

Revelation and the Urim and Thummim

"You had power given unto you to translate by the means of the Urim and Thummim." (D&C 10:1)

In the past most biblical scholars viewed the Urim and Thummim as a rather mechanical device used merely to obtain a yes or no answer, similar to casting lots. This is quite different from the function of the device described in the Book of Mormon as "interpreters" and by the Prophet Joseph Smith as the "Urim and Thummim." In these descriptions of the use of the Urim and Thummim, revelation played a large role. For example, accounts of the translation of the Book of Mormon indicate that Joseph Smith could not translate without the Spirit and that a great deal of mental effort was necessary.¹

However, two studies by biblical scholars on the Urim and Thummim described in the Old Testament are more in harmony with LDS understandings. On the basis of what appears to be solid historical, linguistic, and textual evidence, Cornelius Van Dam rejects the mechanical view, pointing out numerous instances in which the divine answer is detailed and is not merely yes or no.² He argues that "it seems certain that Yahweh's gift of prophetic inspiration was involved and played a major role in the process of giving an answer" through the Urim and Thummim: "When revelation was requested of Yahweh, Yahweh would speak to the high priest or enlighten him and so give him the decision that was necessary. If this inspiration was not forthcoming, the high priest would know that he was in no position to make use of the UT [Urim and Thummim]."³

A 1990 article by C. Houtman agrees with Van Dam that the Urim and Thummim was not used merely to receive a mechanical yes or no answer. He puts forward textual evidence that suggests that for the Urim and Thummim to function, divine power had "to penetrate into the heart, the intellectual centre of the high priest, in order to enable him to 'read' the will of YHWH from the UT."⁴

It remains to be seen whether the arguments of Van Dam and Houtman will persuade biblical scholars and whether new evidence and new interpretations will support or weaken their position. But for now their arguments open the door to an understanding of the Urim and Thummim that sees a greater role for revelation, in keeping with the understanding obtained from latter-day scripture.

Other points in these two studies may also shed light on Book of Mormon passages. Van Dam argues that in many instances in the Old Testament the phrase inquire of the Lord indicates the use of the Urim and Thummim.⁵ On at least two occasions Nephite commanders sent messengers to Alma so that he could "inquire of the Lord" as to the whereabouts of their enemies (Alma 16:6; 43:23–24). In each case Alma revealed specific directions allowing the Nephites to gain advantage over their enemies. Perhaps Alma used the Urim and Thummim to obtain this knowledge. We know he possessed the interpreters (see Mosiah 28:20; Alma 37:24), which Joseph Smith described as the Urim and Thummim, and the account in the book of Mormon fits the biblical usage described by Van Dam.

Finally, Van Dam suggests that there was a visual component to the use of the Urim and Thummim: "A special or miraculous light was somehow involved in the functioning of the UT," possibly through some kind of stone, "in order to verify that the message given by the high priest was from Yahweh."⁶

The Book of Mormon accounts of the interpreters also suggest a visual component. Ammon indicates that the king of the land of Zarahemla “has wherewith that he can look, and translate” (Mosiah 8:13), and Alma speaks of “a stone, which shall shine forth in darkness unto light” to reveal things kept secret (Alma 37:23).

Research by Matthew Roper, originally published as a FARMS Update in *Insights* (December 1995): 2.

Notes

1. See D&C 8:1–4; 9:7–9; and Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, Utah: Grandin, 1991), 86, 199.

2. See Cornelius Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim* (Kampen: Uitgeverij Van Den Berg, 1986).

3. *Ibid.*, 128.

4. C. Houtman, “The Urim and Thummim: A New Suggestion,” *Vetus Testamentum* 40 (April 1990): 231.

5. See Van Dam, *Urim and Thummim*, 89–95.

6. *Ibid.*, 130–31.