

Sanctuary Colors through Egyptian Eyes

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Introduction

In our world today, color may seem like a minor issue; one best relegated to the category of personal preference. But was that the case also in the ancient world? Details, like color, are sometimes overlooked in studies of the ancient world, but iconographic and textual studies have recognized their importance and begun to hint that colors may have been much more carefully chosen than might at first have been assumed. This appears to also be the case for studies related to the ancient Hebrew wilderness sanctuary.

The instructions given for the construction of the Hebrew wilderness sanctuary are very detailed in some regards while details are completely left out in others. For example, the instructions for hanging the veil mention that it should be hung on hooks on four pillars but it doesn't indicate how tall those pillars should be (Exod. 26:32; 36:36). Also, exact dimensions of both cloth covering layers for the tabernacle (linen and goats hair) are included in the instructions (Exod. 26:2, 8; 36:9, 15) but not the dimensions of the two outer layers (rams skin and *tahas* leathers—Exod. 26:14; 36:19). Another example is the size of the two compartments in the tabernacle. There are very detailed descriptions of the dimensions of the tabernacle itself (Exod. 26:15–25; 36:20–30), but where the veil should be hung inside the tabernacle was not mentioned and thus, there can be only guesses as to the exact dimensions of the two rooms. To form some conclusions in this matter, researchers have had to look at later temple-sanctuaries and extrapolate backward to the tent-sanctuary, which is less than satisfying.¹ And so, when details about the

¹ R. E. Friedman, *The Tabernacle in the Temple*, *The Biblical Archaeologist* 43/4 241–48 (1980), 245; B. Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible, Exodus*, trans. W. Jacob

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color of thread are found in the instructions, it begs the question, “What was so significant about these colors that they were specifically mentioned?”

Many people have speculated on the meaning of the colors in the wilderness sanctuary, but is there any indication that colors were supposed to even have had meaning to the ancients at all? How were colors used in Egypt? And, how would someone who just came out of Egypt have experienced seeing those colors?

Colors in Egypt

To begin to answer these questions, it is important to understand how colors were used in Egypt. Because the Egyptians were very religious and every aspect of daily life was tied in some way to the realm of the gods, color was also tied to religion.

Magic and Religion

In ancient Egypt, the reality of divinity was unquestioned. The theological struggle was not over the existence of the gods but the supremacy and order of the gods. For example, Egyptians believed that the earth was created² by the gods and in particular one supreme god, but there was disagreement regarding precisely how and where this took place and by whom.³ Temple architecture attempted to recreate the Island of Creation⁴ and thus tap into the magical force that was present at Creation.⁵ And thus, it was at the temples that cosmic balance was maintained through ritual.

(Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 1992), 774; M. M. Homan, The Divine Warrior in His Tent: A Military Model for Yahweh’s Tabernacle, *Biblical Review* 16/6: 22–33, 55 (2000); James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 200; H. J. Pokrifka, *Exodus: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2018), 307.

² Creation itself was a given, and as far as can be determined, unanimously agreed upon.

³ Rosalie David, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 164. There has been some effort to see unity in the various Egyptian Creation myths (see R. Wilkinson, *Symbol and Magic in Egyptian Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1994).

⁴ David *Handbook*, 169.

⁵ C. Jacq, *Egyptian Magic* (Warminster: Aris & Philips, 1985).

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Jan Assmann has suggested that religion can be divided into three fields of emphasis: cult, theology, and lifestyle.⁶ Cult (defined as contact with the divine), in ancient Egypt included “the role of magic, the divinity of the ruler, and the importance of the mortuary cult.”⁷ Since the forces of chaos, in the Egyptian cosmology, were ever-moving to retake the universe, cult was necessary to keep them at bay.

We understand from Genesis 1 that at Creation, God thought, God spoke, and it was. Moses does not delve into the creative cosmogonic energies⁸ that God employed to make word into reality. The Egyptians, however, called these cosmogonic energies, magic. These cosmogonic energies (called “magic”) that once were used to create the universe, were also considered essential to maintaining the universe and to prevent the forces of chaos from uncreating the universe. This sort of cosmology might be likened to a great tapestry, the threads at which the fingers of chaos were ever snatching at to unravel.

Magic (*heka* or *akhu*, these cosmogonic energies) was given to humanity, they believed, as a means of self-defense against the forces of chaos from which the world was created.⁹ Magic is what kept the world from slowly reverting back to the chaotic state. The Egyptians believed that the world was created by a word and they believed that it was magic that was the force that turned the word into reality.¹⁰ In this understanding, magic was dormant in everything and by simply knowing and speaking the correct words and associated gestures, that magic could be awakened for good or for evil. Magic was thus “a sacred science and creative force,”¹¹ that was studied and then practiced by the scholars who were in fact the priests, through the speech of the gods—hieroglyphs.¹² Not only was magic indistinguishable from religion¹³ but magic was quite literally the “thread that linked everything.”¹⁴

⁶ Jan Assmann, *From Akhenaten to Moses: Ancient Egypt and Religious Change* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press), 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Acting forces at the origin of the cosmos. Moses hints that this was the work of the Spirit of God (Gen. 1:2) without getting into exactly how the Spirit did the work.

⁹ Raymond. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts: Spells 1–354* (Warminster: Aris & Philips, 1973), 199–200.

¹⁰ Rosalie David, *Religion and Magic in Ancient Egypt* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 283–4.

¹¹ *David Handbook*, 169.

¹² *David Handbook*, 171.

¹³ *David Handbook*, 169.

¹⁴ *David Handbook*, 171.

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The priests in the temples, the king in government, and the gods in the sky and underworld all used magic to maintain balance (*ma'at*). Individuals could also use magic to “protect against their own fears.”¹⁵ This was primarily accomplished by household gods and jewelry.

Purpose of Jewelry

Because jewelry was used to magically protect the wearer, all classes, both genders, and all ages wore jewelry in Egypt.¹⁶ Amulets, necklaces, bracelets, anklets, rings, belts, and headdresses were all used from the earliest of times. One might observe that all of these are wrap-around adornments. Earrings appear to have been introduced to Egypt by the Asiatic Hyksos. Earrings (an adornment that requires self-mutilation by the opening of a hole in the earlobe) are first seen in iconography, mummies, and statues on Egyptians beginning in the New Kingdom.¹⁷ Both the materials used in¹⁸ and the design of the item of jewelry were essential¹⁹ to protect against disease, natural disasters, and wild animals.²⁰

Secondary agents were necessary to help connect our world with the primary agents. Kings, statues of gods, and jewelry all are examples of secondary agents. Primary agents would be the god or magic itself. The secondary agent was to enable the primary agent to possess (or indwell).²¹ Priests, for example, could only affect a spell if they were able to “assimilate a deity,” and in doing so they, too, acted as secondary agents.²² Another secondary agent, to their way of understanding, was color appearing in statues and jewelry as gems.

¹⁵ David *Handbook*, 169.

¹⁶ David *Religion*, 174. Even the gods themselves had jewelry (Cyril Aldred, *Jewels of the Pharaohs: Egyptian Jewelry of the Dynastic Period* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1978), 10).

¹⁷ David *Handbook*, 349.

¹⁸ A. Lucas, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries*, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999).

¹⁹ David *Religion*, 175.

²⁰ R. Wilkinson, *Symbol and Magic in Egyptian Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994).

²¹ Lynne Meskeel, *Object Worlds in Ancient Egypt: Materials Biographies Past and Present* (Oxford: 2004); Carolyn Graves-Brown, *Daemons & Spirits in Ancient Egypt* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018), 135–37. For the concept of indwelling (possessing) see, Hermann Junker, *Die Stundenwachen in den Osirismysterien nach den Inschriften von Dendera, Edfu, und Philae* (Vienna: Denkschriften der Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien, 54, 1910).

²² Graves-Brown *Daemons*, 136.

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Gem stones were particularly chosen by the Egyptian jewelers not for their refractive qualities or their brilliance, but rather for their color because of the symbolic association that went with that color. The magical qualities of the color “became an integral part of any object to which it was added.”²³ In this way, the materials themselves, both the metals and the stones,²⁴ “conveyed their own hidden powers.”²⁵ The most popular gem stones, because of the associated color, were carnelian (red), turquoise (blue), and lapis lazuli (purple).²⁶ These are the three gems (and colors: blue, purple, and red) that appear exclusively in all of the jewelry recovered from Tutankhamun’s tomb.²⁷

Symbolism of Color

Paintings in tombs and temples were accomplished to brilliant effect (as can be seen in recent reconstructions or salvage activities).²⁸ These colors were not, however, chosen at random. Each was selected because of the integral part it had with the object it is associated with. As a result, the meaning of the symbolism becomes evident.

The colors selected for depicting the Egyptian cosmos were in part a reflection of reality and in part a reflection of symbolic meaning. The colors of the sky are either depicted as black for night, or blue for day. The blue dome that seems to encircle the earth from the vantage point on the ground was thought to be a sphere of water that encircled the earth similar to the description of the earth prior to the global flood (Genesis 1:6–7; 7:11). This was a body of water that only the gods were able to navigate. Thus, blue became associated with the divine.

The earth and its bodies of water were also described, and indeed named, by color. Because of the rich black silt that settled on the land making it fertile after the annual floods, Egypt was called *kemet*

²³ David *Religion*, 176.

²⁴ David *Handbook*, 349.

²⁵ David *Handbook*, 369.

²⁶ David *Handbook*, 350.

²⁷ Although green can be seen, this is because of the fading of some of the faience that was sometimes substituted for gems but is not reflective of the original color as can be determined by the surrounding colors which are predominately blue in every case.

²⁸ Conservation work by Egypt’s Supreme Counsel of Antiquities in cooperation with the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE), Chicago House, UNESCO, and others has revealed the vibrant colors that lie beneath centuries of soot, which acted as a preservative. In fact, the faded colors that most visitors are familiar are more related to sun exposure, dust, and centuries of curious fingers than to any deficiency in the working materials or techniques of the original artisans (Wilkinson, *Symbols*, 105).

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(meaning, the black). All lands directly affected were thus part of Egypt. A clear line between the black lands that were Egypt and the lands of the desert and beyond can still be seen today as it could in the ancient past. The desert was called *deseret* (meaning, the red). Red was a color that symbolized danger and unpredictability. Fire, blood, and the sun (early and late in the day) were all seen as red and since all were threatening, red represented the realm of peril. The Nile Delta of Lower Egypt (to the north) used a red crown to represent danger to all who opposed the ruler. Doors have even been found at Lahun painted red to keep the dangerous supernatural forces outside. The desert and all foreign lands beyond it were called the red lands because they were dangerous. Bodies of water within the red lands were called the red seas (including today's Red Sea and its two branches—Suez and Aqaba).²⁹ The bitter lakes north of the Gulf of Suez were called the black seas because they were directly watered by a branch of the Nile and were part of Egypt (at least at some point in the ancient past), the black lands. Black was a color associated with life and life sustaining lands. It also was the color of people living in the afterlife (and thus was associated with eternal life). So, in this way red and black worked to contrast with each other in symbolism.

As color was used to distinguish the land of the living, color was also used to distinguish the gods, their realm, and the realm of the dead. Yellow was used for burial chambers since it is the color of gold, which was considered to be the material that the skin of the gods was made from. Yellow is the color of the sun (most of the day) and the stars (the latter of which litter the ceilings of many tombs and temples). As a result, yellow (or gold) came to symbolize the dwelling place of the gods.

It is clear that blue was one of the primary colors associated with the realm of the gods.³⁰ In fact, the god Amun seems to first have been depicted as blue during the reign of the 3rd Thutmoses of the 18th dynasty and by the 19th dynasty, this was the only color used to represent Amun.³¹ It was also associated with fertility and because of its association with water (and sky, because the sky was thought to be

²⁹ The Mediterranean Sea to the north was called the Great blue-green, an appropriate name for anyone who sees it. It was not in the red lands or in the black and thus it had its own color.

³⁰ Green and black were also used but for only specific cases.

³¹ Wilkinson, *Symbol*, 114. The other color associated with Amun was red.

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water) it was associated with creation, since all things came from the primordial waters.

White was used to represent purity and could be seen in everyday life in the bleached, high-quality linens worn by the upper classes. Women of nobility were often depicted with white skin (as opposed to their husbands' reddish-brown skin³²) both as a mark of virtue and also as a true depiction of the reality of their station. Since they were not required to work out in the sun, their skin lightened. A number of sacred animals also were depicted as white. The Nile Valley of Upper Egypt (to the south) used a white crown to represent purity.

Colors could also be combined to not only create a new color, but also to combine the meanings. Purple³³ was made beginning in the New Kingdom by dipping thread in red first³⁴ and then dipping that thread in blue to reach the appropriate color. Thus, the danger of red and the divinity of blue created a color associated with royalty. The king was divine and also someone who had real power over the lives of others and thus was inherently dangerous.

Colors in Wilderness Sanctuary

Blue, purple, and red were the three colors that were specifically requested (Exod. 25:4) when dying thread for the wilderness sanctuary. These three colors were not only reserved for the thread but appear in other parts of the wilderness sanctuary as well. The rams skin leather was to be specifically dyed red and the priestly robes were to be made of these same three colors (blue, purple, and red), while also including gold thread and specific gems. Colors are also implied even if they were not mentioned specifically. The linen requested was fine linen (Exod. 25:4, meaning that it was white. It was used both in the structures and for the

³² The Egyptians used skin color to depict the four human races known to them: Egyptians were reddish-brown, Asiatics (Syrians and others from the Levant including the Hebrews) were depicted pale white, Nubians (to the south) were black, and Libyans (to the north and west) were almost nearly white. It is important to note that these four races appear in the Book of Gates from the New Kingdom, seen in “many New Kingdom royal tombs. . . harmoniously coexisting in the afterlife.” Wilkinson, *Symbol*, 123. So while the Egyptians considered these to be mostly enemies in the present life, they saw eternal life much differently.

³³ Purple is often described as dark blue.

³⁴ A new dye plant (madder) for red was introduced to Egypt from the Levant in the 18th dynasty (Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood, Textiles in *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, eds. Paul T. Nicholson and Ian Shaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000: 268–298), 279.

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priestly robes. Acacia wood has a red core. And all of the metals selected had specific colors that also had meaning.

At least by the historical period, when the wilderness sanctuary was constructed,³⁵ other colors were available. Green, yellow (unless its association with gold), orange, black, and even brown are seen in both linen and leather dyes in Egypt. Yet these are not named directly³⁶ as being colors used in the construction of the wilderness sanctuary. This seems to indicate that there was an intentionality to the request for the specific colors of thread.

Embroidery

Nearly all embroidery during the dynastic periods was associated with royalty. It was not until the medieval period that embroidery became popular with non-royals.³⁷ In fact, the oldest embroidered cloth in Egypt (when it was found) dates to the reign of the 2nd Amenhotep of the 18th dynasty.³⁸ The colored thread was specifically to be used for embroidery in the wilderness sanctuary's courtyard gate, the tabernacle screen, the inner linen covering of the tabernacle, and the veil that demarked the separation from the holy place and the most holy. The significance of this is that the fact that embroidery was used clearly marked the space as belonging to royalty—in this case the King of the Hebrews.

Meaning through Experience

As established, colors had both meaning and purpose in Egypt. The Hebrews had just come out of Egypt where they had worked as artisans and construction workers for the Egyptians (Exod. 1:11; 5:6–18; 35:10, 25–26, 30–36:5). They had entered Egypt as nomadic pastoralists from the Levant (Gen. 46:32–34). Thus, the artistic and construction work would have been learned in Egypt using Egyptian styles and meanings.

³⁵ Sometime in New Kingdom Egypt, which included the 18th, 19th, and 20th dynasties (16th through 11th centuries B.C.), according to internal textual chronology.

³⁶ The association of yellow with gold is not explicitly stated in the Hebrew text but as will be shown below, was not a coincidence.

³⁷ Vogelsang-Eastwood Textiles, 280.

³⁸ When it was found in the tomb of the 4th Thutmoses (2nd Amenhotep's son who succeeded him on the throne), it was an estimated 1000 years older than any other known tapestry. Howard Carter and P. E. Newberry, *Services des Antiquités de L'Égypte Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire, Nos 46001–46529: The Tomb of Thoutmôsis, IV* (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Co., 1904), 143.

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And so, it is likely that the Hebrews would have very much understood the meanings that color had to the Egyptians. As a result, by applying these meanings to the use of color in the wilderness sanctuary, we might be able to look at the sanctuary colors through Egyptian eyes (meaning, the eyes of the Hebrews who had been trained to see this way).

Outside of the Perimeter Gate

The fact that the outside of the perimeter barrier was constructed of white linen hung on poles communicated wealth. Linen was the most common textile in Egypt through most of its periods. However, linen that was bleached white and was of the finest quality could only be afforded by the most wealthy—and to have an entire boundary wall made of it would have demonstrated great wealth. It was bleached to communicate purity back in Egypt, so those on the outside of the courtyard of the wilderness sanctuary would have naturally thought of everything on the inside as pure and of great worth, which was appropriate for a sanctuary (or sacred space).

This would have been even more poignant at the gate that was itself embroidered, signaling that royalty lay within. That the embroidery used only blue, purple, and red thread would have signaled that the one inside was a divine, dangerous, king.

Outside of the Tabernacle

The same subconscious message through the use of embroidery would have been reinforced inside of the courtyard as one looked at the screen of the tabernacle. Thus, both entrances (courtyard gate and tabernacle screen) conveyed the message that royalty lay beyond the entrance screen.

Inside the courtyard nothing could be seen of the outside camp. A wall of white linen surrounded all who stood inside the courtyard. This would have clearly communicated the pure atmosphere of the space. Thus, the simple use of color conveyed a message that was reinforced through the sacrificial system and the furniture.

Inside the Tabernacle

In the holy place (the larger and first of the two rooms) in the tabernacle, one would have seen blue, purple, and red embroidery behind (on the screen), overhead (on the innermost covering layer of the tabernacle), and before (on the veil). In this way the tabernacle screen, the innermost linen cloth covering that formed the visible ceiling, and the

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veil that kept the most holy place out of sight, again communicated that one was in the presence of royalty. To the right and to the left (north and south) gold overlaid walls would have reflected the light of the lamps. All furniture in this room (lampstand, table, and altar) was also visibly and exclusively made of gold or gold overlay. Because of the association of gold (and yellow) with the divine, that aspect of God's nature was reinforced. Of course, the screen, linen covering, and veil were also made of white linen, which would have signaled the purity of the space.

The veil is an enigma in that it is not clear how it was hung. If the veil was a simple curtain, then once beyond it, the veil would have been at the back of the one who entered (only the high priest was allowed), while the linen covering that made up the ceiling would have been seen overhead. To the right, left, and beyond the Ark would have been visible gold walls. If the veil was a canopy, then all that could be seen inside of the veil would have been the white linen and the blue, purple, and red threaded embroidery.³⁹ Either way, this inner sanctum of the God-King of the Hebrews, would have been understood to be a very holy and very special place.

Discussion

There was strong meaning associated with color in Egypt. These associations would likely have been understood and possibly embraced by the Hebrews (most likely, unknowingly in a very natural way). That is not to say that they would not have been able to articulate the meaning, but simply that the meanings would have been understood automatically without any need of explanation, which is likely why God selected them. God seems to have wanted to communicate certain messages in a natural way to the Hebrews so that they could understand the more important messages of salvation through the sanctuary services. In this way, the use of color provided part of a normative framework that allowed God to communicate clearly. In the process, God also divested color of any association with magic by making it clear that He was their Protector and He could not be manipulated as the Egyptians believed their deities could be.

³⁹ For more discussion on the possibilities, see L. S. Baker, Jr., *Archaeological Backgrounds of the Sanctuary: A Search for Egyptian Cultural Influence in the Construction of the Hebrew tent-sanctuary*, a dissertation from Andrews University, 2019.

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What is more remarkable is that God seemed to use these meanings in His instructions. God could have used any metal or even bare wood inside of His tabernacle if He had wanted to. That He used gold to represent His furniture in the tabernacle, when gold was very clearly associated with the gods of Egypt, seems to strongly suggest that He was more interested in communicating to the Hebrews His divinity, than setting any record straight. It also seems to strongly suggest that the meanings associated with colors were purposely and intentionally taken from the Egyptian understanding. In other words, God intentionally chose to communicate in a language the Hebrews could understand even if that meant using pagan associations to do this.

The benefit to us today in knowing these meanings and backgrounds is that it helps us, who live very much removed from those associations to understand what God wanted to communicate to the Hebrews. The more these original culturally associated meanings are understood by us, the more we are able to understand God. Further, by seeing what was used (and also what was not used or what was changed) we can see the cultural framework God was willing to work within as He attempted to help the Hebrews understand His nature and the salvation that He offered to all who would accept Him as their God-King.

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