

## ARE CRYSTALS UNGODLY?

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Last year I gave a talk to raise money for a Christian charity, a school for mentally challenged young adults. The founder, an ex monk, was happy with the topic of crystals and birthstones. A local bookshop was not and refused to display the flyer for the talk. The woman said: “Crystals are ungodly. They belong to the devil”. When the organiser of the event told the local vicar, a lovely man who had called on her for the first time that day despite her having lived in the house for twenty years (a wonderful piece of serendipitous synchronicity), his suggestion was that I should include the Breastplate of the High Priest and Revelations, which builds the New Jerusalem on a crystal foundation – something I had already intended to do.

However, I remained puzzled over how crystals transformed from something created by God, an adornment and, it would appear, essential tool for the high priest, to the ‘crystals are ungodly’ view until I began to put together a presentation as part of my research into the history of birthstones for the MA I am doing in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology. This presentation was also part of my ongoing research into divinatory practices in the Bible, of which there are many instances. Divination is something else that is much frowned upon by many people in the church today, but, as we shall see, it was a practise fundamental to the Jews.

Crystals as an instrument of god speaking – in other words as divination – is something intimately connected to the Breastplate of the High Priest. The artefact described in Exodus probably didn’t look anything like the representations we find in books today. As with so much in the modern Bible, ‘breastplate’ is a mistranslation<sup>1</sup> and although I was consulting a primary text, if you are unable to read the original language, everything has of necessity to be viewed through the lens of the translator. The Hebrew word means ‘pouch’ so Aaron could have been wearing a woven linen bag around his neck and chest, with 12 engraved crystals – which suggests to me a link with the Egyptian use of precious stones. According to Exodus, the Jews had recently been in Egypt and the Egyptians used engraved gems as amulets and as representations of the gods, so there may be a cross over of cultural practice here. The pouch also contained the Urim and Thummin – no one is certain precisely what these were but amongst the suggestions are that they were meteorites or precious stones.<sup>2</sup> The instructions for fabricating the Breastplate of the High Priest can be found in Exodus 28, 15-30:

And thou shall make the breastplate of judgement with cunning work; after the work of the ephod thou shalt make it; of gold, of blue, and of purple, and of scarlet, and of fine linen shalt thou make it...

And thou shalt set in it settings of stones, even four rows of stones: the first row shall be a sardius [sardonyx], a topaz, and a carbuncle [garnet/carnelian]: this shall be the first row.

And the second row shall be an emerald, a sapphire, and a diamond. And the third row a ligure, an agate, and an amethyst. And the fourth row a beryl, and an onyx, and a jasper; they shall be set in gold in their enclosings.

And the stones shall be with the names of the children of Israel, twelve, according to their names, like the engravings on a signet; every one with his name shall they be according to the twelve tribes....

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Lewis, T *Breastplate of the High Priest in Bible History on line* <http://www.bible-history.com/isbe/B/BREASTPLATE+OF+THE+HIGH+PRIEST/> consulted 21.11.05 and

<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=52&letter=U> consulted 3.3.2006

<sup>2</sup> see www.jewishencyclopedia as 1.

And Aaron shall bear the names of the children of Israel in the breastplate of judgement upon his heart, when he goeth in unto the holy place, for a memorial before the Lord continually.

And thou shalt put in the breastplate of judgement the U-rim and the Thum-mim

Exodus 28: 15-30 King James translation

Translation problems that make it difficult to know exactly which stones were used as each biblical translation specifies a different list, although that doesn't stop people making assertions.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of the breastplate is set out in Exodus as:

a continual remembrance before the Lord. In the breastpiece of judgement 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 the judgement of the Israelites on his heart before the Lord continually. (v.29)

The breastplate also had onyx mounted on the shoulders engraved with the names of the tribes *in the order of their birth* (Exodus 28:10), which suggests to me a potential link to birthstones. Both onyx and gold seem to have been important to the Jews as in the second chapter of Genesis we are told that:

The gold of that land is good, bdellium<sup>4</sup> and onyx stone are there. (Gen 2:12)

Onyx often has markings that look rather like writing or even in the case of one particularly beautiful piece I have, the heavenly spheres. They could arguably be used to assist divination.

There's a lovely bit of hearsay evidence about the use of the breastplate as an oracle in Josephus, the Roman historian writing 1500 years later than Exodus:

From the stones which the High Priest wore (these were sardonxyes and I hold it superfluous to describe their nature, since it is known to all), there emanated a light, as often as God was present at the sacrifices that which was worn on the right shoulder instead of a clasp emitting a radiance sufficient to give light even to those far away, although the stone previously lacked this splendour. And certainly, this in itself merits the wonder of all those who do not, out of contempt for religion, allow themselves to be led away by a pretence of wisdom. However, I am about to relate something still more wonderful, namely that God announced victory by means of the twelve stones worn by the High Priest on his breast.. For such splendour shone from them when the army was not yet in motion.. the Greeks called this pectoral 'logeion' or oracle.

But, as Josephus was suggesting that the oracle had been in use up to 200 years previously and it was apparently lost in Babylon some 500 years earlier, he may not be the most reliable source.

The breastplate is the most often cited source for birthstones, a link being made between the tribes and the months.<sup>5</sup> There are many guesses – disguised on websites and in books as certainties – as to which tribe and stone were linked to which month.<sup>6</sup> One uses the cardinal

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance Graham Miller, F (Fellow of Royal Astronomical Society of Canada) *Breastplate Jewels of the High Priest, The Twelve Tribes, Zodiac, Month, Tribe, Settlement*, <http://www.lexiline.com/lexiline/lexi27.htm> consulted 31.10.06

<sup>4</sup> **Bdellium has been translated as an aromatic resin but other scholars suggest pearls or precious stones according to the translators of the New Authorized Version.**

<sup>5</sup> **Kunz: G.W. *The Curious Lore of Precious Stones*, originally published 1913 by Lippincott Company, Philadelphia. [New York: Dover edition, 1971] p.275-302**

<sup>6</sup> see for instance <http://www.lexiline.com/lexiline/lexi25.htm>

points and the 'portions' allotted to the tribes in Ezekiel, a prophet we are going to meet shortly, although, of course, there is no evidence that there is any foundation for this supposition.

Earlier in Exodus we are told by Moses that: 'the people come to me to enquire of God' (18:15) and the breastplate has been described as 'a distinctive symbol of the priest in his capacity as the giver of oracles'.<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Geoffrey W. Dennis says the Talmud describes it as functioning 'as a kind of ouija board with messages being spelled out for the High Priest' – and Lewis pointed out that Mesopotamian sources mention an *elmeshu* stone that also functioned as an oracle but unfortunately he didn't specify where to find the description of the practice.

The breastplate and its contents could, therefore, be seen as an oracle or lot designed by God to ascertain his will, in other words, a method of divination. Numbers 27:21 tells us:

And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the decision of the Urim before the Lord.

And Samuel 14:41 says:

Then Saul said: O Lord God of Israel why have you not answered your servant today? If this guilt is in me or in my son Jonathan give Urim, but if this guilt is in your people Israel give Thummim. And Jonathan and Saul were indicated by the lot, but the people were cleared.

Samuel 28:6-7 gives us an idea of the different ways in which answer to a question could be sought:

When Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, not by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets. Then Saul said to his servants, seek out for me a woman who is a medium, so that I may go to her and inquire of her. His servants ad to him: There is a medium of Endor.

And the medium raises Samuel who foretells Saul's defeat and demise, which duly comes to pass. The culture of the time was steeped in divinatory practises. In this short passage we've got dreams and prophesy, 'lots' and mediumship.

Looking for further inspiration, I practised the ancient art of Sortes – opening a book at random – while asking for insight on the origin of birthstones. The Bible opened to a chapter in Ezekiel that proclaimed:

Moreover, the word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, raise a lamentation over the king of Tyre, and say to him. Thus says the Lord God:  
You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.  
You were in Eden, the garden of God,  
Every precious stone was your covering,  
Carnelian, Chrysolite, and moonstone, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire [or lapis lazuli], turquoise, and emerald;  
And worked in gold were your settings and your engravings.  
On the day that you were created they were prepared.  
.With an anointed cherub as guardian, I placed you  
you were on the holy mountain of God;  
you walked among the stones of fire.

Ezekiel 28:13-14 (NRSV)

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<sup>7</sup> Lewis

Again translation problems occur, the King James version has a totally different crystal list and says: the spandles you wore were made for you on the day of your birth.

The 'day you were created' suggests conception, or earlier, but 'the day of your birth' indicates a possible link to birthstones or at the very least a stone for the month of birth, which excited me. But when I looked at web commentaries on this particular chapter of Ezekiel, I was surprised to find it linked to Satan and his fall from grace rather than the connection between the sky and crystals.

This particular portion of Ezekiel appears to have been written during his exile in Babylon, sometime after he received his call to prophesy in 593BCE, which we'll look at a little later, and probably around 586-585, and is part of his tirades against neighbouring kings – it is addressed to the King of Tyre. By verse 20 he's admonishing the king of Sidon and then in Chapter 29 he turns his attention to the Egyptian Pharaoh and threatening some very dire punishments that are still today, two and half thousand years later, being applied to contemporary events if websites are to be believed. This passage seems to have been interpreted by some Christians as referring to the fall of Satan not the King of Tyre. A quick trawl through the web revealed a host of sites under titles such as *Delving into Demons*<sup>8</sup> in which the opinion is given, for instance, that because in v.2 Ezekiel addresses the Prince of Tyre, the earthly ruler, and then by verse 11 is addressing the King of Tyre, God must be speaking to the 'invisible and ultimate power behind him', which is interpreted as Satan through 'comparison with other texts' both prior to and after Ezekiel. Such an extrapolation seems to be unsupported by the 'evidence' given as Satan is not specifically named.

Nevertheless, the writer goes on to tell his readers that 'the jewelled covering of this creature is one of the highly figurative descriptions found in this book of prophesy. Ezekiel saw many wondrous things – things for which he really had no words'. But reading Ezekiel shows that he had many words and gave vivid descriptions of his visionary experiences. Whilst not specifically saying so, the writer of *Delving into Demons* clearly connects the jewelled covering with the evilness of Satan.

I haven't pursued this idea via scholarly commentaries on Ezekiel yet – mostly because by this time I was losing the will to live, although I did look at an 18<sup>th</sup> century commentary that made no mention of the Satan idea,<sup>9</sup> but this contemporary cultural view may explain the reaction of the woman in the bookshop and her belief that crystals belong to the devil.

What I found far more interesting, was Ezekiel's call to prophesy because of the celestial signs and zodiacal and crystal imagery that accompanied it:

As I looked a stormy wind came out of the north, a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, .. gleaming amber [also translated as 'awesome crystal']. In the middle of it .. four living creatures... As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle... [the fixed cross of astrology]  
... I saw a wheel on the earth beside the living creatures, one for each of the four of them. As for the appearance of the wheels and their construction, their appearance was like the gleaming of beryl... over the heads of the living creatures there was... a dome, shining like crystal... When they moved, I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the thunder of the Almighty... Above the dome

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<sup>8</sup> Jackson, Geof W., *Delving into Demons* <http://www.realanswers.tv/answers/answers29.html> consulted 30.10.2006

<sup>9</sup> Henry, Matthew. "Commentary on Ezekiel 28." *Matthew Henry Commentary on the Whole Bible*. Blue Letter Bible. 01 Mar 1996. 31 Oct 2006. <<http://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/mhc/Eze/Eze028.html>>.

[was] a throne, in appearance like sapphire... Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendour all around. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. [Ezekiel 1]

This is the famous 'chariot of fire' that so many people today interpret as a spaceship coming down to land. And then Ezekiel goes into what sounds like shamanic trance:

And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet and I heard him speaking to me. {2}

I looked and a hand was stretched out to me, and a written scroll was in it. ... He said to me, O mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll and go, speak to the house of Israel. [3]

This eating of the scroll reminds me of the placing of a piece of magical papyrus in the mouth of Egyptian mummies and the small pieces of papyri that were rolled up and worn as a protective amulet, a common practice at that time. But here Ezekiel seems to be literally ingesting the word of God so that he can speak it.

And later he had several visionary out of body experiences including an astral trip from Babylon to Jerusalem:

[the form] stretched out the form of a hand, and took me by a lock of my head, and the spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entry of the gateway of the inner court that faces north...[8]

So, although I'm still tracking down the origin of birthstones, I now know how something created by God in Genesis becomes ungodly, and can see how Ezekiel and the Breastplate of the High Priest epitomise the difference between prophesy and divination (prophecy being something the Christian church seems to approve of whilst divination is not). That the Lord speaks directly to Ezekiel and gives him prophetic visions that he passes onto the people is prophesy. However, the High Priest is not spoken to directly, he uses a divining tool, the breastplate and the Urim and Thummim, through which God speaks to reveal his purpose and prognostications. God himself seems to be practising divination and using crystals as a tool for doing so. And I, for one, shall continue to do the same.

#### Notes and Bibliography:

For instances of consulting God with the breastplate see Judges 1:1-20, 18:28, I Samuel 23:9-11, 30:7-8 and see <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=52&letter=U> consulted 3.3.2006

Illustration for High Priest wearing breastplate: [http://www.gemstone.org/gem-o-rama-gem-o-rambirth\\_plate.html](http://www.gemstone.org/gem-o-rama-gem-o-rambirth_plate.html)

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