



Type: Magazine Article

The Stick of Judah and the Stick of Joseph, Part I: The Doctors Disagree

Author(s): Hugh W. Nibley

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (January 1953)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

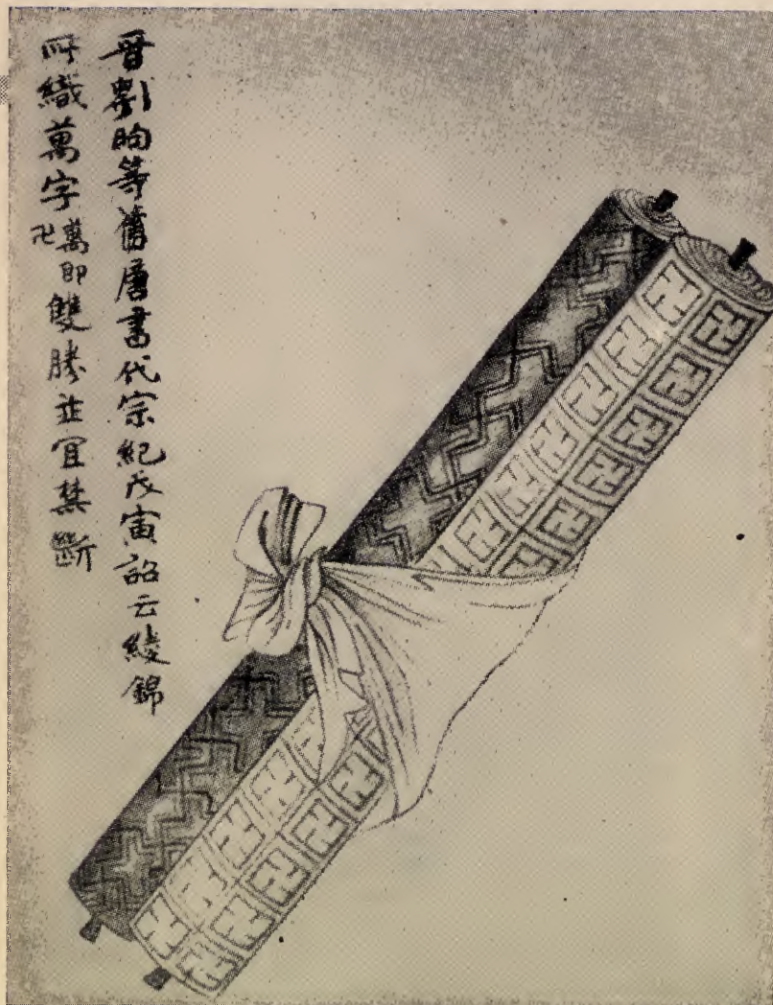
Page(s): 16–17, 38–41

Abstract: This series discusses how writing on tally sticks is related to Ezekiel 37 and the meaning of the prophecy that two sticks shall become one. The author offers extensive commentary on the traditional interpretations given to Ezekiel 37. The first part covers the meaning of the term 'stick' as used in the scriptures.

The Stick of JUDAH

by Hugh Nibley, Ph. D.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, HISTORY AND RELIGION,
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY



An edict of the Empress Wu, to which her successor, the Emperor Tai Tsung (763-779 A.D.), has appended an amplification by having the new scroll placed beside the old and bound to it with a silken cloth. Here the two sticks that are joined into one in the emperor's hand are actually scrolls.

(After J. Lechler, *Vom Hakenkreuz* (Leipzig, 1934), p. 74.)

The word of the Lord came again unto me, saying,

Moreover, thou son of man, take thee one stick, and write upon it, For Judah, and for the children of Israel his companions: then take another stick, and write upon it, For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and for all the house of Israel his companions:

And join them one to another into one stick; and they shall become one in thine hand.

And when the children of thy people shall speak unto thee, saying, Wilt thou not shew us what thou meanest by these?

Say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I will take the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel his fellows, and will put them with him, even with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, and they shall be one in mine hand.

And the sticks whereon thou writest shall be in thine hand before their eyes.

And say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land: . . . (Ezekiel 37:15-21.)

I THE DOCTORS DISAGREE

IN MAINTAINING that Ezekiel in his account of the sticks of Judah and Joseph (Ezek. 37:15ff) was actually referring in prophetic language to the Bible and the Book of Mormon, the Latter-day Saints may invoke the prerogative of any pious reader of the scriptures to interpret any symbolic passage in whatever way carries the most conviction. But the more aggressive use of the passage to support the claims of the Book of Mormon can but elicit loud protests and challenges from the outside world. To answer these, it is necessary to demonstrate not only that our interpretation of the passage is a possible one—for there are many possibilities—but that it is also the one most likely intended by the Prophet Ezekiel. The one way to do this is to show (1) that Ezekiel's strange conception and manipulation of the sticks was not a bizarre or original conceit, but that it was strictly in accordance with ancient practices perfectly familiar to the Jews of that time though lost to the modern world, and (2) that the prophet put a definite interpretation on the stick ritual according to which it can hardly have represented anything but the two books in question.

In explaining this remarkable chapter we are not bound by the opinions of even the most learned so long as there is no concensus among them. Fortunately, we find ourselves in perfect agreement with them in all those points on which they agree among themselves. But for the rest we need not and cannot follow them, for they all rush in different directions. Nor do we expect others to follow our opinions in the matter, but only to view the evidence and form their own. The distinguishing mark of Biblical commentaries in general is a dignified unconcern for anything

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA



been intended a different word would have been used. "Nor have we even to think of a flat board, but simply of pieces of wood upon which a few words could be written," adds Dr. Keil, thus denying the wood any form at all.¹⁰ But since the Septuagint renders Ezekiel's "wood" as *rhabdos* "staff," "rod," and the Bible itself offers convincing parallels (especially Numbers 17), the commentators overwhelmingly favor some form of staff, and in this we gladly concur. As to Ezekiel's refusal to call a staff a staff, upon which Keil lays so much stress, we shall see that that is significant when we come to deciding what the "woods" actually were.

Next we are told that the two sticks are joined together to make one. How was that done? According to the broken-staff theory, by joining together the two broken ends;¹¹ according to the pilgrim-staff theory by simply carrying the two sticks together in one hand;¹² they were *tied* together according to some—and the Septuagint would bear

this out;¹³ but still other methods have been suggested, such as "by a notch, dovetail, glue, or some such method."¹⁴ Skinner says the prophet "put them end to end, and made them look like one," but also suggests the possibility that "when the rods are put together, they miraculously grow into one."¹⁴ Is it necessary to suppose that Ezekiel did anything at all with sticks? "It is a little difficult to decide," says the authority just cited, "whether this was a sign that was actually performed before the people or one that is only imagined. It depends on what we take to be meant by the joining of the two pieces. If the meaning is . . . that when the rods are put together, they miraculously grow into one . . . it is no longer necessary to assume that the action was really performed."¹⁴ "This symbolical action," writes Davidson in the Cambridge Bible, "may have been actually performed, though this supposition is scarcely necessary."¹⁵

(Continued on page 38)

Left, Exchequer Tallies, eighteenth century. Reduced about one-third. Below, Exchequer Tallies, thirteenth century, and Private Tallies, fourteenth century. Reduced about one-half.

that might be called evidence on the subject. The sheer momentum of a heavy theological phrasology, sustained by an occasional (often irrelevant) passage of scripture is thought quite sufficient to override any "saucy doubts and fears" of the layman.

Two sticks are mentioned. What were they actually? Simply "sticks or small pieces of wood," according to some writers,^{1*} the two parts of a broken scepter,² "two pieces of what was probably a broken, scepter-shaped stick,"³ "sticks probably shaped like scepters,"⁴ according to others. "Tribal rods" is another interpretation, based on Numbers 17;⁵ and even "pilgrim rods" has been suggested.⁶ Shepherds' staves,⁷ branches cut from a common trunk,⁸ and boards for writing⁹ have also been considered. Against all of these one of the weightiest authorities, Keil, insists that there is not the slightest proof that 'etz "wood," the Hebrew word here so lyrically interpreted, means "staff" or "rod" at all, and that if any kind of staff had



*Bibliography will be found at end of chapter.

"AS UNTO THE BOW . . ."

(Continued from page 36)

tion of Captain Charles Whitlock, to ride with all speed to help Justensen's company.

At the first crack of dawn, a savage war cry split the silence, and the battle was on. The little company had barricaded themselves as best they could during the night and were ready to sell their lives dearly.

The whooping Indians rode first in a wide circle around the wagons, then suddenly they came straight towards the barricade at full speed

with murder in their hearts. The relief party, waiting for just such a move, mounted their horses, and rode in behind the Indians, who were quick in noticing them.

This unwelcome and wholly unexpected assistance to the besieged wagons threw the Indians off for a few seconds, but then they began firing, shots were discharged from both sides, and several men on both sides were killed.

Chief Black Hawk was a shrewd warrior, and he was quick to retreat

when he knew that he was outnumbered. He let the battle go on for a while, and then signaled his warriors to retreat.

Great was the rejoicing of Captain Justensen's company as they returned to Ephraim, deciding that they had been overly anxious to get on their farms.

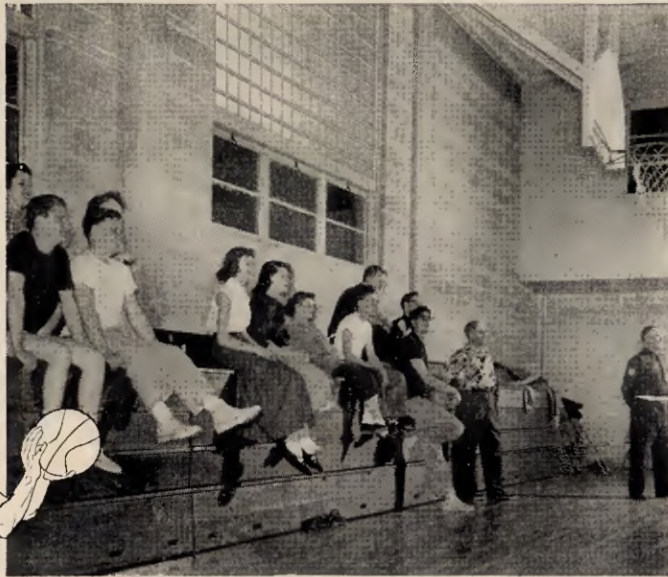
(To be concluded)

The Stick of Judah

(Continued from page 17)

So all the experts have to offer us is a vague admission that there were sticks and that they were joined: What the sticks were and *how* they were joined remains a mystery. As to *why* they were joined, Ezekiel himself gives an adequate explanation, only to encumber it, in the view of the critics, by a needlessly complex description of what was done. "The purpose of the signs is not merely to suggest the idea of political unity," writes Skinner, speaking of the joining of the two sticks, "which is too simple to require any such illustration, but rather to indicate the completeness of the union and the divine force needed to bring it about."¹⁶ But is this not also "too simple to require an illustration" that has the sticks united now in one bundle, now in another, and variously brought together in the hands of Ezekiel, Joseph, Ephraim, Judah, David, and the Lord? The passage "seems to be filled out with explanatory notes which spoil the balance and harmony of the clauses," according to Cooke, who to restore balance and harmony will strike out whatever seems clumsy.¹⁷ Yet as Housman so emphatically observes, it is just such clumsiness that is the surest sign of genuineness in an ancient text. "Even the great Bentley," says Housman, "forgot that counterfeit verses are not wont to be meaningless . . . and that the aim of interpolators is not to make difficulties but to remove them,"¹⁸ i.e. that if an ancient text displays that "balance and harmony" which our critics crave, it is probably because earlier critics have tidied it up. When all the manuscripts at our disposal display signs of confusion, "those MSS are to be preferred," Housman reminds us, "which give the worst nonsense, because they are likely to be the least interpolated."¹⁹

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA



Beauty on a budget with **BUEHNER Blocks**

L.D.S. youth benefit from a balanced program of religious education, worship, and spiritual recreation. This program guides the design of new ward and stake houses, and the selection of materials to go in them.

Buehner Blocks have a real place in these new buildings: exposed block walls with "Built-in" sound absorption and insulation make recreation halls, classrooms, and even chapels quieter, more conducive to reverence . . . as well as less expensive to build, to heat, and to maintain. Special blocks, such as Buehner Hone-tex, safeguard youngsters against injury, and provide an attractive wainscot in recreation halls and classrooms.

Look to Buehners for the newest and best in
concrete masonry.

Buehner Block Co.
2800 So. W. Temple Phone 7-5456



Let the nineteenth verse of the thirty-seventh chapter illustrate the real complexity of Ezekiel's account, upon which scholars have sought to impose simplicity by simply altering the text. Rendered literally, the verse reads: "Verily I am taking the wood of Joseph which is in the hand of Ephraim and the *shivte* of Israel his associates, and I shall place them upon it along with (*eth*) the wood of Judah, and I shall make them for one wood, and they shall be one in my hand." Three things here complicate the picture.

First, there are the *shivte* of Israel. Now, *shevet* means simply staff or rod: it is cognate with the Latin *scipio*, probably with our own "staff," and certainly with the Greek *skeptron*, whence our word "scepter." Since tribes were anciently identified by rods (Num. 17:2), *shevet* can be read "tribe" in certain contexts. But since in this verse the *shivte* of Israel are to be placed upon or fitted against the stick of Joseph, this is one place where the rendering of *shevet* in its proper sense of rod is particularly appropriate, as Migne observes,²⁰ since tribes cannot be placed upon another rod, while other rods can. One has the authority of the Septuagint for reading *shivte* here as tribes, but it is clear that the Septuagint has distorted the whole passage, for every time "staff" or "wood" appear in the verse, they are uniformly rendered "tribe," so that the whole ritual of the sticks is completely obliterated. As the passage stands, it describes Ephraim as possessing a number of documents relating to Joseph and members of the House of Israel associated with him; these are to be fitted together with a like collection of documents relating to Judah "and his associates." (V. 16.) This complexity renders the passage "incomprehensible" (*unverstaendlich*) to Guthe,²¹ while Jamieson would escape it by changing "them" to read "it"²² To leave the passage as it stands opens up a number of disturbing possibilities which must be removed at all cost, even if it means rewriting the text or declaring it nonsense.

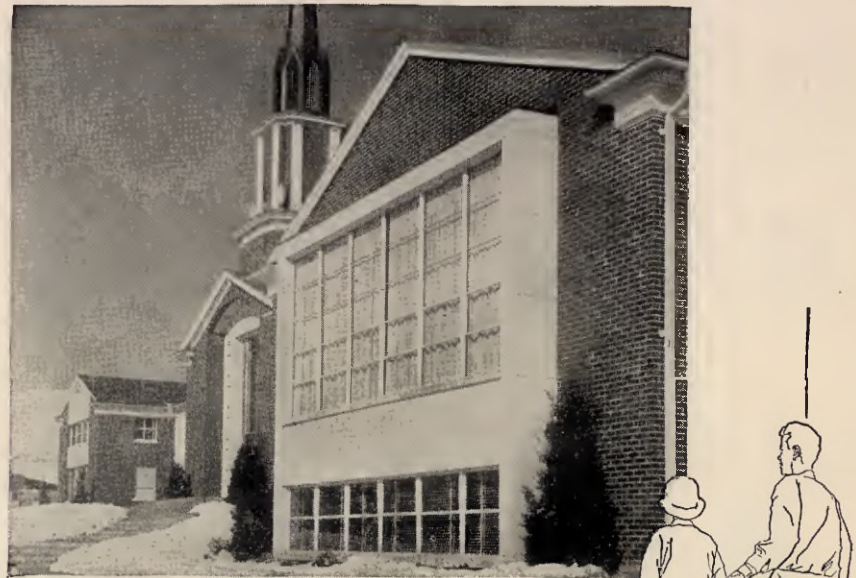
An annoying confirmation of this seemingly needless complexity is the Hebrew *eth* which we have rendered "along with" and which implies that the stick of Joseph having first been compounded in the hand of Ephraim of a number of "rods" will then be joined to the (compound) stick of

Judah. Read this way, the *eth* makes perfectly good sense, but if one wants a simpler reading "the construction is rather unnatural," as the Cambridge Bible observes.²³ "Jack and Jill went up the hill," etc., is an "unnatural construction" if an editor is convinced that water is found only at the bottom of hills, and so "up" should be emended to read "down." Just so, some editors faced by this *eth* have calmly changed it to *el* and thus removed the offensive word from their sight.²⁴

The third rock of offense in this one verse is the statement "they shall

become one in my hand." There have always been scholars favoring the Septuagint reading, "in the hand of Judah."²⁵ Yet as the Cambridge Bible points out, such an emendation is not permissible, since "there is no trace in the passage of any pre-eminence of Judah over Israel of the north"—which should be obvious to any reader, since the equality of two nations is strongly emphasized in the chapter.²⁶ Why then do the scholars prefer a reading that is poorly supported by text and context to one that is well supported? Because "in the

(Continued on following page)



Sparkling beauty with **BUEHNER** Cast Stone

Church buildings demand materials with durability to match the faith for which they stand.

Buehner Cast Stone is such a material. The sparkling natural stone aggregate endures so well that it is used on L.D.S. temples. It requires little cleaning and maintenance. It makes entrances more inviting, and adds extraordinary beauty to pillars, window trim, steeples, and exterior facing . . . at modest cost.

Look to Buehners for durability and beauty in concrete products.

Otto Buehner & Co.
640 Wilmington Avenue Phone 6-8708



Finest Movies

Ideal for ward entertainments, firesides, classwork or for home use.

THE CHOICE LAND

Produced by Ruth and Nathan Hale, both Latter-day Saints. Theme is taken from the Book of Mormon Prophecies. ½ hr. 16mm film in beautiful color. Narration by Wendell Noble. \$10.00 per day rental.

THE LIVING BOOK

13 Stories taken from the Old Testament, Book of Genesis. 16mm B & W or color. Each about ½ hr. Narration by Wendell Noble, prominent L.D.S. Rental \$7.00 in B & W, \$12.00 color. \$6.00 or \$11.00 if 6 or more titles are booked.

EXILE FROM EDEN, NOAH AND HIS FAMILY, HAGAR THE EGYPTIAN, ISAAC AND REBEKAH, JACOB AND ESAU, JACOB AND RACHEL, FLIGHT FROM HARAN, RETURN TO CANAAN, THE STORY OF JOSEPH, JOSEPH THE SLAVE, JOSEPH THE PRISONER, JOSEPH GOVERNOR OF EGYPT and REUNION IN EGYPT.

Book Through

HILLAM'S Ideal Pictures

54 Post Office Place
Salt Lake City, Utah

2950 West 7th Street
Los Angeles, California



PROTECTION WHEN YOU NEED IT

You can't out-guess all accidents but you can be protected. See your local KOLOB AGENT for all your insurance needs. His advice is sound, his policies are backed by strong stock companies and KOLOB gives prompt and fair settlement of claims in case of loss. 300 agents in Utah, Idaho, Montana and Nevada.

A General Insurance Agency



FRANK SALISBURY, MGR.

330 Judge Bldg., Salt Lake City

THE STICK OF JUDAH

(Continued from preceding page)

hand of Judah" sounds more like history, while "in my hand" is the stuff of prophecy—always more suspect and baffling. Modern scholars, like ancient Targumists, have not hesitated "to modify the language of the prophet . . . and even, in certain

cases, to reverse the plain meaning of the text," when it has served their purpose to do so.²⁷

And so our appeal to the experts brings little reward since their work is little more than speculation rather than searching for evidence. Such a search, however, may turn out to be

"Telling" the Truth

Richard L. Evans

THERE is a sentence from one of the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge that suggests a deeply significant subject: "Veracity," he said, "does not consist in saying, but in the intention of communicating truth."¹ Too often it is assumed that the truth has been told if someone simply says the right words. Too often it is assumed that a person has told the truth when actually he has told a half-truth and withheld the other half. But a person hasn't told the truth when he has deliberately left a false impression, no matter what words he has used or how he has used them. Men may mislead other men by the inflection of their voices, by insinuation and innuendo, by gesture, by what they suggest rather than by what they say, and by what they leave unsaid. They may say so much and imply much more, and then hide behind the literal limits of language. In many such ways men frequently falsify—and often we could not legally prove that they had perpetrated an untruth, yet morally we may know that they intended not to tell the truth. There are those who, as Isaiah indicts them, "Make a man an offender for a word"²—those who resort to slick, legal loopholes, those who insincerely rely upon the letter of the law and ignore every intention of honor and honesty. Words can be wonderful, but whatever our words we shall ultimately have to answer for the broad intent of our actions and utterances—and not merely for legal terminology or technicalities, not merely for the letter of the law. The whole intent of a man, what he means to do and what he means not to do, what he means to say and what he means not to say, what he thinks in his heart, what he is in his soul, are all involved in "telling" the truth—for which we are all accountable before our fellow men and before our Eternal Father. God grant that in our time we may hear and know and speak and write and live the truth—and not rely on tricky technicalities or legal loopholes or ambiguous utterance that is a mere mask for falsehood. To close with the words with which we opened: "Veracity does not consist in saying, but in the intention of communicating truth."¹ The mere appearance of truthfulness is not enough.

"The Spoken Word" FROM TEMPLE SQUARE
PRESENTED OVER KSL AND THE COLUMBIA BROADCASTING
SYSTEM, NOVEMBER 9, 1952

¹Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*.

²Isaiah 29:21.

Copyright 1952

quite profitable, and if the least be said we cannot well avoid undertaking it.

(To be continued)

¹H. C. Alleman and E. E. Flack, *Old Testament Commentary* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), p. 770; Carl F. Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Ezekiel* (Edinburgh), II, p. 130; J. R. Dummelow, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (N. Y., 1927), p. 515.

²*The Abingdon Bible Commentary*, C. F. Eiselen, ed. (N.Y., 1929), p. 740.

³Thos. Scott, *Commentary on the Holy Bible* (London, 1850) IV, Ezek. 37.

⁴*Abingdon Bible Commentary*, loc. cit.

⁵Robt. Jamieson et al., *Commentary on the Old and New Testaments* (1878), p. 220.

⁶H. A. Ironside, *Ezekiel the Prophet* (N.Y.: Loizeaux, 1949), p. 261.

⁷E. Kautsch, Budde, Guthe, etc., *Die Heilige Schrift des alten Testaments* (Tuebingen, 1922) I, p. 975.

⁸Thus Origen, in *Patrol. Graec.* XIV, 64; Raban Maurus, in *Patrol. Lat.* CX, 863; cf. XXV, p. 352.

⁹J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Scripturae Sacrae Cursus Completus* (Paris, 1840) XIX, p. 926.

¹⁰Keil, *op. cit.*, p. 130f.

¹¹*Abingdon Commentary* and Ironside, loc. cit.: "The two sticks are being joined together lengthwise in the hand," G. A. Cooke, *The Book of Ezekiel (International Critical Commentary)*, N.Y.: Scribners, 1937), p. 401.

¹²See H. Nibley, *Western Political Quarterly* II (1949), p. 337.

¹³Adam Clarke, *Holy Bible Commentary and Notes* (N.Y.: Abingdon Press) IV, p. 524.

¹⁴John Skinner, *The Book of Ezekiel* (London, 1895), p. 352.

¹⁵A. B. Davidson, *Ezekiel* (Cambridge Univ., 1896), ch. 37.

¹⁶Skinner, *op. cit.*, p. 353.

¹⁷Cooke, *op. cit.*, p. 400.

¹⁸A. E. Housman, *M. Manilii Astronomicon* (Cambridge, 1937) I, p. xviii.

¹⁹*Idem*, p. lxxv.

²⁰J.-P. Migne, loc. cit.

²¹In Kautsch, *op. cit.*, I, p. 975.

²²Jamieson, *op. cit.*, I, p. 611.

²³Davidson, loc. cit. Cases in which *eth* is to be rendered *una cum* (along with) are given in Zorell's *Lexicon Heb. et Aram. Vet. Test.*, p. 90. Raban Maurus renders this *eth* as *pariter cum* (*Patr. Lat.* CX, p. 862).

²⁴*Cambridge Bible*, note on Ezek. 37:19.

²⁵Kautsch and the Abingdon commentators both favor it, as do Dummelow and Rabbi S. Fisch, *Ezekiel* (London: Soncino Press, 1950), p. 249.

²⁶Davidson, loc. cit.; Cooke, *Bk of Ezek.*, p. 401, also favors this reading, which "though it sounds surprising . . . is no more than what the preceding part of the verse affirms."

²⁷For an excellent treatment of the liberties taken by scholars at all periods with the texts of the prophets, J. F. Stenning, *The Targum of Isaiah* (Oxford, 1949), pp. viii-xvi.



POSTUM

Join the millions who enjoy the hearty flavor of Postum daily.

Get Instant Postum today!

A Product of General Foods



A Book For

- Every L. D. S. Family
- Every Missionary
- Every lover of faith-promoting stories
- Every teacher of youth

In The Gospel Net

By Elder John A. Widtsoe

\$1.75 . . . At All Church Bookdealers