

Chapter 11 – Joseph and the Onyx

The eleventh stone is **onyx (7718)**: (shoham /sho'-ham/) from an unused root probably meaning *to blanch*; blanch, whitened, or paled (made pale).¹ It is taken from the root *shuwb* (7725, /shoob/) meaning *to turn* and the word *ham*(2525): (*cham /khawm/*) meaning *hot* ; literally “turn hot” which describes the process of blanching when an object is scalded or parboiled in water or steam to whiten it.^{2,3,4}

Onyx is a “form of chalcedony with contrasting layers of colors arranged in parallel lines. The colors are usually black and white...”⁵ Since the bands on the stone turn from black to white, it is easy to see why it was named *shoham*. The onyx, in its red form, is the fifth foundation stone of New Jerusalem.

Symbols in the stone

The way the bands on the stone change from black to white speaks of our conversion from sinfulness to righteousness through Jesus Christ. He called us out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9). It also speaks of the two opposing natures dwelling in us and their struggle for domination (Rom. 7:15-21).

Bands on the onyx can also represent the following:

- ▶ As saints, we have an ongoing process of confessing our sins so God can forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 Jn. 1:9). In other words, the black marks on our record in heaven that affects the amount of our rewards can be erased when we confess and repent.
- ▶ Discernment of believers, seeing issues of life in black and white.
- ▶ The various times in our lives when we go through periods of struggle (persecutions, tribulations, etc.) which are then followed by periods of ease.

Symbols in the order of the stone

Eleven is the number of spiritual covering (Ex. 26:7).

¹ Strong, p. 113.

² Ibid.

³ Merriam-Webster, p. 120.

⁴ Strong, p. 40.

⁵ Lockyer, p. 571.

Observation: Only eleven of the original twelve disciples were covered.

Facts about Joseph

- ▶ His name means “may Jehovah add.”
- ▶ He was Jacob’s eleventh son and Rachel’s first.
- ▶ Rachel thought of Joseph’s birth as God taking away her reproach and hoped he would give her another son.
- ▶ He was Jacob’s favorite son.
- ▶ God gave him dreams and their interpretations.
- ▶ Joseph had a double portion in the promised land through his sons Manasseh and Ephraim who became the tribes of Joseph.
- ▶ Ephraim had great influence in Israel. They became the leading tribe in the north after Israel split.
- ▶ The tribe of Manasseh split in two and settled territories both east and west of the Jordan River.
- ▶ Two strong judges came from Manasseh—Gideon and Jephthah (Jud. 6-8; Jud. 11-12).
- ▶ Manasseh had mighty men of valor who supported David (1 Chron. 12:19-21, 31, 37).

Jacob’s prophecy over Joseph

“Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well; whose branches run over the wall:”
(Gen. 49:22)

A *bough* is a main branch of a tree. “Fruitful bough” speaks of Joseph’s natural and spiritual success placed on him by God. As a matter of fact, Joseph named his second son Ephraim (fruitful) because God made him fruitful in the land of his affliction. The “fruitful bough by a well” has a never-ending source of nourishment to help it remain fruitful. The well refers to God in the person of the Holy Spirit (John 4:14, 7:38). Joseph prospered because the Holy Spirit was with him.

The wall mentioned here is symbolic of any hindrance that stands in the way of progress while branches, which are offshoots of the bough, are symbolic of Joseph’s descendants. Jacob knew Joseph’s descendants would eventually encounter obstacles (like the Egyptians) that they would overcome.

Application: Saints are designed by God to be fruitful both spiritually and naturally because the Holy Spirit is with us and in us like a well of living water. Not only will he cause us to prosper, but if we are faithful to train up our offspring in the Lord’s laws and judgments, generations that come after us will prosper also.

“The archers have sorely grieved him and shot at him, and hated him: But his bow abode in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob;

(from thence is the shepherd, the stone of Israel)” (Gen. 49:23, 24)

The archers are all of Joseph’s enemies including his brothers and Potiphar’s wife. They shot at Joseph with their fiery darts of persecution, deceit, and defamation which caused him a lot of grief. In spite of the archers, Joseph’s bow (his steadfastness in living righteously) remained strong.

Arms are symbolic of power and might while hands symbolize godly works (Ps. 18:34). Joseph’s power and might to perform godly works were strengthened by God himself. As an underlying thought, Jacob adds that from God’s hands comes the Shepherd (Jesus Christ) who is the stone of Israel (see Isa. 28:16; Eze. 34:23; Jn. 10:11).

Application: The saints of God face archers all the time who go out of their way to grieve us, persecute us, and hate us because of our love for the Lord. Jesus told us these things would happen (Lu. 21:17; Jn. 16:33). Whether they know it or not, they are the agents of Satan sent to shoot their fiery darts at us. However, we must be willing to examine ourselves to make sure that our suffering is not our fault (1 Pet. 2:20). God is only glorified when we suffer for doing well.

When we face tribulations, we must be determined to remain steadfast in righteousness like Joseph. Consequently, God will give us strength to perform godly works with power and might in spite of what our enemies do.

“Even by the God of thy father, who shall help thee; and by the Almighty, who shall bless thee with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lieth under, blessings of the breasts, and of the womb: The blessings of the father have prevailed above the blessings of my progenitors unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills: they shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of him that was separate from his brethren.” (Gen. 49:25,26)

Continuing the thought started by the previous verses, Joseph was made strong by God who is always available to help in times of need. God is all-powerful and would bless Joseph with heavenly and earthly blessings. He would also be blessed with many descendants.

Jacob acknowledged that his blessings exceeded those of his forefathers, including the boundaries of the land he possessed. These blessings would be passed on to Joseph who was despised and rejected by his brothers.

Application: Saints are able to prosper because of God. When we are pleasing to him, we are rewarded with spiritual and natural blessings. These blessings bring fruitfulness, boldness, and power. Characteristics such as these are manifested in how we conduct ourselves in public and private and may not necessarily be shown in the amount of our earthly possessions as is often taught via the “prosperity gospel.” God measures our fruitfulness by *his* standards, not by what feeble humanity considers important. We, as saints, must learn how to do the same.

Our descendants, both natural and spiritual, can be blessed with greater blessings than us if they take advantage of the godly things we teach them and add more godly things to what they’ve been taught. Greater blessings also come when we stand firm in our godly beliefs and

actions in spite of being despised and rejected by the ungodly. Jesus said “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.” (Matt. 5:10-12; see also Gal. 6:9.)

Moses’ prophecy over Joseph

“And of Joseph he said, Blessed of the LORD be his land, for the precious things of heaven, for the dew, and for the deep that coucheth beneath, and for the precious fruits brought forth by the sun, and for the precious things put forth by the moon, and for the chief things of the ancient mountains, and for the precious things of the lasting hills, and for the precious things of the earth and fulness thereof, and for the good will of him that dwelt in the bush: let the blessing come upon the head of Joseph, and upon the top of the head of him that was separated from his brethren.” (Deut. 33:13-16)

This prophecy by Moses is basically the same as what Jacob said in Genesis. In essence, Moses acts as a second witness to confirm what Jacob said. The point of it all is to say that God will use all of his creation, whether in the heavens, on the earth, or under the earth, to bless Joseph because he suffered for righteousness’ sake. Ultimately, Manasseh and Ephraim prospered agriculturally and militarily in fulfillment of this prophecy.

Application: Saints who suffer for righteousness will receive all kinds of blessings from the Lord. He will move heaven and earth to bring about prosperity in the lives of his servants that please him.

“His glory is like the firstling of his bullock, and his horns are like the horns of unicorns: with them he shall push the people together to the ends of the earth: and they are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and they are the thousands of Manasseh.” (Deut. 33:17)

A *firstling* is the firstborn of an animal and is symbolic of something that is most excellent. All firstlings were set apart as the Lord’s possession (Ex. 13:2). In this prophecy, Joseph’s glory is considered most excellent.

Horns are symbolic of power and influence (Hab. 3:5). *Unicorns* are probably a reference to the aurochs, “an extinct large long-horned wild ox” which have been shown being hunted in the Middle East on ancient Assyrian bas-reliefs and were possibly known to have the most

powerful horns.^{6, 7} The tribes of Joseph were destined to have so much power that they would conquer anyone who they would war against. Ephraim, however, would have the greater influence and population than Manasseh, who was the firstborn. This was also prophesied by Jacob in Gen. 48.

Application: God has given excellent glory to his followers so they can exert their influence around the world to speak out against evil and persuade men to be saved.

Summary of symbols & characteristics in Joseph & the onyx: Conversion; the battling of two natures within us; ongoing confession of sins for forgiveness; discernment; alternating periods of darkness and light in our lives; God's spiritual covering for his saints; the Lord's continual adding of blessings to the lives of obedient saints; fruitfulness through the Holy Spirit; overcoming obstacles; God-given strength to perform godly works in the midst of persecution; resources in heaven and earth being used by God for the benefit of his children; glory and power from God to subdue enemies.

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⁶Merriam-Webster, p. 77.

⁷H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell, eds., *The Pulpit Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958) v. 3, p. 537.