
The Priestly Garments

Exodus 39:1-32

Introduction Clothes make the man...

“You’re gonna love how you look.”

Aaron, the great sinner, is now clothed in glorious array.

(v.1) The Holy Garments

From the blue and purple and scarlet yarns they made finely woven garments, for ministering in the Holy Place. They made the holy garments for Aaron, as the LORD had commanded Moses.

The Old Covenant was a time of shadows, symbols and significance. Let us then with our Bibles open see the wonders of a future king and priest through the marvels of the priestly garments.

The Ephod – Representing God’s People

(v.2-7)

² He made the ephod of gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen. ³ And they hammered out gold leaf, and he cut it into threads to work into the blue and purple and the scarlet yarns, and into the fine twined linen, in skilled design. ⁴ They made for the ephod attaching shoulder pieces, joined to it at its two edges. ⁵ And the skillfully woven band on it was of one piece with it and made like it, of gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen, as the LORD had commanded Moses. ⁶ They made the onyx stones, enclosed in settings of gold filigree, and engraved like the engravings of a signet, according to the names of the sons of Israel. ⁷ And he set them on the shoulder pieces of the ephod to be stones of remembrance for the sons of Israel, as the LORD had commanded Moses.

Bezalel began by making the vest known as the ephod. It was a fine linen tunic embroidered in gold and interwoven with blue, purple and scarlet thread. It would have looked much like the beautiful curtains that lined the interior of the Tabernacle. He made it out of two large pieces, one for the front and one for the back. With two other pieces, one draped over each shoulder, he joined the front and back. A decorative sash went around the waist of the High Priest.

In work probably primarily done by Oholiab, two onyx stones were selected and engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel, six on one and six on the other appearing in their birth order. He created a filigree gold setting as a base for the stones and set the stones in them with great skill.

These were to be a constant reminder of God’s people whenever the High Priest served before the Lord. He came as their representative; he was before the Lord on their behalf. He did not come primarily for himself. His ministry was neither self-centered nor self-focused. The massive glittering black onyx stones on his shoulders were a personal and powerful reminder that what he was doing was vital to the spiritual well-being of these people he represented.

The Breastpiece – Caring for God’s People (v.8-21)

⁸ He made the breastpiece, in skilled work, in the style of the ephod, of gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen. ⁹ It was square. They made the breastpiece doubled, a span its length and a span its breadth when doubled. ¹⁰ And they set in it four rows of stones. A row of sardius, topaz, and carbuncle was the first row; ¹¹ and the second row, an emerald, a sapphire, and a diamond; ¹² and the third row, a jacinth, an agate, and an amethyst; ¹³ and the fourth row, a beryl, an onyx, and a jasper. They were enclosed in settings of gold filigree. ¹⁴ There were twelve stones with their names according to the names of the sons of Israel. They were like signets, each engraved with its name, for the twelve tribes. ¹⁵ And they made on the breastpiece twisted chains like cords, of pure gold. ¹⁶ And they made two settings of gold filigree and two gold rings, and put the two rings on the two edges of the breastpiece. ¹⁷ And they put the two cords of gold in the two rings at the edges of the breastpiece. ¹⁸ They attached the two ends of the two cords to the two settings of filigree. Thus they attached it in front to the shoulder pieces of the ephod. ¹⁹ Then they made two rings of gold, and put them at the two ends of the breastpiece, on its inside edge next to the ephod. ²⁰ And they made two rings of gold, and attached them in front to the lower part of the two shoulder pieces of the ephod, at its seam above the skillfully woven band of the ephod. ²¹ And they bound the breastpiece by its rings to the rings of the ephod with a lace of blue, so that it should lie on the skillfully woven band of the ephod, and that the breastpiece should not come loose from the ephod, as the LORD had commanded Moses.

As was instructed by God, Bezalel made the breastpiece which was attached to the front of the ephod. He made it of the same fine linen embroidered with multi-hued yarn as the inner fabric of the tabernacle. It was a bit wider than a man’s hand that was twice as tall as wide and doubled over at the bottom to make a square pouch or sack. In a dazzling display of beauty, he attached four rows of gemstones with three in each row to the outside. On each stone he engraved the name of a tribe of Israel and set in a filigree setting of gold.

These stones were same ones as decorated the fallen anointed cherub who was in the mountain of God and was found in the Garden of Eden (Ezekiel 28:12-15). This cluster of gemstones are spoken of as decorating the foundations of God’s city (Revelation 21:19-20). The reference to these stones in this cluster of texts highlights that God’s plan for redemption is being carried out. The fall with Satan in the Garden, the High Priest before the Lord with God’s people’s names inscribed on the same set of stones and the foundation of God’s holy city, the church, decorated with these stones ties together in an dazzling beauty the storyline of redemption.

Bezalel sewed a gold ring onto each of the breastpiece’s four corners. He looped a gold braided chain through the filigree mounting on the shoulders of the ephod and through the top rings of the breastpiece from which he hung breastpiece. Through the bottom two rings he strung blue cords with one end sewn to the ephod and the other end tied to the sash around the High Priest’s waist to hold it in place.

Interestingly, nothing is said here about the two objects known as the Urim and Thummim. Earlier in the book, Moses was instructed to place these two objects into the breastpiece which is why it was made in form of a sack.

Also, earlier in Exodus, we learned that the breastpiece was to be “over the heart” of the High Priest. This signified that the High Priest was to have Israel’s

interests and concerns as his focus while ministering in the Tabernacle. He was there in the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies on their behalf. Our great high priest, the Lord Jesus, came in a fully human body, now glorified, and sits on the mercy seat, the throne in heaven. He knows our struggles from personal experience. He is there at God's right hand to intercede and to represent us. Let me remind you again that Jesus is not pleading with God the Father to persuade Him to do what He is not inclined to do. No, think of Jesus as asking the Father to do what He wants to do. Think of Jesus simply presenting Himself as the argument with the Father rejoicing to respond with what He has determined already to do. We are over Jesus' heart because we are in God's plans and purposes.

The Robe – Interceding for God's People (v.22-26)

²² He also made the robe of the ephod woven all of blue, ²³ and the opening of the robe in it was like the opening in a garment, with a binding around the opening, so that it might not tear. ²⁴ On the hem of the robe they made pomegranates of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen. ²⁵ They also made bells of pure gold, and put the bells between the pomegranates all around the hem of the robe, between the pomegranates— ²⁶ a bell and a pomegranate, a bell and a pomegranate around the hem of the robe for ministering, as the LORD had commanded Moses.

Bezalel made a solid blue robe to be worn under the ephod. He made it of one piece of cloth with a hole or collar cut to slip it over the head like a poncho. The collar was made with a woven binding so that it might not tear as it was put on. As instructed, he made it to reach down to the knees. Sewn around the hem of the robe were alternating bells and multi-colored balls of yarn in the shape of pomegranates. Apparently, the High Priest was to wear this garment only when he entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. As he moved about in that inner room sprinkling the blood on the mercy seat, the soft tinkling of the bells could be heard throughout the tabernacle.

The significance of the robe is much discussed often with more heat than light. The garments color distinguished the High Priest from all others, who wore only white. The color often points to both royalty and divinity. We know that the Lord wore a garment woven in one piece with the result that the soldiers cast lots for it instead of tearing it. Is this the connection as linked by Philippians 2:4-8 which reads:

Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. [ESV]

The public recognition of his deity and authority Jesus set aside at the cross, symbolized by the removal of the one-piece garment. He has taken it up again in the resurrection and ascension where He now ministers as the King-Priest, fully arrayed in His full Deity and Authority.

The Coats and Turbans – Serving by God’s People (v.27-29)

²⁷ They also made the coats, woven of fine linen, for Aaron and his sons, ²⁸ and the turban of fine linen, and the caps of fine linen, and the linen undergarments of fine twined linen, ²⁹ and the sash of fine twined linen and of blue and purple and scarlet yarns, embroidered with needlework, as the LORD had commanded Moses.

Bezalel also set himself to the task of making the full attire for the regular priests, for Aaron and his sons in the ordinary duties of their priestly work. From the fine white linen, he made all that God had instructed. The raiment consisted of a coat or robe, a turban with a cap and the linen undergarments. Over the robe was worn a sash that was heavily embroidered which was worn around the waist.

The Bible tells us that we are believer-priests the New Covenant. In an amazing scene in heaven we are connected to these ordinary priests in these words:

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” [Revelation 7:13-17]

As those who serve in the living temple, clothed in the white of Christ’s righteousness, we offer up our persons and our praises. We receive from God His lovingly tender care and the longed for fulfillment of His promises. Beginning with our conversion and going throughout eternity, we will serve our great God, seeking to carry out His will here and then as it is carried out in heaven.

The Crown – Sanctifying of God’s People (v.30-31)

³⁰ They made the plate of the holy crown of pure gold, and wrote on it an inscription, like the engraving of a signet, “Holy to the LORD.” ³¹ And they tied to it a cord of blue to fasten it on the turban above, as the LORD had commanded Moses.

Bezalel and Oholiab made the final piece of attire for the High Priest. This was the small shield or medallion made of pure gold. The medallion had the words, “Holy to the Lord” engraved on it. With a cord of blue, it was attached to the turban of the High Priest the medallion hung over the High Priest’s forehead. It had to be worn at all times when he ministered for the people. It was to be a visible reminder to the people and to himself that the purpose of his ministry was to present God’s people as holy to the Lord.

Christ is made to us our holiness. On our forehead he has placed His very own name (Revelation 22:4). Just as the High Priest bore the names of God’s people before God with “Holiness to the Lord” as a gold medallion on his forehead, so God has written our names in the Lamb’s book of life and we bear Jesus’ holy name on our foreheads identifying that we are His, His holy people.

Conclusion

³² Thus all the work of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting was finished, and the people of Israel did according to all that the LORD had commanded Moses; so they did.

Here is the bookend to the opening of this chapter. The people are obedient in their work of making the tabernacle.

What is the significance of these clothes?

In their direct connection by design, material and style to the Tabernacle, they point to the Lord being clothed in flesh. The metaphor of Christ being among us as a tabernacle is now the metaphor of Christ being enrobed in human flesh.

In the fine linen that they are made of, they point to the robe of righteousness that Christ grants to His people. The church is spoken of as being robed in white linen. That white linen is the righteousness of Christ.

The stones on the shoulder and the stones on breastplate all speak of Christ our High Priest who bears us before the throne of God and has our interests at heart. His gracious work from the throne of mercy grants us access to God. We have a present access through worship and prayer while living before the face of God. We will have a final and full access when we will stand with praise swelling hearts before that very throne.

Christ is the substance of the Levitical priesthood. He is the priest in clothing so great and so grand. But He is ever so much more. The great hymnist Isaac Watts *mingled doctrine and doxology in these words.*

The true Messiah now appears,
The types are all withdrawn;
So fly the shadows and the stars
Before the rising dawn.
No smoking sweets, nor bleeding lambs,
Nor kid nor bullock slain;
Incense and spice of costly names
Would all be burnt in vain.
Aaron must lay his robes away,
His mitre and his vest,
When God himself comes down to be
The offering and the priest.
He took our mortal flesh, to show
The wonders of his love;
For us he paid his life below,
And prays for us above.
“Father,” he cries, “forgive their sins,
For I myself have died;”
And then he shows his opened veins,
And pleads his wounded side.²⁸

²⁸ Isaac Watts, *The Psalms and Hymns of Isaac Watts* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1998).

All of us who serve in God's household, in God's temple, the church, recognize both the glorious privilege and the great problem we have. We get to serve God like the priests. But, like the earthly priests we are beset with sin, fallenness and futility. The English pastor of the 1600's, George Herbert, in his poem, *Aaron*, captured the connection between Exodus 39 and our joys and struggles in serving the Lord.

Holiness on the head,
Light and perfections on the breast,
Harmonious bells below, raising the dead
To lead them unto life and rest:
Thus are true Aarons dressed.

Profaneness in my head,
Defects and darkness in my breast,
A noise of passions ringing me for dead
Unto a place where is no rest:
Poor priest, thus am I dressed

Only another head
I have, another heart and breast,
Another music, making live, not dead,
Without whom I could have no rest:
In Him I am well dressed.

Christ is my only head,
My alone-only heart and breast,
My only music, striking me even dead;
That to the old man I may rest,
And be in him new-dressed.

So, holy in my head,
Perfect and light in my dear breast,
My doctrine tuned by Christ (who is not dead,
But lives in me while I do rest),
Come people; Aaron's dressed.²⁹

All that we offer people and God in ministry and service is accepted only in the righteousness of Christ. As we obey and serve our God, may "Holy to the Lord" mark all our work of ministry.

²⁹Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, *Exodus : Saved for God's Glory*, Includes Bibliographical References (P. [1165]-1202) and Indexes. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2005), 1141.