

Duelling dynasties: A proposal concerning Ezekiel's sign-act of the two sticks

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Abstract

Ezekiel's sign-act of the two sticks is an interpretive quagmire. Interpretive issues include the association of 'Israel' with both sticks, the use of the name 'Joseph' to identify the entity associated with the second stick, the interest in a defunct northern kingdom which this is thought to reflect, the relationship between the entities represented by the two sticks, the meaning of the terms עץ and שבט, and the use of מלך. The article aims to resolve a number of these issues and to suggest the cause of certain others. It argues that the sign-act concerns the competing claims of the two royal lines created by the deportation of Jehoiachin to Babylon and the appointment of Zedekiah in Jerusalem. It should therefore be understood as part of a wider corpus of texts attesting to the ideological and practical struggle between the Babylonian golah and those left behind in the land.

Keywords

Exile, Ezekiel, Israel, Jehoiachin, Joseph, Judah, sign-acts, Zedekiah

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the sign-act of the two sticks is an interpretive quagmire. The difficulty of the passage, which begins at Ezek. 37.15 and continues for an indeterminate number of verses, is indicated not least by the apparatus of *Biblia Hebraica* which, in its Stuttgartensia edition, appends no fewer than 30 footnotes to the first nine verses. More than a third of these are concentrated in v. 19. Interpretive issues include the association of 'Israel' with both sticks (v. 16), the use of the name 'Joseph' to identify the entity associated with the second stick and the interest in a defunct northern kingdom which this is thought to reflect (vv. 16, 19), the intended relationship between the entities represented by the two sticks (v. 19), the meaning of the key terms עץ (vv. 16, 17, 19, 20) and שבט (v. 19), and the unexpected use of מלך (v. 22). The following aims to resolve a number of these issues and to suggest the cause, if not necessarily the resultant meaning, of certain others. It argues that the sign-act concerns the competing claims of the two royal lines created by the deportation of Jehoiachin to Babylon and the appointment of Zedekiah in Jerusalem. It should therefore be understood as part of a wider corpus of texts attesting to an ideological and practical struggle between the Babylonian golah and those left behind in the land.

Before turning to the text, a few preliminary matters require attention. The first of these concerns Israel. The tendency of scholars when confronted by an entity of this name has been to assume that it refers to some form of an idealised collective entity, invoking to some greater or lesser degree a collection of traditions about an eponymous ancestor and a united monarchy, or that it refers to the (former) northern

kingdom. This colouration of the term's remit underlies the ubiquitous assumption among interpreters that the sign-act in Ezekiel 37 refers to the reunification of the northern and southern kingdoms.

In fact, closer examination of this entity in the book of Ezekiel very strongly suggests that Israel is not, in this context, understood in these terms.¹ Rather, 'Israel' in the book of Ezekiel refers to a Jerusalemite elite, including both those who were deported to Babylonia in 597 BCE and some who were left behind in the city. This group conceived of itself in genetic and familial terms, which, combined with appeals to a shared mythology of origins, suggests that the anthropological category of 'ethnicity', if somewhat anachronistic, might not be too far off the mark as a description of the kind of community imagined by this term. The evidence for this is as follows.²

First, the book of Ezekiel characterises Israel as an imagined extended family. This is most pronounced in the particular frequency of the phrase 'house of Israel', reinforced by the intermittent use of 'sons of Israel'. Both terms appear in Ezekiel 37. There are frequent references to relationships among the members of this group, often using explicitly generational terms such as 'fathers' and 'children'. Although this language undoubtedly obscures a more complex genetic reality, Ezekiel imagines Israel as the sons and daughters of a single ancestral house, with the attributes of the group passed from one generation to the next. This people is attached to a particular god, Yhwh, whose worship constitutes its most distinctive feature; it is the betrayal of this which results in Israel's destruction. In making these condemnations, Ezekiel further assumes that Israel subscribes to a certain, interrelated group of traditions about its past, most obviously in the condemnatory litany of Ezekiel 20.

That Israel is conceived as an ethnic entity is not a novel observation. More notable is that the book of Ezekiel conceives of Israel as a social and economic elite with a particular association with Jerusalem. The latter is apparent throughout, as the city and its inhabitants are the unrelenting focus of a reiterative prophetic diatribe that continuously addresses 'the house of Israel'. Jerusalem is equated with and is the heart of the Israelite homeland (Ezek. 12.19; 21.2-3). The 'princes of Israel' are located there (Ezek. 21.30; 22.6, cf. 12.10), as are its elders (Ezek. 8.11-12). 'Israel's high hill' is Jerusalem and its royal and cultic complexes (Ezek. 17.23; 20.40). Israel's abominations and idols are concentrated in Jerusalem (Ezek. 8.6-10). The house of Israel now in Babylonia has family still in Jerusalem; they too were from there (Ezek. 24.21). The consistent description of the exiles as the 'house of Israel' and their clear origins in Jerusalem underscore this intimate association. Some Israelites still remain in the city (Ezek. 12.1-16, esp. v. 10; cf. 9.8). Indeed, the remainder of the house of Israel is being gathered to Jerusalem for punishment (Ezek. 22.18-19)—implying the existence of Israelites further afield but so essentially tied to the city that their destruction must occur there. The expectation that Israel ought to be judged in Jerusalem

¹ This and the following observations do not presume that this sign-act is original to a sixth century prophet, on which the present article wishes to make no definitive remark. They do, however, proceed from an expectation that texts should be interpreted first and foremost with reference to their immediate context, including and especially the book in which they are preserved. Only if this proves impossible should recourse be made elsewhere. This general policy is further accentuated by the fact that the book of Ezekiel remains widely recognised as perhaps the most theologically and stylistically coherent of any of the prophetic books. Even if the sign-act derives from editorial activity, therefore, there remains an especially strong case for attempting to interpret it with reference to the rest of the book.

² The following observations are taken from C. L. Crouch, 'Before and after Exile: Involuntary Migration and Ideas of Israel', *HeBAI* 7 (2018): 334-358, and will be unpacked at greater length in a forthcoming monograph. The following aims to build on this work and explore its implications for Ezekiel 37.

is a prerequisite for the subversion of these expectations (Ezek. 11.5-11). The sign-act depicting the siege of Jerusalem is also called a sign for the house of Israel (Ezek. 4.1-3, cf. 5.1-4).³

Israel's association with Jerusalem implies that it comprises, or is at least associated very closely with, a social stratum that wields significant power. This is explicit in a number of passages. Israel conducts its worship in the flagship royal cultic complex, the Jerusalem temple (Ezek. 8-11). It has both oral (Ezek. 12.23; 17.2; 18.3) and written (Ezek. 13.9) traditions and, without becoming bogged down in arguments over the extent of 6th-century literacy, the latter pushes Israel's demographic odds towards the upper echelons. Ezekiel's condemnations of Israel consistently point to the failures of kings and princes—from the allegories about the eagles and their vegetable vassals (Ezek. 17) and the queen mother (Ezek. 19) to the song of the sword (Ezek. 21). Israel is condemned for its abuse of power (Ezek. 19; 22). It and its princes are possessed of the power of life and death (Ezek. 11.6; 22.6). The unyielding focus on Jerusalem itself belies an elite bias, ignoring the rest of the country and its inhabitants. The demographics of Babylonian deportation practices also mean that the house of Israel in Babylonia will have been the city's elites, creamed off by the Babylonians in an attempt to thwart further rebellion.⁴

It is this house of Israel, together with their fellow Israelites remaining in Jerusalem, which has already and will continue to suffer the brunt of the empire's punitive interventions. This analysis, though brief, suggests that in Ezekiel Israel is an ethnic entity that conceives of itself as an extended family, with a shared story of its origins in Egypt. Their fate is linked to that story and to its implications for their shared life together, most explicitly by Ezekiel 20. Israel is characterised by its exclusive devotion to Yhwh, with its failures in this regard perceived as the principal cause of its destruction. Although the house of Israel has been riven in two by the deportations to Babylonia, it maintains a special connection to Jerusalem, where its members comprised the city's elites.

The book of Ezekiel addresses an Israel torn in two by the deportation of 597 BCE, and it is against this background that the sign-act's depiction of a divided Israel should be understood. Indeed, to propose that the division with which the sign-act is concerned relates to the division of the community as a result of this Babylonian deportation has the immediate advantage of bringing it into conversation with the large number of texts that reflect an intense ideological struggle between those deported to Babylonia and those left behind in the land.⁵ In due course, this manifested in a practical battle for authority and resources in

³ By contrast, Ezekiel does not use 'Israel' to refer to the northern kingdom. Where the text wishes to refer to the former state to the north of Jerusalem it uses a different term, as in the comparison between Jerusalem, Sodom and Samaria in Ezekiel 16 or the comparison between Jerusalem and Samaria in Ezekiel 23. On the sign-act in Ezekiel 4, in which the 'house of Israel' is frequently interpreted as the northern kingdom, see C. L. Crouch, 'Ezekiel's Immobility and the Meaning of 'the House of Judah' in Ezekiel 4', *JSOT* 2019; 44(1): 182-197.

⁴ The most exhaustive analysis of Mesopotamian deportation practices remains B. Oded, *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1979), esp. 43-45; on Babylonian practice see O. Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 82-84; A. Faust, 'Deportation and Demography in Sixth-Century B.C.E. Judah', in *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, ed. B. E. Kelle, F. R. Ames and J. L. Wright (Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 91-103. On Ezekiel as elite rhetoric, see C. A. Strine, *Sworn Enemies: The Divine Oath, the Book of Ezekiel, and the Polemics of Exile* (BZAW 436; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013).

⁵ Note that there were at least two groups of deportees in Babylonia already by the time of Ezekiel: the deportees with Ezekiel in the settlement on the Chebar canal, and a (likely much smaller) group of deportees with the royal family in Babylon. The homeland group was in all likelihood an even more diverse collection. For present purposes, however, a simple bifurcation of allegiances appears to be heuristically adequate.

Persian-period Yehud (see especially Ezra-Nehemiah), but its outlines are evident already in the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel 11 places an assertion of divine favour in the mouths of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, only to reject such claims as spurious; it is those in Babylonia who are the true heirs of Israel's patrimony (Ezek. 11.15).⁶ The first divine word to come to the prophet upon receiving news of Jerusalem's fall is not a lament for the city but a rejection of a claim on the land by those who remain in it (Ezek. 33.24).⁷

Competition between the exiles and the non-exiles involved not only a general antagonism between these two groups but also a more specific contest over the locus of royal authority, especially during the decade between 597 and 586 BCE. This is notoriously illustrated by Ezekiel's insistence on dating the prophetic word with reference to the exile of Jehoiachin, rather than with reference to Zedekiah's rule in Jerusalem (Ezek. 1.2, and presupposed by Ezek. 8.1; 20.1; 24.1; 26.1; 29.1, 17; 30.20; 31.1; 32.1, 17; 33.21; 40.1). The illegitimacy of Zedekiah's rule is thus underlined; it is to Jehoiachin in Babylon that any hope for the future must attach. Chapter 17, the allegory of the eagle and his vegetable vassals—one the twig of a cedar, one a low-spreading vine—unpacks this rejection of Zedekiah at greater length, accusing him of breaking his oath of loyalty to the Babylonian king; his kingdom is forfeit and he shall die a captive in Babylon (Ezek. 17.9-10, 15-16). Although the players in this allegory are not named, they are easily recognisable, and the final section makes all but explicit that the future of the monarchy lies with Jehoiachin, the young twig that had been deported to Babylon first (Ezek. 17.4, 22-23).⁸

Zedekiah is also in the prophetic sights in Ezekiel 19. This twofold lament over the princes of Israel refracts its polemic through the queen mother, depicted first as a lioness and then as a vine. Although the identity of the two kings to which the first half of the dirge alludes is disputed, the most likely candidates are Jehoahaz and Zedekiah, whose mother Hamutal was the only royal spouse of the late seventh century to raise not one but two sons to the throne of Judah (2 Kgs. 23.31; 24.18).⁹ As Jehoahaz is already off the stage, Zedekiah is the allegory's primary target. Its use of leonine imagery appears to be connected in some way to the blessing of Judah in Gen. 49.9-11; to the significance of this we will return below.

⁶ Note, especially, the emphatic description of the exiles as 'all the house of Israel, all of it' (Ezek. 11.15); it is as though the text is intent not only on rejecting the remaining Jerusalemites' claim to Yhwh but also their claim to the name '(house of) Israel'.

⁷ For further examples and discussion, see D. Rom-Shiloni, *Exclusive Inclusivity: Identity Conflicts between the Exiles and the People Who Remained (6th–5th Centuries BCE)* (LHBOTS 543; London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 139-197; K.-F. Pohlmann, *Ezechielstudien: zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Buches und zur Frage nach den ältesten Texten* (BZAW 202; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1992); Strine, *Sworn Enemies*, 177-227. Similarly, the tumult of the book of Jeremiah is widely recognised as a textual manifestation of struggles between those taken to Babylonia and those left behind in Judah; see especially C. J. Sharp, *Prophecy and Ideology in Jeremiah: Struggles for Authority in the Deutero-Jeremianic Prose* (OTS; London: T&T Clark, 2003); K.-F. Pohlmann, *Die Ferne Gottes: Studien zum Jeremiabuch: Beiträge zu den 'Konfessionen' in Jeremiabuch und ein Versuch zur Frage nach den Anfängen der Jeremiatradition* (BZAW 179; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989).

⁸ The ultimate success of the campaign in favour of the ongoing legitimacy of Jehoiachin and his line is reflected in the identification of Zerubbabel as his descendant, even if the exact line of this descent is murky: 1 Chronicles 3.17-19 identifies him as Jehoiachin's grandson through Jehoiachin's son Pedaiah, whereas Ezra 3.2, 8; 5.2; Neh. 12.1; and Hag. 1.1, 12, 13 identify him as the son of Jehoiachin's son Shealtiel.

⁹ M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20* (AB 22; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 355-357 and D. I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1-24* (NICOT; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997), 603-607 provide overviews of the issues in assigning historical referents to the characters in this passage.

The probable identity of the mother established, the latter half of the chapter is of particular interest. Although the text is difficult, the allegory invokes arboreal imagery to signify the royal line, likening the mother to a luxuriant vine whose strongest shoots become ruler's sceptres (שבטי משלים). Commentators are unanimous in understanding the image as a comment on the demise of the royal house.¹⁰ Less observed is that the allegory's pronouncement of the dynasty's demise is limited only to the line of descent through this particular woman.¹¹ This narrower focus is implied by several features of the allegory. First is the focus on the singular vine / woman and the emphasis in v. 12 that it is her fruit that is dried up and her shoot that is consumed by fire. The dirge climaxes with the declaration that her dynastic line is no more (v. 14). Also noteworthy is that the shoot (מטה) destroyed in v. 12 is singular, in contrast to the plural (מטות) of v. 11. The plural in v. 11 reiterates the multiplicity of the mother's royal offspring and affirms the identity of the lioness with the vine, but the singular in v. 12 focuses the image on the destruction of the current king. The allegory's vine imagery hearkens back to the vine imagery invoked in the allegory against Zedekiah in Ezekiel 19, including a number of the same terms (, ענף, פרי, יבש, רבים, מים רבים, שחל, דלית, גפן).¹² Even the specificity of the destruction of her fruit by an east wind (רוח הקדים) in v. 12 underscores the focus on Zedekiah: the same phrase is used in Ezek. 17.10 to refer to Zedekiah's destruction by the king of Babylon. Although the text is never explicit, these features all suggest that the passage is designed to reject the possibility of any future royal claimant descended from Zedekiah's line.

The strength of Ezekiel's rejection of Zedekiah and support for Jehoiachin may be contrasted with the book of Jeremiah, in which Jehoiachin is rejected and Zedekiah holds a more ambiguous status. Jeremiah declares that even if Jehoiachin were Yhwh's own signet ring, he would be torn off and thrown out, doomed to die in a foreign land (Jer. 22.24-27). The poetic variation on this theme, immediately following, explicitly extends Yhwh's judgement to Jehoiachin's progeny: 'record this man childless, a man whose masculinity will fail him in his lifetime: for no man will come forth from his seed to sit upon the throne of David, nor rule any longer in Judah' (Jer. 22.30).¹³ Speaking with the voice of those left behind in the land, the book of Jeremiah rejects the king who failed to protect the kingdom from the Babylonians and refuses the possibility that his dynastic line might one day return to the throne. As for Zedekiah, the book attests to a significant degree of confusion. Jeremiah repeatedly implores Zedekiah to submit to Babylonian authority and thereby to save himself, his house, and his kingdom: 'If you will only surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then your life shall be spared, and this city shall not be

¹⁰ The chorus includes but is hardly limited to W. Zimmerli, *Ezechiel 1: Ezechiel 1-24* [BKAT 13/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1969], 429 (translated into English by R. E. Clements as *Ezekiel 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1-24* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia, Penn.: Fortress, 1983], here 397); N.R. Bowen, *Ezekiel* (AOTC; Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2010), 111; R. M. Hals, *Ezekiel* (FOTL 19; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 129; L. C. Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48* (WBC 29; Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1990), 289; M. S. Odell, *Ezekiel* (Smith & Helwys; Macon, Ga.: Smith & Helwys, 2005), 236.

¹¹ Contra, for example, Bowen, *Ezekiel*, 112 who, like most commentators, assumes that the dirge eliminates all hope for the monarchy.

¹² The identification of the vine in Ezekiel 19 as the queen mother raises the interesting possibility that the polemic against the vine in Ezekiel 17, normally construed as a polemic against Zedekiah, may (also) constitute a polemic against the queen mother. Hamutal is never mentioned by name, but neither is Zedekiah. Perhaps an antagonism toward Hamutal lies behind Ezekiel's exceptional—and exceptionally vicious—use of female imagery in Ezekiel 16 and 23.

¹³ For this translation and a discussion of the oracle's imagery, including its claim that Jehoiachin had no offspring, see C. L. Crouch, 'Jehoiachin: Not a Broken Vessel but a Humiliated Vassal (Jer. 22,28-30)', *ZAW* 129 (2017): 234-246.

burned with fire, and you and your house shall live' (Jer. 38.17; cf. 27.12-15). In keeping with the book's ultimately pro-golah stance, however, this hope is elsewhere quashed. Zedekiah and his line are finished, through some combination of his own death (Jer. 21.7; 24.8-10), the death of his sons (Jer. 39.6; 52.10), the deportation of his sons (Jer. 38.23), or his own deportation and implied death in Babylonian captivity (Jer. 32.3-5; 34.2-5, 21; 37.17; 39.7; 52.11; cf. 44.30).¹⁴ The negative portrayal of Ishmael, said to be 'of royal seed' (Jer. 41.1), should probably also be understood as part of the book's denunciation of survivors of the Judahite branch of the royal line. Although Jehoiachin and the exiles are the ultimate victors both in Jeremiah and in Ezekiel, the former makes clear that this was not a foregone conclusion.

With these wider attestations of conflict in mind, we return our attention to Ezekiel 37. Our first contention is that two key terms used in the sign-act, עץ and שבט, both individually and together indicate that the sign-act addresses an issue of royal authority. Indeed, the possibility that עץ 'tree' might be used as a figurative means of referring to a royal sceptre, and that the sign-act should thus be interpreted with reference to kingship, has been explored by a number of commentators. Often this has been with reference to the similar use of arboreal imagery in Ezekiel 19 to signify kingship or with reference to the tree used as a royal metonym in Ezekiel 17.¹⁵ In the latter, the climactic Ezek. 17.24 uses עץ no fewer than five times, as a symbol of the kingship over which Yhwh has absolute control: 'All the trees of the field will know that I have brought low the exalted tree, exalted the low tree, dried out the well-watered tree, and made the dried-out tree burst forth'. That עץ could be used as a symbol of kingship in Ezekiel 37 is a therefore a definite possibility. That this has yet to command a decisive consensus hinges on the appearance in Ezek. 37.19 of שבט.¹⁶ Much more explicitly than the enigmatic עץ, this term can and often does signify a royal 'sceptre'. Its interpretation and translation in Ezekiel 37, however, has suffered from the preponderance of a homonym in Ezekiel 47-48, where שבט refers to the 12 (more or less) 'tribes'.

¹⁴ For further discussion, including the reflection of these debates on the versions, see J. Pakkala, 'Zedekiah's Fate and the Dynastic Succession', *JBL* 125 (2006): 443-452; J. Applegate, 'The Fate of Zedekiah: Redactional Debate in the Book of Jeremiah: Part I', *VT* 48 (1998): 137-160; J. Applegate, 'The Fate of Zedekiah: Redactional Debate in the Book of Jeremiah: Part II', *VT* 48 (1998): 301-308.

¹⁵ Thus Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48*, 192-195; M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37* (AB 22B; London: Doubleday, 1997), 754-759; W. Zimmerli, *Ezechiel 2: Ezechiel 25-48* [BKAT 13/2; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1969], 909-913 (translated into English by J. D. Martin as *Ezekiel 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia, Penn.: Fortress, 1983], here 273-276). In each instance the interpretation of שבט as a sceptre is part of an interpretation of the sign-act as concerning the (re) unification of the northern and southern kingdoms; thus also P. Joyce, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (LHBOTS 482; London: T&T Clark, 2009), 210-211; Hals, *Ezekiel*, 274; Odell, *Ezekiel*, 455. D. I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48* (NICOT; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998), 399 argues against עץ as 'sceptre' but still assumes the concern with the northern kingdom. Whilst the interpretation of the sticks as the northern and southern kingdoms is nearly ubiquitous, most commentators also feel obliged to acknowledge its oddity—either in terms of its anomalousness within the book (Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37*, 759) or its simple implausibility (Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48*, 195; Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37*, 759; Hals, *Ezekiel*, 274; A. Klein, *Schriftauslegung im Ezechielbuch: Redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Ez 34-39* [BZAW 391; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008], 225, 230; Zimmerli, *Ezechiel 2*, 913 [ET 275-276]). Ezekiel 4 and Jeremiah 3 are often invoked as corroborating evidence, but this is unlikely; see Crouch, 'Ezekiel's Immobility' and C. L. Crouch, 'Playing Favourites: Israel, Judah, and the Marriage Metaphor in Jeremiah 3', *JSOT* 2020; 44(4): 594-609.

¹⁶ The term appears in the plural, in the construct phrase שבטי ישראל. To the significance of the plural we will return below. The Greek refers explicitly to a ῥάβδος 'sceptre' later in the verse, but the weight of this is mitigated by the translator's propensity to exegete the passage's metaphors; see A. S. Crane, *Israel's Restoration: A Textual-Comparative Exploration of Ezekiel 36-39* (VTSup 122; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 106-112.

This, together with the ubiquitous assumption that the sign-act concerns the reunification of Israel—an entity comprising tribes from both the northern and southern kingdoms—has led to the invariable translation of שבט in v. 19 as ‘tribe’. As we will now argue, however, the interpretation of שבט in the sign-act should look for guidance not to Ezekiel 47-48 but to Ezekiel 19 and 21. In these texts, שבט clearly signifies a royal sceptre.

The appearance of שבט in Ezek. 19.11, 14 in the context of an arboreal metaphor for kingship has been noted by Allen, who cites it in support of his argument that the several עץ in Ezekiel 37 should also be understood as royal sceptres, akin to the מטה of Ezekiel 19.¹⁷ Indeed, whatever the individual royal identities intended by the dirge’s references to lion cubs and vine shoots, there has been no doubt that the allegory is concerned with kings and kingship. In fact, as the allegorisation of Hamutal and her offspring takes on an arboreal character in the latter half of the chapter, it is the use of שבט ‘sceptre’ as a metonym for the king that confirms the royal frame of reference.¹⁸ Although the parallel between the arboreal imagery of Ezekiel 19 and the arboreal imagery of Ezekiel 37 is not exact, the use of שבט to refer to a royal sceptre in Ezek. 19.11, 14, in the midst of a symbolic depiction of kingship in arboreal terms, lends credibility to the suggestion that שבט, sandwiched in Ezek. 37.19 in the midst of an eightfold repetition of עץ, should be understood as ‘sceptre(s)’.

Further support for this interpretation may be found in the song of the sword in Ezekiel 21.¹⁹ The appearance of both עץ and שבט in Ezek. 21.15 [ET 21.10] has almost never been invoked in the interpretation of Ezekiel 37.²⁰ This is undoubtedly at least partly due to the impossibility of the surrounding text in Ezekiel 21, which is almost invariably deemed unintelligible.²¹ Without wishing to become bogged down trying to make sense of a painfully mangled text, we note the following. First, the song of the sword is aimed at Jerusalem and its sanctuaries (Ezek. 21.6 [ET 21.1]), with a particular recurring interest in its king (Ezek. 21.17-18, 30-31 [ET 21.12-13, 25-26]). This king is certainly Zedekiah.²² The introductory prelude, whose relevance to the song of the sword has been obscured by its English enumeration with the preceding chapter (Ezek. 21.1-5 [ET 20.45-49]), has been similarly interpreted: the ‘forest’ (יער) serves as a metonym for the palace in Jerusalem (cf. 1 Kgs. 7.2; 10.17, 21 // 2 Chr. 9.16, 20; Isa. 22.8; Jer. 21.14), while the ‘well-watered tree’ (עץ לח) and the ‘dried-out tree’ (עץ יבש) signify the kings therein. The same terms occur in Ezek. 17.24 at the culmination of the allegory of the eagles and their vassals in Jerusalem. Furthermore, Allen has argued that the references in Ezek. 21.15 [ET 21.10] to שבט בני מאסת כל עץ (perhaps ‘sceptre of my son / rejecting every tree’) and in Ezek. 21.18 [ET 21.13] to שבט מאסת (perhaps ‘sceptre / rejected’) arose as misplaced glosses on the two appearances of עץ in Ezek. 21.3 [ET 20.47], where they sought to make explicit that these עץ were to be understood as royal symbols.²³

¹⁷ Allen, Ezekiel 20-48, 193.

¹⁸ Hals, Ezekiel, 129.

¹⁹ The English enumeration appends the first five verses to Ezekiel 20, despite their lexical and conceptual connections with the following; thus MT Ezek. 21.1-36 is ET 20.45-21.31.

²⁰ The exception that proves the rule is Allen, Ezekiel 20-48, 193; see below.

²¹ ‘The textual obscurity of this unit makes any analysis of it uncertain in the extreme’ (Hals, Ezekiel, 149); ‘in spite of all the effort expended on it, so far [v. 15] eludes any satisfactory interpretation’ (Zimmerli, Ezechiel 1, 470 [ET 426-427]). Similar expressions of despair are voiced by countless others.

²² Odell, Ezekiel, 264.

²³ L. Allen, ‘The Rejected Sceptre in Ezekiel xxi 15b, 18a’, VT 39 (1989): 67-71.

Whatever the explanation for the muddled state of the extant text, what remains attests to the use of עץ as a royal symbol in conjunction with, or clarified by, שבט. If Ezek. 21.15, 18 [ET 21.10, 13] belong in their current context, they contribute to the song of the sword's focus on Jerusalem and its hierarchy. If Allen is correct and they originated as explanatory glosses on Ezek. 21.3 [ET 20.47], they make explicit the identification of the עץ as royal symbols through the linking of עץ and שבט.

These other texts in Ezekiel provide compelling evidence that עץ and שבט in the sign-act of Ezekiel 37 should be understood as royal signifiers. But who are the royals in question? We have already suggested that the usual interpretation—that the two sticks represent the northern and southern kingdoms, respectively—will not do. Indeed, as ubiquitous as this interpretation is, it is invariably accompanied by embarrassment on the part of commentators, who rightly recognise that it makes little sense, either in the context of a book that has little interest in the former northern kingdom beyond its function as a useful object lesson (Ezek. 16; 23) or with regard to practical considerations. Thus, Hals concludes that the rhetoric is idealising and imaginary and Allen describes reunification as ‘a truth for long tragically hidden from view’, whilst Greenberg observes that it is unique within the book.²⁴ Block tries to suggest that the sign-act is meant to explain how a remnant of the northern kingdom would participate in Yhwh's salvation, even though the sign-act does not do this, and even Zimmerli, who contends that prophetic thoughts of reunification are not at all surprising, concludes that the second half of the section arose from a need to revise this patently unrealistic vision of the future.²⁵ Greenwood summed the problem up when he observed that this and other predictions of a restored northern kingdom are ‘perhaps the most conspicuous example in the [Hebrew Bible] of patently false prophecy’.²⁶

The concerns of the sign-act are much less baffling if the two sticks are understood as the two branches of the royal family created by the deportation of Jehoiachin to Babylon and the enthronement of Zedekiah in Jerusalem. The first stick, ‘for Judah and the sons of Israel allied with it’ (ליהודה ולבני ישראל חברו), represents the homeland branch associated with Zedekiah, while the second stick, ‘for Joseph . . . and the house of Israel allied with it’ (ליוסף . . . וכל בית ישראל חברו), represents the exiled branch associated with Jehoiachin.²⁷ The ‘stick of Joseph’ (עץ יוסף) is unpacked by v. 19 with reference to ‘the sceptres allied with it’ (ושבטי חברו), pinpointing explicitly that this ‘stick’ represents not merely a piece of wood but the power of Israel's future kings.

The identification of the Judah stick with Zedekiah hearkens back to the allegory of Ezekiel 19, in which Hamutal and her offspring were depicted as a lioness and her cubs. As a number of commentators have noted, the use of leonine imagery to refer to a dynastic house is not only a common ancient Near Eastern phenomenon but also linked, in the biblical context, to the specific promise of kingship which is made to Judah in Gen. 49.9-10a:

²⁴ Hals, Ezekiel, 274; Allen, Ezekiel 20-48, 193; Greenberg, Ezekiel 21-37, 759.

²⁵ Block, Chapters 25-48, 393; Zimmerli, Ezechiel 2, 913 (ET 275-276).

²⁶ D. C. Greenwood, ‘On the Jewish Hope for a Restored Northern Kingdom’, ZAW 88 (1976): 384. Commentators' attempts to justify an interpretation of Ezekiel 37 in terms of two kingdoms usually point to Ezekiel 4 and to Jeremiah 3 as precedents or analogies, without acknowledging that these texts refer only to Israel and Judah—no mention of a third entity, or of the division of ‘Israel’ between it and Judah—and that they either reject Judah (Jer. 3.11) or append it as an afterthought (Ezek. 4.6; cf. Jer. 3.18; 30-31). Close analysis of these texts has been undertaken elsewhere and is presupposed here. On Zechariah 10 and Obadiah see below.

²⁷ In both cases following the ketiv חברו rather than the qere חבריו, the latter likely arising when the use of Judah and Joseph for Zedekiah and Jehoiachin (or their lines) was forgotten. On אפרים עץ see below.

Judah is a lion's whelp (גור אריה) . . . he lay down like a lion (אריה) and like a lioness (לביא); who will rouse him? A sceptre (שבט) will not depart from Judah, nor the sceptre (מזקק) from between his feet.

All three of the words used to describe Judah as a 'lion' in Genesis 49—לביא 'lioness', גור 'lion', גור 'cubs'—appear also in Ezekiel 19, which further adds כפיר 'young lion'.²⁸ Although this terminological congruence might be coincidental, the concentration of terms suggests some kind of closer connection, at least conceptually. We have already argued that Ezekiel 19 should be understood as a rejection of the legitimacy of Zedekiah's kingship and as a rejection of his dynastic line in particular. We now suggest that the articulation of this rejection in leonine terms constituted a statement about the (illegitimate) ascension of Zedekiah's dynastic line to the kingship of Judah.²⁹ This association between Zedekiah and Judah was picked up in the sign-act of the two sticks in order to differentiate this group of Israelites (בני ישראל) from the Israelites (בית ישראל) with Jehoiachin in Babylon.³⁰

The identification of the Joseph stick with Jehoiachin and the Babylonian exiles is supported by at least three other texts: Obadiah 17-18, the Joseph traditions as found in Genesis 37-50, and the report of Jehoiachin's release from prison in 2 Kgs. 25.27-30.

The Book of Obadiah has been dated to every century from the ninth to the fourth, but there is a reasonable consensus that the vitriol targeting Edom is probably connected to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BCE.³¹ The verses in which we are interested (vv. 17-18) are generally

²⁸ See Block, Chapters 1–24, 491; Odell, Ezekiel, 235-236; Hals, Ezekiel, 129; Greenberg, Ezekiel 1-20, 357-358. Note also that Gen. 49.11 literally ties Judah to a vine (שרקה, גפן); the term is the one used in Ezekiel 17 rather than the one used in Ezekiel 19, but the coincidence of imagery is quite remarkable, given that there is no inherent link between lions and vines. Indeed, the incongruence is sometimes used to justify dissociating the two halves of Ezekiel 19 (see Zimmerli, Ezechiel 1, 421-422 [ET 392-393] for discussion).

²⁹ On lion imagery see B. A. Strawn, *What Is Stronger than a Lion? Leonine Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (OBO 212; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005). Strawn observes that the Hebrew Bible is surprisingly lacking in royal lion imagery and that, when it does appear, it is consistently negative in force. Indeed, he argues that Ezek. 19.2-9 is 'the only text in the Hebrew Bible where the lion image is used metaphorically of Israelite kings (and perhaps also the queen mother) in a highly-developed and militaristic way akin to what is found in the ancient Near East', and that it differs significantly from those analogies in its negativity (p. 56 [italics original]; for the sustained discussion, see pp. 248-250). The pervasively negative force with which the king-as-lion image is used in the biblical texts suggests that the so-called 'blessing' of Judah in Genesis 49 may not be as positive as is frequently assumed. Strawn observes that the biblical texts do make extended use of lion imagery for God; perhaps the implication of the associations between Zedekiah / Judah and lions is that the Zedekian line has arrogated to itself prerogatives it did not merit—a theologically-freighted accusation of hubris. On the struggle for authority between Judah and Joseph in Genesis 37–50, see below.

³⁰ The difference in phrasing raises the possibility that at some stage there was some significance to the 'sons of Israel' / 'house of Israel' distinction, but the instability of the versions now makes this impossible to clarify; indeed, Greek and Hebrew interchange of 'house of Israel' and 'sons of Israel' occurs several times in the book (T. P. Mackie, *Expanding Ezekiel: The Hermeneutics of Scribal Addition in the Ancient Text Witnesses of the Book of Ezekiel* [FRLANT 257; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015], 95 n. 69). For a brief discussion see Crane, *Israel's Restoration*, 109, 115.

³¹ For a brief history of interpretation see B. A. Anderson, *Brotherhood and Inheritance: A Canonical Reading of the Esau and Edom Traditions* (LHBOTS 556; London: T&T Clark, 2011), 178-186. Notably, one of the cruxes

recognised as part of an announcement of punishment that anticipates the eviction of the pillaging Edomites from Jerusalem and the return of the Babylonian exiles. Mount Zion / Jerusalem is explicitly identified in v. 17a as the destination of the refugee (פליטה) (cf. v. 21) and is implicitly identified as his place of origin in v. 17b (cf. v. 20).³² That this refugee's claim on the city is a claim of one of its former inhabitants is stressed by the verses' talionic language: the dispossessed will reclaim their possession, what was previously done will now be undone, the status quo will be restored.³³

Who is the refugee who will return to Jerusalem in triumph? The euphoric reclamation of the city is described in v. 17 as the restoration of the 'house of Jacob' (בית יעקב). As is well known, Jacob / Israel was widely used as an eponym for the Babylonian exiles, especially in announcements of return to Zion / Jerusalem (e.g., Jer. 30-31; Isa. 40-55). The description of the returnees as of the 'house of Jacob' in v. 17 reinforces an interpretation of these verses as a depiction of the return of the Babylonian exiles. Verses 10-11, which constitute the historical antecedent to the restoration promised by vv. 17-18, also associate Jacob and Jerusalem.

In v. 18, the 'house of Jacob' is identified with the 'house of Joseph' (בית יוסף): 'The house of Jacob shall be a fire and the house of Joseph a flame'.³⁴ No distinction is made between these two entities; together they will regain Mount Zion from Esau / Edom. The double nomenclature suggests that '(the house of) Joseph' could, like '(the house of) Jacob', be used to speak of an entity in Babylonian exile.³⁵

Obadiah's invocation of Joseph raises significant questions concerning the origins and rationale for this phenomenon.³⁶ Developing an idea put forth by Keller, we may suggest that the 'house of Joseph' came into use to designate a specific subgroup of 'the house of Jacob', namely, the Babylonian exiles who are

produced by this dating is the significance of the reference to Joseph, which most commentators assume must refer to the northern kingdom.

³² It would be helpful to have a clear interpretation of the 'sons of Israel' in v. 20, but the relationship of vv. 17-18 to vv. 19-21 is not certain and the syntax is peculiar. Without attempting to untangle vv. 19-21 in their entirety, we note that they associate the 'sons of Israel' with the territories of the (now former) southern kingdom: the Israelites are from the Negev, the Shephelah, Benjamin, and Jerusalem (vv. 19-20) and will rule from Zion (v. 21). Although their aspirations are vast—Edom, Philistia, Samaria, Ephraim, Gilead, Zarephath and Sepharad—their origins and homeland are in the south. For a sustained argument against their interpretation as the northern kingdom, see E. Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Obadiah* (BZAW 242; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996), 197-229.

³³ On the wider context of this (dis)possession rhetoric, see Anderson, *Brotherhood and Inheritance*, 186-194.

³⁴ J. Renkema, *Obadiah* (transl. B. Doyle; HCOT; Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 203; J. Jeremias, *Die Propheten Joel, Obadja, Jona, Micha* (ATD 24,3; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 72-73; and J. J. Niehaus, 'Obadiah', in *The Minor Prophets*, ed. T. E. McComiskey (vol. 2; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1993), 538 all assume that Joseph must refer to the northern kingdom but, given the context, require a connection to the south and therefore claim that Jacob signifies the southern kingdom of Judah. Despite the frequency of such arguments, Ben Zvi rightly points out that this is not what the text actually says (*A Historical-Critical Study*, 192).

³⁵ Although a much later text, Zech. 10.6 seems also to witness to the use of the 'house of Joseph' to refer to those who are or were in exile in Babylon, imagining the return (שוב) of a house of Joseph which had been cast off or rejected (זנח). That the house of Joseph's return will strengthen (גבר) the house of Judah implies that Joseph was in exile, but Judah was not.

³⁶ Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study*, 192-195, here 193.

part but not the entirety of Israel.³⁷ Indeed, while the use of Jacob / Israel for the exiles is well known, the book of Ezekiel attests both to an ongoing claim to this terminology among those left behind and to the confusion that arose as a result. While Ezekiel makes an effort to resolve this issue by denying the legitimacy of the non-exiles' claims to the name Israel—thus, for example, the description of the exiles as 'all the house of Israel, all of it' in Ezek. 11.15—less ambiguous terminology would surely have been attractive. As one of the sons of Jacob / Israel, Joseph would have been well suited as a way of designating this smaller subset of the Israelite community.³⁸

This phenomenon undoubtedly merits a study in its own right, but we are here able to mention only two further texts supporting the use of Joseph as a term for the Babylonian exiles. First, and as widely recognised, the Joseph tradition as preserved in Genesis resonates strongly with the concerns of an exilic community. More specifically, it resonates with the concerns of a community in exile as a direct result of forced migration.³⁹

The Joseph tradition is also intimately concerned with issues of authority: Joseph is the ancestor who dreamt of rule over his brothers (Gen. 37.5-11). Several commentators have observed that the extant form of Genesis 37-50 appears to be caught up in a dispute for authority between Joseph and Judah.⁴⁰ If the Joseph tradition preserved in Genesis is anything like the Joseph tradition circulating among the Babylonian exiles in the 6th-century BCE, it suggests a number of compelling reasons why the exiles may have chosen to invoke this particular ancestor as their representative, especially in an instance of dispute over royal authority.

³⁷ E. Jacob, C.-A. Keller and S. Amsler, *Osée—Joël—Abdias—Jonas—Amos* (CAT 11a; Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1965), 261.

³⁸ With this in mind, it seems likely that the interjections concerning the stick of Ephraim in Ezek. 37.16 (עֵץ אֶפְרַיִם) and the hand of Ephraim in Ezek. 37.19 (יַד אֶפְרַיִם) relate to traditions about Joseph's foreign-born sons. That they are secondary is uncontroversial (Allen, *Ezekiel* 20–48, 190; J. Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel* [Interpretation; Louisville, Ky.: John Knox, 1990], 175; Greenberg, *Ezekiel* 21–37, 754; Klein, *Schriftauslegung*, 212-213; Zimmerli, *Ezechiel* 2, 904-905 [ET 268-269]). Jeremiah 30–31, which proclaim the return of Israel from exile to Zion, indicate that the invocation of Ephraim in Ezekiel 37 does not, in any case, force the interpretation of Joseph as the northern kingdom. Obadiah 19-20 seems to reflect a similar tradition.

³⁹ The Society of Biblical Literature's 'Exile (Forced Migrations) in Biblical Literature' program unit devoted entire sessions to Joseph at the 2017 and 2018 Annual Meetings. In print, see, e.g., H. C. P. Kim, 'Reading the Joseph Story (Genesis 37–50) as a Diaspora Narrative', *CBQ* 75 (2013): 219-238. Crane's discussion of Ezekiel 37 is unusual in recognising the ancestral allusion, but fails to pursue its implications (*Israel's Restoration*, 113-114).

⁴⁰ M. G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), 112-133; M. Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (London: Routledge, 1995), 55-59; F. W. Golka, 'Genesis 37–50: Joseph Story or Israel-Joseph Story?', *CBR* 2 (2004): 153-177; S. Gevirtz, 'Adumbrations of Dan in Jacob's Blessing on Judah', *ZAW* 93 (1981): 21-37; J. S. Kaminsky, *Reclaiming a Theology of Election: Favoritism and the Joseph Story*, *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 31 (2004): 135-152; Y. Levin, 'Joseph, Judah and the "Benjamin Conundrum"', *ZAW* 116 (2004): 223-241; M. A. O'Brien, OP, 'The Contribution of Judah's Speech, Genesis 44.18-34, to the Characterization of Joseph', *CBQ* 59 (1997): 429-447. This is usually conceived as a conflict between the northern and southern kingdoms, with attendant complications. An interpretation of the Joseph novella in light of the present argument is worthwhile but beyond the scope of this article, but note Brett's contention that the narrative's critique of Joseph constitutes a critique of Ezra—that is, of the authority of the 'returnees' from Babylon (*Genesis*, 130-133).

Although the precise form of the Joseph traditions in the 6th-century BCE remains hazy, their existence is affirmed by the peculiar account of Jehoiachin's release from Babylonian prison in 2 Kgs. 25.27-30. Several scholars have argued that this short passage contains a concentration of features meant to signal to the Joseph tradition and, more specifically, to associate the exiled king Jehoiachin with the exiled ancestor Joseph.⁴¹ Although the passage does not make this parallel explicit, it strongly suggests that Joseph was used not only as a symbol of the Babylonian exiles, but more specifically to signify the experience and ultimate fate of Jehoiachin.

If 'Joseph and . . . the house of Israel allied with it' represents Jehoiachin and his supporters in Babylonia, and 'Judah and the sons of Israel allied with it' represents Zedekiah and his supporters in the homeland, what does the sign-act intend to say about the future relationship of these two dynastic lines? Here, again, the interpretation of the two sticks as these two contingents sheds light on the text, for we can readily see the dispute over their relationship and legitimacy reflected in the surviving versions. The initial description of the sign-act leaves the relationship between the two sticks unclear: 'bring them together, one to one, to be one stick for you, and they will be one in your hand' (v. 17). The key verse therefore becomes the notorious v. 19, whose difficulties have produced no fewer than 11 notes in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. A major cause of this snowstorm of annotations is the differences between the Greek and Hebrew textual traditions.

First, the Greek of v. 19b_a indicates that Joseph is the superior stick—literally and (it is assumed) figuratively: Joseph will be set upon Judah (καὶ δώσω αὐτοὺς ἐπὶ τὴν φυλὴν Ἰουδα, probably implying ונתתי אותם אל עץ יהודה).⁴² This is generally thought to reflect an earlier Hebrew text than that preserved by the extant Masoretic text.⁴³ If the sign-act is thus unpacked as a combination of the two sticks with Joseph

⁴¹ J. J. Granowski, 'Jehoiachin at the King's Table: A Reading of the Ending of the Second Book of Kings', in *Reading between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (ed. D. N. Fowell; Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 173-188; K. Schmid, *Erzväter und Exodus: Untersuchungen zur doppelten Begründung der Ursprünge Israels innerhalb der Geschichtsbücher des Alten Testaments* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1999), 142-143 (translated into English as *Genesis and the Moses Story: Israel's Dual Origins in the Hebrew Bible*, by J. D. Nogalski [Siphrut 3; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2010], 130); J. E. Harvey, 'Jehoiachin and Joseph: Hope at the Close of the Deuteronomistic History', in *The Bible as Human Witness to Divine Revelation: Hearing the Word of God through Historically Dissimilar Traditions* (ed. R. Heskett and B. Irwin; LHBOTS 469; London: T&T Clark, 2010), 51-61; M. J. Chan, 'Joseph and Jehoiachin: On the Edge of Exodus', *ZAW* 125 (2013): 566-577; I. D. Wilson, 'Joseph, Jehoiachin, and Cyrus: Book Endings, Exoduses and Exiles, and Yehudite/Judean Social Remembering', *ZAW* 126 (2014): 521-534; P. S. Evans, 'The End of Kings as Presaging an Exodus: The Function of the Jehoiachin Epilogue (2 Kgs 25:27-30) in Light of Parallels with the Joseph Story in Genesis', *MJTM* 16 (2014-2015): 65-100; on the parallel passage in Jer. 52.31-34, see W. McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah XXVI-LII* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 1386. Several commentators suggest that the ending of 2 Kings 25 is intended to presage a second exodus; on the end of exile as second exodus in Ezekiel see C. A. Strine, *Sworn Enemies: The Divine Oath, the Book of Ezekiel, and the Polemics of Exile*, *BZAW* 436 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), 175-283; R. G. S. Idestrom, 'Echoes of the Book of Exodus in Ezekiel', *JSOT* 33 (2009): 489-510.

⁴² The 'explanation' of the sign-act in v. 19 does more to restate the situation than it does to explain it. The Greek translator appears to have tried to clarify matters by unpacking Hebrew עץ 'tree' as a symbol for φυλὴν 'tribe, people'. On the tendency of the translator to engage in this sort of translational exegesis see Crane, *Israel's Restoration*, 106-112, with discussion of this instance on pp. 111-112.

⁴³ On the relationship amongst the versions see Crane, *Israel's Restoration*, esp. 105-137; I. E. Lilly, *Two Books of Ezekiel: Papyrus 967 and the Masoretic Text as Variant Literary Editions* (VTSup 150; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 1-27,

on top, it coheres with the widespread preference for the exiles witnessed by the biblical traditions and by Ezekiel in particular.

Both the Greek and the Hebrew textual traditions, however, reflect in different ways attempts to raise up the Judah branch. In the Greek, this is achieved by the emendation of the description of the two sticks at the end of v. 19b β as ‘in Judah’s hand’ (ἐν τῇ χειρὶ Ἰουδα), in contrast to the ‘in my hand’ (בידי) preserved by the Hebrew.⁴⁴ Although the possibility that the translator interpreted ביד as an abbreviation for ביד יהודה has been suggested and is not impossible, the theological effect of the change—the outright inversion of the priority implied by the first half of the verse—suggests that this Greek text (or its Hebrew Vorlage) was not the result of a casual misinterpretation. Thus, Crane credits the innovation to the translator, arguing that ‘the LXX translator was aware of the Hebrew, but doing another deliberate theological interpretation, as a trans-linguistic wordplay, to leave the balance of power in the hands of Judah’.⁴⁵

The Hebrew text achieves Judah’s superiority by inserting a suffix and a direct object marker at the crucial moment. By this sleight of hand, it transforms a declaration that ‘I will set them [i.e., the stick of Joseph] upon the stick of Judah’ (ונתתי אותם אל עץ יהודה), the text presupposed by the Greek) into the syntactically atrocious claim that ‘I will set them—the stick of Judah—upon it [the stick of Joseph]’ (ונתתי אותם אליו את עץ יהודה).⁴⁶ Its awkwardness, together with the Greek witness, belies the machinations at work here.

In both cases, the extant form of the text reflects an effort to bring Judah in from the cold, in a similar vein to attempts in Jeremiah to extend the restoration which had been promised to the exiles to those who were left behind.⁴⁷ Although this prioritisation of homeland Judah over the exiles is more extreme than other cases, it reflects similar frustration on the part of those in the homeland with the claims of superiority being made by the Babylonian community.

Finally, the interpretation of the sign-act as a reflection of arguments over the legitimacy of Jehoiachin’s and Zedekiah’s respective dynastic lines illuminates the anomalous use of מלך in Ezek. 37.22. As is well

301-317; Mackie, *Expanding Ezekiel*, 16-43. References to important earlier work, especially that of J. Lust, E. Tov and D. I. Block, may be found therein.

⁴⁴ Lilly lists this variant as part of a “‘Death on the Field’ Tendenz’ characteristic of P967, but makes no further discussion of its significance in this respect (Two Books of Ezekiel, 74).

⁴⁵ Crane, *Israel’s Restoration*, 113. He suggests a similar phenomenon in a ‘curious variant’ in Symmachus (*Israel’s Restoration*, 114).

⁴⁶ The Hebrew here is just as awkward as the English suggests. A less convoluted option would be ‘I will set them [that is, the Israelites allied to Joseph, v. 19a] upon it, namely, the stick of Judah’, but this defies the universal expectation that the Judah stick must end up on top and fails to explain the mismatch between את and אל (see, e.g., Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, 755; Joyce, *Ezekiel*, 210). It also effects no change in meaning by which the grammatical muddle might be justified. It thus remains probable that the additional verbiage was intended to invert the relationship between the two sticks. Most translations abandon isomorphism for acceptability and render something like ‘I will place the stick of Judah upon it [the stick of Joseph]’. Contrast Block, *Chapters 25–48*, 405-406, who translates ‘I am taking the wood of Joseph . . . along with the tribes of Israel, which are associated with him, and placing them upon it, that is on the wood of Judah’, but then disregards the expectation that physical superiority is meant to reflect ideological superiority, claiming that ‘the Josephite piece of wood is placed on (nātan ‘al) the Judahite counterpart, hinting at the superiority of the southern tribe’.

⁴⁷ See n. 26 above.

known, the book of Ezekiel overwhelmingly prefers the term נשיא to refer to the future leader of Israel. The sign-act's deviation from this habit is widely recognised as peculiar, if not downright awkward, at the same time that the parallel to ממלכות is generally acknowledged to support the retention of מלך.⁴⁸

One option, of course, has been to blame the terminology on a careless editor, whose elaboration of an earlier form of the sign-act introduced the מלך language inappropriately. While this part of the sign-act's explanation may well be elaborative, an interpretation of its מלך language that does not abandon the search for meaning at the feet of an unobservant editor remains preferable—especially given that the preference for נשיא would have been just as obvious to the ancient commentator as it is to the modern one.⁴⁹ The present interpretation of the sign-act offers such an interpretation: if the issue at stake in Ezekiel 37 is specifically an argument over the legitimacy of the competing claims of the dynastic lines of Jehoiachin and of Zedekiah, then the use of מלך falls into line with Ezekiel's willingness to refer to Jehoiachin and Zedekiah as מלך elsewhere. Jehoiachin is explicitly titled מלך by the heading in Ezek. 1.2; in Ezek. 17.12, Jehoiachin is not named but in the context of the allegory is clearly the מלך in question, as the cedar twig of Ezek. 17.3-4 is identified with Jerusalem's מלך whom the king of Babylon deported to Babylon. Less clear is the identity of the mourning מלך in Ezek. 7.27; the immediate context concerns the devastation of the land, and so perhaps implies that this is Zedekiah, but there is no inherent reason that it might not refer to Jehoiachin, mourning the devastation from afar.⁵⁰ The sign-act is engaged in the argument that raged between supporters of Jehoiachin and supporters of Zedekiah in the wake of the deportation of the former in 597 BCE and just as other texts in Ezekiel that reflect this debate use מלך, it also uses מלך. The terminology is not frequent, but enough of it exists to indicate that, in this frame of reference, מלך is not inexplicable at all.

The preceding has argued that a number of the apparent peculiarities of the sign-act of the two sticks may be resolved if the episode is interpreted in terms of competing claims to dynastic legitimacy by supporters of Jehoiachin and of Zedekiah, respectively. The anomalous and awkward interest in the former northern kingdom is eliminated as a figment of the imagination. The bifurcation of Israel is rendered a sensible statement of the division of Israel into two camps: those deported to Babylonia with Jehoiachin and those left behind in the land with Zedekiah. The use of מלך is explained with reference to the use of this title for Jehoiachin (and perhaps Zedekiah) elsewhere in the book. The meaning of the key words עץ and שבט is clarified, as is the significance of their use in the highly symbolic context of a sign-act. The use of Joseph in opposition to Judah is explained as an unusual but attested use of this name to refer to exiles from

⁴⁸ Thus Block, Chapters 25-48, 414; I. M. Duguid, *Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel* (VTSup 56; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 25, 49; Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 756; Zimmerli, *Ezechiel 2*, 905, 912 (ET 269, 275). Note also the use of גוים for Israel, which elsewhere in Ezekiel always refers to other nations; its use here probably also reflects the passage's political emphasis.

⁴⁹ Indeed, in these verses the Greek consistently renders ἄρχων where MT gives מלך. As the latter is *lectio difficilior*, the widespread consensus is that the Greek is avoiding βασιλεύς, probably for theological reasons (e.g., Block, Chapters 25-48, 414; Duguid, *Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel*, 22-25, 49; Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37*, 756; J. D. Levenson, *Theology of the Program of Restoration of Ezekiel 40-48* [HSM 10; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1976], 64-65; Zimmerli, *Ezechiel 2*, 905, 912 (ET 269, 275); but contra Crane, *Israel's Restoration*, 119-126, who argues that MT introduced מלך as part of the chapter reordering.

⁵⁰ We should also note the pejorative mention of the מלכים in Ezek. 43.7. Note that, if the reference in Ezek. 7.27 is to Jehoiachin, then use of מלך in Ezek. 37.22 further reinforces the claim to the legitimacy and dominance of the Jehoiachin line which was likely characteristic of the earliest version of the sign-act; cf. Duguid's observation that Zedekiah is never explicitly termed מלך by Ezekiel, whereas Jehoiachin is (*Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel*, 24).

Jerusalem, including Jehoiachin. The interpretation also goes some way towards explaining the muddled state of the versions, exactly at the point at which the relationship between the two groups represented by the sticks is announced, by contextualising the sign-act within a wider field of textual disputes between the exiles deported to Babylonia with Jehoiachin and those left behind in the land with Zedekiah. The witness to this battle is not limited to but is especially characteristic of the book of Ezekiel, and it is fitting that this sign-act, whether attributable to the prophet or not, should appear in his book.