

The precious stones of the breastplate of judgment

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Illustration of the priestly breastplate with the tribes' names

ברקת	פטדה	אודם
יהלום	ספיר	נופך
אחלמה	שבו	לשם
ישפה	שוהם	תרשיש

The arrangement of the breastplate precious stones (the stone's names are in Hebrew)

In the Book of Exodus we read: **ועשית בגדי-קדש לאהרן אחיך, לכבוד ולתפארת** - “And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for splendor and for beauty” (Ex 28:2).

ואלה הבגדים אשר יעשו, חשן ואפוד ומעיל, וכתנת תשבץ, מצנפת ואבנט; ועשו בגדי-קדש לאהרן אחיך ולבניו-לכהנו-לי.

“And these are the garments which they shall make: a breastplate, and an ephod, and a robe, and a tunic of chequer work, a mitre, and a girdle; and they shall make holy garments for Aaron thy brother, and his sons, that he may minister to Me in the priest's office” (Ex 24:4).

About the function of the breastplate we read:

ונתת אל-חשן המשפט, את-האורים ואת-התמים, והיו על-לב אהרן בבאו לפני יהוה; ונשא אהרן את- [] משפט בני-ישראל על-לבו, לפני יהוה-תמיד.

“And you shall put in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim; and they shall be upon Aaron's heart, when he goes in before *YHWH*; and Aaron shall bear the [] judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before *YHWH* continually (Ex 28:30; see also: Lev 8:8).

The inner logic of this verse suggests that the word חשן - “breastplate” is erroneously missing here. Furthermore, it tells us that the חשן המשפט - “breastplate of judgment” was a carrying device for the “Urim and the Thummim.”

In the Book of Isaiah we read about Tyre:

והיה סחרה ואתננה קדש ליהוה-לא יאצר, ולא יחסן: כי לישיבים לפני יהוה, יהיה סחרה לאכל לשבעה,

“And her gain and her hire shall be holiness to *YHWH*; it shall not be treasured nor laid up; for her gain shall be for them that dwell before *YHWH*, to eat their fill” (Is 23:18; see also: Is 33:6; Jer 20:5; Eze 22:25).

It is not clear how the English translator determined that here יחסן (*yekhasen*) means “laid up.” The Greek translation of this verse disregards this word, but the content of this verse suggests that its meaning (similarly to Modern Hebrew) is “be stored.” If this interpretation is correct then חשן (*khoshen*) maybe a sibilant letter exchange of חסן (*khosen*) meaning “storage” (and not “breastplate”) for the “Urim and the Thummim.”

We find it quite odd that חשן (*khoshen*), the holy vestment of the high priest, which is mention in the Books of Exodus (23 times) and Leviticus (one time), is never referred to again in the Bible.

The Book of Exodus also tells us how the חשן המשפט - “breastplate of judgment” was made:

ועשית חשן משפט, מעשה חשב-כמעשה אפד תעשנו; זהב תכלת וארגמן ותולעת שני, ושש משזר-תעשה אתו.

רבוע יהיה, כפול; זרת ארכו, וזרת רחבו.

ומלאת בו מלאת אבן, ארבעה טורים אבן: טור, אדם פטדה וברקת-הטור האחד.

והטור השני-נפך ספיר, ויהלם.

והטור השלישי-לשם שבו, ואחלמה.

והטור, הרביעי-תרשיש ושהם, וישפה; משבצים זהב יהיו, במלואתם.

“And you shall make a breastplate of judgment, the work of the skillful workman; like the work of the ephod you shall make it: of gold, of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen, shall you make it.

Four-square it shall be and double: a span shall be the length thereof, and a span the breadth thereof.

And you shall set in it settings of stones, four rows of stones: a row of carnelian, topaz, and smaragd shall be the first row;

And the second row a carbuncle, a sapphire, and an emerald;

And the third row a jacinth, an agate, and an amethyst;

And the fourth row a beryl, and an onyx, and a jasper; they shall be enclosed in gold in their settings” (Ex 28:15-20; see also Ex 39:8-13).

All the stones that were set in the first, second, and fourth rows are mentioned also in one verse of the Book of Ezekiel (Eze 28:13). We do not know why Ezekiel did not mention the stones **לשם** (*leshem*), **שבו** (*shevo*), and **אחלמה** (*akhlamah*) which were set in the breastplate's third row. In fact, beyond these Book of Exodus' two citations, these stones are never mentioned again in the Bible.

The precious stones that are mentioned in verse Eze 28:13 are described as the property of the King of Tyre, and the Prophet never mentions the **חשן משפט** - “breastplate of judgment.”

Although mentioned in verses Ex 28:18; 39:11; and Eze 28:13, the names: **אדם** (*odem*) which is the first stone of the first row of the breastplate, and **ברקת** (*bareqeth*), **יהלם** (*yahalom*) and **ישפה** (*yashpneh*) which are the last stones of the first, second and fourth rows, respectively, do not appear again anywhere else in the Bible.

The Prophet Ezekiel (but no one else) mentions once more **נפך** (*nophech*) which is the first stone of the breastplate's second row. Referring again to Tyre he says:

אדם סחרתך מרב מעשיך; בנפך ארגמן ורקמה ובוץ, וראמת וכדכד, נתנו בעזבוניך.
“Aram was your merchant by reason of the multitude of your wealth; they traded for your wares with carbuncles, purple, and richly woven work, and fine linen, and coral, and rubies” (Eze 27:16).

We should notice that here **נפך** (*nophech*) is mentioned in association with other precious stones.

In addition to the references in the Books of Exodus and Ezekiel, the middle stone of the first row of the breastplate, **פטדה** (*pitdah*) is mentioned only once more. In the Book of Job we read: **כוש - לא-יערכנה, פטדת-כוש** - “The topaz of Ethiopia shall not equal it” (Job 28:19). Job says here that wisdom's value is higher than that of the **פטדה** (*pitdah*) stone. In the same chapter Job indicates that this also true for other precious stones. Toward the end of this chapter Job says that wisdom is a Divine matter that was given to men:

אלהים הבין דרכה; והוא ידע את-מקומה.
“God understands the way thereof, and He knows the place thereof” (Job 28:23).

אז ראה ויספרה; הכינה וגם-חקרה.
“Then did He see it, and declare it; He established it, and searched it out” (Job 28:27).

The remaining stones: **תרשיש** (*tharshish*), which is the first stone of the fourth row; **ספיר** (*sapir*), and **שהם** (*shoham*) that are the middle stones of the second and fourth rows of the breastplate, respectively, appear in more than just four biblical verses.

In chapter ten of the Book of Ezekiel, we read about the Prophet's vision about the Cherubim which were also: **“this is the living creature that I saw by the river Chebar”** (Eze 10:15). We also read in this chapter:

ואראה, והנה ארבעה אופנים אצל הכרובים-אופן אחד אצל הכרוב אחד, ואופן אחד אצל הכרוב אחד; ומראה האופנים, כעין אבן תרשיש.

“And I looked, and behold four wheels beside the cherubim, one wheel beside one cherub, and another wheel beside another cherub; and the appearance of the wheels was as [the color of] a beryl stone” (Eze 10:9; see also: Eze 1:16).

However, the literal translation of **אבן תרשיש** is: “Tharsus’ stone.”

In the Book of Daniel we read about his vision by **“the great river, which is Tigris”**:

ואשא את-עיני וארא, והנה איש-אחד לבוש בדים; ומתניו חגרים בכתם אופז. וגויתו כתרשיש, ופניו כמראה ברק ועיניו כלפידי אש, וזרעתי ומרגלתי כעין נחשת קלל; וקול דבריו כקול המון.

“I lifted up my eyes, and looked, and behold a man clothed in linen, whose loins were girded with fine gold of Uphaz;

His body also was like the beryl, and his face as the appearance of lightning, and his eyes as torches of fire, and his arms and his feet like in color to burnished brass, and the voice of his words like the voice of a multitude” (Dan 10:5-6).

The facts that the words **נחשת קלל** - “burnished brass” appear only here and in in verse Eze 1:7, and the phrase **איש-אחד לבוש בדים** - “a man clothed in linen” appears also in verses Eze 9:2,3, 11; 10:2, 6, 7), and that the vision occurred near a river, suggest that the writer of the Book of Daniel was familiar with the Book of Ezekiel, and that in addition to the terms **“burnished brass”** and **“a man clothed in linen”** he also borrowed the word **תרשיש** (*tharshish*) for Daniel's vision of the supernatural.

In the Book of Canticles we read about the beloved of the singer:

**דודי צח ואדום, דגול מרבבה.
ראשו כתם פז; קוצותיו תלתלים שחרות כעורב.
עיניו כיונים על-אפיקי מים; רחצות בחלב-ישבות, על-מלאת.
לחיו כערוגת הבשם, מגדלות מרקחים; שפתותיו, שושנים-נטפות מור עבר.
ידיו גלילי זהב ממלאים בתרשיש; מעיו עשת שן, מעלפת ספירים.**

“My beloved is white and ruddy, pre-eminent above ten thousand.

His head is as the most fine gold, his locks are curled, and black as a raven.

His eyes are like doves beside the water-brooks; washed with milk, and fitly set.

His cheeks are as a bed of spices, as banks of sweet herbs; his lips are as lilies, dropping with flowing myrrh.

His hands are as rods of gold set with beryl; his body is as polished ivory overlaid with sapphire” (Cant 5:10-14).

The association between **תרשיש** - “beryl” and **ספיר** - “sapphire” is not unique to the Book of Canticles. In the Book of Ezekiel, while the wheels under the cherubim looked like **אבן תרשיש** - “a beryl stone” (Eze 10:9; Eze 1:16), the Prophet saw:

ואראה והנה אל-הרקיע אשר על-ראש הכרובים כאבן ספיר, כמראה דמות כסא-נראה, עליהם.

“Then I looked, and, behold, upon the firmament that was over the head of the cherubim, there appeared above them as it were a sapphire stone, as the appearance of the likeness of a throne” (Eze 10:1; see also: Eze 1:26).

The “sapphire stone” appears also in another vision about the Divine. In the Book of Exodus we read:

ויעל משה ואהרן-נדב ואביהוא ושבעים מזקני ישראל. ויראו את אלהי ישראל; ותחת רגליו כמעשה לבנת הספיר, וכעצם השמים לטהר. ואל-אצילי בני ישראל לא שלח ידו; ויחזו את-האלהים,

“And went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel; And they saw the God of Israel; and there was under His feet the like the work of sapphire stone, and the like of the very heaven for clearness.

And upon the nobles of the children of Israel He laid not His hand; and they saw God in a vision” (Ex 24:9-11).

Some of the elements of verse Ex 24:10 appear also in the Book of Lamentations:

זכו נזיריה משלג, צחו מחלב; אדמו עצם מפנינים, ספיר גזרתם.

“Her nazirites were purer than snow, they were whiter than milk, they were more ruddy in body than rubies, their polishing was as of sapphire” (Thr 4:7).

It is not clear why the English translators of this verse assumed that here the word **עצם** (*etsem*) has a different meaning than that which is found in verse Ex 24:10. However, it should be noted that both these verses deal with purity and both mention the terms: **ספיר** (*sapir*) and **עצם** (*etsem*).

In the Book of Isaiah we read:

עניה סערה לא נחמה; הנה אנכי מרביץ בפוץ אבניך, ויסדתיך בספירים. ושמתי כדכד שמשתיך, ושעריך לאבני אקדח; וכל-גבולך לאבני-חפץ.

“O you afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold, I will set your stones in fair colors, and lay your foundations with sapphires.

And I will make your pinnacles of rubies, and your gates of carbuncles, and all your border of precious stones” (Is 54:11-12).

While here we find the association between **ספיר** (*sapir*) which is the middle stone of the second row of the breastplate, and **כדכד** (*kadkod*), in verse Eze 27:16 (mentioned above) **כדכד** (*kadkod*) is associated with **נפך** (*nophech*), the first stone of the second row of the breastplate.

In the Book of Chronicles we hear David detailing the goods that he prepared for the building of God’s house. Among these items we find:

אבני-שהם ומלואים אבני-פוך ורקמה, וכל אבן יקרה

“**onyx stones, and stones to be set, glistering stones, and of divers colors, and all manner of precious stones**” (1 Ch 29:2).

Here we find the association of **פוך** - “*puch stones*” and **שהם** (*shoham*) which is the middle stone of the fourth row of the breastplate, while in verse Is 54:11, the association of **פוך** (*puch*) is with **ספיר** (*sapir*) which, as indicated above, is the middle stone of the second row of the breastplate.

In the Book of Job we read: **לא-תסלה בכתם אופיר; בשהם יקר וספיר; בשהם יקר וספיר**; “It (= the wisdom) cannot be valued with the gold of Ophir, with the precious onyx, or the sapphire” (Job 28:16; see also: Job 28:6).

Here the association is between **שהם** (*shoham*), which is the middle stone of the fourth row of the breastplate, and **ספיר** (*sapir*) which, as indicated above, is the middle stone of the second row of the breastplate.

In regard to the **שהם** (*shoham*) stones we read in the Book of Genesis:

ונהר יצא מעדן להשקות את-הגן; ומשם יפרד והיה לארבעה ראשים.
שם האחד, פישון-הוא הסבב את כל-ארץ החוילה, אשר-שם הזהב.
וזהב הארץ ההוא טוב; שם הבדלח, ואבן השהם.

“And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became four heads.

The name of the first is Pishon; that is it which compasses the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold;

And the gold of that land is good; there is bdellium and the onyx stone” (Gen 2:10-12).

Here the **שהם** (*shoham*) stone is mentioned in association with **בדלח** (*bedolakh*), another precious stone (see also: Num 11:7 where the Divine manna appearance was like *bedolakh*).

We can conclude that in many of the above verses the stones: **תרשיש** (*tharshish*), **ספיר** (*sapir*), and **שהם** (*shoham*) are associated with Divine visions and holy objects.

We also found that almost always, when stones of the breastplate are mentioned in biblical books beyond the Book of Exodus, it is in association with other precious stones, yet we have no explanation for this phenomenon.

Furthermore, none of the biblical descriptions of these stones gives us realistic clues about their nature, and we have to conclude that all the Greek and English names of these stones appear to be based on pure speculations.