

The Curious Absence of the Color “Blue” In the Dress of the ‘Great Prostitute’ in Revelation 17¹

Ross E. Winkle, PhD
Professor of New Testament
Pacific Union College

Introduction

Revelation is the most colorful book in the NT, and Revelation’s author, John, utilizes a color palette that includes such adjectival color lexemes as λευκός (*leukos*), or white (1:14 [2x]; 2:17; 3:4, 5, 18; 4:4; 6:2, 11; 7:9, 13; 14:14; 19:11, 14 [2x]; 20:11); μέλας, or black (6:5, 12); πυρρός (*pyrros*), or red or bright red (6:4; 12:3); πύρινος (*pyrinos*), or fiery red (9:17); κόκκινος (*kokkinos*), or scarlet or crimson (17:3, 4; 18:12, 16); ὑακίνθινος (*hyakinthinos*),² or blue, also described as sapphire blue, dark blue, bluish purple,³ or hyacinthine (9:17); πορφυροῦς

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Sofia, Bulgaria, on July 16, 2024, at the Language of Color in the Bible: From Word to Image Research Unit during the annual meeting of the European Association of Biblical Studies.

² The adjectival form of this color lexeme for blue is ὑακίνθινος (*hyakinthinos*), and it occurs in LXX Exod 25:5; 26:4, 14; 28:31; 35:7, 23; 36:29, 38; 39:20; Num 4:6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 25; 15:38; Isa 3:23; Ezek 23:6; Sir 6:30; 40:4. Both Philo and Josephus use the adjectival color lexeme as well (Philo = *Moses* 2.110, 118; *Spec. Laws* 1.85, 94; Josephus = *Ant.* 3.165, 186; 11.331; *J.W.* 5.231).

The noun form of this adjectival color lexeme for blue is ὑακίνθος (*hyakinthos*). The noun form appears in the LXX numerous times (Exod 25:4; 26:1, 31, 36; 27:16; 28:5, 8, 15, 33, 37; 31:4; 35:6, 25; 36:9, 10, 12, 15, 28, 31, 36; 37:3, 5, 16; 39:12; 2 Chr 2:6, 13; 3:14; Isa 3:23; Jer 10:9; Ezek 16:10; 27:7, 24; 1 Macc 4:23; Sir 45:10). It occurs in the NT but once, though (Rev 21:20), where it is the eleventh of the twelve foundation stones of the New Jerusalem. English translations there vary from “jacinth” (most English translations) to “sapphire” (*New Jerusalem Bible* [1985]), “turquoise” (*Complete Jewish Bible* [1988]), and “hyacinth” (*New American Bible [Revised Edition]*, 2010). The noun form as a basic color term also occurs three times in Philo (*Migration* 1.97; *Prelim. Studies* 1.117; *Moses* 2.88)—all referring to colors associated with the sanctuary—and several times in Josephus (*Ant.* 3.124, 154, 159, 164, 172, 183, 184; 8.72; 12.312; *J.W.* 5.212, 232; all texts other than *Ant.* 12.312 refer to the blue utilized in sanctuary curtains or the high priest’s dress).

³ The modern color purple (reddish or Tyrian purple: אַרְגָּמָן [*argaman*] / πορφυροῦς [*porphurous*]) was frequently associated with royalty and royal authority (cf., e.g., Judg 8:26; Esth 8:15; Dan 5:7, 16, 29; 4QProto-Esther^c at [4Q550b] 5). Yet it was not a color worn solely by royalty (cf., e.g., Exod 28:5, 6; Prov 31:22; Jer 10:9; 1 Esdr 3:6). On the distinctions between modern violet (bluish purple: MT = תִּכְלֶת [*tekeleth*] LXX and NT = ὑακίνθος [*hyakinthos*] / ὑακίνθινος [*hyakinthinos*]) and modern purple (reddish/Tyrian purple), cf. Manfred Dietrich, “Trumpet Snails and Purple Snails as an Indication of the Transfer of Religion and Technology in the Eastern-Mediterranean Region,” in *Homeland and Exile: Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honour of Bustenay*

(*porphyrous*), or purple or reddish purple (17:4; 18:16); θειώδεις (*theiōdeis*), or sulfurous yellow (9:17); and χλωρός (*chlōros*), or pale green or yellowish green (6:8; 8:7; 9:4).

Despite the infusion of kaleidoscopic chromatism throughout John’s apocalypse, there is at least one place where an *expected* color—blue—is missing.⁴ The fact that this basic color term is missing nevertheless communicates important meaning in Revelation. My purpose is to investigate why this color is missing in the description of the prostitute known as “Babylon” in Revelation 17:4 and what its absence from John’s description means. I intend to demonstrate that the missing blue color in the prostitute’s dress garment ensemble reveals her paradoxical association with high priestly dress symbolism, tabernacle theology, and covenantal spirituality, and yet it consequently underscores her defiant and lawless character. Thus, not only color as a significant element of dress garments, but the lack of one or more colors when expected in one’s dress garments, can have deep theological meaning and communicate one or more identities as well as personal characteristics.

Oded, ed. Gershon Galil, Mark Geller, and Alan Millard, *Vetus Testamentum Supplements* 130 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 51-54; I. Irving Ziderman, “Seashells and Ancient Purple Dyeing,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 53 (June 1990): 98-101; and idem, “Purple Dyeing in the Mediterranean World: Characterisation of Biblical *Tekhelet*,” in *Colour in the Ancient Mediterranean World*, ed. Liza Cleland and Karen Stears with Glenys Davies, *British Archaeological Reports International Series* 1267 (Oxford: Hedges, 2004), 40-45. Wearing purple indicated high status (Herbert Block, “The Missing Thread of Blue,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 31 [2003]: 247; Jane Bridgeman, “Purple Dye in Late Antiquity and Byzantium,” in *The Royal Purple and the Biblical Blue: Argaman and Tekhelet: The Study of Chief Rabbi Dr. Isaac Herzog on the Dye Industries in Ancient Israel and Recent Scientific Contributions*, ed. Ehud Spanier [Jerusalem: Keter, 1987], 159).

The Hebrew term תְּכֵלֶת is understood to be generally blueish or violet-colored purple (*HALOT* 4:1733), but according to Athalya Brenner, it spans heliotrope to green as well (*Colour Terms in the Old Testament*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplements* 21 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982], 148). More recently Mony Almalech has stated that the HB term תְּכֵלֶת (*tekeleth*) spanned “all shades of blue—from light to dark blue in Biblical Hebrew” (“Cultural Unit Blue in the Old Testament,” *Language and Semiotic Studies* 9 no. 2 [2023]: 186).

⁴ Twenty-seven of the fifty-seven references in the LXX and NT to the basic color term are adjectival lexemes (if one understands the eleventh foundation stone of the New Jerusalem as indicating only the color of the stone, then there are fifty-eight references).

The Importance and Meaning of What is Absent

The importance of what is absent or missing—when it is expected to be present—is too often underrated if not just ignored. And yet the absence of what one would expect, the absence of what should be “there,” is often rich in meaning. A classic example of the importance of carefully noting what is missing and should be present occurs in the famous Sherlock Holmes detective short story “The Adventure of Silver Blaze,” written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in 1892. In this story, one considered by Doyle for his “Top Twelve” best stories list⁵ but ultimately not making the cut,⁶ the key to Sherlock Holmes solving the mystery of the disappearance of a prize-winning horse lies in an incident involving a dog. The dog, kept at the stable, did not bark when the crime was committed. This absence of barking is what led Holmes to deduce that the thief was not a stranger but someone the dog knew. The conversation between Holmes and Inspector Gregory illustrates this point:

Gregory: “Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?”

Holmes: “To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.”

Gregory: “The dog did nothing in the night-time.”

Holmes: “That was the curious incident.”⁷

In the story, Holmes recognizes the absence of something—barking at a stranger—that otherwise should have been there, and this absence leads him to the solution of the mystery. At this point in the story, Doyle underscores the importance of paying attention to what is missing or absent,

⁵ This list did not include the twelve stories published in *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, since Doyle felt they were not as accessible to the public as his prior stories. See A. Conan Doyle, “How I Made My List,” *The Strand Magazine* (June 1927), p. 611. According to Doyle, “some forty odd candidates” were left (*ibid.*).

⁶ According to Doyle, it was because “the racing detail in ‘Silver Blaze’ is very faulty” (*ibid.*, p. 612).

⁷ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories*, vol. 1 (New York: Bantam Dell, 1986), p. 540.

rather than just focusing on what is present.

This concept of “the meaning of what is missing when it is expected” also occurs in biblical literature. One of the most explicit cases involves what has been termed the Parable of the Wedding Banquet in Matthew 22:1-14. A particular man attends a wedding banquet put on by a king for his son, but the king notices that the guest is not dressed in wedding garments. They are missing, and that is what generates the king’s question to the man as to how he could have gotten into the banquet without wearing wedding clothes, at which the man was speechless (22:10-13).

Perhaps the most important example of absence and its associated theological meaning is that of the empty tomb in which the body of Jesus had earlier been laid. Several women came to the tomb in which Jesus had been placed after his death to anoint him, but they did not find him there—as they expected he should be. They were subsequently told that he was resurrected from the dead and no longer subject to mortality (Luke 23:55—24:6; cf. Matt 28:1-6; Mark 16:1-6; John 20:1-18). This again substantiates the assertion that what is missing and is expected to be “there” can have or lead to significant theological meaning.

Another Curious, Colorful Case

Like the Sherlock Holmes story, there is another “curious case”: the curious case of the missing color ὑάκινθος (*hyakinthos*: blue) in the dress of the prostitute known as “Babylon” in Revelation 17. The contemporary study of dress (or, “clothing”) from the standpoint of such varied fields as anthropology, psychology, sociology, and fashion has underscored and

highlighted the conclusion that one's overall dress (including garments, ornaments, cosmetics, devices, treatments, equipment, and tools) is a non-verbal language that can communicate a number of varied identities, such as age group; beliefs, loyalties, and values; class and socio-economic status; ethnicity and race; family connections; gender, sexuality, and marital status; geographic region and nationality; means of livelihood, occupation, profession, and trade; personal achievements; political or military rank; religious affiliation; and other sub-group memberships.⁸ One can typically tell the difference, for example, between an astronaut, a ballerina, an Eastern Orthodox Patriarch, a flight attendant, a nurse, and a samurai warrior by their clothing or dress.

Lack of an element of dress (a kind of “negative” dress⁹), either as absence or negation, can not only reveal one or more identities¹⁰ but also provide theological meaning. In Revelation, for example, explicit references to the absence of dress (i.e., being “naked” or in a state of “nakedness”) occur four times (3:17, 18; 16:15; 17:16) and constitute the basis for judgment or, more specifically, condemnation.¹¹ In another example, when describing the appearance of the “one like a son of man” in chap. 1, John takes note of the appearance of his feet—but he does not mention any footwear he is wearing (e.g., sandals, shoes, or boots). The fact that John can see his feet indicates his feet are bare (i.e., he is barefoot). This is a good example of what is known as

⁸ For the use of this field of study applied to the book of Revelation, see Ross E. Winkle, “‘Clothes Make the (One like a Son of) Man’: Dress Imagery in Revelation 1 as an Indicator of High Priestly Status” (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2012).

⁹ See *ibid.*, 227-28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 227-30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 118-19. John's apocalypse refers to the colors associated with several visionary characters, animals, and objects. From the white hair of the “one like a son of man” in 1:14, to the pale greenish grey color of the horse in 6:8, to the sun turning black in 6:12, to the bright red dragon in 12:3, to the scarlet beast in 17:3—the

“negative” dress, and as such it would suggest in the wider sartorial context of chap. 1, at the very least, that the “one like a son of man” was a priestly figure.¹² Since color is a significant element of dress imagery that aids in communicating various identities, the lack or absence of a color can similarly reveal identity and/or theological meaning.

In Revelation 17:1 one of the seven angels of the seven last plagues announces to John that he will show him the punishment of one of the significant characters in the biblical book of Revelation, the “great prostitute,”¹³ who sits on (or, rules over) many waters, the latter “waters” later described as “peoples, large crowds, nations, and languages” (17:15).¹⁴ Regarding her description, Peter J. Leithart notes that “she is clothed; she is gilded; she holds a cup in her hand; and she has a name on her forehead. She is *clothed* in (1) purple and (2) scarlet. She is *gilded* with (3) gold, (4) precious stone, and (5) pearls. She *has* (6) a gold cup in her hand. And on her forehead is *written* (7) a name.”¹⁵

According to modern classification, one would classify the prostitute’s gold, precious stones, and pearls as dress *ornaments*, her gold cup as dress *equipment*, and the name on her forehead as a dress *treatment*. It is the “purple and scarlet” colors, however, that synecdochically refer to her dress *garments*.

Interpreters have frequently interpreted these two colors of purple and scarlet separately,

color palette is an essential part of John’s sensate descriptions.

¹² Ibid., 227-30, 326-27, 364.

¹³ See also 19:2; cf. 17:5, 15, 16. The term “prostitute” refers to one who engages in sex in exchange for money or goods. The term “whore” is more derogatory, while the term “harlot” is older or more of a literary term for a prostitute. A “courtesan” is a high-class, sophisticated prostitute who either entertains or is a companion for older, wealthy men.

¹⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

¹⁵ Peter J. Leithart, *Revelation 12-22*, T&T Clark International Theological Commentary (New York:

associating them with such characteristics as sexual immorality, luxury and wealth, and royalty. But the synecdoche of these two colors should not be split, with its colors analyzed separately, since this combination of purple and scarlet in the dress ensemble of the “great prostitute” in Revelation appears numerous times in the LXX,¹⁶ and Revelation’s penchant for allusion makes this fact of major importance in interpreting the meaning of these colors.

Though these two colors are the sole basic color terms that appear in the dress description of the prostitute, they are not elements of a color *duad*, since reference to the two colors together occur twenty-five times in the LXX—but never as a *duad*. Rather, they are part of a color *triad*, since the combined purple and scarlet colors always appear together in the LXX in association with another explicit basic color term. This specific color in the LXX is blue (ὑάκινθος [*hyakinthos*]; MT תִּקְלָח [*tekeleth*]).¹⁷ But this color blue is missing from the dress garments of the prostitute in Revelation 17:4. The absence of blue in this well-known OT color triad is a seemingly curious omission in John’s description, since John is aware of the terminology and thus the color.¹⁸

Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 178.

¹⁶ These two basic color terms appear together in the LXX of Exod 25:4; 26:1, 31, 36; 27:16; 28:5, 8, 15, 33; 31:4; 35:6, 25; 36:9, 10, 12, 15, 31, 36; 37:3, 5, 16; 39:12; 2 Chron 2:6, 13; 3:14.

¹⁷ That is, wherever purple and scarlet occur together, blue also occurs with them. Thus, all three appear together in a triad in LXX Exod 25:4; 26:1; 31, 36; 27:16; 28:5, 8, 15, 33; 31:4; 35:6, 25; 36:9, 10, 12, 15, 31, 36; 37:3, 5, 16; 39:12; 2 Chron 2:6, 13; 3:14. In the MT 2 Chron 2:6, 13, and 3:14 refer to כֶּרְמִיל (*karmil*) instead of שָׁנִי (*shani*) for the “scarlet,” as in the other references to this color term, but the LXX is the same in translating both terms (κόκκινος [*kokkinos*]).

¹⁸ In the prophetic vision of the sixth trumpet, John describes what a massive army of 200 million mounted troops looked like. These riders had breastplates that were “fiery red [πυρίνους (*pyrinous*)], blue [ὑακινθίνους (*hyakinthinous*)], and sulfurous yellow [θειώδεις (*theiōdeis*)] in color” (9:17). Here John uses the adjectival lexical term for blue, ὑακινθίνους (*hyakinthinous*), for the noun form of the color, ὑάκινθος (*hyakinthos*), and it is the same adjectival form that we would expect in his description of the prostitute, since the other basic color terms of purple (πορφυροῦς [*porphyrous*]) and scarlet (κόκκινος [*kokkinos*]) in that text (17:4) are adjectival in nature.

One point of dispute in 9:17 is whether the accusative masculine participle ἔχοντας (*echontas* [“having”])

While biblical blue has been categorized as a tetrad color because of its use together with purple, scarlet, and (“white”) linen in the fabrication of the high priest’s dress and the tabernacle curtains,¹⁹ in this study I focus on it as part of a basic color triad, since the linen in these biblical sacral contexts is a rival term of prototype and not a basic color term.²⁰

In all the LXX references to the basic color triad of blue, purple, and scarlet, blue is listed first in the triad in all but two of the twenty-five occurrences,²¹ elevating the significance of the color in the triad. Blue was one of the most sacred colors in the tabernacle and temple cultus, exemplified by the high priest’s blue, foot-length robe (Exod 28:31), the blue cords that tied the high priest’s breastpiece to his ephod (Exod 28:28), the blue cords that attached high priest’s turban to the golden plate or rosette inscribed with YHWH’s name (Exod 28:37), and the blue

refers to both the horses and the riders (cf., e.g., G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 510; Isbon Thaddeus Beckworth, *The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary* [New York: Macmillan, 1919; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], 568; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002], 382), or just the riders (e.g., Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black’s New Testament Commentaries [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson; London: Continuum, 2006], 148; Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation*, New Covenant Commentary Series [Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011], 135; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 196; Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005], 239; Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John: The Greek Text with Introduction Notes and Indices*, 3d ed. [1909; repr., *Commentary on Revelation: The Greek Text with Introduction Notes and Indices*, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977], 123; Joseph L. Trafton, *Reading Revelation: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, Reading the New Testament [Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005], 98). The description of the breastplates is also under discussion among commentators: (1) Does it describe color, or material? (2) If colored, are the breastplates multicolored, or singularly-colored (i.e., some are one color, others are another color)? On these questions, cf., e.g., Mounce (*Revelation*, 196) and Swete (*Apocalypse of St John*, 123).

¹⁹ Almalech, “Cultural Unit Blue,” 187.

²⁰ Nevertheless, fine linen does appear along with purple and scarlet in the dress ensemble of the prostitute, now described as the city Babylon, in Rev 18:16.

²¹ It is listed last in LXX 2 Chron 2:6 (purple, scarlet, blue); it is listed second in LXX 2 Chron 2:13 (purple, blue, scarlet). Is it because at this time in Israel’s history purple was considered more valuable than blue? Alternatively, perhaps this anomaly is because these basic color terms appear in lists of material necessary for building Solomon’s temple, and thus they include gold, silver, bronze, and iron before the basic color terms.

coverings for the ark, the dishes, pans, and bowls, the lampstand and its associated accoutrements, the golden altar, and other sanctuary utensils when they were moved (Num 4:6-12). The absence of blue, in light of this cultic significance, further highlights its curious omission in John's description of the prostitute in Revelation. While the lack of a specific color, blue in this case, would seem to cause a rupture in the decoding process of dress communication, it is a potent clue to decoding a potential identity of the prostitute beyond her initial description.

The Allusive Nature of the Prostitute's Colorful Dress

While there are many who suggest that the colors of purple and scarlet in the prostitute's dress refer to Greco-Roman concepts of shameless sexual immorality and prostitution, luxury and wealth, and/or high status, royalty, and sovereignty,²² as I have already indicated, I would suggest that a more compelling case can be made for them alluding to colors utilized in the Israelite tabernacle/temple cultus, specifically, the curtains and veils and the high priestly garments. There are at least five points that contribute to this conclusion. First, John alludes to the OT scores of times, and so the first library of reference should be within that corpus. This does not negate the clear references and allusions to Greco-Roman concepts, but it prioritizes what is primary for John.²³

Second, John explicitly mentions not only the tabernacle and temple structures themselves in his work, but also the outer court, ark, lampstands, altar(s), censer, incense, and the

²² See Leithart, *Revelation 12-22*, pp. 178-79.

²³ Objections that John's audience would not have recognized and/or understood his allusions to the OT make no sense considering the numerous references to that corpus that he makes. For example, his explicit references to Balaam and Jezebel in chap. 2, as well as his implicit references to Elijah and Zerubbabel in chap. 11,

cultic personnel of the priests. Since not only sanctuary terminology but also “sanctuary scenes” occur throughout his work, one should not be surprised to detect sanctuary imagery in any chapter of Revelation—including chap. 17.

Third, Revelation 17’s “great prostitute” has a name written on her forehead, “Babylon the Great” (17:5), parallel to those who have the seal of God on their foreheads and those who have the mark of the beast on their foreheads (and/or their hands). Furthermore, the redeemed humans who enter the New Jerusalem have the name of God written on their foreheads, which alludes to the name of YHWH written on the forehead of the earthly high priest (Exod 28:36²⁴), showing why they can see God face to face (Rev 22:4). While the name or names written on the foreheads of the redeemed in Revelation refer to God (3:12; 7:2; 9:4), Jesus (3:12), the Lamb as a symbol of Jesus (14:1), and/or the New Jerusalem, the city of God (3:12), the name on the prostitute’s forehead is a counter-image of the high priest’s name on the plate or rosette of pure gold on his forehead; she refers to herself instead of YHWH, thus showing a theological contrast with the redeemed and revealing her spiritual arrogance and lack of allegiance to God.

Fourth, the prostitute’s name refers to her as the mother of two things: 1) other prostitutes; and 2) detestable things, or abominations, of the earth (17:5). John’s reference to “abominations” (βδελυγμάτων [*bdelygmatōn*]) points to a prominent though infrequent word in the prescriptions and restrictions involved in the rituals of the tabernacle/temple services in the

illustrate that such objections have no basis in fact.

²⁴ The inscription on the high priest’s plate or rosette of pure gold (צִיִּץ זָהָב טָהוֹר [tsits zahab tahor] / πέταλον χρυσοῦν καθαρὸν [*petalon chrysoun katharon*]) on his forehead said “Holiness to YHWH” (Exod 28:36: לַיהוָה שְׁלֵיחַ [qodesh laYHWH] / ἁγίασμα κυρίου [*hagiasma kyriou*]). Post-exilic literature, however, describes the inscription only with the terminology of the Tetragrammaton, the “four letters,” i.e., YHWH (see Philo Mos.

OT (Lev 5:2; 18:26, 29; Deut 18:12).

Fifth, the judgment of the prostitute entails the “ten horns” or “kings” whom she has committed sexual immorality with hating her, making her both desolate and naked, devouring her flesh, and burning her with fire (17:16). John’s vision of the prostitute is a symbolic one alluding to the OT descriptions of adulterous women who symbolize God’s people (see Hosea) or various cities like Jerusalem, Samaria, and Sodom (Ezekiel 16 and 23). The suggestion that this “burning with fire” is primarily or solely a city image—burning a city with fire (cf. 18:9, 18)—because John states that the woman is the great city who rules over the kings of the earth (17:18),²⁵ ignores the fact that virtually all of the imagery in chap. 17 up to this point has been with regards to his vision of the female prostitute and not a city.²⁶ According to Lev 21:9, if any daughter of a priest profaned herself by engaging in prostitution, her punishment was to be burnt alive. This would suggest that one meaning behind the burning of her with fire was that she has some symbolic association with the priesthood.²⁷

Finally, we return to the basic color triad mentioned earlier. All three colors of blue, purple, and scarlet occur together in the LXX twenty-five times in association with the descriptions of the sanctuary curtains and high priestly garments—and nowhere else in biblical

2.114-15, 132 [cf. *QE* 2.122]; Josephus *Ant.* 3.178, 187 and *B.J.* 5.235; *Let. Aris.* 98).

²⁵ While in chapter 17, the woman is clearly identified as such, 17:18 is a hinge verse that identifies the woman of chap. 17 as a city described in chap. 18: “As for the woman whom you saw, she is the great city who has a kingdom [i.e., ‘who rules’] over the kings of the earth.”

²⁶ Her name is “Babylon the Great” in 17:5.

²⁷ This raises the question of this “great prostitute” being the daughter of a priest. This alludes to Jezebel, the princess who was the notorious wife of King Ahab of Israel but also the daughter of Ethbaal, the king of Tyre and Sidon, who was also a priest of the goddess Astarte. See Robert Merez, “Assyrian-Israelite Dynamics: On the Circumstances Leading to Jehu’s Elevation to the Throne,” *The Biblical Annals* 54.1 (2007): 15. While Jezebel was not the daughter of an Israelite priest, she was the daughter of a priest.

literature as a color triad.²⁸ These three basic color terms were utilized as a group in describing the fabrication of the curtains of the tabernacle, the veil between the holy and most holy places, the main curtain of the courtyard, the ephod, sash, and breastpiece, and the pomegranates on the lower hem of the robe of the ephod of the high priest. That these three basic color terms—blue, purple, and scarlet—occur together only in the constellation of the tabernacle/temple cultus, in particular the dress of the high priest, would suggest that Revelation 17's notorious and powerful prostitute is visually dressed in clothing indicative of high priestly identities, relationships, and/or associations.²⁹ This aspect of John's vision would thus point not to a literal or historical meaning but rather to a theological portrayal.

True Blue

It thus appears that the color blue is missing from an expected basic color triad of blue, purple, and scarlet in the description of the prostitute in Revelation 17. But why would blue be missing? Although cosmological interpretation of the various colors of the furnishings of the Hebrew sanctuary and the high priest's dress were promoted in Judaism,³⁰ I would rather assert

²⁸ Cf. Leithart, *Revelation 12-22*, 178.

²⁹ Others who see high priestly associations with the colored garments of the prostitute in Revelation 17 include Margaret Barker, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ: Which God Gave to Him to Show to His Servants What Must Soon Take Place [Revelation 1.1]* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000], 284, 291; idem, *The Hidden Tradition of the Kingdom of God* (London: SPCK, 2007), 1; idem, *The Great Lady: Restoring Her Story* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2023), 278-79; Beale, *Book of Revelation* (1999), 857, 886, 912; J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation: Introduction, Translation and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 38 (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 287-88; and Edmondo F. Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John*, trans. Maria Poggi Johnson and Adam Kamesar, Italian Texts & Studies on Religion & Society (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 253-57.

Thomas L. Schreiner, however, is not convinced that there is a connection between the prostitute's clothing and the tabernacle furnishings and priestly clothing (*Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023], 574, n. 9).

³⁰ In discussing and describing the various colors of the furnishings of the Hebrew sanctuary and the high priest's dress, the deuterocanonical work known as the Wisdom of Solomon, as well as Philo and Josephus, describe

that the theological meaning associated with the color blue provides a reasonable rationale.

In Numbers 15:1-21 YHWH provides instruction to Moses on various offerings. This is followed in vss. 22-29 by instruction regarding offerings for those who *unintentionally* sin. The next two verses (15:30-31) describe what must happen when one *intentionally* and *defiantly* sins, and this is immediately followed in vss. 32-36 by the brief narrative note about a man who gathered wood on the Sabbath day. Because the commandment about not working on the Sabbath did not include information about punishment, it was not clear what to do with the man. But the answer about what punishment he deserves quickly arrives: stoning to death.

Numbers 15:37-41, the last verses in the chapter, then follow with instructions about how the Israelites are to fabricate tassels on the corners of their garments, with each tassel containing a “blue cord” (פֶּתִיל תְּכֵלֶת [*pethil tekeleth*]). The only other time this specific terminology occurs is earlier in Exod 39:31, where a “blue cord” attaches the golden plate or rosette to the turban of the

their supposed meaning in cosmological terms. When referring to the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram in Numbers 16, Wisdom 18:24a describes the intercessory ministry of the high priest Aaron as follows: “For on his long robe [ποδήρους ἐνδύματος (*podērous endymatos*)] the whole world [or, the whole universe: ὅλος ὁ κόσμος (*holos ho kosmos*)] was depicted,...” (NRSV). When Wisdom refers to this particular garment, it is referring not to the garment itself but also to the pomegranates of blue, purple, and scarlet and the golden bells attached to the lower hem of the garment (e.g., Exod 28:33; 39:24-25). See Philo *Somn.* 1.214-15 (in which τὸν ποδήρη χιτῶνα [*podērē chitōna*] “is a close imitation of the whole heaven” [τοῦ παντός ἀντίμιμον ὄντα οὐρανοῦ [*tou pantos antimimon onta ouranou*], since it also includes or is closely associated with the breastpiece, which itself is a reflection [or, representation] and copy [ἀπεικόνισμα καὶ μίμημα (*apeikonisma kai mimēma*)] of the shining constellations [φωσφόρων ἄστρων (*phōsphorōn astrōn*)]); and *Spec.* 1.84-85 (where Philo suggests that the high priestly ποδήρης χιτῶν [*podērēs chitōn*] is like a reflection [or, representation] and copy of the universe [ἀπεικόνισμα καὶ μίμημα τοῦ κόσμου (*apeikonisma kai mimēma tou kosmou*)] and 1.94-96 (where it is a μίμημα τοῦ παντός [*mimēma tou pantos*: “copy of the All”] and is indicative of πᾶς ὁ κόσμος [*pas ho kosmos*] ministering with him). Cf. Philo *Mos.* 2.117 (where he compares the larger high priestly dress ensemble [ἐσθῆς (*esthēs*)] as a whole and in its parts to the ἀπεικόνισμα καὶ μίμημα τοῦ κόσμου [*apeikonisma kai mimēma tou kosmou*; cf. 2.118-21 and 135]); and Josephus *Ant.* 3.184-87. See the discussion in Jean Laporte (“The High Priest in Philo of Alexandria,” *Studia Philonica Annual* 3 [1991]: 74-77, 80) and David Winston (*The Wisdom of Solomon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 43 [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979], 321-22).

As for Philo and Josephus, they indicated that the blue, purple, scarlet, and (white) linen—the three basic colors terms and the rival of prototype—in the sanctuary cult represented the four elements of the universe (air, sea,

high priest. Here in Numbers 15, this reference to blue (תְּכֵלֶת [*tekeleth*] / ὑακίνθινος [*hyakinthinos*]) is the last reference to that basic color term in the Pentateuch (15:38).

The rationale for this new sartorial rule is that the Israelites would thus look not at the tassels but specifically at the “blue cord”³¹ and remember all the commands of YHWH in order to obey them and not “spy out” or “explore” their own hearts and eyes, by which they had prostituted themselves or, “played the harlot” (15:39).³²

Again, the next verse in Numbers 15 reinforces the point that by looking at the blue cord, the Israelites would “remember” to obey all of YHWH’s commandments, and thus the people would be holy or consecrated to him (15:40). Consequently, the new sartorial decree is coherent with the earlier instruction on defiant sin and the immediately following narrative about the defiant sin of the man gathering wood on the Sabbath. The association of “remembrance” and “commandments” and “holiness” furthermore specifically points to the 4th commandment to “remember the Sabbath in order to keep it holy” (Exod 20:8; cf. 31:14-16; 35:2; Lev 23:3; Deut 5:12).

Why would looking at a blue cord on their clothes cause the Israelites to remember God’s commandments? Because it is likely that the stone tablets of the law that Moses received from

fire, and earth), with the blue color representing the air. See, e.g., Philo, *Mos.* 2.88; Josephus, *Ant.* 3.183.

³¹ Those who have the tassels with the blue cord will “look at it” (וַיִּרְאוּ אֹתוֹ [*ure’ithem ’otho*]). The “it” is masculine singular, and the nearest antecedent that is masculine singular is the blue “cord”—not the tassels themselves.

³² This is an allusion to the story of the twelve spies mentioned in the previous two chapters (Numbers 13-14), who had “spied out” the land and provided a mostly negative report, whereupon the Israelites grumbled and revolted. The LXX uses the verb ἐκπορνεύω (*ekporneuō*: “engage in flagrant immorality or sexual sin”) to translate the Hebrew referring to “prostituting oneself” or “playing the harlot.” Unfaithful activity on the part of God’s people was sometimes described in these terms, and thus some translations (e.g., NET) refer to this in terms of unfaithfulness.

YHWH on Mt. Sinai were made out of סַפִּיר (*sappir*) / σάπφειρος (*sappheiros*), terms which—despite the Hebrew and Greek terminology sounding like our modern blue sapphire—almost certainly refer instead to lapis lazuli instead, a precious stone comprised of an aggregate of blue minerals, but with some white streaking along with flecks of gold.³³ When Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, along with the 70 elders of Israel went up on Mt. Sinai, they saw YHWH according to Exod 24:10, and they saw under his feet a “pavement of lapis lazuli.” Two verses later YHWH provides Moses with “the tablets of stone” (24:12). The only stone mentioned thus far in the narrative has been lapis lazuli.³⁴

³³ Contra Almalech, “Cultural Unit Blue,” 30-31, who bases his opposition to this correspondence on the fact that the stone is described in Exod 24:10 as pure or clear, whereas lapis lazuli is opaque. σάπφειρος does not refer to our modern “sapphire” (blue corundum), as found in many modern translations (cf. the NASB, NIV, and NRSV on Exod 24:10). Cf. Ben Zion Bokser, “The Thread of Blue,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 31 (1963): 13. Walter Schumann observes that from antiquity until as late as the Middle Ages “the name sapphire was understood to mean what is today described as lapis lazuli” (*Gemstones of the World*, trans. Evelyn Stern [New York: Sterling, 1977], 86); cf. *BDAG*, s.v. “σάπφειρος [*sapphiros*]”; *LSJ*, s.v. “σάπφειρος [*sappheiros*]”; John S. Harris, “An Introduction to the Study of Personal Ornaments of Precious, Semi-Precious and Imitation Stones Used Throughout Biblical History,” in *The Annual of Leeds University Oriental Society* 4 (1962-63), ed. by John Macdonald (Leiden: Brill, 1964), 69-70; idem, “The Stones of the High Priest's Breastplate,” *The Annual of Leeds University Oriental Society* 5 (1963-65), ed. by John Macdonald (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 52, where he states: “So strong are the arguments concerning the relation of the ancient name Sapphire to the mineral Lapis-Lazuli that little more need be added”; Mohsen Manutchehr-Danai, *Dictionary of Gems and Gemnology* [Berlin: Springer, 2000], s.v. “lapis lazuli”; H. Quiring, “Die Edelsteine im Amtsschild des jüdischen Hohenpriesters und die Herkunft ihrer Namen,” *Sudhoffs Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin und der Naturwissenschaften* 38 (1954): 200-202; and Nahum N. Sarna, who agrees and states that the modern sapphire “was unknown in the ancient Near East, . . .” (*Exodus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary [Philadelphia: JPS, 1991], 153). See, e.g., Pliny the Elder *Nat.* 37.119-120, where *sappirus* cannot mean sapphire because it has gold flecks in it, as one finds in lapis lazuli; and Theophrastus *Lap.* 1.8; 4.23; and 6.37. Lapis lazuli is “an attractive, massive, complex aggregate of several blue minerals” and “it consists chiefly of lazurite, haüynite, which gives it color, also sodalite, noselite, and flecks of pyrites in a matrix of calcite” (Manutchehr-Danai, *Dictionary*, s.v. “lapis lazuli”). Its primary blue color ranges from azure to green to purple-blue (ibid.).

In later Jewish interpretation, one can thus understand why lapis lazuli was associated with the Hebrew basic color term תְּכֵלֶת (*tekeleth*: “blue”).

³⁴ Lapis Lazuli is described as a “stone” using the same Hebrew terminology in Exod 28:17-18; 39:10-11; Ezek 1:26; 10:1; 28:13-14. Cf. Job 28:6. See b. *Soṭah* 17a, b. *Menah* 43b, b. *Hul.* 89a, p. Ber. 1:2 (3c) and the discussion in David J. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision*, Texte und

In Ezekiel 1:26 and 10:1, the blue lapis lazuli is explicitly associated not with brickwork or tiles under YHWH's feet but with the throne of YHWH itself, with something like a throne looking like lapis lazuli (or, alternatively, something like lapis lazuli resembling a throne). Thus, in both Exodus and Ezekiel, the blue lapis lazuli is closely associated with YHWH, YHWH's throne, and YHWH's tablets of the law.³⁵ Consequently, by looking daily at the blue cord, the Israelites would remember their covenant relationship with YHWH and his law—which they could not see, since it was hidden in the ark of the covenant.

One final note: twice in the book of Leviticus instruction is given to keep YHWH's Sabbath and reverence his sanctuary (Lev 19:30; 26:2). In Lev 19:30, this instruction is literarily connected in the previous verse (19:29) to the warning to not make one's daughter a prostitute.³⁶ One of the links that uniquely ties the Sabbath (and the broader law) and the sanctuary together is the prominence of the color blue. Consequently, the “great prostitute” in Revelation 17-18, whose dress ensemble basic color terms are only purple and scarlet, theologically implies that there are transgressive issues in relation to both the sanctuary and its cult as well as to the Sabbath (and the broader law of God).

Conclusions

The basic color terms explicitly mentioned in the dress ensemble of the “great prostitute”

Studien zum Antiken Judentum (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Siebeck], 1988), 217-20. On the relationship of the blue color and the lapis lazuli stone, see Almalech, “Cultural Unit Blue,” 31 (though he remains convinced that it is not lapis lazuli).

³⁵ Cf. Bokser, “Thread of Blue” (1963): 1, 5.

³⁶ In this chapter each literary unit concludes with “I am the LORD” (19:3, 4, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 25, 28, 30, 31, 32, 34, 36, 37). Lev 19:29-30 is one of these units that ends with this statement.

“Babylon” in Revelation 17 and 18 are only two: purple and scarlet. Further investigation, however, suggests that high priestly imagery and symbolism is paradoxically present regarding the dress description of the “great prostitute,” with the result that these two colors do not constitute a basic color duad but—in light of such high priestly imagery—should rather constitute a basic color triad. The one basic color term “missing in action” in that triad is “blue” (i.e., most likely the adjectival color lexeme ὑακίνθινος [*hyakinthinos*]), a theologically important color in the OT found repeatedly not only as part of a color triad in the context of high priestly dress and sanctuary furnishings but also in a prominent role by itself in both literary arenas. This presents a curious case: like the dog that did not bark in the Sherlock Holmes story, in these texts about the dress ensemble of the “great prostitute,” this significant color did not appear. Why would such a powerful color term be missing from the dress ensemble of the “great prostitute”?

Examination of the literary associations of this basic color triad and in particular, the meaning of the color blue, indicates that the color blue conveys color prominence in the dress of the high priest as well as the sanctuary furnishings, remembrance of the law of God in the context of covenant loyalty and spirituality, and—in its appearance in the precious stone lapis lazuli—close association with the divine and the law of God. The “great prostitute” named “Babylon” of Revelation 17 and 18 however, demonstrates no covenant loyalty and association with God but rather grasping self-exaltation: the name on her forehead refers to herself and her immoral children instead of the name of God, while her brazen assertion in 18:7 (“I sit as a queen and am not a widow and will never see mourning”) reveals her arrogant hubris and

opposition to the “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” (17:14; cf. 19:16). While Jesus, the “one like a son of man” in Revelation 1, wears a foot-length robe that—while not described in terms of color—is blue or hyacinthine in color,³⁷ the “great prostitute” also wears clothing that—while also not described in terms of the basic color term blue—should have included that color.

Despite both characters lacking the explicit mention of blue in their dress ensembles, this woman, however, is an “anti-Jesus” character. Lacking the color blue in her dress ensemble, she has defiantly despised the Sabbath, forgotten the law of God, and instead viciously murdered the holy ones and the witnesses to Jesus (17:6),³⁸ who, according to Rev 12:17 and 14:12, are the ones who themselves have kept both the commandments of God (in covenant loyalty to him) and the faith of Jesus.

Bereft of the color blue in her dress ensemble, she has not only “played the harlot” but become, metaphorically, a sexually immoral character, working in opposition to and, essentially, destroying the concept of the “blue cord” of Numbers 15 in terms of her covenantal spirituality. Consequently, the absence of the most prominent basic color term in the basic color triad is not only a description of what is missing in her dress ensemble but also a judgment on her moral character and spirituality. In essence, with regards to the “great prostitute” and her dress ensemble, the appearance there of “true blue” would never do.

³⁷ See Winkle, “Clothes,” 278-307.

³⁸ In Rev 18:6, John describes Babylon as having “mixed” (ἐκέρασεν [*ekerasen*]) her cup. Prov 9:2, 5 and Isa 5:22 utilizes the same verb in the LXX to describe those who mix wine in their cups. The “mixed cup” in this context in Revelation would allude to the gold cup that the prostitute: she has mixed the blood of God’s people with abominations and the unclean things or impurities of her immorality (17:4).