

Homiletics Analysis: Exodus 39

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Exodus 39 records the completion of the priestly garments according to the precise pattern the LORD commanded Moses on Sinai. The craftsmen, led by Bezalel, construct the ephod (vv. 1–7), the breastpiece (vv. 8–21), the robe of the ephod (vv. 22–26), the tunics, turban, and sash (vv. 27–29), and the golden plate engraved “*Holy to the LORD*” (vv. 30–31). The chapter concludes with the formal presentation of all the completed work to Moses (vv. 32–43), who inspects the work, finds that every element has been made exactly as the LORD commanded, and blesses the people. The chapter is structured by a recurring refrain — “as the LORD commanded Moses” — which appears at least seven times and functions as both narrative anchor and theological verdict.

This Text — Intent

God intends through this chapter to demonstrate that willing, skilled, Spirit-empowered obedience — rendered with complete fidelity to divine instruction — is the proper creaturely response to grace, and that such obedience results in priestly mediation being established as the means by which a holy God is approached by sinful people. The garments are not decorative; they are theological — each element of priestly vestiture announces who the priest is, what he carries, and under what name he stands before God. The reader is meant to feel the weight of holy worship as something ordered, costly, beautiful, and non-negotiable — and to see in the completion and inspection a kind of new-creation echo in which God surveys the finished work and it is found good.

Subject Sentence: The priestly garments completed in full obedience — Israel’s mediation before God clothed and consecrated.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating that access to His presence requires exact, costly, beautiful obedience — and that when His people render that obedience, He receives it, and He blesses them.

Interpretive Evaluation

The “redundancy” objection and its answer

The most common hermeneutical stumbling block in Exodus 39 — and in the tabernacle completion chapters generally — is the perception that these chapters are mere repetition of earlier commands (Exodus 28–29) and therefore homiletically inert. This view treats the repetition as editorial carelessness or ancient Near Eastern convention with no theological freight. It should be *qualified, not acknowledged*. The repetition is intentional and theologically significant. In the ancient world, fulfillment formulae were not redundant — they were the narrative’s way of demonstrating that what was commanded was actually done, and done completely. The refrain “as the LORD commanded Moses” is not an appendix to the story; it *is* the story. Israel does what the LORD said. The gap between command and completion — spanning chapters 32–34, the golden calf catastrophe — makes the completion all the more weighty. These garments are being made by a people who had just fashioned an idol. That the work is completed faithfully after the covenant’s near-rupture is a display of grace, not a narrative footnote.

The typological question

Reformed and dispensational interpreters diverge meaningfully here. Dispensational readings tend to honor the priestly garments as Israel-specific ordinances with no direct application to the church age, treating them as fulfilled and set aside in Christ. Reformed interpreters agree that the Levitical priesthood is fulfilled in Christ but insist the typological dimension is the *primary* theological payoff of these chapters — the garments point to Christ’s perfect mediation, His bearing of Israel’s names before the Father (breastpiece), and His being “Holy to the LORD” (Exod. 39:30; cf. the holiness of the great High Priest in Hebrews). The Reformed reading is preferred because it does not leave the text’s rich priestly theology stranded in the past but reads it canonically — the garments are fulfilled, not merely set aside. The disparity between the dispensational conclusion (“this applied to Israel’s priests”) and the Reformed conclusion (“this points to and is fulfilled in our High Priest”) is not minor; it determines whether the passage generates any christological application for the congregation.

The “merit” misreading

Some readers — particularly in contexts shaped by Roman Catholic sacramentalism or broader works-theology — read the obedience emphasis of this chapter as implying that Israel’s careful compliance *earns* the divine blessing of v. 43. This should be *refuted*. The obedience of Bezalel and the craftsmen is empowered by the Spirit (cf. Exod. 31:3) and flows from the renewed covenant of Exodus 34. The blessing Moses pronounces is not a reward for meritorious performance; it is the covenantal response to covenantal faithfulness — itself made possible by the grace that re-established the covenant after the golden calf. The sequence is: grace → covenant → command → obedience → blessing. The obedience does not generate grace; grace generates the obedience.

The Reformed reading

Exodus 39 is best read as a new-creation completion narrative in which Spirit-empowered craftsmen, working within the covenant of grace, complete the garments that clothe

Israel's mediator — a mediator whose role, vestiture, and intercession all find their fulfillment and termination in the Lord Jesus Christ, Israel's and the church's true and permanent High Priest. The obedience motif ("as the LORD commanded Moses") is not moralistic instruction but doxological display — it shows what a people look like when grace has done its work on them.

Key Canonical Support

- **Exodus 28:1–43** — The original command for the priestly garments; Exodus 39 demonstrates the correspondence between command and completion, making the "as the LORD commanded" refrain meaningful only against the prior command.
 - **Hebrews 4:14–5:10; 7:26–28** — Christ as the great High Priest who fulfills and surpasses the Levitical priesthood; the garments that set Aaron apart typologically anticipate the Son who is "holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens."
 - **Exodus 39:30 / Zechariah 14:20–21** — The inscription "Holy to the LORD" on the golden plate will one day be inscribed on the bells of horses and on every cooking pot — holiness extending from the high priest's forehead to the whole creation; Zechariah shows the eschatological trajectory of what Exodus 39 begins.
 - **Genesis 1:31 / Exodus 39:43** — "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" parallels Moses seeing all the work and finding it done "as the LORD commanded"; the completion/inspection/blessing pattern is a deliberate new-creation echo, signaling that the tabernacle is the new Eden — the place where heaven and earth meet.
 - **Revelation 19:8** — The fine linen of the bride, "bright and pure," representing the righteous deeds of the saints, echoes the linen vestiture of the priests; priestly clothing as the outward mark of holy standing before God runs from Exodus through Revelation.
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Aim: To demonstrate that the careful, complete obedience rendered in Exodus 39 is a pattern of grace-generated worship that finds its ultimate expression in Christ's perfect high-priestly mediation — and that both the obedience and the mediation call the congregation to costly, ordered, beautiful devotion.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
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Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Craftsmen make the woven garments for ministering in the Holy Place, and the holy garments for Aaron — from blue, purple, and scarlet yarns	Opening verse sets the obedience frame; materials match Exod. 28 exactly
2–5	The ephod made from gold, blue, purple, scarlet, and fine twined linen; shoulder pieces attached and joined	“As the LORD commanded Moses” — refrain 1 (v. 5); ephod is the primary priestly garment
6–7	Onyx stones engraved with the names of Israel’s sons, set in gold filigree settings and attached to the shoulder pieces	The priest <i>bears the names</i> of Israel; mediatorial function displayed physically
8–14	The breastpiece made in same materials as ephod; folded square; set with twelve stones, each engraved with the name of a tribe	Breastpiece carries Israel’s twelve names over the priest’s heart before God
15–21	Gold chains, rings, and blue cord attach the breastpiece to the ephod so it cannot come loose	The inseparability of breastpiece from ephod is stressed — the priestly burden cannot be set down
22–26	The robe of the ephod — all blue; hem decorated with pomegranates of blue, purple, and scarlet, alternating with gold bells	“As the LORD commanded Moses” — refrain (v. 26); the bells announce the priest’s presence and movement in the sanctuary
27–29	Woven tunics of fine linen for Aaron and his sons; linen turban, linen caps, linen undergarments; sash of fine twined linen and embroidered work	“As the LORD commanded Moses” — refrain (v. 29); complete vestiture of the entire priestly family
30–31	Golden plate engraved “Holy to the LORD”; attached to the turban with a blue cord	“As the LORD commanded Moses” — refrain (v. 31); the crown declares the priest’s consecrated identity

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
32	All the work of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting was finished; Israel did according to all the LORD commanded	Formal completion statement — the whole project is done
33–41	Inventory: all the components brought to Moses — the tabernacle and its furnishings, the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altar, the basin, the court hangings, the priestly garments	The presentation is comprehensive — nothing withheld, nothing missing
42	“According to all that the LORD had commanded Moses, so the people of Israel had done all the work”	Emphatic double completion statement — people and work both accounted for
43	Moses saw all the work; they had done it as the LORD commanded; Moses blessed them	Inspection → verdict → blessing; new-creation pattern (Gen. 1:31 echo)

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–7	The Ephod: The Priest Clothed and Commissioned
2	8–21	The Breastpiece: The Priest Bearing Israel’s Names
3	22–31	The Remaining Vestments: The Priest Completely Consecrated
4	32–43	The Inspection: Obedience Rendered, Verified, and Blessed

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The priestly garments completed in full obedience — Israel’s mediation before God clothed and consecrated.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating that access to His presence requires exact, costly, beautiful obedience — and that when His people render that obedience, He receives it, and He blesses them.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe what “obedience” means in worship (*Mind/Belief*)

The repeated refrain “as the LORD commanded Moses” teaches that genuine worship is not self-expression — it is faithful correspondence to God’s revealed instruction. In a culture where authenticity has become the supreme value in worship (“what moves me,” “what feels real to me”), this chapter is a direct challenge: the craftsmen did not innovate; they corresponded. The congregation needs to reframe obedience in worship from constraint to artistry — Bezalel was Spirit-filled *and* instruction-following. Those are not in tension. They are the same thing. Ask honestly: when you resist the forms of gathered worship God has ordained, is that the Spirit moving, or is that your preference asserting itself?

2. See Christ as the one who now bears your name before the Father (*Affections/Worship*)

The stones on the ephod and the breastpiece bore the names of Israel’s twelve tribes. The priest did not go before God as a private individual — he carried an entire people on his shoulders and over his heart. This is not a dead metaphor. Hebrews 7:25 says Christ “always lives to make intercession” for those who draw near to God through Him. Your name — your actual name, your actual situation, your actual failures and needs — is before the Father right now, carried by a High Priest who is “holy, innocent, unstained.” Let that reality land. You are not forgotten. You are not on your own before God. You are represented, named, and borne.

3. Count the cost of what access to God actually required (*Affections/Worship*)

The materials catalogued in Exodus 39 — gold, blue, purple, scarlet yarns, fine linen, onyx stones, twelve precious stones, gold chains, gold filigree — are extravagant. The labor is skilled and painstaking. This is not the cheapest available mediation. The chapter is asking the reader to feel the weight of what it took to approach a holy God — and to let that gravity produce reverence, not familiarity. In an era of casual Christianity where approach to God is treated as costless and effortless, Exodus 39 insists that approach is costly. The cost has now been paid — entirely, finally — by Christ. But the reader who has no sense of cost has no sense of grace.

4. Complete the work God has given you — all of it, not most of it *(Will/Behavior)*

The inventory of vv. 33–41 is comprehensive. Every item is accounted for. Nothing is listed as “approximately finished” or “substantially complete.” The presentation to Moses is total. This is not a picture of perfectionism — it is a picture of integrity. Where God has given you a specific assignment — in your household, your vocation, your church, your community — the pattern of Exodus 39 calls you to finish it completely, not to leave the unseen parts undone because no one checks those. Moses checked. And it was all there. God is not honored by work that looks complete from the front.

5. Receive blessing as the fruit of faithful obedience — and extend it *(Will/Behavior)*

Moses blessed the people (v. 43). The blessing is not the goal; it is the result. The goal was faithfulness to the commission. But when faithfulness is rendered, blessing follows — covenantally, reliably, not as a formula but as a pattern. The application is two-directional: (a) stop treating blessing as the goal you are managing toward, and start treating obedience as the thing itself — the blessing will follow; and (b) be the one who, like Moses, names and celebrates faithful work in others. Look for the people around you who are doing the quiet, skilled, unglamorous work of faithfulness. Name it. Bless them. That is what leaders in the covenant community do.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance:

Exodus 39 teaches that the holy God governs the terms of His own approach. He does not receive whatever worship His creatures devise; He receives the worship He has commanded, rendered in the manner He has specified. The repetition of “as the LORD commanded Moses” — seven times in a single chapter — is not stylistic filler; it is a theological argument: the only worship that functions as mediation is worship that corresponds to the divine pattern. The chapter also discloses something essential about the priestly office: the priest is not a private worshiper who happens to enter the Most Holy Place; he is a corporate representative who carries his entire people on his body — named stones on his shoulders, named stones over his heart. The God who receives this priest receives, in him, an entire people. And when the work is completed and inspected, Moses blesses — not because the people have earned transcendent favor, but because faithful, Spirit-empowered obedience to covenant command is the creaturely motion that receives covenantal blessing.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance:

Exodus 39 is a showcase text for the Reformed understanding of worship as regulated, not invented — the regulative principle is not a post-Reformation abstraction but a canonical pattern embedded in the tabernacle narrative itself. The craftsmen bring nothing of their own invention to the sanctuary; they bring their Spirit-empowered skill in service of divinely specified forms. This is exactly what the Reformed tradition has argued: the Spirit and the Word work together, not in opposition; Spirit-gifting enables obedience to the Word's forms, it does not replace or transcend them. More profoundly, the chapter functions as a typological display of the gospel: the garments that clothe Aaron — the golden plate declaring "Holy to the LORD," the breastpiece bearing Israel's names, the bells announcing the priest's presence — all find their antitype in the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone is Holy to the LORD, who bears His people's names before the Father, and whose priestly work (unlike Aaron's) is completed, sufficient, and permanent. The new-creation echo of Moses' inspection in v. 43 anticipates the day when the true Creator-Redeemer surveys all He has accomplished and pronounces it finished (John 19:30; Rev. 21:5–6).

Main Takeaway

God is not approached on the worshiper's terms — He is approached on His own terms, through mediation He has specified, clothed in holiness He has defined. In Exodus 39, that mediation required skilled craftsmen, expensive materials, precise correspondence to divine command, and a priest who bore his people's names on his body before God. All of that has now been perfectly, permanently fulfilled in Jesus Christ, your actual High Priest. The call on you is not to replicate the garments — it is to take seriously what it costs to approach a holy God, to receive with gratitude the One who bore that cost entirely, and to offer the worship God has commanded with the same wholehearted, nothing-withheld completeness these craftsmen brought to their linen and gold.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Treating the chapter as theologically inert repetition.** The most common failure with Exodus 39 is skipping it, summarizing it in thirty seconds, or using it only as a backdrop for the tabernacle's completion in Exodus 40. This misses the chapter's own argument. The refrain "as the LORD commanded Moses" is not a scribal convenience — it is the passage's governing theological claim. Preachers who fail to preach this refrain have failed to preach the chapter.
- **Allegorizing the garments without typological control.** The opposite error: spinning fanciful spiritual applications from each color, each stone, each pomegranate — as though the text is a coded spiritual message awaiting clever decipherment. Allegorism is not typology. Typology follows the canon's own

authoritative connections (Aaron's priesthood → Christ's priesthood in Hebrews); allegory follows the preacher's imagination. Stay on the canonical trajectory.

- **Preaching obedience without grace as its source.** The “as the LORD commanded Moses” refrain can easily be preached as a moralistic call to careful rule-following: “Israel got it right — we should too.” But the craftsmen's obedience is post-golden-calf obedience, Spirit-empowered obedience (Exod. 31:3), covenant-renewed obedience. Strip the grace from the obedience and you have preached law, not gospel. Always locate the obedience within the grace that generated it.
- **Missing the corporate/representative dimension of the priestly garments.** The names on the stones are not incidental — they are the entire point of the breastpiece. The priest does not go before God alone; he carries an entire people. Preachers who treat the garments as mere liturgical costume have missed what the garments *do*. This priestly bearing of Israel's names is the most direct typological bridge to Christ's intercession in Hebrews, and it should be named.
- **Failing to follow the new-creation pattern in verse 43.** Moses' inspection, verdict, and blessing in v. 43 deliberately echo Genesis 1:31. Missing this misses the theological claim that the tabernacle is the new Eden — the restored place of God's presence with His people. The chapter is not merely about finishing a construction project; it is about the re-establishment of heaven-and-earth meeting after sin's disruption. Preachers who close on “they finished the work” have stopped a sentence too soon.
- **Applying the regulative principle polemically rather than doxologically.** The chapter supports a high view of ordered, commanded worship — but if the preacher deploys this primarily to criticize contemporary worship styles, the Primary Claim has been hijacked for an ecclesiological debate. The goal is not to win an argument about worship forms; it is to produce awe at a holy God who governs His own approach, and gratitude that He has provided the One who perfectly fulfills every requirement.