

The Stick of Joseph and the Stick of Judah

BRUCE L. BROWN

We live in a glorious time in the history of the world when much of God's word has been restored, when living prophets are upon the earth again, and when many ancient treasures are available to all who will read them. Joseph the Patriarch, the son of Jacob, prophesied of one in the last days who would be an instrument in the hands of the Lord in bringing forth much scripture to bless his people. "And his name shall be called after me," said this ancient Joseph,

*... and it shall be after the name of his father.
And he shall be like unto me; for the thing, which
the Lord shall bring forth by his hand, by the power
of the Lord shall bring my people unto salvation.
[2 Nephi 3:15]*

I give you my testimony of this Joseph, the Prophet of the Restoration. I know that he was a prophet of God. Of course this record that he was to bring forth to bring the Lord's people unto salvation is the Book of Mormon. Ezekiel, the exile prophet, foresaw the coming forth in the latter days of this book of scripture that had slept in the dust. He referred to it as the stick of Joseph. He foretold that the Saints of the latter days would combine it with the ancient stick

of Judah, the Bible, and that the two would become one in their hand.

I will take these words of Ezekiel as my theme today and share with you some of my experiences of the past eighteen years as a student and teacher of these two great books of scripture.

The Words of the Prophets

In the middle 1970s I experienced something that awakened my interest in the Hebrew Scripture, or as we often refer to it, the Old Testament. I heard Elder Packer deliver a wonderful sermon in the Marriott Center in which he discussed the gifts of the Spirit. As he spoke I began to have an experience not unlike what he was discussing. In particular, I learned that I should begin to study Hebrew in order to be prepared for opportunities that may come.

I have dropped into a number of Hebrew classes in the past twelve years. I haven't given the language the time it needs and I am certainly not fluent, but I have learned enough to have received a great deal of enjoyment and

Bruce L. Brown was a professor of psychology at Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 22 July 1986.

edification from Hebrew Scripture and to gain a great love for the language, culture, and people of Judah. Through it I have discovered a marvelous source of insight into the Old Testament—the Soncino Bible. This is a Jewish publication with the Hebrew text on the right, corresponding English text on the left, and rabbinical commentary from the Talmud and other sources at the bottom. I seldom read it but what I find some great treasure. One very good way to learn about the ancient prophets of the stick of Judah is from the rabbinical commentators and through considering some of the Hebrew words. One really doesn't need much skill in Hebrew to gain at least some benefit from this. Even a few words are a good start. And even without any knowledge of Hebrew one can learn a great deal from the commentary. The rabbis have considered, contemplated, debated, and pondered the words of the prophets for many years, and they give us contact with the ancient traditions.

Consider, for example, this footnote to Zechariah 1, verse 20, where in our King James Version it speaks of four carpenters who come in the day when the Lord will comfort Zion and choose Jerusalem. These four come to “fray” the four horns or powers or nations that have scattered Judah. The Soncino English translation calls them “four craftsmen,” and in the footnote “four smiths.” I quote from the footnote:

*These represent the agencies by which the enemies of Judah will be overthrown . . . the four craftsmen represent builders and artisans who will take a leading part in the rebuilding of the Temple. . . . In the Talmud (Sukkah 52b), the four craftsmen are identified with the Messiah the son of David, the Messiah the son of Joseph, the prophet Elijah, and the Righteous Priest (Melchizedek). [A. Cohen, ed., *The Twelve Prophets: Hebrew Text, English Translation and Commentary*, (Bournemouth, Hants: the Soncino Press, 1948), p. 276]*

The Jews know who Elijah and Melchizedek are, and Christians know that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, son of David. But only one who knows about Joseph Smith, the prophet of the Restoration, will have an idea of who this fourth craftsman is, the messiah or anointed one who is the son of Joseph. I had often heard there was an ancient Jewish tradition about Messiah ben Joseph, the Lord's anointed in the latter days who would die at the hands of an angry mob, but before this I had never seen a reference to that tradition.

Or consider this that I recently read in Holtz's book, *Back to the Sources*. The Hebrew word *tzedakah*, which is usually translated as charity, comes from the root meaning justice and righteousness. It is related to the word *tzedek* found, for example, in the name Melchizedek, or *Melchi-tzedek*, meaning King of Righteousness. That gives one new ways to consider Mormon's great discourse found in Moroni 7 about how faith in Christ will bring one to have hope, and finally charity, and also Paul's discourse on charity in 1 Corinthians.

The Hebrew text of the Bible is filled with wordplays that do not come through in translation. Many of them add substantially to the meaning and joy of the scriptures. For example, Psalm 119 is much more interesting in Hebrew. It is an acrostic consisting of twenty-two sections of eight verses each, with all eight verses in the first section beginning with *aleph*, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, all eight in the second section beginning with *beth*, the second Hebrew letter, and so on.

“Mine Ancient Covenant People”

Two and a half years ago I had an experience that I consider by itself to be repayment many times over for my meager offering in beginning to study this language of the ancient scriptures. I have, through my academic work, become close friends with a well-respected scholar who is also a rabbi. He has been very kind to me and has given me a number of

professional opportunities. I learned from one of our mutual acquaintances that he is also an accomplished Hebrew scholar and student of the scriptures.

When I was in Baltimore in January 1984, I met with him about a joint writing project, and he invited me over to his home to spend the Sabbath. It was a profound experience, almost like a dream. I found that my friend is a collector and scholar of Judaica, with a very large home library of Hebrew texts centuries old (some on scrolls), ancient menorahs, seder plates, mezuzahs, etc. I think he was almost as surprised and elated as I was to find that a Christian could have such a consuming interest in these things that he loves so much. But as he told me about Kaballa, Yom Kippur, the ancient tabernacle and temple, the Shekinah (that is, the divine presence in the Holy of Holies), and the feasts and the holy days, I could see in it all the light of the doctrines of the Restoration. I kept thinking of Brother Nibley's description in one of his classes of Abraham and Sarah's hospitality for the weary traveler. My friend Aron and his wife, Sarah, prepared the dinner as their son Jonathan and I visited, and then we all rejoiced together in four hours of eating, dialogue, and singing. We discussed the Hebrew Scripture, the ideas that engage us, and the concerns of our lives. Occasionally we would sing; Aron would break forth with a hymn in Hebrew, would pass me the hymn-book pointing to the words, and we would all join in. The evening ended much too soon, but I will always remember it as one of the great experiences of my life, the culmination of many years of trying to comprehend "the law and the prophets," learn a few words of Hebrew, and understand the Lord's ancient covenant people. I came away from the experience not only with a deep love for Aron and Sarah and their son and an appreciation for the depth of their faith, but with an increased feeling of gratitude for the restored gospel and an additional testimony of its truthfulness.

This past November I was again near Baltimore for a convention, and again I was invited for Sabbath. This experience was every bit as great as the first. I joined with Aron as we faced the east and he recited, and I tried to read, Hebrew prayers and other scriptures, many of which I recognized from my study of the Law and the Prophets. And then, as we were ready to begin the Sabbath meal, he placed his hands upon his son's head and gave him a father's blessing. A number of times that evening I could feel the Spirit of the Lord present. I was amazed at the spiritual power of the law of performances, the schoolmaster to bring the Jewish people to the Messiah. I believe that it will indeed bring them to the Messiah.

This time we had many things to discuss, with it being just a few months since the difficulties connected with the BYU Jerusalem Center. Among other things I tried to explain to him how our beliefs differ from the rest of Christianity, especially our beliefs about the Jews and the scattered remnants of the house of Israel. For many of the Jews, the name "Christian" is associated with centuries of suffering and persecution at the hands of a Christianity gone awry. I told him about some of the prophecies found in the Book of Mormon concerning Judah and the house of Israel, and about something else important that I had recently read. Nephi had a vision of those dark medieval days of persecution and he said:

And also for the praise of the world do they destroy the saints of God, and bring them down into captivity. [1 Nephi 13:9]

George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl give this commentary on the word "saints" in that verse:

This refers, probably, to the Jews. The Jews, as a people, chosen by God and consecrated to his service, are called "saints." [Commentary on the Book

of *Mormon*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1962), p. 114]

The persecutors foreseen by Nephi were to be enemies of all the saints of God, beginning with the children of Israel.

Last year I bought a book entitled *Back to the Sources*, edited by Barry Holtz. It is a collection of contemporary Jewish writings about the great books of Jewish tradition, such as Torah, the Prophets, Talmud, Midrash, Kabbalistic texts, the teachings of the Hasidic masters, etc. I read a number of things in that book that I wanted to discuss with Aron, but especially one particular thing almost seemed to jump off the page at me. On page 23 Holtz says,

There has been a kind of ongoing prejudice against the Jewish texts that is almost theologically inherent in Christianity itself. . . . The Hebrew Bible was called the “Old” Testament (a term never used in traditional Jewish sources) to contrast it with the fully realized “New” Testament. The effect of such an approach is to undercut the validity in its own terms of the Jewish Bible, but more than that there is the implication that Jewish creativity must have ended with the “Old” Testament. . . .

Thus any Jewish writing after the Bible is seen as necessarily insignificant. Judaism can have no contribution because, according to this view, it has been surpassed by the new religion and its teachings. Hence the persistence of Jewish literature—and Judaism itself—becomes a kind of ongoing embarrassment for Christianity. Perhaps that is why the Church burned the Talmud in the Middle Ages—as an attempt to deny the very existence of a living Jewish tradition. [Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts (New York: Summit Books, 1984)]

Aron believed me when I told him that we are worlds away from the rest of Christianity on this issue. We don’t have this adversarial relation to Judaism. The traditions and the texts are not an embarrassment for us, but

rather a source of edification, a connection to our roots. We believe that the religion Jesus taught was a restoration of something very ancient and pure, and that it ceased to exist upon the earth after the death of the apostles.

I quoted to Aron from 2 Nephi, chapter 29, where Nephi prophesies of the Gentiles of America in the latter days. Nephi foretells that they will reject the Book of Mormon when it shall come to them, and then he answers the Gentiles by telling of the great debt owed to the Jews for their pains in bringing the ancient scriptures to us:

And because my words shall hiss forth—many of the Gentiles shall say: A Bible! A Bible! We have got a Bible, and there cannot be any more Bible.

But thus saith the Lord God: O fools, they shall have a Bible; and it shall proceed forth from the Jews, mine ancient covenant people. And what thank they the Jews for the Bible which they receive from them? Yea, what do the Gentiles mean? Do they remember the travails, and the labors, and the pains of the Jews, and their diligence unto me, in bringing forth salvation unto the Gentiles?

O ye Gentiles, have ye remembered the Jews, mine ancient covenant people? Nay; but ye have cursed them, and have hated them, and have not sought to recover them. But behold, I will return all these things upon your own heads; for I the Lord have not forgotten my people. [2 Nephi 29:3–5]

As we discussed these things, Aron became very thoughtful and spoke slowly and deliberately. He said that this was a very important thing for his people to know.

In the spirit of Nephi’s admonition, I am thankful to the Jews for all they have brought forth for our edification. I am also thankful for the inspiring example of the spiritual life of so many of the faithful among them. The Sabbath for Aron and his family is a great joy. It is a delight, as Isaiah said it should be. We have been told by the Lord in Doctrine and Covenants 59 to celebrate the Sabbath in this

same spirit. They look forward to it for the whole week as a celebration of the things of the Spirit. And learning to the faithful of Judah is a *mitzvah*, a divine commandment. Study for traditional Jews was not a mere intellectual endeavor; it was an act of devotion. They saw themselves as performing a holy act ordained by God. Learning has always been seen as a lifelong process in the world of traditional Judaism. The theme of this book, *Back to the Sources*, is that for a time in America many of the Jews were abandoning their traditions and not studying the traditional books, but in recent years there has been a great surge of renewed interest in these sources, a return to their roots.

By the Mouths of the Prophets

In *Mormon Doctrine*, Elder Bruce R. McConkie spoke of two gospels, both of them true:

Two true gospels are spoken of in the revelations and have been revealed to men as occasions have warranted; one is the fullness of the everlasting gospel, the other is the preparatory gospel. [MD, p. 333]

We have been speaking about the preparatory gospel and about some of the records that have come to us from Judah. Now I would like to speak for a few minutes about our own tradition as Latter-day Saints and the stick of Joseph or the Book of Mormon, which contains the fulness of the everlasting gospel.

In this past April conference President Benson called upon us as a Church to return to our roots, to regularly and diligently study the Book of Mormon:

Now we not only need to say more about the Book of Mormon, but we need to do more with it. Why? The Lord answers: "That they may bring forth fruit meet for their Father's kingdom; otherwise there remaineth a scourge and judgment to

be poured out upon the children of Zion." [Ezra Taft Benson, "Cleansing the Inner Vessel," *Ensign*, May 1986, p. 5]

If we have the words of life from the Book of Mormon within our hearts and minds, they will grow within us and give guidance to our lives that we may do those things that will strengthen and build up the kingdom of God on the earth. If we don't have this we will not bring forth fruit.

On a Saturday afternoon shortly after this April conference, I was in my office at BYU trying to catch up on some of my academic work when I remembered President Benson's words. I started once more at the beginning of 1 Nephi. Within minutes I was immersed in one of the great scripture reading experiences of my life. I had never before noticed how much spiritual power is found in even the first chapter of the first book of Nephi. Chapter one by itself is a powerful scriptural document.

In this first chapter one can see a foreshadowing of the great teachings of the Book of Mormon concerning the scattering and the final redemption of the house of Israel. The record begins in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, King of Judah:

. . . And in that same year there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed.

Wherefore it came to pass that my father, Lehi, as he went forth prayed unto the Lord, yea, even with all his heart, in behalf of his people. [1 Nephi 1:4–5]

In what then follows, we read of Lehi being called to prophesy to the Jews, comparable to the call of Isaiah in Isaiah, chapter 6. We read of his vision of the Father and of the hosts of heaven:

And it came to pass that he returned to his own house at Jerusalem; and he cast himself upon his bed, being overcome with the Spirit and the things which he had seen.

And being thus overcome with the Spirit, he was carried away in a vision, even that he saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God. [verses 7–8]

Can you imagine that? Numberless concourses of righteous, redeemed, celestial men and women with their voices raised in hymns of praise unto the Father. He also saw in vision Jesus and his twelve apostles:

And it came to pass that he saw One descending out of the midst of heaven, and he beheld that his luster was above that of the sun at noon-day.

And he also saw twelve others following him, and their brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament. [9–10]

He then saw them go forth upon the earth, and Jesus came and stood before him and gave him a book to read in which Lehi received his prophetic burden to deliver to the Jews concerning the impending destruction of Jerusalem:

And it came to pass that as he read, he was filled with the Spirit of the Lord.

And he read saying: Wo, wo, unto Jerusalem, for I have seen thine abominations! Yea, and many things did my father read concerning Jerusalem — that it should be destroyed, and the inhabitants thereof; many should perish by the sword, and many should be carried away captive into Babylon. [12–13]

But he saw much more than this vision of immediate impending doom, and what he saw caused him to rejoice:

And it came to pass that when my father had read and seen many great and marvelous things, he did exclaim many things unto the Lord; such as: Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty! Thy throne is high in the heavens, and thy power, and goodness, and mercy are over all the inhabitants of the earth; and, because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish!

And after this manner was the language of my father in the praising of his God; for his soul did rejoice, and his whole heart was filled, because of the things which he had seen, yea, which the Lord had shown unto him. [14–15]

He must have seen the whole picture of the great saga of Israel and their eventual triumph in the last days. He must have seen the indomitable spirit of the faithful of Judah in their diaspora, how God would be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they should come, how their faith, their scriptures, their great and joyful traditions, and their holy days would be a comfort to them in their many years of tribulation. He must have seen their “labors and pains and diligence in bringing forth salvation unto the Gentiles” and seen Judah’s eventual joyful triumph at the great Second Coming of the Messiah.

In 2 Nephi, Lehi’s son Nephi tells his people about these marvelous latter-day events. He first reads to them from Isaiah.

Awake, awake, put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for henceforth there shall no more come into thee the uncircumcised and the unclean.

Shake thyself from the dust; arise. . . . [2 Nephi 8:24–25]

And then he comments:

And now, my beloved brethren, I have read these things that ye might know concerning the

covenants of the Lord that he has covenanted with all the house of Israel—

That he has spoken unto the Jews, by the mouth of his holy prophets, even from the beginning down, from generation to generation, until the time comes that they shall be restored to the true church and fold of God; when they shall be gathered home to the lands of their inheritance, and shall be established in all their lands of promise.

Behold, my beloved brethren, I speak unto you these things that ye may rejoice, and lift up your heads forever, because of the blessings which the Lord God shall bestow upon your children.
[2 Nephi 9:1–3]

The day will come when the Jews will be restored to the fold of God, and until that time God speaks to them by the mouths of the prophets. The faithful among Judah today love the words of the prophets and study them diligently. God still speaks to them through these holy men of old.

The Promise of Eternal Life

The promises of the Lord are not only given to nations, but also to individuals. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that

the ancients, though persecuted and afflicted by men, obtained from God promises of such weight and glory, that our hearts are often filled with gratitude that we are even permitted to look upon them.
[Teachings, p. 65]

This doctrine of promises has a great deal to do with how one obtains eternal life. The Book of Mormon teaches clearly, both by precept and also by examples from the lives of the Nephite Saints, how one can obtain promises from God.

Joseph Smith said:

I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God

by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.
[HC, 4:461]

That is true. There is no other book upon the earth that is clearer in teaching the principles of how one gains eternal life than this restored stick of Joseph. Nephi's soul delighted in plainness, and the whole Book of Mormon is characterized by that kind of clarity in explaining the fundamental doctrines of the gospel.

In the third chapter of the Gospel of John, verse 5, we read these words of Jesus to Nicodemus:

Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

Few scriptures have been misunderstood more than this one. The doctrine of spiritual rebirth and how one obtains eternal life through the Atonement is one of the "plain and precious truths" spoken of by Nephi that has been lost from the Bible, and there is a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding in the Christian world about it. But it is clearly taught in the Book of Mormon, and once one understands it, the relevant passages in the Bible take on new life and become clear.

President Marion G. Romney, in an October 1963 conference address, drew upon a number of scriptures from the Book of Mormon that explain this doctrine, and then gave this summary:

While conversion may be accomplished in stages, one is not really converted in the full sense of the term unless and until he is at heart a new person. "Born again" is the scriptural term. [CR, Oct. 1963, p. 23]

He explains that one is not necessarily converted just because he or she holds membership in the Church, and furthermore, that

being converted, as we are here using the term, and having a testimony are not necessarily the same thing either. A testimony comes when the Holy Ghost gives the earnest seeker a witness of the truth. . . . Conversion, on the other hand, is the fruit of, or the reward for, repentance and obedience. . . .

Conversion is effected by divine forgiveness, which remits sins. The sequence is something like this: An honest seeker hears the message. He asks the Lord in prayer if it is true. The Holy Spirit gives him a witness. This is a testimony. If one's testimony is strong enough, he repents and obeys the commandments. By such obedience he receives divine forgiveness which remits sin. Thus he is converted to a newness of life. His spirit is healed. [CR, Oct. 1963, p. 24]

We have a number of examples of this process in the Book of Mormon. One example is the record of Enos. As Enos begins the story, he already had a testimony of the gospel. His father Jacob had taught him in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. His conversion experience begins with his contemplation of the words of his father:

Behold, I went to hunt beasts in the forests; and the words which I had often heard my father speak concerning eternal life, and the joy of the saints, sunk deep into my heart.

And my soul hungered; and I kneeled down before my Maker, and I cried unto him in mighty prayer and supplication for mine own soul; and all the day long did I cry unto him; yea, and when the night came I did still raise my voice high that it reached the heavens.

And there came a voice unto me, saying: Enos, thy sins are forgiven thee, and thou shalt be blessed.

And I, Enos, knew that God could not lie; wherefore, my guilt was swept away.

And I said: Lord, how is it done?

And he said unto me: Because of thy faith in Christ, whom thou hast never before heard nor

seen. . . . Wherefore, go to, thy faith hath made thee whole. [Enos 3–8]

This has a great deal to do with the statement of Joseph Smith quoted earlier about the promises that were given to the ancient Saints. Enos first received the promise that he himself would be blessed, and then, as he continued to pray, he obtained more promises from the Lord—first for his brethren, the Nephites, and then for the Lamanites. This conversion experience came relatively early in his life, but then years later, after a lifetime of following the voice of the Spirit and fulfilling the commandments of God, he tells us of another kind of promise that he received of the Lord:

And I soon go to the place of my rest, which is with my Redeemer; for I know that in him I shall rest. And I rejoice in the day when my mortal shall put on immortality, and shall stand before him; then shall I see his face with pleasure, and he will say unto me: Come unto me, ye blessed, there is a place prepared for you in the mansions of my Father. [Enos 27]

Explanation of these principles by which one obtains eternal life are found in the teachings of the Resurrected Christ to the Nephites in 3 Nephi, chapter 11, and also in chapter 27. There he refers to them as “my doctrine” and “my gospel.” But they were also given to Nephi, the son of Lehi, many years earlier, as found in 2 Nephi, chapters 31 and 32. Nephi refers to them as “the doctrine of Christ” and “the only and true doctrine of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (2 Nephi 31 :21).

The fundamental principles in these discourses are what we all know as the first principles and ordinances of the gospel. I quote now from Nephi:

Wherefore, do the things which I have told you I have seen that your Lord and your Redeemer should

do; for, for this cause have they been shown unto me, that ye might know the gate by which ye should enter. For the gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water; and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost. [2 Nephi 31:17]

This is the gate by which one enters the earthly kingdom of God. But this is only the beginning:

And now, my beloved brethren, after ye have gotten into this strait and narrow path, I would ask if all is done? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; for ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save.

Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life. [2 Nephi 31:20–21]

This message to press forward with steadfastness and feast upon the word of Christ is the same as the counsel of our prophet to lengthen our stride, cleanse the inner vessel, and diligently study the Book of Mormon. If we are to receive the words of the Father giving us the promise, “Ye shall have eternal life,” as Nephi describes, we must do these things and endure to the end.

As Nephi had taught these things to his people, they seemed to have difficulty understanding what they were to do after they had entered in at the gate in order to obtain the

promise of eternal life. So he told them again in chapter 32, verse 3, that they should continue to

feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do.

And he further said,

For behold, again I say unto you that if ye will enter in by the way, and receive the Holy Ghost, it will show unto you all things what ye should do. [verse 5]

These are the fundamental principles of the higher law for which the Law of Moses was a precursor. They are taught in a number of doctrinal discourses and with many examples from the lives of the people of the Book of Mormon. We have sampled but a few. In Doctrine and Covenants 20:9, the Lord said of the Book of Mormon that it contains “the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles and to the Jews also.”

We are blessed beyond measure to live in a time when all of these things have been restored, when the priesthood of God and the ordinances of his holy temple are upon the earth again. I know that the gospel is true. I am grateful for the heritage we have in these valleys of the Rocky Mountains, for the Prophet Joseph Smith and his successors, for the restoration of the keys of the priesthood and the fulness of the gospel, and for the scriptures that bless our lives, the stick of Joseph and the stick of Judah. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.