

# Why We Wear Purple

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Signet of Zerubbabel Council # 36

According to a recent U.S. survey most Americans associate the color purple with royalty, magic, mystery and piety. (1) I will go out on a limb here and say that those same folks would lump Freemasonry into one of these categories. Indeed, with respect to purple I agree- Freemasonry is without a doubt an organization that promotes purple power. However, to its learned members the color is closer to science than magic.

Purple is most commonly derived from a combination of the two primary colors red and blue. It is a color of transition, if you will. Often confused with violet, purple is indeed similar to violet to look at it, but there is one major difference. Violet is a "true color" and has its own spectral color and its own wavelength. Violet color has a predominant light wavelength of roughly 380-450 nanometers. It is identifiable on the visible Spectrum of Light and was identified by suspected Freemason Sir Isaac Newton in 1672. (1a)

There is no such thing as the "wavelength of purple light"; purple is a composite color and it only exists as a combination of two colors. No doubt this is one of many reasons purple was chosen by our Masonic elders. Purple, or "argamun" (ar-gaw-mawn) in Hebrew, as it applies to Freemasonry cannot not exist without the knowledge of the Blue Lodge and the further light of the York Rite and Scottish Rite. (7)

Within the York Rite, purple is the dashing color of transition, a new color created when a Master Mason moves from the light of the Blue Lodge to that of the Red in the Royal Arch.

In the Council segments of the York Rite purple is our dashing color of choice and is proudly worn by its members and displayed in our Lodges. However, it is only officially assigned to one member- a member that most will consider an unlikely choice- the Scribe. Why would purple, the color of Kings, be given to a Scribe? (2) In my opinion, it was given to the scribe as symbol of his importance to the Craft. Or, more importantly, to instill in other members the importance of preserving an accurate history of the Craft and as a reminder of the literal power of the pen. This can be seen in the drawing of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the patron Saint of the Knight Templar. The hand of God is colored purple and the desk and pen of St. Bernard is also purple. No other colors are present. God is present in the hand of the Scribe.

Indeed, the pen and purple go hand in hand throughout history. Purple parchment or luxurious vellum was used in Greek and Latin versions of the Gospels, mostly in the 6th and 9th centuries. These manuscripts were known as "purple codices". Purple has been used by scribes for thousands of years and it can easily be traced back through the centuries to a place and time very important to Freemasonry. Purple dye was developed and perfected by the people of Phoenicia, particularly those of Sidon and Tyre. The word "phoenicia" actually means "lands of purple". (4) Tyre was famous for Tyrian or Royal purple. It is also the hometown city of the legendary Freemason martyr Hiram Abiff. 2 Chronicles 2:7, "Send me a man to work in gold, silver, brass, iron and in purple, crimson and blue". The Phoenicians' mass production of purple dye attracted the attention of many ancient writers including Homer and Pliny the Elder. Tyre was producing purple dye prior to 1500 B.C. (500+ years before Solomon and Hiram). Tyrian dye, specifically Royal Purple, was said to fetch its weight in silver and or gold. (5)

As stated in 2nd Chronicles, the Lord instructed Moses to gather gold, purple, scarlet and blue to make the purple curtains needed to protect and separate the chambers of the Tabernacle. Priestly garments were also made to feature blue, purple and scarlet, as was the mysterious device worn by the high priest called the "ephod". (8) What were the Biblical scribes telling us about these colors? Purple curtains would have been extremely valuable and would have certainly been very difficult for the newly freed Hebrew to procure. Certainly the writers of Exodus understood this, yet they never waiver from their claim that purple was the color requested by God. Why did Moses want purple? Why did God tell Moses to use purple? Or did ancient scribes simply use purple, known to the people as the color of Kings, in an attempt to add an air of authority to Moses and embellish his stature? Perhaps. Or, maybe the words of Exodus were not intended to boost public opinion nor to boast about the monetary value of the purple used in the tabernacle, but to record clearly in history that Moses and the Hebrew understood the mysteries of the manmade color purple? Is it possible that, by passing through the purple curtains to the Ark of the Covenant, you are passing through a vortex of transition? Is it possible that Moses was showing us how to use purple as a color of transition, instead of as a color of Kings, as is documented by modern writers? If so, the York Rite still imparts this knowledge.

The secrets and rituals of making purple dye were closely guarded by the Phoenicians and the modern consensus agrees that the actual process of making the natural dye is not fully known. What little we do know is that the process started with one of nature's simplest creatures- the sea snail. This unlikely member of the Muricidae family, more commonly known as the Spiny Murex snail, was responsible for coloring the curtains of the tabernacle and clothing Kings. (6) One must wonder how the Phoenicians learned to take snail juice and turn it into a dye as valuable as silver or gold.

Nevertheless, they did. One of the few sources that describe any scientific details of this process was found in the Naturalis Historia by Pliny the Elder. Pliny tells us the process begins with harvesting massive amounts of murex snails. Astoundingly, Archaeologists have found mountain sized piles of murex shells in both Sidon and Tyre. Author David Jacoby tells us in "Silk Economics and Cross Cultural Antiquities Interactions", that 12,000 snails were harvested to produce only 1.4 oz. of the solution. That's enough to color one handkerchief! (3) After harvesting, the shell was removed and the flesh of the murex was marinated in a very specific salt water solution- 20 ounces of salt to every 100 pounds of product- for three days. (4) This process was not for those with a weak stomach. The stench produced by this process was significant enough to be noted by Biblical writers as well as other ancient authors. After marinating three days in this saltwater bath, the putrid contents was then cleaned. At this point, a gland called the Hypobranchial was removed. This small gland contained the mucus-like substance they needed. After the successful removal of the Hypobranchial gland they transferred the gland and its liquid into a huge boiling pot. Evidence suggests that they used a combination of boiling and moderate heat, each applied for specific periods of time over a 10 day period while filtering the mixture occasionally to remove any flesh left over. At some point during or after this heating process, the liquid was exposed to sunlight which transformed the now concentrated solution from its original color of milky-clear to a yellowish green and eventually to purple of varying shades. The exact duration of this process is one of the Phoenicians' closely guarded secrets. A fascinating feature of Tyrian purple cloth was, unlike violet colored cloth which fades, when Tyrian purple garments are exposed to sunlight they become more radiant and colorful, making the cloth extremely valuable. Light enhances the beauty of the cloth. Imagine that- exposure to light initiates a transition from dull to radiant- a transformation that will never fade- The Light of the York Rite.

As if the purple process was not already difficult enough, it takes an unexpected twist. The time of year when the snails are harvested was very important. Ancient sources tell us that the proper season to harvest the murex snails was after the heliacal rising of the Dog Star- the binary star system Sirius in the constellation Canis Major. The helical rising of Sirius was the key to the Egyptian Calendar, it marked the flooding of the Nile and the summer solstice in ancient Egypt. It also marked the "dog days" of the ancient Greeks. The rising of Sirius also coincides with St. John the Baptist day in Freemasonry. The helical rising is the first annual appearance of Sirius in the Eastern Horizon. Harvesting the snails any other than this time of year would produce results not up to Phoenician standards. The summer solstice and Sirius, the brightest star from Earth's view, has been known in antiquity as The Dog Star and or Dog Days and has long been connected to Freemasonry. It is represented by the Hieroglyph shown here as the five point star. The five point star is a well-known facet of Freemasonry. Many authors, such as John Fellows in his 1835 Expositions to Mysteries, goes a step further and says he believes that the Blazing Star of Freemasonry is actually Sirius the Dog Star. It should be noted here that modern Freemasonry does not concur with his conclusion. However, it should also be noted the Blazing Star's meaning has changed many times through Masonic history.

Hence, we find that at various times the Masonic Blazing Star has been declared to be a symbol of



Matthew 10:10-17

Purple Codices



St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Purple Hand of God to the desk and hand of the Scribe.



Spiny Murex Snail  
"Bolinus brandaris"



Hieroglyph of  
Sirius/ Sopdet

Sirius- Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sirius>  
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1. At first it was not mentioned at all
2. Divine Providence

Masonic history.

Hence, we find that at various times the Masonic Blazing Star has been declared to be a symbol of

1. At first it was not mentioned at all
2. Divine Providence
3. Prudence
4. Beauty
5. The Sun
6. Sirius the Binary Star      <<http://www.masonic-lodge-of-education.com/masonic-blazing-star.html>>
7. G.A.O.T.U.

However, I believe the ancient secret of purple dye epitomizes purple's connection to York Rite. Purple is not a naturally occurring color, so to exist it must be crafted from two other colors. It must be sought after, it must be desired, it requires patients and dedication, it needs further light to transform and it takes massive effort to become radiant. It also teaches us that the process is not over after we become purple. If we choose, we can continue to enhance our color with further exposure to light. Simply, purple can only exist as a result of a union, a collaboration of other colors, a mixing of information and a transference of ritual. Purple reminds us of the importance of secrecy and loyalty, despite the putrid stench of adversity and the necessity of recording and preserving proper procedure and exact science. Purple speaks of the importance of the management of our time and the understanding of nature and the universe. Most importantly, purple reveals to us the ancient and unchanging message of God. This message He makes clear, by his instructions to Moses, to feature purple as one of his chosen colors. God wants us to continue to seek the light and, as reward for our effort, we will, like the purple dye garments, become more and more radiant and beautiful as we absorb His light throughout our lives. This is, I believe, the true lesson of the color purple.

- 1) Purple Survey- Eve Heller, Psychology de la Couler, Effets et Symbologies, PP 179-184
  - 1a) "Wavelength of Purple" Physics in the Arts 2008, Academic Press pp112, ISBN 0-12-374150
- 2) Mackey Encyclopedia.
- 3) Paul Friendander, Chemist-Germany 2008, Eve Heller pp. 163
- 4) Pliny the Elder, Wikipedia, Natural History.
- 5) Theopompus, cited by Atheneaus, 12\_526 \_ Charles Barton 1941, Harvard University Press. Zelia Nutta, Harvard Anthropologists- 1909
- 6) Muricidae- Wikipedia, Murex Snail
- 7) Mackey Encyclopedia of Freemasonry, Purple
- 8) Exodus Chapters 38-39- Young's Literal Translation
- 9) Wikipedia- Purple, Murex Snail
- 10) [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com) Young's Literal Translation-- Purple