

Notes and Comments

EZEKIEL, DR. SPERRY, AND THE STICK OF EPHRAIM

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Jon Gunn, a senior in electronics at Weber College in Ogden, Utah, who is not a Mormon, reports that his interest in Old Testament studies arose from his interest in Mormon history and theology, which came "almost inevitably from living in Utah and having a generalized interest in people and their opinions."

In writing a comment of this sort, one runs the risk of having it construed as a boorish intrusion into a private argument among gentlemen; and the only excuse I can offer is that a "Roundtable" has (or should have) no fixed number of sides. If it is construed as an attack on Mormonism, I have a much better answer: of all the proof-texts the Mormon missionaries are wont to cite, there is none more far-fetched or less convincing than the identification of Ezekiel's sticks with two bodies of scripture.¹ If that proof is some day de-emphasized or abandoned, the case for Mormonism will actually be streamlined.

In the "Roundtable" section of the Spring issue of *Dialogue*,² both Dr. Snell and Dr. Sperry complained of insufficient space in which to elaborate upon their respective theses. Each scholar contented himself with outlines and conclusions, merely indicating where an interested reader could find the missing data. This abbreviated reasoning seems justified in both cases. As Dr. Sperry implied, the exegesis of Ezekiel is a complex subject, which cannot be adequately treated in a page or two. Similarly, Dr. Snell, who advocates the historical approach to biblical interpretation generally, could hardly have prefaced his discussion with detailed proof for all the conclusions of modern historical scholarship.

¹Ezekiel 37:15-23. Hugh Nibley observes that however firmly Mormons may believe this interpretation, the connection between "sticks" and "books" must be established before the passage can be counted as a proof. *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: 1964), p. 257. Whatever the merits of Dr. Nibley's substantiation (which is far from airtight), it is much too complex to be incorporated into the usual missionary lessons.

²Vol. 2, no. 1 (Spring 1967), pp. 55-90. In this "Roundtable," the value and correct use of proof-texts were central points of disagreement.

Neither writer claimed to have exhausted his topic; both had to leave out much relevant information.

Dr. Sperry claims this privilege at the top of page 83, where he says (quite reasonably), ". . . I haven't the space here to justify my exegesis of the Hebrew text. . ."; but a strange double standard becomes manifest in the next paragraph. There (less reasonably) he sternly insists that Dr. Snell prove every statement he makes, and complains of "much summary but little or no concrete evidence."

Courteously yielding the floor to one's opponent, when the time comes for proving things, is a time-honored rhetorical device for which Dr. Sperry cannot be criticized; but presenting his two distinct standards of scholarship in such quick succession was an unfortunate tactical error. Of course, it could not have been intentional, and it would not be fair to exaggerate the significance of a simple mistake.³

It would be fair, though, for a reader to assume that the missing evidence for an abridged thesis will actually be found where the author tells him to look. In the particular dispute which I have selected as an example, both Dr. Snell and Dr. Sperry cite the Ezekiel text itself in support of their respective interpretations. Dr. Snell says, "For him [Ezekiel] the sticks mean the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. In his view they will again be 'one nation.' The prophet's words in these verses [21-28] are so plain that 'he who runs may read,' . . ."⁴ But Dr. Sperry asserts that "a careful reading of Ezekiel 37:16-28" should be enough to convince us that the two "sticks" represent the Bible and the Book of Mormon.⁵ When experts disagree and refer us to the same authority, are we to believe Dr. Snell or Dr. Sperry—or must we resort to Ezekiel?

Ezekiel's first-person narrative, with its quotations of quotations of quotations, is not vividly clear at the first reading; but it does not seem difficult to untangle. Ezekiel is first instructed to label and join two sticks, presumably in some manner that will attract, and mystify, an audience (vv. 16-17). When the people ask for an explanation (v. 18), Ezekiel is told to reply first with an allegory (v. 19) and then with its interpretation (vv. 21-22). In these verses and for the rest of the chapter, Ezekiel speaks glowingly of national reunion, but never mentions books or scriptures. To accept the "books" interpretation, it is necessary to assume, first, that Ezekiel's speech in verse 19 was not the allegory it seems to be, but rather an interpretation of an allegory previously expressed by silent pantomime; and, second, that the word "sticks" is either a simple mistranslation (on the part of all translators, past and present) or else an extremely subtle innuendo which few of his hearers would catch. Finally, as if fearing that he has made himself too clear, Ezekiel hastily presents another interpretation, calculated to distract attention from the first. This is curious behavior, on the part of a man with a prophetic message about the Bible and the Book of Mormon.

Since the "*e pluribus unum*" explanation is the only one the text offers (and

³Liberal allowance must also be made for the extremely cramped space in which he had to work.

⁴Heber C. Snell, "The Bible in the Church," *Dialogue* (Spring 1967), p. 62.

⁵Sidney B. Sperry, "Scholars and Prophets," *Ibid.*, p. 83.

then enlarges upon for the rest of the chapter), I shall refer to it—for convenience only and with all due reservations—as “Ezekiel’s interpretation.”⁶

Dr. Sperry agrees that this is the correct meaning of the later verses, but thinks Dr. Snell is sadly mistaken in overlooking a deeper significance, found between the lines of the earlier portion. “In verses 16-20,” he insists, “the Lord is telling Ezekiel to unite writings representing the scriptures of Israel and Judah.” Dr. Sperry did not originate this theory,⁷ but, for convenience again, I shall call it “Dr. Sperry’s interpretation.”⁸

Unable to discern any such meaning in the biblical text, and curious to see what the professor’s reasoning and “concrete evidence” were, I consulted one of his books, *The Voice of Israel’s Prophets*,⁹ which I assumed from the title would surely contain more thorough discussion of this problematical detail. Dr. Sperry’s argument there—where he cannot, and does not, complain of limited space—is not much deeper than that in his magazine article. Moreover, it contains flaws.

He points out, for instance, that “the scriptures of these nations [will] ‘be one’ in the Lord’s hand ‘before their eyes,’” on the unstated but indispensable premise that anything before someone’s eyes is necessarily a book.

For the five words he quotes, he cites Ezekiel 37:19 and 20. Although he seems to have paraphrased the text, close reading of these verses reveals that he has actually spliced fragments of the two together to make them yield the reading he wants.¹⁰ “This interpretation,” he declares confidently, “fits the text of Ezekiel perfectly.” His transposition of the words “interpretation” and “text” may have been inadvertent, but the adverb “perfectly” is quite unwarranted.

This is as far as he goes with arguments comprehensible to the world at large; but there is more to be done for the edification of fellow Mormons. Dr. Sperry quotes at some length from the Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 29:8-14.¹¹ The passage does speak of more than one body of scripture, and does predict that some day they will be combined in one canon. Unfortunately, it has no bearing on the point the good doctor would prove, for it never mentions sticks, or Ezekiel’s predictions.

⁶It cannot be called “Snell’s interpretation,” because he simply copied it from the Bible. Besides, even Sperry once called it “Ezekiel’s own explanation.” *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁷It apparently originated with W.W. Phelps (see editorials in the *Evening and Morning Star*, Nov. 1832 and Jan. 1833). Phelps’s interpretation seems to have directly influenced William Smith (sermon in the *Latter-day Saints Messenger and Advocate*, Jan. 1837) and through him Willford Woodruff (*Latter-day Saints Messenger and Advocate*, Feb. 1837) and Parley P. Pratt (*The Voice of Warning*, 1838). James Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, p. 276f, presents it, among other proof-texts, as if it was commonly known in 1890.

⁸Dr. Sperry would of course want to call it “the L.D.S. interpretation.” I cannot do so in this context, because it might evoke sympathy for the theory I am trying to debunk. That is what I meant by “for convenience.”

⁹(Salt Lake City: Desert Book Co., 3rd printing 1963; copyright by Sidney B. Sperry, 1952), pp. 226-8.

¹⁰The resulting shift in meaning is admittedly subtle, but psychologically important. If the sticks upon which Ezekiel has written remain in his own hand (v. 20), they are probably what he says they are: sticks. In Jehovah’s hand (v. 19) they lend themselves more readily to figurative interpretation. But as “books” they have to be before the people’s eyes (v. 20). The text is stubborn, but it yields to scissors and glue.

¹¹In “Scholars and Prophets” he quotes only verse 14 (on p. 83). Could this reflect a growing awareness, between 1952 and 1967, that some details of the full quotation are dangerous to his thesis? See below.

In fact, it creates a new problem, for the passage refers to scriptures revealed to the Jews, the Nephites, the Lost Tribes, the peoples of the east, west, north and south, as well as the "isles of the sea" and "all the nations of the earth." If there were any real connection between the content of this passage and that of Ezekiel 37, Ezekiel would have had a whole fagot of sticks to join symbolically. If Dr. Sperry contends that Ezekiel had more than the two sticks the Bible mentions, he should explain why he thinks so. If he agrees there were only two, he should offer some reason for ignoring all the "sticks" (in this case, scriptures) that the Book of Mormon emphasizes. Until he finds one or the other of these missing links, he has no valid support from the Book of Mormon.

Dr. Sperry's first and most powerful proof from Mormon scripture is that "the Lord specifically refers to the Book of Mormon as the 'stick of Ephraim.'" He cites Doctrine and Covenants 27:5 as his authority, and adds convincingly, "We have the Lord's own word for it, not man's."

It would be pointless to object that such substantiation is lost on Philistines (prospective converts included), for Dr. Sperry is a Mormon scholar, writing for a Mormon public, and his reasoning must be appraised in the context of those theological postulates accepted by himself and his readers. Therefore, when I saw the above argument, I was convinced that his point was proven, in those terms. But, idly curious to see what the reference said, I checked it anyway, and made the fascinating discovery that the Doctrine and Covenants does *not* speak of the Book of Mormon as "the stick of Ephraim," but as "the *record* of the stick of Ephraim," which makes the "stick" itself the Nephite tribe.¹² Dr. Sperry has had to snip away the significant noun in order to salvage part of its modifying prepositional phrase.

If the hermeneutic scissors are less ruthlessly wielded, we now have, not two, but *three* interpretations of "the stick of Ephraim"—Ezekiel's, Dr. Sperry's, and Joseph Smith's. At first glance, it appears that Dr. Snell has taken sides with Ezekiel against the other two. Actually, it is not at all difficult to force an agreement between Ezekiel's interpretation and Joseph Smith's; for, in the Mormon scheme of history, the Nephites were all that was left of the "stick of Ephraim," except for some lost "splinters" which have never yet been located.

But Dr. Sperry, while representing himself as a staunch defender of prophets against troublemaking scholars, is calmly "telling off" both Ezekiel *and* Joseph Smith, adhering dogmatically to the interpretation he likes best. In this course, he is completely innocent of support from the Bible, Joseph Smith, or the world of scholarship.¹³

That is not to say he is alone. The identification of "sticks" with scriptures is firmly ingrained in Mormon tradition and carelessly adduced as a known fact by countless commentators and missionaries. Dr. Sperry is in perfect accord with the multitude—but that is not the issue. A scholar, who is careful to "study, ponder, and search out all available facts,"¹⁴ is expected to know *more*

¹²The cross references to this verse are Mormon 8:14 and Moroni 10:2, neither of which mentions "sticks" or has any discernible connection with Ezekiel.

¹³Such a sweeping statement is very easily tested: did Joseph Smith ever call a scripture a "stick," even once, in any context?

¹⁴Sperry, "Scholars and Prophets," p. 82.