
The Seamless Tunic

“Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His outer garments and made four parts . . . ; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece. So they said therefore to one another, ‘Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, to decide whose it shall be’; this was to fulfill the Scripture: ‘They divided My outer garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots’” (John 19:23, 24).

All four Gospel writers mentioned that the quaternion, the four-man detail, of soldiers that was given the responsibility of crucifying Jesus divided up His effects among themselves (Matthew 27:35, 36; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:34; John 19:23, 24). The Gospel of John supplies more information about this fact than the other three Gospels. John tells how the soldiers divided Jesus’ clothes, explains why lots were cast, and says that the prophecy in Psalm 22:18 was fulfilled by what was done. The other Gospels only say that lots were cast and His clothes were divided among the soldiers.

The soldiers who had been given the grisly task of executing the condemned men were granted the right of taking whatever clothes or articles the victims possessed at the time of their execution. Although not explicitly stated in the Scriptures, in light of the customs and culture of the times, it is reasonable to believe that Jesus arrived at Golgotha wearing five articles of clothing. His outer garments consisted of four pieces of clothing; for the scarlet robe had been removed after the final period of mockery, when the soldiers put Jesus back into the clothes He had been wearing at the time of His arrest (see Matthew 27:31). Therefore, at Golgotha, He was wearing a turban, His belt, a cloak, and sandals. His undergarment was a seamless, one-piece tunic. It has been supposed that Mary, His mother, had made the tunic for Him and had given it to Him shortly before His trials.

The soldiers had no problem dividing up the four outer garments that He was wearing.

Each one chose the item he wanted, and that was that. The way Matthew, Mark, and Luke describe the scene neither proves nor disproves that the soldiers gambled for each piece of the outer garments. The pieces would not have been of equal value, but the distribution of them seems to have presented no difficulty for the soldiers.

However, the tunic was a different matter. Being a remarkable piece, woven from top to bottom, it presented two problems to the soldiers. First, it was without seams. How could each of the four men have a share of it? They could not divide it up according to the seams, for it had none. Second, if it were cut into pieces, it would be ruined. According to John, the soldiers resolved their dilemma by agreeing to cast lots for it. In this way, whoever won the lottery would receive the entire, uncut, and unmarred tunic.

John wrote that when the soldiers looked at the seamless tunic and noticed its beauty and rarity, they said to each other, “Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, to decide whose it shall be” (John 19:24a). After deciding how they would determine who would get the tunic, they proceeded to cast lots for it. Their casting lots was a trifle, an inconsequential deed to the soldiers. To John, it was of great significance. He saw in it an important fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy. He declared through inspiration by the Holy Spirit that this was done “to fulfill the Scripture” (John 19:24). For even greater clarity and emphasis on the prophecy that had been fulfilled in the actions of the soldiers, he

quoted verbatim from the Septuagint (LXX) version of the Old Testament Scriptures: "They divided My outer garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots." John refers to every detail of the prophecy except its location in the Old Testament, in Psalm 22. It is verse 18 of that graphic psalm. We should take care not to overlook this seemingly unimportant detail of the crucifixion. It helps us to gain an understanding of the whole scope of divine prophecy.

(1) *It reminds us anew of the accuracy of divine prophecy.* Two types of prophecies are easily identified by the student of the Scriptures. The first one is the name prophecy—a prophecy in which the name of a person or a place makes up the central part of the prediction. An example is in Micah 5:2, where Micah foretold that the city of Bethlehem would be the birthplace of the Messiah. Those who carefully studied the Old Testament Scriptures in the first century recognized this prophecy and its fulfillment. When asked by Herod, the chief priests and the scribes pointed to Bethlehem as the place of the Messiah's birth (Matthew 2:4–6). Herod gave this information to the wise men, who in turn, acted on the information. They went to Bethlehem, found the baby Jesus, and worshiped Him.

The second type of prophecy is the specific prophecy. It, too, is easily recognized. This kind of prophecy contains two or more specifics, although it does not contain any names. Its multiple details must be present in its fulfillment in order for us to say that the prophecy has actually come to pass. The prophecy of David from Psalm 22, as referred to by John, falls into this second category. It is a prophecy containing at least two specifics. First, David said, "They divide my garments among them." According to John, this part of the prophecy related to the four articles of His outer garments—the turban, belt, cloak, and sandals. Second, David said, "And for my clothing they cast lots." John said this part of the prophecy related to the seamless undergarment. Since the soldiers could not divide it, they cast lots over it to determine who would keep it.

If David's prophecy was intended as a synonymous parallelism, then the thought of the first line of the prophecy is repeated in the

second line, in different words. If it was written as a synthetic parallelism, then the second line adds a new thought to the first line. Regardless of the type of parallelism that was used by the poet, two thoughts were definitely foretold: the dividing of Jesus' clothes and the casting of lots for His clothes.

In Psalm 22 David vividly described in his prayer a great trial he was undergoing. He was praying to God concerning his bewildering situation. He pictured his predicament in elevated, hyperbolic language—that is, with exaggerated emphasis—but the Holy Spirit used the description as a literal prophecy concerning the death of Jesus. The picture of David's extreme and violent circumstances foreshadowed the actual crucifixion of Jesus. Our Lord literally experienced what David figuratively imagined that he was going through. In a careful study of this prophecy, one cannot miss the fact that Psalm 22:18 was completely fulfilled in Jesus' death.

(2) *This prophecy also declares the commonness of divine prophecy.* It shows the characteristic of earthliness that is sometimes present in the fulfillment of God's predictions. Often He chooses the everyday deeds, the unplanned and common activities of people, as the setting and events through which His prophecies come to pass. These soldiers—having no idea that they were part of God's designs—went about their normal work of implementing an execution. What they did was routine to them. Perhaps they joked about who got what as they divided the outer garments. When they came to the seamless undergarment, they paused to recognize its beauty; beyond that, it was business as usual. After deciding on what to do with the tunic, they gambled over it and gave it to the winner. These men were unaware that they were fulfilling a prophecy made perhaps a thousand years before. They did not know that their actions had been written into the divine record by David or that they were proving that God overrules in all things to fulfill His will.

God uses His servants, people of notoriety, and sometimes national events to confirm His eternal purposes. As we see in this episode beneath the cross, He can also make His great evidences known through the common, everyday activities of nameless men.

(3) *This prophecy declares the richness of the divine Scriptures.* How full and robust divine prophecy is! Evidence of fulfilled prophecy brings assurance and confidence in the integrity of God and of the Scriptures. Joseph P. Free, in his book *Archaeology and Bible History*,¹ cited Canon Liddon as saying that there are 332 distinct prophecies in the Old Testament that have been literally fulfilled in Christ. In regard to the death of Jesus, these prophecies told with whom He would be crucified (Isaiah 53:9), when He would be crucified (Daniel 9:25, 26), minute details of His death (Psalm 22:18), the spirit He would manifest in His death (Isaiah 53:7), and the purpose of His crucifixion (Isaiah 53:4, 5). They also alluded to His resurrection (see Psalm 16:9). Meditating upon these prophecies and their fulfillments undergirds our faith and confirms the reliability of God's promises.

Floyd E. Hamilton declared in his day that "the mathematical probability that these [332 predictions] would all be fulfilled would be represented by a fraction having one for the numerator and eighty-four followed by ninety-seven ciphers [zeros] as the denominator!"²

¹Joseph P. Free, *Archaeology and Bible History* (Wheaton, Ill.: Scripture Press Publications, 1969), 284.

²Floyd E. Hamilton, *The Basis of Christian Faith*, 3d rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), 156–57.

In other words, since Jesus fulfilled all these prophecies, it is preposterous to think that He could be anyone other than the Christ. God has not only given us proof, but He has given us abundant, substantial proof that Jesus Christ is His Son.

The implication of this small event of the dividing up of Jesus' clothes beneath the cross must not escape our notice. In the context of His Son's death at Calvary, God was saying through this fulfillment of the prophecy, "All who pass by this scene should look, listen, and take notice—for something is happening here that towers above all the events of history and all the events of the future. Here, before the eyes of the world, the second member of the Godhead is dying for the sins of the human race!"

Eddie Cloer



The specific prophecy, dated c. 1000 B.C, says, "They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots" (Psalm 22:18). The specific fulfillment, dated A.D. 33, is this: "So they said to one another, 'Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, to decide whose it shall be'; this was to fulfill the Scripture: 'They divided My outer garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots'" (John 19:23, 24).