

Parashat Tetzaveh תצוה

Torah: Exodus 27:20–30:10

Haftarah: Ezekiel 43:10–27

Israel, the Light to the Nations

General Overview

Tetzaveh is another short *parasha*. Its contents include the selection of Aaron and his sons to be the High Priest and regular priests respectively, the manufacture and design of the clothes they were to wear when functioning in their office, and instructions about their ordination.

The Sages who determined the Torah portions provide a commentary for us just by the way they made the divisions. We know that, “the custom of reading the Law of Moses was well established in the first century CE both in Israel and the Diaspora.”¹ However, we are less certain about the exact nature of the Torah portions. There seems to have been a certain degree of freedom or variance concerning the portions during the Second Temple period. For example, at least two cycles of readings existed. There was an Annual Cycle, like the one currently in use. There was also a Triennial Cycle, a three (or even a three and a half) year cycle.

We also know that, according to the Mishnah,

modalities of the readings are thus clear enough at the end of the second century, with no question of a fixed cycle of readings, or, more exactly, of an already fixed list of Sabbath readings.²

Furthermore, the Babylonian Talmud shows evidence that a definitely fixed division of even the haftarah was practised at least before 500 CE.³ However, many are of the opinion that the currently fixed cycle was not fully employed until at least the Middle Ages.

Whenever the Torah was divided into the different portions, it was done so for very specific reasons. The divisions reflect someone’s understanding of the text. This brings us to an important question: Why was the short section about the menorah at the beginning of this parasha, included with the teaching about Aaron and the priesthood? Should it not have been included with the previous parasha that talked about the furniture of the Mishkan?

Let us take the matter further. It seems that Exodus 27:20–21 is placed in *Tetzaveh* to teach us that if we fully understand the significance of *Tetzaveh* we will more clearly see how the Eternal One intended Israel to be a light to the whole world, illuminating it with the grace and splendour of God.

Exposition

Our study will utilize this outline:

- I. Vestments of Sanctity
- II. Vestments of Glory
- III. Vestments of Splendour

In this excerpt from Parashat Tetzaveh, we will look at elements from the Vestments of Sanctity and Vestments of Glory sections.

Sanctity, Glory, and Splendour

The teaching about the priestly garments begins by providing us with an outline for their discussion. This is found in 28:2. Here there are three words used to describe the nature of the priests' clothing: sanctity, glory, and splendour (author's translation). If we analyse this portion along these lines, then perhaps we will more easily see how Israel could function as a menorah to the world.

I. Vestments of Sanctity

The Hebrew phrase translated "vestments of sanctity," *begedei kodesh* (קֹדֶשׁ-בְּגָדֵי), contains the common word usually translated "holy," *kodesh* (קֹדֶשׁ). When we discussed this word previously, we saw it used in connection with people. For example, Exodus 19:5 says that Israel is to be a "holy" nation. Here, however, in 28:2, the word is used in connection with an object, not a person. This may shed some light on its meaning.

Since an object cannot have intrinsic moral qualities like a person, then the word "holy" must mean something else besides its common usage — a religiously moral state. Ultimately, it may include that kind of a description, but its base meaning seems to involve a "setting apart." Specifically, it is a setting apart from all else in order to serve God.

The clothes that the priests wore were therefore not to be used for anything other than the purposes of God. Many other objects connected with the Mishkan or sacrifices were also declared to be "holy" by God. The sanctifying of objects as described in Torah paved the way for us to understand how an object such as our body can be declared "holy." It does not mean that there is some kind of a mystical goodness attached to it. It simply means that God does not want it used for anything other than His own purposes. Just as the clothes for the priests were objects set apart for God, so also our bodies serve as "holy vestments" for the Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:12–20).

Unlike the clothes of the priests, which were worn only when they were using them for their office, the body is worn all the time. This emphasizes the fact that those who trust Yeshua are believer-priests all the time; on call continually for the Holy One!

II. Vestments of Glory

Not only are we told that the priest's clothes are holy garments, we are also informed that they are vestments for "glory." The Hebrew word translated "glory" is *kavod* (כְּבוֹד). Its root meaning is closely connected with the word "heavy." When the word is used in connection with God, it hints at the fact that the Lord is full and heavy with a characteristic that would cause all His creation to worship.

For whose glory were the garments to be? Were they to be for the priests' or for God's? Perhaps one is connected to the other. If people looked upon the priests' garments and beheld their glory, they were most likely to glorify God for His wisdom in creating such clothes.

It is crucial to understand the symbolism of the clothes in order to appreciate how they can bring glory to God. When we do so, we need to apply the same

hermeneutic principles as we did when we studied the Mishkan. The Renewed Covenant Scriptures comment more on the duties and the function of the priests, especially those of the High Priest. However, very few comments are actually made concerning the clothing they wore. We are left to other means to try to determine what the vestments symbolize.

Many books and articles have been written attempting to explain the symbolism of the clothes, especially those of the High Priest. One such book is called *Garments for Glory and For Beauty*.⁴ Many recommend this little book, as indeed, it contains many gems worth reading. Like other writings of a similar nature, however, it fails to distinguish between the intended meaning and the illustrative purpose of the text. When Scripture specifically tells us that a certain object means something, it is obvious that we are to look no further, but when the Scripture is silent, we must be careful. The most we can say is that “such and such provides a good illustration or picture of so and so.”

In short, we want to make a plea for grace and carefulness when we attach a meaning to something about which the Word seems silent. It is in this spirit that we will now proceed to suggest comments concerning the priests and their garments.

Whatever is said and believed about the symbolism of the sacred clothing, we must never lose track of the fact that the priest pictured the dignity and beauty connected with serving God. For 28:4 says that these garments are “that they may serve *Me* as priests.” (Italics ours)

A. The Ephod

The first piece of the priest’s clothing that we encounter in the text is called an “ephod.” The word ephod is a strange one to us. We do not have any piece of clothing to compare with it.⁵ It is a direct transliteration of the Hebrew word *ephod* (אֶפֹד). Not only is the word itself strange, but “The etymology of this word is uncertain.”⁶ Our passage merely describes it for us. It does not explain to us any of its symbolism, nor, until relatively recent times, were we able to determine any of this from other similar ancient Near Eastern clothes.

However, with the discovery of the Ugaritic tablets in modern Ras Shamra, close to the Syrian coast in the late 1920’s, we now have a more definitive picture of some of the meaning of the ephod. According to Nahum M. Sarna, there is a cognate form of the word “ephod” found in Ugaritic, the Canaanite language,

where it refers to some kind of expensive robe. . . It may quite possibly have been an item of apparel that was once widespread among the upper classes in the Near East and that eventually became outmoded. The innate conservatism of religious institutions made for its retention in ecclesiastical circles alone, where it developed into a vestment.⁷

As we can see from this quote, people other than God’s priests wore an ephod. For example, Gideon made a golden ephod that caused Israel to go after other gods (Judges 8:27). In addition, an ephod occupied a permanent place in the Philistine sanctuary behind which Goliath kept his sword (1Samuel 21:9). Moreover, the word itself appears to be linguistically connected with the word *teraphim*,⁸ the household idols that Rachel stole from Laban Genesis 31:19f).

The fabric of the ephod was of the same nature as those of the curtains and veil of the Mishkan, “indicating the intimate connection between the high priest and the Sanctuary.”⁹ Moreover, its importance lies in the fact that it contains all five colours of the Mishkan as well as being the first article of clothing mentioned in the text.

The main function of the ephod seems to be that it held the *avne zikron* (זכרון אבני) or “stones of remembrance for the sons of Israel.” These were two stones placed on the shoulder pieces of the ephod which had the names of the twelve tribes written on them, six each side. The Torah says that their purpose was so that “Aaron is to bear the names on his shoulders as a memorial before the Lord” (28:12).

Hertz explains that their purpose “was to remind the children of Israel of their unity of descent and unity of service to the God of Israel.”¹⁰ Rashi suggests that the stones were there, “so that the names of the twelve tribes shall be visible before God and He will remember their righteousness.”¹¹

Tiller, however, has a different view. He contends that the shoulder stones speak of strength:

What better place for us to be carried than on the shoulders of the Great High Priest? When a shepherd rescues a lamb, he carries it on his shoulder; so the infinite strength of Messiah is capable of bearing us until we reach Heaven's fold.¹²

¹ Martin Jan Mulder, *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, 149.

² *Ibid*, 145.

³ Megilah 29b

⁴ Lawrence V. Tiller, *Garments for Glory and For Beauty* (Cheltenham, Glos. England: Greenhurst Press, 1981).

⁵ There is a piece of outward clothing that the modern Israeli soldier wears as part of his equipment which is referred to in modern Hebrew as an ephod.

⁶ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1, 193.

⁷ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 178.

⁸ *Ibid*, 178.

⁹ J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 340.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 340.

¹¹ *Rashi: Shemot*, ArtScroll Edition, 155.

¹² Tiller, *op. cit.*, 36.