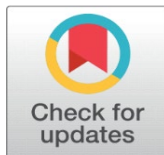
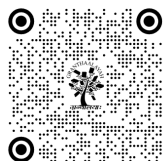


DRESS AND CLOTHING PRACTICES IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Dr. Jolly Alex ¹  

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, Christian College, Kerala, India



Corresponding Author

Dr. Jolly Alex, jollyjeru@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Clothes are the forte of human beings and are reflective of their intellectual and moral superiority as well as distinction from other creatures of the animal kingdom. There has been arguments and debates regarding the evolution of clothing and the origin of the textile industry. This is because the significance of clothing extends far beyond being merely a material covering for the flesh but it also serves as a cultural marker which aids in distinguishing between races, gender and social status. There lies a rich history of clothing practices among the numerous civilizations and cultures mentioned in the Old Testament of the Bible. There is a vast store of information waiting to be unraveled from these seemingly insignificant mention of various apparels and its utility in the Hebrew Bible. The reason being, clothing is intrinsically dynamic and socio-culturally efficacious and hence it warrants a serious and intentional scholarship in order to unpack the social and material impact it conceals within itself. In the Old Testament, dress possesses multiple functions - literary, rhetorical and metaphorical. For a scholar of the past, a dress is of tremendous significance because of the informational value it contains, connecting us to a past which no longer exists. This study of the genesis of clothing and related paraphernalia chiefly centres on the evolution, practice and accessibility of clothing and textiles in human history from a Biblical perspective.

Keywords: Dress, Hebrew Bible, Civilisation, Textile, Manufacturing

1. INTRODUCTION

The **Hebrew Bible**, is a collection of books of the Old Testament in the Bible which were mainly written in the Hebrew language. Except for the apocalyptic book of Daniel, which is in Aramaic, these scriptures were composed between 1200 to 100 BCE and are commonly described as the Hebrew Bible. Matthias (2024).[1]. There lies a rich history of clothing practices among the numerous civilizations and cultures mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. The scholarship of the genesis of clothing and related paraphernalia chiefly focuses on the evolution, employment and accessibility of clothing and textiles in advancing civilizations. Such studies unravel the availability of clothing and textiles in various civilizations at various junctures of its developmental history. These studies are very intriguing and revelatory because they grant us a glimpse into the mores, customs and cultural development in various civilizations over the years. Clothes have been the forte of human beings and hence, they are reflective of their intellectual and moral distinction from other

creatures of the animal kingdom. There has been arguments and debates regarding the evolution of the clothing and textile industry. It is however generally agreed that animal hides, barks and leaves served as a covering for human body from the vagaries of climate especially from rain, heat and cold during the earliest times. Subsequently fibres were extracted from plants and these fibers were converted into yarn and heaped together, twisted, knit or entwined to make fabrics, which gained acceptance in the Middle East during the late Stone Age. Hearle (2002). [2]. From prehistoric period to the contemporary times, the practices of textile production have constantly advanced and diversified, and the wide variety of textiles fashioned and designed have determined how people see themselves in the social strata, clothe themselves, and decorate their surroundings. Jenkins (2003). [3].

Archaeology is a principal source of the study of origin of textiles, their growth, employment of varied equipments to process it and also the intricacies involved in the sale of finished garments. The formal study of textile history, particularly its initial stages, is basically a concern of material culture scholarship. The significance of clothing extends far beyond a covering for the flesh because it serves as a cultural marker which aids in distinguishing between races, gender and social status. They serve to herald human perception of nudity and the need to conceal oneself in order to convey a sense of moral decorum and civility in society. Hence those tribes or people groups which continue to go bare are considered to be barbaric and uncivilised.

2. REVIEW OF STUDY THUS FAR

Even though Biblical studies do not focus much on the clothing motif in general, yet there has been attempts by scholars who have endeavored to explore this area. Most of these studies are focused towards socio-historical aspects of the same. This in turn, leads to the examination of clothing in terms of a semantic and philological approach. Also there have been other studies in which an etymological approach has been prioritised which interprets clothing based on the origin of different vestments mentioned in the Biblical passage and also traces the connection, if any, between these references scattered all over the text. The limitation of such an approach is that it is subject to multiple interpretations due to the ambiguity regarding Hebrew clothing terminology. Besides this, scholars have also concentrated towards a symbolic and metaphoric interpretation of various garments employed in various passages. However, these ignore the material aspect of clothing as a means of approaching social relationships. In actuality clothing is complex and multifaceted. This study marks a momentous phase in riveting scholarly focus towards the significance of clothing, pinpointing its dynamic role in its communal, historical and political contexts. Lennon et al. (2017).[6]. As Lennon mentions that dress is a broad category which encompasses both clothing and adornment. Hence, it can serve as a noun as well a verb according to the usage. It is a noun when it describes a piece of clothing meant to cover oneself, but it becomes a verb when the focus is on the how it is done, the process of adorning. Hence Lennon describes it as a product and a process. Lennon et al. (2017).[6]. Therefore, it entails that both the process as well as the product needs to be simultaneously subject to scrutiny. For a scholar of the past a dress is of tremendous significance because of the informational value it contains-connecting us to a past which no longer exists. It is quite true that information that one gathers is literary rather than material- yet in spite of its limitation it is able to throw light on the value systems, code of conduct and traditions of the people group subject to the study. This study hence focuses on

studying about the origin, growth and usage of dress as mentioned in various passages of the Hebrew Bible to bring forth the meanings encoded within these dresses. The aim is to decipher the symbolic functions inherent in it to analyse cultural discourses through it.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The Hebrew Bible makes multiple references to clothing and related paraphernalia. However, these references have not been subjected to serious scholarship and rather they have been accorded the status of being merely an additional information to embellish the greater frame of Biblical narration. There is a vast store of information waiting to be unraveled from this seemingly insignificant mention of items of clothing and its practices in the Hebrew Bible. In fact, the scripture is replete with references to textile items, and with the sole exception of the book of Habakkuk, every single book of the Hebrew Bible has some or the other reference to items of dress. Quick (2021).[4] The reason being clothing is fundamentally dynamic and socio-culturally efficacious and hence it warrants a serious and intentional scholarship in order to unpack the social and material impact it conceals within itself. The reason why the same is undervalued is due to limited cultural conception of the significance of clothing. In Biblical context scholarly interpretations accord greater weight-age to spiritual aspects rather than such material imports. It is said that references to dresses are plentiful throughout the ancient Hebrew literature, however when the lens of dress is applied specifically for reading the same, many things that previously may have gone unnoticed comes to the fore under this purview. Presumably the authors had mentioned these references to dresses with a definite purpose in mind. Finitis (2019).[5].

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Dress is not merely a material to cover our bodies but it is also representative of status, character and gender of a person. It possess a rhetorical function and has power to dissuade or convince just like a speech. References to dress are plentiful in the Hebrew Bible especially with regard to its description along with explicit instructions regarding its manufacture and usage. However, many of these references are skipped or go unnoticed as they get consumed with the meta narrative of the text. Hence, this study aims to understand the genesis and evolution of clothing in the Biblical times and to delve into the ancient understanding of clothing as distinct from the contemporary times. This topic has received limited attention and the scholarship in this area is in its nascent stages. This paper will therefore focus on the function of dress in Hebrew Bible and also unravel the multiple ways in which dress can function in literature as a marker of culture.

5. CLOTHING IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

A Biblical-historical approach into the genesis of the need for clothing can be traced through the life of Adam and Eve, the very first human beings created, co-habiting in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were clothed with the resplendence of glory, garments of light, which covered their bodies and hence, rendered the need for any other external covering as superfluous. Though seldom mentioned in great detail, yet the motif of Adam's apparel appears with astounding regularity in ancient Judaeo- Christian texts. Undoubtedly the ancient scriptural writings embrace the view that God provided attires to Adam and Eve before the Fall, garments of light, representing the glory of Jehovah Himself whom they were meant to represent. Gen.

2:25 reads: “And they [Adam and Eve] were both nude, the man and his wife, and were not embarrassed.” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001).[7]. At the fall of man, when they were confronted of their transgression and the consequential nudity, they designed the first human-made garment ever by stitching fig leaves together which were aplenty in the garden of Eden. “And the eyes of them both were enlightened, and they at once realised that they were without apparel; and they patched fig-leaves together, and made themselves temporary clothing” (Gen. 3:7). However, Jehovah pitying their fallen state killed an animal and clothed them with its skin as a more enduring garment in comparison to the foliage they had attempted to wrap themselves with. After God articulated the judgement on them for their willful transgression of His commandments, we notice that there itself- the next momentous step in the Biblical history of clothing as is recorded in Gen.3:20-21, “And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife attires of skins, covered their bodies and clothed them.” Although they did make a feeble attempt to cover themselves with foliage (Gen. 3:7), the garments provided by God were doubtlessly much more long-lasting and more techno-progressive. Vogelzang & van Bekkum (1986),273.[8]. Jehovah God clothed them with garments not merely as a covering but also because He was setting a precedence for humanity from now onwards. Eve was going to be the progenitor of human species and this now entitled the covering up of intimate parts of the body and barring its exposure outside marital relationship. Besides, Adam and Eve being discharged from the precincts of Eden towards a harsher clime and greater exposure to the elements of nature, it was of paramount significance that they be appropriately covered. From its very inception, the practice of clothing, was basically towards two ends- for providing warmth and also for the reasons of modesty. Cronin, Argent & Collett(2017).[9]. And this is how it is introduced in the book of Genesis, though subsequently, many other aspects of the same gradually come to the fore.

Sumer was considered to be the ancient centre of civilization which in Biblical history was popularly known as the “land of Shinar”, which was the site of the construction of the Tower of Babel. It was at this place that the language of the builders got mixed up and they consequently got scattered all over the earth. (Gen. 11:1-2). A study of the Sumerians reveals that their garments were designed principally of yarn or sheepskin. Men wore either a long saggy apparel and generally refrained from covering their torso or sometimes they wore a long tunic. The women likewise wore similar garments with a sole difference that they covered the upper as well as lower body. This manner of dressing continued to be passed on from civilizations to civilizations as was reflected in the dressing styles of the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians and the Greeks.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Eames (2018). Sumerian Figures Illustrating Clothing Worn by the Inhabitants of Mesopotamia [10].

Biblical archaeologists attribute this particular trait to their proximity to the post-Adamic race chiefly represented by Noah. After the great flood Noah, in a state of drunken stupor lies naked in his tent which is noticed by his son Ham and consequently derided for the same. This incident highlights the significance accorded to the wrapping of one's body in that civilization. Later Abraham who became the patriarch of the Jewish civilization, began his odyssey from the city of Ur which was in Babylonia towards the promised land of Canaan and would have clad himself in the modest Mesopotamian manner, passing on the same trend to the Canaanites as well.

Joseph, the grandson of Abraham and his "coat of many colors." is a passage frequently discussed in the context of clothing in the Hebrew Bible. He was Jacob's favoured son who bestowed on him a coat of many colours, which caused him to be envied by his older brothers. This example highlights the use of fabrics in the Mesopotamian region which could be dyed separately, weaved together and designed artistically

Figure 2

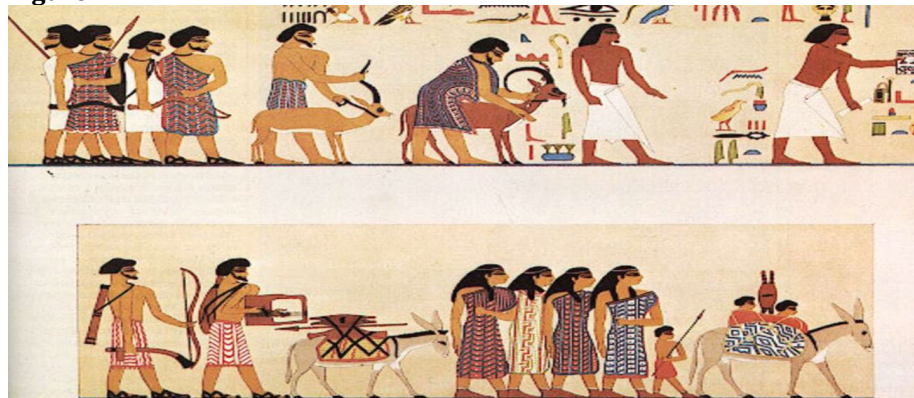


Figure 2 Eames (2018). Ibscha Relief Showing Semitic Traders Visiting Egypt [10]

This Joseph is later, sold to Egypt as a slave and becomes a vassal of Potiphar, whose wife has designs on him. When Joseph refuses to entertain her advances and escapes her clutches, he leaves his robe there in the process, and the abandoned livery is later used as a proof of his guilt. The Egyptian garment as worn by the men of those times consisted of skirt, its length kept varying according to the fashion of the period. This was mainly due to the hot climate of that region, which discouraged them from wearing too many pieces of fabrics. Hence, it is deduced that the garment which Potiphar's wife used as an evidence was Joseph's skirt. However, men also wore loincloths underneath their garments, hence he didn't go totally bare during the episode. However, the tables are turned when, Pharaoh appoints Joseph as the ruler of Egypt next to himself in authority, handing him the royal signet ring as well as arraying him in vestures of fine purple befitting his position as next in command to the Pharaoh. Joseph consequentially, became a part of the imperial Egyptian household and eventually gets so transformed that his brethren failed to recognise him altogether when they meet him after a few years. When they meet him, to each of his ten brothers, he gives changes of raiment but to Benjamin he gives five changes of the same, in order to express his extra affection for his sibling. (Gen. 45:22). These garments which the Egyptians wore were woven from flax and other plant products. Unlike the Mesopotamians, the Egyptians' religious traditions forbade them from donning animal skin. They thence, developed garments designed from plant products like flax. The flax was processed into linen through a tedious,

time-consuming process, which was subsequently woven into garments. This is hinted in the second chapter of Joshua, when the Israelite spies seek shelter in the harlot Rahab's house. In order to conceal them from the King's men she takes them to her roof and hides them under bundles of flax which were meant to be dried thoroughly before being woven. This takes place in the walled city of Jericho which was a vassal city of the Egyptians and hence the marked Egyptian influence. Another hint about Egyptians refraining from garments made from animal skins is seen when Joseph presents his family before the Pharaoh. It is specifically mentioned that the Egyptians detested shepherds, not merely because of their profession but also because of their proximity to animal hide, which was expressly forbidden in the Egyptian pagan religious practices. When the Lord strikes the Egyptians with plagues one after the other, the seventh of these plague resulted in huge hail stones falling from the sky and destroying their standing crops. This adversely affected not only the food crop production that year but their clothing industry as well because flax, which was used as raw material got damaged as well.

When the Israelites, left Egypt and were sojourning towards the Promised land, Moses instructed them about their way of life in Canaan - consisting of details regarding the type of food they could or could not eat, health and hygiene practices, medical quarantine regulations, judicial laws, matrimonial instructions etc., and along with that, Moses also gave them specific instructions regarding their clothing. They were forbidden from donning diverse sorts of garments - for instance those made of woollen and linen woven together. This was basically because wool was derived from animals whereas linen was a plant product. The mixing of these two incompatible fabrics resulted in the creation of a fabric which was of a lessened strength and consequently reduced life. The Canaanites towards whose land they were headed, followed such practices and hence, such specific instructions were given to them, to maintain their cultural essence. Priests were accorded a special status and they wore spectacular garments befitting their mediating position between God and men. The ephod which they wore was a long flowing robe made by entwining threads of gold, azure, purple and scarlet colour with bands on which were embroidered the names of the twelve sons of Jacob, who later served as the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel whom the priest was ordained to represent before God. Beneath the ephod, the priest wore a blue surplice embroidered with flamboyant pomegranates and golden bells. S. Kim suggests that this elaborate and ostentatious ecclesiastical garment "divinized its wearer" Kim,(2004),21.[11] ; undeniably such garments and other various related paraphernalia such as a distinctive turban and embroidered sash signify "that the priest becomes an archetypal figure of God to His chosen people" Kim,(2004),21.[11]. It was his regalia that distinguished him from the common people - thus highlighting the transforming power inherent in a dress. Preparing such garments like the priestly regalia as well as the regular weaving job was relegated to the women folk, as is reflected in Prov.31:13 and evidences of the same has been found in the cave paintings and archaeological findings thereof. The virtuous women in Proverbs 31, is involved in the entire process of making a dress- she seeks and secures the raw materials- wool and flax, works on it with her own hands- manufacturing it by employing the spindle and distaff- and then finally selling the finished product.

6. CONCLUSION

Based on these illustrations it can be comprehended that dress was of paramount significance in ancient cultures and this in turn is reflected in the Hebrew literature. In the Old Testament dress possessed multiple functions -

literary, rhetorical and metaphorical. There are multiple examples bearing evidence to the same. There is mentioned an instance of removing of the assigned dress in the case of Tamar-her widow's dress and replacing it with a harlot's attire, as a sign of her protestation against the injustices meted to her, or it might be the example of Ruth donning her best dress for a night rendezvous with Boaz, or instances of lack of dress as in Noah's case or of handing over of a garment signifying transference of office and authority as in the case of Eleazar who was appointed the High priest instead of Aaron. Hence, such a study focussing on the Hebrew narrative through the lens of dress deepens our understanding of the Old Testament, to discover newer dimensions in the text hitherto not seen - dress as a system of communication as well as an agent encoding societal values.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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