

The Hem Of The Garment

by Clarence H. Wagner, Jr.

Despite the development in the Land of Israel since the founding of the State of Israel, you can still walk along the shores of the Sea of Galilee and imagine what it was like when *Yeshua* (Jesus) was ministering there.

He was almost always followed by throngs of people eager to hear His teaching. It was along the sea that a very sick woman caught up with Him, desperate to be healed of a chronic ailment. This miracle story is very well-known to readers of the New Testament. Yet, there is so much that is "between the lines" which, when understood, will strengthen your relationship with the Lord. This involves tassels, snails, authority, humility, and wings. I know you are thinking, "What is this all about? Read on!"

Tassels

In Matthew 9:20-22, we find a curious story of a sick woman receiving healing simply by touching Jesus' clothes: *"Just then a woman, who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, came up behind Him and touched the hem of His garment; for she said to herself, 'If I only touch His cloak, I will be healed.' Jesus (Yeshua) turned and saw her. 'Take heart, daughter,' He said, 'your faith has healed you.' And the woman was healed from that moment."*

In the Mark account of the same story, it continues: *"At once Yeshua realized that power had gone out from Him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, 'Who touched My clothes?' 'You see the people crowding against You,' His disciples answered, 'and yet You can ask, Who touched Me?'" (Mk. 5:30-31).*

What is so significant about the hem of Jesus' garment? At first reading, it seems an odd practice. However, once we understand the significance of the hem of one's garment, these passages will have much more meaning. The word translated, hem, is actually referring to the fringes, or tassels (called *tzitziyot*, in Hebrew), required to be on the four corners of all clothing of Jewish men, in accordance with God's instruction: *"The Lord said to Moses, 'Speak to the Israelites and say to them: Throughout the generations to come, you are to make tassels on the corners of one's garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. You will have these tassels to look at and so 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.'" (Num. 15:37-41a)*

In ancient Israel, men wore four-cornered outer tunics with these tassels, or *tzitziyot*, tied to the four corners. This outer garment became known as a *tallit*, and eventually evolved into the more formal prayer shawl. But, why tassels? These tassels were to remind each Jewish man of his responsibility to fulfill God's commandments. In fact, these tassels are tied into 613 knots to constantly remind them of the 613 laws of Moses, of which there are 365 prohibitions (The "thou shalt not" laws), and 248 affirmations (the "thou shall" laws). The knots also correspond with the ineffable name of God, the unspoken yod-heh-vav-heh, Yahweh.

Because they were hanging on the four corners of your garment, in full view of everyone including yourself, they would be a constant reminder to walk according to God's Laws. The Hebrew word we translate as Law, is *halacha*, and it literally means "walk." You see, following God's law is a daily walk, and to stay on His path of righteousness, we all need constant reminding.

Wearing these tassels would be comparable to us wearing a large Bible on a rope around our necks. How would we behave in public, how would we speak to others, where would we go? God intended them to be a constant reminder of His Word when he told the Israelites to wear these fringes. Today, because Jewish people wear western clothes, they keep this law by wearing a four-cornered garment as an undershirt. Yet, they bring the tassels out over their belt so that they can be seen. We also find the *tzitziyot* on the corners of the beautiful prayer shawls worn by Jewish men as an outer garment when they pray. I always like to see the men in my neighborhood in Jerusalem coming home from synagogue every Friday night and Saturday morning with their flowing prayer shawls draped over their shoulders. When deep in prayer, Jewish men will put these prayer shawls over their heads to shut out the world and be in the presence of God. This can be seen in the synagogue or at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. The prayer shawls are white, representing the heavens, or the dwelling place of the Lord. And, the color blue represents the *Ruach HaKodesh*, or Holy Spirit of God. Therefore, praying under the *tallit*, or prayer shawl, is covering yourself with the presence of God. From biblical times, this custom was like a prayer closet, and it is likely this is what *Yeshua* was referring to in Matthew 6:6, when He told us to get into our closet, apart from the people around, and pray in secret to the Lord.

This *tallit* was the mantle worn by Samuel (I Sam. 15:27), and it was Elijah's mantle that was conferred upon Elisha (I Kgs. 19:19). It was also worn by *Yeshua*, and the "hem of the garment" that was touched by the woman with the issue of blood was actually the *tzitziyot* or tassels of His *tallit*. Even in His glorious Second Coming, *Yeshua* will be wearing His *tallit*. In Revelation 19:11-16, John gives us a description: *"I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is Faithful and True, ... He has a name written on Him that no one but He Himself knows. He is clothed in a garment dipped in blood: and His Name is The Word of God... On His garment and on His thigh He has a name written: King of Kings, and Lord of Lords" (Rev. 19:11-13,16).*

J. R. Church suggests that the vesture is the *tallit* of *Yeshua* with His titles written upon it and on His thighs. Where do the *tzitziyot* fall, but on one's thigh? Notice there are four titles listed in this passage - perhaps one for each of the four *tzitziyot*:

1. "A Name written, that no man knew but He Himself" - the ineffable name of God, Yahweh! (v. 12)
2. "The Word of God" (v. 13)
3. "King of Kings" and,
4. "Lord of Lords" (v. 16).

The purpose of the four fringes on a garment was, and is, and still will be to proclaim the Word of the Lord, so as to remember them and perform them.

Snails

Each tassel was to have a blue thread. With blue so prevalent in our world today, it is hard to imagine that during the entire biblical period, blue was probably the most expensive color to produce. Therefore, it was reserved for royalty and the wealthy who

could afford it. Before synthetic dyes, the only source was a small gland in the murex snail. It took 12,000 snails to fill up a thimble of blue dye. In 200 BC, one pound of cloth, dyed blue, cost the equivalent of \$36,000. By AD 300, this same pound of blue cloth cost \$96,000. This indicates that Lydia, the seller of purple and an early convert of Christianity, was one of the wealthiest women in the Empire (Acts 16:14).

In the "shorthand" of the Bible, this tidbit of information about Lydia, which means very little to us today, said a lot to early readers of the text. It said, in effect, "Hey, one of the wealthiest and most influential people in the Roman Empire has gotten saved!" Imagine the impact this would make on the message of the Gospel. Blue also represented something divine, which is why royal blue set people apart from the rest of the common world. Therefore, to have a blue thread was to have something of the divine and royal, and served to remind each wearer of his significance in God's sight. After all, God calls us to be a royal priesthood.

This treasured thread would probably have been passed on from a father to his son as one of his precious legacies. The blue stripe on the prayer shawl of Jewish men has the same meaning, and interestingly, this symbol is represented in the blue stripes on the flag of Israel today. The flag of Israel, much maligned in the world, is really a representation of the Lord in all its elements. The white background and blue stripes come from the prayer shawl. The Star of David in the middle has been given a number of explanations. One I like is from the Jewish scholar, Franz Rosensweig, who interprets it this way. The Star of David is made up of two triangles. One is the representation of God as He is manifested as Creator, Redeemer and Teacher. Sound familiar? The other triangle represents God, man and others in a three-way relationship that requires all three elements to manifest the working out of God's Word in our lives. To me, this makes the Israeli flag a true standard and representation of God, and a testimony to the Israeli people of whom they serve and why they exist. Spiritually speaking, perhaps this is why the flag of Israel, like the people and state of Israel, gets so much opposition in the secular world we live in today

Authority

These tassels also came to be associated with a person's authority. Saul and David: In the case of King Saul, we find that David humiliated him by sneaking up to him in a cave at the Spring of Ein Gedi and cutting off Saul's tassels, a symbol of his authority.

David's men said: *"This is the day the Lord spoke of when He said to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish'... Afterward, David was conscience-stricken for having cut off a corner of Saul's robe. He said to his men, 'The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord's anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the Lord'"* (I Sam. 24:4-6).

Why was David upset with himself? Because he understood that to steal someone's tassel was to steal his authority. Even though David did this to prove to Saul that he was not trying to kill him, the symbol of taking the corner fringe would be humiliation to Saul. This bothered David. David immediately went out of the cave and prostrated himself in humility before Saul to prove to Saul that he was not trying to kill him. David said: *"Why do you listen when men say, 'David is bent on harming you?' This day have you seen with your own eyes how the Lord delivered you into my hands in the cave. Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you; I said, 'I will not lift my hand against my master, because he is the Lord's anointed.' See, my father, look at this piece of your robe in my hand! I cut off the corner of your robe, but did not kill you. Now understand and recognize that I am not guilty of wrongdoing or rebellion. I have not wronged you, but you are hunting me down to take my life..."* (I Sam. 24:8-11).

Everyone, including Saul, knew that David had been anointed by Samuel to be the next king, which is why Saul feared David. At Ein Gedi, David had literally taken Saul's authority and at that point, he probably could have taken the throne from Saul. But, he didn't; rather, he let God choose the time for him to receive the throne. This act convinced Saul that David was telling the truth. David's act of giving back Saul's authority also reconciled the two men. Saul said: *"May the Lord reward you well for the way you treated me today. I know that you will surely be king and that the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hands"* (I Sam. 24:19b-20).

Boaz And Ruth:

Another example of the authority represented in the tassel is found in a passage in the book of Ruth, which is sometimes difficult to understand. In Chapter three, Ruth went to Boaz to receive his blessing that would help her out of her difficult situation. She went to the threshing floor and slept at his feet. *"In the middle of the night something startled the man, and he turned and discovered a woman lying at his feet. 'Who are you?' he asked. 'I am your servant, Ruth,' she said. 'Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman redeemer'"* (Ruth 3:8-9).

He immediately understood and said to her: *"Don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character"* (Ruth 3:11).

He proceeded to make every arrangement to help her, and eventually, he married her. What Ruth did in asking Boaz to spread the corner of his garment over her was a symbolic way of saying she was placing herself under Boaz's authority.

Humility

By the end of the Second Temple period (70 BC - AD 135), tassels had become a symbol of social status. The wealthier you were, the more grand your tassels might appear. This is human nature, since we might also be tempted to "show-off" with a public display, e.g. the kind of car we drive, the house we live in, or the jewelry we wear. It is known that during the time of Yeshua, the tassels of some Pharisees were so long and elaborate, that they dragged on the ground. It was this ostentatious display of pride that Yeshua was rebuking when He said, *"They make...the tassels of their prayer shawls long..."* (Mt. 23:5).

In speaking of the Pharisees, it is important to realize that not all Pharisees were hypocrites. Nicodemus was a Pharisee (John 3). They were the conservative religious leaders of the time. In fact, of them Yeshua said, *"[They] sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach"* (Mt. 23:2-3). Just as in our time, some religious leaders were good and godly people; others were charlatans. Because of the references to some who were all show and no heart, Christians today often mistakenly think all Pharisees were unsavory types. Theologically, Yeshua was much closer to the Pharisees than to the Sadducees.

The lesson for all of us from this passage is that it is more important to perform God's commandments from inward conviction, in humility, than by simply wearing it on the outside with overdone religious practices. God looks upon the heart, while man often looks upon outward appearances (I Sam. 16:7).

Under His Wings

Let's go back to the woman on the shores of the Sea of Galilee who came to Jesus for healing. When she pressed through the crowd, she was not content to just pat Jesus on the back. She was a desperate woman, who had spent all of her money on cures that did not work. It was a bold step for her to push through that crowd of people, for according to Levitical law, it was forbidden for her to be out in public with her condition, for she was considered unclean (Lev. 15:25). However, she was at the end of her rope. She had nothing to lose. She had heard of the Messiah who could heal and she anxiously sought Him out.

But why did she want to touch the hem of His garment - the tassels of His tallit? These tzitziyot were a point of contact she needed to help her release her faith to receive a miracle in her life. What did they represent?

First, they represented the Word of God, which is always the place where we can find healing for all the needs in our life.

Second, the fringes also represented the authority of Yeshua. She had heard that many people were healed by Yeshua, that He taught with authority, and when He spoke, people were healed.

Third, there was even more to these fringes. The prophet Malachi spoke of the Messiah of Israel and said of Him, "*But for you who revere My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in His wings*" (Mal. 4:2).

The Hebrew word for "wings" used in this passage is *kanaf*, which is a word that specifically means the fringe-like feathers or edges of a bird's wing, not the whole wing. All of us have seen an eagle or hawk circling in the summer sky and have seen these fringe-like feathers. This word, therefore, had two meanings and could be translated wings, or fringes. The woman had heard Yeshua was the Messiah. Perhaps she remembered this messianic promise from the scroll of Malachi and thought, if I am to be healed, then will it be found in His wings... His tzitziyot? By faith, she reached out and touched the fringes, and was healed.

It is interesting that all though the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for wings in most passages is *kanaf* when referring to God. Surely, the place of refuge is under the *kanaf* of the Lord, i.e., under His Word and His authority!

In a different passage, some time later Yeshua arrived at the town of Genessaret, also on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The men of the town recognized Yeshua and sent word out so that many people brought all their sick to Him and begged Him to let the sick just touch the fringe of His garment. The Bible simply reports, "*all who touched Him were healed*" (Mk. 6:53-56).

These people were not healed simply by touching the fringes of Yeshua's garment in a crowd. They were healed when their faith touched the power of God and the One who could heal their infirmities. It was their point of contact to release their faith to receive a touch from the Lord.

What About You And Me?

None of us is without a need in our life, whether it be healing, family problems, financial or emotional problems. Do we have the simple faith to reach out and touch the hem of the garment of Yeshua? If you do, He is waiting to meet our needs, even today.