

# Disappointed expectations and false hopes: The message of Ezekiel 13:1-16 in a time of change<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Ezekiel 13 forms part of a whole complex in the book of Ezekiel dealing with those prophetic voices challenged by the prophet Ezekiel. His audience paid no attention to his message and had expectations of a quick return from exile. These false expectations were bolstered by false prophets. The prophet unmasks their falsehood as part of an attempt to get the people to listen to his message aimed at repentance. This article explores the meaning of this crucial passage for contemporary South Africa.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is impossible to read a text without one's own situation contributing in some way to one's reading of that text. This is especially true of reading a prophetic text from the Old Testament. The prophets had a message for the people of their own time and frequently that message may have implications for today, as for example in the preaching of the church. Reading a text within your own context may provide a certain angle for reading the text. This paper is an attempt to read Ezekiel 13 within the situation in South Africa today.

One of the greatest problems faced by the authorities and the churches in South Africa is the problem of disappointed expectations. Before the election of 1994 and during the largest part of the rule of the National Party, many prophetic voices were heard

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from different ecclesiastical bodies. These voices were very critical of the situation in the country (cf Strydom 1997:495-502). In the period surrounding the election of 1994 people on all sides had all kinds of expectations about the future in a New South Africa. The oppressed people dreamt of a new future and the privileged people of the old era had high hopes of things remaining more or less the same. Leaders from all sides made promises that people readily believed. Many things have changed, and a lot of these changes were for the better. In many respects many people are better off than eight years ago. But still, with the passing of time many of these expectations went unfulfilled. Many of the people who suffered in the old South Africa have not gained as much as they expected, while those who were privileged feel that they have lost a lot (cf Strydom 2000:104-107). Many of the unemployed is still unemployed and their ranks have grown. Many people still have hopes about a better future for all, but many feel as if everything went wrong. In this lose-lose situation many bitter words are spoken and (political) opponents are blamed for what went wrong. It is probable that some of these frustrated expectations may be part of the cause of the violence that is becoming the scourge of society. In this new situation not many prophetic voices are heard (cf Strydom, 1997:504-507). Many of those who claim the title prophet do not necessarily deserve that title (cf Strydom 2000:108).

Reading the Old Testament in this context cannot remain just an academic exercise (cf Strydom 2000:104). The context forces you to think about the possible implications of this prophetic word for this context. In this paper Ezekiel 13 will be read within its broader context in the book of Ezekiel. At the end of Ezekiel 12 the reactions of the people against the prophetic word of Ezekiel are challenged. Ezekiel 13, with its message against the false prophets, can be read as part of the reaction against the false expectations bolstered by the false prophets. Can this message in some way say something to people in South Africa that have to struggle with their own hopes and expectations?

In the major part of this paper Ezekiel 13:1-16 will be analysed. The last part will try to answer the question whether the message of the passage has some implications for the situation in South Africa today.

## **2. EZEKIEL 13:1-16 IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL**

There exists an almost general consensus amongst scholars that Ezekiel 13:1-16 forms part of a larger section comprising Ezekiel 12:21-14:11 (cf Allen 1994:193 for a survey of views in this regard). The word “prophet” can serve as a catchword to describe the whole section (Zimmerli, 1979:1), dealing with true and false prophets (cf Block 1997:ix). Ezekiel 13 contains Ezekiel’s major critique of the other prophets (Duguid 1994:93). Some scholars divide the whole section into five parts (e g Cooke 1970:135) and some divide it in six parts (e g Allen 1994:193). The difference of opinion is only related to 14:1-11, which some take as one unit, while others divide it in two parts (1-8, 9-11). If the sections are divided into six parts, it is clear that the six parts consist of three pairs (12:21-25 and 26-28; 13:1-16 and 17-23 and 14:1-8 and 9-11). The whole section can be related to Ezekiel’s conflict with other prophets (Block 1997:384). The first pair deals with popular criticism towards the prophetic office, the second pair with the abuse of the office and the third pair with the fate of the false claimants to the office and their supporters (Block, 1997:384). The oracles demonstrate something of the strife amongst different groups who regarded themselves as prophets (cf Block 1997:395). Ezekiel could not accept the message of false hope brought by those whom he regarded as false prophets.

Renz (1999:60-61) is one of the few scholars who see a different structure in the book with regard to Ezekiel 12-14. He divides the first part of the book in four cycles (1-7, 8-13, 14-19 and 20-24). Ezekiel 8-13 is part of his second cycle (8-13), which states that the prophecies regarding the fall of Jerusalem will be fulfilled in spite of certain objections. He does not, however, give clear reasons for this division of the book and his view does not really challenge the consensus regarding the unity of 12:21-14:11.

Allen (1994:xxviii, 208) regards the whole complex of 12:21-14:11 as a further updating of the second collection of Ezekiel’s oracles of judgement. He dates some of these oracles before 587 BC and others after 587 BC. He dates 13:2-9 after 587 BC and 10-16 before that time (1994:200). The whole complex was, however, directed at the community as it existed after the fall of Jerusalem. Cooke (1970:137-138) thinks that two oracles were combined in Ezekiel 13:1-16. Verses 2, 7, 8, 10 and 12-16 address the

prophets in the second person and they were part of the community in Babylon. He dates this oracle before 587 BC. Verses 3, 5, 6 and 9 address the prophets in the third person and date from after 587. These verses are directed at the prophets in Jerusalem who did not perform their duty and who was taken to exile after 587. Other scholars, however, think that 13:1-16 must be dated before the fall of Jerusalem. Vawter and Hoppe (1991:83) relate Ezekiel 13 to bad spiritual leadership in Jerusalem during its dying days.

The exact date of Ezekiel 13 is not that important for the present study. It is indeed true that the whole book in its final form was directed at the people after the fall of Jerusalem, but in the first 24 chapters the reader is confronted with the situation of the people before the fall of Jerusalem (Renz 1999:41). In the final form Ezekiel 13 is preceded by the two popular sayings quoted in Ezekiel 12:22 and 27. They reflect the reaction of the people in the exile on Ezekiel's prophecies regarding the fall of Jerusalem. The people did not want to accept that word of Ezekiel, but rather listened to messages of hope and peace as proclaimed by those regarded as false prophets by Ezekiel. Ezekiel 13 deals with the prophets who proclaimed those messages of false hope.

### **3. GENRE AND STRUCTURE**

Ezekiel 13 is generally regarded as a self-contained section on account of the introductory formulas in 13:1 and 14:1 (cf Zimmerli 1979:290).

With regard to Ezekiel 13 as a whole, it is generally divided into two sections: 1-16 and 17-23. In both sections the prophet is addressed as son of man and the pronouncement of judgement starts with  $\gamma\omega\eta$  -in both sections (cf Zimmerli 1979:290). The first section deals with prophets and the second with prophetesses. This paper deals with the first section.

Block (1997:393) regards Ezekiel 13 as a good example of geminating oracles in Ezekiel. He indicates that the two sections have the same kind of structure, with a preamble (2-3a; 17-18a), charges against the prophets (3b-7; 18b-19) and an announcement of judgement (8-16; 20-23) in two parts in each section (8-9, 10-16; 20-21, 22-23) (Block, 1997:393-395). Both sections contain the three typical elements of a proof saying (Block 1997:394). These are the reason for the judgement with  $\gamma\beta\gamma$  (8, 10, 22), the announcement of divine intervention with  $\gamma\kappa\gamma$  (8, 13, 20, 23), and the declaration of

the divine purpose, with the recognition formula (9, 14, 21, 23). Block also sees elements of a woe oracle in Ezekiel 13, with the use of  $\gamma w h$  (3, 18), the identification of the persons addressed in the third person and by means of a preposition and participle (Block 1997:394). Zimmerli (1979:290) says that verses 10-14 have the classic form of a proof oracle, with three parts. The motivation starts with  $\gamma \zeta$  in verse 10, the declaration of judgement introduced by  $\text{לִכֵּן}$  and the messenger formula in verses 13-14b and the formula of recognition at the end of verse 14. Zimmerli regards verses 11-12 and 15-16 as later additions that disturbs the symmetry of the original proof oracle in verses 10, 13-14. Allen (1994:196-197) divides Ezekiel 13:1-16 in two parts, 1-9 and 10-16, with different settings, as indicated above. Vawter and Hoppe (1991:82-84) make the same division.

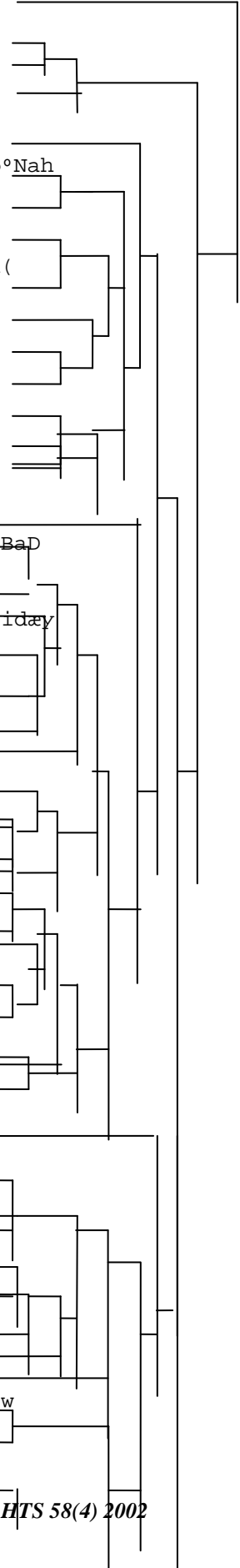
The problem with the views of Zimmerli and Block is that they do not distinguish clearly between the different uses of  $\text{לִכֵּן}$  in Ezekiel 13. They regard the  $\text{לִכֵּן}$  in verse 13 as an introduction to the judgement in the same way as the second  $\text{לִכֵּן}$  in verse 8. The first  $\text{לִכֵּן}$  in verse 8 and the one in verse 13 have, however, the same function, to introduce a new saying of the Lord. For the structure of the whole passage these introductions to the words of the Lord in verses 3, 8 and 13 are very important. Zimmerli has to regard some verses as secondary to obtain a symmetrical structure for his proof saying and neither of them took the basic syntactic structure of the whole section into consideration.

Cooper (1994:153) sees a different structure in Ezekiel 13. He divides the chapter into four parts: God's denunciation of the false prophets (1-7), judgement against the false prophets in two stages (8-12, 13-16), condemnation of the false prophetesses (17-19) and a declaration of judgement (20-23). He does not state the reasons for this division, but one can note that verse 8, 13 and 20 start with  $\text{לִכֵּן}$  before "Thus says the Lord."

In the light of the different structures proposed by different scholars, an analysis of the structure is given, looking especially at important syntactic features in Ezekiel 12:1-16.

The message of Ezekiel 13:1-16 in a time of change

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*The message of Ezekiel 13:1-16 in a time of change*

- 9.5 Then you will know that I am the Lord Almighty.
- 10.1 Because you led my people astray by saying:
- 10.2 Peace,
- 10.3 while there is no peace.
- 10.4 Someone builds a partition-wall
- 10.5 and they plaster it with clay coating.
- 11.1 Say to those who plaster with clay coating:
- 11.2 It will fall down.
- 11.3 There will be a flooding rain
- 11.4 and I will send hailstones that will fall down
- 11.5 and a storm wind will break loose.
- 12.1 Then the wall will fall down.
- 12.2 Will it not be said to you:
- 12.3 Where is the clay coating with which you plastered?
- 13.1 Therefore, thus says the Lord Almighty:
- 13.2 I will cause a storm wind to break loose in my anger
- 13.3 and there will be a flooding rain in my wrath
- 13.4 and hailstones in anger unto destruction.
- 14.1 And I will destroy the wall, which you plastered with clay coating
- 14.2 and I will throw it on the earth
- 14.3 and its foundation will be laid bare
- 14.4 and it will fall down
- 14.5 and you will come to an end in its midst.
- 14.6 Then you will know that I am the Lord Almighty.
- 15.1 And I will bring my wrath to an end against the wall and those who plastered it
- 15.2 and I will say to you:
- 15.3 There is no wall
- 15.4 and those who plastered it are no more,
- 16.1 viz., the prophets of Israel who prophesied about Jerusalem and who saw a vision of peace for her
- 16.2 while there is no peace.



### 16.3 Oracle of the Lord Almighty.

## 4 DISCUSSION

For a detailed discussion of the textual problems in this passage, compare Zimmerli (1979:285-288) and Allen (1994:188-190). Only two textual emendations were made for the translation given above. Note 11b of the BHS is followed. At footnote 11c-c of the BHS the reading of the Septuagint is followed.

According to the analysis above this passage can be divided into four sections. The first is an introduction (13:1-2), consisting of the introductory formula in verse 1 and the commission to the prophet in verse 2. The contents of the message are then presented in the other three sections. The first (13:3-7) is introduced by “Thus says the Lord Almighty” and the other two (13:8-12; 13-16) with “Therefore, thus says the Lord Almighty.” In the introduction the phrase “And the Word of the Lord came to me” is a very common one in Ezekiel. It is common in prophetic literature as a whole, but is most frequent in Ezekiel (cf Zimmerli 1979:144). It is used in Ezekiel to denote a new speech unit (Zimmerli 1979:25). The speech unit in Ezekiel 13 extends to the end of the chapter, but a major division occurs between verses 16 and 17, where the prophet is commanded to address a new group. This paper deals with the passage up to verse 16.

In the introduction Ezekiel is addressed as “son of man”. This occurs 93 times in the book and it is used to stress that Ezekiel is part of God’s creation. He is a servant of God called in his service (Zimmerli 1979:131). In this instance the prophet’s commission was to prophesy against the prophets. The command “to prophesy and say” also occurs frequently in Ezekiel (e.g. 6:2-3, 13:17-18, 21:2-3; cf Zimmerli 1979:182), as does the summons to listen to the word of the Lord (cf 6:1). The message is introduced by the messenger formula (Thus says the Lord) in verse 3. This messenger formula, preceded by “therefore” is also used to introduce the third and fourth sections of this passage, in verses 8 and 13.

The second section (3-7) states that the prophets are undermining the people. These prophets are not called false prophets, but rather foolish prophets. This passage demonstrates the problem to distinguish true and false prophets in the Old Testament. The same terminology is used for these prophets as for the prophets commanded, like

Ezekiel, to proclaim the word of the Lord. The same verbs and nouns are used in this passage to denote the foolish prophets as well as Ezekiel (verses 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7). They are called prophets, they prophesy and see visions and they say that the Lord has spoken. The difference is that the Lord makes it clear that these foolish prophets are following their own minds. They waited for the fulfilment of their own words, but were proved wrong by the destruction of Jerusalem.

A word of woe is directed at the prophets who prophesy on their own authority, though they claim that the Lord sent them. They are prophets, seers, but they do not really see what is going on. Like often in the book, Ezekiel uses metaphors to make his point. These prophets are like foxes in the ruins. They did not really care for the people and thus did not take care of them. They were not inspired by the spirit of the Lord, but by their own spirit. The direct cause of this oracle is not stated, but the oracle is related to the prophets that contradicted Ezekiel's message (Block 1997:395).

רדג refers to a defensive wall (Schoville 1997:831). When the wall of a city is breached, the city is defenceless. The defenders must then stand in the breaches to defend the city against the attackers. The prophets had to defend the people by bringing to them the word of the Lord, but they did not do that. They had to proclaim a message of repentance, but instead they proclaimed a false sense of peace and security. They said what the people wanted to hear. The result was that the people would not be prepared for the day of the Lord (verse 5). The message of these prophets was false and consisted of lies, while the word of the Lord is true. The people would suffer on the day of the Lord because they listened to these deceitful words. Their day of the Lord refer in the book of Ezekiel to the judgement of the Lord, especially the judgement pertaining to the destruction of Jerusalem.

These prophets proclaimed peace. Peace forms an important part of the Lord's plan for saving his people. There can, however, be no peace without the right relation between God and his people. They had to repent to bring about peace with God. This passage is one of the few in Ezekiel that has a positive attitude towards the people of the Lord (cf Renz 1999:214-215). They needed protection and guidance and these prophets did not supply this. The prophets committed three major faults. Their words had a wrong origin, the contents of their oracles were wrong and they created a sense of false

security (Duguid 1994:93-94). In the end they preached the wrong message at the wrong time (Duguid 1994:95). In this way they became a stumbling block for the reception of Ezekiel's message of judgement to the people (Duguid 1994:98).

The third section starts at verse 8 and pronounces judgement on the false prophets and their false prophecies. This section can indeed be regarded as a proof oracle, whereas the previous section is a woe oracle. The three elements can be recognised clearly: the reason for the judgement following ׀עׁ in verse 8, the announcement of the judgement following ׀לכׁ in verse 8 and the divine purpose in verse 9. The crux of the judgement is that the Lord would be against these prophets. He is their enemy because they endangered his people by their words. They used to say that the Lord has spoken, but verse 8, using the same phrase they used to bolster their own thoughts, makes it clear that they were not speaking a message received from the Lord. They used all the correct formulas, but their words were deceitful. On account of this they were going to lose their position in the eyes of the people, their names would be scrapped from the register of God's people and they would not return to Israel. Especially this last part of the judgement demonstrated the futility of their words. They proclaimed a return to their land, but the Lord makes it clear that they would not be part of that return. The recognition formula in verse 9 can be regarded as the conclusion of the proof saying, with verses 10-12 repeating the main thrust of that proof saying.

In the previous section the defensive wall of a city is used metaphorically. This section uses a different image, that of a temporary partition wall, that is plastered to make it look solid. The message of peace proclaimed by the prophets is like such a wall. That message was empty and will not endure the coming judgement. The judgement is symbolised by a storm that would expose the flimsy wall erected by the prophets.

The last section starts at verse 13. It is again introduced with the same formula as in verse 8. It repeats much of what was said in the last part of the previous section, but the emphasis is on the fulfilment of the judgement through the actions of the Lord. Verse 13 uses the word ׀יחׁ for a wall and not the same word used for a partition wall in the previous section. This lexical change marks the transition from the metaphoric to the concrete, with the wall falling on and killing the inhabitants of the city. The last part of the section contains a lot of repetition and some scholars regard it as an addition to the

original oracle. It does not add any new information, but can be regarded as a summary of the message of the whole passage of 13:1-16.

For understanding the section discussed in its final form, it must be kept in mind that it follows on the end of Ezekiel 12 with the two popular sayings and the Lord's reaction to them. The reaction of the Lord emphasises that he does not only speak, but that his words will be affirmed by his deeds. In a certain sense Ezekiel 13:1-16 can be regarded as an example of the Lord's words and deeds complementing one another. God pronounces judgement on the false prophets and emphasises that that judgement will be fulfilled. The fulfilment would bring the people to recognise the power of the Lord. Renz (1999:71) is of the opinion that Ezekiel 13 links the validity of prophetic words to membership of the people of God.

## **5. EZEKIEL 13 IN SOUTH AFRICA TODAY**

Ezekiel 13 indicates by way of a woe oracle and a proof saying that peace is not cheap and easily attainable. The other prophets proclaimed peace without getting down to the heart of the matter. By proclaiming an easy peace the people were not shown what their own responsibilities were. They did not have to do anything, they did not have to change, and things will change for the better through divine intervention. Ezekiel 13 unmasks the false prophets to remove them as a stumbling block for the people to hear Ezekiel's message of judgement and repentance.

People in South Africa have to realise that expectations can be a stumbling block to actions. If you are waiting for others to bring about change and to better your situation, it is more than likely that change will not occur. Churches have a particular responsibility in this regard, by unmasking false expectations, but also by pointing to new possibilities and opportunities. In this process introspection is very important, but also very difficult, as demonstrated by the history of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. If South Africans do not get to grips with their past, all attempts at bringing about a new future can boil down to whitewashing a flimsy wall without any firm foundation.

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