

THE KINGDOM, THE BIBLE, & US

Understanding the Bible's story, Jesus' importance, & Our place in God's Kingdom plan



Lesson 54- God Dwells Among His People: The Priests & Their
Garments
Dustin Burdin-FBC Webb City

Introduction

We finished exploring the pieces of furniture and the materials used to construct the Tabernacle. We will have one more lesson that covers the special event after the Tabernacle was erected, where God filled the place with His special presence.

Before we get to that, the storyline in Exodus begins describing a group of people God wants to do a special task for Him. These were known as the priests. These priests become mediators between God and Israel as well as the official workers and keepers of the Tabernacle and all its furnishings.

It is important to understand the work of the priests in the Old Testament because much of what Jesus did was function as a High Priest. The Book of Hebrews is replete with parallel ideas tying Jesus' death on our behalf of sins to the work of the priests. With this in mind, let's explore the priests.

The Priests

Exodus 28

God tells Moses that his brother Aaron and his sons Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar, are to be set apart as priests to God.

The word priest admittedly comes from an unknown origin parent word. Some scholars claim the word may have origins in the idea of a minister, a servant of God. The word in the Old Testament is nuanced to refer to a person who is dedicated to God's service by administering the sacred things of God, specifically receiving sacrifices.

The first instance of the word in the Hebrew Bible is in Genesis 14:18, "And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a **priest** of God Most High." Melchizedek met Abram after he rescued his nephew Lot from the invading kings. Melchizedek is the king of Salem (later Jerusalem) and was also called a priest of God Most High. He issued a blessing to Abram on behalf of God. Abram gave a tenth of the spoils of war to Melchizedek as a tithe offering.

The second time the word appears is in Exodus chapter 18. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law is called the priest of Midian. "Now Jethro, the **priest of Midian**, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel His people, how the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt" (Exodus 18:1). In Exodus 18:12 it says Jethro took burnt offering and sacrifices for God and he offered them up on behalf of Aaron, Moses, and the elders of Israel, and prepared a meal where they ate before God.

This adds some clarity to the idea of what a priest does. They are an official minister of God, and they carry out holy duties. Predominantly they administer the sacrifices of God on behalf of people. Jethro clearly carries out this function. He acts as a mediator between Moses and Israel, and their God. Jethro offers up sacrifices to God and the fact it is not recorded that God rejected them implies God accepted them from Jethro's hand. We do not get a lot of background beyond this, but in some capacity Melchizedek and Jethro functioned as a pre-Old Covenant Law priest to God.

When exploring how the word priest is used in the rest of the Hebrew Bible, we can conclude the priest had two primary category functions: official ministers of God and official workers/keepers of the holy things (Tabernacle and furniture). Here is a summary of the duties of the priests:

They ministered in an official capacity before the Lord in the Tabernacle on behalf of Israel (Deuteronomy 18:5)

They prayed on behalf of the people (Joel 2:17)

They were to be the teachers of the Law (Leviticus 10:11; Micah 3:11; Malachi 2:7)

They were to be examples of holiness before the people (Deuteronomy 33:9)

They served as judges and mediators in Israel (Deuteronomy 17:9)

They received sacrifices from the people and offered them up before God according to God's Law (Leviticus 1-7)

They carried the Ark of the Covenant and other furnishings of the Tabernacle (Joshua 3:3)

How important would you describe the priests' job as?

The Priests' Garments

Exodus 28

Continuing in chapter twenty-eight, let's look at the garments of the priests since they also communicate a message about the priest's duties.

God calls for holy garments to be made for Aaron. These garments will “consecrate” Aaron, that means physically show his task is set apart for a special divine service. Their will be a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a tunic, a turban, and a sash. God said He would put the spirit of wisdom for making these garments in certain people. Aaron’s sons will also get holy garments.

The garments will use gold, blue, purple, and scarlet linen material. The ephod will be made of gold, blue, purple, and scarlet material. Two onyx stones will have the names of the sons of Israel etched in them by a jeweler. Six names on each stone, these are the twelve tribes of Israel. One stone each goes in the two shoulder pieces of the ephod. “You shall put the two stones on the shoulder pieces of the ephod, as stones of memorial for the sons of Israel, and Aaron shall bear their names before the Lord on his two shoulders for a memorial” (Exodus 28:12). God said Aaron would represent the names of the twelve tribes of Israel before the Lord when he goes in the Tabernacle to minister.

These onyx stones are set inside a gold fixture to hold them and the two shoulder pieces are connected with a twisted gold chain.

Breastpiece of Judgment

Next, God calls for a breastpiece of judgment to be made (28:15). It will be made from gold, blue, purple, and scarlet material. It is to be square, approximately nine square inches, with four rows of stones with three stones in each row. These stones are ornate and expensive, you can read the list in Exodus 28:17-20. It is interesting to note that each of these stones are repeated in Revelation 21:19-20. They will be in Heaven and used to decorate the foundations of God’s city. Notice in Exodus 28:21, “The stones shall be according to the names of the sons of Israel: twelve, according to their names; they shall be *like* the engravings of a seal, each according to his name for the twelve tribes.”

This breastpiece of judgment is given more significance in Exodus 28:29-30. God says Aaron shall, “carry the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment over his heart when he enters the holy place, for a memorial before the Lord continually.” Like the two onyx stones on the shoulder pads, the breastpiece will carry the names of the twelve tribes before the Lord when Aaron ministers in the holy place.

What does the stones with Israel’s tribal names on them in the High Priest’s garments teach us about the main job of the High Priest before the Lord?

In verse thirty God says the Urim and Thummim shall be placed in the breastpiece as well. The Urim and Thummim are mysterious items to us. We are not sure what they looked like. They only appear in a few instances in the Old Testament. The words Urim and Thummim are in plural form in the Hebrew. Thus, we are not sure how many of these items there were, perhaps just two, perhaps many of each kind. Urim is a word of unknown origin, but some scholars claim it can have the idea of *light* in a metaphorical sense, such as *revelation*. Thummim is also of unknown origin while some speculate the word can have reference to completeness or innocence.

The implication is that in some way God communicated His decisions to Israel through the Urim and Thummim. These devices were used when at times it says Israel, “cast lots.” Some have speculated they were similar to dice and were rolled out on the ground. Others say they were types of stones with different colors on each side. The High Priest may have pulled them out of a pouch and whatever side was facing up, its color gave an indicated yes or no answer. We simply do not know what these looked like and how they used them. It seems that in some way the Urim and Thummim were *cast*, either on the ground or in the hands of the High Priest, and the resulting answer was God’s communicated decision to Israel through them.

For example, in Numbers 27:21 it reads, “Moreover, he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the Lord. At his command they shall go out and at his command they shall come in, *both* he and the sons of Israel with him, even all the congregation.” God said in this verse that the High Priest Eleazar (took over after his father Aaron died) will inquire of the Lord’s judgment on behalf of Joshua (who will take over after Moses dies) with the Urim and Thummim.

The breastpiece was folded over in half to form a type of pouch, and these devices were kept in it. The connection comes in the phrase breastpiece of *judgment*. The High Priest carries the Urim and Thummim, which represent God’s judgments and decisions for Israel. The High Priest is the one whom people went to in order to have a tough decision answered by God since he carried these devices of determining God’s will. He also carries the names of each of the twelve tribes of Israel on his chest, over his heart. This means the High Priest also represents the people before God and he represents God’s judgments before the people.

This gives us the main job of the High Priest, he is a **mediator** between God and the people of God. We are jumping ahead, but eventually we will discuss the Day of Atonement as found in Leviticus. For now, let’s point out that it was only the High Priest who was authorized to enter the Holy of Holies, or Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement. Only the High Priest could enter the special room where God’s Mercy Seat was above the Ark of the Covenant. The High Priest functioned like a representative of all the people of Israel before God, and he made atonement for their sins before God through the burnt offering and sprinkling of the blood.

I cannot overstate enough this idea that the High Priest functioned as a mediator, a go-between, between God and the people because the New Testament picks up on this and teaches that Jesus Christ was a greater High Priest than Aaron ever could be.

The Robe of the Ephod

Exodus 28:31-39

God commands that the High Priest have a robe for the ephod made of blue/violet material. This is the same color and material used for the curtain veil that guards the entrance into the Most Holy place. On the hem there are to be pomegranate type weavings of blue, purple, and scarlet. The pomegranates are often thought to signify God's fruitfulness in His ability to provide for His people. Each pomegranate design is to be alternated with a golden bell sown into the hem of the robe. The reason for this? "It shall be on Aaron when he ministers; and its tinkling shall be heard when he enters and leaves the holy place before the Lord, so that he will not die" (Exodus 28:35).

To be honest, we are left to speculate a little as to why God commanded for bells on the hem of the High Priest's robe, or else he would die when entering God's presence. We know that this was not because God needed to hear the bells or else He would not be aware the High Priest was entering. The bells are not for some need on God's part. Therefore, we can safely say these bells are for the High Priest's benefit.

What do you think the bells might be for?

The explanation that I have become convinced of says the bells on the hem were teaching a lesson of reverence to the priests before entering God's presence in the Tabernacle. Think of the bells like a doorbell to a house. You might have friends or relatives whom you are close to and have the kind of relationship with that you do not make them knock or ring the doorbell. "Just come on in," might be your type of relationship with some people. Other people you are not close to, you expect them to ring the doorbell and/or knock before trying to enter your home. If they do not do this, it is considered rude and disrespectful to your home. The priests, and the rest of the people for that matter, could never treat entering God's home (the Tabernacle) with casual irreverence.

The bells were a reminder to the High Priest that he must always announce his presence before entering God's home. Once he is in God's home, his presence will always be announced as he moves from the holy place room to the most holy place room. This was not for God's benefit, this was so the High Priest, and others who hear

the bells, to be reminded they must always treat the house of God, and the presence of God, with the upmost respect and reverence.

The Golden Head Plate

Exodus 28:36-38

God commands a plate of pure gold be made to go on the headpiece turban for the High Priest. On this golden plate it is to have the engraving, “Holy to the Lord.” It goes on the front of the turban and in Exodus 28:38 it says, “It shall be on Aaron’s forehead, and Aaron shall take away the iniquity of the holy things which the sons of Israel consecrate, with regard to all their holy gifts; and it shall always be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the Lord.”

What do you think is the significance of the golden head plate?

Since it is to be placed on the forehead, we can assume this piece is meant to remind Aaron of something that he should always keep on his mind. The purpose of this gold plate is to always remind the High Priest that when he takes an offering from the sinful people, he must be careful to do his job in faith and obedience to the Lord so that he can make atonement for their sins. The gold plate does not bring atonement and forgiveness, but it serves as a reminder to the High Priest that what he is doing is “set apart,” “holy” to the Lord and he must take his job serious, always before the Lord as the peoples’ mediator.

Aaron’s Sons and the Priests’ Undergarments

Aaron’s sons also get their own tunics, sashes, and caps. God was specific enough to call for undergarments (underwear) to be made that would cover the priests’ bare flesh of their inner thighs. This was so when they walk up the steps to the altar or into the Tabernacle, they would not violate the holiness of those places by revealing the flesh of their inner thighs.

Why do you think God went through the trouble to be this detailed about the priestly garments, even including undergarments be worn?

Conclusion

The High Priest and the other priests had a very important function. We covered some of their duties. The High Priest perhaps had the most dangerous job in all of Israel. If he made a mistake during his duties ministering in the Tabernacle, especially the Holy of Holies room, he could be killed. We covered in this lesson mostly the garments the High Priest wore. These details, even about clothing, should teach us a very important lesson. We must take the holiness of God with the upmost seriousness.

God took the time to have this much detail in the clothing of the High Priest to convey the truth that His holy presence must never be treated casually. Only certain people, the priests (and even among them only the High Priest) could enter His presence in the Tabernacle. Then, these priests had to have specific clothes to wear in order to be accepted in God's presence.

Praise God though, that He makes a way for Israel to have representation before His presence by instituting the priesthood. In a later lesson we will cover specifically how Jesus Christ functions as a great High Priest on our behalf. This is good news to everyone, that through faith in Christ, they can have a mediator providing a path for them to be in the presence of God one day.

(See Illustration of High Priest's Garments on last page)

