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What Was the Urim and the Thummim?

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One of the mysteries of the Old Testament is the identity of the Urim and the Thummim, a device used by the priests of Israel to determine God's divine direction. What was this device, and how did God use it to direct the decisions of God's people?

The Meaning of the Hebrew Terms

Both "Urim" and "Thummim" are plural forms of Hebrew nouns. Urim most likely comes from the word *ur* (אור), meaning "light or fire."¹ Thummim probably comes from *tom* (תם), which means "perfection, completeness"² or "integrity."³ Taken together, Urim and Thummim could be translated Lights and Perfections. Unfortunately, the definitions of these terms give little indication of the nature of the device which they designate.

Biblical References

The first reference to the Urim and the Thummim appears in Exodus 28:30. At Mount Sinai, God gave instructions to Moses regarding the High Priest's garments. The High Priest was to wear a special, colorful ephod, an apron-like cloth garment that was worn over the priestly robe. A breast piece "for making decisions" (Exodus 28:15), a cloth covering that was folded in half forming a pouch or pocket, was worn over the ephod. On the breast piece were

mounted twelve precious stones, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Exodus 28:30 says, "Also put the Urim and the Thummim in the breastpiece" so that the High Priest "will always bear the means of making decisions for the Israelites over his heart before the Lord." It appears, therefore, that the Urim and the Thummim was tucked inside the pocket of the breast piece worn by the High Priest, and it was used for discerning God's direction.

Leviticus 8:8, the next reference to the Urim and the Thummim, simply records that Aaron, the first High Priest, was given the Urim and the Thummim as instructed by God. Numbers 27:21 refers to the Urim, omitting the word Thummim, which may indicate that these were two distinct objects. The High Priest was to obtain decisions for Joshua "by inquiring of the Urim before the Lord." These decisions were related to the military maneuvers of the Israelites as they entered the Promised Land. In some of his final words to the Israelites, Moses referred to the Thummim and the Urim (reversing the usual order) as the possession of the tribe of Levi, since the High Priest would always come from that tribe (Deuteronomy 33:8).

The next reference to the Urim, again mentioned apart from the Thummim, doesn't appear until the time of Israel's monarchy. First Samuel 28:6 says that King Saul inquired of the Lord regarding his military strategy, but "the Lord did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets." The Urim and the Thummim, therefore, could give a positive response, a negative response, or no response at all.

Again, there is an extended period of silence regarding the Urim and the Thummim until after the Jewish exile. Ezra 2:63 and Nehemiah 7:65 say that some presumed descendants of Levi who couldn't prove their priestly heritage were forbidden to eat any of the sacred food "until there was a priest ministering with the Urim and Thummim." It appears that the Urim and the Thummim were absent after the exile, but that there was an anticipation that it would soon be restored.

From the brief biblical references to the Urim and the Thummim, we can conclude that this device was entrusted only to the High Priest of Israel, was designed to discern God's direction particularly as it related to military engagements, and was commonly

known throughout Israel's history down through the post-exilic period.

Historical Interpretations

The Septuagint, an ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, adds to the Hebrew text by referring to the Urim and the Thummim in 1 Samuel 14:41. The context revolves around King Saul's vain efforts to receive divine revelation regarding military activities. The New International Version includes this reference in a footnote, translating the Septuagint version of Saul's words, "Why have you not answered your servant today? If the fault is in me or my son Jonathan, respond with Urim, but if the men of Israel are at fault, respond with Thummim." The Septuagint translators apparently considered the Urim and the Thummim as a device that could discern between two options, much like casting lots.

Philo, a Jewish writer from the first century, referred to the Urim and the Thummim allegorically, describing it as "distinctness and truth" that characterize virtuous language.⁴

There has been considerable speculation regarding the nature of the Urim and the Thummim. Archer suggests, "It should be explained that the Urim and the Thummim were the two precious gems contained in a special compartment of the breastplate of the high priest and were to be used in ascertaining God's will when a choice was to be made between two alternatives."⁵ Davis cites a rather bizarre interpretation:

Other interpreters have supposed that when to the high priest, clad in the ephod with the Urim and Thummim and offering prayer, an idea occurred, its divine origin and truth were confirmed by the unwonted gleaming of the gems in the breastplate. . . . It has been suggested that the answer was spelled out by the successive gleaming of the letters which composed the proper names on the stones⁶

This idea may have its roots in Josephus' first-century description of the gem stones associated with the High Priest's garments. Of the gem stones on the High Priest's shoulders he stated, "The one of them shined out when God was present at their sacrifices," and of the twelve gem stones on the High Priest's breast piece he said, "God declared beforehand, by those twelve stones which the high priest

bare on his breast, and which were inserted into his breastplate, when they should be victorious; for so great a splendor shone forth from them before the army began to march, that all the people were sensible of God's being present for their assistance."⁷ Josephus goes on to say that this mysterious expression of God's direction had passed off the scene two hundred years before his time.⁸

It is unlikely that the Urim and the Thummim contained any magical powers. While it is true that "just how they functioned and what they looked like is unknown,"⁹ it seems likely that this object functioned in a similar fashion to casting lots. "They were objects in the ephod used in determining the Lord's will, probably a kind of sacred lot, and their value derived from the providential behavior of the lots when God's priest used them (Prov 16:33)."¹⁰

Concluding Thoughts

Discerning God's direction today is based on a personal relationship with Him through faith in Jesus Christ. The indwelling Holy Spirit leads Bible-informed Christians to know God's direction without the need for special devices such as the Urim and Thummim.

¹ Unger, Merrill F. *Unger's Bible Dictionary*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, p. 1128.

² Unger, p. 1128.

³ Koehler, Ludwig and Baumgartner, Walter. *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958, p. 1030.

⁴ Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation III*, 119-120.

⁵ Archer, Gleason L. *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982, p. 40.

⁶ Davis, John J. *A Dictionary of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1956, p. 795.

⁷ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 3.8.9 (215-217).

⁸ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 3.8.9 (218).

⁹ Kaiser, Walter C. "Exodus" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 2. Frank E. Gaebelin, editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990, p. 467.

¹⁰ R. Laird Harris. "Leviticus" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 2. Frank E. Gaebelin, editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990, pp. 562-563.