



Type: Magazine Article

Urim and Thummim

Author(s): Joel E. Ricks

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 18, No. 7 (May 1915)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 611–615

Abstract: This article gives a definition of the Urim and Thummim and discusses its history using the scriptures as a guide.

Urim and Thummim

BY JOEL RICKS

DEFINITION

In several places in the Bible, the old Jewish historians have left us references to a curious instrument which was given to the High Priest who was to wear it upon his breast when he went into the holy precincts of the temple to officiate in behalf of the people; but nowhere have they given us a description of what the instrument was. The Book of Mormon writers are a little more explicit as to its appearance and uses, but even they refer to it in such meagre terms as these: "And now he translated them by the means of these two stones which were fastened into the two rims of a bow." (Mosiah 38:13.) The Jaredite historian refers to the instrument as two stones. (Ether 3:23.)

It is left to the Prophet Joseph Smith to give us definite information as to the appearance of the wonderful instrument which played so important a part as a revealer of mysteries in the various dispensations of the past. This is his statement, "With the records was found a curious instrument, called by the ancients the Urim and Thummim, which consisted of two transparent stones, clear as crystal, set in the two rims of a bow." Compare this clear statement with the following: "The Urim and Thummim were two small oracular images, similar to the teraphim, personifying revelation and truth, which were placed in the cavity or pouch formed by the folds of the breastplate, and which uttered oracles by voice." (*Popular Bible Encyclopaedia*, page 1,693.) The description given by the Nephite writers and the Prophet Joseph indicate that the instrument was very similar to a pair of old style spectacles, minus the appendage that passes over the ear.

HISTORY

Just when the Urim and Thummim was first given to man must remain a mystery, but the first reference we have of it was when the brother of Jared received the instrument from the Lord. This was somewhere near the year 2000 B. C. The brother of Jared had been shown some wonderful visions which he was commanded to seal up that the world should not know of them until after the coming of Christ. He was also commanded to seal up the two stones with his records. Whether the instrument was

attached to the twenty-four plates found by the men of Limhi, and thus came into the possession of Mosiah, we are not informed, but from the statement of Moroni, (Ether 4:1-3) it is evident that Mosiah received the records and passed them on down to Moroni who buried them in the earth to be revealed 1400 years later.

It seems from the reference, in Mosiah 8:13, that the Nephite prophets were the custodians of a Urim and Thummim of their own, which had been handed down from generation to generation long before the finding of Jaredite records, so it seems not improbable that for a period, at least, they had two of those instruments in their possession.

The first Bible reference to the Urim and Thummim, is made when Moses was preparing the robes of the high priest who was to administer in the tabernacle. After being instructed to put the two onyx stones on the shoulders, and engrave on them the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, he was instructed to make a breastplate, of the bigness of a span, and to place in it four rows of stones, in rows of threes, and to engrave on each the name of one of the tribes. The breastplate was to be made double, and the Urim and Thummim was to be placed within the breastplate and was always to be worn on the breast of the high priest when he went into the sacred precincts of the tabernacle or temple to officiate before the Lord. (Exodus 28:30.) It is generally understood that the Urim and Thummim was in the possession of the Jews until the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, about 600 B. C., when it disappeared. After the return from captivity the priests regretted its loss, and refused to determine certain matters until a priest stood up with the instrument who could adjust the matters satisfactorily.

Josephus is authority for the following, (Book 3:8) in regard to the two stones set on the shoulders of the high priest:

“But as to those stones, of which we told you before, the high priest bare on his shoulders, which were sardonyxes; (and I think it needless to describe their nature, they being known to everybody); the one of them shined out when God was present at their sacrifices: I mean that which was in the nature of a button on his right shoulder, bright rays darting out thence: and being seen by those that were most remote: which splendor yet was not before natural to the stone. This has appeared a wonderful thing to such as have not so far indulged themselves in philosophy, as to despise divine revelation. Yet will I mention what is still more wonderful than this: for 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 in battle: 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. Whence it came to pass that those Greeks who had a veneration for our laws, because they could not possibly contradict this, called the breastplate the Oracle. Now this breastplate, and this sardonyx, left off shining two hundred

years before I composed this book, God having been displeased at the transgression of his laws."

It is evident from the above that Josephus attributed to the stones in the breastplate the miraculous power of manifesting the Divine will to the high priest and the people. Inasmuch as the Urim and Thummim was lost about 600 B. C. and the stones in the breastplate continued to shine down to about 200 B. C., it is clear that there was no connection between the two.

The room in the temple where the high priest went to commune with God was without windows, and was therefore a dark place. This probably explains the statement of Solomon: "The Lord said that he would dwell in the thick darkness." It is probable that the shining of the stones in the breastplate indicated to the high priest the presence of the Lord, and gave light to the room.

THE PURPOSES FOR WHICH THE URIM AND THUMMIM WAS USED

This subject has been more widely discussed than any other, bearing on the Urim and Thummim, due to the fact that the ancient writers failed to leave us an explicit statement of the uses of the instrument, thinking probably, as Josephus expresses it, "I think it needless to describe their nature, they being known to everybody." There are a number of statements made by ancient and modern writers, which indicate quite clearly the uses of the instrument.

The following is from the *Popular Bible Encyclopedia*:

"The meaning of the words, Urim is rendered as Haw-oo-reem, or lights; Thummim is rendered veh-hat-toom-meem, or perfections. The septuagint render them as revelation and truth. It is generally believed that these stones, in answer to an appeal to God, in difficult cases, indicated his mind by some supernatural appearance. It has been conjectured by others that the response was given in an audible voice to the high priest, arrayed in full pontificals and standing in the holy place with his face towards the ark."

The translator of Josephus in a footnote, on page 87, says:

"I say these answers were not made by the shining of the special stones, after an awkward manner, in the high priest's breastplate as the modern rabbis vainly suppose. For certainly the shining of the stones might precede or accompany the oracle, without itself delivering that oracle, but rather by an audible voice from the mercy seat between the cherubim."

That neither of these views is wholly correct is proved by the fact that David utilized the Urim and Thummim which had been carried away from the tabernacle by the priest Abithar, to obtain information from the Lord on several occasions, when in sore need. On such occasions David sent for the ephod which contained the Urim and Thummim, and made a personal appeal to God, who gave him an immediate answer. If it were not that it is

so evident that the Urim and Thummim was used as a medium in receiving these answers, we would incline to the opinion that the answers were by an audible voice, but the following quotations would indicate more clearly how the answers came:

“Now Ammon said to him, I can assuredly tell thee, O king, of a man that can translate the records: for he has wherewith that he can look and translate all records of ancient date; and it is a gift from God, and the things are called interpreters, and no man can look in them, except he be commanded lest he should look for that he ought not, and should perish. And whosoever is commanded to look in them, the same is called a seer.” (Mosiah 8:13.)

Moroni refers to the instrument as follows:

“Wherefore the Lord hath commanded me to write them; and I have written them. And he commanded me that I should seal them up; and he also hath commanded that I should seal up the interpretation thereof; wherefore I have sealed up the interpreters according to the commandment of the Lord.” (Ether 4:5.)

“Joseph kept the Urim and Thummim constantly about his person, by the use of which he could in a moment tell whether the plates were in any danger. Just before Emma rode up to Mrs. Wells, Joseph, from an impression that he had had, came up out of the well in which he was laboring, and met her not far from the house. Emma immediately informed him of what had transpired, whereupon he looked in the Urim and Thummim, and saw that the record was yet safe.” (*History of Joseph Smith*, by his Mother, page 104.)

On this subject David Whitmer says:

“A piece of something resembling parchment did appear (i. e., in the Urim and Thummim), and on that appeared the writing, one character at a time would appear and under it was the translation in English.” (*An Address to All Believers in Christ*, page 12.)

Martin Harris is quoted as saying:

“By aid of the seer stone sentences would appear and were read by the prophet and written by Martin and when finished he would say ‘written’ and if correctly written the sentence would disappear and another appear in its place; but if not written correctly it remained until corrected.”

“Some time after Mr. Harris begun to write for me, he began to importune me to give him liberty to carry the writings home and show them: and desired of me that I would inquire of the Lord through the Urim and Thummim, if he might not do so, I did inquire and the answer was that he must not.” (*History of the Church*, Vol. 1, page 21.)

The prophet often refers to its use in terms like this, “I inquired of the Lord through the Urim and Thummim and received the following.” A difference of opinion arose between Oliver and Joseph which they agreed to settle by the Urim and Thummim. An important revelation was received through the instrument in answer to their request:

“And now behold I say unto you, that because you delivered up those writings, which you had power given unto you to translate, by means of the Urim and Thummim, into the hands of a wicked man, you have lost them.” (Doctrine and Covenants, Sec. 10:1.)

“That of which I spoke, which Joseph termed a key, was, indeed, nothing more nor less than the Urim and Thummim, and it was by this that the angel showed him many things which he saw in vision; by which also he could ascertain at any time, the approach of danger, either to himself or the record, and on account of which he always kept the Urim and Thummim about his person.” (*History of Joseph Smith*, by his Mother, page 106.)

From the foregoing quotations it is clear that the Urim and Thummim was not only used for the purpose of translating ancient records; but as a medium of communicating with God, also of seeing visions of things past, present and to come. Understanding this, one can readily see the reason why the high priest was commanded to wear it upon his breast continually, when he went into the sacred precincts of the temple to communicate with God. The Tirshatah understood its importance as a medium of receiving divine instruction, and were not willing to act until a priest stood up with Urim and Thummim. We can now understand how the two stones given to the brother of Jared were to magnify to the eyes of men, the sacred things which he had written. One can readily see why David sent for the instrument when he desired to know the will of God pertaining to himself and people. In fact, it makes plain many things which heretofore have been little understood, and throws greater light on the following extracts from the Doctrine and Covenants, Sec. 130:6-10:

“The angels do not reside on a planet like this earth, but they reside in the presence of God, on a globe like a sea of glass and fire, where all things for their glory are manifest—past, present, and future, and are continually before the Lord. The place where God resides is a great Urim and Thummim. This earth, in its sanctified and immortal state, will be made like unto crystal and will be a Urim and Thummim to the inhabitants who dwell thereon, whereby all things pertaining to an inferior kingdom, or all kingdoms of a lower order, will be manifest to those who dwell on it; and this earth will be Christ’s. Then the white stone mentioned in Revelations 2:17, will become a Urim and Thummim to each individual who receives one, whereby things pertaining to a higher order of kingdoms, even all kingdoms, will be made known.”

LOGAN, UTAH