

# Delimiting the contours of Israel in Ezek 12:21-25 and 12:26-28

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## 1. Introduction

**1.1** In 1958 Zimmerli wrote an article entitled "Israel im Buche Ezechiel".<sup>1</sup> Zimmerli begins by remarking that Ezekiel<sup>2</sup> represents a special case among the prophetic books. In fact, Ezekiel's use of the word *Israel* (185 times) by far outnumbers his use of the word *Judah* (15 times)<sup>3</sup> --this is so despite the fact that the book places the prophet amidst the *Judean* exiles in Babylon. After surveying the word combinations around the word *Israel*, Zimmerli points out that in the history of *Israel* there have been two great splits: the split of the short-lived united monarchy after Solomon and the split between the children of Israel in the land and those abroad as a consequence of the Babylonian victories over Judah of 597/6 and 587/6 BCE.

**1.2** Now, the first question is: can one notice any sign of dichotomy or juxtaposition between Israel and Judah as distinct entities? After examining Ez 4:4-8; 9:9; 16:46ff.; 23:1ff.; 25:3; 26:4-6; 27:11-25a; 37:15ff., Zimmerli concludes that the more original stratum of the book never opposes Israel to Judah. It is only the later re-workings of the school of the prophet that will give room for confusion. In Zimmerli's own words,

Israel bleibt immer das umgreifende Ganze und wird nie sektenhaft vereinzelt. Erst die Nachinterpretation der Schule verlässt gelegentlich diese klare Linie.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. W. Zimmerli, "Israel im Buche Ezechiel," in *VT* 8 (1958) 75-90.

<sup>2</sup> By "Ezekiel" I mean the *book*, whereas by "EZEKIEL" I refer to the *prophet*.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. W. Zimmerli, "Israel," 76-77.

<sup>4</sup> W. Zimmerli, "Israel," 84.

- 1.3** The second question is: can one detect in Ezekiel any division between the rest of Israel that remained in the land, those that were exiled to Babylon in 597 BCE and those that fled southwards and eastwards in 587/6 BCE?<sup>5</sup> Zimmerli observes that, despite the fact that the book sets the hopes for the future amongst the exiles, it never embraces an outright exclusion of those that remained in the land.<sup>6</sup>
- 1.4** Israel remains in fact a promise that has never quite become reality since, from the early days in Egypt up to the book's own present time, the people have never lived up to their vocation to be YHWH's people. Ultimately, neither the people in the land nor the people away from it are irreproachable Israelites. Nevertheless, it is from the midst of the nations and peoples that YHWH will bring out His Israel. And this is -- according to Zimmerli-- "das verborgenste Geheimnis Israels".<sup>7</sup>
- 1.5.** In this article, we shall try and elicit the view or contours of Israel implied by Ezek 12:21-25 and 12:26-28. These passages present us with two brief disputation speeches concerning vision and prophecy. Their immediate context is Ezek 12:21--13:23,<sup>8</sup> which constitutes a thematic block dealing with the issue of prophecy, prophets and prophetesses:

### About prophecy

12:21-25      cynicism towards vision and prophecy in Israel

12:26-28      cynicism towards EZEKIEL's prophetic activity

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. W. Zimmerli, "Israel," 85.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. W. Zimmerli, "Israel," 86.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. W. Zimmerli, "Israel," 90.

<sup>8</sup> Some consider Ezek 14 to be also part of the immediate thematic context of Ezek 12:21-25.26-28.

## About prophets and prophetesses

13:1-16        against the prophets of Israel

13:17-23      against the daughters of Israel that are prophetesses

The thematic block clearly ends in Ezek 13:23, while Ezek 14:1 sets the scene for a different block by depicting some elders of Israel coming up to EZEKIEL and sitting down before him. The text turns then its attention to the issue of idolatry (cf. Ezek 14:2-11). This is followed by a chain of oracles, each of which is introduced by the stereotypical message formula (cf. Ezek 14:2, 14:12, 15:1, etc.) and deals with different issues. The relationship between Ezek 14:1 and the following oracles is far from obvious, perhaps there is none.

The question behind our analysis of Ezek 12:21-25 and 12:26-28 concerns the manner in which they contribute to defining *the contours of Israel* within Ezekiel. To this end, it will be important to determine *who is saying what about whom* within these passages. In other words, are these disputations between the prophet and his immediate audience or between Jerusalemites and their local prophets?<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Ezek 12:21-25

**2.1** Ezek 12:21-26 concern the *value* or *worth* of vision/prophecy. This disputation revolves around a quoted proverb which states either that it is extinct or that it is a futile business.

### 2.2 Structure

The structure of this passage is very simple:

12:21	introduction:	stereotypical message formula	וְיִהְיֶה דְבַר־יְהוָה אֵלַי לֵאמֹר
12:22	thesis:	the quotation of a proverb	מִהַ־מִּשְׁלֵי הַזֶּה
12:23	counter thesis:	sentence adverb	לִכֵּן
	12:23	a) command to prophesy and basic rebuttal	אָמַר אֵלֵיהֶם
	12:23	b) 1 <sup>st</sup> dismissal	כִּי אֵם
	12:24	c) 2 <sup>nd</sup> dismissal	כִּי לֹא
	12:25a	d) 3 <sup>rd</sup> dismissal	כִּי אֲנִי
	12:25b	d) 4 <sup>th</sup> dismissal	כִּי בִימֵיכֶם
12:25c	end:	stereotypical declaratory formula	נִאֲמַם אֲדַנִּי יְהוָה

## 2.3 What is the text saying?

### 2.3.1 Ezek 12:22, the thesis: the proverb.

**2.3.1.1** מִהַ־מִּשְׁלֵי הַזֶּה לָכֵם ("what is this proverb that you [pl.] have"). This time the disputation speech is occasioned by a מִשְׁלֵי. The root מִשַׁל (*mšl*)<sup>10</sup> is used 18 times in Ezekiel. It means (i.) *to rule, to have dominion* (cf. 19:11.14) and (ii.) *to utter a proverb* (cf. Ezek 12:22.23, 14:8, 16:44, 17:2, 18:2.3, 21:5 and 24:3). As a noun, it means *proverb*. The

<sup>9</sup> D. Block states, for instance, that "these oracles are not only about false prophecy in general; they also reflect the specific personal conflict between Ezekiel and his audience;" in D. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1-24* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1997) 385.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. W.A. Vangemeren (ed.), *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 2 (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1997) 1134-1137. G.J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren & H.-J. Fabry (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. IX (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1998) 64-71.

expression משל משל (i.e. the same root is used twice as verb + noun) means *to utter a proverb* (cf. Ezek 12:23, 16:44, 17:2, 18:2.3, 21:5 and 24:3). The present use of משל (*mšl*) in Ezek 12:22.23 is very close to that in Ezek 18:2.3; in both cases the book tells the readers that YHWH knows what the people are saying and that He is not happy about it.

The nature of משל or proverbs is that, by being concise in their formulation and by their repeated use, they have the power to speak to the mind as though they encapsulated the whole truth or at least half the truth.<sup>11</sup>

**2.3.1.2** על-אדמת ישראל. The question is whether the preposition על must be translated here as *upon* (in local sense) or *about, concerning* the soil of Israel.

The phrase על-אדמת ישראל ("upon or concerning the soil of Israel") is used in Ezekiel in 12:22, 18:2, 33:24, 36:6, 38:18 and 38:19. The same ambiguity regarding the value of the preposition על ("upon/concerning") exists in Ezek 18:2

(מה-לכם אתם משלים את-המשל הזה על-אדמת ישראל), "what do you mean by quoting this proverb upon/about the soil of Israel?"). Nonetheless, we may say that Ezek 18:3, by speaking of בישראל ("in Israel"), interprets Ezek 18:2 as having a locative meaning. In Ezek 33:24 the preposition must clearly be understood as referring to the place where the saying is being uttered and not to its subject-matter:

ישבי החרבות האלה על-אדמת ישראל אמרים ("the inhabitants of these waste places upon the soil of Israel are saying..."). In Ezek 36:6 the meaning of the preposition would more clearly seem to be "concerning the soil of Israel".<sup>12</sup> In Ezek 38:18 we find

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979) 280.

<sup>12</sup> In Ezek 36:6, YHWH speaks of אדמת ישראל ("the land of Israel") which is described in the previous verse as being ארצי ("My [YHWH's] land"). Yet, in spite of the fact that Ezek 36:5 uses ארץ ("land"), where Ezek 36:6 does אדמה ("soil"), both verses are along the lines of Is 14:2 (בית ישראל על-אדמת יהוה) "the house

ביום בואו על-אדמת ישראל. The combination בוא+על can mean *to go to* (cf. Ex 18:23) or *to come upon, to fall upon, to befall*, both with positive and negative connotations (cf. Jos 23:15).<sup>13</sup> This means that Ezek 38:18 could be translated either as "on the day of Gog's coming *against* the soil of Israel" or as "on the day of Gog's coming *upon* the soil of Israel". The LXX reads

can mean

either "*upon* or *against* the soil of Israel"; yet, considering the present context of war, the preposition *על* in the combination *בוא+על* can be better rendered as "to come up against the soil". The *Vulgate* reads "*adventus Gog super terram Israhel*," ("Gog's coming upon or arrival into the land of Israel"). We could say that in light of Ezek 38:19 ביום ההוא יהיה רעש גדול על-אדמת ישראל, "on that day there will be a great shaking upon the soil of Israel"), which definitely has locative connotations, the preposition *על* in Ezek 38:18 can mean both *upon* and *against*, in fact when Gog comes up against the soil of Israel, he will come to it and a great commotion will take place there.

Furthermore, if the reference to *upon the soil of Israel* is looked at in light of Ezek 12:19 עם הארץ ... יושבי ירושלם אל-אדמת ישראל, "the people of the land..., the inhabitants of Jerusalem upon the soil of Israel"), where the preposition *אל* ("towards") is used instead of *על* ("on, about, concerning")<sup>14</sup>, then we could conclude that it is not

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of Israel upon YHWH's soil") and of Zech 2:16, where Judah is described as חלקו ("His [YHWH's] portion") על-אדמת הקדש ("upon the holy soil" or "upon the soil of holiness"). It is worth nothing that Zech 2:16 would appear to indicate that the holy soil in its totality is greater than Judah alone. A similar vocabulary is used in the theophany episode narrated in Ex 3:5.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. L. Koehler & W. Baumgartner (ed.), *Lexicon in veteris testamenti libros* (Leiden: Brill, 1953) 111-112.

<sup>14</sup> As D. Block remarks: "Had 'concerning' been the intended sense it would have been preceded by the conjunction". D. Block, *Ezekiel*, 380, footnote 4.

just the proverb that proceeds from Palestinian soil but the very people quoting it.<sup>15</sup>

This interpretation is confirmed by the text itself in Ezek 12:23,

ולא ימשלו אתו עוד בישראל ("they shall no longer quote it *in Israel*").

**2.3.1.3** יֵאָרְכוּ הַיָּמִים וְאֵבֶד כָּל־חֲזוֹן ("The days grow long and every vision perishes"). The proverb is about visions and their worth or validity. From the foregoing sentence we may assume that it is the visionary activity carried out upon Israelite soil that the people quoting the proverb are referring to. The proverb can be understood, however, in two different ways: it states either that vision (or prophecy) is extinct or that it has become futile<sup>16</sup>.

The first interpretation would imply that time goes by and there is *no more vision*. In other words, vision has died out. The second interpretation would basically entail that a long time has already elapsed since the event of the vision and every vision remains still unfulfilled.<sup>17</sup> Things are seen and words are said, yet they never come true: their realisation never arrives, they are like a stillborn child whose possibilities were truncated from the outset.

One thing is clear: the proverb stresses the *passage* of time with regard to the lack of fulfilment of visions (יֵאָרְכוּ הַיָּמִים וְאֵבֶד כָּל־חֲזוֹן, "the days grow long and every vision perishes"). This is why we prefer to see שוֹא as meaning *futile* rather than *false*.

The whole ensuing refutation of this proverb will concentrate on *effective realisation*

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<sup>15</sup> Had אָמַר been used here instead of מָשַׁל, it would have been more difficult to determine the present value of עַל since the expression עַל אָמַר, meaning "to say something *concerning* something else," is well attested, cf. Jer 12:14, 14:15, 16:3, 22:6, 23:2, etc. It is worth noting that even in some of these cases the prepositions עַל and אֶל are used interchangeably, cf. 2 Kgs 19:32 and Jer 27:19.

<sup>16</sup> According to the *BBC English Dictionary's* definition of "futile," asserting that a vision or a prophecy is futile would mean that it "is not successful, and is unlikely ever to be successful" (London: HarperCollins Publishers, <sup>2</sup>1993).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. A. Van der Born, *Ezechiël* (Roermond & Maaseik: J.J. Romen en zonen, 1954) 81. D. Block, *Ezekiel*, 386ff.

(the opposite of *futility*) and not on *truth* (the opposite of *falsehood*). Non-realisation and falsehood may coincide in some respects, but they do not have the same logical and semantic connotations. Ezek 12:21-25, unlike Ezek 13, does not deal with false prophecies, but with worthless or futile ones.

### **2.3.2 Ezek 12:23-25, the counter thesis.**

**2.3.2.1** The contrary thesis or refutation of the proverb unfolds in several stages, is based on various reasons and refers to different things. The initial sentence adverb (לכן, "therefore") indicates that what follows constitutes a re-interpretation of the foregoing.

**2.3.2.2** Command to prophesy and basic rejection (Ezek 12:23a).

YHWH's first reaction is addressed to the prophet: אֵלֵיהֶם אָמַר ("say to them!"). Now, what is the prophet to proclaim? Not the termination of vision(s), but the end of the use of the proverb: וְלֹא יִמְשְׁלוּ אֹתוֹ עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, "I am making this proverb to cease and they shall no longer quote it in Israel". After that, the text goes on to dismiss the proverb repeatedly by means of sentences introduced by the particle כִּי ("for").

### **2.3.2.3 First dismissal (Ezek 12:23b)**

כִּי אִם ... קָרְבוּ הַיָּמִים וּדְבַר כָּל-חֲזוֹן ("For... the days and the reality of every vision draw near"). The first reply recasts the proverb and states that *every* vision<sup>18</sup> is coming close to the day when its core will reach fulfilment. In other words, vision and reality

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<sup>18</sup> According to M. Greenberg the word *every* refers to the prophecies of doom. "This first oracle, unlike the next one, does not concern Ezekiel's prophecies; it reacts to a proverb on the soil of Israel, and thus suggests the doom-prophecies of such as Jeremiah or Uriah as the immediate objects of skepticism (...). If so, we have here an acknowledgement almost unparalleled in Ezekiel, and rare in any of the classical prophets, that beside himself other true prophets were at work." M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), 230.



are catching up with each other. This verse would imply that all visions will be fulfilled. It does not say any more than that.

#### 2.3.2.4 Second dismissal (Ezek 12:24)

לא יהיה עוד כל-חזון שוא ומקסם חלק בתך בית ישראל ("For there will no longer be any futile vision or smooth divination in the midst of the house of Israel").

This verse brings in a new element. It implicitly differentiates between futile prophecies and smooth divination, and the rest.

כל-חזון שוא ("[No longer] ... any futile vision"). The word שוא is used 51 times<sup>19</sup> in the Hebrew Scriptures and has an array of meanings, namely, *worthless, unrestrained, deceitful, destruction, magic, futile, vain*.<sup>20</sup> We prefer to translate it here as *futile* instead of *deceitful* or *false* on two accounts. Firstly, the present context does not refer to prophecies that are deceitful or that lie, but to prophecies that do not come about and are therefore better described as *futile*. Secondly, the LXX of Ezekiel itself renders the word שוא sometimes as ("false," cf. Ezek 12:24; 13:6.7.8.9.23) and some other times as / ("futile," cf. Ezek 21:28.34; 22:28) showing that the translators understood the concept שוא as clearly embodying both ranges of meaning. The word is often used to refer to acts of speech that are futile or worthless, either because they have no content or because they do not adequately reflect reality, which renders them iniquitous.

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Ex 20:7(x2), 23:1, Dt 5:11(x2).20, Jb 7:3, 11:11, 15:31, 31:5, 35:13, Ps 12:3, 24:4, 26:4, 31:7, 41:7, 60:13, 89:48, 108:13, 119:37, 127:1.2, 139:20, 144:8.11, Prv 30:8, Is 1:13, 5:18, 30:28, 59:4, Jer 2:30, 4:30, 6:29, 18:15, 46:11, Lm 2:14, Ezek 12:24, 13:6.7.8.9.23, 21:28.34, 22:28, Hos 10:4, Jon 2:9, Zech 10:2 and Mal 3:14. In 1 Chr 2:49 and 18:16 we find שוא, which means *vanity, worthlessness, futility*. In 2 Sm 20:25 MT<sup>k</sup> we find שׂוֹא, (*sh<sup>e</sup>ya'*) whereas the MT<sup>q</sup> reads שוא (*sh<sup>e</sup>wa'*).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. M.E.J. Richardson (ed.), L. Koehler & W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 4 (Leiden - Boston - Köln: Brill, 1999) 1425-1426.

Ezekiel uses the word שׁוּא 9 times (cf. Ezek 12:24; 13:6.7.8.9.23; 21:28.34 and 22:28), always in the context of vision and prophecy. Interestingly enough, Lam 2:14, which -unlike Ezekiel-- represents those that remained in Jerusalem, also accuses the local prophets (נְבִיאֵיךְ, "your prophets") of having seen שׁוּא וְהַפֵּל ("futility and whitewash").

חֶלֶק וּמִקְסָם ("[No longer] ... smooth divination"). The word מִקְסָם derives from the root קָסַם, which means *to practise divination*. The purpose of such practices was to determine the mind of (the) God(s) and, eventually, to attempt to steer the course of events.<sup>21</sup> The adjective חֶלֶק comes from the root חָלַק (used 6 times in Ezekiel), which as a verb has two sets of meanings (i) *to apportion, to divide, to scatter* (cf. Ezek 5:1, 47:21) and (ii) *to be smooth, to be slippery, to flatter* (hi. and hitp.). The noun can mean either *portion* or *smoothness* and/or *flattery* (cf. Ezek 45:7, 48:8:21), whereas the adjective means *smooth, slippery* (cf. Ezek 12:24).

The reply regarding the annihilation of futile vision and smooth divination sounds rather strange after the promise that the fulfilment of כָּל־חִזּוֹן ("all vision") was drawing near. Or are the readers to understand that every vision will come true only when all futile visions have disappeared?<sup>22</sup> At any rate, the theme of the second dismissal is more akin, albeit not equivalent, to that of chapter 13 than to that of chapter 12 as a whole. Beside that, the addressees of this verse are no longer referred to as those "upon the soil of Israel" or "in Israel" but as "the house of Israel". Now, do these phrases refer to the members of one and the same target group?

### 2.3.2.5 Third dismissal (Ezek 12:25a)

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. D. Block, *Ezekiel*, 390.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. D. Block, *Ezekiel*, 389.

כי אני יהוה אדבר את אשר אדבר דבר ויעשה לא תמשך עוד ("For it is I, YHWH, that will speak the word that I will speak. And it shall be done. It shall not be postponed any longer"). Ezek 12:25a continues the thought put forward in verses 23a and 23b. The proverb will cease to be quoted (cf. Ezek 12:23a). Reality and prophecy are catching up with each other (cf. Ezek 12:23b). And all of that because YHWH is the one that will be speaking. Ezek 12:24 clearly interrupts this progression of thought by bringing in the elements of futile vision and smooth divination which, as we said above, belong rather to Ezek 13.

#### **2.3.2.6 Fourth dismissal (Ezek 12:25b)**

כי בימיכם בית המרי אדבר דבר ועשיתי ("For in your days, oh rebellious house, I shall speak a word and I shall do it"). This last dismissal drives the point home: they will not have to wait long before YHWH's word comes true. This reinforces once again the interpretation that the initial proverb was not about the extinction of prophecy but about its non-fulfilment or delayed fulfilment. The addressees are described otherwise than in Ezek 12:22-23: they are "the rebellious house". The question is, on the one hand, whether those "upon the soil of Israel" and those "in Israel" are to be equated with the "rebellious house" and, on the other hand, whether the expression "rebellious house" encompasses other people that are not actually in Israel.

בית ישראל ("the rebellious house"). The description of the character of בית ישראל ("the house of Israel") in terms of rebelliousness or obstinacy is commonplace in Ezekiel. The refusal to hear is one of the things for which Ezekiel's YHWH reproaches the house of Israel (Ezek 2:5-8; 3:9.26f.; 12:2f.9.25; 17:12; 24:3; 44:6). The Hebrew

root מרה means *to be obstinate*.<sup>23</sup> It basically expresses a defiant and stubborn mental attitude and implies the usual conscious and wilful refusal to listen, comply or compromise, which is characteristic of obstinate people. Obstinance points, therefore, not only to people that are passively shut in on themselves, but also that are actively and defiantly opposed to whatever is suggested to them. Such attitude is very akin to immaturity.

The root מרה is often used to express rebellion against YHWH (e.g. Nm 17:25; 20:10.24; 27:14; Is 63:10; Ps 78:8.17; 106:7.43). For Ezekiel, the very prophetic task implies that the prophet must go beyond obstinance and open himself up to the word coming to him from on high (cf. Ezek 2:8--3:3). EZEKIEL is warned in advance that his audience, i.e. "the house of Israel," will not listen to him because they are not willing to listen to YHWH in the first place (cf. Ezek 3:7). The use of such qualifying words is far from impartial. In fact, it is ideologically charged since it articulates a value judgment concerning those that do not share the views espoused by the book.

## 2.4 Partial conclusions

Firstly, we may conclude that the use of the expression על-אדמת ישראל ("upon the soil of Israel") in conjunction with בישראל ("in Israel") seems to indicate that the book envisages some sort of *Israel* that can be conceived of in *locative* terms.

Secondly, it is (some) people upon the soil of Israel that allegedly discard prophecy upon Israelite soil as a futile enterprise. These people are confronted head-on by YHWH, who takes their claim personally. The fact that the concept *Israel* is

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. E. Jenni & C. Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Pub., 1997) 687.

associated with that of *soil* in the literary context of the Babylonian exile is very interesting since by then Israel had long ceased to exist as a political entity.

Secondly, all things considered, the present configuration of the text seems to support the second interpretation suggested above, i.e. that the proverb claims that prophecy is futile rather than extinct. The whole refutation is clearly about the *realisation* of vision (and the end of futile visions and smooth divinations, cf. Ezek 12:23-24), and not about the present *lack* of visionary activity.

Thirdly, there does not seem to be a clear indication of what visions in particular are being alluded to by the text<sup>24</sup>. Neither Ezek 12:22 nor the following verses give the reader any information about that. The fact that Ezek 12:23 speaks of *every* vision and their reality ("word/thing") as drawing near would indicate that *no vision* is futile since, after all, *all* visions will come true. Ezek 12:24 refers though to *futile* visions and *smooth* divination that are no longer to take place in the midst of the house of Israel, upon Israelite soil. Ezek 12:25 does not speak of visions as such but of words. This mention of דבר (here meaning "word") need nonetheless not be opposed too strongly to the issue of vision since Ezek 12:23 had already brought both words together by speaking of "the days and the דבר ("word/thing," i.e. reality) of every vision".<sup>25</sup>

We may say then that Ezek 12:21-25 represents a strand within the book that takes a negative stance on the actions and the mentality of (some of) those residing upon Israelite soil.

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. D. Block, *Ezekiel*, 388.

<sup>25</sup> Perhaps, Ezek 12:24 did not originally belong where it is now since thematically speaking its proper place is chapter 13 rather than chapter 12. Ezek 12:25 might represent an expansion on the statement in Ezek 12:23 that "the days and the reality (word/thing) of every vision draw near".

### 3. Ezek 12:26-28

**3.1** Even though Ezek 12:26-28 uses a vocabulary similar to that of Ezek 12:21-25, these verses have a unity of their own. From a text critical point of view (and perhaps also from a literary critical perspective), it is worth noting that Ezek 12:26-28 are not present in the text of the Greek papyrus 967.<sup>26</sup> This could mean that this papyrus reflects either a minus due to transcriptional error or a stage in the growth of Ezekiel when Ezek 12:27-28 had not been inserted yet. Yet, what we are concerned with here is not the provenance of these verses, but the way in which they contribute to the delimitation of *the contours of Israel*.

### 3.2 Structure

The structure of Ezek 12:26-28 comprises but a few essential elements.

12:26	introduction:	stereotypical message formula	וַיְהִי דְבַר יְהוָה אֵלַי לֵאמֹר
12:27	address:	stereotypical address form	בֶּן־אָדָם
	thesis:	saying	הִנֵּה בֵית יִשְׂרָאֵל אֹמְרִים
	counter thesis	rebuttal	לִכֵּן אָמַר אֵלֵיהֶם
12:28	end:	Stereotypical declaratory formula	נֹאם אֲדֹנָי יְהוָה

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. J. Lust, "Le Messianisme et la Septante d'Ezechieel," in *TSAFON* (1990) 9-11. Fernández Galiano, "Nuevas Páginas del código 967 del A.T. griego," in *St.Pap.* 10 (1971) 7-76; 1971, 15. F.V. Filson, "The Omissions of Ezek. 12,26-28 and 36,23b-38 in Codex 967," in *JBL* 62 (1943) 27-32.

### 3.3 What is the text saying?

#### 3.3.1 Ezek 12:27, the thesis.

**3.3.1.1** בית ישראל אומר ("The house of Israel is saying"). The thesis encapsulated in the quoted saying is ascribed to "the house of Israel". Yet, are the contours of "the house of Israel" spoken of here the same as those of "the house of Israel" mentioned in Ezek 12:24<sup>27</sup>? Whereas in Ezek 12:22-23 the text speaks of people that are "upon the soil of Israel" and "in Israel," there is here no mention whatsoever of Israelite soil. Furthermore, must the expression "the house of Israel" be read in light of Ezek 12:9 and 44:6 as being synonymous with "the rebellious house," cf. Ezek 12:25?

**3.3.1.2** החזון אשר יהוא חזה לימים רבים ולעתים רחוקות הוא נבא ("The vision that he sees is for many days and it is for the far-off times that he prophesies."). The fact that the pronoun הוא ("he") is used twice makes it clear that it is EZEKIEL that they are talking about. This thesis questions therefore the relevancy of the vision and the prophecy or prophecies of EZEKIEL. It would be helpful then if we could determine to which of EZEKIEL's visions and prophetic utterances this saying is referring.

Does vision or prophecy refer to the foregoing vision(s) of doom in Ezek 3:1--11:1-16 or to the brighter future depicted, for instance, in Ezek 40--48? The former foresees destruction for Jerusalem, while the latter predicts the restoration and even the transfiguration of the city in eschatological terms. Or does it refer, for instance, to the foregoing positive oracle in Ezek 11:17-20 or to the more negative oracles, for

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<sup>27</sup> The mentions of "the house of Israel" both in Ezek 12:24 and in Ezek 12:27 are rather awkward since they would appear to refer to two different settings, the former to those in Israel and the latter to those in the exile (see below).

instance, in Ezek 13:1ff. and Ezek 14?<sup>28</sup> We can safely leave Ezek 13:1ff. aside since it is rebutted by the rest of chapter 13. Ezek 14 is too closely linked to fate of Jerusalem (cf. Ezek 14:21) and those on Israelite soil (cf. Ezek 14:7) to belong together with Ezek 12:26-28, which are about EZEKIEL's prophetic activity.

If this saying were linked with 3:1--11:1-16, we could presuppose that the saying is quoted as a sign of relief: even though EZEKIEL had foreseen gloom and doom, fortunately not much of it has really come about.<sup>29</sup> In other words, the people quoting it are not really sad about the non-fulfilment of EZEKIEL's prophecies.

If the saying were linked, on the contrary, either with Ezek 11:17-20 or with 40--48, then it could be interpreted as voicing scepticism about the prophecies announcing favourable things for the future. Ezek 11:17-20 is a different case since it refers to the gathering of the *dispersed*, which appears to refer to a group other than the Babylonian *golah*. If this saying referred to Ezek 11:17-20, it would then reflect the doubt of some of the dispersed that they will ever return to the soil of Israel. Ezek 40--48 present us with a completely different kind of prophecy: these chapters are clearly eschatological.<sup>30</sup> It is perhaps about these prophetic utterances that Ezek 12:27 is talking when it speaks of רחוקות ולעתים רבים ("...for many days and for far-off times").

A closer look at the terms used may give us some clues as to their connotation

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<sup>28</sup> For K.-F. Pohlmann this disputation speech is connected with Ezek 7 and both represent a pre-*golah*-oriented text. Cf. K.-F. Pohlmann, *Der Prophet Hesekiel/Ezechiel* Kapitel 1-19 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996) 181-182.

<sup>29</sup> This seems to be A. Van der Born's and W. Irwin's opinion, cf. A. Van der Born, *Ezechiël*, 81; and W. Irwin, *The Problem of Ezekiel* (Chicago: The University Press, 1943) 107.

<sup>30</sup> So as K.-F. Pohlmann himself has asked: "Zu fragen ist ferner, in welcher Weise 12,26-28 mit den jetzt in Ezek 40-48 vorgestellten Zukunftsentwürfen in Einklang stehen kann." K.-F. Pohlmann, *Der Prophet Hesekiel/Ezechiel* Kapitel 1-19, 183.



לַיָּמִים רַבִּים ("for many days"). The word יָמִים without the definite article means *days* and is used 270 times in total in the Hebrew Bible. In Ezekiel, the form יָמִים (without article and/or prepositions) is found 7 times: once alone (cf. Ezek 4:5), five times in the combination יָמִים שִׁבְעָה ("seven days," cf. Ezek 3:15.16, 43:25.26, 44:26), and once as יָמִים שִׁבְעוֹת ("a week of days, seven days," cf. Ezek 45:21). The word pair יָמִים רַבִּים is found 24 times in the Hebrew Scriptures (without prepositions) meaning *many days*, i.e. *a long time*<sup>31</sup> and 5 times accompanied by a preposition<sup>32</sup>.

The form הַיָּמִים (i.e. with the definite article) means *the days* and it is found 136 times in the Hebrew Scriptures. It can be used adverbially in the combination כָּל-הַיָּמִים meaning *all the days*, i.e. *always*. The most interesting use of the word in the context of Ezek 12:27 is the expression הַיָּמִים הַבְּאֲחֵרִית because it means *in the latter days*.

This expression is used mostly in prophecies that refer to *some later days*, cf. Gn 49:1, Nm 24:14, Dt 4:30, 31:29, Jer 23:20, 30:24, 48:47, 49:39 and Hos 3:5. In Is 2:2 and Mi 4:1 the expression הַיָּמִים הַבְּאֲחֵרִית would seem to have somewhat eschatological undertones. Dn 10:14 presents us with an interesting case where הַיָּמִים הַבְּאֲחֵרִית is set side by side with לַיָּמִים as though the latter explained the former. There is no doubt, however, that in Daniel both expressions have reached their highest eschatological potentials.

The form לַיָּמִים is in fact used 16 times in the Hebrew Scriptures in different ways.<sup>33</sup>

It can mean *in* or *during the days*, cf. Gn 7:4 and Ezek 22:14, *for an x-number of days*, cf. 2 Chr 29:17, as well as *in years*, *in terms of years* or *as far as age is concerned*,

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Gn 21:34, 37:34, Lv 15:25, Nm 9:19, 20:15, Dt 1:46, 2:1, 20:19, Jos 11:18, 22:3, 24:7, 2 Sm 14:2, 1 Kgs 2:38, 3:11, 18:1, 1 Chr 7:22, 2 Chr 1:11, Est 1:4, Jer 13:6, 32:14, 35:7, 37:16, Hos 3:3.4.

<sup>32</sup> In 2 Chr 15:3 (+ו), Jos 23:1 and Ezek 38:8 (+ו), and in Ezek 12:27 and Dn 8:26 (+ל).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Gn 7:4, Dt 4:32, Jgs 17:10, 2 Sm 14:26, 2 Chr 21:19(x2), 29:17, Est 9:26, Jb 30:1, 32:4.6, Ezek 12:27, 22:14, Dn 8:26, 10:14 and 12:12.

cf. Jb 30:1, 32:4 and 32:6. The particular phrase **לַיָּמִים מִיָּמִים** means *in course of time*, cf. 2 Chr 21:19, whereas **לַיָּמִים הַקֵּץ** means *at the end of an x-number of years*, cf. 2 Chr 21:19. This idea of *years* is also present in those cases where **לַיָּמִים** means *annually*, cf. Jgs 17:10 and 2 Sm 14:26. There are two instances, however, in which the form **לַיָּמִים** is simply the result of grammatical rules since the preceding verbs call for the use of the preposition **ל**, namely **שְׁאַל-נָא לַיָּמִים רִאשֹׁנִים** ("ask about former days") in Dt 4:32 and **קראו לַיָּמִים פּוּרִים** ("they call these days 'Purim'") in Est 9:26. Yet, the most interesting occurrences of the form **לַיָּמִים** are found in Daniel, not because of their meaning, which is either *for the days*, cf. Dn 8:26 and 10:14, or *up to an x-number of days*, cf. Dn 12:12, but because of their eschatological connotation within those sentences and passages.

Dn 8:26 is in fact the best and only parallel to Ezek 12:27 that there is in the Hebrew Scriptures. While Ezek 12:27 states that **חֹזֵה לַיָּמִים רַבִּים** ("The vision that he sees is for many days"), Dn 8:26 says:

**וְאַתָּה סַתֵּם הַחֹזֶן כִּי לַיָּמִים רַבִּים** ("As for you, seal the vision for it is for many days").

The meaning of **לַיָּמִים רַבִּים** ("for many days") must be therefore the opposite of the phrase **הִנֵּה יָמִים בָּאִים** ("behold! days are coming..."), which is used to introduce prophecies that will assuredly come true. The latter is used once in 2 Sm 2:31, once in 2 Kgs 20:17, which is nearly literally the same as Is 39:6, three times in Amos

(cf. Am 4:2, 8:11 and 9:13) and rather frequently in Jeremiah (cf. Jer 7:32, 9:24, 16:14, 19:6, 23:5.7, 30:3, 31:27.31 (also MT<sup>Q</sup> 31:38), 33:14, 48:12, 49:2, 51:47.52).<sup>34</sup>

ולעתים רחוקות ("for far-off times"). The singular noun עת is used 16 times in Ezekiel.<sup>35</sup> As a noun, it means *time*, cf. Ezek 7:7.12, 12:27, 16:8, 21:30, 21:34, 22:3, 30:3, 35:5, or *season*, *opportune time*, or *right time for something*,<sup>36</sup> cf. 16:57 and 34:26. It can also be used in an adverbial sense: עת means then *now*, perhaps in the sense of *this time*, cf. Ezek 16:57 and 27:34, and מעתה עד־עת means *from time to time*, *at set or separate times*, cf. Ezek 4:10.11. There are also a number of verses that are of interest here for their semantic implications since they connect the ideas of *time* and *wrath* as a realised fact.

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<sup>34</sup> In Jeremiah the phrase is almost always followed by נִאמַר יְהוָה ("declaration of YHWH"), with the only exception of Jer 51:52. In Am 4:2 it stands on its own; in Am 8:11 it is followed by נִאמַר יְהוָה ("declaration of the Lord YHWH"), while in Am 9:13 by נִאמַר יְהוָה ("declaration of YHWH").

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Ezek 4:10(x2).11(x2), 7:7.12, 12:27, 16:8(x2), 16:57, 21:30, 22:3, 27:34, 30:3, 34:26 and 35:5(x2).

<sup>36</sup> This idea is very common in Ecclesiastes, cf. Eccl 3:2.3.4.5.6.7.8.17 and 8:6.

7:7	the time has come, the day is near	בא העת קרוב היום
7:12	the time has come, the day has arrived	בא העת הניע היום
21:30	whose day has come at the time of his final iniquity	אשר־בא יומו בעת עון קץ
21:34	whose day has come at the time of his final iniquity	אשר־בא יומם בעת עון קץ
22:3	that her (the bloody city's) time may come	לבוא עתה
30:3	For near is a day	כי־קרוב יום
	and near is the day of YHWH	וקרוב יום ליהוה
	a day of clouds	יום ענן
	a time for the nations it is going to be	עת גוים יהיה
35:5	at the time of their distress	בעת אידם
	at the time of the final iniquity	בעת עון קץ

In the above cases the word עת ("time") has obvious adverse connotations. It is worth noting that Ezekiel's talk of עת עון קץ ("the time of the final iniquity") in Ezek 21:34, 22:3 and 35:5 is akin to Daniel's expression עת קץ ("the final time"), cf. Dn 11:35, 12:4 and 12:9. The word עת ("time") is indeed associated with the idea of *evil*, *wrath*, *distress* or *punishment* also elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures (often referring to YHWH's visitation as the coming of judgment). Such combinations are found, for

instance, in Jgs 10:14, Ps 37:19.39, Is 33:2, Jer 2:28 (cf. Jgs 10:14), 6:15, 9:12, 10:15, 11:12, 11:14, 14:8, 15:11, 18:23, 46:21, 49:8, 50:27.31, 51:6.18.33, Am 5:13, Mi 2:3, Neh 9:28 and Dn 12:1.

Ezek 12:27 speaks of עתים ("times"). Apart from Ezek 12:27 the plural is also used only in Neh 9:28, where it is said that YHWH has rescued them רבות עתים ("many times"), and in Jb 24:1, where it is asked why YHWH does not keep עתים ("times").

The shortness of the ensuing rebuttal of the saying in Ezek 12:28 forces us to admit that the question as to whether this saying suggests complacency<sup>37</sup> or despondency<sup>38</sup> about the present situation<sup>39</sup> or about the future<sup>40</sup> must remain open. The vocabulary used in Ezek 12:27 may, however, quite likely point to a later debate about the eschatological strand of Ezekiel, which was then seen as still unfulfilled.

### 3.3.2 Ezek 12:28, the counter thesis.

לֹא-תִמְשַׁךְ עוֹד כָּל-דִּבְרֵי אֲשֶׁר אֲדַבֵּר דְּבַר וַיֵּעָשֶׂה ("No longer will any of my words be delayed because I shall speak a word and it will be done"). The idea put forward in the counter thesis is akin to that in Ezek 12:25.<sup>41</sup> In fact, Ezek 12:23.25.28 foresee the

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<sup>37</sup> M. Greenberg is of the opinion that it represents rather complacency than despondency in the sense that it defuses Ezekiel's prophecies by putting them far-off in the future. Cf. M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 231.

<sup>38</sup> A. Graffy takes this disputation speech as countering their despondency and encouraging them to hope. Cf. A. Graffy, *A Prophet Confronts His People* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1984) 58. W. Irwin does likewise; cf. W. Irwin, *The Problem of Ezekiel*, 108.

<sup>39</sup> This seems to be K.-F. Pohlmann's suggestion. "Hält der Verfasser von 12,26-28 dagegen, so ist zu erwägen, ob hier nicht geradezu ein deutliches Votum gegen eine eschatologische Interpretation des 'Ezechielbuches' beabsichtigt ist. Eine solche Interpretation konnte zumal im Blick auf Ezek 7 und das dort verhandelte Thema 'das Ende kommt' naheliegen." K.-F. Pohlmann, *Der Prophet Hesekiel/Ezechiel* Kapitel 1-19, 184.

<sup>40</sup> For J. Lust this passage represents a late eschatological Masoretic "plus". Cf. J. Lust, "Le messianisme et la Septante d'Ezechiel," 9-11.

<sup>41</sup> In D. Block's words: "The refutation of this challenge consists of an abbreviated version of vv. 23-25, though the reference to *Every pronouncement I make shall surely be fulfilled* makes it especially pointed. Again Yahweh stamps Ezekiel's words with his imprimatur, the concluding signatory formula." D. Block, *Ezekiel*, 392. Yet, D. Block interprets the "abbreviated version" as having different addressees from the longer version.

precise opposite of the claim in Ezek 12:27 that EZEKIEL's vision and prophetic utterances are רחוקות וְלעתים רבים ("...for many days and for far-off times").

Nonetheless, the postponement of the realisation of vision and prophecy envisaged by Ezek 12:26-28 is clearly longer than that implied by Ezek 12:21-25. While the proverb in the latter implies that the wait for prophetic fulfilment seems to lead nowhere; the saying in the former places it in the eschatological times, that is, it postpones it indefinitely.

### 3.4 Partial conclusions

Firstly, the saying quoted speaks of the validity of prophecy in a way that differs from Ezek 12:21-25. It qualifies it as being for the distant future, in other words, as not quite relevant or applicable to the present situation.<sup>42</sup> Eschatological prophecies can be both appealing to the imagination *and* ineffective, precisely because what they promise is "for far-off days".

In any case, if we take this passage as and where it now stands in the MT, we can say that it clearly wants to caution against any exaggeratedly positive theological appraisal of the *golah*. At least some of the members of the *golah* doubt<sup>43</sup> the validity of EZEKIEL's vision and prophecy.<sup>44</sup> The similarities regarding *Sitz im Leben* between

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 283.

<sup>43</sup> This seems to be D. Block's opinion, who states: "Rather than challenging a proverb circulating in Jerusalem, this address appears to be directed at the exiles who have become disillusioned with Ezekiel. (...) Ezekiel's fellow exiles seem to have dismissed his utterances as of no consequence to them." D. Block, *Ezekiel*, 392.

<sup>44</sup> K.-F. Pohlmann sees it still "als Bestandteil des golafavorisierenden Ezechielbuches," in K.-F. Pohlmann, *Der Prophet Hesekiel/Ezechiel Kapitel 1-19*, 183.

Ezek 12:26-28 and Ezek 33:30-33<sup>45</sup> (about the *golah*) are bigger than those between Ezek 12:21-25 and Ezek 12:26-28.<sup>46</sup>

Secondly, the Masoretic configuration of Ezek 12:26-28 implies that the saying in question is about EZEKIEL's own visionary and prophetic activity and not about prophecy in general.<sup>47</sup>

Thirdly, the text has YHWH indirectly admit that His words have been delayed in the past.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

These two short disputation speeches, namely Ezek 12:21-25 and 12:26-28, clearly appear to have different points of reference.<sup>48</sup> Whereas Ezek 12:21-25 deals with the issue of visions and prophecies upon the soil of Israel, Ezek 12:27-28 is about Ezekiel's or EZEKIEL's own visionary and prophetic activity. The first disputation speech takes issue with ideas that are being upheld upon Israelite soil, whereas the second disputation speech attacks the mentality of some of the members of EZEKIEL's implicit audience, i.e. the *golah*, or Ezekiel's real audience, i.e. (perhaps) in the post-exilic times. The implicit *Sitz im Leben* of the second pericope would be then either the Babylonian *golah* or some post-exilic group.

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<sup>45</sup> "(30)As for you, mortal, your people who talk together about you by the walls, and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to a neighbour, "Come and hear what the word is that comes from the LORD." (31) They come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear your words, but they will not obey them. For flattery is on their lips, but their heart is set on their gain. (32) To them you are like a singer of love songs, one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; they hear what you say, but they will not do it. (33) When this comes-- and come it will!-- then they shall know that a prophet has been among them."

<sup>46</sup> W. Zimmerli is of the opinion that the point of reference here is no longer to be sought upon the soil of Israel. "The 'house of Israel' (v27) means the exiled community around the prophet, which, before the occurrence of the catastrophe of 587 BC gave expression to these skeptical words about Ezekiel's preaching. The saying must have been spoken before the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem in the year 589 BC" W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 283.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. A. Graffy, *A Prophet Confronts His People*, 57.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. D. Block, *Ezekiel*, 392.

As far as the ideological intention of the book is concerned, verses 21-23 are interesting because they seem to validate the prophetic activity that took place upon the soil of Israel.

Verses 24-25 fall within the first disputation speech since they elaborate on the preceding verses, i.e. Ezek 12:21-23. They bring in, however, two terms, namely "the house of Israel" and "the rebellious house," whose relationship with the land of Israel in Ezekiel must be studied further.

It is plausible for verse 27 to refer to the eschatological strand within the book. It would then reflect a contemporary or later opinion that runs counter to the positive and confident tone of, for instance, Ezek 40--48.

Our basic question concerned the delimitation of *the contours of Israel*. These two passages present us with differing pictures of "the house of Israel". On the one hand, Ezek 12:21-25 assigns to it a certain geographical dimension: it finds itself upon the *soil* of Israel. This is somewhat strange. At the time of the Babylonian *golah*, the northern kingdom of *Israel* did not exist any more as a political entity. Only the southern kingdom of Judah had survived first as a vassal of the Babylonians and then under the Persians either as part of the satrapy of Transeuphrates through Samaria and Damascus or as a more or less autonomous province.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, Ezek 12:26-28 applies the expression "the house of Israel" to EZEKIEL's audience which, according to Ezek 1:1.2, must be visualised in Babylon by the river Chebar. Having said that, if we accept that Ezek 12:27 is aimed at Ezekiel's great eschatological prospect (Ezek 40--48), then it can be concluded that it both builds on the foregoing disputation speech by re-iterating in Ezek 12:28 the idea expressed in Ezek 12:25 and



expands it by shifting the point of reference beyond Palestine and even beyond the Babylonian *golah*. This means that *the contours of Israel* become larger and increasingly blurred.

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. J.A. Soggin, *An Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah* (London: SCM Press Ltd., <sup>2</sup>1993) 280.