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Book review:

Van Dam, Cornelius. *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997.

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has long strived to excise the personal, reshaping its language into seemingly unassailable, and increasingly incomprehensible, jargon. The resulting narrowing of the audience to a small circle of specialists has also shut out the less-informed masses, who happen to foot the bill. This approach is defensive and hubristic. There is also a conceit in American archaeology's posture as a science, posing our tiny samples, idiosyncratic reconstructions, and meager generalizations with the same sweep and grandeur as the laws of physics and, more lately, biology. To its equal discredit, much of European archaeology has succumbed to relativism and hand-wringing, giving up any aspiration to rigor. Books such as Lamberg-Karlovsky's are important attempts to find middle ground that is intellectually and socially responsible, literate, accessible scholarship, authoritative but not dictatorial, presenting as coherent and complete a vision of early Mesopotamian, Iranian, and Indus valley societies as we have anywhere. It thus deserves our thanks and consideration at a number of levels.

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The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel. By CORNELIUS VAN DAM. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1997. Pp. xxii + 296. \$34.50.

It has been more than one hundred and fifty years since the last exhaustive investigations of the Hebrew Bible's mysterious Urim and Thummim (hereafter U and T) were published.¹ Since that time, numerous smaller studies, both philological and comparative in scope, have appeared that have attempted to elucidate these most curious terms. Thus, it is with happy expectation that I opened this work, a revision of the author's 1988 doctoral dissertation submitted to

¹ J. J. Bellermann, *Die Urim und Thummim, die ältesten Gemmen: Ein Beitrag zur biblisch-hebräischen Alterthumskunde* (Berlin, 1824); J. L. Saalschütz, "Prüfung der vorzüglichsten Ansichten von den Urim und Thummim," in *Historisch-theologische Abhandlungen*, ed. C. F. Illger (Leipzig, 1924), p. 3.31-101 (noted by Van Dam, p. 1).

the Theologische Universiteit at Kampen, in The Netherlands.

Van Dam had before him no easy task, for to "discover the identity and mode of operation of the U[and]T . . ." (p. 4) requires that one carefully examines the ancient translations and discussions of the U and T, their relationship to the אֶפֶד "ephod" and חֶשֶׁן "breastpiece," a host of proposed ancient Near Eastern analogues, and the complete gamut of literary and historical contexts in which we find the U and T. While this work succeeds in synthesizing all of the relevant data, some of the conclusions reached by the author are not altogether convincing.

The book opens with a historical survey of the various exegetical and translational approaches to the U and T. This is one of Van Dam's most useful contributions, for tracing the various treatments of the U and T presents the reader with multiple options for understanding these items and also provides a window to the historical presuppositions and interpretive trends active in early antiquity. Van Dam examines the relevant textual evidence from Qumran, and the treatment of the U and T by Philo, Origen, Jerome, Augustine, Bede, Thomas Aquinas, the reformers Calvin and Luther, among others, and, regrettably, to a lesser extent the medieval Jewish exegetes, with Rashi appearing most prominently.²

Van Dam then examines each of the previously proposed ancient Near Eastern analogues to the U and T with an emphasis on the Egyptian and Mesopotamian evidence.

Breastplates, magic stones, the Tablets of Destiny,³ *teraphim*, and pendants, are weighed against the philological evidence and rejected (with the possible exception of the *teraphim*). Often Van Dam's rejection is based on a perceived difference of purpose between these oracular media and the U and T, but since items and practices seldom are borrowed by an adoptive culture without some modification, the similarities perhaps

² The bibliography too is a disappointing two and one half pages in length.

³ The author would have benefited by consulting Shalom M. Paul, "Heavenly Tablets and the Book of Life," *JANES* 5 (1973): 345-53. Similarly, Van Dam treats the Mesopotamian *mahhû* as an "ecstatic" (p. 112), but there is no evidence, contextual or otherwise, to suggest this. See already Howard Wohl, "The Problem of the *Mahhû*," *JANES* 3 (1970): 112-18.

should be given more weight than Van Dam allows.⁴ Nevertheless, even if one is inclined to see these analogues as sharing similar functions, Van Dam cautions that it is "faulty argumentation to deduce physical similarities from similar functions" (p. 81). Methodologically, this removes all propriety of comparison and results in setting the U and T apart from all modes of divination.

Also integral to Van Dam's investigation is an accurate understanding of the phrases נתן אל "give/place to/in," referring to the placement of the U and T; שאל ב- "inquire of . . . (Yahweh/God)" when used without reference to revelatory means; and לפני יהוה "before Yahweh," occurring in conjunction with the use of the U and T.

The first of these expressions Van Dam sees as referring to the placement of the U and T as real and tangible objects (contra a host of earlier exegetes prior to the sixteenth century) inside the breastpiece, perhaps in a pouch of some kind. An examination of the second phrase, שאל ב- "inquire of . . .," which appears ambiguously without reference to a revelatory vehicle in sixteen passages in Judges, 1 Samuel, and 2 Samuel, suggests to Van Dam that "there is good reason to assume that the U[and]T were involved in these instances" (p. 188). Concerning the phrase לפני יהוה "before Yahweh," Van Dam asserts:

Indeed, the fact that the inquiry had to take place before Yahweh was a reminder that, each time, revelation from God was given. It was not the result of some magical power of the U[and]T. It also reminded God's people that they had no need for the divination practiced by the other nations (p. 168).

On the basis of the textual, philological, and comparative evidence, Van Dam uniquely concludes that the U and T "may be interpreted as a hendiadys" (p. 139),⁵ probably representing a single gem whose name means "perfect light" (p. 230). This "miraculous light verified that the message given by the high priest was indeed from God . . ." (p. 230). Thus, Van Dam distin-

guishes the U and T from the casting of lots and suggests that "the teraphim functioned as a substitute for the U[and]T with illegitimate 'ephods'" (p. 150). As to the use of the U and T, Van Dam observes:

Most of the times that the U(and)T were employed, a problem of a military nature had to be resolved, but this was not always the case [1 Sam. 10:22, 2 Sam. 2:1]. In all cases, the well-being of the theocratic nation was directly or indirectly at stake (p. 193).

Van Dam's analysis of context and his rejection of divinatory parallels ultimately lead him to place the U and T on par with prophecy as a means of revelation. "Prophetic inspiration is the only revelatory means that is known that can adequately account for the complexity and subtlety of some of the answers received" (p. 217). This statement agrees with some ancient sources (for example, Num. Rab 21:9, b. Yoma 73b) but is difficult to reconcile with other evidence, such as 1 Sam. 28:6, which distinguishes the U and T from prophecy. Indeed one might ask, if the U and T and prophecy are synonymous modes of revelation, why does the Bible differentiate them? To explain, Van Dam posits a development in the use of and attitude towards the U and T beginning with the time of Moses.

. . . the silence in Exodus 28 and 39 concerning the manufacture or description of the U[and]T appears to imply the prior existence of the U[and]T and the knowledge of this oracular equipment by Israel as a whole. This in turn suggests that the U[and]T predates Moses. The inclusion of the U[and]T in the breastpiece of Aaron when he was ordained as high priest (Lev. 8:8) could therefore signal the official incorporation of an ancient means of revelation into the official cult (p. 236).

According to Van Dam, the demise of the U and T began during David's reign and was complete after the exile⁶ and was due in part to the displacement of the high priest with the U and T as a means of revelation by prophecy. If correct, this would imply an element of competition between the priesthood and the prophets as Van Dam espies.

⁶ Despite the references to the U and T in Ezra 2:63 and Neh. 7:65.

⁴ For example, contra Van Dam (pp. 40–42), I remained convinced by the important study of W. Horowitz and V. A. Hurowitz, "Urim and Thummim in Light of a Psephomancy Ritual from Assur (LKA 137)," *JANES* 21 (1992): 95–115.

⁵ The mention of the Urim alone in 1 Sam. 28:6 Van Dam treats as a *pars pro toto* for the U and T (pp. 190–91).

If the U[and]T were not a lot oracle but were closely related to prophecy (as I have argued), then we are bringing together two elements that generally speaking have been carefully separated in biblical scholarship, priesthood and prophecy (p. 231).

Yet Van Dam stops short of drawing a direct correlation between the two and attributes the diminishing use of the U and T also to priestly unfaithfulness and an increased reliance on professional counselors.

My criticisms of this work stem from what I perceive to be a methodological double standard and a theological presupposition concerning the nature of the U and T. Though on the one hand Van Dam posits a development in the use of and attitude towards the U and T in ancient Israel, on the other, he tends to treat the Israelite theological stance on divination and magic as a monolith without contradictions, developments, or regressions. It is simplistic to treat Saul's consultation of the necromancer (1 Sam. 28) as an anti-Sauline polemic or an example of "popular" practice, but the appearance of other divinatory means are not as easily dismissed. The uncondemned presence of *teraphim* in David's private room (1 Sam. 19:13, 19:16) at a time which Van Dam argues witnessed the declining use of U and T (a means of revelation that he also states replaced the *teraphim* [p. 260]) and the condemnatory listing of *teraphim* in Ezek. 21:26 among the Babylonian king's repertoire of divinatory tools are cases in point. Such contradictions perhaps compel Van Dam to side with a proposal first suggested by John Spencer (1630–93) that views the *teraphim* as a means of prophetic revelation and the only possible analogue to the U and T (pp. 44–45, 149–51).⁷ This also raises a question unaddressed by Van Dam, namely, the possible impact of the state religion upon the U and T, especially in those periods for which apostasy is recorded.

One could add that no biblical prohibitions against magic and divination (for example, 18:10–11) would have been issued if people were not practicing these arts. Moreover, what is deemed a legitimate means of access to God in one culture is often illegitimate in another, and

⁷ Van Dam also is persuaded by the LXX's treatment of the *teraphim* in Hos. 3:4 with an identical word (*dēloi*) to that used to translate Urim in Num. 27:21, Deut. 33:8, and 1 Sam. 28:6 (p. 149).

such distinctions are often maintained within the same culture as well. It is perhaps analogous that Hammurapi's Code and the Middle Assyrian laws also proscribe sorcery and black magic despite the fact that divination and other forms of magic are deemed theologically legitimate and are quite ubiquitous during these periods.⁸

Van Dam's static portrayal of the Israelite attitude towards magic and divination eventually creates a sort of circular reasoning. Divination is rejected in some passages of the Hebrew Bible, and since the U and T are employed apparently without condemnation in others, it must not constitute divination and must be something else. Thus Van Dam asserts very early in his work that "as a licit oracular means, the U(and)T must have functioned in such a way that the reason for outlawing divination as practiced among Israel's neighbors did not apply to this priestly oracle" (p. 125). In this way, Van Dam severs perhaps too hastily the more divinatory dimensions of the U and T.

The assumption that the U and T is not a divinatory vehicle in turn shapes his methodology. When investigating the expression *שאַל בַּ* "inquire of . . . (Yahweh/God)," Van Dam eliminates from the discussion the same expression when used in reference to a ghost (1 Chron. 10:13), *teraphim* (Ezek. 21:26), and wood (Hos. 4:12) because in these cases the expression refers to divinatory sources of revelation.⁹ Also excluded is 1 Sam. 28:6, since it mentions dreams and prophets.

Van Dam similarly argues: "The association of the Name with the U[and]T effectively dispels magical notions about the oracle" (p. 24). The evidence for competing Yahwist belief systems in Israel¹⁰ and other ancient Near Eastern divinatory and magical practices in which sacred names are

⁸ On this point, see also Erica Reiner, *Astral Magic in Babylonia*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society 85/4 (Philadelphia, 1995), p. 101.

⁹ Yet the Akkadian cognate *šālu* "ask" appears in reference to the divinatory use of magical stones. See, for example, Horowitz and Hurowitz, "Urim and Thummim in Light of a Psephomancy Ritual from Assur (LKA 137)," pp. 105, 107.

¹⁰ See, for example, Jeffery Tigay, "The Significance of the End of Deuteronomy," in Michael V. Fox et al., eds., *Texts, Temples, and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran* (Winona Lake, Indiana, 1996), pp. 137–43.

invoked demands that we rethink this conclusion. Moreover, the same ancient sources that Van Dam cites in support of the use of the U and T as a prophetic experience (i.e., b. Yoma 73b), also specifies the ritual placement of the inquirers. This suggests that the use of the U and T was less revelatory and more mechanical in technique. Sipre Numbers 27:21 also tells us that the inquiry using the U and T involved ritual whispering, an act that smacks more of magical praxis than revelation.¹¹ In any event, the reader would have benefited if Van Dam had defined and demarcated more clearly what he means by magic, divination, oracular activity, and prophecy.

Throughout the work, one senses in the methodology and interpretation of evidence, a theological desire to disconnect the U and T from all forms of divination. This is especially noticeable when Van Dam turns his attention to the theological implications of his observations.

Against the background of controlling the god(s), manipulation, and coercion (which are inherent in this view of reality and thus also of divination) stood God's revelation of himself to Israel. He as the sovereign God was not to be controlled or manipulated (p. 122).

Yet earlier Van Dam distinguishes divination from revelation by the diviner's initiative in discerning the import of the deity's message (p. 117) and a lack of divine self-disclosure. This would appear to place U and T among divinatory and not revelatory methods of inquiry, since the U and T clearly are used at the request of humans.

Similarly, after discussing the possible use of the *teraphim* as earlier and somewhat analogous oracular vehicles of revelation, Van Dam suggests that "Yahweh may have accommodated himself to this situation by granting his people the U[and]T as a revelatory aid in place of the *teraphim*" (p. 260). If such is the case, avers Van Dam, "Yahweh's calling the U(and)T *his*"¹² [Deut 33:8] deepens in meaning, for it illustrates the extent to which Yahweh went to accommodate his people" (p. 260). At this point, Van Dam's analysis turns slightly sermonesque: "The crux of the shift to prophecy seems to have been that

Yahweh was weaning his people from the use of physical means of revelation [as the U(and)T were] to dependence on revelation by the word of God as given by the prophets" (p. 272). Indeed, the conclusion of this book romantically theologizes what would be discussed in many circles as evidence of religious syncretism. For Van Dam, the move away from signs to word alone illustrates that "... Yahweh sought to nurture Israel to maturity" (p. 273).

Such remarks pave the way for a Christological perspective on revelation that pervades and informs the remainder of the book. Much like the Christian canon, prophecy is placed at the end of a chain of religious progress: "After Malachi, no other prophet arose until John the Baptist appeared, as predicted . . ." (pp. 273-74). Thus, the U and T eventually became an outmoded and perhaps less revelatory means by which people communicated with God, the most effective way being now through Jesus. Van Dam concludes by way of a doxology: "the fulfillment of all Old Testament revelation would be revealed in the promised Messiah, who is the Word and Who became flesh (John 1:14)" (p. 274).

In sum, while Van Dam offers a fresh approach to the topic and a comprehensive synthesis of all prior studies on the subject, the total body of evidence ultimately leads us to a skepticism underscoring our inability to deduce the function and cultural significance of the U and T. It is frustratingly ironic that despite a host of comparative material, textual evidence, and a plethora of scholarly inquiry on the subject, we fare only slightly better in terms of our knowledge of U and T than the scholars of the nineteenth century. Van Dam certainly has shed a great deal of light on the purpose and use of the U and T, but it is the nature of the evidence that forces us to conclude, albeit more pessimistically, by citing the author: "Nowhere is there an indisputable and clearly datable reference to the U[and]T" (p. 242).

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¹¹ Cf. Biblical Hebrew לַחֲשׁוֹת "whisper" and Akkadian *lahāšu* "whisper," both frequently used in reference to magical incantations.

¹² The emphasis is Van Dam's.