

Beyond the Grave: Ezekiel's Vision of Death and Afterlife¹

DANIEL I. BLOCK
BETHEL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman and fellow scholars. I am honored to have been invited to read this year's Old Testament paper. For the past eight years or so the prophet Ezekiel and I have developed a very special relationship. But as I have been poring over the collection of his prophecies found in the Old Testament, I have often found myself wishing that he were personally present to answer some of my questions. Among the many intriguing issues which the book of Ezekiel raises is the nature of death and especially the prophet's vision of life beyond the grave. Around the turn of the year I suggested to Professor Hawthorne that this topic might be worth exploring in a paper to this gathering of scholars. At the time I had no idea how in tune with the times my own questions were. However, when the June 3, 1991, issue of *Time* magazine headlined its feature article on show business, "Hollywood Goes to Heaven," I realized we were on to something.² This year will see the release of no fewer than a dozen films dealing with the afterlife. The supernatural, death, and the afterlife are "in." The renaissance of popular fascination with the subject has caused me to wonder if scholarly interest will match it. Perhaps an investigation such as this will provide a catalyst for some of us to wrestle more earnestly with a matter that was of great concern to the ancients.

Several problems confront anyone interested in pursuing Ezekiel's vision of death and afterlife: (1) How many of the ideas represented in the book that goes by his name are the prophet's own, and

1. This is a revised version of the paper delivered to the Institute of Biblical Research in Kansas City, Missouri, 23 November, 1991.

2. Martha Smilgis, "Hollywood Goes to Heaven," *Time*, 3 June 1991, 70-71.

how many derive from later interpreters?³ (2) What is the source of Ezekiel's images of post-mortem realities? (3) To what extent do the images reflect reality, or are these to be interpreted merely as figures of speech? For those of us who are concerned to develop a Christian doctrine of the afterlife, this issue is of more than academic interest.

In this short study we cannot possibly answer all of these questions. However, it does seem to me that Ezekiel's vision of death and afterlife deserves a little more respect than it has received in the past.⁴ Our aim is to assemble the data which reflect this prophet's vision of death and to synthesize them in an ordered picture. We shall do so by first exploring Ezekiel's vocabulary of death; then examining his perception of the nature of death itself, the state of the dead, and their relationship to the living; and finally summarizing his view of life beyond the grave.

THE VOCABULARY OF DEATH IN EZEKIEL

Many casual readers stumble over the overwhelmingly judgmental character of three-fourths of the book of Ezekiel. The prophet himself might also have, had Yahweh not prepared him for this type of ministry. At the time of Ezekiel's commissioning Yahweh had commanded him to swallow a scroll received from his hand on which were written "lamentations, dirges and woes" (2:10).⁵ These three expressions capture in a nutshell the nature of the messages which he was to pass on to the house of Israel, particularly in the years leading up to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. But I admit that the

3. The differences in perspective are illustrated by Walther Zimmerli, who distinguishes between the prophet's own work and that of the "Ezekielian school" (*Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel* [Hermeneia, 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979/1983]; also J. Garscha, *Studien zum Ezechielbuch: Eine redaktionskritische Untersuchung von 1-39*, [Europäische Hochschulschriften 23; Bern/Frankfurt: Herbert/Peter Lang, 1974]), and Moshe Greenberg, who attributes virtually all of the book to the prophet himself (*Ezekiel 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 22; Garden City: Doubleday, 1983]). For Greenberg's critique of the Zimmerlian approach see "What Are Valid Criteria for Determining Inauthentic Matter in Ezekiel?" *Ezekiel and His Book* (BETL 74; ed. J. Lust; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1986) 123-35.

4. Apart from passing references to Ezek 37:1-14, the prophet's contributions to the subject tend to be largely ignored by theologians, even in discussions of *Sheol / Hades*. Cf. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1938) 1. 276-308; K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 3/2 The Doctrine of Creation (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960) 587-640; J. O. Buswell, Jr., *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962) 2.304-23; C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 3.713-32; H. Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 3.400-3; M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 3.1167-84.

5. *qinîm wāhegeh wāhî*, as rendered by *NJPS*.

overtly mortuary nature of his ministry had not gripped me until I conducted a systematic tabulation of the expressions relating to death and dying used in the book.

The common Semitic root *mwt* occurs 51 times in Ezekiel,⁶ two-thirds (33) of these occurrences being clustered in three stylistically related texts: 3:1-20 [6x]; 18:1-32 [15x]; 33:1-20 [12].⁷ But other words for the dead and for dying also occur. *pēgārîm* is used of corpses in 6:5.⁸ Euphemistic expressions for the dead include *hannōpēlîm*, "those who have fallen" (32:22-24 [3x]);⁹ *hayyōrēdîm*, "those who go down" (26x), especially to Sheol,¹⁰ where they lie;¹¹ *hālālîm*, "the mortally wounded" (36x);¹² *hahārûgîm* "the slain," in 37:9.¹³ To this list we may add a series of verbs for "killing," including *hārag*, "to kill";¹⁴ *rāaṣah*, "to slaughter" (21:27 [22]); *tābah*, "to butcher, slay,"¹⁵ *ṣahat*, "to slay [children] for sacrifice" (16:21; 23:39);¹⁶ *hišmîd*, of Yahweh destroying persons;¹⁷ *hikrît*, of "cutting off" from the living or from the

6. Including *bāmôtām* in 43:7. Of the prophets only Jeremiah uses the root more often (61x). For a study of *mwt* see G. Gerleman, *THAT* 1.893-97.

7. The remainder are found in 5:12; 6:12 [2x]; 7:15; 11:13; 12:13; 13:19 [2x]; 17:16; 24:17, 18; 28:8-10 [4x]; 31:14; 43:7; 44:25.

8. Cf. 43:7, 9, where the word denotes a stela erected in honor of the dead. While others use *gēwiyyâ* for a cadaver, Ezekiel uses the term only for visionary living creatures (1:11, 23).

9. The root *npl* occurs 60 times. More than two-thirds of these refer to the violent fall of persons. The experience of death is their *mappelet*, "fall" (26:15, 18; 27:27; 32:10. Cf. the fall of a tree in 31:13, 16).

10. Except for 26:16, 27:11, 29, 30:6, 31:12, and 47:1, 8, the verb always describes the descent of the dead to their nether abode, identified variously as Sheol (31:15, 16, 17; 32:27), "the pit" (*bôr*: 26:20 [2x]; 31:14, 16; 32:18, 24, 25, 29, 30; *ṣahat*: 28:8), "the netherworld" (*'ereṣ taḥtiyyôt*: 32:18, 24; cf. 31:18, *'el 'ereṣ taḥtîṭ*). 28:8 associates "going down to the pit" with "dying the death of the slain" (*wāmattāh mēmôtê hālāl*).

11. In 31:18, 32:19, 21 and 32:32, those who are sent down lie (*ṣākab*) among the uncircumcised and those who have fallen to the sword.

12. In 26:15 and 30:24 *hālālîm* refers simply to "the wounded," but in most other cases the expression denotes "the mortally wounded," those slain in battle or executed. See further below. In 32:22, 23, 24 the *hālālîm* are more closely defined as *hannōpēlîm ba-herēb*, "those who fall by the sword." *hālāl* and *nāpal* are also conjoined in 6:4, 7, 28:23, and 30:4. The expression *hālālê herēb*, "those slain by the sword," is typically Ezekielian (31:17, 18; 32:20, 21, 25, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32; 35:8). Cf. also the *pual* form, *mēhulēlê herēb* in 32:26, and the expression, *hālāl rāṣā'*, "mortal sinner," in 21:30, 34 [25, 29].

13. Cf. also the abstract noun *herēg*, "slaughter," in 26:15. Four of these associate the slaughter directly with the sword (23:10; 26:6, 8, 11).

14. 9:6; 21:16; 23:10, 47; 26:6, 8, 11, 15; 28:9.

15. Cf. the description of the sword as *tēbōah tebah hūhaddāh*, "sharpened for slaughter" (21:15 [10]); *pētūhā lētebah*, "polished for slaughter" (21:33 [28]); *mē'uttā lētebah*, "wrapped for slaughter" (21:20 [15]).

16. Cf. 40:39, 41, 42, and 44:11, where the word is used of killing a sacrificial animal.

17. 14:9; 25:7; 34:16. Cf. 32:12, where the *niphal* is used of a devastated multitude (*hāmônāh*).

earth;¹⁸ *'ibbēed*, "to destroy," used of persons in 22:27;¹⁹ *šihēt*, "to ruin, destroy," of persons in 5:16 and 20:17;²⁰ *killā*, "to exterminate, annihilate," with the accusative of persons in 20:13, 22:31, and 43:8.²¹

This list is not exhaustive, but it is sufficient to capture the somber tone of Ezekiel's ministry. Despite Yahweh's affirmation that he takes no delight in death, not even the death of the wicked (18:32), in the first twenty-four chapters its shadow hangs like a cloud over the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah. However, once the divine judgment has fallen upon his own people, the cloud lifts and assumes new positions over the foreign nations, who take their turns as the objects of God's lethal wrath. In the meantime the sun may shine again upon Israel. We should not be surprised that the vocabulary of death disappears almost completely in Ezekiel's oracles and visions of restoration in chapters 32-34 and 36-48.

THE WAY OF DEATH IN EZEKIEL

Modern cartoonists often portray death as a skeletal grim reaper dressed in black with scythe in hand. This image bears little resemblance to the way ancient Near Easterners perceived death. Outside of Israel, death itself was personalized as a divine figure, the ruler of the netherworld, whom Mesopotamians identified as Nergal,²² and

18. 17:17 speaks of Nebuchadnezzar "cutting off many lives" (*lēhokrīt nēpāšōt rab-bōt*). In most instances, however, Yahweh is the subject: 14:8, 13, 17; 21:8, 9 [3, 4]; 25:1, 7, 13, 16; 29:8; 30:7, 15. Cf. the literal sense of cutting in 31:12 (*qal*, of a tree), 16:4 (*piel*, of an umbilical cord), and the idiom *kārat bērit*, "to cut a covenant" (34:25; 37:26).

19. *lē'abbēd nēpāšōt*. The verse compares the greedy princes of Jerusalem to wolves tearing prey (*zē'ēbīm tōrēpē tārep*), and shedding blood (*šāpak dām*). Cf. the use of the *qal*, *'ābad*, "to perish" (7:26, of Torah; 12:22, of a vision; 19:5, 37:11, of hope; 26:17, of Tyre). In 34:4, 16 lost sheep are referred to as *hā'ōbedet*, "the perishing."

20. The root is used most often of ruining inanimate entities: of ruinous deeds (20:44); ruined walls (22:30; 26:4); corrupting wisdom (28:17); the land (30:11); the city (43:3). Cf. 16:47 and 23:11, where the hiphil form means "to act corruptly." In 20:17 *šihēt* functions antithetically to *hūs*, "to spare," and synonymously with *'āsā kālā*, "to effect annihilation." The form *mašhīt*, "destruction," is applied to persons in 5:16, 9:1 (*mašhēt*), 6; 21:36, and 25:15. The noun *šahat*, is used of "the place of ruin," that is a trap used to catch lions (19:4, 8), as well as the grave, where humans go to ruin (28:8).

21. The *qal* form in 5:12 (alongside *mūt* and *nāpal*) and 13:14 speaks of humans perishing. The root denotes fundamentally "to cease, to be at, come to an end" (G. Gerleman, *THAT* 1.831-33). Ezekiel often uses it of Yahweh's satisfaction of his fury against humans: *qal*: 5:13a (cf. *kallōtū* in 13b); *piel* + *bē*: 5:13; 6:12; 7:8; 13:15; 20:8, 21. To this list should be added the occurrences of the noun form *kālā*, which carries the sense "annihilation" in 11:13, 13:13, and 20:17.

22. On Nergal see W. H. Ph. Römer, "Religion of Ancient Mesopotamia," *Religions of the Past* (Historia Religionum 1; ed. C. J. Bleeker and G. Widengren; Leiden: Brill, 1988) 137-37; E. von Weiherr, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (AOAT 11; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1971); as well as the review of this volume by W. G. Lambert, "Studies in Nergal," *BibOr* 30 (1973) 355-63.

Northwestern Semites as Mot (from the same root as Hebrew *mût*, "to die").²³ In Ugaritic mythology the perpetual struggle between the forces of death and life, which played itself out primarily in the annual seasonal cycles of nature, was personified in the conflict between Mot and Baal, the life and fertility dispensing deity. But Mot's influence was also evident in nonroutine calamities: war, famine, plague and pestilence.²⁴ Although we may have difficulty at times distinguishing between the deity of death and personalized forces of death,²⁵ it was often thought that behind these evils lay malevolent spirits, demons,²⁶ who came up from the netherworld and stalked the land in search of victims. In fact, like Death itself, they too were personalized, bearing names like *Resheph*,²⁷ *Deber*,²⁸ and *Qeteb*.²⁹

The doctrine of malevolent spirits remains remarkably undeveloped in the Old Testament. To be sure, some have found demons in the *šēdīm* of Deut 32:17 and Ps 106:37, the *šē'rîrîm* of Lev 17:7 and 2 Chr

23. On the Ugaritic deity Mot see M. L. Pope, *Götter and Mythen im Vorderen Orient* (*Wörterbuch der Mythologie* 1; ed. H. W. Haussig; Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1965; hereafter cited as *WdM*) 300-2; idem, "Mot," *IDBSup* (1976) 607-8; Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Netherworld in the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969) 99-107; M. S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990) 53 and notes.

24. For a recent study of plagues in the ancient Near East and the peoples' perceptions thereof see R. M. Martinez, "Epidemic Disease, Ecology, and Culture in the Ancient Near East," *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III* (ANETS 8; ed. W. W. Hallo, et al.; Lewiston: Mellen, 1990) 413-58.

25. Cf. the Mesopotamian equation of Nergal = Erra, the god of pestilence. For an account of the activities of Erra see Luigi Cagni, *The Poem of Erra* (SANE 1; Malibu: Undena, 1977).

26. On demons in Mesopotamia see E. Ebeling, "Dämonen," *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* (ed. E. Ebeling and B. Meissner; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1938) 2.107-12.

27. On this deity see M. H. Pope and W. Wag, *WdM*, 305-6; W. J. Fulco, *The Canaanite God Rešep* (AOS 8; New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1976); Y. Yadin, "New Gleanings on Resheph from Ugarit," *Biblical and Related Studies Presented to Samuel Iwry* (ed. A. Kort and S. Morschauser; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1985) 259-73; M. Weinfeld, "Divine Intervention in War in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East," *History, Historiography and Interpretation: Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literature* (ed. H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1983) 124-31. J. Day interprets the title *b'l ḥz ršp* in UT 1001:3 as Resheph the archer ("New Light on the Mythological Background of the Allusion to Resheph in Habakkuk III 5," *VT* 29 [1979] 259-74).

28. An Eblaite deity, whose name survives in Ugaritic only as a common word for "fatal pestilence" (UT 67 VI:6-7). Cf. M. Dahood, *Ras Shamra Parallels: The Texts from Ugarit and the Hebrew Bible* (AnOr 51; ed. S. Rummel; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1981) 3.54-55 §84 (hereafter cited as RSP); A. Caquot, "Sur quelques demons de l'Ancien Testament (Reshep, Qeteb, Deber)," *Semitica* 6 (1956) 57-58. According to G. Pettinato the title ^d*da-bi-ir dingir-eb-la*^{ki} in Ebla tablet TM.75.G.1464 suggests that Dabir was the patron deity of the city (*The Archives of Ebla: An Empire Inscribed in Clay* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1981] 247).

29. Cf. Caquot, "Sur quelques demons," 66-68; Fulco, *The Canaanite God Rešep*, 57; Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions*; 161-66.

11:15, the *lîlît* of Isa 34:14, and the Azazel figure of Lev 16:8, 10, 26, but the force of the evidence varies for each of these.³⁰ Actually, if the Old Testament writers recognized demons at all, they remain faint and indefinite figures, and the influence of malevolent spirits has been almost if not totally expunged.³¹ Yahweh has assumed all power over life and death, health and illness, fortune and misfortune.³²

In this regard Ezekiel follows traditional Jewish thinking, according to which the threat to human life is not to be found in some sort of Mot figure, nor in demons, but in God alone.³³ But this does not mean that Yahweh is always perceived as being directly responsible when death occurs. On the contrary, the prophet recognized at least four ways in which people died.

First, Ezekiel actually witnesses the death of two persons, apparently from natural causes—Pelatiah, in visionary form (11:13), and his own wife, in person (24:16-24).

Second, people die as victims of other persons' violence, often without a hint of divine involvement. The human participants operate on their own accord and for their own reasons.³⁴

Third, Yahweh employs a variety of agents to carry out his deadly mission. The prophet's perspective is summarized in several scattered texts, most notably 5:17: "I will send famine and wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children; pestilence and bloodshed shall pass through you; and I will bring the sword upon you" (NRSV).³⁵ A sixth agent is referred to in 39:6, "I will send fire on Magog and on those who live securely in the coastlands." What distinguishes these calamities as divinely authorized agents is the use of the verb *šālah*, "to send," or more precisely the *piel* form,

30. The literature on the subject is vast. For general overviews see T. H. Gaster, "Demon, Demonology," *IDB* 1.818-22; H. Ringgren, *Israelite Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 101-3; Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965/1967) 2.223-28; D. E. Aune, "Demon, Demonology," *ISBE* (rev. ed.) 1.919-22.

31. Eichrodt proposed that some of the Israelite cultic and ritual laws originated in apotropaic rites against demons (*Theology of the Old Testament*, 2.226).

32. The notion of an "evil spirit" (*rûah rā'ā*) sent by Yahweh is perhaps the nearest counterpart to the demons (Judg 9:23; 1 Sam 16:14).

33. See several Old Testament texts which seem to personify death: Isa 25:8; 28:15, 18; Jer 9:20 [21]; Hos 13:14; Hab 2:5; Ps 18:5-6 (= 2 Sam 22:5-6); Job 18:14.

34. This finds graphic expression in the idiom, "to shed blood," always with humans as subjects (16:38; 18:10; 22:3, 4, 6, 9, 12; 23:45; 33:25; 36:18). Elsewhere the Israelites slaughter their (Yahweh's) children (16:21; 23:39); her princes destroy lives (22:27); the Philistines take vengeance on Israel by destroying them (25:15); Nebuchadnezzar opens his mouth for slaughter (21:27 [22]), and his forces carry out a siege to cut off many lives (17:17); the Assyrians slay Oholah with the sword (23:10).

35. Cf. similar catalogues in 6:11, 7:15, 12:16, 14:21, and 28:23.

šillēah, "to let loose," with Yahweh as the subject.³⁶ This feature strengthens the view that the inspiration for Ezekiel's understanding of Yahweh's agents of destruction lies in Israel's covenant curse traditions, preserved in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28.³⁷

Fourth, Yahweh is directly involved in issues of life and death. While he takes his stand firmly on the side of life (18:23, 32; 33:11), he is the divine judge who sentences the wicked and the sinner to death;³⁸ he executes the sentence,³⁹ he wields the sword in his own hand,⁴⁰ he cuts people off,⁴¹ he destroys,⁴² he causes to perish,⁴³ in his fury he consumes,⁴⁴ he causes people to fall,⁴⁵ he sends them down to Sheol/the Pit.⁴⁶ A vivid illustration of Yahweh's direct involvement is found in 17:19-21, where he poses as a hunter out to capture prey.

36. 5:16 (hunger); 14:13 (famine); 14:19 (pestilence); 14:21 (sword, famine, wild animals, plague); 28:23 (pestilence, blood, sword); 39:6 (fire); but also 'ap "rage," in 7:3. But Ezekiel employs the customary *qal* stem when he describes his personal commissioning (2:3, 4; 3:6; cf. 2 Kgs 2:2, 4, 6; Isa 6:8; Jer 1:7. Cf. also Hag 1:12; Zech 2:12-13, 15; 4:9; 6:15), as well as in his denunciation of false prophets for never having been formally sent by Yahweh (13:6). This usage applies also to the dispatching of an acknowledged prophet on a specific mission. E.g., 1 Sam 15:1; 16:1; 2 Sam 12:1; etc. For discussion of this use of *šālah* see W. Richter, *Die sogenannten vorprophetischen Beru-fungsberichte* (FRLANT 101; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970) 156-58. For a fuller study of the root see M. Delcor and E. Jenni, *THAT* 2.909-16.

37. Lev 26:25; Deut 28:20; 32:24. On comparable lists of curses in ancient Near Eastern documents see F. C. Fensham, "Common Trends in Curses of the Near Eastern Treaties and *Kudurru*-Inscriptions Compared with the Maledictions of Amos and Isaiah," *ZAW* 75 (1963) 155-75; D. R. Hillers, *Treaty-Curses and the Old Testament Prophets* (BibOr 16; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964).

38. Cf. "I will judge/pass sentence according to their ways" in 18:30 and 33:20, as well as the generally quasi-legal formulae "You/he shall surely die" (*mūt tāmūt / yāmūt*) and "for his guilt/iniquity he shall die" (*ba 'āwōnō yāmūt*) in 3:16-21; 18:1-32; 33:1-20. On the form and usage of these expressions in Ezekiel see H. G. Reventlow, *Wächter über Israel: Ezekiel and seine Tradition* (BZAW 82; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1962) 108-34; H. Schulz, *Das Todesrecht im Alten Testament: Studien zur Rechtsform der Mot-Jumat-Sätze* (BZAW 114; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1969) 162-92; Zimmerli, *Ezekiel I*, 374-77, 383-84.

39. *šāpaṭ* means "to execute judgment" in 11:10, 11; 21:35; 35:11 (perhaps 7:27). Cf. 'āšā šēpātīm, "to execute judgments," in 5:10, 15; 11:9; 16:41; 25:11; 28:22, 26; 30:14, 19. Only in 25:11 does the "execution" not necessarily involve death.

40. Cf. 21:8-10 [3-5], where Yahweh "unsheathes" his sword (*wēhōse 'tī harbī mit-ta 'rāh*), and 32:10, where he "brandishes" his sword (*bē 'ōpēpī harbī*). The form *harbī*, "my sword," occurs elsewhere in 30:24, 25.

41. Yahweh is the subject of *hikrīt* in 14:8, 13, 17; 21:8 [3], 9 [4]; 25:7, 13, 16; 29:8; 30:15; 35:7.

42. Yahweh is the subject of *hišmīd* in 14:9; 25:7; 34:16.

43. Yahweh is the subject of *ha 'ābīd* in 6:3; 25:7, 16; 28:16; 30:13 (of idols); 32:13 (of cattle).

44. Yahweh is the subject of *killā* in 20:13; 22:31; 43:8. Cf. also 11:13; 20:17.

45. Yahweh is the subject of *hippīl* in 6:4; 32:12.

46. Yahweh is the subject of *hōrīd* in 26:20; 31:16.

EZEKIEL'S VISION OF THE NETHERWORLD

But what happens to people when they die? The increasing interest in Israelite views of death and the netherworld is reflected in a growing bibliography of studies on the subject.⁴⁷ Earlier discussions tended to concentrate on references to Sheol in the Psalms and in the outbursts of Job, with occasional appeal to Isaiah (Isa 14; 26:7-19). But scholars have paid little attention to Ezekiel, despite the fact that his collection of prophecies probably devotes as much space to the subject as any other biblical book.

Three texts provide most of the information on Ezekiel's views concerning the state of the dead: 26:19-21 represents the conclusion to the first of three redactional units that make up Ezekiel's oracles against Tyre; 31:14b-18 serves as the conclusion to the fifth of seven oracles against Egypt; and 32:17-32, the longest of this triad, brings the entire complex of oracles against Egypt to a conclusion.

These texts are closely related in both style and substance. In fact, the plethora of lexical links between 32:17-32 and 31:14-18⁴⁸ suggests that this text presents another example of the typically Ezekielian pattern of *Wiederaufname*, "resumption."⁴⁹ Especially intriguing is the notice in 31:16 that Yahweh would cause the nations to shake (*hir 'aštī gōyim*) over the fall of the tree and that they would take comfort (*wayyinnāhāmū*) at its descent into Sheol. 32:17-32 provides a representative sampling of those nations, and describes in greater detail their relationship to the Egyptian newcomer. The shoe of comfort, however, has been placed on the other foot. Instead of the nations finding consolation in the arrival of Egypt, Egypt may take comfort in the fact that she is not alone in the netherworld. Other nations, great

47. Cf. C. McDannell and B. Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven/London: Yale University, 1988); K. Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (AOAT 219; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986); Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions*; L. Wächter, *Der Tod im Alten Testament* (Arbeiten zur Theologie 2/8; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1967); C. Barth, *Die Errettung vom Tode in den individuellen Klage- und Dankliedern des Alten Testaments* (Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag, 1947).

48. Expressions that are repeated include *nātan*, "to hand over" (to death, 31:14; to the sword, 32:20); *'eres tahtiyyōt*, "netherworld" (31:14, 16, 18; 32:18, 24); *yōrēdē bōr*, "those who go down to the pit" (31:14, 16; 32:18, 24, 25, 29, 30); *yārad šē'ōlā*, "to go down to Sheol" (31:15, 16, 17; 32:27); *halēlē hereb*, "victims of the sword" (31:17, 18; 32:20, 21, 25, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32); *'ārēlīm*, "uncircumcised" (31:18; 32:19, 21, etc.); *šākab 'et /bētōk*, "to lie with/among" (31:18; 32:19, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32); *hāmōn*, "pomp, horde" (31:18; 32:18, 20, 24, 25, 26, 31, 32).

49. According to which a subject is raised in an early text, only to be dropped immediately without further development, but then picked up and given fuller exposition in a later text. We use the term *Wiederaufname* somewhat differently from C. Kuhl, for whom *Wiederaufname* serves to distinguish interpolations from the original *traditum* ("Die 'Wiederaufname'-ein literarisches Prinzip," *ZAW* 64 [1952] 1-11). Cf. also M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 84-86.

and small, have experienced the same fate (32:31). In view of the expository nature of 32:17-32, we may focus our attention here.

Structurally 32:17-32 is complex.⁵⁰ Following the opening date notice, Yahweh commands Ezekiel to wait for the hordes of Egypt and to bring them down to the netherworld (vv. 17-18). This charge serves as a thesis type statement, introducing the reader to the theme of the oracle. Vv. 19-21 constitute a general announcement of judgment upon the nation, highlighting the depths to which she shall fall. The bulk of the oracle (vv. 22-30) is taken up with a roll call of nations that greet Egypt upon her arrival in Sheol. The passage concludes with a statement of the significance of the previous scenes for Pharaoh (v. 31), and a theological interpretation of the descent of the king of Egypt (v. 32).

The problematic state of the text complicates the interpretation of the prophecy. Not since the prophet's opening vision have truncated sentences and inconsistencies of gender, number, and tense so plagued a passage.⁵¹ Compounding the issue is a stylistic monotony, which some would say ill befits the prophet so renowned for his literary power. The pool of words and expressions is limited, but its heavy dependence upon stock phrases associated with death and burial contributes to its morbid tone. But the issue for us is, what does this text tell us about Ezekiel's view of life after death?

The Topography of the Netherworld

We do well to begin our discussion of Ezekiel's understanding of the netherworld with a look at its relationship to the rest of the universe. Like his fellow Israelites, Ezekiel assumed a universe divided into three tiers:⁵²

Heaven: The Realm of Deity⁵³

Earth: The Realm of the Living⁵⁴

Sheol: The Realm of the Dead

50. Perhaps a consequence of the grief poem (*nēhī*) genre, on which see R. M. Hals, *Ezekiel* (Forms of Old Testament Literature 19; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 228-29.

51. Cf. the number of diversions from MT in LXX.

52. Cf. Bernhard Lang's discussion of the relationships among the tiers ("Life After Death in the Prophetic Promise," *Congress Volume: Jerusalem 1986* [VTSup 40; ed. J. A. Emerton; Leiden: Brill, 1988] 145-48).

53. The word *šāmayim* occurs eight times in the book, but only in 1:1 does it denote the realm of deity.

54. Identified in Ezekiel as *'ereš haḥayyīm*, "the land of the living" (26:20; 32:23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 32). This is the sphere in which humans live and in which they inflict terror upon one another (cf. 32:23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30, 32).

Ezekiel 32 uses several different expressions for the netherworld. Of special interest is its use of *'eres*. In Ezekiel this term usually denotes "earth" in contrast to "the heavens" (see 8:3). However, it is clear from phrases like *'eres taḥtiyyôt*, "land of the depths" (vv. 18, 24; cf. 26:20), a distinctly Ezekielian variation of *'eres taḥtîṭ*, "the lower world" (cf. 31:14, 16, 18),⁵⁵ that in this context it refers to the netherworld. As such it represents a counterpart to *'eres haḥayyîm*, "land of the living" (vv. 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 32; cf. 26:20).⁵⁶ The subterranean location of the realm of the dead is reflected in the frequent occurrence of the verb *yārad* "to go down,"⁵⁷ as well as the specific terms used to identify the place: *bôr*, "pit, cistern" (vv. 18, 23, 24, 25, 29, 30),⁵⁸ and its semantic cognate *šahat*, "pit, trap" (28:8),⁵⁹ as well as the distinctly Hebrew expression, *šē'ôl* (vv. 21, 27; cf. 31:15, 16).⁶⁰ Since all of these terms are used elsewhere for "grave," it is not surprising that they should have assumed this netherworldly significance.

Ezekiel offers few details of the design of the netherworld. Nowhere does he describe how one enters, whether by "the gates of Sheol" (Isa 38:10) or "the gates of death" (Job 38:17; Pss 9:14; 107:18). However, his description creates the impression of a massive communal cemetery, in which the graves are arranged by nationality and organized in such a way that the principal grave is located in the center, surrounded by the graves of the attendants.⁶¹ The residents themselves are all reclining on their own beds (*miškāb*).⁶²

55. Cf. *taḥtiyyôt 'eres*, "depths of the earth" (Isa 44:23; Pss 63:10 [9]; 139:15); *bôr taḥtiyyôt* (Ps 88:7 [6]; Lam 3:55); *šē'ôl taḥtîṭ* (Deut 32:33).

56. Cf. the absolute use of *'eres* for "netherworld" elsewhere in the Old Testament (Isa 26:19; Jonah 2:7 [6]; Ps 22:30 [29]), as well as Ugaritic *'rs*, and the Akkadian cognate *eršetu*. On these terms as designations for the netherworld see L. J. Stadelmann, *The Hebrew Conception of the World: A Philological and Literary Study* (AnBib 39; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1970) 167.

57. Hence the identification of the deceased as *yôredê bôr*, "those who go down to the pit" (26:20 [2x]; 31:14, 16; 32:18, 24, 25, 29, 30), and references to "going/bringing down to Sheol" (*yārad/hôrid šē'ôlâ*) in 31:15, 16, 17; 32:27; as well as the use of *yārad/hôrid* alone in 26:20; 31:18; 32:18, 19, 21, 24, 30.

58. Cf. also 26:20a, 20b; 31:14, 16. On the range of meanings for *bôr*, a by-form of *bē'ôr*, see J.-G. Heintz, *TDOT* 1.463-66.

59. The word's primary sense is reflected in 19:4, 8, where *šahat* denotes a pit dug for trapping game. On this term see further Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions*, 69-71; M. H. Pope, "The Word *šahat* in Job 9:31," *JBL* 5 (1964) 269-78; *idem*, "A Little Soul-Searching," *Maarav* 1 (1978) 25-31. Cf. also M. Held, "Pits and Pitfalls in Akkadian and Biblical Hebrew," *JANESCU* 5 (1973) 173-90, who distinguishes between *šahat* I, "pit, netherworld," and *šahat* II, "net."

60. While the etymology of the word remains unknown, the fact that it always occurs without the article suggests that it was considered a proper name. For discussions cf. Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 66-71; Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions*, 21-23; G. Gerleman, *THAT* II, 837-4; Stadelmann, *Hebrew Conception of the World*, 165-67.

61. The word *qibrôt*, "graves," appears six times in vv. 22-26.

62. The verb *šākab*, "to lie," occurs seven times in vv. 22-32.

Another image of the netherworld is suggested by 26:20, which, though textually

The expression *yarkēte bôr*, "the remotest parts of the Pit" (v. 23), suggests a gradation of assignments in Sheol, with the most dishonorable occupants being sent to the farthest recesses. The fact that the uncircumcised and the victims of the sword are separated from the "mighty men of old," who receive an honorable burial with their weapons of war at their sides, reinforces this impression. It is unclear whether these compartments are arranged horizontally or vertically. The plural form *'eres tahtiyyôt*, "land of depths," may point in the latter direction.

Ezekiel's picture of the netherworld is reminiscent of two well-known ancient mortuary customs. First, the arrangement of the grave complexes resembles that of a royal tomb, with the king's (in this instance the queen's) crypt (sarcophagus?) in the middle, and his (her) nobles all around. In fact, this oracle displays some deliberate local coloring. The pyramid complexes, in which the Pharaoh's tomb (the pyramid itself) was surrounded by the tombs of his princes, courtiers, and other high officials, provides the closest analogue to Ezekiel's portrayal of Sheol.⁶³ Second, the image of the beds recalls the pattern of ancient Near Eastern tombs in which the place where the corpse was laid was designed as a bed, often complete with headrest.⁶⁴

The Inhabitants of the Netherworld

But who are these *yôrēde bôr*, "who go down to the pit"? Earlier, in 31:16, 18 the prophet had identified the occupants of Sheol as *kol 'āsē 'ēden*, "all the trees of Eden." The dendroid imagery is appropriate for an oracle in which Assyria is presented as a tall tree that is cut down and sent to the netherworld. Assyria will be one of many nations as

problematic, speaks of Tyre as dwelling in the lower parts of the earth like *hōrābôt mē'ōlām*, "waste places from eternity." Here Sheol seems to have taken on the character of a massive wasteland filled with the refuse of collapsed civilizations, an image which is reminiscent of a Mesopotamian view reflected in one of Nergal's titles, "King of the Wasteland" (*šar gēri*). Cf. AHW, 1095; K. Tallqvist, *Sumerisch-akkadische Namen der Totenwelt* (StudOr 5/4; Helsingfors: Societas Orientalis Fennica, 1934) 17, 22-23. On the netherworld as a wasteland see further J. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (London: Oxford University, 1926) 464; Barth, *Die Errettung vom Tode*, 86-87.

63. On Egyptian burial patterns see P. Montet, *Eternal Egypt* (New York: New American Library, 1964) 199-234; esp. 212-23; C. Aldred, "Grablage, Auszeichnung durch," *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* (ed. W. Helck and E. Otto; Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1977) 2.859-62.

64. On Judahite bench tombs see E. Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs About the Dead* (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1990) 24-34 (forthcoming in the JSOTSup series, Sheffield: JSOT Press). Cf. the superbly illustrated presentation of a complex Israelite family tomb by G. Barkay and A. Kloner, "Jerusalem Tombs from the Days of the First Temple," *BAR* 12/2 (1986) 22-39.

wholes that have been assigned their places in Sheol, a notion which chapter 32 picks up and develops more fully.

In 32:17-32 Ezekiel refers repeatedly to *hālālîm* and 'ārēlîm. The former expression is filled out with *halēlē hereb*, a typically Ezekielian phrase, which translates literally as "those slain by the sword."⁶⁵ However, as Eissfeldt has shown, the persons so designated are not simply passive victims of violence nor soldiers who have died valiant deaths on the battlefield. In the book of Ezekiel the expression generally refers to executed murderers and evildoers,⁶⁶ whose bodies may have been tossed in a heap in a separate burial place, or even left out in the open,⁶⁷ instead of being given an honorable burial. 28:10 implies that no death is more ignominious than the death of the *halēlē hereb*, an interpretation which the frequent pairing of *hālālîm* and 'ārēlîm confirms.

31:18 had mentioned 'ārēlîm, "the uncircumcised," only in passing, but the expression appears no fewer than ten times in 32:17-32. It is somewhat surprising to see the Egyptians among the uncircumcised in Sheol, especially since they (as well as Edomites and Sidonians from this list) practiced the rite of circumcision.⁶⁸ Obviously Ezekiel's usage of the term is metaphorical and culturally determined. In Israel, circumcision was the sign and seal of membership in the covenant community (Genesis 17), which in time became a symbol of cultural superiority. To call anyone "uncircumcised" was the ultimate insult. Those who did not bear this mark at the time of their deaths were excluded from the family grave. For Ezekiel this meant being sentenced to the most undesirable compartment of the netherworld along with other vile and unclean persons.⁶⁹

A third designation for the residents of Sheol is *hittî bē'eres hayyîm*, "those who spread terror in the land of the living" (32:23). The distinctly Ezekielian expression *hittî*, occurs seven times in vv. 17-32.⁷⁰ It derives from a root meaning "to be filled with terror,"

65. *hālālîm* and derivatives occur fourteen times in 32:17-32.

66. O. Eissfeldt, "Schwerterschlagene bei Hesekiel," *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy* (T. H. Robinson Festschrift, ed. H. H. Rowley; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950) 73-81; cf. W. Dommershausen, *TDOT* 4.417-21. Note the pejorative connotations in 28:8.

67. On the ignominy of being denied a proper burial or exhumation see Deut 28:25-26; 1 Kgs 13:22; 14:10-11; Jer 16:4.

68. On circumcision in the ancient Near East see J. M. Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 85 (1966): 473-76; T. Lewis and C. Armerding, "Circumcision," *ISBE* (rev. ed.) 1.700-2. For primary evidence see the illustration in *ANEP* §629; the inscription dealing with the rite, *ANET*, 326; Herodotus, *Histories* 2.104; Josephus, *Ant.* 8.10.3.

69. Cf. A. Lods, "La 'mort des incirconcis'," *Comptes rendus des seances de l'Academie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* (Paris: 1943) 271-83.

70. Cf. 26:21. This expression is not to be confused with its homonym "Hittite" in 16:3, 45.

and refers to the fear, confusion, and anguish created by a powerful foe.⁷¹ In this text those nations who have created such *Angst* in others discover that their violent conduct while in the land of the living has determined their status in the realm of the dead.

V. 21 identifies another group in Sheol, *'ēlē gibbôrîm*, literally "the rams of mighty men."⁷² In v. 27 they are referred to as "the fallen heroes from ancient times."⁷³ This phrase is reminiscent of Gen 6:4, which labels the antediluvian progeny of the "sons of God" (*běneh 'ēlōhîm*) and human daughters (*běnôt hā'ādām*) Nephilim,⁷⁴ and identifies them more closely as *haggibbōrîm 'āšer mē'ōlām 'anšē haš-šēm*, "the heroes who were from ancient times, the men of renown."

According to Ezek 32:21, these heroic personages speak from the midst of Sheol, which may suggest that they are located in the heart of the netherworld, perhaps a more honorable assignment than "the remotest recesses of the pit," where the uncircumcised and those who have fallen by the sword lie. The description in v. 27 indicates that these individuals have indeed been afforded noble burials. There they lie with their weapons of war, their swords laid under their heads and their shields⁷⁵ placed upon their bones. Ancient burial customs in which personal items and symbols of status were buried with the corpses of the deceased provide the source of this image.⁷⁶

Ezekiel's use of the antediluvian heroic traditions at this point is shocking. How could the prophet possibly perceive these men as noble and hold them up as honorable residents of Sheol, when his own religious tradition presents them as the epitome of wickedness, corruption, and violence (Gen 6:5, 11-12)?⁷⁷ To be sure, as he himself

71. On the expression see F. Maas, *TDOT* 5.277-83.

72. *'ayil* occurs also in 17:13; 30:13; 31:11, 14; 39:18. For a discussion of this expression see P. D. Miller, "Animal Names as Designations in Ugaritic and Hebrew," *UF* 2 (1970): 181-82.

73. Assuming the originality of LXX ἄπ' αἰῶνος, which reflects an original *mē'ōlām*, a form which has occurred earlier in 26:20. MT's *nōpēlîm mē'ārēlîm* is not only unattested elsewhere; it makes no sense. L. Allen suggests MT arose as a result of a r/w confusion and assimilation with the recurring *'ārēlîm* (*Ezekiel 20-48* [WBC 29; Dallas: Word, 1990] 135).

74. BHS, W. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 436, and many others repoint *nōpēlîm* as *nēpîlîm*.

75. Even though MT *'āwōnōtām*, "their iniquity," is reflected in all of the versions, the context requires emendation to *šinnōtām*, "their shields" (thus BHS and most translations: RSV, NRSV, JB, NEB, following C. H. Cornill, *Das Buch des Propheten Ezechiel* [Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1886] 390). For an explanation of the error see Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48*, 135.

76. On the practice in Judah and its significance see Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 67-73.

77. For a discussion of the relationship between these texts see R. Hanson, "Rebellion in Heaven, Azazel, and the Euhemeristic Heroes in 1 Enoch 6-11," *JBL* 96 (1977): 208-9.

recognizes, they too had terrorized the land of the living. But why should they be granted special status in Sheol? Three explanations may be considered. *First*, Ezekiel's picture might be inspired by some independent Israelite tradition that actually perceived the antediluvians as noble figures, *à la* Gilgamesh of Mesopotamia, the hero of the Great Deluge, of whom it was said that two-thirds of him was god and one-third was human.⁷⁸ But this view flounders for lack of evidence. *Second*, the present image might derive from extra-Israelite traditions in which departed kings were viewed as divinized heroes. However, according to the picture of the netherworld painted in vv. 22-26, the kings are surrounded by their courtiers in "the farthest recesses of the pit." Furthermore, this interpretation overlooks the allusions to Gen 6:4 in vv. 21 and 27. *Third*, this description might represent another example of Ezekielian revisionism, according to which authentic Israelite traditions are reinterpreted for rhetorical effect.⁷⁹ The present aim is to highlight the ignominy of Meshech-Tubal. No matter how negatively the tradition might have considered the antediluvians, they were noble compared to the Meshech-Tubalites, and by extension the Egyptians, who will join them in the nether recesses of the underworld.

Some have seen references to the occupants of the netherworld in two additional expressions that occur outside this passage. In 26:20 the prophet announces that Tyre shall join the *'am 'ôlām*. The literary context suggests some relationship between this phrase and *mētē 'ôlām*, which in Ps 143:3 and Lam 3:6 denotes the departed dead from long ago who dwell in dark places.⁸⁰ On the other hand, if we understand *'ôlām* substantively, viz., as a designation for "eternity," or more specifically the netherworld,⁸¹ then the *'am 'ôlām* may be the inhabitants of the *bēt 'ôlām*, "eternal house," referred to in Qoh 12:5,⁸² that is "the people of the netherworld."

78. ANET, 73.

79. Cf. 16:44-59, where Jerusalem is shamed not only for being more wicked than her sister but for abominations that exceeded those of Sodom, and 20:25, according to which Yahweh had given Israel statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live.

80. Cf. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms III* (AB 17a; Garden City: Doubleday, 1970) 323, who reprints *mētē* as *mētē*, and translates "men of the eternal home."

81. Cf. A. Cooper ("MLK 'Im: 'Eternal King' or 'King of Eternity,— in *Love and Death in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of Marvin H. Pope* [ed. J. H. Marks and R. M. Good; Guildford: Four Quarters, 1987] 1-8) and M. H. Pope (in a review of K. Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, UF 19 [1987] 458), who interpret the Ugaritic expression *mlk 'lm*, "king of eternity," as "king of the underworld." According to Cooper and E. Jenni (*THAT* 2.242), this spatial understanding of "eternity" derives from Egypt, where Osiris bore the title, "Lord of Eternity" (*hk3 d.t* or *nb nhh*), which alluded to his domain (the realm of the dead), as well as the duration of his reign.

82. The expression *byt 'lm*, signifying "grave," has also surfaced in the Deir 'Allā texts (11:6, on which see J. A. Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir 'āAllā* [HSM 31; Chico,

In 39:11, 14 the phrase, *gê hā'ōbērîm* identifies the place of Gog's burial. Scholars have interpreted this expression in several ways, most notably as "Valley of the Travelers,"⁸³ a variant spelling of Abarim,⁸⁴ or as a new name, "the Valley of Hamon-Gog," which plays on *gê' hinnōm*, "the valley of Hinnom."⁸⁵ However, drawing on the support of the Ugaritic text KTU 1:22 1:12-17, some have recently argued that *hā'ōbērîm* represent the inhabitants of the netherworld.⁸⁶ This mortuary cultic document associates the *'brm* with *mlkm*, departed kings who are identified elsewhere as *rpim*.⁸⁷ According to this interpretation, *hā'ōbērîm* refers to these departed heroes,⁸⁸ and the "valley of those who have passed on" is a cemetery where people disposed of their dead.

In surveying Ezekiel's references to the inhabitants of the netherworld one observes two glaring omissions. *First*, nowhere does he identify these individuals as *rēpā'rîm*, a term used elsewhere for the chthonic shades.⁸⁹ Is the word loaded with too many pagan associations? Is it too closely tied to the cult of the dead? Perhaps we should see here another illustration of the prophet's historicizing and demythologizing style. For him the occupants of Sheol are real people:

CA: Scholars Press, 1980] 59), and other Northwest Semitic inscriptions (on which see cf. E. Jenni, "Das Wort *'ōlām* in Alten Testament," *ZAW* 64 [1952] 217; J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts from Deir 'Alla* [Leiden: Brill, 1976] 224-25), and is well known in the Rabbinic writings (cf. M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* [New York: Judaica Press, 1971] 1084-85). Jenni compares the expression to the Egyptian reference to a tomb as *niwt nt nhh*, "the city of eternity" (THAT 2.242). *byt 'ōlām* finds a semantic equivalent also in Akkadian *šubat dārati/dārat*, "the dwelling place of eternity," and *ēkal salāli kimah tap-šuhti šubat dārati*, "a palace of sleeping, a resting tomb, a dwelling place of eternity." On these see H. Tawil, "A Note on the Ahiḥam Inscription," *JANESCU* 3 (1970) 36.

83. Thus *NRSV* and *NJPS*, treating *hā'ōbērîm* as a participle from *'ābar*, "to pass over." For possible locations of this valley see Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 2, 317.

84. Cf. KB³, 1000; Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48*, 201. The Old Testament knows of two Abarims, one east of Galilee (Jer 22:20), and another in the Moabite highlands (Num 27:12). However, this interpretation is weakened by the fact that the place of Gog's burial is explicitly located "in Israel."

85. This valley was the site of Molech worship (Jer 2:23; etc.) and the place where the bodies of animals and criminals were burned. Cf. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 2, 317.

86. So F. S. Ribichini and P. Xella, "'La valle dei passanti' (Ezechiele 39:11)," *UF* 12 (1980) 434-47; Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 229-30; M. H. Pope, "Notes on the Rephaim Texts from Ugarit," *Ancient Near Eastern Studies* (J. J. Finkelstein Festschrift, ed. M. de Jong Ellis; Hamden: Archon, 1977) 173-75; *idem*, review of Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, *UF* 19 (1987) 462.

87. On which see B. Levine and J.-M. Tarragon, "Dead Kings and Rephaim: The Patrons of the Ugaritic Dynasty," *JAOS* 104 (1984) 649-59; J. F. Healey, "MLKM/RP'UM and the *Kispum*," *UF* 10 (1978) 89-91.

88. Pope describes the *'ōbērîm* as "those who cross over the boundary separating them from the living so that from the viewpoint of the living they 'go over' rather than 'come over'," *UF* 12 (1980) 462.

89. Isa 14:9; 26:14, 19; Job 26:5; Ps 88:10 [11]; Prov 2:18.

Assyrians, Elamites, Sidonians, Egyptians, antediluvians. They are not divinized kings.

Second, Ezekiel provides no information on the state of the righteous in death. The persons he describes in 32:17-32 are all wicked individuals or nations. Not a word is said about the righteous.

Would they also have been in Sheol? If so, where would their beds have been located? On the other hand, we note that all of his depictions of the netherworld occur in oracles against foreign nations (cf. Isa 14:9-20). But where is Israel in all of this? We know from chapter 37 that the prophet's own nation was considered deceased, but in these accounts they are completely out of the picture. Whether he would have located them among these foreign nations or reserved a compartment separate from them we may only speculate.

The State of the Dead

Ancient Mesopotamians perceived the netherworld as an inhospitable place, dark and dingy, especially for those who had been killed in battle and/or who had not been afforded a proper burial.⁹⁰ How familiar Ezekiel was with these notions we cannot say. His own comments on the state of the dead are not entirely consistent. On the one hand, the oracles against Tyre present death as the termination of existence. Three times in roughly equivalent terms the prophet announces, "I shall bring terrors upon you and you will be no more."⁹¹ In fact, according to 26:21, any efforts by search parties to find the lost city would prove futile. However, the broader context of this verse shows that we should not interpret these statements literally. The language is phenomenological; no one ever returns from the realm of the dead.

On the other hand, our primary text, 32:17-32, clearly recognizes a continued existence for the deceased. Several observations on their condition in the afterlife may be made. *First*, that which survives of the deceased is not simply the spiritual component of the human being, but a shadowy image of the whole person, complete with head and skeleton.⁹² *Second*, as we have already noted, the deceased lie (*šākab*)⁹³ on beds (*miškāb*) in their respective wards, arranged according to nationality. *Third*, the inhabitants of Sheol are not asleep, but

90. Cf. the poetic account of the descent of Ishtar into the netherworld (*ANET*, 107); "The Vision of the Netherworld" (*ibid*, 109-10); and Enkidu's description of the fate of the dead ("Epic of Gilgamesh," *ibid*, 99).

91. Cf. 26:21 *ballāhôt 'ettē'nēk wē'ênēk*

27:36 *ballāhôt hāyīt wē'ênēk 'ad-'ólām*

28:19 *ballāhôt hāyītā wē'ênēkā 'ad-'ólām*

92. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2.214. *NEB* renders 'ēlōhīm as "ghostly form" in 1 Sam 28:13.

93. 32:21, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32.

fully conscious.⁹⁴ They are not only aware of one another and their relative positions; they also know that their conduct during their tenure "in the land of the living" has determined their respective positions in Sheol. Those who were high and mighty on earth express grief over their loss of status and power (32:31). They consciously bear the disgrace (*nāśā' kēlimmātām*) of those who have been dishonorably buried (32:24, 25, 30). This description agrees with Israelite burial practices,⁹⁵ which suggest that the tomb was not considered the permanent resting place of the deceased. While the physical flesh decomposed, the person was thought to descend to the vast subterranean mausoleum in which the dead continued to live in a remarkably real sense as "living corpses."⁹⁶

The Cult of the Dead

One further question remains. What is Ezekiel's understanding of the relationship between the dead and the living? In the ancient world outside Israel, it was commonly assumed that the deceased continued to exercise both beneficent and malevolent power over the living. The favorable influence of departed ancestors could be won through necromancy, which required the engagement of mediums, and through mortuary cults involving propitiatory sacrifices by a specially designated member of the family,⁹⁷ and through urgent pleas for their blessing. In the light of explicit prohibitions on such activity in the Old Testament (Deut 14:1; 26:14), scholars have tended to deny the existence of any such practices in Israel.⁹⁸ However, scholars are uncovering more and more evidence that mortuary cult activities persisted throughout the nation's history, not only in the biblical writings,⁹⁹ but in the archaeological records as well.¹⁰⁰

94. Cf. Job's desire as expressed in 3:13, 18, 7:9, and the phenomenological language of Dan 12:2; Matt 9:24; John 11:11; 1 Cor 11:30; 15:51; 1 Thess 4:14; 5:10.

95. Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 9-86.

96. Robert E. Cooley, "Gathered to His People: A Study of a Dothan Family Tomb," in *The Living and Active Word of God: Studies in Honor of Samuel J. Schultz* (ed. M. Inch, et al.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983) 47-58.

97. On the role of the *pāqīdu* see M. Bayliss, "The Cult of Dead Kin in Assyria and Babylonia," *Iraq* 35 (1973) 115-25.

98. Cf. G. E. Wright, *Deuteronomy* (IB; New York: Abingdon, 1953) 487; R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961) 60; Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1960) 312.

99. (1) Ps 106:28 condemns *zibhē mētīm*, "sacrificial meals for the dead." Cf. vv. 37-38. The dependence of the phrase on *zibhē 'ēlōhīm* in Num 25:2 is widely recognized. Cf. G. C. Heider, *The Cult of Molek: A Reassessment* (JSOTSup 43; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985) 388-89; M. Smith and E. Bloch-Smith, "Death and Afterlife in Ugarit and Israel," *JAOS* 108 (1988) 282. (2) Isa 65:3-5a describes people as spending the night in rock cut tombs; (3) Amos 6:7 and Jer 16:5 refer to the *marzēah*, a funerary feast, on

Given Ezekiel's denunciation of so many pagan features in Judah's religious life, his silence on mortuary cult practices in his judgment oracles (chapters 1-24) is striking. Only once in the entire book, in 43:7-9, is there any allusion to the veneration of the dead.¹⁰¹ Here Ezekiel refers to a series of past abominable practices, including "the corpses of their kings at their death,"¹⁰² and calls upon the Israelites to put away their idolatry and the "corpses of their kings." There is some dispute among scholars about the meaning of *pigrê malkêhem*,¹⁰³ but it seems best to associate Ezekiel's *pëgârîm* with the pagan practices referred to in Lev 26:30. Here *pigrê gillûlêkem* refers not to the corpses themselves, but to some element of the cult of the dead. Appealing to the Ugaritic usage of the same root, *pgr*, D. Neiman proposed that in both these texts the *pëgârîm* were memorial stelae to the gods erected in honor of the

which see Heider, 389. (4) 2 Chr 16:12 has the diseased Asa seeking (*dāraš*) aid from the Rephaim instead of Yahweh. So also Pope, *UF* 19 (1987) 461. Neither R. B. Dillard, *2 Chronicles* (WBC 15; Waco: Word, 1987) 126-27, nor H. G. M. Williamson, *1 and 2 Chronicles* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 276-77, considers this possibility. (5) Ps 16:3-4 speaks of pouring out libations of blood to the "saints who are in the earth" (*qēdōšî 'āšer bā'āreš*) and to the "mighty ones" (*'addîrîm*). So Pope, *UF* 19 (1987) 462-63, approving of Spronk, 249. For additional possible allusions to the mortuary cult see Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 99-102. For a recent caution on some of these texts see W. T. Pitard, "Post-Funeral Offerings to the Dead in Canaan and Israel" (Paper delivered to the Society of Biblical Literature in Kansas City, 24 November 1991; cf. AARSBLA [1991] 76-77).

100. Cf. Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*; Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*; etc.

101. The prohibition on "eating the bread of men" in 24:17, 22 is not to be associated with mortuary cult rituals but customary mourning rites.

102. Thus *NRSV*, repointing MT's *bāmôtām*, "on their high places," as *bēmôtām*, "in their death," with most moderns. On the textual problems see Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 2, 402; Allen, *Ezekiel* 20-48, 243.

103. The use of *pëgârîm* in 6:5 to denote corpses of idolaters strewn about their idols accords with the common Old Testament usage and corresponds to the meaning of the Akkadian cognate, *pagrum* (*AHW*, 809), leading many to see here an allusion to royal graves located in the vicinity of the Temple precinct. Cf. J. B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1969) 265; J. W. Wevers, *Ezekiel* (NCB; London: Thomas Nelson, 1969) 312; A. Cody, *Ezekiel* (Old Testament Message 11; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984) 219; R. H. Alexander, "Ezekiel," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. F. C. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 969; Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 250. However, this interpretation is weakened by the absence of archaeological evidence for such tombs near enough to the Temple grounds to have been considered defiling, and the fact that most of Judah's kings were buried "in the city of David," some distance removed from the Temple. Cf. J. J. Simons, *Jerusalem in the Old Testament: Researches and Theories* (Leiden: Brill, 1952) 194-225; K. Galling, "Die Nekropole von Jerusalem," *PJ* 32 (1936) 73-101. The apostate kings, Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:18; 2 Chr 33:20) and Amon (2 Kgs 21:26), who were interred "in the garden of Uzza," apparently on the palace grounds, and Josiah, who was buried in his own tomb (2 Kgs 23:30), were exceptions. Cf. Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 95-96.

kings.¹⁰⁴ More recently scholars have removed the divine connection and seen here stelae erected in memory of the dead,¹⁰⁵ or special offerings involved in the cult of the dead, in which case they would be related to the *pagru*-offering found in Akkadian texts.¹⁰⁶ In either case, Ezekiel is attacking some sort of Israelite royal ancestor cult,¹⁰⁷ comparable perhaps to the cult of the dead at Ugarit, which was designed to ensure the positive influence of the deceased on the fortunes of the living.

If this interpretation is correct, in keeping with orthodox Yahwism, Ezekiel is calling for the strict maintenance of the boundaries between the land of the living and the realm of the dead.¹⁰⁸ Although the deceased retained consciousness, memory, emotion, awareness of their relationship to others in Sheol, and even a measure of form,¹⁰⁹ mortuary cult activity is forbidden. Undoubtedly he would also have repudiated any necromantic consultation of the dead as well.

EZEKIEL'S VISION OF LIFE AFTER DEATH

So far we have been focusing on the realm of the dead and the state of the deceased within that sphere. But does the absolute severance

104. David Neiman, "PGR: A Canaanite Cult-object in the Old Testament," *JBL* 67 (1948) 55-60. Cf. the pillar set up by Absalom for himself in the King's Valley in 2 Sam 18:18.

105. Cf. K. Galling, "Erwägungen zum Stelenheiligtum von Hazor," *ZDPV* 75 (1959) 11; W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (5th ed.; Garden City: Doubleday, 1968) 201-2 n. 29, "mortuary stelae"; J. Lust, "Exegesis and Theology in the Septuagint of Ezekiel: The Longer 'Pluses' and Ezek 43:1-9," in *VI Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies* (ed. C. E. Cox; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) 217. For a fuller discussion see T. J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit* (HSM 5/39; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 72-79.

106. Cf. the identification of Dagan as *b'l pagrê* in the Mari texts, on which see J. F. Healey, "The Underworld Character of the God Dagan," *JNSL* 5 (1977) 43-51; J. H. Ebach, "PGR = (Toten-)Opfer? Ein Vorschlag zum Verständnis von Ez. 43,7.9," *UF* 3 (1971) 365-68; Heider, *Cult of Molek*, 392-94; KB³, 861-62.

107. Most commentators interpret *mēlākîm* in its usual sense, "kings," in which case Ezekiel's ban is on some sort of royal ancestor cult. However, some have seen in the expression a reference to the rephaim, which in Canaanite usage could apply to deceased and divinized kings. This sense of *mēlākîm* is admittedly rare in the Old Testament (cf. Isa 24:21, on which see Heider, *Cult of Molek*, 392), but it accords with the usage of *mlkm* in the Ugaritic texts. Cf. M. Dietrich and O. Loretz, who conclude that like the *mlkm*, the *rp'ym* belong to the beneficent spirits of the dead worshiped by the living ("Neue Studien zu den Ritualtexten aus Ugarit," *UF* 13 [1981] 69-74). See also J. F. Healey, "MLKM/RP'UM and the KISPUM," 89-91; P. Xella, "Aspekte religiöser Vorstellungen in Syrien nach den Ebla- und Ugarit-Texten," *UF* 15 (1983) 288, who finds a singular Eblaite counterpart in *ilib*.

108. This principle also informed Israel's strict taboos on contact with corpses. See Lang, "Life After Death," 149-51.

109. Cf. the notion of a "living corpse" in Egypt, as discussed by S. Morenz, *Egyptian Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1973) 198-204.

of ties between the living and the dead mean that Ezekiel viewed death as final? That there was no hope beyond the grave and Sheol? To answer this question we turn to one more text, the well-known vision of the dry bones (37:1-14).

No prophecy in the entire book of Ezekiel has captured the imagination of readers down through the centuries like the account of the revivification of the dry bones in chapter 37.¹¹⁰ Few have consumed so much scholarly energy. Unfortunately, time and space constraints force us to limit our comments to conclusions that relate directly to our topic.

At the outset we acknowledge that 32:17-32 and 37:1-14 bear little if any relationship to one another. These texts differ in respect to genre (judgment oracle vs. divine vision), style (formal pronouncement vs. narrative), prophetic involvement (passive recipient vs. active participant), focus of attention (Egypt vs. Israel), result (Pharaoh will take comfort vs. Israel will acknowledge Yahweh), aim (pronounce judgment vs. inspire hope), the location of the dead (persons in Sheol vs. dry bones on the surface of the ground and/or corpses in physical graves¹¹¹), the sphere in which the afterlife is experienced ("the land below" vs. "the land of Israel"), and language.¹¹² One hesitates, therefore, to draw two texts, which display such total disparity, into the same discussion. Nevertheless, since they both deal with the issue of life beyond the grave, we shall proceed.

Although the literary integrity of 37:1-14 continues to be questioned by some,¹¹³ we follow an increasing number of scholars in treating the entire passage as a unity.¹¹⁴ With respect to genre, the text represents a mixed form, being cast (1) as an account of a vision, complete with the vision proper (vv. 1-10) and its interpretation (vv. 11-14); (2) as a dramatic autobiographical narrative, with the prophet's actions playing a more significant role than in any previous vision (cf. 1:1-3:15; 8:1-11:25; 40:1-48:35); (3) and as a salvation

110. Cf. the lower frieze of the third century A.D. synagogue of Dura-Europas, on which see C. H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue* (Yale Excavations at Dura-Europas, final report, part 1; New Haven: Yale University, 1956) 178-207, and plates LXIX-LXXI.

111. The *qibrôt* in 32:22-26 are portrayed as resting places in Sheol; in 37:12-13 the term is used in its literal sense, "graves."

112. None of the technical terms relating to Sheol that occur in 32:17-32 is found in 37:1-14.

113. Cf. P. Höffken, "Beobachtungen zu Ezechiel XXXVII 1-10," *VT* 31 (1981) 305-17; R. Bartelmus, "Ez 37,1-14, die Verbform *wēqātal* und die Anfänge der Auferstehungshoffnung," *ZAW* 97 (1985) 366-89; idem, "Textkritik, Literarkritik und Syntax. Anmerkungen zur neueren Diskussion um Ez 37,11," *Biblische Notizen* 25 (1984) 55-64.

114. Cf. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, 256-58; M. Fox, "The Rhetoric of Ezekiel's Vision of the Valley of the Bones," *HUCA* 51 (1980) 1-15; M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 451-52.

oracle. Although the occasion for this prophecy is declared in v. 11, viz., the loss of hope by the prophet's fellow exiles, the seeds of this vision have actually been planted earlier. In fact, in this passage we recognize another example of Ezekielian *Wideraufnahme*, with 37:1-14 offering an expansion on 36:26-27, where the subject of Yahweh's infusion of his Spirit (*rûah*) had been first introduced.

The prophet begins by recounting how he is brought in visionary form to a vast valley, white with the bones of humans long deceased. The issue of the vision is presented in direct interrogatory form by Yahweh himself: "Can these bones live?" (v. 3). After deferring to Yahweh for the answer, through a series of miraculous events the prophets discovers that the question is to be answered with an enthusiastic "Indeed!" Infused with the breath of Yahweh, Israel can—nay, she will live again!

But the question for us is, what does this text say about Ezekiel's perception of death and afterlife? Without entering into a detailed discussion, we offer the following brief observations:

First, for Ezekiel (as for other prophets) death represents the punishment for spiritual infidelity. Because Israel had not kept Yahweh's covenant, he had imposed its curses upon them.¹¹⁵ *Second*, the Israelites may take hope because there is life after death. God sees their present hopeless condition and cares about their welfare. And he has the power to revive them and to return them to their native soil.¹¹⁶ Death and the grave need not keep their sting (see Hos 13:14) because the Creator of life and the divine patron of Israel, not Nebuchadnezzar, holds the key to the nation's future. Third, the means whereby the corpses are revitalized is by being infused with Yahweh's own life-giving spirit.¹¹⁷ This is how the first lump of clay

115. V. 9 indicates the bones are the remains of *hahărûgîm*, "the slain," that is victims of battle; hence W. Baumgartner's designation of this text as a *Schlachtfeldsage* (*Zum Alten Testament und seiner Umwelt: ausgewählte Aufsätze* [Leiden: Brill, 1959] 361). The fact that the corpses had been left exposed for the vultures and hyenas suggests that they were the objects of some horrendous curse. Cf. F. C. Fensham, "The Curse of the Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37:1-14 Changed to a Blessing of Resurrection," *JNSL* 13 (1987) 59-60. One of the curses in Esarhaddon's vassal-treaty with Ramataya of Urakazabanu provides an extrabiblical analogue: "May Ninurta, leader of the gods, fell you with his fierce arrow, and fill the plain with your corpses, give your flesh to eagles and vultures (Fensham translates "jackal") to feed upon" (*ANET*, 538). Similar curses hung over the Israelites if they should break their covenant oath with Yahweh. Cf. Deut 28:25-26; Jer 34:17-20.

116. Cf. D. E. Demson, "Divine Power Politics: Reflections on Ezekiel 37," in *Intergerini Perietis Septvm (Eph. 2:14): Essays Presented to Markus Barth on his Sixty-fifth Birthday* (ed. D. Y. Hadidian; Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1981) 97-110.

117. Cf. our discussion of the role of Yahweh's *rûah* in "The Prophet of the Spirit: The Use of *rwh* in the Book of Ezekiel," *JETS* 32 (1989) 27-49, especially pp. 34-41 on the *rûah* as "agency of animation."

became a living being; this is how these dry bones will come to life. *Fourth*, this miraculous act of God will result in Yahweh's people recognizing his person and the power of his word. In fact, this is Yahweh's primary objective in the event.

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Having gathered the data that reflect Ezekiel's understanding of the afterlife, several major questions remain. First, what is the doctrinal value of his picture of the netherworld? Does it represent the beliefs of the Israelites, or has the prophet simply created a metaphor for rhetorical effect? Several considerations seem to support the latter view.

First, since Ezekiel's picture is heavily influenced by ancient burial practices (see the inferior location of the realm of the dead, the stratification, the reclining posture, the burial objects), it seems natural that he would describe the netherworld as an extension of the grave, a massive communal mausoleum in which the departed continue to exist as "living corpses."

Second, all of Ezekiel's images of the netherworld are found in judgment oracles against foreign nations.¹¹⁸ The fact that such pictures are absent in prophecies condemnatory of his own people may suggest they were uniquely relevant for non-Israelites, perhaps because of their distinctive perceptions of the afterlife.

Third, Ezekiel regularly borrows images from outside Israel to craft his own oracles, without thereby giving assent to their reality.¹¹⁹ Not only do several features of his netherworld recall Canaanite and Egyptian models (the three-tiered universe, the designations for the realm of the dead, the presence of "heroes" and kings in the netherworld), the incorporation of local coloring in 32:17-32 (the arrangement of the tombs of lesser individuals around

118. The same is true of the closest extra-Ezekielan analogue, Isaiah's taunt of the "King of Babylon" in 14:9-11, 15-20. The links between this text and Ezek 32:17-32 are obvious: (1) The designations for the netherworld (Sheol, the Pit); (2) The physical stratification of Sheol (cf. the references to *yarkētê bôr*, "the farthest recesses of the Pit"); (3) The social ordering of its residents, with the more wicked inhabitants (like the "King of Babylon" in Isaiah), who were never afforded an honorable burial, being confined to the farthest recesses of the Pit; (4) The state of the dead (a shadowy existence, as "living corpses," lying on their beds, but fully conscious of their relative positions). On the date of Isaiah 14 see S. Erlandsson, *The Burden of Babylon: A Study of Isaiah 13:2-14:23* (ConBOT 4; Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1970), esp. 160-66.

119. Cf. the iconographic features of his inaugural vision (1:4-28); the description of the king of Tyre's hybris and fall (28:1-10); the comparison of the king of Egypt to a sea monster (*tannîm*, 29:3-5; 32:2-8).

that of the king) is quite appropriate for the principal subject of the oracle.

Fourth, the intention of this oracle is not doctrinal, but rhetorical—inspire hope in the hearts of the prophet's fellow exiles by announcing the eventual demise of their foreign enemies. The caricatured and contrary-to-fact features in the prophecy (e.g., Egypt, Sidon, Edom lie among the uncircumcised) suggest that it should be interpreted as a literary cartoon rather than a literary photograph.

Fifth, the doctrinal value of related texts is not always clear. Like our text, the nearest prophetic analogue, Isaiah 14, concerns a foreign nation. Comments on the netherworld in the book of Job and in the Psalter represent human responses to reality from the lips of persons experiencing intense trauma, rather than didactic expressions of belief or divine affirmations of reality. Nor is the issue resolved when Jesus takes up the metaphor in Luke 16:19-31. The Old Testament background helps to explain the distinct fates of Lazarus and the rich man in the afterlife. But with his reference to the impenetrable gulf between "Abraham's Bosom" and "Hades,"¹²⁰ Jesus has not only taken the stratification in Sheol one step farther; if Abraham's Bosom is actually to be located in the netherworld he has also found a place there for the righteous. However, as in the prophetic utterances, Jesus' discussion of the afterlife occurs in story form in a polemic against his opponents.

It is tempting to conclude, therefore, that the Israelites had no doctrine of the netherworld; they just told stories about it.¹²¹ However, the doctrinal implications of oracles like this should not be discounted too quickly. Admittedly Ezekiel's prophecy deals with a foreign nation, but to base the claim that the Israelites shared none of these views on their absence in oracles concerning their own judgment is to argue from silence. Moreover, although the oracles against the foreign nations by definition dealt primarily with Israel's enemies, they were intended first of all for the prophet's own people's consumption. His primary audience consisted of fellow Israelites in exile

120. The New Testament use of "Hades" is inconsistent. On the one hand, it identifies the location of the ungodly in the netherworld at their decease (as in Luke 16:23; cf. 1 Pet 3:19), in contrast to Abraham's Bosom (Luke 16:23), Paradise (23:23), the presence of the Lord (2 Cor 5:8), union with Christ (Phil 1:23), the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22). On the other hand, Acts 2:27, 31 seems to envision Hades as the place of assembly for all souls. This inconsistency of usage is also evident in Josephus. Hades is the place of both the righteous and the wicked in *Ant* 18.14 and *Wars* 2.163; of the temporary sojourn of the wicked only in *Wars* 3.375. Cf. J. Jeremias, *TDNT* 1.146-49.

121. According to G. von Rad, "Apart from isolated questionings (e.g., Job xiv.13-22), it [the realm of the dead] was not a subject of real interest to faith. Poetic fancy alone took it up now and then (Isa xiv. 9ff.; Ezek xxxii.20ff.)" (*Old Testament Theology* [2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962/1965] 2.350).

with whom he shared a particular worldview, but whose minds he was seeking to change. Given the apostate condition of his countrymen, it is conceivable that many of them had bought into pagan beliefs concerning the netherworld, and many of them will have interpreted the details of his oracle literally. But this does not preclude the normativeness of the underlying theological truths: life continues after death; Yahweh is the supreme ruler of the entire universe, including the netherworld; a person's status in the afterlife is affected by conduct in the realm of the living.

But we should not be surprised that there are still many gaps in Ezekiel's presentation of the afterlife. His occasional use of the term 'ōlām creates the impression of an enduring stay, but he provides no clear indication of how permanent the assignments in Sheol are. His Sheol is not to be confused with Gehenna/hell. There are no hints yet of a final eschatological judgment, or of an eternal fiery punishment of the wicked. All of these developments must await a later day.¹²²

The second major doctrinal question is raised by chapter 37. It is clear that the primary concern of this vision is the revival of the nation of Israel, but does the prophet hereby imply a belief in individual resurrection? In addressing the issue two types of evidence may be considered, viz., the witness of comparative ancient Near Eastern religion, and inner biblical data.

Some have found the roots of Ezekiel's ideas in Egyptian beliefs about the deceased rising as stars and taking their place in the heavens.¹²³ Others have recognized a belief in personal resurrection in ancient Mesopotamian and Syrian festivals celebrating the annual revivification of the storm god, and/or the annual New Year's fes-

122. Cf. Dan 12:2. However, there is still no specific mention of torment or the fires of Gehenna. On the development of this notion in early Jewish thought see R. Bauckham, "Early Jewish Visions of Hell," *JTS*, n.s. 41 (1990) 355-85. Cf. also S. J. Fox, *Hell in Jewish Literature* (Northbrook: Whitehall, 1972). On the growth of the Christian doctrine see G. W. Bromiley, "Hell, History of the Doctrine of," *ISBE* (rev. ed.) 2.677-79.

123. On which see H. Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion: An Interpretation* (New York: Cornell University, 1948) 100-23; Cf. Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 86-95; Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 204-13. In some Old Kingdom texts hope for a beatific afterlife was held out only for the king, who in his identification with a star, or later the sun-god Re, crossed the heavens each day and entered the netherworld at night. Some texts identify the king with Osiris, the ruler of the dead, but this role offered him no possibility of leaving that realm. Later these two notions merged, and Osiris took his place in the heavens, being associated with Orion or the moon, as a nightly counterpart to Re. The custom of mummification was designed to enable the deceased to live on as a "living corpse" and to protect him on his nightly journey to the world of the dead and the daily journey through heaven. With the decline of the Egyptian kingdom, some democratization of the hope of beatific afterlife made possible by identification with Osiris after death becomes apparent. On the role of Osiris see H. Kees, *Totenglauben and Jenseitsvorstellungen der alten Ägypter* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1980) 132-59.

tival which commemorated the storm god's victory over death (Mot).¹²⁴ K. Spronk argues that the hope for a beatific afterlife, which he defines as "being forever with God (or the gods) in heaven (cf. I Thess 4:17)," was an important element in Israelite "folk religion" (as opposed to "official Yahwistic religion").¹²⁵ He concludes, "The Israelites were clearly familiar with the Canaanite belief in Baal rising from the netherworld every year and taking the deified spirits, of the royal dead with him."¹²⁶ These royal dead, known as Rephaim, are thereby entitled to celebrate with Baal at the New Year's Festival, and as "divine ancestors" (*'il'ib*, KTU 1.17:1,26).

However, neither the Egyptian nor the Near Year's festival theory is convincing.¹²⁷ Nor does Ezekiel's vision of the resuscitation of the dead have anything to do with a beatific afterlife "forever with God in heaven," as Spronk defines it.¹²⁸ The theory of Zoroastrian influence seems more likely.¹²⁹ B. Lang is especially impressed by the sight of the dry bones lying exposed on the surface of the ground, which he relates to the Zoroastrian practice of exposing

124. Cf. Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 195-96. On the issue of the Ugaritic New Year's festival see D. Marcus in a review of J. C. de Moor, *New Year with Canaanites and Israelites* in *JAOS* 93 (1973) 589-91; L. L. Grabbe, "The Seasonal Pattern and the Baal Cycle," *UF* 8 (1976) 57-63. On the New Year's festival background to Ezekielian ideas see H. Riesenfeld, *The Resurrection in Ezekiel XXXVII and in the Dura-Europas Paintings* (Uppsala Universitets Arsskrift 11; Uppsala: Lundeqistska Bokhandeln, 1948). But cf. H. Birkeland, "The Belief in the Resurrection of the Dead in the Old Testament," *Studia Theologica* 3 (1949) 60-78; Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 2, 264.

125. *Beatific Afterlife*, 85.

126. *Ibid* 344.

127. There are no hints of Egyptian influence at all in Ezekiel 37. The resuscitation of the dry bones is presented as a one time event, the graves actually open and return their occupants to the land of the living (not to heaven), and Yahweh, at once the patron of Israel and sovereign Lord of life and death, imbues the corpses with his breath. Not only is it doubtful that a New Year's festival based on the Mesopotamian or Canaanite model was ever a part of the Yahwist cult (cf. D. I. Block, "New Year," *ISBE* [rev. ed.] 3.529-32), orthodox Yahwism viewed notions of fertility deities and their conflicts with the god of death as pagan and tended to react against them rather than to incorporate them into its cult. Cf. also Birkeland, "The Belief in the Resurrection," 60-78, and Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 2, 264, for rejection of this connection.

128. Cf. the critique of Spronk by M. S. Smith and E. Bloch-Smith, "Death and Afterlife in Ugarit and Israel," *JAOS* 108 (1988) 277-84.

129. See B. Lang, "Street Theater, Raising the Dead, and the Zoroastrian Connection in Ezekiel's Prophecy," in *Ezekiel and His Book: Textual and Literary Criticism and their Interrelation* (BETL 74; ed. J. Lust; Leuven: Leuven University, 1986) 307-16; *idem*, "Life After Death in the Prophetic Promise," 144-56, esp. 154-55; *idem*, "Afterlife: Ancient Israel's Changing Vision of the World Beyond," *BR* 4 (1988) 12-23, esp. 19-20 (a popular treatment); McDannell and Lang, *Heaven: A History*, 12-13. For a survey of the history of this view and a more cautious understanding of the relationship see R. Martin-Achard, *From Death to Life: A Study of the Development of the Doctrine of the Resurrection in the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960) 186-95; Spronk,

human corpses to the elements, rather than burying them.¹³⁰ He surmises that Ezekiel might have visited or heard of funeral grounds such as these, and that the prophet's vision echoes the Zoroastrian belief that one day the bones will be reassembled and revived.

There is no a priori reason why Ezekiel could not have incorporated Iranian notions into his message for rhetorical effect, even as he makes use of Mesopotamian, Syrian and Phoenician ideas elsewhere. In fact the monotheism and ethical character of this religion render it much more compatible with Yahwism than the other pagan ideologies. However, not only does Lang not answer the chronological¹³¹ and conceptual¹³² objections to the theory of Iranian influence that have been raised previously,¹³³ his suggestion that Ezekiel may have been familiar with, and may even have visited Zoroastrian funeral grounds is speculative wishful thinking. This would have required visionary translocation far to the northeast of the exilic community to the land of Persia, a land which no other Israelite had ever visited. Furthermore, the reference to *hahārûgîm*, "the slain," in 37:9 rules out

Beatific Afterlife, 57-59. Cf. also G. Widengren, "Israelite-Jewish Religion," *Religions of the Past (Historia Religionum* 1; ed. C. J. Bleeker and G. Widengren; Leiden: Brill, 1969) 311-12; Birkeland, "Belief in the Resurrection," 60-78. Cf. also M. Nobile, who relates the motif of resurrection in Ezekiel 37 to the annual Iranian festival of *Farvardigān* ("Influssi Iranici nel Libro di Ezechiele?" *Antoniano* 63 [1988] 449-57).

130. Lang, "Street Theater," 310-12. Cf. Herodotus, *Histories* 1.140. For a description of Zoroastrian funeral practices see Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism* (Handbuch der Orientalistik 1/8/1; Leiden/Köln: Brill, 1975) 325-30. Cf. also J. R. Russel, "Burial iii. In Zoroastrianism," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (ed. E. Yarshater; London/New York: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1982) 4.561-63.

131. It is unclear when the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead was developed in Persian religion. The earliest certain reference derives from the Greek Theopompus (born *circa* 380 B.c.). The citation by Aeneas of Gaza in Theophrastus 77 reads as follows:

And yet even Plato brings back Armenius in bodily form from Hades to the land of the living. And Zoroaster prophesies that some day there will be a resurrection of all dead. Theopompus knows of this and is himself the source of information concerning it for the other writers.

No explicit contemporary Persian attestation is known.

132. Whereas the Old Testament concentrates on life before death, the Persian attention is focused on life after death. The Old Testament has no counterpart to the Persian view of the separation of body and soul. The Persian focus on judgment immediately after death contrasts with the Israelite, and specifically Ezekielian view of Sheol as a place of shadowy existence. When the doctrine of judgment emerges it is seen as an eschatological event. Perhaps the most important difference is the Israelite interest in reconciliation with God and the remission of sins, notions which have no parallel in Persian thought.

133. See the critique of F. König, *Zarathustras Jenseitsvorstellungen und das Alte Testament* (Wien: 1964), 271-85. Cf. also Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 58.

the possibility of Ezekiel's valley of dry bones being a cemetery of any kind, Israelite, Babylonian, or Persian. What Ezekiel sees in the bones is a graphic portrayal of the effects of the covenant curse upon his people. If there is any connection with Persian notions at all, rather than adopting Zoroastrian ideas, in vv. 11-14 in particular, Ezekiel has presented a powerful polemic against them.¹³⁴

Native Israelite soil provides a more likely seedbed for Ezekiel's notions of resurrection. *First*, the doctrine of resurrection could have developed as a natural corollary to Israelite anthropological views. The Hebrews looked upon man as a unity, a *nepesš hayyâ*, constituted by the infusion of divine life breath into the physical form (Gen 2:7).¹³⁵ At death, which was viewed as the divine sentence for sin (Gen 2:17; 3:19), the physical matter and life-giving breath are divorced and the *nepesš* dissolves (Job 34:14-15; Ps 104:29; Qoh 3:18-21; 12:7). It follows then that any hope of victory over death and a beatific afterlife would require a reunion of the divorced components, which is exactly what happens in Ezekiel 37.¹³⁶

Second, the revivification of the dry bones is reminiscent of the life-giving power of his predecessors, Elijah and Elisha (1 Kgs 17:17-24; 2 Kgs 4:18-37; and 13:20-21). To be sure, these cases could be interpreted simply as postmortem healings, inasmuch as the raised persons had recently died and their flesh was certainly still on the bones. But the fact is that as was the case with Elijah and Elisha, through the involvement of a prophet, the dead come to life.

Third, the psalmists regarded having one's life threatened as being in the grip of Sheol, and to be delivered from this dangerous situation as being brought back to life (e.g., 16:11-12; 49:15-16).¹³⁷ Admittedly, the concern is for an early, if not immediate, rescue

134. This Zoroastrian connection is also rejected by A. A. di Lella, in L. F. Hartman and A. A. di Lella, *The Book of Daniel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 23; Garden City: Doubleday, 1978) 308.

135. Cf. *nepesš mēt*, Num 6:6; Lev 21:11. On the expression see A. Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1964) 19; H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 22; Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2.134-42.

136. Cf. the discussion of L. J. Greenspoon, "The Origin of the Idea of Resurrection," in *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith* (F. M. Cross Festschrift, ed. B. Halpern and J. D. Levenson; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1981) 249-53 (Greenspoon argues that the doctrine arises out of the image of Yahweh as a divine warrior); L. Rost, "Alttestamentliche Wurzeln der Ersten Auferstehung," in *Memoriam Ernst Lohmeyer* (ed. W. Schmauch; Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1951) 66-72. But this interpretation is rejected by di Lella, *The Book of Daniel*, 308.

137. Cf. F. I. Andersen and D. N. Freedman, *Hosea: A New Translation with Introduction and Notes* (AB 24; Garden City: Doubleday, 1980) 421. For discussion of the relevant texts in the Psalms, as well as several from Proverbs see M. Dahood, *Psalms III*

rather than an eschatological deliverance from Sheol, but the language of resurrection can scarcely be denied.

Fourth, earlier prophets anticipate Ezekiel's vision of a national resurrection. The fact that Hosea (6:1-3¹³⁸) and Isaiah (26:19)¹³⁹ had already toyed with the idea suggests that in chapter 37 an idea that had germinated at least one and a half centuries earlier has begun to bud.¹⁴⁰ On the other hand, although scholars are reluctant to acknowledge the creative contributions of any prophet, we should not overlook the significance of internal evidence. This message comes to Ezekiel as a direct revelation from God. In a new and dramatic way, the conviction that the grave need not be the end provided a powerful vehicle for announcing the full restoration of Israel. The curse would be lifted. Yahweh would bring his people back to life. To be sure, the form of Ezekiel's message is striking, but his concept of resurrection need not have caught his audience by surprise.¹⁴¹ Even so,

(AB 17A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1970, xlii—lii). Dahood's recognition of this "obvious meaning" (p. xlv) contrasts with that of earlier scholars like C. Barth, who maintained that the belief in Yahweh's ability to rescue one from death has nothing to do with a belief in a beatific afterlife (*Die Errettung vom Tode in den individuellen Klage- und Dankliedern des Alten Testaments* [Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag, 1947], 166).

138. Note the resurrection language in the verbs in v. 2: *hīyyā*, "to make alive," and *hēqīm*, "to raise up," with which may be compared Ezekiel's *hāyyā*, "to live," and *āmad*, "to stand" (37:10). Recent scholars have tended to view this penitential song as a reflex of the Canaanite myth of Baal, whose death and resurrection are celebrated annually in the cult. H. W. Wolff speaks of "the Canaanization of the Yahweh cult" (*Hosea* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974] 117). Cf. Martin-Achard, *From Death to Life*, 74-86; Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 62-63. Since it is doubtful that Hosea himself would have composed such a song, it has become fashionable to see here the words of Hosea's opponents, perhaps the priests, who found in the pagan myth cheap grounds for hope. Cf. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2.504-5; Wolff, *Hosea*, 109, 117. But the style of the text is genuinely Hoseanic, and its placement in the context follows the doom-hope alternation characteristic of the book as a whole. Cf. Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea*, 417-25; D. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (WBC 31; Waco: Word, 1987) 106-9.

139. This text provides one of the clearest statements of resurrection in the Old Testament, whether one interprets it as a prayer (Martin-Achard, *From Death to Life*, 131; *NJPS*; etc.) or an affirmation of certainty (O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39: A Commentary* [OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974] 2315; J. D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33* [WBC 24; Waco: Word, 1985], 337; Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 299; etc.). On the passage see G. F. Hasel, "Resurrection in the Theology of Old Testament Apocalyptic," *ZAW* 92 (1980) 268 n. 8. For defenses of an early date for this text see J. N. Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 441; *idem*, "Recent Studies in the OT Eschatology and Apocalyptic," *JETS* 24 (1981) 289-302. Cf. also R. J. Coggins, "The Problem of Isa. 24-27," *ET* 90 (1978-79) 329-33.

140. Other texts that have been drawn into the discussion of resurrection include Deut 32:39; Hos 13:4; Isa 53:10-12; Jer 51:39, 57.

141. Cf. the overstatement of M. Fox, "Ezekiel's primary strategy is boldly to affirm the absurd . . . He will seek to make them expect the unexpected" ("The Rhetoric

it remained for his successors to develop a clearer picture of an eschatological individualized revivification.¹⁴²

CONCLUSION

It is remarkable that as recently as 1985 biblical scholars were still maintaining that "in ancient Israel there was no belief in a life after death."¹⁴³ Many believe that the Pharisaic acceptance of the doctrine (see Acts 23:6-9) derives from a limited number of late texts which reflect Persian influence, and that the Sadduceans, who rejected the notion, were the true heirs of Old Testament belief. It is encouraging to see that some have reversed the roles of these two parties and are now insisting that the Sadducean position represented a conscious departure from both Hebrew and common Semitic beliefs.¹⁴⁴

In his oracles against Egypt and in his vision of the resuscitated dry bones, Ezekiel offered his countrymen powerful declarations of hope. There is life after death, and there is hope beyond the grave. Yahweh remains the incontestable Lord, not only of the living, but also of the dead. He alone determines the moment and nature of a person's decease. He alone has the keys to the gates of Sheol, and he faces no challenge from Mot or any other chthonic power. In this regard Ezekiel, like all other orthodox Yahwists, distances himself from the prevailing notions of his day. But this vision of resuscitation of dry bones is not only for the nation of Israel. It holds out hope for all who offer themselves to Yahweh in covenant commitment. With good reason we who are heirs of the glorious message of the prophets and apostles may find in this text a dramatic affirmation that the sting of death may—nay, it will be overcome by the animating power of Yahweh's Spirit. After all, as Ezekiel had witnessed, and as he had heard on dozens of occasions, the Lord is Yahweh. He has spoken. He will make good his word.

of Ezekiel's Vision," p. 10). While Ezekiel 37 may represent a determinative moment for the Old Testament belief in the resurrection of the dead (cf. E. Haag, "Ez 37 und der Glaube an die Auferstehung der Toten," *Trierer theologische Zeitschrift* 82 [1973] 78-92), contra many (e.g., R. Hanson, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* [OTL; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964] 368), it is highly unlikely that this passage provides the first reference to the resurrection of the dead in Hebrew literature.

142. Cf. R. A. Muller, "Resurrection," *ISBE* (rev. ed.) 4.145-50.

143. J. H. Neyrey, "Eternal Life," *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (ed. P. J. Achtemeier; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 282. Cf. the reaction to this statement by Lang, "Life After Death in the Prophetic Promise," 144.

144. B. Lang, *Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983) 25; *idem*, "Life After Death in the Prophetic Promise," 144-45 (cf. his citation of other scholars who have come to similar conclusions).