Visions of Death and Re-creation: Ezekiel 8–11; 37:1–14 and the Crisis of Identity in the Babylonian Exile and Beyond

A collective identity is essential to any group of human beings. When one or several elements vital to this identity are taken away, the group will face a crisis and, as a group, it may cease to exist. The onset of the Babylonian Exile in the early sixth century B.C.E. posed a crisis of unprecedented depth to the deported Judeans. In the face of the loss of most expressions of their national-religious identity, such as temple, king, and land, they had to make sense of this loss theologically and redefine their identity-forming relationship to their national deity: YHWH.

In this process, the book of Ezekiel plays an important part. It deals with the issues not abstractly but in a narrative way, in the genres of a prophetic book, such as oracles, reports of symbolic actions and strikingly elaborate vision accounts. To a great extent, the book of Ezekiel is about destruction and death. However, it is also, especially in its second half, about re-creation and new life. This contrast is deliberate and reflects the depth of the crisis that does not allow for a direct continuation.

It is important to note that the words and images of death and re-creation in Ezekiel are neither about the resurrection of individuals, nor about the death of individuals alone, nor do they refer to any eschatological idea of eternal life after death. Rather, it is first and foremost a collective body whose death and, later, world-
immanent re-creation is announced: the ‘House of Israel’ in its identity as the people of YHWH. We might also say: what dies and is re-created is the relationship between God and God’s people.¹

While the death-and-recreation pattern as such has repeatedly received attention in the literature on Ezekiel, also in view of its anthropological and theological implications,² its collective character has not always been underlined so strongly. The present article wishes to contribute to the theological discussion on Ezekiel and its meaning for today while staying close to the biblical text and its historical background. Among the many relevant text units in the book of Ezekiel, it will zoom in on two texts that are symptomatic snapshots of the death and re-creation of the divine-human relationship: the vision of the defiled temple in Ezekiel 8–11 (death); and the vision of


the dry bones in Ezek 37:1–14 (recreation). Both texts are vision narratives, depicting the events they announce in graphic imagery and anticipating them on a visionary level. In both visions, images of physical violent death, or its reversal, play a central role. Choosing only two of the many possible text units will allow us to analyze the text in some depth. The basis of the discussion will be mainly what I consider the original layer of the texts, yet without going into detail with the redaction-critical analysis. The discussion will include the texts’ structure and employ tools of narrative criticism and rhetorical criticism.

The historical background that is assumed for at least the oldest parts of these texts is the early Babylonian Exile, the author ‘Ezekiel’ being among those Judeans who were deported, together with King Jehoiachin, in 598/7 B.C.E. The primary intended

3 Certainly, death is not the only theme in Ezekiel 8–11 but it is an important one. When focusing more on the themes of the temple or of the presence and absence of God, Ezekiel 8–11 is usually read in the context of its ‘reversal’ in chs 40–48 and/or the other large vision account in chs 1–3. On the close connections between all four of these texts, see Janina Maria Hiebel, Ezekiel’s Vision Accounts as Interrelated Narratives: A Redaction-Critical and Theological Study (BZAW 475; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2015).

4 For a detailed redaction-critical discussion of Ezekiel 8–11; 37:1–14, see Hiebel, Ezekiel’s Vision Accounts as Interrelated Narratives, 99–118 and 140–55, respectively. The original layer of Ezekiel 8–11 is there defined as 8:1, 3*, 5–7a, 9–18; 9:1, 2*, 5*, 6*, 7–10; 10:2, 4, 6a–c, 7*, 18a, 19d; 11:23–25. The original layer of Ezek 37:1–14 is defined as 37:1–6, 7c–8d, 10c–12, 14a–f.
audience of the texts is therefore the exilic community, though it may have also included those Judeans who remained in the land.  

From Life to Death: Ezekiel 8–11

The first 24 chapters of Ezekiel are filled mainly with announcements of death, devastation, and divine punishment. One climax of this is the vision of the temple in chs 8–11. While following the common prophetic sequence of crime and punishment, this text eloquently indicates a profound crisis in the divine-human relationship.

Ezekiel 8–11 presents itself as a long vision account; the limits of the text unit are clearly marked by a frame, from the beginning of ch. 8 to the end of ch. 11. The material within the account is however quite diverse, which is due to its redaction history. Disregarding, for the moment, some elements that were added secondarily in this context, such as the two disputation words in 11:1–21 and the description of the cherubim throne and glory throughout ch. 10, the basic structure of the vision has two parts:

8:1–3* Frame: From Exile to Jerusalem

8:5–18 First Part: Demonstration of Guilt

Exactly who is intended by the ubiquitous term “House of Israel” (bet yisra’el) is not always clear and seems to vary within the book. It certainly means the exilic community (the main focus of Ezek 37:1–14); whilst in Ezekiel 8–11 it is also used for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.
9:1–11:23* Second Part: Judgement

11:24–25 Frame: Return from Jerusalem into Exile

The frame sees the prophet-narrator transported from the exilic community to Jerusalem and back by a divine force. The main body is, by structure, a sequence of short vision accounts (8:5–6, 7–13*, 14–15, 16–18). At the same time, it is a prophetic word of judgement in two parts: first the demonstration of guilt, followed by the announcement of judgement. 6

In the first part, the prophet is led by a guide around the temple area (8:5–18). In four locations, which are increasingly close to the temple building, he witnesses four ‘abominations’ (to’ebot), that is non-YHWH cult practices. The repetitive scenes are a sequence of four partial visions; each is showing one aspect of ‘abomination’ but, when read together, they illustrate the completeness of Israel’s sins. 7 Three scenes involve, respectively, a large group of elders (8:7–13), a group of women (8:14–15), and a group of men (8:16–18) – together representing the House of Israel in its entirety. The vision

6 Leslie C. Allen, Ezekiel 1–19 (WBC 28; Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 130 calls it appropriately ‘a visionary version of a two-part oracle of judgement’.

indicates that not only some individuals but all of the House of Israel have in one way or another turned their back on YHWH, just as the men in the temple court have done physically (8:16).\(^8\)

The underlying attitude of the people is expressed in their twice-quoted statement, ‘The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land’ (8:12 NRSV; cf. 9:9). The Hebrew wording of the first clause (‘en yhwh ro’eh) translates literally even more forcefully as ‘There is no YHWH who sees.’ This is not about turning a blind eye on one or the other particular situation. This statement either affirms that YHWH is blind altogether or, as the second clause suggests, that he is absent and does not care. The statement is quoted by the guide to the prophet in obvious disapproval. Moreover, the fallacy is immediately clear to the reader, as God not only sees the ‘abominations’ but in fact makes sure the prophet (and thus the reader) sees them as well. Moreover, God is obviously still present while the people presume his absence, and leaves the city precisely on account of what they are doing.

Thus the first part of the vision portrays a God who knows the deeds and thoughts of his people, and a House of Israel who has lost, in principle and in practice, any trust, respect and fear towards their God.

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\(^8\) Steven S. Tuell, *Ezekiel* (NIBCOT; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2009), 44–45. From this viewpoint the much disputed question whether the described cults could have taken place in Jerusalem in 597–587 or whether they represent memories from the times of Manasseh becomes almost irrelevant.
The second part of the vision (9:1–11:23*) is clearly intended to illustrate the consequences of this situation. As the people have rejected YHWH (especially through their ways of worshipping), now YHWH rejects and destroys his people (explicitly starting from their place of worship). Seven men arrive to execute the judgement (9:2). Six are sent off to kill the inhabitants of Jerusalem (9:5–7). The seventh man is told to take burning coals from the temple and to scatter them over the city (10:2, 6–7) whilst the glory of YHWH departs first from the temple and then from the city (10:4, 18–19*; 11:23).

All this signifies the end of the relationship between YHWH and Israel. The temple and the city of Jerusalem were supposed to be privileged places of YHWH’s presence, but they can no longer be regarded as such.11 The ties between God and

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9 A later redaction mitigated this somewhat by having the innocent marked and spared. This redaction comprises 9:2 (waqeset hassoper bmtnayw), 3b–4, 5 (kaharayw), 6 (w‘al-kol-‘ish ‘asher-‘alayw hattaw ‘al-tigashu). It was first identified by Ernst Vogt, Untersuchungen zum Buch Ezechiel (AnBib 95; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981), 46–48. For criticism on this proposal, see for example Thomas Renz, The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel (VTSup 76; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 185–88.

10 Later redactors inserted ample embellishments regarding the exit of the glory, generously copying from Ezek 1:4–28. (For details, see Hiebel, Vision Accounts, 115, 241–46). The motif of the glory of YHWH abandoning temple and city is reversed in Ezek 43:1–12.

11 Thomas Renz, ‘The Use of the Zion Tradition in the Book of Ezekiel,’ in Hess and Wenham (eds) Zion, City of our God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 89–91, 102. Again, the holiness of the temple
people seem now to be severed from both sides. Hence, the House of Israel, as a collective, is no longer the people of YHWH.

However, being the people of YHWH is at the heart of their identity; Israel without YHWH cannot exist. The prophet’s grasp of the events is therefore correct when he asks, ‘Are you destroying the entire remnant of Israel by pouring out your wrath upon Jerusalem?’ (9:8). His question is not so much concerned with the survival of individuals; rather, it is the question of whether Israel in its collective identity as the people of YHWH will continue to exist. Against the background of the catastrophic events of 597/587 B.C.E. this certainly is a valid and serious question.

On a narrative level, it is interesting to observe the use of point-of-view in this passage. Generally in Ezekiel, the figure of the prophet functions as the first-person narrator. While this means that the readers ‘see’ everything through the prophet-narrator’s eyes, they are not usually made privy to his thoughts and feelings. The character of the prophet, in contrast to that of YHWH, remains flat and colourless. The and God’s presence in temple and city are restored and secured in the second temple vision in chs 40–48.

12 On the use of point of view in the Ezekielian vision accounts, see Hiebel, Vision Accounts, 260–63.

outcry in 9:8 is a rare exception to this.\textsuperscript{14} Here the prophet dramatically expresses his point of view of the events: he sees total destruction through the outpouring of divine wrath. YHWH’s answer describes the same scene – but from YHWH’s point of view: ‘The guilt of the House of Israel and Judah is very, very great. ... For they say, “YHWH has abandoned the land; there is no YHWH who sees.” ... I have brought their deeds upon their heads’ (9:9–10). What appears to the prophet as a destructive act of God is seen by YHWH as a consequence of Israel’s destructive behaviour. Both affirmations together indicate to the reader that the judgement is indeed aimed at the complete annihilation of the ‘House of Israel and Judah’.

Overall, from Ezekiel’s first temple vision, it is evident that the relationship between YHWH and Israel is so deeply in crisis that no way of repair can be envisioned.\textsuperscript{15} In fact, the text contains no summons to repentance. Nothing can be done except accepting the death sentence. The people of YHWH is no longer the people of

\textsuperscript{14} On the significance of the three outcries in Ezek 4:14; 9:8; 11:13 from a reader-response perspective, see Tobias Häner, Bloibendes Nachwirken des Exils: Eine Untersuchung zur kanonischen Endgestalt des Ezechielbuches (Herders Biblische Studien 78; Freiburg: Herder, 2014), 189–92.

\textsuperscript{15} For Ezekiel, ‘nothing is salvageable, neither the land, nor human identity – all must be destroyed so that they may be recreated de novo’ (Lapsley, ‘Ezekiel,’ 284). See also Renz, Rhetorical Function, 177–99.
YHWH; therefore it will no longer be a people. As a people, as a collective identity, it is dead already.

**From Death to Life: Ezek 37:1–14**

Historically speaking, the events of 587 – to which this vision refers – were not the end of Israelite identity and religion. Presumably, it took the first (generation of) author(s) of the Ezekielian writings some time to start considering the possibility of a future, despite and within the Exile. And even then, the writings do not have the death sentence revoked: Israel, in its collective identity, did have to die before it could live again.

The text that most vividly illustrates this is the vision of the valley of bones, Ezek 37:1–14. A literary and rhetorical masterpiece, it is one of the better-known passages in Ezekiel. As with the previous text, I will mainly focus on what I consider to be the oldest version of the account.

The beginning of the vision leaves no doubt about the reality of death as it displays a large number of scattered human bones, dead for so long that no individual traits are preserved (37:1–2). The fact that these bones are not buried but are lying on


17 That is, 37:1–6, 7c–8d, 10c–12, 14a–f. For a detailed redaction criticism of Ezek 37:1–14, see Hiebel, *Vision Accounts*, 140–55.
the surface of the plain, or valley (habbiq’ah), indicates a violent death, perhaps a battle in war.

The vision account has, again, two parts. There is no frame as with the temple vision, although the introduction in 37:1 includes transportation by divine power.

37:1–10* Vision: The Bones receive New Life

37:11–14* Disputation: Israel receives New Life

Only the first part (37:1–10) is set on a visionary level; the second (37:11–14) refers to the narrated reality. The two parts have strong parallels. Firstly, both vv. 1–2 and v. 11 begin by describing a situation of death involving dry bones. Secondly, towards the beginning of each part, and only there, we find the typical Ezekielian speech introduction ‘And he said to me, “Son of man...”’ (37:3, 11).18 Thirdly, each part contains a divine promise of life (37:4–6, 12–14). The introduction of the divine speech in vv. 4–5 matches that of v. 12: ‘Prophesy...and you shall say to them,’ followed by the messenger formula (37:4–5a, 12). The promise itself begins with ‘Behold, I am going to...’ (hinneh ’ani plus participle; 37:5, 12) and unfolds in a series of details.

The first part holds a prophecy of life to the dead bones (vv. 5–6), spelled out as their receiving sinews, flesh, skin, and finally ‘breath’ (ruaḥ) and life. As the prophet

18 This phrase is specifically linked to vision accounts in Ezekiel (Cornelius B. Houk, ‘בן־אדם Patterns as Literary Criteria in Ezekiel,’ JBL 88 [1969], 186).
relates this incredible promise to the bones, he witnesses its coming true. On receiving
the prophecy, the bones immediately reconstitute bodies and, after being given ruah,
finally turn into a multitude of living human beings (vv. 8–10*). The promise to the
bones is fulfilled literally and in every detail as promised (sinews, flesh, skin). Only one
element of the promise is missing in the fulfilment: the recognition formula ‘and you
shall know that I am YHWH’ (v. 6) is not taken up in vv. 8–10. The vision ends in v. 10
with the revived people, now called ‘a very great army/force’, standing in the plain. The
story seems incomplete, insofar as the reader is left wondering what the crowd is going
to do.

In the second part, v. 11 reveals that the bones are a symbol for Israel in exile,
which would have been of little surprise to contemporary readers. As stated above, the
subsequent promise to the exiles has close parallels to the promise to the bones.
Although, consistent with the addressee, the two promises differ in their actual content,
the same verb (’lh ‘to go up’) appears in vv. 6, 8 and 12. Both v. 6 and v. 14 promise
ruah in connection to life and knowledge of God. In v. 6 the word is not further

19 In what is arguably a later expansion of the text (from the last clause of v. 8 until v. 10a), the actual
restoration of life is delayed and occurs only in a second step; but in any case, the bones live. For a
short overview of the redaction-critical discussion, see Karin Schöpflin, ‘The Revivification of the Dry
Bones: Ezekiel 37:1–14,’ in Nicklas, Reiterer and Verheyden (eds), The Human Body in Death and
qualified and thus can mean ‘breath’ (physical life) or ‘spirit’ (mind, willpower). Verse 14 adds a possessive suffix (ruḥi, ‘my spirit’), which specifies that here a sharing in the divine spirit is envisioned. In order to re-create the exiles from their state of ‘death’ more is needed than the physical ability to breathe, or even human willpower; what the exiles need to ‘live again’ is the ‘spirit of God’: being again in relationship with God.20

Whilst the two promises are parallel, there is no corresponding section to 37:7–10. The re-creation of Israel is announced, but not narrated. However: once the readers have followed the plot of the vision this far, they are effectively obliged to accept that, if YHWH is able to breathe life into scattered, sun-bleached bones, and if the exiles are ‘cut off’ and dried-up bones, then, by logical inference, it is also within YHWH’s power to restore the exiles.21 The incredible event of new life being given to the dead becomes more credible through the fact that the prophet-narrator does not predict it but witnesses it, albeit in vision. The account is open-ended because it is to be completed in history.

20 See Michael V. Fox, ‘Rhetoric,’ 14–15. Verse 14 is often seen as a later redactional addition; see for example Johannes Schnocks, Rettung und Neuschöpfung: Studien zur alttestamentlichen Grundlegung einer gesamtbiblischen Theologie der Auferstehung (Bonner Biblische Beiträge 158; Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2009), 222–26; Konkel, ‘Ezechiel – Prophet ohne Eigenschaften,’ 236 and ‘“Kehrt um, kehrt um!”’ (Ez 33,11),’ 226–27.

21 Michael V. Fox, ‘Rhetoric,’ 11–12.
The equation of the exiles with dry bones fully acknowledges the severity of their condition: it is striking that YHWH does not negate, but on the contrary emphasizes, that his people as such is dead. The message of restoration stands therefore not in contrast but in continuation to the previous message of judgement (Ezekiel 8–11). Israel did die, yes, but YHWH can make it live again.\(^{22}\) YHWH’s spirit (37:14) will make the restored exiles willing and able to truly behave as YHWH’s people.

It is important to notice that, in contrast to the judgement, for which humans are held responsible, the restoration does not depend on them. In fact, the people as such is dead; hence it is absolutely unable to meet any pre-condition.\(^{23}\)

For Ezekiel, as exemplified in these two texts, the initiative for destruction lies on the human side first; the initiative for restoration lies with God alone. This allows some insight into how Ezekiel 8–11; 37:1–14 view humanity and how they view God, in other words, into the underlying anthropological and theological views of these texts.

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\(^{22}\) ‘The new creation of Israel is not described primarily as the survival of a remnant, but as the resurrection of a people’ (Renz, *Rhetorical Function*, 221). See also Lapsley, ‘Ezekiel,’ 290.

\(^{23}\) Tobias Häner, *Bleibendes Nachwirken*, 433–36 highlights the contrast in this text between God’s unlimited power and capability and the people’s powerlessness and inability to escape their self-inflicted death-like state. See also Konkel, ‘Ezechiel – Prophet ohne Eigenschaften,’ 235.
Anthropological View

It would seem that the first author, or group of authors, of Ezekiel had a deeply pessimistic attitude about moral capacity, the ability to discern and to do the right thing. Throughout the book of Ezekiel, the ‘house of Israel’ is portrayed as so used to disobeying God that they do not even perceive their actions as wrong anymore – hence the nonchalance with which the foreign cults are practiced in the temple (8:5–16). In Ezek 2:3, the first time the House of Israel is mentioned, YHWH calls it ‘a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day’ (NRSV). Accordingly, YHWH calls them ‘House of Rebellion’ (bet mri), instead of ‘House of Israel’. As a collective category (which of course includes but also transcends any individual identity), the people seems so ingrained in its refusal of the divine laws that it cannot even recognize its transgressions as such, which makes repentance impossible.25 Later, after the punishment, the people, again in

24 The issue of moral capacity and moral identity is amply discussed in Lapsley, Can These Bones Live?

25 Other texts, in particular Ezek 18:30–32, seem to advocate repentance as a realistic possibility. In a recent essay, Michael Konkel convincingly argues that Israel’s habitual rebelliousness in Ezekiel ‘represents an exception, but not the norm of human nature’ and is therefore not to be interpreted in anthropological terms. The earlier stages of the book advocated the freedom to repent; only late texts, especially 36:23–28, assume a kind of moral determinism: Michael Konkel, “‘Kehrt um, kehrt um!” (Ez 33,11): Die Ethik des Ezechielbuches zwischen Determinismus und Freiheit,’ in Frevel (ed.), Mehr als Zehn Worte? Zur Bedeutung des Alten Testaments in ethischen Fragen (QD 273; Freiburg: Herder,
its collective identity, is ‘dead’ – either way it is utterly incapable of regaining God’s favour by its own efforts. This conviction finds a poignant expression also in the narrative ‘histories’ in Ezekiel 16; 20; 23 which narrate of Jerusalem’s/Israel’s bad choices from the very beginning. While this negative view may be restricted to this particular nation, the great Ezekiel commentator Walther Zimmerli is not without foundation when he calls Ezekiel ‘the great proclaimer of “radical evil”’; and he continues, ‘one is almost tempted to introduce the term “original sin.”’\(^{26}\)

As a consequence, if there is to be any future for Israel, it cannot depend on human merits; it needs to be given by God, undeserved and – one is almost tempted to say – by grace alone.\(^{27}\) A change of heart and of behaviour (as hinted at in 37:14) is expected only in consequence to this gift.\(^{28}\)

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26 Walther Zimmerli, ‘The Message of the Prophet Ezekiel,’ in Hanson (ed.), The Fiery Throne: The Prophets and Old Testament Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 84. While this expression is certainly, at least in part, owed to Zimmerli’s heritage as a Swiss Reformed theologian, it is not inappropriate.

27 The term ‘grace’ is used by a number of Ezekiel scholars; apart from Zimmerli, see for example Paul M. Joyce, Ezekiel: A Commentary, second ed. (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 482; New York/London: T&T Clark, 2009), 26–27.
The God of Ezekiel

This leads us to the theological question. How, and in which terms, do these texts speak about God? One key attribute of God in the book of Ezekiel is unconstrained power. Both the divine judgement, resulting in death, and the re-creation from death to life can readily be seen as power displays. However, there is a qualitative difference between the two.

In Ezekiel 8–11*, YHWH’s violent action unquestionably displays power in a dramatic way. However, YHWH’s initiative and freedom are, in actual fact, limited in this instance. For in destroying Israel, God is only reacting to a situation brought about by human doing, rather than acting out of God’s own free will. The temple vision strongly underlines this reactive character of the judgement. YHWH rejects his people because the people has rejected YHWH first (‘I have brought down their deeds upon their heads’ 9:10). The use of the vision genre with its vivid display of ‘abominations’

28 See the (probably quite late) texts Ezek 11:19; 36:26–27 which have God exchange Israel’s – unnatural – heart of stone for a heart of flesh. The fact that a moral change is only expected in response to divine intervention is emphasized quite strongly in Lapsley, Can these Bones Live? throughout. See, for instance, her commentary on Ezek 37:1–14 on pp. 169–71, and pp. 180–82.

29 To give only one example, see the opening vision in Ezek 1:1–28.

30 Mein, Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile, 238–39.

and the subtle use of point of view as discussed above reflect a concern for underlining the justice of God’s judgement, which takes priority, in this instance, over the usual concern for stating God’s supremacy. As a consequence, God’s actions are almost presented as a necessary result of the human actions. Human and divine agents follow the same rationale, only that the divine means are more powerful.

Quite different, in the undeserved re-creation of Israel, God acts freely and out of his own initiative. The act of re-creating the people from their scattered remains (37:1–14*) is unique, unsolicited and only possible to God. The narrative, and not only in Ezek 37:1–14 but also elsewhere throughout the book, makes it very clear that the incentive for God’s restoring action does not lie with any human behaviour. The people do not, and essentially cannot, deserve to be saved.

The reason for God’s decision to save his people, according to the book of Ezekiel, is that YHWH’s identity is associated with being the God of Israel almost as much as the identity of the House of Israel rests on being the people of YHWH. While God certainly can exist without this connection (different from Israel) God cannot be present in history without a people. For his own reasons, YHWH seems to need the

Behrens, *Prophetische Visionsschilderungen*, 61–75, prophetic vision accounts, as a genre, are a means of proclamation, due to their high level of immediacy and credibility.

32 Concentrated in the probably very late verse 36:22, ‘It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name’; see also Ezekiel 20.
House of Israel, a people in direct relationship with him. The ‘death’ of the collective entity Israel becomes a threat, in a way, also for YHWH’s identity as their national deity.\footnote{Elsewhere in Ezekiel this is expressed by YHWH’s concern for ‘my holy name’, which has been profaned by the House of Israel. Paradoxically, their complete destruction would constitute an even greater profanation (Ezek 20:9, 14, 22, 39, 44; 36:20–23; 39:7, 25; 43:7–8). This topic is explored also in Alex Luc, ‘A Theology of Ezekiel: God's Name and Israel's History,’ \textit{JETS} 26, no. 2 (1983), 137–43 and Ka Leung Wong, ‘Profanation / Sanctification and the Past, Present and Future of Israel in the Book of Ezekiel,’ \textit{JSOT} 28 (2003), 210–39.}

In short, both the death and the re-creation of the House of Israel as the people of YHWH are directed toward the defence of YHWH’s own identity. Yet in the case of the judgement, God’s reaction is partly against God’s own nature, since in destroying the people YHWH severs, as it were, part of his own identity. By contrast, in the undeserved re-creation of Israel, YHWH acts freely, safeguarding both his honour and his identity as the God of Israel.

By creating a new future for Israel, YHWH demonstrates his being God – his holiness – in a more unequivocal way than in his work of destruction. YHWH reveals himself ‘more’ God – if this was quantifiable – in re-establishing the relationship with Israel than in howsoever powerfully (and/or justly) turning against them. In fact, the
ultimate aim of the resurrection of the bones is not ‘and you shall live’ but precisely: ‘And you shall know that I am the LORD’ (37:6, 13, 14 NRSV).\(^3\)

**Conclusion**

This portrayal of the divine-human relationship in Ezekiel, though certainly not flattering for the human part, is a profound theological reflection on the reasons that led to the national disaster of 597/587 and on the reasons for surviving that disaster. It also bears witness to a school of thought that, having given up hope in human virtue, puts all hope in God – not assuming that God is *merciful* enough to save, but trusting that God is *powerful* enough to do so, and that God will do it because it is a matter concerning God’s own identity.

This move away from a divine-human relationship in which merit plays a role, towards a relationship in which the human part depends altogether on the divine allows, in the context of the crisis, for hope even beyond the humanly possible and ‘meritable’. It further makes the book of Ezekiel a precursor, in the sense of an initial inspiration that consciously or subconsciously was taken up later, to New Testament teachings about grace. Its peculiarity lies in the fact that it bases this ‘grace’ not on God’s mercy or love, but only on ‘divine self-interest’.\(^5\) Human capability, morality, and even


\(^5\) Joyce, ‘Ezekiel and Moral Transformation,’ 154 and elsewhere.
lovability, are deemed so unreliable that they need to be kept entirely out of the equation. Perhaps, in a situation of genuine despair, that is one of the more convincing arguments. In the context of the dramatic historical circumstances of the early Babylonian Exile such reasoning is understandable, at the least. From our perspective, the Babylonian Exile proved to be ‘one of the most fruitful crises in the history of ideas’ — for Ezekiel’s contemporaries it meant first of all suffering, loss and threat of identity. The two texts here discussed bear witness to the anguish and violence of the crisis, but also to the intuition that something entirely new may come from it. Despite the ‘harder edge’ that Ezekiel’s theology undeniably has to it, its contribution to overcoming one of the deepest crises of biblical history is not to be underestimated, and its potential to encourage hope is greater than commonly granted.

Of course, care must be taken when applying the biblical texts to our times. Lapsley rightly states that, ‘because Ezekiel’s argument is embedded in the particularity of the changing Babylonian crisis,’ we cannot simply transfer moral or theological

36 See Lapsley, Can these Bones Live?, 188–89.

37 Mein, Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile, 75.

38 ‘YHWH’s action in Ezekiel has a harder edge to it than most Christian presentations of grace’ (Mein, Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile, 246). In this regard, see also Mein’s more recent article, ‘Ezekiel’s Awkward God: Atheism, Idolatry and the Via Negativa,’ SJT 66, no. 3 (2013), 261–77, in which he suggests an apophatic approach to Ezekiel’s texts of violence, ‘in which cherished notions of God are thrown into disarray and theological logic stretched to breaking point’ (p. 277).
solutions from it in a copy-and-paste mode ‘without extreme violence to the text and to our contemporary situation.’ For example, the idea of a powerful punishing god is not a helpful way of speaking of God today. On the other hand, there are parallels between then and now. The current collective identity of Western culture and societies (and not only) is covered in question marks. Moreover, contemporary events keep demonstrating to us that, despite all our knowledge and technology, we are not in control of everything. In fact, in the most vital questions of life and death we are far from it. History also reminds us just to what extent human beings are capable of evil, and often incapable of living in peace and justice with one another, with God, and with the environment. Ezekiel might teach us a little humility in that regard. As individuals and as societies, we are not completely in control. We depend on things beyond our own reach and merit. On the other hand, and counterbalancing the pessimism that could arise from this, hope is never lost. To the potentiality of life itself, the book of Ezekiel adds a distinctly theocentric element: a fresh start is always possible if, when and because it is wanted by God. Somewhere in between these two poles of critical realism and trusting

39 Lapsley, *Can these Bones Live?*, 189 under reference to Michael Walzer. Lapsley goes on to suggest that one way of learning from the book of Ezekiel could be by focussing on the process of dealing with the moral crisis, rather than on the actual conclusions drawn in the book (p. 190).

40 As also affirmed by Lapsley, *Can these Bones Live?*, 2, 190–93.
hope lies, it would seem, the source of resilience that not only carried Israel through the Babylonian Exile but made it a very fruitful crisis indeed.