

Bible Study # 48 Exodus 28.1–14 04–02–2021

Having explained the setting up of the Tent of Meeting, it is not surprising that the following narrative concerns the dress of the priests, in general, and especially of the high priest. Some of the ornateness of the Most Holy Place is replicated in the breastplate and turban of the high priest.

The significance of the priestly dress does not lie in each individual part, nor does the import of the priest's role depend on each individual action they performed in Israel. The exposition of that role in the epistle to the Hebrews must guide the interpretation.

The priestly role was to serve the LORD, and 'to offer gifts and sacrifices for sin' and 'to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray' (Heb. 5:1–2). The priests also had responsibilities relating to the law, for they had to read it to the people and remind them that as covenant servants they had duties to perform (Deut. 31:9–13; Neh. 8:2–3).

While the text does not say so explicitly, this chapter deals mainly with the dress of the high priest, though there is some mention of the other priests as well. The most frequent designation of the high priest, at first, was simply 'the priest', while later he is referred to as 'the high priest' (Heb. Lit. 'great priest', Num. 35:25, 28), or less often as 'the first priest' (2 Chron. 19:11).

Just as it was later prescribed for the kings and prophets (Deut. 17:15; 18:15), the priests had to be from Israel itself, not imported from other nations. Aaron had already served as Moses' prophet (Exod. 4:10–16), while his sons, Nadab and Abihu, had been associated with the elders of Israel in worship of the LORD (24:1). Now two other sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, were to be set aside as priests as well.

The LORD indicated three times in this section that the task of these men towards him was 'to serve as a priest' (vs. 1, 3, 4). It is not the usual verb for 'serve' that is used here but a verb made up from the noun 'priest' (Heb. 'kohên'). Aaron was to be clothed in sacred garments (lit., 'garments of holiness') 'for glory and for honor'. The high dignity of the office had to be reflected by the wearing of suitable garments.

Specific men were chosen by God, and endowed with his spirit, for the task of making the Tent of Meeting and the garments worn by the priests (31:1–11). They were given the spirit of wisdom, later referred to as a filling with the Spirit of God (31:3; 35:31). The leaders of this group were Bezalel and Oholiab (31:2, 6).

Six specific items of dress were specified, two of which, the ephod and the breastpiece, are described in much fuller detail in verses 6–14 and 15–30 respectively. Of the others, the robe is also given further treatment in verses 31–35, while the woven tunic is discussed in verses 39–41. The turban features in verses 36–38, while the sash is described in verses 39–40.

All these items are called 'holy garments' as they were designed for special use at the Tent of Meeting. They separated the priests from the rest of the community, and their colors (gold, blue, purple and scarlet) tied them in explicitly with the colors of the Tent of Meeting.

Since there is no exact equivalent in English of the Hebrew word, it is almost universally transliterated as 'ephod'. Several other ephods are mentioned in the Old Testament in addition to that of the high priest dealt with in these verses: The rest of the priesthood wore something that was less elaborate (linen ephod, [ESV, NASB95], 1 Sam. 2:18). Some replica ephods were venerated (see e.g., Judg. 8:27; 17:1–5).

The ephod was a close-fitting garment with sleeves, extending from the shoulders to the hips, and held together by two shoulder pieces. It was made of yarn and linen, with an integrated waistband of the same composition and colors.

In vs. 9–14 the representative nature of the high priest’s role is emphasized by the further provision concerning the engraving of the names of the twelve tribes on stones. Two onyx stones were needed, with six of the names on each one, and listed according to their birth order. These stones were placed in an appropriate jewelry setting before being attached to the shoulders of the ephod. The word for ‘jewelry setting’ only occurs in the passages in Exodus dealing with the high priest’s garments, except for Psalm 45:14, where it seemingly means ‘embroidered garment’.

The significance of these stones is brought out by the repeated mention in v. 12 that they were ‘memorial stones’. Together with the names on the breastplate (see v. 21), these signified that when the high priest ministered in the Holy Place he was fulfilling a mediatorial role for Israel.

Our study will continue tomorrow with Exodus 28:15–30.