

The Urim And The Thummim

Gary McDade

“The Urim and the Thummim” were a means by which God communicated with the High Priest in his exercise of judgment for the Israelites. Knowledge of them will strengthen appreciation for the variety of ways God communicated His will until the Bible was completed.

In Exodus 28, the clothing the High Priest was to wear in the exercise of his official duties in the Tabernacle is described, “And take thou unto thee Aaron thy brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister unto me in the priest’s office, even Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron’s sons. And thou shalt make holy garments for Aaron thy brother for glory and for beauty” (vv. 1-2). The verses which follow paint an impressive picture of the “holy garments” the High Priest and his descendants would wear. In this description is where we are introduced to “the Urim and the Thummim.” Three questions will be answered: **One**, where were “the Urim and the Thummim” kept? **Two**, what were “the Urim and the Thummim”? And, **three**, what was the purpose for “the Urim and the Thummim”?

One

Part of the ephod, as the upper section of the priest’s clothing was called, was the breastplate of judgment that contained “the Urim and the Thummim.”

And thou shalt make the breastplate of judgment with cunning work; after the work of the ephod thou shalt make it; of gold, of blue, and of purple, and of scarlet, and of fine twined linen, shalt thou make it. Foursquare it shall be being doubled; a span shall be the length thereof, and a span shall be the breadth thereof. And thou shalt set in it settings of stones, even four rows of stones: the first row shall be a sardius, a topaz, and a carbuncle: this shall be the first row. And the second row shall be an emerald, a sapphire, and a diamond. And the third row a ligure, an agate, and an amethyst. And the fourth row a beryl, and an onyx, and a jasper: they shall be set in gold in their inclosings. And the stones shall be with the names of the children of Israel, twelve, according to their names, like the engravings of a signet; every one with his name shall they be according to the twelve tribes (vv. 15-21).

Apparently, the breastplate of judgment was made with a compartment to house “the Urim and the Thummim.” Moses wrote, “And thou shalt put in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim; and they shall be upon Aaron’s heart, when he goeth in before the Lord: and Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before the Lord continually” (v. 30).

This is the first reference to “the Urim and the Thummim.” Five times “the Urim and the Thummim” are mentioned together (Ex. 28:30; Lev. 8:8; Deut. 33:8; Ezra 2:63; and Neh. 7:65); twice only the Urim is mentioned (Num. 27:21 and 1 Sam. 28:6), but, obviously, a figure of speech known as synecdoche is used where a part, i.e., Urim, stands for the whole, i.e., “the Urim and the Thummim.” While “the Urim and the Thummim” are specifically mentioned only

seven times in the Bible anytime the ephod, which includes the breastplate of judgment, is mentioned “the Urim and the Thummim” are present.

Two

“The Urim and the Thummim” were gems or stones, the two words suggest two items as does the definite article “the” preceding each word, but their definite composition cannot be known.

Three

The meaning of “Urim” is “lights”; the meaning of “Thummim” is “perfections.” A summary of the seven verses mentioned earlier where “the Urim and the Thummim” appear shows they were used to learn God’s specific will in special cases. Exactly how they conveyed God’s will we are not told, but record of their use implies “yes” and “no” questions would be answered by one gem lighting for “yes” and the other for “no.” (Again, which would light up for a “yes” answer and which for a “no” we cannot know).

“The Urim and the Thummim” provided a continual reminder to the High Priest of his important role in bearing the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart (Ex. 28:30). Also, in blessing the tribe of Levi before his death, Moses recalled the two places in their wandering where the Israelites complained with thirst (Deut. 33:8-11). Both Rephidim at Mt. Horeb and Kadesh in the Wilderness of Sin are called Meribah which means “contention” (Ex. 17:1-7; Num. 20:1-13). It was at Meribah-Kadesh that Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it as instructed that kept him out of the promised land (Num. 20:12). How fitting that he would speak of the stones of judgment, “the Urim and the Thummim,” when reflecting upon his own flawed judgment that forbade him entrance into Canaan!

Now, a closer look at the actual use of “the Urim and the Thummim” will show why the suggestion of its providing “yes” or “no” answers has been given. Let’s look at three cases where “the Urim and the Thummim” were used to determine God’s judgment.

The First Case

The first case is Joshua’s approval to succeed Moses which depended upon the High Priest’s confirmation. Moses wrote, “And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall ask counsel for him after the judgment of Urim before the Lord: at his word shall they go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he, and all the children of Israel with him, even all the congregation” (Num. 27:21). The judgment to confirm Joshua “after the judgment of Urim before the Lord” was either “yes” or “no.” The positive affirmation of Eleazar the High Priest underscored the Lord’s choice of Joshua in the eyes of the people.

The Second Case

The second case comes up in David’s flight from Saul. After Saul slew Ahimelech the High Priest at Nob and all his descendants except Abiathar, totaling 85 priests, it came to pass that when Abiathar “fled to David to Keilah, that he came down with an ephod in his hand” (1 Sam. 23:6). [Remember the ephod is where “the Urim and the Thummim” were kept.] David asked two “yes” or “no” questions of the High Priest Abiathar. One, “will Saul come down, as thy servant hath heard?” (v. 11) and, two, “will the men of Keilah deliver me and my men into the hand of Saul?” (v. 12). Both received a “yes” answer, so David and his men “arose and departed out of Keilah, and went whithersoever they could go.”

The Third Case

The third case occurs after the return from Babylonian Captivity when the children of Habaiah and Koz and Barzillai, children of the priests, “sought their register among those that were reckoned by genealogy, but they were not found: therefore were they, as polluted, put from

the priesthood” (Ezra 2:61-63). Both Zerubbabel the High Priest and Nehemiah are referenced by the official Persian title of “Tirshatha” or Governor of Judea (cf. Ezra 2:63 and Neh. 7:65, 70; 8:9; 10:1). And, in their official capacity they said these children of the priests “should not eat of the most holy things, till there stood up a priest with Urim and with Thummim” (Ezra 2:63 and Neh. 7:65). These priests would not be allowed to serve until a determination could be made as to whether or not they were approved of God. Again, a “yes” or “no” answer would resolve the concern.

In closing, the seven times “the Urim and the Thummim” are mentioned in the Bible they are always mentioned in connection with the High Priest and stand for the judgment of God. The approximate dates of the cases presented in this review show the perennial presence of “the Urim and the Thummim” across the history of Israel; the dates in the order the cases were presented being approximately 1500, 1000, and 500 B.C. “The Urim and the Thummim” were one means among many God might use to communicate His will. For example, near his end when wicked King Saul “inquired of the Lord, the Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets” (1 Sam. 28:6). The Hebrews writer tells plainly how God communicated in times past and how He communicates today, “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds” (Heb. 1:1-2).