

## The Curtains of Linen and Colorful Yarn

*Quotes are from NRSV unless indicated otherwise. Highlighting by underlining is mine.*

Many translations lack clarity in regard to the craftsmanship of the Tabernacle curtains. My suggestion is that translations should be based on the following understanding: **The cloth was woven from linen, then it was embroidered with colorful yarns of wool.**

### Weaving *versus* embroidering

Ex 35:35 says about Bezalel and Oholiab:

NASB: He has filled them with skill to perform every work of an engraver and of a designer and of an embroiderer, in blue and in purple and in scarlet material, and in fine linen, and of a weaver, as performers of every work and makers of designs.

The meaning of the word for ‘weaver’ is not debated (root: **רָגַן** ‘rg). As to the word that is translated ‘embroiderer’, the Hebrew form is **רֹקֵם** *rōqēm*. This is the participle from the root **רָקַם** *rqm*, and is explained in HALOT like this [bold in orig.]:

**weaver of coloured cloth or embroiderer of coloured thread**, a craftsman who decorates cloth with colourful patterns using a needle, ...

Thus, HALOT is not absolutely certain about the exact technique – weaving or embroidering.<sup>1</sup> But the usage of the root elsewhere seems to point more into the direction of embroidering. HALOT’s entry also includes the following remark:

Arb. *raqama* **to do needle-point embroidery, also, to write** (Gesenius-B.), for further meanings, including **to point a text, to brand a horse**, and to stripe a fabric, see Wehr-Cowan 354b.

These are actions where a pointed tool is used to add something on an existing object. Furthermore, in 1Chr 29:2 a cognate word is used of stones of various colors (mosaic?), which is also something “put together”, not “intertwined”. Anyway, there must have been a reason why the writer of Exodus used a different verb apart from ‘to weave’. Most likely, he wanted to talk of a different technique. The Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew speaks of a “person whose profession it is to sew decorative patterns into cloth”.

This is also the view expressed in the *Realia Handbook*’s entry that deals with the words *rōqēm* and *riqmâ* (s. v. Embroidered cloth, needlework, § 1.5.3.11, pp. 51f.): “Embroidered cloth was cloth into which decorative patterns or figures were sewn by hand.” (But compare the quote from the *Realia Handbook* further below for a less definitive comment.)

NIDOTTE, in its entry **רֹקֵם** *rqm*, shows an ambiguity similar to the one found in HALOT, in that it gives the gloss “do the work of an embroiderer” for the qal, but “woven together” for the pual. However, the cognate noun **רִיקְמָה** *riqmâ* is explained like this:

It specifically refers to embroidered fabric. In two places it has to do with different colored semiprecious stones (1Chron 29:2) and with variegated feathers (Ezek 17:3).

Except for GNB, all English translations use the word ‘embroiderer’.

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<sup>1</sup> Embroidery is “the art of working raised and ornamental designs in threads of silk, cotton, gold, silver, or other material, upon any woven fabric, leather, paper, etc., with a needle.” (dictionary.com).

If, then, everybody speaks of embroidery in regard to the colorful material, and of weaving in regard to the linen, this allows us to be clear also in those places where the techniques are not explicitly mentioned.

## The making of the curtains

A remark beforehand: The same technique that we discuss is used for the making of the various **curtains** (screens) of the Tabernacle and for the **first** (innermost) **tent covering** of the Tabernacle. Since this tent covering is mentioned first, we deal with it in detail. The references concerning the curtains are given at the end. Note however, that the English translations, rather misleadingly, call the first tent covering also a ‘curtain’ (see the separate notes on this issue).

Ex 26:1 says:

Moreover you shall make the tabernacle with ten curtains [i.e. tent coverings!] of fine twisted linen, and blue, purple, and crimson yarns; you shall make them with cherubim skillfully worked into them.

The Handbook comments:

**And blue and purple and scarlet stuff** is identical with 25.4. (See the discussion there). Here again the word **stuff** is not in the Hebrew, so NRSV has “blue, purple, and crimson yarns.” TEV and CEV's use of “wool” introduces a different kind of fabric, and it is confusing to think of “fine linen woven with blue, purple, and red wool.” It is possible that woolen thread of the different colors was used for the embroidery, but this is not clear in the text. (The mixing of linen and wool is actually forbidden in Deut 22.11, but there it refers to clothing. See also Lev 19.19.) There are thus two possible alternative models:

- Make [or, Have them make] the sacred tent out of ten pieces of the finest linen. Weave these out of blue, purple, and crimson thread. Also have them embroider....
- Make the sacred tent [or, tent where I live] out of ten pieces of the finest linen cloth. Have them take blue, purple, and crimson wool thread and embroider....

The first model does not seem realistic. The relation between the linen and the other material is not clear. Also, it is difficult to imagine how a tent covering that is already made of colorful thread is then decorated with cherubim. The second model is to be preferred. If one follows it here, then one should *not* follow the suggested model translation for v. 31 of the same chapter. There, the Handbook says:

Have them weave a curtain out of the finest linen, with blue, purple, and red thread. Then have a skilled person embroider it with figures of cherubs.

The question is whether the colorful thread goes together with the weaving (in the first clause of the English translation) or with the embroidering (in the second clause). The latter is more likely how the thread was used.

The *Realia Handbook* states (s. v. Linen cloth strips, § 3.15.2.3.6.1, pp. 208f.):

The description of how the strips of cloth were decorated in Exodus 26:1 leaves open the question of whether the figures of cherubim were woven into the cloth or embroidered on it. The older Jewish commentators understood the figures to have been an integral part of the weaving of the strips (compare NJPSV “with a design of cherubim worked into them” and *God's Word* [GW] “and creatively work an angel design into the fabric”). Most translations, however, prefer using the word “embroider” here (GNT, CEV, GECL; see 1.5.3.11). Some translations find ways to describe the decoration without determining the method by which it was put on the cloth; for example, ITCL has “you will decorate them with figures of cherubim.”

It is not explicit about the relation between the linen and the other threads though.

Houtman says (on Ex 26:1-2):<sup>2</sup>

**The meaning seems to be that the cherubim are embroidered on fine twined linen by means of blue purple etc.**

This is a most reasonable understanding.

It could also explain why this combination of linen and wool was allowed, whereas Lev 19:19 says "... nor wear a garment upon you of two kinds of material mixed together" (NASB), and Deut 22:11 says "You shall not wear a material mixed of wool and linen together." (NASB). – Perhaps, weaving a cloth of two different materials was not allowed, but weaving from one type of material and then embroidering it with another type of material was allowed.

## Translation

In either case, translations should aim at clarity. If one holds the view that the cherubim were *woven into the curtain*, then one could, for instance, adapt NIV for Ex 26:1 as follows:

NIV:

"Make the tabernacle with ten curtains of finely twisted linen and blue, purple and scarlet yarn, with cherubim worked into them by a skilled craftsman.

Alternative:

"Make the tabernacle with ten curtains of finely twisted linen and use blue, purple and scarlet yarn to work cherubim into them by a skilled craftsman.

If one holds the view that the cherubim were *embroidered*, which seems to be more likely, then NLT could be used, and slightly improved:

NLT:

"Make the Tabernacle from ten curtains of finely woven linen. Decorate the curtains with blue, purple, and scarlet thread and with skillfully embroidered cherubim.

Alternative:

"Make the Tabernacle from ten curtains of finely woven linen. Use blue, purple, and scarlet thread to decorate the curtains with skillfully embroidered cherubim.

The change to the original is that the translation does not first talk about the materials – i.e. linen and the colored threads – and afterwards speak about the cherubim, as if they had nothing to do with either of these materials. This issue is solved well by GECL:

Für meine Wohnung sollst du zehn kostbare Zeltbahnen anfertigen lassen. Sie sollen aus gezwirnten Leinenfäden gewebt sein und mit Bildern von Keruben geziert, die mit blauer, roter und karmesinroter Wolle daraufgestickt sind.

*Engl.:* For my dwelling, you shall have ten precious tent coverings made. They shall be woven from twisted linen yarn and decorated with pictures of cherubim, which are embroidered onto it with blue, red and crimson wool.

One would, for example, not follow GNT in its translation of Ex 26:1:

Make the interior of the sacred Tent, the Tent of my presence, out of ten pieces of fine linen woven with blue, purple, and red wool. Embroider them with figures of winged creatures.

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<sup>2</sup> Cornelius Houtman: Exodus, vol. 3. Historical Commentary on the Old Testament. Cornelius Houtman et al. (eds.). Peeters, 2000.

Below are **further references** listed where the same issue arises. The wording in Hebrew varies, but the materials and technique seem to always be the same. So my suggestion would be to devise one standard phrase and use it everywhere (with minor adjustments as required by the context).

Re: the first (innermost) tent layer of the Tabernacle

Ex 36:8 All those with skill among the workers made the tabernacle with ten curtains; they were made of fine twisted linen, and blue, purple, and crimson yarns, with cherubim skillfully worked into them.

Re: the curtain at the entrance of the courtyard

Ex 27:16 For the gate of the court there shall be a screen twenty cubits long, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen, embroidered with needlework; ...

Ex 38:18 The screen for the entrance to the court was embroidered with needlework in blue, purple, and crimson yarns and fine twisted linen. ...

Re: the curtain at the entrance of the Holy Place

Ex 26:36 You shall make a screen for the entrance of the tent, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen, embroidered with needlework.

Ex 36:37 He also made a screen for the entrance to the tent, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine twisted linen, embroidered with needlework;

Re: the curtain in front of the Most Holy Place

Ex 26:31 You shall make a curtain of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen; it shall be made with cherubim skillfully worked into it. [Cf. v. 36.]

Ex 36:35 He made the curtain of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine twisted linen, with cherubim skillfully worked into it.

2Ch 3:14 And Solomon made the curtain of blue and purple and crimson fabrics and fine linen, and worked cherubim into it.

Note that in these places, the working in of *cherubim* is only mentioned for the first tent covering and for the curtain of the Most Holy Place. The motifs that were to be embroidered onto the other curtains are not specified.