

Clothing, Conformity, and Power: Garment Imagery in the Book of Esther

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Abstract

Recent scholarship has shown a burgeoning interest in the narrative functions and implications of references to dress and adornment in the Hebrew Bible. Yet the many references to the various clothing items and associated acts of dressing and undressing in the book of Esther have been less explored. In fact, the book of Esther weaves a complex tapestry of garment imagery, and untangling this tapestry is essential to properly interpreting this text. Through dress, characters can communicate their conformity to certain conventional expectations, affecting the ways in which other characters relate and behave towards them. Characters can utilize dress to express their protest, or conversely hide their true intentions. Crucially, differences in clothing develop distinctions between the power and status of the various characters. Clothing therefore has discrete and important functions in the book of Esther, providing new access to understanding characterisation and plot.

Keywords

Book of Esther – Gen 37–50 – Deuteronomistic History – clothing and adornment – royalty – gender – power

Recent scholarship has shown a burgeoning interest in the narrative functions and implications of references to dress and adornment in the Hebrew Bible.¹ In particular, a number of scholars have demonstrated the significance of clothing as an important motif in the Joseph story, Gen 37–50.² On the other hand, the many references to the various clothing items and associated acts of dressing and undressing in the book of Esther have been less explored³—despite the connections that exist between the stories of Esther and Joseph more generally⁴ and, as this essay will demonstrate, between the clothing imagery shared between Esther and Joseph in particular. In fact, the imagery of clothing in the book of Esther presupposes that of the Joseph story, as well as a variety of other texts concerning clothing and kingship in the Hebrew Bible, transforming and intensifying this imagery. As such, the book of Esther weaves a complex tapestry of garment imagery, and untangling this tapestry is essential to properly interpreting the text. Clothing has discrete and important functions in the book of Esther, with implications for understanding the power, status, and intentions of its various characters and their world.

These insights are made possible by drawing upon recent research into dress and adornment from a sociological perspective: in this essay, we propose to understand the body as a site of social, cultural, and sexual communication. This is indebted to the pioneering work of Heather McKay, who across a series of articles has provided a perspective on biblical conceptions of the body through the lens of social theory.⁵ McKay has mapped the development of approaches to clothing and the clothed body, from considering merely the functional aspects of dress as a means of insulation and protection, through more recent perspectives concerned with dress as an embodied activity embedded within social relations. The utilization of items of dress is the means by which bodies are made social, the “social skin” which models social boundaries between an individual actor and the other actors around her.⁶ Our

1 Two collections of essays have recently been published: Berner et al., eds., *Clothing*; and Finitis, ed., *Dress*. For recent monographs on clothing in the Hebrew Bible, see Bender, *Sprache*; Kersken, *Töchter*; Staubli, *Kleider*; Quick, *Dress*.

2 See Matthews, “Anthropology”; Huddelstun, “Divestiture”; Ede, “Garment.”

3 Two exceptions include Siebert-Hommes, “On the Third Day,” who explores the function of clothing as a plot device; and Spoelstra, “Vestments,” who argues that Mordecai’s clothing links the character to both royal and religious contexts. Cosmetics in the book of Esther have been treated by Quick, “Decorated Women.”

4 The story of Joseph and the book of Esther, alongside Dan 2–6 and the book of Tobit, are all examples of the genre of the “court tale,” in which a Jewish hero finds success in the court of a foreign king. On the relationship between Gen 37–50 and the book of Esther, see Gan, “Book”; Humphreys, “Life-Style”; Meinhold, “Gattung I”; idem, “Gattung II.”

5 See McKay, “Discourse”; idem, “Body”; idem, “Clothing.”

6 See Turner, “Social Skin.”

social skin requires our attention, whether unconscious or otherwise, to the norms and expectations of these other actors within any particular social setting. There are “right” and “wrong” ways of being in any given social space—and hence right and wrong ways of appearing, dressing, and adorning oneself. Dress is therefore an effective means of non-verbal communication, but one which at the same time is controlled and dictated through normative social values.⁷ To transgress these values is to communicate something specific about one’s social or sexual status. As McKay has argued, dress must be understood as a “declaratory interface.”⁸ When we read ancient texts, we must therefore pay close attention to the various implications of the sartorial customs and sumptuary laws described therein. With this new theoretical orientation to the language of dress, we gain crucial insights into the actions and interactions of biblical characters—with significant implications for understanding the book of Esther.

1 Clothing and Conformity

In fact, the narrative chain of events recounted in the book of Esther is set off due to sartorial behaviours. King Ahasuerus wishes to display his conspicuous consumption for those assembled at his royal court: all the “riches of his royal glory and the splendour of his majestic greatness” (1:4). Feeling the effects of his good hospitality,⁹ the king decides to display a further item at his disposal which is demonstrative of his wealth and high status: his wife, Queen Vashti:

He ordered Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zathar and Carcas, the seven eunuchs who attended him, to bring Queen Vashti into the king’s presence wearing her royal crown. He wanted to show the people and the officials her beauty, for she was very attractive (1:10–11).¹⁰

The king wishes his wife to appear before his royal court in a particular item of dress: a כתר מלכות, a “royal crown.” The term כתר, here “crown,” is only found in the Hebrew Bible in the book of Esther (1:11; 2:17; 6:8). Context confirms that it is an item of headwear (“... so he placed the כתר מלכות on her head ...”; 2:17). In

7 See Arthur, “Dress.”

8 McKay, “Body,” 85.

9 The Hebrew reads “the heart of the king was good with the wine” (1:10).

10 English translations are based on the NET, with alterations where necessary. Verse enumeration follows the Hebrew.

Rabbinic Hebrew, the term commonly describes crowns (B. Men. 29b; B. Shab. 29a,b). Despite this, a number of modern translations of the book of Esther prefer to render the term alternatively as “turban” or even “diadem.”¹¹ Alison Salvesen connects the noun to the Hebrew root כתר, “to surround,” suggesting that this was an item which required tying “rather than a crown in the usual sense of the word.”¹² As such, “turban” might be a more appropriate rendering of the term, implying some sort of fabric headwear. Nevertheless, as Salvesen notes, the Hebrew term is related to the Greek *κίθαρις/κίταρις*, used by classical authors to describe the headgear worn by Persian kings in the Achaemenid period.¹³ In the book of Esther, the term is qualified by מלכות, which occurs with an adjectival nuance, so “royal.” As such, we have favoured the traditional rendering “crown” in order to focalize the royal implications of the item: this is explicitly an item of royal dress, and therefore an item indicative of royal status.

In the history of interpretation, Ahasuerus’s request has been understood as a desire that Vashti appear wearing *only* this item of royal headgear.¹⁴ Nevertheless, this is not stated explicitly in the Hebrew text. Instead, the king wishes his wife to don an item demonstrative of her royal status in order to show the people of his court that she was “good in appearance” (1:11). The lexeme טוב has a wide application in Biblical Hebrew and can refer to spiritual or moral qualities as well as to physical characteristics. In the LXX, the translators tend to supply the word *καλός*, “beauty,” for טוב only when it is in construct with a defining phrase, either “in form” (תאר) or “in appearance” (מראה), and thus explicitly referring to a physical quality.¹⁵ Here in the book of Esther, Vashti is said to be טוב “in appearance” and in conjunction with the noun יפי, “beautiful”: the term must relate to her external physical qualities. Consequently, while he may not wish his wife to parade nude in front of his royal court, Ahasuerus’s motivations in displaying Vashti and her royal crown define her value entirely in relation to her ability to please observers through her physical appearance and attire. He is setting up certain standards and expectations with regards to Vashti’s dress, and asking her to heed them in full view of the watching courtiers.

Yet Vashti refuses the king’s request (1:12). In so doing, she fails to conform to his conventional expectations in how she should dress and adorn herself.

11 NET renders the term “turban”; JPS prefers “diadem.”

12 Salvesen, “כתר,” 39.

13 See Salvesen, “כתר,” 35.

14 This interpretation is common in rabbinic literature. See Esth Rab. 3:13–14; Targum Sheni 1:10–11; Targum Rishon 1:10–11; B. Meg. 12b.

15 See Konstan, *Beauty*, 140.

In the Hebrew Bible, as in many cultures around the world, female dress and appearance are frequently subject to policing and control, whether explicitly in the case of sumptuary laws¹⁶ or implicitly in the case of certain normative social values which must nevertheless be adhered to.¹⁷ Vashti's failure to comply challenges Ahasuerus's royal, male prerogative to dictate conventions of female dress. As such, it issues a challenge to the very social political order, all the more so since the male characters in the world of the story become concerned that the queen's non-conformity to her husband's desires would spread to all of the women of the land (1:17). It thus becomes a matter of state, and the king accordingly confers with "all those who were proficient in laws and legalities" (1:13). Vashti is to be deposed, and another found who may be more willing to conform to conventional male expectations of dress and adornment (1:19). Ultimately, because she has failed to don her "royal crown," Vashti's very existence as a royal woman is also denied to her.

The king appoints officers to gather all of the attractive young women of the citadel together, legislating that these women should be provided with cosmetics (2:3).¹⁸ From these young women, the king will choose whomever he finds most attractive (2:4).¹⁹ Contra the NET translation, the women are not to be gifted "whatever cosmetics they desire." The application of these cosmetics is not a gift for the benefit of the women, but rather a requirement which is placed upon them: the choice of the term דָּת, "law," to describe the demand for the cosmetic treatments indicates the seriousness with which they were

16 The Hebrew Bible provides a number of legislative commands concerning clothing. Cross-dressing is prohibited (Deut 22:5), while the Israelites are commanded to make tassels upon the corners of their garments (Num 15:39; Deut 22:12). The wearing of fabrics made from mixed material is forbidden (Deut 22:11; Lev 19:19). The *Soṭah* ritual (Num 5:11–31) details a lengthy procedure for a woman suspected of adultery, including the removal of her veil (v. 18).

17 For example, while there is no legal requirement for women to veil in biblical literature, it is probable that Israelite women would have been expected to wear some sort of head covering. Having unbound or uncovered hair was likely socially stigmatizing as a woman accused of adultery would have her veil removed as part of a ritual in order to establish her innocence or guilt (Num 5:18; cf. TH Susanna 32). Similarly, the mourning period seems to have been marked by the wearing of distinctive garments (Gen 38:14; 2 Sam 14:2; Jdt 8:5), although there is no paralleled legislative command to do so in the Torah.

18 The term *תמרוק* occurs only in the book of Esther (2:3, 9, 12). It is related to the root *מרק*, "to polish, burnish, scour," various forms of which are used elsewhere to describe perfumed ointments, for example *מרקחים*, "perfumes," in Song 5:13; as well as the process of beautification itself, so *מרוקים* in Esth 2:12.

19 Literally, "whoever is good in the eyes of the king." Given that the king is choosing from women who are good "in appearance" (2:3) and that their appearance is to be enhanced through the application of cosmetics, this must refer to their outward beauty.

regarded (2:12). This is a “law for women” required by men “and not a law prescribed by the women themselves.”²⁰ Thus the young women of the king’s harem are required to undergo a twelve-month beauty treatment before being presented to the king:

Six months with oil of myrrh,²¹ and six months with balsam²² and various cosmetics used by women. Then the woman would go to the king in the following way: whatever she asked for would be provided for her to take with her from the harem to the royal palace. In the evening she went, and in the morning she returned to a separate part of the harem, to the authority of Shaashgaz the king’s eunuch who was overseeing the concubines. She would not go back to the king unless the king was pleased with her and she was requested by name (2:12–14).

The sexual implications of the transaction are explicit: the virgin is to “go to” the king, a euphemism in the Hebrew Bible for sexual activity.²³ After her evening in the king’s company she does not return to the residence of the virgins, but to a second harem—unless she has found special favour in the eyes of the king. And this is the case with Esther. Although the narrator tells us that Esther was already “beautiful of form and good in appearance” (2:7), it is also the case that Esther enhances her beauty through the application of cosmetics. In fact, because she has found special favour in the eyes of Hegai, who has authority over the royal harem, Esther is provided with additional cosmetics (2:9). By applying these cosmetics, Esther demonstrates her willingness to conform to the expectations placed upon her: she willingly adheres to the *תורה*, “law,” required of the women to dress and appear in a certain way. Thus Esther meets approval “in the eyes” of all of those who saw her (2:15): the narrative is explicit that it is her external appearance that is essential in Esther’s selection by the king. But it is not just a beautiful appearance which is key in this context, but rather the necessity that Esther conform and, crucially, be *seen* to be conforming to the conventional male expectations of dress and

20 De Troyer, “Oriental,” 52.

21 Myrrh occurs frequently in the Song of Songs as an erotic motif (1:13; 3:6; 4:6, 14; 5:1, 5, 13). In Prov 7:17, the Strange Woman perfumes her bed with myrrh in order to allure unsuspecting male youths into committing adultery.

22 Like myrrh, balsam is utilized in the Song in erotic contexts (4:10, 14, 16; 5:1, 13; 6:2; 8:14). These scents thus have highly erotic implications: the women are being instructed to utilize cosmetic treatments which enhance their sexual allure.

23 See, e.g., Gen 16:2; 29:21, 23; 30:4; 38:2; Judg 16:1; 2 Sam 11:4; 12:24; 16:21–22.

adornment.²⁴ In this way, she communicates that—contra Vashti—she will be an obedient and compliant queen. Consequently, the king places a כתר מלכות, a “royal crown,” upon her head (2:17). The very item which Vashti refused to don now becomes the symbol of Esther’s change in fortune—a change which is only made possible because of her willingness to conform to wearing it in the first place. Through clothing, Vashti and Esther illustrate their willingness to conform or not conform to conventional male expectations—and this is crucial for how they are treated by the male characters around them.

2 Clothing and Protest

Another character that utilizes the communicative potential of clothing is Mordecai. Mordecai refuses to pay homage to Haman, the highest official of the king’s court, leading to Haman’s vendetta against the Jews of Susa (3:2–5). Haman coerces the king to issue an edict to kill Susa’s Jewish population, and the king agrees, signalled by his gifting of his signet ring to Haman (3:10). Upon hearing this:

Mordecai tore his garments and put on sackcloth and ashes. He went out into the city, crying in a loud and bitter voice. But he went no further than the king’s gate, for no one was permitted to enter the king’s gate clothed in sackcloth (4:1–2).

Biblical texts attest to a number of formalized responses to death: biblical mourners are variously described as tearing out their hair, striking parts of their bodies, sitting upon ashes, wailing, and fasting.²⁵ Most significantly, biblical mourners are described as tearing their clothing as well as donning sackcloth.²⁶ While these rituals are employed in the context of mourning the dead, the same vocabulary and actions are also employed in reaction to or in opposition of disaster.²⁷ These actions are often understood as symbolizing the humility of the mourner, as a mark of their self-abasement, while at the same

24 And the narrative elsewhere notes that Esther behaves according to the instructions of her male relatives (2:20).

25 See, e.g., Gen 37:34; Lev 19:28; 21:5, 10; Deut 14:1; Isa 15:2; 32:12; Jer 16:6; 31:19; 41:5; Hos 7:14; Nah 2:8; Joel 1:8; Job 1:20; Jdt 4:11–12.

26 See, e.g., 1 Kgs 20:31–32; 21:27–29; 2 Kgs 5:7–8; 6:30; 18:37; 19:1–2; 22:11, 19. According to Melanie Köhlmoos (“Tearing”), the wearing of sackcloth is the most pervasive biblical ritual of mourning.

27 See Olyan, *Mourning*, 19–27.

time allowing the individual to express their feelings of grief and despair.²⁸ But by tearing their clothes or changing into sackcloth, by beating their skin or pulling out their hair, by rubbing themselves with dust, these mourners utilize their bodies to mimic and enact the transformation and fragmentation that the body experiences after death. As Francesca Stavrakopoulou has argued, these are acts of ritual identification.²⁹ Recently, David Lambert has provided a brilliant treatment of acts of repentance in biblical literature. We have suggested that mourning rituals are essentially acts of ritual identification. Lambert emphasizes that they are also communicative acts, encoding suffering on the body: “it uses the body as a canvas upon which to represent that suffering, to externalize a state that, in another cultural milieu, might remain private.”³⁰ As visible, audible acts, mourning rituals are meant to be seen and heard by someone: they manifest distress as an appeal to the observer.³¹ Accordingly, the controlled representation of bodily fragmentation in acts of mourning had an apotropaic function. These actions manifest the performer’s anxiety concerning the dangers of death and other calamities, and hence appeal for protection from these external threats. They are thus highly efficacious ritual behaviours.

This recognition of the ritual efficacy of these mourning activities is important for understanding clothing manipulation in the book of Esther, not just as a mark of despair, but as something meant to be ritually effective. Mordecai is not just manifesting his distress or despair—he is issuing a petition or plea to those around him. Clothing is being utilized in an act of protest. This protest is then aided by the larger community, who immediately react to Mordecai’s change of clothing, joining him in these ritual behaviours, and putting on sackcloth and ashes themselves (4:3). Esther recognizes the dangerous sociopolitical implications to these actions and responds immediately: “she sent garments for Mordecai to put on so that he could remove his sackcloth” (4:4). But Mordecai refuses and ultimately Esther answers his plea, issuing an entreaty to the king to save her people (4:15–16). While Mordecai does not directly petition the king himself, sometimes actions speak louder than words. Mordecai’s body becomes the canvas through which the dangers facing his community are given external voice. Mordecai’s ritually effective clothing thus manifests these dangers, and through it he compels Esther to act.

28 See Kutsch, “Trauerbräuche.”

29 See Stavrakopoulou, “Huldah,” 289.

30 Lambert, *Repentance*, 16.

31 See Lambert, *Repentance*, 41.

3 Clothing and Disguise

Clothing is also essential for understanding the actions and intentions of Mordecai's adversary, Haman. Aside from the signet ring which he receives from the king, and in spite of his desire to wear particular items of clothing that we will explore in more detail below, Haman is described as wearing only one other item of clothing in the course of the narrative. The king decides to honour Mordecai, and Haman is furious:

Then Mordecai again sat at the king's gate, while Haman hurried away to his home, mournful and with a veil over his head (6:12).

Haman is described as "mournful," using the adjective **אבל**, which is characteristic of mourning, grief and lament in the Hebrew Bible.³² This word expresses Haman's upset at the turn of events. He is also described as "covering his head," with the connotation that he is veiled. However, this is not part of his mourning behaviour: elsewhere headgear is not connected to ritual acts of mourning. In fact, in Lev 10:6 priests are prohibited from mourning procedures, including tearing their clothing but also "removing their headwear," with the implication that the head would normally be uncovered during the state of mourning.³³ Similarly, Tamar covers herself with a veil only after changing from her widow's garments (Gen 38:14). Haman's covered head does not therefore relate to a ritualized response to mourning. Unlike Mordecai who used clothing to make explicit his implicit feelings about Ahasuerus's decree, something else is going on with Haman's veil.

Several biblical characters are described as wearing a veil in the Hebrew Bible. As we have seen, Tamar covers herself with a veil—and she was subsequently mistaken for a prostitute (Gen 38:14–16). Some commentators therefore suppose that the veil in this story functions as part of the costume of the

32 See, e.g., Gen 37:35; Isa 57:18; 61:2–3; Ps 35:14; Job 29:25; Lam 1:4.

33 The text commands "do not free your heads." This can be interpreted as relating to the removal of the priestly headgear, where the High Priest wears a **מִצְנֶפֶת** and regular priests wear a **מִגְבָּעָה** (Exod 28:4, 40). Alternatively, the parallel command in Lev 21:10 ties this prohibition to the anointing of the head with oil rather than the donning of a turban or diadem. Consequently, the NET translation of the verse is "do not dishevel the hair of your heads," with the implication that having unkempt hair may have been a ritualized expression of mourning. However, while the Hebrew Bible describes a number of ritual procedures for hair in the context of mourning, these relate to the removal of hair rather than grooming, and therefore we prefer to interpret Lev 10:6 according to the plain sense of the verse.

prostitute.³⁴ In fact, veiling was widespread throughout the ancient Near East.³⁵ Married and unmarried women, prostitutes and otherwise, might wear a veil, and this is reflected in biblical literature.³⁶ So Tamar's veil does not indicate that she is a prostitute. Instead, the veil functions to disguise her face.³⁷ In the Song of Songs, veils wrap around the face, leaving only the eyes and perhaps part of the cheeks exposed (4:1; 6:7). In Job 24:15, the adulterer conceals his identity with a covering of the face. Veils, then, can be utilized as part of a disguise, covering the face of the wearer. Haman's clothing thus fulfils the opposite function of Mordecai's. Whereas Mordecai used clothing to manifest his true feelings and intentions in a ritually effective protest, Haman uses clothing to cover them up. Though he is mournful about the king's actions, he hides these feelings by covering his face. Instead of speaking openly, he continues to plot behind the scenes. Haman's covered face reveals that he is a slippery character that cannot be trusted. Clothing is thus an important plot device for characterisation in the book of Esther.

4 Clothing, Protest, and Disguise: Esther's Hidden Nonconformity

Earlier we noted Esther's willingness to conform to the conventional male expectations of dress that were placed upon her, donning cosmetics and consequently being gifted with the very crown that Vashti had refused to wear. Yet the acceptance of these expectations in fact affords Esther with the power to subvert the patriarchal system, petitioning the king to act in favour of her people. Indeed, prior to visiting the king to make her request, Esther once again puts on her "royal attire" (5:1). This is sometimes taken to refer to a particularly appealing outfit, with the implication that Esther will utilize seduction in order to get her way.³⁸ This likely governs the Greek translation of the verse, which interprets Esther's clothing in a metaphorical sense: Esther is *καὶ περιεβάλετο*

34 See Brenner, *Woman*, 82.

35 See van der Toorn, "Significance," 328.

36 Thus in Gen 24:65 Rebekah covers herself with a veil immediately prior to meeting her new husband. A married woman accused of adultery would have her veil removed as part of a ritual in order to establish her innocence or guilt (Num 5:18).

37 It is likely Tamar's spatial location, rather than her veil, which implied that she was a prostitute. Tamar stations herself at the city gates, a location where prostitutes sold their wares in the ancient Near East. In Prov 7:6–23, the Strange Woman engages in seduction in the public street. In Josh 2:15, the prostitute Rahab actually lives inside the city-walls. See Quick, *Dress*, 99–100.

38 This was suggested already in antiquity by Clement of Alexandria, who noted that Esther utilized ornamentation "without blame" (*Christ the Educator* 3.2.12). For a modern

τὴν δόξαν αὐτῆς, “clothed in glory,” rather than in any alluring or appealing garments.³⁹ But rather than seduction, we might relate Esther’s change of clothes to a further attempt to demonstrate her willingness to conform to the sartorial expectations that the king’s first wife had refused. While Vashti would not don a royal crown, Esther will put on “royalty” itself before appearing before the king.⁴⁰ This queen is willing to dress the part. And because her appearance therefore finds favour “in the eyes of the king” (5:2, 8), he decides to grant her request.

By conforming to male expectations in dress, then, Esther is actually afforded a power to affect a change in the position of her people. We might argue that, like Haman, Esther is also utilizing clothing as a disguise. Her royal crown and attire announce to her husband her willingness to conform to his whims and desires, and so he responds positively to her, granting her request. But her request to save her people betrays her true intention: though dressed as Esther in her royal Persian garb, underneath it she was in fact Hadassah after all. While she may not cover her face in disguise like Haman, her clothing similarly disguises her intentions. And though more covertly than Mordecai in his clothes of mourning, Esther similarly utilizes clothing in a defiant act. Initially, Esther failed to join her relative in his dangerous protest. She sends him new garments, but he refuses to change his clothes (4:4), and Esther is therefore persuaded to act, finally perceiving the importance of Mordecai’s unusual attire and hence the dangers facing her community. She may not be able to publicly join in with Mordecai and don sackcloth herself, but the covert potential of Esther’s sartorial behaviours are what allow her to confront these dangers. Esther, through her sartorial choices, is just as slippery and defiant a character as her male counterparts.

interpretation of Esther’s royal attire as a dressy or seductive outfit, see Bechtel, *Esther*, 52, who suggests that Esther “has taken pains” with her appearance.

- 39 The idea of being “clothed in glory” relates to the potential of clothing as a metaphor to describe being overwhelmed or encompassed by a particular psychic or somatic state. See Waldman, “Imagery”; Burton, “Robed.” This apparent distaste for the utilization of beauty and seduction in the story of Esther is characteristic of the Greek translations of the book. In the Alpha Text of Esther, Esther’s cosmetic treatments are eliminated. Addition C has Esther abandon her cosmetics; instead “every part that she loved to adorn she covered with her tangled hair” (14:2).
- 40 The syntax of Hebrew *וּתְלַבֵּשׁ אֶסְתֵּר מַלְכוּת*, literally “and Esther put on royalty,” where *מַלְכוּת* is not qualified by a clothing item, is unusual. Arguably, it is this syntactic difficulty which allowed the Greek translator of the book of Esther to creatively rework the verse in favour of removing any possibility that Esther had dressed provocatively.

5 Clothing and Power

In fact, Esther's similarity to Haman in terms of her disguise and slippery motives ultimately reflects their similar levels of power—or lack of power—towards the end of the tale. The clothing and adornment both Haman and Esther end up wearing echo this idea. The only other item Haman is explicitly described as wearing is Ahasuerus's signet ring (3:10, 12). This is not a gift from the king, but rather relates to the potential of items of royal insignia to manifest the king in legal settings and so ratify the law. The king's signet ring has and can confer power and authority, and hence a law sealed by the personal ring of the king can stand in for the king in the case of his physical absence (1 Kgs 21:8). Haman's royal signet thus demonstrates his power and authority, as second-in-command to the king.

But Haman also fantasises about wearing other items of the royal regalia including garments and a crown, requesting that Ahasuerus bestow this adornment upon “whom the king wishes to honour” in a comedy of errors in which Haman believes the king is speaking about him but in fact it is Mordecai who is to be honoured. Haman suggests:

For the man whom the king wishes to honour, let them bring royal attire which the king has worn and a horse on which the king himself has ridden, and a royal crown on his head. Then let this clothing and this horse be given to one of the king's noble officials. Let him then clothe the man whom the king wishes to honour and let him lead him about through the plaza of the city on the horse, calling before him: ‘So shall it be done to the man whom the king wishes to honour!’ (6:7–9).

Haman's suggestions are reminiscent of the honouring of Joseph by Pharaoh in the book of Genesis, in which Pharaoh gifts Joseph with his signet ring in order to invest him with authority:

Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his own hand and put it on Joseph's. He clothed him with fine linen clothes and put a gold chain around his neck. Pharaoh had him ride in the chariot used by his second-in-command, and they cried out before him, ‘Kneel down!’ So he placed him over all the land of Egypt (Gen 41:42–43).

The connection between Haman's request in the book of Esther and Pharaoh's treatment of Joseph in Genesis was noted already in antiquity by Josephus, who synthesizes the accounts, adding that Haman also asked for a golden

chain (A.J. 11.6.10). But Haman's request in Esther goes beyond what was gifted to Joseph. Haman had already received the king's signet ring (3:10). As well as this, Haman is now asking to wear personal items which had actually been worn by the king. Though Joseph is gifted with fine clothing, there is no indication that these items had ever belonged to or been worn by the king. Whereas Joseph rides on a chariot commandeered by the king's second-in-command, Haman wishes to ride on the king's own horse. This is reminiscent of the books of Kings, when David orders that Solomon be publicly mounted on the king's mule in the context of his election to the throne (1 Kgs 1:32–49). Haman's requests go further than the mere convocation of honour and are tantamount to a claim to royal status. This was recognized by the Targum Sheni to the book of Esther, which following Haman's request adds "the king regarded Haman closely, and thought in his heart and said to himself, 'Haman wishes to kill me and make himself king in my stead'" (7:10).

Haman's desire for kingship is thus made manifest via his sartorial preferences. His fall from grace is then cemented when the king takes back his signet ring and gives it instead to Mordecai (8:2). The ring serves to demonstrate the king's transfer of allegiance from Haman to Mordecai. Earlier we noted that Haman's request for royal clothing parallels Joseph but goes further than this. In this context, it is ironic that Mordecai's change of clothes also goes further than that of Joseph. Mordecai undergoes several changes of clothing in the course of the narrative, changing from his everyday clothes into sackcloth (4:1), and then finally into garments of royal colours, purple and fine linen (8:15). This mirrors Joseph's change from prison clothes to fine linen (Gen 41:42). Joseph is gifted with בגדי־שש ("garments of fine linen"), representing his introduction into the Egyptian court, adopting their royal robes, and distinguishing his new authority in Egypt.⁴¹ Mordecai's introduction to the Persian court goes further as he is adorned with בלבוש מלכות תכלת וחור ("royal apparel of purple and white") and ותכריך בוץ וארגמן ("a robe of fine linen and purple").⁴² Mordecai is gifted two kinds of garments consisting of two different purple materials and two white-coloured fabrics. The repetition of purple and white reinforces the significance of these robes. Both תכלת and ארגמן are dyes extracted from

41 See Matthews, "Anthropology," 34–35. Joseph is adorned in שש ("fine linen"), which elsewhere occurs in biblical texts associated with Egypt (Ezek 27:7). Middle Kingdom texts provide the term šs ("linen"), affirming an Egyptian origin. See Lambdin, "Egyptian," 155.

42 Mordecai is adorned in בוץ ("fine linen"), which is synonymous with Joseph's שש ("fine linen"). שש features primarily in CBH, whereas בוץ appears in LBH. See Hurvitz, "שש"; Brenner, "White Textiles," 40.

different species of the *murex* sea snail.⁴³ From snails to the end product, the actual dyeing process was time consuming, labour intensive, and extremely pungent.⁴⁴ The colours produced had a vivid shine, a sheer iridescence, and were permanent and resistant. The purple-dyed garments were thus worn by political leaders, royalty, and even adorned deities and cult statues across the ancient world.⁴⁵ In the Hebrew Bible, תכלת and ארגמן are primarily found together during the making of the Tabernacle, the High Priest's clothing, and Solomon's Temple, demonstrating that purple is an extremely prestigious colour and has a high theological value.⁴⁶ Fine linen is found in similar contexts.⁴⁷ There is thus a strong connection between these colours and fabrics with ritual and the cult. Athalya Brenner argued that חור is synonymous with בוך in Esther,⁴⁸ and though it primarily relates to the post-exilic basic colour term "white," it too has associations with the divine.⁴⁹ The term חור, alongside כרפס in 1:6, denotes a "white fine linen" in the description of the Persian palace décor.⁵⁰ It is therefore a bright, white material of prestigious value. Mordecai's clothing therefore has significant cultural connotations of elite prestige. His clothing goes beyond Joseph's regalia, and in this narrative indicates a reversal of fortunes: Haman from glory to mourning (6:12); Mordecai from mourning to glory.⁵¹

Mordecai's rise to power and his related sartorial transformation is also reflected in the connections which exist between the book of Esther and the Deuteronomistic History, explicit in Mordecai's genealogy. Mordecai is a Benjaminite and his genealogical line traces back to Kish (Esth 2:5), which was the name of Saul's father (1 Sam 9:1).⁵² Along with Joseph, Benjamin is

43 *Murex trunculus* produced a bluish tint whereas *murex brandaris* more reddish, respectively thought to map onto תכלת and ארגמן.

44 Pliny (*Nat.* 9.125–138) provides the oldest and most detailed account of *murex* dyeing.

45 See Reinhold, *Purple*.

46 The combination of these terms occurs multiple times during the descriptions of the tabernacle furnishings in Exod 26 and 36; the High Priest's robes in Exod 28 and 39; and Solomon's Temple in 2 Chr 2.

47 See, e.g., Exod 25; 26; 27; 28; 35; 36; 38; 39; 2 Chr 2:14; 3:14; 5:12. On the divine connotations of white fabric, see Moss, *Bodies*, 95–113.

48 See Brenner, *Colour*, 149; idem, "White' Textiles," 41; cf. LXX βύσσις ("byssus") instead of חור.

49 חור appears in LBH and Biblical Aramaic as a "fine linen" and has significant associations with divinity (e.g. Dan 7:9).

50 These affinities between Ahasuerus's palace (1:6) and Mordecai's clothing (8:15) have been recognised by multiple scholars: Mordecai's status is thus somewhat analogous to that of King Ahasuerus. See Spoelstra, "Vestments," 185; Levenson, *Esther*, 45.

51 See Siebert-Hommes, "On the Third Day," 5–7.

52 Other ancient texts demonstrate Kish is the distant ancestor of Mordecai and the father of Saul: Targum Rishon declares: "And he was called Mordecai ... son of Yair son of Shimei

the only other son of Rachel and Jacob (Gen 35:24). There is a significant connection between these two brothers and clothing: as we have seen, the Joseph story itself has a garment motif;⁵³ and Benjamin's line also has a garment motif through his father Jacob, which later extends into stories concerning Saul and his son Jonathan: Jacob deceives his father with the help of his mother Rebekah into receiving the firstborn blessing, involving Rebekah taking the "best garments of her elder son Esau" (Gen 27:15) to put on Jacob to conceal his true identity. When David cuts off the hem of Saul's cloak (1 Sam 24:4), this marks a symbolic act of David taking the kingdom from Saul. David receives clothing (1 Sam 17:38–39; 18:4) and Saul loses it (1 Sam 17:38–39; 24:4; 31:9), eventually appearing naked (1 Sam 19:24).⁵⁴ Saul later disguises himself with clothing in order to travel to En-Dor, and once there Saul identifies Samuel by his cloak (1 Sam 28:8–25). Finally, the Philistines stripped Saul of his armour before he died (1 Sam 31:9).⁵⁵ Jonathan, Saul's firstborn son, has a close relationship to David. In 1 Sam 18:4, Jonathan gives his cloak and belt to David, symbolic of his claim to the throne and identity as the prince of Israel. He transfers the right of succession from himself to David.⁵⁶ Clothing is never far away as a literary device in stories about the Benjaminite line and their relation to the throne.

As Mordecai is a Benjaminite, he fulfils royal potential set up in these earlier stories by way of a larger garment motif. Mordecai is therefore dressed up in specific royal garments to fulfil his ancestral destiny where a variety of characters' royal status is made manifest via their dress. Indeed, 1 Sam 15 describes Saul failing to destroy Agag, the king of Amalek (vv. 8, 9, 20, 32, 33), thus when Haman, the enemy of the Jews, is called an "Agagite," the narrative is inevitably recalling the hostility between the Israelites and the Amalekites.⁵⁷ Therefore when Mordecai defeats Haman, which subsequently puts an end to this long

son of Gera son of Kish." Shimei is the same Shimei in 2 Sam 19:16. For further evidence and a fuller genealogy, see Grossfeld, *Targum*, 28–29, 64–65. This idea does not intend to solve the historicity of the genealogy or to suggest that Saul and David's rivalry and polemic resurfaced in the Persian period, but rather to demonstrate (like many scholars have done before us) that there is an almost satirical connection between Mordecai, Esther, Saul, and David. See, e.g., Koller, "Exile"; Berger, "Esther"; Amit, "Polemic," 653–656.

53 See Matthews, "Anthropology"; Huddelstun, "Divestiture"; Ede, "Garment."

54 See Prouser, "Suited," 27–37.

55 See Cook, "Philistines," 123–124. On the treatment of Saul's body by the Philistines following his death, see Stavrakopoulou, "Curating."

56 See Prouser, "Suited," 32; Cook, "Philistines," 116. This is contrary to 1 Sam 17:38–39, when Saul dresses David in some of his armour on the battlefield but it is too heavy, so David rejects it. In 1 Sam 18:4, David takes Jonathan's robe, and it fits like a glove. On this irony, see Fokkelman, *Crossing Fates*, 199.

57 See Berger, "Esther," 633–634; Amit, "Polemic," 653–654; Spoelstra, "Surviving," 172.

history of oppression from the Amalekites, he is appropriately rewarded with the finest of garments (Esth 8:15).

Like Haman, Esther's relationship with the clothing and adornments she wears echo her levels of power. Upon becoming queen, Esther wears a royal crown (2:17) and royal garments (5:1). However, neither the crown nor the garments are mentioned in specific detail compared to Mordecai's elaborate dress. While Esther wears a כתר, Mordecai wears an עטרה. At first glance, there are similarities between these items. In Ezek 21:31, עטרה occurs in parallel to מצנפת, elsewhere used of the turbans worn by Israel's priesthood, where it is explicitly said to be a woven, fabric item (Exod 28:39; 39:28; Lev 16:4). In Job 31:36, Job describes how an עטרה is "bound" upon the wearer. Thus, like Esther's כתר, it is probable that Mordecai's עטרה describes a fabric item akin to a turban which is tied around the head. But while Esther's כתר is symbolic of royalty, Mordecai's עטרה has implications even beyond this. Certainly, it adorns the heads of royals (Jer 13:18; Ezek 21:31; Ps 21:3; Song 3:11).⁵⁸ But crucially, the item also has connections to the divine sphere. We have already noted that in Ezek 21:31, the term occurs in parallel with מצנפת, the turbans worn by Israel's priesthood. In Zech 6:11, an עטרה is specifically part of the dress worn by the High Priest Joshua; this crown then becomes symbolic of the priesthood, to be passed on "as a memorial in the temple of the Lord" (v. 14). In fact, in 2 Sam 12:30, it is worn upon the head of a divine cult statue. Indeed, it has been suggested that the dress of priests in the ancient Near East developed from the practice of clothing cult statues.⁵⁹ Here David takes the עטרה from an individual called מלכם, literally "their king." However, the LXX takes this as the proper name, Milkom. This relates to the cult statue of the Ammonite deity, Milkom, and to the practice of dressing cult statues in both clothing and jewellery.⁶⁰ David has thus removed the crown from this statue. The עטרה therefore has implications of royalty, but also the cultic and divine.

The significance of Mordecai's עטרה is also reinforced by its description as "a great gold crown." In Esther, זהב is used only to describe Ahasuerus's royal sceptre (4:11; 5:2; 8:4), the drinking vessels in the palace (1:7), and Mordecai's crown. But elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible gold as a precious material is primarily associated with the divine sphere, associated with the tabernacle furnishings,

58 Spoolstra ("Vestments," 186) argues Mordecai's עטרה is a prophetic reference to a prince of Israel; see also Jauhiainen, "Turban."

59 See Oppenheim, "Garments."

60 Gen 35:4 may refer to the earrings which adorned a cult statue. See Hurowitz, "Earring." Clothed cult statues are explicitly referred to in Ezek 16:18 and Jer 10:9. In this latter text, the clothing of the cult statue is said to be purple, another indication of the cultic significance of this colour.

the High Priest's garments, even idols.⁶¹ Thus while the crown would initially appear royal, there are in fact affinities with the Temple and High Priest. Just as the High Priest Joshua was adorned with a golden עטרה, the High Priest in Exodus also wore a "rosette" of gold worn as a frontlet upon his linen turban (Zech 6:11; cf. Exod 28:36–37). Just as we can interpret Esther's כתר as a fabric turban, Mordecai's עטרה too can be interpreted in a similar fashion—but since this turban is "golden," the implication is that, like the High Priest, he is wearing a fabric headdress adorned with a golden frontlet.⁶² Mordecai's "great gold crown" thus connects Mordecai to both royal but also priestly contexts.⁶³

Esther's כתר מלכות, "royal crown," has none of these associations and is thus less impressive. Her garments, too, are only categorised as "royal" rather than of fine linen and expensive dyes. Though her lineage relates to Mordecai,⁶⁴ and arguably she could too be of Benjaminite heritage,⁶⁵ by ending the story with Esther dressed in her royal Persian robes, the narrative suggests that she has fully adopted the persona of Esther, the Persian queen. Hadassah and the modicum of power that she appropriated through her Persian disguise is ultimately subsumed by it. On the other hand, Mordecai's clothing connects him to Israelite and specifically priestly contexts. The female character subsumes her ethnic identity in aid of her people; the male character is celebrated as the culmination of his family line. Ultimately, through their items of clothing, the narrative maintains clear distinctions in terms of Esther and Mordecai's relative status and power, developed along gendered lines.

6 Conclusions

We began by noting a gap in scholarship surrounding clothing in the book of Esther, despite the book's commonalities with the Joseph story and the garment motif developed throughout this narrative. In fact, as we have attempted to demonstrate, the book of Esther weaves its narrative with a variety of intertexts relating to clothing and kingship in order to magnify Mordecai as the

61 See, e.g., Exod 20:23; 25; 26; 28; 35; 36; 37; 38; 39; Lev 8:9; Num 7; Deut 7:25; 29:17; 1 Kgs 6; 7; Isa 2:20; 30:22; 31:7; 40:19; 1 Chr 28; 2 Chr 3; 4.

62 In fact, the עטרה worn by the cult statue of Milkom is also adorned with a frontlet, since the crown "held a precious stone" (2 Sam 12:30).

63 Spoelstra ("Vestments," 187) has also recognised the royal and religious contexts of Mordecai's dress, without unpacking the full implications of his עטרה.

64 Esth 2:7 describes Esther as בת־דודו, commonly understood as "daughter of his uncle," Mordecai's cousin from paternal ancestry. See Sanmartin-Ascaso, "דוד."

65 See Berger, "Esther," 625–644.

fulfilment of the Benjamite royal line. The clothing motif is therefore an essential aspect of the narrative dynamics of the book of Esther. And in order to unpick this, we have drawn upon sociological perspectives on clothing and the clothed body, calling attention to the potential of clothing to function as a “declaratory interface,” crucial for understanding the actions and interactions of characters. In so doing, we have highlighted several discrete functions of clothing in the book of Esther. Vashti and Esther demonstrate their willingness or disinclination to conform to conventional male expectations of dress and adornment through their sartorial behaviours. This affects how the male characters relate to them and is therefore crucial in Esther’s promotion over Vashti. The ritual potential of textiles allows Mordecai to issue a protest wrought through his manner of dress, and this is ultimately what provokes Esther to act on his behalf. While Mordecai utilizes clothing to manifest his internal feelings of opposition to Ahasuerus’s decrees, Haman disguises his true intentions by covering his face. And in a way, Esther too is disguised—by conforming to Ahasuerus’s sartorial preferences, she is afforded a modicum of power which enables her to save her people.

Crucially, the power and status of the characters is made manifest through their items of dress. While Haman wished to wear clothing items indicative of royal status, this was denied to him, putting an end to the long history of oppression from the Amalekites. Instead, it is Mordecai who will don the clothing of kingship. Fulfilling a larger garment motif associated with the Benjamite line, we leave Mordecai clad in items indicative of his royal status. His purple and white garments and golden crown also connect him to the Israelite cult, cementing his ethnic identity as the leader of his people. On the other hand, Esther’s final outfit is her royal Persian dress. By adopting the disguise of the obedient wife of the Persian king, she becomes the saviour of her people. But in so doing, she gives up her Jewish identity and is ultimately subordinated to the magnified status of Mordecai.⁶⁶ The book of Esther weaves a complex tapestry of garment imagery, with implications for understanding the power, status, and intentions of its various characters and their world.

66 This is brought into greater relief when comparing the book of Esther to the book of Judith. Like Esther, Judith similarly uses cosmetics and clothing in order to gain favourable treatment from a foreign ruler (Jdt 10:4). But while Esther marries her foreign ruler and so ends her story removed from her community, Judith assures all that she had enticed Holofernes without actually having sex with him (16:22). Because of this, she is reincorporated back into her community at the end of the tale: unlike Esther, her disguise was a temporary one.

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