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The Sticks of Judah and Joseph:
Reflections on Defending the Kingdom

Joseph M. Spencer

I wish to pursue two tasks simultaneously in this essay. First, in line with its title, I will address a very old matter of interpretation. I aim to explain as definitively as possible how to make sense of the relationship between Ezekiel 37:15–19, with its talk of the sticks of Judah and Joseph, and the claims of the Restoration, which include somehow connecting the stick of Joseph to the Book of Mormon. Second, in line with the subtitle of this essay, I wish to draw a crucial lesson from the history of how Latter-day Saints have dealt with this issue in the past. Lastly, I will outline some concrete advice about what it means to do apologetics, or what it means to defend the Restoration with the resources of the intellect.

Essentially, what I will show in the following pages is that, despite a long history of doing so,¹ there may be less reason than often assumed for Latter-day Saints to argue that Ezekiel’s “sticks” are equivalent to writings or books or records. Many interesting things have come out of past work on Ezekiel along these lines, and that is of interest in its own right. Nevertheless, I will argue that the best approach to the text—the most faithful to the biblical text, but also the most faithful to the unique scriptures of the Restoration as well—is another one. In fact, I will argue that at least certain past interpretive efforts with Ezekiel’s prophecy have run the unnecessary risk of distracting members of the Church from its deepest relevance to the purposes of the Book of Mormon. As in so many other cases, we must be careful in interpreting Ezekiel 37 to couple our righteous zeal to defend the Restoration with good information, with the best knowledge we can gain.
Origins of an Interpretation

The first newspaper printed under the auspices of the Church began publication in June 1832. Assigned to the task by revelation, William Wine Phelps was its editor, setting up his printshop in Independence, Missouri. The very first issue of the paper, titled The Evening and the Morning Star, included on its eighth page a short article titled “The Book of Mormon.” It began with these sentences:

There are not a few honest enquiring persons, who wish to learn the truth of the book of Mormon. To put them in possession of such testimony as may lead to truth, is our duty, and, after stating that this Book contains a record of that branch of the tribe of Joseph which was separated from his brethren, according to the 49th chapter of Genesis, we say read the 37th chapter of Ezekiel and if the stick of Ephraim, therein mentioned does not mean the book of Mormon, what does it mean?

This, it seems, is the first published reference to a possible connection between Ezekiel’s prophecy and the Book of Mormon. Apparently authored by Phelps himself, the article does no more than ask a rhetorical question (thus appealing to intuition): If Ezekiel 37’s “stick of Ephraim” is not the Book of Mormon, what could it be?

The prophecy to which this 1832 article refers famously finds the prophet Ezekiel instructed by God to take up two sticks in turn, writing on the one “For Judah, and for the children of Israel his companions,” and on the other “For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and for all the house of Israel his companions” (Ezekiel 37:16). The prophet is then told to “join them one to another into one stick,” such that they “become one” in his hand (v. 17). In interpreting this, Phelps almost certainly had an eye on a passage in the Book of Mormon, a prophecy attributed to Joseph of Egypt and quoted in 2 Nephi 3. The latter passage distinguishes between what “the fruit of the loins of Judah” would write and what “the fruit of [Joseph’s] loins” would
write but then predicts that the two writings would “grow together” (v. 12). Parallel predictions that distinguishable Judahite and Josephite things (sticks in Ezekiel, writings in 2 Nephi) would eventually be joined together (becoming one in Ezekiel, growing together in 2 Nephi) would seem to have given Phelps what he took to be the interpretive key for making sense of Ezekiel’s prophecy. It was a boon that the interpretation suggested to him that Ezekiel was therefore directly prophesying of the Book of Mormon.

A few months later, in November 1832, Phelps returned to Ezekiel 37 in another issue of *The Evening and the Morning Star*. This time he explicitly connected Ezekiel’s prophecy to the one from 2 Nephi 3. After quoting at length from the latter, he quotes the whole of Ezekiel 37:15–26 and then comments: “So, then, it appears, that Ephraim, besides becoming a multitude of nations, writes and keeps one of the sticks or books of the Lord. . . . [W]ho can mistake what Ezekiel meant by the Two Sticks? They are the Lord’s reading sticks [or records] for the benefit of Israel.” As before, Phelps seems to assume that his interpretation is intuitive—the kind of thing that ought to convict a plain reader of the Bible. He nonetheless provides more help to his readers than before, quoting his sources at length and clarifying for his readers that Ezekiel’s “sticks” are “books” or “records” or even “reading sticks.” Phelps had apparently grown more convinced of his interpretation than a few months earlier. He had also, however, begun to see that potential objections might be raised to it, at the very least the concern that Ezekiel’s “sticks” are not obviously books or records.

Just two months later, Phelps wrote again about Ezekiel 37 and the Book of Mormon in *The Evening and the Morning Star*. This time he quoted just verses 15–16 from Ezekiel’s prophecy (amid a long series of quotations from the Bible), but he provided a more substantial explanation of their meaning. After a few (somewhat ambiguous) words explaining his by-then
established interpretation, Phelps adds two sentences in its defense: “The ancient and modern practice of reading sticks, wants but little elucidation. The common schoolboy ought to know, that anciently, they wrote on parchment for common use, and rolled it round a stick; and latterly, newspapers are put into a stick for public utility.” For the first time, Phelps here does more than simply assert the intuitiveness of his interpretation of Ezekiel 37. He adds argument and not just clarification, appealing not to scholars, however, but to what should be known even by “the common schoolboy.” It would seem that his repeated appeals to Ezekiel’s prophecy were still drawing out objections, and he increasingly saw the need to defend their appropriateness to the text’s meaning.

Although Phelps’s interpretation may have had its opponents in 1832–33, it clearly had supporters among the Saints. There is reason, in fact, to think that the majority of believers found the interpretation compelling. This is apparent from the fact that, within a year of the appearance of Phelps’s third article on the matter in his newspaper, the Saints could use the language of Ezekiel 37 casually and assume that other members of the Church would know it had reference to the Book of Mormon. Thus, Phelps published early in 1834 a letter from John F. Boynton (who would soon be called as an apostle) written from Maine, where Boynton was preaching as a missionary. Boynton wrote, “For my determination is, with the stick of Joseph in one hand, and the stick of Judah in the other, to labor diligently in this world that my skirts may be clear from the blood of all men, and I stand acquitted before the bar of God.” Phelps’s interpretation, it would appear, had become culturally normative already by 1834. Indeed, when Warren Parish abandoned the Church in 1838, he felt it necessary to do so by directly repudiating the interpretation: “I am well satisfied,” he reportedly said, “that the 29 and 37 Chap[ter]s of Isai[a]h
& Ezekiel together with others in which we depended to prove the truth of the book of Mormon have no bearing when correctly understand but are entirely irrelevant.”

What helped to make Phelps’s interpretation of Ezekiel 37 standard among the Saints by 1838 was the fact that the Church’s ablest orators and pamphleteers had begun to champion it by that point. In February 1836, Joseph Smith dictated a journal entry summarizing “an animated discourse delivered by Pres. S[idney] Rigdon,” the talented speaker who served as one of the prophet’s counselors in the First Presidency. “He touched the outlines of our faith,” the entry says, and “showed the scattering & gathering of Israel from the scriptures & the stick of Joseph in the hands of Eaphraim & The law of Eaphraim aside from that of Moses.”

Then, in 1837, Parley P. Pratt published A Voice of Warning, which Peter Crawley has rightly called “the most important of all noncanonical Mormon books.” Pratt included Phelps’s interpretation (without attribution), announcing, Phelps-like, that “nothing can be more plain” than Ezekiel 37’s meaning. Because Pratt’s pamphlet went on to be one of the most read and most studied works produced by a Latter-day Saint, it effectively cemented Phelps’s reading.

Pratt likely felt he had received divine confirmation of the interpretation he relayed in A Voice of Warning. During the very months he was writing the pamphlet (in New York City, where he settled in to preach in the late summer of 1837), he reported a miraculous event that concerned Ezekiel 37. He wrote of it in a letter published in the Kirtland Elders’ Journal:

On last Sunday eve while preaching at the house of a good old Cornelious who had not yet obeyed the gospel, but was seeking and believing, while I yet spake he was carried away in a vision and saw the two sticks, representing the two books and the light and glory of God shining around them: to this he arose and testified in the power of the Spirit and immediately spake in tongues & interpreted the same, speaking of the two records and of the remnant of Joseph and how they would soon come to the knowledge of the
truth and nearly all present believed and glorified God, and several are intending to obey the ordinance.\textsuperscript{14}

Here again it can be seen that a phrase like “the two sticks” could be used without explanation, the clear assumption being that all Latter-day Saint readers would know the meaning and reference. More importantly, Pratt could point to spiritual gifts attending and confirming the interpretation that had become standard among the Saints shortly after Phelps introduced it in his paper.

After 1837, it seems to have become a foregone conclusion among the Saints that the correct interpretation of Ezekiel’s prophecy was that it was a largely straightforward prediction of the Book of Mormon’s coming forth. Church leaders and missionaries preached on the subject frequently through the remainder of the lifetime of Joseph Smith, who himself may have allowed the interpretation to prevail in some ways. Some drafts of Joseph Smith’s history, for instance, include an equation of “the Book of Mormon” with “the Stick of Joseph in the hands of Ephraim.”\textsuperscript{15} And the prophet signed a letter (along with Sidney Rigdon and George W. Robinson) in 1838 that seems to equate “the record of Joseph” with “the stick of Joseph.”\textsuperscript{16} By 1844, shortly after the prophet’s death, Parley Pratt felt it appropriate to print a broadside advertisement for the Book of Mormon that included characters from the gold plates, which transcript Martin Harris carried to New York City in 1828. In bold letters, the broadside begins: “The Stick of Joseph, Taken from the Hand of Ephraim.”
That this interpretation of Ezekiel 37 became standard among the Saints by the mid-1830s does not mean, however, that it ceased to be controversial when those outside the faith encountered it. Charles B. Thompson, in an 1841 pamphlet written in defense of the Book of Mormon, felt it necessary to dedicate a full ten pages to explaining and then defending the Saints’ approach to Ezekiel’s prophecy. His treatment is more substantial than others from the period, and his defense against the usual objection is worth quoting in full:

But you next inquire why these records are called sticks? I answer, in the days of the prophet Ezekiel, the art of making paper was not known. Consequently, when they wrote, they were obliged to write something that they knew how to prepare for that purpose. They sometimes wrote upon skins, tanned for that purpose, which they called parchment; and sometimes upon bark which they called pappirus; and sometimes upon sticks or blocks of wood, hewed and prepared for that purpose. This last was the easiest prepared. Therefore, as the prophet Ezekiel was commanded to fit out a couple of writings, which were to be used by him, in the presence of the Israelites, merely as an ensample of what was to be done by the Lord in some future generation, he commanded him to make these
writings on sticks, because they were the easiest prepared for that purpose, of any material then in use. Consequently the records are called sticks, instead of books.\textsuperscript{17}

Phelps’s claim that Ezekiel 37 contains a simple prediction of the Book of Mormon’s coming forth became uncontroversial among the Saints as the first decade or so of the Church’s history progressed. At the same time, the interpretation was consistently regarded as nonobvious to outsiders, who raised the question of why Ezekiel’s “sticks” should be understood as records consistently enough to provoke further elaboration from members of the Church.\textsuperscript{18}

Defenses of Phelps’s interpretation of Ezekiel 37—naturally, without apparent awareness of its origins—would in fact grow more and more elaborate over time, culminating in strikingly learned defenses in the second half of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{19} It should be asked, however, whether faithful Saints have any reason to come to Phelps’s defense. How binding is the equation of Ezekiel 37’s “stick of Joseph” with the Book of Mormon?

A Text with Authority

Some readers of the preceding paragraphs are likely to feel as if a major source for the development of the early Saints’ interpretation of Ezekiel 37 has been left out. Such might point to section 27 of the Doctrine and Covenants, a revelation given in the summer of 1830, and ask why it should have been left out. Does that revelation not speak of “the Book of Mormon” as “the stick of Ephraim” (v. 5)? After just a glance at the relevant text in the Doctrine and Covenants, many would certainly feel compelled to say that a \textit{scriptural} source revealed through a \textit{prophet}—rather than a \textit{periodical} source printed by an average \textit{member} of the Church—lies behind the interpretation I have traced and reviewed so far here. And such might well wish to insist on the importance of the revelation’s origins being \textit{earlier} than the newspaper articles written by Phelps. Were the Saints of the 1830s not working in simple faithfulness to a revelation
given them by God? Taking a closer look at the matter, however, one finds that things are a good deal more complicated than they appear at first glance—not least because section 27 has a complex textual history.

I will come to such complications in the final section of this essay, however. It is probably best to begin simply by pointing out that the text of the revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants simply does not equate the Book of Mormon with “the stick of Ephraim.” It says, in the course of predicting a glorious last-days event, that among those present at the event in question will be “Moroni, whom I have sent unto you to reveal the Book of Mormon, containing the fulness of my everlasting gospel, to whom I have committed the keys of the record of the stick of Ephraim” (27:5). While this passage equates “the Book of Mormon” with the thing over which Moroni holds divinely ordained priesthood keys, the thing in question crucially is not “the stick of Ephraim” but “the record of the stick of Ephraim.” A few commentators have in fact pointed this out. This revelation thus in no way asks the Saints—whether early in the Church’s history or today—to understand Ezekiel’s “stick of Ephraim” as being a book or a record. It asks them and us to understand Ezekiel’s “stick of Ephraim” as having a book or a record that belongs most appropriately to them.

With the revelation in hand, then, Latter-day Saints have no obvious reason to defend the idea that the word stick or the underlying Hebrew word ‘iṣ (sometimes transliterated etz) actually refers to books or records or writing implements. They are entirely free to explore other possible meanings of Ezekiel’s prophecy. Lacking the felt need to defend a specific interpretation as if it were revealed from God, they can begin to inquire what else it might say. In fact, paying careful attention to the words of the revelation and taking the traditional interpretation as only one option among many, the Saints might develop a different attitude in
approaching an important biblical prophecy. Further, instead of potentially coming to the text in a defensive spirit, perhaps worried that biblical scholarship can only threaten their spiritual convictions, they can come to it in a spirit of openness, hoping to see how study might deepen and enrich their faith.

A vast consensus about the basic meaning of Ezekiel’s prophecy in fact exists among biblical scholars. The overall thrust of Ezekiel 37:15–19 is, in other words, entirely noncontroversial within the field of biblical scholarship. The point of the prophecy is to predict the reunification of divided Israel. As readers familiar with Israel’s history will know, the settled kingdom of Israel divided into rival nations shortly after the reigns of the great kings David and Solomon. The southern kingdom, ruled by kings from the tribe of Judah, bore the name of their kings’ tribe, while the northern kingdom, which scholars today often simply call the Kingdom of Samaria, bore several names: Israel, Joseph, and Ephraim. For centuries after Israel divided in two, its prophets spoke of a day when the nation’s wound would heal, when Judah and Joseph (or Judah and Ephraim, or the house of Judah and the house of Israel) would reunite as a single people under the guidance of Israel’s God. Among the most familiar such prophecies for Latter-day Saints (familiar because it is quoted in the Book of Mormon) is Isaiah 11:12: “And [the Lord] shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel [the northern kingdom], and gather together the dispersed of Judah [the southern kingdom] from the four corners of the earth.”

Although the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrian Empire eight centuries before Christ—in the event Latter-day Saints usually call “the scattering of the ten tribes”—“the ideal of eventual reunification was never completely lost from sight,” and “Ezekiel himself never loses sight of it” despite living more than a century after the fall and scattering of the northern
The fact is that “the idea of Israel as a unity was clearly very important to the prophets of the Old Testament and to none more so than Ezekiel.” It is the reunification of Judah and Joseph (or Ephraim) that Ezekiel is commanded to put on display before his fellows “through a symbolic act” the description of which “is so vivid that it is impossible to understand how it could be described as literary fiction.” Despite its vivid nature, however, the symbolic act “is a simple one, holding two sticks together end to end in [the prophet’s] hand, with the adjacent ends concealed so that they looked a single stick.” In Ezekiel’s hand, two pieces of wood become one. And when the prophecy goes on to provide a divinely provided explanation of the image, it says that the two sticks become one in God’s hand (see Ezekiel 37:19).

The basic meaning of Ezekiel’s prophecy is thus taken to be perfectly clear. A century and a half after the scattering of the northern kingdom of Joseph, standing among those exiled from the southern kingdom of Judah, Ezekiel predicts a restoration of all Israel, redemption for Judah and for Joseph. The book of Genesis predicts much the same thing, although it does so obliquely, as through a parable. The last third of Genesis tells the story of Israel’s twelve sons, centering the story on a division among them: a rivalry between Judah and Joseph for ascendancy. Judah rids himself of Joseph by selling him into slavery in Egypt, and once Joseph has risen to power in Egypt, he plays nasty tricks on Judah. The two, however, ultimately reconcile when Judah offers himself as a slave to save his youngest brother, and when Joseph comes to see that God has watched over all the family’s affairs. The story in Genesis, like the prophet Ezekiel, looks forward to the reconciliation of the two kingdoms, necessary to the fulfillment of the promises given to the unified nation.

The Book of Mormon’s prophets look forward to the same reconciliation, expressing the same hopes for the covenant people of Israel. Despite having their Old World origins in the kingdom.
kingdom of Judah (more than a century after the destruction and scattering of their native northern kingdom), the Nephites and the Lamanites are Josephites, an identity they retain through their whole history. Moroni draws from the prophecies of Ether, in fact, a direct connection between the story that concludes the book of Genesis and the whole of Nephite-Lamanite history. Ether prophesied, Moroni reports,

that a New Jerusalem should be built up upon this land [the New World], unto the remnant of the seed of Joseph, for which things there has been a type. For as Joseph brought his father down into the land of Egypt, even so he died there; wherefore, the Lord brought a remnant of the seed of Joseph out of the land of Jerusalem, that he might be merciful unto the seed of Joseph that they should perish not, even as he was merciful unto the father of Joseph that he should perish not. (Ether 13:6–7)

Lehi, moreover, quotes a divine word addressed directly to Joseph himself, anticipating reconciliation for the respective peoples that would come from him and his brother Judah. “The fruit of thy loins shall write,” the text reads, “and the fruit of the loins of Judah shall write; and that which shall be written by the fruit of thy loins, and also that which shall be written by the fruit of the loins of Judah, shall grow together” (2 Nephi 3:12).

As I have noted above, beginning with W. W. Phelps, early Latter-day Saints connected this very prophecy quoted by Lehi to the prophecy of Ezekiel 37. They were almost certainly right to do so. However, there is little reason to suggest that the repeating phrase “that which shall be written” in 2 Nephi 3 is meant to be equivalent to Ezekiel’s prophetic image of the two sticks. Rather, it seems best to take “the fruit of thy [Joseph’s] loins” and “the fruit of the loins of Judah” in 2 Nephi 3 to be respectively equivalent to “the stick of Joseph” and “the stick of Judah” in Ezekiel 37. It is perhaps significant, in fact, that, “as a rule,” the Hebrew word translated “stick” in Ezekiel’s prophecy (again, ‘iṣ or ets) “designates the tree . . . from which
one harvests fruit.” There is at least some reason to suspect that Ezekiel uses a productively ambiguous word, one that can mean “stick” and so allows for the visual demonstration he is to undertake before his fellow Jews in exile, but one that can also mean “tree” and so allows for a connection between this and other prophecies of Israel’s reconciliation and restoration. Ezekiel’s “trees” and Lehi’s or Joseph’s “fruit” are strikingly similar.

The revelation making up today’s section 27 of the Doctrine and Covenants completes the network of parallels between the prophecies in 2 Nephi 3 and Ezekiel 37. Ezekiel speaks of Judah and Joseph, as does Lehi. Ezekiel speaks of sticks or trees in parallel with Lehi’s talk of fruit. Ezekiel speaks of writing, as Lehi does in quoting from the ancient prophecy, but here the two prophetic texts seem to differ substantially. The prophecy Lehi quotes speaks of the fruit of Judah’s and Joseph’s loins as doing the work of writing. Ezekiel instead finds himself commanded to write, and to write on the sticks or trees of Judah and Joseph. Both prophecies speak of writing, then, but not in the same way. The writing God commands Ezekiel to do in the course of his symbolic act does not appear to be anything like producing a record. Rather, his task is essentially to label the two sticks or trees. The Hebrew l- (translated “for” in “for Judah” and “for Joseph” in the King James Version) is, Moshe Greenberg explains, “modeled on the customary indication of the owner on stamp seals.” The one stick or tree is marked as belonging to Judah, the other to Joseph. Ezekiel 37 thus lacks a direct parallel for 2 Nephi 3’s talk of “that which shall be written” by the descendants of Judah and Joseph. The revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants provides this missing element by speaking of “the record of the stick of Ephraim” (27:5). It adds the final element to create the full parallel. Ezekiel’s sticks or trees of Judah and Joseph eventually produce records, and it is over just the one of these that Moroni holds certain keys.
### Connections among Three Related Passages

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<td>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: 17 And join them one to another into one stick; and they shall become one in thine hand. . . . 19 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.</td>
<td>Wherefore, the fruit of thy loins shall write; and the fruit of the loins of Judah shall write; and that which shall be written by the fruit of thy loins, and also that which shall be written by the fruit of the loins of Judah, shall grow together, unto the confounding of false doctrines and laying down of contentions, and establishing peace among the fruit of thy loins, and bringing them to the knowledge of their fathers in the latter days, and also to the knowledge of my covenants, saith the Lord.</td>
<td>Behold, this is wisdom in me; wherefore, marvel not, for the hour cometh that I will drink of the fruit of the vine with you on the earth, and with Moroni, whom I have sent unto you to reveal the Book of Mormon, containing the fulness of my everlasting gospel, to whom I have committed the keys of the record of the stick of Ephraim.</td>
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With all these elements put together, the basic meaning of Doctrine and Covenants 27 becomes clear. Readers move too quickly if they assume at a glance that the text requires Ezekiel’s “sticks” to be equivalent to writings or records. Rather, the sticks or trees are whole nations, the unreconciled halves of a once-unified people. Each of these nations, however, eventually produces its own book or record—the Book of Mormon in the case of Joseph and the Bible in the case of Judah. What the revelation asks Latter-day Saints to affirm is not something biblical scholars would likely call a strained interpretation of Ezekiel 37 (making “sticks” or even “trees” into media for writing), but rather an understanding of just how Ezekiel’s (and other prophets’) predictions of the reunification of Israel is to unfold. Joseph is not forgotten. Rather, “out of the fruit of his loins the Lord God would raise up a righteous branch unto the house of Israel; not the Messiah, but a branch which was to be broken off, nevertheless, to be remembered in the covenants of the Lord” (2 Nephi 3:5). When this branch would be recognizable once again, thanks to the surfacing of a long-lost record written by ancient Josephites, then the records of the two halves of divided Israel could “grow together” (v. 12) and Ezekiel’s prophecy could be fulfilled.

Put simply, the revelation in Doctrine and Covenants 27 does not explain the original and mysterious meaning of Ezekiel’s prophecy or its symbols. Rather, it affirms the relatively plain prophecy and the obvious meaning of its symbols and then adds further revelation about how the prediction is, specifically, to be fulfilled. The revelation calls Latter-day Saints to take seriously the Bible’s promises about Israel’s gathering, and it provides them with some understanding about how God has quietly gone about preparing that gathering’s success.
Complications and a Lesson

I mentioned above that there are complications to be dealt with in considering Doctrine and Covenants 27—complications that go well beyond just noticing that the revelation does not equate “the stick of Ephraim” with any “record” but speaks rather of “the record of the stick of Ephraim.” Because this revelation is dated to 1830, and because W. W. Phelps and others only began to set out their interpretation of Ezekiel 37 in 1832, one might naturally surmise that it was the revelation that spurred the interpretation. Indeed, I brought the revelation into the discussion above precisely because some might be initially inclined to say that it was the revelation that introduced the idea of Ezekiel’s sticks being records, such that Phelps and others were simply working to defend what God had said to their prophet. As it turns out, however, there is no evidence that members of the Church were familiar with the relevant passage before 1835. It was thus apparently not until some three years after Phelps began to spell out his interpretation of Ezekiel 37—and at least one year after the interpretation had become a standard among the Saints—that the text of Doctrine and Covenants 27 as we know it today was in circulation.

The revelation in question was indeed received in the late summer or early fall of 1830. The earliest existing manuscript version of the text introduces it as “A Revelation to the Church given at Harmony susquehannah County State of Pennsylvania given to Joseph the Seer at a time that he went to purchase wine # for Sacrament & he was stoped by an Angel & he he spok to him as follows.” That manuscript copy of the revelation then produces the first four and a half verses of the text found today in the Doctrine and Covenants, but it skips everything from “and with Moroni” in the middle of verse 5 through to “which are on earth” at the end of verse 13, continuing instead with the canonical version’s verse 14. Ten or so verses of the revelation as it appears in the Doctrine and Covenants are entirely missing in the manuscript version. Included
in the omitted part is the reference to “the record of the stick of Ephraim.” This shorter, original version of the revelation then appeared in the March 1833 issue of The Evening and the Morning Star—the same newspaper printed by Phelps, in which he printed his interpretation of Ezekiel 37. It also appeared in truncated fashion in the 1833 Book of Commandments, the first printed volume that collected the revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

The expanded or full version of the revelation appeared for the first time only in 1835, in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. The same expanded version then appeared in a May 1836 Kirtland, Ohio, reprint of the March 1833 issue of The Evening and the Morning Star. Because the revelation, in its shorter version, had appeared in the March 1833 issue, it was decided to print it anew. But because the revelation had by that time appeared in an expanded version in the Doctrine and Covenants, the reprinting used the text found in the Doctrine and Covenants rather than that of the earlier issue of the newspaper. By the time that Parley Pratt’s A Voice of Warning was in circulation, the Saints were familiar with the expanded version of the revelation, with its reference to “the record of the stick of Ephraim.” But by the time that expanded version was promulgated, the Phelps interpretation of Ezekiel 37 was long established.

Joseph Smith provided no explanation himself for having dictated a shorter version of the revelation earlier and then publishing a longer and expanded version later. One of the prophet’s earliest followers, however, appears to have provided an explanation. Newel Knight, assisting in producing the prophet’s history in the 1840s in Nauvoo, Illinois, wrote about the occasion for the revelation’s original reception. He was part of the group that sent the prophet out to procure wine for a celebration of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Joseph Smith, Knight wrote, “had gone only a short distance, when he was met by a heavenly messenger, and received the following revelation. The first paragraph of which was written at this time and the remainder in the Sept
following.” These lines of explanation then appeared in the prophet’s official history. This might be a sufficient explanation for the developing nature of the revelation’s published text—a shorter version in manuscript and early printings, and then a dramatically expanded version in the Doctrine and Covenants. Many of the prophet’s revelations were, however, edited for publication in the Doctrine and Covenants, and it may be that Knight was simply trying to reconcile different dates attributed to the revelation (sometimes August and sometimes September in the manuscript and early print sources) rather than attempting to account of the textual development of the revelation.

There is good reason to date the expansion of the revelation to 1835, rather than to date the whole of the expanded revelation to 1830 (mysteriously left uncopied in the manuscript sources and unprinted in early printings of the text). As the editors of The Joseph Smith Papers Project point out, references to priesthood keys in the expanded parts of the revelation fit better in the mid-1830s. Further, though, and of more relevance here is the possibility that the expanded revelation was in part meant to respond to and to correct—gently but critically—the developing interpretation of Ezekiel 37 that had grown up in the previous several years. Whether one sees Joseph Smith as directly expanding the text by his own prophetic initiative, or whether one sees Joseph Smith as simply receiving the expanded text by direct revelation from God, it may be that the wording in the revelation’s canonical version regarding Moroni’s authoritative relationship to the Book of Mormon clarifies the relationship between Ezekiel 37 and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Might the prophet or even God himself have wished to affirm the Saints’ developed emphasis on the relevance of the Book of Mormon to Ezekiel’s prophecy, while nonetheless subtly replacing their initial (and well-intentioned) approach (which would eventually require intellectual defenses of an unnecessary interpretation) with a clearer one
(which would allow the more straightforward meaning of Ezekiel’s prophecy to prevail while revealing the particular way in which it would actually be fulfilled)?

There is of course no way, currently, of verifying this. There is nonetheless something rather satisfying about the idea that God or his prophet intervened—quietly and patiently—in matters of scriptural interpretation in 1835. There is something beautiful about the idea that God wishes to help the Saints to avoid unnecessary roadblocks in presenting the Restoration to the world, especially when these threaten to become tools for use in ideological battles among believers in different versions of Christianity. The early Saints were—like many members of the Church after them have been—looking for definitive biblical proof that the Book of Mormon would come forth, evidence of the Restoration external to the Restoration’s own texts. The 1835 expansion of the 1830 revelation (if that is in fact when the expansion took place) seems to point in another direction. Rather than presenting biblical proof for the Restoration, it asks readers to develop faith in the word. It beats the spear or sword of the Saints’ understanding of Ezekiel 37 into a pruninghook or a plowshare, a productive tool to assist the humble who look for the fruit of the tree of life rather than a weapon used to compel belief among the resistant.

A long history has in fact shown Ezekiel 37 to be largely ineffective as a weapon with which to defend the Restoration. As a prophecy of Israel’s restoration and reunification, Judah and Joseph together, it contains a real promise. The Book of Mormon adds to that prophetic promise an angelic word about just how God intends to see the promise fulfilled at last. But the Book of Mormon is to be received in faith. And for those who develop real faith in the Book of Mormon, Ezekiel 37 becomes a particularly important—and in fact, divinely confirmed—prophecy of what remains to be accomplished. Section 27 of the Doctrine and Covenants calls for revitalized trust in the ancient prophet’s predictions, in an otherwise unremarkable symbolic
act once performed in obscure circumstances. It calls for real and radical faith in the Restoration.49

What, then, does all this mean for the task every believer has to “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15)? The lesson, at the very least, is that there is reason to be slower and more deliberate in our attempts to defend the Restoration against its critics. William W. Phelps and other early Latter-day Saints unquestionably intended to do good by gathering biblical passages that might be interpreted as giving evidence for the faith claims of the Restoration. And Latter-day Saints generally—from as early as 1832 and continuing right into the twenty-first century—have for understandable reasons latched on to the defenses of the Book of Mormon produced by Phelps and his companions (as well as those produced by their intellectual heirs in the nearly two centuries since). I have argued, however, that our own canonized scriptures might contain a gentle rebuke for the way the earliest defenders went about their labor, and perhaps a gentle anticipatory rebuke for the way many defenders have gone about their labor since. There is reason to think that we assumed to know more than we know, and thus that we have often felt it necessary to defend things to which the Restoration lays no claim.

Defend the kingdom of God we must. But before we seek to do so, we ought first to obtain an understanding of the kingdom of God itself—a mature and staid understanding, rooted in real and devoted study. Then, I feel assured, all these things will be added to us.

The assignment can be found canonically in Doctrine and Covenants 57:11–12, received in July of 1831.

“The Book of Mormon,” *The Evening and the Morning Star*, June 1832, 8. I have retained original punctuation and orthography.

It may be that Phelps here puts in print what was already a common interpretation in early Latter-day Saint preaching. I am aware of no sources that confirm this, however. Phelps may be the interpretation’s originator.

Because Phelps would occasionally—although much more consistently only a decade later in Nauvoo, Illinois—serve as a kind of ghostwriter for Joseph Smith, one might argue that Phelps merely relayed an understanding of the text that originated with the Prophet. The discussion of Doctrine and Covenants 27 below, however, suggests otherwise.

“The Tribe of Joseph,” *The Evening and the Morning Star*, November 1832, 82. The words in brackets (“or records”) are Phelps’s own.


He does assert its intuitive nature once more in this article, however. After quoting Ezekiel 37:15–16, he writes, “The bible for the stick of Judah, and the book of Mormon for the stick of Joseph, in the hand of Ephraim, is all that need be said, upon these words.” “Book of Mormon,” 114.


Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 179. The reference to “the law of Ephraim” almost certainly involved comments on Hosea 8:11–12. Phelps referred to these verses obliquely in the third of his 1832–33 articles on Ezekiel 37 (citing Hosea not by chapter and verse but by paraphrasing Hosea 8:11–12), and Parley Pratt just a year later tied Hosea 8:12 to Ezekiel 37 in a systematic presentation of the Phelps interpretation.


P. P. Pratt, *A Voice of Warning and Instruction to All People, containing a Declaration of the Faith and Doctrine of the Church of the Latter Day Saints, Commonly Called Mormons* (New York: W. Sandford, 1837), 134. Pratt subtly weaves the language of 2 Nephi 3 in a summary paraphrase of Ezekiel’s prophecy: the two writings of Judah and Ephraim “are to become one in their testimony, and grow together in this manner” (134).


18 A good example of an early response to this interpretation from critics is that of J. B. Turner: “This union of sticks, whether we interpret literally, or metaphysically, or grandiloquently, or spiritually, must still refer to a union, not of two sticks, but of two people, viz—the ten tribes, or children of Israel, and the children of Judah.” With a smirk, Turner adds: “I suppose the Book of Mormon is here *literally* called a stick, because it is the instrument with which Joe Smith belabors the backs of his dupes.” J. B. Turner, *Mormonism in All Ages; Or the Rise, Progress, and Causes of Mormonism; With the Biography of Its Author and Founder, Joseph Smith, Junior* (New York: Platt and Peters, 1842), 188–89.

19 The most elaborate of these is Hugh Nibley’s five-part series of articles published in the Church’s magazine *The Improvement Era* in 1953. These have been gathered together into a single, flowing essay in Hugh Nibley, “The Stick of Judah,” in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1989), 1–48. Another influential scholarly defense of the Phelps interpretation is Keith H. Meservy, “Ezekiel’s Sticks and the Gathering of Israel,” *Ensign*, February 1987, 4–13. That the interpretation has continued into the present is clear from its recent use in Tad R. Callister, *A Case for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019), 190–91—not to mention its common use in classrooms and missionary work.


21 See Stephen E. Robinson and H. Dean Garrett, *A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 1:180–81: “Technically, the two ‘sticks’ or ‘wooden tablets’ are symbolic of the descendants or ‘houses’ of Ephraim and of Judah who had divided into two separate kingdoms . . . Hence, since the house of Ephraim is the ‘stick,’ Moroni is correctly said here to hold ‘the keys of the record of the stick of Ephraim,’ that is, the record of the house of Ephraim, which is the Book of Mormon. In contemporary LDS usage this fine distinction has been lost.” Robinson and Garrett go on, however, to say that “on another level of meaning, the common interpretation . . . is also correct, for the Bible and the Book of Mormon . . . may themselves symbolize the two houses that have been separated but are soon to be joined.” See also John W. Welch, Neal Rappleye, Stephen O. Smoot, David J. Larsen, and Taylor Halverson, eds., *Knowing Why: 137 Evidences That the Book of Mormon Is True* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2017), 135: “Readers should be careful to distinguish the symbols of the sticks (the tribes), the record of the sticks (the written scriptures), and the
covenants between Jehovah and His ancient people. This distinction between the sticks and the record of the sticks is made in Restoration scripture: “Behold . . . the hour cometh that I will drink of the fruit of the vine with you on the earth, and with Moroni, whom I have sent unto you to reveal the Book of Mormon, containing the fulness of my everlasting gospel, to whom I have committed the keys of the record of the stick of Ephraim” (D&C 27:5, emphasis added).

22 Of course, one form of belonging could be that of intellectual content to material medium, as if “the record” were the transmissible content and “the stick” the actual medium on which the content is inscribed. It is possible to interpret the wording of the revelation in a way that aligns with the interpretive tradition. What is crucial, though, is that it is in no way necessary to interpret it in that way. If “the stick” is something other than a writing medium—if it were a prophetic image for a people (Ephraim), for instance—then the record would be the book that belongs to that other kind of thing.

23 One might object to this statement as overly strong, precisely in response to the evidence compiled by scholars who have defended the traditional Latter-day Saint interpretation. Especially important are Hugh Nibley’s efforts (in the before-cited “The Stick of Judah”) and those of Keith Meservy (in addition to “Ezekiel’s Sticks and the Gathering of Israel,” see his Discoveries at Nimrud and the “Sticks” of Ezekiel [Provo, UT: FARMS, 1990]). If the Doctrine and Covenants, however, does not equate Ezekiel’s sticks with records, then such evidence seems to be beside the point. The evidence is academically interesting, but it remains part of a longer-term conversation among specialists. Until such specialists converge toward a consensus that the evidence in question compels an interpretation along lines traditional among Latter-day Saints, it remains the case that Latter-day Saints have neither a revelatory nor a scholarly need to argue that Ezekiel’s sticks are books.

24 In his study of Ezekiel 37, Hugh Nibley observed that “we are not bound by the opinions of even the most learned so long as there is no consensus among them,” and, “fortunately, we find ourselves in perfect agreement with them in all those points on which they agree among themselves.” “Stick of Judah,” 2.

25 Walther Zimmerli points out that “in Ezekiel the name ‘Israel’ is confined to the covenant nation as a whole,” such that it makes good sense “that he does not refer to the northern kingdom by its usual name Israel.” Instead, then, “Israel” is in the course of this prophecy only the name of individuals who attach themselves to either of the two divided nations: Ezekiel “mentions alongside Judah ‘the Israelites associated with him’ . . . and alongside Joseph ‘the whole house of Israel associated with him.’” Ezekiel 2: A Commentary on the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 25–48, trans. James D. Martin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 274.


29 Leslie C. Allen, Ezekiel 20–48 (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), 192. This is the standard interpretation. See also Moshe Greenberg, Ezekiel 21–37: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 758: “The prophet is ordered to enact a symbol with two sticks labeled ‘Judah’ and ‘Joseph’ which he is to hold together to form one long stick.” Hugh Nibley’s interesting contribution was, apart from attempting a defense of the traditional Phelps interpretation, to suggest ways that Ezekiel’s symbolic act might have been far less straightforward than commentators have traditionally assumed. Drawing on
his own realms of expertise, he argued that Ezekiel’s sticks were notched staffs used in certain ancient cultures to symbolize covenants made and promises fulfilled. See “Stick of Judah,” 7–22.

For references to the Josephite status of the Nephites and Lamanites scattered throughout the Book of Mormon, see 1 Nephi 5:14; 2 Nephi 3:5; Jacob 2:25; Alma 10:3; 46:23; 3 Nephi 5:21; 10:17; 15:12; Ether 13:6.

Zimmerli, Ezekiel 2, 273.

That Ezekiel’s word most simply means “tree” is also suggestive in that the prophecy Lehi quotes speaks of things that “grow together”—perhaps two trees that, originally distinct living entities, grow into each other and become one living organism. This is suggestive, but it also potentially muddies the waters somewhat. The two things that “grow together” in 2 Nephi 3 are not the respective seeds of Judah and Joseph, but the writings produced by those two peoples. If the phrase “grow together” is taken as suggestively connected to Ezekiel’s talk of two “trees,” then it would seem indeed that the “sticks” (or “trees”) are writings or records, despite the case I am making here that Doctrine and Covenants 27:5 distinguishes “the record” from “the stick” of Joseph. I concede that this is a possible reading. And I would in fact add that if one wishes to preserve the traditional reading initiated by Phelps, then the best way forward is not to argue that Ezekiel’s “sticks” are obscurely described writing media, but rather that they are trees (as the Hebrew word most naturally indicates) that Ezekiel then uses his hands to train toward each other, making them one as they “grow together.” Even if one wishes to pursue this other route and so to grant some credence to the traditional interpretation, it is still unnecessary to make elaborate arguments about how Ezekiel’s “sticks” should be regarded as writing media. My overarching point in this essay stands.

It might seem somewhat strained to equate, synecdochically, trees and their fruit. But in fact, Lehi just a chapter earlier contrasts the two famed trees from the Garden of Eden in just such a way, speaking of “an opposition; even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life” (2 Nephi 2:15).

Greenberg, Ezekiel 21–37, 753. See also Zimmerli, Ezekiel 2, 273: “one would have to think of a carved mark of ownership.” According to Zimmerli, even if a more substantial writing medium is meant in Ezekiel’s prophecy, all Ezekiel is commanded to produce is “a dedicatory inscription.”

Italicized, underlined, bolded, and highlighted phrases mark connections between any two of these passages or, in a couple of cases, across all three passages.

While Robinson and Garrett, in Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants, exhibit care and detailed examination in interpreting 27:5, many other such commentaries are shorter and so give less space than might be useful in this matter.


JSP, D1:165.

Much of the section’s verses 15–18 are also missing in the original manuscript. For the earliest extant text, see JSP, D1:165–66.

See JSP, RT2:72.

See JSP, RT2:489–91.

See JSP, RT2:277–79.


See JSP, H1:428–29.

For a helpful analysis of the significance of editing in one particular revelation’s case, see Grant Underwood, “‘The Laws of the Church of Christ’ (D&C 42): A Textual and Historical Analysis,” in *The Doctrine and Covenants: Revelations in Context*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, J. Spencer Fluhman, and Alonzo L. Gaskill (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2008), 108–41.

