

Exodus 28:15-17, 29-30

Introduction

We've learned, over the last couple of weeks, that the priest wore something called a "breastpiece of judgment." When we hear the word "judgment," we might automatically think of something negative – the judgment of God's wrath and anger against sin. But what else could a "judgment" be? It could mean a "decision" that someone makes, or a "decree." And that's what the Hebrew word here is always referring to. God's judgments are all of His commands, and rules, and decisions, which are always righteous, and wise, and good. (cf. Exod. 21:1; Deut. 6:1; Ps. 9:7; 10:5)

I. Exodus 28:15–17 — You shall make a breastpiece [for God's judgments and decisions], in skilled work. In the style of the ephod you shall make it—of gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen shall you make it. It shall be square and doubled [sewed together on the sides?], a span its length and a span its breadth [a large pocket?].

[See Illustration on page 9]

Of course, the question is: What does this breastpiece have to do with God's judgments and decisions? Skipping ahead to verses 29-30, we read this:

II. Exodus 28:29–30 — And in the breastpiece [for God's judgments and decisions] you shall put the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be on Aaron's heart, when he goes in before the LORD. Thus Aaron shall bear [lift up?] the judgment[s] of the people of Israel on his heart before the LORD regularly. [Thus Aaron shall lift up Israel's need for God's judgments and decisions before the Lord regularly?]

Once again, we see how the priest represents, and even embodies, a particular people – the covenant people that God has chosen and set apart for Himself. The high priest represents "before the Lord" the need of *this specific people* for the judgments and the decisions of their King. And how does the high priest do this? How does he represent this need? By carrying, *inside* the breastpiece (and immediately behind the twelve stones engraved with the twelve names of the sons of Israel), the Urim (plural) and the Thummim (plural). **[See Illustration on page 9]**

The Urim and the Thummim were intended not only to bring to God's remembrance Israel's need for His judgments and decisions, but also as a means for Israel to actually *receive* God's judgments and decisions. Though we may not know all the specifics, it does seem pretty clear that the Urim and Thummim functioned similarly to casting lots, or drawing straws. (cf. 1 Sam. 14:18-19; cf. 14:41-42) So, by the use of Urim and Thummim, the people of Israel could learn what the "decision" or "judgment" of the Lord was in a particular situation.

And right away, maybe we're thinking, "How convenient would that be? If only we could use the Urim and the Thummim today whenever we wanted to know the will of the Lord!" But it's not at all from wisdom that we ask this or think this. (cf. Eccl. 7:10) Notice the wording: "**How**

convenient would that be? If only we could use Urim and Thummim today *whenever we wanted* to know the will of the Lord!” We may not be so blatant, but in much of today’s obsession with knowing the will of God, or hearing a “word” from God, there is a deep, underlying motive of selfishness – a subtle self-promotion, and even a self-worship. Did the Urim and Thummim really exist for Israel’s convenience? And could they really be used **anytime** to discern God’s will on **any and every matter**? What this is really about is “revelation” (compare much of today’s preoccupation with “knowing God’s will” and “hearing God’s voice.”) If we look closely at the Urim and Thummim, what we’ll come away with is a much-needed foundation for a true biblical understanding of *revelation* – a theology of revelation (versus *only* proof texts).

Remember that the high priest “*stands for*” the covenant people *as a whole*. We saw this in the two stones on the shoulder pieces of the ephod each engraved with six of the twelve names of the sons of Israel. And we saw this in the twelve stones of the breastpiece, each engraved with one of the names of the twelve sons of Israel. This people is made up of individuals, and yet the high priest never represents one person in isolation from the rest. So what does this mean? It means that Urim and Thummim are only to be used for matters affecting or involving the covenant people as a **whole**. (cf. Stuart)

- Judges 1:1–2 (cf. 20:18, 23, 26-27) — After the death of Joshua, **the people of Israel** inquired of the LORD [probably by Urim and Thummim], “Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?”

Nowhere in Scripture do we see the Urim and Thummim being consulted by “*private*” individuals for their own *personal, individual* guidance. The only *individuals* in Scripture who consult the Lord using Urim and Thummim are leaders of the people such as Joshua, and Saul, and David,¹ and the reason for this is that their decisions will affect everyone else around them – the **entire** covenant community. But this isn’t how we think, is it? We want *personal* “**revelations**” from God for our lives in particular. Doesn’t God care about the individual? Yes, He does! We’ll think more about this next week. But the assumption, here (and throughout Scripture in general), is that you and I personally will come to know **all** that we need to know for the living of our lives in the context of God’s **revelation** to the whole community. **To sum up: A biblical theology of revelation involves seeing revelation in the context of (or *impacting*) the whole covenant community.** This *very important* point leads us to another *related* and very important point.

Notice that the Urim and Thummim can only be handled by the **high priest** who is ministering **before the Lord**. This is important! The work of the priest is **redemptive work** from beginning to end. What does this mean? It means that the priest’s use of the Urim and Thummim will only be for “redemptive” purposes – revelation that is “redemptive.” We want to know God’s will before any decision that we feel is of major significance. But redemptive revelation is revelation that’s **directly related** to the working out of God’s redeeming plan for the world (which He is working out *not* through individuals isolated from each other, but through individuals living in covenant with each other – the covenant people **as a whole**).

¹ Cf. 1 Sam 14:2–3, 18–19, 36–37, 41–42; 1 Sam. 23:6–12; 28:5–7; 30:7–8

- Deuteronomy 33:8–10 (cf. 1 Sam. 2:28) — Of Levi [Moses] said, “Give to Levi your Thummim, and your Urim to your godly one... They shall teach Jacob your judgments [decisions] and Israel your law; they shall put incense before you and whole burnt offerings on your altar.

Do you see how the Urim and the Thummim as instruments of **revelation** are connected with the **law**, and also with the priestly work of **making atonement**? The work of the priest is **all priestly** work; it’s *all* connected with the covenant, and the covenant people as a whole, and so also *their* ultimate **salvation**. It’s these principles and guidelines that govern all use of the Urim and Thummim. It’s these principles and guidelines that should govern our entire understanding of the whole idea of “**revelation.**” **A biblical theology of revelation involves seeing all revelation in the context of God’s redeeming plan for the world.** We need a theology of revelation (not simply proof-texts) if we are to navigate the ideas about knowing God’s will and hearing His voice that are prevalent in large parts of the Church today.

So, for example, if decisions must be made that are directly related to the progress, or the advancing, of God’s redeeming plans for the world, then it may be appropriate to “use” the Urim and Thummim.

- Numbers 27:15–23 — The LORD said to Moses, “Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him... You shall invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey. And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the LORD. At his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he and all the people of Israel with him, **the whole congregation.**”²

Notice that Joshua’s use of the Urim and Thummim is tied completely to the covenant people as a whole and to the progress of God’ redeeming plan for the world as the people are going in to inherit the land of promise (which is a type of our own inheritance in the New Creation).³ I think of Abraham’s servant, when he went to find a wife for Isaac. He didn’t have the Urim and the Thummim, but he prayed for a sign.

- Genesis 24:14 — Let the young woman to whom I shall say, “Please let down your jar that I may drink,” and who shall say, “Drink, and I will water your camels”—let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master.

This obviously isn’t a method that we should all be using in our search for wives! What makes it appropriate, here, is that it’s connected directly with one of the most essential parts in the progress of God’s plan of redemption for *all* of His covenant people. This decision wasn’t just

² Unlike Moses, who spoke with the Lord “face to face,” Joshua will need to consult the Lord for His judgments and decisions using the Urim and Thummim. (cf. Ashley; NICOT)

³ Cf. Josh. 7:14–15; 1 Sam. 10:20–22; Lev. 16:8–10; Josh. 18:8–10

In each of these examples, it seems likely that the casting of “lots” involved the use of the Urim and Thummim. In each of these examples, the casting of lots is intimately tied to the progress of redemptive history in the context of the covenant people as a whole.

about Abraham, or Isaac – it was ultimately about all of us. The servant apparently already knew that there was one woman in particular that God had chosen for Isaac (cf. “the woman”), and he knew that the provision of this wife for Isaac would be in direct fulfillment of God’s covenant promises to Abraham. (prior revelation; cf. Gen. 24:5-9) The choice of Isaac’s wife had redemptive-historical significance that no marriage today can ever have. In this connection, we can also think of the dreams associated with Pharaoh and Joseph, Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel, and the Midianite and Gideon. Or, consider the revelation given to Cornelius and the corresponding vision of the Apostle Peter. (cf. Acts 10) What it’s important to understand, here, is that the salvation of Cornelius had redemptive-historical significance that no conversion experience of anyone today could possibly have.

So, if decisions must be made that are directly related to the progress of God’s redeeming plans for the world and therefore in the context of (or impacting) the whole covenant people, then it *may* be appropriate to “use” the Urim and Thummim. But, now, let’s take this in another, very closely related direction.

Until the coming of Christ, all revelation was **partial** and **incomplete**. All revelation, being redemptive, *had* to be incomplete because God’s redeeming plan had not yet reached its culmination in Christ. This means that **in the context of God’s entire covenant people, and in light of the continuing progress of God’s redeeming plan for the world**, situations might arise when the partial and incomplete nature of God’s revelation resulted in “confusion.” It *may* be appropriate, in situations like these, to consult Urim and Thummim.

- Ezra 2:62–63 (cf. Neh. 7:64-65; cf. Num. 27:1-11; 36:1-13) — [Certain men recently returned from exile] sought their [priestly] registration among those enrolled in the genealogies, but they were not found there, and so they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. The governor told them that they were not to partake of the most holy food, until there should be a priest to consult Urim and Thummim.

Notice how this is a matter affecting the entire covenant people, how this is a matter directly related to the progress of God’s redeeming plan for the world, and how this is also related to the “incompleteness” of all prior revelation. We see another example of all three of these points in Numbers fifteen:

- Numbers 15:32–35 — While the people of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation. They put him in custody, because it had not been made clear what should be done to him. And the LORD said to Moses, “The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.”

To sum up: All “revelation” from God is **connected** with the **progress (or advancement)** of His **redeeming** plan for the world, and has an impact upon His covenant **people** as a **whole**. We see this very clearly illustrated in the fact that the instrument for revelation from God (Urim and Thummim) was given to the **high priest** to carry **on his heart before the Lord (in the tabernacle)**.⁴ We’ve also seen that related to the **progress/advancement** of God’s redeeming

⁴ Or, before the Ark of the Covenant (cf. 1 Sam. 14:2-3, 18-19)

plan for the world is the reality that **all new** revelation from God always assumes the **incompleteness** of **all** prior revelation (and so, also, the incompleteness of redemptive history). This explains why for *fifteen hundred years*, there was always room for more books to be added to the Bible!

Conclusion

So, then, what does all of this mean for us today? We're going to try and answer this question partly this week, and then more fully next week.

First of all, we are being pointed to a beautiful, wonderful truth. In the Old Testament, the very nature of all revelation from God was partial and incomplete because it was all pointing to, or preparing the way for, Christ, who had not yet come.⁵ Therefore, when Christ comes, what does that mean? We now have God's revelation no longer partial or incomplete, but now **completed** and **finished**—in Christ. This is something that I think many of us as Christians can fail to fully appreciate.

➤ Hebrews 1:1–2 (cf. John 1:1, 14, 18) — Long ago, at **many times** and in **many ways** [**because always incomplete**], **God spoke** to our fathers by the prophets, **but** in these last days he has **spoken to us** [**once and for all**] **by his Son** [**complete**], whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

Now, there's an "**already**" and a "**not yet**" to this "completeness" of revelation. The "already" explains why we can no longer **add** more books to the Bible – the canon of the Bible is permanently closed. The "not yet" explains why we still look to the day when we will see Christ face to face and then "know **fully**" even as we have been "fully known." (cf. 1 Cor. 13:8-12) God has "already" spoken His **last**, and His **final**, and His **complete** word in Christ. And so, in Christ, both God's **revelation** and God's **redeeming plan** have come together to their **conclusion**.

But wait! What about the apostles and prophets who lived in the early church *after* Christ (God's final word) had already ascended back into heaven? The fundamental role of these apostles and prophets was to **record** and to **explain** the final, redeeming word that God had spoken through Christ. It only makes sense that this would have been desperately needed! (cf. Acts 15) Listen to what Jesus said to the apostles:

⁵ In some way or another, all revelation prior to Christ was needful precisely *because* the revelation to that point was fundamentally incomplete. The following are some observations related to this point:

1. Some of the revelation in the Bible was occasioned by the fact that there was not, as yet, any covenant people with corresponding covenant documents (pre-Sinai).
2. Other revelation is occasioned by the fact that the Spirit was not yet given to the entire covenant people, and so the people had need of constant divine reminders, warnings, exhortations, etc. (cf. 1 Jn. 2:20, 27; footnote 6)
3. We see in the Scriptures that at significant moments in redemptive history there is a corresponding significant outpouring of revelation (Adam and Eve; Noah; Abraham-Joseph; Moses, Aaron, Joshua; Samuel, David, Solomon; Pre and Post-exilic prophets; John the Baptist, Christ, Apostles; cf. Waldron class notes, page 46)

- John 14:26 — But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance **all that I have said to you.**
- John 16:12–14 — I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. **He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.**

But that’s just the Apostles. What about the prophets? Since the apostles couldn’t be everywhere at once, it was also necessary to have prophets in every infant church. The fundamental role of these prophets was to **explain**, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, this brand new revelation of God’s **salvation** through Jesus Christ. Paul writes:

- Ephesians 3:1–6 (cf. 3:8-10) — When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy **apostles** and **prophets** by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul associates “prophetic powers” with the understanding of all “mysteries,” and for Paul, “mysteries” are the things connected with God’s redeeming plan for the world through Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 13:2) In 1 Thessalonians, Paul writes:

- 1 Thessalonians 5:20–21 — Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good.

How was the early church to “test” the prophecies that it received? They were to test them **by the Old Testament Scriptures**. This means more than just making sure they didn’t “contradict” the Scriptures or were in basic, general harmony with them. The early church was to test the prophets (discerning whether they were **true** or **false**) by seeing if their prophecies were truly explaining and bringing to light all the previous redemptive revelation contained in the Old Testament. If the prophecies passed this test, they were then to “hold fast” to these prophecies as the true and **saving** word of God. So when Paul came to Berea and proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ to them, this is what we read:

- Acts 17:11 — Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word [the revelation of the mystery] with all eagerness, **examining the [Old Testament] Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.**

The role of the apostles and prophets was to explain, and ultimately to record, the previously unrevealed mysteries of God’s salvation through Jesus Christ. Therefore, once the explaining and recording of God’s salvation through Jesus was finished, there no longer remained any possible place or need for apostles or prophets – or any of the revelatory gifts.⁶ Paul writes:

⁶ In this connection, we might also think of what have been appropriately called the “sign gifts” (cf. healings and miracles; 1 Cor. 12:9-10; Gal. 3:5). The author of Hebrews connects these “gifts of the Holy Spirit” with the “signs and wonders” performed by the Jesus and the Apostles.

- Ephesians 2:19–22 — So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the **apostles** and **prophets**, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

Just as the cornerstone cannot be duplicated today, so also, neither can the foundation of the apostles and prophets be duplicated today. The apostles and prophets were foundational in the sense that they appeared at the **beginning** of the history of the church, and also because they explained and recorded all the foundational truths of God’s salvation through Jesus Christ. And so we see that the ceasing of the revelatory gifts in the New Testament church goes hand in hand with the closing of the Bible’s canon. Ask yourself this question: On what **biblical** basis do I believe that the church can no longer add more books to the Bible? We *must* have a **biblical** basis! But it’s our solid biblical grounds for *this* belief that is *also* the grounds for seeing that the gift of prophecy (and also every other revelatory gift) has ceased.

Today (and at various times throughout history), large parts of the professing church have become enamored with the idea that “God is still speaking today” through prophets, and even apostles – and I say with true sorrow and grief that *multitudes* in the church are being deceived and led astray. Why are we so enamored with the idea that there are still prophets in the church today? Perhaps it sounds more “alive” and “real,” more “powerful” and “exciting,” more “spiritual” and “fresh” and “relevant.” Perhaps it holds forth the apparent promise of a greater intimacy and “connection” with God. But all of these things only reveal that behind this being enamored with the revelatory gifts, there is ultimately a self-promoting idolatry – an exalting of self, and a minimizing of Christ. Truly, this is rarely intended, and yet in the end, it’s inescapable. Because of the redeeming nature and purposes of *all* special revelation and revelatory gifts, any “real” claim to prophetic revelation today is a claim to the incompleteness of God’s revelation through Christ. Any “real” claim to prophetic revelation today is a claim to be able to explain and reveal further, previously unrevealed mysteries of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I’m not saying these things to be harsh or mean. These are things that I myself needed to hear some years ago. Very often, those who go down this “charismatic” path have become convinced of its truth by a superficial reading of Scripture (not having any idea of how to argue *biblically*

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- Acts 2:22 — Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man **attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs** that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know.
 - Acts 2:42–43 — And they devoted themselves to the **apostles’ teaching** and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and **many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles**.
 - Mark 16:20 — And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and **confirmed the message by accompanying signs**.
 - Hebrews 2:3–4 — How shall we escape if we neglect **such a great salvation? It was declared** at first by the Lord, **and it was attested to us** by those who heard, while God also bore witness by **signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit** distributed according to his will.

Notice that in all of these passages, the purpose of the signs and wonders is to authenticate and confirm the message of salvation through Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of Old Testament promise and expectation. In other words, signs and wonders were not intended to convince the ignorant and the unbelieving (though they did always increase responsibility), but rather to confirm and verify the message of the Messiah to those who had long been watching and waiting. Once the message had been confirmed and the New Covenant community (the church) established, there no longer remained any need for authenticating “signs and wonders” (cf. the “sign gifts”).

for the closing of the canon), and even more importantly by a dependence upon their own “experiences.” And so we make ourselves the authority, and not God. We deify our experiences at the expense of God’s truth. If someone ever claims to be a prophet or a prophetess, whether someone like Joseph Smith or someone within the charismatic circles of the church, we can know immediately that either he doesn’t really *mean* what he’s claiming (we’ll talk more about this next week), or he really is a false prophet (or prophetess).

Any claim to prophetic revelation today is, inescapably, to rob our God of His glory by denying the **miracle** of the full and complete deposit of truth—of redemptive revelation through Christ—that we have today in the closed canon of Scripture. The point of this sermon is not primarily negative; it’s not primarily to warn us against being deceived by the “so-called” gift of prophecy in the church today. The *primary* point is for us to know what it **truly** means to rejoice greatly in *this* completed revelation that we have; reading it, hearing it, studying it, so that we might “grow up into salvation” – so that we might “grow up in **every way** into Him who is the head, into Christ.” (1 Pet. 2:2; Eph. 4:15) Brothers and sisters, may the Lord establish you in a true theology of revelation that brings glory to His name and that drives you *always*, and *only*, and *for all things* to the **Scriptures**. Jesus said:

- Matthew 11:11 — Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist [the last of the Old Covenant prophets; cf. Mat. 11:13-14]. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Why is this? How can this be? Well, what made John the Baptist “greater” than even Moses? The answer has everything to do with the period of redemptive history in which John lived. So, then, what makes us even “greater” than John the Baptist? The answer is that today, **all** vision and prophecy has been sealed up (cf. Dan. 9:24), **in so far as it’s all come to its goal and end in Jesus Christ**. Today, we have in the Scriptures what even the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets never had – the **completed** revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the one “**in whom all** the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are safely kept [and now also *revealed* to us].” (cf. Col. 2:2-3; NCV)⁷

⁷ A passage often appealed to by those who believe the revelatory gifts are still active today is Acts 2:16–18. Peter explains what was happening on the day of Pentecost by quoting from a passage in Joel: “But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: ‘And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.’” What we half to see, here, is that those who have the Spirit are the exact same group (in name and number) as those who prophesy, see visions, and dream dreams. Therefore, the “continuationist” appeal to this passage requires the belief that **all** who have the Spirit (the entire New Covenant community) will prophesy without exception – a belief that is explicitly contradicted by Paul in 1 Cor. 12:27-30. The significance of Joel’s prophecy and its fulfillment in Acts is that **all** in the New Covenant community without exception will have the revelation of God’s law written on their hearts (cf. Jer. 31:33-34), and all in the New Covenant community will have the full knowledge of God’s redemption and salvation through Jesus Christ. This will be true even of those who don’t literally/technically prophesy. Moses showed his own understanding of this deeper and more fundamental significance of prophecy when he responded to Joshua’s concern that there were two men prophesying in the camp: “Moses said to him, ‘Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!’” (Num. 11:29) Moses wished for all of God’s people to be prophets not for the sake of new revelations, but rather so that all the people might live in obedience to God and to His laws and experience His salvation. The prophecy of Joel and its fulfillment in Acts and the New Covenant community cannot support the continuation of prophecy by *some* in the New Testament church who have been uniquely called/gifted in this way.

The High Priest's Golden Garments

Shemot/Exodus 28

