

The Living Word D'var Chaim

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Royal Blue: Of Wars and Rebellions

Biblical Tehelet

By Ron Cantrell

Now Korah was a wealthy man. The blue dye was a precious commodity that would bring him untold riches in the Sumerian and Babylonian market places. Seeing that his course of priestly duty was only one month a year, he would have plenty of time to travel as a merchant and reap rich benefits from the wonders of the tiny Red Sea snail.

Korah was drunk with the knowledge that he was no longer a slave—not of Pharaoh, and he was not going to become a slave of Moses. He did not need to obey Moses and Aaron's directives about his blue dye. The request for hundreds of thousands of cords of blue, four per Hebrew man attached to the four corners of their garments, would exhaust his supply. Didn't they realize the supply was not endless?

The items he had already made had diminished his stock by half: Curtains for the tabernacle, hangings, priests garments, a veil, and full coverings for the Ark had all been requisitioned.

Korah regretted ever show-

ing Moses the dyed wool. The color was like magic. There in the desert, the dyed fabric became one with its pale surroundings. It echoed the azure of the sky. It seemed to perfectly compliment the beige and tan world of sand and limestone. Even more astounding was when the dome of the heavens blushed with sunset colors, painting the tan mountains mauve, the blue held its own and seemed to challenge the changing hues until darkness stole all color from one's eyes.

Korah's position as master of textiles in the court of Pharaoh had taught him about blue and the market for the costly dye. It was more precious than gold because of the difficulty of harvesting it from the small gland in the sea snail. In Egypt, though he knew exactly how it was procured, all he had ever seen was the already harvested dye in vats.

Besides, it was he alone who had the wits about him to pick up the snails as the Israelites trod the Red Sea floor fleeing Pharaoh. He had instructed his 250 men to gather as they walked and pack every empty space in their carts full with the small snails. Later, during their travels, he instructed young boys in cracking the snails, finding the dark gland and piercing it with a sliver of flint to catch the drops of dye. Initially the dye was pus-colored and smelled

bad. If you did not know what you were doing, you would discard the strong smelling liquid quickly. It was undoubtedly a fisherman who first watched the creamy liquid turn heavenly blue as the air and sun dried it on his fingers and where he had wiped it on his clothing.

Korah guarded the recipe for dyeing wool in his head. No one else among the exiles from Egypt, not even one other among the almost one million exiles knew this special process of dyeing. He was careful to personally oversee the 10-step process. Those whom he employed in the trade knew only the steps for which they were responsible.



In Korah's eyes, Moses and Aaron had gone too far and he was determined to teach them a lesson. As he sat beside his tent in the shade, thirty-five of his men were dying 250 wool caftans blue. In the desert heat, the transformation of the color from the milky garlic smelling liquid to the astonishing blue-purple took place quickly. Rinsing in boiling water, then washing with olive soap, a small amount of diluted camel urine and sheep dung set the blue permanently in the fabric. The camel urine cut the garlic-like smell of the dye potion.

Korah had not managed Pharaoh's fabric business without exceptional wisdom. He knew he could resell the blue caftans for a great price on the market, but scattering his dye for blue cords in the fringes of thousands of men's garments was valuable material lost forever.

Dyed, rinsed, dried and finished, Korah's robes would be ready for the confrontation with Moses and Aaron the following day.

Did a cord of blue make a man holy? As a priest, he ought to know about holiness.



“You Belong to Me”- Blue's Purpose

Korah, in his pride and arrogance, rose up against Moses, the man recorded in Scripture as the “most humble man on earth.” Jewish sources confirm that the story centered around *tehelet*, the color blue.

Korah's accusation against Moses' authority immediately follows God's direct command in Numbers 15 for men to wear a cord of blue in the fringes of their garments. The purpose for the thread of blue was to remind the Israelites when they looked upon it that they belonged to God.

Speak to the Israelites and say to them: “Throughout the generations to come you are to make fringes on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each fringe.

You will have these fringes to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the LORD, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by going after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes.

Then you will remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God.

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the LORD your God.’

Num. 15:38-41

In Rabbinic legend, Korah was consumed by jealousy. It seems greed accompanied his feelings. Korah began his rebellion by making Moses appear ridiculous in the eyes of the people. Then, dressed in the garments made entirely of blue for his two hundred and fifty men, he and his company appeared before Moses and asked him whether these garments required fringes. Moses answered “Yes.” Korah replied, “The blue wool of which the entire garment is made does not make it ritually correct; yet, according to your direction, four threads would!”

Korah son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, and certain Reubenites—Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—became insolent and rose up against Moses. With them were 250 Israelite men, well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council.

They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly?”

When Moses heard this, he fell face down.

Then he said to Korah and all his followers: “In the morning the LORD will show who belongs to him and who is holy, and he will make that person come near him. The man he chooses he will cause to come near him.

You, Korah, and all your followers are to do this: Take censers and tomorrow put fire and incense in them before the LORD. The man the LORD chooses will be the one who is holy. You Levites have gone too far!” Moses also said to Korah, “Now listen, you Levites! Isn't it enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the Israelite community and brought you near himself to do the work at the LORD's tabernacle and to stand before the community and minister to them?

He has brought you and all your fellow Levites near himself, but now you are trying to get the priesthood too.

It is against the LORD that you and all your followers have banded together. Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him?”

Then Moses summoned Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab. But they said, “We will not come!”

Nu. 15:38 - 16:12



Murex dye varies from royal blue to purple, Tehelet to Argaman.

The rebellion of Korah resulted in he and all his men being swallowed by the earth itself. In a rabbinic midrash (a homelitical story) Rabbi Bar Chanah—the Munchausen (a teller of fantastic tales) of the Talmud—said that while traveling in the desert, an Arab showed him the place where Korah met his doom. Putting his ear to the crack he could still hear the cry of Korah saying, “Moses and the Torah are true, and we are liars.”

Following the Thread

The history of biblical blue is a rich journey through varying time periods, biblical characters, various empires, and rebellions—both of individuals and kingdoms. The blue thread runs through many eras. From the earliest biblical records to the sack of Jerusalem by Rome, the color blue played an important role.

Alexander the Great conquered the Persian city of Shushan, where he found approximately 270,000 pounds of Royal Blue dyed material from the treasuries of the Greek city of Hermione. It had been stored on the shelves of the treasury for two hundred years yet still had its rich vibrant color.

Pliny the Elder, Roman historian and public figure, wrote in his work *Historia Naturalis* concerning purple. He records that violet purple cost 100 Dinar per pound. A more valuable dye Tyrian purple arrived later on the scene that went for more than 1,000 Dinar per pound. A double dying technique produced a deeper and more refined product and was clamored for by Roman officials.

There are other legends about the color blue.

Romulus and Romeo, the twin founders of Rome who were suckled by a she-wolf are said to have worn royal purple in their robes.



Theodosius the Great of the Roman Empire went beyond most in praise of the royal color when he wrote, “The holy purple mollusk must be worshiped.”

Both blue and purple were considered royal colors because of the expense and difficulty of acquisition.

The two words in Hebrew for blue and purple are *argamon* and *cahol*. *Argamon* is a red-purple; *cahol* is similar, but much more blue. The color in the Jewish men’s fringes or *tzitzit* is *techelet*, a form of the word *cahol*.

Mordecai, Queen Esther’s Uncle, was rewarded by King Ahasuerus with garments of royal color:

And Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue [techelet] and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a garment of fine linen and purple [argaman]: and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad.

Esther 8:15

The Palace of Shushan of the book of Esther was the same conquest of Alexander the Great.

The color *techelet* is not a strong purple. As illustrated, it is a bluish purple—almost periwinkle blue. However, both *techelet*, and *argaman* come from the mollusk.

Daniel and the Royal Colors

The book of Daniel provides us a picture of the importance of royal colors. Daniel’s promised reward for solving the riddle of the writing on the wall during Belshazzar’s drunken brawl of a banquet was that he would receive great honor and be clothed royally:

And I have heard of thee, that thou canst make interpretations, and dissolve doubts: now if thou canst read the writing, and make known to me the interpretation thereof, thou shalt be clothed with scarlet, and [have] a chain of gold about thy neck, and shalt be the third ruler in the kingdom.

Dan. 5:16 (KJV)

The Hebrew word for scarlet is *shani*. If the color in Daniel’s story was really scarlet, the word *shani* would have been used. *Shani* was not close to royal blue and did not come from a mollusk, it came from a worm, not a mollusk. The Aramaic word used here is *argavan*, very close to *argaman*.

Daniel refused the garment, no doubt recalling the story of Korah. Daniel understood that royal colors were a symbol that united the Israelites and not something to be used to set apart social castes.

In view of this, it helps us to understand why Daniel responded to the king that he could keep his royal robe and gold chain. But, for Daniel to turn down offers of gratitude from a powerful king in this time period could have had grave consequences. With the understanding of the importance of the color to the Jewish people as a national identity and as a connection with their God, you can appreciate Daniel’s reticence. He would not wear an item to lift himself up above his fellow captives in the Babylonian Empire, even if it meant he would enjoy third highest position. The fellowship of serving God Almighty was the mortar between the bricks that kept the Jewish people a nation within a nation. The color *argaman* was one of the earmarks of that fellowship.

Blue in the New Testament

Paul and company meet Lydia in Macedonia. Lydia was a “seller of purple” (Acts 16:14).

From this statement we know, Lydia was not a poor woman. To extract even a fraction of an ounce of purple dye, about 12,000 murex snails had to be crushed. One human being could never extract enough of the dye alone. Lydia must have had a fair-sized production operation going on to make a profitable living on the sale of the purple dye, or dyed cloth.

By the time period of this story in Acts, every Jewish man had the right to wear *techelet* in the fringes of his gar-

ment, according to the scriptural tenet. The color continued to proclaim that the Israelite had a connection with God, and with his community.

Rome Changes the Picture

Some Jewish prayer shawls today do not have blue or purple in their fringes but rather have a black stripe in the shawl itself. During the dispersion of the Jews in A.D. 70 from Israel, the exact technique of manufacturing this unique color was lost.

As the Jews migrated through Europe, they decided to substitute a black stripe to commemorate their great loss—the destruction of the Temple—rather than guessing the correct biblical color blue.

One of the final blows took place in A.D. 68. An imperial edict from Rome stated that only the emperor could wear purple. Jews all over the world who were wearing *techelet* in the *tzitzit* of their prayer shawls and their garments were suddenly in violation of an empirical decree! No longer could they purchase the dye. No doubt Lydia's livelihood came to an end as well. Two years later the Jewish rebellion against Rome began. This edict from Rome may have served as the proverbial "straw that broke the camel's back." In a unified voice the Jews must have declared, *We can no longer cooperate with Rome.* Every Jewish man who prayed to God had a purple cord in the *tzitzit* of his prayer shawl. In A.D. 70, the rebellion against Rome resulted in the Jews fleeing from the city of Jerusalem to Masada, the desert fortress that Herod built but never visited. Masada became the stage for a monumen-

tal drama. High above the Dead Sea the Jewish resistance fled to the almost deserted fortress and set up their camp. It took the Romans three years to get to the Jewish hold-outs. Finally, Rome conquered Masada, but victory was empty as over nine hundred Jewish men, women, and children had committed suicide to keep the Romans from abusing them. From that time on, the Jews were forbidden by the Romans to come to their beloved city of Jerusalem. The city was renamed "Aelia Capitolina" by Hadrian, the Roman emperor at the time. But the greatest loss to the Jews was that their Temple was destroyed in the siege. Likewise, the process for the color blue was also lost.

The last and final straw came during the Muslim conquest of Asia. Sultan Mehemet II who placed a half-moon on the dome of Hagia Sofia Basilica in Constantinople in May of 1453 also destroyed the last known purple dye works. Any hope of resurrecting the technique was gone forever.

A Glorious Commandment

In considering the commandments given in the Torah by God, the commandment to wear blue to me is glorious. One of my favorite places to visit is the Judean and Sinai Deserts.

In the final hours of the day as the sun drops low in the sky, the mountains put on a totally new face. Artists come from all over the world to take in the desert colors. It is surreal—like walking in an Impressionist painting. The command that the Israelites were to wear blue in their fringes to remind them of their relationship to God, is purposeful.

Perhaps blue is one of God's favorite colors.

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