

The Priesthood, Part 1

The Garments of the Priesthood

The last several months we have been looking at holiness. This month we are going to look at the priesthood and how it pertains to holiness. Peter writes, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (**1 Peter 2:9**). This was not a new revelation to Peter. God tells Israel at Mount Sinai, "Now if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (**Exodus 19:5-6**). Now, the tribe of Levi was the only people who could be priests, so how could God tell the whole nation this? Well, the Levitical priests were the priesthood to the nation of Israel, but the nation of Israel was to be the priesthood to the world. To understand this, we must understand the priesthood.

The Duties of the Priesthood

No other people except the Levites could approach God or minister to Him, and only the descendants of Aaron could be High Priests. They were set apart by God because God requires holiness in His temple. Everything that was done at the Temple was exclusively done by them. The Levites were divided by families, and each family would take their tour of duty. We see this in Luke's account of the announcement of John the Baptist: "In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. Now it came about, while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division...." (**chapter 1:5**). So it was the function of the priests to maintain the Temple, fill the oil in the menorah, put in new wicks, clean the vessels, replace the show bread every week, etc. But what we most likely think of is what they do at the altar. Now, there is great depth in all of their duties, so we want to look at only a few but first we want to look at their garments and as we do, we will see how Israel was a chosen race, a holy nation, a royal priesthood.

The Garments of the Priesthood

God spoke to Moses and said, "You shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and beauty" (**Exodus 28:2**). Like everything with God, He

requires a specific way to everything that has to do with Him because He is Holy! God often said to Moses, “Be careful to do everything that I have spoken.” This is very important to note because there is no place for “man-made” anything when it comes to God. We must always do things God’s way, not ours.

There were eight garments which were called “vestments of sanctity.” The Hebrew word for “sanctity” comes from the word for “holy,” which is *Kadosh*. Therefore these garments were only used in the service of the Temple and at no other time. We also see this with the utensils used in the Temple; in fact, everything associated with the Temple was considered holy and was to be handled in a special way. These garments were called garments of glory. The Hebrew word for “glory” comes from the root word which has the meaning “heavy,” as in full, like the fullness of the Lord. The garments were a picture of the dignity and beauty connected with serving God.

The Ephod

Biblical scholars did not know what to compare the ephod to because there was no piece of clothing to compare to it. The symbolism behind it could not even be determined because there was nothing similar to it in the ancient Near East: that is, until 1920 when they discovered tablets from Ugaritic. Ugaritic was in the modern Ras Shamra near the Syrian coast. We find that the ephod was referred to as an expensive robe, something worn by the upper class in the Near East. An ephod was worn by people other than the priests. Gideon made a gold ephod which caused Israel to go after other gods. An ephod had a permanent place in the Philistine sanctuary; it was behind this ephod where Goliath placed his sword.

The word seems to be linguistically connected with *teraph*, which was the household idol of Rachel. The fabric of the ephod was the same kind of fabric used in the curtains and veil of the Mishkan, the Tent of Meetings, thereby making a connection between the High Priest and the Sanctuary. The ephod contained all five colors of the Mishkan. The main function of the ephod was the “stones of remembrance.” These were two stones of onyx which the names of the twelve tribes were written upon, six to a stone. Aaron wore this on his shoulders, symbolic of the shepherd who carries his lambs on his shoulders.

The Breastplate

The breastplate was called the “breastplate of judgment.” The breastplate was a rectangular plate with jewels hanging from gold chains. It was worn by kings. Its purpose? Well, the high priest was considered the mediator between God and the people. He was to bring the sanctity, glory, and splendor of God to the people, and he was to bring the sinful man to God. The breastplate was worn over the heart. The breastplate was set with four rows of small square stones, each row containing three stones. The first row was a sardius, a topaz, and a carbuncle. The second row was an emerald, a sapphire, and a diamond. The third row was a

figure, an agate, and an amethyst. The fourth row was a beryl, an onyx, and a jasper. These beautiful stones had the names of Israel engraved on them. When Aaron entered into the presence of God, these precious, beautiful stones were a memorial and testimony to God of His love for His people. These same stones will be used in the New Jerusalem which is described in **Revelation 21**.

The breastplate, along with its pouch, contained the Urim and Thummim. If the stones are a picture of the high priest representing us before God, the Urim and Thummim is a picture of the high priest representing God to us. The Urim and Thummim were two stones used as a means by which God's judgment might be made known. Their meaning is light and perfection. They were considered like a lot, to determine God's light in a matter or His perfect will. After the days of David, we no longer read about them in God's Word. Those stones seem quite the mystery; scholars feel that this, too, like the ephod, may have been used before the time of Moses.

The Robe

This next piece of clothing is called "the robe of the ephod." It was the robe that the ephod was worn over. The robe was quite unique with its bells and pomegranates on the hem. The bells were for the purpose that the people could hear them and know that the High Priest was ministering before God. This way the people could pray and repent as he was officiating in their name. Also they would know that he was not struck dead by God, but that God was receiving his offering. The Talmud (the collective work of the oral Torah) interprets the priestly garments this way: as sacrifices make atonement, so do the priestly vestments make atonement. The coat atoned for bloodshed, the breeches for lewdness, the head covering for arrogance, the girdle for impure meditations of the heart, the breastplate for neglect of civil laws, the ephod for idolatry, the head piece for brazenness, and the robe for slander because it says, "Let an article of sound come and atone for an offense of sound." From this it seems that the rabbis considered the actual vestments worn by the High Priest on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) to be in some way involved with making atonement. Now if you consider Yeshua as our High Priest, He also entered into the Holy of Holies and made atonement for us; and did He not enter into that sacred place with all His glory and splendor like those garments represent?

How about the pomegranates? Well, a pomegranate contains 613 seeds representing the 613 commandments of Torah, thus this is a picture of the high priest carrying a constant reminder of the Torah on his clothing.

The Head Piece

The head piece, or crown, was made of solid gold and upon the head piece it is written "Holy to the Lord." Thus it is said, "When Aaron stood before the Lord fully arrayed in all of his garments of splendor, God saw the gold plate flashing

forth Holiness to His Name and accepted the people through the priest.” We also approach God by His Name, for all our prayers are in the name of Yeshua. So the head piece was upon Aaron’s forehead so that he would bring forgiveness for the sacred offerings that the children of Israel consecrated. And it shall be on his head always to bring them favor before the Lord. One day, Yeshua will wear the golden crown of splendor upon His forehead.

The Tunic

Not much is said about the tunic except, “You shall weave the tunic of checkered work of fine linen.” The tunic was made of white linen. The word used here for linen is *shesh*, which literally means “six.” This meant that the thread used in this garment was a six-ply linen thread. It was worn closest to the body and it represented purity. It teaches us that no one may approach God with impurity/sin. Yeshua was our High Priest and He was blameless and pure, without sin. Yeshua Himself wore a one-piece tunic which was like the priests and it was this that the soldiers cast lots for at His crucifixion.

The Head Covering

There were two different types of head coverings. The priests wore one type of which Josephus writes that it was a flattish cap of woven linen that was wrapped repeatedly around part of the head like a turban and then it hung down on the back. The high priest wore a beautiful wound turban around his full head and it then hung down on his back and the gold head piece was placed upon it. Yet, the turban and head piece left enough room on the forehead for the tefillin. The covering of the head spoke of submission. It symbolized humility before God. Because the entire priesthood wore some sort of covering on their heads, this is why Jews wear a covering on their heads even till today.

The Breeches

The breeches were like pants. They went from the hip to the thigh. Some commentaries refer to them as pants, others call them underwear. Nevertheless, the reason for them was for modesty. It was to cover up any potential nakedness when the priest would ascend to the altar.

Vestments of Splendor

God referred to the priest’s garments not only as garments of sanctity and garments of glory, but garments of splendor. Splendor could be translated as beauty. These garments added beauty to the sanctuary. These garments had the finest embroidery and stitch work, detailed weaving, and handiwork. But what also added to the beauty were the colors. The colors of the sanctuary were the same colors of the priestly garments. We are going to look at these colors and what they symbolized.

Gold: Gold is the purest metal and is often used in connection with royalty. This showed that the priesthood was a royal priesthood.

Blue: The sky blue color in Hebrew is called *techelet*. Blue was to represent heaven. It is also the same color as the tzitzit (the cords which are worn on the four corners of the garments). The priest's robe was made of this blue. So like the tzitzit, it is a reminder to follow Torah; the priest's robe was like one big tzitzit to remind the people to follow Torah. Now this blue was made from the blood of the *chilazon*. The *chilazon* was a Mediterranean snail. It was very rare. It took 12,000 snails to produce 1.4 grams of dye.

Scarlet: Scarlet is a color to remind us of our human nature. The high priest then represented mankind. The crimson color was produced by a worm called the crimson worm. The crimson red was called *tola'at shani*.

Purple: Purple was a combination of the blue and scarlet. Again, because of the difficulty in making this color, it was a sign of royalty. This dark red color which resembled purple was called *argaman*.

White: White represents purity; it's on this basis that we come to God.

What a Picture

Now, the Hebrew word for "splendor" means beauty, but it means much more. The same root word is also used in **Isaiah 61:3** and **verse 10** to refer to the Bridegroom. Specifically, it refers to the beautiful headwear a bridegroom used to wear. So it would seem that the picture that God was painting was one of a beautifully dressed bridegroom serving his bride in their little house, the Mishkan (the tabernacle). So here we have our Great High Priest Yeshua, who serves His Bride Israel, and those who have been grafted in, the redeemed, in their little house, represented by several things like the sukkah or the tabernacle of our hearts and most of all, we too are being built up into a spiritual dwelling, a holy temple where our Great High Priest will reside full of glory and splendor.

What a picture of such glory and majestic beauty, the Bride and the Bridegroom, the Great High Priest ministering at the heavenly altar! But what does this have to do with us being a Royal Priesthood? Well, we too have clothing that we are to wear, and we too must minister at the altar. And the purpose of the priesthood was to lead the people in their act of worship which was done by their sacrifices. But all of this we will look at the next time.