

## The key term עֶפֹד *ēpōd* “ephod” in its different contexts

*Notes for translators. Peter Schmidt. 2023*

HALOT classifies the root עֶפֹד as denominative, and translates it ‘to fit close’.

The noun comes in the two spellings עֶפֹד *ēpōd* / עֶפֹד *ēpōd*.

The word *ēpōd* is used in the following related, but distinct ways:

### 1. most frequently, as part of the high priest’s clothes

E.g. Exod. 25:7; 28:4, 6

UBS *Realia Handbook* § 4.5 (and more under § 4.5.4.):

Next came the ephod, which was a kind of apron with its own belt and shoulder straps. Between the straps and the belt of the ephod was a jeweled breastpiece. The biblical description does not make it clear if the shoulder straps of the ephod reached all the way to the waist in the front (as shown in the illustration at the right), or if the breastpiece with its cords formed the bridge between the shoulder straps and the top of the ephod at the waist.

➤ “Apron” [German “Schürze / Schurz”] is okay, or perhaps “vest”.

### 2. a few times, a priestly apron as feature of priests in general

1SA 2:18 1SA 22:18 2SA 6:14 1CH 15:27

In these places, the *ēpōd* is always explicitly “of linen” (i.e., a simpler piece of clothing than the high priest’s *ēpōd*).

➤ In order for its function or significance to be communicated, I suggest “priestly apron (of linen)”.

1Chr. 15:27 reads:

Now David was clothed with a robe of fine linen with all the Levites who were carrying the ark, and the singers, and Chenaniah the leader of the singing with the singers. David also wore an ephod of linen.

Because the two pieces of clothing are distinguished, it is probably not enough to think of the *ēpōd* itself simply as a “priestly garment”; rather, it seems it was worn on top of, or in addition to, the regular clothing. So, the meaning ‘apron’ fits in these places as well.

### 3. a priestly gear – whether a piece of clothing or just a pouch – with a focus on its use for finding out the will of God through the lots that it contains

In the high priest’s vestments, the *ēpōd* is closely associated with the “breastpiece”, which contained the holy lots. Exod. 28:28-30 (NASB) says:

... so that the breastpiece will not come loose from the ephod. ... And you shall put in the breastpiece of judgment the Urim and the Thummim ...

**It is probably this connection between the *ēpōd* and the lots that leads to the use of the word *ēpōd* for an item that contained the lots. We cannot tell for sure whether it was only a kind of pouch or container, or whether this was still attached to a garment.** Consequently, interpreters struggle to determine whether

the verb נָשָׂא *ns'* should be translated “carry” or “wear” (cf. *Handbook* on 2:28). I leave this question open here.

This usage is found in the stories that these verses are part of:

1SA 2:28 1SA 14:3 1SA 21:10[9] 1SA 23:6 1SA 23:9 1SA 30:7 1SA 30:7

### Remarks

- 1Sam. 2:28 could also be listed under no. 1 above, but I prefer to list it together with other references from 1Sam. There seems to be some discontinuity in the object that the word refers to in Exod. and in 1Sam.
- In 1Sam. 14:3, the need for having an *ēpōd* for divination is not immediately obvious, but it becomes clear in vv. 18-19, 36ff.
- Note that within the same story, *ēpōd* can be used in slightly different ways (compare 2:18 with 2:28; and 21:10[9] with 22:18).
- In 1Sam. 21:10[9], where the *ēpōd* is almost treated like a piece of furniture, perhaps it was indeed kept in a shrine. In translation, instead of “behind the *ēpōd*”, perhaps a phrasing like “behind the place where the *ēpōd* is kept” would be more natural.

### Commentaries

- UBS *Handbook* on 1Sam. 2:18:  
“It is uncertain whether the term ephod always refers to the priestly garment or whether in some instances it refers to a ritual object or an idol.”
- On 30:7:  
“The ephod involved here was not the article of clothing worn by the priest, but rather the object used in trying to find out the will of God.”
- Houtman (*Exodus*, HCOT, 2000, 3:476ff.) has eight pages of discussion. To him, the so-called solid ephod (as in Jdg, 1Sa 2:28 etc.) is an oracular instrument.
- Tsumura (*First Book of Samuel*, NICOT, 2007, 358, cf. 166) says “It contained a pocket or compartment for the Urim and Thummim”, i.e., he takes it as **the garment with the oracular instruments**. I favor this.

### Translation

- A paraphrase could be “a priestly garment with a pouch for (sacred/oracular) lots”. Or an explanatory footnote might be in order.

To be avoided is a translation that fails to convey the significance of the *ēpōd*: the priest who wore (or carried) the *ēpōd* was enabled to consult God using the lots.

Surprisingly, NET08 presents its text for 1 Samuel using the foreign word “ephod”, and without explaining it in its footnotes.

NLT07’s approach in 1 Samuel is interesting, but not inconsistent. 2:18 is solved well with “He wore a linen garment like that of a priest”, plus a footnote mentioning “ephod”. 2:28 has the phrase “to wear the priestly vest”, which shows again a rendering fitting the context. But then, 14:3 introduces the loan word “ephod” by means of an apposition (“who was wearing the ephod, the priestly vest”). I doubt this is enough for the reader to understand what this object is needed for when he comes to 21:9[10] with the phrase “behind the ephod” and 23:6 with the clause “he brought the ephod”.

### 4. in the context of idolatry: as in no. 3 – or an idol

JDG 8:27

JDG 17:5 JDG 18:14 JDG 18:17 JDG 18:18 JDG 18:20

HOS 3:4

In Judg. 8:27, it seems that the object is not only a garment (& pouch for lots), but a whole **idol, perhaps dressed with such a garment (& pouch for lots)?**

The *Realia Handbook* (§ 4.5.4.) discusses the verse and concludes:

It seems best, then, to decide between “idol/image/statue” and “priestly apron”; or, if “ephod” is kept, to include a footnote indicating the possible meanings. The TOB note on this verse is a good model: “The *ephod* may designate here either a receptacle for the sacred lots, used for divination, or the statue of a god.”

The same applies to the other verses listed above: “idol” could work, but *ēpōd* could also be understood as in no. 3, because idols are mentioned *in addition* to it.

The *ēpōd* might have been used in connection with the *tārāpîm*, and that might be comparable to how it was used together with the ark in 1Sam. 14:18-19.

For Judg. 17:5ff., the UBS *Handbook* also entertains the possibility that the *ēpōd* was the priestly garment that Micah’s son [or later the Levite] wore.

##### 5. Then there is the form אֶפְדָּה <sup>a</sup>*puddāh*.

References: EXO 28:8 EXO 39:5 ISA 30:22.

We first find this problematic word in Exod. 28:8:

וְחָשַׁב אֶפְדָּתוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו כְּמַעֲשֵׂהוּ מִמְּנוּ יִהְיֶה

##### Literature

Houtman (3:477) explains on the above verse:

אֶפְדָּה is regarded as a feminine equivalent of אֶפֶד (e.g. *BDB*), or as infinitive (of אָפַד [denominative verb of אֶפֶד], ‘to put on the ephod’ [29:5; Lev. 8:7], with the meaning ‘Anlegen des Efod [putting on of the *ēpōd*, PS]’ (Meyer §65.1a; *Ges.*<sup>18</sup>). In Isa. 30:22 אֶפֶד is usually interpreted as a covering of precious metal on the wooden or metal core of an idol. Commentators on אֶפֶד often have a different view.

- Houtman himself translates the word “for putting it on”.
- This matches what we find in RSV. It says:  
“And the skilfully woven band upon it, to gird it on, shall be of the same workmanship and materials.”
- The UBS *Handbook* comments:  
“**And the skilfully woven band upon it** is literally “and a waistband which [is] upon it.” The word for “waistband” is related to the word translated as **skilfully** in describing the embroidered cherubim woven into the tabernacle fabric. (See the comment at 26.1.) So it was not to be just an ordinary **band**, but a “decorated band” (NRSV), an “embroidered belt” (NAB), or “a finely woven belt” (TEV). To gird it on is the verb form of the word for ephod, which means “to put on tightly.” (See the comment at verse 6.)”
- Cassuto (1951/1967, p. 374) translates “the band of its attachment”, and comments: “that is, the girdle of the ephod that attaches it to the priest’s body ...”.
- Jacob (*Das Buch Exodus*, 1940 / Calw 1997) calls the חָשַׁב אֶפְדָּתוֹ a “Gurtband” [≈ ‘strap-band’]. This also seems to be based on אֶפְדָּתוֹ expressing a function, not an item: “a band to strap [the *ēpōd*]”, not “the band *of* the *ēpōd*”.

By contrast, others take <sup>a</sup>*puddāh* as a noun. Among these are:

- Davidson (*Analytical Lexicon*, 1848/1991).
- The UBS *Realia Handbook* does not discuss the form <sup>a</sup>*puddāh* in particular, but from its listing of references (on p. 263) and its comment on Exod. 28:8; 39:5 (on p. 264) it becomes clear that it makes no distinction to *ēpōd*.
- Durham (WBC, 1987) translates “The elaborate belt of the Ephod”, that is, he as well simply takes the word as meaning the same as *ēpōd*.

## Evaluation

What makes the equation with *ēpōd* questionable is the suffix. After vv. 6-7, which talked about the *ēpōd* already, I would expect *either* “the band of the *ēpōd*”, or “the band of it”, but not “the band of its *ēpōd*” – all the more as “it” appears once more in the following phrase אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו *ʾašer ʿalāyw*.

Therefore, I prefer “the band **for putting it on / attaching it** [“it” being the *ēpōd*]”.

## Translation

Either *ʾaḥḥāh* simply is another form of the noun meaning *ēpōd*.

E.g. NET08: The artistically woven waistband of the ephod that is on it

Or, preferably, *ʾaḥḥāh* is, in one way or another, understood to express the action of “putting on”.

E.g. RSV: The skilfully woven band upon it, to gird it on

E.g. NASB: The skillfully woven band of its overlay[?]

Partly due to the additional phrase אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו *ʾašer ʿalāyw* ‘which is on it’, it is sometimes difficult to see which element in a certain version accounts for which element of the Hebrew text.

E.g. GNTD: A finely woven belt ... is to be attached to the ephod

Several English versions seem to drop the word *ʾaḥḥāh* as redundant.

E.g. NRSV: The decorated band on it

E.g. ESV: And the skillfully woven band on it

## Isaiah 30:22

There, the UBS *Handbook* takes *ʾaḥḥāh* as (gold-)plated / covered (with gold) – as do most versions. The common idea with the above usage in Exodus seems to be the “putting on”. But in contrast to the two places in Exodus discussed above, here the analysis as a noun seems the easier solution. It is not evident why a rendering with “ephod” in the sense of a garment (cf. no. 1.-3. above) is not considered in the UBS *Handbook*. NICOT and WBC do not explain the word either. NIDOTTE (no. 679 אֶפֶד, § 1. / 1:475-476) addresses the issue. Jenson notes:

In Isa 30:22 “the ephod of (אֶפֶדְתָּ) your idol of gold” (NIV, “your images covered with gold”) is parallel to “your silver-covered idols” (NIV, “your idols overlaid with silver”), and this may refer to a garment after the Mesopotamian pattern.

It would then be the idol that is of gold, not its covering.