
The Agony of Exile: A Social-Scientific Reading of Ezekiel 37:1–14

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Abstract

The vision of dry bones in Ezekiel 37:1–14 is an analogy about the suffering of the Jewish people in Babylon and their restoration by YHWH. While their situation was deplorable and hopeless, the text indicates the divine power to reestablish them in their ancient homeland. The context of the text is that of suffering and desperation. Exile had an impact on the social and religious life of the Judeans. The experience of the hardship of the Jewish people in the land of exile gives ground to the context of the suffering of people in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Reading Ezekiel's text from a social-scientific lens brings insight into understanding and applying the text in the context of Ituri and North Kivu provinces that have experienced internal and external exile. Like the exiles in Babylon, the Internal Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Ituri and North Kivu go through the same experience. Their internal exile has impacted them negatively. But, like for the exiles in Babylon, there is hope of restoration for them.

Keywords: Agony, Exile, Social-Scientific, North Kivu, Ituri.

The social and psychological implications of exile for the children of war in Africa have similarities to the experiences of the ancient Israelites and Judeans. While some Hebrew Bible texts attribute the Babylonian exile to national sin and Torah disobedience, the African children of war did not find themselves in the predicament as a result of national sin. Yet, in an exilic moment of being forcibly displaced from their homeland, the children, perhaps like some of the ancient Judeans, sensed the loss not only on their traditional lands but also their familial connections, religion, culture, customs, and language. Indeed, they lost their way of life or those traditional things that held them together.¹

Introduction

The book of Ezekiel belongs to the category of 'major prophets'. Joyce recognises that Ezekiel influenced the book's writing, which bears his name and the sixth century BC as its date. After some consideration, he states, 'We can, then, with a measure of confidence speak of the sixth-century witness of the book of Ezekiel, and also regard that witness as profoundly influenced, both in content and in style, by Ezekiel himself'.² Ezekiel remains the key person in the book. The book describes his role as receiving the message from YHWH and transmitting it to the

¹ H. Kanya, 'The Impact of War on children: The Psychology of Displacement and Exile', in B. E. Kelle, F. R. Ames, and J. L. Wright (eds.), *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2012, pp. 245–46.

² P. Joyce, *Ezekiel: A Commentary*, New York, T & T Clark, 2009, p. 16.

people. Block portrays Ezekiel as ‘a man totally possessed by the Spirit of Yahweh’³ to the point that it is impossible to distinguish between the prophet and his message: ‘The medium is the message’.⁴ Ezekiel’s prophetic message underscores his complete submission and commitment to YHWH.

Ezekiel 37 is in the second part of the book, which addresses the restoration of Israel. The relevance of this chapter resides in the fact that it continues with the theme of restoration, repeating the message in Chapters 34 and 36 and adding new elements. Hence, it strengthens the theme of restoration in the section and emphasises YHWH’s plan for his people. Ezekiel 37:1–14 presents the Jewish people’s situation as ‘dry bones’. It depicts how desperate the people were. This section emphasises the hardships that the Jewish people endured in Babylon. The experience of the Jews can be compared to the experiences of people in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This article discusses the impact of insecurity on a peaceful population. The insecurity imposed on a nonviolent population resulting in forced exile agonises more than all the known coronavirus variants to date. Undoubtedly, forced exile impacts the holiness of Christians in the affected region. Using the text of Ezekiel 37:1–14, the author will contextualise the Babylonian exile of the Jews with the IDPs in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The Congolese Context

Applying a biblical text like that of Ezekiel 37:1–14 to a particular context, such as the one prevailing in the eastern part of the DRC, is essential. Although the message of this text concerns the Jewish people during their Babylonian exile, it does affect the wounded people of the eastern provinces of the DRC.⁵

The provinces of North Kivu and Ituri in the eastern DRC have gone through recurrent conflicts and violence. The resurgence of attacks by different militia groups has claimed the lives of thousands. There are more than one hundred armed groups in eastern Congo.⁶ Political and inter-communal reasons cause violence in this region. For example,

Clashes between the M23 and military forces in June 2022 led to the M23 taking control of several localities of Rutshuru and Bwisha in Rutshuru territory. The strengthening of the M23 is likely to cause more displacement in the future. In February 2022, clashes between the military and the M23 had already led to the displacement of 8,000 households in northern Goma.⁷

Unfortunately, the situation in Goma reached its climax when the M23 troops finally entered the town and seized it on 27 January 2025. The fall of Goma into the hands of the M23 rebels comes with considerable fatalities, including destruction of properties, injuries, and death of people. In an article published in *CNN* on 6 February 2025, the United Nations confirmed that

³ D. I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans, 1997, p. 11.

⁴ Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*.

⁵ This article will focus on Ituri and North Kivu.

⁶ U.S. Department of State, ‘Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Democratic Republic of the Congo’, *United States Department of State* [website], <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/democratic-republic-of-the-congo/>, (accessed 18 February 2023).

⁷ Acaps, ‘Democratic Republic of Congo: Humanitarian Concerns in North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri’, *Population*, vol. 10, no. 7,339,415, 2022, p. 20. The number of localities under the control of M23 have since increased, leading to the displacement of more households.

‘nearly 3,000 people have been killed in the city of Goma’.⁸ The province of Ituri has faced similar challenges. The violence that began in December 2017 has wreaked havoc. Armed groups have killed people, destroyed villages, and displaced households, forcing them to seek refuge in neighbouring countries. According to OCHA, by May 2022, Ituri had 1.9 million displaced and hosted 13,000 refugees. About 19,000 Congolese refugees fled violence from Rutshuru and Ituri to Uganda at the beginning of the same month.⁹

The Present Study

A social-scientific perspective could interpret the passage as reflecting the Israelites’ feelings of despair and hopelessness during their exile. The image of the dry bones evokes a stark absence of life and vitality, symbolising the Israelites’ potential loss and alienation upon their forced departure from their homeland to live among foreigners. We can interpret the rebirth of the bones and their recovery in the flesh as a metaphor for restoring hope and the prospect of a fresh start. The analogy would have been a compelling message for the Israelites, who were struggling to maintain their identity and sense of community in a foreign land.

Exile, or the forced departure from one’s home or country, is a challenging and painful experience. It often involves feelings of loss, separation, isolation, and the challenges of adapting to a new place and culture. Grief, frustration, and even anger can accompany exile, as the individual may perceive their forced departure from their home and community as unfair. The experience of exile can be emotionally and psychologically traumatising, and it is not uncommon for people in exile to experience depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. Therefore, it is essential for those experiencing exile to seek support and find ways to cope with their challenges.

The physical or emotional suffering a person endures when forced to leave their home or country is known as the agony of exile. Exile is a complex and traumatic experience that separates the person from their loved ones, familiar surroundings, and way of life. Exile involves isolation, loneliness, and alienation, as the person may struggle to adapt to a new environment and culture. The pain of exile encompasses the loss of social and economic status, true spirituality, and the difficulties of starting over in a new place.

An internal exile is a form of punishment or restriction on movement imposed on an individual within the borders of their own country. Typically, it is a substitute for imprisonment or banishment, limiting an individual’s freedom of movement within a specific area or region. Internal exile may also apply to other forms of punishment or restrictions, such as losing certain rights or privileges. People often use it for political repression or to isolate and punish those deemed a threat to the government or society.

Conflict, violence, persecution, or human rights violations have forced IDPs to flee their homes, but they have not crossed an international border. While international refugee laws often refer to them as refugees, IDPs lack the same protection and access to assistance and support. They frequently face challenges accessing necessities such as food, shelter, and medical care and may be at risk of exploitation and abuse. Many IDPs live in camps or other temporary settlements, where conditions can be difficult and overcrowded. There is a need to protect and assist IDPs in finding durable solutions, like returning home, resettling in a new location, or integrating into their host communities.

⁸ C. Jaime, M. Elsamra, and A. Stambaugh, ‘Nearly 3,000 People Killed after Rebels Seize Key African City, UN Says’, CNN, 6 February 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/06/africa/dr-congo-goma-violence-deaths-intl-hnk/index.html>.

⁹ Acaps, 5. The violence that started in December 2017 in Ituri continues despite endless the efforts to end it.

The DRC and many other African countries anticipate the phenomenon of refugees and IDPs. Addressing the experience of the affected population, reading the text of Ezekiel 37:1–14 with a social-scientific eye brings the reader to the context of internal exile.

Methodology

This article applies social scientific methodology to this study. Social scientific methodology in biblical studies involves using social scientific theories and methods to study the Bible. This approach seeks to understand the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which biblical texts were written and to analyse how these contexts influenced the content and meaning of the readers. Furthermore, every biblical work serves a literary, theological, or social purpose and a composition of literature and rhetoric. It aims to foster social interaction, communication, and action among its intended audience. The biblical texts are both records of and producers of such sociality. Therefore, exegesis must have a social-scientific component.¹⁰ This research focuses on a group of people who share the same identity. The social identity theory is appropriate for understanding what they are going through concerning Ezekiel 37. This theory ‘concerns itself with the way group members understand themselves as part of the group and differentiate their group from other groups in order to achieve a positive social identity’.¹¹ The group refers to people living in exile in their own territory, compared to the Jewish people during their exile in Babylon.

The study employs a historical analysis in examining the historical and cultural contexts of Ezekiel 37 and the social, economic, and political forces that shaped this context. It analyses the content and structure of the biblical text and its shaping by the social and cultural contexts in which they were produced. Applying this approach seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the historical, cultural, and textual contexts of the biblical text to shed new light on the meanings and interpretations of these texts for application in the DRC context.

The Context and Analysis of Ezekiel 37:1–14

Ezekiel 37:1–14 describes the Jew’s situation as ‘dry bones’, portraying their desperate condition. Reading this section signals the hardship of the Jewish people in Babylon. Labelled as ‘dry bones’, ‘The emotive picture that the reader visualises of the intensity/degree of the dryness of the bones is to the effect that they would not even attract a dog sniffing them’.¹² The political and religious conditions of the exiles were so arid that their situation appeared hopeless and irreparable.¹³

At the same time, this passage describes the restoration that the Jewish people will experience. Remarkably, it is YHWH who will change the miserable condition of his people. Taylor describes the Jew’s situation in exile as hopeless: ‘The bones represent the Israelites in exile. They have been there for more than ten years now, and what glimmerings of hope they had when they arrived have been altogether extinguished. Their hope was lost: as bones, they were dry’.¹⁴ Fortunately, ‘Israel’s only hope rests in her God, who is at the same time the

¹⁰ J. H. Elliott, ‘Social-Scientific Criticism: Perspective, Process and Payoff. Evil Eye Accusation at Galatia as Illustration of the Method’, *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* vol. 67, no. 1, March 2011, p. 1.

¹¹ C. A Baker, ‘Social Identity Theory and Biblical Interpretation’, *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, vol. 42, no. 3, August 2012, p. 130, doi:10.1177/0146107912452244.

¹² J. K. T. Biwul, ‘The Restoration of the “Dry Bones” in Ezekiel 37:1-14: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis’, *Scriptura* vol. 118, no. 1, July 2019, p. 5.

¹³ Biwul, ‘The Restoration of the “Dry Bones”’.

¹⁴ J. B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, London, Tyndale Publishers, 1969, p. 228.

sovereign Lord of history and the source of life. The restoration of his people will be his climactic moment of self-revelation'.¹⁵ Obinwa summarises the message of restoration found in the vision of the dry bones:

The vision of the dry bones presents YHWH's promise to open (פתח) the graves of his people and to bring (עלה) them out from the graves and lead them back to the land of Israel (37:12). Their graves are symbolic of their exilic bondage. In contrast, the acts of opening the graves and bringing the people out of them are expressive of deliverance or breaking the bars of their yoke (cf. 34:27). So Ezek. 37:1–14 states that YHWH will rescue his people from the land of their captivity and lead them back to their land (cf. 34:13).¹⁶

The text expresses assurance that YHWH can fulfil what seemed impossible.

The Babylonian exile completely changed the daily life of the Jewish people. Their social, political, and religious life was changed, and they faced challenges. One of the outcomes of the exile is that it added to the trauma of the Jewish people, who suffered greatly. As observed by A. Mein:

The early sixth century BCE was a time of almost unprecedented crisis for the Jewish people, as successive Babylonian invasions left Judah devastated and Jerusalem in ruins... With the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 the state of Judah ceased to exist as an independent political entity, and a new and an important phase in Jewish history began.¹⁷

The exile of the sixth century was a breaking point in the historical, social, and religious life of the Jews. The political and religious institutions needed to be fixed. The Jewish community was fragmented and shattered.¹⁸

Mein and Middlemas argue that Babylon destroyed Judah. The devastation of Judah did not affect only their political and religious life but also their psychological energy, which needed healing. Despite Judah's demise as an independent entity, the Jewish people and Judah as a country continued to exist. However, the deportation to Babylon was a disappointing event; the exile was 'one of the great fundamental breaks in the long history of the people, one of the worst catastrophes: not only was it the end of political independence, but the dynasty which

¹⁵ Daniel Isaac Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48*, NICOT, Grand Rapids, Michigan, W.B. Eerdmans, 1997, p. 383.

¹⁶ I. M. C. Obinwa, 'I Shall Feed Them with Good Pasture' (Ezek 34:14): *The Shepherd Motif in Ezekiel 34: Its Theological Import and Socio-Political Implications*, Forschung Zur Bibel, Bd. 125, Würzburg, Echter, 2012, pp. 412–413.

¹⁷ A. Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile*, Oxford Theological Monographs, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 1, 53.

¹⁸ J. A. Middlemas, *The Templeless Age: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the 'Exile'*, Louisville, Kentucky, Westminster John Knox, 2007, p. 26. The fact that the Babylonian exile was a crisis for the Jewish people is supported by other scholars like S. Anthonioz, 'Crise et théologie de l'exil chez les trois grands prophètes', in *Actes Du VIIIe Colloque international: La transeuphratène à l'époque perse: Crises et autres difficultés*, Transeuphratène 1.1, Paris, Gabalda, 2010, p. 21. D. L. Smith in his book *The Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile*, New York, Meyer Stone Book, 1989, pp. 50–55. R. Albertz qualifies the Babylonian exile as political, psychological, and religious tribulations (R. Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.*, trans. D. Green, SBL 3, Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2003, 102).

divine oracles had once said would last forever had collapsed, and with the underlying ideology of the people of Judah'.¹⁹

The Babylonians alienated the Jewish people, and the former completely controlled them. Their presence in Babylon raises an important question: Why should the Jewish people leave the land that God promised and gave to them, and which land could be a permanent residence for them? The impact of the exile on their society and religion needs some consideration.

Social Life

Despite having certain advantages, the Jewish people in Babylon were dependent on others.²⁰ The assumption is that they worked for the state or individuals as foreigners without land. The importance of land for the Jews resides in the fact that YHWH gave them the Promised Land, where every tribe had a portion, except the Levites (Deut. 10:8-10; 18:1-2; Josh. 18:4-7). After the conquest of Canaan, Joshua's first task consisted of distributing land to the different tribes. The primary source of wealth and its relationship to religion was land. Wright expresses the significance of land in ancient Israelite culture well: 'For a nation of arable and pastoral farming like Israel, land was the only permanent possession. Crops and herds and habitations might be destroyed by drought or war, but the land would recover. But to be dispossessed of one's family land or, worst of all, to be driven out of the country into exile was unmitigated calamity'.²¹

Wright underlines that land was crucial for the survival of an Israelite family and the whole nation. Hence, the economy of Israel was based on its land. The land was as significant for Israel as for any other country today.²² Additionally, Wright underscores that land is the hope of family and nation. Even in the face of destruction, the land provides the potential for prosperity. This hope disappears when one loses one's land. After leaving their land, the Jews found themselves without land, even if they weren't empty-handed. Therefore, their lack of land in Babylon as a people or individuals indicates that they were diminished, humiliated, and impoverished, a state comparable to dry bones.

In Babylon, the exiles experienced a shift from the status of citizens to that of strangers. They found themselves in a new place with its system of governance and culture. However, Babylon allowed them to conduct their normal daily activities despite being strangers. To clarify the treatment of the exilic community, M. Noth says, 'The exiles were not "prisoners" but represented a compulsory transplanted subject population who were able to move about freely in their daily life, but were presumably compelled to render compulsory labour service'.²³ As deportees, it is possible that they did not have a class distinction. High-ranking individuals in Jerusalem did not receive the same treatment to which they had become accustomed. About their new status, N. P. Lemche comments,

¹⁹ J. A. Soggin, *An Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah*, trans. John Bowden, 2nd edn., London, SCM, 1993, p. 267.

²⁰ The Book of Daniel mentions some Jews who occupied important posts in the administration of Babylon.

²¹ C. J. H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, W.B. Eerdmans, 1990, pp. 3-4.

²² Conflicts of boundaries have emerged among many African countries and have, sometimes, escalated to war. The case of Sudan and South Sudan, Kenya and Uganda claiming each other the ownership of the Migingo Island in Lake Victoria, Tanzania and Malawi, Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda; Kenya and Somalia have a case at The Hague about maritime territory in the Indian Ocean (I. Ongiri, 'Alarm as Somalia Claims Kenya's Territorial Waters', *Sunday Nation*, 14 September 2014) to mention just a few examples.

²³ M. Noth, *The History of Israel*, 2nd edn., New York, Harper & Row, 1960, p. 296.

The deported élite couldn't maintain their social position in exile... they were in large part, the leadership class, but in the eyes of the Babylonians, they could be put to little use within the complicated administrative system then in use in Mesopotamia. For one thing, the Judeans were not educated to be able to undertake important administrative jobs (for which knowledge of cuneiform and Sumerian, the 'Latin' of the day, was essential); for another, there would always be doubts as to the loyalty of the group. It appears that, to begin with leadership stratum were reduced to the status of peasants who farmed plots of land which had been assigned to them by the Babylonian state.²⁴

The current author concurs with Lemche that the Babylonian administration did not allow the exiles to lead. The Jewish people received adequate education. However, as foreigners, they may not have been familiar with Babylon's administrative language and system, which could have hindered their ability to participate in leadership roles. Another reason could be that Nebuchadnezzar's administration sought total control over the Jewish deportees to avert any potential revolution or rebellion (cf. 2 Kgs 24:1; 2 Chr. 36:13). Besides preventing any rebellion, which, in fact, could not be easy, the exiles could not fit in the Babylonian administration because they were foreigners and mere deportees assimilated to prisoners of war.

In Babylon, they might have had the privilege to cultivate the land and benefit from its production, but they did not have total control over it as they did in Judah. Due to the failure of their leaders, they were forced to adapt to their current situation in Babylon. In exile, they had a measure of freedom, indicating that they were not enslaved; it is presupposed that they were comfortable living there.²⁵ This idea is also supported by Miller and Hayes: 'The exiles remained relatively free and certainly should not be understood as enslaved people. They would have been under no overt pressure to assimilate and lose their identities'.²⁶ However, Miller and Hayes assert that the Jewish people were not spared from suffering despite the reality that they were not mistreated. They state:

The Babylonian treatment of exiled Judeans was probably varied. Many captives who had leadership roles in the revolt were sent into exile in chains and were presumably imprisoned or confined. This was the case with both Judean kings—Jehoaichin (II Kings 25:27) and Zedekiah (II Kings 25:7)—and other members of the royal family. Those, however who were deported to weaken the rebellious nation, or to siphon off the superpatriots, or to provide service for the conquerors were treated differently.²⁷

Despite the apparent freedom, it becomes clear that the people in Babylon endured significant suffering. Nebuchadnezzar's administration forced them to go to Babylon, preventing them from experiencing complete freedom. Their forced presence in Babylon was, in today's language, a violation of their human rights.²⁸ In a foreign country, they might have experienced oppression in one way or another. In his reflection on the status and treatment of the Jewish people in the Babylonian exile, Smith-Christopher mentions one of the cuneiform tablets discussed by Weissbach. He explains, 'The terms used in this inscription ("I forced them to

²⁴ N. P. Lemche, *Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society*, The Biblical Seminar, vol. 5, Sheffield, England, JSOT Press, 1988, p. 180.

²⁵ B. Oded, 'Judah and the Exile', *Israelite and Judaeon History*, J. H. Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller (eds.), London, S.C.M., 1977, p. 483.

²⁶ J. M. Miller and J. H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, London, SCM, 1986, p. 433.

²⁷ Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel*, p. 432.

²⁸ J. J. Ahn, *Exile as Forced Migrations: A Sociological, Literary, and Theological Approach on the Displacement and Resettlement of the Southern Kingdom of Judah*, Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, Bd. 417, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2010, p. 45.

work...”) clearly refer to corvée labour, and *e-mi-id-su-nu-ti tu-up-si-ik-ku* (“I imposed on them the brick basket”) further implies strong terms of subservience’.²⁹ The mention of ‘brick basket’ suggests that the forced labour consisted of making bricks. The impression is that construction with bricks was a demanding task. When bricks were not baked in an oven, they were exposed to the sun—the bricks baked in the oven were more solid and expensive than those baked in the sun—implying that summer was the appropriate time to manufacture bricks to cut the cost of heating.³⁰ Making bricks during the sunny season is most likely one of the forced works that the Jewish people were subjected to in Babylon. Since they were in captivity, they did not have the freedom to resist what they were asked to do. Babylon might have taken the opportunity to use the captives as its human resources. Psalm 137 suggests that in Babylon, the Jews did not have any predisposition to sing when their ‘captors’ and ‘tormentors’ asked them to sing one of the songs of Zion (Ps. 137:3). Verse 4 expresses their sorrow, indicating that they were not comfortable in a foreign land; they were suffering.

Indeed, the Jewish people had a different experience in Babylon than in Egypt before the exodus. Nevertheless, this does not exclude the fact that they suffered in one way or another. Exile was a loss for Israel. As said above, they did not choose to go to Babylon, but they were forced; they were deported to live in the diaspora. Their absence from their homeland could lead to significant suffering. The deportees’ new status in Babylon also impacted their religious life.

Religious Life

Not only did the Jews lose their homeland during their exile, but their religious life also suffered significantly. Initially, the spiritual life of the exiles was linked to their homeland to the point that they considered Babylon a ‘strange land’³¹ that they found unsuitable for worshipping their God. The reading of Psalm 137 suggests how Babylon, as a strange land, was not an appropriate place to sing for YHWH.³² It is not that YHWH prohibited his people from worshipping him in Babylon or that they never worshipped Him during their exile. Psalm 137 is linked to the Babylonian exile because the people missed their temple in Jerusalem, where they preferred worshipping YHWH.

In the daily life of the Jews, the temple had a central place. The ‘Zion theology, the predominant ideology of the pre-exilic Jerusalem temple cult which rested on the dual foundation of the inviolability of the city and the eternal covenant with David, was called forcibly into question’.³³ The temple was the centre of Judaic theology, where they, as the chosen people, most affectionately experienced their relationship with YHWH. Unfortunately, with the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation to Babylon,

²⁹ D. L. Smith-Christopher, ‘Reassessing the Historical and Sociological Impact of the Babylonian Exile (597/587-539 BCE,)’ *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions*, J. M. Scott (ed.), Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism vol. 56, Leiden, Brill, 1997, p. 24. From F. H. Weissbach, *Das Hauptheiligtum des Marduk in Babylon*, Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1938, pp. 46—7. The translation of the Akkadian reads: ‘...the lands of Hattim, from the upper sea to the lower sea, the land of Sumer and Akkad, the land between the two rivers... the rulers of the Lands of Hattim across Euphrates where the sun sets, whose rulership, at the bidding of Marduk my Lord, I overcame, and the mighty Cedars of the mountain of Lebanon were brought to the City of Babylon, the whole of the races, people from far places, whom Marduk my Lord delivered to me—I forced them to work on the building of Etemenanki—I imposed on them the brick-basket...’

³⁰ S. Bertman, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*, Facts on File Library of World History, New York, Facts on File, 2003, pp. 186–88.

³¹ Noth, *The History of Israel*, p. 297.

³² The reference to Psalm 137 does not mean that this Psalm was sung in Babylon during the exile. It serves, in the context of this work, to show how Jews had difficulty to worship in a foreign country.

³³ J. A. Middlemas, *The Troubles of Templeless Judah*, Oxford Theological Monographs, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 2.

The temple, of course, was destroyed, and many of the religious implements of worship were carried into exile with the people. The policy of Nebuchadnezzar was to place captured religious implements or statutes in the temple of Marduk in the city of Babylon in order to symbolise the capture of the people and the defeat of their gods.³⁴

In a foreign nation, the exiles were not denied practising their religion; they ‘could continue their national religion in the land of their exile, although there was the tendency to combine this with some form of worship of the gods of the lands in which they dwelt (see Ezek. 14:3; 20:29)’.³⁵ Without a proper environment to worship YHWH, with the exposition to syncretism, the holiness of the people was questionable. The outcome of exile on the life of the Jewish people was comprehensive. It affected their political sovereignty, independence, the loss of their territorial borders, and the relinquishment of their mutual religious identity.³⁶

The Babylonian exile resulted in a crisis of holiness, as unfamiliar surroundings and customs could impede exiles from upholding their religious identity. It is critical to understand that ‘The period after destruction of the temple was one of severe disruption to the political, social, and religious spheres of Judah... The impression provided by the biblical writers certainly suggests that illicit worship took place in sixth-century Judah’.³⁷

The Democratic Republic of Congo Refugee Situation in the Light of Ezekiel 37:1-14

The Democratic Republic of Congo’s refugee crisis is a complicated humanitarian catastrophe that is fuelled by war, violence, and political instability. Human rights abuses, political instability, and violence mark it. Decades of civil war and violence in the DRC have caused millions of internally displaced people and refugees to flee to other countries. Among the main humanitarian problems are limited access to education, inadequate healthcare, and food shortages.

Ezekiel 37:1–14 addresses God’s promise to bring life to the dry bones. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, this passage communicates a message of hope and restoration. In eastern DRC, people have suffered from oppression and injustice, including war and economic exploitation. Their social life has been destroyed. The religious/spiritual life of some of them is questionable; syncretism and witchcraft have become standard practices among the victims and the armed groups. Thus, they can relate to the imagery of dry bones and the longing for new life. Without a doubt, Ezekiel 37 is a source of encouragement for those who are struggling with displacement, illness, poverty, discrimination, alienation, or other forms of adversity in the DRC. This text is a reminder that YHWH, the holy God, can bring hope and new life even in the most challenging circumstances.

The understanding of Ezekiel 37:1–14 in the eastern DRC is shaped by its historical, cultural, and religious context. While the passage is primarily a message of hope and restoration for the people of Israel, its themes of life, resurrection, and renewal resonate with many Congolese Christians as they seek to navigate the challenges of their daily lives due to conflict ravages in the region. Like the Jews in Babylon, the internally displaced persons in Ituri and North Kivu have lost their [ancestral] land. Though not enslaved people, they go through atrocious suffering. Nevertheless, they hope to return to their lands.

³⁴ Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, p. 60.

³⁵ Miller and J. H. Hayes (eds.), *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, p. 433.

³⁶ R. Elior, ‘Exile and Redemption in Jewish Mystical Thought’, *Studies in Spirituality* vol. 14, 2004, p. 1. <https://dlwqtxts1x7le7.cloudfront.net>, (accessed 24 February 2023).

³⁷ Middlemas, *The Troubles of Templeless Judah*, pp. 72–73.

Examining the DRC's refugee issue through the lens of Ezekiel 37:1–14:1 reveals several themes, including desperation and hopelessness. Many individuals in the DRC suffer from extreme trauma, loss, and instability, which leaves them feeling hopeless. The text of Ezekiel underlines the need for repair, including social services, psychological support, and physical repair through humanitarian relief to aid in the recovery and reconstruction of individuals and communities.

Ezekiel's vision calls for both the restoration of each individual and the reunification of the community. In many respects, the refugee crisis highlights the importance of communal cooperation and resilience. The primary objectives of initiatives to aid refugees and Internally Displaced Persons should be to build community ties and create areas where people may gather to support one another. The passage also offers a compelling case for God's ability to intervene in trying times. Amid hardship, many individuals in the DRC mostly rely on their faith to keep them optimistic.

Conclusion

The restoration of the Jewish people is the main issue addressed in the text of Ezekiel 37:1–14. The vision that Ezekiel receives portrays the people as dry bones without any hope of regaining life. The vision also indicates the power of YHWH to reverse what seems impossible for humans. The dry bones symbolise the suffering of the Jewish people in their Babylonian exile. The context of the text is that of exile. Reading Ezekiel 37:1–14 helps to understand the situation and the realities in Ituri and North Kivu provinces. The conflict that has become a standard practice in the region has considerably affected the social-political and religious life of the people. Moreover, the area is in the grip of destruction daily. Efforts to bring stability have so far failed.

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