

## **Bible Study # 49 Exodus 28:15–30 04–03–2021**

The breastpiece was not purely decorative. It served a function in the judicial processes of Israel, for it held the Urim and Thummim (see comment on v. 30). The names of sons of Israel on it contributed to the intercessory ministry of the high priest.

The breastpiece was similar in composition to the ephod, yet distinct from it. Square in shape, it had four rows of precious stones (with three in each row) set in the same sort of embroidered settings as used for the stones attached to the shoulders (cf. vv. 6–14).

On each stone was the name of one of the twelve tribes. Note how the breastpiece is referred to as ‘breastpiece of judgment’, a description repeated in v. 30. The significance of the reference for using it to make decisions as well as the note regarding the names of the tribes, are both brought out later (see vs. 29–30).

In vs. 22–28 detailed instructions were given as to how the breastpiece was to be attached to the ephod. When folded, the ephod served as a pouch or container for the Urim and Thummim. It had gold rings at the corners, and gold cords that tied it to the engraved gems on the shoulders.

The lower rings enabled a blue cord to be tied to the breastpiece and thus to connect it with the waistband of the ephod. The reason for this was that ‘the breastpiece will not swing out from the ephod’ (v. 28). In other words, the breastpiece was to be held tightly against the ephod.

The purpose of the breastpiece was twofold. On the one hand, it was a reminder or memorial of the people of Israel, in addition to the memorial stones worn on the shoulders of Aaron. As the High Priest entered into the Holy Place he carried in a double way the names of the tribes he represented before the LORD.

He carried them ‘over his heart’ (vs. 29–30), an expression that may be more than just a physical description, as the same Hebrew phrase is used by Jeremiah when describing the new covenant being written on the hearts of God’s people (‘on their hearts’, Jer. 31:33). It may denote the devout feelings of the high priest and his sympathy for those whom he represented.

The second important function of the breastpiece was that it contained the Urim and Thummim. Twice in this chapter the expression is found that the breastpiece was used for making decisions for the Israelites (v.15 & 30, ‘breastplate of judgment’. ‘Thus Aaron shall bear the judgment of the people of Israel on his heart before the LORD regularly.

The nature of the urim and thummim has never been revealed, and the derivation of these words is uncertain. The traditional meanings, ‘lights’ and ‘perfections’, still seem more convincing than more recent suggestions. The two were something tangible, probably stones (in addition to the ones with the names of the tribes of Israel), and were entrusted to the Levites (Deut. 33:8).

However, they could not have been stones providing only ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answers. When revelation was sought, the answer was given in terms of divine revelation, so that prophetic speech seems to have been involved (cf. Judg. 1:1–2; 1 Sam. 14:36–42). In the biblical text, there is no mention of the use of urim and thummim after the time of David, possibly being replaced by the ministry of the prophets.

We will study Exodus 28:31–43 next.