

Introduction

Since the Old Testament (OT) rituals put into effect by Moses at the Lord's command are to serve as an example and shadow of heavenly things (Heb. 8:5) concerning the relationship between God and his believers, I thought it would be a good idea to explore in detail the breastplate of judgment worn by the high priest. The breastplate, like the rest of the things involved with the tabernacle, has a rich symbolism that provides followers of Christ with a picture of who we are in God's eyes, and what he expects from us.

In this study, I will begin with a general explanation of the breastplate's purpose and symbolism of materials used to make it as described in Exodus (Ex.) 28:15-30. Then I will focus on each of the gems placed in the breastplate, how they relate to the twelve tribes based on prophecies by Jacob and Moses along with other scriptures, and, finally, their symbolic meanings to Christians. With each stone, I have included *Strong's* key numbers, the Hebrew word for the stone, and definitions.

The breastplate was only worn by the high priest, who is a type of our New Testament (NT) high priest, Jesus Christ (Heb. 2:17). The purposes of the breastplate are given to us from Ex. 28 as follows:

First purpose

“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.” (Ex. 28:29)

Therefore, the first purpose was to show the constant concern for the Israelites that the high priest was to have as he ministered before the Lord.

Second purpose

“And thou shalt put in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim; and they shall be upon Aaron's heart, when he goeth in before the LORD: and Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before the LORD continually.” (Ex. 28:30)

The high priest was also to be prepared to hear from God because the Lord would tell him about things concerning Israel whether they were good or bad.

Observation: In the same way the high priest wore the breastplate on his heart when he entered the temple, so Christ constantly has the church (including individual believers) on his heart as he prays for us to the Father (Heb. 7:25; 1 Jn.2:1). As he goes to the Father on our behalf, Christ hears from the Father the decisions he makes concerning us and our situations, then does his part to carry out what the Father tells him.

Materials used to make the breastplate

Ex. 28:15–“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.”

Gold (yellow): this represents faith in God and purity (Zech. 13:9 (*God’s people are like gold tried in the fire—in the midst of hardships, they are shown to be pure in their faithfulness to God*); Rev. 3:18); works that please God (1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Tim. 2:19-21).

Blue: symbolizes royalty, sovereignty, rulership, power and authority worthy of honor (Es. 8:15 (*blue was known to be royal apparel*); Eze. 23:6 (*speaks of the leaders of Assyria being clothed in blue*)).

Purple: symbolic of royalty, prosperity, and preciousness (Jud. 8:26; Prov. 31:22 (*the context of this scripture is a virtuous woman who is prosperous*); Jer. 10:9 (*this passage talks about how the heathen dress up their idols as if those idols are royalty, hence the blue and purple that is mentioned*)).

Scarlet (red): represents redemption (Josh. 2:18-21); royalty, prosperity, prestige, and valiance (Lam. 4:5 (*in this scripture, “they that were brought up in scarlet” refers to the class of people who were the most prestigious and wealthy*); Dan. 5:7,16,29; Nah. 2:3).

Fine twined linen: symbolizes the righteousness of the saints (Rev. 19:8) that comes through Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:30).

Observation: The breastplate was a “cunning work.” The word *cunning* when used as an adjective in the context of the scriptures means *skillful* or *skillfully devised*. This means it was crafted with careful deliberation and represents how God crafts his church with the same mindset. We are God’s workmanship (Eph. 2:10) and he has not haphazardly thrown us together, but has re-created us in the image of his Son.

How the breastplate was fashioned

Ex. 28:16–“Foursquare it shall be being doubled; a span shall be the length thereof, and a span shall be the breadth.”

Foursquare: symbolic of the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:16).

General observations of the symbolisms in the breastplate

1. The gems represent the characteristics and benefits of the saints as well as the types of service they give to God. The glistening or shininess of the gems is symbolic of the glory of God that we, as saints, should reflect in our character.

2. As saints, we are clothed in gold, blue, purple, scarlet, and fine twined linen (i.e. we have put on Christ; see Gal. 3:27). We are royalty in God’s eyes (1 Pet. 2:9).
3. The gems being placed in a foursquare container is symbolic of our citizenship in the New Jerusalem.

The layout of the stones on the breastplate

Ex. 28:17-21–

- “17 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.
 18 And the second row shall be an emerald, a sapphire, and a diamond.
 19 And the third row a ligure, an agate, and an amethyst.
 20 And the fourth row a beryl, and an onyx, and a jasper: they shall be set in gold in their inclosings.
 21 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.”*

carbuncle (Levi)	topaz (Simeon)	sardius (Reuben)
diamond (Naphtali)	sapphire (Dan)	emerald (Judah)
amethyst (Issachar)	agate (Asher)	ligure (Gad)
jasper (Benjamin)	onyx (Joseph)	beryl (Zebulun)

Hebrew is read and counted from right to left, hence the order of the stones in this diagram.

The order of the tribes’ names on the stones is implied in the context of Ex. 28. In verses 9 and 10, the Lord tells Moses that the two onyx stones to be placed on Aaron’s shoulders should have the names of the children of Israel in order according to their birth—six on one stone and six on the other. When he gives instructions concerning the names on the breastplate stones in verse 21, it is implied that he wants the names in the same order because he doesn’t give any details to the contrary.