

Exodus 28: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Exodus chapter 28 Then bring near to you Aaron your brother and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests, Aaron and Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu, Eliezer and Ithamar.

And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty. You shall speak to all the skilful whom I have filled with a spirit of skill, that they make Aaron's garments to consecrate him for my priesthood.

These are the garments that they shall make, a breastplate, an ephod, a robe, a code of checker work, a turban and a sash. They shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother and his sons to serve me as priests.

They shall receive gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen. And they shall make the ephod of gold, of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and of fine twined linen, skillfully worked.

It shall have two shoulder pieces attached to its two edges, so that it may be joined together. And the skillfully woven band on it shall be made like it and be of one piece with it, of gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen.

[1 : 0 7] You shall take two onyx stones and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel, six of their names on the one stone and the names of the remaining six on the other stone, in the order of their birth.

As a jeweller engraves signets, so shall you engrave the two stones with the names of the sons of Israel. You shall enclose them in settings of gold filigree, and you shall set the two stones on the shoulder pieces of the ephod, as stones of remembrance for the sons of Israel.

And Aaron shall bear their names before the Lord on his two shoulders for remembrance. You shall make settings of gold filigree, and two chains of pure gold, twisted like cords, and you shall attach the corded chains to the settings.

You shall make a breastplate of judgment, in skilled work. In the style of the ephod you shall make it, of gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen shall you make it.

It shall be square and doubled, a span its length and a span its breadth. You shall set in it four rows of stones, a row of sardius, topaz, and carbuncle shall be the first row, and the second row an emerald, a sapphire and a diamond, and the third row a jacinth, an agate, an amethyst, and the fourth row a beryl, an onyx, and a jasper.

[2 : 2 1] They shall be set in gold filigree. There shall be twelve stones with their names according to the names of the sons of Israel. They shall be like signets, each engraved with its name, for the twelve tribes.

You shall make for the breastplate twisted chains like cords of pure gold. And you shall make for the breastplate two rings of gold, and put the two rings on the two edges of the breastpiece.

And you shall put the two cords of gold in the two rings at the edges of the breastpiece. The two ends of the two cords you shall attach to the two settings of filigree, and so attach it in front to the shoulder pieces of the ephod.

You shall make two rings of gold, and put them at the two ends of the breastpiece, on its inside edge next to the ephod. And you shall make two rings of gold, and attach them in front to the lower part of the two shoulder pieces of the ephod, at its seam above the skilfully woven band of the ephod.

And they shall bind the breastpiece by its rings to the rings of the ephod, with a lace of blue, so that it may lie on the skilfully woven band of the ephod, so that the breastpiece shall not come loose from the ephod.

[3 : 25] So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart, when he goes into the holy place, to bring them to regular remembrance before the Lord. And in the breastpiece of judgment you shall put the urim and the thummim, and they shall be on Aaron's heart, when he goes in before the Lord.

Thus Aaron shall bear the judgment of the people of Israel on his heart before the Lord regularly. You shall make the robe of the ephod all of blue. It shall have an opening for the head in the middle of it, with a woven binding around the opening, like the opening in a garment, so that it may not tear.

On its hem you shall make pomegranates of blue and purple and scarlet yarns, around its hem, with bells of gold between them, a golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, around the hem of the robe.

And it shall be on Aaron when he ministers, and its sound shall be heard when he goes into the holy place before the Lord, and when he comes out, so that he does not die. You shall make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet, holy to the Lord.

And you shall fasten it on the turban by a cord of blue. It shall be on the front of the turban. It shall be on Aaron's forehead, and Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts.

[4 : 42] It shall regularly be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the Lord. You shall weave the coat in checker work of fine linen, and you shall make a turban of fine linen, and you shall make a sash embroidered with needlework.

For Aaron's sons you shall make coats and sashes and caps. You shall make them for glory and beauty. And you shall put them on Aaron your brother, and on his sons with him, and shall anoint them, and ordain them, and consecrate them, that they may serve me as priests.

You shall make for them linen undergarments to cover their naked flesh. They shall reach from the hips to the thighs. And they shall be on Aaron and on his sons when they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister in the holy place, lest they bear guilt and die.

This shall be a statute forever for him and for his offspring after him. Exodus chapter 28 concerns the clothing for the priests, most particularly the high priest. These are the things that surround the priest, and the priest's glorious garments correspond with the tabernacle, as we'll see.

There's holy garments for a holy house, and the garments of the high priest are like a tent in many respects. The connection between the person and the house should be recognised. I've already observed the way that the construction of the different parts of the tabernacle correspond with the days of creation, and here we'd see events corresponding with the fifth day, the fifth day also corresponding with the second day.

[6 : 05] The second day concerned the structure of the tabernacle itself, and now we have the priests and their dress that corresponds with the tabernacle. It is this clothing that enables them, as it were, to fly across the face of the firmament, to be like the angels who enter into the realm of the Lord in his heavens.

The construction of these garments was entrusted in people who had been filled with a spirit of skill, the gifts of the spirit for the forming of the house. It's worth noting here, and later on in the discussion of the formation of the tabernacle, that the spirit is deeply involved in equipping people to create this realm.

The spirit is the one who creates this, using people that he has filled with his gifts. To understand the garments of the high priest, it might be helpful to step back a bit, and to think about the purpose of garments more generally.

Garments can be extensions and surroundings of us. They glorify us, they can represent authority and standing and status. When someone takes on a new office, there is a process of investiture.

They put on new garments, robes of office, maybe a particular chain, or there is a coronation in which they take the crown upon themselves. They also cover nakedness. Nakedness can be connected with shame.

[7 : 22] It can also be connected with immaturity in childhood. An infant is naked because they haven't yet achieved glory. But nakedness can also be seen in terms of guilt and a loss of integrity.

We fear nakedness because it represents exposure to judgment, to the gaze of some other party. Clothing then covers that nakedness. It protects us from the gaze of judgment of other parties.

But it also gives us glory. It's a way in which we express, for instance, our individuality, or a way in which we express a particular office that we hold, or function that we're performing.

Aaron is wearing the world. There's vegetation. You can think about the linen. There's animal. The wool. There's precious metal. There's precious stones. And then there are expensive dyes.

And all these different things are part of what he's wearing. And human beings are distinguished from the animals, among other things, in the fact that we wear clothes. We dress ourselves with the world.

[8 : 20] And to actually be naked is to be peeled, to lose something of the covering that is natural to us. It's natural for human beings to wear clothes. Every culture you go to, pretty much, human beings wear clothes.

That can change from culture to culture. There are different standards of dress and different fashions from time to time. But we all wear clothes. It's something that's a virtual human universal.

Aaron's garments represent the tribes, among other things. He stands for Israel. He is dressed in a symbolic manner. The purpose of his garments are in part for covering nakedness.

We see that in places like verse 42. But they're also given for glory and beauty. It's natural for a human being, when they grow up, to want to wear garments that are glorious.

Garments that express something of their status, their individuality, that distinguish them from others in one way or another. The clothing of the high priest has many different connotations that we can think of, too.

[9 : 17] It's like military dress. A lot of it is metallic and heavy. It's a sort of chain mail at certain points. A weaving involving gold. As the weft, perhaps you have gold and then you have the warp as some other sort of precious thread.

It is a garment that serves a purpose as he goes into the presence of the Lord. The high priest memorializes Israel before the Lord and is also marked out with a special thing that represents his status.

The blossom on his forehead that represents him as the high priest as holy to the Lord. The high priest that stands for Israel in part as a kingdom of priests.

The garments are also nuptial. And in Isaiah chapter 61 verse 10 and 11 we see something of this particular connection. I will greatly rejoice in the Lord.

My soul shall exalt in my God. For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation. He has covered me with the robe of righteousness. As a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress.

[10 : 21] And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its sprouts. And as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up. So the Lord will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.

The connection then between the clothes of the bridegroom and the clothes of the priest should be noted here. And the headdress of the priest seems to be connected in part with the headdress of a bridegroom.

The priests represent the divine bridegroom to the bride. The priest is perhaps best understood as a sort of palace servant. Now a palace servant or minister within the palace is someone who represents the king to his guests.

The authority of the king. He is one who acts in the name of the king. But he is one who is under the king. As one who has to serve the guests in certain ways. And so on the one hand he represents the king to those that come into the house.

But on the other hand he serves those who come into the house on behalf of the king. And here he represents the divine bridegroom to the bride. Serving the bride in the name of and as a symbol of the divine bridegroom.

[11 : 34] The garments of the high priest are also like a tabernacle around him. They are made using similar materials to the tabernacle. And we can see some more specific correspondences. The ephod for instance could be compared to the holy place.

It goes from the waistband to the shoulder. And much of its significance seems to be related to what it carries. To the onyx stones and also to the breast piece that is placed upon it.

We have a number of references to ephods in scripture. And they seem to have some sort of cultic purpose. Often associated with some sort of judgment or divining. And in places seem to have an idolatrous purpose.

Here the importance may be particularly the relationship between the ephod and what it carries upon it. The breast piece. The onyx stones are engraved with the names of Israel.

And the different tribes of Israel. It's a memorial to the Lord. It brings the people of Israel to God's mind as it were. Calling him to act on their behalf. To act recognizing that they are his people.

[12 : 37] On the other hand if they are sinful it brings them to mind in a more negative way. You can think of the way we have memorials. So someone who wears a wedding ring. That can be a memorial of their spouse.

It's something that brings their spouse to mind. And the bond that they have with their spouse. And so the breast piece and the onyx stones have that sort of memorial purpose within the structure of the high priest garments.

The breast piece is attached to these things. Among other things. It doesn't seem to be supported by those. But it is attached to them. And the ephod maybe was some sort of waistcoat type thing.

And then there are the two onyx stones on the shoulder. And then there's this connected plate that lies over the chest of the high priest. And that plate or that breast piece has precious names and stones again.

More of them. And the square shape of it suggests maybe a relationship with the Holy of Holies. There's a movement also in glory. The Holy of Holies is connected with gold. And here the breast piece is a golden object with precious stones on it.

[13 : 42] And once again it serves a memorial purpose. It is also the place where the Urim and the Thummim are held. Those are stones of judgment. And it seems that they were consulted as a means of consulting God.

In Numbers chapter 27 verse 21 we see one example of this. And he shall stand before Eliezer the priest who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the Lord. At his word they shall go out and at his word they shall come in.

Both he and all the people of Israel with him. The whole congregation. And then in 1 Samuel chapter 14 verse 41. From this sort of verse it seems that the Urim and the Thummim served a purpose akin to taking lots.

They were sacred lot taking. And it was a means of determining a decision between two binary choices. And so one of the stones would be connected with one decision and the other with the other.

The robe of the ephod could be connected with the curtains of the tabernacle. Once again we're seeing similarities in the sort of construction. The sort of materials that are used. And it has bells and pomegranates at the bottom.

[15 : 02] The pomegranates represent presumably fertility and blessing in that sense. And maybe some of the nuptial themes connected with this as a bridegroom's dress.

A dress that represents the divine bridegroom to the people. And so the high priest symbolises the divine bridegroom with the pomegranates. The bells have to be there in order that he can go into the presence of God.

And the high priest moves with the sound of these bells. In verse 35 it is necessary that he should not die. Maybe it's the musical sound of worship that they represent.

He comes in with this tinkling of bells that represents the music with which God should be approached. Now it's worth pausing for a moment here and considering the way that a lot of this garment seems to be designed to protect the high priest.

He's coming into a dangerous realm. He's coming into the realm of God's presence. And if he does not come with the right memorials, if he does not come covered up in his nakedness, and if he does not come with the proper sound, then he will die.

[16 : 02] He will be judged. It's a dangerous realm. It's God's presence. It's the realm of the king. And if he is not welcomed, then he's in trouble. On the forehead of the high priest, there is a golden plate or blossom that's placed.

This is again engraved like a seal, like the breastplate and the onyx stones. And the fact that these three objects are all engraved in that same sort of way suggests that there's a connection between them.

The breast piece is connected with the Holy of Holies. It has that square shape. It's something that is made with the most precious materials. Here we have another gold thing that represents the budding or the blossom of the high priest.

And we can think of that in terms of Aaron's rod that blossoms. It's the same sort of word that's used, and it's a token of his authority, of his particular standing as the representative of Israel.

So we have the onyx stones. We have the breast piece. And then we also have the blossom. And all of these have a particular significance that maybe attaches them with the Holy of Holies.

[17 : 03] In discussing the blossom or the plate on the forehead, we are told that Aaron is to bear guilt for the people in the holy things. So both the tabernacle and the high priest's garments have some sort of atoning purpose or connection with the process of atonement.

And here we should reflect upon the importance of the Day of Atonement, when the high priest has to divest himself of his glorious garments, go through the process of atonement, and then put on those garments once more.

The other priests have garments of lesser holiness. They cover their nakedness so that they do not die. The high priest wears eight garments, an ephod, breastplate, robe, turban, frontlet, or this little plate or blossom, and then a tunic, sash, and undergarments.

The regular priest wears some version of four of these. It has a coat, sashes, cap, or some sort of headdress, and then linen undergarments. And so there are similarities between them that connect the two of them, but make very clear that the high priest has a higher level of glory, a glory that's associated with the Holy of Holies, not just the Holy Place.

And there's an elevation of the garments from Aaron's body. They move out from his body, from that inner level of the linen undergarments, out until you have the most glorious elements of the garments representing the Holy of Holies.

[18 : 26] One thing this might alert us to is the connection between the tabernacle and the human body. The tabernacle is a sort of body, and those sorts of connections with the body are even more clearly seen in the case of the temple, where there are elements of the temple that correspond to all different parts of the body.

There are five tables on either side of the Holy Place, with five lampstands on each, thinking about the two hands on the two hands, and then there are five fingers that correspond with those different elements there.

In the Holy of Holies, there is hidden the tablets of the law, which relates to the way we must hide the law of God in our hearts. There's the presence of God, particularly found in that realm.

The heart of the human being is the place where God's presence should be found. And then we have things like the two trunks of the pillars of Jacon and Boaz, connected with the legs of the human being.

The altar that may relate to the earth that lies beneath us, and the way that the bronze sea is like the reproductive organs of the human body, that give life, and from which life can flow.

[19 : 34] Incense might be related to the function of the nose. The lamps to the function of seeing. And all these different elements suggest that there is some correspondence between the tabernacle and the temple and the body.

And when in the New Testament we're told that we are a living temple, that Christ's body is the temple, this is not coming out of the blue. This is something that should be understood from the logic of the Old Testament itself.

And one of the things that we are seeing in the clothing of the high priest is a marking out of the body of the high priest according to the logic of the tabernacle. And so the logic of the tabernacle is written onto the body of the high priest.

Now it's important to think about the way that the whole sacrificial system works, the way the tabernacle works. It works according to a sort of analogical system, where things are mapped onto each other symbolically, and there are all these different layers of connections.

It's a more poetic system than we're used to. We're used to things that are more prosaic rather than analogical and poetic. But this is actually how the system of scripture works.

[20 : 42] It works with a sort of concrete logic, where human beings can be mapped onto animals, onto particular types of plants, where clothing can represent something of a building, and a building can represent a mountain or can represent heaven.

And all these sorts of connections help us to see the way that the universe is all connected. And these connections are connections within which divine meaning can be found, and lives can be lived in tune with a deeper reality.

So our task when thinking through these passages is to observe these connections, to see the different analogies and correspondences that are at work, and then having understood the basic logic of the system, to understand how that logic can become the framework within which meaningful communication occurs.

So this is all just the framework, like the different words that you might have in a dictionary, or the different structures of a grammar, and then you actually form sentences with these things. And those sentences can be found particularly in the practice of the sacrificial system.

And so when we get to the book of Leviticus, we'll see that logic of the sacrificial system working within the language and the grammatical structure of the tabernacle structure, and the dress, and the priestly structure, and the way that that relates to animals, and all these other things.

[22 : 05] A question to consider. Where in the New Testament do we see allusions, perhaps, to the clothing of the high priest? And what further light might these references shed upon the meaning of these things within the Old Testament itself?