

ENQUIRING OF GOD

What means did the people of Israel use when enquiring of God and how did it work?

The Linguistic Data

In the main, there are two Hebrew words used in connection with 'enquiring of God'. The root of the one is 'to seek – usually with care',¹ and the root of the other is 'to ask'.² In the context of enquiring of God, these two words are used more or less as synonyms.³

The following are some of the relevant references of the 'seek' word:

Gen. 25.22; Exod. 18.15; Deut. 17.9; 1 Sam. 9.9; 28.7; 1 Kings 22.5, 7, 8; 2 Kings 1.16; 3.11; 8.8; 22.13, 18; 1 Chron. 10.14; 13.3; 14.10, 14; 21.30; 2 Chron. 18.4, 6, 7; 34.21, 26; Jer. 21.2; 37.7; Ezek. 14.3; 20.1, 3, 31. (To 'seek' God often involved enquiring after knowledge, advice and insight.⁴)

The following are some of the relevant references of the 'ask' word:

Numb. 27.21 (AV = ask counsel); Josh. 9.14 (ask counsel); Judges 1.1 (ask); 20.18 (ask), 23 (ask), 27; 1 Sam. 10.22; 22.10, 13, 15; 23. 2, 4; 28.6; 2 Sam. 2.1; 5.19, 23.

The Ephod and the Breastplate

The main biblical data is found in Exod. 28.4-35.

The ephod was made 'of gold⁵, blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen'. It seems that the ephod was made of two pieces – one for the front and one for the back – which were held together by two shoulder-pieces and a skilfully woven band which served as a girdle for the ephod. On the shoulder-pieces were two onyx stones on which were engraved the names of the twelve tribes of Israel; six on each stone.

The linen fabric of the breastplate seems to have been doubled over to form a pouch or bag. In shape it was a square of a 'span' in length and breadth. That is, it was only about 9 inches by 9 inches – big enough to cover the breast of the High Priest. It was suspended from the gems on the high priest's shoulders by golden chains and fastened to the girdle of the ephod by a lace of blue.

The names on the two shoulder stones probably differed from the names on the breastplate. The names of the tribes on the shoulders were 'according to their birth', Exod. 28.10, and would therefore have included Levi and Joseph. The names on the breastplate were 'according to the twelve tribes', Exod. 28.21, and would therefore have probably included the sons of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh) separately. Because the breastplate followed the 'tribal' classification, no mention was made of Levi; compare Numb. 10.14-28.

The breastplate was called 'the breastplate of judgement' – that is, 'of decision(s)'. The breastplate was inseparably linked to the ephod; 'that the breastplate be not loosed from the ephod', Exod. 28.28. Because the breastplate (containing the Urim and Thummim) was attached to the ephod, to request the ephod meant to ask the priest to obtain the Lord's direction by means of the 'breastplate of decision' and the Urim and Thummim.

The Urim and Thummim

We read of the 'Urim and Thummim' in Exod. 28.30; Lev. 8.8; Ezra 2.63 and Neh. 7.65; of 'Thummim and Urim' in Deut. 33.8; and of 'Urim' alone in Num. 27.21 and 1 Sam. 28.6.

There is no record of the 'Urim and Thummim' being made. Moses was simply told to 'put' them into the breastplate, Exod. 28.30. The possession of the 'Thummim' and the 'Urim' (note the reverse order) seems to have been the crowning glory of the tribe of Levi; 'of Levi he (Moses) said, Let thy Thummim and thy Urim be with thy holy one', Deut. 33.8.

There seems no doubt that **the purpose of the 'Urim and Thummim'** (housed in the breastplate, which was permanently attached to the ephod) **was to make known God's mind in response to specific enquiries**. The following references seem to be conclusive: (i) Joshua 'shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall ask counsel (enquire) for him after the judgment of Urim before the Lord: at his word shall they go out, and at his word they shall come in', Num. 27.21; (ii) David 'said to Abiathar the priest, Bring hither the ephod. Then said David, O Lord God of Israel ...Will the men of Keilah deliver me up into his hand?', 1 Sam. 23.9-11; (iii) 'when Saul enquired of the Lord, the Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets', 1 Sam. 28.6; (iv) 'David said to Abiathar the priest, Ahimelech's son, I pray thee, bring me hither the ephod. And Abiathar brought thither the ephod

to David. And David enquired at the Lord', 30.7-8; 'The Tirshatha said unto them, that they should not eat of the most holy things, till there stood up a priest with Urim and with Thummim', Ezra 2.63.

That much is clear – but the details are certainly not! 'What the Urim and Thummim really were cannot be determined with certainty, either from the names themselves, or from any circumstances connected with them'.⁶

The actual Urim and Thummim are never described. The words 'Urim' and 'Thummim' are plural – meaning 'Lights' and 'Perfections'. But this may well be a 'plural of majesty and excellence' used for the purpose of emphasis, and may therefore signify 'Light' and 'Perfection'.

It is possible that the Urim and Thummim were two stones which were placed in the breastplate. Some suggest that the high priest would ask God a question requiring a simple 'Yes' or 'No' response, would reach down into the breastplate, and would pull out a stone which would indicate God's answer.

This would explain why it seems that God would answer only one question at a time – and why, if two questions were asked in an illogical order, the first question would need to be repeated after the answer was given to the second, 1 Sam. 23. 11-12.

One theory is that there was one white stone and one black stone, and that the drawing out of the white stone would indicate a positive answer and the drawing out of the black would indicate a negative answer. (C. W. Slemming, 'These are the Garments', page 150.)⁷

In effect, this would have been a form of casting lots. On two occasions the revelation made in answer to men enquiring of God was given in close association with the casting of lots: 1 Sam. 10.19-22; 14.37-42.⁸ Compare, 'The lot is cast into the lap ('bosom', lit.); but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord', Prov. 16.33. Such an interpretation might account for it was necessary for Eleazar the high priest to be present when Joshua divided the land 'by lot', Num. 26.55; 34.17; Josh. 17.4. Perhaps the words 'came up', 'came forth' and 'came out', Josh. 18.11; 19.1, 17, signified from the pouch of the ephod.

It strikes me that there is a problem with the 'lot' theory of the Urim and Thummim. This is that **some of the answers obtained by 'enquiring of the Lord' went far beyond a simple 'Yes' or 'No'**.

Although it is possible to imagine a series of questions which would lead to the identification of one particular tribe and even to the assurance of victory – as in Judg. 1.2; 20.18 – there are other answers which went much further – and seem to include the revealing of information which did not form part of the question. See, for example:

(a) 'The children of Israel enquired of the Lord, (for the ark of the covenant of God⁹ was there in those days, and Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, stood before it in those days,) saying, Shall I yet again go out to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother, or shall I cease? And the Lord said, Go up; for *tomorrow* I will deliver them into thine hand', Judg. 20.27-28;

(b) 'They enquired of the Lord further, if the man should yet come hither. And the Lord answered, 'Behold, he hath hid himself among the stuff', 1 Sam. 10.22;

(c) 'When David enquired of the Lord, he said, Thou shalt not go up; *but fetch a compass behind them, and come upon them over against the mulberry trees. And let it be, when thou hearest the sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees, that then thou shalt bestir thyself:* for then shall the Lord go out before thee, to smite the host of the Philistines', 2 Sam. 5.23-24; and

(d) 'David enquired of the Lord. And the Lord answered, *It is for Saul, and for his bloody house, because he slew the Gibeonites*', 2 Sam. 21.1.

Such passages certainly point to some fuller revelation from the Lord than a simple 'yea' or 'nay'. (It is well nigh impossible to imagine 'yes or no' questions which would, for example, have obtained the information about 'the sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees!') Nor, as far as is known, were prophets to hand in cases (a), (c) or (d) to augment any Urim and Thummim answer.

I do not know how these 'fuller' answers were obtained. In the case of (a), the children of Israel had gone 'up to the house of God' to enquire – suggesting, but not actually saying, that they made use of the ephod. There is no information, one way or the other, about any use made of the ephod in the case of (b), (c) or (d). (In the case of 1 Sam. 10.22, would Samuel have had access to the ephod? As a prophet, would he have needed it?)

If these four cases didn't involve the use of the ephod, then it might be that, on the occasions when the Urim and Thummim were used, God did answer only by 'Yes' or 'No'. This would require that it was possible for men to enquire of God and to obtain fuller answers than 'yes' or 'No' in ways not involving the Urim and Thummim – and it may be then that each of the four cases referred to above fall into that category. It is worth noting that, when Saul 'enquired of the Lord', we are told that 'the Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets', 28.6. The clear implication is that God's answers to 'enquiries' made of Him were not necessarily by way of the ephod. We know, for instance, that there were prophets at hand in both the days of the Judges - (a) above; see Judg. 2.27; 6.8 - and in David's days - (c) and (d) above; e.g. Gad and Nathan. Samuel was, of course, present for (b) above.

Otherwise, in some mysterious way unknown to us, the Urim and Thummim themselves may have been the means of securing quite detailed answers from God to the questions put to Him. If so, is there any clue to how this was done in the names 'light/lights' and 'perfection/perfections' (completeness, sincerity, truth, integrity, uprightness)? Might God have made known 'light' and 'truth' to the mind of the priest who approached him in the manner appointed and who was therefore able to interpret the will of God for the occasion?

There is no firm evidence in scripture that the person making the enquiry needed to be a man of public importance or that the question itself needed to be of public importance - although the Jewish Talmud laid down these rules for the use of the (then non-existing!) Urim and Thummim. It could be argued, I suppose, that the location of the Urim and Thummim in a breastplate which bore the names of the 12 tribes suggests that only group matters were to be made the subject of enquiry – and not strictly private and individual matters. Clearly if there was any basis for such a requirement, Ahimelech could not have enquired of the Lord in respect of David's purely personal needs, 1 Sam. 22.10, 13, 15.

After the days of David, when the role of the prophets was in the ascendancy, the use of the ephod, breastplate and Urim and Thummim fades from view.¹⁰ Indeed, there is no reference to the use of the Urim and Thummim after David's reign. And we are told explicitly that, at the time of the return from the exile, there was no priest with the Urim and the Thummim, Ezra 2.63; Neh. 7.65.

Footnotes

¹ See NIDOTTE, Vol. 1, pages 993-999 and TWOT, Vol. 1, pages 198-199.

² See NIDOTTE, Vol. 4, pages 7-10 and TWOT, Vol. 2, Pages 891-892.

³ See the fourth paragraph on page 8 of NIDOTTE, Vol. 4 for suggested distinctions between several Hebrew words which touch on the subject of enquiring of God.

⁴ 'Seeking' God for advice, insight etc was often done through a prophet, 1 Sam. 9.9; 2 Kings 3.11; 8.8; 22.13, 18; 2 Chron. 18.4, 6, 7; 34.21, 26; Jer. 21.2 etc. But sometimes it was through a priest, Deut. 17.9 – seemingly there with no use of the ephod and the Urim and Thummim.

⁵ The gold was beaten into thin plates and then cut into wires, which were woven into the fabric.

⁶ Delitzsch. 'The Pentateuch', Vol II, page 198.

⁷ A variant to this theory would be that one stone had the Hebrew word for 'Yes' engraved on it, and the other the Hebrew word for 'No'. Yet another suggestion is that the two stones were identical and flat – white on the one side and black on the other. If both fell with the white side up, the answer was 'yes'. If both fell with the black side up, the answer was 'No'. If one had the white side up, and the other the black side up, God was not prepared to answer the question.

⁸ When Saul prayed, 'Give a perfect lot', 1 Sam. 14.41, he used the word 'thāmīm', which is very similar to the word 'thummīm'.

⁹ There are several passages which link the ark with enquiring of God; Judg. 20.27; 1 Sam. 14. 18-19; 1 Chron. 13.3. It may be, however, that, wherever possible, the high priest stood before the ark when he made use of the ephod, breastplate and Urim and Thummim.

¹⁰ We do read that, in the days of the later kings, God said, 'the children of Israel shall abide many days without a king, and without a prince, and without a sacrifice, and without an image, *and without an ephod*, and without teraphim', Hosea 3.4. But it seems likely that here, sandwiched as it is between 'image' and 'teraphim', the 'ephod' in question may have had idolatrous associations; cf. Judg. 8.27; 17.5; 18.14, 17, 18, 20.