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## What was the purpose of the ephod

We learned from Exodus 28 today that an ephod was part of the garment of the High Priest that he wore upon his shoulders (28:6-14). The text describes it as being made of gold and blue, purple and scarlet yarns, and of fine twined linen by an expert craftsman. It has two onyx stones, one for each shoulder, enclosed in gold settings with gold chains hanging from the settings. Seems pretty clear what an ephod is, right? Outside the Pentateuch, there are 17 verses that use the term "ephod." The more we read about this garment, the more we might wonder: are we talking about the same thing? Let's start with the book of Samuel. 1 and 2 Samuel have several references to the ephod, beginning with little Samuel himself. In 1 Sam 2:18, the text tells us that Samuel ministered before Yahweh as a "boy clothed with a linen ephod." Right away this raises a few questions: Why was Samuel, who was not a high priest (or even a Levite) wearing a priestly garment? And why is it made of linen and not gold, blue, purple and scarlet material? The answer to these questions may be one and the same. The High Priest wore the special ephod described in Exodus 28. Other ephods might have been made for the regular priests, just out of different or lesser-quality material (hence: linen). Samuel was dedicated to the service of the Tabernacle as a young boy, making him some sort of "honorary Levite," and therefore he was permitted to wear the lesser type of ephod designating him as such. Indeed, in 22:18, Doseg the Edomite strikes down 85 priests that "wore the linen ephod." So this linen variety seems to designate the more common ephod that the regular priests wore, as opposed to "the ephod" that signifies the High Priest's special garment. This may help explain some of the other usages we see in Samuel. 1 Samuel 2:28 and 14:3 both reference "an ephod" that is worn by a priest. These are both normal usages. Later, though, when David is on the run from Saul and he takes refuge at the sanctuary, Ahimelech the priest points to Goliath's sword, which is "wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod." This ephod is definite, with an article attached. Why would this ephod be hanging somewhere instead of on a priest? Perhaps because it was the High Priest's ephod, not just an average linen variety. It was hanging because it was not currently in use. Continuing in 1 Samuel, we also see a few curious instances where an ephod (linen, presumably) is used for the purpose of divination. In chapter 23, Ahimelech's son Abiathar flees to David with "an ephod in his hand" (23:6). David requests that he brings the ephod near and then through it inquires of God whether the men of the city will betray David into Saul's hand. God answers him, and the implication is the answer comes through the ephod, perhaps the Urim/Thummim within it (23:9-11). A similar thing occurs in 30:7-8 with the same cast of characters. If these ephods in chapters 23 and 30 are of the average linen variety, this may indicate that they all had some sort of breastpieces with Urim/Thummim inside the pouches and God at times could give direction even through these. In 2 Samuel 6:14 (parallel 1 Chr 15:27), things get stranger. David is seen dancing before the Lord with all his might, "wearing a linen ephod." This one is harder to explain and rationalize than Samuel wearing the ephod. David was not a Levite, nor was he dedicated to the service of the temple. Perhaps he is supposed to be seen here operating in some capacity in a priest-like manner? The celebration is over the return of the Ark of the Covenant, the most important element of the Tabernacle/Temple. Did kings at times have the privilege of wearing a linen ephod? And if so, does this mean they were sometimes granted priestly duties? The answers to these questions are not clear, but the text might lead us to assume affirmative answers. The book of Judges has a few more references to ephods. All the references there, though, are to illegitimate ephods. First, Gideon collects 1700 shekels of gold and makes a golden ephod, which becomes an object of worship and a snare to the people (8:26-27). Later a man named Micah (not the prophet!) made a shrine, ordained one of his sons as a makeshift priest and made an ephod alongside other idols to worship (17:5). This ephod is later stolen and used for widespread worship in Israel (18:14-20). Certainly this indicates that the object was at times manufactured for sinful purposes and worshipped as an idol, which was an abomination before God. Mankind has once again found ways to pervert that which is holy and good. Hosea the prophet may indicate that ephods were used illegitimately in his days too. Hosea 3:4 reads: "For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or household gods" (ESV). Notice how the ephod is paired with "household gods," which may indicate that it was used idolatrously. However, it is also in parallel with "sacrifice" in the line above it, which may indicate it is not necessarily meant to be viewed negatively here. Hosea may be intermixing good and bad elements of Israel's worship to simply say that in exile, they will have none of it - good or bad. But either way, a few things are clear from our brief survey of the ephod in the Bible: 1) The High Priest's ephod was different from the linen ephods that other priests wore. 2) There were times that non-priests wore the linen ephods (i.e. a prophet and a king). 3) Linen ephods were likely used for divination purposes at times. 4) The ephod was sometimes illegitimately replicated and used for idolatrous purposes. It is evident that what God intended for good and holy use was at times manipulated for evil purposes. Let us take a lesson from that and make sure to adhere closely to God's Word and not pervert the good thing around us. Ephod—it's a word you don't typically see today, and yet it carries great weight in the Bible when it comes to ceremony and honor: King David wore a linen ephod when he famously danced before the Lord when they carried the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David. Moses's brother, Aaron, donned the ephod and other priestly garments as his formal clothing at the holy tabernacle, which was the portable sanctuary used by the Israelites to worship the Lord during their years in the wilderness. The prophet Samuel, too, wore an ephod during his service to God. But what is an ephod, exactly? Is it an article of clothing, or a piece of jewelry? And why was it important? Here, we explore the biblical meaning and spiritual significance of the ephod. What Is Meant by 'Ephod' in the Old Testament? There are two basic meanings for the word ephod. The most well-known understanding of it, that of a garment or item to be worn, comes in Exodus and Leviticus, where God describes for Moses exactly what preparations Aaron is to take for his priestly service, including how to wash himself and what to wear. Here, the ephod is included among a litany of sacred garments Aaron is to wear. The other items are a breastpiece, robe, woven tunic, turban, and sash (Exodus 28:4). Great detail goes into the Lord's description of the ephod. As He specifies, the ephod should be made "of gold, and of blue, purple and scarlet yarn, and of finely twisted linen—the work of skilled hands. It is to have two shoulder pieces attached to two of its corners, so it can be fastened. Its skillfully woven waistband is to be like it—of one piece with the ephod and made with gold, and with blue, purple and scarlet yarn, and with finely twisted linen" (Exodus 28:6-8 NIV). Further, two onyx stones are to be mounted in gold and fastened on the ephod's shoulder pieces. These stones are to be engraved with the names of the 12 tribes of Israel, with six names on one and six on the other, and two braided gold chains are to connect the stones (v. 9-14). The ephod was of great importance. It was listed first of these priestly garments, and the breastpiece was to be fashioned after the ephod, as well as tied to it with blue cord. The crafting of these priestly garments, along with other preparations for the elaborate details of the Lord's tabernacle, takes up several chapters in Exodus—first the descriptions of how they are to be made, then the description of the crafting itself. In Exodus 39, we read how the Israelites were obedient in this and crafted the ephod exactly as God commanded. Shortly after, in Leviticus 8, we read how Moses then adorned Aaron with the priestly garments, fastening them all on him just so. Thus, Aaron and his sons were ordained as God's priests in accordance with all God's commands. But the ephod is not just mentioned in Exodus and Leviticus. Years later the prophet Samuel, who so pleased God especially in comparison to the showy, sinful sons of the prophet Eli, is described as wearing a "linen ephod" as he served the Lord as a boy (1 Samuel 2:18). We also see King David wearing a linen ephod in 2 Samuel 6:14 and 1 Chronicles 15:27 as he and others carried the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem. The other meaning of "ephod" is somewhat similar—described less as a garment but rather more as an item of ceremonial, sacred significance, much like an idol or other special item to be worn but not necessarily an item of clothing. This ephod might have been worn or set upon an altar. For instance, in Judges 8:25-27, the Israelites threw gold rings into a pile, which were then melted down and turned into an ephod that Gideon placed in his town, where it was worshipped by the people. What Was the Spiritual Purpose of the Ephod? We know the ephod was a tool of ceremony—a special, ornate, handcrafted item with great significance. Much effort went into the making of the ephod, and it was crafted from fiery. It carried much symbolic weight. The onyx stones were meant to be memorial stones, we are told in Exodus 28:12, representing the sons of Israel—literally, the descendants of the biblical patriarch Jacob, also known as Israel, through his 12 sons birthed through his two wives, Leah and Rebekah, and two concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah. In addition to being a holy item, the ephod is a symbol of the people, as well as their sins. God tells Moses the two stones upon the ephod are, in fact, "memorial stones for the sons of Israel" and that "Aaron is to bear the names on his shoulders as a memorial before the Lord" (Exodus 28:12). They are a part of the ritual the people must do to communicate with God, both to worship God and atone for their sins. These sons—Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin—all became the heads of their own family groups, comprising God's people, Israel. These are the same people who Moses led out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. But the people had gone astray, as the Bible tells us. So God, speaking through Moses, gave the people instructions on how they should live. On Mount Sinai, God commanded Moses to tell the people, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6a). God also told Moses to make sure the people stayed back and did not try to approach the Lord, for they were not holy or capable enough to be in His presence. He told Moses, "Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the Lord and many of them perish. Even the priests, who approach the Lord, must consecrate themselves, or the Lord will break out against them" (Exodus 19:21-22). God then gave Moses the Ten Commandments and other laws. But when Moses stayed with God too long on the mountain, 40 days and nights, the people turned away from the Lord and worshipped other gods (Exodus 32). God was furious over their disobedience and faithlessness and planned to destroy the Israelites. But Moses pleaded with God to forgive the people, and God relented. He made a covenant with Moses, promising He would still be with the people in spite of their misdeeds as long as they obeyed God (Exodus 34:10-11). Therefore, the people knew they were not only duty-bound but also bound under threat of annihilation by God Himself to follow God's commands. They attempted to follow everything God commanded, from His rules about how to properly make a sacrifice and how to build the tabernacle, to who gets to enter the tent and how they are to ceremonially prepare for this work. The ephod was one of these instructions, as significant as the rest. Only the special priest could wear the ephod. It was an integral part of being ceremonially ready to serve God. Without the ephod—or the breastpiece, tunic, or sash—the priest was unfit to serve. He was not prepared, not "clean" and "holy" enough, to do the work of the Lord. The ephod enabled him to do his job and to properly hear God. As Moses explained to Aaron, they needed to follow these directions perfectly or face consequences, including death. "What has been done today was commanded by the Lord to make atonement for you. You must stay at the entrance to the tent of meeting day and night for seven days and do what the Lord requires, so you will not die; for that is what I have been commanded" (Leviticus 8:34-35). How Did God Speak through the Ephod to His People? Before Jesus, most people didn't simply talk with God about His will, whether out of fear they were not holy enough and would incur His wrath or because God typically only spoke through His prophets. So when they wanted to know God's will, they consulted a priest or prophet, who would then speak to God on their behalf. Those who spoke to God would use holy items, such as the ephod, to help them communicate with the Lord. For instance, in 1 Samuel 23, when David heard Saul was plotting against him, he went to Abiathar the priest and asked him to "bring the ephod" (v. 9). Then David asked God for guidance, and God told him what to do. Later, the same thing happened. David needed guidance from God, so he asked Abiathar again to bring him the ephod (1 Samuel 30:7). David then inquired of God, and God told him what to do. Much, much later, the Bible tells us God allowed the destruction of Israel because of their great and continued long streak of disobedience, and that part of their destruction included no guidance from God. As God said through His prophet Hosea, "The Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or household gods" (Hosea 3:4). They would be alone, isolated, without help—without God or a way to communicate with Him. Do We Need an Ephod to Talk to God Today? We don't need an ephod to talk to God today, just as we no longer need to sacrifice lambs on the altar to atone for our sins. God sent His Son, Jesus, to be our Savior and "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). Jesus removed the barrier between us and God. We don't have to fear God's wrath when we approach Him or think He cannot hear us. Hebrews 4:16 tells us we can "approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." And as we're told in 1 John 5:14, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us." Jesus is our "high priest," our Redeemer, and He is all we need. Photo credit: ©GettyImages/Javier\_Art. Photography Jessica Brodie is an award-winning Christian novelist, journalist, editor, blogger, and writing coach and the recipient of the 2018 American Christian Fiction Writers Genesis Award for her novel, The Memory Garden. 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