

HAFTARAH EXHORTATIONS:

Haftarah VaYigash

by Mark Huey posted 03 January, 2009 www.outreachisrael.net

Ezekiel 37:15-28

“Sticks and Bones”

In the past century, there was an old school yard rhyme that was used to ward off the verbal attacks of opponents intent on demeaning schoolmates when physical force could potentially result in after school detention: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Certainly there is some corporeal validity to this retort from spoken taunts or name calling. However, one might argue that the spoken, or even written word, has the residual potential to do far more psychological damage than a broken bone that will mend itself over time. This recent defensive expression came to mind when I considered the messages conveyed by our examinations in the Torah, as the sons of Jacob were rescued from the results of a regional famine in *VaYigash* (Genesis 44:18-47:27). But even more reflection was stimulated when I considered its corresponding Haftarah selection, which speaks directly of a restored family of all Israel, after depicting a resurrection of dry bones.

The great chasm and potential animosity that could have developed between Joseph and his brothers, as a result of him being sold into slavery, never really occurred as our Torah portion for this week relates. Instead, the banished Joseph, recognizing the providential hand of God upon his life, mercifully uses the circumstances of crop failures to teach his siblings a tremendous lesson about His sovereign hand upon the affairs of mankind. Whether the brothers were able to comprehend and appreciate what had transpired in their generation, is certainly open to conjecture. But no doubt, the maturation of Judah, as he struggled with personal transgressions and issues of life that drew him closer to the Creator, is certainly a contributing part. He unconditionally offered his own life for the life of his brother Benjamin, the final son of Jacob and his beloved wife Rachel:

“Then Judah approached him, and said, ‘Oh my lord, may your servant please speak a word in my lord's ears, and do not be angry with your servant; for you are equal to Pharaoh. My lord asked his servants, saying, “Have you a father or a brother?” We said to my lord, “We have an old father and a little child of *his* old age. Now his brother is dead, so he alone is left of his mother, and his father loves him.” Then you said to your servants, “Bring him down to me that I may set my eyes on him.” But we said to my lord, “The lad cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.” You said to your servants, however, “Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you will not see my face again.” Thus it came about when we went up to your servant my father, we told him the words of my lord. Our father said, “Go back, buy us a little food.” But we said, “We cannot go down. If our youngest brother is with us, then we will go down; for we cannot see the man's face unless our youngest brother is with us.” Your servant my father said to us, “**You know that my wife bore me two sons; and the one went out from me,**” and I said, “**Surely he is torn in pieces,**” and I have not seen him since. “**If you take this one also from me, and harm befalls him, you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow.**” Now, therefore, when I come to your servant my father, and the lad is not with us, since his life is bound up in the lad's life, when he sees that the lad is not *with us*, he will die. Thus your servants will bring the gray hair of your servant our father down to Sheol in sorrow. For your servant became surety for the lad to my father, saying, “If I do not bring him *back* to you, then let me bear the blame before my father forever.” Now, therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the lad a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers. For how shall I go up to my father if the lad is not with me—for fear that I see the evil that would overtake my father?” (Genesis 44:18-34).

It is at this point in our Torah reading that the clear distinction between the two leading sons of Jacob is indelibly marked. Judah, the fourth son of Jacob and Leah, had become the dominant brother of his generation, and ultimately received the mantle of inheriting the line of

blessing passed down from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob. On the other hand, the two sons of Jacob and Rachel, Joseph and to a lesser extent Benjamin, maintain a different stature with Joseph—predominating as a Messiah-like son saving Israel from extinction. Due to Joseph’s position as the viceroy of Egypt and his marriage to Asenath, the daughter of the priest of On (Genesis 41:45) and father of the two sons Manasseh and Ephraim, Joseph eventually received a double portion blessing when Jacob adopted his grandsons (Genesis 48:5), making them joint heirs with their uncles. Consequently, there would be two distinctive strains among the Ancient Israelites: those who become associated with Judah (the Southern Kingdom), and those who became associated with Joseph and son Ephraim (the Northern Kingdom).¹

The differences between two emerging sectors of Israel began to manifest themselves after Joshua’s conquest of the Promised Land. The Books of Joshua, Judges, and the Historical Books of Samuel-Kings and Chronicles, provide an overview of what transpired as the various iniquities and transgressions of the fathers—specifically worshipping other gods—were passed down and multiplied from generation to generation just as the Torah said they would:

“You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, **visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments**” (Exodus 20:3-6).

By the time one arrives at Ezekiel’s generation, the required judgment upon and exile of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms has been dispensed. God has used the Assyrians and the Babylonians to take away the Israelites from the Promised Land, sending many into the nations. The promise of a restoration of the captives to Zion comes to Ezekiel in a vision of dry bones coming to life, as they take on sinew, muscles, flesh, and rise up from the dust and from graves filled with the wind of the Ruach HaKodesh (Ezekiel 37: 1-14). Then a profound prophecy is made about returning all Israel to the Promised Land:

“Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people. **I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land.** Then you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken and done it,’ declares the LORD” (Ezekiel 37:13-14).

What an awesome vision about Israel’s restoration! The balance of Ezekiel 37, which makes up Haftarah *VaYigash*, describes aspects of what the sticks of reunification entail. The picture of two inscribed sticks in the hand of the Son of Man is prophetically comforting, when you consider Judah and his companions and Joseph and his companions, will one day be reunited:

“The word of the LORD came again to me saying, ‘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.” Then join them for yourself one to another into one stick, that they may become one in your hand” (Ezekiel 37:15-17).

A proper interpretation and application of the specific promises seen in Ezekiel 37:15-28 are things over which many people today do not agree. Some Jewish interpreters believe that the prophecies have been fulfilled. Some Christian interpreters allegorize these prophecies as speaking of ecumenical unity. Messianic interpreters often believe that these are futuristic prophecies, and others simply do not want to touch them because of the controversy. Those that do touch these prophecies of Scripture are very brave souls indeed!

When one sees the various views present of Ezekiel 37:15-28 in the Messianic movement, you find a **great number of sticks and stones of verbal and written accusation**. There can be abuse, slander, hatred, strife, and all sorts of evil deriving from various people—simply because you have decided to offer your interpretation of a prophecy speaking of Israel’s restoration. Instead

¹ Cf. Genesis 48:19-20.

of bringing great comfort and encouragement to God's people, particularly in the past decade as the Messianic movement has grown significantly, these verses have been used to bring great division. But this is no fault of the Scriptures! It is instead the fault of those who fail to look at Ezekiel 37:15-28 with an attitude closely guided by the Holy Spirit.

It is a shame that every year when we encounter *VaYigash*, the great reconciliation that took place in Egypt over three millennia ago, and Haftarah *VaYigash*, which prophesies of the full restoration of the whole House of Israel are read—ancient animosities tend to prevail. Is it possible that the iniquities of the fathers are simply being passed down to the third and fourth generations that are alive today? Are old wounds of Jewish and Christian misunderstanding, pogroms, persecutions, inquisitions, the Holocaust, and prejudice simply being replayed by another set of actors? Is there reconciliation that needs to take place among those today who make up the Messianic movement, namely Jewish Believers who have recognized Yeshua as Messiah, and non-Jewish Believers who have embraced their Hebraic Roots?²

While attempts at reconciliation have been made in recent years, the ability to overcome the spoken and written words of contempt has continued to fall short of the goal of universal acceptance. A spiritually edifying and constructive way to approach the issues has often not prevailed. As you read the balance of Ezekiel's prophecy, you will have to note that many of the aspects of the promised restoration have not come to pass. Most notable is the fact that God's Sanctuary will be in the midst of the Earth forever! Does anyone honestly argue that this has taken place yet in such fullness? What will it take in order to see it finally take place?

"The word of the LORD came again to me saying, '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." Then join them for yourself one to another into one stick, that they may become one in your hand. When the sons of your people speak to you saying, "Will you not declare to us what you mean by these?" 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.'" The sticks on which you write will be in your hand before their eyes. '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; 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. My dwelling place also will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be My people. And the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forever'"'"' (Ezekiel 37:21-28).³

² Interpreting Ezekiel 37:15-28, Joseph Blenkinsopp considers the "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" (*Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching: Ezekiel* [Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990], 175). He, and other interpreters, often view Ezekiel 37:15-28 as a word regarding the unity that is to occur among God's people both internally within their own denomination, and externally between Christians and Jews.

³ For a further discussion on this prophecy, and related prophecies, consult the article "The Two Houses of Israel in the End-Times" by J.K. McKee

In recent years, we have seen the beginning of the fulfillment of this prophecy, and many others. The formation of the State of Israel in 1948 was a significant part of this. Jewish people coming to faith in Messiah Yeshua is also quite significant and absolutely required. But now questions are being asked from large numbers of non-Jewish Believers who are drawn to Israel and their Hebraic Roots. What this means has been difficult to ascertain for many. Messianic Judaism, by-and-large, is at present not very welcoming of non-Jewish Believers into their ranks, often failing to consider them their full equals in the Lord (Galatians 3:28)—and their presence in the Messianic movement is certainly not believed to be related with anything to do with Israel's end-time restoration. In spite of many of the challenges that currently exist, the Scriptural references we see in the Torah, Tanakh, and Apostolic Writings indicate that all Israel will be restored. Recognizing all of God's people as a part of the Commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:11-12) is a good place to start discussing what prophecies like Ezekiel 37:15-28 mean. For as Judah and Ephraim will say, "Will you not show us what you mean by these?" (v. 18, RSV). **This is the question we are all asking today.**

The sticks and bones of Ezekiel are certain reminders that, in time, the prophecies of Scripture will come to pass. Great David's Greater Son, Yeshua the Messiah, will rule over a restored and reunited people of Israel—composed of native born and sojourner alike—forever. Thankfully, the sticks and stones of ancient generations when the Southern Kingdom and the Northern Kingdom were at war with one another are not being used to break the tender bones of those receiving the Ruach and turning to renewed paths of righteousness. But sadly, we do have some who are hurling invectives that continue to keep Israel a separated people, and actually do more to deter the restoration process than to accelerate it.

Hopefully, as we revisit these ancient stories about Joseph and Judah, and we re-acquaint ourselves with the prophecies of Ezekiel, the Almighty will bring new revelation to the minds and hearts of those hardened by the words of condemnation. God is able to heal broken bones *and even broken hearts*. Our challenge is to lay down the sticks, and as His people embrace one another and all with open arms of repentance as the Ruach fills us and leads us.

May He do so quickly!

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