

Wojciech Pikor

The Subjecthood of the Land of Israel in the Book of Ezekiel

The Biblical Annals 3/1, 29-46

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach
dozwolonego użytku.

The Subjecthood of the Land of Israel in the Book of Israel

WOJCIECH PIKOR

Institute of Biblical Studies, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin
address: Aleje Racławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin, Poland; e-mail: pikorwo@wp.pl

SUMMARY: The Book of Ezekiel proposes a new look at the land of Israel from the perspective of its subjecthood. The theological novelty of this approach lies in the process of the anthropomorphization of the land, which can be seen especially in the oracles addressed to the land. The analysis of these oracles tries to shed some light on three aspects of the land of Israel, namely its subjecthood, its relativity and the role it plays in, and for, the world.

KEYWORDS: Book of Ezekiel, land of Israel, mountains of Israel, promised land, Babylonian exile

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Księga Ezechiela, ziemia Izraela, góry Izraela, Ziemia Obiecana, wygnanie babilońskie

Living in Babylonian captivity, Ezekiel attempts to revise the basic axioms of the faith of Israel. One of these axioms is the promised land, which constitutes the basis of the life of Israel, not only in terms of economy or politics, but also in terms of religion. The promised land is the sign and guarantee of Yahweh's covenant with his people. The loss of the land due to its conquest by the Babylonians generates questions about the credibility of God's promises. Ezekiel does not join the choir of voices contesting or doubting God's deeds, but rather suggests looking at the land of Israel from a perspective which would take into account people's responsibility for the history of the land. The theological novelty of his approach lies in the process of the anthropomorphization of the land, which can be seen especially in the oracles addressed to the land itself. What is the function of this rhetorical strategy employed by Ezekiel? Answering this question will shed some light on three aspects of the land of Israel, namely its subjecthood, its relativity and the role it plays in, and for, the world.

I. The land as the addressee of the oracles

The oracles addressed to the land are directed either to the land of Israel or to the mountains of Israel (including Mount Seir in Eze 35). K.R. Stevenson understands the relationship between the land and the mountains in terms of a synecdoche.¹ Synecdoche is a type of metonymy in which a word with a narrow range of meanings (here, the mountains of Israel) takes the place of one with a broader meaning (here, the land of Israel) according to the Latin rule of *pars pro toto*. However, in the Book of Ezekiel these two designations – the land and the mountains – are rather used as being synonymous. This is borne out first and foremost by the geomorphological description comprising four elements – “mountains, hills, valleys, ravines” – which refers both to the mountains (cf. Eze 6:2; 36:4) and to the land of Israel (cf. Eze 36:6). The equation of the mountains with the land of Israel is also confirmed by the use of the terms *ʾereš* and *hārîm* as synonyms in Eze 33:28 and 37:22. Geomorphologically and anthropo-geographically, these two terms have a different meaning, but in the prophetic communication they denote the same addressee. It would seem that the use of these two different labels to refer to the same addressee serves rhetorical purposes, and this hypothesis will be verified in the present article.

The land of Israel as the addressee of the oracles is evoked through the appropriate preposition, whereby the land becomes the indirect object of various formulations introducing Ezekiel's oracles, as shown below:

	<i>ʾadmaṭ yisrāʾēl</i>	<i>hārê yisrāʾēl</i>	<i>hārîm + gəḥāʾôṭ + ʾāpîqîm + gēʾāyôṭ</i>
messenger formula <i>kôh-ʾamar ʾādōnāy yhw̄h lā</i>	7:2		6:3; 36:4
command formula <i>ʾāmartā lā</i> ²	21:8 ³	6:3; 36:1	36:6

- ¹ Cf. K.R. Stevenson, “If Earth Could Speak. The Case of the Mountains against YHWH in Ezekiel 6; 35–36”, *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets* (ed. N.C. Habel; The Earth Bible 4; Sheffield 2001), 160. This argument is further developed in: D. Casson, *The Mountain Shall Be Most Holy*. Metaphoric Mountains in Ezekiel's Rhetoric (Diss. Emory University; Atlanta, GA 2004), 78.
- ² In 22:24 the object of the same command formula, which is a form of an order, is the land of Israel: *ʾemor-lāh*. The suffix added to the preposition *lā* signifies the land of Israel (here referred to as *ʾereš*), which the prophet addresses directly in a subsequent part of his speech.
- ³ The same command formula is used in Ezek 21:3; here, however, its object is “the southern forest”, which in 21:1-12 functions as a synonym for “the land of Israel”.

The Subjecthood of the Land of Israel in the Book of Israel

command formula <i>hinnāḇē' ʾel</i> ⁴	21:7	6:2 ⁵ ; 36:1	
command formula <i>hinnāḇē' ʾal</i>	36:6		
orientation formula <i>šim pāneḳā ʾel</i> ⁶		6:2 ⁷	

It is also worth mentioning the call to attention formula: *šimʿu dāḇar-yhwh*, which in 6:3 and 36:1,4 is addressed to the “mountains of Israel”. Thus, the land of Israel as the addressee of the oracles appears in the following prophecies: 6:1-14; 7:1-27; 21:1-12; 22:23-31⁸ and 36:1-15. The oracle in 35:1-15 is in turn addressed to Mount Seir.

What is striking about these formulations is the fact that, as inanimate matter, the land and the mountains cannot be the subjects of verbal communication. In this way the land of Israel joins the ranks of other inanimate addressees of prophecies, such as Jerusalem and dry bones.⁹ Jerusalem constitutes an object (through the use of the appropriate preposition) of the messenger formula (cf. 16:3), the prophetic command formula (cf. 4:7)¹⁰ and the call to attention formula (cf. 16:35). Dry bones, in turn, are introduced

⁴ The object of the same command formula in Ezek 21:2 is “the forest land of the south”, which is synonymous with “the land of Israel”, as confirmed by the parallels visible in 21:2-3a and 7-8b.

⁵ Here, “the mountains of Israel” are expressed through the 3 m pl suffix, which is the object of the preposition *ʾel*.

⁶ This command is also used in Ezek 21:3 with the complement “toward the south”, which is paralleled in 21:7 by the complement “toward Jerusalem”. Both expressions denote the land of Israel.

⁷ The object of the same orientation formula in 35:2 is “Mount Seir”, which is, however, introduced with the preposition *ʾal*.

⁸ Rhetorically speaking, this part closes a longer oracle, comprising the whole of chapter 22. Taking into account only formal elements (that is, stereotypical prophetic formulas), one can distinguish three parts to this oracle, which are addressed to the “blood city” (vv. 1-16), the “house of Israel” (vv. 17-22) and the “land” of Israel (vv. 23-31). As far as the content of the oracle is concerned (namely, the description of the religious transgressions and social misdeeds), there are parallels between parts one and three. The latter is very precise in pointing out among the leaders of Israel those responsible for the sins which are the source of pollution both of Jerusalem (cf. vv. 3,4,15) and the land of Israel (cf. v. 24).

⁹ Others include *rūʾāh*, which is introduced with the preposition *ʾel* and constitutes, in Ezek 37:9, first the object of the call to prophesize, and later of the call to speak, and “every winged bird and all the wild beasts of the field” as the object of the order in 39:17 “to speak to (*lā*)”. Although in the second case neither of the addressees is human, they comply with Yahweh’s commands as animate beings. The polysemantic *rūʾāh* (wind, breath, spirit) ultimately refers to a life-giving force originating with God (cf. 37:4,14). The “sheep” as the indirect object (through the preposition *ʾel*) of the command formula in 34:20 should be interpreted as the people of Israel.

¹⁰ Cf. Jerusalem as the indirect object of the verb *nḥʾ* in Ezek 13:16.

through the use of prepositions as the object of the prophetic command formula and the call to attention formula in Ezek 37:4. “Dry bones” will come back to life during the vision and, hence, can be interpreted as animate beings, which ties in with the explanation of the vision in 37:11 (“these bones are the whole house of Israel”). The oracle included in chapter 16, which is addressed to Jerusalem (that is accompanied by her sister, Samaria), together with the prophecy addressed to both Jerusalem and Samaria in Ezek 23, personifies the two cities. They are represented as women who are in a marriage relationship with Yahweh.¹¹ By contrast with these two cities as the recipients of Yahweh’s word, Ezekiel does not refer to the land of Israel as to a woman (even though both terms denoting land – *ʿereṣ* and *ʾădāmā^h* – are feminine forms). He does not present the history of the land of Israel in the form of a biography, nor does he present the relationship between the land of Israel and Yahweh as akin to a personal relationship between people.¹² How exactly, then, does Ezekiel animate the land of Israel?

Some scholars are of the opinion that Ezekiel personifies the mountains and the land of Israel so that they could metonymically represent the people of Israel in the oracles.¹³ D. Casson even speaks of the “geographization” of the people of Israel, by which he means the application of the mountains’

- 11 A. Fitzgerald, “The Mythological Background for the Presentation of Jerusalem as a Queen and False Worship as Adultery in the Old Testament”, *CBQ* 34 (1972) 406-13, followed by others, argues for the mythological provenance of the prophetic personification of Jerusalem, which would be an offspring of the West Semitic tradition of presenting a city as a goddess married to the patron deity of that city. M. Wischnowsky points out, however, that the fact of using the same names to refer both to the city and the goddess (*rbt*, *ʿm*, *qdšh*) is in itself insufficient to argue for the relationship between the two (*Tochter Zion*. Aufnahme und Überwindung der Stadtklage in den Prophetenschriften des Alten Testaments [WMANT 89; Neukirchen-Vluyn 2001], 13-14). B.E. Kelle claims that in the Akkadian language the masculine word for the “city” (*ālu*) was treated by scribes as feminine (“Wartime Rhetoric. Prophetic Metaphorization of Cities as Female”, *Writing and Reading War*. Rhetoric, Gender, and Ethics in Biblical and Modern Contexts [eds. B.E. Kelle and F.R. Ames; SBLSS 42; Atlanta, GA 2008], 98; cf. the term “*ālu[m]* I” in: J. Black and A. George and N. Postgate, *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian* [SANTAG Arbeiten und Untersuchungen zur Keilschriftkunde 5; Wiesbaden 2000], 13). This example proves the existence of a non-mythological tradition of personifying a city as a woman. According to M. Wischnowsky, *Tochter Zion*, 44-45, the biblical representation of Jerusalem as the unfaithful wife of Yahweh (the deity) is unheard of outside Israel.
- 12 Cf. K.D. Hutchens, *Although Yahweh Was There*. The Land in the Book of Ezekiel (Diss. Emory University; Atlanta, GA 1998), 200.
- 13 Cf. J.W. Wevers, *Ezekiel* (NCBC; Grand Rapids, MI 1956), 60; W.H. Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1–19* (WBC 28; Waco, TX 1986), 96; C.J.H. Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel* (The Bible Speaks Today; Leicester – Downers Grove, IL 2001), 94; J. Galambush, “God’s Land and Mine. Creation as Property in the Book of Ezekiel”, *Ezekiel’s Hierarchical World*. Wrestling with a Tiered Reality (eds. S.L. Cook and C.L. Patton; SBLSymS 31; Leiden – Boston, MA 2004), 99-100; N. Habel, “The Silence of the Lands. The Ecojustice Implications of Ezekiel’s Judgment Oracles”, *Ezekiel’s Hierarchical World*. Wrestling with a Tiered Reality (eds. S.L. Cook and C.L. Patton) (SBLSymS 31; Leiden – Boston, MA 2004), 134.

The Subjecthood of the Land of Israel in the Book of Israel

characteristics to Israel, especially to its leaders.¹⁴ Thus, the mountains of Israel would function as a metaphor, presenting, in a negative way, the people, especially their leaders, deserting God. Like mountains, people assert their autonomy in order to separate themselves from God (mountains are separated, autonomous from one another). People are obstinate and haughty (as symbolized by the mountains' immobility), and they strive to achieve high social status (as symbolized by the mountains' height). Such an interpretation of the metaphor becomes problematic if one takes into account the classical understanding of this rhetorical figure, which presupposes the existence of three elements: the metaphorizing, the metaphorized and the motivation – the relationship between the two which makes the understanding of the metaphor possible.¹⁵ The mountains of Israel, like the land of Israel, do not take the place of the people or their leaders in the Book of Ezekiel. The mountains/land and the people remain separate entities, which – though intricately connected – do not lose their independent and individualistic status. The mountains and the land are geomorphological entities that serve as the space of life for people and animals. It has to be noted that, in Ezek 6, the punishment that will befall the mountains of Israel will result in their depopulation (cf. 6:6,7,14), which obviously necessitates the distinction between the mountains and the people inhabiting them. A similar conclusion can be drawn from the depiction of the place where there will lie the corpses of the idol-worshippers killed by the sword. This space is first identified with the mountains (cf. 6:4: "I will throw your beaten ones in front of your idols" – the 2 m pl possessive pronoun refers to the mountains), but later it is described as an environment defined by human activity (cf. 6:5: "I will lay the corpses of the people of Israel in front of their idols").¹⁶ Another argument supporting the distinction

¹⁴ Cf. D. Casson, *The Mountain Shall Be Most Holy*, 65. The American exegete relies on the cognitive theory of metaphors, according to which the more concrete source (here, the mountains) shapes the more complex and abstract target (here, the people). Having discussed the "geographization" of the leaders of Israel (ibid. 63-72), Casson also speaks about the personification of the mountains, which are put to life by Ezekiel through the activities of Israeli apostates (cf. ibid. 74-76).

¹⁵ The elements comprising a metaphor may go by different names: I.A. Richards calls them the "tenor" and the "vehicle". M. Black distinguishes between the "frame" and the "focus" of the metaphor, defining them as "the principal subject" and "the subsidiary subject", respectively; for M.C. Beardsley a metaphor comprises the "subject" and the "modifier"; cf. P. Ricoeur, *La metafora viva*. Dalla retorica alla poetica: per un linguaggio di rivelazione (Di fronte e attraverso 69; Milano 1981; French original 1975), 103-132. For the sake of clarity this article will employ the terms metaphorized and metaphorizing as equivalents of tenor (frame) and vehicle (focus), respectively. Similar terminology is used by D. Bourguet in his study *Des métaphores de Jérémie* (Études Bibliques 9; Paris 1987), 10.

¹⁶ Because of the absence of this fragment in *LXX* and *Vulgate*, scholars believe it is a later addition generated by a similar formulation in the Book of Leviticus 26:30 (in, among others,

between the mountains of Israel and the people of Israel in Ezek 6 is the fact that both of them are presented independently as the subject recognizing Yahweh: in verse 7 the command to recognize Yahweh is addressed to the mountains of Israel, whilst in verse 10 to those saved among the people of Israel. In Ezek 22:23-27 the distinction between the land of Israel and the leaders of the people is made even clearer. In this oracle, the land of Israel is devoid of any protection (cf. v. 29) from the leaders of Israel (vv. 25-29 mention priests, prophets, princes and “the people of the land”, that is, the land-owning aristocracy). Due to their religious and social transgressions they make the land impure (cf. v. 24).

The mountains and the land of Israel acquire human characteristics as a result of being the addressee of the oracle; nevertheless, in none of the prophecies are the characteristics typical of the mountains (especially their height, interpreted as haughtiness) attributed to Israel. The land functions as the element that is metaphorized, while the people, their behaviours and features, are the metaphorizing element. Despite certain attempts at their “humanization”, the mountains and the land retain their geomorphological properties, and thus, instead of speaking of their personification, it seems more relevant to verify the extent of their anthropomorphization and hence clarify their position in the world.

As a direct recipient of God’s word, the land of Israel is treated as the subject of prophetic communication. This fact is confirmed by the usage of personal pronouns in reference to the land and the mountains of Israel. It has to be remembered that, in Hebrew, personal pronouns in the first and second person are used only with reference to animate beings (cf. 2 m pl pronoun in 36:8 used with reference to the mountains of Israel and, the 2 f sg pronoun in 22:24 and 36:13 used with reference to the land of Israel).¹⁷ In the case of a human being, listening is a process involving ears, eyes and the heart, so that the word is not only received but also understood and interiorized (cf. the description of the activity of listening in Ezek 12:2; 40:4; 44:5). Verbal communication also presupposes a reply, which in turn involves the use of

Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 179; Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 132; Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, 82; Pohlmann, *Der Prophet Hesekiel/Ezechiel*. Kapitel 1–19, 102). D.I. Block in *The Book of Ezekiel*. Chapters 1–24, 220 points out, however, that the absence of this sentence in the Greek Bible might be the outcome of a homoioteleuton mistake – the scribe might have proceeded from *līpnê gillûlēkem* at the end of verse 4 straight to a similar expression in verse 5a. If this sentence had been the result of interference from Lev 26:30, the 2 m pl suffix added to the word “idols” (*gillûlēkem*) should have been retained. The employment of the 3 m pl suffix in the Masoretic Text seems to emphasize the fact that the idols belong to the conquered inhabitants of the mountains of Israel.

¹⁷ Cf. Waltke and O’Connor, §16.1d.

The Subjecthood of the Land of Israel in the Book of Israel

the mouth. In the accounts of prophetic calling, the mouth becomes the major tool of communication, which is understood as the opening of the mouth by the prophet: first to receive (consume) the word of God, and, secondly, to convey it to its final recipients (cf. Jer 1:9-10; Ezek 2:8-3:3). Ezekiel does not allegorize the mountains and the land of Israel, whose descriptions do not allude to the organs of human perception. Still, they are the subject listening to the words of Yahweh, as well as to the words of foreign nations, as related in Ezek 36:2,13. Mount Seir is also described as the speaking subject, whose words are heard by Yahweh (cf. 35:12-13). Since the mountains and the land of Israel are put side by side with another subject called to listen to God's word, namely the house of Israel, it can be inferred that all of them are free in their communication with God. The word which God addresses to them may be rejected, as happened in the case of the people of Israel (cf. 2:5,7; 3:7,11,27). By contrast to the house of Israel, however, the mountains and the land of Israel are not presented as rebelling against or resisting the prophet's mission.

The oracles addressed to the mountains or to the land of Israel present them as the subject of moral conduct. The land of Israel will be judged by Yahweh on the basis of "its ways" (*dereḳ*, in its meaning of "conduct") and its "abominations" (Ezek 7:3,8). The judgment by God will be independent of the judgment carried out by the leaders of Israel (Ezek 7:27). The punishment that will befall the land of Israel is of a retributive character, as suggested by the expression "I will put your ways/abominations upon you" (Ezek 7:3-4).¹⁸ Ezek 14:13 presents a hypothetical sinfulness and unfaithfulness of some unspecified "land" against Yahweh, but in the oracle included in verses 21-23 this land is identified as the land of Israel. Both verbs used in this oracle to describe the land's activity – *ḥāṭā'* and *mā'al* – are normally used with reference to a human subject. The mountains of Israel, being the subject of the verb *kāṣal* in *Hi* in Ezek 36:15, are presented as being responsible for bringing about the downfall of their people. The land of Israel is treated as the owner of the people who inhabit it, which is clear in the accusation that it "devours men and bereaves its nation of children" (cf. Ezek 36:12-14).¹⁹

The land of Israel also acquires subjecthood as the space of life for the people of Israel. In Ezek 36:8,12 Yahweh speaks of "his own people, Israel", but in 36:13-15 he calls Israel "your people" (*gōyayik*), whereby the 2 f sg possessive pronoun refers precisely to the land of Israel. The mountains of

¹⁸ Cf. P. Bovati, *Ristabilire la giustizia*. Procedure, vocabolario, orientamenti (AnBib 110; Roma ²1997), 348-349.

¹⁹ Cf. Hutchens, *Although Yahweh Was There*, 199.

Israel own various cult objects and installations: high places, altars, stelae, and idols (cf. Ezek 6:3-6). On the approaching Day of Yahweh the land of Israel will be deprived of “its wealth” (*hāmônāh* in Ezek 7:12-14), which is the outcome of trade.

The above analysis of Ezekiel’s anthropomorphization of the land of Israel shows that the prophet, “humanizing” certain behaviours of the mountains and the land, does not deprive them of their belonging within the natural world, nor does he enforce a human form on them. The land does not undergo a process of personification but rather that of subjectification, as a result of which the land becomes a moral subject. The land’s subjecthood is expressed in its activities typical of human beings, who are aware of good and evil, who are free and responsible for their own behaviour.²⁰ In this way, the land of Israel co-creates history by entering into relations with various other subjects that are the protagonists of the history of salvation.

2. The relationality of the land of Israel

The land of Israel is a specific geomorphological structure which, in Ezekiel’s stereotypical rendering, is comprised of mountains, hills, valleys and ravines (cf. Ezek 6:3; 34:13; 36:4,6). This space has a particular anthropo-geographical character that is contingent upon its relations with three subjects: Yahweh, Israel and the foreign nations.

2.1 The relationship with Yahweh

The oracles in which Yahweh addresses the mountains or the land of Israel belong almost exclusively, to the category of punishment prophecies. The only exception is the oracle in Ezek 36:1-15, which foretells the revival of the mountains of Israel, at the same time confirming the fulfilment of the punishment prophecy in chapter 6. Some scholars see the relationship between Yahweh and the land that arises from these texts as one which is full of violence, aggression and God’s cruelty towards the land. They argue that God abuses the land, discriminates against it and treats it as an object; the land becomes a scapegoat onto which God projects the transgressions

²⁰ Cf. the characterization of the moral subject in: J. Galarowicz, *Powołani do odpowiedzialności. Elementarz etyczny* (Kraków 1993), 13-14.19-22; T. Ślipko, *Bioetyka. Najważniejsze problemy* (Kraków 2009), 65.

The Subjecthood of the Land of Israel in the Book of Israel

of other parties.²¹ This scholarship, however, neglects Yahweh treatment of the land as a subject; as its owner, Yahweh respects the land's autonomy, independence and responsibility.

Yahweh defines the land's status vis-à-vis himself by the use of several nouns to which he adds the 1 sg possessive pronoun, whereby the land is construed as belonging to him. Yahweh's ownership of the land is first expressed through the expression "my land" (*ʾarṣî*). In 36:5 Yahweh takes up a position on the side of "his land", which has become the possession (*môrāšā^b*) of other nations and of the whole of Edom due to its conquest in 586 BCE. On the one hand, the occupants treat the land as loot that is plundered and destroyed (cf. 7:21; 36:3,5²²). On the other hand, the land of Israel is scorned by its new owners (cf. 36:3,5), who question its relationship with Yahweh's people (cf. their statements in 36:13,20). However, the land as Yahweh's property remains his gift for Israel (cf. 36:12). The value of this gift is guaranteed by the sympathy of Yahweh, who turns to the land in the wake of its destruction and declares his involvement in its recultivation and repopulation (cf. 36:9-11). The expression "my land" is used by Yahweh for the second time in the context of Gog's invasion in 38:16. Speaking about bringing Gog and his army to his own land, God negates the aggressor's conviction of the right to appropriate and plunder the land (cf. 38:11-12), which remains solely in Yahweh's remit.

The second expression shedding light on the land's relationship with Yahweh is *ṣəpūnî* ("my treasure") in 7:22. In this text, the profanation of Yahweh's "treasure" is foretold twice, but in the second case the verb *ḥālal* in *Pi* has as its direct object the 3 f sg suffix (instead of the expected masculine form, if

21 Cf. Stevenson, "If Earth Could Speak", 158-171. Stevenson's ideas are discussed by N. Habel in "The Silence of the Lands", 135-138. In a similar – though somewhat more balanced – vein, K. Carley asks in "Ezekiel's Formula of Desolation. Harsh Justice for the Land/Earth" about the land's responsibility for its relationship with Yahweh, (in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets* (ed. N.C. Habel; The Earth Bible 4; Sheffield 2001), 143-157). Ultimately, she accuses Ezekiel of insensitivity towards the land (ibid. 152-154; cf. K. Carley, "From Harshness to Hope. The Implications for Earth Hierarchy in Ezekiel", *Ezekiel's Hierarchical World. Wrestling with a Tiered Reality* [eds. S.L. Cook and C.L. Patton; SBLSymS 31; Leiden – Boston, MA 2004], 122-123).

22 The expression *ləmaʿan miḡrāšāh lābāz* in Ezek 36:5 can be understood in two different ways. Some exegetes believe this phrase to be a damaged gloss (cf. Fohrer and Galling, *Ezechiel*, 201; Allen, *Ezekiel* 20–48, 168), while others interpret *miḡrāšāh* as a noun similar to *miḡrās* – the term denoting the pasture areas adjacent to the city in Ezek 45:2; 48:15,17, and thus translate the phrase as "so that its pastures become the loot" (cf. Wevers, *Ezekiel*, 189; Greenberg, *Ezekiel* 21–37, 711; Block, *The Book of Ezekiel. Chapters 25–48*, 326). Still others treat *miḡrāšāh* as an *infinitus constructus* assuming the meaning of the Aramaic verb *grš* "to destroy" and suggest the following translation "to plunder the loot" (cf. G.A. Cooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel* [ICC; Edinburgh 1936], 394; Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 2, 229).

the suffix were to be synonymous with *šəp̄ūnî*). Some scholars believe that Yahweh's "treasure" is Jerusalem with its temple,²³ but the description of the invasion in verse 24 mentions the profanation of the sanctuaries, which implies the existence of various places of worship in different parts of the land of Israel. The text of *Targum* also supports the argument that *šəp̄ūnî* refers to the land of Israel, as it translates the term analyzed here as "the land where my Shekinah is".²⁴ Calling the land of Israel his "treasure", Yahweh does not treat it as his exclusive property but shares it with Israel, to which it is given as "its beautiful ornament" (*šəbî 'edyô*). This expression appears in 7:20 in the context of accusing Israel of "exchanging its beautiful ornament for pride". In the context of the gold and silver mentioned in 7:19, it may be assumed that the fault of the people lies in their melting their jewellery to make "abominable and disgusting images" of idols.²⁵ The word *šdî* is also used in Ezek 16:11 and 23:40, where it refers to valuable ornaments given by Yahweh to his bride, Jerusalem. Thanks to Yahweh's benefaction, she becomes a beautiful queen (cf. 16:13). This image has a symbolic character, which harks back to Hosea's description of the gifts that God gives to his people, who are presented as a harlot. The gifts are connected with the land and the fruit that it bears (cf. Hos 2:7,10-11,14). Such an understanding of *šdî* in Ezek 7:20 is supported by its attributive relationship to the term *šəbî* ("grandeur, beauty"). This noun is used in the Book of Ezekiel to denote the magnificence of the land of Israel, which is superior to any other land on account of its fertility and beauty (cf. 20:6,15).²⁶ The land of Israel is similarly depicted in Jer 3:19 (*naḥālaṭ šəbî*) and in the Book of Daniel, where it is referred to as *ʾereš haššəbî* (Dan 8:9; 11:16,41) and as *har-šəbî-qōdeš* (Dan 11:45). Even though such formulations referring to the land of Israel are not directly connected with the metaphor of the bride present in Ezek 16, they still reveal Yahweh's feelings towards the land he gives to Israel. As the owner of the land, Yahweh intends to manage it in such a way so that it

²³ Cf. W. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel. A Commentary* (OTL; London ⁵1996; German original 1965) 104; Fohrer and Galling, *Ezechiel*, 65; Wevers, *Ezekiel*, 65; Hutchens, *Although Yahweh Was There*, 114-115.

²⁴ S.H. Levey, *The Targum of Ezekiel*. Translated with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes (The Aramaic Bible 13, Edinburgh 1987), 34. A similar argument can be found in: Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 199; Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 154; Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*. Chapters 1–24, 266-267.

²⁵ Some scholars see it as an allusion to Manasseh's installation of Asherah and other idolatrous objects in Jerusalem's temple (cf. 2 Kings 21:7); cf. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 153; Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*. Chapters 1–24, 265.

²⁶ In its two other usages, the term refers either to the land of Moab (25:9) or to "the land of the living" (26:20). Thus, Ezekiel employs the term *šəbî* exclusively to assess the value of the land.

The Subjecthood of the Land of Israel in the Book of Israel

would regain its original beauty lost due to its transgressions, yield harvests and become a suitable place for people and animals to live (cf. Ezek 36:9-11).

The actual relationship between Yahweh and the land of Israel was called into question by the events of the year 597 BCE and later of 586 BCE, which led to the conquest of the land of Israel by other nations (not only by the Babylonians, but also by the smaller neighbour-nations of Judah, especially Edom, which took advantage of Jerusalem's fall to annex some of its land). It was not only Israel that questioned this relationship, but the other nations did so too. In his visionary tour of Jerusalem's temple, related in chapters 8–11, Ezekiel quotes the elders of Judah: "Yahweh does not see us, Yahweh has abandoned this land" (8:12), which corresponds with the ordinary people's conviction that "Yahweh has abandoned this land, Yahweh does not see" (9:9). The context suggests that such utterances are not a sign of resignation or disorientation in the face of the disasters that befall the land of Israel. Rather, as the context in which the prophet quotes the people's words makes it clear, they constitute a justification of their conduct. On the one hand, people believe that, since Yahweh did not manage to save Jerusalem from the attack of the nations, he showed his weakness and was forced to leave his land, which falls now within the remit of other gods. These gods are now responsible for the well-being of the land, which explains the idolatry committed in Jerusalem's temple (cf. 8:12). On the other hand, since Yahweh has deserted his land, there is now no need to respect his law in social life, and thus it is possible to "fill the land with blood, to fill the city with perversity" and to get away with it (cf. 9:9). Edom further radicalizes the idea of God's absence by claiming its right to the land. Viewing Yahweh as the patron deity of Israel, Edom interprets the plundering of the land as proof of Yahweh's absence there, due to which the land now belongs to Edom (cf. 35:10) and to the other nations (cf. 36:2²⁷).

The utterances analysed above which question Yahweh's presence are, however, rejected by Yahweh himself. The argument that Yahweh "does not see us" is a misunderstanding, since Yahweh is the one leading Ezekiel around the temple so that he could "see" the ritual abominations committed by

²⁷ The subject of the expression "the perennial highlands that have become our possession", quoted in Ezek 36:2, are "other nations and the whole of Edom" (v. 5). A more precise expression used in verse 4 – "the rest of the nations which are around" (cf. v. 7) – suggests that Ezekiel means the closest neighbours of Israel, which benefit from Judah's downfall. This can be inferred from the oracles addressed to the nations in Eze 25–32, in which Ammon is accused of rejoicing at, among others, the devastation of the land of Israel (cf. 25:3), Moab is accused of refusing Judah and its land a special status among other lands (cf. 25:8), and Tyre of treating the destruction of Jerusalem, "the gate of the peoples", as fostering its expansion into trade routes leading to Transjordan, the Arabian Peninsula and the Red Sea (cf. 26:2).

Israelites (cf. the verb *rāʾāh* in 8:6-7,9-10,12-13,15,17). The belief in Yahweh's abandonment of the land is likewise negated by Yahweh's actions. Exposed to acts of idolatry committed in his own temple, Yahweh claims that such "great abominations" force him to "to go far away from his sanctuary"²⁸ (8:6). The vision ends with an image of God's glory, which after leaving the temple stops on the mountain situated to the east of the city (11:23), thus staying within the land of Israel. In the whole Book of Ezekiel God does not speak even once of deserting the land of Israel. The return of Yahweh's glory, described in Eze 43:1-9, occurs in the direction "from the east" (v. 2) to the temple, not to the land as such (cf. v. 3). God's presence in the destroyed and plundered land of Israel is additionally proved by his reaction to the claims laid upon the land, not only by the nations (cf. 35:10; 36:2), but also, by the Judeans themselves who, after the fall of Jerusalem, live in "the ruins in the land of Israel" (cf. 33:24). Edom misunderstands the doom befalling the land of Israel as evidence of Yahweh's desertion of the land while, in fact, he is present there all the time (cf. 35:10). The destruction of the land of Israel should be interpreted as God's punishment for betraying him. Though punished by God, the land still remains his and he is worried by the nations' treatment of the land as loot and subject of derision (36:5).

2.2 The relationship with Yahweh's people

In response to the nations' claims on the land of Israel as their property (cf. 35:10; 36:3,5) God confirms in 36:12 the right of "his people, Israel" to dispose of the land as their property. In its relationship to the people the land retains its status as the subject, which is emphasized in the last fragment of the oracle addressed to the mountains of Israel in chapter 36

²⁸ Because of the lack of a subject in this clause of purpose (*lārōḥōqā^h mē'al miqdāšī*), some scholars have tried to find another subject performing the activity of going away from the temple. Some understand it as a reference to an altar which will be erected outside the sacred area (Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 218), others believe that the subject are the people who keep their distance from the sanctuary (E. Vogt, *Untersuchungen zum Buch Ezechiel* [AnBib 95; Rome 1981], 43), while, for yet another group of scholars, this sentence constitutes a prediction of the people's alienation from the sanctuary due to exile (Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 169). Nevertheless, in light of the above-quoted utterances of the people in 8:12 and 9:9, as well as of the main subject matter of the vision, namely the abandonment of the temple by the divine glory, God foretells in 8:6 his own distance from the temple. W.A. Tooman in "Ezekiel's Radical Challenge to Inviolability" (*ZAW* 121 (2009), 505) argues that Yahweh cannot be the subject of the verb *rāḥaq* used in Ezek 8:6; as he claims, to express Yahweh's distance this verb would require the conjugation *Pi*, not the conjugation *Qal*, in which it functions as an intransitive verb ("to be far away"). In Ezek 44:10, however, the verb *rāḥaq* in *Qal* is a transitive verb.

The Subjecthood of the Land of Israel in the Book of Israel

(vv. 13-15). Addressing the land of Israel directly, Yahweh promises in the oracle to nullify the punishment inflicted on the land with respect to the land's relationship with Yahweh's people. The people who inhabit the land are called "your people" three times (*gôyēk*, vv. 13,14,15). The term *gôy* is employed here to emphasize the political aspect of the relationship between the land and Israel. In its original meaning, the term *gôy* denotes a community of people coming from the same ancestor, living on the same land and governed by the same ruler.²⁹ Even if Edom perceives the land of Israel as divided into two separate areas inhabited by two politically autonomous nations (cf. *ʿet-šanē haggôyīm wəʿet-štē hāʾrāšôṭ lî* in 35:10), Yahweh speaks in 36:13-15 of "your people" in the singular, anticipating the prediction in 37:22 that Israel and Judah will become one nation, inhabiting one land and governed by one ruler. If the land is the factor determining the autonomy and political identity of Yahweh's people, then, by the same token, the land deprived of its people loses its anthropo-geographical status and ceases to be land, geomorphologically understood.

In the prophecies addressed to the land and the mountains of Israel there recurs a prediction that they will become an area of desolation and waste. As a result of material destruction "all the inhabited places" (cf. 6:6,14) will become "ruins" (*horbāh*, cf. 33:24,27; 36:4,10,33). But a more severe desolation will be the outcome of the land's depopulation: the cities will be abandoned (cf. 6:6; 12:20; 36:4), "sword, famine, wild animals and plague" will drive "people and animals" away (cf. 14:13,21), while those who will survive will be scattered across foreign lands (cf. 6:8-9). The totality of the destruction of the land's material and human components (cf. 6:14; 21:9) will make the land the object of scorn among the nations, which will ridicule it as the land which "devours men and bereaves its nation of children" (36:13). The quotation relies on a two-fold metaphor, employing zoomorphic and maternal imagery. The image of a lion devouring people is used in Ezek 19:3,6 as a metaphor for the rapacity of Judah's leaders. The construction of the land as an insatiable beast which devours its inhabitants brings to mind a similar expression used by the spies sent by Moses to explore the land of Canaan (cf. Num 13:32). The second metaphor makes use of the verb *šākal* in *Pi* ("to lose a child, be childless, take away a child, miscarry"),³⁰ comparing the land to a woman who does not have children on account of her sterility. Viewed by the Hebrews as God's curse, childlessness brought serious consequences: a childless person had no future since the future was

²⁹ Cf. A. Cody, "When Is the Chosen People Called a *gôy*?", *VT* 14 (1964), 5.

³⁰ Cf. the semantic analysis of this verb in: H. Schmold, "שָׁכַל", *TWAT* VI, 1323-1327.

guaranteed solely by having children (cf. Jer 11:19; 22:30). By analogy, when deprived of its people, the land of Israel is doomed to cultural and political annihilation. Without the people cultivating it (cf. Ezek 36:9), the land loses its fertility and is turned into a desert (cf. 14:15). Deprived of the people that contribute to its political identity, the land loses its sovereignty for the sake of the nations, which will complete its destruction in cultural terms.³¹

Presenting various aspects of the relationship between the land of Israel and the people that inhabit it, Ezekiel draws attention to the mutual responsibility of these two subjects for religious transgressions, and this becomes clearest in the oracle included in chapter 6. The objects used for the sake of idolatrous worship belong both to the mountains and to the people that inhabit the mountains, as signalled by the possessive pronouns “your” (2 m pl suffix) and “their” (3 m pl suffix) added to the term “idols” (vv. 4-5,13) and “altars” (vv. 4-13). At the same time, the prophet emphasizes the people’s responsibility for the state of the land, on the basis of which they are judged by God. The land’s impurity mentioned in Ezek 22:24 is a result of the social injustice that is rampant in Jerusalem, from which it spreads all over the land.³² In this context, God speaks of his ineffectual search among the people of Israel for “a man who would erect a wall and take up position in front of the hole in it so that it is not destroyed, but he did not find anyone” (22:30; cf. a similar charge levelled at the false prophets in 13:5). Without the appropriate attitude of the people towards the land, the latter not only loses its cultural profile intended by God, but it also ceases to function as the space of contact between man and God, and man and another man.

2.3 The relationship with the nations

The relationship between Yahweh, the land and the people, outlined above, is also recognized by the nations among whom the Israelites live as a result of their exile. In their statement quoted in Ezek 36:20: “These are the people of the Lord, and they came forth out of his land”, the attributive structure employed indicates not only that both the land and the people belong to Yahweh, but also that they are connected to each other. As the verb “to come forth out of” (*yāšāh*) suggests, the relationship between the land and the people is now broken. The words of Edom cited in 35:10 confirm the conviction of

³¹ Cf. the desire expressed by Edom in Ezek 35:12 to “devour” the mountains of Israel.

³² Cf. the parallel in Ezek 22 between the words addressed to “the bloody city” (vv. 1-16) and to “the land” of Israel (vv. 23-31) in the description of the transgressions by Israel’s various leaders.

The Subjecthood of the Land of Israel in the Book of Israel

Judah's neighbours that "the land of Israel", in fact, is comprised of "two lands" populated by "two nations". The pagans' misinterpretation of the destruction and depopulation of the land of Israel leads them to believe that Yahweh has abandoned the land, by which he showed his weakness, and that the land now belongs to them (cf. 35:10; 36:2). Such an attitude towards the land of Israel makes them the land's "enemies" (*hā'ōyēb* in 36:2), among whom the most prominent one is Edom with its "perennial enmity" (*ēbat ōlām* in 35:5) and "hatred" (*šin'āte*³³ *kā* in 35:11).

The relationality of the land of Israel is what underlies its cultural, religious and political functions. The most prominent relationship is the one with Yahweh, for whom it becomes an autonomous and independent subject, responsible for its actions. Presenting the land to his people, Yahweh determines its geopolitical position while simultaneously ensuring its cultural existence. In its relationship with Israel, the land does not lose its status as a subject, which becomes especially clear when one takes into account its active participation in the people's relationship with Yahweh. The breach of the relationship with Yahweh leads to the land's destruction and desolation, whereby the land loses its proper identity intended by Yahweh and becomes an object in its relationship with the nations.

3. The land of Israel and the knowledge of Yahweh

The loss of the land's status as a subject in the wake of the events in 586 BCE gives rise to a question concerning the function that it is supposed to play in its relationship with the nations. The land's role is prominent in the relationship between Yahweh and the nations.

Ezekiel's perspective on the land of Israel is influenced by his exile in Babylon: he calls the land of Israel "the mountains of Israel" since, from the position of Babylon's alluvial plains, the land of Israel indeed seems mountainous. By the same token, he situates the land of Israel to the south in Ezek 21:2-3. At the same time, Ezekiel respects the Hebrew viewpoint according to which the land of Israel is the point of reference for the localization of other countries; he calls the mountains of Israel "the centre of the earth" (*tabbūr hā'āreṣ*) in 38:12. Jerusalem is thus situated by God "in the centre of the nations, with countries all around her" (5:5). The Book of Ezekiel distinguishes between the lands where Yahweh's people live in exile (*hā'ārāšōt*),³³ and those that are adjacent to the land of Israel. The inhabitants

³³ Cf. 6:8; 11:16-17; 12:15; 20:23,3,41; 22:15; 34:13; 36:19,24; 39:27; 38:8.

of the latter are referred to in the prophecy against the mountains of Israel in 36:1-15 as “the rest of the nations all round” (v. 4), “the rest of the nations” (v. 5) and “the nations that are around” (v. 7). All six of them constitute the first group of the addressees of the oracle against the nations (25:1–28:23). They are addressed in clockwise order on the basis of their geographical position vis-à-vis Israel (*missābīb*), beginning in the east: Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre and Sidon. The reference to them as to “the rest of the nations” (*š'ērīt haggōyīm*) emphasizes that, unlike the land of Israel, they survived the Babylonian assault.³⁴ These nations made Jerusalem their loot and object of scorn (cf. 36:4).

The destruction of the land of Israel is misinterpreted by the nations as proof of its abandonment by Yahweh and as proof of Yahweh's weakness. Using a recognition formula, Ezekiel calls Israel's neighbours, as well as Yahweh's own people, to recognize Yahweh. W. Zimmerli, the author of a comprehensive analysis of this formula typically used by Ezekiel, notes that it is used seventy two times in the Book of Ezekiel. P. Joyce, in turn, analyses sixty-seven occurrences of this formula in the Book of Ezekiel in order to distinguish between various types of this formula, depending on its subject (Israel and the nations) and on the ground for recognition (punishment and deliverance for Israel and the nations).³⁵ In its basic form, the formula is “you will know that I am Yahweh” (*wīda'tem/wəyāqū kī-ʾānī yhwḥ*). Its extension occurs as a result of adding a particular action or characteristic of God to the subordinate clause of the self-manifestation formula. The recognition of God that the formula refers to is an outcome of God's historical action (*factum externum*), which is connected to the prophecy foretelling this particular event (*verbum externum*).³⁶ These events, which are first foretold and later fulfilled, are meant to provoke a response on the part of man: “Now I know that Yahweh is God”.³⁷ Biblical scholars cannot agree whether this formula contains the expectation that the nations will recognize Yahweh. H. Graf Reventlow argues that the nations' “recognition of Yahweh” will lead to their belief in Yahweh,³⁸ while for P. Joyce the positing of the nations as the subject of the recognition formula is merely a rhetorical strategy whose

34 Cf. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 718. Zimmerli in *Ezekiel 1*, 237 applies this expression more narrowly to the nations that survived Yahweh's first judgment (cf. Ezek 25:16).

35 Cf. W. Zimmerli, “La conoscenza di Dio nel libro di Ezechiele”, *Rivelazione di Dio. Una teologia dell'Antico Testamento* (Milano 1975), 46; P. Joyce, *Divine Initiative and Human Response* (JSOT.S 51; Sheffield 1989), 91.

36 Cf. Zimmerli, “La conoscenza di Dio nel libro di Ezechiele”, 92.

37 Cf. Zimmerli, “La conoscenza di Dio nel libro di Ezechiele”, 92.

38 Cf. Graf Reventlow, “Die Völker als Jahwes Zeugen bei Ezechiël”, *ZAW* 71 (1959), 43.

The Subjecthood of the Land of Israel in the Book of Israel

aim is to emphasize Ezekiel's central theme, namely Yahweh's manifestation.³⁹ Neither of the two understandings is completely convincing. Reventlow's argument is based on his conviction that the nations are the witnesses in a specific court case that Yahweh initiated against Israel in Egypt and that he finalizes in the Book of Ezekiel. The expression "in the sight of the nations" (*l'ênê haggôyîm* in Ezek 5:8,14; 16:41; 20:9,14,22,41; 22:16; 28:18,25; 36:34; 38:23; 39:27) is, in itself, not sufficient proof of the existence of such a court case in Ezekiel's text. Joyce's conviction of the mere rhetorical function of the recognition formula when addressed to the nations cannot be accepted either, since these nations are presented in the Book of Ezekiel as an active subject, for example in their relations with the land of Israel. It seems that the problem of the nations' recognition of Yahweh requires a broader look at the verb *yāda'*. Recognition cannot be understood only in cognitive terms, as it goes hand in hand with "contact" recognition, whose outcome is "experience, conviction, noticing".⁴⁰ Recognition is thus not theoretical, but practical: a witness to Yahweh's actions experiences a particular aspect of his being.

Another subject recognizing Yahweh are the mountains of Israel which will experience God both through his punishment (cf. Ezek 6:7,13) and through revival (cf. 36:11). The latter is connected with the punishment of the nations that appropriated the land of Israel. Undoubtedly, God's judicial action with respect to the land of Israel is aimed at making the land recognize Yahweh's power over it (and, more broadly, God's power over nature and the nations, cf. 21:4,10), Yahweh's interest in whatever is happening on the land (contrary to the people's conviction that Yahweh does not see, cf. 8:12; 9:9), Yahweh's justice in judging the land (cf. 7:4,9), and, finally, the reliability and efficacy of Yahweh's word (cf. 6:10). However, such recognition does not amount to a complete knowledge of Yahweh, which will only be possible after the revival of the land of Israel (cf. 36:9-11).

The pagan nations misread the punishment befalling the land of Israel as evidence of Yahweh's weakness and absence. They will learn the truth about Yahweh only after the punishment they receive from God. This is confirmed by the use of the recognition formula in the oracles against the nations, including the one against Mount Seir (cf. 35:4,9,11-12,15). Ezekiel emphasizes the fact that the manifestation of Yahweh's power over the neighbouring nations will become complete during the revival of the land of Israel. As

³⁹ Cf. Joyce, *Divine Initiative and Human Response*, 94.

⁴⁰ Cf. W. Schottroff, "ידע erkennen", *THAT* I, 690; F. Fechter, *Bewältigung der Katastrophe. Untersuchungen zu ausgewählten Fremdvölkersprüchen im Ezechielbuch* (BZAW 208; Berlin – New York 1992), 66-68.

witnesses to Yahweh's renewal of the land, "the nations that are around" will experience God's creative actions in bringing back to life what is destroyed and dead (cf. 36:36). This way they will find out how reliable God's word is (cf. the conclusion formula: "I, Yahweh, said and I will do" in 36:36).

To conclude, it needs to be emphasized that Ezekiel highlights the subjective and relational status of the land of Israel. The land remains autonomous before God in its relation to Israel. However, the land's breach of the relationship with Yahweh leads to the loss of its subjecthood in its relationship with the nations. The land plays a remarkable role in the context of Yahweh's recognition. Like "all flesh" (cf. 21:4,10), the land is called to see the person of Yahweh in all the events that it participates in. At the same time, the land constitutes a space in which Yahweh makes his presence known to the nations. Thus, the land's relationship with Yahweh is indispensable, because only thanks to this relationship can the land experience renewal, which is the source of God's ultimate manifestation in the world.