Exodus Chapter Thirty-Nine

Overview

Much of Exodus chapter 39 is a fulfillment of the Lord’s instructions which are recorded in Exodus chapter 28. The only exception is Exodus 39:32-43, which record Moses’ inspection of the completion of the tabernacle project. These verses are a fulfillment of Exodus 35:10-19. Therefore, chapter 39 deals primarily with the manufacture of the priestly garments, which include the making of the ephod, the breastpiece, the robe, linen coats and the turban with its engraved statement “Holy to the Lord.”

Campbell writes that “Running through the narrative is the repeated phrase ‘as the L ORD had commanded Moses’ (see for example vv. 1, 5, 7, 21, 26, 29, 31). This is further emphasized in the summary statement of verse 32: ‘Thus all the work of the tabernacle was finished, and the people of Israel did according to all that the L ORD had commanded Moses so they did’. Moses saw the work, and blessed the people (vv. 42–43), language that echoes the creation account (see Gen. 1:31; 2:3).”

Hanna has the following comment on chapter 39, he writes “These verses correspond generally with God’s instructions to Moses in chapter 28. The priestly garments included the ephod (39:1-7; cf. 28:6-14), the breastpiece (39:8-21; cf. 28:15-30), the robe of the ephod (39:22-26; cf. 28:31-35), miscellaneous garments (39:27-29; cf. 28:39-43), and the engraved headband (39:30-31; cf. 28:36-38). Since chapters 35-40 generally deal only with the tabernacle’s construction and not with the functions in the sanctuary, this section (39:1-31) makes no mention of the Urim and the Thummim (cf. 28:30). Other minor differences are that the “breastpiece for making decisions” (28:15; cf. 28:29) is simply referred to in 39:8, 15, 19, 21 as the breastpiece. The plate of gold that was worn as a headband by the high priest (28:36-38) is here called the sacred diadem (39:30-31). Also mention is made in verse 3 that the fine threads of gold worked into the yarn and linen of the ephod were hammered out of thin sheets of gold.”


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Exodus 39:1: Overview Of Manufacture of Priestly Garments

Exodus 39:1 Moreover, from the blue and purple and scarlet material, they made finely woven garments for ministering in the holy place as well as the holy garments which were for Aaron, just as the Lord had commanded Moses. (NASB95)

Exodus 39:1 records the overview of the manufacture of the priestly garments which is a fulfillment of the Lord’s instructions recorded in Exodus 28:2-5, which present a sort of overview for chapter 28.

Interestingly, throughout the Exodus narrative we see quite often the phrase “blue and purple and scarlet material” (25:4; 26:1, 31, 36; 27:16; 28:5-6, 8, 15,
33; cf. 35:6, 35; 36:8, 35, 37; 38;18, 23). It is appropriate that these colors are used in the tabernacle since they are associated with royalty and expressed sovereignty and greatness in the ancient world. Thus, these colors convey God’s greatness and sovereignty.

The same fabrics and colors that would be used to make the priestly garments would be used in making the inner curtains and entrance curtain of the tabernacle. This emphasizes that these fabrics and clothing were to reflect the dignity and honor of the office of the high priest as well as the tabernacle itself.

The phrase “the holy garments” would represent the fact that Aaron and his sons were set apart exclusively for the priesthood in order to serve the Lord and the Israelites. This phrase emphasizes that the garments that the priests would wear represented the honor and dignity and authority of the office they would hold.

*Exodus 39:2-7: Manufacture of Ephod*

Exodus 39:2 He made the ephod of gold, and of blue and purple and scarlet material, and fine twisted linen. 3 Then they hammered out gold sheets and cut them into threads to be woven in with the blue and the purple and the scarlet material, and the fine linen, the work of a skillful workman. 4 They made attaching shoulder pieces for the ephod; it was attached at its two upper ends. 5 The skillfully woven band which was on it was like its workmanship, of the same material: of gold and of blue and purple and scarlet material, and fine twisted linen, just as the Lord had commanded Moses. 6 They made the onyx stones, set in gold filigree settings; they were engraved like the engravings of a signet, according to the names of the sons of Israel. 7 And he placed them on the shoulder pieces of the ephod, as memorial stones for the sons of Israel, just as the Lord had commanded Moses. (NASB95)


“Ephod” is the noun ἔφοδ (ἔφοδ) (ay-fode’), which refers to a garment like that of a vest or a coat over one’s robe, which the high priest was to wear in the tabernacle when serving. It was the distinguishing mark of the high priest Aaron. Of course, the material used to make this garment of the high priest was gold, blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen.

The “ephod” referred to a garment or a piece of clothing that covered the body from thigh to shoulder without covering either the arms or legs. It was typically worn by priests or temple servants (e.g. 1 Samuel 2:18; 22:18). The ephod worn by
Aaron was a very elaborate and impressive sort of ceremonial vest or coat worn over his other garments. Symbolically, it signified that Aaron was to represent God among the Israelites. It became a symbol of God’s presence among the Israelites.

The ephod is distinguished from the breastpiece, which was attached to it for the purpose of discerning God’s will through the Urim and Thummim. The term “ephod” eventually referred to both articles in the sense of the breastpiece attached to the ephod since they were not used separately but always together. The books in the Old Testament that come after Exodus use the term “ephod” on a consistent basis to refer to both articles of clothing.

The ephod was made of the same fabric and colors as the rest of Aaron’s garments as well as the inner curtains of the tabernacle itself. The two shoulder pieces were either loops or straps that permitted the front and the back of the garment to be tied together once the ephod was placed on the high priest.

The ephod was to be secured around Aaron’s waist since the phrase “woven band” actually refers to a woven waistband which the NET Bible brings out in its translation of the verse. A special, elaborate “waistband” was to be attached to the ephod and was to be of the same fabric and color as the rest of the ephod. This “waistband” would be tied around Aaron, the high priest much like the waistband of a bathrobe or waistband that ties at the front of a jacket or vest.

Two onyx stones were to have the names of the sons of Israel engraved on them with six of the names on one stone and the other remaining six on the second stone according to the order of their birth. Onyx was a type of quartz with varicolored bands and was imported in biblical times as a precious stone comparable in value to gold and sapphire (Genesis 2:12; Job 28:16). The variously colored bands of onyx make it an excellent material for carving in the sense that a skilled engraver can carve the stone so that the engraving is in a completely different color than the background, which would make it a highly suitable material for signets and seals.

The accounts in Genesis 29-30 and Genesis 35 are organized in such a way as to suggest the order of birth of Jacob’s sons. Therefore, from these two accounts, the names engraved on the onyx stones of the ephod of the high priest starting on the right shoulder and continuing in order would have been Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan and Naphtali. The left shoulder would have had the names of Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph and Benjamin. The significance of the birth order only suggested that just as Jacob’s sons were born in order to him whose descendants became the house of Israel, so the high priest represented the entire family of Israel in God’s presence as symbolized by the ephod shoulder stones.

The onyx stones were carefully engraved with the names of the sons of Israel cut deeply and permanently in the stones, which were to be mounted in filigree or fancy gold settings that would enhance their dignity. The stones were to be fastened permanently to the shoulders of the ephod by braided gold chains. This
was to be worn by Aaron whenever he ministered in the presence of the Lord in the tabernacle. This was to remind the Israelites that Aaron represented not only himself but the entire house of Israel. It was to emphasize that everyone in Israel was important to the Lord with no exceptions. These onyx stones would hang by their special gold chains and would of course swing as Aaron moved, which would be a visible reminder of the Israelites corporate solidarity with Aaron before the Lord.

Exodus 39:3 explains to the reader who the command recorded in Exodus 28:6-8 was executed. The gold was hammered into sheets and then cut into thin strands in order that it could be interwoven with the yarn and linen. Thus, this would produce a patterned cloth that sparkled brilliantly and would be flexible and functional.

Metalworkers can hammer gold into sheets as thin as a thousandth of an inch since gold has such a high malleability and tensile strength; but the thickness of the gold “fabric” used in the ephod can only be guessed at—perhaps a few thousandths of an inch for durability and flexibility combined. Lucas confirms that the present description of making gold thread/lace was already developed by the Egyptians and therefore, by implication, would have been known to a person such as Bezalel from his training in Egypt (Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries, 263–65).³

Exodus 39:8-21: Manufacture of Breastpiece

Exodus 39:8 He made the breastpiece, the work of a skillful workman, like the workmanship of the ephod: of gold and of blue and purple and scarlet material and fine twisted linen. 9 It was square; they made the breastpiece folded double, a span long and a span wide when folded double. 10 And they mounted four rows of stones on it. The first row was a row of ruby, topaz, and emerald; 11 and the second row, a turquoise, a sapphire and a diamond; 12 and the third row, a jacinth, an agate, and an amethyst; 13 and the fourth row, a beryl, an onyx, and a jasper. They were set in gold filigree settings when they were mounted. 14 The stones were corresponding to the names of the sons of Israel; they were twelve, corresponding to their names, engraved with the engravings of a signet, each with its name for the twelve tribes. 15 They made on the breastpiece chains like cords, of twisted cordage work in pure gold. 16 They made two gold filigree settings and two gold rings, and put the two rings on the two ends of the breastpiece. 17 Then they put the two gold cords in the two rings at the ends of the breastpiece. 18 They put the other two ends of the two cords on the two filigree settings, and put them on the

shoulder pieces of the ephod at the front of it. 19 They made two gold rings and placed them on the two ends of the breastpiece, on its inner edge which was next to the ephod. 20 Furthermore, they made two gold rings and placed them on the bottom of the two shoulder pieces of the ephod, on the front of it, close to the place where it joined, above the woven band of the ephod. 21 They bound the breastpiece by its rings to the rings of the ephod with a blue cord, so that it would be on the woven band of the ephod, and that the breastpiece would not come loose from the ephod, just as the Lord had commanded Moses. (NASB95)

Exodus 39:8-21 records the Israelites manufacturing the breastpiece, which fulfills the Lord’s commands to do so as recorded in Exodus 28:15-28.

The breastpiece was a square pouch, which was used for divination. It was eighteen inches square and was basically a fancy pocket worn over the high priest’s chest as part of the ephod that held the stones used for discerning the will of God.

“Breastpiece” is of the masculine singular construct form of the noun הֹ֫שֶּׁן (kho’-shen), which means “breast-plate” which is an ornamental chest covering worn by the high priest in Israel, which held the Urim and Thummim.

The breastpiece was made of the same material and colors as the ephod. The colors of the breastpiece were blue, purple, scarlet and was made of gold according to this verse, which corresponds to the gold and the colors that composed the inner part of the tabernacle. The breastpiece was to be square and when doubled it was nine inches long and nine inches wide and the twelve stones were arranged three to a row in a total of four rows. This is comparable to the ephod shoulder stones.

“Ruby” is the noun אָדֶם (o´-dem), which refers to some type of reddish stone since the root of this word is associated with “redness.” Thus, the NET, NIV and NASB render the word “ruby,” which is a precious stone that is a red corundum.

“Topaz” is the noun פִ֫תְדָּא (pit-daw’), which the Septuagint and Vulgate identify as topaz, which was a yellow to brownish-yellow transparent mineral used as a gem.

“Emerald” is the noun בַ֫רְאֶקְט (baw-reh’-keth), which literally means “flashing” or “sparkling.” The KJV and ESV render the word “carbuncle” whereas the NET and NIV render it “beryl.” The Septuagint translates it with the noun σμαράγδος, which means “emerald,” which was a rich green variety of beryl. Thus, either “emerald” or “beryl” is a good translation for the word since emerald was a form of beryl.

“Turquoise” is the noun נָפֶק (no´-fek), which the NIV and NET render “turquoise” which is a light greenish blue whereas the ESV translates it “emerald.” The former is more likely the color of this gemstone since the noun בַ֫רְאֶקְט (baw-reh’-keth) speaks of a beryl or emerald stone.
“Sapphire” is the noun sā·pîr (sap-peer’), which denotes a clear blue lapis lazuli rather than a very hard modern sapphire (see TNIV). It owes its name to the Sanskrit ćanipriya. That the word denotes a lapis lazuli, the rich, azure gem so common to the ancient world is based upon a comparison between the Ugaritic parallels ṯhr (gem)/iqlnim (lapis lazuli) and the biblical pair ṯāhōr, ṯōhar/sappîr.4

“Diamond” is the noun yā-hālōm (yah-hal-ome’), which refers to either a very hard stone or one that was mined and could be either a diamond or a jasper.

“Jacinth” is the noun lē′šēm (leh’-shem), which the NET, NIV, NASB and ESV all translate as “jacinth.” Various studies concerning this word which only occurs here in Exodus 28:19, do not agree as to the color of this stone, thus making a certain identification impossible.

“Agate” is the noun sēḥō (sheb-oo’), which the NET, NIV, and ESV render as “agate,” which was a variety of chalcedony with colored bands.

“Amethyst” is the noun ʾāh-lā-māḥ(h) (akh-law’-maw), which the NET, NIV, and ESV translate as “amethyst,” which was a clear purple or bluish-violet variety of crystallized quartz.

“Beryl” is the noun tār-šēš (tar-sheesh’), which the NET and NIV translate as “chrysolite.” This noun is identified with the Spanish topaz. Spanish gold topaz was chrysolite to the ancients. The Septuagint employs the Greek noun χρυσόλιθος to translate it, which means “chrysolite,” which was golden yellow in color.

“Onyx” is the noun sō-hām (sho´-ham), which is also translated “onyx” by the ESV, NIV and NET. The word’s significance is clear through Akkadian cognates with the meaning “red,” thus some render the word “carnelian,” which was a hard red chalcedony.

“Jasper” is the noun yā-s Según(h) (yaw-shef-ay’), which is correctly translated referring to an opaque cryptocrystalline quartz of any of several colors especially green chalcedony.

These various stones represent each of the twelve tribes of Israel. This breastpiece was yet another place where another representation of the twelve tribes of Israel could be worn by the high priest while he served in the presence of the Lord. If you recall, two onyx shoulder stones of the ephod held the names of the twelve tribes of Israel engraved on it with the name of a single tribe engraved on a single stone. Therefore, the twelve tribes of Israel were represented both as groups and individually on both the shoulder stones of the ephod and the breastpiece.

Each of Israel’s tribes is thus a precious jewel in God’s sight, and was represented before Him in this fashion whenever the high priest entered into the presence of God. The breastplate served the practical function of acting as a means of communication from the Lord in designating specific tribes for specific tasks.

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The breastpiece was a separate item from the ephod and was not sewn to it but attached by gold chains at the shoulders and gold rings at the waist. It was to be attached in order to keep it from swinging.

There were two specific purposes for the breastpiece, namely representation and divination. The former meant that the high priest would represent the twelve tribes of Israel when he served in the tabernacle. The latter was related to the Urim and Thummim, which was used to determine the will of God.

Exodus 39:22-26: Manufacture of Robe

Exodus 39:22 Then he made the robe of the ephod of woven work, all of blue; 23 and the opening of the robe was at the top in the center, as the opening of a coat of mail, with a binding all around its opening, so that it would not be torn. 24 They made pomegranates of blue and purple and scarlet material and twisted linen on the hem of the robe. 25 They also made bells of pure gold, and put the bells between the pomegranates all around on the hem of the robe, 26 alternating a bell and a pomegranate all around on the hem of the robe for the service, just as the Lord had commanded Moses. (NASB95)

Exodus 39:22-26 presents to the reader the Israelites manufacturing the robe which was in fulfillment of the Lord’s instructions which are recorded in Exodus 28:31-35. The robe of the ephod was completely blue, which stands in contrast to the multicolored ephod with its multicolored breastpiece. This blue colored robe was to be worn underneath the ephod, which also contained a blue color. This solid colored robe underneath the ephod was to have a round aperture large enough for the high priest to slip over his head. The circle of this hole was to be protected by a sturdy border that would prevent tearing or serious wear as it was put on and taken off during the performance of the high priest’s duties. This robe would have been approximately eight feet long since it had a front and back and would hang to the ankles. All around the hem of the robe, there were to be blue, purple and scarlet pomegranates and bells composed of gold.

Ornamental representations of pomegranate fruit were all around the hem of the robe that goes underneath the ephod. These pomegranate tassels provided decorative beauty for this blue robe and kept the bells of gold from hitting each other. They represent the fruitfulness of the Lord’s provision for His people.

In contrast to the pomegranate tassels on the robe, the gold bells that also were to be all around the hem of the robe had an extremely important function in that they prevented the death of the high priest. These gold bells would tinkle and thus allow the Israelites to hear the high priest as he ministered in the holy place. The sound of these bells would assure the Israelites of God’s mercy and grace in
allowing the high priest to minister on their behalf in the presence of the Lord. The bells represent joyfulness as we serve the Lord.

Exodus 39:27-31: Manufacture of Tunics and Turban

Exodus 39:27 They made the tunics of finely woven linen for Aaron and his sons, 28 and the turban of fine linen, and the decorated caps of fine linen, and the linen breeches of fine twisted linen, 29 and the sash of fine twisted linen, and blue and purple and scarlet material, the work of the weaver, just as the Lord had commanded Moses. 30 They made the plate of the holy crown of pure gold, and inscribed it like the engravings of a signet, “Holy to the Lord.” 31 They fastened a blue cord to it, to fasten it on the turban above, just as the Lord had commanded Moses. (NASB95)

In Exodus 39:27-31, we have the record of the Israelites manufacturing the tunics and turban in fulfillment of the Lord’s commands to do so as recorded in Exodus 28:36-43. The turban was worn by the high priest while serving in the tabernacle.

On the front of the turban was a special gold forehead plate, which was to bear the inscription “Holy to the Lord.” This plate symbolized Aaron’s role as the representative of the Israelites in relation to the atonement. Without the forehead piece on the turban he wore while serving in the tabernacle, Aaron’s role as representative on behalf of the Israelites in seeking forgiveness for sins through the various offerings would be nullified.

This forehead piece was a reminder to Aaron and the Israelites that Aaron’s service in the tabernacle was performed by means of faith in order to fulfill the purpose of receiving the forgiveness of sins from the Lord with the result that the Israelites would be holy in the presence of the Lord. They received the forgiveness of sins and were restored to fellowship as a result of their faith that Aaron’s actions were done in obedience to the Lord. Based upon Aaron’s faithfulness, they received the forgiveness of their sins and were restored to fellowship. So the gold piece on the turban symbolized the meaning behind Aaron’s actions as high priest.

The tunic was a long white coat worn beneath the robe of the ephod and was more complete than a loincloth and reached to the knees. The standard garment worn by both men and women in the biblical period was a linen tunic. Worn next to the skin, ankle length, with long sleeves, it provided protection from the sun and sometimes was embroidered or given a fancy hem by the wealthy (Gen 37:3 and 2 Sam 13:18–19) or by priests.5 The sash was a wide belt worn around the waist of the high priest and was to be the work of an embroiderer.

The tunics, sashes and caps for Aarons’ sons were for dignity and honor in the sense that these articles would provide them with high status in the Israelite community so that they are respected.

Exodus 39:32-43: Tabernacle Project Passes Moses’ Inspection

Exodus 39:32 Thus all the work of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting was completed; and the sons of Israel did according to all that the Lord had commanded Moses; so they did. 33 They brought the tabernacle to Moses, the tent and all its furnishings: its clasps, its boards, its bars, and its pillars and its sockets; 34 and the covering of rams’ skins dyed red, and the covering of porpoise skins, and the screening veil; 35 the ark of the testimony and its poles and the mercy seat; 36 the table, all its utensils, and the bread of the Presence; 37 the pure gold lampstand, with its arrangement of lamps and all its utensils, and the oil for the light; 38 and the gold altar, and the anointing oil and the fragrant incense, and the veil for the doorway of the tent; 39 the bronze altar and its bronze grating, its poles and all its utensils, the laver and its stand; 40 the hangings for the court, its pillars and its sockets, and the screen for the gate of the court, its cords and its pegs and all the equipment for the service of the tabernacle, for the tent of meeting; 41 the woven garments for ministering in the holy place and the holy garments for Aaron the priest and the garments of his sons, to minister as priests. 42 So the sons of Israel did all the work according to all that the Lord had commanded Moses. 43 And Moses examined all the work and behold, they had done it; just as the Lord had commanded, this they had done. So Moses blessed them. (NASB95)

Exodus 39:32-43 presents to the reader the account of Moses inspecting the completion of the tabernacle project by the Israelites and finding that everything was according to the Lord’s instructions. This construction was in fulfillment of the Lord’s commands which are recorded in Exodus 35:10-19.

Exodus 39:33-41 covers much of the same material which appears in Exodus 35:11-19. It reveals that every individual part of the tabernacle and its furnishings was manufactured with attention to detail and brought to Moses for him to inspect. He examined meticulously the work of the Israelites in order to see if they executed perfectly all that the Lord commanded. Then, he blessed the Israelites in the sense that he praised them for a job well done.