

Mariecke van den Berg

Bones Talking Back: Theology and Public Mourning After the Crash of Flight MH17

Abstract

In this article I formulate a theological response to the shocking event of the crash of Malaysia Airlines flight 17 (MH17), which was shot down over Eastern Ukraine on 17 July 2014. None of the 298 passengers survived the crash. Moreover, since the plane crashed in territory where separatist militias were involved in an armed conflict with the Ukrainian military, the victims' bodies could not be removed from the crash site for several days. I address how displays of public grief, such as those in the aftermath of MH17, are embedded in a 'politics of mourning' (Eng and Kazajian 2003) in which feelings of loss and despair are expressed against the backdrop of particular political entanglements and national histories. In the case of MH17, these entanglements included a construction of the civilized Western mourner versus the barbaric Ukrainian separatist who does not know how to properly treat a body. Taking the body as my point of departure and using Mario Aguilar's (2009) notion of a 'hermeneutics of bones', I trace some of the 'past narratives of God and bones' in the Old Testament. These narratives show that Old Testament accounts of bones testify to the deep notion of human beings as created by God and are therefore a place to locate God in times of despair (e.g. in Job). Moreover, Old Testament renderings of bones can offer the comfort of language and speakability. They show how bones can be a site of ultimate humiliation, but also the site where dignity is restored. I then turn to a more in-depth reading of Rizpah, who in 2 Samuel 21 publicly mourns over the bones of her sons for six months until they receive a proper burial at the hands of King David, thereby changing the power constellations that had led to their deaths in the first place.

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel formuliere ich eine theologische Antwort auf das schockierende Ereignis des Absturzes des Fluges 17 (MH17) von Malaysia Airlines, der am 17. Juli 2014 über der Ostukraine abgeschossen wurde. Keiner der 298 Passagiere überlebte den Unfall. Da das Flugzeug in einem Gebiet abstürzte, in dem separatistische Milizen in einen bewaffneten Konflikt mit dem ukrainischen Militär verwickelt waren, konnten die Körper der Opfer mehrere Tage lang nicht von der Absturzstelle entfernt werden. Ich spreche darüber, wie Darstellungen öffentlicher Trauer, wie sie beispielsweise nach

MH17 entstanden sind, in eine „Politik der Trauer“ (Eng und Kazajian 2003) eingebettet sind, in der Gefühle von Verlust und Verzweiflung vor dem Hintergrund bestimmter politischer Verflechtungen und nationaler Geschichten zum Ausdruck kommen. Im Falle von MH17 beinhalteten diese Verwicklungen eine Konstruktion des zivilisierten westlichen Trauernden gegen den barbarischen ukrainischen Separatisten, der nicht weiß, wie man einen Körper richtig behandelt. Ausgehend vom Körper als Ausgangspunkt und unter Verwendung von Mario Aguilar (2009) Vorstellung einer „Hermeneutik der Knochen“ verfolge ich einige der „vergangenen Erzählungen von Gott und den Knochen“ im Alten Testament. Diese Erzählungen zeigen, dass alttestamentliche Knochenberichte von der tiefen Vorstellung des Menschen, wie er von Gott geschaffen wurde, zeugen und daher ein Ort sind, um Gott in Zeiten der Verzweiflung (z. B. in Hiob) zu finden. Darüber hinaus können alttestamentliche Darstellungen von Knochen den Komfort von Sprache und Sprechfertigkeit bieten. Sie zeigen, wie Knochen ein Ort der ultimativen Erniedrigung sein können, aber auch der Ort, an dem die Würde wiederhergestellt wird. Ich wende mich dann einer vertieften Lektüre von Rizpa zu, die im Jahr 2 Samuel 21 sechs Monate lang öffentlich über die Knochen ihrer Söhne trauert, bis sie durch König David ein ordentliches Begräbnis erhalten und damit die Machtkonstellationen verändern, die überhaupt zu ihrem Tod geführt haben.

Resumen

En este artículo, formulo una repuesta teológica al traumático evento del accidente aéreo del vuelo 17 de Malaysia Airlines (MH17), que fue derribado en Ucrania oriental el 17 de julio de 2014. Ninguno de los 298 pasajeros sobrevivió al accidente. Además, desde que el avión se estrellara en el territorio en el que las milicias separatistas se encontraban sumidas en un conflicto armado con el ejército ucraniano, los cuerpos de las víctimas no pudieron retirarse del lugar del accidente durante varios días. Abordo cómo las demostraciones públicas de luto, como aquellas tras el MH17, están engarzadas en una “política del lamento” (Eng y Kazajian 2003) donde los sentimientos de pérdida y desesperación se expresan contra el trasfondo de ciertos entresijos políticos e historias nacionales. En el caso del MH17, estos entresijos incluían la construcción de un doliente occidental civilizado versus el separatista ucraniano bárbaro que no sabe cómo tratar correctamente a un cuerpo. Tomando al cuerpo como mi punto de partida y usando la noción de la “hermenéutica de los huesos” de Mario Aguilar (2009), trazo algunas de las “narrativas pasadas de Dios y los huesos” en el Antiguo Testamento. Estas narrativas muestran cómo el Antiguo Testamento da cuenta de huesos que testifican sobre la profunda noción de los seres humanos como creados por Dios y son, por lo tanto, un lugar donde ubicar a Dios en tiempo de desesperación (por ejemplo, en Job). Además, las representaciones de huesos del Antiguo Testamento pueden ofrecer el consuelo del lenguaje y del no tabú. Muestran cómo los huesos pueden ser un lugar de humillación última, pero también el lugar en el que se restaura la dignidad. Regreso, entonces, a una lectura

en mayor profundidad de Rizpah, quien, en 2 Samuel 21, llora públicamente a los huesos de sus hijos durante seis meses hasta que reciben una sepultura digna a manos del rey David, cambiando así las constelaciones de poder que les habían dirigido hacia la muerte en un primer momento.

On July 23, 2014, I got in my car and drove off from my home in one of the larger cities in the Netherlands, for a family visit. It was a warm summer day and I rolled down the windows to catch the breeze and smell the scent of the city: the full-grown grass in the park, the sun on the asphalt, the window-cleaner fluid of my car. When I drove out of the city and turned onto the highway, I was stopped by the police. As were the drivers before me and the drivers behind me. The highway was closed off and completely empty. Only then did I realise what was happening. I got out of my car to stand on the road facing the highway. The other people did the same. We stood by our cars and watched the most impressive funeral procession we had ever seen. It consisted of forty hearses, all completely similar, guided by police cars. No-one spoke. We just stood there and watched. As the last hearse passed by, I briefly looked at the woman who had stepped out of the car right behind me. We just nodded and then got into our cars, waiting for the police to clear the way.

What we had just observed was the home-coming of the remains of forty victims of the crash of flight MH17.¹ On July 17, 2014 Malaysia Airlines flight 17 crashed in Eastern Ukraine, near the Russian border, in the middle of a territory where separatist militias who wanted to join Russia were involved in an armed conflict with the Ukrainian military. All 298 passengers including 15 crew died in the crash. 193 of them were Dutch. Soon after the crash it became clear that this was no accident, but that the plane had been shot down. Research by the Dutch Safety Board claimed that the plane had been shot down by a Buk-rocket placed in a territory occupied by Ukrainian separatist.² That the crash took place in a war zone meant that the bodies could not be immediately recovered. Emergency workers had to take into account their own safety and had to negotiate with separatists to get access to the crash site. This

¹ In fact, as the remains had yet to be identified, at this point it was unclear to what extent this was a 'home-coming' of the victims, or whether their home was actually in another country.

² Dutch Safety Board, *Crash van Malaysia Airlines Vlucht MH17, Hrabove, Oekraïne, 17 juli 2014*. Research report (The Hague: October 2015).

meant that a horrific situation presented itself in which the bodies of the victims lay scattered across the fields for days until they could be transported to the Netherlands, where they would be identified. The first flight containing remains of victims arrived at Eindhoven Airport on July 23, 2014 (more flights were to follow in the next days), a National Day of Mourning.

The impact of the crash was enormous. Not only in the Netherlands, where it was seen in the media as a ‘Dutch 9/11’,³ but also in countries like Malaysia and Australia which had lost substantial numbers of people (28 and 27, respectively). Precisely the fact that this had been an act of war and not ‘just’ an accident meant that the impact of the crash was bigger and lasted longer than previous crashes that had taken place in the Netherlands or had involved many Dutch victims, such as that in the ‘Bijlmer’ neighborhood in Amsterdam in 1992 or the one in Tenerife in 1977. The MH17 crash generated a long process of meaning-making that started right after the crash and continues to this day. At first, this process of asking questions and finding answers mostly took place in the media, but as the years passed, other forms were introduced. The government started investigations which produced technical reports. At Tilburg University, a series of lectures was organised in the Fall of 2014 to commemorate its Professor in Law and Member of the Senate Willem Witteveen, who had died in the crash, together with his wife and daughter. In 2015, this lecture series was published in an edited volume that addresses the crash from a variety of perspectives and disciplines.⁴ In 2018, moreover, the well-known Dutch novelist A. F. Th. van der Heijden published the novel *Mooi doodliggen*, partly inspired by the crash and offering a literary understanding of the events.

The attempt to make at least some sense of what had happened includes a wide variety of questions. Juridical questions were directed at finding out who had done this, with what motives, and how the perpetrators could be brought to justice. Politically, the crash generated questions about European relations. Until the

³ See for instance: Rob Wijnberg, “Nationalisering van een ramp,” in: *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 23 July 2014. Arjen Schreuder, “Wraak valt altijd tegen,” in: *NRCNext*, 9 September 2014. Piet de Jong, “Vertrouwen in politiek groter na ramp MH17,” in: *Nederlands Dagblad*, 26 September 2014. Thijs Broer, Max van Wezel and Bas van der Schot, “Er heerst weer angst op het Binnenhof (terwijl het juist zo lekker ging); paniek in de politieke beschouwingen,” in: *Vrij Nederland*, 11 October 2014. Johan van de Beek, “MH17: Vertrouwen, vrees en veel vragen,” in: *Dagblad De Limburger*, 10 November 2014.

⁴ Gabriël van den Brink (ed.), *Een ramp die Nederland veranderde? Nadenken over vlucht MH17* (Uitgeverij Boom: Amsterdam 2015).

crash, the Netherlands had considered itself uninvolved in the war in Ukraine.⁵ After the tragedy, the conflict has suddenly become a very tangible reality that ended 193 Dutch lives and affected many more. This raised questions about relations between Western Europe/the Netherlands and Eastern Europe/Russia.⁶ Other questions that were raised were more reflective. The many responses and debates in the media were an incentive to investigate what the impact of the crash had been for the collective sense of self of the Dutch; in other words, what the crash had meant for the formation of national identity.⁷ Moreover, faced with many outbursts of public displays of mourning and emotion, people started to investigate how public mourning rituals had altered and what this implied for changes in the relation between individual and society and the changing role of religion and secularity.⁸

My aim here is to investigate yet another aspect of the crash of flight MH17: its theological implications. The need to come to a (Christian) theological reflection of MH17 derives from the urge that I, and surely many others, feel to seek sources of comfort and meaning-giving in the face of grief and sense of insecurity implied in moments of disaster. But a theological reflection on this particular tragedy can and should do more, I argue, than offer comfort. Theology can be a part of addressing the complicated entanglements of the ‘politics of mourning’.⁹ To be sure, I understand the politics of mourning as separate from the process of grief experienced by the bereaved who stand in a (close) relationship to those who passed away. Rather, it poses the questions suggested by Judith Butler in her 2003 essay *Violence, Mourning, Politics*: “[W]ho counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, what makes for a grievable life?”¹⁰ A politics of mourning asks questions about the discursive effects of public displays of grief, about who has stakes in regulating grief and whose pain

⁵ Erik Borgman, “Wat de ramp met Nederland doet,” in: Gabriël van den Brink (ed.), *Een ramp die Nederland veranderde? Nadenken over vlucht MH17* (Uitgeverij Boom: Amsterdam 2015), 129-150.

⁶ André Gerrits, “De crisis in Oekraïne,” in: Gabriël van den Brink (ed.), *Een ramp die Nederland veranderde? Nadenken over vlucht MH17* (Uitgeverij Boom: Amsterdam 2015), 59-80.

⁷ Gabriël van den Brink, “Een ramp met vele betekenissen,” in: *Een ramp die Nederland veranderde? Nadenken over vlucht MH17* (Uitgeverij Boom: Amsterdam 2015), 13-28.

⁸ Borgman, “Wat de ramp,” 129-150.

⁹ The term ‘the politics of mourning’ is used, but not defined for instance in David Eng and David Kazanjian, (eds.), *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (University of California Press: Berkely 2003).

¹⁰ Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” in: *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 4(1) (2003), 9-37, here 10.

and sorrow get to be represented, recognised and related to. In Butler's words: "How do our cultural frames for thinking the human set limits on the kinds of losses we can avow as loss?"¹¹ These questions are important to ask in relation to the national grief in the aftermath of MH17 in the Netherlands, where a difference could be noted in how losses were valued. Perhaps understandably so, Dutch lives that were lost in the crash were discussed much more than those of victims of other nationalities. The victims of the plane crash, moreover, were given much more attention than the casualties of the Ukrainian war in general. As Dutch theologian Erik Borgman explains, on the one hand such public grief over Dutch lives resulted in a sense of unity, oneness, and mutual consolation. On the other hand, the public grief generated a sense of national identity in which 'we' Dutch know how to properly take care of the remains of the victims, contrary to 'them' in Eastern Europe. The public mourning showed our presumed civilised nature. This self-identification could only exist, Borgman argues, if people agreed to neglect the role played by Western Europe in general and the Netherlands in particular in the escalation of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia.¹² Post-traumatic public theology, as Shelly Rambo argues, can play its part in responding to trauma in a different, transformative, and more just way that opens up new possibilities of living together:

The visions and practices of religious traditions can assist us in this transfiguration, offering not simply the counter-logic, but the counter-movements to bring about peace: movements of compassion and justice, of resistance and resilience.¹³

MH17 and the body

In my search for a theological understanding of the crash, which indeed I hope can be a form of post-traumatic public theology as defined by Rambo, I take my point of departure in the body. Bodies, in particular those of the victims, have been central to both the event of the crash and the process of signification in the media. There was something paradoxical about these bodies, as Heidi de Mare argues.¹⁴ On the one hand, there was the reality of bodies that lay scattered across the fields in Eastern Ukraine for days before they were collected,

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

¹² Borgman, "Wat de ramp," 142-143.

¹³ Shelly Rambo, "Introduction," in: Stephanie N. Arel and Shelly Rambo (eds.), *Post-Traumatic Public Theology* (Palgrave MacMillan: Cham 2016), 1-21.

¹⁴ Heidi de Mare, "MH17 en de publieke zaak," in: Gabriël van den Brink (ed.), *Een ramp die Nederland veranderde? Nadenken over vlucht MH17* (Uitgeverij Boom: Amsterdam 2015), 103-127.

transported and prepared for identification. It was precisely this reality that people tried to grasp and come to terms with. On the other hand, this reality seemed too horrific, too dreadful for people to address directly. What happened therefore was that language about bodies was replaced by ‘body-language’. Instead of addressing the reality of the victim’s bodies, people described their own responses and emotions in terms of bodily metaphors: they were bleeding from a thousand wounds, had goose-bumps, broken hearts, were pointing the finger, and so on.¹⁵ And there were other bodies involved. That of the whole country which, according to the Dutch King Willem-Alexander who addressed the nation in a speech, had been hurt itself. There were the bodies of Ukrainian separatists who occupied the territory, and of the Ukrainians living near the crash site. The body of Minister of Foreign affairs Frans Timmermans who, in a moment of comfort that seemed to stretch beyond those directly involved, hugged a family member of one of the victims when coffins with remains started being carried out of a plane at Eindhoven Airport.

I therefore start by exploring how a focus on the body can help in the sense-making of the crash of flight MH17. Taking as my point of departure a ‘hermeneutics of bones’, a term coined by liberation theologian Mario Aguilar, I shall depart from theories developed by or relating to communities that have had many reasons to let the bones of their ancestors speak. A discussion of how bones figure in the Old Testament follows, starting with general tendencies found in Biblical narratives regarding bones and moving on to a more in-depth case-study of a Biblical narrative that seems particularly suited for a dialogue with the happenings of the crash of flight MH17: the story of Rizpah watching over the remains of her sons in 2 Samuel 21.

A Hermeneutics of Bones

In *Theology, Liberation and Genocide: A Theology of the Periphery* (2009), Mario Aguilar attempts to come to a theological understanding of the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. Aguilar is compelled to start thinking from/with bones when he learns that in Rwanda, most bones of those who were killed were not buried but put on display in memorial centres or in churches for family and friends, but also passers-by, to come and see. Here, they served as a continuous memory of what has happened.¹⁶ The ‘hermeneutics of bones’ he subsequently develops

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁶ Mario Aguilar, *Theology, Liberation and Genocide: A Theology of the Periphery* (SCM Press: London 2009), 42.

shall form the starting point for thinking about the bodies implied in the crash of flight MH17. A hermeneutics of bones, Aguilar explains, departs from the stories that bones tell,¹⁷ and from stories that can be connected to “past narratives about God and bones”.¹⁸ “It is a message that comes out of the materiality of bones, bones that in the case of genocide express death and desolation, conflict and anger.”¹⁹ To listen to this story can be alarming from the perspective of the believer: Aguilar acknowledges that the story that is told can ultimately be that of an absent God. Where was God when people fled to the churches but were killed anyway and when white missionaries hastily left the country?²⁰ For Aguilar, however, the bones of those killed do not tell this story. He understands the bones as the material commemoration of the fact that God was, in fact, present, since God takes part in suffering. Quoting Jon Sobrino, Aguilar states that “victims are the place where God is known, but sacramentally. They make God known because they make Him present.”²¹ Important theological notions in which this conclusion is embedded are those of the suffering and resurrection of Jesus Christ, regularly celebrated in the Eucharist by many Rwandan Catholics.²² Importantly, then, to Aguilar the bones of those killed may serve as a sign of a God who is present and who shares in the suffering, and whom, through the presence of bones literally in public spaces and sacramentally in the Eucharist, may serve as an incentive for community building.

I find Aguilar’s notion of a ‘hermeneutics of bones’ or a ‘skeletal theology’²³ very compelling as a starting point for a theological understanding of MH17, because it speaks to the very pressing reality of displaced bodies that so characterises this attack. There are, however, some other questions I would like to ask, and some other stories I suspect bones could tell us if we are open to listen to them. Aguilar’s theological understanding of bones seems to be primarily intended to give an answer to the question of theodicy and it is perhaps therefore that he, to my opinion, rather quickly brings in the promise of resurrection. To Aguilar, the sacred meaning of bones needs to be located in

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 48-49

²¹ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Burns & Oates: Turnbridge Wells 1994), 251. Quoted in Aguilar, *Theology, Liberation and Genocide*, 49.

²² Aguilar, *Theology, Liberation and Genocide*, 44.

²³ *Ibid.*, 43.

the New Testament, where God is revealed as one who suffers alongside human beings, instead of the sometimes ‘aloof’ God of the Old Testament who can (temporarily) turn away from suffering.²⁴ I would, however, like to explore whether and how ‘past narratives of bones and God’ might take us further back, precisely to the Old Testament, where our bones were first formed. It is my presumption that indeed an Old Testament rendering of bones can bring forth another account of the sacredness of bones, with the possibility of resurrection being put ‘on hold’ for the moment. Such an account of bones is needed because a quick recourse to the resurrection may have unwanted, yet very real, exclusionary effects. For instance: what about victims and survivors of the crash of flight MH17 who did not or do not believe in resurrection or an afterlife? Do they wish to be incorporated into a Christian rendering of life after death? What about the perpetrators? What could the comfort of resurrection imply for their sense of responsibility and accountability? Can bones also tell a story of justice, form a charge? These, to me, are solid reasons to suspend resurrection and first, or perhaps also ultimately, take note of how God and bones were perceived in a world where resurrection did not yet form a part of common faith.

Biblical bones

Reading the Old Testament from the perspective of bones reveals important knowledge of how human beings, their social relations, and their relation to God are viewed in Scripture. Bones figure prominently in a number of places: they are very present in the book of Job (7 passages) and the book of Psalms (11 passages), and in the Prophets, where they are mentioned 19 times, most prominently in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations and Ezekiel. Though these passages address bones in very different ways, one thing becomes clear when one reads all these pieces of Scripture alongside each other: in the Bible, bones signify the core of human beings. This is even implied in the Hebrew language: *אָשְׁמִי*, ‘aşmy, ‘myself’, derives from the word *עֵצֶם*, ‘eşem, ‘bone’, the literal meaning of ‘aşmy thus being ‘my bone’. It is no wonder, then, that Joseph asks for his remains to be taken back to Canaan when his people return and that consequently his brothers, Moses and the Israelites honour his wish until his remains can finally be buried in Shechem, the piece of land bought by Jacob.²⁵ Nor is it surprising that the absence of a body, both in Biblical

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁵ See Gen. 50:25, Ex. 13:19 and Josh. 24:32.

times and in our present day, is among the hardest scenarios for the bereaved to cope with. After the ascension of the prophet Elijah, a search party consisting of 50 men searches for him in vain for 3 days.²⁶ The urge to organise an intensive search, despite Elijah's successor, Elisha's, advice to let it be, later finds an echo in Mary's despair at finding Jesus' grave empty.²⁷

The core-function of bones is partly due to the fact that bones are seen as an invaluable part of Creation, of the way God formed human beings. In his moments of despair, Job locates the value of his life in this act of Creation:

- 8 Your hands shaped me and made me.
Will you now turn and destroy me?
9 Remember that you moulded me like clay.
Will you now turn me to dust again?
10 Did you not pour me out like milk
and curdle me like cheese,
11 clothe me with skin and flesh
and knit me together with bones and sinews?
12 You gave me life and showed me kindness,
and in your providence watched over my spirit.²⁸

What is striking about this passage is that the act of Creation is used to actually remind God of Job's dignity as a human being. His bones are a point of departure to call God to account: has God forgotten what He has so skilfully made?

Since bones are related to the core of human existence, they are also the site where intense suffering is located, and can therefore be turned into a metaphor that enables the authors of Biblical texts to express deep senses of agony, despair and abandonment. When shortly after the crash of flight MH17 people were, as Heidi de Mare noted, lacking words with which to understand what the victims had gone through and the survivors were still going through, evoking the metaphor of bones seemed one of the few occasions in which this suffering was done justice in language. This could be observed during the ecumenical church service held on the National Day of Mourning, on July 23, 2014, when the first remains were brought from Ukraine to the Netherlands. The Bible, it appeared, could offer a vocabulary of the broken body, and

²⁶ 2 Ki. 2:17.

²⁷ John 20:11-13.

²⁸ Job 10: 8-12, New International Version.

people could turn to this vocabulary to speak of the bodies of MH17. TV host Annemiek Schrijver read an adaptation of Psalm 22:

- 14 I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.
13 My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted within me.
15 My mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me in the dust of death.
16 Dogs surround me,
a pack of villains encircles me;
they pierce my hands and my feet.
17 All my bones are on display;
people stare and gloat over me.
18 They divide my clothes among them
and cast lots for my garment.
19 But you, LORD, do not be far from me.
You are my strength; come quickly to help me.²⁹

Psalm 22 did what at that moment various journalists, survivors, politicians, and bystanders could not do: talk about the horrid events that were taking place in the skies and the fields of Ukraine. Coming from the mouth of the living, the Psalm succeeds in coinciding the horrible reality of the victims and the deep grief of those who are left behind. It forms a complaint against a reality in which bodies can be unprotected, unshielded, “on display”. At the same time, though in the service the ‘gloaters’ were not specified, reading Psalm 22 in this context may well have resonated with news reports seeping through about Ukrainian separatists and local civilians looting and disrespecting the victims’ bodies.³⁰ It would turn out later that these reports provided a distorted image of reality, and I will return to the role of Ukrainian locals at a later point.

Besides in Job and the Psalms, bones figure prominently in the Prophets, where they often serve as a site of retribution (for the prophets themselves) or

²⁹ The adaptation used in the service was written by Kees Waaijman, Carmelite and Director of the Titus Brandsma Institute, research centre Christian mysticism and spirituality. The text used here is taken from the New International Version.

³⁰ Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau, “Timmermans: breng de slachtoffers naar huis,” in: *Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau*, 21 July 2014.

for punishment.³¹ In the latter case, the bones may belong to the Israelites who are being punished for evil deeds,³² their leaders who lead them astray,³³ or the city of Jerusalem.³⁴ The metaphoric language of bones in all these passages conveys the potential depth of humiliation. It also includes the possibility of complete destruction and eradication: when bones are burned upon death, as happens to those of the Baal priests purged by king Josiah,³⁵ nothing remains to be properly buried.

The rather dreadful passages on bones at which the Prophets direct their wrath are mirrored by accounts narrating the complete opposite: passages where bones function as a site of restoration, reconstruction, new beginnings. The most telling example is the well-known vision of Ezekiel where the Spirit of the Lord leads the prophet to a valley full of dry bones, where the prophet is asked: “Son of man, can these bones live?”³⁶ Ezekiel answers that only God knows the answer to that question and is then summoned to prophesy to the bones:

- 4 Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! ⁵This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.’”

Ezekiel does what the Lord tells him to do, and then the bones come to life: first, flesh appears and then, after Ezekiel prophesies a second time, “breath entered them.”³⁷ To Aguilar, an important element of the vision of Ezekiel is that, as one of the few Old Testament references to resurrection, it restores faith in the God who gives life: “there must be a divine purpose and presence among bones.”³⁸ Indeed Ezekiel 37 could be read as a foreboding of the much more prominent notion of resurrection in the New Testament. Yet, it also opens up imaginations of bones coming to life in other ways, for instance in

³¹ E.g. Is. 38:13, Jer. 20:9. (Here and hereafter, all quotes are from the New International Version.)

³² E.g. Jer. 50:17, Ez. 24:4.

³³ E.g. Mic. 3:2, Jer. 8:1-3.

³⁴ Lam. 1:13.

³⁵ 2 Ki. 23: 20, 1 Chr. 34:5.

³⁶ Ez. 37:3.

³⁷ Ez 37:10.

³⁸ Aguilar, *Theology, Liberation and Genocide*, 45.

narrative or relational ways. Our contribution, that is, of us humans, is to give flesh to deceased loved ones by remembering them, telling stories about them, creating imagined worlds in which they are still in some way with us. God may be present in these stories by breathing life into our memory, by making possible a temporary reality in which the deceased are among us: making the impossible possible, if only for a moment.

The vigil of Rizpah

One Old Testament narrative of the treatment of bones lends itself in particular for a more in-depth study in relation to MH17, for reasons explained below. This is the story of Rizpah who, in 2 Samuel 21, mourns over the remains of her two sons in an impressive vigil that eventually changes the heart and mind of King David.

The story begins by stating that during the reign of King David, there is a famine that lasts three years. God tells David that the famine is the result of a violation by his predecessor, King Saul, who dishonoured a treaty with the Gibeonites. Joshua 9 tells how this treaty protected the Gibeonites from being killed by the Israelites, under the condition that they be servants from that moment onward. Saul, apparently, had tried to annihilate the Gibeonites anyway, thus violating a pact that had been sealed in the name of the Lord. David asks the Gibeonites how he can make amends and they ask that he gives them seven male descendants of Saul for them to kill and be “exposed to the Lord,” which, according to F. Charles Fensham and Robin Gallaher Branch,³⁹ was a common way in the ancient Middle East to punish those who violate a contract. David complies and selects seven men. He sticks to his oath to Jonathan and spares Jonathan’s son Mephiboseth.⁴⁰ The seven he chooses are two sons of Rizpah, who had been Saul’s concubine, and five sons of Saul’s daughter Merab. The Gibeonites then do as they promised: they kill the seven men and expose them on a hill at Gibeah. The story then continues with a remarkable intervention by Rizpah:

- ¹⁰ Rizpah daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it out for herself on a rock. From the beginning of the harvest till the rain poured down from the heavens on the bodies, she did not let the birds touch them by day or the wild animals by night.

³⁹ Charles F. Fensham, “The Treaty between Israel and the Gibeonites,” in: *The Biblical Archaeologist* 27(3), 1964, 96-100, here 100; Robin Gallaher Branch, “Rizpah: Activist in nation-building, An analysis of 2 Samuel 21:1-14,” in: *Journal for Semitics* 14(1), 2005, 74-94, here 82.

⁴⁰ 1 Sam. 20:14-15

When David hears of her vigil, he gathers the bones of Saul and Jonathan from Jabesh Gilead, the city which had previously stolen these bones from the Philistines in Beth Shan, as well as the bones of the seven men killed in Gibeah. The bones of Saul and Jonathan are buried in the grave of Saul's father Kish; the text does not mention what eventually happens to the bones of the seven men who were executed.

What I find important about this narrative is that the vigil of Rizpah takes place against a backdrop of conflict, political plots and a struggle for power where the defining line between good and evil becomes very thin. Every participant in the story may at face-value seem to have a clear role cut out for them, only to be complicated on further consideration. Saul is said to have broken the pact with the Gibeonites and seems to be the catalyst of this whole episode, but this is a piece of information that is confirmed nowhere in Scripture, as also Branch points out.⁴¹ It is a charge that God conveys directly to David: we have to take David's word for it. In other words, it may be 'fake news'. Moreover, even if Saul would have attacked the Gibeonites, he would have had historical reasons to do so: Joshua 9 does not only narrate the story of the making of the pact, but also on how this pact depended in the first place on a treacherous scheme by the Gibeonites, who pretended to be a people from far away instead of Israel's direct neighbours. This would in turn invite the reader to think of the Gibeonites as the evil-doers in this narrative. After all, they are the ones who kill seven men (or boys) for the mere fact of their descent. But once again, such a clear-cut conclusion is hard to draw. Joshua 9 implicitly states that at the time of the treaty, the Gibeonites had little choice: Israel had been sacking cities all over the country, and the Gibeonites were going to be next. It was either this treaty, forced by treason, or almost certain death. The result, as 2 Samuel 21 implies, is their inferior status as no 'true Israelites' but second-class citizens within the realm.⁴² The next character, David, may at first sight come across as sympathetic. He appears as prudent and pious,⁴³ even though he takes his time doing 'the right thing'. Yet David, as Branch argues, has much to gain from the death of 'the seven': to him it means less rivals to the throne.⁴⁴ As also Simeon Chavel points out, this story

⁴¹ Branch, "Rizpah: Activist in nation-building," 77-78.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴³ Brian Britt, "Death, Social Conflict, and the Barley Harvest in the Hebrew Bible," in: *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 5, 2005, 6.

⁴⁴ Branch, "Rizpah: Activist in nation-building," 77.

in fact works out quite well for David. It covers up his complicity in the death of the seven executed men and seems to suggest that it was in fact Saul who, by breaking the treaty, forced David to make uneasy choices to satisfy the Gibeonites.⁴⁵ Finally, there is the questionable role of God. How is God implied in this story? Is God merely paying lip service to David, enabling him to legitimise his claim to the throne? Or is God most of all implicitly present as the story moves towards the respectful burial of the remains of Saul and Jonathan and, perhaps, also those of the seven men?

It is in this snake-pit, this game of thrones, that Rizpah decides to act, and it makes her display of public mourning a layered act that speaks to the complexity of the situation and the characters who are involved. Chavel argues that theologically, this is the story of two sins: the breaking of the pact with the Gibeonites and the careless attitude towards bones.⁴⁶ I would like to argue that there is a connection between the two: precisely in a context of conflict, the breaking of pacts and the doubtfulness of truth, things will happen to bodies. When distrust and disloyalty prevail, this is played out on bodies and inscribed on bones. As Branch argues, in rabbinical literature the famine in the country is understood in these terms: there is famine because the bodies of Saul, Jonathan and the seven are not treated right.⁴⁷ One might thus conclude that not only the bodies of the dead are affected, but also those of the living, and the hunger that captivates the nation might well be not just for food but also for justice. What needs to be restored is not just crops, but values of trust, loyalty and respect.

The depth of the distorted relation between loyalty and bodies becomes perhaps most clear from David's attitude towards Jonathan. Gone are the days when they made each other promises,⁴⁸ when they wept over their good-byes,⁴⁹ when David despaired over Jonathan's death, his friend Jonathan whose love was more important to him than that of women.⁵⁰ As David literally leaves Jonathan to rot, the text does not seem to bear even the traces of the intense friendship that had been. The friendship seems to be beyond rescue, and Jonathan's memory seems to be faded from David's mind: almost like a second death.

⁴⁵ Simeon Chavel, "Compositry and Creativity in 2 Samuel 21:1-14," in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122(1), 2003, 23-52, here 51.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Branch, "Rizpah: Activist in nation-building," 78.

⁴⁸ 1 Sam. 20:12-17

⁴⁹ 1 Sam. 20:41

⁵⁰ 2 Sam. 1

The subversiveness of public mourning

Rizpah's vigil taking place in the middle of this narrative has often been neglected by Biblical scholars.⁵¹ Yet when scholars do focus on Rizpah, they find that her act marks a moment of important transition.⁵² Let us first look at the specifics of her vigil and then move on to its implications in the narrative.

What stands out first and foremost is the duration of the vigil, and thus, Rizpah's resolution. She sits there for months,⁵³ perhaps even half a year.⁵⁴ There is no rest for her: she watches over the bodies day and night. Rizpah does what I imagine many bereaved by flight MH17 would have liked to do for their family members if only they could have done so: to travel to Ukraine, by foot if they had to, to sit in the fields of Hrabove and watch over the bodies of their family members and friends. To me, the text conveys a strong drive that enables Rizpah to do the impossible, as is so often the case for people faced with intense grief. Although they do not know where their strength comes from, to their surprise, they find they are able to make arrangements, write invitations, prepare food, sit through funerals, hold speeches, and bury or cremate the remains of their loved ones. Only, contrary to many present-day Western customs and rituals, Rizpah's 'dealing with the dead' does not last for a few days or a week, but for months. This is something else she has in common with the bereaved of MH17: often people had to wait for weeks, months even, for their loved ones to be identified and returned to them for a proper funeral. Some are waiting still. It was perhaps this sense of helplessness among the bereaved, but also among the Dutch (and Malaysians, Australians, etc) in general, that generated strong responses to news reports of Ukrainian separatists and locals looting the luggage and disrespecting the victims' bodies. Reality proved to be quite different. Reports on locals stealing wedding bands and disrespecting property and bodies had to be retracted. In fact, the wedding band in question was safely put away in a box.⁵⁵ Locals played

⁵¹ Branch, "Rizpah: Activist in nation-building," 82.

⁵² Britt, "Death, Social Conflict," 3; see also Susan M. Pigott, "Wives, Witches and Wise Women: Prophetic Heralds of Kingship in 1 and 2 Samuel," in: *Review and Expositor* 99, 2002, 145-173, here 146; and L. Juliana Claassens, "Violence, Mourning, Politics: Rizpah's Lament in Conversation with Judith Butler," in: L. Juliana Claassens & Bruce C. Birch (eds.), *Restorative Readings: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Human Dignity* (Pickwick Publications: Eugene OR 2015), 19-36.

⁵³ Amy Kalmanofsky, "Women of God: Maternal Grief and Religious response in 1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 4," in: *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (1), 2011, 55-74, here 60.

⁵⁴ Branch, "Rizpah: Activist in nation-building," 76.

⁵⁵ Romana Abels, "Mythen rond de MH17," in: *Trouw*, 9 September 2014.

a crucial role in recovering the victims' bodies. As Geert Luyten, one of the coordinators of the repatriation mission, explained in an interview, his team could only function with the help of Ukrainian volunteers who worked as translators or who on a daily basis cooked meals for the team.⁵⁶ And, importantly, an extensive Ukrainian team consisting of two hundred professionals and eight hundred volunteers had been searching the fields to locate, mark, and gather as many bodies as possible.⁵⁷ The impressive Ukrainian contribution to the complicated mission of repatriating the bodies is as obscured in the news coverage on MH17 as is Rizpah's vigil in 2 Samuel 21. Just as Rizpah's vigil is tucked away in a single verse, Ukrainian professionals and volunteers are relegated to subordinate clauses in stories that are usually not about them, but about Dutch or international interference. Luyten's recognition of their work, however important, is exceptional. Yet, like Rizpah's vigil, Ukrainian interference at the crash site was crucial. It was important in the practical sense of taking up the difficult responsibility of recovering the bodies or making it possible that others do so. It was also important on a symbolic level. The bodies were not left to themselves without someone watching over them. They were taken care of, gathered, treated with urgent respect. Local Ukrainians did what many of the bereaved could not do, and though they are not given the credit that is due, their actions mattered.

Another point of great importance regarding Rizpah's vigil is that it brings God back into the picture. God appears only briefly in the beginning of the narrative, when He tells David of Saul's "blood-stain", and then reappears in the words of the Gibeonites, who claim they want to "expose the bodies before the Lord."⁵⁸ When Rizpah holds her vigil, God is once again being addressed, albeit implicitly. Amy Kalmanofsky points to the fact that Rizpah stretches sack-cloth "across a rock", literally "to the rock", an idiom which occurs only on two more occasions in the Bible, Isaiah 30:29 and 51:1. In both instances, the "rock" refers to God.⁵⁹ Kalmanofsky understands this implicit relation as an act meant to revive Rizpah's sons, just as the prophets Elijah and Elisha stretched themselves over the dead in order to bring them back to life.⁶⁰ I find this link important and interesting but I would like to suggest another interpretation. Rather than trying to raise her sons from the dead, Rizpah is making

⁵⁶ Erik van Hest, "Altijd maar helpen," in: *BN DeStem*, 6 September 2014.

⁵⁷ Romana Abels, "Mythen rond de MH17".

⁵⁸ 2 Sam. 21: 6 and 9.

⁵⁹ Kalmanofsky, "Women of God," 60.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

a statement about God. She covers the face of God with her acts of mourning until justice is done. Until a proper burial has taken place, until her sons have been given the dignity they deserve as human beings, the presence of God needs to be covered up. The two things, God and the desecration of the bodies, cannot exist simultaneously. Therefore, Rizpah, paradoxically, evokes the presence of God and erases that presence within the same moment. In fact, God's presence becomes conditional: only when her mourning ritual comes to an ending, when she can remove her sack-cloth, can God's face reappear in Israel. Perhaps also implicitly, she makes clear that the killing of her sons was never commanded by God. This was an idea proposed by the Gibeonites and condoned by David: God had only pointed to the injustice done to the Gibeonites. Other solutions to compensate them for this transgression might have been possible. In Rizpah's mourning ritual, there is no room for a God who gloats over dead bodies, a God who takes part in campaigns for power and who tramples on those who stand in the way.

Rizpah's act has both pastoral and political implications, in fact showing that "the pastoral is political."⁶¹ The pivotal moment in this story is when all the parties involved realise that bodies can be marked differently. The Gibeonites had marked the bodies by exposing them on a hill, David had marked them by neglect and amnesia. Rizpah marks them by watching over them. Her act is not about reviving her sons, as also Funlola Olojede argues, but about dignity.⁶² It centres not on power but rather on humanity, as is also suggested in L. Juliana Claassens' Butlerian reading of the narrative of Rizpah.⁶³ As Claassens shows, Rizpah's vigil is a public act, a "silent public protest."⁶⁴ I would like to emphasise that this public act makes apparent how bodies are at the disposal of those in power. The bodies of the Gibeonites are in the hands of the Israelites, the bodies of Saul's descendants in the hands of David. Yet Rizpah succeeds in orchestrating a mourning ritual that does not reaffirm those power-structures. She sits there, watches over the bodies, and waits for those involved to recognise this humanising act and change their minds. And her appeal works. Rizpah manages to subvert a politics of

⁶¹ As coined by Rev. Dr. Amy Butler in the blog *Talk with the Preacher* (<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/talkwiththepreacher/2016/07/12/the-pastoral-is-political>, 11 December 2018).

⁶² Funlola Olojede, "Women and the Cry for Justice in Old Testament Court Narratives: An African Reflection," in: *Old Testament Essays* 26(3), 2013, 761-772, here 766.

⁶³ Claassens, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," 27.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

dehumanisation in which pacts are broken, friendships forgotten, and human bodies are but an exchange object. Finally, King David decides to do justice to the remains of Saul and of Jonathan, his friend. Perhaps also he realises that Rizpah has been doing what he himself summoned the “daughters of Israel” to do, namely, to weep over Saul.⁶⁵ And perhaps this brings back to life also his memory of his friendship with Jonathan, paving the way for the ‘relational resurrection’ of his friend. Even the Gibeonites, Chavel observes, seem to soften at the sight of the Rizpah’s vigil as they gather up the bones of the impaled in verse 13b.⁶⁶ Rizpah’s vigil therefore has personal implications for herself and for David, but also larger implications that shape the contours of a new political landscape.

Public mourning as a “joint venture”

The crash of flight MH17 showed that in Europe, there is a dire need for a new political landscape. In the aftermath of the crash it became abundantly clear that Europe today shares characteristics with the political climate in ancient Israel at the time of Saul and David. It is a time in which finding the truth is extremely difficult, as investigations into the crash show: the answer to the question who exactly is responsible remains as of yet unanswered, with the Netherlands, other Western countries and Ukraine posing one version of the events and Russia another. In the search for answers, official reports and alternative conspiracy theories vie for credibility among the public. MH17 launched the Dutch society back into Cold War anxieties, where it finds itself faced with a Russia that feels threatened by the NATO pact and the expansion of the EU, and in its turn violates international law, for instance by the annexation of Crimea earlier in 2014. MH17 was a proof of this entanglement of broken pacts, distrusted loyalties and opposing truths in which it is tempting to assume a clear-cut division of roles and ignore more complicated histories and haunting pasts.

In such a context, public mourning can hardly be neutral, but it can be subversive. Judith Butler wonders whether grief could become “part of the framework within which we think our international ties.”⁶⁷ This would imply departing from the notion of vulnerability and consequently a sense of “collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another.”⁶⁸ As she argues,

⁶⁵ 2 Sam. 1:24.

⁶⁶ Chavel, “Compositry and Creativity,” 33.

⁶⁷ Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” 19.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

“to grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned into inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself.”⁶⁹ This resonates very well with the mourning politics of Rizpah, who stubbornly maintained her watch over her sons’ remains until they were recognised as being of value by all who were involved. When the mutual recognition of vulnerability, and therefore the potential of suffering in every human life, becomes a point of departure, it also becomes possible to think of possible modes of public mourning. A kind of mourning that addresses the pain and grief of loss and the questions of justice and gratification that rise when crimes against life are committed. Yet a kind of mourning also be aimed at reconciliation instead of division, at recognition instead of disregard.

In order to arrive at such a form of public mourning, that moreover is not reduced to idle talk and pompous empty words, we need to learn to let bones speak, and we need to learn to listen to them. Bones can be a site of resistance. Bones have agency.⁷⁰ Bones are talking back. They talk back to those who want to mark them for their own purposes. To those who would rather forget about them. They talk back to their Creator when He does not protect what He himself has made. They address humans who do not take care of them. And where there are no bones, their absence keeps on whispering the story that might have been.

Bones talk back in cooperation with the living. Public mourning is a “joint venture”. Bones need the living to afford flesh to their stories, and perhaps also sacred intervention to breathe life into their narratives, so that they may have a lasting potential for genuine change.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to formulate a theological response to the horrifying event of the crash of flight MH17 in 2014, addressing how displays of public grief are embedded in a ‘politics of mourning’ in which feelings of loss and despair are always embedded in particular political entanglements and national histories. In the case of MH17, these entanglements included constructing the civilised Western mourner versus the barbaric Ukrainian separatist who does not know how to properly treat a body. Departing from Mario Aguilar’s notion

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Howard Williams, “The Agency of Bodies and of Bones in Early Anglo-Saxon Cremation Rites,” in: *Journal of Material Culture* 9(3) (2004), 263-291.

of a ‘hermeneutics of bones’, I have traced some of the ‘past narratives of God and bones’ in the Old Testament. These narratives show that Old Testament accounts of bones testify to the deep notion of human beings as created by God and can therefore serve as places in which God may be located in times of despair. Moreover, Old Testament renderings of bones, such as in Psalm 22, may offer the comfort of language and speakability to those who have to deal with unspeakable realities of bones. Finally, bones can be a site of ultimate humiliation, but also the site where dignity is restored and where stories of those who were lost come back to life.

The story of the mourning of Rizpah in 2 Sam. 21, of which I have offered a more in-depth reading, reveals a social and political reality in which, like in our present European context, the roles of both key players and the public are always more layered and complex than they seem to be at face value. Rizpah’s context resembles our own, as it is characterised by the distribution of fake news, forgotten alliances and broken pacts. It is against this backdrop that Rizpah conducts an act of mourning in which enduring and determined grieving forms a charge against those who inflict pain. Rizpah’s mourning ritual situates God not simply as the ‘grand consoler’, but also as the one who may be called to account. Her ritual is a form of the re-marking of bodies, marking them with dignity instead of humiliation, reminiscent of crucial Ukrainian contributions to the repatriation of the bodies of the victims of MH17. Finally, the story of Rizpah invites us to recognise the contours of a new political landscape in Europe, one in which pacts are honoured, friendships last, bodies matter. We can participate in this landscape by recognising mourning as a joint venture, a shared form of story-telling in which the voices of those who passed away, those who are left behind, and God, come together.

Mariecke van den Berg is a post-doctoral researcher at Utrecht University, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies. She is currently involved in the research project “Beyond ‘religion versus emancipation’: gender and sexuality in women’s conversion to Judaism, Christianity and Islam in contemporary Western Europe”, funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).