

EZEKIEL 37:15-28  
Have the Two Sticks  
Been Reunited?

What is commonly called the two-stick prophecy, appearing in Ezekiel 37:15-28, has generated a great deal of attention since the late 1990s. This, in no small part, has been due to the large numbers of non-Jewish Believers entering into the Messianic movement, embracing their Hebraic Roots, and setting out on a life of Torah observance like Messiah Yeshua (Christ Jesus). Inevitably asked, or at least wondered by such people, is how much of a part of Israel they truly are. Do they just have citizenship in Israel's Kingdom because of their faith in Israel's Messiah (Ephesians 2:11-12; 3:6), being a part of the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16), being grafted-in to the olive tree (Romans 11:17-18)—*or* could such people at all be Israel on a physical level? Do these people have a lost Jewish ancestor, and that is why they are drawn into Messianic things—or are they even a part of what is commonly called the "Lost Tribes"? *Questions have certainly been asked, which have generated a wide number of responses.*

At the center of many of these questions is the oracle of **Ezekiel 37:15-28**. This short selection of fourteen verses has generated a huge amount of discussion for proponents, opponents, and skeptics of what has been widely touted as "the Two-House teaching." Many of today's Messianic Jews believe that all Israel was gathered together and restored in ancient times, and that nothing more really awaits. Many other people believe that a larger restoration of Israel awaits in the future eschaton. Many people do not want to touch the subject matter, considering it to be too flammable. Many people do not know what to do, especially with all of the opinions floating around, and are confused.

- What is the truth? Has all of Israel been restored, or is it something with more to be experienced in the future?
- Who is involved with this restoration? Only Jews? Only physical Israelites? Or all who acknowledge the God of Israel?

The only way we can know for certain is **by going to the text**. If we do this, we do not have any excuse to overlook or dismiss it with some kind of hyped-up

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rhetoric about the “two schticks.” And if we do this, we also have to acknowledge that the overriding message of Ezekiel 37:15-28 is about bringing all of God’s people together, and that we should not unnecessarily be driving people apart with either this prophetic word, anything we might relate to it, or some kind of associate agenda.

Are we really ready to see whether the two sticks of Ezekiel 37:15-28 have been reunited? I think that an exegetical paper on this passage of Scripture, engaged with scholastic proposals from the past half-century or so, **is long overdue**. *I have been quite curious for a while, as to what this investigation will uncover*. Why some of the biggest and most well-known leaders and teachers in the Two-House sub-movement have yet to write anything detailed on this prophecy, makes very little sense to me. Would they at least be interested in how other people have interpreted it: Jews, Christians, conservatives, and liberals? Or, could there be some things seen in the prophecy that they do not wish to recognize, because they have made this subject matter something a bit too simplistic and under-developed? Have some of today’s popular/populist Two-House proponents actually failed to follow some of this prophecy’s clear directives?

I have been interested in this prophecy for quite a while. I think that when we weigh not only the claims of the text, but also the different views that are out there, **we can safely say that the two sticks of Judah and Israel/Ephraim have not yet been reunited**. Yet this prophecy also has an important message of fostering unity among God’s people, which many of today’s popular Two-House teachers, who you are likely to encounter, have seriously overlooked or just absolutely not implemented.

### EZEKIEL 37:15-28 - HEBREW

[15] *v'yehi devar-ADONAI elai l'emor*

[16] *v'attah ben-adam qach-lekha etz echad u'ketov alayv l'Yehudah v'tivnei Yisrael (chavero) [chavarayv] u'leqach etz echad u'ketov alayv l'Yosef etz Efraim v'kol-Beit Yisrael (chavero) [chavarayv]*

[17] *v'qarav otam echad el-echad lekha l'etz echad v'hayu l'achadim b'yadekha*

[18] *v'k'asher yom'ru eleykha benei amekha l'emor ha'lo-taggid l'nu ma-elleh llak*

[19] *daveir alei'hem koh-amar Adonai ELOHIM hinneih ani loqieach et-etz Yosef asher b'yad-Efraim v'shiv'tei Yisrael (chavero) [chavarayv] v'natatti otam alayv et-etz Yehudah v'asitim l'etz echad v'hayu echad b'yadi*

[20] *v'hayu ha'etzim asher-tiktov alei'yhem b'yadkha l'eimeihem*

[21] *v'daveir alei'hem koh-amar Adonai ELOHIM hinneih ani loqech et-benei Yisrael mi'bbein ha'goyim asher halku-sham v'qibbatz'ti otam mi'saviv v'heiveiti otam el-admatam*

[22] *v'asiti otam l'goy echad b'erez b'harei Yisrael u'melek echad yih'yeh l'kulam l'melek v'lo (yih'yeh-)[yihyu]-od l'shnei goyim v'lo yeichatzu od l'shitei mamlakot od*

[23] *v'lo yitamm'u od b'gillulei'hem u'b'shiqqutzei'hem u'v'kol pish'eihem v'hosha'ti otam m'kol moshvotai'hem asher chatu b'hem v'tiharti otam v'hayu-li l'am v'ani ehyeh l'hem l'Elohim*

[24] *v'avdi David melek alei'hem v'roeh echad yih'yeh l'kulam u'v'mishpatai yeileiku v'chuqotai yish'meru v'asu otam*

[25] *v'yashvu al-ha'erez asher natatti l'avdi l'Ya'akov asher yashvu-bah avoteikhem v'yashvu aleyah*

*heimmah u'beneihem u'benei beneihem ad-olam v'David avdi nasi l'hem l'olam*

[26] *v'karati l'hem b'rit shalom b'rit olam yih'yeh otam u'netattim v'hir'beiti otam v'nattati et-miqdashi b'tokam l'olam*

[27] *v'hayah mishkani alei'hem v'hayiti l'hem l'Elohim v'heimmah yih'yu-li l'am*

[28] *v'yad'u ha'goyim ki ani ADONAI meqadeish et-Yisrael b'heyot miqdashi b'tokam l'olam*

[15] וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֵלַי לֵאמֹר:

[16] וְאַתָּה בֶן־אָדָם קַח־לְךָ עֵץ אֶחָד וּכְתֹב עָלָיו וְיִהְיֶההוּא לְבִנִי

יִשְׂרָאֵל (חִבְרוֹ) [חִבְרִיּוֹן] וּלְקַח עֵץ אֶחָד וּכְתֹב עָלָיו לְיוֹסֵף

עֵץ אֶפְרַיִם וְכָל־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל (חִבְרוֹ) [חִבְרִיּוֹן]

[17] וְקָרַב אַתֶּם אֶחָד אֶל־אֶחָד לְךָ לְעֵץ אֶחָד וְהָיוּ לְאַחֲדָיִם בְּיַדְךָ

[18] וְכֹאשֶׁר יֹאמְרוּ אֵלֶיךָ בְּנֵי עַמּוּךָ לֵאמֹר הֲלוֹא־תִגִּיד לָנוּ מִזֶּה־אֱלֹהָ לְךָ

[19] דַּבֵּר אֲלֵיהֶם כֹּה־אָמַר אֲדַנִּי יְהוָה הִנֵּה אֲנִי לִקַּח אֶת־עֵץ יוֹסֵף אֲשֶׁר

בְּיַד־אֶפְרַיִם וּשְׂבִטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (חִבְרוֹ) [חִבְרִיּוֹן] וְנָתַתִּי אוֹתָם עָלָיו אֶת־עֵץ

יְהוּדָה וְעֲשִׂיתֶם לְעֵץ אֶחָד וְהָיוּ אֶחָד בְּיַדִּי

[20] וְהָיוּ הָעֵצִים אֲשֶׁר־תִּכְתֹּב עֲלֵיהֶם בְּיַדְךָ לְעֵינֵיהֶם

[21] וְדַבֵּר אֲלֵיהֶם כֹּה־אָמַר אֲדַנִּי יְהוָה הִנֵּה אֲנִי לִקַּח אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִבְּיִן

הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר הִלְכִי־שָׁם וְקִבְצָתִי אֹתָם מִסְבִּיב וְהִבֵּאתִי אוֹתָם אֶל־אֲדָמָתָם

[22] וְעֲשִׂיתִי אֹתָם לְגוֹי אֶחָד בְּאֶרֶץ בְּהָרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמֶלֶךְ אֶחָד יִהְיֶה

לְכָלָם לְמֶלֶךְ וְלֹא (יִהְיֶה־) [וְיִהְיֶה] עוֹד לְשְׁנֵי גוֹיִם וְלֹא יִחַצּוּ עוֹד לְשְׁתֵּי

מַמְלָכוֹת עוֹד

[23] וְלֹא יִטְמְאוּ עוֹד בְּגִלּוּלֵיהֶם וּבַשְּׂקוּצִיהֶם וּבְכָל פְּשָׁעֵיהֶם וְהוֹשַׁעְתִּי אֹתָם

מִכָּל מוֹשְׁבֹתֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר חָטְאוּ בָהֶם וְטַהַרְתִּי אוֹתָם וְהִיִּדְלִי לָעַם וְאֲנִי

אֶהְיֶה לָהֶם לֵאלֹהִים

[24] וְעַבְדֵי דָוִד מֶלֶךְ עֲלֵיהֶם וְרוּעֵה אֶחָד יִהְיֶה לְכָלָם וּבְמִשְׁפָּטִי יִלְכוּ

וְחִקְתִּי יִשְׁמְרוּ וַעֲשׂוּ אוֹתָם

[25] וְיִשְׁבוּ עַל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לְעַבְדֵי לְיַעֲקֹב אֲשֶׁר וְשִׁבְדִּיבָה אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם

וְיִשְׁבוּ עָלֶיהָ הַמָּה וּבְנֵיהֶם וּבְנֵיהֶם עַד־עוֹלָם וְדָוִד עַבְדִּי נָשִׂיא

לָהֶם לְעוֹלָם

[26] וְכִרְתִּיתִי לָהֶם בְּרִית שְׁלוֹם בְּרִית עוֹלָם יִהְיֶה אוֹתָם וְנִתְתִּים וְהִרְבִּיתִי

אוֹתָם וְנָתַתִּי אֶת־מִקְדָּשִׁי בְּתוֹכָם לְעוֹלָם

[27] וְהָיָה מִשְׁכְּנִי עֲלֵיהֶם וְהָיִיתִי לָהֶם לֵאלֹהִים וְהָמָה יִהְיֶה־לִּי לָעַם

[28] וְיָרְעוּ הַגּוֹיִם כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה מְקַדֵּשׁ אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהִיּוֹת מִקְדָּשִׁי בְּתוֹכָם

לְעוֹלָם

## EZEKIEL 37:15-28 - ENGLISH

NASU

NJPS

[15] The word of the LORD came again to me saying, [16] "And you, son of man, take for yourself one stick and write on it, 'For Judah and for the sons of Israel, his companions'; then take another stick and write on it, 'For Joseph, the stick of

[15] The word of the LORD came to me: [16] And you, O mortal, take a stick and write on it, "Of Judah and the Israelites associated with him"; and take another stick and write on it, "Of Joseph -- the stick of Ephraim -- and all

Ephraim and all the house of Israel, his companions.' [17] Then join them for yourself one to another into one stick, that they may become one in your hand. [18] "When the sons of your people speak to you saying, 'Will you not declare to us what you mean by these?' [19] say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I will take the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel, his companions; and I will put them with it, with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, and they will be one in My hand.'" [20] "The sticks on which you write will be in your hand before their eyes. [21] Say to them, "Thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I will take the sons of Israel from among the nations where they have gone, and I will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; [22] and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king will be king for all of them; and they will no longer be two nations and no longer be divided into two kingdoms. [23] "They will no longer defile themselves with their idols, or with their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions; but I will deliver them from all their dwelling places in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them. And they will be My people, and I will be their God. [24] "My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd; and they will walk in My ordinances and keep My statutes and observe them. [25] They will live on the land that I gave to Jacob My servant, in which your fathers lived; and they will live on it, they, and their sons and their sons' sons, forever; and David My servant will be their prince forever. [26] I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will place them and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever. [27] "My dwelling place

the House of Israel associated with him." [17] Bring them close to each other, so that they become one stick, joined together in your hand. [18] And when any of your people ask you, "Won't you tell us what these actions of yours mean?" [19] answer them, "Thus said the Lord GOD: I am going to take the stick of Joseph -- which is in the hand of Ephraim -- and of the tribes of Israel associated with him, and I will place the stick of Judah upon it and make them into one stick; they shall be joined in My hand." [20] You shall hold up before their eyes the sticks which you have inscribed, [21] and you shall declare to them: Thus said the Lord GOD: I am going to take the Israelite people from among the nations they have gone to, and gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. [22] I will make them a single nation in the land, on the hills of Israel, and one king shall be king of them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms. [23] Nor shall they ever again defile themselves by their fetishes and their abhorrent things, and by their other transgressions. I will save them in all their settlements where they sinned, and I will cleanse them. Then they shall be My people, and I will be their God. [24] My servant David shall be king over them; there shall be one shepherd for all of them. They shall follow My rules and faithfully obey My laws. [25] Thus they shall remain in the land which I gave to My servant Jacob and in which your fathers dwelt; they and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, with My servant David as their prince for all time [26] I will make a covenant of friendship with them -- it shall be an everlasting

<p>also will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be My people. [28] And the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forever.'""</p>	<p>covenant with them -- I will establish them and multiply them, and I will place My Sanctuary among them forever. [27] My Presence shall rest over them; I will be their God and they shall be My people. [28] And when My Sanctuary abides among them forever, the nations shall know that I the LORD do sanctify Israel.</p>
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## The Context and the Purpose of the Prophecy

The prophecies contained in the Book of Ezekiel were delivered to the Jewish exiles in Babylon, likely sometime between 593-573 B.C.E., with the Book of Ezekiel probably reaching its final textual form sometime after the exile in the later 500s B.C.E. Many of the messages that we see in Ezekiel were given to motivate the Jewish exiles, so that they would know that in spite of their sins which caused their expulsion to Babylon, God had not totally forgotten about them, nor was it His intention to never restore Israel. He would erase their record of sin and return them to their Land.

The two-stick prophecy of Ezekiel 37:15-28 occurs within a much larger narrative of various messages of hope (33:1-48:35). It is wedged between a description of the Prophet Ezekiel as a watchman (33:1-20), an explanation of Jerusalem's fall (33:21-33), a prophetic word delivered against false shepherds (ch. 34), judgment declared against Mount Seir and Edom (ch. 35), a prophetic word on how the mountains of Israel will be fruitful and how God's people will be given new hearts (ch. 36), and the valley of dry bones depicting the resurrection of Israel (37:1-14). After the two-stick prophecy, prophetic oracles are delivered against Gog and Magog (chs. 38-39), and the remainder of the Book of Ezekiel is spent discussing the reconstruction of the Temple, and the inauguration of a new spiritual order (chs. 40-48).

It is not at all surprising, seeing the various themes of Ezekiel, why many people are confused, and why many do not really know how to handle the various symbols and images employed by the Prophet. Are these images to be taken literally or figuratively? Will there be a real restoration of Israel to the Promised Land, or should we allegorize these passages? Does this concern an ancient Sixth Century B.C.E. scene, or something to occur in the distant future? Will there be a physical Temple reconstructed (for a future Millennial Kingdom), where God's presence will manifest itself on Earth, or is this just symbolic of the *ekklesia* and God's people possessing His Spirit? Anyone who chooses to give some kind of significance to the two-stick prophecy of Ezekiel 37:15-28 is admittedly walking

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into a place where this Divine oracle is actually one of the least controversial words, given what is seen in the surrounding chapters.<sup>1</sup>

The two-stick prophecy of Ezekiel 37:15-28, no different than the other prophetic words seen in chs. 33-48, is seriously meant to inspire the Jewish exiles in Babylon. God had not abandoned them, and by His power He was going to accomplish some awesome works. The Prophet Ezekiel, in his unique style, uses physical objects such as *etzim* (עֵצִים)—pieces of wood—to visually show his audience that the Lord is going to perform important activity. Daniel I. Block observes how “There are no convincing reasons, historical or otherwise, to deny Ezekiel credit for both the visual and oral presentation of this prophecy. In a text that affirms his literacy, he may even have been responsible for its transcription”<sup>2</sup> (i.e., 37:16, 20).

The circumstance that the two-stick prophecy intends to reverse is the division of the Ancient Kingdom of Israel, which had been split since King Solomon’s death, in 921-922 B.C.E. (1 Kings 12). The theme of the two-stick prophecy not only concerns the general restoration of Israel, but the reunion of Israel’s *divided* Kingdom. The Southern Kingdom, which had remained loyal to the Davidic monarchy, was known as Judah (1 Kings 12:22-44), with the Northern Kingdom known as either Israel, or by the name of its largest tribe, Ephraim (i.e., Hosea 5:3, 5, 11-14). Ephraim is also used as the name of the Northern Kingdom, possibly because its first monarch, Jeroboam, was from the tribe of Ephraim (1 Kings 11:26). The Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim had been corporately taken away into captivity by the Assyrian Empire in 722-721 B.C.E., with Judah being taken away in a series of exiles by the Babylon Empire in 606, 597, and 586 B.C.E.<sup>3</sup> Somehow and in some way, God is going to miraculously bring all of Israel back together.

Ezekiel has been prophesying on what is to come to Israel (chs. 34-39), most notably including a resurrection of dry bones (37:1-14). When we arrive at the two-stick prophecy, we see how the reunion of Judah and exiled Israel/Ephraim is the critical point where everything crescendos, the fulfillment of which can then lead to the succeeding events and establishment of the new Temple. Iain M. Duguid considers how this oracle “acts as a hinge, both summing up the oracles of hope in chapters 34-37 and looking forward to the establishment of the new sanctuary (chs. 40-48) after the...convulsion of evil in chapters 38-39.”<sup>4</sup> From a literary standpoint, one cannot avoid the significance that the two-stick prophecy of Ezekiel 37:15-28 plays within the larger narrative of events seen in Ezekiel chs. 33-34 all the way to ch. 48.

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<sup>1</sup> For some further discussion, consult the author’s entry for the Book of Ezekiel in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel I. Block, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 394.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Charles H. Dyer, “Ezekiel,” in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1299.

<sup>4</sup> Iain M. Duguid, *NIV Application Commentary: Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 435.

Because of the importance of the two-stick prophecy within the expectation of Israel's restoration, it should not be surprising that there does exist the very real possibility of being burned when trying to read and interpret it. Charles H. Dyer has to mention one view of how, "Some have claimed that the two sticks represent the Bible (the stick of Judah) and the Book of Mormon (the stick of Joseph). However, this assertion ignores the clear interpretation in verses 18-28 and seeks to impose a foreign meaning on the sticks."<sup>5</sup> One only need to add to this mix various speculations made by both British-Israel and Christian Identity people, and their many offshoots, and the significant anti-Semitism they promote. For some, the association of these groups to this prophecy is just too much, and so they think that it is best to avoid the prophecy of Ezekiel 37:15-28 altogether. But even though there have been abuses with the two-stick prophecy, and no one can deny how aberrant groups have interpreted it throughout recent religious history—it is nevertheless a part of the Biblical canon that cannot be avoided.

At the exact opposite end of the theological spectrum, one encounters the thoughts and sentiments of liberal interpreters who engage with Ezekiel 37:15-28. Katheryn Pfisterer Darr makes the remark of how God's "plan for the people encompasses not only those who survived the collapse of Judah and their offspring, but also the descendants of those northern Israelites who, in the wake of Assyria's defeat of their kingdom in 721 BCE, were dispersed across the Assyrian empire a century and a half earlier. Farfetched as this might sound, it was a pulsating hope at the time."<sup>6</sup> Yet, liberals think that this is not something we are to really take that serious today. Darr further notes various challenges that have existed, concerning the authenticity of Ezekiel's prophecy, specifically in how "from the perspective of many modern-day commentators...[there is] evidence to suggest that in addition to clarifying glosses interspersed here and there, the original sign-act account was subsequently expanded..."<sup>7</sup> by later redactors. So, liberals say how much of the two-stick prophecy is real cannot be known for certain, and we need not give it too much significance.

While most proponents of a larger restoration of Israel yet to come, adhere to the view that the prophecy of Ezekiel 37:15-28 is yet to be fulfilled—few are actually aware of the wide diversity of interpretations that exist in contemporary theology today. Jewish and Christian commentators have had more time to deal with the Book of Ezekiel than any of today's Messianics. Even though one can correctly assume that laypersons have been largely ignorant of the two-stick prophecy, it is not right for us to assume that Rabbis and theologians have been totally ignorant. Anyone, who has had to write a commentary on the Book of Ezekiel, has had to interpret it on some level. This most especially includes conservative evangelical interpreters, who consider 37:15-28 to be an authentic

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<sup>5</sup> Dyer, in *BKCOT*, 1299.

<sup>6</sup> Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, "The Book of Ezekiel," in Leander E. Keck, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 6 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 1505.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

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Ezekielian prophecy that somehow concerns the future—with whom we will be engaging the most. As John B. Taylor summarizes it,

“[I]n the restored Israel, the old divisions of north and south will be abolished and the nation will be united in God’s hand. The interpretation of this, however, raises a number of controversial issues. If the inhabitants of Israel/Samaria were scattered throughout the Assyrian Empire, is there any prospect of their descendants being literally brought back, with the exiles from Judah, into the promised land? Or are we to understand ‘Israel’ as consisting simply of those men of northern tribal origin who had associated themselves with [sic] Judah from time to time? Do we allegorize it all and see it simply as a picture of the church, the new Israel, united in the future kingdom of God?”<sup>8</sup>

These are only a few of the interpretations of Ezekiel 37:15-28 which are present in today’s theology. Taylor is right to recognize, though, that the vision foresees the removal of divisions between Northern and Southern Israel, and the establishment of a single sanctuary, reversing the split enacted after Solomon’s death (1 Kings 12:25-33). And, not to be overlooked is how Ezekiel’s word is to be applied to the daily mission and focus of today’s Believers, where we strive to see the Lord’s people all brought together as one in Him.

In our examination of this prophetic oracle, we will assume that the material is more-or-less authentic to Ezekiel himself, but that Ezekiel was probably not the one who transcribed it in its final form. Our responsibility is to deal with the text in its final, canonical form, recognizing how all of what is seen in Ezekiel 37:15-28 is concurrent with the will of God and overall message of the Prophets, even if a few points here or there might have been added by a later editor. Leslie C. Allen specifically describes how “vv 15-28 represent a basic text that has been subsequently amplified, as is the case with very many of the literary units in the book. Its early part derives from Ezekiel, but seems to be later than vv 1-13, which still reflect the shock of the catastrophe in 587 B.C. It looks back at the crisis reflectively...and ponders deeply upon its reversal.”<sup>9</sup> He notes his view that whether vs. 23-24a are original to what Ezekiel first delivered, or are a further reflection on Israel’s restoration, “is not easily decided.”<sup>10</sup>

I think that if those ultimately responsible for compiling Ezekiel’s prophecies may have noted some additional things, not explicitly stated by Ezekiel in his act of putting the two sticks together—we need not think that Ezekiel’s prophecy has been “tampered” with. Such redactors had to be just as Divinely inspired as the Prophet Ezekiel himself was, in their work of preserving his oracles for future generations of God’s people.

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<sup>8</sup> John B. Taylor, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Ezekiel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1969), 239.

<sup>9</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ezekiel 20-48*, Vol 29 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 192.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

## The Prophecy

**15** The word of the LORD came again to me saying, **16** “And you, son of man, take for yourself one stick and write on it, ‘For Judah and for the sons of Israel, his companions’; then take another stick and write on it, ‘For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim and all the house of Israel, his companions.’ **17** Then join them for yourself one to another into one stick, that they may become one in your hand.

37:15 The two-stick prophecy begins with the important indicator of its origin. Ezekiel says “a message came to me from the LORD” (NLT). The term *davar* (דָּבָר) simply relates to “word,” or quite possibly also an “**affair, thing**” (CHALOT).<sup>11</sup> This *davar-ADONAI* (דְּבַר־יְהוָה) coming to Ezekiel is simply a recognition of the prophecy’s Divine origin, as “The revelatory work of God is often expressed by ‘the word of the Lord came’ to or upon a person” (TWOT).<sup>12</sup> Being such a Divine matter, any interpreter of Ezekiel’s prophecy that follows has to make sure that he or she is sure to render due honor to the Source from which it came, and His intention for His people. It is a very important matter to our Heavenly Father, which is not to be mocked, misappropriated, or abused.

37:16 The Prophet Ezekiel is instructed by the Lord to take a physical object and perform a symbolic act. He tells him, “son of man, take for yourself one stick and write on it.” When reading this prophecy, we are not at all unjustified to ask ourselves who this *ben-adam* (בֶּן־אָדָם) is. Is it simply describing Ezekiel as a “mortal” (NRSV/NJPS), or is more intended? In v. 19 we later see how it is God Himself who fuses Israel together. While Ezekiel might be the one called to pick up a piece of wood and write on it, is it at all inappropriate to recognize this *ben-adam* as ultimately being the Son of Man, Yeshua the Messiah? Scholars largely recognize how “Son of Man” is the one term that the Messiah refers to Himself as in the Gospels more than any other, originating from the various Danielic references to the *bar enash* (בַּר אֲנָשׁ) who is given ultimate power and dominion (Daniel 7:13-14).<sup>13</sup> It would certainly not be a stretch to conclude that even though Ezekiel takes the stick and presents it to his audience of Jewish exiles, that it is ultimately God’s Messiah who must be the actual One who restores Israel.

What does the physical object or stick represent? Ezekiel says how the Lord instructed him, “take for yourself one stick and write on it, ‘For Judah and for the sons of Israel, his companions’; then take another stick and write on it, ‘For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim and all the house of Israel, his companions.’” The first stick represents the Southern Kingdom of Judah, and the second stick represents the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim. *But is it really a “stick”?*

The Hebrew term *etz* (עֵץ) has a variety of possible meanings, including both the plural and singular “**trees**” and “**tree**,” as well as “**wood**” and “**timber**”

<sup>11</sup> CHALOT, 67.

<sup>12</sup> Earl S. Kalland, “dābār,” in TWOT, 1:180.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. I. Howard Marshall, “Son of Man,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, pp 775-781.

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(*CHALOT*).<sup>14</sup> The two objects that Ezekiel holds in his hands can very well be considered sticks, but they could just be some generic pieces of wood that he picked up off the ground. S. Fisch considers the *etz* to be an “emblem of the royal sceptre.”<sup>15</sup> One of the most intriguing views of what the *etz* represents, compared to the rest of them, is reflected in the NEB extrapolation: “take one leaf of a wooden tablet.”

Are the two pieces of wood that the Prophet Ezekiel is called to take some kind of a wooden tablet or board? This position is especially argued by Block, with supports given from various Ancient Near Eastern sources.<sup>16</sup> His viewpoint is highlighted by the fact that the prophecy does not envision the reunification of the monarchies of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms—with the *etz* representing some kind of regal staff—but of the Kingdoms themselves:

“Nowhere is the union of the northern dynasty with the Davidic house contemplated; on the contrary, the northern kingdom was considered an aberration from the beginning and all its kings illegitimate...Here [Ezekiel] takes extra pains to link these wooden objects with their respective nations rather than their kings, and in the interpretation to follow he will highlight Yahweh’s activity of bringing the ‘descendants of Israel’ to their own land and making them one nation.”<sup>17</sup>

The necessity of the pieces of wood that Ezekiel is to join together being writing tablets, in the view of his audience, at least to Block,<sup>18</sup> is substantiated by some other prophetic words:

“Now go, write it on a tablet [*luach*, לוח] before them and inscribe it on a scroll, that it may serve in the time to come as a witness forever” (Isaiah 30:8).

“Then the LORD answered me and said, ‘Record the vision and inscribe it on tablets [*luchot*, לוחות], that the one who reads it may run’” (Habakkuk 2:2).

With these other prophecies in view, it is certainly not outside of the realm of possibilities for the two pieces of wood for Ezekiel to be holding to be some kind of ancient writing tablets. This could be a bit more significant for the Prophet’s audience than just two generic sticks, which he might have difficulty writing on. From this angle, Christopher J.H. Wright connects this to what might make the most sense to Twenty-First Century people, paraphrasing v. 16 with, “Take a single sheet of notepaper and write this on it...Then take another single sheet of notepaper and write this on it...Now glue them together down the middle to make the two sheets into one new single sheet.”<sup>19</sup>

The reason for some that writing tablets or boards, as opposed to just generic pieces of wood, are to be preferred, is because upon them the redemptive work of

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<sup>14</sup> *CHALOT*, 279.

<sup>15</sup> S. Fisch, *Soncino Books of the Bible: Ezekiel* (London: Soncino, 1950, 1994), 249.

<sup>16</sup> Block, pp 397-400.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 399.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 401.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 312.

God can be transcribed. For some interpreters it is insufficient for just *Yehudah* (יהודה), *Yosef* (יוסף) or *Efraim* (אֶפְרַיִם), and then some other scribbling, to be whittled onto a common stick, which may not even possess enough space to contain more than a few words. In Block's estimation, "the boards offer visual affirmation of the truth declared in the following promises that *all* Israel would participate in the envisioned restoration. No tribe or clan would be missing...once Ezekiel had presented his interpretation in the sign action (vv. 21-28), he would have used these tablets to record the oracle."<sup>20</sup> This reason is certainly compelling, because the Prophet Ezekiel would have been unable to record the reunification oracle on a stick that only gave him a few inches to carve into. Furthermore, writing tablets or boards could be used later as a primary source to compile Ezekiel's prophecies into their canonical form.

Block's view of the wooden objects to be fused together, as writing tablets or boards, is both interesting and compelling, although it is speculative. It is possible that the Prophet Ezekiel used some kind of ancient writing board, but then again it may be unlikely as Ezekiel has used more common objects to make previous points to his audience.<sup>21</sup> The Septuagint renders *etz* as *hrabdos* (ῥάβδος), itself having a variety of possible meanings, including "a rod, wand, stick, switch," but here most likely pertaining to "a staff of office" (LS).<sup>22</sup> Allen, but more because of the wider themes of kingship (v. 24), opts for the *etz* being some kind of regal staff. He remarks, "The sticks have a national significance insofar as they suggest the institution of monarchy that represents the nation."<sup>23</sup>

Using staffs is also an important feature seen throughout the Tanach. The rod or *matteh* (מַטֵּה) of Aaron actually sprouted almond blossoms:

"Moses therefore spoke to the sons of Israel, and all their leaders gave him a rod apiece, for each leader according to their fathers' households, twelve rods, with the rod of Aaron among their rods. So Moses deposited the rods before the LORD in the tent of the testimony. Now on the next day Moses went into the tent of the testimony; and behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds. Moses then brought out all the rods from the presence of the LORD to all the sons of Israel; and they looked, and each man took his rod. But the LORD said to Moses, 'Put back the rod of Aaron before the testimony to be kept as a sign against the rebels, that you may put an end to their grumblings against Me, so that they will not die'" (Numbers 17:6-10).

The post-exilic word of Zechariah 11:7, believed by many to be based on this oracle in Ezekiel, uses a staff or *maqeil* (מַקְעֵל) to make an important point:

"So I pastured the flock *doomed* to slaughter, hence the afflicted of the flock. And I took for myself two staffs: the one I called Favor and the other I called Union; so I pastured the flock."

<sup>20</sup> Block, pp 404-405.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 399; Darr, in *NIB*, 6:1507.

<sup>22</sup> *LS*, 714.

<sup>23</sup> Allen, 193.

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Also not to be overlooked, per what *etz* may mean in Ezekiel, is how the Apostle Paul describes Israel as an olive tree, with natural branches broken off, and with wild branches grafted in (Romans chs. 9-11).

Weighing all the options together—whether we are to view Ezekiel’s *etz* as a writing tablet, a regal staff or scepter, or just a stick or generic piece of wood—the default option is to just call it a **stick**. We can safely disregard *etz* as being a tree, simply because of the fact that unless Ezekiel possessed superhuman strength, or there were some really small bonsai-like trees convenient, it would be difficult to see him pick up two trees and try to join them together. While I personally find Block’s writing tablet hypothesis intriguing, as have others, for the sake of our examination we will simply refer to what Ezekiel joins together as sticks or pieces of wood. The prophetic point being made more than anything else is that they are to become one. The term *echad* (אֶחָד) or “one” is used a total of ten times in this passage—an emphasis on the theme of unity that God will bring to Israel.

Anyone who reads the two-stick prophecy of Ezekiel 37:15-28 recognizes how, on the whole, it is a message of the unity that is to take place between Judah and Israel/Ephraim. Everyone agrees that the stick marked “*Yehudah*,” and the stick marked “*Yosef*” or “*Efraim*,” represents the people of either the Southern Kingdom or the Northern Kingdom. But there is no agreement about how to render the wider two clauses *l’Yehudah v’livnei Yisrael (chavero) [chaverayv]* (יִשְׂרָאֵל (חֵבְרוֹ) [חֵבְרִיִּים]) and *l’Yosef etz Efraim v’kol-Beit Yisrael (chavero) [chaverayv]* (יִשְׂרָאֵל (חֵבְרוֹ) [חֵבְרִיִּים] (לְיִזְרְכָל עֵץ אֶפְרַיִם וְכָל־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל (חֵבְרוֹ)). There are some textual variants in the manuscript traditions that have to be weighed, and we may also have to consider a slightly wider window of restoration of Israel prophecies in order to make a determination.

First of all, how is the preposition *l’* (לְ) to be viewed in what the two sticks represent? It can mean to, for, concerning, or indicate some kind of possession,<sup>24</sup> as in “belonging to” (NIV). Does each stick represent either Judah and Israel as a group of people, or does each stick represent a power that each possesses? Does it at all regard something that either Judah and Israel must give up to be reunited, or are these just symbols? Block argues that we should view *l’* “as a *lamed* of reference,”<sup>25</sup> meaning that *l’Yehudah* and *l’Yosef* mean “Pertaining to Judah....pertaining to Joseph...”

Secondly, if one is comparing Bible translations, it is not too difficult to discern a difference between versions like the NASU, when compared against either the RSV or NIV. One speaks of Judah and Israel having some kind of “companions.” The other two (and also NRSV, NJPS, ESV, HCSB, etc.) have something like “and the Israelites associated with him...and all the house of Israel associated with him” (NIV). From this point of view, rather than the people of the House of Judah, and the people of the House of Israel/Ephraim, both possessing some kind of associated

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<sup>24</sup> BDB, pp 510-518.

<sup>25</sup> Block, 403.

companions from outside themselves—the only “companions” seen are the natural born Israelites who make up either House.

We cannot overlook the fact that there is a difference between the Qere (what is read) and Ketiv (what is written) of v. 16.<sup>26</sup> What is read is *chaverayv* (חֲבֵרָיִי), which is implied to be “the Israelites/all the House of Israel associated with him” (NJPS), only members of either Judah and Israel/Ephraim. What is written is *chavero* (חֲבֵרֹו), simply meaning “his companion(s),” which can be viewed as a third group of people connected to Judah and Israel/Ephraim, but still a third group of people. Most interpreters choose to follow the Ketiv rendering.<sup>27</sup>

The prophecy of the two sticks was originally directed to a Jewish audience in Babylonian exile. They would probably have thought that a reunion with the scattered Northern Kingdom was utterly impossible, and so we certainly cannot deny how the two sticks the Prophet Ezekiel is directed to present to them principally represent these two divided kingdoms. Those of the exiled Southern Kingdom, who made up the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, were intended to be encouraged by this oracle. The *ArtScroll Chumash* notes for us,

“[T]he prophecy of this *Haftarah* [connected to *V'yigash*, Genesis 44:18-47:27] was a source of great comfort to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, for even if their long-lost comrades of the Northern Kingdom were assured that they would again become part of the nation, surely the two southern tribes could be certain that God was not forsaking them.”<sup>28</sup>

The (assimilated) exiles of the Northern Kingdom were not in Babylon to hear Ezekiel make his prophecies, but those from the exiled Southern Kingdom certainly were. All are agreed that at least two groups of people—Judah and Israel/Ephraim—are involved in this restoration.

But is there really a third group, a group of “companions”? Is the Qere or Ketiv right? The singular term *chaver* (חֵבֵר) can mean “united, associate, companion” (*BDB*).<sup>29</sup> It appears in Judges 20:11, where the people of Israel are gathered together “as one man—companions”<sup>30</sup> (YLT). Those of Jerusalem are chastised in Isaiah 1:23 with “Your rulers are rebels and companions of thieves.”<sup>31</sup> In Song of Songs we see references to “the flocks of your companions”<sup>32</sup> and “O you who sit in the gardens, *My* companions<sup>33</sup> are listening for your voice” (Song of Songs 1:7; 8:13). *Chaver* has a variance of usages, which although can be a reference to all of those people who compose either Judah or Israel/Ephraim, could also be a reference to people who have joined alongside Judah or Israel/Ephraim, and are involved along with them in the restoration process.

<sup>26</sup> Aron Dotan, ed., *Biblia Hebraica Leningradensia* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 784.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Block, 396 fn#11.

<sup>28</sup> Scherman, *Chumash*, 1145.

<sup>29</sup> *BDB*, 288.

<sup>30</sup> Heb. *k'ish echad chaverim* (כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד חֲבֵרִים).

<sup>31</sup> Heb. *v'chaverei gannavim* (וְחֲבֵרֵי גַנָּבִים).

<sup>32</sup> Heb. *chaverekha* (חֲבֵרְיָךְ).

<sup>33</sup> Heb. *chaverim* (חֲבֵרִים).

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If one chooses to follow the Ketiv of v. 16, *chavero* (חַבְרֹוֹ), then the singular *chaver* (חֶבֶר) would need to be rendered somewhere along the lines of “an associate, a companion, fellow” (*Gesenius’ Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*).<sup>34</sup> While “his companions” (NASU) is seen, “his associates” would also be a proper translation as well.

That there is some group of people associated with Judah and Israel/Ephraim is certainly implied by v. 16. But, are these people those of the Israelite tribes that made up the Northern or Southern Kingdoms or associated companions from the nations, to be likened unto the *gerim* (גֵּרִים) or sojourners seen in the Torah?<sup>35</sup> It would seem a bit redundant to include either the Qere *chaverayv* or Ketiv *chavero*, when both Judah and Joseph/Ephraim referenced, would be an indicator enough for the people of the two divided Kingdoms. The presence of *chavero*, “his companions” or “his associates,” points us in the direction of more people than just the descendants of either the Southern Kingdom of Judah or Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim, being involved in the restoration process.

The Greek LXX has some very interesting renderings that need to be considered in our deliberations. The first rod concerns *Ioudan kai tous huious Israēl tous proskeimenous ep’ auton* (Ιουδαν καὶ τοὺς υἱοὺς Ἰσραηλ τοὺς προσκειμένους ἐπ’ αὐτόν), and the second rod concerns *tō Iōsēph rhabdon Ephraim kai pantas tous huious Israēl tous prosthentas* (τῷ Ἰωσηφ ῥάβδον Ἐφραϊμ καὶ πάντας τοὺς υἱοὺς Ἰσραηλ τοὺς προστεθέντας). This is a fairly literal translation of the Hebrew. Both Judah and Israel/Ephraim here have a group of people attached to them, designated by the plural participles *proskeimenous* and *prosthentas*.

The first participle (verb functioning as a noun), *proskeimenous*, a group associated with Judah, is derived from the verb *proskeimai* (πρόσκειμαι), meaning “to be attached or devoted to” (LS),<sup>36</sup> “his adherents” (LXE). The second participle, *prosthentas*, a group associated with Israel/Ephraim, is derived from the verb *prostithēmi* (προστίθημι), which BDAG first defines as “to add to someth. that is already present or exists,”<sup>37</sup> either those “that belong to him” (LXE) or “that are added to him.”<sup>38</sup>

The opening message of the two sticks, representing Judah and Israel/Ephraim, and who the companions are—whether they are Israelites who make up either House, or companions from the nations at large—can only really be known by weighing in other prophecies of Israel’s restoration. What I actually consider to be *the most important prophecy*, that is to guide our overall exegesis and understanding of the Father’s mission, is Isaiah 49:6, where He says of the Messiah,

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<sup>34</sup> H.F.W. Gesenius: *Gesenius’ Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*, trans. Samuel Prideaux Tregelles (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 259.

Cf. Gerard Van Groningen, “hābēr,” in TWOT, 1:260.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Exodus 22:21; 23:9; Leviticus 19:33-34; 24:22.

<sup>36</sup> LS, 692.

<sup>37</sup> BDAG, 885.

<sup>38</sup> Sir Lancelot C. L. Brenton, ed & trans, *The Septuagint With Apocrypha* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 1029 fn 6.

“It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”<sup>39</sup> The Lord is not only planning to bring Judah and Ephraim together—**His salvation is going to go out to the entire world.** We are thus on a safe footing to conclude that the “companions” of v. 16 are largely not people who compose either Judah or Israel/Ephraim, but are instead non-Israelites from the nations at large, who are involved in the restoration of Israel, and are to be incorporated into an enlarged Kingdom realm of Israel in the eschaton.

The restoration of Judah and Israel/Ephraim really does involve *three*, and not two groups, of people. This could just about qualify anyone who acknowledges the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And, it is most probable that the significant majority of people involved in the two-stick reunion are actually welcome companions from the nations themselves.

37:17 The Prophet Ezekiel is instructed by God to do something with the two sticks: “Then bring them close to yourself, one to the other, like one piece of wood, and they will become united in your hand” (ATS). The two sticks are to be made into *etz echad* (עֵץ אֶחָד), representing a reassembling together. We can certainly recall here the similar word of Hosea 1:11, “the sons of Judah and the sons of Israel will be gathered together.” Perhaps most significant and reflective would be the previous oracle of Ezekiel 37:1-14 and the reassembling of the dry bones. Just as Judah and Israel are to be brought together in the day of Jezreel (Hosea 1:11b; cf. Revelation 16:16), so does the revivifying of the dry bones indicate the future resurrection (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). This is a very good indicator that this word of Judah and Israel becoming a united *etz* occurs subsequent to the eschaton. Most of what is communicated by Ezekiel thus concerns the future eschaton, and not necessarily the Jewish exiles to whom he was speaking in Babylon.

18 “When the sons of your people speak to you saying, ‘Will you not declare to us what you mean by these?’ 19 say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, I will take the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel, his companions; and I will put them with it, with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, and they will be one in My hand.””

37:18 Seeing Ezekiel join two pieces of wood together, the curiosity of the people is aroused, something that is not uncommon (12:9; 21:7; 24:19). They ask him, “Won't you tell us what these things have to do with us?” (NIV). To these exiles, they would be confounded at what all this symbolism would mean. Was the Prophet Ezekiel just mentally disturbed in picking up two pieces of wood off the ground, joining them together? Block indicates, “If the restoration of Judah

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<sup>39</sup> Heb. *u'netattikha l'or goyim l'heyot yeshuati ad-qetzeih ha'eret* (לְאוֹר נוֹרָם לְהוֹיֹת וְיִשְׁעוּתִי עַד-קֶצֶת הָאָרֶץ) (וינתתירך).

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represented a major problem in the people's minds, how much more would they have stumbled over the idea of the restoration of the northern kingdom"?<sup>40</sup> They would have likely thought this was a sheer impossibility.

Moving forward to today, we are a generation that has actually witnessed a fair number of prophecies regarding Israel's restoration. Most notably, we have seen the fulfillment of Isaiah 66:8, "Can a land be born in one day? Can a nation be brought forth all at once?" via the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Yet many evangelical Christians *and* Messianic Jews, though, are surprisingly unfamiliar with a word like Ezekiel 37:15-28. Perhaps various leaders have stayed away from talking about a prophecy like this, because of controversies in history over the Lost Tribes of Israel. At the same time, if there is more to be expected in salvation history regarding the restoration of Israel in the Last Days, a word like this deserves to be considered and probed for significance.

When people approach the two-stick oracle of Ezekiel 37:15-28, the question "Will you not show us what you mean by these?" (RSV) is not only tended to be asked by many who encounter it and are asking questions; **it is prayed to God.** People really want to entreat the Lord for answers!

There are many people who see the growth of today's Messianic community, particularly Jewish and non-Jewish Believers being brought together in common cause and unity, and do instinctively know by the presence of the Holy Spirit inside of them that more is going on. The basic question of "What does all this mean?" is being asked, but the possibility of the answer involving the two-stick oracle of Ezekiel 37:15-28, is more than frightening for a few.

What is really going on in today's Messianic movement? Is it just a movement designed to see a form of Jewish Christianity come forth, that will not really include anybody but Jewish Believers? The question of v. 18 has notably been answered in a variety of ways, some of which have, and some of which have not, been in alignment with the Lord's objectives. Jews, Christians, and Messianic Jews have all approached the subject, at times, with an agenda.

**37:19** The Prophet Ezekiel might have been the one called to take two pieces of wood, and visually show his fellow exiles that the divided, scattered, and exiled Northern and Southern Kingdoms would reunite—**yet it is God Himself who performs the reunion.** Ezekiel is to just declare, "Thus says the Lord GOD, 'Behold, I will take the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel, his companions; and I will put them with it, with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, and they will be one in My hand.'" God is the One who says, *ani loqeiach* (אֲנִי לִקְיָאֵךְ), "I am going to take..." (NIV/NJPS).

This is a very special, Divine action that is to be performed. The Kingdom of Israel had been split since after Solomon's death (1 Kings 12), and attempts made by Southern Kingdom monarchs like Hezekiah or Josiah to reunite with people from the Northern Kingdom (2 Chronicles 30; 34:6, 9; 35:18), had really not succeeded. Duguid notes, "The solution to Israel's lengthy history of internal

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<sup>40</sup> Block, 395.

division is not to be found in the appointment of a binational committee to develop a ‘peace process’ but in the divine act of reuniting his people.”<sup>41</sup> And examining the prophecy, it will really take an act of God to reunite Judah, Israel/Ephraim, and companions from the nations into a single community chosen not only for Him, but for His end-time service to the world (Daniel 12:3; Titus 2:14; et. al.)

Those who give any significance in their theology or praxis to the two-stick prophecy *have to recognize* how the job of ultimately restoring Israel’s Kingdom is to be left in the hands of the Lord. While people may recognize various things in motion, and rightly have a much bigger vision for the Messianic movement—than it just becoming another branch of Judaism—the **final orchestration of events is to occur in His perfect timing**. It is certainly not the job of any Messianic ministry or (pseudo-)denomination to try to declare the reunion of Judah and Ephraim from the halls of some conference, which would actually contribute to seeing people driven apart. Nor is it the job of any interfaith Jewish-Christian organization that might downplay the place of Yeshua in a person’s salvation. Only God can orchestrate this reunion! He might use flawed people to do it, but the responsibility is ultimately His.

It is quite important to remember how King Rehoboam would not do what was right to serve the people, contrary to the advice of his counselors (1 Kings 12:7). He had an opportunistic agenda, and the division between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms was finalized. Today, it is not difficult to see how sectors like the Two-House sub-movement are utterly riddled with similar opportunists, who have not fully heeded the warnings given in the Historical Books of the Tanach. Thankfully, though, we can have confidence that **God will see His promises come to pass**.

**20 “The sticks on which you write will be in your hand before their eyes. 21 Say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, I will take the sons of Israel from among the nations where they have gone, and I will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; 22 and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king will be king for all of them; and they will no longer be two nations and no longer be divided into two kingdoms.**

37:20 The *etzim* (עֲצִים) that the Prophet Ezekiel must bear, possibly being wooden writing tablets and not just sticks, has its strongest support from v. 20. Here, he is instructed, “the leaves on which you write are there in your hand for all to see” (REB). The message of Israel’s reunification, or even the complete prophecy itself, is to be laid before the eyes of the people. Thus, the people can be held accountable for what they do with the prophecy, most especially in terms of whether they mock it, disregard it, or ignore it—all of which has happened in various parts of the Messianic community today.

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<sup>41</sup> Duguid, 436.

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37:21 The work of the Lord in bringing Israel together does not only involve a reunification of the people of Judah and Israel/Ephraim, but also bringing them home to the Promised Land. The Prophet Ezekiel declares, “Thus said the Lord HASHEM/ELOHIM: Behold I am taking the Children of Israel from among the nations to which they have gone; I will gather them from all around and I will bring them to their soil” (ATS). Ezekiel has previously alluded to a theme of a Second Exodus (34:13; 36:12, 24; 37:12), some of it even with a harsh tone (20:33-44). We should also be reminded of the Prophet Jeremiah’s previous oracle,

“In those days the house of Judah will walk with the house of Israel, and they will come together from the land of the north to the land that I gave your fathers as an inheritance” (Jeremiah 3:18).

It is important to remember that Ezekiel’s prophecy was delivered almost five centuries *after* the split of Israel into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, meaning that the return of the people was going to fix a significant breach present in God’s chosen nation. Yet the *b’nei Yisrael* (בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל) here is a reference to all of Israel, and not just those of the exiled Northern Kingdom. The Jewish exiles in Babylon were just as exiled as those of the Northern Kingdom before it, and they would take this as a promise for some kind of a return home, regardless of what would happen with those of Israel/Ephraim.

Yet from the vantage point of the Jewish exiles in Babylon, the most important fact that is often overlooked is that God *would even bother* to gather those of the exiled Northern Kingdom. In Block’s words, “Ezekiel’s Judean audience learns that the scope of the anticipated restoration extends far beyond their own exilic situation in Babylon; Yahweh will regather the descendants of Israel from all around (*missābīb* [מִסָּבִיב]).”<sup>42</sup> Peter C. Craigie also observes how the Jewish exiles in Babylon “had ceased to wonder whether or not there was a future for their relatives in the northern kingdom, which had been defeated in war in 722 B.C. But where human memory ceases, often through selfish lack of concern for others, the divine memory is still at work.”<sup>43</sup>

One challenge, not to be overlooked in contemplating God’s promise to gather the Israelites, is that He says He will bring them *mi’bbein ha’goyim asher halku-sham* (מִבֵּין הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר הָלְכּוּ-שָׁמָּה), “from among the nations where they have gone” or “from among the nations they have gone to” (NJPS). Is this speaking of where Israel had been scattered during the time of Ezekiel, in which case a futuristic regathering of people will pretty much be limited to extent of the sphere of influence of the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires (and later the Persian Empire)? Or, is it speaking of the past tense time—in the future—when this prophecy will be accomplished, subsequent to the eschaton? While the Jewish exiles in Babylon probably thought that God had completely written off the Northern Kingdom, how extensive is the regathering of these people from the nations?

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<sup>42</sup> Block, 411.

<sup>43</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *Daily Study Bible Series: Ezekiel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 264.

## Ezekiel 37:15-28 Have the Two Sticks Been Reunited?

Much of this is determinant on not just the Jewish exile to Babylon, or the dispersion of the Jewish people following the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. Much of it is determinant on how broad the Northern Kingdom Israelites were, or would be, scattered. This is where many people stop reading the prophecy, in no small part due to the abuses that have ensued when the subject of the “Lost Tribes” comes up,<sup>44</sup> and is only compounded by a misdiagnosis of what is being addressed. A regathering of all Israel, including a scattered group from the Northern Kingdom out there in the world, is only necessary for the fulfillment of prophecy and the participation of a certain player in prophecy. The involvement of this “Ephraim” is only important because it is one of the three players who participate in Israel’s restoration, along with Judah and the many associated companions from the nations. No physical ancestry from the exiled and relatively lost Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim, is at all a guarantee of eternal salvation.

What happened in the punishment and scattering of Israel? The *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* aptly summarizes, “The prophets threatened the nation with the loss of the land if they were unfaithful to the covenant; after several centuries their words came true, when Assyria exiled many residents of the northern kingdom in 722 B.C.E. and the Babylonians deported thousands from the southern kingdom in 587 and 586 B.C.E...Though not all residents left the land, the return to the land of a sizeable number of Jewish people from Babylon and points east began in 538 B.C.E. and continued in different waves for some time thereafter,”<sup>45</sup> suggesting that this was in fulfillment of Jeremiah 32. Any careful interpreter of the two-stick prophecy is stuck having to wonder about the scattered Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim, and really weigh how serious this message might be, beyond the hope of an ancient Jewish return to the Land of Israel from Babylon.

Allen is one who poignantly indicates, “We know comparatively little about the history of the exiled northerners, but there is no evidence of any return. There was Jewish awareness of northern tribes in Assyria: the apocryphal book of Tobit has such a setting. In Judah’s early post-exilic period it is clear that barriers were erected from the southern side, and time seems to have done nothing to demolish them.”<sup>46</sup> The Book of Tobit is a very interesting case study to be aware of, because if we consider it to have any degree of accurate history, it does indicate that there were Northern Kingdom exiles in Assyria, who not only were not assimilated into the dominant culture, but maintained a degree of loyalty to the God of Israel.

Tobit was of the tribe of Naphtali, exiled to Assyria, but who lamented how his people were separated from the House of David and the Temple worship in Jerusalem (Tobit 1:3-4). While in Assyrian exile, he instructs his son not to marry a

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<sup>44</sup> For an assortment of many of these abuses, which today’s Two-House sub-movement has widely done a very poor job at staying away from, consult the relevant sections of Tudor Parfitt, *The Lost Tribes of Israel: The History of a Myth* (London: Phoenix, 2002) and Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Ten Lost Tribes: A World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>45</sup> “Israel, Land of,” in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, pp 322-323.

<sup>46</sup> Allen, 195.

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foreign woman, but instead marry from his own people, like the Patriarchs before them (Tobit 4:12). It is possible that Tobit's family remained faithful to the God of Israel for multiple generations, and after Babylon conquered Assyria, and then after Persia conquered Babylon, his descendants joined with the Jewish returnees in the Land of Israel, becoming a part of the Jewish community.

Tobit appears to be an exception, though, rather than the rule. Various Northern Kingdom Israelites here and there, being integrated into the Southern Kingdom—either before or after the exile—is not the issue of Ezekiel's prophecy. **The issue of Ezekiel's prophecy is the corporate restoration of Israel.** Block observes,

"From a human perspective, Ezekiel's vision of remnants of the original twelve-tribe nation streaming back to their hereditary homeland seems impossible. The northern population had been dispersed in upper Mesopotamia by an entirely different regime, the Assyrians, one and one-half centuries earlier; further Assyrian imperial policy deliberately aimed to assimilate them into the population."<sup>47</sup>

Block notes some references present in 2 Kings to be aware of, detailing the scattering of the Northern Kingdom Israelites:

- "In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria and carried Israel away into exile to Assyria, and settled them in Halah and Habor, on the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes" (2 Kings 17:6).
- "Then the king of Assyria carried Israel away into exile to Assyria, and put them in Halah and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes" (2 Kings 18:11).

These two verses indicate a dispersion of people into Mesopotamia. Assimilation into the Assyrian Empire was imposed, either through some kind of forced intermarriage, forced religious and cultural changes, or simply displacing the people from their homeland so far away that future generations would largely forget who they were. Block goes on to say, though, "the presence of distinctly Israelite names in documents from their exilic settlements generations after the collapse of Samaria suggest that many retained a distinctive ethnic self-consciousness."<sup>48</sup> It is possible that from this group of people, families like that of Tobit eventually integrated themselves into Judaism. But Ezekiel's prophecy of reunification does not speak to individual groups like these—it **speaks to the corporate division of Israel that needs to be repaired.** Block further indicates, "religious and political jealousies were too deeply entrenched to contemplate

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<sup>47</sup> Block, pp 411-412.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 412.

For a further discussion, consult B.E. Kelle and B.A. Strawn, "History of Israel 5: Assyrian Period," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Historical Books*, pp 468-469.

Kelle and Strawn note how "The presence of Israelite exiles in Mesopotamia after 720 BCE is attested also by the appearance of West Semitic personal names in Assyrian texts, but the occasional references suggests that Israelite ethnic and national identity was lost within a few generations" (*Ibid.*, 469).

rapprochement between the northern Israelite exiles and their southern Judean counterparts."<sup>49</sup>

Block concludes that only Divine intervention, likened unto a heart transplant (36:27-28) or the dead bones coming back to life (37:1-14), would be sufficient to enact such a miracle. In his words, "ethnic reunion alone was insufficient to restore the national integrity of Israel."<sup>50</sup> While various families and groups from the scattered Northern Kingdom, remaining loyal to the God of Israel, were likely to have integrated themselves into Judaism, perhaps like the First Century Anna from the tribe of Asher (Luke 2:36), this does not constitute the kind of reunion foreseen by Ezekiel. Aside from those Northern Kingdom Israelites who later became part of the Jewish community, what is to be made of the summarizing remark of 2 Kings 17:23? It says,

"[T]he LORD removed Israel from His sight, as He spoke through all His servants the prophets. So Israel was carried away into exile from their own land to Assyria until this day" (cf. 1 Chronicles 5:26).

The authors or editors of 1&2 Kings say that the people of the Northern Kingdom were exiled to Assyria *ad ha'yom ha'zeh* (עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה), extrapolated by the NIV as, "and they are still there." The real challenge to understanding this remark is that while Samuel-Kings is undoubtedly a product of the historians of the Southern Kingdom, when did the text reach its final form? Is this a pre-exilic remark made, or a post-exilic remark?<sup>51</sup> Arguments can probably be made from both sides, but if the latter is the case, it would indicate that there were exiled Northern Kingdom Israelites still in the land of Assyria, and associated territories, even if there had been a significant return of exiled Southern Kingdom Israelites back to the environs of Jerusalem in the Persian era.

The view that the Northern Kingdom was still corporately in exile is reflected in the writings of the First Century C.E. Jewish historian Josephus. Reflecting on his time, he makes the observation that "the ten tribes are beyond Euphrates till now, and are an immense multitude, and not to be estimated by numbers" (*Antiquities of the Jews* 11.133).<sup>52</sup> He does not at all intend to fill in any specific details, but just asserts that people from the scattered Northern Kingdom were out there in the world. "God only knows who and where they are..." seems to be the thought.

A largely pessimistic thought on what we encounter in v. 21 is offered by Charles L. Feinberg, when he says, "The prophets all recognized the northern tribes as still in existence and knew of no such error as 'lost' tribes (cf. Isa. 43:5-7, 'every one'; 49:5-6; Jer. 3:12-15)."<sup>53</sup> These remarks are not so much focused on the statement "I will take the sons of Israel from among the nations where they have gone," however extensive this may be at the moment of restoration in the end-

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<sup>49</sup> Block, 412.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> For further consideration, consult the author's entry for the Books of Kings in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

<sup>52</sup> *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 294.

<sup>53</sup> Charles L. Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel: The Glory of The Lord* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 215.

## Israel in Future Prophecy

times, but instead are an overreaction to the mid-Twentieth Century abuses with British-Israelism.<sup>54</sup> The conservative scholastic position in Old Testament scholarship, on the exiled Northern Kingdom, has always been concurrent with the Assyrian practice of displaced persons being forced to assimilate,<sup>55</sup> so that they would not rebel against the regime. The traditional places where the descendants of the deported exiles of the Northern Kingdom have always been sought out, have been in Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Central Africa, and the Eastern Mediterranean basin—not Northwestern Europe and the British Isles. In terms of prophetic fulfillment, God scattered Israel, and thus it is God's responsibility to gather the people back (cf. Jeremiah 31:10).

I do not believe it would be entirely appropriate for us to consider the end-time gathering together of Israel to only be limited to the extent of the modern Middle East. It will take place from however extended the descendants from both the Northern *and* Southern Kingdoms have gone out, when the Lord sovereignly brings them back together and restores the broken Kingdom of Israel. I look to the general sphere of influence of the old Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Empires, for those geographic areas where the exiles of the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim would have migrated and/or been assimilated. As Lamar Eugene Cooper says, "God will personally find Israel and gather the people from among the nations."<sup>56</sup> Deuteronomy 30:1-4 is commonly applied to the Jewish people returning to the Promised Land, yet in consideration of other prophecies, it also concerns the descendants of the exiled Northern Kingdom as well:

"So it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call *them* to mind in all nations where the LORD your God has banished you, and you return to the LORD your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I command you today, you and your sons, then the LORD your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are at the ends of the earth, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back."

Here, Moses communicates that the exiles of Israel will actually return to their home country *b'qetzeih ha'shamayim* (בְּקֵצֵיהֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם), from "the uttermost parts of heaven" (ESV), which would be a much further radius than the exiles being scattered to what is today the modern Middle East. It implies something that is a little more global in scope. It surely involves the Jewish people returning to the Promised Land, but it also involves more. The Jewish people have certainly been dispersed since the fall of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. If we consider the sphere of influence of the Ancient Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Empires in view for the areas where exiled Israel/Ephraim has gone—presumed descendants of those

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. speaks earlier of "the folly of the Anglo-Israel delusion."

<sup>55</sup> Cf. C.F. Pfeiffer, "Israel, History of the People of," in *ISBE*, 2:917.

<sup>56</sup> Lamar Eugene Cooper, *New American Commentary: Ezekiel* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994),

people have certainly moved around since the European powers decolonized after the Second World War, pulling out of Southeast Asia, the Indian sub-continent, the Middle East, and Africa.

(This would mean, for example, that various people of Indian or Pakistani nationality living in the United Kingdom, have a much better chance at being a descendant of the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim, than a native Briton [English, Scottish, Irish, or Welsh] has. A native British person, would actually have a much better chance at having a Jewish ancestor or two, who assimilated into Christianity of the Middle Ages.)

Taylor recognizes how “The explanation given in 21-28 is futuristic,” but he is also right to describe, “The answer of the New Testament to this future hope of Israel is that it has come about, but has not been fulfilled. The golden age has dawned in the coming of Jesus the Messiah; fulfillment has begun, but it has not yet been completed.”<sup>57</sup> It is correct that on some level, the unity that God wanted to see restored to a divided Judah and Israel/Ephraim, can be experienced among His people today who are filled with His Spirit and bound together in the gospel. But this is not the corporate, futuristic restoration of the Kingdom to Israel. We might experience some of the elements what this prophecy, and many others, depict in our individual lives—**but more is yet to come.**

Reflecting a more liberal perspective of Israel being brought together, Joseph Blenkinsopp does note, “Perhaps Ezekiel had in mind the survivors of the mixed population to the north of whom we hear from time to time (e.g., Jer. 41:4-8).” This would be an indication that they will be gathered together some time in the future. But for him, given the tenor of the whole prophecy, Blenkinsopp concludes, “Ezekiel is acting out and proclaiming an eschatological goal the fulfillment of which, would be brought about by God.”<sup>58</sup> Blenkinsopp leaves any kind of restoration of Israel’s Kingdom as something that only concerns God, and not any of us today, following a much more allegorized view of the prophecy (quoted further).

For those of us who read prophecy through a much more literal lens, the scope of Israel—either of Judah or scattered Israel/Ephraim—being brought together, is wider in extent than those who were initially exiled to the vicinity of the Ancient Near East. *It is surely only by the sovereign hand of God that they are brought together.* We might know where there are large Jewish communities outside of the Land of Israel, but only He may know where the various pockets of Israel/Ephraim are ultimately scattered. It would go too far to think that such lines are in every corner and country on Planet Earth. It does not go too far to think that it involves groups of people adjacent to where the exiles of the Northern Kingdom were originally scattered, whose main leaders or elders have preserved some kind of oral tradition tracing their descent back to the Assyrian exile.

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<sup>57</sup> Taylor, pp 239-240.

<sup>58</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Ezekiel* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 176.

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Furthermore, as the restoration of Israel is initiated by God and proceeds ahead, companions from the nations at large will hear of this and will naturally join—fully concurrent with God’s mission to see the light of truth reach the entire world (Isaiah 42:6; 60:3)—and they will most probably make up *the majority* of those who are involved. The worldwide effects of the two-stick prophecy, beyond just Judah and Ephraim, are too often downplayed by today’s popular Two-House advocates (v. 28). Likewise, at least experiencing the motif of unity depicted, by the two-stick prophecy in the workings of the Body of Messiah, is too widely overlooked.

37:22 What the Prophet Ezekiel actually declares is a time of not only restoration of the Twelve Tribes to the Promised Land, but a political reunification that is far different from the period of the Divided Kingdom. He says, “I will make them a single nation in the land, on the hills of Israel, and one king shall be king of them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms” (NJPS). A single king will rule over this Israel. Did this ever happen in ancient times when the Jewish exiles returned from Babylon, and a few stragglers from the Northern Kingdom, who had remained loyal to the Lord, joined them? Or is this really a futuristic oracle describing a reunited Israel ruled by the Messiah?

23 **“They will no longer defile themselves with their idols, or with their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions; but I will deliver them from all their dwelling places in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them. And they will be My people, and I will be their God.**

37:23 A return of Judah and Israel/Ephraim to the Promised Land, and a healing of the division between the Southern and Northern Kingdoms, is important. **But it is not as important as Israel’s corporate relationship with God being fully restored.** The long-term affects of two exiles, not only one exile, have to be reversed. And, punishment was issued upon the people of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms not only for sin and idolatry committed in the Land of Israel. When the grand return and restoration occurs, Ezekiel declares,

“[N]or shall they defile themselves any more with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions: but I will save them in all their dwelling places, where they have sinned, and will cleanse them: so shall they be my people and I will be their God” (Jerusalem Bible-Koren).

Take notice of how the people committed sin against God even in their exiles—from where He must deliver them home—*m’kol moshvotei’hem asher chatu* (מִכָּל מוֹשְׁבֵי־הֵמָּה אֲשֶׁר חָטְאוּ): “from all their dwelling places in which they had sinned” (ATS).<sup>59</sup> Deliverance for the sins Israel committed in their places of exile

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<sup>59</sup> The LXX has instead *apo pasōn tōn anomīōn autōn hōn hēmartosan* (ἀπὸ πασῶν τῶν ἀνομιῶν αὐτῶν ὧν ἡμάρτοσαν), which the NRSV tries to conform with, “from all the apostasies into which they have fallen.”

(Deuteronomy 28:64-65) will be offered. Corporate redemption from these previous sins, which caused the exile into the nations and has been compounded, will end.

Do remember and **never forget** that individuals may be redeemed from all their sins and possess eternal life *in Messiah Yeshua* long before the complete restoration of Israel culminates. Yet the community of Israel as a whole—composed of Judah, Israel/Ephraim, and many companions—has to acknowledge its sin, confess, and be corporately restored to God and to His purpose. Thankfully, God is able to hear such cries for mercy, and He does offer forgiveness (cf. Romans 5:6-9)!

While there has been a great deal of discussion about our Heavenly Father restoring Judah and Ephraim in the Two-House sub-movement and its popular conference events—how much of this discussion has really taken into consideration a serious reflection on Israel’s corporate sins? These sins are not necessarily having Christmas trees in ignorance, going to church on Sunday instead of remembering *Shabbat*, nor are they eating pork thinking that it is food—as has been too commonly asserted. These sins are detailed in the historical record of the Tanach in 2 Kings, and include not only idolatrous worship and gross sexual immorality, **but child sacrifice** to Canaanite deities like Molech. The historical record of the different Northern Kingdom dynasties, in particular, should not go overlooked.

If any non-Jewish Messianic Believer really wants to claim “Ephraim” as his or her heritage, *this sin heritage has to be claimed as well*, and a corporate repentance before the Creator God must follow. It is not at all surprising why this is not a subject of interest at many of the popular Two-House conference gatherings, a likely indicator that it will be a good long while before Israel will be fully restored, among other reasons. And, the continuation of such sins, perhaps up even into the more modern period, are far more consistent with the religious and cultural groups of the East—as the exiles of the Northern Kingdom were progressively spread eastward—than they are with the more relative Judeo-Christian West.

**24 “My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd; and they will walk in My ordinances and keep My statutes and observe them. 25 They will live on the land that I gave to Jacob My servant, in which your fathers lived; and they will live on it, they, and their sons and their sons' sons, forever; and David My servant will be their prince forever. 26 I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will place them and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever.**

37:24 As Israel is brought together, and experiences a corporate ceasing from the sins that caused the exile of both the Southern *and* Northern Kingdoms, a special king, *melek* (מֶלֶךְ), will come forth to rule. It is decreed, “My servant David will be king over them.” We can certainly see a reiteration here of the Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 23:5), as well as the promises detailed in Isaiah 11. Many

## Israel in Future Prophecy

Christian interpreters, and I believe quite rightly, have proposed that “David” is a reference to Yeshua the Messiah. Ralph H. Alexander summarizes,

“The Messiah, David’s greater Son, would be the only King, Shepherd, and Prince and Israel would ever have in accord with the Davidic covenant (vv. 22b, 24a, 25b; cf. 34:10b-31; 2 Sam 7:13, 16). This united people of God would be cleansed from their former idolatry and transgressions through the complete forgiveness provided by the Messiah’s death and the ministry of the Spirit promised in the new covenant (v. 23a; 36:16-32; Jer 31:31-34).”<sup>60</sup>

The result of being ruled by the Messiah, as Davidic King, will be one of total obedience—reversing the state of the disobedience and idolatry: “They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees” (NIV). This is an obvious reiteration of the previous word Ezekiel delivered about the work of God’s Spirit (36:27), but also of Jeremiah’s oracle about God writing His Torah onto the hearts of Judah and Israel (Jeremiah 31:31-34). As this word reaches its complete fulfillment, an obedience to God’s Torah will lead a regathered Judah and Israel/Ephraim to dwell once again in the Promised Land—something that will not be stopped as it is the will of God. Allen indicates,

“The people’s obedience would make possible continued occupation of the promised land envisaged in 28:25-26 and 36:28. The disobedience that had been the cause of the exile would haunt them no longer.”<sup>61</sup>

What is this obedience to the Torah primarily related to? A *complete overturning* of the idolatry and paganism that had permeated both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms (v. 23). This involves a corporate acknowledgment of guilt and repentance, for abominable practices like child sacrifice committed by Ancient Israel, going well beyond just having various high places or idolatrous shrines alongside worship of HaShem. Consequently, if anyone is really serious about Israel being restored, not only will a conscious recognition of these sins need to be accomplished (preceded by an examination of the record of 2 Kings)—**but also a corporate and public confession of them.**<sup>62</sup> As to my knowledge, none of the popular Two-House advocates one is likely to have encountered, have ever really noted the importance of this for Israel’s restoration.<sup>63</sup>

37:25 In order to give the Jewish exiles a real sense of hope for a grand restoration of Israel in the future, Ezekiel’s word includes an appeal made to the distant past: “they shall remain in the land which I gave to My servant Jacob and in which your fathers dwelt; they and their children and their children’s children shall

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<sup>60</sup> Ralph H. Alexander, “Ezekiel,” in *EXP*, 6:927.

<sup>61</sup> Allen, 194.

<sup>62</sup> Please note that as heinous a sin as abortion is today, this kind of public confession is for past sins that are contained in the Biblical record.

<sup>63</sup> On the contrary, many Two-House advocates and teachers do not even really know what to do with *Yom Kippur* or the Day of Atonement. This should be a time for Messianic congregations to come together and corporately confess sins, but it should also be a time of serious intercession for the lost and unsaved of Planet Earth—most especially our Jewish brethren who do not know Yeshua.

For further consideration, consult the relevant sections of the *Messianic Fall Holiday Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

dwell there forever, with My servant David as their prince for all time” (NJPS). Jacob, as we know, was the father of all of Israel’s twelve tribes. The result of the two-stick prophecy being fulfilled, and those of Judah and Israel/Ephraim brought together, is that David as their leader will rule over them in the Promised Land *l’olam* (לְעוֹלָם).<sup>64</sup> This indicates a high degree of permanency—not at all experienced after the Jewish return from Babylonian exile. This is a Messianic rule over Israel, and thusly the world as a whole, that can only be trumped by the inauguration of the Eternal State after the Millennium, and the ushering in of the New Creation.

Is there any particular reason why in v. 24 this leader is referred to as a *melek*, but in v. 25 is referred to as a *nasi* (נָשִׂיא) or prince? Is there a contradiction with the assertion in v. 22, *u’melek echad yih’yeh l’kulam l’mlekh* (וּמֶלֶךְ אֶחָד יִהְיֶה לְכֻלָּם לְמֶלֶךְ), “and one king will be king for all of them”? I do not believe that there are contradictions, as the different roles of the Davidic ruler—also including that of shepherd (Heb. verb *ra’ah*, רָעָה)—are being summarized. Fisch concludes, “While *king* signifies a political ruler, *shepherd* denotes a spiritual leader. The Messiah will combine both offices.”<sup>65</sup> Another Jewish commentator, A. Cohen, remarks, “The Messiah will be called David, because he will be descended from him; or perhaps, it hints at the resurrection.”<sup>66</sup>

Various Jewish interpreters of the two-stick prophecy do recognize that it is yet to be fulfilled, even though the Davidic King to which they are looking might not be Yeshua the Messiah, but perhaps a resurrected King David. Interestingly enough, even John F. Walvoord, a dispensational pre-tribulationist, concurs with the Jewish view that a resurrected King David will reign over Israel in the Millennium:

“[T]he clear statement is that David, who is now dead and whose body is in his tomb in Jerusalem (Acts 2:29), will be resurrected. This will occur at the Second Coming (Dan. 12:1-3), indicating plainly that the restoration of Israel will be subsequent to, not before, the Second Coming...The promise that David would be her prince forever must be interpreted as being fulfilled in the 1,000-year reign.”<sup>67</sup>

Walvoord’s dispensational bias does come through, which requires him to view a resurrected King David as ruling over Israel, with the Messiah Himself reigning over the whole Earth and the Church having returned from Heaven after the seven-year Tribulation. The valid point that is made, though, is that Walvoord recognizes how Israel’s restoration **is not yet completed**. Walvoord is entirely right to chastise how “some have attempted to take this prophecy in less than its literal meaning.”<sup>68</sup>

*David avdi* (דָּוִד עַבְדִּי), “My servant David,” ruling over Israel “forever,” can be taken as a clear implication of this being a supernatural ruler,<sup>69</sup> and not necessarily

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Darr, in *NIB*, 6:1510.

<sup>65</sup> Fisch, 251.

<sup>66</sup> A. Cohen, *Soncino Chumash* (Brooklyn: Soncino Press, 1983), 294.

<sup>67</sup> Walvoord, *Every Prophecy of the Bible*, 187.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Taylor, 240.

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a resurrected King David, but Messiah the Prince of Peace (i.e, Isaiah 9:6). And this King Messiah, while certainly being the Leader of a restored Judah and Israel/Ephraim, is King of the whole world.

Having noted that companions from the nations are involved in the restoration process, when the Land of Israel is divided in the Millennium, it is notable that various aliens are included and they are welcomed into the community of Israel on an equal footing with the native born:

“So you shall divide this land among yourselves according to the tribes of Israel. You shall divide it by lot for an inheritance among yourselves and among the aliens who stay in your midst, who bring forth sons in your midst. And they shall be to you as the native-born among the sons of Israel; they shall be allotted an inheritance with you among the tribes of Israel. And in the tribe with which the alien stays, there you shall give *him* his inheritance,’ declares the Lord GOD” (Ezekiel 47:21-23).

This group is considered by me, at least, to be a very small, specialized group of non-Israelites—who have no physical descent from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—yet who during the Millennial reign of Yeshua the Messiah are, for various unique reasons, likely as a reward given to them by the Lord, permitted permanent residence in the Land of Israel.

37:26 The Prophet Ezekiel’s declarations about Judah, Israel, and various companions coming together as one people, while surely important, is not as important as the spiritual effects of what this involves. The Lord promises, “I will seal a covenant of peace with them; it will be an eternal covenant with them; and I will emplace them and increase them, and I will place My Sanctuary among them forever” (ATS). The Lord will establish a *b’rit shalom b’rit olam* (שְׁלוֹם בְּרִית עוֹלָם), an eternal peace covenant, with His corporate people as the eschaton culminates. This eternal peace covenant signals a complete end of hostilities between God and Israel that were created by the sin committed by the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, requiring the exile.

We can certainly see some echoes of God’s covenant of peace with Phinehas (Numbers 25:10-13), and how Isaiah declared “My lovingkindness will not be removed from you, and My covenant of peace will not be shaken” (Isaiah 54:10). Ezekiel himself had previously decreed, “I will not let you hear insults from the nations anymore, nor will you bear disgrace from the peoples any longer, nor will you cause your nation to stumble any longer” (36:15). This is to be contrasted with the departure of God’s glory seen in Ezekiel chs. 9-11.

Because of the sacrifice of Yeshua, and Believers partaking of salvation and eternal life, we already experience the reality of an eternal covenant of peace in our individual lives. By repenting of our sins and partaking of salvation, each one of us has (or should have!) made our peace with God. What Ezekiel declares is a corporate covenant with peace with a reunited Israel. It also involves God’s sanctuary or *miqdash* (מִקְדָּשׁ) being present in the midst of the Earth, discussed further in the Temple visions of Ezekiel chs. 40-48, and not necessarily just His presence in our individual selves. While this message speaks very readily to

concepts of realized eschatology—future realities of the age to come partaken of in the present evil age—the eternal covenant of peace is something yet to be fully enacted. Fisch correctly concludes, “This assurance indicates that the prophecy of the restoration and reunion of the Kingdoms relates to the Messianic era.”<sup>70</sup>

**27 “My dwelling place also will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be My people. 28 And the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forever.”**<sup>71</sup>

37:27 Israel being restored not only as an exiled and scattered people, and not only being forgiven of sins, but also with God’s presence visibly among them, **is a theme that cannot be overlooked.** All of this speaks to the *futuristic aspects* of the two-stick prophecy. When Judah and Israel/Ephraim are finally brought together, and returned back to the Promised Land, it is decreed “My dwelling place also will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be My people.” The clause *v’hayah mishkani alei’hem* (וְהָיָה מִשְׁכְּנִי עֲלֵיהֶם) is actually rendered by the NJPS with “My Presence shall rest over them.” *Mishkan* (מִשְׁכָּן), however, would most especially concern God’s “tabernacle” (*CHALOT*; Exodus 25:9).<sup>71</sup> A full, corporate restoration of Israel is in view—where they are specifically designated as “My people.”

In order to be God’s people, one has to be cleansed from sin, a theme seen throughout Ezekiel (11:20; 14:11; 36:28). Being a member of God’s people also requires a great deal of responsibility, *beyond just obedience* to His Instruction. J.H. Hertz points out, “God’s Divine Presence will be clearly among them when they are true to their vocation as a Holy People. And thus too will Israel be the means of revealing God to the nations.”<sup>72</sup> Keep in mind that these are the remarks of an early Twentieth Century, Orthodox Jewish academic, and not the words of a Twenty-First Century evangelical Christian missiologist. Yet, they are absolutely true **because a cleansed and restored people of God will accomplish His mission of testifying to the world of His goodness.** For us as Believers, this is only intensified as God’s restored people must be able to declare forth the message of the Davidic Messiah, our Savior Yeshua!

37:28 The effects of the restoration of Israel, or perhaps even an in-process restoration of Israel, are surely to be worldwide. Ezekiel ends this oracle with the promise, “the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever” (NIV). This is a reiteration of the Torah’s promise of how the nations at large will know how God sanctifies Israel, seeing His sanctuary in their midst (cf. Leviticus 26:4-13).

<sup>70</sup> Fisch, 252.

<sup>71</sup> *CHALOT*, 219.

<sup>72</sup> Hertz, *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, 179.

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The end-time restoration of Israel will include the reconstruction of His sanctuary. Dyer comments, "This literal structure will serve as a visual object lesson to Israel and **the nations** of God's presence in the midst of His people."<sup>73</sup> He may consider this to be the Third Temple, to be desecrated by the antimesiah/antichrist (Daniel 9:27; 2 Thessalonians 2:4), whereas I am more inclined (at least right now) to think of this as the Ezekiel 40-48 Millennial Temple. *Perhaps these are just finer points that we have to leave open-ended.* Block reminds us of the overall importance of this word, asserting, "Ezekiel's statement expresses Yahweh's definitive rejection of any threat ever to abandon his people again, as he had in 586 B.C., and as was so graphically portrayed in the temple vision of chs. 8-11."<sup>74</sup>

As the two-stick prophecy, decreeing the reunification and restoration of Judah and Israel/Ephraim, comes to a close, what would this have meant to the Jewish exiles of Babylon? If they had faith in the Lord, it would have given them the confidence to know that the wrongs both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms had committed would be righted. Israel would be brought back into its fullness, and recognizing God's hand in this restoration (v. 21), it would take place sometime in the future. **This restoration would be a significant Divine act, with eternal effects.** We should be able to easily agree with Jewish commentator Michael Fishbane,

"[This text] focuses on settlement in the Land, and the new sanctuary. The elements of ingathering, monarchy, repurification, and Temple building constitute the main configuration of messianic hope for ancient Israel and for subsequent Jewish generations....[A] recurrent theme is 'permanence,' expressed as a permanent change from the past and as a vision of a permanent future. The idioms used are *lo od* [לֹא עוֹד] (never again, vv. 22,23) and *l'olam* [לְעוֹלָם] (forever, vv.25,26,28)."<sup>75</sup>

## Have the Two Sticks Been Reunited?

### A Review of Opinions

Most of today's Messianic Believers read prophecies of the Tanach or Old Testament through a literal lens, especially prophetic words applying to Israel. While we may be able to learn principles about God's goodness toward individuals, and even be informed about the dynamics of the salvation we possess in Messiah Yeshua, nevertheless a word like Ezekiel 37:15-28 should be read as a futuristic prophecy that is yet to be fulfilled. Looking at the two-stick prophecy as a future prophetic oracle, what is to take place when it is completed?

1. We see this united Israel with a single King reigning over it (v. 22).
2. We see this restored Israel cleansed of its corporate sins and defilements (v. 23).

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<sup>73</sup> Dyer, in *BKCOT*, 1299.

<sup>74</sup> Block, 421.

<sup>75</sup> Fishbane, "Haftarah for Va-Yiggash," in *Etz Hayim*, 290.

## Ezekiel 37:15-28 Have the Two Sticks Been Reunited?

3. We see the inauguration of a new Davidic King, the Messiah, where obedience and God's blessings can flourish (vs. 24-25).
4. We see an eternal covenant of peace enacted (v. 26).

All of the promises of the two-stick prophecy of Ezekiel 37:15-28 envision a complete reversal of what is depicted in Ezekiel chs. 8-11, and the bringing in of what is summarized by Ezekiel 20:40: "'For on My holy mountain, on the high mountain of Israel,' declares the Lord GOD, 'there the whole house of Israel, all of them,<sup>76</sup> will serve Me in the land; there I will accept them and there I will seek your contributions and the choicest of your gifts, with all your holy things.'"

The main issue we need to be considering is whether the two-stick prophecy was, in fact, really fulfilled in ancient times. When the exiles returned from Babylon, and "Ezra rose and made the leading priests, the Levites and all Israel, take oath" (Ezra 10:5), who are we to understand *kol-Yisrael* (כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל) to be? Were the expectations seen in Ezekiel's two-stick oracle fully completed in the Sixth Century B.C.E., with the Second Temple constructed? Or, is "all Israel" simply a recognition of how the Jewish returnees certainly constituted the remaining people of Israel, those who were responsible for the rebuilding of the nation? From this perspective, "all Israel" would simply be *all Israel present*, or perhaps even, *all Israel that had survived and returned*.

(We probably need to take a cue here from how 1 Kings 12:20 speaks of "all Israel," and it is not "all Israel" in the sense of *both* the Northern and Southern Kingdoms: "It came about when all Israel heard that Jeroboam had returned, that they sent and called him to the assembly and made him king over all Israel. None but the tribe of Judah followed the house of David." In this verse "all Israel" referred to is the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim. In a similar manner, a verse like Ezra 10:5 does not refer to "all Israel" reunited, but only those of the Southern Kingdom who had returned. Context should always determine who is being talked about, when "all Israel" is used.)

It is not easy to consider the two-stick prophecy of Ezekiel 37:15-28 sometimes, because of all the "Who is an 'Ephraimite'?" rhetoric out there in the various Two-House pseudo-denominations and their popular/populist conference events. Rather than trying to speculate on whether today's Messianic non-Jews really are some sort of scattered Israelites, which populist voices tend to push—what we need to do instead is look at the expectations the Prophet Ezekiel spoke directly from the Lord. *We have to let the text guide us*. Israel's regathering and restoration is a sovereign act of God, and as such it is His job to sort out the finer details of this prophecy. **It is our job to recognize whether this prophetic oracle is fulfilled or not.**

When one weighs into the equation the different scope of interpretations available for Ezekiel 37:15-28, the options are actually not as simple as it being fulfilled in past history *versus* to be fulfilled in the future. There are actually four primary interpretations we encounter, to be considered:

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<sup>76</sup> Heb. *kol-Beit Yisrael kulloh* (כָּל־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּלּוּה).

# Israel in Future Prophecy

1. This is a prophecy of Israel's restoration, either accomplished in the past or to be accomplished in the future.
2. This is an allegorical depiction of the unity required in today's Christian Church, and/or the unity required between Christians and Jews.
3. This is an idealistic vision with no particular application.
4. This is an idealistic vision that is so ideal, it will never be accomplished (and perhaps even Ezekiel has misled us).

The following chart has summarized a selection of various opinions present among an array of commentators and scholars today:

Ezekiel 37:15-28 A REVIEW OF OPINIONS	
IDEALISTIC VISION	PROPHECY WILL NOT BE FULFILLED
<p>"One conclusion that can be drawn by the Christian reader of the Old Testament is that the ecumenical movement, which has lost some of its urgency in recent years, has its biblical basis in the unity of Israel acted out and proclaimed by Ezekiel after the fall of Jerusalem...And, as Karl Barth pointed out during the Second Vatican Council, beyond the issue of church unity there lies the one basic and immensely problematic issue of Christian-Jewish relations...The attainment of a lost unity may be an eschatological goal but one that no Christian body professing allegiance to the biblical tradition can afford to neglect."<sup>77</sup></p> <p>Joseph Blenkinsopp, <i>liberal Catholic</i></p>	<p>"Ezek.'s theme of reconciliation was shared by some (cf. Isa. 56:3-8) but ignored by many of the returning exiles (cf. Ezra 4:1-3). A complete reversal of this pantomime is found in Zech. 11:7-14, where 'the brotherhood between Judah and Israel' is annulled."<sup>78</sup></p> <p>William Hugh Brownlee, <i>liberal Christian</i></p>
<p>"The New Testament proclaimed a new Christ-centered unity between Jew and Samaritan (John 4:7-42; Acts 1:8; 8:5-25) and indeed an overarching unity between Jew and Gentile that created a metaphorical 'holy people' (Eph 2:11-12) and posited the idea of 'one flock, one shepherd' (John 10:16). The ideal, like that which Ezekiel set before his Judean audience, presents a challenge to work toward."<sup>79</sup></p> <p>Leslie C. Allen, <i>British Bible scholar</i></p>	

<sup>77</sup> Blenkinsopp, 175.

<sup>78</sup> William Hugh Brownlee, "The Book of Ezekiel," in Charles M. Laymon, ed., *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), pp 430-431.

<sup>79</sup> Allen, 196.

## Ezekiel 37:15-28 Have the Two Sticks Been Reunited?

<p>“Christ has broken down the old wall between Jews and Gentiles through his death on the cross, building both together into a new, holy temple to the Lord (Eph. 2:14-22). There is but one temple of God in this age, the church, the body of Jesus Christ, in which Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles are all brought together as one...[quotes Galatians 3:28].”<sup>80</sup> Iain M. Duguid, <i>Reformed Christian</i></p>	
<p>“...Ezekiel’s point...is not so much ethnic and geographical, but theological, or perhaps we might say ecclesiological. He is determined to insist that the future of God’s people is a future for <i>one</i> people. One God, one people, one covenant...God’s work in Israel would have implications beyond Israel and affect the rest of the nations...God’s ultimate purpose is ‘one new humanity’, of believing Gentiles and Jews, united through the cross of Christ and acceptable to God.”<sup>81</sup> Christopher J.H. Wright, <i>evangelical Christian</i></p>	
<p>“This may be a highly idealized prophecy, since it is unlikely that significant remnants of the ten northern tribes survived until this period.”<sup>82</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, <i>liberal Jewish</i></p>	
<h3 style="margin: 0;">FUTURE PROPHECY AWAITING FULFILLMENT</h3>	
<p>“It is sometimes pointed out that this never happened in the post-exilic history of Israel; but the prophet is looking for nothing less than the advent of the Messianic kingdom, when the Tabernacle of God shall be with His people (v. 27; see Rev. 21:3). At that time the nations shall recognize the power of Yahweh through His redemption of His people (v. 28).”<sup>83</sup> G.R. Beasley-Murray, <i>evangelical Christian</i></p>	
<p>“It is difficult to know how to apply or interpret the oracle. The northern kingdom no longer existed, and many of its peoples had been scattered and long absorbed by other cultures. How could it be restored to the land? Recognising this mystery, several cults and sects in recent centuries have sought to identify themselves with the lost tribes of Israel, and thus find a place in prophecy. But it is safer to recognise the necessary element of mystery involved in any language addressing the future. The main thrust of the prophecy is that <i>all</i></p>	

<sup>80</sup> Duguid, pp 440-441.

<sup>81</sup> Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel*, pp 313, 314.

<sup>82</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, “Ezekiel,” in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1114.

<sup>83</sup> G.R. Beasley-Murray, “Ezekiel,” in *NBCR*, 681.

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of God's people would somehow participate in the future restoration; how this could be is not known, yet it is the essence of the prophet's affirmation....It is clear, with the benefit of hindsight, that the prophecy concerns a distant future. The preceding passage, concerning the dry bones, could be interpreted simply in terms of exiles returning to their homeland. But this oracle moves out of the realm of history, as we commonly understand it, and anticipates a future time in which God will bring a new kind of reality into being. While the precise significance of each part of the prophecy may elude us, the broad thrust is clear: God had not forgotten his people and had determined their restoration."<sup>84</sup>  
Peter C. Craigie, *evangelical Christian*

"It is clear from our vantage point that all of these promises were not fulfilled after the first return from Babylon. Prophecy often had an immediate, limited fulfillment but also a long-range, more complete fulfillment. If this was the case, it meant that Ezekiel was describing details, many of which would be fulfilled in a future permanent return beyond the immediate purview of the return from Babylon. This explains why so many symbols, figures, and verses from Ezekiel were incorporated into John's view of the last days in Revelation. The truth is that both were describing the same events....The passage anticipates the future work of God with Israel in bringing about a complete restoration of the nation."<sup>85</sup>  
Lamar Eugene Cooper, *dispensational Christian*

"This regathering cannot be the one conducted by Zerubbabel in 536 B.C., or the one overseen by Ezra in 457, or the one led by Nehemiah in 445, for these three are only a prelude to a worldwide gathering that God himself will conduct in that final era of history when there will be 'one king' over his people and they will again be 'one nation' (v. 22), without the northern and southern divisions that have existed since 931 B.C.....This promise of a reunited nation in the land of Canaan was not fulfilled according to the terms of this prophecy in David and Solomon's day, any more than it was fulfilled in the days of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah—unless someone wants to argue for an unusual period of obedience to God's law in Israel and for a temporary unification of the nation when presumably the Messiah came down to rule and reign in the postexilic days—an event that never took place!"<sup>86</sup>  
Walter C. Kaiser, *evangelical Christian*

"The prophecy speaks not of a mere political union, free from the wars and rivalry that marred the era of the First Temple. Rather, it speaks of an era under a king from the House of David, who will be a servant of God and who will unify the people in allegiance to the Torah. Idolatry will be gone and the Temple will stand; the standard of life will be obedience to the laws of the Torah and the result will be that the entire world will know that HASHEM is God."<sup>87</sup>  
ArtScroll Chumash, *Orthodox Jewish*

"After Solomon, the ten tribes following Jeroboam became the kingdom of Israel, the two remaining tribes in Jerusalem, Judah and Benjamin, became the kingdom of Judah. The ten

<sup>84</sup> Craigie, pp 263-264.

<sup>85</sup> Cooper, 327, 327 fn#80.

<sup>86</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *The Messiah in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 198.

<sup>87</sup> Scherman, *Chumash*, 1445.

tribes were carried off to Assyria in 722 B.C., and the two remaining tribes were carried off by Babylon between 605 and 586 B.C. The situation where these two kingdoms were divided will end, and as this and other prophecies predict, the two kingdoms will become one nation (cf. Jer. 3:18; 23:5-6; 30:3; Hosea 1:11; Amos 9:11). No fulfillment has ever been recorded in history, and the future regathering of Israel will occur in the Millennium.”<sup>88</sup>  
John F. Walvoord, *dispensational Christian*

“The Kingdom of David and Solomon split in 931 B.C., becoming Israel and Judah. In restored Israel, all tribes are represented and the nation will be united, as the sign of the fused stick reveals.”<sup>89</sup>  
Tim LaHaye Prophecy Study Bible, *dispensational Christian*

While there is an array of points of view to be considered, as shown from the diversity of views quoted above, most Messianics’ interpretation of Ezekiel 37:15-28 will fall into the literal scope of fulfilled in the past/to be fulfilled in the future. The primary Jewish orientation of the regathering of all Israel, even though there was certainly debate in ancient times, is reflected in the Talmud:

**“The ten tribes are not destined to return, since it is said, “And he cast them into another land, as on this day” (Deu. 29:28). Just as the day passes and does not return, so they have gone their way and will not return,’ the words of R. Aqiba. R. Eliezer says, ‘Just as this day is dark and then grows light, so the ten tribes for whom it now is dark — thus in the future it is destined to grow light for them.’**

*“Our rabbis have taught on Tannaite authority: ‘The ten tribes have no portion in the world to come [T.: and will not live in the world to come], as it is said, “And the Lord drove them out of their land with anger and heat and great wrath” (Deu. 29: 8) — in this world; and cast them forth into another land’ (Deu. 29:28) — in the world to come,’ the words of R. Aqiba. R. Simeon b. Judah of Kefar Akkum says in the name of R. Simeon, ‘Scripture said, “As at this day” — if their deeds remains as they are this day, they will [not] reach it, and if not, they will (not) reach it.’ Rabbi says, [Both these and those] have a portion in the world to come, as it is said, “And it shall come to pass in that day that the trumpet shall be blown [and those who are perishing in the land of Assyria and those who are driven away in to the Land of Egypt shall come and worship the Lord in the holy mountain, in Jerusalem]” (Isa. 27:13): [T. San. 13:12].” (b.Sanhedrin 110b).<sup>90</sup>*

Some of the Jewish Sages, while acknowledging that the Northern Kingdom was exiled, denied that its descendants would ever return to the fold of Israel. At the same time, other Jewish Sages affirmed the Prophets’ expectation that the

<sup>88</sup> John F. Walvoord, *Every Prophecy of the Bible* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1999), pp 186-187.

<sup>89</sup> LaHaye, 873.

<sup>90</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

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Northern Kingdom would be restored within a wider restoration of Israel. Within later history, we see how historian Zvi Ben-Dor Benite can make reference to the Italian Jewish Rabbi Isaac Lampronti (1679-1756), commenting how “whatever others might be debating about the tribes and their location, what the Jews really ought to do is stick to the prophecy promising their return. This reunion, [Lampronti] assures his readers, is going to be the work of God, not of modern geography, and will happen ‘according principally to the prophecy of Ezekiel in chapter 37’ (*principalmente di quella d’Ezechieel cap. 37*).”<sup>91</sup>

Today’s Orthodox Jewish expectation, concurrent with what is communicated in the Talmud regarding Israel’s restoration, and among some later voices, does seem to be a little bigger than the construction of the Second Temple by Zerubbabel, and affirmation statements regarding “all Israel present” after the Babylonian exile. Every day in the *Shacharit* or the weekday morning service, Orthodox Jews pray that the Lord will come to Jerusalem and establish His Kingdom once again. This also includes the reestablishment of the Davidic Kingdom, which did not happen following the return of the Jews from Babylon:

“And to Jerusalem, Your city, may You return in compassion, and may You rest within it, as You have spoken. May You rebuild it soon in our days as an eternal structure, and may You speedily establish the throne of David within it. Blessed are You HASHEM, the Builder of Jerusalem....The offspring of your servant David may You speedily cause to flourish, and enhance his pride for Your salvation all day long. Blessed are You, HASHEM, Who causes the pride of salvation to flourish.”<sup>92</sup>

Holding to a futuristic fulfillment of Ezekiel 37:15-28 is surely compatible with Jewish views of Israel’s restoration. Yet quite surprisingly, and even a bit disturbingly, some of today’s Messianic Jews try to honestly argue that Israel was reunited and restored in past history, which is often flippantly based on surface references to “all Israel” in Ezra-Nehemiah.<sup>93</sup> The two sticks are believed to have already been reunited, because along with the survivors of the Babylonian exile, various survivors from the Northern Kingdom, had been already been joined with Judah. Well, if this is true and the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel have been corporately reunited in all their fullness, then we should assume that *all of the expectations* of Ezekiel’s two-stick prophecy have now been accomplished. This is a position, we should believe, that is widely unsustainable when remarks like “the nations shall know that I the LORD sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them forevermore” (37:28, NRSV) are made.

Daniel C. Juster has been among those Messianic Jews who have affirmed a past fulfillment of Ezekiel 37:15-28 in the Sixth Century B.C.E., as he detailed in his 1994 report “Is the Church Ephraim?”, “When the nation of Israel came back from

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<sup>91</sup> Ben-Dor Benite, 208.

<sup>92</sup> Scherman and Zlotowitz, *Complete ArtScroll Siddur*, 109.

<sup>93</sup> Ezra 2:70; 6:17; 8:25, 35; 10:5; Nehemiah 7:73; 12:47; 13:26.

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captivity, Northerners were included and there was one country. The two sticks became one and will yet receive the covenant of peace after their present regathering is complete. Perhaps over time, more Northerners found their way back to the land of Israel and into the Jewish community in Israel and Babylon than we realize.”<sup>94</sup> Juster then added the conditional statement, which is a bit revealing: “The Messiah could identify and gather the lost tribes after his return.”<sup>95</sup>

Juster appears, here in 1994, to admit to the possibility of a future fulfillment of the two-stick prophecy, but is largely pessimistic to it, and relegated almost all of it to the past. While he is, of course, free to hold to such a position, a majority of pre-millennial interpreters in contrast, hold to an almost entirely futuristic fulfillment of Ezekiel 37:15-28 (especially Craigie, Kaiser), even if they do not know all of the finer details of it. There are some other voices within contemporary Messianic Judaism, in contrast to this, who affirm a more futuristic orientation of Ezekiel 37:15-28:

- Arnold G. Fructenbaum: “One of the major features of the final restoration is that Israel will be reunited as a nation, never to be divided into separate kingdoms again....[I]n Ezekiel 37:15-23, the prophet is commanded to take two sticks. On one stick he is to write *Judah* and on the other *Joseph*, and then put the two sticks together so that they become one stick in his hand (vv. 15-17). The interpretation is that the two kingdoms will someday be reunited into one nation (vv. 18-20). When the regathering of Israel comes (v. 21), they will not be regathered into two nations, but only into one, for they will be under one king in one kingdom (v. 22). At that time they will be thoroughly cleansed of their sins which were the root cause of the original division.”<sup>96</sup>
- Jeffrey Enoch Feinberg: “[T]he prophet Y’chezkel (*Ezekiel*), in exile with his people, promises complete restoration between the tribes led by Y’hudah and the ten lost tribes led by Yosef’s son Efrayim. Indeed, the two kingdoms will be united under a king from Y’hudah (Ez. 37:22, 24)....The LORD promises to purify his people into a holy kingdom (Ez. 37:23). He promises a covenant of peace, and a Sanctuary in which He will dwell among His people. Only then will the nation find its place among the nations of the world.”<sup>97</sup>
- Michael L. Brown: “[T]here is one good thing that has been accomplished by the Two House theory, and that is to draw attention to passages such as Ezekiel 37:15-25, where God speaks of

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<sup>94</sup> Daniel C. Juster, in *Is the Church Ephraim? A Requested Response to the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations*, 10.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>96</sup> Arnold G. Fructenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, revised edition (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1996), 806.

<sup>97</sup> Jeffrey Enoch Feinberg, *Walk Genesis: A Messianic Jewish Devotional Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Lederer, 1998), 204.

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the reunification of Judah with Ephraim. The Two House proponents do get these texts wrong, but the question must be asked: Were verses such as these fulfilled in the return of the Jews from Babylonian exile, since among them were Israelite exiles as well, or do they point to a yet future restoration, one that could be ongoing this very day, in which scattered remnants of the so-called Ten Lost Tribes—from India and Africa—are returning to the Land?<sup>98</sup>

- Boaz Michael & Jacob Fronczak: “The prophets repeatedly prophesy to both houses even after the deportation of both kingdoms. One passage in particular clearly speaks of their reunification as one indivisible body (Ezekiel 37:15-28), and it is a passage that, at least toward its end, is clearly referring to the Messianic Age. This seems to imply that the reunification of the people of Israel has not yet been accomplished and will not be until Messiah returns...Ezekiel’s prophecy certainly has elements that are unfulfilled...”<sup>99</sup>

The problem with claiming that Ezekiel 37:15-28 is an essentially fulfilled prophecy today, as encountered in some parts of Messianic Judaism, is obvious: if the two-stick prophecy was accomplished in past history, then one has to entirely allegorize the requirement for God’s Sanctuary to be present in the Earth. Likewise problematic is why the Jewish people were again dispersed from the Land of Israel after 70 C.E., with “all Israel” supposedly having returned to the Promised Land with David as king *l’olam* or “for eternity” (37:25). Should we be surprised that in his 2013 edition of *Jewish Roots*, Juster has had to now acknowledge, “there is evidence that Orthodox Rabbis and Messianic Jewish leaders are finding real lost tribes people in Pakistan, India, South Africa, and Zimbabwe?”<sup>100</sup>

Not unlike prophecies such as those of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27), or the nations coming to Zion to be taught God’s Law (Micah 4:1-3; Isaiah 2:2-4), given the corporate restoration of Israel here to the Promised Land, a fulfillment of the two-stick oracle of Ezekiel 37:15-28 would be most impossible for the pre-resurrection era. If we choose to take a realized eschatology approach to this oracle, where many of its realities can be experienced now among God’s people, then *only* when the complete cleansing (37:20) would be available via the work of Yeshua the Messiah in the post-resurrection era, could this prophecy really

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<sup>98</sup> Michael L. Brown, *60 Questions Christians Ask About Jewish Beliefs and Practices* (Minneapolis: Chosen Books, 2011), 244.

<sup>99</sup> Boaz Michael, with Jacob Fronczak, *Twelve Gates: Where Do the Nations Enter?* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2012), pp 26, 27.

Also to be noted are the thoughts of D. Thomas Lancaster, *Grafted In: Israel, Gentiles, and the Mystery of the Gospel* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2009), 167:

“Judaism anticipates that when Messiah comes, he will sound a great trumpet and gather the Jewish people back to the land of Israel. Even the ten lost tribes will be included in this end-times gathering.”

<sup>100</sup> Daniel Juster, *Jewish Roots: Understanding Your Jewish Faith*, revised edition (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2013), 326.

begin to take shape. Only from the First Century C.E. to the present could Israel truly be in the process of restoration.

**I think that much of today's Messianic Judaism simply does not want to consider the serious ramifications of the two-stick prophecy,** and on the whole wants to stay away from an issue that is bound to get non-Jewish Believers in their midst stirred up, as many are likely to think that they "must be" descendants of the exiled Northern Kingdom. Various leaders within today's Messianic Judaism will devise as many ways as they can to get out of addressing the verses of Ezekiel 37:15-28 in detail, and with that fail to weigh the opinions of commentators and interpreters who direct us to a futuristic perspective of fulfillment.

A futuristic view of the two-stick prophecy fits well within an appropriate window of interpretational possibilities of Ezekiel 37:15-28, especially those who hold to a pre-millennial eschatology. Ironically enough, dispensational Christian theologians—who think that the so-called "Church" will be raptured out prior to the Tribulation—even recognize that the two-stick prophecy is yet to be fulfilled.

An interpreter like John Goldingay will not avoid the two-stick prophecy the same way as some of today's Messianic Jews. He actually labels the oracle of Ezekiel 37:15-28 to be "A Conjuring Trick Whereby Two Sticks Become One."<sup>101</sup> He considers Ezekiel to be like a "contextual theologian," recognizing "that Yahweh cannot have finished with...northern Israel as an entity."<sup>102</sup> However, not quite knowing what to do, Goldingay is left comparing the two-stick prophecy to religious divisions that exist between Jews and Christians, and within the broad spectrum of Christianity, summarizing,

"It was not clear then and it is not clear 2,500 years later how....[this] can be worked out for the Jewish people or for the Christian church. Both are riven by divisions: orthodox, conservative, liberal; Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal; liberal, fundamentalist. One group refuses to accept the validity of another's religious practices. As some divisions fade away, others develop."<sup>103</sup>

In Goldingay's estimation, the two-stick prophecy of Ezekiel 37:15-28 is no more fulfillable than Yeshua's prayer in John 17 for unity among His followers. The more mainline allegorized views of this oracle, though, are from interpreters who simply consider the two-stick prophecy as a motivation for expressing faith in God, as the Jewish exiles to Babylon would have required overwhelming faith to see their nation fully restored. Darr remarks, "We cannot know how Ezekiel's fellow exiles responded to his perfect portrait of Israel's future...Surely some thought the prophet to be crazy..."<sup>104</sup>

Other than interpreters who really do allegorize the Ezekiel 37:15-28 prophecy, or consider it to be so impossible that it will never happen, it is really sad that a wide number of today's Messianic Jews are those who pretty much avoid the

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<sup>101</sup> John Goldingay, "Ezekiel," in James D.G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson, eds., *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 657.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Darr, in *NIB*, 6:1511.

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futuristic reality of the text. Or, when holding to a pre-millennial eschatology, some of today's Messianic Jews actually argue that this prophecy was largely accomplished in ancient times. This is notably quite contrary to some mainline Jewish interpretations of the two-stick prophecy, which even though do not recognize Yeshua the Messiah as the Davidic King, **do recognize future fulfillment.**

### What do these things mean to them?

One of the most significant things, that the Lord Himself actually anticipates, as the Prophet Ezekiel held up two pieces of wood to the Jewish exiles in Babylon, is that they would ask, "Will you not show us what you mean by these?" (Ezekiel 37:18, RSV). Hopefully for Ezekiel's original audience, they took the message of Israel's future restoration to be one of promise—recognizing that God would surely end the period of exile. Today in much of the Messianic movement, the same basic question of "What do these things mean?" is being asked. People who read the two-stick prophecy of Ezekiel 37:15-28 are answering this question in a variety of ways. Some of these answers have been good, and some of them have not at all been that good. Answering this question properly—concurrent with the Lord's desire to see His people brought together—will be very important for the future.

A cursory examination of the Messianic world will reveal that today's Messianic Jews have largely chosen to ignore or discount this prophecy. Likewise, there has arisen a large number of Two-House populists, who make a prophecy like Ezekiel 37:15-28 the very center of their spiritual being, sometimes even more important than the personal salvation that we are to all possess in Messiah Yeshua. These populists see the message as one of physical identity, rather than unfulfilled Bible prophecy. Finding a third alternative, which respects the eschatological focus of the two-stick oracle, but keeps it within the right perspective of who we are to be first and foremost as redeemed people in Yeshua the Messiah, may be a challenge for the short term.

Many of today's Messianic Jews and adherents of a populist Two-House teaching are actually not that different in their approach to spirituality, with each unable to see the real focus of what our Father wants the Messianic movement to become. Much of today's Messianic Judaism has the vision of becoming another formal, recognized branch of Judaism. Those who adhere to this ideological drive want to build a faith community that is almost exclusively composed of Jewish Believers in Yeshua, (reluctantly) with a few intermarrieds, but without the large numbers of non-Jews that currently make up and (financially) support much of Messianic Judaism. Their desire is to build a "safe," almost totally ethnic Jewish environment, where Yeshua can be honored, but where non-Jewish Believers pretty much remain in the Christian Church and away from them. This is supposed to be a vision of what ultimately may be considered two sub-peoples of God.

For far too many in the Two-House sub-movement, a person's identity is similarly focused on just being a member of physical people. It is automatically assumed, quite presumptuously, that if a non-Jewish person is a part of the

Messianic movement, that he or she must automatically be a member of the “Lost Tribes.” One will hear an overblown emphasis on the reunion of “Ephraim and Judah,” so much so that many Jewish Believers are quite turned off to considering the wider scope of prophecies of Israel’s restoration, with themselves often being placed as significantly secondary to this “Ephraim.” Furthermore, the two-stick prophecy’s emphasis on companions from the nations being a part of this reunion, is a fact often quickly left by the wayside—especially if it is proven that as many as eighty to ninety percent or more of those involved in the restoration of Israel’s Kingdom, are going to be companions from the nations at large. The populist Two-House teaching also employs a great deal of theological eisegesis, where many accounts of “two” in the Scriptures are all of a sudden about the Two Houses of Israel, when they may not be (i.e., Luke 15:11-32). Much of the long term focus of what is to become of this is just all over the board at present.

While many of the populist Two-House advocates will simply claim that all non-Jewish Believers are “Ephraim,” this is much more of a “touchy feely” thing more than anything else, guided by a semi-charismatic approach to spirituality. A more extreme variety of this goes beyond simply claiming that most every non-Jew in the Messianic movement is a scattered “Ephraimite,” but would actually identify various people of specific nationalities as being of Tribe XYZ. Concurrent with this is a great deal of pseudo-history, the most significant encountered being British-Israelism. The fact that there are pseudo-historical claims sometimes associated with those who interpret Ezekiel 37:15-28, has not gone unnoticed by evangelical scholars. Of particular importance are the thoughts of Wright, originally from Northern Ireland, who comments,

“The view, which is still adamantly held in some quarters, that the ‘ten lost tribes’ of the destroyed northern kingdom somehow migrated to northwestern Europe and became the ancestors of the Anglo-Saxon peoples (primarily Britain and America) has no basis in reputable historical research....and the theological implication that it is built upon...flies in the face of the New Testament teaching which affirms Ezekiel’s vision of the unity of Israel in the Messiah Jesus, and generates an ethnocentric (and virtually racist) contradiction to the biblical picture of the multinational nature of the people of God in Christ.”<sup>105</sup>

If there are truly groups of people out in the nations, descended from the exiles of Israel/Ephraim, then the prophecy clearly states that God is the One who restores them to corporate Israel in the eschaton (Ezekiel 37:19). It is not the job of any human person to be so presumptuous so as to absolutely think that this or that tribe went here or there, and promote ridiculous assertions like the term “British” being of Hebrew origin, or fantastical claims that the Ancient Israelites somehow settled North America. The imperative of Amos 9:9 is, “I will shake the house of Israel among all nations as *grain* is shaken in a sieve, but not a kernel will fall to the ground.” God’s sovereignty alone will gather scattered Israel (of either Judah or Ephraim) back, not any human arrogance—as best epitomized by the false claims

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<sup>105</sup> Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel*, 313 fn# 108.

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of British-Israelism and its offshoots. He alone knows where they went, He will gather them back, and the *only importance* is that scattered Israel/Ephraim is one of the three groups to be reunited as a part of restored Israel in prophecy. Even if one is of scattered Ephraim, that by no means guarantees him or her eternal salvation. All are human, and all need the same salvation available in Yeshua (cf. Romans chs. 1-3).

On the whole, the vision of much of Messianic Judaism today or the Two-House sub-movement cannot really affect **significant spiritual change in people's lives**, where the mandate of God is entirely fulfilled. This involves understanding what Israel was called to be as a missional community, a kingdom of priests called to serve the people of Planet Earth, by spreading the light and goodness of the Creator God (Exodus 19:6; Isaiah 42:6), and now by extension Messiah Yeshua. If today's Messianic Jews or Two-House adherents could really grasp the significance of this simple, yet complex requirement that the Lord has given us, *we could be a real force of positive change for the world*. The Messianic emphasis on the Torah, for example, is desperately needed in an hour of moral relativism and growing licentiousness.<sup>106</sup>

Israel's restoration is much bigger than just the Jewish people, or even Judah and Israel/Ephraim; **it is something that affects the entire world**. If today's Two-House sub-movement actually bothered to really emphasize the associated "companions" (Ezekiel 37:16, 19; cf. Isaiah 49:6) from the nations at large a little more frequently, then some of the (valid) accusations of "racism" that get levied against it would have no basis at all. Alas, often because of the limitations of these still early years of the Messianic movement, the restoration of Israel's Kingdom presented as a *very inclusive process* might take a while to see come to the forefront.

Concurrent with this is the debate that is raging right now in the Messianic movement about the relevance of God's Torah for (all of) God's people.<sup>107</sup> In the context of the two-stick prophecy of Ezekiel 37:15-28, all those who are brought together—Judah, exiled Israel/Ephraim, and companions from the nations—will be fully obedient to the Lord when it is completed (Ezekiel 37:24). Yet, such an obedience is to be surely compelled by the transformative work of God's Spirit on the hearts and minds of His people (Ezekiel 36:25-27).

Yet this has its own unique set of challenges. Many people in today's Messianic world have a very close relationship with the Law, but they do not have a very close relationship with the Lawgiver, failing to see how the Torah is to point people to Yeshua (Galatians 3:24, Grk.; Romans 10:4, Grk.). Some consider the Torah to be part of the time prior to Messiah, perhaps important for Jewish identity, but not that important as the foundational instructions that inform God's people how to live holy lives. Many people in today's Two-House sub-movement,

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<sup>106</sup> Consult the author's McHuey Blog post from 14 September, 2009, "A Low Hamartology," appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper*.

<sup>107</sup> Consult the relevant sections of the *Messianic Torah Helper* by Messianic Apologetics (forthcoming).

while rightfully believing that the Torah is for today, disregard too many mainline Jewish interpretations and viewpoints concerning its application.

The issue of the Torah's relevance, but perhaps more specifically how it is to be followed, has been a major wedge that divides many Two-House advocates with Messianic Jews. The Two-House sub-movement, in particular, has various leaders who speak in favor of uniting "all Israel," but absolutely thumb their nose at mainline Jewish traditions that would be honored in either the Conservative or Reform Synagogue, or most Messianic Jewish congregations (not fringe things like the Kabbalah or some of the Orthodox Jewish extremities). Very little sensitivity has been encouraged toward understanding Christian theology, and so the same bad approach has similarly been encouraged toward Jewish theology. So while claiming to want to see people brought together, particularly Jews and Christians, very little is able to be accomplished *at actually bringing them together*.

This is not to say that many of today's Messianic Jews have not been immature and childish when it comes to examining a Biblical passage like Ezekiel 37:15-28. *On the contrary, they have!* Some of today's Messianic Jews expect a blind obedience to many Jewish traditions that violate the ethos of Scripture, in particular as it comes to the equality of all people in the Lord. But rather than take Messianic Judaism to task over a serious issue like this, and how many non-Jews may sometimes be treated as second or third-class people by them, Two-House advocates often go after Messianic Jews for issues like not using the Divine Name of God or following the Hillel II Rabbinical calendar. This does not help, and it only makes things more complicated.

While populist Two-House advocates at least try to address the two-stick prophecy of Ezekiel 37:15-28, even if they go to some extremes here and there, many of today's Messianic Jews cannot even handle it without having some kind of heart palpitations. The fact remains that unless one wants to allegorize the two-stick prophecy, it is a *yet-to-be-fulfilled* prophecy. And we might not know all the details right now, but that is perfectly alright if we have faith in the Lord. We do not know many of the specific details of the eschaton—especially that of the resurrection—yet we still believe!

People like myself have no problem thinking that significant numbers of non-Jewish Believers being led into the Messianic movement is quite important, in fulfillment of the prophetic words such as the nations streaming toward Zion and toward God's Torah (Isaiah 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-3). But unlike most of the popular Two-House proponents out there, as a non-Jewish Messianic Believer I definitely feel a strong need to honor the positive difference that Messianic Judaism has made in my life. I have to recognize that on the whole Messianic Judaism is far more spiritually and theologically stable (in spite of its flaws) than a Two-House sub-movement that is often riddled with a great deal of unprofessionalism and grossly unqualified leaders.

I think the main answer in getting Messianic Jews to really consider Biblical passages like Ezekiel 37:15-28 will be found in whether or not those in the more independent Messianic movement will continue to place any unnecessary barriers

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between itself and Messianic Judaism. We all need to position ourselves to grow and mature in a close parallel to Messianic Judaism, so that when a future time comes, we can hope to have greater dialogue about what is transpiring. Unfortunately, though, too many barriers probably exist for such progress to really be made today.

### What do these things mean to me?

While the question of Ezekiel 37:18, “Will you not show us what you mean by these?” (RSV), has been answered in various ways by today’s Messianic Jews and Two-House advocates, **I have my own views as to how this question should be properly answered.** I think that when stuck between the extremes of people avoiding the subject matter of the two-stick prophecy, or then placing their lives at the very center of the issue, that a third alternative must emerge.

The only “safe” way that we can really address the whole issue of a larger restoration of Israel, is as **futuristic end-time prophecy.** Because this is futuristic prophecy, it automatically is not placed at the center of who we are as Believers, because who we are as Believers is to know and emulate the Lord Yeshua. Likewise, because the two-stick oracle is recognized as futuristic prophecy, we may not know all of the details of how it is to come to pass. This does not mean that we ignore it, but it does mean that we have to place a great deal of trust in God. Any interpretation we have cannot by any means be branded as “heresy,” especially if we are in common agreement with both Jewish and evangelical Christian interpreters who recognize Ezekiel 37:15-28 as yet-to-be-fulfilled.

Something that I have also had to consider very seriously about the two-stick prophecy, especially when evaluating the wide spectrum of opinions, is its significant theme of unity. While I may not totally approve of those who allegorize or spiritualize Ezekiel’s word, commentators who do so are absolutely right about how the Prophet Ezekiel communicates a broad message of required unity to God’s people. How often do we really sit down as Messianic Believers, and consider what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:10?

“Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.”

Applying the themes of Ezekiel 37:15-28 to an evangelical Christian audience, Duguid’s thoughts should be well taken:

“Churches and denominations ought not to be ‘homogeneous units,’ where Christians choose to meet together with others exactly like them. Rather, each church should strive to be a heterogeneous mixture of those for whom Christ died, an entity that transcends racial, ethnic, cultural, and class barriers, giving expression as a worshipping community to the unity that is ours in our common adoption into God’s family.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Duguid, 441.

Even though much of today's Messianic Judaism may have the long term vision of its congregations being relatively homogeneous, with a few intermarrieds, I have seldom attended a Messianic congregation that is not ethnically and culturally diverse. There is very much a "mixed salad" present in today's Messianic movement. Given the themes of Israel's olive tree in Romans 9-11, this may be an olive salad with some very dominant Jewish flavors, but there are enough associated flavors for it to still be a rather unique olive salad.

As I have searched the Scriptures, read the words of trusted scholars and theologians, and experienced much in my Messianic walk—I have a vision of the Messianic movement, albeit developing, that is rather unique. It is not the multi-class system of much of today's Messianic Judaism, nor is it the populism of much of today's Two-House sub-movement. It is a view that will build on the work of our Jewish and Christian forbearers, which I would hope has the capacity to bring those who believe in the God of Israel, and our Messiah Yeshua, together as one group of people empowered to fulfill the Divine mandate. It will recognize us all as a part of the Commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:11-13), and that what is to befall Israel in the end-times—including prophecies like Ezekiel 37:15-28—will involve all of us in some way. Most of today's non-Jewish Messianic Believers are not at all going to be descendants of the exiled Northern Kingdom in the end, **but we will all end up being a part of the same community, or enlarged Kingdom realm, of Israel.**

I do very much believe that a Jewish leadership in matters of Torah *halachah* is to be respected (Genesis 49:10; Matthew 23:2-3; Romans 3:2; 11:29), and that many of the independent forms of Torah observance present in the Two-House sub-movement have not helped. This does not mean that I advocate that we blindly follow all Jewish traditions, but we certainly need to have a traditionally Jewish style of Torah observance consistent with the Conservative or Reform Synagogue today. I also very much believe that we need to give what is properly due to our shared Jewish and Christian theological heritage, as our engagement with the Scriptures improves, and we learn to join into a larger conversation of Biblical Studies. We need to learn to focus on what we have in common with others first (Ephesians 4:1-6), and then respectfully and constructively work through our differences. If we cannot learn how to fairly dialogue with our evangelical Christian brethren who know the Messiah, how will we be able to fairly dialogue with our Jewish brethren who do not know the Messiah? Some of these questions may always be *in process*, but the word of Ephesians 4:29 cannot be forgotten:

"Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a *word* as is good for edification according to the need of *the moment*, so that it will give grace to those who hear."<sup>109</sup>

I have also learned via some experience that one of the main reasons why today's Messianic movement, while wishing to have unity—does not have it—is

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<sup>109</sup> Consult the author's exegetical paper on Ephesians 4:29, "How Are Messianics to Properly Communicate?"

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because we are not fully prepared to consider the three categories of people who have been made equal via the atoning work of Messiah Yeshua. According to Galatians 3:28, where Paul directly subverted an ancient Rabbinical prayer (t.*Berachot* 6:18) appearing in the Orthodox Jewish *siddur* even until today,<sup>110</sup> not only are Jews and Greeks and slaves and free equal, but so are males and females. There is actually a **three-class**, and not a two-class system, that needs to be jettisoned from too much of the broad Messianic movement. Yet, considering the full implications of the kind of Biblical equality restored by the Lord, is one that today's Messianic generation, regardless of what position people take regarding a larger restoration of Israel, is not that ready or willing to consider. I personally do not believe that God will grant us unity, though, until we not only consider it, but do something about it. We need to work toward the "one new humanity" (Ephesians 2:15, NRSV/CJB)<sup>111</sup> that He desires us to be, **not** some "one new man/male."<sup>112</sup>

By no means do I think that the Messianic movement needs to embrace some kind of broad ecumenical vision, but it is a bit too parochial at the present time. We have difficulty looking at the bigger picture, the world beyond Israel, and God's desire to see the good news of salvation reach the ends of the Earth. We are only now beginning to consider the great potential we have, beyond the awesomeness of reaching out to Jews and Christians, in an effort to see Jewish people saved and Christians embrace their Hebraic Roots. Perhaps not too unlike how some of the Prophet Ezekiel's fellow Jewish exiles disregarded or mocked what he said when he held two pieces of wood before them, some of my own thoughts of what the Messianic movement needs to be considering (although on a far lesser plain than Ezekiel), are disregarded by some of the Messianic leaders I have interacted with.

While it is certainly important for us to encourage Messianic congregations and fellowships to be places where all are welcomed in the Lord and spiritually edified, and we need to be far more united than we are—there are justifiable reasons to be divided. Duguid refers to 2 John 10-11 and 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 as some examples to be considered, specifically recognizing how some people may need to show that they have God's approval on the basis of 1 Corinthians 11:19: "For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you."<sup>113</sup> Unfortunately, due to the small size and relatively young age of today's emerging Messianic movement, there are some necessary divisions over significant theological issues. Since I have already addressed these in various articles and other publications, I see no need in this paper to refer you to some long list of theological and spiritual issues to be remedied, which you may find a bit depressing.

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<sup>110</sup> Hertz, *Authorised Daily Prayer Book*, pp 19, 21; Scherman and Zlotowitz, *Complete ArtScroll Siddur*, 19.

<sup>111</sup> Grk. *kainon anthrōpon* (καλὸν ἄνθρωπον).

<sup>112</sup> For a further discussion, consult the author's exegetical paper on Galatians 3:28, "Biblical Equality and Today's Messianic Movement."

<sup>113</sup> Duguid, 442.

## Ezekiel 37:15-28 Have the Two Sticks Been Reunited?

As someone who chooses to engage with the issues of Ezekiel 37:15-28, J.K. McKee is placed between two extremes: one ignores the subject matter, and then another over-emphasizes the subject matter. One group does not really want to align itself with God's mission of having a single albeit internally diverse people united in Him, and the other bears all the signs of a still-maturing movement that is under-developed in too many areas.

I am basically an advocate for a Messianic faith, similar to what has been seen in much of Messianic Judaism—but definitely with equality for all of God's people. It would affirm that a larger restoration of Israel is something in process, but it would leave many of the details in His hands to be sorted out. I am a conundrum to many I interact with, because I could easily be classified as being the most "Messianic Jewish" of the various people out there who address passages like Ezekiel 37:15-28 in a positive manner. I have no problem with the healthy role that a Conservative degree of Jewish tradition can play in Torah observance—yet as a Bible teacher true to the text, I have to actually deal with passages like Ezekiel 37:15-28, unlike what many Messianic Jews have chosen to do. I likewise know that today's Messianic movement positively benefits in too many ways from our evangelical Christian heritage, not to just be discarded as well. On the whole, this tactful approach represents a third stream of Messianic faith that has yet to really be seen in today's generation—yet it probably represents the best way we can be all the things that the Lord wants us to be. It will certainly be growing in the 2010s!

Already knowing that my identity in the Lord is secure, because of how Yeshua has saved me from my sins and made me a new person via the transforming power of the gospel—I personally do not care whether or not I am a physical descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. *I am a human being made in God's image, with extreme value to my Creator.* Everyone who calls on the same Messiah Yeshua (Christ Jesus) is welcome to be a part of Israel's restoration, as God's people are brought together in the sovereign hand of the Son of Man.

While many non-Jewish Believers who adhere to the Two-House teaching speculate that they could actually be scattered Israelites from Tribe XYZ, I think such speculation is utterly **off limits** from what we see in the Scriptures. The Apostle Paul instructed Titus on the island of Crete to "avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and strife" (Titus 3:9).<sup>114</sup> When people spend more time trying to figure out who they are physically, **than who they are in Messiah Yeshua**, God's objective of seeing people saved and discipled is not easily achieved. The Apostles never identified non-Jewish Believers as being of Tribe XYZ, but they did affirm the expectation of the Prophets, and how Israel would be restored by God's sovereign

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<sup>114</sup> The perspective of Titus 3:9 is directly concerned with "those of the circumcision" (Titus 1:10), likely some kind of Jewish troublemakers who were using their pedigree to act superior to everyone else. In 1 Timothy 1:4, which also refers to genealogies, this is most probably associated with the misuse of the Torah that Paul confronts (1 Timothy 1:6-7), and involved speculations by the false teachers on the genealogy listings of obscure Tanach figures (i.e., Genesis chs. 5, 11).

For a further discussion on this and related issues, consult the author's commentary *The Pastoral Epistles for the Practical Messianic*.

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hand. They certainly had no difficulty applying various prophecies about Israel's restoration to the salvation of the nations in the ancient Mediterranean (i.e., Acts 15:15-18; Amos 9:11-12), but they stopped at trying to figure out "who was who." That people were being redeemed from their sins, and being granted eternal salvation, **was by far the most important thing!**

A significantly moderate approach to this issue does need to emerge that focuses more on the eschatological side of the matter, rather than on some kind of physical identity. Some people are really not going to like the idea—and I say this as an Arminian and a Wesleyan—that much of the issue of who scattered Israel/Ephraim is, should be left to the sovereign working of God as prophecies like Ezekiel 37:15-28 are fulfilled in future time and naturally play out. *This means that we may not know all the details until Yeshua returns.* Craigie has properly directed us, "it is safer to recognise the necessary element of mystery involved in any language addressing the future. The main thrust of the prophecy is that *all* of God's people would somehow participate in the future restoration; how this could be is not known."<sup>115</sup>

Most importantly and above all, what has to emerge regarding a larger restoration of Israel, will *really be concerned* about bringing people together as one in Messiah Yeshua. **All of God's people get to be involved in the restoration of God's Kingdom!** Unfortunately, the modus operandi that we find in many sectors of the current Two-House sub-movement of giving the Christian Church and Jewish Synagogue a proverbial "kick in the ass" (*tuccus* for you Yiddish speakers), has deterred this significantly. Mutual respect and honor needs to be encouraged, and the Messianic movement needs to grow up into adulthood and become a unifying force of God's holiness and righteousness.

As important as the Ezekiel 37:15-28 prophecy is for giving us a glimpse into the restoration of God's Kingdom, the unity of Judah and Israel/Ephraim is by no means enough, as it is not the consummation of God's plan for humanity. Block's view of the two-stick prophecy is, "The prophet's vision concerns not so much the consummation, the end of history, as its climax."<sup>116</sup> The unity of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers as one, as depicted in Ephesians 3:10,<sup>117</sup> is a foretaste of the ultimate consummation coming to the cosmos (Ephesians 1:21-23). The consummation of the ages will only take place when the redeemed enter into the New Creation that is coming. It just so happens, though, that the restoration of Israel's Kingdom realm is the major event seen in the Bible that is going to help leapfrog us closer to the Eternal State.

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<sup>115</sup> Craigie, 263.

<sup>116</sup> Block, 417.

<sup>117</sup> "[S]o that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the [assembly] to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 3:10).

## How do we see God's people unite?

I suspect that most of you who have read this analysis of Ezekiel 37:15-28, who have been in the Messianic movement for a while, and who have been exposed to the Two-House sub-movement and its teachings in some form—had no idea that there were this many opinions floating around about the two-stick prophecy. Having had to see some of these opinions, how do you think we are to move forward? How can we let the thoughts of both Jewish and Christian scholars inform us as to future Messianic development, as we seek answers to the questions posed by the Prophet Ezekiel? Taylor points out some things that we need not forget:

“An over-literal interpretation of one aspect of this future hope prevents one from seeing that the prophet is mainly concerned with the ideal of unity in the Messianic kingdom.”<sup>118</sup>

No one who honestly reads the oracle of Ezekiel 37:15-28 can avoid its message of unity. *God wants to see His people brought together.* Wright appeals to Ephesians 3:6 as being an appropriate New Testament equivalent of Ezekiel's message, concluding how “Nothing less than this great declaration will satisfy the chords of Ezekiel's great symphonic prophecy of one people under the Lord.”<sup>119</sup> The Apostle Paul's assertion that the nations “are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Messiah Yeshua through the gospel” (Ephesians 3:6), is often not that welcomed in various parts of today's Messianic Judaism. Many Messianic Jews do not want to see non-Jewish Believers as “co-heirs” (HCSB) and equal citizens of an enlarged Kingdom realm of Israel with them. Whether they really do stand against God's intention to unite all of His people, as laid forth by prophetic passages like Ezekiel 37:15-28, is a matter that we should leave entirely to His determination.

Today's Two-House sub-movement needs to be about improving itself, refining what the subject matter it advocates is Biblically, and reorienting itself to fulfilling God's mission of being a blessing to the world at large. Sadly, it does seem that most of the Two-House sub-movement is completely impotent to doing this, as it has become a sideshow in recent days for an entire array of urban legends and myths.<sup>120</sup> The most recent, and I believe most problematic of these thus far, has been the promotion of polygamy by a particular Two-House teacher.<sup>121</sup> The enemy knows the power that can be manifest in God's people being united together. This is not some ecumenical unity that waters down foundational doctrines, but Jewish

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<sup>118</sup> Taylor, 240.

<sup>119</sup> Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel*, 314.

<sup>120</sup> Consult the author's articles “The Quest for Credibility” and “The Top Ten Urban Myths of Today's Messianic Movement,” appearing in his book *Confronting Critical Issues: An Analysis of Subjects that Affects the Growth and Stability of the Emerging Messianic Movement*.

<sup>121</sup> Moshe Koniuchowsky, *Sex and the Believer: Shocking Freedom of Sexuality in Torah* (Margate, FL: Your Arms to Israel Publishing, 2008).

For an analysis and refutation of the concept of polygamy, consult the author's article “Is Polygamy for Today?” (appearing in *Men and Women in the Body of Messiah: Answering Crucial Questions*).

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and non-Jewish Believers coming together as one people in Messiah Yeshua, laying the groundwork for the eventual restoration of Israel's Kingdom **that will indeed change the world.**

Messianic Judaism may be immature in completely avoiding things like the two-stick prophecy, "whiting out" as it were, Ezekiel 37:15-28. But, various voices in the Two-House sub-movement have not given their cause a great deal of credibility, either. How we get beyond this, and emphasize the kind of unity envisioned by Ezekiel's prophecy, will be a significant goal for us to work toward in the days ahead. It will surely have to be accomplished in a different way from what we have seen in the recent past. It is not something impossible to reach for, but will not happen overnight. Some painful changes needing to be implemented are most probably on the near horizon.

We may not know all of the details of how the two-stick prophecy of Ezekiel 37:15-28 comes together. Some of the people who assume themselves to be of "Ephraim" are just companions from the nations at large. Yet the restoration of Israel is to be an inclusive process, and the worldwide affects of it cannot be avoided or underemphasized. It is also very much a message tied to the gospel of the Kingdom, a message of personal salvation and inclusion within Israel to be declared in the Last Days (Matthew 24:14).

Block holds that there is no built in timeframe for the Ezekiel 37:15-28 prophecy, observing, "no hints concerning the time of fulfillment are given. Accordingly, these events are deemed eschatological not because they are expected to transpire at the end of history but because they are new and they are final—their effects are guaranteed to continue forever."<sup>122</sup> It may very well be, that there is no "In that day...." clue mentioned in the two-stick oracle, **because the Lord is the One who really does bring it to pass.** He will only accomplish it when His people are mature and ready.

So how do we make sure that we are facilitating the restoration of God's Kingdom? Such a unity begins when we can recognize the high value that God had placed on each and every one of us as His human creations. We must learn to work together to achieve the mandate He originally gave to Ancient Israel, and be a blessing to all we encounter. *Let us get ready for great things ahead!*

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<sup>122</sup> Block, pp 416-417.