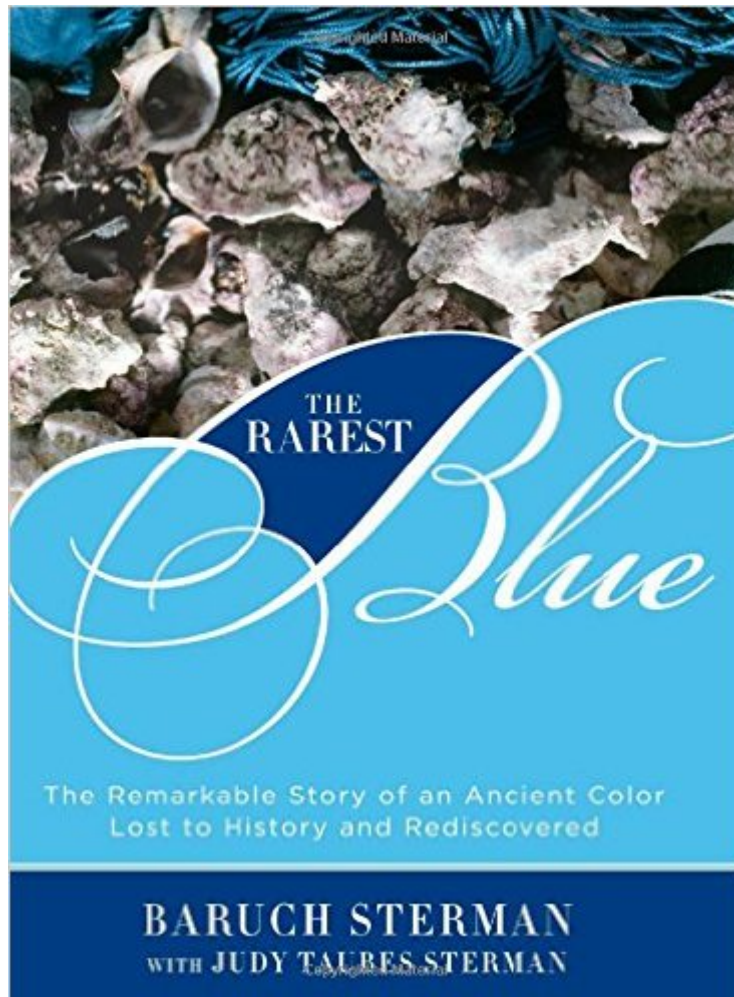


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# Rarest Blue: The Remarkable Story Of An Ancient Color Lost To History And Rediscovered



## Synopsis

For centuries, dyed fabrics ranked among the most expensive objects of the ancient Mediterranean world, fetching up to 20 times their weight in gold. Huge fortunes were made from and lost to them, and battles were fought over control of the industry. The few who knew the dyes' complex secrets carefully guarded the valuable knowledge. The Rarest Blue tells the amazing story of tekhelet, or hyacinth blue, the elusive sky-blue dye mentioned 50 times in the Hebrew Bible. The Minoans discovered it; the Phoenicians stole the technique; Cleopatra adored it; and Jews "obeying a Biblical commandment to affix a single thread of the radiant color to the corner of their garments" risked their lives for it. But with the fall of the Roman Empire, the technique was lost to the ages. Then, in the nineteenth century, a marine biologist saw a fisherman smearing his shirt with snail guts, marveling as the yellow stains turned sky blue. But what was the secret? At the same time, a Hasidic master obsessed with reviving the ancient tradition posited that the source wasn't a snail at all but a squid. Bitter fighting ensued until another rabbi discovered that one of them was wrong "but had an unscrupulous chemist deliberately deceived him? Baruch Sterman brilliantly recounts the complete, amazing story of this sacred dye that changed the color of history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As a scientist who has long been fascinated by the story of tekhelet (Tyrian Blue), I found this book to be a masterpiece. The authors deftly combine biblical, ancient, and modern history; scholarly detective work; and a bit of easily understandable chemistry into an engaging and well-told tale of

ancient knowledge lost and re-discovered. I have ordered extra copies for my rabbi, a relative who is an industrial chemist, and a good friend who loves detective stories. How many books could be such a perfect gift for people with such a wide range of backgrounds and interests? Bravo!

How often does one find a book, ostensibly about an esoteric and neglected corner of history and science, that reads like a thriller, and outshines the best of detective novels? Truth is indeed stranger than fiction, and infinitely more interesting! Baruch and Judy Sterman tell the story of "Tekhelet" the rare and precious blue dye obtained in ancient times by a special and secret process from unique species of Mediterranean snails. The dye was so beautiful and expensive, that it was reserved from its first use, for royalty and for sacred purposes. Jewish tradition from the Bible onwards democratized and thereby revolutionized the use of tekhelet, requiring every Jew to wear this color in a string attached to the hem of his garment. The history of Tekhelet in ancient times is fascinating enough, and reads like an Indiana Jones adventure; the tragic loss of knowledge about, and use of, Tekhelet for over 1200 years is tragic and poignant; but most exciting is the story of the rediscovery of this rarest blue over the past 150 years, a true tale that rivals science fiction and is chock full of observations on human nature, from follies to triumphs. The Stermans and their colleagues played a major role in this rediscovery and renewal; their personal story is the fitting culmination to a saga that began 3500 years ago. The closing chapters on the science behind the color blue, and the emotional and philosophic symbolic meanings of blue, were just as fascinating to me. I cannot recommend this book enough!! Anyone with the slightest interest in the biblical heritage, in its material, but especially spiritual aspect, should buy and read this book.

I always enjoy reading books about color, like *Mauve* or *A Perfect Red*, so when a friend gave me a copy of *The Rarest Blue* I had a general idea of what to expect. My expectations were more than met. It is a history of the ancient art of shellfish dyeing that produced the famous Tyrian blue and Biblical blue. It also contains surprisingly readable descriptions of the weird biology of murex snails, the chemistry of dyeing, and the physics of color. The book is crammed with all kinds of historical and psychological information, as well as some intriguing characters who played a role in the cultivation of blue as a usable color. Blue, it turns out, is really a very rare color in nature, though it is now found everywhere. The modern rediscovery of the ancient techniques of dyeing and their current application to Jewish religious practices is a fascinating story in its own right. Altogether a rich and rewarding book.

Fascinating study of color hitherto unknown to me. The book is very readable and not at all pedantic or boring. It's a kind of adventure for those of us who cannot go adventuring! I came to this book almost accidentally and have been enchanted by this story ever since. I do recommend this for the reader who can no longer stand the run of the mill books taking over the marketplace these days. The reader who wants the pleasure of learning, along with the joys of reading.

The Rarest Blue covers the rediscovery of "tekhelet", an ancient sky-blue colorfast dye (a dye that chemically bonds to the fabric so it never fades). "Tzitzit," fringes tied on the corners of a four-cornered garment, are typically worn by observant Jews. In ancient days, they contained a single blue thread. But, after being outlawed by Romans (who wanted to reserve this rare dye for nobles), the art and source of the blue was lost. The dye has been described in ancient writings as coming from a snail, indistinguishable from rocks, that has a tiny yellow gland that can be transformed into this rare dye. Finally, the snail and dye were found...only to turn purple. But a group of sleuths discovered that the dye turned purple because the researchers were doing their work inside. Expose the dye to sunlight, and it transforms into a brilliant sky blue! This is one of many mini-discoveries that make up the remarkable journey, bringing back a tradition hidden for 2,000 years. If you are looking for any knowledge about these ritual fringes (or those who wear a tallit in synagogue), this is a fascinating read! This book reads like an adventure story and is a wonderful combination of mystery, history, science, and religion.

This is an interesting book. But it does not hold the interest like "Perfect Red" which is another world history book on color. This book is scattered and choppy. Normally I read a book in a sitting but this is one I will have to go back too in order to complete.

I'm not sure if this book was more about the story of Tekhelet, the sky blue strings attached to the corners of the Jewish prayer shawl, or the Murex trunculus, the marine snail that allows us to dye this beautiful, colorfast blue. Both are interesting topics, however, and I enjoyed reading through the book. By reading this book, you'll learn a lot about the dyeing process itself and the use of it throughout history, the physics of light and color, the Bible's requirement of a single thread of tekhelet tied to the fringes or corners of the Jewish tzitzit or prayer shawl, and the author's very thorough explanation of the shawl and the meaning of these colorful blue strings. It was not what I was expecting, but the book came through in a lot of good ways. You have to like reading to finish this book, but I recommend sticking with it because you'll come away with a lot of new information

and understanding about blue and about this apparently small but very important factor of Jewish tradition.

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