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# MAGIC, BIBLICAL LAW, AND THE ISRAELITE URIM AND THUMMIM

TREVAN G. HATCH

WE know from seven passages in the Hebrew Bible that the Israelites used an object in the temple referred to as the Urim and Thummim.<sup>1</sup> This paper will discuss issues pertaining to this object in connection with magical practices and biblical law. It will not discuss the intricate details of its function or appearance, but rather its function and use in direct association with biblical law. First, I will establish a foundation by briefly discussing separation of church and state laws in ancient Israel. Second, I will discuss the influence of the Lord on the use and function of the Urim and Thummim. Finally, I will discuss legal matters pertaining to the high priest's use of the Urim and Thummim.

## Church and State Laws in Ancient Israel

It seems that in recent past we have witnessed, at least in the United States of America, an increase in outspoken opinion toward the separation of church and state. Among other things, prayer has been removed from public schools, the Bible has been removed from courtrooms, and most recently, there has been a surge to remove "God" from the Pledge of Allegiance.<sup>2</sup> In ancient Israel, however, the separation of church and state laws was almost nonexistent. The Western religious ideology of the 21st century C.E. would have been considered blasphemy in ancient Israel.

Textual and even archaeological evidence of the ancient world shows that the people of every civilization were motivated in everyday living by their god or gods. Evidence also shows, at least in ancient Israel, that the god, or gods,

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1. Passages that only mention the Urim are Num 27:21; 1 Sam 28:6. Passages that mention both the Urim and Thummim are Exod 28:30; Lev 8:8; Ezra 2:63; Neh 7:65.

2. See "Under God' Should Be Removed from the Pledge of Allegiance," in *Religion in America*, ed. Mary E. Williams (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2006), 119–23.

of a particular civilization were involved in all aspects of living. YHWH, the God of the Israelites, instructed the prophets and kings in matters concerning law, punishments, architecture, and even war. In the ancient Near East, when a nation attacked and conquered another nation, the victors would burn and destroy the holy sanctuary and subsequently build their holy structure over the remains. This was meant as a statement to the effect of “our god is more powerful than your god.” The ideas, beliefs, and customs of the Israelites required the stamp of God’s approval in all things.

In Exodus 24:12 we read, “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and commands I have written for their instruction’” (NIV). Concerning this law, biblical law scholar Ze’ev W. Falk wrote, “Hebrew tradition did not distinguish between norms of religion, morality, and law.”<sup>3</sup> He also wrote, “Justice [was] administered in the name of God and quite often the court or official body convene[d] in the sanctuary or on the occasion of a religious ceremony.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Magic and the Urim and Thummim**

Was the Urim and Thummim used in connection with God’s law, or was it used by magicians? In answering this question, let us first differentiate between magic and religion, or magic and miracle. Dr. John Welch, a biblical scholar who specializes in ancient law, wrote:

Religion and magic are often distinguished by the ways they interact with the divine. For example, religion represents the practice of a certain ethnic or political group and is institutionalized. Its priests are publicly legitimized and recognized, and they receive authority from a sanctioned organization, which is generally dedicated to a specific deity. Magic, on the other hand, is outside of strict sociopolitical boundaries. Teachers of magic have to be sought out in secret, and their authority lies in their ability or knowledge. . . . Religion tends to ask, appeal to, and maybe coerce the divine; sacrifices, obligations, prayers, and worship all contribute to the practitioner’s appeal for a deity’s actions; religion makes petitions to God. Magic typically tries to command, control, or manipulate the supernatural by esoteric knowledge, imprecations, or special communication with deity.<sup>5</sup>

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3. Ze’ev W. Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press and Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 4.

4. Falk, *Hebrew Law*, 5.

5. John W. Welch, “Miracles, Maleficium, and Maistas,” in *Jesus and Archaeology*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 359.

Arthur E. Waite, in quoting the *Zohar*,<sup>6</sup> stated that faith was “being [in] friendship with God, whereas magic is friendship with the demon.” It is clear, at least from a biblical perspective, that Satan, who is the “demon,” often attempts to imitate the workings and miracles of God. An example of this is found in Exodus 7. In this chapter Moses cast signs and plagues in the name of YHWH upon the Egyptians, but Pharaoh’s magicians and sorcerers performed the same wonders with their “enchantments” as did Moses (Exod 7:11, 22; see also Exod 8:7, 18). A similar incident occurred when Moses, as well as the magicians of Pharaoh, turned their staffs into serpents (see Exod 7:12). Notice that it was Moses’s serpent that devoured the magician’s serpents in Pharaoh’s court. “This is a perfect example,” stated Peter Schafer, “of ‘your magic is my miracle’: what the Egyptian magicians do is . . . nothing but magic, and what Moses and Aaron do is miracle; and . . . miracle is superior to magic: miracle is performed with the aid of God, magic is performed with spell.”<sup>8</sup> Or one could say, with the “aid of the ‘demon.’”

We find passages in the Bible stating that the Lord strictly prohibited the working of magic.<sup>9</sup> God told the Israelites,

When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the LORD your God. The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the LORD your God has not permitted you to do so. (Deut 18:9–14, NIV)

Speaking of magic and divination in biblical times, the great Rabbi Maimonides of the middle ages stated, “I know that nearly all men [were] led greatly astray in matters of this kind and think there is some reality in them; but it is not so. There [were] even good and pious men of . . . faith who think there is reality in these practices, but they are only forbidden by the Torah.”<sup>10</sup>

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6. The *Zohar* is a Jewish Kabbalistic work containing rabbinical commentary on the Pentateuch. The text was probably compiled around the 13th century C.E.

7. Arthur Edward Waite, *The Secret Doctrine in Israel: A Study of the Zohar and Its Connections* (London: William Rider & Son, 1913), 274.

8. Peter Schafer, “Magic and Religion in Ancient Judaism,” in *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*, ed. Peter Schafer and Hans G. Kippenberg (New York: Brill, 1997), 29.

9. See Isa 44:25; Lev 19:31; 20:27; Num 19:14.

10. Rev. A. Cohen, *The Teachings of Maimonides* (New York: KTAV Publishing, 1968), 123.

It is clear that the Lord did not approve of any man performing magic, for magic was the “abomination” of other “nations” (Deut 18:9). A way of proving whether a particular individual had performed a miracle or magic was by showing under what authority he acted. If an individual produced great miracles using another name beside the name of the God of Israel, he was considered a magician and would therefore be sentenced to death.<sup>11</sup> One must act under proper authority when performing miracles. We see an example of this in the Gospel of Mark. After Jesus had performed healings and miracles he was anxiously asked, “By what authority do you do these things?” (Mark 11:28). His critics wanted to be sure that works of evil and magic were not being performed in their land, especially near the temple.

Now that we have differentiated between magic and miracle, the question remains, was the Urim and Thummim used in connection with God or magic? The Urim and Thummim was kept in the possession of the high priest. It was used for the general purpose of understanding the will of God and for foreseeing the future. Textual evidence shows that not only did the Lord approve of the Urim and Thummim but he also commanded the high priest concerning how to use it (see Exod 28, Num 27:21).<sup>12</sup> When the Lord condemned divination, he was referring to the practice of divining in a name of a god other than his own. It was the “foreign” work of magic that the Lord did not approve of.<sup>13</sup>

### The Urim and Thummim and God’s law

*Laws regarding the Urim and Thummim and sacred vestments of the high priest.* The high priest was instructed to wear, as sacred holy vestments, “a breastplate, and an ephod, and a robe, and a brodered coat, a mitre, and a girdle” (Exod 28:4, KJV). The ephod, which was made of gold, blue, purple, and scarlet material, was an article of clothing made to drape over the shoulders with the sides joined together. The ephod contained two shoulder pieces by which two stones were attached to each side. The breastplate containing twelve pouches, each holding a precious stone bearing a name of a tribe, was placed over the ephod. The Lord instructed the high priest to fasten the Urim and Thummim to the breastplate and construct a pouch in which the Urim and Thummim could be placed. The Urim and Thummim pouch was most likely located behind the twelve stones in the middle of the breastplate. We assume

11. See Welch, “Miracles,” 350, 361–62. The Mishnah states that a magician should be put to death by stoning. See *San* 7:4, 11, as cited in Schafer, “Magic and Religion,” 34.

12. See Cornelius Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 231.

13. David N. Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:469.

this was the case due to the Lord's instruction to have the Urim and Thummim placed over the "heart" of the high priest (see Exod 28).<sup>14</sup>

*Receiving revelation and instruction from the Urim and Thummim.* The only people permitted to use the Urim and Thummim in ancient Israel were the high priest and the prophets.<sup>15</sup> If a man desired to receive instruction from the Lord, it was required that he approach the high priest and request that he inquire of the Lord through the Urim and Thummim. The inquirer was also required to be spiritually clean. If the high priest inquired for any individual who was unclean in spirit, the Urim and Thummim would remain dark and no answer would be provided (see Num 27:21; 1 Sam 28:6). If the entire nation of Israel were collectively seeking guidance from the Urim and Thummim, they must all be clean. The Jerusalem Talmud<sup>16</sup> states:

They are called Urim, derived from or, "light," because they light the way for Israel, showing them what course to follow; Tumim, cognate to tanim, "whole," because they make the way "whole" before them. For when the children of Israel were "whole," that is, righteous, the Urim and Tumim would direct them along the proper path.<sup>17</sup>

Not only must the individual, or individuals, approaching the high priest be clean, but the high priest himself must also be clean and possess the Holy Spirit when inquiring of the Lord through the Urim and Thummim. The Babylonian Talmud states, "No priest was inquired of who does not speak by means of the Holy Spirit and upon whom the Divine Presence does not rest."<sup>18</sup> Louis Ginzberg, a noted Jewish scholar, stated, "Only the high priest who was permeated with the Holy Spirit . . . might obtain an answer. . . . If the high priest was worthy, he received an answer to every inquiry, for on these stones

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14. For a more detailed analysis of the clothing worn by the high priest see Van Dam, *Urim*, 141–63.

15. After the death of the prophets and the destruction of the first temple in the sixth century B.C.E., the Urim and Thummim ceased working (see Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946], 6:69).

16. The Talmud is an ancient record which contain rabbinic discussions and writings regarding Jewish custom, law, and history. The Talmud is made up of two components. One component is called the Mishnah which contains the oral law, the other is referred to as the Gemara which contains discussions mainly pertaining to the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible). There are two sets of Tamlud which exist today: The Babylonian Talmud produced in Babylon (ca. 500 C.E.), and the Palestinian Tamlud, also known as the Jerusalem Talmud, produced in Jerusalem (ca. 200–400 C.E.). Today the Babylonian Talmud is recognized as the primary source of authority and rabbinic discussion. These texts are still widely used, especially among Jewish scholars.

17. Yoma 7:3, as cited in Avraham Yaakov Finkel, *The Torah Revealed: Talmudic Masters Unveil the Secrets of the Bible* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 134.

18. Yoma 73b, as cited in Van Dam, *Urim*, 32.

were engraved all the letters of the alphabet, so that all conceivable words could be constructed from them.<sup>19</sup>

After a request to inquire of the Lord, the high priest would then withdraw into the tabernacle to communicate with the Lord.<sup>20</sup> After the high priest inquired through the Urim and Thummim, the answer would appear in the twelve stones located in the breastplate. Each stone contained the engraved name of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Several letters would become illuminated, thus creating a word.<sup>21</sup> An example of this would be Zebulon, Naphtali, Levi, which would render, *betel*. (There are no vowels in Hebrew and therefore, when the consonants became illumined, the high priest would have to render the meaning.)

*The Urim and Thummim was used in connection with war. We find, in Jewish tradition, instances where the high priest would not withdraw into the tabernacle to receive an answer from the Lord but would stand before a congregation, most likely in or near the temple courtyard. A perfect example of this would be prior to the Israelites going into war. The high priest, clad in the sacred vestments, would stand before the army and inquire of the Lord regarding war strategies and even inquire as to whether they would be victorious in battle.*<sup>22</sup>

One tradition states that the answer would come to the army by the “flashing of the two engraved stones on the shoulder piece of the ephod.”<sup>23</sup> Josephus Flavius, a Jewish historian (ca. 38–100 C.E.), stated that when the high priest participated in priestly ceremonies or spoke of the revelations given by YHWH to the people, the stone on the shoulder piece began to shine. He also said, “By means of the twelve stones [and Urim and Thummim], which the high-priest wore upon his breast . . . God foreshadowed victory to those on the eve of battle. For so brilliant a light flashed out from them.”<sup>24</sup> The *Zohar*, of the 13th century C.E., a mystical work of the Middle Ages, quoting Rabbi Hiyya, stated that not only did the stones flash brightly, but the face of the high priest shone bright as well.<sup>25</sup> All of Israel could see divine light emanating from the breastplate worn by the high priest, which showed them that they were protected by God. The troops would understand the message by the manner in which the stones flashed their light.

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19. Ginzberg, *Legends*, 3:172–73.

20. See I. L. Cohen, *Urim and Thummim: The Secret of God* (Greenvale, NY: New Research Publications, 1977), 29.

21. Ginzberg, *Legends*, 3:172.

22. Ginzberg, *Legends*, 3:377–78.

23. Van Dam, *Urim*, 17.

24. Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 3.163, 166, 185; as cited in Van Dam, *Urim*, 19–20.

25. Van Dam, *Urim*, 25.

Another tradition states that the answer would come audibly. The Urim and Thummim would act as a device to project sound, probably similar to our modern-day microphone or speaker. This would make it possible for all the troops of Israel to hear the instruction from the Lord, and therefore every person would know exactly what the battle plans entailed, otherwise confusion may have crept in.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps this is the reason Israel was so successful in defeating their enemies, at least during the days of the tabernacle and the First Temple Period.

We find in the law strict orders from the Lord against the wearing of the priestly vestments outside the tabernacle or the courtyard of the temple (see Lev 16:23). There is however, at least one possible exception. The high priest was commanded to wear his priestly vestments with the Urim and Thummim while accompanying his army into battle. Not only did the high priest bring along the Urim and Thummim and his priestly robes onto the battlefield, but he also brought the ark (see Josh 6). A passage in Exodus tells us that the high priest must have the Urim and Thummim with him when approaching the Lord (see Exod 28:30). When approaching the Lord, the high priest was required to go into the Holy of Holies, the place in which the ark was kept. It seems fitting that the high priest would wear his priestly robes as well as the Urim and Thummim when going into war, knowing that the Ark of the Covenant would be carried by his side.<sup>27</sup>

### The Urim and Thummim and the Holy of Holies

As mentioned, the high priest must have the Urim and Thummim with him while entering into the Holy of Holies. The precious stones located on the breastplate contained the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. One tradition states that while the precious stones contained the names of tribes, the Urim and Thummim contained the holy name. In the Targum of Exodus 28:30, *Pseudo-Jonathan*,<sup>28</sup> we find an interesting translation which discusses the power of this holy name when uttered:

And you shall put into the breastplate the Urim, which illuminate their words and make manifest the hidden things of the House of Israel, and the Thummim which perfect their deeds, for the high priest who seeks instruction from the Lord through them. Because in them is engraved and exposed the great and holy Name by which the three hundred and ten

26. Cohen, *Secret of God*, 30, 34–35.

27. Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.8.46, as cited in Cohen, *Secret of God*, 54–55.

28. Targumim are Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible which were used for several hundred years by Jewish scholars, Rabbis and others. The Targumim were compiled in Babylon or Israel during the Second Temple Period (537–520 B.C.E.).

worlds were created. . . . And whoever pronounces this holy Name in the hour of distress, shall be saved.<sup>29</sup>

If the translation carries the tradition accurately, we may assume that the reason why the Urim and Thummim was taken into battle by the high priest was to save Israel in time of distress. Whenever the Israelite army encountered defeat and great distress, the holy name which appeared in the Urim and Thummim would have been pronounced, and thus the Israelites would have been saved.

The holy name which brings about the creation of “three hundred and ten worlds,” and by which this world was created, was considered by Rashi (1040–1105 C.E.)<sup>30</sup> to be YHWH, the sacred name of God, which, even to this day, is rarely uttered aloud by Jews. The well-known Rabbi Ramban (1194–1270 C.E.) suggests that there were several names of God displayed in the Urim and Thummim with which the high priest must be familiar. These names would also have been pronounced by the high priest before being permitted to enter the Holy of Holies, or the presence of God. The *Zohar*, quoting Rabbi Judah, stated that the name by which the worlds were created is 42 letters in length.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps this may have also been the name by which the high priest recited before proceeding through the veil and entering into the presence of God.

It appears, by the statements of the previous rabbis, that the holy name of YHWH may have been accompanied by another, much longer phrase comprising of 42 consonants. Another possibility is that the high priest pronounced all the names of God, which totaled 42 consonants in length, before entering the Holy of Holies.

## Conclusion

The Urim and Thummim was an object given to the Israelites by God to be used by the high priest for revelatory purposes as well as protection. It was not used in connection with magic and divination but was used by the high priest and the prophets on God’s terms. Certain laws were strictly obeyed in approaching God, both in the procedure of inquiring through the Urim and Thummim and in the entering of the high priest into the Holy of Holies.

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29. Translation given by McNamara and Maher in *Diez Macho*, Neophyti 1, 3.465–66; as cited in Van Dam, *Urim*, 23, emphasis added.

30. Rashi was a well-revered Jewish rabbi thought to have been given a divine gift from God to provide commentary on the Bible as well as the *Bab*, 24, 25.

31. Van Dam, *Urim*, 24, 25.