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The Stick of Judah and the Stick of Joseph, Part II: What Were the Sticks?

Author(s): Hugh W. Nibley

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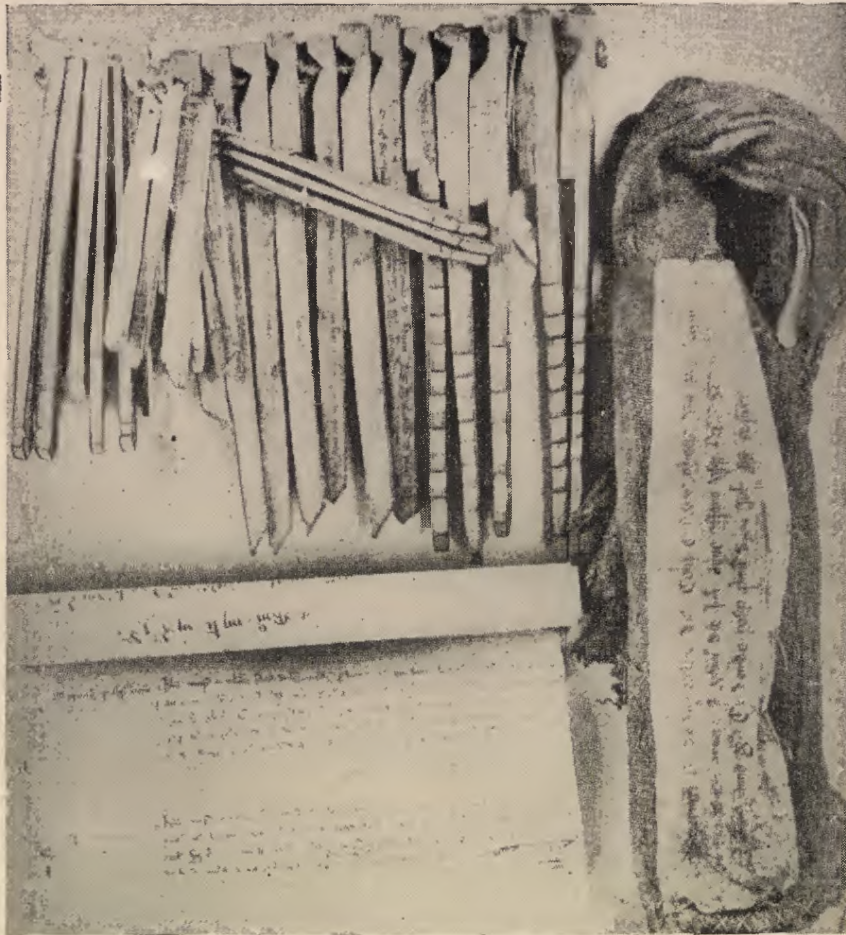
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Abstract: This series discusses how writing on tally sticks is related to Ezekiel 37 and the meaning of the prophecy that two sticks shall become one. The author offers extensive commentary on the traditional interpretations given to Ezekiel 37. The second part covers the nature of the sticks themselves.

The Stick of JUDAH and the Stick of JOSEPH

by Hugh Nibley, Ph. D.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, HISTORY AND RELIGION,
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY



Tally-sticks 600 years old with their original bag and labels. The shorter sticks are the "stocks," the larger ones the "foils" to which the "stocks" were fitted to "become one stick" in the hand of the king's representative upon the completion of payment by either party and the settlement of the account.

(Reproduced from "Archaeologia"
Vol. 74 (1925), Plate lxxv.)

II WHAT WERE THE STICKS?

THE theme of the whole thirty-seventh chapter of Ezekiel is clear to all: it is the great final gathering of the Lord's people into a holy nation, united forever under the scepter of the rightful king, God's anointed, with the sanctuary of the Lord forever in their midst. (Vv. 21-28.)²⁸ The dry bones of the first half of the chapter represent Israel that has lost hope of ever becoming a nation again, and as Professor Driver observes, Ezekiel shows that "God can restore the dead nation to life and plant it again in its old home."²⁹ Driver further points out, what most scholars overlook, that the uniting of the sticks to represent (as the prophet explains, vv. 20-22) the reuniting of the nation is a necessary part of the

picture. More recently, Rabbi Fisch has confirmed this basic interpretation.³⁰ Now the bringing together of tribal rods or staffs marked with the names of tribes was actually practised in Israel when the nation assembled, and indeed commentators have not failed to note the probable identity of the "sticks" of Ezekiel with the tribal rods described in the seventeenth chapter of Numbers. But since the experts have failed to look into the remarkable institution of the tribal rods, it shall be necessary here for us to consider the subject briefly, referring the reader, as much out of necessity as vanity, to studies of our own on the topic.

The great national assemblies of the Israelites, such as that one idealized in Ezekiel 37, had their counterpart in every nation of the ancient

world. For thousands of years and "at hundreds of holy shrines, each believed to mark the exact center of the universe . . . one might have seen assembled at the New Year—the moment of creation, the beginning and ending of time—vast concourses of people, each thought to represent the entire human race in the presence of all its ancestors and gods."³¹ The concept of a great and perfect assembly of the whole human race at the throne of a heavenly king is thus the dream and ideal of every nation of the ancient world, and that not by virtue of independent invention or evolutionary development, but rather as the common, though often denatured, heritage from a single lost pattern of church and priesthood.^{31a}

Now all who came to these assemblies were represented individual-

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ly and collectively by rods or sticks. Consider first the individual identification rod:

Throughout the northern steppe it was the custom to require all who came to the king's assembly to bring arrows with them, and to present these personally to the king. From these arrows a census was taken, each man submitting but a single shaft, which represented him and bore his mark, for "both in the Old World and the New, the arrow came to stand as the token and symbol of a man." To the arrows used may be applied, for want of a better term, the name "census-arrow." The census-arrow is found among the Scythians, Tartars, Persians, Georgians, Norsemen, and American Indians, and it survived in recognizable form in India, Egypt, and the Far East.³²

The Greeks and Romans preserved the census-arrow as a simple rod or staff, such as the marked rods that had to be presented by the jurors for admission to the heliastic courts, and the "sections of reed" submitted by all who would participate in the great public feasts in the Eastern Empire.³³ The Arabs always "employed reed arrow-shafts, devoid alike of feathers and heads, but bearing some marks of individual ownership, 'to make division' at their tribal feasts,"³⁴ a custom which Freeman refers directly to the "sticks" of Ezekiel, chapter 37.³⁴ For the use of such identification-sticks on the occasion of the great assembly of Israel is clear from Numbers 17, while in the oldest Christian literary composition, "the Pastor of Hermas (*Simil.* viii, 1-6), all who come to the assembly of the Lord present sections of willow-reed for admission, each receiving his proper place as designated by certain cuts (*schismata*) on his rod."³⁵

The rods or arrows submitted by all who came to the feast were often bound together in a ritual bundle to signify the unity of the nation. "Bundles of fifty-two rods, bearing individual and tribal markings . . . represented the full membership of Indian tribes in assembly," as of the Tartar tribes of Asia.³⁶ Equally common are tribal bundles of seven arrows, such as the holy bundle of the Osage, which "represented the Seven Chiefs, who held the tribe together in peaceful unity."³⁷ Such tribal bundles are found in the Old World among "the Scythians, Alans, Slavs, and ancient Germans (who also chose their leaders by drawing willow lots), and these have been compared with the Persian Baresma."³⁸ The Persian king would sit with the Baresma

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spread out before him at the New Year, telling the fortunes of the year as he gave away unlimited wealth to all the tribes who came to answer the summons to present themselves before him on that day—the only day of the year on which the veil between him and the outer world was removed.³⁹ This recalls the king of Babylon "shaking out the arrows" before him in divination at the New Year,³⁹ and Hoenir in the Far North, holding his holy lottery in the Golden Age.⁴⁰ It most vividly reminds one of the ritual feasts of certain Indians of the northwest coast.⁴¹

The most famous of all tribal bundles, with one exception, was the Roman *fascis*, symbol of the unity and authority of the nation—originally twelve sticks bound together to represent twelve Etruscan tribes.⁴² The one exception is, of course, that bundle of twelve rods which, according to the Talmud, were all cut from a single stick, and bound together when Moses laid them up in the ark.⁴³ What may be the earliest Christian writing after the New Testament thus elaborates on the account in Numbers 17:

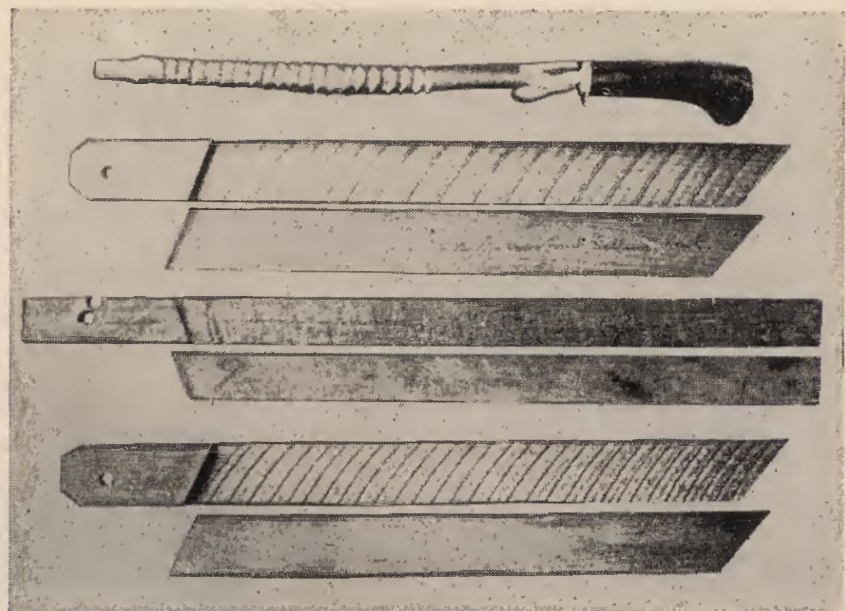
And he took them and bound them together, and sealed [them] with the rings of the leaders of the tribes, and he laid them up in the Ark of the Covenant before the altar of God. And he closed the Ark and sealed the locks, just as he had the rods. Then he said unto them: Men and brethren, that tribe whose rod shall blossom has been chosen of God to be priests and ministers to Him. And when it was

morning, he summoned together all Israel, the 600,000 men, showed the seals to the leaders of the tribes, opened the Ark of the Covenant, and brought out the rods. . . .⁴⁴

A variation on this theme is the very ancient story of "how all the men of Israel were required to attend a great assembly, bringing each his staff, to be handed over to the high priest and used in a lottery for the distribution of brides." It has close parallels among the Bedouins, Scythians, the ancient Turkish, Finnish, Mongolian, and Ossetian tribes.⁴⁵ There is a remarkable expression found in the colophon of the oldest known Hebrew text of the Pentateuch (the Aleppo Codex, cir. 930 A.D.), in which the author of the text is designated as "Mar Rab Ahron Mar Rab Asher, may his soul be bound in the Bundle of Life with the righteous and wise prophets."⁴⁶ Farther on, the colophon speaks of a group of other venerable doctors: "May their souls be bound in the bundle of Life in the Garden of Eden beneath the Tree of Life. . . ."⁴⁷ From these expressions it is apparent that the tribal bundle was actually an ancient Hebrew institution.

It is quite obvious that these customs, found throughout the entire world (we have but skimmed the surface here), are no local inventions, but all go back to a single prototype. When Fowkes compares the holiest possession of the Cheyennes, a ritual

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Modern English tally-sticks. The photograph shows how the sticks fit together to "become one," as well as the manner in which simple rods of willow or other wood could be used to cut primitive tallies.

(Reproduced from "Archaeologia" Vol. 62 (1911), Plate xlvi.)

The Stick of Judah

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arrow-bundle, with the Jewish Ark of the Covenant,⁴⁸ we are faced with a challenge that cannot easily be brushed aside—whence this amazing uniformity in the ways of ancient men the world over? We cannot investigate the problem here: *Why* the ancients chose to be represented individually and collectively by marked rods when they came together at their great national assemblies is a subject I have treated elsewhere; what concerns us here is simply the fact that they did practise such a strange economy, and that the tribal rods of which Ezekiel is speaking are no fanciful invention of his own but something quite familiar to the people to whom he is speaking. The ruin of Moab is represented by Jeremiah as the breaking of his rod (48:17): “. . . and all ye that know [or recognize] his name, say, How is the strong staff broken, the beautiful rod!” Here the name is recognized written on the rod. Ezekiel himself (19:10ff) depicts the fall of the nation by the breaking of its rods (verse 12): “her strong rods were broken and withered . . .” the rods being (verse 11) “strong rods for the sceptres of them that bare rule. . . .”

It is only natural that an identification-staff should serve as a rod of office or authority. As such it commonly served in ancient times as a message-staff or “summons-arrow:”

Throughout the ancient world a ruler was thought to command everything his arrow could touch. Thus whenever a ruler of the North would summon all his subjects to his presence, he would order an arrow, usually called a “war-arrow” (*herör*) to be “cut up” and sent out among them. Upon being touched by this arrow, every man had immediately to “follow the arrow” (*fylga örum*) to the royal presence or suffer banishment from the kingdom. . . . The “cutting” of the arrow was the placing of the royal mark upon it, giving it the force of the king’s seal. As often as not the arrow took the form of a simple rod (*stefni*), bearing marks of authorization, while the message was delivered by word of mouth. . . .⁴⁹

Such a use of the message-stick is found everywhere in antiquity—we need not go through the list again but should point out that the institution was also found among the Jews. Thus “the Lord, calling upon a city to declare its allegiance to him, sends his rod to it, and a herald (a man of *tushiah*), seeing the name on the rod, calls out to the people; ‘Heed ye the

(Continued on following page)

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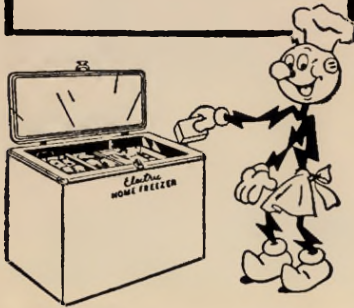
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The Stick of Judah

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rod and the one who hath appointed it."⁵⁰ (See also Micah 6:9.) In Ezekiel 37:18ff it is evident that the inscribed sticks are to serve as messenger-staves. The prophet is to show them to all the people, and when they ask him what the message is, he is to repeat the words summoning them all to the great assembly: "the Lord Jehovah . . . will take the sons of Israel out of the nations among whom they walk, and will gather them from round about, and lead them into their land. . . ." The prophet is God's herald, sent to gather in the hosts for the last time. Jane Harrison has noted that the herald's staff "is, in intent, a king's sceptre held by the herald as deputy,"⁵¹ and few have failed to observe that the sticks in Ezekiel 37 are among other things scepters.

How thoroughly familiar the Jews of old were with the use and significance of various types of symbolic rods may be seen from the wealth of tradition built up around the wonderful Rod of Aaron. This was "the rod that the Holy One . . . created in the twilight of the first Sabbath eve and gave to Adam. He transmitted it to Enoch," from whom it passed down in succession to Noah, Shem, Abraham, and Joseph, from whom it was stolen by servants of Pharaoh, only to be stolen back again by the man whose daughter married Moses who alone of all her suitors was able to grasp the rod without being consumed.⁵² According to another account, "Jacob wrested the rod from Esau, and . . . he always kept it with him . . . at his death he bequeathed it to his favorite son Joseph."⁵³ We are assured that "Aaron's rod is identical with the rod of Judah," and that the same rod was in David's hand when he went to fight Goliath, and that "it will come from hiding in the time of the Messiah."⁵⁴ It is this very rod "that the Judean kings used until the time of the destruction of the Temple, when, in miraculous fashion, it disappeared. Elijah will in the future fetch it forth and hand it to the Messiah."⁵⁵ For when the Messiah comes, it is by this rod, which bears his name, that he will establish his identity before the people: first of all, we are told, will come Elijah, and to make sure of the identity of the Messiah, the Jews will demand that

he perform the miracle of resurrection before their eyes," instead of which he will "wave the sceptre given him by God. . . . Then the Jews will believe that Elijah is the Elijah promised to them and the Messiah introduced by him is the true Messiah."⁵⁶ The Book of the Bee brings this same staff into the Christian system by claiming that "it belonged to Joseph . . . at the moment of the birth of the Saviour, and it served afterwards as one of the planks in the Cross of Christ."⁵⁷

Note that this staff in the hand of a prophet or patriarch is a true herald's staff, "in intent a king's sceptre, held by the herald as deputy." Thus God is represented as promising to Moses in the hereafter: "and one of my many sceptres upon which is engraved the Ineffable Name, one that I have employed in the creation of the world, shall I give to thee, the image of which I had already given thee in this world."⁵⁸ And thus Moses speaks to the Red Sea: "For a whole day I spoke to thee at the bidding of the Holy One . . . but thou didst refuse to heed my words; even when I showed thee my rod, didst thou remain obdurate."⁵⁹ When Pharaoh asked Moses and Aaron, "Who will believe you when you say that you are ambassadors of God, as you pretend to be?" the credentials they produced were the rod and its miracles.⁶⁰ This aspect of the rod as a sign to the world that God has given his authority to the holder is very significant, since it represents the power of priesthood: Indeed, the early Christian Fathers insist that the rod is simply a symbolic representation of the power of priesthood: "The rod of Aaron," says Justin Martyr, "bearing blossoms showed him to be the High Priest. A rod from the root of Jesse became the Christ. . . . By the wood God showed himself to Abraham. . . ." ⁶¹

It is exceedingly convenient to have such a message-stick to confirm one's claim to have been sent by some king or by God himself. There are many instances of the usage in the ancient world, and they all seem to go back to the divine pattern. Thus, "the Herald of Zeus goes forth to summon his subjects armed with a golden wand that subdues all creatures with its touch."⁶² This is the civilizing and governing rod of Hermes that makes its holder ruler of the world, the golden wand of the two entwined

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serpents, the caduseus, the arrow of Zeus in whose name all things are compelled to do obeisance.⁶² It was this same caduseus with which Aesculapius presumed to raise the dead—an office reserved to God alone, and to this day the life-giving staff of Aesculapius with its two serpents is the symbol of the medical profession. Strangest of all, the episcopal staves borne by the heads of various ancient Christian churches are still adorned by the two serpents that clearly betray the pagan origin and descent of their emblems of priesthood.⁶³ Innocent III tells us that the pontifical staff signifies the power of Christ and quotes Psalms II and XLIV to prove it.⁶⁴ Yet there are few better-known traditions in the Roman Church than that which reports that the Pope has no rod, because the rod of Peter, the only one he could have, was given by Peter to Eucherius, Bishop of Trier, when he was sent on his mission to the Germans; this rod is said to have raised Eucherius' successor, Maternus, from the dead,⁶⁵ just as the rod of Elijah was said to have raised the dead.

The various aspects of ancient rods of office are given here not by way of picturesque diversion, but because we cannot understand the sticks of Ezekiel until we know what such sticks could and did represent. At this point some general observations are in order:

1. The ancients used marked staves for identification. The staff and ring of the Babylonians (Herodotus, History I, 195) recalls the staff and ring by which Tamar identified Judah.

2. A king's staff in the hand of another showed that the other was a delegate of the king, with authority to act in his name. The royal staff is thus a sign of power, a scepter.

3. In referring to the sticks of Joseph and Judah, Ezekiel is using a familiar custom (not inventing fantastic imagery) to illustrate a lesson. The lesson has to do with the establishing of identity and the exercise of divine power, or priesthood, in the days of the restoration of Israel. An important clue to the situation is the peculiar way in which the two sticks "become one."

(To be continued)

⁶²This is the chief passage in which Ezekiel reaffirms the social ideal characteristic of the prophets: an age of peace under the government of a righteous ruler." Cooke, *op. cit.*, p. 400.

⁶³S. R. Driver, *Einleitung in die Litteratur*

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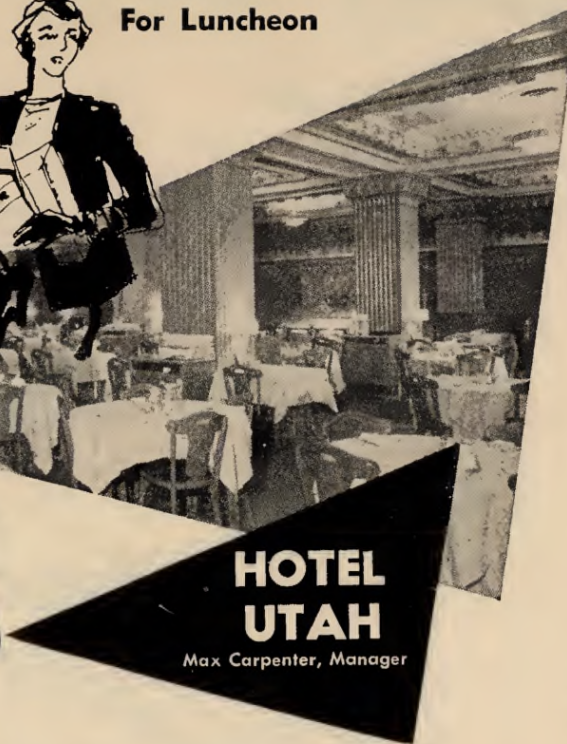


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The Stick of Judah

(Continued from preceding page)

des Alten Testaments, trs. Rothstein (Berlin, 1896), p. 311.

³⁰Fisch, *Ezekiel*, p. 249: "The prediction of national resurrection, as symbolized in the vision of the dry bones, is followed by the symbolic action of the reunion of the two kingdoms to indicate that unity is an essential factor in preserving the life of the nation."

³¹H. Nibley, in *Western Political Quarterly* IV (1951), p. 226.

^{31a}For a general treatment of this subject, Lord Raglan, *The Origins of Religion* (Thinkers' Library, 1945).

³²Nibley, *Wstn. Pol. Quart.* II (1949), p. 334.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 336.

³⁴Jas. M. Freeman, *Handbook of Bible Manners and Customs* (N.Y., 1877), pp. 305f.

³⁵Nibley, *loc. cit.*

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 337.

³⁷A. C. Fletcher and F. La Flesche, in *Bur. Ethnol. Rept.* XXVII (1905-6), pp. 228, 242, 274.

³⁸Nibley, *op cit.*, p. 337.

³⁹*Loc. cit.*, esp. note 5.

⁴⁰*Poetic Edda, Völuspa* 63.

⁴¹Like the kings of Persia and Babylon, the host among the Kwakiutls gives away all his wealth at the New Year, as he sits with the staves or arrows of all his guests spread out before him, F. Boas, "Kwakiutl Indians," *U.S. National Museum Report* 1895, p. 503f.

⁴²Nibley, *loc. cit.*

⁴³L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Soc., 1909ff), III, 306.

⁴⁴I Clement, *Epist. ad Corinthos*, Ch. 43.

⁴⁵Nibley, *op. cit.*, p. 335.

⁴⁶Paul Kahle, *Masoreten des Westens* (Stuttgart, 1927) I, pp. 3f.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁸In *Bureau of Ethnol. Rept.* XIII (1891-2), p. 116.

⁴⁹Nibley, *op. cit.*, pp. 331f.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 333.

⁵¹Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1924), p. 44.

⁵²Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, II, p. 291.

⁵³*Ibid.*, V, p. 412.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, VI, p. 106.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, III, p. 307.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, IV, p. 234.

⁵⁷Quoted in A. S. Rappoport, *Myth and Legend of Ancient Israel* (London, 1928) II, p. 366: "When Adam was driven out of Paradise, he cut a branch from the fig tree which was the tree of Life, and this branch served him as a staff all his life. This staff he left to his son, and it was transmitted from generation to generation till it came into the possession of Abraham. It was with this staff that the Patriarch smashed the idols of his father Terah. Jacob used the staff as he tended the flocks . . . and his son Judah gave it as a pledge to his daughter-in-law Tamar." Later it was hidden by an angel and found by Jethro, who gave it to Moses. "The staff then came into the possession of Phineas, who buried it in the desert. It belonged to Joseph . . . at the moment of the birth of the Saviour, and it served afterwards as one of the planks in the Cross of Christ."

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⁵⁶Ginzberg, *op. cit.*, III, pp. 430f.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, III, p. 19.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, III, 335.

⁶¹Justin Martyr, *Dial. with Trypho*, 86, in *Patrol. Graec.* VI, 680-1: "The cross is the symbol of the wood of Life in Paradise. Moses with a rod was sent to liberate the people; and holding this rod in his hands as commander of the nation he divided the Red Sea. By its power he struck water from the rock, and by throwing it into the waters of Merra he made them sweet. . . . Jacob boasts that he passed through the river on this staff," etc.

⁶²Nibley, *op. cit.*, p. 332, with special ref. to the notes.

⁶³See the interesting series of photographs in the *National Geographic Magazine* liii (1927), 683-9. For the serpent on the earliest staves of the Western Church, see *Archaeologia*, Vol. 74 (1924), pp. 314-5. Usually the staff of authority is thought to represent the thunderbolt by which the enemies of God are smitten: for extensive identifications see C. S. Blinkenberg, *The Thunderweapon in Religion and Folklore* (Cambridge, 1911); A. B. Cook, *Zeus* (Cambridge, 1925) II, 1045-9; 473; 574, n. 2; 774; 777; 780; 786-9 (the trident is the lightning.) Thunderbolt, caduseus, plant of immortality, and the lance of St. George are identified by Dougherty in *Annals of the American Schools of Oriental Research V* (1925), 6-8; 19; scepter, "rods" of Israel, and the staff of the inspired poet are identified by Ludw. Deubner in *Archiv fuer Religionswissenschaft* 30 (1932), 82-84; extensive comparisons are given by E. D. Clarke, "On the Lituus of the Ancient Romans," *Archaeologia* 19 (1821), 386-400. On the trident and fleur-de-lis (found on early Christian bishops' staves), W. M. Wylie, in *Archaeologia* 35 (1853) 48-53, and H. B. Walters, "Poseidon's Trident," *Jnl. of Hellenic Studies* 13 (1892-3) 13-20, 11: "In the archaic period . . . Poseidon has, instead of a trident a lotos-sceptre," as does Zeus. Significantly, early bishops' staves were topped with the lotus-sign, G. F. Lee, "Episcopal Staves," *Archaeol.* 51 (1888) 374, the "Finger of God" (*Idem*, 376), or the hunter's sign of St. Hubert, and bore such formidable inscription as "Strike-Spare," (*Idem*, 360). The earliest bishops' staves resemble the caduseus, crowned with double serpents, as can be seen from the photographs in the *National Geographic Magazine* 52 (Dec. 1927), Pl. i-vii, from Savaric's staff (c. 1200 A.D.), see *Archaeol.* 58 (1903), p. 409, fig. 2, Pl. xxvii; p. 412, fig. 5, and the oldest such staff from the north, reproduced in JJA Worsaae, *Nordiske Oldsager i det Kongl. Mus. i Kjöbenhavn* (Copenhagen, 1859) p. 150, Pl. 542; cf. C. H. Read, "A Morse Ivory Tau Cross Head of the 11th Century," *Archaeologia* 58 (1903), p. 409, fig. 2; p. 412, fig. 5. In the oldest pictures Hermes' caduseus is topped by the serpent or the fleur-de-lis, Ed. Gerhard, *Etruskische Spiegel* (Berlin, 1884) V, taf. 8, nos. 1, 2. In these and many other cases the rods of office borne by Christian bishops can be traced back to the pagan priesthoods of antiquity. Their use in the Christian churches is first met with in the seventh century, and is not general until the eleventh century, L. Duchesne, *Origines du Culte Chrétien* (Paris, 1898), p. 383.

⁶⁴In *Patrol. Lat.* CCXVII, 790.

⁶⁵In *Patrol. Lat.* CCXXI, 600.

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