

The vision of 'Dry Bones' in Ezekiel 37:1–28: Resonating Ezekiel's message as the African prophet of hope

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Against the background of a disenfranchised and hopeless exilic Israel, Ezekiel received the vision of 'Dry Bones', predicting an eschatological resuscitation and resurrection to life and restoration to the land of Yahweh's covenant people. This article previews the political, social, economic and moral conditions of many African societies as being in a disenfranchised, hopeless exilic state. It nonetheless argues that the theological essence of Ezekiel's visionary imagery of 'Dry Bones' resonates well with such deteriorating and hopeless African societies. It envisages the semblances, relatedness and relevance of Ezekiel's hope principle of a restorative eschatological theology as a possible reality for Africa's hopeless present 'Dry Bones' state. Upon this hope principle, the article proposes a theological framework of faith against despondency and despair for the realisation of such eschatological reality for Africa. It holds that God is equally capable of displaying his restorative power and sovereignty to reverse the hopeless conditions of African nations in demonstration of his love, compassion and care as he did for the apparently irreparable condition of exilic Israel.

Introduction

Jewish prophetic literature is coloured with various literary genres, which, as the '... religious spokesmen in their own world and to their own times' (Bullock 2007:33), their prophets employed to communicate the divine message. Among such literary genres is the language of imagery. As poets, they constantly reached into the everyday experiences of the people to illustrate the spiritual truths they were espousing in declaring the prophetic word through the use of figurative imagery (Osborne 2006:230).

While some prophets used more of poetry than prose narrative, others used more of prose narrative with lots of figurative speeches and imageries. Ezekiel, 'portrayed as a prophet of judgment, whom Yahweh invites to pass a verdict of judgment upon a sinful people' (Allen 1990:xxiii), is among the latter. As one whose prophecies grew out of an exilic context but with anticipatory future hope (Robertson 2004:290), Ezekiel used more of sign-acts, oracular dirges, courtroom indictments and symbolic imageries. By taking on oral oracles, visions, symbolic actions and prophetic discourse (Bullock 2007:281) as communicative modes, Ezekiel used the stylistic literary tradition of imageries purposefully. His literary mode of the imagery of 'Dry Bones' held theological implications for his primary audience.

This work investigates the semblances and relatedness to the African condition of Ezekiel's theological motivation for taking on such imagery in declaring the prophetic word and its effects on the exiles, himself being 'the prophet of the Babylonian exiles ... [whose] ministry was conducted in Babylon' (Clements 1996:151). The book of Ezekiel, 'addressed primarily to the exiles in Babylon, ... wrestles with the deep questions surrounding the exile' (Taylor 2002:396), a concept described as 'a compulsion and a subjugation of the individual and the community' (Adamo 2010:14). Like exilic Israel, the turn of events in Africa pictures the continent as being in exile. The unimaginable horrible physical, emotional and psychological torturous condition that Africans are subjected to in their homeland far outweighs those days of African slavery (Adamo 2010:18). Unlike the Babylonian exilic experience, the enslaving taskmasters are predominantly the African persons who sit at the corridor of political and economic power. They and their accomplices, by their egocentric attitudes and actions, put Africans back into the days of colonial and apartheid regimes of slavery and oppression. Like the attitude of those African kings who supported and aided slavery, these enslaving taskmasters get 'involved in capturing fellow Africans for commercial gains' (Adamo 2010:25). The condition of the oppressed is best captured by the empirical observation of the Jewish *Qoheleth*:

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Again, I observed all the oppression that takes place under the sun. I saw the tears of the oppressed, with no one to comfort them. The oppressors have great power, and their victims are helpless. (Ec 4:1 NLT)

The hopeless socio-political and socio-religious contexts that warranted Ezekiel taking on the imagery of 'Dry Bones' share some semblances with the African situation of its disparaged citizens. To this extent, this article employs an exegetical-theological approach to engage Ezekiel 37:1–28 vis-à-vis the contextual experiences of many Africans today. It resonates the semblances, relatedness and relevance of Ezekiel's theology of 'Dry Bones' to the African situation. It also explores how the theological essence of this imagery, used as a restorative principle to describe the state of the Babylonian exiles and the Jewish race at large, can find relevance to the declining political, social, economic and moral climate of most African societies today. Lastly, it questions why the continent still struggles with political, social, economic and moral issues despite the increase in its developmental indices.

The structure of Ezekiel 37

According to Boadt, 'Ezekiel is one of the most highly ordered books in the Bible' (1984:388) with chapter 37 situated in the last order. The weaving thread in Ezekiel chapters 34–48, described as the gospel of hope according to Ezekiel (Block 1998:268), is its restorative hope principle.¹ Liberating hope for exiled Israel is powerfully expressed, especially in these chapters (Evans 2015:75). It accentuates the central theme of the glory of Yahweh as the most fundamental concept of the book of Ezekiel (De Vries 2015:326). The actualisation of the hope of restoration from exile was to encapsulate a unification of both evanesced Judah and Ephraim. This hope was to be realised on the basis of Yahweh's covenant fidelity and his mercy and compassion for the people.

Ezekiel 37, a chapter that deals with an 'extraordinary vision' (Taylor 2002:396), is conceptualised as a second exodus text (Eichrodt 1970:510; Idestrom 2009:489, 491; Allen 1990:xxiii; Strong 2010:498) as well as one of four vision narratives all introduced by the phrase, 'The hand of Yahweh was on me' (Blenkinsopp 1990:170). Its 'theological content is primarily eschatological' (Alexander 1986:924). Described as 'the valley of the shadow of death' and 'a scene of total desolation' (Duguid 1999:426), this chapter falls within the restoration section of the prophetic book, broadly divided into two sections – verses 1–14 and verses 15–28. The first section visualises the dead state of Israel (vv. 1–14) in the prophet's visionary experience of the valley of 'Dry Bones'. The second announces the restorative hope for Yahweh's people in exile, visualising the eventual realisation of postexilic eschatological 'reconstitution' (Robertson 2004:306) and reunification of the uprooted and dispersed tribes of Judah and Ephraim (vv. 15–28; see Hs 1:10–11; Is 11:12–13; Jr 3:6–18; 30:1–3, 8–9). The

1.While various genres are extant (Coetzee 2016:1) regarding the conceptualisation, ideological perception, linguistic expressions and theological interpretation of eschatology, prophetic eschatology is predominantly hope inclined or predisposed. As was the case with the Jews of every generation, Africans too always recourse to a future hope principle in difficult or challenging times.

literary pericope of verses 1–14 also divides itself into two other literary subunits – the introductory epilogue presented in a prophetic reported speech (vv. 1–4) and the prophet's reported divine speech couched in a messenger formula (vv. 5–14). Also, the remaining verses branch into two streams by a graphic epigraph on two sticks (vv. 15–19), closely followed by its explication (vv. 20–28). Here the prophetic enactment clearly crystallises 'the message of national reunification as an aspect of Israel's restoration' (Robertson 2004:305).

Prophetic literary expression

The language of imagery is among the stylistic literary features employed by Jewish writers, and varied imageries are particularly extant in the Writing Prophets (Schöpflin 2005:101). Such language was not used by the Jewish prophets merely to fulfil prevailing literary conventions but was rather employed purposefully.² Prophetic³ imagery itself paints a vivid mental picture of the essence of the prophetic message being communicated, functioning as a catchword or like a luring device that traps a fish into the net.

Israelite prophets also engaged in stylistic and artistic use of imageries to achieve the point of symbolisation (Day 2010:216) and thereby achieve an emotive agenda. Besides, they sometimes employed imageries when expressing a condemnable act with strong language like in the case of Ezekiel (Grabbe 2004:13). Similarly, they took on the language of imagery not just to colour their product with literary styles but specifically as an aspect of poetry. Because prosaic expression was inadequate '... poetry as an emotional, deep expression of faith and worship became a necessity' (Osborne 2006:231) for such occasional prophetic literary dependence.

Significantly, the prophetic engagement of imageries largely has recourse to the relationship of Yahweh with his covenant people. The core of imaging linguistic expression in Ezekiel captures this weaving thread and controlling centre, and the vision of 'Dry Bones' is one among the many stylistic literary imageries found in the book of Ezekiel. He uses elaborate symbolic actions, visions and literary allegories and images (Boadt 1984:390). As a leading restorative hope imagery, this vision appears as the most striking in Ezekiel, a communicative device captured in visionary mode, which forms an integral part of Ezekiel's prophecy (VanGemeren 1990:327). Ezekiel himself, in view of his crucial role, is described as 'the most remarkable individual during Israel's period of exile' (Boadt 1984:386). Here, the visionary imagery of dry bones deals with the idea of life and existence against an irreparable exilic context. Its theological import for exilic Israelites is pursued in the subsequent section.

2.The Jewish prophets were sages, poets and theologians. Their books are 'works of theology' (Gowan 1998:1) because in them the prophets claim to explain Yahweh's role and action in historical events. Such theological import plays out in Ezekiel's imagery of 'Dry Bones'.

3.Nissinen, Seow and Robert (2003:1–2) consider prophetic function as a process of human transmission of the divine message which consists of four components: the divine sender of the message, the message itself, the human transmitter of the message and the recipient of the message. Here, prophets used imageries to transmit the divine message through the prophetic word.

The exegetical–theological analysis of Ezekiel 37

The revelatory vision of the valley of dry bones, vv. 1–6

Yahweh's covenant people had been in exile for years, a condition described as 'the biggest crisis of Israel's history' (Coetzee 2016:1), when this spectacular vision was received. Ezekiel begins this visionary section by making reference to the theological representation of the *divine presence*. The reference to divine agency (Allen 1990:184) is glaring in his recurring use of *הַיְדֹּהָהּ עָלַי יְדֹהָהּ* [The hand of the Lord was upon me] and *וְרוּחַ יְהוָה* [And/then the Spirit of the Lord]. These recurring phrases are crucial literary expressions in Ezekiel. The first occurs in Ezekiel 1:3; 3:22; 8:1, 3; 37:1; and 40:1, and the second occurs in Ezekiel 2:2; 3:12, 14, 24; 8:3; 11:1, 2, 5, 24; 36:27; 37:1, 14; 39:29; and 43:5. Pneumatology in Ezekiel functions both as a transporting agency and as a renewing force (De Vries 2015:328). In this particular visionary experience, 'the prophet finds himself carried away and deposited in a valley' (Block 1998:373) by the agency of Yahweh's Spirit. Also, acting as a life-giving agent, Yahweh's command to the prophet to 'prophesy' (v. 4) to the 'Dry Bones' was for the 'infusion of the Spirit' (Duguid 1999:427) to cause their regeneration. The theology of Yahweh's *presence* in Ezekiel outside his city and shrine by the representation of his voice and Spirit replaces the hitherto held view of him as a localised deity with his mobility. The role of Yahweh's Spirit in this visionary experience suggestively replicates the hovering role of *רוּחַ* at creation (Gn 1:2).

Ezekiel describes the state of the bones that he saw in the valley as very dry (37:2), presenting the picture of 'total death' (Duguid 1999:426). Exposed bones indicate curse and desecration 'as scattering an enemy's bones or leaving them unburied was common in the ancient Near East' (Taylor 2002:417). The descriptive Hebrew particle adverb used here is *מְאֹד*, 'exceedingly', used to express the intensity of a highest degree, with translation variance as *very* (ASV, ESV, GNV, KJV, NAS, NET, NIV, NKJ, NRS, RSV, TNK, YLT), *completely* (NJB, NLT) and *so* (CJB). Such an adverbial word usually stands mostly with nouns to describe the status or condition of the object of association. In this case, it is the dry bones⁴ in the valley.

By implication, the emotive picture that the reader visualises of the degree of the dryness of the bones is to the effect that they would not even attract a dog sniffing them. This symbolic representation is descriptive of the extremity of Israel's condition in her exilic state as 'helpless and hopeless, cut off from God's life giving presence' (Duguid 1999:428). Such conditions led Ezekiel 'to an overwhelming realization that this is the place where death holds triumph' (Eichrodt 1970:507). According to Joyce, the imagery of dry bones 'sums

4.The Hebrew *עצם*, translated as 'bone' is used elsewhere in the Old Testament. It appears in its poetic form (Gn 2:23; Pr 15:30) and in its literal form used elsewhere in Ezekiel (Ezk 39:15). The plural form *עצמות*; also has a dual function. It functions in both its literal sense (Ex 13:19; Jos 24:32; 2 Sm 21:12–14; 2 Ki 23:14; 2 Ki 23:18; 2 Ki 23:20) and in its poetic sense (Ps 51:10; Pr 14:30; Jr 8:1; Am 2:1).

up well the situation of the exiles ... [as] the personification of the bones reflects the fact that they represent the exiles' (2009:208) whose political and religious conditions at the moment were indeed very dry, indicating both a hopeless situation and an irreparable condition. This is well captured by the exile's expression, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off' (v. 11). The word *גָּזַר* (*gazar*) for 'cut off' is used here as an expression to indicate the separation, detachment, alienation, expulsion and exclusion of the Israelites from their ancestral land and religion.

For certain, the vision in chapter 37, described as 'the doctrine of resurrection of the dead' (Feinberg 1969:212), is directed at a despondent nation, a people living in despair and pessimism. Yet, despite such socio-psychological conditions, dead national and spiritual Israel in the Babylonian captivity would physically be resurrected (Hs 6:2) on the basis of their being a covenant people. As Tuell confirms, 'texts from around the time of the exile use *gazar* for separation in a more abstract sense' (2009:262). It is in such a hopeless condition following the demise of Jerusalem and all its political and religious institutions that Ezekiel took on this vision as a 'moment to comfort the godly [of national Israel] with the hope of the restoration and transformation' (VanGemeren 1990:327). Here, he:

was very skilfully trying to recreate a sense of trust that God still worked as he always had, and that he still spoke with as much authority and power as he always had. (Boadt 1984:386)

However, of all the occurrences of the word in both its singular and plural forms, only Ezekiel's use of *עצם* for 'bone' in chapter 37 is specific to the humanly irreparable and irrecoverable condition of the Israelites in exile. This prepares the ground for the Hebrew adjective *יָבֵשׁ* for 'dry', 'dried up', 'withered', which suggests not only the deplorable state of the bones but also their condition of total deadness. Here, Yahweh's vision of the condition of his covenant people is said to be *very* dry, *so* dry and *completely* dry. In essence, the bones were *exceedingly* dried; they were *greatly* dried; lying waste in their lifeless state in the valley; and were therefore good for nothing.

The prophet's being led back and forth among the wasting bones that were exceedingly dried in their state of severance (v. 2) indicates Yahweh's intention to reveal to him a full view of the vastness and the extent of the extremity of the exiles. What is to follow then would display Yahweh's sovereignty. This theological understanding is critically tied to Yahweh's question to Ezekiel, 'Son of man, can these bones live?' (v. 3; also see Jr 1:16; Am 7:8; Zch 4:2–5). Such a 'surprising' (Eichrodt 1970:507) and 'ridiculous' (Allen 1990:184) rhetorical question is quite enigmatic. The one to whom such a question is posed is a *בֶּן־אָדָם* 'son of man', 'mortal one', a weak and frail created being who is limited in knowledge, ability, wisdom and power. Such an enigma is heightened by the fact that:

the image concretises the hopelessness [of Judah and Ephraim] expressed in v. 11; no life force remains in them at all.... the picture is one of death in all its horror, intensity, and finality. (Block 1998:374)

Would such a mortal know the answer?

Ezekiel knew of course, as anyone would, that dry bones do not live. He pondered on the illusive possibility of a restored life to such bones and responded appropriately to Yahweh's enigmatic question; 'O Sovereign LORD, you alone know' (37:3b NIV). Although Odell thinks that 'the prophet's reply to Yahweh's question may therefore contain a tacit acknowledgment of his own failure' (2005:454), it seems appropriate to suggest rather that it is an expression of the prophet's inadequacy and incapability to think that dry bones could become humans. From Ezekiel's priestly background, such a response could well be grounded in the concept of reverential awe, trust and dependence on Yahweh. Blenkinsopp considers such a response to mean the prophet's expression of confidence and his knowledge 'that the power of God extends even into the realm of death' (1990:171). To the prophet's mind, he reasoned, 'If Yahweh can bring life back to those dead, dried, scattered bones, then he can bring life back to anyone, including scattered, defeated Israel' (Hays 2010:225). Here, Ezekiel acknowledged Yahweh's sovereignty and omnipotence over cosmic order or events, and hence his response is that of resignation of his inability into divine ability. According to Eichrodt, in responding to such question of any possibility of a life-giving force to the dry bones in verse 3, he wasted no words regarding the potencies of the divine power of resuscitation of Israel. Ezekiel shifted the responsibility of answering the question 'on to God's shoulders' because he was convinced that 'even death does not set a limit to the manifestation of his power ... [for he is] the Lord over life and death' (1970:508).

Verses 4–6 are Ezekiel's report of the divine command for his participation in the restorative agenda. He was commanded to 'address the defunct bones around him and to announce their imminent reanimation' (Allen 1990:185). Ezekiel was obliged by the divine command to prophesy the spirit of obedience and life to the dry bones (v. 4). The series of imperative perfects that govern 'breath', 'tendons', 'flesh' and 'skin' (vv. 5–6) is an indication that the power to resuscitate the dried-up bones is within the purview of divine authority, not that of humans. Both Ezekiel and his fellow exiles were incapable, but Yahweh was very capable to resurrect them both physically and spiritually (Feinberg 1969:215).

The impact of the prophet's obedience to the divine command, vv. 7–10

Ezekiel's role 'as agent of the process' (Allen 1990:185) of the divine drama in chapter 37 is one of loyalty. Like Jonah in the city of Nineveh (Jn 3:1–4), his obedience to the divine directive was to actualise Yahweh's planned resurrective theology that would occur in two phases (vv. 7–8). Bullock summarises them thus, 'The valley of dry bones and their resuscitation primarily constitute a message of return from captivity and restoration to the land ...' (2007:301). The rattling sound of the bones, their coming together, their having tendons and flesh put on them and their covering with skin in response to the

prophet's declaration is indicative of a resurrection theology. Accordingly, Yahweh's promise of reanimation serves here 'as a framework for the reclothing of the bones with bodies made up of sinews, flesh and skin' (Allen 1990:185).

The condition of the Israelites in exile in Ezekiel's day was apparently helpless, hopeless, pitiful and practically irreparable. It was a total collapse of the priesthood and its rituals, the monarchy and its respect, the temple and its glory, the city and its integrity, Yahweh and his honour and glory, and the people and their national and cultic pride. These national repertoires had all been lost following the dispossession of Israel's ancestral land and subsequently her forceful rending and deposition in a foreign land. And worst of all, the people now 'lived in an alien culture that denied the truth of their ancestral faith' (Gowan 1998:123). Accordingly, there was practically no 'likelihood that they could achieve and maintain an identity that could preserve the uniqueness of the Yahwistic faith under these conditions' (Gowan 1998:123). The lamentation of the exiles, then, that 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off' (Ezk 37:11b NIV) clearly expresses such a helpless, hopeless, pitiful and disparaged condition. But the imagery of the 'Dry Bones' was to reverse this condition.

Although the bones became skeletons, and tendons and flesh were put on the exceedingly dry bones, and skin covered them following Ezekiel's declaration, yet they were still lifeless corpses (vv. 7–8). Consequently, in the second phase of the resurrection, this imagery conveys an embedded resuscitative theological element (vv. 9–10) which flows from the theological stream of resurrection. Ezekiel's obedience to Yahweh's imperative to prophesy to the dry bones (vv. 4, 7), immediately following with the divine explanation in advance of what the effects of the action would be (vv. 5–6), resulted in the resuscitation of the bodies now lying lifeless and motionless in bodily form.

The pronouncement of life to the dry bones, against natural laws, rational human imagination and common sense, resurrected and resuscitated the bodily forms into living humans as a 'vast army' (v. 10). According to Eichrodt, this vision of salvation, inward recreation and national restoration of Israel is 'so full of dramatic power' (1970:506) which came in response to the prophetic declarative word. Blenkinsopp (1990:173) perceives this life-giving event as a reenactment of the primal act of creation put *paripassu* with the incident of Genesis 2:7. Block explains that the corpses were revived by the specific direct act of Yahweh, for it is him who infused them with breath. Hence, 'the two-phased process of resuscitation also serves a theologico-anthropological function, emulating the paradigm of Yahweh's creation of [Adam]' (Block 1998:379).

The identity and resurrection of the dry bones, vv. 11–14

According to Allen, this section consists of a thesis of despair and a counter thesis of hope (1990:183). The despairing

lamentation of the exiles here was as a result of their cessation as a nation. The demise of Jerusalem 'as the ultimate guarantee of their survival as a nation' had 'given them up to be the prey of death'; consequently, exilic Israel had been 'deprived of the last remnants of life' (Eichrodt 1970:510). Conversely, 'the restoration of life to the bones is a parable of Israel's national resurrection' (Bruce 1986:838) with a clear restorative theological focus via the 'Dry Bones' imagery (vv. 11–12). The prophetic narrative reveals that the promised restoration, captured in the imagery of the grave, would begin with Yahweh's excavation of the graves and the exhumation of the dead bones from them (v. 12). Yahweh was to soon demonstrate his miraculous acts by breaking through the prison door of Babylon and bringing forth those imprisoned in the tomb then actualising their revivification and departure (Eichrodt 1970:510). Such a miracle was to demonstrate God's gracious act of transforming his covenant people from a Gentile context (Robertson 2004:306).

The symbolic imagery of the grave here is obviously not a literal one but a reference to 'the lands to which they had been exiled' (Bruce 1986:838). The ancient tradition of reopening the varied family rock-cut tombs every time another family member died, so the person could be gathered to the ancestors (Block 1998:381), was reversed in Ezekiel. Figuratively, Yahweh was instead to revive his exiled covenant people, the 'Dry Bones', into corpses, give breath and life to them and then bring them out of the tombs of their exilic state. Here, then, a despairing living is 'overcome by the consoling forces of the divine promise' of an infidel covenant Yahweh (Eichrodt 1970:510).

Israel is restored to her earlier unitary state, vv. 15–23

Dead national Israel is restored to life and would no longer experience disunity or an acrimonious relationship. Block grounds the necessity for a restorative theology on national losses when he said national Israel had 'lost all hope in their future and all hope in God. The nation obviously needs deliverance not only from their exile in Babylon but also from their own despondency' (1998:372). This physical national resurrection, then, would culminate in the reunification of the Jewish race, pictured by the symbolic act of the prophet's inscribing on two separate wooden sticks and of joining them together to become one stick (vv. 15–22). Block (1998:376) concedes a dual element in this restoration – a physical restoration of the Israelite state and a spiritual revival of a restored relationship of Israel to Yahweh.

Yahweh's self-revelation to the prophet in the divine drama of the theology of his presence, resurrection and resuscitation and restoration was to culminate in a recognitive theological import (vv. 5–6, 13–14). The basic theological motivation for this revival, which was to later culminate in Yahweh's eschatological restoration, is situated in the prophet's use of the recognition formula, 'Then you will know that I am the LORD' (vv. 6b, 13, 14b). All the occurrences of the recognition formula or motif in Ezekiel are directed either to all the

Gentile nations in view of their oppressive relationship to national Israel or specifically to Israel in view of her infidel covenant relationship with Yahweh. According to Ralph Alexander (1986):

The most important consequence of Israel's restoration would be the spread of the knowledge of the Lord throughout the world. The nations would unequivocally know that Israel's God had accomplished this great restoration. They would know that he was not a weak god but the only God who does exactly what he says (v. 36). Israel herself will humbly acknowledge that the one who restored her was the Lord her God (v. 38). (p. 922)

It is significant, then, that we understand the import of this formula or motif in the context of Ezekiel as such a theological element plays out crucially in the vision in chapter 37:

In Ezekiel's text, the function of the recognition formula serves to achieve an awesome recognition and admission of the greatness, power, and supreme authority of Yahweh on the part of the targeted recipients of the prophetic message. Also, it functions to achieve the purpose of clarification in perception of the unique personhood and acts of the divine as the latter are seen displayed in the cosmic order or historic events. In this regard, the recognition formula functions as an enhancer to achieve a deepened understanding of Yahweh in all the embodiment of his glory, dignity, and majesty. (Biwul 2013:226)

The ground for Ezekiel's frequent use of this prophetic formula specific to national Israel, then, is unambiguous:

The recognition motif points to Yahweh's faithful commitment to his covenant with the people and to reveal as well his ownership of the people ... This therefore clearly articulates Ezekiel's use of the shepherd metaphor within a covenantal context with a decidedly fixed eschatological motif. (Biwul 2013:225–226)

Israel's rejection of Yahweh for other gods would be reversed by the acknowledgement of his being after they had recognised his acts in history. Clearly, Ezekiel's use of the recognition formula, much more in chapter 37, is fundamentally about 'Yahweh's honour vis-à-vis opposing powers' (Strong 2010:478–479). Yahweh's display of his divine actions and sovereignty on behalf of his covenant people was to earn honour and gain glory for himself, a glory the divine shares with no mortal (Is 42:8; 48:11; Ex 14:4, 17–18; 15:11; Nm 14:22).

The point of the display of divine sovereignty is heightened by the prophetic imperative declaration, הַעֲצֻמוֹת הַיְבֹשֹׁת שְׁמָעוּ דְבַר־יְהוָה [Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!] (v. 4). According to Odell, 'in the poetic literature, the metaphor of bones represents the totality of the human person' (2005:453). This in turn is used as a representation of the Jews as a covenant people. The coming back to life of these dry bones, a representation of the eschatological restoration, as well as the reunification of Yahweh's covenant people, is a clear demonstration of Yahweh's sovereignty and the display of his absolute power of control over the cosmic order and history. It reveals the essence of Yahweh as the 'I am that I am' (Ex 3:14). The expression of Yahweh's sovereignty brings him to clear view not only as the one who directs history and historical

events in human society, but it also testifies to such events as possessing theological import for the careful participant or an observer. Only Israel's Yahweh is capable of doing what the gods of other nations and what humans are incapable of doing. This section closes with the use of 'covenant language' (Bruce 1986:838), 'my people ... their God' (v. 23).

The Davidic leadership paradigm revisited, vv. 24–28

Verses 24–28 of Ezekiel 37 divide into two parts, the first concerning itself with the Davidic princely rule over the restored covenant community (vv. 24–25). Verses 24–25 open with the description of the Davidic ruler and prince as Yahweh's servant, וְיָדָו אֲנִי עַבְדִּי (And David my servant), a phrase repeated twice in this section (vv. 24, 25). Scholarly consensus regarding the actual identity of this Davidic prince is lacking. Some hold to a Messianic age (Alexander 1986:927; Keil & Delitzsch 1980:135). Iain Duguid explains that the reference to 'my servant David' here 'focusses not so much on the nature of the leader as on his significance as the foundation of unity' (Duguid 1999:436). But the question of identity still remains unresolved. It appears this description more appropriately suggests the revisitation of the traditionally held paradigm of a Davidic ideal kingship, to be effected by Yahweh himself over his restored people in the eschatological existence, where the restored community would willingly oblige to the stipulations of the Mosaic covenant. This period would actualise Yahweh's honouring of the fourfold ancient promises of ruler, land, covenant and temple (Blenkinsopp 1990:176).

The second section concerns itself with Yahweh's renewed covenant of shalom which is an everlasting one (vv. 26–28). It also reveals Yahweh's taking residence among the restored community, and consequently, the Gentile nations would acknowledge his sanctified ministry for his covenant people hitherto abused, molested, humiliated, brutalised and dehumanised by them (v. 28). Existence in this new redeemed community requires that the restored community would be purged from their attitude of covenant infidelity, acts of idolatry and from the theological dirt of their foreign sojourning. Yahweh himself would re-create (Duguid 1999:430), renovate and eradicate all sinful desire, tendencies and influences from Israel's heart and from around them so national Israel would 'become in truth the people of God' (Keil & Delitzsch 1980:135). Afterwards, 'backsliding from YHWH will no longer be a possibility in the future that is prophesied' (De Vries 2015:328).

The implication of Ezekiel's vision of 'Dry Bones' for the African condition

Increasing global threatening events and catastrophes⁵ signal a possible hopeless existence for the future. Africa is no less a

5. The oppressor and the oppressed, the strong and the weak and the rich and poor in society all suffer the effects whenever natural disasters come upon an environment. The reality of cosmic mishaps, disasters and catastrophes in human society are non-discriminatory on the basis of persons, gender, status, race, colour, country of citizenship or tribe. Like the Assyrian and Babylonian captives who suffered the consequences, so it is the case here. The nature of calamities is like death that spares no one when it strikes. The state of dependency, hopelessness and despair is a disaster-like experience with disenfranchising effects.

victim. As rightly observed, 'despite the immense blessings of natural wealth, many African nations are inescapably marked by misery, material distress, deprivation, disease, and chaos' (Kaunda 2016:55). Kekerie corroborates that, 'the present African world, [is] full of natural and human disasters, political conflicts, economic misdirection, and globalization' (2007:447). For example, Van Wyk (2017) reports Swanepoel's (2000:21) description of the South African condition as experiencing:

a number of problems and challenges, such as high levels of poverty, unemployment, murder, other crimes, human trafficking and drug abuse amongst the youth, as well as child and women abuse. These challenges outweigh the HIV and/or AIDS pandemic. (p. 1)

The author equates the situation as cancerous, eating up the moral fibre of the core of society. The continuous deteriorating African condition indicates a hopeless state which leaves disenfranchising and shattering effects on the citizenry.

Consequently, a majority of religious and nonreligious Africans struggle endlessly with the insecurity of economic, social, political, moral, relational and religious issues of life. Some of these despondent Africans cannot find solutions for their predicaments.⁶ One finds in every region of Africa – north, central, east, west and south – certain intimidating political, economic, social, moral, religious, ethnic and tribal challenges, some of which appear unending. What Africa needs vis-à-vis confronting her myriad problems and challenges, most of which are manmade and self-caused, is a prophetic message like that of Ezekiel's vision of 'Dry Bones'. The prophetic message from this vision resonates well with the African condition and Ezekiel himself acts in several ways as an African prophet of hope. Being himself a Babylonian deportee who lived among the exiles (Ezk 1:1–3), and was enabled to proclaim the message of hope to this community (Ezk 37:1–6), Ezekiel qualifies to speak to the African conditions; for his work reveals, for the exiles, 'a divine sanction for the renewal and revitalising of worship in Jerusalem after the tragic events that had brought it to an almost complete end' (Clements 1996:158).

As we articulated earlier, Ezekiel's use of the imagery of the 'Dry Bones' was necessitated by the lamentation of the disenfranchised Babylonian exiles about their hopeless condition. They had lost all their institutions, and any thought of their repatriation or restoration, either in part or in full, was merely a mirage (Biwul 2013:143–156). Such a psychosocial condition shares some affinities with what plays out in most African societies. Although the institutions of those African societies such as family, kingship, clan ties, religion, customs and cultures remain physically intact, their present condition can best be captured in the Ezekielian vision of the state of 'Dry Bones'. Many are asking whether

6. One way to resolve such threatening issues, from a religious angle, is the proposed methodological framework by Magezi and Magezi (2017): an appropriate understanding of Christ's sinlessness is helpful in addressing the challenges of African spiritual insecurity. Yet, not all disenfranchised and despondent Africans subscribe to this strand of religious orientation so they could apply such suggested therapy to life.

they will yet benefit from better days ahead in their unique conditions. Among them are also those who resort to lamentation when they remember the glory and fortunes of the past.

The hope principle in the theology of 'dry bones shall live' in Ezekiel 37:1–28 holds some relevance for the African context in several respects. It is a text that serves to restore hope and acts as an inspiration to those Africans 'who like the exiles experience life to be more like death' (Taylor 2002:418). This theological principle is appropriated to the African situation, specifically to some persistently nagging national predatory issues that are plaguing the continent such as politics and governance, social divides, economy and morality.

The political implication

Why are the majority of African nations not able to 'forge a distinctive destiny apart from the Western world' since independence? (Kaunda 2016:56). The pictures revealed by a screenplay of the storyline of the dilemma of many African societies are more worrisome than what the exiled Jews experienced. As Agboluaje lamented, 'Ours is a society with a notable feature of affluence, exploitation and profit motive with [a] moral standard sinking into disrepute' (2007:181). The enigmatic African drama lies in the manner in which her political leaders go about the administration and governance of their nations. Most are acting like the Babylonian captors by their attitude that is grounded on egocentric benefits and a protectionist motif of their future interests. Research indicates (Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers 2008) that a political protectionist armed group ideology is becoming a widespread phenomenon in Africa because some egocentric political leaders want to hold on to power. The situation in Zimbabwe, Northern Sudan and Cameroon where their political leaders have remained tight-fisted to the presidency are clear examples. The rise in more ethnic militias and their fight for resource control in places such as South Sudan and South-South in Nigeria is a clear indication of a seeming collapse of the political system. Such a politico-economic struggle that lacks national orientation forces many Africans to wonder if 'The labour of their heroes' past', like the expended efforts of African nationalists, is now in vain.

The basic question about whether there is hope for the African situation is a pertinent one. Although Israel was in exile, far removed from home, she still remained a covenant people and her God kept his covenant fidelity despite her acts of covenant infidelity. In the prevailing African case, however, the reality of a loving and providential God only seems to be true for the politically powerful and the economically affluent. Consequently, the powerless and downtrodden are constantly asking whether the biblical claim, 'I am the God of all flesh' (Gn 2:26, 27; 9:6; Jr 32:27; Ezk 18:4) is a tangible reality for all or only for a select few. When the ideal of life is put *paripassu* with the reality of what plays out in real earthly life, such ideology seems to many, more or less, a fallacious daydream at best and a remote reality at worst. Nonetheless, hope is possible. As a first step, African political leaders and the

nobles should purposefully and proactively seek to recover from their mind colonisation and egocentric slavery to achieve 'economic and political development, social cohesion, and nation-building' for their societies (Kaunda 2016:65).

From an optimistic point of view, the theological message of Ezekiel's vision of the valley of 'Dry Bones' has some relevance to the present political predicament operative in most African societies. While the circumstances of the days of Ezekiel differ significantly from the African situation, the point here, as Blenkinsopp (1990:10) draws attention to, is to inquire how the prophetic word, spoken to address the constraints and challenges posed by the historical situation of Ezekiel's time, can apply to our quite different situation. Put differently, the messages of Ezekiel and his prophetic counterparts 'throw light upon our own generation and our situation by announcing the eternal principles of divine providence which will always operate whenever similar conditions are present' (Agboluaje 2007:175). Africans, in their hopeless conditions, are to share Ezekiel's optimism that 'the sole basis for hope lies in the superhuman and miraculous power of his God' (Eichrodt 1970:510).

As we indicated previously, the essence of the vision of 'Dry Bones' had an eschatological theological import. The dry bones in the valley came to life as a vast army (Ezk 37:7–10) when Ezekiel declared the prophetic word in obedience to Yahweh. National and continental political unity will be achieved in Africa when the application of the principles of universal moral laws by those in governance and the administration of good governance that takes cognisance of justice, fairness, equity and a good moral conscience are adhered to. Such optimism hinges on the hope principle derivable from Ezekiel's vision of 'Dry Bones'. God is able to make this a reality if only the operators of the system and the followers make themselves subservient to his rule.

Sociological implication

Regional and geopolitical divides, ethnic, and tribal segregation have created apparent boundaries among the peoples of Africa.⁷ Except for the achievement of commercial and political goals and benefits, there can hardly be any well-cemented meaningful relationship existing among African nations. The loyalty of individuals is first to their ethno-tribal enclaves, then to their country of nationality, rather than to the long-cherished African brotherhood relationships with people considered as 'the other' though they share continental ancestry.⁸ Like is the case elsewhere in Africa, the ethnic strife which consequently led to the civil war that ravaged The Democratic Republic of Congo (Zaire) between 1996 and 2003 is a clear sign of crime committed not only against humanity but against the principle and spirit of African

⁷The undergirding ideology behind the expression of ethnic and tribal sentiments in Africa is grounded in the quest for one's identity and belongingness. The expressive indicators are common features such as culture, customs, tradition, language, kinship, homeland and shared ancestry (Kissi & van Eck 2017:1; Maigadi 2006:19).

⁸While ethnic and tribal identity is sociologically grounded in the biblical text (Gn 11), a negative expression of it becomes incongruous to a harmonious society (Maigadi 2006).

brotherhood. The recently recorded xenophobic experience in South Africa also explains such an enigmatic misnomer.

Like Ezekiel was questioned whether the dry bones he saw would live, many disparaged Africans are equally asking whether the sociological cohesion expected of a functional African society on the ground of expected continental commonwealth brotherhood identity can ever be achieved in many African societies where slacking national and continental relationships are being experienced.

A restored post-exilic Israel was to become a unified state. Similarly, hope for a better and more united Africa should be sustained. When those highly placed and high-class Africans seek to replace their attitude of arrogance, superiority and complacency with humility, brotherhood, compassion, philanthropy and demureness, this will achieve for Africa a cohesive, just and fair society. This will also become a reality when political and economic dominance and discrimination give way for a well-knitted sociological human relatedness in society.

Additionally, when the moral value of African brotherhood is sustained, it enhances a sustainable functional moral society. Reinforcing the culture of respect for and recognition of the worth of other humans in society achieves cohesive relationships and a productive society. This works well 'by viewing others as equals and recognising their contribution to the well-being of society' (Beyers 2016:10). Particularly, a socially cohesive society is achieved when the sanctity of the individual and their fundamental human rights are respected and protected (Breytenbach 2015:1).

Economic implication

It is rightly pointed out that 'poverty continues to present an enormous challenge to the well-being of humanity' (Tenai 2016:1). The African economic bourgeoisie, cartels and the cabals who have a buzzard's attitude have hijacked the economic stream and blocked its flow to all people. Like the Pharisees, they have blocked the entrance into economic empowerment and freedom to achieve their egocentricity (Mt 23:13). They have intentionally and systematically impoverished the majority of Africans to perpetually control and enslave them against the tie of African brotherhood and the principle of human dignity and their *Imago Dei*.

Agreeably, poverty⁹ and its depriving, dehumanising, marginalising and excluding characteristics have to be fought

9. At an academic level, it could easily be asserted that a consensus understanding of conceptualising, quantifying and responding to poverty is difficult (Tenai 2016:1). It could even be queried further that a precise consensus working definition of poverty is lacking. For instance, is poverty defined on specific income level, seen as a relative term, or is it to be understood at an exclusion and deprivation social level? (Galson & Hoffenberg 2010:2). One could, in fact, add whether a clear identification of a poor person is tenable. Such queries only satisfy an insatiable academic thirst and curiosity and remain at such level. When poverty is theorised to achieve a well-conceptualised understanding, it naturally achieves academic logic and is detached from its contextual reality. Real empirical poverty is an experienced reality that is practical. It is not only heard but seen, touched and felt physiologically, sociologically, psychologically and emotionally. A husband who loses his wife to the pangs of death because he is unable to afford medical treatment for her, or a parent who loses a child to the same fate for their financial incapacitation to treat the child, does not need a definition of poverty nor does such a person need any explanation regarding the nature and effects of poverty. Poverty is a lived experience only to the truly poor in Africa.

(Tenai 2016:2). Yet, such effort is more a mirage than a reality for most poverty-stricken hopeless Africans in contrast to the extremely wealthy existing in the same African society. The condition is worsened in the face of bad governance and improper regulation of economic policies.

Still, even where some governments make efforts at some marginal level of economic empowerment scheme to score political points, even this is frustrated and hijacked by the cartels and the cabals where government lacks the political will and administrative power to enforce relevant laws. In some contexts, large businesses and multinational companies swallow up medium-scale and small-scale businesses, thereby frustrating their effort at growth. This evil is most times executed with the knowledge, support and approval of some relevant government offices and officers charged with the responsibility of commerce and industry.

As a result, despondent Africans are lamenting like the Babylonian exiles, 'Our economic bones are dried up and our hope for survival is gone; we are cut off' (Ezk 37:11). They have been harassed, unfortunately, by greedy¹⁰ compatriots.

This is where Ezekiel steps in with his message of hope for a better future economy for Africa. Like Yahweh rhetorically asked Ezekiel, harassed Africans in their ancestral lands are asking whether their bones in their present stage of total economic deprivation, oppression, impoverishment and enslavement can live again. And like the exiles, they are looking for an Ezekiel among their political leaders who will prophesy to them, 'Dry bones, live!' (Ezk 37:9-10). Yet, with God, nothing is impossible and irreparable. He can overturn the table of such seemingly hopeless economic condition; for in Ezekiel, we see 'God as the giver of life, even life to bones that are dead and dry' (Taylor 2002:397).

Ethical implication

Corruption is a daily orchestrated music that strikes the loudest chord in the ears of all Africans. This reveals a 'dismal grasp' of African morality (Kunhiyop 2008:20). As Gwamna laments over the Nigerian condition, 'the pervasive influence of corruption permeates all facets of the Nigerian life today. It has risen to unprecedented heights in the country despite attempts to contain it' (2007:434). This lament resonates with the corrupt condition of many African countries where several of their leaders and people in government are morally unfit for public office.

Corporate communal morality and moral rightness of existence in society have been redefined by many African leaders, politicians, academia, businesspeople, employers and employees, students and the like. Even the African morality of marriage relationships and other forms of relationships is being redefined. Although Kunhiyop argues that African morality is knitted to a strong sense of community,

10. Greed is a viral disease of the mind and attitude, and it serves as a fertile ground for these repressing predators. The presence of greed is highly infectious to a functional growing African economy.

hence 'the concept of shame is an important regulating factor in African morality' (2008:24), this understanding of 'shame culture' in Africa is fast being reconceptualised and redefined.

The concept of a strong communal corporate existence that the 'common good takes precedence over the individual good' (Kunhiyop 2008:24) is also gradually being replaced with the ideology of individualism of greedy material acquisition against the corporate good. Many Africans no longer cherish the corporate African ideology of 'I am; because we are' (Mbiti 2008:106) or 'God for us and all for us'. Rather, they have shifted the paradigm to take on the new individualistic egocentric vocabulary of 'all for me and God for all'. Many privileged and well-placed people in the African society who live in their elegant mansions in a suburb fail to notice and care for the needs of the less privileged and the disadvantaged in the same society.

Sadly, in some countries in Africa, no qualified contractor is awarded a contract without a defined percentage of kickback. Those who refuse to oblige are forcefully and systematically flushed out of business. The threatening gimmick, against moral conscience, is, 'You either play the game by the rule or you lose out'.¹¹ Consequently, substandard products have flooded the markets of some African countries. More threatening, fake drugs have been administered to patients, sending most of them to early graves, thereby depriving them of life and their contributions to the development of the African society. For instance, in his description of the moral state of Nigeria, Agboluaje (2007) noted:

Never before in our national history has the entire fabric of our society been so permeated with corruption than it is in our present generation despite the efforts of ... (p. 182)

The presumed morally upright regulatory agencies who play the role of the 'watchdog' over national corruption.

This ugly scenario presents no glimpse of hope, particularly, as successive governments lack the political and moral will to enforce regulatory laws for society's good. The African dilemma goes beyond proposing decolonising the mind for an alternative future (Kaunda 2016:54). Many right-thinking Africans, like the Babylonian exiles, see no hope but a gloomy state of affairs for their nation. Nonetheless, readers should recognise that 'the theological emphasis of the vision [of *Dry Bones*] was on future things that were to encourage the Judean exiles who were in oppressive conditions' (Alexander 1986:924) like most African countries. Here, Ezekiel the visionary pragmatic realist stands as an inspiration. A reparable moral condition is possible for Africa. With an increased political and moral awareness of the citizenry, and with the political will and moral conscience to achieve the corporate good by people in governance, the rattling sound of dry bones will be heard someday in Africa.

¹¹ More on such moral corruption is extant. Substandard road construction work and buildings have become the norm in many African states. Yet such evil and murderous-like acts are perpetrated with the connivance of some government inspectorate officials who approve such substandard work for a specified kickback. It is not surprising to find in some African countries that funds are paid for jobs that have never been executed or haphazardly executed at the detriment of the African economy and development.

Conclusion

The visionary experience of 'Dry Bones' in Ezekiel 37:1–28 was not only crucial to Israel's national history but particularly critical to Ezekiel's core restorative eschatological theology. Yahweh's salvific plan of Israel's restoration and return to the land, according to O. Palmer Robertson, is nowhere made most vivid in Ezekiel than in his vision of the valley of dry bones (2004:302). A hopeless exilic Israel is, more or less, a dead people. But Yahweh's planned agenda of resurrecting and restoring the exiles to Jerusalem was to climax in the final reunification of the dissolved divided kingdom. Upon this, a renewed eschatological shalom and covenant renewal of a new community of Yahweh would finally be actualised.

Israel's national story could become Africa's story. African nationalists such as Nelson Mandela, Kwame Nkruma, Nnamdi Azikwe, Jomo Kenyatta, Kenneth Kaunda, Julius Nyerere, et cetera expended their political effort to achieve for Africa, not only free independent national states, but much more, a developed African continent that would serve the world with quality political leadership, growing economy and human resources. But the turn of events in Africa today is gradually experiencing a growing downward spiral against their vision and dream.

Yet, many Africans are hopeful in faith for a better future. They believe that the God who acted in the restoration of the Israelites because she was incapable of self-deliverance, and who reversed the hopeless condition of the Babylonian exiles in the imagery of the 'Dry Bones', will also change the fate of the present and future Africa and Africans. As Eichrodt echoes the point, reflecting on the life-giving role of the Spirit, that 'the concentration of spirit inundates the field where the dead lie evidently constitutes a major offensive against the forces of death, which must result in a victory for life' (1970:509). On the basis of this faith framework, Africans will soon hear the voice of Ezekiel, their African prophet, say, 'Dry bones, live', and the noise from the rattling sound of a revived and reformed political, social, economic, religious, moral and environmental life will, expectedly, be heard for a realised hope. For certain, Ezekiel's 'message of hope continues to bring great comfort and promise to women and men whose experiences have left them hopeless and despairing of life' (Taylor 2002:418).

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