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# An Exegetical Exploration of 'Spirit' References in Ezekiel 36 and 37

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## *Abstract*

*The 'spirit' references in Ezekiel 36 and 37 are as yet largely unexplored in scholarship, although they are rich and meaningful for any theology of the spirit. Set against Israel's sin and her experience in exile, the spirit is portrayed as the moral conscience, which makes the people aware of their sin, and as the animating force enabling the people to walk in God's ways again. In the famous passage of the 'Valley of the Bones' in chapter 37, the spoken Word only becomes effective after the Spirit breathed life into it, thereby clearly underlining the New Testament theology of the need for the Spirit's empowerment in preaching and His involvement in conversion.*

## **1. Introduction**

Ezekiel is often referred to as 'the prophet of the Spirit', an expression warranted for a couple of reasons.<sup>2</sup> Firstly, the Hebrew word רִיחַ (rūach - wind/breath/spirit) appears 52 times in the Book of Ezekiel, which is more often than in any other book in the Old Testament (OT), naturally making it stand out. Secondly, references to the spirit are distributed widely throughout the book and cover the full semantic range the word signifies throughout the OT.<sup>3</sup>

The focus of this paper will be the references to the spirit in chapter 36 with the related verse 18:31, and chapter 37 with the related verse of 39:29. While a general exegesis of the passages and their contexts will be provided, the focus of the exegesis will be on the references to the spirit in order to

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<sup>2</sup> D.I. Block, 'The Prophet of the Spirit: The Use of RWH in the Book of Ezekiel,' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, (1/1989), 28-29; R. Tribe, 'Spirit in the Old Testament Writings,' *Theology*, XXXII, (5/1936), 267

<sup>3</sup> W. Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 187; P. Finny, *The Origins of Pauline Pneumatology*, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 36

explore its workings within these passages. The paper will thus be divided into three parts: (1) Preliminary Remarks, (2) A New Heart and a New Spirit, and (3) The Valley of the Dead Bones, after which brief concluding observations will be presented.

## 2. Preliminary Remarks

### 2.1 The Etymology of 'spirit'

In order to fully understand the working of the spirit in Ezekiel, it is necessary to first look at its etymology in the OT as such. The three most common categories of 'spirit' are meteorological, anthropological and theological.<sup>4</sup>

In its meteorological and most basic sense, 'spirit' refers to wind or 'air in motion' (Job 4:15; Gen. 3:8; Jer. 4:12).<sup>5</sup> The anthropological concept of 'spirit' retains this sense of 'air in motion' and primarily refers to the physical act of breathing.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, 'spirit' incorporates a variety of psychological and emotional dispositions (Gen. 6:17; 7:15; Num. 16:22) in its anthropological sense, which exact translation often derives from the immediate context of the word (Gen. 41:8; Dan. 2:3; 7:15; Isa. 54:6).<sup>7</sup> The emotions are understood to come forth out of the spirit and affect both disposition and behaviour.<sup>8</sup> The theological meaning is 'Spirit', as in God's Spirit. In this sense, 'spirit' is often qualified as e.g. *rūach elohim* (God's Spirit), *harūach* (the Spirit) or *rūchi* (my Spirit) (Gen. 41:38; 2 Sam. 23:2; 1 Kings 22:24),<sup>9</sup> though it never really loses its meteorological sense as wind. This results in some instances where it is difficult to distinguish between the two senses and where ambiguity is also intended as in Ezekiel 37:9.<sup>10</sup> Not only does the meteorological concept mix with the theological, but also with the anthropological use of 'spirit'. It is

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<sup>4</sup> J. Robson, *Word and Spirit in Ezekiel*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 18; Tribe, 262; W. Kasper, *Gegenwart des Geistes. Aspekte der Pneumatologie*, (Freiburg: Herder, 1979), 67; F.A. Gosling, 'An Unresolved Problem of Old Testament Theology,' *Expository Times*, (8/1995), 234

<sup>5</sup> F. Baumgartel, 'Spirit in the Old Testament,' *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, VI, 360; G.T. Montague, 'The Fire in the Word: The Holy Spirit in Scripture,' in B.E. Hinze, & D.L. Dabney, *Advents of the Spirit*, (Milwaukee: Marquette Press, 2001), 36

<sup>6</sup> W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 566

<sup>7</sup> L.J. Wood, *The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 17

<sup>8</sup> Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God*, 14

<sup>9</sup> Wood, *The Holy Spirit in...*, 18

<sup>10</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, 567; Montague, in Hinze & Dabney, 37

often integrated into a theological context of meaning, e.g. when the wind is presented as the instrument of healing, again merging the concepts together.<sup>11</sup>

Koch suggests that the concept of the divine breath of life in humankind originates in Egyptian myths, while the idea of an extraordinary vital power stems from Babylonian religious beliefs.<sup>12</sup> Though recognising the similarities, Neve rightly points out that there is no concept in ancient Near Eastern literature, which could have served as preparation for the Spirit of God as it is described in the vast majority of the Biblical texts.<sup>13</sup> Hildebrandt further stresses that there is no evidence that has the meaning 'Sprit' outside the Hebrew canon.<sup>14</sup> The OT is, thus, the only ancient literature that develops this term to portray a people's experience with their God.

## 2.2 The Book of Ezekiel: *Sitz im Leben*

The period during which Ezekiel prophesied was a time of intense political crisis for Israel. However, even more significant than the political chaos was the religious and theological crisis triggered by the first deportation in 597 BC and the ever increasing threat of the total destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>15</sup> It is commonly assumed that Ezekiel was deported to Babylon in 597 BC, shortly after which he started his prophetic ministry to the exiles.<sup>16</sup> He was a Zadokite priest, and as such prepared from an early age for the rigorous task of interpreting and pronouncing the law, which is demonstrated by the fact that he draws upon historical and prophetic traditions as well as legal ones.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> M. Wenk, *Community-Forming Power: The Socio-Ethical Role of the Spirit in Luke-Acts*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 57

<sup>12</sup> R. Koch, *Der Geist Gottes im Alten Testament*, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1991), 24

<sup>13</sup> L. Neve, *The Spirit of God in the Old Testament*, (Tokyo: Seibunsha, 1972), 12; W. Ma, *Until the Spirit Comes: The Spirit of God in the Book of Isaiah*. *Journal of the Old Testament Supplement Series* # 271, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 27

<sup>14</sup> Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God*, 5

<sup>15</sup> R.R. Wilson, 'Prophecy in Crisis: The Call of Ezekiel,' in J.L. Mays, & P.J. Achtemeier, (eds.) *Interpreting the Prophets*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 161

<sup>16</sup> D.F. Launderville, *Spirit and Reason*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 12; W. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, (London: SCM Press, 1970), 1; W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 10-11; W.H. Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1-19. Word Biblical Commentary*, (Waco: Word Books, 1986), xxviii

<sup>17</sup> E.F. Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll*, (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 40; B. Vawter, & L.J. Hoppe, *Ezekiel: A New Heart*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 11

The Book of Ezekiel has been the centre of scholarly debate for the last century starting in the early 1930s, when its coherence and literary quality was heavily critiqued by Torrey, who considered it a pseudonymous creation of the Hellenistic period.<sup>18</sup> While few scholars went as far as Torrey by critiquing the book as such, Ezekiel himself has often been accused of suffering from a mental illness such as schizophrenia, due to his extreme behaviour and often overpowering spiritual experiences (3:14-15), some of which are unprecedented in the OT.<sup>19</sup> Lately, scholarship has returned to a more conservative view of the book and the prophet, though commentators still seem to be caught up in the discussion on the locale and time of the prophet, which admittedly are hard to place.<sup>20</sup> These scholarly discussions will be included in this paper, though only where they have a direct influence on the interpretation of 'spirit' references in the texts.

### 3. A New Heart and a New Spirit

Having thus laid the background foundation for this paper, the following section will now explore one of the most prominent 'spirit' themes in the Book of Ezekiel, the 'new heart and new spirit' texts in 36:25-28 and 18:31.

#### 3.1 Observation on Papyrus 967

Before starting to look at this passage in greater depth, it is necessary to comment on the omission of verses 36:23b-38 in the oldest manuscript of the Septuagint, Papyrus 967 (dated 200 AD), as well as the Codex Wirceburgensis (dated 600 AD).<sup>21</sup>

A number of theories have been put forward of which Launderville's is probably the least likely one, suggesting that the passage of 36:23b-38 contains 1,451 letters, almost a full page of a codex (1,512 letters), which might have simply been lost.<sup>22</sup> The fact that 36:23b-38 is not simply missing but that there was also a rearrangement of chapters, 37 follows 38 in Papyrus 967, discredits this theory from the start. Another heavily debated

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<sup>18</sup> Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1-19*, xx

<sup>19</sup> Wilson, 'Prophecy and Ecstasy' in Mays & Achtemeier, 158; C.L. Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 11

<sup>20</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 19; J.E. Lapsley, *Can Theses Bones Live? The Problem of the Moral Self in the Book of Ezekiel*. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 32

<sup>21</sup> J. Lust, 'Ezekiel 36-40 in the oldest Greek Manuscript,' *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43, (4/1981), 517

<sup>22</sup> Launderville, *Spirit and Reason*, 29

suggestion is that of McGregor proposing a case of inner-Greek parablepsis from the recognition formula in verse 23 to the one in verse 38.<sup>23</sup> However, it seems too large an omission to be a copying error, an interpretation Lust also vehemently opposes stating that if a scribal error had occurred, the scribe would have continued with 37:1 and not chapter 38. Thus, the above-mentioned rearrangement of chapters further disqualifies McGregor's interpretation.<sup>24</sup>

Commenting on the Hebrew text itself, Allan observes the significant non-Ezekielian nature of the Hebrew, notably the unique אֲנֹכִי ('*aṅokiî* - 'which') of verse 28, the only occurrence in Ezekiel of מַצְלַל (*ma'alāl* - 'practice,' usually bad) of verse 31, תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר (*tachath 'ašher* - 'whereas') of verse 34, and הֲלֹזוּ (*halležu* - 'this') of verse 35.<sup>25</sup> Remarking on this, Lust rightly notes though that other prophetic passages display similar phenomena, and thus these *hapax legomena* would not be alarming as such. However, he concludes that taken together with the omission of the text in Papyrus 967 and the rearrangement of the chapters therein, it is an indicator that the text might have been omitted in the Hebrew *Vorlage* and was a later addition. Though this seems possible, it would also pose the questions of when and why that would have been done, for which there are no answers, hence shedding doubt on Lust's conclusion.<sup>26</sup>

It is difficult to come to a definite conclusion at this point, since even Lust admits that his comments on the Hebrew text are partly speculative due to the lack of information.<sup>27</sup> At any rate, the passage of 36:23b-38 is affirmed by the canonical tradition preserved in the Massoretic Text (MT), which opts for including it rather than following the abbreviated reading of Papyrus 967.<sup>28</sup> What might also be of value for this study is to say that on an exegetical level, the text-critical background of this passage has to be taken into account, though it should not be overestimated as no new theology is introduced in this passage. Looking at the content of 36:23b-38, it seems like a well-worded summary, borrowing from the surrounding chapters - its

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<sup>23</sup> L.J. McGregor, *The Greek Text of Ezekiel, An Examination of its Homogeneity*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 190-191

<sup>24</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 2, 245; Lust, 'Ezekiel 36-40', 520

<sup>25</sup> L.C. Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48. Word Biblical Commentary*, (Waco: Word Books, 1990), 177

<sup>26</sup> Lust, 'Ezekiel 36-40', 525

<sup>27</sup> Lust, 'Ezekiel 36-40', 529

<sup>28</sup> Launderville, *Spirit and Reason* 30

most famous thought, the gift of a new heart and a new spirit, is mentioned again in 11:19, though obviously in a different context.<sup>29</sup>

### 3.2 *The New Spirit: 36:25-2*

Bearing these concluding remarks in mind, one can now proceed to look at 36:25-28 in depth, which starts out with a cleansing scene preceding the giving of the new heart and spirit.<sup>30</sup>

Though the verb זָרַק (*zāraq* – ‘sprinkle’) in verse 25 is usually connected with the sprinkling of blood, the sprinkling with pure water here should be understood as a ritual cleansing and recalls the Mosaic rites of purification (cf. Num. 19:17-19; Isa. 4:4; Zech. 13:1) as well as Psalm 51:7, which refers to sprinkling and cleansing of the worshipper.<sup>31</sup> In other cleansing texts, the spirit was the agent of the cleansing itself (cf. Isa. 4:4; the spirit is related to fire and water). In the text here, however, the new spirit appears as the positive life *following* the cleansing, which is unprecedented in the OT,<sup>32</sup> though it seems to level the way for some of the New Testament (NT) experiences of the Spirit (Heb. 9:13-14; 10:22; Eph. 5:26).

The reference to the spirit with an adjective in verse 26 is again unique within the Book of Ezekiel and this has created considerable debate on whether to interpret it anthropologically or theologically.<sup>33</sup> If one opts for a theological interpretation, the new spirit could be identified with God’s Spirit in verse 27, as Montague suggests.<sup>34</sup> Finny, however, points out that if understood theologically, the impression is that the ‘new’ spirit that would be given to the people of Israel is different in operation from the one that is already operative in Israelite religion/experience.<sup>35</sup> While recognising his argument, it is, nevertheless, doubtful that such a line of thought was

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<sup>29</sup> Lapsley, *Can Theses Bones Live?* 167

<sup>30</sup> Neve, *The Spirit of God*, 91; J. Rea, *The Holy Spirit in the Bible: All the Major Passages about the Spirit*, (Lake Mary: Creation House, 1990), 103; Montague, 47

<sup>31</sup> C.R. Biggs, *The Book of Ezekiel*, (London: Epworth Press, 1996), 116; Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel*, 209

<sup>32</sup> G.T. Montague, *Holy Spirit. Growth of a Biblical Tradition*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1976), 46

<sup>33</sup> Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48*, 179; Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, 249; Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 499

<sup>34</sup> Montague, 47; P. Joyce, *Divine Initiative and Human Response in Ezekiel*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 51. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 110

<sup>35</sup> Finny, *The Origins of Pauline Pneumatology*, 39

intended, as it seems like a natural flow within the text to identify the 'new spirit' in verse 26 with 'my spirit' in 27.<sup>36</sup>

Still, most scholars understand verse 26 anthropologically stating that due to the use of 'spirit' alongside  $\text{לב}$  (*leb* - 'heart'), it is to be treated synonymously as meaning the centre of human volition, thought and moral will.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, a renewal of heart and spirit seems to be brought about by the granting of a new moral will and a new attitude of spirit towards God and His statutes.<sup>38</sup> Along with the deepening of the nature of the spirit come a continuity of its activity and a general internalisation of religion.<sup>39</sup>

It seems that this verse goes beyond the usual anthropological interpretation at this point since on a physical level, there is an underlying sense that the people are defective in some fashion, that they are not fully human in a significant way, since a human being cannot live with a heart of stone.<sup>40</sup> This organ transplant, however, will recreate the people as distinctively *human*, suggesting that people only become truly human and find to their true self after being given the Spirit of God.

The purpose for which the gift of the spirit is given is further defined in verse 27, with the emphasis on God's Spirit causing Israel to obey His statutes.<sup>41</sup> While the impression is often given that the Spirit replaces the law (and the tension between law and Spirit is acknowledged here), this passage sets out beautifully how the law came first, then the Spirit, which, however, points back to the law in almost a circular argument, with the Spirit granting the added capability of fulfilling the law. In Biggs' words, 'God would take a new initiative by providing the motive force for the people to respond to God's action with the obedience God required.'<sup>42</sup> Thus, God was willing to actively participate in His people's struggle for obedience and as a result vindicate His name.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Robson, *Word and Spirit in Ezekiel*, 243

<sup>37</sup> W.E. Lemke, 'Life in the present and hope for the future,' *Interpretation* 38, (2/1984), 177; C.H.J. Wright, *Knowing the Spirit through the Old Testament*, (Leicester: IVP, 2006), 129; Koch, 130; Rea, *The Holy Spirit in the Bible*, 102; C.R. Seitz, 'Ezekiel 37:1-14,' *Interpretation* 46, (1/1992), 53

<sup>38</sup> Wright, *Knowing the Spirit through the OT*, 129; Koch, 130; Rea, *The Holy Spirit in the Bible*, 152; Joyce, 108; Lapsley, *Can These Bones Live?* 166

<sup>39</sup> Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 500; Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God*, 95

<sup>40</sup> Lapsley, *Can These Bones Live?* 104; Robson, *Word and Spirit in Ezekiel*, 244

<sup>41</sup> Finny, *The Origins of Pauline Pneumatology*, 40

<sup>42</sup> Biggs, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 116; Davis, 115

<sup>43</sup> Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God*, 96

### 3.3 'Get' A New Spirit: 18:31

The bestowal of the Spirit, however, does not obviate human responsibility. Ezekiel does not envision a new creation devoid of wilful obedience.<sup>44</sup> The issue of human responsibility versus God's action leads to chapter 18:31, where the command is to 'make/get yourself' a new heart and a new spirit, as compared to 11:19 and 36:26, where God gives/promises the new Spirit.<sup>45</sup> Putting these three verses side-by-side makes one realise that the call is for partnership and not mere passivity when the issue of salvation and grace is concerned – a tension that continues in the NT with the appeal to 'work out your salvation' (Phil. 2:12).<sup>46</sup>

Chapter 18 interrupts the two statements on the kings in chapters 17 and 19 to deal with accountability before God in terms of individual responsibility.<sup>47</sup> It begins with a refutation of an apparently well-known proverb in Ezekiel's time and climaxes with his most vigorous exhortation to turn away from the transgressions that the people have committed.<sup>48</sup>

18:31 is not to be taken merely as a contrast to the great promise of 36:26, that perhaps Ezekiel became more disillusioned with human capabilities to affect significant inward change, as Lemke argues.<sup>49</sup> Briscoe rightly points out that there is no contradiction in the 18:31 'make/get' to the 36:26 'promise' of the new Spirit; they are two sides of the same coin.<sup>50</sup> Biggs sums it up in an appropriate statement saying that 'the two forms highlight the action of God toward the people calling for repentance, offering the way of repentance and renewal when the Israelites repented, and acknowledging that the person had to accept the opportunity to repent.'<sup>51</sup>

Ezekiel thus points out to the exiles that their own sins and not those of their parents or society as such are responsible for their fate, and by arguing that their relationship with God is not inherited but intentional, they are freed *and* required to take responsibility for it.<sup>52</sup> The focus here is on a

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<sup>44</sup> Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll*, 116

<sup>45</sup> Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 291

<sup>46</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 386

<sup>47</sup> Biggs, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 54

<sup>48</sup> K.D. Sakenfeld, 'Ezekiel 18:25-32', *Interpretation* 32, (3/1978), 295

<sup>49</sup> Lemke, 'Life in the present' 177; Brownlee, *Ezekiel, 1-19*, 291

<sup>50</sup> Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 246; S. Briscoe, *All Things Weird and Wonderful*, (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1981), 95

<sup>51</sup> Biggs, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 56

<sup>52</sup> M. Fishbane, 'Sin and Judgment in the Prophecies of Ezekiel,' in Mays & Achtemeier, 179

*decision*, which is made clear by the fact that a call to repentance appears three times in the short section of 18:30-32.<sup>53</sup> Here, repentance is not described as a *return* to God, but as a *turning away* from wickedness and from rebellion.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, not only does Ezekiel demand that the people cast off their old selves, he also urges them to become agents of their transformation into new selves.<sup>55</sup>

As a summary of this part, it can be concluded that the spirit is portrayed as the positive life following a cleansing of heart, as the animating force that will cause the people to walk in God's ways, and, finally, as the moral conscience, which makes the people aware of their sin so they can repent of it.

#### 4. *The Valley of the Dead Bones*

The Book of Ezekiel is probably most famous for the vision of the valley of the dead bones in 37:1-14, which is set between two corresponding themes: the ethical renewal of Israel in chapter 36 and the national restoration of Israel and Judah in 37:15-28.<sup>56</sup> The spirit plays a central role in this text as it occurs no fewer than ten times in these fourteen verses, with varying nuances, which embrace virtually the whole range of meanings previously discussed in the section on its etymology.<sup>57</sup>

Ezekiel is brought to the valley plain (cf. 3:22; 8:4), which had been a place where judgement had to be suffered, but now becomes the place where God triumphs over death and serves as an impressive symbol of God's resurrecting power.<sup>58</sup> This is not the only mention of spirit transportation in Ezekiel (cf. 3:12, 14; 8:3; 40:1), which is always induced by the 'the hand of God,' an expression often used to describe God's possession, inspiration, and empowering of the prophet.<sup>59</sup> It seems to designate something felt, rather than seen; an awareness of the divine power coming over Ezekiel's consciousness enabling him to experience these heavenly visions.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Launderville, *Spirit and Reason*, 14; Sakenfeld, 299

<sup>54</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 386

<sup>55</sup> F.A. Tatford, *Dead Bones Live*, (Heathfield: Errey's Printers, 1977). 105

<sup>56</sup> Koch, *Der Geist Gottes im Alten Testament*, 124

<sup>57</sup> Lemke, 'Life in the Present', 179; Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48*, 187

<sup>58</sup> Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 507

<sup>59</sup> Neve, *The Spirit of God*, 97; Robson, *Word and Spirit in Ezekiel*, 85; Koch, 45-46

<sup>60</sup> R.R. Wilson, 'Prophecy and Ecstasy: A Re-examination,' *Journal of Biblical Literature*, (98/1979), 322; G.W.H. Lampe, 'Holy Spirit,' *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible II*, 628

#### 4.1 The Spirit and the Word

In verse 4, God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, that He will 'bring' and 'give' the spirit so that the bones shall live, and 'know that I am Yahweh', which Ezekiel does. The actual events in the vision, however, in response to that first prophetic word, culminate in a puzzling anti-climax at the end of verse 8, almost giving the impression that the spoken word beforehand *failed* to fulfil its purpose.<sup>61</sup> It seems that something from the outside, the spirit, was needed to come and bring to completion what the word had started.<sup>62</sup> This is also illustrated by the fact that contrary to the usage of נָתַן (*nathan* - put into) as a gift given by Yahweh in verse 6, the verb בָּרָא (*bo'* - 'enter in') in verse 9 indicates something external that is 'caused to enter' into the bone or called out from the four winds.<sup>63</sup> Apparently, the issue concerning the two stages is not so much the power of the word per se, but *how* that word can become effective in people's experience<sup>64</sup> - the obvious implication being that word and Spirit need to be united to achieve the aim of bringing people to God.

#### 4.2 The Spirit as Creative Force

Scholars often comment on the close relationship of Ezekiel 37:5, 6, 8 and 10 with the creation account in Genesis 2:7 and its context, where God forms the first human being from the dust and then breathes the breath of life into the nostrils.<sup>65</sup> The presence of two stages (forming, then in-breathing), the repetition of 'breathe' (Gen. 2:7; Ezek. 37:9), and the 'setting' (Gen. 2:15; Ezek. 37:14) of the people into their 'land' (Gen. 2:5; Ezek. 37:12, 14) all point into this direction.<sup>66</sup> Ezekiel, however, shows a particular variation in the concept of the place of origin of the spirit of human life.<sup>67</sup> While in the Genesis creation account, God was still the subject of the 'breathing', it changes in Ezekiel to the spirit, which is unique in the OT.<sup>68</sup> In this context,

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<sup>61</sup> Vawter & Hoppe, *Ezekiel: A New Heart*, 165, Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, 260

<sup>62</sup> Robson, *Word and Spirit in Ezekiel*, 233

<sup>63</sup> Finny, *The Origins of Pauline Pneumatology*, 44

<sup>64</sup> Robson, *Word and Spirit in Ezekiel*, 230

<sup>65</sup> Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God* 18; Koch, 26; Vawter & Hoppe, *Ezekiel: A New Heart*, 166; Seitz, 'Ezekiel 37:1-14,' 53

<sup>66</sup> Robson, *Word and Spirit in Ezekiel*, 225

<sup>67</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, 261

<sup>68</sup> H.M. Wahl, 'Tod und Leben: Zur Wiederherstellung Israels nach Ezekiel 37:1-14,' *Vetus Testamentum* 49, (2/1999), 226

'spirit' is the animating principle of life that makes a person a living being.<sup>69</sup> Commenting on this, Koch rightly states that Ezekiel, therefore, gives an unprecedented scope to 'spirit' as the origin of the 'breath of life', which has, thus, irrevocably made its way into the creation language.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, the identification of the spirit as 'my spirit' in verse 14 indicates that a measure of divine life has been given to these reconstituted exiles.<sup>71</sup> The biological reality has thus turned into an inherently theological reality.<sup>72</sup>

### 4.3 The Summoning of the Spirit

The five-fold clustering of 'spirit' references in verse nine suggests that this is the heart of the unit.<sup>73</sup> The change from the anarthrous 'spirit' of the previous verses to 'the spirit' stands out and rightly makes Launderville argue for a shift in the meaning of 'spirit', which previously meant *breath* or *human spirit*, but now seems to involve the wind as a symbol of the divine Spirit.<sup>74</sup> Block argues that Ezekiel is to *summon/command* the spirit, which would give the impression that he can control or influence it.<sup>75</sup> However, the ultimate command came from God and not from Ezekiel; Ezekiel was commanded to prophecy to the spirit not to command it himself. The reference to the 'four winds' here is on the one hand a symbol of the universality of the life-giving spirit,<sup>76</sup> but on the other hand, an Akkadian idiom for the four corners of the earth.<sup>77</sup> It is likely that both meanings were intended here.

### 4.4 The Spirit Connected to the Land

Reading verse 14, one naturally thinks of the newly bestowed Spirit of life in verse 9, yet it is remarkable that the reference here is explicitly to 'my spirit'.<sup>78</sup> This suffixed form of 'spirit' clearly refers to God's Spirit as the ultimate source of life in the full range of both its physical as well as its

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<sup>69</sup> Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God* 96; R.G. Bratcher, 'Biblical Words describing Man: Breath, Life, Spirit,' *Bible Translator* 34, (4/1983), 203

<sup>70</sup> Koch, *Der Geist Gottes im Alten Testament*, 26; Wahl, 'Tod und Leben', 226

<sup>71</sup> Launderville, *Spirit and reason*, 345; M.G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980), 22

<sup>72</sup> Seitz, 'Ezekiel 37:1-14,' 53

<sup>73</sup> Block, *JETS*, 38; Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48*, 185; Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 508

<sup>74</sup> Launderville, *Spirit and Reason*, 335; Koch, 125

<sup>75</sup> Block, *JETS*, 38

<sup>76</sup> Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel*, 214

<sup>77</sup> Tatford, *Dead Bones Live*, 217

<sup>78</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 2, 263

spiritual connotations.<sup>79</sup> This promise is placed alongside two key phrases, namely, 'you shall live' and 'I will place you in your own land' (cf. 36:28-30 and 39:28b).<sup>80</sup> God's Spirit takes up His action in giving the exiles life, settling them in their homeland and thus causing them to know that God's spoken word was fulfilled.<sup>81</sup> The fact that Ezekiel sets the resurrection of the dead Israel in between its ethical restoration (chapter 36) and its return to the promised land (37:15-28), indicates that the physical and political restoration of Israel was part of God's covenantal blessing as well as a crucial part, maybe even the final stage, of Israel's spiritual renewal.<sup>82</sup> The timeline, however, is important here, since Israel has to be renewed inwardly first (cf. 36:26-27) before God will restore them outwardly by placing them back into their land. Israel was in exile due to their disobedience to God and also due to their failure to tend to the land (2 Chron. 36:21), which makes Israel's return to the land a part of God's salvific plan as well as a part of His 'healing' of Israel's broken trust in Him. Thus, the promise of 'my spirit' comes as a response to the outcry of the people 'our hope is lost, we are clean cut off' in verse 11. The reference to 'my spirit' in this passage is remarkably similar to that of 36:27,<sup>83</sup> suggesting that the entire unit (37:1-14) is an exposition of the notion introduced in 36:26-27.<sup>84</sup>

#### 4.5 *The Spirit being 'Poured Out': 39:29*

The passage of 39:25-29 is predominantly considered a summary of God's accomplishing of salvation described in chapters 34-37, hence its inclusion here.<sup>85</sup> In 39:28b, the reference to the land is again tied in with God's covenantal plan of restoration for Israel (cf. 36:28-30 and 37:14). In 39:29, the third and final instance of 'my spirit' in Ezekiel can be found, occurring in the conclusion of the Gog oracle.

Unlike the earlier usage, however, Ezekiel 39:29 employs a different phrase which is 'to pour out' for the expectation of the spirit.<sup>86</sup> Two expressions seem important here, namely 'I will pour out' and 'I will not

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<sup>79</sup> Lemke, 'Life in the present' 179

<sup>80</sup> Finny, *The Origins of Pauline Pneumatology*, 45

<sup>81</sup> Biggs, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 119

<sup>82</sup> Lapsley, *Can Theses Bones Live?* 145

<sup>83</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, 257; Allan, 187

<sup>84</sup> Finny, *The Origins of Pauline Pneumatology*, 43

<sup>85</sup> D.I. Block, 'Gog and the pouring out of the Spirit: reflections on Ezekiel 39:21-29,' *Vetus Testamentum* 37, (3/1987), 259; Rea, *The Holy Spirit in the Bible*, 105; Robson, , *Word and Spirit in Ezekiel*, 252; Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 529; W.A. Van Gemeren, 'The Spirit of Restoration,' *Westminster Theological Journal*, (50/1988), 96

<sup>86</sup> Finny, *The Origins of Pauline Pneumatology*, 47

hide my face anymore.’ The reference to God hiding His face is usually connected to His wrath in Ezekiel (cf. 7:8; 9:8; 20:8; 30:15; 36:18).<sup>87</sup> In the present passage, however, what was a stereotypical threat of judgement – ‘I will pour out *my wrath*’ – changes into God’s restorative activity – ‘I will pour out *my spirit*.’<sup>88</sup> This reversal is further evident as God will *not* ‘hide His face anymore,’ which usually describes God’s response to Israel’s disobedience (cf. Isaiah 5:25; 9:11; 10:4; 30:4).

The precise relationship of the phrase ‘I will pour out my Spirit’, to Yahweh’s promise that He will ‘give’ His Spirit ‘within them,’ in 36:27 and 37:14 has been disputed, with the debate usually revolving around the significance of the different verbs and prepositions in the respective passages.<sup>89</sup> Block strongly argues for a change of meaning from 36:27 and 37:14 to 39:29, stating that in 39:29, the outpouring of the Spirit serves as a guarantee of the future unbroken fellowship between God and His people.<sup>90</sup> He further comments that the pouring out of God’s Spirit upon His people represented an assurance of new life, peace and prosperity, and also served as the definitive act of claiming ownership of Israel.<sup>91</sup> While this is accurate, it still seems more coherent to *not* see a shift in essential meaning between the texts, as an analysis of God’s ‘giving’ the Spirit and His ‘pouring’ it, points to them describing essentially similar actions.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, on a conceptual basis, it seems that the reason for the bestowing of the Spirit was Israel’s disobedience, i.e. in all three texts, God’s Spirit will ensure the obedience of the restored people.<sup>93</sup> It can, thus, be assumed that the change in terminology expresses symmetry with the pouring out of God’s wrath, but does not signify something fundamentally new or different from that which is envisaged in 36:27 and 37:14.

In summary of section 4, one can say that word and Spirit go together and will only achieve their aim of bringing people to God when they are joined. Ezekiel, furthermore, builds upon the creation account presenting the spirit as partaking in creation, even as the origin of the breath of life. Another important theme in this passage is the Spirit’s connection to the land and the people’s daily living. It seems that one of the main reasons for

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<sup>87</sup> Robson, *Word and Spirit in Ezekiel*, 254

<sup>88</sup> Finny, *The Origins of Pauline Pneumatology*, 47

<sup>89</sup> Robson, *Word and Spirit in Ezekiel*, 256

<sup>90</sup> Block, *VT*, 267

<sup>91</sup> Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 529; Block, *VT*, 268

<sup>92</sup> Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48*, 208-209

<sup>93</sup> Robson, *Word and Spirit in Ezekiel*, 261

the giving of the Spirit is so that the people of Israel would know that God has not forsaken them and that He is still true to His word. The return to the land plays a vital part in this 'healing' of Israel's trust in their God, and also in God's salvific plan for His people. The pouring out of the Spirit in 39:29 should be seen in light of the preceding chapters as signifying the sealing of God's people as a mark of ownership and covenant fulfilment concerning Israel's return of the land (cf. 39:28b).

### 5. Conclusion

After having explored the spirit references in the above verses the conclusion can be drawn that the spirit follows the cleansing of the heart, that it is the animating force causing the people obey God's statutes and that it is a moral conscience for the people. The giving of the Spirit is very much a divine initiative, but it is also recognised that the people still have to do their part and actively follow God. In both chapters the granting of the Spirit is tied to the land also indicating that no difference is made between the spiritual and nonreligious parts of life and that the Spirit has influence on both. Above all, the covenant framework of the two chapters suggests that the Spirit was given as proof that God was still faithful to His people and also to instil hope for future deliverance from exile.

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