

Ezekiel 37, Sticks, and Babylonian Writing Boards: A Critical Reappraisal

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DURING ITS FIRST 158 YEARS, Mormonism, like any other religious system, has developed its own theological and ritual structure with its own built-in defensive mechanisms. A fundamental part of this defensive infrastructure is a series of Old Testament texts, passages used to justify and validate various unique and unusual theological dogma found within the faith.¹ These passages have played a positive and important role both in underpinning members' faith and in proselyting. Unfortunately, interpretations of the passages have gradually attained a pseudo-canonical status within the community, allowing for little tampering with their traditional understandings. This is unfortunate since such rigorous attention to one narrow avenue of interpretation ignores and obscures literary and structural aspects of the Hebrew Bible, aspects essential for understanding many theological and historical elements of

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¹ These texts are too numerous to mention here. They can be found with commentary in most books dealing with the fundamentals of Mormonism written by Mormon authors. Examples would include LeGrand Richards (1979) and Joseph Fielding Smith (1956). These are commonly referred to as "proof-texts," a rather unpopular designation in Mormonism, discussed by Heber Snell (1967, 61-63).

Israelite religion and culture. Furthermore, detailed studies of these passages could provide valuable insights into the history and evolution of Mormon exegesis.

One text that has captured the attention of many Mormon scholars, Ezekiel 37:15-28, has traditionally been used to support the divine status of the Book of Mormon. The text reads as follows:²

The word of Yahweh came to me as follows: "Son of Man, take a stick and inscribe on it: 'Judah and the descendants of Israel, his associates'; then take another stick and inscribe on it: 'Joseph (It is the stick of Ephraim), and all of the house of Israel, his associates.' Hold them together as if they were one stick, and they will be as one in your hand. When your people say: 'Will you not tell us what this means?' say to them: Thus says Lord Yahweh: I will take the stick of Joseph (which was in the hand of Ephraim) and the tribes of Israel, his associates, and place it together with the other, i.e., the stick of Judah, and I will make them as one stick, and they will be as one in my hand. The sticks on which you have inscribed will be in your hand before their eyes; (then) say to them: Thus says Lord Yahweh: I will take the descendants of Israel from among the nations, wherever they went, and gather them from all around and bring them to their land. I will make of them one nation in the land, upon the hills of Israel, and one king will rule all of them. They will not be two nations anymore and they will not be divided any more into two kingdoms. They will not defile themselves again with their idols and their despicable things and all their rebellions, and I will rescue them from all of their backsliding by which they sinned. I will then cleanse them and they will be my people and I will be their god. My servant David will be king over them and they will have one shepherd. They will live according to my precepts and they will keep my statutes and will do them. Then they will dwell upon the land where your fathers dwelt which I gave to my servant Jacob. They and their children and their grandchildren will dwell there forever and David, my servant, will be a prince to them for eternity. I will then make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an eternal covenant with them. I will establish them and multiply them, and I will place my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be among them and I will be their god and they will be my people. Then the foreign nations will know that I am Yahweh, the one who sanctifies Israel when my sanctuary is forever in their midst.

Most Mormon scholars, especially Hugh Nibley and Sidney Sperry, have wanted to see these sticks of Joseph and of Judah as the Book of Mormon and the Bible respectively. For them the passage prophesies the appearance of the Book of Mormon in modern times (Nibley 1957, 271-87; Sperry 1963, 226-28; 1967, 74-85). However, some LDS scholars, most notably Heber Snell, have argued that Ezekiel's sticks cannot refer to scripture and, following many biblical scholars, interpret the passage in the more general

² All of the biblical passages quoted in this essay have been translated by the author.

sense as foretelling only the future gathering of Israel (Snell 1967, 55-74).

The most recent additions to the debate are two articles by Keith Meservy, published in the September 1977 and the February 1987 issues of the *Ensign*. He provides evidence that the "sticks" referred to by Ezekiel were actually wooden writing boards—thin leaves of wood coated on one side with wax attached together with metal or leather hinges. These writing boards were fairly common in Babylonia in the first millennium B.C. The appearance of his arguments in the official Church magazine has given prestige to his ideas, which have subsequently appeared in modified form in both Sunday School and Institute manuals (*The Old Testament: Gospel Doctrine Teacher's Supplement* 1985:157; *The Old Testament: 1 Kings—Malachi* 1981, 283-84). Even in the 1979 LDS edition of the Bible the word "stick" in the Ezekiel passage is identified in a marginal note as: "Wooden writing tablet," an interpretation most likely derived from Meservy's writings. In light of the widespread acceptance of Meservy's theory in the LDS community, it is time to seriously reevaluate the issue of Ezekiel's sticks and the Babylonian writing boards to see how sound that identification really is.

The basic problem for Mormon exegesis and the crux of the passage for Mormon and non-Mormon scholars alike is the meaning of the Hebrew word *eš*, rendered by the King James translators as "stick." The word *eš* spans the whole range of Semitic languages (Bergsträsser 1983, 217), yet its various meanings reveal extraordinary continuity between the different languages. The term generally refers to a tree, wood in general, firewood, and specific items made of wood. In Hebrew the traditional semantic range is correspondingly broad, but again the word basically means tree, wood, sticks, branches, firewood, and timber for building. Occasionally it can refer to objects made of wood, such as a pole, the handle of an axe, gallows, idols, and vessels (Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1980, 781-82). Moreover, in post-biblical Hebrew the term *eš* again refers to trees, different types of wood, a pole, the gallows, and a wooden pot ladle (Jastrow 1971, 1101). Therefore, as far as our current lexical knowledge goes, the Hebrew *eš* does not refer to a writing board or document. The lexical evidence does not support either the traditional rendering by most biblical scholars of *eš* as a scepter.

The semantic field of *eš*, or any other Hebrew word for that matter, is certainly not sacred and can be modified as evidence warrants. Nevertheless, any attempt to work outside the currently established semantic field without justification is simple speculation. Thus any scholar must provide evidence to support a claim that *eš* can mean a written document. Before investigating Meservy's evidence, however, a

brief summary of the exegetical history of the Ezekiel pericope will give a better diachronic understanding of the problem.

Two exegetical traditions have developed concerning this Ezekiel passage. The first tradition originates from the Septuagint, the Greek rendering of the Hebrew Old Testament, completed in the second century B.C., possibly in Egypt. This version translates the Hebrew *es* as *rabdos*, Greek for staff or scepter (Rahlfs 1979, 839-40). Although *es* does not, as previously noted, mean specifically a scepter or a staff, this translation seems reasonable when we consider that the passage refers to the reuniting of the tribes of Israel into their old political entities, the North and South Kingdoms. In this tradition, the staff or scepter obviously became a metaphor for kingship, just as the crown came to symbolize kingship later in medieval Europe.

The second interpretation is based on the Aramaic Targums. The Targums are Aramaic translations or loose paraphrases of the Hebrew Old Testament used in the synagogues after the Babylonian exile when Aramaic had replaced Hebrew as the vernacular and the common people had difficulty understanding Hebrew. The Targums were written during the first few centuries A.D. (Würthwein 1979, 75). The Targum of Ezekiel translates the original Hebrew *es* with the Aramaic word *lûha'*, meaning a tablet and occasionally a writing board (*Biblia Rabbinica* 1972, 3:306). The reasoning behind this "translation" is unknown. In light of the lexical evidence already presented, the correlation between *es* and *lûha'*, seems arbitrary, but perhaps the translators were influenced by the use of the Hebrew verb *kâtab*, "to write."

I must emphasize, however, that neither translation reflects a solid lexicographical base; both translations are simply interpretations of their respective authors or traditions. Nevertheless, these two traditions have become the main avenues for modern interpretations of this passage. Most biblical scholars accept either one or the other (in one form or another) when studying Ezekiel 37, generally favoring the Septuagint tradition because it can be reconciled to the reuniting of the two kingdoms easier than the Targumic rendering. However, occasionally more literal-minded scholars seriously consider the Targumic tradition, believing the image of combining books together is more plausible than a literal attempt to join scepters³ (Zimmerli 1983, 273-74).

Mormon scholars have approached the Ezekiel problem from different angles, but in general their arguments have been unconvincing or

³ This is certainly the reasoning behind the New English Bible translation of this passage, which obviously follows the Targumic tradition and was perhaps stimulated by the discovery of the writing boards in the well at Nimrud.

incomprehensible.⁴ The most interesting and sophisticated studies are the articles by Keith Meservy. In both essays he uses fairly recent archaeological discoveries to broach the central problem of the meaning of *eš*. His argument in the earlier work can be outlined as follows: (1) Ezekiel's context was sixth-century Mesopotamia where he would have become familiar with Babylonian customs and lifestyle (1977, 25). (2) In Southern Mesopotamia the scribes wrote cuneiform, not only on the well-known and traditional clay tablets, but also on boards filled with a mixture of beeswax and other substances. These boards were referred to in Akkadian⁵ as *iš lē'u* (Meservy 1977, 25-26). (3) The Akkadian word *išu* is cognate to Hebrew *eš*, therefore, when Ezekiel speaks of an *eš* he is using an abbreviated form of *iš lē'u*, which his listeners and readers would have understood, being familiar with Ezekiel's cultural environment (Meservy 1977, 26).

Meservy's argument is clever, but unfortunately it is based on erroneous linguistic data. The *iš* component of *iš lē'u*, the part that would be cognate to the Hebrew *eš*, is only found in the written Akkadian language and is read as *gish*. It functioned as a semantic indicator, a grapheme present in the writing system but not pronounced. These indicators or determinatives, as they are usually called, are word-signs taken from the Sumerian language, a non-Semitic, logographic language that coexisted with Akkadian as a literary vehicle throughout much of the cuneiform period. The cuneiform writing system was actually developed for Sumerian and was borrowed and adapted to write Akkadian. During this adaptive period, certain Sumerian word-signs, such as the determinatives, were adopted into the writing system for use with the Semitic language. Grammarian Richard Caplice explained: "The determinative is a logogram preceding or following a word and identifying the class (man, god, city, plant, etc.) to which it belongs, but which is not intended to be pronounced in reading the text aloud. Thus a writing AN Assur refers to the god Assur, whereas URU (city) Aššur refers to the homonymous city" (1980, 8). *Gish* indicates that the object in question was, at least at one time, made of wood. The reading of the *iš* sign when used as a determinative as *gish* is certain because these deter-

⁴ For example, see Hugh Nibley (1957, 271-87) and Sidney Sperry (1963, 226-28, 1967, 82-83). For more traditional interpretations of the passage see Orson Pratt (1855, 290, 91), James Talmage (1890, 276), and Joseph Fielding Smith (1956, 3:210).

⁵ Akkadian is the Semitic language found as a literary medium throughout Mesopotamia from about 2500 B.C. to approximately 50 A.D. This language is revealed mainly by its dialects, Assyrian and Babylonian, and was written with the cuneiform script.

minatives were occasionally retained and pronounced as part of the word in scholarly loan-words from Sumerian to Akkadian. For example, note the Akkadian word *gishtû*, "wooden writing board," which is a loan-word from Sumerian, written as *gish-da* and the Akkadian *gishrinnu*, which reflects the Sumerian word *gish-erîn*, "balance."⁶

From these and other occurrences of the semantic indicator being spoken, we know that the determinative for wooden objects was considered to be *gish*, not *iš*. It is certain, moreover, that the Akkadian word in question here was pronounced *lē'u* and not **iš lē'u* or even **gish lē'u* because it was often written without the determinative. In fact, at least in Assyria, the word never used the *gish* determinative, even when referring to a wooden writing board (Postgate 1986, 23; *The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* 9:156-59). Furthermore, *lē'u* is cognate to Hebrew *lûah* and Aramaic *lûha'*, a fact that confirms the reading of the word as *lē'u*.

This technical discussion becomes relevant to our Ezekiel passage because in his social position as a Hebrew-speaking deportee, Ezekiel would have had no knowledge of Babylonian or its complex writing system, and therefore would have known nothing of the *gish* determinative, which as a grapheme existed solely in the written form of the language. He would have been familiar only with the spoken word, either the Babylonian *lē'u* or most likely, the Aramaic *lûha'*.⁷ Thus, the critical connection between *eš* and *lē'u* that Meservy needs for his theory is severed, and the foundation for his interpretation crumbles.

In his most recent article Meservy simply builds on his previous conclusions, suggesting that the terminology of the Ezekiel passage itself points to a wooden writing board and emphasizing the common nature and widespread use of that medium in the Aramaic and cuneiform world. He takes his argument from: (1) the use of the Hebrew verb *kātab*, "to write," found in the Ezekiel passage (Meservy 1987, 6); (2) the mental image of combining the sticks or "leaves of a writing board" as an action of a scribe who was working with a writing board (p. 6); and (3) the writing of names on the *eš* as comparable to the signing of a document, just as the writing boards found at Nimrud had the name of the king written on the cover leaf (p. 7). These arguments are probably not new. In fact, it is probable that they explain the Targumic render-

⁶ Also note *kiskibirru*, "kindling wood," from *gish.kibir*; *kishkanû*, a type of tree, from *gish.kin2*; and *kishkattû*, "kiln," from *gish.kin.ti*. All of these examples are found in the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, vol. 8.

⁷ It could be debated whether Ezekiel would have come into contact with the Babylonian language at all since Aramaic was quickly becoming the vernacular of the area. See Franz Rosenthal (1983, 6).

ing of *es* as *lûha'*, although the possible antiquity of these arguments in no way increases their validity.⁸

The argument using the verb *kātab* to impose meaning on the writing material is circular, since *kātab* frequently takes its nuances of meaning from the material being inscribed. For example, note Exodus 39:30, "They made the flower-shaped ornament of the holy crown of pure gold, and they engraved [*kātab*] on it an inscription, just like the engraving of a seal: 'holiness is to Yahweh.'" Also there is the well-known passage, Numbers 17:2, "Yahweh spoke to Moses: 'Speak to the children of Israel and take from them a staff of each father's household, from among all their leaders according to the household of their fathers: twelve staffs. You will carve [*kātab*] each man's name upon his staff.'" The same circularity is found in Meservy's other two criteria, bringing together the *eš* and the act of inscribing the objects with names. These two actions only suggest writing boards because Meservy is already assuming that they are writing boards.⁹

The use and distribution of these writing boards is certainly more complex than Meservy would have us believe (1987, 7-9). The evidence is basically iconographic and textual except for the two fragments found in the well at Nimrud, the uninscribed piece from Aššur, and the one recently found in the shipwreck off the coast of Turkey (Bass 1987, 731). The preserved writing boards, iconography, and the textual material strongly suggest that the wooden writing board was a prestige item and not a common writing medium. Preserved writing boards are made of walnut and ivory (Wiseman 1955, 3), two rare and expensive materials in Mesopotamia, not to mention the cost of the beeswax mixture, a technician to mix the wax, and a craftsman to fashion the document. Simo Parpola, a well-known authority on this period, has also concluded that writing boards must certainly "have been more expensive and difficult to make than clay tablets" (1983, 8).

Furthermore, Parpola, while studying some documents that listed clay tablets and writing boards acquired by the archive of the last Assyrian king, found that the writing boards were used mostly to record omen series and recipe texts, reference material for the palace diviners

⁸ It is interesting to note that Meservy did not include the Targumic interpretation in his argument because *lûha'* means, among other things, a wooden tablet or writing board. (After all it is a cognate of the Akkadian *lû'u*.) See Ronald Williams (1982, 917).

⁹ See a parallel Akkadian phrase, *issa anāku artakassunūti*, "I joined the 'woods,'" which independently is ambiguous, but when placed in its context refers to the yoke of a plow (*The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* 7:218).

and magicians (1983, 5-6). Thus it comes as no surprise that the label on the one we possess inscribed *lē'u* indicates that it was a copy of *Enuma Anu Enlil*, a rather esoteric astrological omen series that belonged to the library of one of the kings of Assyria (Wiseman 1955, 6-8).

The textual evidence for the writing boards is even more ambiguous. The term *lē'u*, besides meaning a writing board like those found in Nimrud or Turkey, can also mean a document in general, with no allusion to its nature or material (*The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* 9:156-61). Thus when the term is used in the economic documents of the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods, it is unclear whether it is a generic term for a clay tablet or refers to a writing board. J. N. Postgate stated in his study: "Without the *gish* in front, we cannot be certain that *Lē'um* does not refer to a particularly large type of clay tablet" (1986, 23). In any case, in those later periods the term *Lē'u* is mentioned predominantly in palace and priestly documents (*The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* 9:156-61).

The evidence for writing boards in the Aramaic speaking lands, including pre-exilic Palestine, is minimal. There is iconographic evidence of Aramaic scribes using *lē'us*, but we cannot ascertain how widely they were used since the iconography is almost exclusively from royal contexts. However, the materials and the technology involved in constructing the writing boards indicate that they were luxury items in the Syria-Palestine area. Papyrus was most likely more popular as a writing medium, and potsherds, a ubiquitous and inexpensive writing material, were readily available in that area (Williams 1962, 917). Therefore, it seems unlikely that Ezekiel, a deported Hebrew living in a community on the Chebar Canal outside of the urban center of Nippur in southern Babylonia (Oded 1977, 482), would have had access to the materials and the technology to construct a writing board for his public demonstration. If he had wanted to convey the notion of writing, he would probably have used a more common medium. The people who heard or read Ezekiel would have been more familiar with, and just as likely to identify, writing with sherds, papyrus, or even the Babylonian clay tablets.

Even more problematic than the arguments over the physical nature of the *eš* is the supposed conceptual leap from a written document to scripture. In the pericope in question, Ezekiel's actions are divinely interpreted as an eventual reuniting of the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, requiring a conceptual link between the *eš* and the two nations in the minds of the listeners or readers. Meservy and the others who argue that the *eš* refers to scripture require the audience to first connect the *eš* with a written document, then jump to the idea of scripture, and from there make the metaphoric

identification with the gathering of Israel. As I have previously demonstrated, the connection between the *es* and a written document is tenuous. We should also carefully consider the alleged connection between a written document and scripture before accepting it. The ubiquity of writing in Palestine at that time and the multiplicity of genre make the leap from a written document to scripture as questionable as the present-day assumption that a written piece must be canon.

Meservy supports his contentions that the Jews would have immediately identified the inscribed objects with scripture by referring to the Jews as the "People of the Book." This designation is appropriate later, but in Ezekiel's time the complex canonization process that culminated in "the Book" was just beginning.¹⁰ The monarchy, the land, and the temple were the unifying concepts for the Hebrews. During the exile, when all these were stripped away, scripture became a necessary instrument to preserve "Judaism." Ezekiel stood at the crossroads between the old order and the new Jewish religion, a transitional figure during a transitional period. It is unlikely that during his life the Jews held any congruent notion of scripture.

It is not necessary, however, to impose this series of conceptual and semantic acrobatics on the Jews of that time if we do not assume *es* in this passage to be a scepter or a book but rather a literal stick or a piece of wood. Such an interpretation fits into a literary pattern found throughout the book of Ezekiel and referred to by Walther Zimmerli as a "sign-action" (1983, 272). Variations of the sign-action are found in numerous Ezekiel passages.¹¹ Although the details and character of each passage differ, we can synthesize three main characteristics of the sign-action: (1) instructions from God to the prophet to manipulate an object in some manner, always in public; (2) the request for an explanation of the symbolism by Ezekiel's audience (an optional element); and (3) the divine explanation of the object and Ezekiel's corresponding actions.

The symbolism of the objects and their manipulations in these passages can be classified as either arbitrary or metaphoric. When the symbolism is functioning arbitrarily, we can only ascertain the meaning of the sign-action by using the interpretation provided by God through the prophet (Ez. 5:1-14, 21:19-27, 24:1-14). Most often, however, the symbolism is metaphoric, and the physical object resembles the object or

¹⁰ Some scholars suggest that the process actually began in 621 B.C., when the "law" (most likely parts of the book of Deuteronomy) was found during the renovation of the temple under King Josiah (see Eissfeldt 1965, 559-71; Pfeiffer 1962, 498-520).

¹¹ 4:1-13, 5:11-14, 12:3-16, 12:17-26, 21:19-27, 24:1-14, 24:16-25, 37:15-18.

concept it represents.¹² For example, in 4:1-13 the brick represents the city of Jerusalem (in lower Mesopotamia all buildings were made of mud bricks), and the piece of iron represents an iron siege wall. In 24:16-24 Ezekiel himself symbolizes the nation of Israel as a whole, and in a similar way the sticks of Ezekiel 37:15-28 must represent the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, a representation strengthened by a metaphoric connection of sticks with scepters. Thus I argue that the *ešm* (plural of *eš*), were in fact pieces of wood, not scepters or books. In Ezekiel's symbolic demonstration, they metaphorically represented ruling scepters and thus, using the extremely common principle of synecdoche (a part designating a whole), the two nations as a whole. This interpretation does not violate the parameters of the semantic field of *eš* and meets the needs of the context.

Let us, therefore, analyze the passage as follows. Verses 15 to 17 of chapter 37 relate God's divine instructions to Ezekiel:

The word of Yahweh came to me as follows: "Son of Man, take a stick and inscribe on it 'Judah and the children of Israel, his associates,' then take another stick and inscribe on it 'Joseph (it is the stick of Ephraim), and all of the house of Israel, his associates.' Hold them together as if they were one stick and they will be as one in your hand."

Ezekiel was required to identify each stick as symbolizing Judah and Joseph. Judah is clearly the Southern Kingdom, while Joseph is a rare designation for the Northern Kingdom.¹³ However, note the phrase, "It is the stick of Ephraim," which is certainly a gloss by the writer or a later editor intended to explain this rare usage of Joseph. Ephraim is the most common designation for the Northern Kingdom in the writings of the later prophets, especially in the book of Ezekiel's contemporary, Jeremiah (Reed 1962, 120; Zimmerli 1983, 274). Close scrutiny of the book of Ezekiel reveals that the term "Israel" (probably the most common term for the Northern Kingdom in the Old Testament) is used in Ezekiel exclusively to designate the covenant nation as a whole (*i.e.*, the northern tribes and Judah together), thus the need for alternate terminology (Zimmerli 1983, 274).

After the sticks were properly identified,¹⁴ Ezekiel brought them together and held them in one hand before the people. This is the

¹² See Ezekiel 4:1-13, 12:3-16, 12:17-20, 24:17-24, 24:16-25, 37:15-28.

¹³ This term occurs as a name for the Northern Kingdom in Amos 5:5-6, 15 and 6:6.

¹⁴ Whether this was accomplished by simple verbal association or by actually writing the names on the sticks is impossible to ascertain. For Ezekiel's purposes either way would have sufficed.

extent of the action in this particular performance. The audience then asked for an explanation (v. 18), thus creating a transition to the divine definition of the act which occurred in two parts. Part one is verse 19: "Say to them: 'Thus says Lord Yahweh: I will take the stick of Joseph (which was in the hand of Ephraim) and the tribes of Israel, his associates, and place it together with the other, *i.e.*, the stick of Judah, and I will make them as one stick, and they will be as one in my hand.'"

The important point in this virtual reiteration of the original instructions is the change from second person to first person pronouns. Ezekiel's performance with the sticks becomes an act which God himself is about to do; Ezekiel becomes a metaphor for God.

After the divine status of the act is established, an editorial comment focuses the reader's attention back to the sticks, which had been brought together in Ezekiel's hand before the people (v. 20), explicitly revealing the symbolism of the uniting of the sticks: "(Then) say to them: 'Thus says Lord Yahweh: I will take the descendants of Israel from among the nations, wherever they went, and gather them from all around and bring them to their land. I will make of them one nation in the land, upon the hills of Israel, and one king will rule all of them. They will not be two nations anymore and they will not be divided any more into two kingdoms.'"

Therefore, the point of the whole passage is that just as Ezekiel brought two sticks together into one hand, so God will bring back the North and South Kingdoms into their homeland, to be ruled over by one leader, a Davidic descendant. A grammatical error in verse 19 makes it clear that the writer of this passage had the metaphoric connection between the sticks and the two kingdoms in mind when writing this text. The object of the verb "to place" is the stick of Joseph, therefore a singular pronoun is called for and the passage should read: "I will certainly take the stick of Joseph (which was in the hand of Ephraim) and the tribes of Israel which were connected with him and place *it* together with the other." However, the text actually reads: "and place *them* together with the other." The writer, obviously thinking of the plural tribes that made up the North Kingdom, which the stick inscribed with Joseph represented, apparently used the plural pronoun instead of the proper singular pronoun. We would not expect such an error if the writer was thinking of a book or a written document.

By placing the Ezekiel passage into the context of the sign-form, it becomes clear that Ezekiel's performance with the sticks was intended for the public and symbolized what God was planning to do—reunify the two kingdoms of Israel. In fact, Ezekiel could have used any two objects inscribed or otherwise associated with the names of Joseph and

Judah—bricks, lumps of clay, potsherds, or rocks—and the audience, on the basis of his actions and words, would have connected the objects with the nations of Judah and Israel. That identification was simply underscored by the metaphoric use of the two sticks. Introducing scripture here complicates the sign-form and confuses the progression of Ezekiel's message.

In conclusion, therefore, identifying the sticks of Ezekiel with Babylonian writing boards was a clever exegetical idea, but it does not hold up to a close inspection. On the other hand, this passage is lucid when interpreted within the framework of Ezekiel's own literary style. This interpretation does, however, cast doubts on the Targumic tradition of exegesis which, as a result, casts doubt on the validity of the traditional Mormon interpretation of the passage as referring to written documents in general and the Bible and the Book of Mormon in particular. However, we must realize that most of the traditional Mormon expositions of scripture have their roots in the nineteenth century, a textually naive, yet conceptually more imaginative period of Mormonism. Unfortunately, many of these interesting and unusual interpretations have been promulgated and transmitted with a reverence and vigor befitting scripture itself. In spite of this, Mormon interpretations of scripture such as the one discussed in this essay are not canonical and certainly should be subject to review and revision as textual, linguistic, and historical knowledge increases. I do not intend the interpretation of Ezekiel 37:15-28 presented in this essay to cast doubts upon the Book of Mormon. I question only the validity of the traditional Mormon interpretation of scripture in general and of Ezekiel 37 in particular and attempts by Mormon scholars to build a protective "hedge" around these interpretations instead of seriously and critically evaluating them to further our knowledge and understanding of the canonical literature and of Mormonism.

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