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Lesson 24 - Ezekiel 37:15-23 as Evidence for the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: The Latter-day Saint claim that Ezekiel's account of the Stick of Joseph and the Stick of Judah is a clear reference to the Book of Mormon has, of course, been challenged. There is no agreement among scholars today as to what the prophet was talking about, and so no competing explanation carries very great authority. The ancient commentators certainly believed that Ezekiel was talking about books of scripture, which they also identify with a staff or rod. As scepters and rods of identification the Two Sticks refer to Judah and Israel or else to the Old Testament and the New. But in this lesson we present the obvious objections to such an argument. The only alternative is that the Stick of Joseph is something like the Book of Mormon. But did the ancient Jews know about the Lord's people in this hemisphere? The Book of Mormon says they did not, but in so doing specifies that it was the wicked from whom that knowledge was withheld. Hence it is quite possible that it was had secretly among the righteous, and there is actually some evidence that this was so.

Lesson 24

EZEKIEL 37:15-23 AS EVIDENCE FOR THE BOOK OF MORMON

Prospectus of Lesson 24: The Latter-day Saint claim that Ezekiel's account of the Stick of Joseph and the Stick of Judah is a clear reference to the Book of Mormon has, of course, been challenged. There is no agreement among scholars today as to what the prophet was talking about, and so no competing explanation carries very great authority. The ancient commentators certainly believed that Ezekiel was talking about books of scripture, which they also identify with a staff or rod. As scepters and rods of identification the Two Sticks refer to Judah and Israel or else to the Old Testament and the New. But in this lesson we present the obvious objections to such an argument. The only alternative is that the Stick of Joseph is something like the Book of Mormon. But did the ancient Jews know about the Lord's people in this hemisphere? The Book of Mormon says they did not, but in so doing specifies that it was the wicked from whom that knowledge was withheld. Hence it is quite possible that it was had secretly among the righteous, and there is actually some evidence that this was so.

Can the Claim be Proven?: The Latter-day Saints have always cited Ezekiel's prophecy concerning the Stick of Joseph and the Stick of Judah (Ez. 37:15-23), as confirmation of the divine provenance of the Book of Mormon. But while these verses may bear the greatest conviction for *them*, before they can be called proof by an unbiased observer a number of propositions regarding them must be established beyond doubt. A few years ago the writer of these lessons was convinced that he had established these propositions, but apparently his evidence was so recondite and his arguments so involved that they defeated their purpose. Since then, however, a number of important studies by "outsiders" who know nothing of the Book of Mormon, have repeated our own labors and put the stamp of Gentile respectability on our conclusions. The preliminary work for determining whether or not Ezekiel was speaking of the Book of Mormon has now been done by unprejudiced scholars,

and we are free to go ahead and demonstrate just why we are now firmly convinced that the Prophet *was* speaking of the Book of Mormon when he spoke of the Stick of Joseph.

The preliminary questions are: 1) Is there any obvious interpretation for the passage? 2) If not, does *any* existing interpretation, no matter how involved, meet all the conditions? 3) What could Ezekiel have meant by "wood"? 4) Did the ancients actually think of a book as a staff and *vice versa*? 5) How could the sticks "become one"? 6) To what tribal separation and reuniting can Ezekiel be referring? 7) Could anyone in the Old World have known about Lehi's secret departure? An unfavorable answer to any one of these questions would be enough to refute the claim that the prophet Ezekiel was thinking of the Book of Mormon when he spoke of the sticks. Let us consider them briefly one by one.

Ezekiel 37 is not Obvious: 1. The usual clerical rebuttal to the claim that Ezekiel's vision refers to the Book of Mormon is that Ezekiel cannot possibly be referring to the Book of Mormon because he was "obviously" referring to something else.¹ But whatever obviousness there is in the reference resides in the will and mind of the critic and is anything but obvious to the rest of the world. If no book in the world has been the subject of more dispute than the Bible, certainly no book in the Bible is more argued about today than Ezekiel; and no passage in Ezekiel is more variously and more fancifully explained than the mysterious account of the Stick of Joseph and the Stick of Judah. (Ez. 37:16-23.) To whom shall we turn for an authoritative explanation of this or any other part of Ezekiel? Quite recently the retired dean of one of the greatest American divinity schools, after a thorough examination of all the scholarly writings on Ezekiel produced between 1943 and 1953, came to a significant conclusion: "Not a single scholar has succeeded in convincing his colleagues of the finality of his analysis of so much as one passage" in that much-

studied book; "They give only opinions," says the dean, "when the situation cries aloud for evidence. . . . Every scholar goes his own way and according to his private predilection chooses what is genuine and what is secondary in the book; and the figure and work of Ezekiel still dwell in thick darkness."²

In view of that verdict, how can we accept any man's judgment as final or announce that the Mormons can't be right because, forsooth, Dr. So-and-so thinks otherwise?

Ezekiel 37 Now Given up As Hopeless: 2. But not only is there no "obvious" interpretation to put up against the Mormon one, not even the long and ingenious labors of scholarship have been able to present a convincing interpretation of the passage. Of recent years there has been a strong move among the learned to throw out the passage entirely! "In despair," writes a Jewish Ezekiel scholar, "some will always resort to force: if the puzzling passage cannot be explained, it can be expunged."³ The astuteness and vanity of scholars do not easily give up the stimulating and challenging game of speculation. When they call, as they now do, for the deletion of a passage of scripture it is truly a sign of "despair," and an admission that the Ezekiel passage as it stands is beyond them.

A more pleasing alternative to expunging the offending verses is of course to rewrite them, and the fact that the leading Ezekiel scholars now insist that they cannot understand the verses about the sticks unless *they* rewrite them, carefully removing as spurious all puzzling and complicating parts, is evidence enough in itself that Ezekiel is speaking of something quite unfamiliar to their training or experience. The wild and contradictory guesses of the ablest scholars on this passage demonstrate beyond a doubt that *Ezekiel is here talking about a matter which, however familiar it may have been to his ancient audience, lies wholly outside the scope of conventional Bible scholarship.*

What is an “’etz”?: 3. Since it is claimed that Ezekiel’s “sticks” stood for books, the questions arise, a) could they have done so? and b) did they? The first thing to consider is that the prophet does not speak of “sticks” at all, but only of “wood,” in the singular and plural. The word he uses is ‘etz, which in itself simply means “wood,” and can only be taken to indicate this or that wooden object or implement when we know the specific use to which it is put. Thus in the Bible one plays music on an ‘etz, and then it is not just wood but a harp; one writes with an ‘etz, and then it is a stylus or a pen; one ploughs with an ‘etz, and then it is more than wood—it is a plough; fruit grows on an ‘etz, and then it is a tree; or a tree itself can have an ‘etz, which is a branch; when it resembles a person an ‘etz is an image; when as such it is worshipped, then it is an idol; as an instrument of execution it is a gallows; as building material it is a beam; as a weapon, it is a spear, etc.⁴ As Gregory the Great observed long ago, the Hebrew word ‘etz as used in the Old Testament can mean almost anything, depending entirely on the context in which it is used.⁵ So before we can translate Ezekiel’s ‘etz, or even guess at what kind of a thing it was, we must consider the specific uses to which he put it.

It is a Written Text: First of all, the prophet is ordered to *write* upon the “woods”. It is not surprising, therefore, that the oldest Jewish commentators on Ezekiel, men who knew far more about Hebrew language, customs and symbols than any modern seminarist ever can, insisted that Ezekiel’s “woods” were writing-tablets or books.⁶ Recent important discoveries have shown that the board or tablet form of book is exceedingly old—much older than had formerly been supposed, and that “from the Old Babylonian period onwards” a single word was used to designate board, tablet and written documents.⁷ The earliest of all surviving Ezekiel commentaries, those of Eusebius and Jerome—the ablest scholars of their time and both trained in Hebrew—main-

tained that the “woods” of Ezekiel were actually *books*, specifically, books of Scripture.⁸ Dr. Keil, in the foremost modern Jewish commentary on Ezekiel, finds it most significant that though the “woods” are definitely rods or staves in some connections, Ezekiel deliberately avoids calling them such, since he does not wish in presenting the complex symbolism of the sticks in any way to obscure the priority of the idea of the “woods” as written documents.⁹

The Word of God as a Staff: 4. Two recent studies give full confirmation to this interpretation. According to Widengren, “the heavenly tablets in the literature of early Judaism play a considerable role,” appearing as the Book of Life, Books of Remembrance, records of laws, records of contemporary events, and records of prophecy.¹⁰ “That the various aspects of these tablets in early Judaism can be explained only from the original conception of them as oracles of lots,” the same authority continues, “is so obvious that no commentary is needed.” Since everything to happen is decided by them, and then written upon them, we hereby gain all the meanings attached to them in Jewish writings.¹¹ The lots referred to were originally sticks, shaken or drawn from a bag, and the lots and the tablets always went together because originally they were one and the same.¹² In Babylon the King would determine the fates or judgments in imitation of the king of the gods, “who casts the lots by means of the tablets of destiny. . . . These tablets express the law of the whole world, they contain supreme wisdom, and they are truly the mystery of heaven and earth.”¹² Studying the Egyptian practices, W. B. Kristensen asks, “What have the staff and the serpent and the Word of Jahwe to do with each other?” He quotes Nöldeke and others who have shown that in Egypt as among the Hebrews the staff was specifically the Word of God, and the Word of God was the *Matteh ha-elohim* or Staff of God.¹³ Spiegelberg has shown that the priestly staves were a physical representation of the

presence of God among men, both in Egyptian and Jewish practice.¹⁴ And while Widengren demonstrates that such a staff was “a symbol of the Tree of Life,” Kristensen notes that it also in many instances symbolizes the resurrection.¹⁵

The Staff As a Book: But the staff symbolized the Word of God in no abstract sense, it was specifically the word of God as written down in a *Book*. Hence the constant identification of the staff with the tablets. The ancient book took two forms, the tablet form and the scroll. Both originated with the marked sticks or scepters and always retain marks of their origin. Culin traces the tablet or sheet book-form to “the bundle of engraved or painted arrow-derived slips used in divination.”¹⁶ To this day our word “book” (and even more clearly German *Buch-Stabe*, “boxwood-staff” and O. Slav. *bukva*) recalls the box or beechwood stick scratched with runic symbols by our Norse ancestors and used exactly as the Hebrews used their rods of identification at the great public feasts.¹⁷ Even the Latin *codex* and *liber* refer to the wooden origin of books.¹⁸ Books and staves are everywhere identified, but what most concerns us here is the Jewish tradition. Ginzberg has shown that the *tablets* of the Law and the *rod* of Moses were in Hebrew tradition identical.¹⁹ As with other ancient people, inscribed rods were among the oldest forms of written communication among the Hebrews—the first books, in fact, and Freeman actually compares the “woods” of Ezekiel 37 with the tablets and sticks (*axones*) on which the oldest laws of the Greeks and Romans were kept.²⁰

Origin of the Scroll: Even without the abundant evidence available to prove it, it should be easy to see how the scroll type of book grew out of the stick-type. When a lengthy communication was desired, a single message-stick did not offer enough writing-surface, and so a piece of leather or cloth was attached to the staff to hold more writing. For convenience this was wrapped around the stick when it was not being read. The prac-

tice is found throughout the ancient world.²¹ Its antiquity among the Hebrews may be seen in the fact that not parchment (first introduced in the Achaemenian period) but leather is the official material for scrolls of the law, and that cannot be ordinary leather, but must be the skins of *wild* animals.²² This implies "primitive" origins indeed.

In the usage of the Synagogue the sticks around which the scrolls of the law were rolled were always regarded as holy and treated as *scepters*. It should be noted in passing that commentators often point out that the sticks of Ezekiel are plainly meant to represent scepters. The scrolls of the law were used by the king of Judah as other kings used scepters, being "kept near his throne and carried into battle."²⁵ "The scroll itself," we are told, "is girded with a strip of silk and robed in a Mantle of the Law," while the wooden rod has a crown on its upper end, like the scepter of a king. "Some scrolls," says the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, "have two crowns, one for each upper end."²² These honors shown the Jewish scrolls of the Law are the same as those accorded to the royal herald's-staff or scepter in other parts of the world.²³

Rods of Identification: But if the "woods" were written texts, as such they were put to peculiar uses. For the nature of the inscription put upon them—"for Joseph," "for Judah"—shows plainly that they are to serve as rods of identification.²⁴ When the people ask the prophet what the marked rods signify, he is to explain to them that they stand for the tribes whose names they bear; and when he formally joins the two sticks "before their eyes" it is with the explanation that this represents the joining of the nations represented by the rods. In joining the two sticks, the nations are joined. (Ezek. 37:18-21.)

Such staves or rods of identification enjoyed a prominent place in the public economy of the ancient Hebrews, as of other early peoples. Individuals carried

such rods on formal occasions, and tribes as well as individuals were identified by and with their "staves" or "sceptres." Every man who came to the great gathering of the nation at the New Year was required to bring with him a staff with his name on it.²⁵ For the same occasion the leader of every tribe had to present a tribal staff with official marks of identification on it; the twelve tribal staves were then bound together in a ritual bundle and laid up in the Ark of the Covenant as representing the united force of the nation.²⁶ The tribe itself on this occasion was called a "*shevet*—staff", the word being cognate with the Greek *skeptron* (cf. Lat. *scipio*) whence our own "sceptre." Indeed, in the crucial 19th verse of our text the Septuagint does not say "sticks" at all, but only "tribes." Commentators on Ezekiel point to parallel passages in the Old Testament which show the "woods" of Ezekiel to be scepters, and suggest that they were "the two parts of a broken sceptre,"²⁷ "two pieces of what was probably a broken, scepter-shaped stick,"²⁸ "sticks probably shaped like scepters,"²⁹ etc.

For the ancients it was quite possible for a piece of wood to be at one and the same time a scepter, a rod of identification (which was only a private scepter), and a book (which was a message written on or attached to the sender's staff). Jewish legend is full of wonderful staffs. The rods of Adam, Enoch, Elijah, Moses, Aaron, David, Judah, etc., were actually thought of as one and the same scepter, loaned by God to his earthly representative from time to time as a badge of authority, and an instrument of miracles, proving to the world that its holder was God's messenger.³⁰ But such a thing is also the law, and the Rabbis spoke of the law as God's staff, to lead and discipline his people.³¹

How the Sticks Become One: 5. How could the sticks become one? To judge by the commentaries, that is just about the toughest problem in all Ezekiel. All sorts of ingenious explanations have been devised by the experts to describe in what manner the sticks of

Ezekiel could have been put together to “make them one stick.”³² The thing is so totally foreign to any modern experience that even Professor Driver had decided that the passage must be a mistake.³³ But the long experience of scholarship has shown that it is just such oddities as this one, which completely baffle the critics, that give the stamp of authenticity to a record and usually hold the key to the whole business.

The Tally Sticks: Ezekiel is in all probability here referring to an institution which flourished among the ancient Hebrews but was completely lost sight of after the Middle Ages until its rediscovery in the last century. That is the institution of the tally-sticks. A tally is “a stick notched and split through the notches, so that both parties to a transaction may have a part of the record.”³⁴ That is, when a contract was made certain official marks were placed upon a stick of wood in the presence of a notary representing the king. The marks indicated the nature of the contract, what goods and payments were involved, and the names of the contracting parties. Then the stick was split down the middle, and each of the parties kept half as his claim-token (hence our word “stock” from “stick”) and his check upon the other party (hence called a “foil”).³⁵ Now both parties possessed a sure means of identification and an authoritative claim upon each other no matter how many miles or how many years might separate them. For the tally-stick was fool-proof. When the time for settlement came and the king’s magistrate placed the two sticks side by side to see that all was in order, the two would only fit together perfectly mark for mark and grain for grain to “become one” in the King’s hand if they had been one originally—no two other halves in the world would match without a flaw; and if either of the parties had attempted to add or efface any item of the bill (“bill” means originally also a stick of wood), by putting any new marks or “indentures” upon it the fraud would become at once apparent.³⁶ So when the final payment was made and

all the terms of the contract fulfilled, the two pieces of wood were joined by the King's magistrate at the exchequer, tied as one, and laid up forever in the royal vaults, becoming as it were "one in the king's hand."³⁷

The announcement in verse 19 that the sticks "shall be one in *mine* hand," has puzzled the commentators no end. They want to substitute in its place, "the hand of Judah,"—an impossible and meaningless arrangement, as the Cambridge Bible points out, showing a complete miscomprehension of the ordinance here described.³⁸ Ezekiel tells us that the reuniting of the sticks signifies the re-establishment of bonds of brotherhood. In Zechariah 11:10, 14 we read: "And I took my staff, even Beauty, and cut it asunder, that I might break my covenant which I had made with all the people. . . . Then I cut asunder mine other staff, even Bands, that I might break the brotherhood between Judah and Israel." When the two halves of the rod are "cut asunder" that breaks the covenant or bond that binds Judah and Israel together (that is the meaning of the strange name *Bands*), and the two go their separate ways. As we know, this was not to be a permanent separation. As the sticks and nations can be separated, so they can be joined together again, and that is exactly what happens in the case of Joseph and Judah, for the Lord explains that Ezekiel shall "make them one stick" to show that he ". . . will make them one nation in the land. . . ." (Ezek. 37:22.) The Jewish doctors taught that the twelve tribal staves of Israel were originally cut from one staff, and that the rods naturally belong together, since they were all shoots from a single stock.³⁹

The use of tally-sticks is very ancient and widespread, and no people of antiquity seem to have made more constant use of them than the Jews.⁴⁰ Everywhere the proper time and place for bringing the sticks together as well as for cutting new contracts is the great national assembly at the New Year, the yearly gathering of the nation in the presence of the king—still commemorated by the Jews in the three "pilgrimage festivals." On that

occasion, as we have said, each tribe and individual was expected to bring a staff or rod with the proper marks of identification on it. And just as the tribal staves would be bound together and put in the Ark, so the rods of individuals—of every male in Israel—were tied together in the so-called Bundle of Life, which is often mentioned in Rabinnical Writings and is a concept of great antiquity.⁴¹ Unless a man's name was included—"bound up"—in the Bundle of Life, he had no place in the Kingdom. Here again we see the tie between sticks and books, for this Bundle can be easily identified with "the Book of Life" which contained the names of all citizens of the holy nation.⁴²

Thus the joining of the sticks by Ezekiel does not want for ancient parallels in Israel. The prophet knew what he was doing, and so did his hearers. There are rods many, as there are tribes many, and when Ezekiel shows us the rod of Joseph, he is speaking of that tribe specifically.

Joseph, not Israel: 6. But to what tribal separation and reuniting can Ezekiel be referring? Judah and Israel, some have said, Judaism and Christianity, others maintain. These are the two explanations that spring most readily to mind, but on second thought both fall through completely. As to the first, Hertrich finds it "exceedingly surprising" that Ezekiel should suddenly start talking about the irrelevant separation of Israel and Judah, though he can think of no other explanation for the prophecy.⁴³ "The book of Ezekiel," writes Spiegel, "spans the years of his captivity, 593-568 B.C., including perhaps a few earlier oracles, spoken while the prophet was still in Palestine."⁴⁴ Yet instead of writing about the scattering and captivity of his own time, he is supposed to be referring indirectly to those occurring 400 years earlier. That is indeed surprising and puzzling, but there is a more serious objection.

Everybody knows that Judah and Israel were two nations that had once been one nation, so what could be

more natural than to conclude that their reuniting is the subject of the story? Well, if Ezekiel had meant it that way, he would have said so, and there an end. And that is just what the commentators find so annoying about the whole thing: Ezekiel does *not* say so. He speaks instead of Judah and *Joseph*, a combination which calls forth entirely different associations. Nor does he speak of a simple joining together of two symbolic sticks. He takes one stick and writes upon it: “. . . For Judah and for the children of Israel his companions: . . .” (Ezek. 37:16.) placing both Judah and Israel on a single stick. Then he takes another piece of wood and writes on it. “. . . For Joseph; the stick of Ephraim, and for all the house of Israel *his* companions.” (Ezek. 37:16.) It is not Israel over against Judah at all, but Judah and such of Israel as are with him, as against Joseph and such of Israel as are with him. We are dealing with two clearly marked but composite branches of Israel which together make up “the whole house of Israel.” The text says literally: “I will take the wood of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim *and* the staves of Israel his associates, and I shall place them alongside the wood of Judah, and I shall take them for one wood, and they shall be one in my hand.” This is no simple joining of two sticks: the wood of Joseph goes along with other sticks of Israel—those of Israel “associated with him”—and these are fitted to the wood of Judah.

How much simpler to have Ezekiel speak directly of the joining of Judah and Israel! Impatient of the prophet's refusal to cooperate, the experts have taken it upon themselves either to reject or rewrite the passage entirely.

Joseph and Judah not Old Testament and New Testament: When one thinks of two covenant books, one naturally thinks of the Old and New Testaments, and that is exactly what the two most famous Bible critics of all time — Eusebius and Jerome — thought of. The former says the two sticks must have been the Old and

New Testaments respectively,⁴⁵ and Jerome projects the symbolism farther: it is not only the Old and New Testament, according to him; it is likewise the Synagogue and the Church, the Jews and the Gentiles, the old covenant and the new one that followed and replaced it.⁴⁶ But it is only too easy to see why this ingratiating interpretation was not accepted by their successors, ancient or modern. To point out but a few of the more obvious objections, 1) the New Testament is no more Joseph's book than it is Judah's; 2) in Ezekiel's account the perfect equality of the two is stressed; Judah does not absorb Joseph, nor Joseph absorb Judah, as the Church is supposed by the fathers to absorb the Synagogue; 3) nor in Ezekiel does one covenant follow after and supplant the other in time; they are strictly contemporary, brought together and placed side by side to become one; 4) the Old Testament and New Testament were brought together almost immediately, and at that time neither of the two parties were scattered, smashed, dead,—“Dry bones,”—as both should have been if the prophecy refers to them; 5) but, most significant, the two nations are described by Ezekiel as being reunited after a long separation (*dudum separata*, says Jerome); they once shared a common covenant and brotherhood which is here simply being renewed. This entirely disqualifies any claims of the Gentiles to hold the stick of Joseph, coming in as they do as outsiders who have never known the covenant.

Did Ezekiel Know?: 7. The most interesting question of all is whether Lehi's departure could have been “leaked out” to the Jews at Jerusalem. We receive solemn assurance in the Book of Mormon that that did not happen:

. . . because of their iniquity that they know not of you. And . . . other tribes hath the Father separated from them; and it is because of their iniquity that they know not of them. (3 Ne. 15:19-20.)

And not at any time hath the Father given me commandment that I should tell it unto your brethren at Jerusalem. Neither . . .

that I should tell unto them concerning the other tribes . . . whom the Father hath led away. . . . (3 Ne. 15:14-15.)

Yet Ezekiel knew about them. But the Lord is speaking of his communications to those at Jerusalem during his earthly mission among them when he says: “. . . because of stiffneckedness and unbelief they understood not my word; therefore I was commanded to say no more . . . concerning this thing unto them.” (3 Ne. 15:18.) “They” in this case are “the Jews at Jerusalem,” from whom precious things are withheld specifically “because of their iniquity.” Ezekiel does not come under such a head, and neither do Peter, James and John. When the multitude gathered to hear Jesus he did *not* tell them “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven”; “Because,” he explained to his disciples, “it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.” (Matt. 13:11.) But nowhere does the Book of Mormon say or imply that *no* one was ever told about the other sheep, indeed the opposite is indicated by the repeated explanation that it is only because of iniquity that people are denied the knowledge, and the ignorant ones are always designated specifically as they at Jerusalem.

Hidden Knowledge: An interesting confirmation of the deliberate withholding of knowledge from the unworthy is the statement of Irenaeus, who is in many things our last link with the Primitive Church, that the meaning of Ezekiel’s prophecy about the sticks of Joseph and Judah “is hidden from *us*, for since by the wood we rejected him, by the wood his greatness shall be made visible to everyone, and as one of our predecessors has said, by the holy reaching out of the hands the two people are led to one God. For there are two hands and two nations scattered to the ends of the earth.”⁴⁷

Who the “predecessor” was in the Early Church who made that statement we do not know, but his words certainly recall those of Nephi:

. . . Know ye not that the testimony of two nations is a witness unto you that I am God, that I remember one nation like unto another? Wherefore, I speak the same words unto one nation like unto another. And when the two nations shall run together the testimony of the two nations shall run together also. . . . and I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it. . . . And . . . my people . . . shall be gathered home . . . and my word also shall be gathered in one. (2 Ne. 29:8-14.)

These words suggest nothing so powerful as the ancient technique of the tallies—totally unknown to the world in Joseph Smith's day, but the fact that Irenaeus is quoting an early Christian disciple on Ezekiel and admitting his own ignorance is significant. While the later doctors of the Church had glib or ingenious explanations for Ezekiel's sticks, the celebrated editor of the *Patrologia* has observed that for the *earliest* Christians that prophecy held immense significance, the real meaning of which they deliberately concealed from the world.⁴⁸ Even more interesting is a hint dropped by Origen:

Clement, the disciple of the Apostles, recalls those whom the Greeks designate as *antichthonians* (dwellers on the other side of the earth), and other parts of the earth's sphere (or circuit) which cannot be reached by anyone from our regions, and from which none of the inhabitants dwelling there is able to get to us; he calls these areas "worlds" when he says: "The Ocean is not to be crossed by men, but those worlds which lie on the other side of it are governed by the same ordinances (lit. dispositions) of a guiding and directing God as these."⁴⁹

Here is a clear statement that the *earliest* Christians taught that there were people living on the other side of the world who enjoyed the guidance of God in complete isolation from the rest of the world. Origen knows of mysterious knowledge that was had among the leaders of the Primitive Church but was neither divulged by them to the general public nor passed on to the general membership, and this includes the assurance that there were people living on the other side of the world who enjoyed the same divine guidance as themselves in a state of complete isolation.

The Rejected Key: While it may be clear that the *Jews* were not told of Lehi's departure, it seems likely that Ezekiel did know of it. Yet, the knowledge he possessed was conveyed in such form that only those who held the key were able to recognize it. Even the ablest scholars being without that key are at a loss to say what Ezekiel is getting at. The message was meant only for those who had "ears to hear" it, and in the time of Lehi, the time of Christ, and our own day, only they have heard it, though the documents have at all times been accessible to the public! So it has always been with the mysteries of the kingdom and the preaching of the Gospel: set forth in all plainness to the eye of faith, sealed with seven seals to those that are lost, "that seeing they might not see." So it has been in modern times when the message has been rejected. "I told you," Christ told his contemporaries, "and you would not believe me." Ezekiel when he was asked ". . . Wilt thou not show us what thou meanest by these?" (Ezek. 37:18ff) was ordered to give them a full explanation—which nobody has understood to this day! Why not? Because the Jews were a stiffnecked people; and they

despised the words of plainness, . . . and sought for things that they could not understand. Wherefore, because of their blindness, which blindness came by looking beyond the mark, they must needs fall; for God hath taken away his plainness from them. . . . And because they desired it God hath done it, that they may stumble. (Jac. 4:14.)

". . . because of stiffneckedness and unbelief," the Lord told the Nephites, "they understood not my word; therefore I was commanded to say no more . . . concerning this thing unto them." (3 Ne. 15:18.) That is why the plain testimony of the sticks has been by-passed by the learned in favor of "things that they could not understand." By speaking in a parable, even as the Lord spoke in parables, Ezekiel could give the whole world the opportunity of learning about chosen people in other lands and yet not run the risk of divulging the

Lord's secrets to the unrighteous. "Who has ears to hear let him hear!"

Questions

1. Why is there no agreement among experts on the interpretation of Ezekiel 37:15-23?
2. Why did the ancient Bible commentators insist that Ezekiel's "woods" were books or tablets of scripture?
3. How was the Word of God anciently identified with a staff?
4. How can a stick or staff be a book?
5. How are staff and book identical in the rites of the synagogue?
6. What indication is there in Ezekiel that the sticks of Joseph and Judah were tribal staves, scepters, or identification rods?
7. How could the sticks "become one"?
8. What evidence is there that Ezekiel may have been speaking of tally sticks?
9. Why cannot the two sticks be taken to refer to Judah and Israel?
10. Why can they not symbolize the Church and the Synagogue?
11. Why was all knowledge of the Book of Mormon people kept from the Jews at Jerusalem?
12. How could Ezekiel give the righteous a chance to hear the message without the risk of divulging it to the unrighteous? Does the Lord follow the same policy in the New Testament? What method does he use to spread the gospel while guarding the mysteries?