

“Can These Bones Live?” A Performance Criticism Study of Ezekiel 37:1–14

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Abstract

We live in a time when a paradigm shift is occurring from the study of the Bible as a series of texts read in silence by readers, to the study of the Bible as a set of compositions performed for audiences. Biblical performance criticism is the emerging paradigm. It begins by recognising the essential nature of the biblical tradition as oral events, where transformative meaning is created in the interplay of story, storyteller, telling, and audience. Experiential exegesis is a proposed new methodology for the study of particular compositions as performance literature. This approach to biblical study enables the re-creation of a meaningful resemblance of the original performance experience for a contemporary audience. In this article, the processes of experiential exegesis are applied to the story of the Dry Bones, recorded in Ezekiel 37:1–14. The study of the Dry Bones as a story performed for audiences reveals that the interaction between the storyteller and the audience occasions a transformation of despair into hope. Experiences of telling the story to a church congregation and to incarcerated women confirm the viability of performance criticism study to interpret biblical tradition such that, in the words of Walter Wink: “the past becomes alive and illumines our present with new possibilities for personal and social transformation.”

Keywords: biblical performance criticism; experiential exegesis; Ezekiel; storytelling; prison ministry

Introduction

Several years ago I told the story of Ezekiel and the dry bones to a small group of women incarcerated in a county jail. When I finished the telling, the woman seated next to me exclaimed, “I wish God would do that for me!” This woman was fully engaged in the



story, intuiting what it meant for those who heard it centuries ago, and hoping its message could be meant for her as well. She was powerfully impacted by it. How did this happen? This article explores the way it happened, through a new paradigm of biblical study and a new methodology for exegetical analysis.

Biblical Performance Criticism

Nearly half a century ago, Walter Wink (1973) called for a paradigm shift in biblical study. He published a manifesto that began with the provocative statement, “Historical biblical criticism is bankrupt” (1973, 1). Expanding on the business metaphor he explained that bankruptcy does not mean that the traditional method of biblical study developed in modernity is without value, but that, as Wink said, “it is no longer able to accomplish its avowed purpose for existence” (1973, 1). Wink’s critique of the historical-critical method as having “reduced the Bible to a dead letter” (1973, 4) echoes Martin Luther’s sentiments, and is shared by many today who desire on-going relevance of the biblical tradition. In the new millennium, a paradigm shift in biblical study is occurring. An approach to biblical study is developing that can accomplish the purpose for biblical study that Wink (1973) articulated: “to interpret the Scriptures that the past becomes alive and illumines our present with new possibilities for personal and social transformation” (1973, 1). This approach is called “biblical performance criticism.”

At the heart of the need for a new paradigm of biblical study is the recognition that the Bible is not, as assumed by practitioners of the historical-critical method, a static written document meant to be read in silence by individual readers. Rather, it is a collection of recordings of dynamic oral presentations and scripts meant to aid the memory of oral performers addressing communal audiences. A primary characteristic of biblical performance criticism is the practice of storytelling as a beginning, a means, and an end of research. In storytelling meaning is only minimally connected with ideas or facts. The meaning of a storytelling event is connected with experience. The ultimate purpose of biblical performance criticism is not to increase information, but to help people engage with the Bible in order to make a concrete, positive difference in their lives.

Dennis Dewey (2009), reflecting on his vocation as a biblical storyteller, provides a helpful metaphor: “The written/printed text, as we have it in the Bible is a transcript of a performance, the fossil record of a lively storytelling tradition” (2009, 148). Even when the tradition does point to an original document, as with the letters of Paul, the delivery of these letters, their publication, was oral and lively. The radical implication for biblical scholarship is the need for the interpreter to internalise the “story” (broadly speaking) and experience it with an audience. That is, in this paradigm the story is learned “by heart” in accordance with what we know about how it might have been heard, understood, and experienced in its original context. This is achieved by taking advantage of knowledge coming from a variety of academic disciplines and by internalising and telling the story to an audience.

On the surface, the paradigm shift seems simple enough. It is to understand the original character of what we call “the Bible” as an oral/aural event involving a performer and an audience in the context of a communication culture that pre-dates print culture. But biblical scholarship has been wedded to print culture for five centuries. Its practitioners now wear high-literate lenses.¹ The language of biblical study is the language of fixed marks on a surface: scripture, text, book, author, reader. The shift is not so simple after all. It involves conceiving the Bible as a collection of compositions, like musical scores. It means understanding that these compositions point to original *performances*, not to an original document. These events were dynamic, flexible, vital, participatory, engaging, transforming, empowering, emotional, communal, and temporal. The shift is from dead letters to experiential knowledge.

A primary consequence in the paradigm shift is awareness of the importance of sound. According to Tom Boomershine (2015): “The implication of the emerging picture of the communication culture of the ancient world is that the accurate exegesis of the meaning of these compositions in their original context requires a methodology that is congruent with the character of the manuscripts as a medium for the recording of sounds in performance” (Boomershine 2015, 5). This means paying attention to the dynamics of vocal quality and inflection; including volume, pitch, pace, pronunciation, and pauses (Rhoads 2010, 171).

Not only sound must be considered in biblical performance criticism, but also physicality and presence. The story is embodied by a living person with gestures, facial expressions, and movement. As Whitney Shiner (2003, 127) has it made clear, in the cultures of the ancient Near East words and gestures were not “divorced from each other” as they are in the print-oriented cultures of modernity (Shiner 2003, 127). Plato observed, “Some of us make gestures that are invariably in harmony with our words, but some of us fail” (Shiner 2003, 127). In the ancient world, gestures were taken seriously as an integral component of effective oral communication.

The analysis of gesture and movement for performing scriptures is an important part of biblical performance criticism. The study of ancient rhetorical gestures informs decisions about gestures in biblical speeches. For example, exaggerated gestures developed both to demonstrate skill in communication and to deal with the pragmatic problem of being heard when addressing a large and sometimes noisy crowd. The exaggerated gesture style that developed may well have transferred to performance of speeches before small groups as well (Shiner 2003, 128). Besides rhetorical gestures, the other main type of gesture and movement used in the ancient world was imitative:

¹ The fact that human culture has experienced another communication revolution and is now dominated by digital systems in some ways complicates the problem, but in other ways highlights it. Digital communication has more in common with oral communication than literate. It is, as Walter Ong explains in *Orality and Literacy*, a kind of “secondary orality” (Ong 1982, 135).

the kind of gestures and movements employed by actors to imitate the voice and action of characters in their dramas. Storytelling combined both the rhetorical type and the imitative type.

“Biblical performance criticism” is an umbrella term for a wide range of topics from various disciplines providing solid groundwork for biblical interpretation in digital culture. Anyone who wishes to engage biblical performance criticism in the service of interpreting specific compositions can draw on this body of work for support and guidance.² It is also the case that at this early stage of the paradigm shift in biblical hermeneutics, there are few examples of performance critical study of specific stories. Furthermore, to my knowledge, there are no published “how to” guides for attempting such a study. To help fill that gap, the next section outlines basic components of a methodology for biblical performance criticism called “experiential exegesis.”³

Experiential Exegesis

Experiential exegesis is the effort to explicate the original meaning of a specific segment of the biblical tradition as it was experienced by ancient audiences. This effort is groundwork for a faithful telling. It is at the same time objective and subjective. The value of exegesis is its respect for tradition by letting it speak for itself, and listening to what it has to say as objectively as possible in its original context, while being fully aware that pure objectivity is neither possible nor desirable. The value of *experiential* exegesis is its respect for tradition by participating in it, being impacted by it, and enabling others to experience it as well.

In the culture of silent print, what made the Bible meaningful was its function as a reference book for historical and theological knowledge. It was valued as a sourcebook of “true” facts about history and “true” ideas about God. This contrasts with what was meaningful in the oral culture of antiquity. There, as Rhoads explains: “Meaning is in the whole event at the site of performance—sounds, sights, storytelling/speech, audience reaction, shared cultural beliefs and values, social location, and historical circumstances” (Rhoads 2006, 126) Referential meaning is important in digital culture, but has lost determinative power. Authentic experience that evokes emotion, inspires action, motivates change, and produces hope carries the power in today’s world.

Experiential exegesis is organised around four basic elements: telling, story, storyteller, and audience. First, there is the event itself, unique in every instance. Under the literate paradigm, this event would be called a “reading.” The current trend in performance

² Wipf and Stock publishes a series devoted to performance criticism. Peter Perry and Jeanette Mathews administer a website dedicated to biblical performance criticism: www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org.

³ Tom Boomershine first used this term in his courses on “Christianity and Communications in Contemporary Culture” at United Theological Seminary, 2004–2006.

criticism is to call it a “performance” or a “composition-in-performance” (Rhoads 2006, 126). I opt for the language of storytelling and refer to the event as a *telling*. In this article descriptions of the telling often refer to contemporary events, whereas the other elements explore matters related to the original context.

Second, *story* will be used to designate the object of study. The story is that which is communicated from the faith tradition, referred to above as “a specific segment of the biblical tradition.” In the documentary paradigm, this is called the “text” or “pericope.” Both of these words are too wedded to literacy for use in performance criticism. Options more compatible with orality include “tradition,” and “composition,” and “story.” Typically, “story” refers to a narrative with a setting, characters, and plot sequence. Biblical tradition includes laws, poetry, prophecies, and letters. Even these can be understood as residing within a story.

Third, there is the *storyteller* who embodies the composition. The storyteller literally gives the story breath so that it can stand on its feet and live. “Storyteller” refers both to those who told the story long ago and to those who tell it today. I use storyteller rather than performer because storyteller connotes more personal interaction with the story and with the audience. Storyteller is also less allied with drama, which is a significantly different art form than storytelling. Drama was part of ancient Greek culture. Storytelling, not drama, conveyed Hebrew and early Christian culture.

Audience is the fourth basic element. Audience refers to those who listen to the storyteller tell the story. Audience is implicitly, though not necessarily, plural. This is in keeping with the original character of the story experience. The audience is not assumed to be passively receptive, nor silent in their listening. Members of the audience may laugh or grumble; they may express, through verbal or non-verbal communication their pleasure, displeasure, engagement, or disengagement with the story. The audience may be given a way to participate in the storytelling event in some intentional manner—like a sung or spoken phrase, a movement, or a gesture. With an effective telling, audience members will make connections with the story. They will identify with characters, experience associations with various aspects of the story, and be impacted by its dynamics. The woman in jail who exclaimed, “I wish God would do that for me!” exemplifies this kind of involvement in a biblical storytelling event.

Experiential exegesis is an attempt to listen to the story in its original context—that is to understand how it was heard and experienced by its first audiences. It also considers the range of connections and responses of current audiences, which will be contingent on their current context. There are two goals of analysis. The first is to re-create a meaningful resemblance of the original performance experience for a contemporary audience. The second is to facilitate engagement with the story for the sake of spiritual formation. Aspects of experiential exegesis use standard exegetical methods, drawing on the expertise of scholars as conveyed in commentaries and reference tools. However,

these methods are used in service of a critical study of the story, grounded in its internalisation and performance. Understanding develops in the process of learning the story by heart and telling it to an audience. Information and insights from those working in fields relevant to biblical performance criticism also contribute to the analysis.

The dynamic relationship between the four basic elements of experiential exegesis is apparent even in the process of naming them. To talk about one is to talk about the others. Nevertheless, different questions can be asked of each and grouped in the four categories of telling, story, storyteller, and audience. (For a descriptive listing of these questions, see my book, *A Breath of Fresh Air: Biblical Storytelling with Prisoners.*) (Boomershine 2017, 37-42). The following analysis of the “Dry Bones” story (Ezekiel 37:1–14) is structured around the four basic elements of experiential exegesis and their associated questions.

Dry Bones (Ezekiel 37:1–14)

As you will recall, under Saul and David the Israelite tribal confederacy united to become a nation state. Soon after David’s son Solomon died (922 BCE) the nation divided into northern and southern kingdoms. Two hundred years later the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians. Then in 587 BCE General Nebuzaradan, commander of Nebuchadnezzar’s army, delivered the deathblow to national identity when he torched Jerusalem and the Temple and appropriated the southern kingdom for the Babylonian empire. When the smoke cleared, in the words of John Bright, (1972) “the land had been completely wrecked, its cities destroyed, its economy ruined, its leading citizens killed or deported” (Bright, 1972, 331). Ezekiel was among those deported. One of his visions begins in a valley full of bones. The following is a sound map of this story.⁴

The hand of the Lord came upon me
and brought me out by the spirit of the Lord
and set me down in the middle of a valley.
It was full of bones.

The spirit led me all around them.
There were very many lying in the valley.
And they were very dry.

The Lord said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?”
I answered, “O Lord God, you know.”

Then the Lord God said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them:
O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord:

⁴ See the discussion of sound maps in Lee and Scott, 2009. *Sound Mapping the New Testament.*

Thus says the Lord God to these bones:
I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.
I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you,
and cover you with skin,
and put breath in you, and you shall live,
and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

So I prophesied as I had been commanded.
And as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling,
and the bones came together, bone to its bone.
I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them,
and skin had covered them, but there was no breath in them.

Then the Lord God said to me,
“Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath:
Thus says the Lord God:
“Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain,
that they may live.”
I prophesied as the Lord God commanded me,
and the breath came into them,
and they lived,
and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then the Lord God said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel.
They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’

Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God:
I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people,
and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.
And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves,
and bring you up from your graves, O my people.

I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live,
and I will place you on your own soil.
Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act,” says the Lord.

The story of the Dry Bones comes toward the end of Ezekiel. For most of the epic, the prophet has spelled out in painful detail all the shortcomings of his people and the reasons for their defeat and captivity. Having made God’s judgment clear, he then tells how God will act for God’s own sake to save the people and bring them out of captivity. This prophecy culminates with the image of “ruined towns filled with flocks of people” (Ezek. 36:38), setting the stage for the story of the Dry Bones.

The above sound map for telling the story follows the New Revised Standard Version translation. An exception is language referring to God. Referents to God have been

changed to neutralise gender. The pronoun “he” is in the first instance eliminated and in subsequent occurrences replaced by whatever word most recently has been used in reference: “spirit,” “Lord,” or “Lord God.” God is neither male nor female but when God is constantly referenced as male the image of God one develops is male. Male imagery for God grew out of a patriarchal social structure and has reinforced the same cultural patterns for millennia. On the assumption that patriarchy oppresses both men and women, and that it is time to develop new social patterns, one strategy for change is to alter language referring to God. This is particularly important when a biblical story is going to be internalised and told by heart.

The story divides rather neatly into four parts. It begins with an action phrase: “The hand of the Lord came upon me.” Part One then establishes the setting, introduces the characters and significant objects in the story, and sets up the plot. The plot is a series of three commands to prophesy. There is one command for each of the subsequent three parts, all of which begin with the same phrase: “Then the Lord God said to me ...” In Parts Two and Three the command to prophesy constitutes the first episode, while the second episode reports the actual prophecy with its result. In Part Four, all three episodes relate God’s speech. The story concludes with promises of an intimate relationship with God, new life, and return to the homeland.

The opening verses of the Ezekiel epic establish a beginning date as the fifth year of the Babylonian exile (593 BCE) and locate it in Mesopotamia. This is the general setting for the Dry Bones story. There are a number of subsequent time markers, the most recent preceding the Dry Bones story is news of the fall of Jerusalem. The day this news came to Ezekiel was indelibly marked on the communal memory: “in the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month, on the fifth day of the month” (Ezek. 33:21) which would be 19 January, 585 BCE.

Ezekiel was a priest who lived in Jerusalem until its first defeat by Nebuchadnezzar. His wife died and he was deported to Babylon along with other leaders. There he received visions and messages from God to communicate to his exiled people. Cut off from the temple, he had no place to function as a priest. He was given a new role: prophet. In his description of ancient prophets, Joseph Blenkinsopp speaks from the perspective of the performance criticism paradigm: “The people we call prophets were ... public orators and emotional preachers rather than authors. They did not set out to write a book but to persuade by the spoken word” (Blenkinsopp 1990, 1).

Ezekiel recounts visions and messages in a narrative style with little autobiographical detail. One exception occurs in the account of his wife’s death. We learn that Ezekiel had a wife who was “the delight of [his] eyes” (Ezek. 24:16). But when she dies, the Lord instructs Ezekiel to refrain from normal lamentation practices and keep his feelings to himself: “Sigh, but not aloud; make no mourning for the dead” (Ezek. 24:17). Similar

instructions are given to the people in preparation for their impending disaster and monumental loss.

The Dry Bones story takes place in a broad, unnamed valley. Scholars have speculated about the specific location of this valley, hypothesising that it was the site of a great battle in which many Israelite warriors were killed. While this is plausible, the story does not identify its location historically or geographically. The valley functions imaginatively as a place to which Ezekiel was transported by the Spirit of God. A literal location does not matter. What does matter are the bones. This valley is a place of death, desolation, and despair.

The story has two main characters who are introduced in the opening line. “The hand of the Lord came upon me” is Ezekiel’s characteristic way of describing the beginning of a vision. The story is told in first person from Ezekiel’s point of view. The Lord is the other main character, embodied with a hand that comes upon Ezekiel and leads him all around the valley. Yet the Lord is also the Spirit who brings Ezekiel to the valley. The Hebrew word *ruach* is woven throughout the Dry Bones story with its three-fold meaning of breath, spirit, and wind. All relate to the presence and life-power of God. The Lord speaks and acts. The Lord is a commanding presence, fully engaged and in control of the situation. This would be reassurance to an audience of defeated, dispersed, and captive people. Three times in the story Ezekiel is addressed by God as “mortal,”⁵ emphasising the radical distance between the two characters of the story.

Bones are a principal object in the story. They are introduced with the emphasis of a short, slow sentence as the climax of an episode: “It was full of bones.” In the second episode their number is emphasised (“there were very many of them”) as is their condition (“they were very dry”). The latter comes at the end of the episode in another short, climactic phrase that warrants a significant pause in the telling to allow the image to sink in. These dry bones are the object of the Lord’s attention, message, and action. Their number, their dryness, their being strewn about unburied, their description as “these slain,” all point to a history of violence.

In the last part of the story the Lord identifies the bones as the “whole house of Israel,” that is, all the people who have been divided and dispersed through years of war. Further, the Lord identifies their communal state of mind as lacking power (“our bones are dried up”), hope (“our hope is gone”), and connection (“we are cut off completely”). God’s description of what the bones say cleverly communicates the inside view of an entire nation of people. Who can argue with divine perception? In the concluding

⁵ Other translations use “son of man” or “mortal man” which have the disadvantage of patriarchal language but are more consistent with the original language.

episode of the story, the Lord references another object closely related to dry bones: graves.

The plot of the story unfolds quite logically:

Part One. Ezekiel has a spirit-inspired experience of being set down in the middle of a wide valley filled with dry bones and walking all around them. The dilemma of the story is established when the Lord asks him if the bones can live. Ezekiel wisely defers to the Lord's judgment about that.

Part Two. Ezekiel is told to prophecy to the bones that they will be restored to new life with breath, sinews, flesh, and skin. He does, and the bones came together with sinews, flesh, and skin, but without breath.

Part Three. Ezekiel is told to prophecy to the breath. He does, and the breath enters. The "vast multitude" then stand on their feet. These are not zombies; they are fully alive with the spirit of God breathed into them.

Part Four. The Lord interprets who these bones are and how they feel, announcing what will be done about it and what will be the result. The Lord will put the Lord's spirit in them, restore them to their land, and expect them to realise the divine source of their redemption. The question raised in Part One about whether or not the bones could live is answered in the affirmative.

Norms of judgment present in this story revolve around the bones as remains of dead bodies that were not properly buried. Hebrew sensibilities about clean and unclean would come into play here. Along with being a symbol of death, the scattered bones represent a state of gross uncleanness. The concept of being unclean was connected in the previous story with the people's unfaithfulness to God. Their promised cleansing was attributed exclusively to the will and work of God: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses" (Ezek. 36:25). In the same way, the defilement of death will be removed by the freely-given Spirit of God. It is the obedience of the prophet in telling the message he is commanded to tell that makes possible the opportunity for new life, the restoration of hope, and the return to community.

The Storyteller

The following section will identify in detail the possible gestures, tempo, and attitudes used by a storyteller in telling the story of Dry Bones.

Part One. If the telling venue is a confined space with a small group, the storyteller might begin from a seated position. In a large venue the storyteller would stand, allowing for bigger movements. She speaks in a calm, steady, strong voice to deliver

the line known to signify an impending experience with God: “The hand of the Lord came upon me.” There is no eye contact with the audience as the storyteller enters a kind of trance such as Ezekiel would have experienced. This line might be accompanied by a raised arm outstretched with palm down, slowly moving up and down, then moving back to open up a vision of the valley. While the arm lowers to the side, a long dramatic pause allows the storyteller and the audience to look in that space between them, established as the valley. Then the storyteller might connect with the audience through eye contact, while delivering the climactic sentence slowly, with emphasis and a sense of horror and grief: “It was full of bones.”

As the second episode begins, the storyteller returns to her introspective state, looking down at the bones. She moves her arm in a figure eight to indicate being led all around them, or if telling in a large venue, walking about the space. The episode ends with a sigh of deep sorrow accompanying the short, concluding sentence: “And they were very dry.” The phrase is said slowly, dirge-like. The eyes are downcast, the posture drooping.

Both the tempo and the tone pick up when the Lord starts speaking in episode three. The storyteller might experiment with different volumes to see what fits best. It could be a soft voice, almost a whisper. Or it could be a come-to-attention voice, drawing the storyteller and audience out of their sorrow. The spine straightens and the head comes up, perhaps with a sideways tilt and glance to indicate the question from one to another. Ezekiel’s response is delivered with a shake of the head, perhaps another sigh and a tone of doubtful resignation. There is no eye contact with the audience during this episode which depicts dialogue between the Lord and the prophet.

Part Two. The phrase “Then the Lord God said to me” begins each of the remaining three parts of the story. It is said quickly in a neutral voice as Ezekiel recounts what happened. The instructions to prophesy that follow are vocalised with clear articulation, moderate speed, and an everything-is-under-control-here attitude. The hand might be raised in a stylised rhetorical gesture, bringing it down during the brief pause before the next episode.

The second episode of Part Two begins at a slow pace with emphasis on the word “breath.” The hand might stretch out from the mouth toward the audience at an angle. Emphasis continues on each word of the conclusion of that sentence, especially the last one: “and ... you ... shall ... LIVE.” This clause is a verbal thread repeated at the end of the next sentence, twice in episode three with slight variations, and again word-for-word at the end of the story. The message is not to be missed and the promise is sure. The attitude to convey here and again throughout the story is, “I am the Lord and there is no question about this happening if I say it will happen. You can put your full trust in my word.”

The sentence about the sinews, flesh, skin, and breath is a long one and therefore moves along quickly, perhaps accompanied by gestures of stroking alternate arms. The sequence of body parts can be remembered by thinking from the inside out: bones, sinews (tendons), flesh (muscles), all covered by skin and animated by breath. “And you shall know that I am the Lord” is a verbal thread connecting this beginning of God’s word in the story to its ending. It should be said with the same no-nonsense attitude mentioned above.

The ball is now back in Ezekiel’s court. It is easy to remember the next episode because it follows so logically on the heels of God’s command: “So I prophesied as I had been commanded.” This line presents an opportunity for the storyteller to reconnect with the audience. A bit of lightness could be introduced into this otherwise heavy story by the enthusiasm and energy of compliance. The storyteller wants to be sure the audience knows that she, as Ezekiel, has done what she was told.

In the remainder of the episode the storyteller, portraying Ezekiel’s perspective, describes what happened as a result of the prophesying with increasing volume, speed, and amazement. First, she describes something heard (cock the head in a gesture of listening, bring the fingers of both hands together to indicate the coming together of the bones), then something seen (repeat the gestures accompanying the repeated words about sinews, flesh, and skin). The vocalisation radically downshifts with the concluding phrase of Part Two: “But there was no breath in them.” This is said quietly, slowly, with an air of disappointment. The storyteller looks at the audience sadly, shaking her head.

Part Three. This is the shortest part of the story, easy for the storyteller to remember because it follows the same pattern as the previous part: instruction to prophesy, compliance, and results. The use of voice and gesture may also follow suit with “the breath came into them” delivered in even greater amazement than for the coming of sinews, etc. The next phrase – “and stood on their feet” – gives stage directions for the storyteller to stand up if seated and indicate by gesture (raise both arms) for the audience to stand up.

For the remainder of the story, the storyteller maintains eye contact with the audience. Through the dynamic of audience address, the audience becomes the “vast multitude” (spoken slowly with great emphasis).⁶ The storyteller widens her outstretched arms and moves her body in a scan to include all in the room. The stage is now set for the final powerful scene of the story.

⁶ For discussion of audience address, see Boomershine, T. 2015. “Audience Address and Purpose.” 124–125.

Part Four. The words of God addressed to Ezekiel at the beginning of Part Four are delivered in a manner that maintains the audience's identity as the people of Israel in exile. "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel ..." is spoken like an explanatory aside, though one directed not by the storyteller to the audience, but rather one delivered by God to Ezekiel. This is accomplished by gesturing toward the audience in a listening stance and speaking God's words in a gentle tone. "And they say ..." introduces the ultimate inside view: God speaking what is on the hearts of the people.

When the Lord quotes the people, the storyteller might invite audience members to repeat "Our bones are dried up ..." This will deepen audience identification with the people of Israel, already established in the act of standing, and set them up for a powerful experience of God's redemptive love in the concluding episodes. The three laments should be said with increasing distress. Be prepared for the repeating to continue beyond the laments, unless there is an obvious cue to stop audience response. If the repeating does continue, as was the case in the jail telling, there will be a mutual benediction. The storyteller, speaking as God to the audience, blesses them with the promise of new life. The audience speaking as God to the storyteller blesses her with the same promise.

The command to prophesy, with its familiar phrases, is delivered as before. But the tone changes with the actual prophecy that runs through the rest of the story. The distance is closed between God and God's people through the incredible, beautiful promises God makes. The storyteller's tone conveys both the power and the compassion of God's unconditional love, especially poignant in the repeated phrase, "O my people." It is said very slowly, like a caress, the second time. Appropriate gestures are graceful, full-arm movements indicating opening graves, bringing up from graves, and bringing back to the land. The hand to the heart with a soft pat could compliment the phrase, "I will put my spirit within you." In delivering the last line with full audience engagement, the storyteller should muster up her strongest faith conviction about divine will, power, steadfast mercy, and everlasting love.

The first time I told this story was in a suburban church for an Easter vigil. The congregation, unused to biblical storytelling, did not stand up when I raised my arms for them to rise. So I slowly repeated Ezekiel's words with emphasis: "And they STOOD ON THEIR FEET." They stood. The experience of speaking God's words to them about being brought up from their graves and imbued with God's spirit was transformative for me as the teller, and, judging from the feedback I received after the vigil, powerful for the congregation as well.

The Audience

The original context for this story was summarised in the introduction to this chapter: the days of the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE when it seemed to the Israelites that all had been lost through the violence of war and the greed of empire. The original audiences of this story were people who had experienced the loss of family,

friends, leaders, homes, and freedom. Their holy city and its glorious temple lay in ruins along with their way of life. God seemed either absent or powerless. Belief systems that had worked to make sense of reality had apparently failed.

The story begins in a place of death, a condition of permanent uncleanness, a valley of dry bones. The original audience had been conquered and exiled by a Gentile enemy. The connections would be immediately apparent to them. They may be offended or pained at the reminder of their situation, but more likely will appreciate its exposure, especially when visited by the Lord and the prophet's attention. Previously in the epic the audience has received explanation for their situation: a consequence of breaking God's laws.

The unfolding drama of this story gives the audience a reason to hope for the possibility of new life. That hope is grounded in the power, will, and love of God for them, as communicated through the prophet/storyteller. The audience is encouraged to experience God's presence along with Ezekiel, to hear God's voice delivered by the storyteller, to trust God's power and promises, and, finally, to feel God's love. All that God does is credited to God's desire that the people know God. *God is*, and *God is for* them.

This story is all about dynamics of distance between the immortality of God and the mortality of the audience. The starting point is extreme distance. The Lord is far away; the audience is invited to observe a field of bones. Because of the norm of judgment about uncleanness associated with dead bodies, the original audience would have felt alienated by the vision, perhaps aghast that the Lord and Ezekiel were moving all around those bones. To the extent that the audience identifies with the bones, they are also distanced from the Holy One. During the course of the story the distance of relationship with God decreases because (1) the bones take on life, (2) the audience is directly addressed as the bones/people, (3) God demonstrates inside knowledge of the people's emotions, and (4) God's address becomes increasingly intimate.

At the end of the story, God is still completely *other*, but the distance has been eliminated at God's initiative by God's indwelling spirit. The impact of the story is most likely the experience of forgiveness for breaking God's laws and of restoration to right relationship. It is the relief of despair by a new source of hope, a breath of divine air for dry bones. The story invites the audience to consider both the nature and the sources of their hopes. It encourages the audience to recall the disasters of their life, which left them lying like so many dry bones slain in a valley, and to reflect on their degree of trust in God to bring new life out of those disasters. The strongest invitation is to experience the presence and power of God within their own being, bringing hope with each breath. They can be invited to notice their own breath.

Many of these same dynamics are readily experienced by audiences today, especially audiences of incarcerated persons. They, too, have been captured and taken away from their community. They have lost friends and family by being locked away; some have lost them through rejection. Their situation is a result of society's judgment that they have disobeyed the law. Many experience depression ("our bones are dried up"), hopelessness ("our hope is gone"), and lonely isolation ("we are cut off completely"). The story can have a similar impact on this audience as it had on the original one.

The possibility of these connections for incarcerated persons was actualised when this story was told to a circle of nine women in jail. Following the telling, a "check-in" round elicited these responses: "The story evoked emotion – God can do that for me"; "I feel blessed – my dry bones are living for Christ"; "I am feeling grateful; I was depressed, now I'm back to an upswing." One woman reflected with a tone of scandal about her self-destructive behaviour and then expressed hope that God might give her new life, too. While the inmates responded in these ways, the programme leaders from the outside community most strongly connected with the final line. We expressed frustration with all the injustices in today's world and desire that God would, indeed, *act* to do something about them.

A tragic connection of this story with contemporary experience is "the killing fields" of Cambodia. From 1974–1979 an estimated one and a half to two million people were executed by the Khmer Rouge and buried in mass graves. One of these sites is now a memorial to the suffering experienced by the people of Cambodia: Choeung Ek near the capital city of Phnom Penh. The centerpiece is a large Buddhist stupa filled with layers of skulls of the victims. As we walked around the shallow graves of the killing fields, we encountered clothes and bones that continue to surface during heavy rains. It is an all too literal experience of the valley of dry bones which Ezekiel described. Nevertheless, Cambodia, like Israel, has experienced new life. While still challenged with many struggles, it is a youthful, vibrant, and hopeful country.

At a training meeting for jail volunteers the chaplain told about a young lady convicted of killing her grandmother: "She asked me if her life was over. I shared with her that although she had to give an account of her actions by going to prison, her life was not over." He went on to identify ways she could find meaning for her life. Just as the chaplain was called to minister to an imprisoned young woman asking "Is my life over?" so also Ezekiel was called to speak prophetic words to his defeated people. The book of Ezekiel records the visions and words that explain how their present predicament is an accounting for breaking God's Law. Then, moving beyond judgment, Ezekiel's visions and words promise new life. In the valley of dry bones, God asks Ezekiel the question on the minds of the people, "Mortal, can these bones live?" (Ezek. 37:3a). Obeying God's command, Ezekiel exhorts the people to trust the presence and power of God, whatever their circumstance, whatever our circumstance.

Dry Bones is potentially a transformative story for everyone. Most people, incarcerated or not, at one time or another experience depression, hopelessness, and isolation. All of us are imprisoned in mortal bodies. While many people identify with the bones that are “the whole house of Israel,” others identify with Ezekiel, reflecting on ways they can provide a prophetic witness to God’s Word. Ezekiel was one of the exiles, a captive experiencing all the pain that other exiles suffered. In the Dry Bones story, he follows the divine directive to transcend his own suffering and communicate confidence in a just, attentive, and active God whose Spirit breathes new life into defeated people. Experiencing this story in a way made possible by biblical performance criticism and experiential exegesis, some in the audience will receive the gift of hope, others the gift of empowerment. In either case, the purpose of biblical criticism will be fulfilled and its bones will live again.

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