

# The Priestly Garments and Their Significance

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## The Materials

The garments were to be made from materials received in offerings from the people (Exodus 25:2-7). This included the usual offerings of colored yarn (blue, purple, and scarlet). Woolen fabrics were identified by the costly dyes used in their manufacture. In addition, gold thread was received, along with fine-twined linen, which had been spun from flax by the women (35:25). The people also contributed precious stones for the ephod and the breastpiece (25:7). All of the dyes, gem stones, gold thread and other materials would have been incredibly expensive, showing that only the very best should be used in the worship of God to honor his own majesty and glory.

The High Priest would have been noticeable by three different senses. He was beautifully dressed, he made a sound as he walked, and he carried the smell of holy anointing oil. This gave him an aura of being utterly set apart and holy for God's service. His garments and anointment served several purposes:

1. *Decorative*--They were to give Aaron dignity and grandeur (Exodus 28:2). This was most essential since the appearance of the high priest was to convey the beauty and authority that belonged to God himself.
2. *Functional*--Each piece obviously had, in addition to the decorative purpose, a functional role. The breeches, for example, were for the sake of modesty (Exodus 28:42), and the breastplate served as a pouch to contain the sacred lot, Urim and Thummim. 28:30).<sup>3</sup>
3. *Symbolic*--More than ornamentation was involved. Consider the 12 precious stones of the breastpiece of judgment, which represented the 12 tribes of Israel. When wearing this article, the high priest bore the names of the tribes to bring them to continual remembrance before the Lord (Exodus 28:29). The clothing of the priest was to provide a measure of realization of his task in representing Israel to God.

## Articles of Clothing

Eight items of clothing are listed for the priest. There were four "inner" garments to be worn by all the priests: breeches, tunic, girdle, and hat. The remaining four articles were "over" garments to be worn by Aaron and the high priests that followed him: robe, ephod, breastpiece, and diadem.

**Tunic**--This item, part of the normal dress of every man, was to be worn under the outer garment.<sup>4</sup> It was a long or half-sleeved shirtlike garb reaching to the ankles.<sup>5</sup> Made of linen, as were all the "inner" garments, it was to have a checked design, indicating either an open texture or a variegation of colors (Exodus 28:39). It was white and undyed. Linen does not dye well, so any linen garments were white.

**Girdle**--This was a kind of linen sash, essential to a flowing garment, to assure warmth and maneuverability.

**Breeches**--This particular garment (Exodus 28:42), a type of linen underwear, was to assure the modesty demanded of the priest when officiating at the altar (20:26). Ancient people otherwise did not wear anything under their tunics. In other cultures of the time, pagan priests would officiate naked,

because they often performed fertility rites that had strong sexual content. But God wanted worship of him to be utterly unlike the pagan worship of the surrounding nations.

**Robe of the Ephod** (Exodus 28:31-34)--The first "over" piece to be put on was the robe. This garment, probably sleeveless, was essentially a large blue mantle with a hole for the wearer's head. A closely woven binding bordered the edge of the head opening to prevent tearing. The skirts of this robe were fringed with alternating woolen pomegranates (i.e., woolen balls shaped like pomegranates) and golden bells. Pomegranates were used for decorative purposes. (1 Kings 7:20, 42). This fruit was also popular as a fertility symbol because of its many seeds, suggesting incomparable fruitfulness, God's promise to Abraham and to Moses that Israel would become a great nation. The bells provided sound by which the people could follow the progress of the priest.

**Ephod** (Exodus 28:6-12). This was perhaps the most important item of the priestly clothing. A kind of apron made of materials woven out of gold and linen thread and variously colored yarns, it covered the back and chest, reaching nearly to the knees. It was fastened to the body by two shoulder straps and a belt with which it was lined. Upon the shoulder straps were two onyx stones, on which the names of the sons of Israel were engraved in the order of their birth. These two onyx stones, called "stones of remembrance," were not so much to remind Aaron of all the tribes he should serve, but to remind God of all the tribes with whom He had made a covenant. As long as the priest bore the names of Israel before the Lord, He would not forget to be gracious to Israel. Thus, in effect, there was a kind of wordless intercessory prayer.<sup>6</sup>

**Breastpiece** (Exodus 28:15-30). The breastpiece, so called because of its position when worn, was a pouch made from the same materials as the ephod. Chains of braided gold and golden rings with loops of blue secured the breastpiece in position. Its primary purpose was to contain the sacred lot, the Urim and Thummim. By wearing them above his heart, Aaron would indicate that justice originates with God and would remind God to maintain the administration of justice in Israel. Three times this article is referred to as the "breastpiece of judgment."

**Turban** (Exodus 28:36-38). This tall, cone-shaped headdress was made of linen. (The Hebrew term means "that which is wrapped" and suggests a long piece of linen that was wound around the head many times.) Attached to this turban was a plate of pure gold on which were engraved the words "Holy to the Lord." This gold plate was equivalent to a diadem or crown, symbolizing the regal splendor of the high priest. The phrase "Holy to the Lord" signified that the high priest and, through his mediatorship, the entire nation belonged to the Lord and were set apart for His peculiar service. By wearing this turban, the priest could compensate for any deficiencies in his conduct of worship so that there would be no infringements on the demands of holiness. The wearing of this hat assured the acceptance of the people before the Lord.

## **Anointment**

(Exodus 30:22-30) The priest, along with everything in the sanctuary was anointed with a holy anointing oil made of olive oil mixed with myrrh, cinnamon, cassia. The oil was to be made by a skilled perfumer, and would have been incredibly expensive - like liquid diamonds - because of the spices that came from thousands of miles away. The anointing oil was to be unique to the tabernacle and used only on things anointed for holy purposes. The priests, as well as everything in the temple, had an aura of holiness that came from the scent of the precious and unique oil used to anoint them.