

Minerals of the Breastplate: Exodus 28

One of the most mineral-rich passages in the Bible is Exodus 28 which describes a priestly garment. From the New International Version:

"Fashion a breastpiece... Then mount four rows of precious stones on it. The first row shall be **carnelian**, **chrysolite** and **beryl**; the second row shall be **turquoise**, **lapis lazuli** and **emerald**; the third row shall be **jasinth**, **agate** and **amethyst**; the fourth row shall be **topaz**, **onyx** and **jasper**.

Mount them in **gold** filigree settings." Exodus 28:15-20



But there is a great deal of disagreement about how the passage describing the breastplate should be translated. Many words used to refer to stones refer to placenames or qualities of the stone rather than a name we can recognize. As a result, different traditions identify different types of minerals as part of the breastplate.

3.) Bareket בָּרֶקֶת

Meaning "lightning flash" or sparkly. Usually interpreted as a green beryl like **emerald** or **heliodor**, but **onyx/agate** have also been suggested.

2.) Pit'dah פִּתְדָּה

Possibly meaning **topaz** or a mineral from the isle of Topazos (likely **peridot**). It has also been translated as **chrysolite**.

1.) Odem אָדָם

Meaning "red". Probably refers to the classical red stone "sard", but has been translated as **carnelian** or **jasper**.

6.) Yahalom יָהַלּוֹם

Meaning is highly debated. Could possibly mean "honey-colored stone" or a light blue stone like **agate** or **onyx**. Some say **emerald**.

5.) Sappir סַפִּיר

Surprisingly does not refer to sapphire, but more likely **lapis lazuli**, a blue metamorphic stone.

4.) Nofekh נָפֶךְ

Usually translated as a type of red or pink **garnet**. Has also been associated with the Egyptian word for **turquoise** or **malachite**.

9.) Ahlamah אֲחַלָּמָה

Most agree this refers to **amethyst**, the purple variety of crystalline quartz.

8.) Ševo שְׁבוֹ

Most agree this stone is **agate**, likely a gray variety.

7.) Lešem לֵשֶׁם

Probably refers to hardened tree material like **amber** or **opal**, but **jacinth**, a red type of zircon, has also been suggested.

12.) Yāšefēh יָשְׁפֵה

A cognate of "**jasper**", but not identical in meaning. Most likely **ruby**, **zircon**, or **emerald**.

11.) Šoham שְׁוָהָם

Likely refers to some green stone. Jewish tradition usually interprets this as green **beryl**, but others suggest **malachite** or **onyx**.

10.) Taršîš תַּרְשִׁישׁ

Referring to Tarshish, a mineral-rich place in biblical times. Most likely this refers to **topaz**, **lapis lazuli**, **jasper**, or **serpentine**.

Bruce Dice

MINERALOGICAL MUSEUM

Information from:

***The Bible – New International Version**

Mindat.org – The world's largest online mineral database.

****Rock and Gem: The definitive guide to rocks, minerals, gemstones, and fossils**” by Bonewitz, R. and the Smithsonian Institute, New York, NY: Dorling Kindersle. 2008.

****Simon and Schuster's Guide to Rocks and Minerals**” – edited by Martin Prinz, George Harlow, and Joseph Peters. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978.

“The Gems in the High Priest's Breastplate: A Pragmatic Review” by Meschel, S.V. 2018. Jewish Bible Quarterly, Vol 46:4 (241-251).

International Gem Society: “What Were the Gemstones of the Breastplate of Aaron?” – <https://www.gemsociety.org/article/what-were-the-gemstones-of-the-breastplate-of-aaron/>

“Old Testament Gemstones: A Philological, Geological, and Archaeological Assessment of the Septuagint” by Harrell, James A. in Bulletin for Biblical Research, vol. 21, no. 2, 2011, (141-171). Available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26424638>

6/10/2022

By Jillian Herlinger (Dice Scholar / Museum
Curator 2021-2022)