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Linen Loincloth in Diaspora: Identity (Re)Formation of God's People in Jeremiah 13:1–11

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Abstract: This article examines Jeremiah 13:1–11, an Old Testament prophetic symbolic action, to uncover theological insights relevant to contemporary questions of human identity amid the global movement of people driven by war and conflict, economic collapse, and the forces of globalization. It demonstrates how the linen loincloth, representing the Judahites, functions as a metaphor for addressing existential concerns about their identity as God's people. Though physical and inanimate, the garment exemplifies how material symbols can serve as indicators of theological and communal identity. In today's cultural milieu, individuals and communities often define identity through material possessions, educational achievements, age, race and ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, or political affiliation. In contrast, the religious symbol of the linen loincloth underscores the enduring significance of theological identity—shaping one's sense of belonging to God, purpose, and meaning in a globalized world. While rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the insights drawn from this text speak beyond religious communities, offering meaningful reflection for all human beings—created in God's image—who grapple with the complex questions of identity in an age marked by war, pluralism, and globalization, and cross-cultural exchange.

Keyword: Jeremiah 13:1–11, Post-Exilic Judah, prophetic symbolic action, linen loincloth, diaspora, identity formation, displacement, migration.

Introduction

Amid intensifying globalization and technological change—where East and West intersect through trade, politics, education, religion, travel, and culture—human identity faces an urgent crisis. Wars and conflicts, economic and political instability, and the pursuit of a better life drive global migration and movement, making questions of human identity not theoretical but existential. Contemporary culture often defines self and community through external and fluid markers: heritage, possessions,

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education, profession, achievements, gender, sexuality, politics, or experiences of power and marginality. While these frameworks address pressing needs of identity, they fall short theologically for communities of faith. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the questions "Who am I?" and "Whose am I?" cannot be separated from God. They are not abstract musings but existential demands, essential for resisting the loss of self in an age of division, fragmentation, and confusion.

The quest for identity in today's pluralistic society finds a striking parallel in the experience of the ancient Judahites, the southern kingdom, the chosen people of Yahweh. In the aftermath of the Babylonian invasion—marked by war, forced displacement or deportation, migration, and the search for refuge—ancient Judahites faced a profound crisis of identity. Their struggle to redefine both personal and communal identity amid loss, destruction, trauma, and human movement reveals significant points of continuity and discontinuity with the modern human search for selfhood and belonging.

Since the 1980s, the study of Israel's Babylonian exile has gained increasing attention among biblical scholars. This growing body of scholarship has emphasized the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach—drawing from history, sociology, anthropology, and psychology—to better understand this pivotal chapter in Israelite history as the scope of inquiry has expanded to include sub-themes such as migration, displacement, trauma, and diaspora.[1] Accordingly, this article offers a nuanced and coherent intersectional analysis of Jeremiah 13:1–11, engaging conceptual metaphor, dress and communication studies, and diaspora identity frameworks.

This paper offers a focused discussion on Jeremiah 13:1–11, a prophetic symbolic action centered on the *leitmotif* of the linen loincloth, through which the diasporic fate and identity of the Judahites are communicated. The analysis proceeds in two stages: first, by exploring the socio-historical significance of the text for pre-exilic Judahites; and second, by examining its function and relevance for the exilic and post-exilic communities. Next, special attention is given to the cognitive process of how the linen loincloth, as an element of human dress, conveys theologically charged notions of identity. Then, insofar as the linen loincloth acts as a metaphor of Judah's identity, the essay elucidates the cognitive and structural entailments of the loincloth for Judah's covenantal relationship with Yahweh, particularly in the context of diaspora and identity crisis. It is argued that the loincloth functions *imaginally* (emphasis mine) on multiple levels—as both a marker and a medium of identity (re)formation. Finally, the study concludes with a theological reflection on humility as the foundational virtue necessary for reconstructing a fractured identity before Yahweh.

1 All biblical texts cited in this article are from the NRSV, unless otherwise indicated.
For Review of Exilic/Post-Exilic Scholarship, See Brad E. Kelle, "An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Exile," in *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts,* edited by Brad K. Kelle, Frank Ritchel Ames, and Jacob L. Wright (Atlanta: SBL, 2011), 5–38; Louis Stulman, "Reading the Bible as Trauma Literature: The legacy of the losers," n *Conversations with the Biblical World* 34 (2014):1–13; Eve-Becker, Marie et al., eds. *Trauma and Traumatization in Individual and Collective Dimensions: Insights from Biblical Studies and Beyond* (Studia Aarhusiana Neotestamentica; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

Socio-Historical Meaning and Function of Jeremiah 13:1–11

The meaning and function of a biblical text emerge through its diverse literary, social, political, and historical milieus, as well as through the various redactional layers and editorial processes that shape it. These dimensions serve as avenues for meaning making. To restrict interpretation solely to the question of "what it meant" risks reducing the text's inherent polysemy. Accordingly, the following discussion explores at least two distinct layers of meaning and function of Jeremiah 13:1–11.[2]

Jeremiah 13:1–11 in Pre-Exilic Judah

Jeremiah 13:1–11 exemplifies a literary form known as *Prophetic Symbolic Action*.[3] This form is *prophetic* in nature, as it intimately involves the prophet—his person, family, and vocation—as the medium through which Yahweh's message is communicated. It is an *action*, in that it requires the prophet's full bodily enactment of the divine command. Such actions can be described as instances of the "embodied word," where the divine message is not merely spoken but enacted—*the word becomes flesh*. Lastly, it is *symbolic* as the performed action signifies a reality beyond itself; the action functions as a signifier, while its theological meaning—the signified—is of greater significance. These symbolic acts reveal truths about Yahweh and his people.

The prophetic symbolic action follows a three-step sequence. First, Jeremiah is instructed to purchase a linen loincloth and to wear it around his waist. Jeremiah does accordingly. Second, Yahweh instructed him to take the same linen loincloth and to hide it in a crevice in the rocks at Perath: "Take the belt you bought and are wearing around your waist, and go now to Perath and hide it there in a crevice in the rocks" (vv. 4–5 NIV). Jeremiah complies. Third, "after many days," Yahweh tells Jeremiah to retrieve the linen loincloth. Upon uncovering it, Jeremiah finds that the loincloth has become "ruined and completely useless" (vv. 6–7). The entire symbolic action centers on the narrative arc of the linen loincloth—transitioning from its initial state of usefulness when worn on the prophet's body to its eventual state of ruin and worthlessness after being buried. This performative sequence conveys Judah's deteriorating covenantal identity and relationship with Yahweh.

In verses 8–10, Yahweh self-explained the theological meaning of the symbolic action.

> Then the word of the Lord came to me: "This is what the Lord says: 'In the same way I will ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. These

2 Klaas Smelik surveys proposals concerning a range of questions: the intention of the author, the peculiarity of God's commands, the identification of "Perath," the choice of a linen girdle, the relation between the narrative element and the prophecies with which the passage concludes, the symbolic import of the river Euphrates, and the hidden meaning of the text as a whole in Klass A.D. Smelik, "The Girdle and the Cleft: The Parable of Jeremiah 13:1–11," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 28 (2014): 116–32.

3 Other Prophetic Symbolic Action in Jeremiah in Jer 13:1–11; 18:1–6; 25:15–29; 43:8–13; 51:59–64. See also Kelvin G. Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts: Rhetorical Nonverbal Communication* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

> wicked people, who refuse to listen to my words, who follow the stubbornness of their hearts and go after other gods to serve and worship them, will be like this belt—completely useless!'" (Jer 13:8–10)

The linen loincloth symbolizes the pride (*gəʾōn*) of Judah and the great pride (*gəʾōn rāḇ*) of Jerusalem. The pride of Judah and Jerusalem is construed as a metonym for the Judahites/Jerusalemites. The people have become spiritually useless and morally ruined, thereby forfeiting their covenantal identity and vocation. Their downfall is attributed to their pride and the obstinacy of their hearts. Central to their failure is idolatry in violation of the covenant, constituting a direct breach of the first commandment (Ex 20:3; cf. Dt 5:7)—highlighting the theological gravity of their disobedience and their alienation from Yahweh.

Jeremiah scholars have divided the book into two major divisions reflecting the historical situations: Jeremiah 1–25 and 26–52. Since our text belongs to the first volume, the pre-literary occasion of the symbolic action is situated in the pre-exilic period. In its oral stage, the instruction was presumably enacted by Jeremiah himself during the early stage of Judah's history prior to the exile, serving as a performative warning of impending divine judgment.[4] Eberhard Baumann contends that the symbolic action should be understood as a warning in which the possibility of repentance could still avert national ruin.[5] Similarly, Charles Southwood emphasizes the geopolitical implications of the passage, stating: "The symbolic action of Jeremiah reported in Jer 13:1–11 threatens Judah with an invasion from Babylon as a consequence of her apostasy from Yahweh, to whom she had formerly clung closely and safely."[6] Robert Carroll indicates that "It is a dramatic enactment of exile in Babylon and quite good theatre at that!"[7] Despite these prophetic warnings, Judah's persistent unrepentance ultimately led to the catastrophic Babylonian invasion, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the exile.

Jeremiah 13:1–11 in Exilic/Post-Exilic Judah

The book of Jeremiah may be appropriately understood as a work of exilic/post-exilic postcolonial war and trauma literature. The prophetic ministry of Jeremiah began in the years of King Josiah till the time of captivity (Jer 1:1–3). Jer 52:28–30 referred to the three exiles (7th, 18th and 23rd). The latest personality and event recorded in the book of Jeremiah is King Jehoiachin's release from prison in Babylon in 562 BCE (Jer 52:31–34). This historical notice implies that the final composition of the book surely took place after the Babylonian invasion and during the exile. The

4 Jeremiah scholars like Robert Carroll are not convinced that Jeremiah performed these instructions literally. He maintains others classify this as imaginary journey, dream, vision or spoken parable. See pages 294–295 in Robert Carroll, *The Book of Jeremiah* (SCM Press, 1986).

5 Eberard Baumann, "Der Linnene Schurz Jer 13:1–11," *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 65 no. 1–2 (1953): 77–81, https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=9a29906d-0a67-3a63-9deb-97461ba875e1.

6 Charles Southwood, "The Spoiling of Jeremiah's Girdle (Jer 13:1-11)," *Vetus Testamentum* 29 no. 2 (1979): 231–37, 235.

7 Carroll, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 297.

above data indicate that the final editorial shaping of the book, including our text in its literary form, occurred after the Babylonian exile.

In the final years of Judah's monarchy, its population experienced a fragmented and multidirectional dispersion.[8] A close examination reveals a more complex pattern of displacement: some Judeans were forcibly deported or voluntarily migrated to Babylon like King Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, Ezekiel, possibly including Daniel and his friends (Dn 1:1–3); others remained in the land under Babylonian control like Jeremiah (2 Kgs 25:12, Jer 39:10, 40:6–12); others fled to the Arabah region (Jer 39:4; 52:7), and possibly to regions beyond Judah; while others went to find refuge in Egypt as refugees (Jer 24:8; 26:21; 41:17; 42:14–19; 43:7–44:30). Specifically, Rainer Albertz writes: "Jeremiah 43:7–8 notes a settlement in Tahpanhes in Lower Egypt, while Jeremiah 44:1 indicates the presence of Judean communities in Migdol, Noph (Memphis), and the land of Pathros (Upper Egypt). This suggests that the Egyptian refugees were not solely a consequence of Nebuchadnezzar's conquests but included earlier waves of Judean migration prompted by various circumstances."[9] Later in the Persian period and beyond, while some Judeans—such as Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah—returned to rebuild Jerusalem and the second temple, others remained in diaspora, as represented by figures like Esther and Mordecai.

This compositional context adds an important interpretive layer—not only to the textual dimensions of the book but also to its socio-historical significance. The recipients of this literature had endured the devastation of their homeland, the destruction of their religious center, and the trauma of displacement and exile.

Truth be told, Else Holt rightly identifies a methodological issue in contemporary biblical scholarship, which this paper also addresses. She critiques the approach of reading clearly non-exilic texts as if they were intended for an exilic or post-exilic audience. As she asks, "How is it that even texts which cannot be substantiated as part of the exilic book of Jeremiah should be read through the lenses of trauma and disaster?" After much deliberation and study, Holt concludes that such texts "be understood as representations or configurations of cultural trauma, used as an agent for the building or rebuilding of a national identity in the post-exilic centuries."[10] Simply put, this is a literary and theological process of "*making past time present*"[11]—when a text brings a past event into the present, not merely to remember it, but to re-experience it as living and meaningful in the 'now.' We may now drawing on J. L. Austin's Speech-Act Theory, while the locution (the utterance) remains the same, the illocutionary and perlocutionary forces in the post-exilic context differ from those in the pre-exilic setting. In this light, the interpretive task becomes an exercise in imaginative inquiry: How might Jeremiah 13:1–11 function if a post-exilic

8 Jill Middlemas, "Jeremiah: Diaspora in Service to Exile," in *The Oxford Handbok of Jeremiah*, edited by Louis Stulman and Edward Silver (Oxford University Press, 2021), 42.

9 Rainer Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century BCE* (Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 97.

10 Else K. Holt reads Jeremiah 2:21–25 as cultural trauma in "Daughter Zion: Trauma, Cultural Memory and Gender in OT Poetics," in *Trauma and Traumatization in Individual and Collective Dimensions Insights from Biblical Studies and Beyond* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co. KG, Göttingen, 2014), 162–176, 171–172.

11 Holt, "Daughter of Zion," 162.

scribe were addressing a displaced community, seeking to reconstruct the Judahites' identity in the context of diaspora? Below is my reconstructive attempt.

Linen Loincloth and The Quest of Identity of Judahites in Diaspora

Identity Crisis of Post-Exilic Judahites

Deportation, exile, and forced relocation were common military tactics in the ancient world, best epitomized by the Neo-Assyrians, to punish, control, and secure loyalty from conquered peoples.[12] Contemporary studies on social crises—such as wars, natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes, famines), and political or economic instability—have shown that these often result in both forced and voluntary migration. In such situations, people leave their homelands, whether by necessity or choice, in pursuit of survival or greener pastures. Insights from colonial/postcolonial and migration studies have significantly deepened our understanding of the complex and multi-layered consequences of exile and displacement.[13]

In the case of Judah's Babylonian exile, one of the most pressing consequences was the cultural and personal identity crisis faced by the displaced Judahites and those living in diaspora.[14] Their struggle to maintain identity amidst foreign domination and dislocation remains a crucial dimension in interpreting their historical and theological experience. Rainer Albertz writes it well:

> The fall of the Judean state put an end to the unquestioned presumption of a national identity. As long as the state existed, Judean identity was simply a given, part of life within the national community. It was incontrovertible, no matter how far an individual might stray from the religious or ethical norms of society. As long as there was a state, belief in Yahweh was only one identifying mark among others: territorial, political, and ethnic marks played a much more important role in determining who belonged.[15]

In the Persian diaspora, separation from ancestral roots amid diverse cultures made identity a pressing issue. The text functions post-exilically to remind Judahites of their ancestors' covenant failure, urging self-reflection and acceptance of painful critique. Albertz says it aptly: "It is of lasting importance that the Israel of the exilic period did not run away from its catastrophic history but instead seized the political

12 Jill Middlemas, "Prophecy and Diaspora," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Prophets* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), 38.

13 Elelwani Farisani, "A Sociological Analysis of Israelites in Babylonian Exile" *Old Testament Essay* 17 no. 3 (2004): 380–88; Adele Berlin, "Exile and Diaspora in the Bible," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Jewish Diaspora,* edited by Hasia R. Diner (Oxford University Press, 2021); J. A. Middlemas, "Going Beyond the Myth of the Empty Land: A Reassessment of the Early Persian Period," in *Exile and Restoration Revisited: Essays on the Babylonian and Persian Periods in Memory of Peter A. Ackroyd*, edited by Gary N. Knoppers, et al. (Londond: T&T Clark, 2009), 174–194.

14 Daniel Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

15 Albertz, *Israel in Exile,* 137.

catastrophe as an opportunity to examine its past theologically...That they openly blamed the people and the kings and sought to demonstrate on the basis of past history how their sins against Yahweh had led to catastrophe ...".[16] For a resilient community intent on rebuilding personal and communal identity, the warning text may be read as transformational, shaping the post-exilic Judahites' theological identity as survivors called to move forward and live better.

The Quest of Identity of Post-Exilic Judahites

Jon Berquist discusses different ways scholars have defined identity. The definition includes Ethnicity, Nationality, Religion, and Roles.[17] These four indicators may or may not be interrelated and interdependent. The more indicators one subscribes to, the stronger the sense of identity formation and affiliation. Insofar as ethnicity is concerned, Ezra-Nehemiah addresses the issue of mixed marriage. While mixed marriage involves issues of ethnicity, the prohibition is rooted in religious terms. In matters of nationality, living in the Persian empire and in diaspora, became relativized and impractical. Insofar as religious faith is concerned, Yahweh asserts himself as their god alone and that they are to become "his people," which may carry national connotations, too. Then, insofar as roles are concerned, Berquist maintains that role theories espoused by sociologists are about "how individual people take on distinct roles in society, integrating functions and self-understanding.' Although roles may be helpful in defining identity, the multiplicity of roles complicates one's search for identity.[18] He writes: "Roles only describe partial identity. In reality, roles are not only multiple in the sense that a society requires a near infinite number of separate roles to operate; roles are also multiple in the sense that each person has several roles. At most moments, it is hardly possible to determine which role is being enacted. Each person's roles are not only overlapping but also contradictory."[19]

Linen Loincloth in Diaspora as Priestly Identity of Post-Exilic Judahites

Now, what story, tradition, activity, or material object in Jeremiah 13:1–11 might be used to articulate Judah's identity? What data are worthy of consideration? Strikingly, our chosen text makes no mention of the Davidic kingship and dynasty, the temple with its offerings and sacrifices, or even the feasts and festivals. Nor is there any reference to the Torah of Yahweh. Instead, the text is about the story of the linen loincloth. Moreover, the reference to *Perath*—although it incurred scholarly debate, it

16 Albertz, *Israel in Exile,* 436.

17 Jon L. Berquist, "Constructions of Identity in Postcolonial Yehud," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period,* edited by Oded Lischits and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 53–66.

18 Berquist, "Constructions of Identity," 58.

19 Berquist, "Constructions of Identity," 60.

is the Persian name for the Euphrates River—may suggest that the text alludes to the experience of the diaspora Judahites.[20]

Empirical studies by anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists triangulate the connections between materiality, emotions, and human migration.[21] Accordingly, displaced people often carry with them photos, textiles, and other memorabilia as tangible means of binding themselves to, and remaining connected with, their homeland, family, and culture. For the displaced, the loss of the familiar demanded resourcefulness. Informed by this research, we construe that the linen loincloth—ordinary yet portable—serves as a symbolic object that exiles could carry into diaspora, reminding them of their heritage and identity even in foreign and multicultural contexts.

Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne Eicher pioneered the intersection of dress and communication theories. They studied dress and dressing and its associated rhetorical and social functions in multiple dimensions. After all, "there is virtually nothing that is part of the human experience that cannot be looked at from a rhetorical perspective."[22] Roach Higgins defines "dress of an individual as an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body. Dress, so defined, includes a long list of possible direct modifications of the body such as coiffed hair, colored skin, pierced ears, and scented breath, as well as an equally long list of garments, jewelry, accessories, and other categories of items added to the body as supplements."[23] They conceptualize and argue that dress is a form of communication, and this involves communicating and establishing one's identity, perhaps possessing priority over verbal communication. They write:

> We have formulated a conceptual definition of dress that allows us to identify, classify, and describe both modifications of and supplements to the body.... Further, we have explored the relation of dress, as a means of communication, to the process whereby individuals establish identities and selves and attribute identities to others. We have noted that dress has a certain priority over verbal

20 There are opposing views. Jeremiah scholars see it as impossible for Jeremiah to travel to Euphrates River which will take 4 months with a total of 700 miles (8 kilometers (Holladay)). They suggest that Perath may be a short distance northeast of Anatoth in John Bright, *Jeremiah* (Doubleday, 1965), 96. Jack Lundbom reads Parah as a place near Anathoth but still maintains that Parah "symbolize the Euphrates" in *Jeremiah 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 670–71. But R. Carroll maintains "Euphrates remains the more likely candidate and Babylon as agent of destruction" for *pᵉrāt*. (p. 296).

21 Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway, and Sarah Randles, eds., *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History*, Emotions In History, online edn. (Oxford University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198802648.003.0002.

22 Karen Foss, "Rhetorical Theory," *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009). 854–58, 855.

23 Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher, "Dress and Identity," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 10 no. 4 (1992): 1–8. Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins, "Dress and Identity," in *Dress and Identity*, ed. Roach-Higgins, Joanne B. Eicher, and Kim K.P. Johnson (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1995). Biblical scholars' investigation on dress and garments in Hebrew Bible have built their work on the work of May Ellen Roach-Higgins, see Bibliography below.

> discourse in communicating identity since it ordinarily sets the stage for subsequent verbal communication.[24]

Grounded on dress theory, even as an accessory, the loincloth constitutes a meaningful component of attire in the ancient Near Eastern world. As such, it participates in the broader social and symbolic system of dress, often serving as an extension or expression of one's identity.

Consequently, Charles Southwood notes that the use of linen for this belt may allude to priestly garments: "The linen girdle may suggest the sacred character of the people (linen being used for priestly vestments in Israel), and its purchase by Jeremiah points to their belonging to Yahweh through the covenant."[25] Louis Stulman focuses not on the girdle but on the linen as "fabric used for priestly vestments (Lev 16:4)."[26] Holladay also writes: "Since priests wore linen garments (Ex 28:39), one thinks immediately of the vocation of the people to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation…".[27]

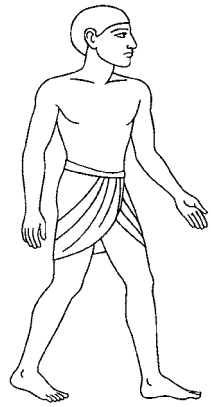

Figure 1. Outline drawing of an ancient man wearing a linen loincloth.
Image generated by ChatGPT (OpenAI), DALL·E model (September 2025).
Reproduced with permission under OpenAI's terms of use.

The above scholars are vague in the way they link the linen loincloth with Israel's priesthood, but what evidence supports this claim? The Hebrew lexeme used for "loincloth" in this text is *ʾēzôr*, a garment worn around the *mōṯnayim* (waist or loins). Mary Houston's research notes that ancient Egyptians wore the *shendyt*, either on its own or over another garment. The linen loinbelt may function like underwear. While it is difficult to determine whether the linen loincloth here is identical to the *shendyt*,

24 Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher, "Dress and identity" in *Perspective on Dress and Identity* (1995): 7–18, 16. Retrieved from the University Digital Conservancy, https://hdl.handle.net/11299/170351.

25 Southwood, "The Spoiling of Jeremiah's Girdle (Jer 13:1–11)," 232.

26 Louis Stulman, *Jeremiah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 134.

27 William Holladay, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophets Jeremiah Chapters 1–25* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 397.

the connection is perhaps the closest parallel.[28] Of further interest is the specific term used for the textile material—*pišṭîm* (linen). Unlike *šēš* (שֵׁשׁ, fine linen, Exod 28:6) or *bāḏ* (בַּד, linen, Lev 16:4), which is typically used for the office of the priests as priestly garments for religious rituals in Exodus and Leviticus, but a different lexeme *pišṭîm* is employed here.[29] In fact, this same textile term is more common as it appears in Lev 13:47, 48, 52, and 59 in reference to garments associated with leprosy. It is also used in Deut 22:11 concerning the prohibition against mixing linen and wool, and again in Ezekiel 44:17–18 to prescribe linen as the designated fabric for post-exilic priestly garments.

The above data suggest that associating the linen loincloth in Jeremiah 13 too directly with official priestly garments may be overly hasty. Moreover, a distinction between priestly *office* and *function* needs to be made for clarity. Also, one might reasonably ask: if the intention were to evoke Israel's priesthood system, why wasn't the distinctly priestly ensemble used as the object lesson? A closer examination of Israel's priestly tradition shows that ordinary priests wore white linen breeches, caps, and tunics secured with an embroidered sash (Ex 28:39–43), whereas the high priest's attire included a richly decorated blue robe, a golden ephod, a jeweled breastpiece, and a head turban bearing an inscribed diadem (Ex 28:2–39; Lv 8:7–9).[30] Moreover, when in diaspora, the absence of the temple and its cultic activities renders the office and its priestly garment not only impractical but cultically unnecessary. Most crucially, priestly garments in ancient Israel were reserved exclusively for those in the priestly office, particularly the high priest, who served as an intermediary between Yahweh and the Judahites in a ritual milieu. Therefore, interpreting the linen belt as representative of the full official priestly identity stretches the linen loincloth beyond its likely intent.

Since the text does not explicitly address the high priestly *office*, the linen loincloth is better construed as evoking priestly *function*. Linen loincloth thus becomes a creative way of ascribing priestly identity and function to the post-exilic Judahite community, recalling Israel's transformation from slaves in Egypt to Yahweh's "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19:6). Though most Israelites lacked formal priestly office or garments, they nonetheless carried a priestly vocation before the nations in diaspora.

28 Mary G. Houston, *Ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian & Persian Costume* (New York: Mineola, 2002).

29 MacDonald argues that priestly vestments are not incidental—they are textual theology woven in cloth, performing complex theological work: mediating divine presence, marking priestly status, shaping cultic performance, and reinforcing a uniquely Israelite vision of holiness and power in Nathan MacDonald, "The Priestly Vestment" in *Clothing and Nudity in the Hebrew Bible*, edited by Christoph Berner (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 435–448.

30 For full discussion on high priest regalia, see Carmen Joy Imes, "Between Two Worlds: The Functional and Symbolic Significance of the High Priestly Regalia" in *Dress and Clothing in the Hebrew Bible: For All Her Household Are Clothed in Crimson*, edited by Antonios Finitsis (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 29–62.

Conceptual Metaphor of Linen Loin Cloth

Zoltán Kövecses, who explains the unfolding of metaphor scholarship, reveals that metaphor is "not simply as an ornamental device in language but as a conceptual tool for structuring, restructuring, and even creating reality."[31] In fact, Mark Johnson strongly argues that "Philosophy's debt to metaphor is profound and immeasurable. Without metaphor, there would be no philosophy."[32] The same may be said of theological language. Metaphors are not merely linguistic expressions and varieties but a way to understand a reality like identity,

as in the designation of early Israel as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

While Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins, together with Joanne Eicher, is concerned with clothing in sociological perspective, S. J. Parrott has advanced our understanding of the symbolic and rhetorical functions of clothing metaphors. He conceptualizes how dress is associated with the self and identity of Judahites and their interaction with Yahweh as investor and divestor in four prophetic texts.[33] In this light, the linen loincloth serves as a metaphor for depicting Judah's identity, albeit not worn—both in its deformed state and in its potential restoration.

Since a conceptual metaphor is a set of correspondences between two domains of experience, our working metaphor here is JUDAH IS LINEN LOINCLOTH. A conceptual metaphor requires cross-mapping between domains: The Source Domain (linen loincloth) provides the conceptual structure, while the Target Domain (Judahites) receives the mapped meaning. From this metaphor, we *imaginally* predict and construct metaphorical entailments or inferences that transfer to the Target Domain. As noted, "metaphors can range from purely relational comparisons or analogies to purely attributional comparisons, while others defy clear alignment."[34] In this case, the concrete metaphor also incorporates the material qualities and the intended purposes or functions of the loincloth.

Material: Linen
Purpose/Function
To secure or hold up clothing
To carry objects such as tools
To define and accentuate the waist

Source Domain: Linen Loin Cloth

Material: Human body
Purpose/Function
Sense of Belongingness
Sense of Purpose
Sense of Meaning

Target Domain: Judahites/Jerusalemites

31 Zoltán Kövecses, "Conceptual Metaphor Theory" in *The Routledge Handbook of Metaphor and Language*, edited by Elena Semino and Zsofia Demjen (Routledge, 2017), 13–27.

32 Mark Johnson, "Philosophy's Debt to Metaphor" in *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought,* edited by Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr. (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 39–52, 39.

33 Parrott, S. J., *The Conceptualization of Dress in Prophetic Metaphors* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 15 Jun. 2023), https://doi-org.cegstproxy.flysheet.com.tw:8443/10.1163/9789004677456. Interestingly, Parrott discusses the theme of dress and clothing extensively in Jeremiah 13:20–27, while bypassing the preceding passage—Jeremiah 13:1–11.

34 Dedre Gentner and Brian Bowdle, "Metaphor as Structure-Mapping" *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*, edited by Raymon W. Gibbs, Jr. (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 109–128, 110.

Linen Loincloth and the (Re)Formation of the Priestly Identity of God's People in Diaspora

A material study of dress and costume in the ancient Near East offers valuable insight into the loincloth—how it was worn and, more importantly, what it symbolized and its intended purpose. We *imaginally* construct the linen loincloth as having at least three interrelated functions.

Sense of Belongingness: Attachment to the Body

First, one of the functions of a loincloth is to attach itself to the person's loin. Verse 11a says that Judahites/Jerusalemites are loincloths bound to Yahweh.

> For as the loincloth clings to one's loins, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, says the LORD. (Jer 13:11a)

The optimal utility, however, depends on it being tightly bound to the wearer's loins. Exegetically significant is the thrice-repeated reference to the loins (*mōṯnayim*, vv. 1, 2, 4). Once detached from the human loins, it ceases to function as a loincloth and becomes merely a piece of linen cloth. Its attachment to the waist is a necessary condition for fulfilling its function.

The attachment is confirmed by the term "bound" (*dābaq*) appearing twice—first with the *loincloth* as subject, then with *Yahweh*, who promises to bind his people to himself. This same verb is used in Genesis 2:24 to describe the marital bond: "…a man leaves his father and mother and clings (*dābaq*) to his wife." The imagery underscores Judah's intended intimate fidelity to Yahweh, just as a loincloth clings to the waist to fulfill its purpose. Stulman notes, "Like the linen loincloth, the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah once 'embraced' God and so were God's people…. The imagery here conveys a sense of loyalty, devotion, and intimacy. Long ago, Israel and Yahweh were inseparable. Israel loved Yahweh and was steadfast and obedient. Prideful Israel, however, no longer clings or listens, but goes its own way." [35]

In the ancient Near East, contrary to modern individualism, identity was closely tied to the deity one worshiped, often a land or ancestral god.[36] By contrast, Judah's identity lay in covenantal allegiance to Yahweh—"I will be your God, and you will be my people"—grounded in the Abrahamic promise, so that even in diaspora they were to find their identity in Yahweh rather than local deities.[37] In diaspora, identity tied to homeland, community, and culture may be destabilized; yet, as Middlemas argues, the post-exilic recognition of Yahweh as the universal deity redefined identity not geographically but religiously.

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35 Stulman, *Jeremiah*, 135.

36 Daniel Block, *The Gods of the Nations: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern National Theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2013).

37 Jason Staples, *The Idea of Israel in Second Temple Judaism: A New Theory of People, Exile and Israelite Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Sense of Purpose: To Carry Objects such as Tools and Weapons

Another metaphorical entailment of the linen loincloth is its role as a carrier. In the ancient world, the loincloth often held a dagger, sword, or chains. Likewise, the Judahites are depicted as vessels meant to bear Yahweh's presence. This image parallels Genesis's description of humanity as God's image-bearers. Just as ancient Near Eastern idols were fashioned and animated to embody divine presence, so the Judahites, like the loincloth, were meant to carry and reflect Yahweh's presence to the world.[38]

Simply put, as Yahweh's linen loincloth, the Judahites were vessels embodying his presence. Apostle Paul echoes this in 2 Cor 4:7, where believers are 'jars of clay' holding a priceless treasure—God. Intimacy with God is not about external attachment, like cloth at the loin, but about God's people embodying his presence while maintaining the Creator–creature distinction. In Christian tradition, this is expressed in the Spirit's indwelling as the believer becomes a bearer of God's presence.

Sense of Meaning: To Define or Accentuate

> For as the loincloth clings to one's loins, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, says the LORD, in order that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory. But they would not listen. (Jer 13:11)

The loincloth's third identitarian function is to define and accentuate the body, serving not just as underwear but as an outer adornment. Similarly, the people of Yahweh define and glorify him, giving visible form to the invisible God. The language of 'a people, a name, a praise, and a glory' (cf. Dt 26:19) and the use of *tip*ʾ*eret* for priestly adornment (Ex 28:2, 40) underscore this function: Judahites are Yahweh's aesthetics, his adornment before the world, becoming his renown, praise, and glory through their faithfulness.

This accentuation is intended to draw other nations to know and worship Yahweh. The post-exilic oracles envision a time when the nations will make pilgrimages to Zion to learn the Torah and worship the God of Zion (Is 2:1–5). Middlemas argues that in Israel's Templeless Age, "there was a theological shift in their understanding of Yahweh as possessing universal rule, such that the deity [Yahweh] came to be understood as sovereign of all the earth, with purposes for the nations, rather than just the covenant people of ancient Israel." [39] In parallel, David Garbin shows that for diaspora communities, religion functions as their moral anchor, spiritual sanctuary, and transnational network, making migrants key agents in reshaping global religious

38 Catherine L McDowell, *The Image of God in the Garden of Eden: The Creation of Humankind in Genesis 2:5–3:24 in light of the mīs pî pīt pî and wpt-r Rituals of Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2015).

39 Jill Middlemas, *The Templeless Age: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the "Exile"* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 3.

life.[40] As religious agents, obedience to Yahweh's universal reign transcends boundaries of geography, ethnicity, culture, and generation. Belonging is not presumed but must be embodied daily through humility and covenantal faithfulness.[41]

In the New Testament tradition, the people of God are described as God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which in turn highlight and magnify God's character (Eph 2:10). By embodying such works, Christians bear witness so that non-Christians may come to honor and praise the God of Jesus—Yahweh (cf. Mt 5:16). This vocation is framed in explicitly priestly terms: "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Pt 2:9). As such, the people of God are called to mediate God's presence and to reflect his glory and honor in the world. The priestly dimension is further affirmed in the doxological vision of Revelation, where believers are made "a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father" (Rv 1:6). Thus, the Christian community embodies both vocation and identity—God's masterpieces created to display his glory through lives of holiness, service, and witness.[42]

In sum, among the various traditions available for rearticulating the identity of Judahites in diaspora, what is particularly striking is how the identitarian function of the linen loincloth evokes the Creation narrative as well as the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenantal traditions. These traditions, rooted in the Pentateuchal sources, are original and historic sources to (re)shape the Judahites' self-understanding. Notably, Jeremiah bypasses the Davidic-Zion and Temple-centered traditions in constructing this identity (re)formation. Such a strategic redirection accords with postcolonial scholarship, which observes that the Davidic and Zion traditions had become entangled with imperial structures and hegemonic power, thereby rendering them less effective as resources for theological reflection for the displaced and traumatized community.[43]

Humility in Identity (Re)Formation and Contemporary Implications

> Thus says the LORD: Just so I will ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. This evil people, who refuse to hear my words, who stubbornly follow their own will and have gone after other gods to serve them and worship them, shall be like this loincloth, which is good for nothing. (Jer 13: 9–10)

Pride and stubbornness can devastate human life by embodying spiritual autonomy and distance from God, running counter to divine design. Created in God's image,

40 David Garbin, "Religion, Migration, and Diasporas," in *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, Edited by H. Callan (2018), https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea2255.

41 Rainer Albertz, "More and Less Than A Myth: Reality and Significance of Exile for the Political, Social and Religious History of Judah," in *By the Irrigation Canals of Babylon: Approaches to the Study of the Exile,* edited by John J. Ahn and Jill Middlemas (T&T Clark, 2012), 20-33, 31.

42 Edwin Searcy, "'A People, a Name, a Praise, and a Glory': False and True Faith in Jeremiah," *Word & World 22* (2002): 333–39.

43 Leo Perdue, Warren Carter and Coleman Baker, *Israel and Empire: A Postcolonial History of Israel and Early Judaism* (T&T Clark, 2015), 87–88.

humans are called to relational dependence, not isolation. As covenant partners, their identity is anchored in divine communion and purpose. Estrangement from God disables them from serving as bearers of God's glory. Pride exalts self or surrogate deities, placing oneself under destructive supernatural powers. Pride corrodes the covenant bond, distorts vocation, and leads to self-destruction—like the ruined linen loincloth—shattering integrity and reducing identity to something brittle, scattered, and swept away by the wind (cf. Jer 17:6; Ps 1:4).

The (re)formation of pride is humility, rooted in the Deuteronomistic shema—to hear and obey. Israel's identity depends on attentiveness to God's word, yet is compromised by refusal to listen (vv. 10–11). The Recabites in Jeremiah 35 exemplify humility as obedience, showing that shema entails active embodiment, not passive hearing. True humility is comprehensive faithfulness, not selective obedience, and serves as the foundational virtue for reconstructing covenantal identity with God.

Socio-theologically, diaspora dislocation creates a state of liminality (Victor Turner), where loss of status and autonomy makes individuals vulnerable yet receptive to transformation. Turner's discussion on the intersection of liminality with "humility and hierarchy" explains that in losing one's perceived high status, control, and subjectivity, the individual becomes vulnerable, dependent, and more receptive to intervention.[44] Liminality fosters humility—sometimes immediate, often gradual—by disrupting self-sufficiency. Ezekiel 11:16–20 affirms that in spite of and even in exile, Yahweh is a sanctuary (*miqdāš*) for his displaced people for a little while, where he gives his people a new heart and spirit. In this space of change, divine indwelling cultivates humility that reshapes both personal transformation and communal identity as God's people.

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44 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 94–131, 166–203.

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Образ лляного поясу та діаспора: (Пере)формування ідентичності Божого народу в Єремії 13:1–11

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Анотація: У цій статті досліджується текст пророка Єремії 13:1–11, старозавітній пророчий символічний акт, із метою розкриття теологічних ідей, що мають відношення до сучасних питань людської ідентичності в умовах глобального руху людей, спричиненого війнами та конфліктами, економічним колапсом і силами глобалізації. У статті показано, як лляний пояс, що символізує юдеїв, слугує метафорою для вирішення екзистенційних проблем, пов'язаних з їхньою ідентичністю як Божого народу. Хоча цей одяг є фізичним і неживим, він ілюструє, як матеріальні символи можуть слугувати індикаторами теологічної та спільнотної ідентичності. У сучасному культурному середовищі індивіди та спільноти часто визначають ідентичність через матеріальні володіння, освітні досягнення, вік, расу та етнічну приналежність, стать та сексуальну орієнтацію або політичну приналежність. На відміну від цього, релігійний символ лляного поясу підкреслює незмінне значення теологічної ідентичності, яка формує почуття приналежності до Бога, мету та сенс у глобалізованому світі. Хоча ці ідеї кореняться в юдео-християнській традиції, висновки, зроблені на основі цього тексту, виходять за межі релігійних спільнот і пропонують значущі роздуми для всіх людей — створених за образом Божим — які борються зі складними питаннями ідентичності в епоху, позначену війною, плюралізмом, глобалізацією та міжкультурним обміном.

Ключові слова: Єремія 13:1–11, Юдея після вигнання, пророчі символічні дії, лляна набедрена пов'язка, лляний пояс, діаспора, формування ідентичності, переміщення, міграція.

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