“O mortal, can these bones live?” (Ezekiel 37,3)

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I thank you for the invitation that has been extended to me and for the pleasure of being here with you again at this now annual event. As you know, the program for this day was decided many months in advance by a joint commission of the Italian Bishops’ Conference and the Assembly of Italian Rabbis. And this year, long before the tragic events of 7 October, it was decided to discuss the prophecy of Ezekiel 37. And then what happened happened. There was a trauma, and the Jewish communities were also struck by the way in which the Catholic world reacted to this trauma. Cardinal Pizzaballa, to whom I will return, said the other day in his speech at the Catholic University [the Gemelli Polyclinic in Rome]: “This war is also a watershed in religious dialogue, which can no longer be the same as before.”

As a result of these events, a succession of difficulties and contradictions emerged. So, we discussed whether to change the title of the day and then we came to a sort of compromise: let’s keep the prophecy of Ezekiel and let’s also discuss the present. And that is what I will do now. Let’s start with Ezekiel.

To continue in the field of exegesis, of interpretation, there is an important page in the Babylonian Talmud in *Sanhedrin’s* treatise, 92b, that discusses how to interpret this passage [Ezekiel 37:1-14]; it asks two questions that actually seem to be placed in two different periods. The first and older question, which is discussed by some second-century rabbis, is whether the vision was a real thing or a parable. The word given for parable is *mashal,* an imaginary, symbolic thing. One rabbi, speaking of prophecy, used an ambiguous expression, saying “it is a true parable” and his colleague said to him: “if it is true, it is not a parable and if it is a parable, it is not true,” so make up your mind. The response was, “Certainly, it is a parable”— a parable in which there is the symbolic representation of something that can happen. Not everyone thought so. Another rabbi said: I am a descendant of these dead who have been resurrected, who have started to live again, who have started a family and from them I have inherited things. Someone else said instead that those dead were resurrected for a short time, just long enough to recite these words: “The Lord causes death with righteousness and revives with mercy,” in the sense that the resurrection is a gift, an act of mercy.

This is the first series of interpretations, which alone open up a wide field for further reflection. The second set of interpretations seeks to answer another question: to whom is Ezekiel referring, who are the dead of whom he speaks? And here the answers are varied. A first answer is linked to a story that could be a legend but is full of symbolic meanings even in the present day. They are the sons of Ephraim, one of Joseph’s two sons. When the Hebrews came out of Egypt, it is said in the book of Exodus (13:17) that the Lord did not lead them by the shortest road, which was the coastal road, because they would meet the Philistines, and with them war, and so would turn back in fear. On the basis of this and other Scriptural records (1 Chr. 7:21), rabbinic tradition imagines that before the departure from Egypt there was an attempt by the tribe of Ephraim to flee Egypt. Why did they make this attempt? Because when Abraham received the announcement of slavery (Gen. 15:13), he was told that the exile would last 400 years. The problem was to understand when these 400 years would expire. The correct interpretation was that the count started from the birth of

Isaac, who was born to Abraham when he was 100 years old. The announcement, on the other hand, is placed at when Abraham was 70 years old, so if you start from there the account of the liberation would have taken place 30 years earlier. So, the sons of Ephraim miscounted, tried to move toward the promised land, but were stopped by the Philistines in Gath and all were exterminated. It is a story that speaks of the desire to press history forward and these sad events took place in the very area where fighting is taking place right now; the Gaza Strip was the main Philistine settlement (hence the name Palestine). According to another interpretation, other rabbis say that the dead spoken of were people who in various ways had committed sins, which are deduced from the words of Ezekiel: there were those who denied the resurrection of the dead and were denied by their resurrection; or those who had no “moisture” in the sense of a good deed, and this is alluded to by the expression “our bones are dry” (Ezek. 37:11), and yet were resurrected; or those who had defaced the Temple in Jerusalem with a series of idolatrous images, because in an earlier vision of Ezekiel — in chapter 8:10, when he sees the desecration of the Temple — it is said “all around,” the same expression that appears in the prophecy of the bones (37:2). Another interpretation is that of Rabbi Yochanàn, who says that the dead spoken of are those of the valley of Dura, and here it is linked to another legendary cycle: it is said that when the Jews were taken into exile by the Babylonians there was a group of young men who for their beauty drove the Chaldean women mad with desire and this unleashed the jealousy of the men. King Nebuchadnezzar ordered them to be killed. And these are the dead of the Dura Valley. And this is yet another way of applying prophecy to certain events in the past.

These are the Talmudic sources, but the discussion of Ezekiel’s prophecy has gone on over time. The interpretative crux of this vision is always the same: what is Ezekiel talking about? What is he promising? The answers oscillate between two solutions: Is he talking about the resurrection of the dead, or is he talking about Israel’s return to the land? The prophet says, “These bones are the whole house of Israel, ... I will open your graves... and I will bring you back to the land of Israel” (37:11-12). So, there are two images, there are two promises, one with the other, the return of the exiles and/or the resurrection of the dead. Exegetical history has been divided on these two readings. Hence some, such as Abrabanel, maintain that this prophecy specifically refers to the resurrection of the dead. But this does not exclude the return of the exiles and the gathering of those scattered, because, according to this reading, Ezekiel’s eschatology is in three stages: first the war of Gog and Magog, then the gathering of the diasporas, and finally the resurrection of the dead. This exegetical discussion shows that, in any case, the Jewish people have read this and other prophecies for centuries and millennia, as a promise and an expression of hope in the reconstruction of the unity of the Jewish people in the land of Israel. And this is a cornerstone of Jewish identity, just as the hope in the resurrection of the dead, which we repeat daily in our prayers, every day, three times a day, is a cornerstone of faith. This issue was also the subject of discussion between the Pharisees and Sadducees and was a pillar of the Pharisaic faith. And it is a fact that in the sensibility of the Jewish people this text of hope for redemption and resurrection does not mean only the *post-mortem* one, but resurrection after the disasters of history. In 1878, a poet with a very unusual life, Naftali Hertz Imber, wrote a poem in Hebrew entitled *Tiqvatenu,* “our hope,” taking the phrase that Ezekiel puts in the mouth of the bones—the house of Israel: “our hope is finished” (37:11), and reversing it into “our hope is not finished.” This poem soon became the anthem of the Zionist movement and today it is the anthem of the State of Israel, in which the phrase “our hope is not over” is sung. The national trials of Italy have had a similar history: the *Va, pensiero* compares the fate of Italy to that of the Jewish exiles in Babylon and paraphrases Psalm 137 with the image of the lyres hanging from the willows. But there is also a reference to Ezekiel 37, one does not think about it, in Garibaldi’s *Hymn* of 1858, which begins with the words “the tombs are discovered, the dead are raised, our martyrs are all risen.” The *Risorgimento* [Resurgence] movements were inspired by biblical images of Jewish history. But it’s one thing to borrow images, and another to live them. The Jewish people live these images in their heart’s core. In a few days, on January 27, will be Holocaust Remembrance Day, set on the day when the gates of Auschwitz were opened. But the Shoah did not end on that day. It went on for more months until the defeat of the Nazis at the end of April 1945. There had never been a vastness of

death like that produced by the Shoah, and three years later, in May 1948, the state of Israel was founded. A historical reversal of exceptional dimensions, in which two epochal events, that of destruction and that of reconstruction, followed one another in a very short time. The Jewish spirit tends to see a divine hand in this. And it remembers Ezekiel’s words. This is the deep Jewish feeling.

All these discussions on the distinctive Jewish sensibility and on how biblical prophecies are lived [today] confront us with a difference in approach and interpretation. We must see to what degree this leads us to disagreements. All such contradictions, from the theological point of view, even more than from the political point of view, have come to the surface in recent days. I quote parts of a letter written recently by Johan Bonny, bishop of Antwerp. Antwerp is a city in which there is a considerable Jewish community. The letter is entitled “Jewish Friends, I Can No Longer Remain Silent,” and thank goodness it is from a “friend.” It is an illustrative text that I quote to show backward steps in the dialogue.

> *Christians and Jews largely share the same holy books, the books we call the Old Testament. But in our [Christian] interpretation of these writings, we are by no means in accord after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This difference is not incidental but is the heart of the problem: the fact that God’s love and God’s salvation are no longer tied to a specific country, race, or culture. At the heart of Christianity lies the universality of salvation. All the rights and duties associated with the Christian faith have universal significance. They transcend all private interests, even any private religious interests. Consequently, according to Christian opinion, there is no word of God in the Old Testament that, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, can legitimize a violent recovery or military expansion of the so-called “biblical land.”*

Now it is not only a question of the criticism of military references (Amalek?), but there is, in the light of an old anti-Jewish Christian exegesis, the restoration of all the oppositional schemes. Here we are faced with the denial of the theological progress of recent decades, of everything that Father Renczes said sitting next to me a little while ago. Here we are practically denying Israel’s autonomy, its relationship with Scripture, its specific way to salvation, its being a nation with a mission that has never been exhausted — everything is denied. And this has come out now, accompanied by other, even more problematic things. A leading Italian theologian, who has also been invited to various events of dialogue, Alberto Maggi, writes on the occasion of Christmas:

> *While Christians remember the massacre of the innocents in Bethlehem [my note: the children killed by Herod were Jews], an even more horrendous slaughter is underway in Gaza with the extermination of an entire people... Long live free Palestine! Poor Israel: Almost eighty years of ruthless occupation, of injustices... [my note: eighty years is the founding of the State of Israel, so Israel’s right to exist as a nation is being denied] have anesthetized its heart and rendered it merciless.*

This theme of Jewish ruthlessness, of Jewish wickedness, is the same theme that lies behind the accusatory image of deicide, which has been eliminated since 1965, and yet Jewish wickedness must always be present. In recent days we have listened to important theologians, even at the highest levels of the hierarchy, who have said that it is not even the law of retaliation, it is Lamech’s revenge, revenge multiplied 77 times. We are a vengeful people. And this has come out of the mouths of major theologians.

At the political level, we have witnessed the policy of the “balance sheet,” in the sense that if minimal and delayed attention is given to the families of the abductees, just as much time must be devoted to the families of Gaza. Personally, I have received private messages of friendship and

solidarity from people in this hall. But I must say that other open and official messages have come from the highest levels: that we are all terrorists. Those who were the perpetrators of a terrible massacre and those who are trying to eliminate this thing and prevent its blatantly threatened repetition have been put on the same level. And then I pose a problem, which goes to the heart of consciences; the prayer of peace. You don’t have a monopoly on peace. We all want peace. But it depends on what kind of peace it is: what kind of peace do you want? A peace in which the workers of evil are not defeated? The workers of evil must be defeated. And we cannot accept the principle that war is a defeat for everyone, because someone has to be defeated, as Nazism was defeated in 1945. He who does evil must be defeated; This does not sanction any and all responses, but it must be clear that we must not equate those who are suffering from incredible abuse with those who have committed it. This is what has been lacking in sensitivity. And when there were [Jewish] objections, the [Catholic] response was belated and measured. It was the jumble of religion and politics that confused and even offended us. But is it possible that the most important representative of the Catholic Church in Israel goes to Christmas Mass in Bethlehem with the *keffiyeh* over his cardinal’s vestments? It is not just a political choice, which jeopardizes, among other things, the possibility of being an impartial mediator. The cardinal is going to celebrate the birth of a Jewish child and at the same time feeds the myth of the Palestinian Christ, a falsification.

These are all alarming signs that we need to think about, even if the speeches I have heard here tonight go against the grain of what we have heard elsewhere. There is a problem of retrograde theology and substantial misunderstanding. For this reason, it is absolutely necessary to start again, not from scratch, to pick up the threads of the conversation. And let it not be said: we are against antisemitism, because when certain things are done and said, it is anti-Judaism. It is one thing to affirm principles and another to deny them in daily practice. I am sorry to have had to deal with the subject in this way, but I wanted to send a message of reflection to reconstitute a conversation, to see if and how it is possible to repair the rift that has been created. Thank you.

Rabbi Riccardo Shmuel Di Segniis the chief rabbi of Rome. A specialist in diagnostic radiology, he is descended from three generations of rabbis. He completed his rabbinical studies in 1973 and was elected chief rabbi of Rome in 2001.

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