

Urim and Thummim

In the Hebrew Bible, the **Urim and the Thummim** (Hebrew: עֲרִים וְתֻמִּים, Standard *ha-Urim veva-Thummim* Tiberian *hā Ӯրִים wəħatTummīm*; meaning uncertain, possibly "Lights and Perfections") are elements of the hoshen, the breastplate worn by the High Priest attached to the ephod. They are connected with divination in general, and cleromancy in particular. Most scholars suspect that the phrase refers to a set of two objects used by the high priest to answer a question or reveal the will of God.^{[1][2]}

The Urim and the Thummim first appear in Exodus 28:30, where they are named for inclusion on the breastplate to be worn by Aaron in the holy place. Other books, especially 1 Samuel, describe their use in divination.

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Name and meaning

Urim (עוֹרִים) traditionally has been taken to derive from a root meaning *lights*; these derivations are reflected in the Nequdot of the Masoretic Text.^[3] In consequence, *Urim and Thummim* has traditionally been translated as "lights and perfections" (by Theodotion, for example), or, by taking the phrase allegorically, as meaning "revelation and truth", or "doctrine and truth" (it appears in this form in the Vulgate, in the writing of St. Jerome, and in the Hexapla).^[4] The latter use was defended in modern Catholic interpretations by connecting *Urim* and *Thummim* from the roots *הָרִיר* (to teach) and *מַמֵּה* (be true).^[2]

Thummim (תוּמִים) is widely considered to be derived from the consonantal root מ.מ.מ (t-m-m), meaning *innocent*.^{[1][4][3]} Many scholars now believe that *Urim* (עוֹרִים) simply derives from the Hebrew term *אֶרְרִים* (*Arrim*), meaning "curses", and thus that *Urim and Thummim* essentially means "cursed or faultless", in reference to the deity's judgment of an accused person; in other words, *Urim and Thummim* were used to answer the question "innocent or guilty".^{[1][3]}

Assyriologist William Muss-Arnolt connected the singular forms—*ur* and *tumm*—with the Babylonian terms *ūrtu* and *tamītu*, meaning "oracle" and "command", respectively. According to his theory the Hebrew words use a *pluralis intensivus* to enhance their apparent majesty, not to indicate the presence of more than one.^[4] Along these lines the *urim* and *thummim* are hypothesized to derive from the Tablets of Destiny worn by Marduk on his breast according to Babylonian religion.^{[2][a]}

Form and function

1 Samuel 14:41 is regarded by biblical scholars as key to understanding the *Urim and Thummim*.^[4] the passage describes an attempt to identify a sinner via divination, by repeatedly splitting the people into two groups and identifying which group contains the sinner. In the version of this passage in the Masoretic Text, it describes Saul and Jonathan being separated from the rest of the people, and lots being cast between them; the Septuagint version, however, states that *Urim* would indicate Saul and Jonathan, while *Thummim* would indicate the people. In the Septuagint, a previous verse^[6] uses a phrase which is usually translated as "inquired of God", which is significant as the grammatical form of the Hebrew implies that the inquiry was performed by objects being manipulated; scholars view it as evident from these verses and versions that cleromancy was involved, and that *Urim and Thummim* were the names of the objects being cast.^{[3][2]}

The description of the clothing of the Hebrew high priest in the Book of Exodus portrays the *Urim and Thummim* as being put into the sacred breastplate, worn by the high priest over the Ephod.^[7] Where the biblical text elsewhere describes an Ephod being used for divination, scholars presume that it is referring to use of the *Urim and Thummim* in conjunction with the Ephod, as this seems to be intimately connected with it;^{[4][2]} similarly where non-prophets are portrayed as asking God for guidance, and the advice is not described as given by visions, scholars think that *Urim and Thummim* were the medium implied.^[3] In all but two cases (1 Samuel 10:22 (<https://bible.oremus.org/?passage=1+Samuel+10:22-10:22&version=nrsv>) and 2 Samuel 5:23 (<https://bible.oremus.org/?passage=2+Samuel+5:23-5:23&version=nrsv>)), the question is one which is effectively answered by a simple "yes" or "no";^[3] a number of scholars believe that the two exceptions to this pattern, which give more complex answers, were originally also just sequences of "yes" or "no" questions, but became corrupted by later editing.^[3]

There is no description of the form of the *Urim and Thummim* in the passage describing the high priest's vestments, and a number of scholars believe that the author of the passage, which textual scholars attribute to the priestly source, was not actually entirely aware of what they were either.^[3] Nevertheless, the passage does describe them as being *put into* the breastplate, which scholars think implies they were objects put into some sort of pouch within it, and then, while out of view, one (or one side, if the *Urim and Thummim* was a single object) was chosen by touch and withdrawn or thrown out;^[3] since the *Urim and Thummim* were put inside this pouch, they were presumably small and fairly flat, and were possibly tablets of wood or of bone.^[3] Considering the scholars' conclusion that *Urim* essentially means "guilty" and *Thummim* essentially means "innocent", this would imply that the purpose of the *Urim and Thummim* was an ordeal to confirm or refute suspected guilt; if the *Urim* was selected it meant guilt, while selection of the *Thummim* would mean innocence.

According to classical rabbinical literature, in order for the *Urim and Thummim* to give an answer, it was first necessary for the individual to stand facing the fully dressed high priest, and vocalise the question briefly and in a simple way, though it was not necessary for it to be loud enough for anyone else to hear it.^[4] The Talmudic rabbis argued that *Urim and Thummim* were words written on the sacred breastplate.^[8] Most of the Talmudic rabbis, and Josephus, following the belief that *Urim* meant "lights", argued that divination by *Urim and Thummim* involved questions being answered by great rays of light shining out of certain jewels on the breastplate; each jewel was taken to represent different letters, and the sequence of lighting thus would spell out an answer (though there were 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and only 12 jewels on the breastplate);^{[9][10][11]} two Talmudic rabbis, however, argued that the jewels themselves moved in a way that made them stand out from the rest, or even moved themselves into groups to form words.^[12]

According to Islamic sources, there was a similar form of divination among the Arabs before the beginning of Islam.^[3] There, two arrow shafts (without heads or feathers), on one of which was written "command" and the other "prohibition" or similar, were kept in a container, and stored in the Kaaba at Mecca,^[3] whenever someone wished to know whether to get married, go on a journey, or to make some other similar decision, one of the Kaaba's guardians would randomly pull one of the arrow shafts out of the container, and the word written upon it was said to indicate the will of the god concerning the matter in question.^[3] Sometimes a third, blank, arrow shaft would be used, to represent the refusal of the deity to give an answer.^[3] This practice is called rhabdomancy, after the Greek roots *rhabd-* "rod" and *-mancy* ("divination").

History of use

The first reference to *Urim and Thummim* in the Bible is the description in the Book of Exodus concerning the high priest's vestments;^[13] the chronologically earliest passage mentioning them, according to textual scholars, is in the Book of Hosea,^[14] where it is implied, by reference to the Ephod, that the Urim and Thummim were fundamental elements in the popular form of the Israelite religion,^[3] in the mid 8th century BC.^[4] Consulting the Urim and Thummim was said to be permitted for determining territorial boundaries, and was said to be required, in addition to permission from the king or a prophet, if there was an intention to expand Jerusalem or the Temple in Jerusalem;^{[15][16][17][18]} however, these rabbinical sources did question, or at least tried to justify, why Urim and Thummim would be required when a prophet was also present.^[19] The classical rabbinical writers argued that the Urim and Thummim were only permitted to be consulted by very prominent figures such as army generals, the most senior of court figures, and kings, and the only questions which could be raised were those which were asked for the benefit of the people as a whole.^[20] Abiathar joined David, who was then in the cave of Adullam (1 Sam. 22:20-23; 23:6). He remained with David, and became priest of the party of which he was the leader (1 Sam. 30:7). When David ascended the throne of Judah, Abiathar was appointed High Priest (1 Chr. 15:11; 1 Kings 2:26) and the "king's counselor" (1 Chr. 27:33-34). Meanwhile, Zadok, of the house of Eleazar, had been made High Priest. According to the *Jewish Encyclopedia* Abiathar was deposed from office when he was deserted by the Holy Spirit without which the Urim and Thummim could not be consulted.^[21]

Although Josephus argues that the Urim and Thummim continued to be used until the era of the Maccabees,^[22] Talmudic sources are unanimous in agreeing that the Urim and Thummim were lost much earlier, when Jerusalem was sacked by the Babylonians.^{[23][24][25]} In a passage from the part of the Book of Ezra which overlaps with the Book of Nehemiah, it is mentioned that individuals who were unable to prove, after the Babylonian captivity had ended, that they were descended from the priesthood before the captivity began, were required to wait until priests in possession of Urim and Thummim were discovered;^[26] this would appear to confirm the statements in the Talmud that the Urim and Thummim had by then been lost.^{[1][4][3]} Indeed, since the priestly source, which textual scholars date to a couple of centuries prior to the captivity, does not appear to know what the Urim and Thummim looked like, and there is no mention of the Urim and Thummim in the *deuteronomic history* beyond the death of David, scholars suspect that use of them decayed some time before the Babylonian conquest,^[3] probably as a result of the growing influence of prophets at that time.^[4]

Latter Day Saint movement

Joseph Smith, founder of the Latter Day Saint movement, said that he used interpreters in order to translate the Book of Mormon from the golden plates. The interpreters he described as a pair of stones, fastened to a breastplate joined in a form similar to that of a large pair of spectacles. Smith later referred to this object as the Urim and Thummim. In 1823, Smith said that the angel Moroni, who had told him about the golden plates, also told him about the Urim and Thummim, "two stones in silver bows" fastened to a breastplate, and the angel intimated that they had been prepared by God to aid in the translation of the plates.^[27] Smith's mother, Lucy Mack Smith, described these Urim and Thummim as being like "two smooth three-cornered diamonds."^[28]

Smith also said he used the Urim and Thummim to assist him in receiving other divine revelations, including some of the sections of the Doctrine and Covenants and portions of the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. Only Oliver Cowdery is claimed to have attempted to use them to receive his own revelation.^[29] Latter Day Saints believe that Smith's Urim and Thummim were functionally identical to the biblical Urim and Thummim.

Smith extended the use of the term "Urim and Thummim" to describe the dwelling place of God, the earth in a future state, and the white stone mentioned in the Book of Revelation.^[30]

In popular culture

In accordance with the belief that *Urim and Thummim* translates to "Light and Truth", the Latin equivalent *Lux et Veritas* has been used for several university mottoes. For example, *Lux et Veritas* is the motto of Indiana University and the University of Montana. Similarly, Northeastern University's motto is *Lux, Veritas, Virtus* ("Light, Truth, Virtue"). Although *Urim and Thummim* itself is emblazoned across the open book pictured on the Yale University coat of arms, *Lux et Veritas* appears below on a banner.^[31]

The Urim and Thummim are also mentioned in some modern fiction:

- Urim and Thummim were the names given to two objects of mystical technology in the Prosopopeia transmedia series, culminating in the International Emmy Award-winning participatory drama series *The Truth About Marika* by SVT and The company P.
- In the television series *Dig*, the breastplate that is a part of the mystery is said to be the breastplate of the High Priest of the Temple in Jerusalem and used to communicate with God.



Yale University Coat of Arms, with *Urim and Thummim* shown in Hebrew letters on an open book

See also

- Cleromancy: the drawing of lots for the purpose of divination
- Divination: ascertaining information by supernatural means
- Dice: polyhedral objects used to randomize decisions
- Oracle: person or object used to obtain information via prophecy or clairvoyance
- Scrying: obtaining supernatural knowledge by means of an object

Notes and citations

- a. 1 Samuel 28:3-6 (<https://bible.oremus.org/?passage=1+Samuel+28:3-28:6&version=nrsv>) mentions three methods of divine communication – dreams, prophets, and the *Urim and Thummim*; the first two of these are also mentioned copiously in Assyrian and Babylonian literature, and such literature also mentions *Tablets of Destiny*, which are similar in some ways to the Urim and Thummim. The *Tablets of Destiny* had to rest on the breast of deities mediating between the other gods and mankind in order to function, while the Urim and Thummim had to rest within the breastplate of the priest mediating between God and mankind. Marduk was said to have put his seal on the Tablets of Destiny, while the Israelite breastplate had a jewelled stone upon it for each of the Israelite tribes, which may derive from the same principle.^[4] Like the Urim and Thummim, the Tablets of Destiny came into use when the fate of king and nation was concerned. According to some archaeologists, the Israelites emerged as a subculture from within Canaanite society, and not as an invading force from outside, and therefore it would be natural for them to have used similar religious practices to other Semitic nations,^[5] and these scholars suspect that the concept of Urim and Thummim was originally derived from the Tablets of Destiny.^{[4][2]}
1. *A Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Arthur Peake, p. 191 (<https://archive.org/stream/commentaryonthe00peak#page/190/mode/2up/search/urim+and+thummim>) etc. (1919).
2. William Muss-Arnolt, "The Urim and Thummim: A Suggestion as to their Original Nature and Significance" (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/527621>), *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* (continuing *Hebraica*), Vol. XVI, No. 4, July 1900.
3. George Foote Moore, "Urim and Thummim", *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, ed. Cheyne & Black, vol. IV (Q-Z), cols. 5235-5237 (<https://archive.org/stream/encyclopaediabib04cheyn0ft#page/n677/mode/2up>) (1903).
4. Hirsch, Emil G.; Muss-Arnolt, William; Bacher, Wilhelm; Blau, Ludwig (1906). "Urim and Thummim" (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14609-urim-and-thummim>). In Singer, Isidore; et al. (eds.). *The Jewish Encyclopedia*. 12. New York: Funk & Wagnalls. p. 384-385.
5. Israel Finkelstein, *The Bible Unearthed*
6. 1 Samuel 14:37
7. Exodus 28:13-30 (<https://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Exodus+28:13-28:30&version=nrsv>)
8. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Exodus 28:30
9. Yoma 73a-b

10. Yoma 44c in the Jerusalem Talmud
11. [Sifre](#), Numbers 141
12. Yoma 73b
13. [Exodus 28:30](#) (<https://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Exodus+28:30-28:30&version=nrsv>)
14. [Hosea 3:4](#) (<https://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Hosea+3:4-3:4&version=nrsv>)
15. Sanhedrin 16a
16. Yoma 41b (Jerusalem Talmud)
17. Shebbit 2-3, and 16a
18. Shebbit 33d (Jerusalem Talmud)
19. Sanhedrin 19b (Jerusalem Talmud)
20. Yoma 7; [Targum Pseudo-Jonathan](#) on Exodus 28:30
21. [!\[\]\(7e19807c61da14f515588e95cd49886c_img.jpg\) Ginzberg, Louis](#) (1901). "Abiathar" (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/266-abiathar>). In [Singer, Isidore](#); et al. (eds.). *The Jewish Encyclopedia*. 1. New York: Funk & Wagnalls. p. 56.
22. Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* (volume 3) 8:9
23. Sotah 9:10
24. Yoma 21b
25. Tamid 65b (Jerusalem Talmud)
26. [Ezra 2:63](#) (<https://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Ezra+2:63-2:63&version=nrsv>), which is also [Nehemiah 7:65](#) (<https://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Nehemiah+7:65-7:65&version=nrsv>)
27. [Joseph Smith—History](#) (http://bibles.lds.org/en/js_h/1/34-35#34). The Urim and Thummim were said to have been found with the golden plates, the aforementioned breastplate, and the Sword of Laban.
28. [Smith, Lucy Mack](#) (1853). "Biographical sketches of Joseph Smith the prophet, and his progenitors for many generations" (<http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u?/NCMP1820-1846,17387>). Brigham Young University Religious Education Archive. p. 101. Retrieved 2006-02-02. "It [Joseph's Urim and Thummim]; also at *EMD*, 1: 328-29."
29. [Section 9](#)
30. [Doctrine and Covenants 130:8–10](#) (<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/dc-testament/dc/130.8-10?lang=eng>).
31. "How Hebrew Came to Yale" (<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/how-hebrew-came-to-yale>). www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org. Retrieved 2018-04-16.

External links

- The Urim and Thummim (<http://rchainqoton.blogspot.com/2007/06/urim-and-thummim.html>) by Reb Chaim HaQoton (<http://rchainqoton.blogspot.com>)
- Mormon views of Urim and Thummim and Seer Stones (https://web.archive.org/web/20070927224955/http://www.lightplanet.com/mormons/daily/prayer/seer_stones_eom.htm/view.jsp?artid=52&letter=U)
- Commentary on Exodus 28:30 (http://www.studylight.org/com/wen/view.cgi?book=ex&chapter=028#Ex28_30) by John Wesley
- Commentary on Exodus 28:30 (http://bible.crosswalk.com/Commentaries/ScofieldReferenceNotes/srn.cgi?book=ex&chapter=028#Ex28_30) by Cyrus Scofield
- The Urim V'tummim: The History of Yale's Insignia and Jewish Thought Today (<https://web.archive.org/web/20141014041439/http://www.westvilleshul.org/content/urim-vtumim-history-yales-insignia-and-jewish-thought-today>) at [westvilleshul.org](http://www.westvilleshul.org), by Beth Hamedrosh Hagadol – B'nai Israel, the Westville Synagogue, New Haven, Connecticut

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