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AARON ADORNED BY CHRIST: THE *TELOS* OF THE PRIESTLY VESTMENTS

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OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUNDS

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Introduction

If a hundred people had to describe the text of Exodus 28, which covers the garments of the Aaronic priesthood, in a single word, “boring” would probably win a majority, or at least a strong plurality, of the votes. This is probably true even in many Christian circles. Yet this result would be the greatest shame, for “All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness,”¹ including the entirety of the Torah. Exodus 28 and the instructions therein for priestly vestment is actually breathed-out by God not only for a people thousands of years ago, but also for His people today. This old text to an old people is able to still be relevant today because, like all of Scripture,² it was from the beginning inspired to point towards Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. This paper will examine what the priestly garments both in their parts and as a whole represented in their original contexts and how this meaning finds consummation in the person and work of Jesus. To set the stage for the details of this examination will require looking first broadly at the meaning and purpose of the garments as a whole.

The Nature and Meaning of Priestly Adornment

While there would be little difficulty in taking the unique priestly vestments for granted, they actually pose many interesting questions. What is their purpose? Perhaps the best category for understanding their use is that of the priests as mediators. As mediators, the priesthood stood in a

¹ 2 Tim. 3:16. All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*.

² John 5:39.

unique position in relation to God and His people. Gordon J. Wenham puts the point this way: “As mediators priests had a dual role: they represented God to Israel and they represented Israel before God.”³ This, he goes on to explain, is a key reason why God ordained such particular clothing for them, for “Their godly authority was expressed by their splendid robes, which evoked the majesty of God himself.”⁴ In fact, there are two sides for this. On the one hand, the glory of their vestments displayed before the people a representation of the glory of the God for whom they served as representatives. On the other hand, their vestments were also products of human creativity, craftsmanship, and culture, and as such they displayed before God a representation of man's glory in His image. Thus by taking on their vestments the priests were enrolled as God to Israel and Israel to God.

The Christological significance of this should be abundantly clear. Jesus was (and is) able to serve as an eternal and final High Priest because He not only *represents* both God and man, as the priests of old did, but in fact *is* both God and man. In the priesthood of Christ there is no mere role-playing but an ontological reality in which the Priest by nature and not merely by appointment is the one who expresses the glory of God and of man.⁵ The garments which the Aaronic priests put on to become mediators foreshadow the flesh which Christ put on to become the one Mediator, set apart to save humanity.

On the note of “set apart,” another key purpose of the priestly vestments was to sanctify, or

³ Gordon J. Wenham. "The Priests." In *Exploring the Old Testament: The Pentateuch*. Vol. 1. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2003.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Heb. 1-2.

set apart, the priests for their work. After all, no one could merely approach God as himself on his own terms, for all have sinned,⁶ and God is a consuming fire.⁷ For this reason God told Moses that the clothes would be necessary to enable the priests to serve before God.⁸ By donning these clothes, the priests could leave their natural identities behind in order to act in a divinely appointed roll in a divinely appointed manner. Keil and Delitzsch said of this, “These clothes were to be used 'to sanctify him'...Sanctification, as the indispensable condition of priestly service, was not merely the removal of the uncleanness which flowed from sin, but, as it were, the transformation of the natural into the glory of the image of God.”⁹ Without the priestly clothes, the priests would have been natural and unclean.

This need for external sanctifying aids also points antitypically to Christ, as when He stepped into the priestly service He needed no such help at all. The Lord Jesus had no sins to cover, and He was to be found clothed with a righteousness of His own work and merit, the very righteousness of God. Jesus' holy life proved entirely sufficient to qualify Him for priesthood , even high priesthood, after He had perfected His work by persevering in obedience through suffering.¹⁰ Thus in Christian retrospect the need of the priests for divinely provided adornment prefigured in contrast Christ's inherent perfection.

⁶ Rom. 3:23.

⁷ Deut. 4:24.

⁸ Exod. 28:4.

⁹ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch. "Directions Concerning the Sanctuary and Priesthood." In *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2002.

¹⁰ Heb. 5:8-10.

The Ephod: Wearing the Word

With a brief Christocentric account of the priestly garments as a whole established, the individual parts deserve their own examination. The first of these, both in the order of the description in Exodus 28 and in importance, would be the High Priest's ephod. The exact details of what an ephod was and looked like are historically ambiguous, but the Biblical description includes a front piece, a back piece, and some kind of connection between the two across the shoulders.¹¹ The ephod was to be made out of fine linen, gold embroidery, and blue, purple, and scarlet yarn. These are the same materials as the curtain of the Tabernacle, a point to which Peter Enns calls attention.¹² Apparently there is an important link between the servant of God and the Tabernacle in which God dwells. The High Priest is set apart for a unique relationship to the presence of God.

There also appears to be a connection between the ephod and the revelation of God's will. The ephod bears the "breastpiece of judgment," which the HCSB translates "breastpiece for making decisions," and in 1 Samuel the ephod is employed on multiple occasions to seek out God's guidance.¹³¹⁴ This important strand, when combined with the note above about the link between the ephod and the curtain to God's presence, seems to paint a picture of the High Priest as the one who is uniquely employed to bear the revelation of God's will because he alone is

¹¹ Exod. 28:6-8.

¹² Peter Enns. "Priestly Garments." In *Exodus (The NIV Application Commentary Series)*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ 1 Sam. 23:9-11, 30:7-8.

authorized to enter the holy presence of God and return.

Once again there appears clear Christological import. Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of this unique revelatory role, something which the apostle John emphasizes in his Gospel account. He opens by saying of Jesus, “No one has ever seen God. The One and Only Son — the One who is at the Father’s side — He has revealed Him,”¹⁵ and also records Jesus as saying to Nicodemus, “No one has ascended into heaven except the One who descended from heaven — the Son of Man.”¹⁶ Jesus takes up the role as the one who enters God’s presence to return with revelation, indeed the very revelation of forgiveness. The High Priest needed to don his ephod to bring revelation, but Christ revealed God in donning His own human flesh, clothing which was likewise bound up with the very presence of God.

One feature of the ephod of particular interest is the placement of two onyx stones on its shoulders. In these stones were carved the names of the tribes of Israel, six on each stone. The Scripture says that they were to be carried by the High Priest as a memorial for all the Israelites. This is very significant, for the whole concept of a High Priest performing atonement rests on what the stones symbolize: one man identifying with his entire people to act on their whole behalf. As John Calvin said, “That the connection between the priest and the people might be made more plain, God not only placed on his breast the memorials of the twelve tribes, but also engraved their names on his shoulders.”¹⁷ This absolute identity of priest and people was essential to atonement,

¹⁵ John 1:18.

¹⁶ John 3:13.

¹⁷ John Calvin. *Harmony of the Law – Volume 2*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2009. Accessed 18 April 2016. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom04>.

so that the one could be for the many. All of Israel was carried into the Holy of Holies on the shoulders of the High Priest.

The unity of one and many represented by the ephod's shoulder stones is naturally quite directly applicable to what Christ came to do. Jesus became the one who acted for the many not by putting stones on His shoulders but by taking on human shoulders.¹⁸ He identified (and identifies) fully with humanity in its broken state, and holding this identity in place He has entered the presence of God the Father Almighty, where He saves and intercedes for His people as one man for all men.¹⁹

Lights and Perfections

By this point the most obscure matter of the priestly clothing, the *Urim* and *Thummim*, comes to relevance. The last significant part of the ephod is the “breastpiece of judgment” or “breastpiece for making decisions,” which contained the *Urim* and *Thummim*. The breastpiece itself was just a square, double-folded fabric block made out of the same material as the rest of the ephod. Twelve different precious stones set in gold filled its surface in four rows of three stones each, and each stone was engraved with a name of one of the tribes of Israel.

So what were the *Urim* and *Thummim*? Their names translate to “lights and perfections,” but this is ambiguous. No one knows for sure what they were. One traditional view, accepted by James K. Bruckner, is that they were black and white stones used like lots.²⁰ Enns suggests that

¹⁸ Heb. 2:17.

¹⁹ Heb. 6:20.

²⁰ James K. Bruckner. "Instructions: Priestly Garments." In *Exodus (Understanding the Bible*

they could have involved a luminous gem.²¹ Calvin argues that they are not distinct objects but some kind of patterns or markings or decorations.²² Whatever they actually were, the agreement is that they bear some relation, either symbolically or functionally, to the nature of the breastpiece as being for judgment/decisions.

The actual meaning of the *Urim* and *Thummim*, then, should most likely be understood in light of what was previously stated about the association of the ephod as a whole with the revelation of God's will. They probably served to mark the High Priest as the authorized bearer of God's word, the mediator of His will to Israel. They are called "lights and perfections" rightly, for whatever word from God they accompany will be a word of light and perfection. This word represents the justice and truth of God to which Israel was bound and from which she derived her Torah. Whenever the High Priest sought out the will of God bearing the *Urim* and *Thummim*, he would return with a message of true righteousness.

If the *Urim* and *Thummim* are to be understood in this way, then they should be understood to prefigure Christ Himself. He is the true Light and Perfection, the image of the invisible God and the fullness of divine revelation. As the author of Hebrews proclaims, "In these last days, [God] has spoken to us by His Son. God has appointed Him heir of all things and made the universe through Him. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact expression of His nature."²³ In Christ God's Word is revealed as a true, perfect light which enlightens everyone who comes into

Commentary Series). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2012.

²¹ Enns, "Priestly Garments."

²² Calvin, *Harmony*, comments on Exod. 28:30.

²³ Heb. 1:2-3a

the world.

Lesser Parts, No Lesser Meaning

By this point the ephod has been fully examined, but under the ephod the High Priest had to wear a robe. This robe was to be made of solid blue, unlike all of the mixes met so far. In its solid form, blue seems to be Biblically associated with wealth or value in a way similar to purple.²⁴ The bottom of the robe was to be decorated with small pomegranates, which Bruckner also says were associated with abundance or prosperity, and with gold bells.²⁵ The significance of the bells is an issue of debate, with Calvin and some others arguing that they represent the sounding of God's word of response,²⁶ while Bruckner claims they were a reverential announcement of entrance, akin to quietly knocking on a door.²⁷ Taking these elements all together paints something of a picture of Israel in their High Priest respectfully approaching God on His terms in order to receive from Him a word of abundant blessing and forgiveness.

Yet again, the light of Christ now shines brightly through the Old Testament types. Jesus is Himself both the Word of God²⁸ Israel sought as well as the reverential human word spoken to God in response.²⁹ By this perfect response He won for His people exactly what the High Priest sought

²⁴ Num. 4:6-12, 15:28; Jer. 10:9; Ezek. 27:24.

²⁵ Bruckner, "Instructions: Priestly Garments."

²⁶ Calvin, *Harmony*, comments on Exodus 28:31.

²⁷ Bruckner, "Instructions: Priestly Garments."

²⁸ John 1:1.

²⁹ John 17.

to find: forgiveness of sins. His perfect response of faith overflowed to invite from God His blessed word of forgiveness, the righteous declaration of free justification, for all who share in His life as Israel did in their High Priest's.

Topping all of these vestments in an additional glory was a bright, white turban. According to Keil and Delitzsch, the white color of the turban should be associated with the holiness of their profession.³⁰ This would be in accord with the gold medallion that was also prescribed to the High Priest to be bound to the front of the turban. On this medallion was the inscription: "holy/holiness to the LORD." Together these two symbols of holiness clearly marked out the High Priest as a sacred servant, claimed by God for His work. Only by this work of God sanctifying His priest could an otherwise fallible man "bear the guilt connected with the holy offerings that the Israelites consecrate as all their holy gifts."³¹ He had to keep the turban and medallion on his head, or he

³⁰ Keil and Delitzsch, "Directions Concerning the Sanctuary and the Priesthood."

³¹ Exod. 28:38.

would not be able to find acceptance when he served.

In a similar way to this, Jesus was Himself sanctified, set apart for God's service, at priestly age when the white dove of the Spirit descended from heaven to Him and anointed Him for ministry. Quite relevantly, this happened at His baptism, precisely the moment when He freely identified Himself with needy human sinners. By creating solidarity with sinful humanity in a baptism of repentance, while also being unbreakably sanctified, He was also able to bear the guilt of sinners on their behalf. Without the artifice of any medallion or turban, He is Himself so sanctified that He finds and wins for His people acceptance with God.

Near the end of the line, finally, are the questions of underwear and footwear. All of the priests, High Priest and others, were required to wear special linen undergarments while serving in the Tabernacle. Keil and Delitzsch suggest that the purpose of this was to cover the symbolism of human frailty, corruptibility, and impurity exposed in a man's most private parts.³² That side of humanity is not fit to serve as God's representatives, therefore underwear was required. Footwear, on the other hand, is never mentioned. In the entire chapter, nothing is said about what to wear on feet, despite the detailed regulations for everything else. Obviously, nothing too conclusive can be drawn from such silence, but there seems a possibility that the priests actually served barefoot, as though the Tabernacle were portable "holy ground" like that which Moses had so recently encountered.³³ This is, at least, a possibility which Enns is quick to mention. His comments are worth fully quoting:

³² Keil and Delitzsch, "Directions Concerning the Sanctuary and the Priesthood."

³³ Exod. 3:5.

What is conspicuously absent from the list is shoes, perhaps because of what has already been suggested in 3:5: “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” These words were spoken to Moses as he approached God on Mount Horeb. As we have seen, the tabernacle is an earthly representation of a heavenly reality — a portable Mount Horeb/Sinai. Although 3:5 is not explicitly reiterated in chapter 28, this connection seems a fruitful avenue of approach. The priests stand in God’s presence and must conduct themselves appropriately.³⁴

If this is correct, then the barefoot priests certainly would have found their feet to be entirely covered in blood, caked by the son, at the end of the day. This graphic routine would have undoubtedly created a strange and messy connection between priest and sacrifice.

With these thoughts in a mind, a few more Christological insights seem available. In regards to the undergarments, Jesus demonstrated the created goodness of even the most private human parts by assuming them to His divine person, and yet still overcame human impurity and corruptibility by His glorified resurrection. He also became the embodiment of holy ground, the walking presence of God, and made the unity between priest and sacrifice total and literal.

Conclusion

In the end, then, if even half of these observations are on the right track then the case seems to be that Exodus 28 and the priestly vestments described therein are not, as so many are certainly tempted to imagine, merely boring or unnecessary. Rather, the adornment of Aaron should be viewed as an essential part of God’s shaping of Israel’s life and pulling it ever forward towards the Incarnation of Christ. With these kinds of thoughts in mind, a vision of Jesus at the heart of every chapter of the Scriptures, then by no means should even priestly garments appear dry or dull. Instead let all Christians say that in the priestly code and clothing, in the vestments as a whole and in their parts, they were and remain a powerful testimony to Jesus Christ, who is the image of the

³⁴ Enns, “Priestly Garments.”

invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, and the Savior of the world. Can anything be more relevant than that?

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