear the insults of the nations, no longer shall you bear the disgrace of the peoples; and no longer shall you cause your nation to stumble, says the Lord YHWH.

Here we have an oracle of salvation. YHWH promises to restore the mountains of Israel. The exiles ‘shall soon come home’(verse 8).

The nations are saying that the depopulation of the mountains of Israel is because of Israel’s aggression against other nations. She has brought it upon herself.

YHWH is saying that this will never happen again

There are elements in verses 16-38 that echo statements found in the part of the Isaiah scroll that comes from the last years of the exile. Perhaps what we have here is material from the same period composed by the Ezekiel School.

Verses 18 and 19 recall the terrible destruction of Judah and Jerusalem in 598 and again in 587 and the consequent scattering and dispersal of the population (compare 12:15; 20:23). Verse 17 insists that the cause was the conduct of the people, something that is repeated in verses 18-19: 'In accordance with their conduct and their deeds I judged them' (compare 24:14).

Verse 20 clarifies why it is necessary to insist on this. What happened to Judah has given the nations the impression that YHWH is either powerless or, even worse, malicious. His 'holy name' is being profaned. Since YHWH wants the nations to know him, he cannot afford to allow his name to be profaned. In verse 21 he insists again that the fault lies with 'the house of Israel'.

Verses 22-23 repeat YHWH's determination to do something to stop the bad repute that is attached to his name because of what he has done to punish the sin of his people. He wants the nations to see his 'holiness' (verse 23), that is to say, his majestic transcendence.

Verse 24 announces what it is that he is about to do: 'I will take you from the nations, and gather you from the countries, and bring you into your own land'. This will show the nations that what happened to the house of Israel was not because of YHWH's powerlessness in the face of the gods of Babylon. His people had to be punished. He had to 'pour out his wrath upon them' (verse 18; compare 7:8; 9:8; 14:19; 20:8,13,21; 22:22; 30:15). Now that this has happened he is ready to redeem them, and has the power to do so.

¹⁶The word of YHWH came to me:
¹⁷Son of man, when the house of Israel lived on their own soil, they defiled it with their ways and their deeds; their conduct in my sight was like the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual period.
¹⁸So I poured out my wrath upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land, and for the idols with which they had defiled it. ¹⁹I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries; in accordance with their conduct and their deeds I judged them. ²⁰But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that it was said of them, "These are the people of YHWH, and yet they had to go out of his land." ²¹But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.

²²Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord YHWH: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. ²³I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am YHWH, says the Lord YHWH, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. ²⁴I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land.

Covenant renewal

The catastrophe that overwhelmed Judah in the 6th century was the result of the people's failure to observe the covenant. Jeremiah came to the conclusion that the problem of Israel's constant failure was that the people were simply incapable of obeying:

Can Ethiopians change their skin or leopards their spots?
Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil.

– Jeremiah 13:23

Ezekiel came to the same conclusion. YHWH addressed him as follows:

I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn.

– Ezekiel 2:3-4

Jeremiah saw the need for a new covenant:

The days are surely coming, says YHWH, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt — a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says YHWH. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says YHWH: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know YHWH," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says YHWH; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

– Jeremiah 31:31-34

I will make an everlasting covenant with them, never to draw back from doing good to them; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts, so that they may not turn from me.

– Jeremiah 32:40

Ezekiel, too, focuses on a covenant that YHWH will make with his people:

I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant ... I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am YHWH.

– Ezekiel 16:60, 62

I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forever more.

– Ezekiel 37:26 (see 34:25).

In the closing years of the exile we find the same theme from the Isaiah School:

For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says YHWH, who has compassion on you.

– Isaiah 54:10

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

– Isaiah 55:3

If this covenant is to last (see Ezekiel 16:60; 37:26), YHWH will have to offer a special grace. Jeremiah speaks of 'writing the covenant the law on their hearts'(31:33). Ezekiel's words follow.

YHWH's first action is to purify the people from past sin (verse 25).

Our 'spirit'(breath) is something breathed into us by God. It is not ours to hold, for as we breath out we give it back to God. We depend on God to renew our breath. If God does not, we die. 'Spirit', therefore, speaks of our life-communion with God. YHWH's second action is to breathe life into us in a new way (verses 26). This is accompanied by 'a new heart'(compare Ezekiel 11:19-20; 18:31). The word 'heart' occurs over 1,100 times in the Older Testament, mostly, as in this text, as *lēb* (לֵב), but also in the form *lēbab* (לִבָּב). It refers to the depths of a person's consciousness, including our thoughts (*lēb* is often better translated 'mind'), our higher emotions (irrational feelings have a different word) and our decisions. Spirit and heart are closely connected:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me ... The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

– Psalm 51:10, 17

YHWH is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.

– Psalm 34:18

Deuteronomy and Baruch also speak of God's action on the human heart:

Yahweh your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love Yahweh your God with all your heart and soul, and so will live.

– Deuteronomy 30:6

Until today, Yahweh has not given you a heart to understand.

– Deuteronomy 29:3

I will give them a heart that will listen.

– Baruch 2:31).

In the country of their exile they will take all this to heart, and acknowledge that I am YHWH, their God. I will give them a heart, and an attentive ear.

– Baruch 2:30

²⁵I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

Obedience and prosperity

²⁷I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

²⁸Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

²⁹I will save you from all your uncleannesses, and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. ³⁰I will make the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field abundant, so that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations.

³¹Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds.

³²It is not for your sake that I will act, says the Lord YHWH; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and dismayed for your ways, O house of Israel.

The effect of the new life-breath that YHWH will breathe into his people will be that they are able to obey (verse 27, compare 11:20).

This obedience will make it possible for them to remain in the land (verse 28).

Furthermore, just as the devastation of the land followed on the failure of the people to obey, so the cleansing of the people will mean that the land will flourish (verses 29-30).

They cannot afford to forget (verse 31).

The conclusion in verse 32 takes us back to the beginning of the oracle:

Therefore say to the house of Israel,
Thus says the Lord YHWH: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.

– Ezekiel 36:22

They must not think that they have earned any of this grace. YHWH is acting to preserve his holy name from being profaned. He wants the nations to know him. His people are being summoned, not to rejoicing, but to repentance.

Verses 33-36 echo the following from the Isaiah scroll in the final years of the exile:

I am YHWH who says of Jerusalem, "It shall be inhabited," and of the cities of Judah, "They shall be rebuilt, and I will raise up their ruins" ... who says of Jerusalem, "It shall be rebuilt," and of the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid."

– Isaiah 44:26, 28

The focus of the oracle here in Ezekiel is on foreigners observing what YHWH is doing. The oracles against the nations recorded YHWH's anger at them. Here we are told why it is that they were not completely annihilated: they are to witness what YHWH is doing for his chosen people.

Verses 37-38 echo the following from the same scroll:

Sing, O barren one who did not bear; burst into song and shout, you who have not been in labour! For the children of the desolate woman will be more than the children of her that is married, says YHWH. Enlarge the site of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. For you will spread out to the right and to the left, and your descendants will possess the nations and will settle the desolate towns.

– Isaiah 54:1-3

³³Thus says the Lord YHWH: On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the towns to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt.

³⁴The land that was desolate shall be tilled, instead of being the desolation that it was in the sight of all who passed by. ³⁵And they will say, "This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden; and the waste and desolate and ruined towns are now inhabited and fortified."

³⁶Then the nations that are left all around you shall know that I, YHWH, have rebuilt the ruined places, and replanted that which was desolate; I, YHWH, have spoken, and I will do it.

³⁷Thus says the Lord YHWH: I will also let the house of Israel ask me to do this for them: to increase their population like a flock. ³⁸Like the flock for sacrifices, like the flock at Jerusalem during her appointed festivals, so shall the ruined towns be filled with flocks of people. Then they shall know that I am YHWH.

YHWH restores to life

¹The hand of YHWH came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of YHWH and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord YHWH, you know."

⁴Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of YHWH. ⁵Thus says the Lord YHWH to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I 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 YHWH."

⁷So 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. ⁸I 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.

⁹Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord YHWH: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

This is the third vision in the Ezekiel scroll. The first two (1:1 - 3:15 and 8:1 - 11:25) were dated. If there was a date included here in verse 1 it has been lost in transmission. 'The hand of YHWH' was on Ezekiel in both earlier visions (see 1:3; 3:14; 3:22 and 8:1; see also 33:22). The 'spirit of YHWH' points to the experience as a trance (compare 11:5, 24).

As verse 11 will make clear, the image of the dry bones comes from the resigned despair of those in exile. They see no hope of finding life again. In response to YHWH's question, Ezekiel admits that he, too, cannot imagine a restoration. But he knows that all things are possible to God (verse 3).

In verses 4-6 he is instructed to tell the people that YHWH is about to do what he did in the first creation when he formed man and 'breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being' (Genesis 2:7). Then they will 'know that I am YHWH'(verse 6).

The prophetic word brings about what it declares. The dry bones strewn in the field are now bodies. At first they are still dead ('slain', verse 9). But then YHWH commands the life-giving breath to come from every point of the compass. What were just dry bones, and then lifeless corpses, are restored to life. They stand ready to move.

In verse 11 we are given the interpretation of the vision, and the people's despair. They thought of themselves as being lifeless bones cut off from all hope (compare Ezekiel 19:5). In the words of Proverbs 17, verse 22: 'A cheerful heart enlivens the body, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.'

In verse 12 the image is no longer bones strewn in a field, but graves that YHWH will open. He will bring the people 'back to the land of Israel'. Once again (see 36:27) YHWH promises that he will give 'my spirit' (verse 14). Verse 14 also makes it clear that the restoration of Israel will reveal YHWH to the world.

Verses 15-19 are the first part of a separate oracle. In verse 16 Ezekiel is told to take a **יָדָע** (literally 'wood'), and then a second one. Is one to imagine 'sticks' representing sceptres, or wooden writing tablets? In any case, he is instructed to inscribe on them the names of the main tribe of the southern kingdom (Judah) and the main tribe of the northern kingdom (Joseph).

Then he is to join the two sceptres (or tablets) together. When asked the meaning of this action he is to declare YHWH's intention to reunite the northern and southern kingdoms. Jeremiah, too, speaks of this reunification (see Jeremiah 3:18; 30:3; 31:6).

¹¹Then he said to me, "Son of man, 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.'

¹²Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord YHWH: 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. ¹³And you shall know that I am YHWH, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I 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, YHWH, have spoken and will act," says YHWH.

¹⁵The word of YHWH came to me:

¹⁶Son of man, take a stick and write on it, "For Judah, and the Israelites associated with it"; then take another stick and write on it, "For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and all the house of Israel associated with it"; ¹⁷and join them together into one stick, so that they may become one in your hand. ¹⁸And when your people say to you, "Will you not show us what you mean by these?" ¹⁹say to them, Thus says the Lord YHWH: I am about to take the stick of Joseph (which is in the hand of Ephraim) and the tribes of Israel associated with it; and I will put the stick of Judah upon it, and make them one stick, in order that they may be one in my hand.

²⁰When the sticks on which you write are in your hand before their eyes, ²¹then say to them, Thus says the Lord YHWH: I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. ²²I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms. ²³They shall never again defile themselves with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. I will save them from all the apostasies into which they have fallen, and will cleanse them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God. ²⁴My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd.

They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. ²⁵They shall live in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, in which your ancestors lived; they and their children and their children's children shall live there forever; and my servant David shall be their prince forever. ²⁶I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. ²⁷My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ²⁸Then the nations shall know that I YHWH sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them forevermore.

Verses 20-24 'clarify' the oracle just recorded. No longer is there talk of reuniting two kingdoms. The northern kingdom had long ceased to exist, and the southern kingdom had more recently lost any vestige of independence.

The accent is on gathering Israel's exiles from wherever they have been dispersed, bringing them back to their land and forming them into one nation, under one king (verses 21-22).

Once again purification is stressed (verse 23; see 36:25). The covenant is renewed: 'they shall be my people and I will be their God'(verse 23).

The king, as YHWH promised, will be of the Davidic dynasty (verse 24).

In verses 24b-28 any reference to the uniting of the two 'sticks' is entirely lacking. The accent here is on obedience and on 'an everlasting covenant'(verse 26; see 16:60). His people will stay in the land 'for ever'(verse 25). There will never again be an exile. Likewise, the reign of the Davidic prince will be 'for ever'(verse 25). Finally, YHWH's sanctuary will stand in their midst 'for ever'(verse 26; see Ezekiel 40-48). It will never again be destroyed. One nation requires one shepherd. Ezekiel names David because of the promise found in 2Samuel 7. This traditional hope, however, is secondary to the promise of YHWH's dwelling in their midst - something that will become even clearer from the final 9 chapters of the scroll.