

Ezekiel's Vision of Israel's Restoration

Part 2

—
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The Vision Interpreted and Explained

The various erroneous views of Ezekiel's prophecy of the dry bones have been noticed and discussed. There remains to be examined the true view. It has been demonstrated that the vision cannot picture physical resurrection of the dead in general, nor include physical resurrection in any sense, of Israel or others, nor yet be taken as the spiritual resurrection or conversion of a soul, nor yet spiritualized in any way and made applicable to the Christian church. That the true scope and meaning of the passage is the national and spiritual reinstatement of God's chosen people will appear as the prophecy is further interpreted and explained. It is necessary, first, to examine

I. The Method of the Restoration of Israel

This is indicated to be *by the divine power*. The question Jehovah addresses to Ezekiel after showing him the valley of the dry bones: "Son of man, can these bones live [i.e., will these bones come to life]?" prepares the way for the miracle. The prophet-priest's perplexed reply: "O Lord, Jehovah, Thou knowest" (Ezek 37:3) dramatically shows that from a human standpoint it was inconceivable that they could ever come to life again, and, in any case, nothing short of the omnipotence of God could ever effect this—so many they were and so dry were they.

The method of restoration is further revealed to be not only by divine power, but also *by the divine word*. Ezekiel is told to prophesy over the bones and say unto them, "Hear ye the *word* of Jehovah. Thus *saith* Jehovah.... *I* will cause breath to enter into you.... *I* will lay sinews upon you, and bring flesh upon you, and put breath in you.... ye shall know that *I* am Jehovah" (vs. 4–6). It is the divine *power* which operates through the divine *word*, emphasizing the oft recurring thought in the apparent hopeless impossibility of the rehabilitation of such an effete nation, namely, that what Jehovah promises to fulfill He has the power to fulfill.

The idea of the divine power working through the divine word is also significantly and prominently linked with Israel's national gathering in the key New Testament passages on the subject. Thus in Matthew 24 there is the regathering (v. 31), the restoration under the fig-tree symbolism (vs. 32, 33), the national preservation (v. 34), appended with which comes the glowing finale: "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but *my words* shall not pass away" (v. 35). The same is true of Mark's account (Mark 13:27–31) and Luke's (Luke 21:29–33). The restoration of Israel will be one of the outstanding miracles of the ages (Jer 16:14, 15), eclipsing even the Egyptian deliverance and an indubitable proof that what God promises to do He is both able to do and *will* do (cf. Jer 31:35, 36).

The method of the restoration, however, is not only by the divine power, and the divine word, but also *by the divine life*. The prophet's words, which were God's words, were followed by the divine miracle—a "noise or sound" (קול, "a voice"); and what was to extraordinary, "Behold, a

trembling or rumbling,” i.e., an earthquake-like commotion as the bones came together, “bone to its bone.” This phenomenon of bones strewn so confusedly over the face of the valley but coming together and fitting so marvelously each into its proper place, picturesquely bespeaks God’s power to bring all the Twelve Tribes together no matter where they are, or in what condition they are. The “sinews,” the “flesh” and the “skin” coming upon the “bones” (v. 8), which are now in proper place, might well suggest Israel’s awakening to a feeling of nationalism, expressed in Zionism and kindred nationalistic trends of the past decades. All this takes place, however, before there is any national or spiritual life, that is to say while Israel is yet without nationhood, being politically dead. For we read the emphatic and pregnant declaration, despite the bones, being clothed with flesh. “But there was no breath in them” (v. 8). The רוּחַ, as Keil suggests, “is the animating spirit or breath, equal to רוּחַ חַיִּים (Gen 6:17, 7:22).”¹

The coming of the breath or spirit into the prone and dead bodies of flesh and bones as the prophet calls for the four winds of heaven to blow upon them *is* the coming to life of the politically dead nation of Israel. “The breath (i.e., life) came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceeding army” (v. 10). The life is *not* their spiritual life because they are not yet gathered to their land, and not converted until *after* they are regathered; but it is their national life—their reconstruction as a nation. It may possibly be said, however, that their spiritual life is, so to speak, in embryo in their resurrection to national life, inasmuch as the latter is a prerequisite to the former. All the *regathered* nation surviving the tribulation judgments will be saved at Messiah’s Advent (Rom 11:26), and certainly the scope of the vision as given in the divine commentary on it (vs. 11–14) embraces Israel’s establishment in her own land and her subsequent conversion (v. 14).

It is noteworthy that Ezekiel, in outlining Israel’s national resurrection, addresses the word of Jehovah to the “breath” of life for it to “come from the four winds” to breathe upon the dead nation (v. 9). This speaks of Israel’s world-wide dispersion at the time of the national reconstitution. Matthew, picturing the same event, significantly speaks of the Son of man gathering together “His elect” (of Israel) from the *four winds*, “from one end of heaven to the other” (Matt 24:31).

Matthew adds some pertinent details to the method of the restitution of Israel which are not mentioned by Ezekiel. The latter merely attributes the accomplishment of this momentous event to the divine power, the divine word, and the divine life. Matthew adds mention of the agency of angels. “And He shall send forth his angels with a great sound of a trumpet to gather together His elect” (Matt 24:31).

It may be doubted that the “noise” (v. 7) is to be connected with the trumpet-blast of Matthew’s passage, inasmuch as קוֹל involves the philological difficulty of not signifying the blast of a trumpet, not without amplified definition. רעש, however, meaning also “earthquake,” is hardly to be taken with that meaning in this connection unless קוֹל is construed as signifying trumpet-blast, inasmuch as both phenomena are often concomitants of resurrection. It seems best then to take both terms as referring to the “noise” and “rumbling” that the dry bones would naturally make in joining themselves together.

It is necessary to scrutinize next

II. The Purpose of the Restoration of Israel

¹ 1. Carl Friedrich Keil, *ibid.*, p. 116.

1. *To vindicate the divine word.* The execution of so vast and grand an undertaking at once so seemingly improbable and impossible of accomplishment, will be with the definite divine end in view of demonstrating to the unbelieving world in general, and proving to Israel in particular, that what God has promised His chosen people, everything apparently contrary to its fulfillment notwithstanding, He will most assuredly fulfill. “And ye shall know that I, Jehovah, have *spoken it, and performed it, saith Jehovah*” (v. 14).

And what has God promised Israel? By solemn covenant He promised to Abram’s posterity the land extending from the river of Egypt on to the Euphrates (Gen 15:18), confirming His word with an oath (Gen 22:16–18) and extending the promise to Isaac (Gen 26:3) and also in brilliant vision to Jacob (Gen 28:12–16). To the latter, as he was fleeing the land from the murderous rage of Esau, was granted not only the renewal of the promise of the land to himself, and his posterity, but he was given a preview of that glorious future day when Israel shall be back in the Promised Land, herself converted under Messiah, and heaven and earth in very close proximity as symbolized by the bright ladder set up on earth and reaching to heaven, with the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man, the glorious Christ, who will be reigning as “Lord of Lords and King of Kings” on the throne of David (John 1:51).

Dim centuries, meanwhile, have dragged on. Millennia have intervened during which Israel has been dispersed, beaten, despised and murdered among the Gentiles. Yea, the dead which Ezekiel saw in the vision are more than the dead, more than desiccated bones. They are specifically הרגים (“slain, killed, butchered”), i.e., in ancient and modern pogroms (v. 9). Will God fulfill His word to His distressed and downtrodden people? Will the silence of ages ever be broken? Will the heavens always be brass? Gentiles sneer in unbelief. Israel herself cries out in despair, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off” (נגזרנו לנו), in other words “It’s all over with us!” (v. 11). The consummation of the marvel of restoration will be with the divine intent of demonstrating to an amazed world that it is “not all over” with Israel, but that God will do what He said He would do for them (Deut 30:3, Jer 23:5–8, Luke 1:30–33, Acts 15:14–17). Their future indeed is destined to be far more glorious than ever their past was.

This thought leads to another purpose of the vision, namely,

2. *To revive Israel’s lost national hope.* Since the divine interpretation of the vision is that the “bones are the whole house of Israel” (v. 11), that is, the whole nation looked upon as not divided or “halved” into two separate kingdoms (v. 22), the drying up of these bones means complete loss of that status in national and spiritual death (v. 11). Their condition is certainly depicted as something deplorable, as of course it is. The bold figures of the vision bring Israel’s sad plight as a nation into sharp relief. What could be more expressive of their national and spiritual death than “bones,” not with some orderly arrangements to form skeletons, not even piled up in a heap, nor bones of recent corpses; but desiccated bones, unburied, long bleached by the sun, reduced to powdery dryness by the wind, strewn promiscuously and confusedly “upon the face [or, the surface] of the valley,” “very many, and very dry” (vs. 1, 2)!

The “valley” is a very apt figure expressing the *place* of Israel’s dispersion. It denotes a “wide valley, plain, or fissure.” The article prefixed הבקעה specifies it as a very definite valley, and likely refers very pointedly to the whole earth—among the nations—as the locality of Israel’s scattering. Often Scripture uses the figure of a mountain to refer to nations or kingdoms (Dan 2:35; Isa 2:2), and as a valley is a low and depressed region among mountains the present image is expressive in not only characterizing Israel’s *place* of captivity among the Gentile nations, but her *condition* there as one of persecution, depression and humiliation.

It is because of the fact in this dreadful state Israel will lose all national hope and fall into desperate discouragement that the prophet is told to give forth his message, to comfort them in their tribulations and to revive them in their national expectation. “Therefore, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord Jehovah: Behold, I will open your graves, and cause you to come out of your graves, O my people, and I will bring you into the land of Israel” (v. 12).

Another purpose of the restoration appears, namely,

3. *To settle Israel in her own land.* The rehabilitation plainly includes the bringing of the people *out* from among the nations (vs. 12, 13) and the bringing of them *into* the “land of Israel” (v. 12) and the placing or setting down of them in rest and quietness in the land (v. 14). Three separate momentous events are thus consequently announced in these verses, and must not be confused with each other.

First, *Israel’s being brought out of her place among the nations:* “Behold, I will open your graves, and cause you to come out of your graves....(v. 12), “And ye shall know that I am Jehovah, when I have opened your graves, and caused you to come up out of your graves” (v. 13). The “graves” are Israel’s place of death as a nation, scattered among the Gentiles. That the term “graves” does *not* signify literal graves but Israel’s burial in dispersion in the graveyard of the nations, appears from the fact the bones are not in graves at all, but strewn on the surface of the valley. The bones coming up out of the graves, therefore, can only mean Israel’s coming up out of the cemetery of her dispersion among the nations of the earth, to be a nation once more herself. That the physically dead of the nation cannot be meant looks clear, for the same figure of speech is employed in the New Testament of the prodigal son, who in his backslidings speaks of an Israelite out of covenant relationship with Jehovah and of whom it was said “For this my son was dead, and is alive again” (Luke 15:24). Yet he was not physically dead, nor was he made alive physically. Israel, the nation, playing the prodigal is similarly out of fellowship with Jehovah, and viewed as nationally and spiritually dead.

The second event announced in these verses is: *Israel’s being brought into the land.* This event, so pivotal, is referred to only *once* in these verses, and in these words, “And I will bring you into the land of Israel” (v. 12). It naturally follows the coming to life of the nation and is vitally connected with it. As there can be no nation without a definite territory to occupy as a nation, so Israel cannot be a nation until she has received a national home. That that national home will be Palestine, rather than some other part of the globe, is clearly emphasized. The reason that the reconstitution as a nation and the national regathering are presented in the vision as separate and chronological events, though closely connected, is that the nation and the national home will likely be reestablished as such before any considerable portion of the people actually return to the homeland.

The third event distinguished in this portion is *Israel’s being settled securely and permanently in the land.* “And I will *place* you in your own land” (v. 14). והנחתי, “And I will lead you to rest [i.e., set you in peace, let you remain, leave you in quiet] in your own land”; for such is the precise connotation of the verb נוח (“to settle down, rest, dwell”) in the hifil. This declaration refers *not* to the leading out from the graves among the nations, nor to the leading into the land of Israel, but to their permanent and unmolested settlement and establishment by Jehovah in the land, after their arrival. From these considerations it becomes evident that Israel’s national resuscitation and their national regathering to their homeland, together with their spiritual revival (as will shortly be discovered), are all events in a chain, and all are prerequisites to the nation’s secure and perpetual establishment in the land.

“The land of Israel” (v. 12) is said to be “your own land” (v. 14). It is called “the land of Israel” because it was specially confirmed to Jacob (or, Israel) and his seed through Abraham and Isaac (Gen 28:12–15). It is “your own land” because bestowed by covenant and oath upon Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their descendants forever (Gen 17:8, Ezek 37:25). It is important to note that the nation has never yet taken the land as promised under the unconditional Abrahamic covenant, nor yet has it possessed the whole land (Gen 15:18, Num 34:1–12).

The reestablishment of Israel back in her land embraced in the vision of the dry bones must not be confused with the restoration from the Babylonian captivity, as it has been by some. It is impossible to apply the “exceeding great army” of the reinstated (v. 10) with any show of propriety to the return of the less than 50,000 (counting all) who finally returned from Babylon, especially inasmuch as ancient armies were commonly very large. The returning remnant was a very inconsiderable army compared with even that of Judah alone under the kings. “The whole house of Israel” (v. 11), too, puts any past return from captivity out of the question.

The gift of the land of Palestine to Israel is modified by the prophecies of dispossessions and restorations. Some list three dispossessions and three restorations, taking the Egyptian bondage and deliverance as one dispossession and restoration (Gen 15:13, 14, 16). Under such a listing Israel is thought of as now in the third dispossession, from which she will be restored at the return of the Lord as her king under the Davidic covenant.

However, some believe it better not to think of the Egyptian servitude and march from Egypt to Canaan as a restoration, inasmuch as Canaan could hardly be said to have been considered as in Israel’s possession at all until *after* its conquest by Joshua, and hence could not properly be thought of as restored before that time. In reality the Jews have never been restored but *once*, and that was from Babylon. It seems evident then that the return from the Babylonian captivity is to be reckoned as the first restoration, and the Scriptures therefore speak of a *second* regathering when the Lord returns as King to set up the theocratic Davidic Kingdom. “And it shall come to pass in that day [the Millennial day] that the Lord will set his hand again the *second* time to recover the remnant of His people from Assyria and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea” (Isa 11:11).

It is to this *second* regathering to her own land from her present world-wide diaspora that Ezekiel’s vision also refers, for the regathered people are to dwell in the land this time “forever” (Ezek 37:25). This cannot be applied to the return from Babylon, as they were driven out of the land after that, and the promise here is for perpetual possession and habitation. As Amos graphically portrays Jehovah’s secure settlement of the people in the land this time, “I will plant them upon their land, and they shall *no more* be pulled up out of their land” (Amos 9:15). This passage is equivalent to Ezekiel’s succinct but emphatic enunciation of the same fact, “And I [Jehovah] will *place* you in your own land” (Ezek 37:24).

A further purpose of the restoration of God’s chosen people is indicated, to wit,

4. *To effect Israel’s spiritual conversion.* “And I [Jehovah] will put my Spirit in you, and ye shall live” (v. 14a). This feature, of course, is vital and indispensable to the national reinstatement. Without it the other outstanding events connected with it would be useless or impossible. The gathering out of the nations, the leading into the land, would accomplish little without spiritual renewal of the people, as the divine blessing could not be vouchsafed to hard and impenitent hearts. As for the perpetual and undisturbed settlement in the land, spiritual revival of the nation is obviously an indispensable prerequisite, since the latter would be an

impossibility without the former. Accordingly, the prophet observes a beautiful order: national resuscitation (v. 4–10, 12, 13), national regathering (v. 12), national regeneration (v. 14a), national reestablishment (v. 14b).

The facts presented in the divine interpretation of the vision are these: Israel will be raised to nationhood and regathered to Palestine in unbelief. *There* she shall be converted as a nation, previous to being established forever in peace and glory in the land during Messiah’s Kingdom (cf. Ezek 37:24).

It is remarkable to observe that in the vision itself (vs. 1–10) the national resurrection of Israel alone is portrayed, both in the symbolism and the imagery, and *not* in the spiritual reviving. Indeed, nothing is included in the actual vision to designate either the regathering, the conversion or the establishment in the land; for the vision itself ends with the resurrected people nationally alive, standing upon their feet, but still in the valley, or as the imagery indicates still among the nations. These last three great events appear only in the divine interpretation (vs. 11–14) as inseparably included and inevitably growing out of the event portrayed in the vision, but not actually included in its symbolic drapery at all.

The explanation of this striking fact appears to be that the resuscitation of Israel to the status of a nation is the sine qua non for all the other events so vitally connected with her restitution. Establishing the fact of the revival of Israel’s national life as the vision per se does, her national regathering, national regeneration and national reestablishment in the land are guaranteed and assured *in the national resuscitation*. For it is self-evident that Israel cannot actually exist as a nation unless gathered out of the nations and into some territory her own, and there brought to spiritual life to be able to enjoy the blessings of permanent settlement in the land. That is the reason why the divine interpretation lists these events as inherent and germinally included in the vision, although not pictured in the actual figures.

The word “live,” accordingly, is employed in a twofold sense in the passage. In verses 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10 it denotes “to live nationally” and expresses Israel’s national revivification. In verse 14 it alone signifies “to live spiritually” and the reference is to Israel’s spiritual reclamation.

The fact that Ezekiel’s vision presents Israel’s conversion as subsequent to her regathering is in agreement with the order as assigned elsewhere in prophecy. “For I will take you from among the nations, and gather you out of all the countries, and will bring you into your own land. Then will I [“And I will,” R.V.] sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you; and a new spirit will I put within you.... And I will put my Spirit within you.... and ye shall dwell in the land. (Ezek 36:24–28).

This deep-seated work of cleansing and spiritual renewal is tersely expressed by Ezekiel, “And I [Jehovah] will put my Spirit in you,” in (v. 14). Thus Israel will be regenerated by the Holy Spirit (John 3:3, 4), indwelt, sealed, and marvelously filled with the Spirit (Joel 2:28, 29) during the Kingdom, and, indeed, enjoying every ministry of the Spirit characteristic of this present Church age except the baptism with the Spirit, which of necessity by its very nature is uniquely confined to the period of the outcalling of the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13).

The prophet further elaborates on the nature of the spiritual awakening in Israel in verse 23 . The people are said to be saved from their “idols” and their “detestable things” and, furthermore, “saved out of all their dwelling-places, where they have sinned.” Their dwelling-places “at” or “in” which they have sinned cannot be their settlements in foreign lands, as Hitzig supposes, but only the dwelling-places in Canaan to which they have been restored, as Keil maintains. הושעת

(cf. Ezek 36:29) signifies to “preserve therefrom”; so in the present instance the thought can only be that “God will preserve them from all the dwelling-places in which they have sinned.”

Jehovah thus would remove from their environment everything that could offer them solicitation to sin. For though sin has its seat not in the external, but in the internal (i.e., the heart), and they will be given a “new” heart (Ezek 36:26), yet the outward circumstances of a man do offer various inducements to sin. Through the idolatry and the moral corruption of the inhabitants left in the land, Canaan offered such a temptation to evil in the years before the captivity. In the future, however, when His people are brought back to Canaan, Jehovah promises to keep His people from the sinful influence of their dwelling-places. The land will be thoroughly purged.

With the cleansing of the heart within and the land without and withal having Satan bound (Rev 20:3), Israel’s spiritual reanimation will be complete and unflinching. “So shall they be my people, and I will be their God” (v. 24), and that not only theoretically but also actually and practically (Jer 32:38). And it appears not only nationally but even individually; for all those regathered and surviving the devastating and decimating judgments of the Great Tribulation (“the time of Jacob’s trouble,” Jer 30:7) will evidently be saved, “And so Israel [nationally] shall be saved, even as it is written, There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer, He shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob” (Rom 11:26). The sight of the returning “Son of man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of glory” (Matt 26:64) will be the medium of the conversion, when the Spirit of grace and supplications will be poured out upon them as they gaze upon Him whom “they pierced” (Zech 12:10–14) and a “fountain” of cleansing will be opened to them” (Zech 13:1).

A final purpose of the restoration will be

5. *To demonstrate Israel’s status as an elect nation.* “Thus saith the Lord Jehovah: Behold, I will open your graves, and cause you to come out of your graves, O my people,” עַמִּי (v. 12). Again, in verse 13 Jehovah significantly calls to them, “O my people!” The repetition is forceful. Jehovah calls them His people, and tenderly claims them as such while yet they are in humiliation as dry bones scattered among the graves of the nations. He moreover gives them the glowing and heartening promises of their rehabilitation in their calamity and distress, not because of anything they are in themselves (Ezek 36:32, for they are to be “ashamed and confounded for their ways”), but simply and graciously because they are *His* people, and as such He must vindicate His holy name which they have defiled and disgraced before the nations (Ezek 36:21–23). The tender compassionate love of Jehovah for His people breathes through His dramatic call to them in the midst of their misery and wretchedness, “O my people!”

It is very arresting to notice that in verse 23 Jehovah, having presented the future spiritual renewal of His people, there significantly represents their being His people only as a future event, dependent upon their conversion. “So *shall* they be my people, and I will be their God.” The explanation is that now Israel is God’s own people, not because of their choice or faithfulness but solely because of His faithfulness as their covenant-keeping God. Had He dealt with them according to their deserts and so forgotten His covenant with them, they would have been destroyed long ago, or swallowed up and digested by the nations instead of miraculously being preserved through fire and sword, and what is still more wonderful from being assimilated by the Gentiles.

This future scene, after their conversion, foretells the time when they, from their own hearts and by their own choice, shall be His people in reality. In other words, verses 12, 13 present

Israel as perpetually God's own from the divine side in accordance with His own immutable faithfulness. Verse 23 , on the other hand, views Israel as experimentally God's own from the human side, in accordance with the nation's own choice and fidelity in that future day of spiritual rebirth.

It does not appear possible to the Gentile nations that a people so hated and hounded, so despised and distressed, so selfish and sordid (in their unsaved condition) could be God's elect nation, His own chosen people. That God should address them tenderly as "O my people" in the midst of their national dispersion and death among the nations, is utterly incomprehensible to the nations in general among which Israel has been buried. Israel's dispersion and punishment, while a divine necessity for her waywardness, has caused Jehovah's name which Israel bears, as well as her own name, to be brought into ignominy and reproach. The nations have insulted Israel, and thereby have blasphemed Jehovah. The exaltation of Israel, nationally and spiritually, and her establishment to be the "head" of the nations and "not the tail" (Deut 28:13) will be the most stupendous vindication of God's goodness and faithfulness the world has ever seen or ever will see, and the most colossal proof that Israel, despite all her backsliding and disobedience, is God's elect nation, His own chosen people.

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