

“On the third day Esther put on her queen’s robes” (Esther 5:1)

The Symbolic Function of Clothing in the Book of Esther¹

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Kleidung spielt eine wichtige Rolle im Estherbuch. Die Hauptpersonen werden definiert mittels ihrer jeweiligen Bekleidungsweise. Vashti, die zum Trinkgelage des Ahasveros geboten wird, soll das königliche Diadem tragen. Wie steht es mit dem Rest ihres Leibes? Ist sie weiterhin nackt wie die Rabbiner (Esther 3:13-14) annehmen? Das hebräische Wort für Diadem, קטר (*kætær*), findet man nur im Buch Esther, immer mit der Beifügung „königlich“, מלכות (*malkut*). Als Esther Königin wird, bekommt sie dieses Diadem auf den Kopf gesetzt.

Als Esther dem König zum ersten Mal begegnet, wird nichts gesagt in Bezug auf ihre Kleidung. Die Bemerkung, dass sie „nichts begehrte als was Hegai, der Kämmerer des Königs ihr riet“ (2:15), betont ihre Machtlosigkeit. Jedoch, als sie sich selbst (!) mit ihrem königlichen Gewand bekleidet, gewinnt sie Macht.

Mardochai meldet sich am Hof in unanständiger Kleidung (4:1), aber am Ende tritt er hinaus (8:15) in königlichem Gewande und mit einer grossen, goldenen Krone: אַטאַרַט (*atæræt*).

Das Traumbild Hamans ist „bekleidet zu sein mit dem Gewande des Königs“ und „zu reiten auf dem Pferde des Königs“ (6:8-9). Ironischerweise muss er diesen Traum an Mardochai erfüllen. Zum Schluss gibt es eine intrigierende Frage: weshalb wünscht Haman sich die מלכות קטר (*kætær malkut*) (sic!) auf dem Kopf des Pferdes? (6:8).

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Dress and ornamentation play a meaningful role in society. Cultural-anthropological studies emphasise that clothing is more than giving protection to the human body, it often functions as a special form of communication. It expresses a person’s cultural identity, or it indicates the status, power or gender of the wearer. In short, dress belongs to the phenomena of ‘body language’. It is a way of making silent statements about someone’s political, religious or social standing.

In literary texts the impact of clothing objects and other insignia may be even more crucial, because authors and writers often intentionally make use of special details about dress and garments to convey certain information about the main characters. More than can be expressed in words these

details offer a very illustrative picture of the narrative world and in many cases they clarify matters that are difficult to put into words.

This applies to biblical texts as well. Heather McKay, who did some critical research concerning clothing and adornment in biblical texts, has pointed out that items of clothing frequently have an indispensable function in the development of the biblical plot.² This is not only true for wearing, giving or receiving garments, but ‘events’ such as tearing robes or covering with ash, may create pivotal points in the story as well. Without words they give a clear message to the reader. “The garments speak silently, but speak they do.”³

This statement also holds true for the book of Esther, i.e. in the Hebrew version, as I will show. Each of the five main characters in the book, Ahasuerus, Vashti, Esther, Haman and Mordecai, are dealing with some kind of silent communication by means of clothing, although they are not all *equally* related to the topic of clothing.

Mordecai: from ‘mourning’ to ‘glory’

The most striking example is Mordecai. In the fourth chapter, after Haman has promulgated his law to exterminate the Jews, Mordecai tears his robe and appears אצ" (ja'tsa), in sackcloth and ashes. Now, tearing robes and mourning in sackcloth and ashes is common use to the Jews.⁴ But, what is striking in this case is that Mordecai goes to the king's gate in mourning. This is a very dangerous action, since no one is allowed to come to the king's gate clothed with sackcloth (4:2). Mordecai probably wants to inform Esther, but why does he resort to such a risky act? Why doesn't he simply tell her, as he did in an earlier scene when he discovered a conspiracy against the king? At that time he easily made contact with Esther to give her the information. Thereupon she spoke to the king in Mordecai's name (2:21-23).

Here in chapter 4 however, the situation has become quite different. This time Esther will no longer have a simple function as the bearer of a message, she will play a much more important role. For that role Mordecai is going to prepare her carefully, step by step. The first step is to silently show her his mourning. His torn robe, the sackcloth and the ashes speak their own language, a strong language.

It works. When Esther's maids inform her about Mordecai's silent demonstration, she is deeply dismayed. She is trembling heavily: ארתתחלהל מאד (*wattitchalchal me'od*). The Hebrew word used here is a special form (hitpapel) of the verb חול (*chul*), and means something like ‘whirling in severe pain or anguish’; it is often linked with labour pains. The queen is terribly shocked as she shows with her ‘body language’. Yet, just like Mordecai, she doesn't speak. She doesn't even ask

the reason of her uncle's mourning. She answers simply by sending him appropriate clothes. These have to convey her message: 'Take off your sackcloth!' Mordecai's answer is again silent: he refuses to accept the clothes. His reply is clear: 'The clothes are not the problem'.

Then, finally, Esther seems to get the message. She orders her servant to ask what's going on. Only now Esther starts to speak, initially through the mediation of her servant, afterwards more directly. From this moment onwards she becomes more and more involved in the great disaster that threatens the Jews.

Mordecai, in refusing to take off his sackcloth, conveys a very strong message. Later on, at the end of the story, when everything has turned out all right, Mordecai appears once more; here again the verb *נצא* is used. This time too, his outfit is appropriate to the situation, but one that is totally different from previously. Here he is dressed in blue and white, instead of sackcloth. He wears a great golden crown and a mantle of fine linen and purple (8:15). Although this mantle is not explicitly a 'royal robe', Mordecai looks like the king himself. And, what's more, the whole city of Susa is shouting with joy.

What is the reason for this great joy? In the preceding verses the elimination of Haman, the archenemy of the Jews, has been achieved, thanks to Mordecai. This is the reason why the whole city – not only the Jewish population! – is cheering him. In a way *he* receives the honour that Haman wanted so badly for himself, as became clear in chapter 6, where Haman had to advise the king 'what to do for the man whom the king wishes to honour'. Under the impression that *he* was the one who 'the king wishes to honour', Haman described his own dream: to wear a robe 'the king himself has worn before'. Ironically enough, this royal robe was put on the shoulders of Mordecai, his rival. And Haman was the one who had to perform this homage.

This is the only instance that talks about clothing in relation to Haman. This is all the more remarkable since it concerns the kind of clothing that Haman *desires*, but will never have. It will be for Mordecai, his great adversary. The scene characterises the sharp contrast between the two protagonists, a contrast that is reconfirmed by Mordecai's royal dress when he comes out after Haman's death in 8:15.⁵

Haman: from 'glory' to 'mourning'

Haman himself does not receive any garments in the story. At his first presentation, when his seat is set above all the officials who are with him and everyone is ordered to bow down to him (3:1-2), there is no talk of any clothing. Yet, he receives an important insignia of authority, namely at the moment he has made plans to destroy the Jews. At that occasion the king hands over to him his

signet ring, which means that Haman may constitute every law he wishes (3:10). This ring has an important function in the plot. After Haman's execution the ring is given to Mordecai (8:2), so that now *he* can promulgate the law. This ring stands for great power.

Still, there is another remarkable sort of dress connected to Haman. In the above-mentioned scene, chapter 6, he had to proclaim Mordecai's honour, which was deeply degrading for him. After that incident he hurries to his house in mourning and with his head covered. This 'mourning' is reminiscent of Mordecai's act in chapter 4 where *he* was in mourning after Haman threatened the Jews to death. Here Haman is the one who is mourning, which accentuates the changing of roles between the two rivals. The text does not provide any details about Haman's head covering, but the signal is clear: Haman has lost face. This feature returns at the end of his career, when Esther reveals Haman's evil intentions. The king, in addition, thinks that he is assaulting the queen (7:8), whereupon the eunuchs cover Haman's face as a sign that he has lost face for ever.

King Ahasuerus and Queen Vashti

It is surprising that we don't hear anything about the royal garments of king Ahasuerus himself. Nothing is said about his robe, nor about his crown. The only object mentioned is his signet ring, the symbol of his reign. Surprisingly it is exactly this symbol of royal power that he gives away! First to Haman, later to Mordecai. Yet, there is talk about some sumptuous and luxurious fabrics. However, these cloths do not dress the *king*, but they decorate the exotic marquee in the garden of the palace (1:6). They serve as a background for the famous party with which the king displays the great wealth of his kingdom and the splendour and glory of his majesty. One can wonder why the text doesn't mention whether the king wore some of these splendid cloths himself!

Another person of whom we do not know much about her clothing is Queen Vashti. We only meet her in the background of the aforementioned party at the beginning of the book. On the last day, when 'the heart of the king is merry with wine' (1:10), he orders an unforgettable finale for the impressive show. The festivities will not be rounded off with magnificent fireworks but with a show of the most peculiar and intimate of all his treasures: his own wife, the queen. Seven chamberlains, all mentioned by name, are sent to Vashti. The text is unambiguous concerning the intention of the message: the queen has 'to show her beauty' to the peoples and the princes (1:11). The parallel with foregoing verses, where the king showed his riches and greatness in order to increase his fame and prestige, is evident. With the same intention he wants to show off the beauty of his queen now. By doing so his image will rise to a zenith.

There is a touch of irony in this situation: the monarch expects to increase his own prestige by exhibiting the beauty of Vashti.⁶ One can question the state of a king who presumes to derive his fame from the beauty of his wife. Whose fame is at stake?

The Crown of the Kingship

It is not without significance that Vashti has to wear ‘the crown of the kingship’, קטר מלכות (*kætær malkut*). This is not just a fine ornament; it is the symbol of her royal dignity. Nevertheless it is peculiar that the king himself apparently doesn’t have a crown. Only the queen has one.

Other details concerning Vashti’s clothing are not mentioned. For that reason the Rabbis suppose⁷ that she was naked otherwise – after all, she had to show off her beauty! With her royal crown she has to appear ‘at the face of the king’, ולפני המלך (*lifnej hammælækh*). This scene has all the signs of becoming a revealing spectacle. The repeated usage of the verb ראה (*ra’ah*), ‘to see’, is telling: she will be *seen*!

But, the ‘striptease’ will not take place, because Vashti refuses to come. This is really shocking: a wife who doesn’t obey her husband! The king is completely wrong footed. What can he do? The king’s sages ‘who knew the laws’ advise him to dismiss Vashti. ‘Her kingship must be given to another woman, better than she’ (1:19). The counsellors do not mention the קטר (*kætær*), the crown with which Vashti should have come, but they do talk about the מלכות (*malkut*), the kingship. This is what has to be given to another queen, as they say. The קטר (*kætær*) and the מלכות (*malkut*) are strongly linked to each other, as becomes clear in a following scene where the new queen is introduced.

Although the king has appointed commissioners in *all* the provinces to gather *all* the young virgins into his harem, it proves to be not so easy to find a new queen. Each girl will have to go through a cosmetic treatment of twelve months, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and massage.⁸ However, there is no talk of clothing. Every night one girl is taken to the king; in the evening she comes, in the morning she goes. She doesn’t come for a second time, unless the king has remembered her name and asks for her.

Four years after Vashti’s dismissal, in the seventh year of Ahasuerus’ reign, it is Esther’s turn to come to the king’s bedroom. Then, finally, he can make a choice: he falls in love with Esther. Of all the virgins *she* wins his favour and devotion. He grants her the royal status by placing the crown upon her head and making her ‘queen instead of Vashti’ (2:17). The ‘crown of the kingship’, קטר מלכות (*kætær malkut*), with which Vashti had been ordered to come, is now given to Esther. What will

be the result? Vashti was called, but didn't come; Esther will not be called, but *she* will come, as we shall see.

Queen Esther: dressed with her Kingship

Yet, the story presents another clothing object connected to Esther's status: she has a 'royal robe'! Let us take a look at the most crucial scene of the story: Esther's famous entering to the king to plead for her people (5:1-5). After Haman's promulgation of the law to destroy the Jews, Esther decides to save her people. As part of her strategy, she invites the king *and* Haman to a couple of banquets. At the first one she prepares her action, at the second she puts her plans into effect.⁹

The first problem to be solved is conveying the dinner-invitation to the king. This turns out to be a very difficult part of her enterprise, for it is impossible to enter into the king's territory without being called. Approaching the king without invitation would mean an affront to his authority and this would mean her death.

Esther decides to take the risk, she will go. The way in which she prepares herself for the action is striking: she does not eat nor drink for three days and three nights. In addition she orders the whole Jewish community to do the same on her behalf; even her maidens have to fast. And then, on the third day – often a crucial day in biblical narratives – she goes into the inner court of the palace. This means entering within the range of the royal power, an act that flies in the face of all rules! Impressively, the text describes how the king is sitting on the throne of his kingship, in the house of his kingship (5:1). He is depicted in the complete dignity of his kingship: מלכותו (*malkuto*).

Esther for her part looks impressive as well; she has her own dignity. She has dressed herself in a royal robe; that is to say, the majority of the English translations say so. The Hebrew text, however, gives more specific information: 'she put on the kingship', ותלבש מלכות (*wattilbash malkut*). There she is, Esther, opposite the king, invested with her own authority: a queen. The repeated, 'opposite of', underlines the confrontational nature of the encounter of the two royal authorities. Will they find each other in harmony, or will the king repudiate her as he did Vashti at the time? Everything depends on the reaction of Ahasuerus.

Yet, Esther obtains 'favour' in the eyes of the king (5:2a). This determines her fate. The king holds out the golden sceptre in his hand, a ceremonial sign of grace which Esther answers with an appropriate gesture: she approaches and touches the top of the sceptre (5:2). So she shows herself to be the real queen.

Esther is the most important character in the book that bears her name. She is the only one in the story who is 'dressed with the kingship'. And she knows how to make use of it.

The Royal Crown on the head of the horse

Finally, there is one intriguing issue left: ‘the royal crown on the head of the horse’, a highly unusual picture found in the aforementioned scene about Haman’s fantasy of wearing the king’s royal mantle and sitting on his horse (6:8). The message is clear: Haman doesn’t simply want to be honoured, he wishes to be the king himself, as the formulation of his desire shows: ‘Let a royal robe be brought, which the king himself has worn’. Just a royal robe is not good enough, probably, the king himself must have worn it before. The same goes for the horse, ‘a horse that the king himself has ridden’. But what about ‘the royal crown’ on the head of the horse? In my opinion the royal crown on the head of the horse has to be seen within the context of Haman’s desire to be the *king* for one day: to wear his personal clothes, to ride his personal horse. But... ‘the royal crown’ on the horse’s head? What is the precise function of this ornament?

Pictures from the ancient Middle East show that decorations on the heads of royal horses were very common.¹⁰ Yet, the curious formulation of Haman’s desire raises the suggestion that he does not mean just some sort of decoration, but the special head-dress of the queen herself, the ‘crown of the kingship’. This is the special object with which Vashti was summoned to show herself at the party of Ahasuerus (1:11) and it was, later on, put on the head of Esther, the new queen. In both cases this unique crown is the symbol of the queen’s royal dignity, her identifying mark. This ‘crown of the kingship’, קטר מלכות (*kaetær malkut*), is mentioned nowhere else but in the book of Esther. It is the *queen’s crown* on the head of Vashti, on the head of Esther and on the head of the horse. We have to notice that Mordecai’s great golden crown (8:15) is specified with a more common Hebrew word: עטרת (*atæræt*).

The fact that Haman wishes the *queen’s crown* on the head of the horse on which he will ride creates the impression that Haman in his fantasy is not so much thinking of a royal horse from the court-stables, but rather of having the *queen* for one night...!

We may assume that Ahasuerus suspected this as well, given his extremely distrustful reaction when he finds Haman on his knees before the bed (sic!) on which Esther is lying. He accuses Haman of assaulting the queen in the king’s own house (7:8). It is striking that this accusation, rather than his hatred of the Jews, results in Haman’s final execution.

And what about Esther? In an earlier scene (4:11) she told Mordecai that she was out of favour with the king, she had not been with him for thirty days. Haman’s fantasy, however, seems to have raised the envy of the king, because from that moment onwards he is very generous to Esther and gives her all she wants. Unlike Vashti, Esther succeeds in keeping the ‘crown of her kingship’. For, on the crucial

moment (5:1), she dressed herself ‘with the kingship’! The author of the book of Esther made a proper use of the symbolic function of clothing to give a clear message about the characters in the story.

¹ This article is a revised version of a paper presented at a session of the Hebrew Bible Section at the SBL International Meeting in Rome, July 2001.

² Heather A. McKay, ‘Gendering the body: Clothes maketh the (wo)man’, in: Robert Hannaford/J’annine Jobling (eds.) *Theology and the Body; Gender, Text and Ideology*, Gracewing, Exeter 1999, 84.

³ Idem, 93.

⁴ ‘Sackcloth and ashes signify male mourning and loss’. See Heather A. McKay, ‘Gendering the Discourse of Display in the Hebrew Bible’, in: Bob Becking / Meindert Dijkstra (eds.), *On Reading Prophetic Texts. Gender-Specific & Related Studies in Memory of Fokkeliën van Dijk-Hemmes*, Brill, Leiden 1996, 188N59.

⁵ ‘Clothing is a conspicuous code signalling where one stands in the power axis’, David J.A. Clines, ‘Reading Esther from Left to Right. Contemporary Strategies for Reading a Biblical Text’, in: David J.A. Clines / Stephen E. Fowl / Stanley E. Porter (eds.), *The Bible in Three Dimensions. Essays in celebration of forty years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield*, JSOTS 87 (1990), 39.

⁶ This ‘striptease’ is not only a matter of erotics, but has to do with power as well. See: Jopie Siebert-Hommes, “‘Come to the dinner I have prepared for you” (Esther 5:4). Story of Love or Struggle for Power?”, in: Janet W. Dyk a.o. (eds.), *The Rediscovery of the Hebrew Bible* (Amsterdamse Cahiers voor Exegese van de Bijbel en zijn Tradities, Supp. I), Shaker Publishing, Maastricht 1999, 90.

⁷ *Midrash Rabbah Esther* 3:13-14, M. Simon (transl.), Jerusalem 1977.

⁸ For the various renderings of the ‘Beauty Contest’ in Septuagint and Hebrew Bible, see Kristin De Troyer, ‘An Oriental Beauty Parlour: An Analysis of Esther 2:8-18 in the Hebrew, the Septuagint and the Second Greek Text’, in: Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1995, 47-70.

⁹ See about the repetition of plot movements in the book of Esther: Athalya Brenner, ‘Looking at Esther Through the Looking Glass’, in: Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1995, 71-80.

¹⁰ See Gillis Gerleman, *Esther* (Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament), Neukirchen/Vluyn 1973, 116-118.



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Some of her publications:

- “‘With Bonds of Love’: Hosea 11 as “Recapitulation” of the Basic Themes in the Book of Hosea’, in: Janet W. Dyk a.o., *Unless some one guide me...* (Festschrift for Karel A. Deurloo) (Amsterdamse Cahiers voor Exegese van de Bijbel en zijn Tradities, Supp. II), Shaker Publishing, Maastricht 2001, 167-173.

- ‘The Widow of Zarephath and the great Woman of Shunem. A Comparative Analysis of Two Stories’, in: Athalya Brenner (ed.), *Samuel and Kings. A Feminist Companion to the Bible (2nd Series)*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 2000, 98-114.

- “‘Come to the dinner I have prepared for you” (Esther 5:4). Story of Love or Struggle for Power?’, in: Janet W. Dyk a.o. (eds.), *The Rediscovery of the Hebrew Bible* (Amsterdamse Cahiers voor Exegese van de Bijbel en zijn Tradities, Supp. I), Shaker Publishing, Maastricht 1999, 85-100.

- *Let the Daughters Live! The Literary Architecture of Exodus 1-2 as a Key for Interpretation*, Brill, Leiden 1998.

- ‘Hebräerinnen sind chaitot’, in: Matthias Augustin / Klaus-Dietrich Schunck (Hgg.) “*Dort ziehen Schiffe dahin...*” *Collected Communications to the XIVth Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament* (Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des antiken Judentums 28), Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main 1996, 191-200.

- ‘But if she be a Daughter... She may Live! “Daughters” and “Sons” in Exodus 1-2’, in: Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1994, 62-74.

- ‘Die Geburtsgeschichte des Mose innerhalb des Erzählzusammenhangs von Exodus I und II’, in: *Vetus Testamentum* XLII, 3 (1992), 398-403.