Priestly Divination and Illuminating Stones in Second Temple Judaism

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In recent decades, scholars of ancient Judaism have reevaluated many of the common assumptions regarding the fate of prophecy and prophetic gifts following the First Temple period. Traditionally, treatments of this topic have reflected claims made in rabbinic literature that the Holy Spirit ceased to function in Israel after the pre-exilic “former prophets” and that earlier means of ascertaining the divine will did not exist among Jews in the era of the Second Temple.¹ However, while most scholars still agree that the Babylonian exile brought significant changes to ancient Israel’s socio-religious institutions, more recent studies have explored aspects of prophetic continuity between the pre- and post-exilic periods. For example, by broadening the category of Jewish “prophecy” beyond its classical parameters, evidence can be found among some circles for the continuation of various prophetic manifestations into the late Second Temple period, including claims of apocalyptic visions, revelatory exegesis, the interpretation of dreams, predictive foresight, and the appearance of popular prophetic figures.²

Related to this discussion is the practice of priestly divination as a means of obtaining divine revelation. Whereas the Hebrew Bible describes Israel’s high priest as being in possession of illuminating and oracular stones—such as the engraved gems of the breastplate and the enigmatic Urim and Thummim—rabbinic literature and traditional scholarship has claimed that these items

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¹ L. Stephen Cook, On the Question of the “Cessation of Prophecy” in Ancient Judaism (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011); for discussion of the rabbinic evidence in particular, see pp. 8–9, 149–173.
exclusively belonged to the First Temple period and were not in operation among the priests of the Second Temple.\(^3\) Recent studies, however, have noted that traditions of priestly divination through the Urim, Thummim, and other oracular stones persisted in the Hellenistic and Roman periods.\(^4\) These traditions vary and their historical value is often difficult to determine, but they demonstrate that some Jews viewed the continuation and legitimacy of priestly oracles differently than the rabbinic sages. Such traditions provide valuable insight into the diversity of thought and practice within early Judaism, especially as they pertained to views of religious authority and divine communion; while some circles appear to have downplayed priestly connections to the divine realm and invalidated claims of post-biblical priestly oracles, others continued to view the illuminating stones of the high priest as evidence of the priesthood’s ability to communicate with the divine and to provide mediation between God and Israel.

In an attempt to articulate some of this diversity, I will provide a survey of the post-exilic traditions surrounding the precious stones of the high priestly vestments, their oracular use by Jewish priests, and the ongoing interest in their significance among priestly circles during the time of the Second Temple. With the limitations on space, I will not be able to examine each tradition in depth or consider the supernatural phenomena of the stones. Instead, in this survey I will consider the historical claims and ideological implications of these traditions—including those found among the Dead Sea Scrolls—as a way to illustrate the different attitudes toward priestly prophecy that existed within early Judaism and to show that, at least in some circles, practices of priestly divination may have continued into the late Second Temple period. I will begin by summarizing the origins of priestly oracles in the Hebrew Bible and will then examine the disparate views of their fate following the loss of Solomon’s Temple.

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\(^3\) Scholarship on this specific topic has not been as extensive as the work done on the (dis)continuation of prophecy in general, but when priestly divination is addressed, scholars have traditionally adopted the rabbinic claims that the use of oracular stones ceased after the First Temple period. E.g., Gedalyahu Alon, *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1977), 27–28n.22 and Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1994), 352–353.