

# Change of Garment: A Symbolic “Rite of Passage” in Joseph Narrative (Gen 37; 39; 41)

*Emmanuel O. Nwaoru*

## Introduction

The Joseph narrative (Gen 37-50) is very much distinguished from other narratives<sup>1</sup> in Genesis by its unique role. It provides generally the link between Genesis and Exodus – giving answers to the “why”, the “how”, and the “when” about Israel’s presence in Egypt and its exit from it. The chief protagonist and hero of the narrative, Joseph, the eleventh son of Jacob but first son of Rachel, Jacob’s second wife, is presented all through as a figure or rather a “sign” of contradiction. He is both a freeborn and slave / prisoner; he is beloved and hated; honoured and dishonoured; accepted and rejected; recognized and forgotten, promoted and demoted alike. He has benefactors as well as adversaries; vested with authority and divested of authority, etc. At the end, Joseph emerges as a Prime Minister in Egypt and the eponymous ancestor of Israel. He is buried among his fathers, the patriarchs, and his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, become two of the tribes of Israel. The Joseph story couldn’t have been so exciting and affecting without the use of “change of garment”<sup>2</sup> as both narrative and theological device. For the major events of the narrative play themselves out under this singular motif. According to Hendel, “The repeated images of Joseph’s clothing torn away present a series of symbolic ‘rites of passage’ from one state to another, from beloved son to foreign slave to prisoner.”<sup>3</sup> It is this succinct remark that has inspired the title of this article to seek to demonstrate that the motif of clothing and unclothing lies at the very centre of Joseph’s conflicting and contradictory life experiences. It will do so with the help of a few chapters (37, 39, and 41) of Genesis which we consider essential to the development of the theme.<sup>4</sup> It will also try to relate the pragmatic importance of this motif vis-à-vis Joseph experiences to the religious and social values placed on change of garment in certain other societies.

---

<sup>1</sup> For instance, the Abraham and Sarah story (11,27-25,18) and the Isaac and Jacob story (2,19-36,43).

<sup>2</sup> The expression “change of garment” is used here in a double sense. It applies interchangeably to putting on new garments and removing old ones.

<sup>3</sup> Hendel, Genesis, 937.

<sup>4</sup> Huddleston, *Divestiture*, 47-62.

### 1. Change of Garment: A Symbolic Language

For the Biblical world as well as in many other societies, garment or an item of clothing is not just a piece of stuff to cover nakedness. Garments have much to communicate on the social and religious status of an individual or group. Victor H. Matthews in his article, “The Anthropology of Clothing in the Joseph Narrative,” has demonstrated this fact.<sup>5</sup> He has shown that cloth and clothing could define identity of persons and groups and, in addition, “serve as a form of language which reflects the societal norms of beauty, modesty, fashion.”<sup>6</sup> This is well observed in many African societies where individuals and groups take pleasure in making not only their garment but also the colour and stuff of it reveal their social or religious stand. Our concern here is not on garment per se but on the act of clothing and unclothing (change of garment) which ritually symbolises a new status or condition of life.

Ordinarily, people are clothed or stripped of their clothing for various reasons. According to Biblical narrative, the first attempt made by humans to clothe themselves goes back to Adam and Eve in their bid to cover their nakedness and shame in the garden – “The eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons (Gen 3,7; cf. 10; contrast Gen 2,25). Although this occurred within the context of punishment, God rewarded the effort by providing real garments for the man and his wife – “the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins (עֹרֹת עָוֹר), and clothed them” (Gen 3,21). Therefore, one can say that making of garments and giving the same as gift originates from God. Literarily speaking, God provides and clothes his own, to cover their nakedness and shame. It is remarkable that God’s gift of garments here achieves more than mere covering of nakedness; it raises social condition of the man and his wife, from the use of aprons sewed from fig leaves to garments of skins. This has given the prophet a new understanding about his God as the One who clothes, an imagery that depicts God’s salvific act (Isa 61,10; cf. Isa 61,3; Ezk 16,10-13; also Ps 132,16), and his conferment of authority on someone (Isa 22,21). The contrary is also valid in the prophetic texts; God’s act of judgement and punishment is occasionally portrayed in terms of removal of garment - stripping naked (Hos 2,5[3], 11-12[9-10]; Isa 3,18-24; Jer 13,26; 49,10; Ezk 16,37; cf.; Isa 47,3; Jer 13,22; Ezk 16,39; 23,26).

On the human sphere, it is difficult to categorise always the motif behind change of garment. Although clothing or gift of garment and removal of garment (unclothing) evoke positive and negative ideas respectively, the former

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Matthews, *Anthropology*, 25-36.

<sup>6</sup> Matthews, *Anthropology*, 25; cf. Roach / Eicher, *Language*, 7.

may not always be a sign of favour or love, just as the latter may not all the time signify punishment and hatred. In other words, change of garment carries with it various motifs. As the story of the man Adam and his wife reveals the primary and most fundamental motive for one to clothe oneself or another is to protect the clothed from the shame of nakedness. The action of Shem and Japheth who covered Noah their father in his drunkenness with a garment comes ready to mind (Gen 9,23). Ironically, on the contrary, Jesus was arrayed in gorgeous garment just to mock and scorn him (Lk 23,11; Jn 19,2-3; cf. Mt 27,28; Mk 15,17). Nevertheless, the Joseph narrative, as we shall later come to discuss, betrays other reasons.

Apart from being a way of exposing a victim to shame, as is customary in dealing with thieves in some societies<sup>7</sup> and prisoners of war,<sup>8</sup> rending of garment has great significance in Biblical tradition. Rending one's garment is properly a sign of mourning or deep grief for the death of a loved one (Gen 37,34; Josh 7,5-6; 1Sam 4,12, 17; 2Sam 1,2; 13,31; Job 1,20; Jer 41,5; Ezra 9,3; cf. Esth 4,1), or for the loss of something precious to someone like the ark (1Sam 4,12) or virginity as in the case of Tamar, the king's daughter (2Sam 13,18-19). It could also be an expression of anger (2Kgs 5,7); of fear and despair (2Kgs 18,37 = Isa 36,22; 2Kgs 19,1); of loyalty (15,32); of desperation as in the case of Saul laying hands on Samuel's garment rendering it (1Sam 15,27), or of Reuben when he found that Joseph had been taken from the pit (Gen 37,29); or even of Joseph's brothers when the cup was found in Benjamin's sack (Gen 44,13). Stripping oneself could be a way to seal a covenant (1Sam 18,4), a sign of spirit-possession (1Sam 19,24), or even indignation (Mt 26,65). The "rite" of unclothing of a priest may symbolically signify the end of a career and transfer of office / authority (Num 20,28; cf. 2Kgs 2,12-13). We shall discover other reasons as we now proceed to consider change of garment in Joseph narrative, especially in Genesis 37,23; 39,12; 41,14).

## 2. Change of Garment: The Joseph Experience

One of the most compelling devices that would strike a close reader of the Joseph story is the use of garments as "textual signifiers" as Furman would brand it.<sup>9</sup> Today, many commentators would agree with Westermann that there is a garment motif in the Joseph story.<sup>10</sup> The change of garment here is not just

<sup>7</sup> For instance, it is a common practice to forcibly strip a thief or brigand publicly among the Igbo of Southern Nigeria. In the past, the stolen article was hung around the neck of the thief while he or she was paraded naked around the village.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. 2Sam 10,4 = 1Chr 19,4; Isa 20,3-4; Jer 13,26; Mic 1,11; also Rev 3,18.

<sup>9</sup> Furman, *Story*, 143-144.147; cf. Huddlestone, *Divestiture*, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Westermann, *Genesis*, 37; cf. Matthews, *Anthropology*, 28.

literary device; it is also a theological motif. Hence the literary and theological functions of change of garment complement each other in about eight occasions in which Joseph experiences change of garment. In five<sup>11</sup> instances he is clothed in new garments, and in three, his clothes are removed. Interestingly, Joseph in one of the occasions has to remove his robe himself and replace it with a new garment. The structure can be represented thus:

A Joseph gets a sleeved tunic (כְּתֹנֶת פְּסִים) from Jacob his father (is clothed) (Gen 37,3)

B He is stripped of his sleeved tunic by his brothers (Gen 37,23)

[A<sup>1</sup> Joseph receives (?) a garment (is clothed) in Potiphar's house (cf. Gen 39,12; also v.1, 4)]

B<sup>1</sup> He is stripped of his garment (הַ בְּגָדוֹ) by Potiphar's wife (Gen 39,12, 13)

[A<sup>2</sup> Joseph receives a prisoner's robe (cf. Gen 41,14; also 2Kgs 25,29)]

B<sup>2</sup> He removes his prisoner's robe (Gen 41,14)

A<sup>3</sup> Joseph dresses himself in a wrapper or mantle (שַׁמְלָה) (Gen 41,14)

A<sup>4</sup> Joseph is decorated by the Pharaoh in fine linen (בְּגֵדֵי שֵׁשׁ) (Gen 41,42).

The structure here indicates that the change of garment as Joseph experiences it is full of reversals, with his receiving a garment or being clothed changing hands with his being stripped. Nevertheless, the first and final clothing events (A<sup>1</sup>, A<sup>4</sup>) remain high points in the narrative. What begins within the family circle as a generous gesture of a father to his son (Gen 37,3) gradually evolves through several hurdles into and culminates in an international royal investiture (Gen 41,42). Even though garments may continue to play some vital role in the narrative (cf. Gen 45,22), the beginning and end point of the Joseph change of garment experience can be said to form an inclusio.<sup>12</sup> But the other instances in which Joseph changes garment are no less important, literally and theologically. They take their departure from events in Jacob's family and are oriented towards the events at the Pharaoh's court.

As Joseph's social conditions and status change because of his changing garment, so also does the semantic field of his garments. The Bible employs various words for items of clothing. They include, *k'fōnef* tunic, *begeḏ* garment, *šimlāh* wrapper / mantle, *šēš* linen, *taqaš* leather, *me'il* cloak, *lebūš* robe, *mad*

<sup>11</sup> Out of these, three are stated and two are derived from context. We shall place the derived ones in parenthesis.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Matthews, Anthropology, 29.

cloth, etc. Only four of these, as shown above, are used in relation to Joseph. However, what is striking in the narrative structure is that each stage has its distinctive garment. For instance, as a beloved son of the Jacob's family Joseph has a sleeved tunic, *כְּתֹנֶת פָּסִים*, (Gen 37,3); as a slave in Potiphar's house in Egypt he is identified with an unspecified garment, *בְּגָד*, (Gen 39,12, 13, 15, 16, 18). In Egyptian prison Joseph has a wrapper or mantle *hl'm.fi* as clothing (Gen 41,14) while at the royal court the Pharaoh decorates him with garments of fine linen *בְּגָדֵי יִשָּׁשׁ* as Egyptian Prime Minister (Gen 41,42). These are the four stages that will engage our discussion in this article. It is important to observe that not all the four types of garments mentioned in this narrative are worn by other individuals in the story. For instance, Joseph's first and last garments are strictly reserved for him. He may well share with others his garments in Potiphar's house and in prison but not the special sleeved tunic made for him by his father and the garments of fine linen given by the Pharaoh. In fact, the phrase *בְּגָדֵי יִשָּׁשׁ* can only be found here; i.e., it is used only once in the Old Testament and in connection with Joseph. These two special garments delimit the framework within which we now consider in details Joseph experience in the narrative, as he changes garment at home, in Potiphar's house, in prison and in the Pharaoh's royal court.

## 2.1 At Home

Genesis 37,3 gives the prelude to all other episodes of change of garment in Joseph story thus: "Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a long robe with sleeves" (RSV). The text indicates that the tunic with which Israel (Jacob) clothed Joseph is a distinctive garment, a sleeved tunic (*כְּתֹנֶת פָּסִים*), and that he did so for specific reasons. The garment is special for two basic reasons; for its stuff or material as well as its mode – a long robe with sleeves comparable to that worn by the king's daughter (cf. 2Sam 13,18). It is made from *kitū* linen, a stuff that is probably connected with the Akkadian *kitinnu* or *kitintu*, suggesting that it is a foreign material and, consequently, more expensive. The uniqueness of the tunic is further demonstrated by the fact that it is mostly used in royal and priestly families. Hence it is worn by royal men (2Sam 15,32; Isa 22,21; cf. Gen 3,21) and women (2Sam 13,18; Cant 5,3), and by priests (Ex 28,4; 29,5; 39,27; Lev 8,7; 10,5; Ezra 2,69; Neh 7,69).

The major reason for the special gift is the father's preferential love for the younger son "because he was the son of his old age." Surely, this reason may not be enough to explain why he loved him more than any other, even though the disappointing behaviour of Jacob's elder sons, especially Reuben could merit such a shift (cf. Gen 35,22; also 49,4; 1Chr 5,1; Lev 18,8; 20,11; Dt

27,20; 1Cor 5,1). Other reasons could be quite implicit; especially when we realize that Joseph was a long-awaited child that opened the womb after the mother's years of barrenness,<sup>13</sup> a son of a favourite mother on whose behalf Jacob laboured for Laban for extra seven years (Gen 29). Having lost his mother, Joseph's position in the family is that of a motherless lad among sons of the first wife. Jacob finds indeed every reason to love Joseph more who has now become the comfort of his declining years.<sup>14</sup> Without suppressing his feelings, Jacob made this exclusive tunic for Joseph as a sign of his love for Joseph and / or of his lingering affection for his beloved wife Rachael (cf. Gen 29,18.20.30). By this singular act Joseph is set apart from his siblings.

The resultant jealousies and hatred evoked by preferential love in a polygamous family are predictable. Already the narrative shows that even before the gift of sleeved tunic, Joseph has reported to his father the strange attitude of his brothers, especially the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, towards him in the fields (Gen 37,2). The strong hatred was exacerbated by jealousy after the gift of the tunic to the extent that they (Joseph's brothers) "could not speak peaceably to him" (Gen 37,4; cf. v.11; Acts 7,9; also Gen 4,4-8; 1Sam 18,8-9.14-16.29-30; Eccl 4,4; Mt 27,18). This situation was further bedevilled by Joseph's dreams of supremacy and pre-eminence among his siblings (Gen 37,5-11). All this prepared the ground for the stripping of Joseph of this special garment by his infuriated and jealous brothers. But the occasion that provided the opportunity was a pitiable one, when Joseph went to establish the wellbeing of his brothers rearing cattle in the fields (Gen 37,12-14). Jacob's desire to hear from his sons and Joseph's willingness to go extra distance even at the risk of his life in search of them (v.15-17) demonstrate that Joseph loves his brothers as much as Jacob loves his other sons. The actions and reactions of the brothers to this bond of kinship go against the old adage that says: "One good turn deserves another!"

This gesture does not change the evil machinations of hateful brothers. This is evident in the first reactions of Joseph's siblings to eliminate him and conceal the crime, "Here comes this dreamer. Come on, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild beast has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams" (v.19-20; cf. v.18). According to the narrative, the timely intervention of Reuben prevents the worse from happening (v.21-22). As alternative to killing Joseph physically his brothers

---

<sup>13</sup> The two possible etymologies of יוסף from which the name Joseph is derived convey the message. The name is either an expression of his mother's gratitude to God who has at last "'taken away, removed' my reproach" (Gen 30,23) or a wish that God "may 'add' another son to her" (Gen 30,24). In whichever case, the play on the word יוסף expresses an inner feelings of one time barren mother.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Fausset, Fausset's Bible Dictionary, 2034.01.

“killed”<sup>15</sup> him symbolically. They “stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore” (Gen 37,23), an act that suggests his emasculation, or aims at reversing the father’s deep affection for him and, consequently, the pre-eminent position Joseph could occupy in the family.<sup>16</sup> This is almost comparable to the systematic disrobing of Inanna as she descends to the underworld.<sup>17</sup> It would be difficult to establish that stripping Joseph instead of killing him was an afterthought on the part of the brothers who initially planned to kill him, as Redford suggests.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps, it would be more appropriate to perceive the so-called afterthought as part of the narrator’s ploy to use the change of garment rather than outright killing of Joseph to create complications that moves the story forward.

But where lies the hatred that prompts the plan to kill Joseph, on the dream or on the sleeved tunic he was wearing? The text gives the impression that it is on Joseph dreams (Gen 37,19-20). On the contrary, the action of the siblings indicates that the real source of contention is the tunic, except if one would suppose as we do here that a mixed motif is inherent in the stripping of Joseph. There is little doubt that the narrator implies that the father’s gift of special tunic intensifies the jealousy and hatred that Joseph dreams provoked among his siblings. In removing the garment from him, especially in a place where no rescue was in sight, the brothers supposed they also removed the pre-eminent position that Joseph dreams insinuated.

The depth of the hatred is further illustrated in the brothers’ implicit denial of any kinship with Joseph. Firstly, they threw him into a pit, signifying utter rejection and disavowal (Gen 37,24, cf. Jer 38,6; Lam 3,53), and then sat down to enjoy (?) the food Joseph brought (v.25). It would be unimaginable that true kinsmen could sit down to eat while “our brother, our own flesh” was in a pit. Secondly, the partial realisation of the bond of kinship with Joseph awakened by Judah’s plea waned immediately because of financial gain (Gen 37,26-27). Even at that, they sold him<sup>19</sup> to foreign merchants cheaper than the thirty pieces of silver, the price of a slave (v.28),<sup>20</sup> indicating clearly that Joseph’s life had

<sup>15</sup> We agree with King, Pattern, 51, that stripping Joseph could be a prelude to his murder. See also Matthews, *Anthropology*, 30.

<sup>16</sup> For Matthews, *Anthropology*, 31, it is “a reversal of the investiture ceremony in which his father clothed Joseph in his special robe.” Such a ceremony is far from being evident in the text.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Pritchard, *ANET*, 52-57; also Wolkstein / Kramer, *Inanna*, 57-60; Matthews, *Anthropology*, 31.

<sup>18</sup> See Redford, *Study*, 142-43; also Matthews, *Anthropology*, 30-31.

<sup>19</sup> Later Jewish tradition considers the act of selling a human being a crime that merits death (Ex 21,16). More so is the selling of a brother (cf. Neh 5,8).

<sup>20</sup> For the prescribed price of a slave, see Ex 21,32; cf. Zech 11,12; Mt 26,15; 27,9.

little worth for them. Thirdly, given the value they placed on Joseph they had no scruples to exchange the blood of their brother for that of a goat, to cover their crime (Gen 37,31). The high point of the denial of kinship, however, was when they finally disassociated themselves with Joseph as Jacob's sons (Gen 37,32). Joseph who was initially recognised by Judah as "our" brother (v.26, 27) is now Jacob's ("your") son – "They sent the long robe with sleeves and brought it to their father, and said, 'This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not'" (RSV). Joseph has to pay a painful price for the love his father bears for him and for his personal endowment in the hands of his elder brothers. That price is slavery which, according to later Biblical tradition, took place in spite of Joseph's plea to his brothers to spare his life (cf. Gen 42,21). Joseph's garment has been removed. As a slave he goes naked ahead of his foreign masters, in the way of all slaves, to a foreign land. Will he again ever be clothed? That will be the subject matter of the next subtitle.

## 2.2 In Potiphar's House

Having been stripped of his clothes it is likely that Joseph is brought like a captive to the "slave" market in Egypt without clothes (cf. Isa 20,3-4). In fact, there is no necessity for the Ishmaelite / Midianite traders to clothe him, since it is to their interest that Joseph appears full-bodied, to display his youthful vigour. The appearance of the seventeen year old Joseph (Gen 37,2) could not escape the eyes of Potiphar for his household chores. Joseph is sold to Potiphar "an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard," by the Midianite traders (Gen 37,36; 39,1).

The events at the slave market begin a new phase of Joseph experience, now as a slave in the service of foreign master. It is a great reversal of his dignity and status; changing his personality from that of a beloved son, clothed in a special garment, to a slave without garment at the threshold of his master's house. Although the narrator is silent at this stage, later indications show that Potiphar clothed Joseph, otherwise it will be inconceivable to speak of a torn garment in Gen 39,12. By indicating that Joseph found favour before Potiphar (Gen 39,4) the narrator recalls the favour Joseph found before his father that was made manifest in a special garment (Gen 37,3). It is unlikely that the experience here will be different. Moreover, that Joseph's entry into Potiphar's service brought prosperity to his household presupposes a reciprocal gesture. Such a gesture is evidenced in Joseph's appointment as "overseer" (Gen 39,4-5) and as one conferred with authority.<sup>21</sup> This demonstrates that he is not only fully integrated

---

<sup>21</sup> It is important to remark that the phrase to put ... "into his hand" (בְּיָדוֹ) is a typical Hebrew phrase for conferment of power or authority (Gen 39,4, cf. v.8; also v.23;



into the household but also beloved. This appointment may also have been matched by some distinct garment to symbolise the new status and authority,<sup>22</sup> thus removing the sense of shame attached to his low status and powerlessness as slave.

The reversal is fascinating: the hated becomes the beloved; a Jewish slave becomes overseer in Egyptian household; the powerless obtains power and authority; the stripped is clothed, etc. At this stage, one can, contrary to Matthews' opinion, say that the narrative continues to employ its structural device – the change of garment<sup>23</sup> – to move the narrative to its climactic point. The contribution of this sub-unit as well as the subsequent one (Joseph's imprisonment) in the overall Joseph story must not be underrated. It is not a mere "embellishment of the narrative," and it does not just serve "as logical digressions which both heighten the tension in the narrative and provide a foundation for Joseph's introduction at pharaoh's court," as Matthews supposes.<sup>24</sup>

The favour and love Joseph experiences in Potiphar's family, just as in his own family, becomes the source of problem that leads to his being stripped and consequent demotion. Unlike in Joseph's family, this love does not breed hatred or jealousy; rather it stirs up self-indulgence in Potiphar's wife. In Gen 39,12 we read: "... she caught (תפשה) him by his garment (בגדו),<sup>25</sup> saying, 'Lie with me.' But he left (עזב) his garment in her hand, and fled and got out of the house." Ironically, it is through the hand (בְּיַד) of Potiphar's wife that Joseph is stripped of this garment. By this act she tends to forget all that the Lord has done for her household through the hands (*b<sup>e</sup>yad*) of Joseph (39,3) and ostensibly annuls what her husband placed into the hands (*b<sup>e</sup>yad*) of Joseph (v.4). Many

---

Judg 2,14; 4,2; 6,1; Dan 1,1-2; 2,37-38; 3,15,17; Ezra 5,12). See Huddleston, *Divestiture*, 59, in his survey of the use of this phrase and other important words in Gen 39.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Matthews, *Anthropology*, 32.

<sup>23</sup> For Matthews, *Anthropology*, 29, "the garment motif is not explicit part of the [Joseph] story" but only "serves as an inclusio."

<sup>24</sup> This is the way Matthews, *Anthropology*, 29, perceives the section (Gen 39,1-41,23 [sic]) describing Joseph's time in Potiphar's service and his imprisonment. Huddleston, *Divestiture*, 48, considers the section to be 39,1-41,32). On our part, Joseph's imprisonment ends in Gen 41,13 and, therefore, marks the end of a sub-section.

<sup>25</sup> It is interesting to observe that Joseph's garment in Potiphar's house is referred to as *beged* (Gen 39,12-13,15- 16,18). Semantically, *beged* covers wears of any kind (cf. Gen 37,29; Joel 2,13), from the filthy clothing of the leper to the bridal dress (Gen 24,53) and holy robes of the (high) priests (Ex 28,2; Hag 2,12). It is the simplest covering of the poor (Job 22,6; cf. Ps 22,19), the widow (Dt 24,17) as well as the costly raiment of the rich and noble (Judg 8,26; 1Kgs 1,1; 2Chr 18,9; Ps 45,9; Isa 36,22; 37,1; cf. Esth 4,1, 4). Cf. Brown / Driver / Briggs, *Lexicon*, 94a.

propositions have been made with regard to how Joseph lost his garment.<sup>26</sup> The language of the text seems to suggest, contrary to many other views that the garment was forcefully removed and that Joseph reacted accordingly. The two verbs (חָפַשׂ) and (עִזַּב) strongly imply that in the context. Although Huddleston does not allude to Joseph's reaction, his observation that "her [Potiphar's wife] act of grabbing the garment implies a forceful removal and thereupon reminds the reader of the shredded clothing of ch. 37" cannot be ignored.<sup>27</sup> Whatever, the act of Potiphar's wife prepares the narrative for another scene, namely Joseph's imprisonment for a crime he did not commit (cf. Gen 40,15). What happens to this silent sufferer who is not even given a chance to defend himself before his imprisonment? That will engage us next.

### 2.3 In Prison

Joseph is imprisoned by Potiphar, the master who once loved him and put everything he had in his hands because of the false reports of his wife (Gen 40,17-19). The name of Potiphar's wife is not given; nevertheless her role in the narrative as we already seen is not insignificant. Joseph comes into prison<sup>28</sup> without a garment (Gen 39,20) and the text is silent over his receiving a new one in prison. But there are indications in Gen 41,14 that he did receive a prisoner's garment, a wrapper or mantle (שִׁמְלֹתָא) like every prisoner to identify him as such (cf. 2Kgs 25,29). If so, the new garment would symbolise his passage into a prisoner's status. Thus he descends from a beloved servant to a prisoner.

<sup>26</sup> Some rabbinic exegetes have suggested that Joseph removed his garment voluntarily prior to his "change of heart" and subsequent flight. According to the Babylonian Talmud (b. Sot. 36b), the phrase "to do his work" in Gen 39,11 is to be understood as referring to Joseph's sexual intentions, although at the last minute an apparition of his father caused him to change his mind. Gen. R. 87.7 interprets "there was not a man in the house" in Gen 39,11 as an indication of Joseph's initial willingness which was followed by sexual impotence (alluding to the taut bow of Joseph in Gen 49,24). Cf. Neuner, Genesis, 235. For more on why and how Joseph lost his garment in Talmudic tradition, see Kugel, Potiphar's House, 94-98, also the anthology of texts in Kugel, Bible, 257-261 cited in Huddleston, Divestiture, 55 n. 23.

<sup>27</sup> Huddleston, Divestiture, 55.

<sup>28</sup> The word rendered "prison" here is the Hebrew *bôr* which actually means pit, cistern, well. It is likely that large empty pits or cisterns with their steep smooth sides were used as dungeon or place of imprisonment in the ancient Near East, including Israel as evidenced in the OT (cf. Ex 12,29; Isa 24,22; Zech 9,11; Lam 3,53). For instance, Joseph was found in two occasions in such a near-death condition, at home (Gen 37,20-29) and in Egypt (cf. Gen 40,15; 41,14); so also was Jeremiah (cf. Jer 37,16; 38,6). Cf. Keel, Symbolism, 69.

For all Joseph's changing of garment and its corresponding change of status, it is the events that took place in prison that provide the greatest platform for Joseph's definitive self-determination and liberation. Here Joseph takes his destiny in his own hand to determine his fate and status, which up till now have been determined by others. Experience has taught him not to rely much on human promotion, not even on his new position as a senior prisoner in charge of other prisoners (Gen 40,4), but on his God-given ability to interpret dreams. In prison Joseph graduates from being a "master" dreamer (cf. Gen 37,19) to "master" interpreter of dreams (Gen 40,12-13.18-19). It is the fulfilment of the interpretation of the dreams of the Pharaoh's chief butler and chief baker (40,21, 22) that invariably paves the way to definitive freedom and personal greatness in fulfilment of his own dreams at home (Gen 37,5-11). Notwithstanding the human element, which each time tends to make life arduous for Joseph,<sup>29</sup> his freedom is won and is symbolised by another change of garment. For the first time the narrator tells his hearers / readers in Gen 41,14 that Joseph himself removed his prison garment and put on a new garment that saw him out of prison. "Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they brought him hastily out of the dungeon; and when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes (שִׁמְלֹתָיו),<sup>30</sup> he came in before Pharaoh" (RSV). This self-unclothing and self-clothing "rite" marks the penultimate passage into full self-realisation. No wonder Westermann regards this verse as the climax of chapter 41.<sup>31</sup> The ultimate is yet to play itself out in the Pharaoh's court. Would it be marked with a change of garment?

#### 2.4 In the Pharaoh's Court

Fate or rather divine providence has always used people to bring Joseph to a certain height or depth of his life.<sup>32</sup> The narrator exemplifies this literary

<sup>29</sup> It is likely that Joseph's plea to the chief butler to help secure his freedom in prison waned shortly after the butler had won his own freedom (Gen 40,23; cf. v.14.15). This could have lengthened the duration of Joseph's imprisonment. We have earlier noticed how human elements such as the hatred and jealousy of his brothers and the self-indulgent love of his master's wife tried to change (for the worse) the course of events for Joseph.

<sup>30</sup> שִׁמְלֹתָיו is the general Hebrew word for clothes, but more specifically for outer garment such as wrapper or mantle (Gen 9,23; 44,13; 45,22; cf. Ex 22,26; Josh 7,6). It is used as covering in sleep, bed-covering; covering or receptacle for articles. Cf. Brown / Driver / Briggs, 971a; also Harris / Archer / Waltke, Wordbook, 2270a, b.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Westermann, Genesis, 89.

<sup>32</sup> It has to be recalled that it was Joseph's brothers who sold him to the Midianite merchants out of envy and jealousy (37,28), and the Midianite merchants who

programme in Joseph's appearing before the Pharaoh through the agency of the ex-prisoner, Pharaoh's chief butler. The butler at last remembers Joseph's plea and mentions him to the troubled Pharaoh (41,9-13). Dreams and dream interpretation are the connecting factors between this episode and the preceding one.

Joseph comes out of prison with a garment other than prison garment to listen to and interpret the Pharaoh's dreams (41,14-32). Both his dream interpretation and his counsel to the Pharaoh regarding appropriate measures to avert the looming famine won favour in the eyes of the Pharaoh (41,33-38). Having found in Joseph the divine gem of the sages (v.39), he set him over his household, his people and, indeed, "over all the land of Egypt" (v.40.41). Except for the throne Joseph is made Pharaoh's equal (v.40). As usual, Joseph's change of status (now from a prisoner to Egyptian noble prince) is symbolised by a change of garment, only that the investiture here is distinct and elaborate, equal to none in the Biblical narrative (cf. Dan 5,29; Esth 8,2; 3,12; 8,8; Ex 28). In Gen 41,42-43 we read: "Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and arrayed him in garments of fine linen (*bigdê-šēš*), and put a gold chain about his neck; he made him to ride in his second chariot ..."<sup>33</sup> Unlike in other instances, Joseph is decorated in a more unique way; the four items in the decoration (signet ring, garment, gold chain, riding on Pharaoh's second chariot) underscore the fact. As if these were not enough, Joseph is further invested with extraordinary powers (v.44), a delegated sovereignty already signalled by transference of Pharaoh's signet ring (v.42); he is given a new (Egyptian) name Zaphenathpaneah (= "nourisher of the living one")<sup>34</sup>, and in marriage to a priestly family (v.45). Although change of garment has always marked Joseph's rite of passage to a new status, what is outstanding in

---

brought Joseph to Potiphar's household for commercial interest (Gen 39,1). Here the butler introduces Joseph to the Pharaoh as an act of gratitude.

<sup>33</sup> It has been observed that the description here is similar to those portrayed in the El Amarna tomb paintings of Meryra. See Davies, *Rock Tombs*, Plate XXX, 35-36, cited in Matthews, *Anthropology*, 33. Other striking descriptions are found in other ancient Near Eastern documents. For instance, Sargon II the king of Assyria (721-705 BC) in his historical inscriptions (CAD, 'B' 258) declared: "I clad him in garments with multi-coloured trim (and put rings on him)." Also from Ashurbanipal's inscriptions we read: "I made (a treaty) with him (protected by) oaths which greatly surpassed (those of the former treaty). I clad him in a garment with multi-coloured trimmings, placed a golden chain on him (as the) insigne of his kingship, put golden rings on his hands ..." Cf. Pritchard, *ANET*, 295a; also Matthews, *Anthropology*, 34.

<sup>34</sup> According to Sarna, *Understanding* (ad.loc.), the interpretation of the name is: "The god has spoken and he (the bearer of the name) shall live".

this episode is the nature of the garment changed. It is a garment of fine linen *בגדי־שש*, solely meant for Joseph.

The distinctiveness of Joseph's investiture here indicates that the Joseph story has reached its climax. By rising to the rank of Pharaoh's vizier Joseph reaches the peak of his career in Egypt,<sup>35</sup> a complete reversal of his past misfortune and a foretaste of the fulfilment of his own dreams (Gen 37,5-11), as the rest of the narrative would demonstrate. Our next concern is to examine the relevance of the Joseph change of garment for our context.

### 3. Hermeneutical Issues in Joseph Change of Garment for the African Reader

From antiquity many African societies are familiar with change of garment as a rite of passage from one status in life to another, especially in initiation, betrothal and mourning ceremonies. Individuals as well as groups are clothed or stripped of their garment as mark of honour and dishonour respectively. Thus in the African cultural setting there is always a correlation between change of garment and personal dignity, status, and mood. For instance, the investiture of traditional and religious rulers such as kings and queens, priests and priestesses, title holders, etc., is no mere change of the colour, stuff, and design of their garment but a true rite of passage into a royal or religious state.<sup>36</sup> In Baganda and Banyoro in Uganda, Amhara in Ethiopia and many other societies in Africa the king is dressed with a special robe at his coronation ceremony.<sup>37</sup> Unclothing and clothing is a unique rite associated with title taking in some places in Igboland and other societies in Nigeria. For instance, the man for ozo title is stripped of his clothes in a preliminal rite. This symbolises his total separation

<sup>35</sup> De Vaux, *History*, 297-301, acknowledges that not even what is known today about other Asiatics who like Joseph rose to position of power and authority in Egypt within a period of over five centuries could shed light on the precise functions of Joseph in Egypt. He however believes that "Joseph's promotion to a high position was historically possible."

<sup>36</sup> This is familiar to other Biblical narrative (cf. Dan 5,29; Lk 15,22). It is also observed in Christian ceremonies such as ordination of priests and religious profession. Among some religious congregations, the rite of passage is very pervasive as the candidates progress from postulancy to novitiate, first religious profession and final profession. Each stage is symbolised by a change of garment or clothing ceremony, just as dismissal at any stage is accompanied by divestiture. Also Clothing with white garment is a rite known to Christian baptism. While putting on the garment on the child the celebrant pronounces its name and says: "You have become a new creation, and have clothed yourself in Christ. See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity..... Cf. Pueblo Publishing, *Rite*, n. 63.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Mbiti, *Religions*, 184.

from past mode of life and dressing, thus preparing him for a new status which is marked by an investiture with a new traditional ozo garment of cow skin among other paraphernalia.<sup>38</sup> It is also customary for women who take traditional titles to be clothed in a specific garment. In the same way, a titled person does not only lose his / her title for social misbehaviour but also the garment.

According to Sarpong, those who participate in puberty ceremonies in Fante and Ga in Ghana are mostly clad in green colour which symbolises “newness, fertility, vitality, and primeness in growth.” But the blue colour, “the colour for love and female tenderness” and a colour “likened to the serene appearance of the crescent moon in the sky,” signify the rule of the queen mothers.<sup>39</sup> Among the Efik of Nigeria, the young girls mark the end of confinement or fattening period that precede their marriage with a change of garment. They are dressed up “in costly robes” and painted “in white clay”.<sup>40</sup> In some societies in Igboland young men perform *iwa Akwa* (clothing) ceremony to symbolise their initiation into ripe adult age. By this rite of passage their dignity as well as their rights and responsibilities in society change. They can be said to be capable of leading an independent life and take socio-political and economical responsibilities. Similarly, newly married ladies change their maiden clothes to wrapper to symbolise the change of status after marriage. This change of garment is not just to distinguish them from unmarried women in society; it rather brings them truly into the world of womanhood / motherhood. Although the rite may be performed during the traditional marriage ceremony, *ima ogo* (clothing) as it is called in some areas takes place as “pregnancy ritual” in the first pregnancy. Here the young pregnant lady celebrates her new status by putting on her best wrapper as she goes to the market. Indeed, it is the rite that incorporates “the new bride into the husband’s kindred.”<sup>41</sup>

These African cultural practices, which indicate that new status with its rights and additional responsibilities, can be ritually represented by change of garment, and they totally agree with Joseph experience. Hence African cultures are better equipped to appreciate the social and religious significance of change of garment in the Joseph story than any other. Joseph’s experience has hermeneutical consequences for the African reader. It offers a new insight into some traditional beliefs about change of garment, especially those that would always associate cause with effect – divestiture with personal crimes or misconduct. In the story of Joseph the change of garment reveals that persons or groups of

---

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Eboh, Gospel, 108.197.

<sup>39</sup> Sarpong, Ghana, 103.

<sup>40</sup> Ikenga-Metuh, Studies, 210.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Ikenga-Metuh, Religions, 124-125.

persons can be stripped for reasons other than personal misbehaviour. Their being stripped may, like Joseph's, be motivated by hatred, jealousy, denial (of kinship), deception, false accusation, forgetfulness of one who should remember, etc. The stripped in this sense represent the "innocent sufferer," the defenceless and the voiceless, of the Biblical tradition, to which Joseph himself belongs (cf. Isa 53,8; Ps 105,18-19; also Dan 3,21).

The narrator of Joseph story could have employed this device to demonstrate the unfathomable depth of God's providence at work in Joseph. Through other human beings (including their failings) Joseph is made great and others are saved (Gen 45,5-8; 50,20). One must continue to wonder all through the narrative why Reuben was absent at the moment when his presence would have saved Joseph from being sold into slavery, or why the chief butler should forget to mention Joseph to Pharaoh earlier than he did. For the narrator, it was not accidental that Joseph married Asenath, the daughter of an Egyptian priest. She had to become the mother of Israel's two tribes Manasseh and Ephraim (Gen 46,20; cf. Ruth 4,17; 2Sam 11-12).

It has been rightly observed by V.H. Matthews and others that Joseph's physical transformation into an Egyptian makes him acceptable at the Egyptian court and reflects his own acceptance of a new identity within the power structure of a foreign culture.<sup>42</sup> That Joseph has totally integrated himself into foreign (Egyptian) culture, as demonstrated by his marriage and his style of life and administration, does not however make him lose sight of his roots. In his position of honour and wealth, Joseph remains faithful to the God of his fathers and professes his religion (Gen 42,18). He allows his religious beliefs to impact on others, including the Pharaoh (Gen 41,32.38.39). As Prime Minister of Egypt, Joseph does not conceive his powers and authority as those of an imperialist. He did not ascend unto power to "divide and rule." Instead he identified himself with the joys and fears of Egypt and went on to govern the nation as one would his own.

Perhaps the most compelling hermeneutical issue in the narrative is Joseph's indomitable spirit. Joseph does not allow the pains associated with his change of garment to dictate his future relationship with his brothers. Rather his own bitter experience taught him to reconcile and forgive his siblings who already out of fear had torn their garment (Gen 44,13). Joseph creates the forum for total reconciliation and forgiveness when he calms down their fears by inviting them to draw close to him and by revealing himself to them (Gen 45,3-5). The process is ratified by a joyful reversal: the brothers who stripped Joseph of his sleeved tunic are now clothed in new garments (wrapper) by Joseph (45,22), a symbol

---

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Matthews, *Anthropology*, 34; cf. Langdon, *Siona*, 16.

of forgiveness (Zech 3,4). This gesture apparently brings to an end the series of instances in which garments are changed in the narrative.

#### 4. Conclusion

At the end of this article one can rightly say that the motif, change of garment, in the Joseph narrative is more than a self-decoration or divestiture. For Joseph, it is a “rite of passage” into a new state of life (for honour or dishonour), just as it could be for persons and groups in other cultural settings. There are four strategic locations – Joseph’s home, Potiphar’s house, Egyptian prison, Pharaoh’s court – that confirm this reality in Joseph’s experience. However, the climactic end at the Pharaoh’s court, with Joseph ascending from Israelite slave prisoner to Egyptian Prime Minister, indicates that the change of garment motif has not only literary but also socio-cultural and theological functions in the Joseph narrative. Hence its hermeneutical values for societies such as those of Africa that mark change in social / religious status with change of garment.

#### Summary

The Joseph story couldn’t have been so exciting and affecting without the use of “change of garment” as both narrative and theological device. In about five instances Joseph is clothed in new garments and, in three, divested of them. These take place in four strategic locations, namely Joseph’s family circle, Potiphar’s house, Egyptian prison, Pharaoh’s court. But as Joseph’s social conditions and status change because of his changing garment, so does the stuff of his garments. This article examines the structure of the narrative and comes up with the view that the narrator intends to make change of garment a symbolic “rite of passage” to positions which mark turning points in Joseph’s life. It also relates the pragmatic importance of the motif vis-à-vis Joseph’s experience to the religious and social values placed on change of garment in certain societies in Africa.

#### Zusammenfassung

Die Josephsgeschichte wäre ohne den „Kleiderwechsel“ sowohl als poetische wie auch als theologische Einheit wohl kaum so aufregend und ergreifend wie sie es ist. In ungefähr fünf Fällen wird Joseph in neue Gewänder gekleidet und in drei Fällen derauf beraubt. Dieser findet an vier zentralen Orten statt, nämlich in Josephs Familie, in Potiphars Haus, in der ägyptischen Gefangenschaft und am Gerichtshof des Pharaos. Genauso wie Josephs soziale Bedingungen und Status sich ändern – angezeigt durch den Kleiderwechsel –, ändert sich auch das Material seiner Kleidung. Dieser Artikel untersucht die Struktur der Erzählung und kommt zu dem Ergebnis, dass der Erzähler den Kleiderwechsel zu einem symbolischen „Ritus“ in Situationen, die ein markanter Wendepunkt in Josephs Leben sind, macht. Es wird auch die konkrete Bedeutsamkeit des Motivs untersucht, wonach sich ein religiös und sozial bedingter Kleiderwechsel in bestimmten Gesellschaften Afrikas mit der Erfahrung Josephs vergleichen lässt.



## Bibliographic

- Brown, F. / Driver, S.R. / Briggs, C.A., *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (BDB)*, Oxford 1907.
- Davies, N. de G., *The Rock Tombs of El Amarna. I. The Tomb of Meryra*, London 1903.
- de Vaux, R., *The Early History of Israel*, Philadelphia, PA 1978.
- Eboh, S., *The Gospel of Christ and African Culture* Ozo Title Institution in Igboland, (PUA), Munich / Kinshasa 1993.
- Fausset, A.R., *Fausset's Bible Dictionary*, in: Bushell, M.S. / Tan M.D., *BibleWorks LLC 6*, 1992-2003.
- Furman, N., *His Story Versus Her Story: Male Genealogy and Female Strategy in the Jacob Cycle*, in: Amihai, M. / Coats G.W. / Solomon, A.M. (Hg.), *Narrative Research on the Hebrew Bible (Semeia, 46)*, Atlanta, GA 1989, 141-49.
- Harris, R.L. / Archer, G.L. / Waltke, B.K., *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT)*, in: Bushell, M.S. / Tan M.D., *BibleWorks LLC 6*, 1992-2003.
- Hendel, R.S., *Genesis, Book of*, in: *ABD II*, New York / London 1992, 937.
- Huddleston, J.R., *Divestiture, Deception, and Demotion: The Garment Motif in Genesis 37-39*, in: *JSOT 98 (2002) 47-62*.
- Ikenga-Metuh, E., *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes: The Problem of Interpretation*, Onitsha <sup>2</sup>1991.
- Ikenga-Metuh, E., *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions*, Onitsha 1987.
- Keel, O., *The Symbolism of the Biblical World*, translation Hallett, T.J., Winona Lake, IN 1997.
- King, J.R., *A Pattern for Making a Healthy Existence: An Interdisciplinary Examination of the Biblical Story of Joseph*, Florida 1977 (PhD dissertation).
- Kugel, J.L., *The Bible as it Was*, Cambridge, MA / London 1997.
- Kugel, J.L., *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts*, San Francisco, CA 1990.
- Langdon, E.J., *Siona Clothing and Adornment, or You Are What You Wear*, in: Cordwell Cordwell J.M. / Schwarz, R.A. (Hg.), *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, The Hague 1979.
- Matthews, V.H. *The Anthropology of Clothing in the Joseph Narrative*, in: *JSOT 65 (1995) 25-36*.
- Mbiti, J., *African religions and Philosophy*, London 1969.
- Neuner, J., *Genesis Rabbah the Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis III*, (BJS 106), Atlanta, GA 1985.
- Pritchard, J.B. (Hg.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament (ANET 3)*, Princeton, NJ 1969.
- Pueblo Publishing, *Rite of Baptism for Children*, in: *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, New York 1976.
- Redford, D.B., *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50)*, Leiden 1970.
- Roach M.E. / Eicher, J.B., *The Language of Personal Adornment*, in: Cordwell J.M. / Schwarz, R.A. (Hg.), *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, The Hague 1979.

- Sarna, N.M., *Understanding Genesis (The heritage of biblical Israel 1,5)*, New York 1978.
- Sarpong, P., *Ghana in Retrospect Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, Accra-Tema 1974.
- Westermann, C. *Genesis 37-50 A commentary*, (trans. J.J Scullion), Minneapolis, MN 1986.
- Wolkstein D. / Kramer, S.N., *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer*, New York 1983.

Dr. Emmanuel O. Nwaoru  
Department of Biblical Studies  
Catholic Institute of West Africa  
P.O. Box 499  
Port Harcourt  
Nigeria, NB.  
E-Mail: [conwaoru@yahoo.com](mailto:conwaoru@yahoo.com)