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The Urim and Thummim: The Means of Making Decisions

28: 30

The Urim and Thummim: the means of making decisions DIG: How exactly did the high priest go about making decisions for the people? How does this way of making decisions differ from Jethro's idea of decentralized decision-making (18:13-23)?

REFLECT: How do you determine what the will of God is in a particular situation?



The purpose of the breastpiece was for making decisions. The fifth piece of clothing, Urim and the Thummim, were the means by which the high priest made those decisions for the Israelites that were beyond human perception. The breastpiece was folded double (28:16) and formed kind of pouch for those precious stones. The fact that they were over Aaron's heart whenever he entered the presence of ADONAI, reminded him of his awesome responsibility to discern the will of God when making decisions for the twelve tribes. It would be by the means of these stones, that the divine will was revealed.

The Urim means *lights* and the Thummim means *perfections*. The Septuagint, or the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, rather than translating the words, translates their meaning as *revelation* and *truth*. The words don't mean *revelation*

and *truth*, but **the Urim** and **the Thummim** *revealed the truth*. The fact that **Urim** begins the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet and **Thummim** begins with the last letter, probably meant that the lots were restricted to giving a positive or negative response to questions asked of them by *lighting up*. That is why they were named *lights* and *perfections*, or *perfect light*. Therefore, they were used to determine what “light” from **ADONAI** could be shed on a pending decision, or what **His** will would be (a “*perfection*”) for a particular matter. In other words, **they** brought a little of **God’s** judgment and wisdom down to needy mankind.

In the TaNaKh they are mentioned by name seven different times. In **Exodus 28:30**, **Leviticus 8:8** and **Numbers 27:21** **they** were seen as a means of inquiring of **God’s** mind. In **Deuteronomy 33:8** **they** were seen as a unique possession of the tribe of Levi. In **First Samuel 28:6** **they** refused to respond to King Saul’s questions.

There are **nine biblical examples** of how **the Urim and the Thummim** worked, although the words **Urim and Thummim** are not used explicitly. **First, the high priest** would cast lots to decide which of the two goats would be sacrificed as a sin offering to **Ha’Shem** on the Day of Atonement, and which one would be the scapegoat (**Leviticus 16:7-10**).

Secondly, Joshua had a problem. **He** needed to find out who was guilty of violating the *herem* ban on taking any plunder from Jericho that brought about **Isra’el’s** defeat at Ai. **Joshua** demanded: **In the morning, present yourselves tribe by tribe. The tribe that ADONAI takes shall come forward clan by clan; the clan that He takes shall come forward family by family; and the family that He takes shall come forward man by man. The one who is caught with the devoted things shall be destroyed by fire, along with all that belongs to him. He has violated the covenant of ADONAI and has done a disgraceful thing in Isra’el (Joshua 7:14-15).**

Early the next morning **Joshua** had **Isra’el** come forward by tribes, and **Judah** was taken. The clans of **Judah** came forward, and he took the **Zerahites**. He had the clan of **Zerahites** come forward by families, and **Zimri** was taken. **Joshua** had his family come forward man by man, and **Achan son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken (Joshua 7:16-18)**. **God** could have simply told **Joshua** who the guilty person was. But **He** wanted him to use **the Urim** and **the Thummim** of the **high priest**, because they could only answer yes or no depending on the lighting of

the stones. Each **tribe** had to pass by, but they only lit up when the tribe of **Judah** passed. Each **clan** passed, each **family** passed and each person within that **family** passed, and eventually they lit up and **Achan** was found to be the guilty party by **the Urim** and **the Thummin**.

A **third** example is also found in **Joshua**. There were seven tribes that had not received their inheritance of **the Land**. They were supposed **to survey the Land** and divide it up **into seven parts**. After they had **written descriptions of each**, they were to return to **Joshua** who would then have the high priest **cast lots for them in the presence of ADONAI** to determine which plot of land they would receive (**Joshua 18:3-6**).

Fourthly, there is another in **First Samuel**. So **Saul asked God, “Shall I go down after the Philistines? Will you give them into Isra’el’s hand?” But God did not answer him that day. Saul therefore said: Come here, all you who are leaders of the army, and let us find out what sin has been committed today.** A sin had been committed that resulted in Saul losing in battle. So he used the **Urim** and **the Thummin** to find out who the guilty party was. **Then Saul prayed to ADONAI, the God of Isra’el, “Give me the right answer.” And Jonathan and Saul were taken by lot, and the men cleared. Saul then said: Cast the lot between me and Jonathan my son. And Jonathan was taken (First Samuel 14:37-42).**

Here is a **fifth** example. One of the **sons of Ahimelech, son of Ahitub**, named **Abiathar, escaped and fled to join David**. King **Saul had killed all the priests of God**, and only he had escaped and **brought the ephod**, which contained **the Urim** and **the Thummin with him**. When **David learned that Saul was plotting against him, he said to Abiathar the priest: Bring the ephod. David said: ADONAI, God of Isra’el, your servant has heard definitely that Saul plans to come to Keilah and destroy the town on account of me. Will the citizens of Keilah surrender me to him? Will Saul come down, as your servant has heard? ADONAI, God of Isra’el, tell your servant. And YHVH answered: He will. Again David asked: Will the citizens of Keilah surrender me and my men to Saul? And the LORD said: They will (First Samuel 22:20-21, 23:6, 10-12).** By asking those yes and no questions to **the Urim** and **the Thummin** within **the ephod**, **David** was directed what to do by **God**.

David would use **the ephod** again in the **sixth** example. **Then David said to Abiathar the priest, the son of Ahimelech, “Bring me the ephod.” Abiathar**

brought it to him, and David inquired of God, “Shall I pursue this raiding party? Will I overtake them?” “Pursue them,” God answered, “You will certainly overtake them and succeed in the rescue” (First Samuel 30:7-8). The reason that David knew that he should pursue after the invading party was that he questioned by means of the Urim and the Thummin.

In the **seventh** example, David inquired of God. He asked: “Shall I go up to one of the towns in Judah?” YHVH said: “Go up.” So it was by the means of the Urim and the Thummin that David knew it was time to return to Isra’el.

In the **eighth** example the final decision on whether an exile qualified as a priest but was unable to prove it through genealogical records was decided by a priest and the Urim and Thummin (see the commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah, to see link click [Ag - The First Return](#)). They sought their genealogical records, but could not find them. So they were disqualified from the priesthood. As a result, the ruler (most likely Zerubbabel) said to them that they should not eat any of the most holy food until a cohen was ministering with the Urim and Thummim (Ezra 2:63).

Lastly, we see the same thing when Ezra returned to lead a spiritual revival in Yerushalayim (see Ezra-Nehemiah [Bf - The Second Return](#)). These sought their names in the genealogies, but were not found; so they were disqualified from the priesthood. The ruler (most likely Ezra) said to them that they should not eat any of the most holy things until a choen arose with the Urim and Thummim (Nehemiah 7:65).

The casting of lots by an Israelite high priest was by no means the same as throwing dice, because the results were not determined by chance. The high priest knew that the lots’ every decision was from ADONAI (Proverbs 16:33). The last mention of a divine decision mediated through lots in the Bible is found in Acts 1:23-26. When the Holy Spirit came on the day of Shavu’ot (Acts 2:1-4), the need for casting lots disappeared.⁶³¹