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The Urim and the Thummim

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Nehemiah 7:61-65.

"They shall make the ephod of gold, of blue, and purple, scarlet, and fine twined linen, the work of the skilful workman... Aaron shall bear the names of the children of Israel in the breastplate of judgment upon his heart, when he goeth in unto the holy place, for a memorial before Jehovah continually. And thou shalt put in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim; and they shall be upon Aaron's heart, when he goeth in before Jehovah: and Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before Jehovah continually." (Exodus 28:6, 29-30).

Just a little word is on my heart with regard to the place and use of these (so far as the Old Testament is concerned) somewhat mysterious elements known as the Urim and the Thummim. You, with what you know of the Word in this connection, will have been able to reduce the whole matter, at any rate, to quite a small compass of explanation. Although we may still have some doubt as to the method in which they functioned, we know why they functioned, and what their purpose was. The method we can leave. There are various views about that, and I do not know that that is of primary importance. The thing which really does matter is that we should know not so much how, but why.

"How" is very often a matter of human curiosity. Nicodemus got in the toils of a "how", and there were other men who got into the toils of how: "*How* can this man give us His flesh to eat?" And there were still others who got into the net of, "*How* are the dead raised...?" The human mind is always

concerned to know how. The Lord does not always satisfy that curiosity, but He does give a "why", and, so far as these things are concerned, the "how" does seem to be left somewhat uncertain, but the "why" is in no doubt whatever.

We can reduce the whole thing to one word, and that word is spiritual *government*.

Government

The Urim and the Thummim were, as we know quite well from the various references to them, the means by which the Lord governed the spiritual life of His people. That is, they were used to enquire of the Lord, to get from the Lord a "Yea!" or a "Nay!" - God's affirmation of a curse, or God's negation of that curse. You remember that on one occasion David took the ephod with the Urim and the Thummim and enquired of the Lord as to a certain movement, and the Lord gave him a direct answer.

Now, this government by this means seems to me to have a twofold use or application in the Old Testament, which has a New Testament counterpart. We will put them in the reverse order to that in which they occur, and take the passage in Nehemiah first.

Here you have a later development and something which is not in the normal course of the Lord's intention, that is, the captivity has come in, and that was not in the straight line of the Lord's will. But with the return of the remnant from captivity, one of the things which had happened was that a number of people had lost their register, that is, their title, their pedigree, and they were unable to give satisfaction as to their standing among the Lord's people. An extraordinary state of things - quite a number mixed up with the Lord's people, but in a very uncertain and unsatisfactory state. They could not prove their position as being genuine; whether these themselves were actually in doubt or not, we do not know. It may be that they were uncertain as to the purity of their blood and the straightforwardness of their descent, but certainly they could not give the required proof of their standing as really belonging to the people of God. And being unable to give this proof, they are put into the position of being rejected from priesthood, rejected from priestly ministry among the Lord's people, until a priest should stand up with the Urim and Thummim, that is, until there should be that spiritual government, the spiritual determining from the Lord as to where these people really stood, until there should be the ground provided upon which certainty one way or the other could be established as to these people's true relationship to the Lord and His people. So that the Urim and the Thummim in this case was the means of determining the reality or the unreality of the life of those found among the people of God.

Now, that is reducing it to a small issue, and yet, of course, an ultimate and primary issue. It is very important in these days that all who bear the name of the Lord's people should be able to establish their right to bear that name. It is very important that there should be a line drawn between professors and possessors. There is a good deal of mixture, and while it is not ours to judge, it is the Lord's to judge and determine, we do no harm, I think, when we in a general way take account of the fact that there is little doubt but that a great many are in this precarious, or very uncertain position as to their relationship to the Lord. I speak in this way not to determine the relationship, but to give you occasion of rejoicing.

Now, leaving that for a moment, we will go back to the original usage of the Urim and the Thummim in government, in the matter of spiritual guidance; not only of acceptance, but of direction, or in

other words, coming to know the Lord's mind. That is a matter that very greatly concerns all the children of God, to know the Lord's mind.

Now what I am going to say does not simply solve the whole problem of guidance, but it is foundational to the knowledge of the mind of the Lord, and I am quite sure that, until this is established, there never can be any hope of knowing the mind of the Lord. Now then, for these two purposes: ascertaining and determining our relationship with the Lord, and providing a basis for the Lord's guidance in life, what does the Urim and Thummim say to us? Well, you will see that your marginal reference against the words themselves simply gives you the interpretation of the original thing, that these shall be for Lights and Perfections. The Urim, the lights; the Thummim, the perfections.

Carry that over to the New Testament, and the thing becomes very simple and very plain. But you notice that this is inseparably related to and bound up with the High Priesthood. Now, there is a distinguishing mark about the High Priest over his sons. Aaron's sons as priests had their robes, but in their robes there was one thing missing that was in his. In their garments there was white, the fine linen; there was the heavenly blue; there was the royal purple, and the scarlet. But when you come to Aaron himself, the High Priest, you have an extra feature: the gold. That is the distinguishing thing of the ultimate, supreme Priesthood, as represented by Aaron. And it is that matter alone that this government is bound by, and it seems to say that that extra factor is the factor which makes it possible for government to be with him; the Urim and the Thummim, that factor represented by the gold. We know what that gold represents, that it speaks of a perfected holiness, a perfected Divine nature in High Priesthood. It is not a part of the life of the priests; they come into the good of it by reason of their relationship to him, but it is with him alone. And it is on that ground that this spiritual government operates.

Of course, we know that that points clearly to the Lord Jesus. It is now the Lord Jesus, having passed through the cross, and having been made perfect through suffering, who now bears before the presence of God all His own upon His breast, and wears the ephod, and has the Urim and the Thummim bound up with Him on the ground of what He is in the perfection of Divine nature; it is spiritual government. All spiritual government comes by and through the Lord Jesus. All determining of position in relation to the Lord comes by Him, but how does it come? There is the effect! How does it come? The New Testament, while it shows us how it comes spiritually, does not help us very much as to the Old Testament method, but it is perfectly clear what happened in the New Testament.

Take the two things. Firstly, the Urim - Lights. How, in relation to the Lord Jesus in His High Priestly position, on the ground of the perfection of holiness (the Divine nature in Him) can we have our relationship with the Lord determined, settled once and for all? Along the line of His having become the Light. Turn to your second letter to the Corinthians, and you have the whole thing explained: "God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in THE FACE OF JESUS CHRIST" (AV). The shining of that Light in the Old Testament meant terror, dread, awe, and so awful was it that a veil had to be put over the face of Moses. "When it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away." The veil is taken away in Christ, and Christ, who is the Light, has been revealed in our hearts. To use Paul's words: "It pleased God to reveal His Son in me". It is the knowledge of the Lord Jesus in our own hearts that settles it once and for all. That is one way of putting it.

It is that God has shined into our hearts. That is all the difference from an external or objective thing. There is the objective side of our appreciation of Christ, but the thing which settles our relationship with God once and for all is that God has shined in, and that Christ has become an inward reality and illumination from God. That settles our pedigree, that settles our register, that determines once and for all our spiritual history. The ultimate question is not anything objective in apprehension, but now the fact that God has shined into our hearts represents a mighty work of destroying: "The god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelieving". Those that are perishing are perishing because the god of this age has blinded their minds, but: "God has shined in our hearts", and the work of the devil in blinding has been shattered and broken and destroyed once and for all by that in-shining, and we are established in our relationship to God.

This in-shining is always a terrific thing. All the blinding, darkening work of the devil is shattered when God shines in. We know that in effect; in experience we see how it happens. We have seen lives utterly gripped in the blinding, darkening work of the devil, and cannot grasp anything of the light or truth. Anything being said they cannot understand. And then we have seen, like a shaft of light from heaven, a flash, and the darkness cleft and an apprehension from that time - liberation. Then they say, "I see, I know". The relation has been brought about by the in-shining. That settles the Nehemiah question at once, the priest, arising with the lights, to establish the doubtful question as to professing without possessing. It is very simple, but for us it is confirmatory of our position, and for us to have the intelligence of it is equipping for service.

Then the Thummim - perfections. Now we come again not only to the matter of relationship, but of spiritual guidance; to lay the foundation for having our lives guided by the Lord. Now, this can be put in a very few words, and in a very simple form.

We shall never stand in any possibility of being led spiritually by the Lord until we have got the perfections of the Lord Jesus as the basis of our lives. Some of us know people who are the Lord's (we do not doubt for a moment that they belong to the Lord) but they are so unsatisfactory in the way of going straight on with the Lord. They are always getting tied up in knots, circling round themselves and their own spiritual problems, never sure, never able to take a straight, strong, definite forward step; if they take a step forward, they take two backwards shortly after. They never have a sense of certainty or definiteness about their walk: it is all questions, doubts. Sometimes they doubt their salvation. They are saved right enough, but they sometimes doubt their salvation, they call into question every spiritual thing. What is the matter with those people?

If you get down to it, you will discover almost invariably that those people have not come to a final position as to the perfections of the work of the Lord Jesus. Somewhere there is a weakness as to the perfection of the salvation which He has wrought, the finality of the work that He has done. They have never grasped in an utter way the fact that they can never be any more saved in Christ than they are on the day when they first put faith in Him.

Salvation will work out, but in Christ salvation is final. In Christ sanctification is utter, there is nothing more to be done. In Christ glorification is utter, perfect, there is nothing more to be done. In Christ there are perfections of every kind; all the spiritual and all the moral perfections are found in Christ on our behalf. We all know that so well. Most of us are rejoicing in that, and yet here is the fact that, lying back of a great deal of indefiniteness and uncertainty in the spiritual life, there has not been that final grasp of what Christ is to God for us. We are trying somehow, in some way, to find something with which to satisfy God,

apart from Christ, and we get all over the place at once. We are knocked hither and thither, and the Lord never does a scrap to help us until we come back to the place of: "Oh, Lord, you will have to do it all: it is all hopeless; I can never do anything". The Lord can never guide our lives and show us His will until that is settled, so that a great deal of service to the Lord is forfeited and a great deal of usefulness to the Lord is unavailable because the Lord can never use as He wants that life to the full, and bring it into all the ways of His will until this thing has been settled. Sooner or later the enemy will have ground.

What more tragic and pathetic sight is there than a servant of the Lord, one who has been in the Lord's service for a long time, coming to the place where he begins to question the foundational things? Many a man or woman who has been in the service of the Lord all their lives closes their days questioning their salvation, and you go back over their life and see that they served the Lord all their days, and yet at the end they went out under a cloud.

For the Lord to get the most in a life, and to be able to give spiritual guidance so that every step will be a certain one, He must at least have this foundation settled - the perfections of the Lord Jesus. I am able to think of some whom I know well, who could be used tremendously by the Lord, if only there were about them a note of certainty; that is, if they were settled. And the whole trouble is that they have not grasped in their hearts the perfections of the Lord Jesus as being their perfections before God. They go on and on, and the Lord would otherwise be using those lives and leading them into service. They cry to the Lord to know the Lord's mind, to know the Lord's will, to get to a place of certainty as to what the Lord would have them do, and the Lord is not answering. Why? Because when you talk to them you discover they are all over the shop about the foundation of their perfections in Christ; they are not settled there.

The Lord will not build upon a rickety foundation. Lights and perfections are the ground of certainty and guidance in life; the ground of relationship and the ground of service. It is a priestly matter.

I am quite conscious that I have said nothing new. I have only re-emphasized what is well-known. But I do feel that in days such as those in which we are living, when the enemy is leaving nothing untried and unused to bring the Lord's people into a place of doubt, and where the Lord would have us come more and more to a place of complete certainty and rest, such a word is not out of place. If only it will lead us to a fresh appreciation of what the Lord Jesus is to us in the presence of God, it will not be in vain.