

The Breastplate

Before we can deal with the breastplate, which formed part of the High Priest's garments, we need to look at the garments as a whole so that we can see how the breastplate fits into the overall teaching regarding these garments. The High Priest acted as a 'mediator' between God and man – the one between God and man, because man himself cannot approach God direct.

All men are naked and unclean before God, and so Aaron had to first wash himself and then put on linen pants. Let us read this from Exodus 28 vss. 42-43:

“Make linen undergarments as a covering for the body, reaching from the waist to the thigh. Aaron and his sons must wear them whenever they enter the Tent of Meeting or approach the altar to minister in the Holy Place, so that they will not incur guilt and die. This is to be a lasting ordinance for Aaron and his descendants.”

Then over these was a long white gown made of fine linen, which was made from Egyptian cotton and like silk; it was pure white, covering the whole body and arms. There was also a turban of this material covering the head. Somewhat like the picture on the front of the notes and as you can see on this model. So from head to foot the High Priest was covered in white. This is symbolic of righteousness. We are told in Revelation (19:8) of the bride of Christ (the believers) who would be “arrayed in fine linen, clean and white, for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints”. On the turban was a gold plate inscribed with the words, “Holiness to the Lord”.

On top of the white gown was a blue robe, along the bottom of which were attached bells and pomegranates which would make a joyful sound whenever the priest moved. I think blue is a symbol of heavenly things, indeed in some cases of the word of God.

Over this blue robe was the ephod. Let us read Ex. 28 vs. 6-8

“Make the ephod of gold, and of blue, purple and scarlet yarn, and of finely twisted linen – the work of a skilled craftsman. It is to have two shoulder pieces attached to two of its corners, so that it can be fastened. Its skilfully woven waistband is to be like it – of one piece with the ephod and made with gold, and with blue, purple and scarlet yarn, and with finely twisted linen”.

This finely twisted linen would have been thicker material than the long white robe – perhaps more like a fine canvas– and was heavily embroidered – thin wires of gold, woven into it, together with blue, purple and scarlet yarn Gold is the symbol of faith, the blue the symbol of heavenly things and the scarlet red for purified sin. The purple being the symbol of royalty, made up of blue and red.

The ephod garment – sometimes called the coat of the ephod – was made in two sections of the same material as the veil and was joined at the shoulders, enabling it to go over the head, so that one section would cover the back and the other would cover the chest and go down to the waist. The illustration on the second page gives the idea The edges were bound, and along the two edges was a belt-like strap that would be tied together at the hip.

This belt, held the ephod and undergarments in position; without it they would have impeded movement. We read in Ephesians (6 v 14) what the girdle represents: “Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled round your waist with the breastplate of righteousness in place.”

On the shoulders were two attachments – shoulder pieces - on which were fixed two onyx stones. Let us read about them in Ex. 28 vs. 9-14

Onyx stone consists of layers of different colours – like marble – black, white, blue, red and brown, but predominately white. On these two stones were placed, in order of their birth, the names of the 12 sons of Jacob (the children of Israel). The two stones were mounted in gold with filigree work and fixed (permanently) on the shoulders of this ephod.

We mentioned that the material of the ephod was of the same as that of the veil. Now we read in Hebrews 10 v 20 (RV) that the veil represents Jesus' flesh and so the ephod, being of the same material as the veil, represents Christ. The shoulders speak of the strength for carrying loads, for authority and government. Let us read a couple of verses from Isaiah about this. In Isa. ch. 9 v 6 we have a clear reference to Christ NIV: "For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders". And ch. 22 v 22, again refers to the future government being on Christ's shoulders, "I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open". So these two stones are speaking to us of Jesus' rule over the 12 tribes.

We now come to the breastplate. On each corner was a ring of gold. The two upper rings were connected to the shoulder onyx stones by a gold chain and the lower two rings were connected by ribbons of blue to the sides of the ephod garment. Let us read Ex. 28 vs. 22-28: and see how they were attached.

The breastplate itself was only a span wide and long – a span is about 9in, the distance between the tip of the thumb and little finger when the hand is stretched out – about this size – and was double thickness folded over and probably sewn at the bottom and a little at the sides forming a pouch in which may be two other stones were placed.

There is considerable variations as to what these stones were; as you see in the chart on page 3 of the variations in translation between the AV and the New English Bible, and further changes exist in the NIV. Some translators seem to have tried to relate the colours of these stones to the mythology surrounding what they call 'birth stones' and the signs of the Zodiac, which is very different to biblical teaching.

Exodus 28 vs. 15-21:

"And thou shalt make the breastplate of judgment with cunning work; after the work of the ephod thou shalt make it; of gold, of blue and of purple and of scarlet and of fine twined linen shalt thou make it. Foursquare it shall be being doubled; a span shall be the length thereof and a span shall be the breadth thereof. And thou shalt set in it settings of stones, even four rows of stones: the first row shall be a sardius, a topaz, and a carbuncle: this shall be the first row. And the second row shall be an emerald, a sapphire and a diamond. And the third row a ligure, an agate and an amethyst. And the fourth row a beryl and an onyx and a jasper: they shall be set in in gold in their inclosings. And the stones shall be with the names of the children of Israel, twelve, according to their names, like the engravings of a signet; every one with his name shall they be according to the twelve tribes".

So there were four rows of stones, and as the Jews read from the right (backwards to us), the first stone was, v. 17, a sardius. We are told in v. 21 that the stones had the names of the 12 tribes on them and we assume, like the names on the shoulder stones, they would have been in the order of birth. So the first stone, the sardius, represents Jacob's firstborn, Reuben and the last stone, the jasper, v. 20, represents Jacob's last born son, Benjamin.

Collectively, these stones represented the physical twelve tribes of Israel and also, as we shall see, spiritual Israel. If we turn to Ezekiel ch. 28 we shall see a reference which confirms that the twelve stones represent Israel. Eze. 28 vs. 12-14 refers to Tyre.

“Son of man, take up a lamentation upon the king of Tyrus, and say unto him, Thus saith the Lord God, Thou sealest up the sum, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God; every precious stone was thy covering, the sardius topaz and the diamond, the beryl, the onyx, and the jasper, the sapphire, the emerald and the carbuncle, and gold: the workmanship of thy tabrets and of thy pipes was prepared in thee in the day that thou wast created. Thou art the anointed cherub that covereth; and I have set thee so; thou wast upon the holy mountain of God; thou has walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire”.

Here, only nine of the stones are listed, but in the Septuagint it has the twelve in exactly the same order as in Exodus, thus identifying Israel and, of course, the mountain of the Lord is Jerusalem. The reference in v. 14 to the “stones of fire”, or “fiery stones” is referring to the sparkling brilliance of these precious stones and doubtless also has a later day fulfillment.

However, none of these precious stones had any light of themselves; their brilliance was only revealed by light, which is reflected in various directions and colour, and as each jewel shone the rays from it would also be refracted from the other jewels, giving a glorious blaze of colour – hence, collectively, Ezekiel refers to them as “fiery stones” or “stones of fire”.

The special lesson for us is that although we are precious jewels in God’s sight we have no light of ourselves, but can only reflect Jesus, who is the light of the world (John 8:12). Without God calling us to see the light of the truth, we would have no hope, and although today our light is only a dim reflection of Jesus, yet in the future we will reflect in full the Divine glory.

These stones were resting on the heart. In Scripture the heart is regarded as the thinking part of man, the equivalent of his mind; for example, one could have an evil or a good heart. To be on Jesus heart means we are constantly in his mind and that he cares for us. Let us read verse 29 of Ex. 28.

“And Aaron shall bear the names of the children of Israel in the breastplate of judgment upon his heart when he goeth in unto the holy place for a memorial before the Lord continually”.

A memorial is to have something or someone in remembrance, and all the believers, dead or living are constantly in Christ’s mind.

The significance of the order of these stones seems to refer to a progression of our redemption, but because of the problems of interpreting some of the names, one cannot be dogmatic. The following are just ideas on this theme.

The first stone was a sardius which, in the Hebrew, is odem, which is synonymous with Adam, meaning ‘red earth’. The sardius is red, speaking of sin. The meaning Reuben is ‘see a son’, it speaks to us of Adam, the ‘son of God (Luke 3:38).

The next stone, the topaz, is derived from aluminium oxide and is a pale yellow colour (Zondervan). Yellow, or gold, stands for tried faith. Simeon means ‘hearing with acceptance’. We read in Romans 10 v 17, “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God”. So this second stone is telling us that we must hear and accept, by faith, God’s word.

The third stone is the carbuncle, a reddish green. Parkhurst says it comes from a verb meaning ‘to impart light’. In Isaiah 54 (v. 12) it is associated with gates or entrances = “I will make your

gates of carbuncles”. Ps. 119 (v 130) combines these two ideas of light and entrances, “The entrance of thy word giveth light”. Let us look together at John ch. 10 v 9.

“I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture”. As we said, the carbuncle is reddish green, red speaking of sin’s flesh and green tends to stand for the pleasant things and of life, as, for example, when we see, as we are doing at this time of year, the green fields and trees which are so lovely to behold. The verse we have just read gives this pleasing thought, Jesus said of himself that he is the gate and whoever enters can go in and out and find green pastures. The name ‘Levi’ means ‘Joined to the Lord’ and so we see it is the light of God’s word by which we are enlightened and joined to Him and our Lord – we can delve into it – going in and out of it – constantly finding spiritual food.

This first row, then, speaks to us of Adam, the red, sinful creature who, by hearing, as the word Simeon means, develops faith, as the yellow topaz indicates, and it is this knowledge, imparted by the light of the truth, that enlightens us, so that we can be joined to the Lord.

Names are often significant in the Bible, and I am indebted to this Dictionary of Old Testament Names that has given me the meanings, as I don’t understand Hebrew myself.

On now to row two stone number 4. It is the emerald, the one referred to in the Bible is a red stone. Parkhurst, who wrote the famous Hebrew Lexicon, says that this word for emerald comes from a root word ‘to turn’, and from it comes our word ‘repent’. After our being joined to the Lord we, red, sinful humans, are repentant, and the forgiveness of our sins makes us feel happy because by our repentance our sins have been forgiven and so we praise the Lord for that, and that is what the word ‘Judah’ means – ‘Praise’. When Judah was born, Leah said, “I will praise the Lord” and that is what the forgiveness of our sins causes us to do.

The 5th stone is the blue sapphire. Blue speaks of the heavens, of the spirit power of God which heals. When this noun, ‘sapphire’ is used as a verb, it means to write. Let us look at Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, and see an example of this. – the word ‘sapphire’ being used as a verb, ‘to write’. Malachi ch. 3 vs. 16 & 17.

“Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honoured his name. They will be mine, says the Lord Almighty, in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not”.

The words, “treasured possession” is rendered in the AV “my jewels”. We see how the faithful are written in the book of remembrance, which is also referred to as the “book of life”. The word Dan means ‘judging’. Instead of our being, as it were, in the book of the dead, we have been judged by God to be in the book of life. Just as a pleasant thought – I was thinking that instead of being written in black or red ink, we are written in the sapphire blue ink.

This leads us to the 6th stone, the diamond. Some argue that the technology of engraving diamonds was unknown in those days. I, personally, don’t see that as a problem as God gave them the wisdom to do these things.

The diamond is the hardest of jewels. Hebrew ‘Yahalom’, which means ‘Ya’ God’s and ‘halom’ hammer. It is God’s hammer that knocks things into shape. The diamond is a pure stone that you can see right through; it has no impurities in it. Now that is how we have to be, pure and as

hard as a hammer in knocking off any of the surrounding earthy pieces that may try to attach themselves to us. Another characteristic of the diamond is that if anything is put in between it and the source of light, it goes dark Surely a lesson for us – if we allow anything to stop the light of God reaching us, we will lose our spiritual sparkle.

There are so many competing things in life that we need to wrestle with to maintain our purity with God. Hence we see the appropriateness of the meaning of the name ‘Naphtali’, which means ‘wrestling’. Let us read Gen. 30 v 7 & 8 :

“Rachel’s servant Bilhar conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. Then Rachel said, I have had a great struggle with my sister and I have won. So she named him Naphtali”.

You will see in the margin that Naphtali means struggling, “my struggle”, rendered in the AV ‘wrestling’.

So in this second line the red emerald speaks of sin which is forgiven at baptism, resulting in our praising God, followed by the blue sapphire resulting in our being judged worthy of being written in the book of Life, and to maintain ourselves in it, we have to struggle, wrestle, to keep in contact with the word of Life.

We now proceed to the third row, stone No. 7 is the ligure. The RSV margin has it as amber, a mixture of red and yellow. When we see the amber traffic light we get ready to go. The seventh son of Jacob was Gad. Let’s read vs 9 & 10 of this chapter 30.

“When Leah saw that she had stopped having children, she took her maidservant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Leah’s servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son. Then Leah said, What good fortune!. So she named him Gad”. In the margin ‘good fortune’ is rendered ‘a troop and in the AV ‘a troop cometh’.

Combining these two thoughts together, we need to get going in faith and as a group.

The 8th stone is the agate, a stone of layers of different colours and when it is looked at from different angles one can see the different colours. So this can indicate a mixture of changing things. In verse 12 & 13 we see the name Asher indicates ‘happiness’:

“Lear’s servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. Then Lear said, How hapy I am! The women will call me happy. So she named him Asher”.

It is the joy that our changing nature brings and gives us happiness in the truth. Even though life will have difficult times, we can be happy because we know God is with us. Paul, in spite of his afflictions, could say, “None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself,, so that I might finish my course with joy” (Acts 20:24). Also, “I take pleasure in infirmities” (2 Cor. 12:10). So as we progress in the truth we really have every reason to be happy.

The 9th stone, the amethyst, is purple, pointing forward to royalty; the Hebrew word indicates to break off or separate. The birth of Issachar was the result of his mother in effect hiring Jacob by the giving of her mandrakes (a food plant). Let’s read Gen. 30 vs. 14-17,

“During wheat harvest, Reuben went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants, which he brought to his mother Lear. Rachel said to Lear, Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes. But she said to her, Wasn’t it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son’s mandrakes too? Very well, Rachel said, he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son’s mandrakes. So when Jacob came in from the fields that evening, Lear went out to meet

him. You must sleep with me, she said. I have hired you with my son's mandrakes. So he slept with her that night. God listened to Lear, and she became pregnant and bore Jacob a fifth son. Then Lear said, God has rewarded me for giving my maidservant to my husband. So she named him Issachar"

The margin suggests the name may mean 'reward'. Leah was rewarded for sacrificing the mandrakes. So to we separate ourselves from our surroundings, to become kings we have to sacrifice worldly things to obtain the reward.

The lessons from the third row are that with the amber of faith we have to go forward; the many colours of the agate, although speaking of our changing nature and the difficulties we all face at times, we can still be happy and because we separate ourselves from the world we will be rewarded as kings and priests in the age to come.

The 4th row commences with the beryl, a bright golden green stone. Let us look at Daniel 10 v 6, where we see it is associated with the glory of immortal beings – the chrysolite is the same as the beryl stone. Dan. 10 v 6:

"His body was like chrysolite, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude".

So the beryl stands for divine glory. Going back to Gen. 30 v 20 we consider the meaning of Zebulun :

"Then Leah said, God has presented me with a precious gift. This time my husband will treat me with honour, because I have borne him six sons. So she named him Zebulun".

Zebulun means 'to dwell with' or 'habitation' So the prospect for those who reflect the glory of God is to dwell with Him. Even today this has an application. God has said, "I will dwell in them and walk in them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (2 Cor. 6:16), but, of course, in the fullest sense this will apply to us in the future.

The 11th stone is the onyx, a white stone with streaks of red and other colours in it, probably indicating that although we will always have the flesh with us, yet hopefully it is reduced as we strive to be more like our Master. The name 'Joseph' means 'he shall add', and we know that Rachel did have the blessing of another son, Benjamin.

And the final stone is jasper, clear as crystal and of a greenish/purple hue. Green speaking of life and purple of kingship. It is the time of entering the Kingdom. Turning to Revelation 21 vs. 10-12 we see that the jasper is likened to the New Jerusalem –. (Rev. 21 vs 10-12)

"And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel".

The name 'Benjamin' means 'Son of the right hand'. We shall then be part of the multitudinous Son of man (and dwell) in the 'New Jerusalem'

Although, owing to the possible difference of translation of these various stones one cannot be dogmatic, we think they show us the various stages of how the natural man can gradually be changed to become, in God's great mercy, Sons of God . We commenced with the natural man.

By faith in the word of God, men, with their sins forgiven, could be joined to the Lord and praise Him in that He had written them in the book of Life. With much struggling they had maintained the truth and gone forward in happiness and confidently looking forward to the reward – to dwell in His house and become part of the immortal, multitudinous Son of Man.

The breastplate was called the ‘breastplate of judgment’. Let us look at Ex. 28 vs. 29-30:

“Whenever Aaron enters the Holy Place, he will bear the names of the sons of Israel over his heart on the breastpiece of decision as a continuing memorial before the Lord. Also put the Urim and the Thummim in the breastpiece, so they may be over Aaron’s heart whenever he enters the presence of the Lord. Thus Aaron will always bear the means of making decisions for the Israelites over his heart before the Lord”.

“Breastpiece of decision” is rendered “breastplate of judgment” in the AV. Some believe the Urim and Thummim were two stones kept in the pouch of the breastplate, YOU RECALL IT WAS FOLDED OVER DOUBLE. That when a decision was to be made the priest would take out one of the stones – one meant ‘yes’ and the other ‘no’, thus an instant decision was made. That all sounds very easy, but we are not told anything about such stones and I wonder if this is really so. Let us look at 1 Sam. Ch. 28, where king Saul was fighting against the Philistines. 1 Sam. 28 v 5 & 6::

“When Saul saw the Philistine army, he was afraid; terror filled his heart. He enquired of the Lord, but the Lord did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets”.

If all that was required to receive an answer was to select one of the stones from the pouch, it would have been quite a simple thing to have done. I would like to put forward an alternative suggestion, and that is that the Urim and Thummim were not stones. The word ‘Urim’ is an original Hebrew word, and when translated means ‘lights’.(plural) The word ‘Thummim’ when translated into English means ‘perfection’ or ‘fulness’. The word Urim (‘light’) is plural (Strong’s 214) when used in the singular (Strong’s 216) it refers to the glory that appeared between the cherubims, showing God’s approval. I suspect in ordinary circumstances of light there would have been some brilliance of the breastplate stones, but when it was the light of God (referred to as “the glory of the Lord”) the Shikiner glory, then all the breastplate stones would have shone intensely and would have been like a fire, shooting forth their various coloured beams of light, a revealing of God’s glory as at the burning bush for example, hence, as we read earlier (Ez. 28:14), these stones were described as “fiery stones” and this was because of their intense brilliance when the light of God’s glory, Urim (plural) double light as it were, shone upon them and that revealed the Thummim – the fulness or perfection of God’s glory. And that was the decisive answer Yes. No extra glory, the answer was No. (I hope this doesn’t sound too complicated!).

In the Kingdom we are, in the mercy of God, going to shine forth as stars, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed in us. As we sparkle as God’s precious jewel.

May that day come very soon.

(Num. 27:18-21 – Joshua)