

EZEKIEL 37:1-14

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

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. ⁸ I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no *ruach* in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the *ruach*, prophesy, mortal, and say to the *ruach*: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four *ruachs*, O *ruach*, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’ ¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the *ruach* came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

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.’ 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. 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. ¹⁴ I will put my *ruach* 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.’¹

¹ Text from the New Revised Standard Version with the exception of *ruach*, which I left untranslated. All quotations from the text will be taken from the NRSV.

AN INTERPRETATION OF *RUACH* IN EZEKIEL 37:1-14

“Suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone” (Ezekiel 37:7). The images of the first fourteen verses in thirty-seventh chapter of Ezekiel are hard to forget: a valley full of dry bones, a sudden rattling noise, bones knocking together as sinews, muscles, and flesh begin to cover them until they are standing before the prophet, a vast army of lifeless bodies. The scene is only slightly grimmer than Ezekiel’s prophecies have been up to this point.

Called to prophesy to the Israelites who have been exiled to Babylon, Ezekiel is given harsh prophecies of judgment and wrath from Yahweh in order that the exiles might know that Yahweh is the Lord: “Thus says the Lord God: Disaster after disaster! See it comes . . . soon now I will pour out my wrath upon you” (7:5-8). Image after image of violence, death, and judgment pile on top of one another for twenty four chapters as Yahweh makes known, through Ezekiel, that the punishment of the people is just and deserved; indeed, they deserve even more. It is not until the thirty-third chapter, after first prophesying doom and judgment against other nations as well, that the book begins to shift. In the thirty-third chapter Ezekiel reports hearing news that Jerusalem has fallen and it is as if Yahweh or the prophet know that this is enough – the exiles have had all they can manage of judgment and destruction and are now teetering on the brink of despair. Into all of this bleakness, real and prophesied, come three chapters (34-37) of hope for the restoration of Judah.

It is in this section that our passage is located. Given all Ezekiel has prophesied already, a valley full of dry bones seems an utterly appropriate image for not only those who have died in the conflict between Babylonia and Judah, but for the hopes of the exiles as well. They do not need Ezekiel’s prophecies of doom and gloom to realize the foundations of their faith are

systematically being taken away: their land, their self-identification as chosen people, their temple, and their monarchy.¹ All seems lost.

Into this situation of death and utter despair, the prophet is called to prophesy new life. Yet, as we saw above, the drama heightens when Ezekiel's words create not new life, but an army of lifeless bodies. It is not until the spirit comes, called from the four winds to breathe the breath of life into these reconstituted bodies that life is regained.

While there is plenty to study and ponder in these fourteen verses, it is the relationship between wind, spirit, and breath that particularly intrigues me. In the Hebrew, one word, *ruach*, is used for all three of these terms, leaving me to wonder if Ezekiel had one concept in mind while English translators have turned it into three; or, if not, why Ezekiel would use the same word for three different concepts when other words exist in Hebrew to convey the same meaning. Moreover, does it make a difference if *ruach* is translated as wind, spirit or breath? Or are they interchangeable?

While *ruach* is used over 378 times in the Old Testament, Ezekiel is unique among the prophets in his use of the term. Called the "prophet of the Spirit,"² Ezekiel uses the term fifty-two times, more than any other prophet. In Jeremiah, who was writing at the same time and influenced Ezekiel's ministry in many ways, the term is used a sparse eighteen times and only to refer to a meteorological phenomenon, wind. Likewise, in Leviticus, which Ezekiel draws on for stylistic and thematic features, the term is not used at all. Ezekiel's use of *ruach* is unusual and all his own.³

¹ {Joyce, 2007, Library of Hebrew Bible/ Old Testament Studies, 482}, 4

² {Block, 1989, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, 32, 27-49}, 28

³ {Block, 1989, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, 32, 27-49}, 28

Yet, lest we mistakenly think that whole of Ezekiel's use of *ruach* mirrors these fourteen verses in his thirty-seventh chapter, it is important to begin at the beginning. Much as Ezekiel's prophecy changes from destruction to visions of restoration, his use of *ruach* likewise shifts and grows throughout the course of his prophecy.⁴ Ezekiel's first use of the term occurs in his recounting of his call to be a prophet and refers to a "stormy wind" from the north that brings fire and four strange creatures (1:4-5). Ezekiel, like many other writers in the Old Testament, uses *ruach* to refer to the wind many times throughout his writing, making his meaning explicit by always pairing the word with another descriptive term, "stormy," or "east," among others.⁵

This meaning, however, is just the beginning of Ezekiel's use. A mere seven verses later the stormy *ruach* is a guiding force moving the four creatures; even the inanimate wheels in the vision move because "the *ruach* of the living creatures was in the wheels" as well (1:12, 20-21). Here Ezekiel has shifted from a meteorological phenomenon to something more accurately translated as a "spirit." Moreover, where wind has the ability to exert force on creatures from without, this spirit is now capable of moving creatures, and inanimate objects, from within.

As the prophecy continues, *ruach* is employed, both as wind and spirit, as an agent of God's judgment. Indeed, even in chapter five, when the literal translation of *ruach* is closest to "direction," the connotations are ones of fear and destruction: "I will execute judgments on you, and any of you who survive I will scatter to every *ruach*" (5:10). As a wind, the *ruach* brings "a deluge of rain, [and] great hailstones" (13:11). In chapter ten, the *ruach* is the force that moves God's presence out of the Temple, thus confirming the greatest fears of exile, a temple without the presence of Yahweh and a people who do not know where to locate their God (10:17-19).

⁴ {Kinlaw, 2003, Perspectives in Religious Studies, 30, 161-172}. Kinlaw persuasively argues that it is possible to see *ruach* expand in meaning from the beginning to the end of Ezekiel's prophecy. She catalogues this expansion through the lens of literary theory and the notion of an expanding symbol.

⁵ {Block, 1989, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, 32, 27-49}, 32.

Alongside these images of *ruach* as a force of destruction and judgment, Ezekiel refers to the *ruach* as something within humans as well, although this *ruach* is faulty and in need of replacement: “I [Yahweh] know the things that come into your *ruach*” (11:5). One of the few moments of hope that comes in these first twenty-four chapters of destruction is God’s promise to give the people a new heart and put a new *ruach* in them (11:9). In this way, a faulty *ruach* within human is both the *source* of judgment because it leads them astray, the *force* of judgment as it brings winds of destruction and death, and the *promise* of new life. This paradoxical tension is heightened at various points in Ezekiel’s prophecy as God both promises to give the people a new *ruach* and then later commands them to get their own (18:31). As the reader nears the turning point of chapter thirty-three, the questions and sense of foreboding are looming: will God give the people a new *ruach* and thereby a new life? Or, must the people save themselves? Moreover, while moments of hope appear, it is hard to overemphasize the number of time *ruach* appears as a deadly force. All in all, by chapter thirty-three, even the reader not living in exile is exhausted and worn out, thinking that Ezekiel will only ever be a prophet of doom and gloom.

It is into this situation of hopelessness that Ezekiel finally turns to visions of restoration and we come to chapter thirty-seven and the passage under consideration. In a brief fourteen verses, Ezekiel uses the term *ruach* ten times, drawing on the connotations and meanings of the term he has already established. The scene opens with a traditional formula as the hand of the Lord comes upon Ezekiel and brings him out by the *ruach* of the Lord. Finding himself in a valley full of dry bones, Ezekiel is asked the seemingly rhetorical question of whether or not these bones can live. Given all of the destruction, death and judgment up to this point, it seems the answer is obviously no, but Ezekiel politely defers the question leaving the final judgment up to God. Despite all expectations to the contrary, Yahweh reveals an intention to bring the bones

back to life by causing the *ruach* to enter them. Given the command to prophesy Ezekiel does so and bones clatter against bones until a swarm of bodies stands before him, but there is still no *ruach* within them. In this dramatic pause, likened by one commentator to a magician “who invariably “fails” once or twice in attempting his grand finale,”⁶ suspense is heightened as God issues another command to prophesy, this time to the *ruach*. While in English *ruach* is translated as both breath and wind, making the verse read more smoothly, in Hebrew, the concentration of *ruach* is evident: ““Prophesy to the *ruach*, prophesy, mortal, and say to the *ruach*: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four *ruachs*, O *ruach*, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live”” (37:9). Four times in one verse *ruach* is invoked to come and dwell in the lifeless bodies. What once brought death and destruction is now invoked to bring new life. In interpreting the vision in the final four verses of this passage, Ezekiel makes a subtle shift in his use of the term: no longer is Yahweh placing just any *ruach* within the people, Yahweh promises Yahweh’s own *ruach*, ““I [Yahweh] will put my *ruach* 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.””

Given Ezekiel’s unique use of the term, as well as the varied ways in which he employs it throughout his prophecy, it is clear that *ruach* is not a single entity. While it might be tempting to want to “pin down” its meaning, Ezekiel is intentionally ambiguous in his use of the term, employing it to mean “wind, direction, side, an agency of conveyance, an agency of animation, an agency of inspiration, the mind, and a sign of divine ownership.”⁷ Moreover, *ruach* is a force of destruction and judgment as well as an agent of life and recreation, a vivifying force associated with the powerfulness of wind and the tenderness of breath. To separate out these images or reduce them to a single understanding would be to reduce a three-dimensional force to

⁶ {Fox, 1980, Hebrew Union College Annual, 51, 1-15}, 11

⁷ {Block, 1989, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, 32, 27-49}. I am drawing here on Block’s categorization of the different meanings of the term in Ezekiel, 31.

a two-dimensional depiction. In Ezekiel's theology, Yahweh gathers in all the connotations of *ruach*, making them God's own and acting through them. There are no clean lines or neat boxes by which to categorize either *ruach* or God's movement in the world. What can be said is that the conception of spirit that emerges from this passage is a holistic image that moves between creation and God to convey God's presence, judgment, and mercy even to those in exile who feel outside the reach of God. This is a spirit who brings life when we expect death and who, in return, expects new life and responsibility from us.

EXPLANATION

I chose this passage because it has always been one of my favorites and because one of my guiding questions in the doctoral program revolves around who the Spirit is and how we understand the Spirit today; the broad use of *ruach* in this passage makes it an interesting case study on the spirit from the perspective of the Old Testament. Therefore, when I began to work on the passage, I began, as Tiffany and Ringe suggest, at home, by naming my own questions. What is the *ruach* in this passage and why is it translated so variously? How did Ezekiel understand this concept? And does the way we translate *ruach* affect our understanding of the passage? While there are many possible ways to go about answering some of these questions, I adopted a theological approach primarily because that is where my interest lies, but also because a number of my questions are theological in nature.

With these questions framing my study, I set about determining the methods that would best help me address my particular interest. I began with the literary method of intertextuality, specifically a word study. I started broad by looking to see how many times *ruach* is used in the Old Testament. When the results came back in the hundreds, I decided to narrow my focus,

looking to see how many times Ezekiel used the term and then looking at other prophets and Leviticus. While this was primarily a literary method, it did require some historical work to determine when Ezekiel was written, what resources he might have drawn on and who his contemporaries might have been. Throughout, I was aware that Ezekiel is considered a redacted work that is not easily separated out into author and editor so that today most scholars admit to being uncertain as to which sections the prophet wrote himself and which sections were added later. Nevertheless, I decided that for my purposes it was sufficient to consider “Ezekiel” the redacted author, or authors, of the final work. In doing this, I took a particularly reader-centered approach.

In the process of doing the word study, it became clear that Ezekiel was unique in his use of the term and that he used it over fifty times. Given the limits of the paper, I decided to look only briefly at how Jeremiah, Ezekiel’s contemporary used the term, and then focus specifically on Ezekiel’s usage. Because Ezekiel uses *ruach* throughout his prophecy, the word study also helped me gain a sense of the structure of Ezekiel’s prophecy as a whole. This became important for my interpretation as I realized in reading the book just how long and tedious the first twenty-four chapters are and how exhausted a reader is likely to be by the time they reach the thirty-seventh chapter. In this way, my word study also led me to a compositional-critical method that helped me locate my particular passage within the larger work of Ezekiel, which in turn added to my sense of what Ezekiel might have been trying to accomplish with this vision.

To return to the word study, it became clear in my reading that the majority of scholars studying the concept of *ruach* in the book of Ezekiel work on identifying the different meanings of the term and categorizing them. While these categories were helpful in giving me an overview of the usage, I was more intrigued by Pamela Kinlaw’s argument that the concept of *ruach*

expands as one reads through Ezekiel. While I had not noticed this in my own reading and agree with those who critique Kinlaw that this might not be obvious to the average reader, Kinlaw argues that when you stop to actually study the term, this pattern of expansion emerges. Drawing on literary theory, Kinlaw applies the concept of an expanding symbol to Ezekiel's use of *ruach* arguing that, "the narrative communicates an idea 'subtle or otherwise elusive,' an idea that only an expanding symbol could hope to elucidate."⁸ With this theory in mind, I reread Ezekiel's use of *ruach* looking for the ways in which the changing narrative corresponded with the changing use of the term itself. While there was not a direct parallel in every instance, I did see a movement, particularly as the book shifted focus from prophecies of judgment to prophecies of hope. Moreover, recognizing the use of *ruach* as a force of destruction prior to being a force of life helped give depth to the concept and emphasized the miraculous nature of the vision in chapter thirty-seven.

Having completed my word study, I moved to looking briefly at the rhetoric of the passage. While I thought this might be outside the scope of my particular interpretation for this paper, the striking images and force of the narrative are part of what drew me to it initially and I thought it important to at least consider this dimension of the text. And, indeed, I was glad I did. While I had been considering my passage a whole, scholars who look at the rhetoric of this passage tend to sub-divide it into two sections, separating out verses eleven through fourteen as the interpretation given the first ten verses. Moreover, I became aware of the two-fold nature of the prophetic action itself, which I had not noticed before. This break, where Ezekiel's words at first do not seem to be effective, helped me see not only the tension the passage creates, but the way in which the structure of the passage helps to emphasize the role of *ruach* as well.

While literary methods provided more than enough to work with, I wanted to be true to

⁸ {Kinlaw, 2003, Perspectives in Religious Studies, 30, 161-172}, 172

what we had been discussing in class by at least considering other methods, particularly some more post-modern or reader-centered approaches. To this end, I spend some time on the internet looking at artistic interpretations of this passage across the centuries. I was hoping to see different ways in which the *ruach* was portrayed, but I found instead that the majority of artists focus on the bones and the valley, leaving the wind or the breath out of the image entirely.⁹ In addition to art, I looked at a modern interpretation of the vision by Daniel Berrigan, a Roman Catholic priest, poet, and peace activist.¹⁰ What was striking in both this interpretation and the artwork was how overwhelming it would be to find oneself in a valley full of dry bones. Berrigan likens the valley to the killing fields of modern-day genocides and I was struck in a new way by the overwhelming sense of death portrayed both in Ezekiel as a whole, and even this passage, which I had previously associated with life. While I did not explicitly use either of these methods in my own interpretation, they certainly shaped my own sense of the picture Ezekiel was painting.

Finally, having done all of this work on the text itself and then its interpretation, I wanted to ground myself in the historical dimensions of the text: when it had been written, who it had been written for, and the context in which it had been written. While I had the basic facts from my early work, I found myself immersed in literature about the exile and the psychological and theological implications of the exile for Ezekiel's audience, which added to my understanding of the rhetorical power of the book as a whole as well as Ezekiel's message. From this perspective, it is possible to understand Ezekiel's focus on judgment and destruction as an answer to the questions of exile, which seemed to present only two options: either Yahweh was weaker than

⁹ There were a handful of exceptions, including one painting where the artist had portrayed the wind as four cherubic faces in the clouds blowing wind onto the scene. The exact title of the image is unknown, but the artist is Fontana and the image can be found here:

http://www.biblicalart.com/artwork.asp?id_artwork=30907&showmode=Full.

¹⁰ {Berrigan, 1997, Ezekiel: vision in the dust, xxi, 137 p}

the other gods, or Yahweh was unfair. Either of these solutions would have left the Israelites in an untenable position with regard to their faith and so Ezekiel's answer is a third option: Yahweh is neither unfair nor weaker, rather the people have brought about their own destruction. While this may not be a theological response many of us like today, it helps to understand Ezekiel's writing as crisis writing rather than a systematic theology.

All of these methods yielded fascinating information, to the point that it was challenging to force myself to stop reading and begin writing; and, when I did, I found myself forced with some hard choices. With only five pages, I had to narrow my interests to a specific focus. I decided to do this by returning to my original question about the role of the spirit and allowing all of the information I had garnered to filter in through a primarily literary method. In order to convey the understanding of *ruach* I had gained through my research, I thought it would be most effective to take the reader through the text of Ezekiel itself, in an abridged fashion, to gain a sense of the movement of the text, while also hopefully inserting a sense of the psychology and theology of exile into the description. In this way I would name my methodology as primarily literary with historic and reader-centered methods informing my own reading of the text itself. With more pages, and more time, it would be interesting to see if there was a way to create an interpretation of the spirit in Ezekiel that more explicitly weaved in the psychological and theological dimensions of exile both historically and ideologically. In the meantime, however, I am left with a richer sense of the *ruach* in Ezekiel and a more profound understanding of the power of the book as a whole.