


Tearing of clothes: A study of an ancient practice in the Old Testament



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Tearing of clothes occurs in sorrowful occasions but there is a class of person that the law excludes from this custom. This article attempts a synopsis and a synchronised presentation of all the occurrences of this phenomenon in the Old Testament. Particular attention is paid to the verbal roots and mood employed for the action of rending clothes, words used for clothes, persons performing the action, reasons for the action and contexts. The specific objective of the study is to elucidate this ancient practice, especially the contexts in which it is found in the Old Testament.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The research on ancient Israel's practice of tearing clothes is a biblical analysis of this phenomenon in the Old Testament. It is discovered that this practice was used as an external manifestation of personal or communal dolorous experience, still practised among Jews today. Disciplines implicated are sociology and psychology.

Introduction

From the perspective of modern readers of the Old Testament (OT), who are separated from its world in time, space and cultural background, tearing garments is utterly strange. Its prevalence in the OT and at some key points in the New Testament (NT) incites a search for its significance. Did the persons in the world of the Bible delight in some dramatic scenes that were devoid of any importance? What could have led someone to rend his or her garments in public? Most of the occurrences of this ritual seem to have been performed by important persons like kings or royal officials.

If human beings have to link their painful emotions to the dress they are wearing, it most probably means that dress has some significance to the person who wears it. Therefore, the first part of this article includes a brief investigation of the symbolism of dress and dressing in some of the OT texts that mention or allude to this subject. This we hope will elucidate the original meaning of tearing one's clothes in the OT. The aim is to have an overview of the distribution of the ritual of tearing garments in the OT.

An overview of the symbolism of clothing in the Old Testament

Fig leaves woven into loincloths by the first parents of humankind improvisationally served to protect what they discovered to be nakedness (Gn 3:7). Deviation from the divine command made them aware of the need for modesty. Their makeshift outfit achieved its purpose to an extent. However, a more adequate covering made by God (Gn 3:21) for this first couple protected them more than their loincloths for the Creator made for them an undergarment or tunic (כְּתוּנֹת) from skins (Clifford-Murphy 1992). From this inception of the human use of clothing, its two basic purposes are for warmth and for the reasons of modesty (Cronin, Argent & Collett 2017; Ze'ev 2007).

Besides these two basic purposes, clothing, which is a pervasive human need and symbol, portrays status or position of a person. An individual is identified by what the person wears. There are, for instance, royal robes for kings (Es 6:8). Genesis 38:14 provides a clue that in the world of the Hebrew Bible, widows had special clothing that distinguished them from other women (Shilo 2005:32). Mourning garments (בְּגָדֵי אֲבֵל) are also mentioned (cf. 2 Sm 14:2) which indicates that persons who were mourning generally wore specific garments. Prisoners had their own distinctive attire (2 Ki 25:29). Priests and others who had special cultic functions to perform were known by their apparel carefully prepared for their ministry (Ex 28:2). Hairy mantle associated with prophets and visionaries in Zechariah 13:4 could suggest that these had unique

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garb that distinguishes them in the society. Virgin daughters of the king had their characteristic described in 2 Samuel 13:18 as a beautiful robe (מְעִיָּים). Persons in festive mood dressed accordingly to show their contentment and joy (Jdg 10:3; Es 8:15; Ec 9:8). They wear 'no beggars dress, but the beggars' robe that befits it' (Gunkel 2016:20).

Clothing differentiates the rich from the poor. However, Edwards (1992:232) reveals that the names of the attire for each of these two social classes do not seem to be significant for the sacred writers. Hebrew generic term for garments is *beqed* בֶּקֶד, which occurs more than any other term for clothing. A less frequent word that also indicates garments in general is *šimlāh* or *šamlāh*, even though it can also mean a specific type of garment. It refers to mantle, cloak or cape (Ex 12:34; 1 Sm 21:10[9]; 1 Ki 11:30; Rt 3:3) (Niehr 2004:159). It is useful for covering at night; therefore, the law enjoins on moneylenders not to keep the mantle of the creditors until morning (Ex 22:25–27; Dt 24:13). *Kuttōnet* is another specific garment; it is an undergarment or tunic, worn by both men and women. It occurs in the phrase *ktōnet passim* for the special garment which Jacob made for his son Joseph (Gn 37:3) and for the royal garments of virgins (2 Sm 13:18). There is also *m'īl*; it is a term for a coat, robe, 'a long outer garment open at the front' (Ze'ev 2007:213). It is worn by important persons like kings and princes (1 Sm 15:27; 18:4; 24:5, 11; Ezk 26:16; Job 1:20; 2:12), daughters of David (2 Sm 13:18) and high priest (Ex 28:31; 29:5; 39:22; Lv 8:7). It is a sign of royal or sacred office (McKenzie 1965:144).

Garments are considered an important and precious property of a person most probably because of the material from which they were made as well as the energy expended in producing them. They can be expensive and thus were given as gifts (Gn 45:22) and taken for booty in battle (Jdg 14:12). Kings had special guards for their wardrobe (2 Ki 22:14). Garments are precious possessions of a person who has them.

Rending of clothing in the Old Testament

Texts examined here are only those that clearly indicate moments of deep sorrow, especially something that has already happened or is believed to have occurred. Tearing one's clothes as a sign of profound sorrow differs from this; therefore, they do not form part of our study here.

From a general survey of the ritual of tearing clothes in the OT, it is observed that it occurs mostly in narrative sections of the OT. In the Pentateuch, it is found in these texts: Genesis 37:29,34; 44:12–13; Leviticus 10:1–7; 13:45; 21:10; Numbers 14:1–9. The highest occurrence is in the Former Prophets: Joshua 7:3–6; Judges 11:34–35; 1 Samuel 4:12; 2 Samuel 1:11–12; 3:31; 13:19; 13:30–31; 1 Kings 21:20–27; 2 Kings 2:12; 5:7–8; 6:26–30; 11:14; 18:37; 22:11. It is found in the following texts of the Latter Prophets: Isaiah 36:22 which is parallel to 2 Kings 18:37 and Isaiah 37:1 which is parallel to 2 Kings 18:13–37. In Jeremiah 36:21–24, it is said of King Jehoiakim of Judah that

he and his servants did not tear their clothes when they read the letter sent by Jeremiah through Baruch. In a context of the call to repentance in Joel 2:13, the addressees are exhorted to rend their heart and not their garments. Among the writings, the practice of tearing one's clothes is seen in Job 1:20; 2:12; Esther 4:1; Ezra 9:5; 2 Chronicles 23:13//2 Kings 11:14; 34:19//2 Kings 22:11. It also occurs in the Deuterocanonical Books: Judith 14:16, 19; 1 Maccabees 2:14; 3:47; 4:39; 11:71.

The Book of Leviticus records three times the practice of tearing clothes and none of these actually describes an action that took place. Two of these are laws: the first seen in Leviticus 13:45 states that persons who have leprosy shall wear torn clothes and dishevelled hair. The second (Lv 21:10) is a law forbidding *hākkōhēn hāggādōl* 'the high priest' to tear his vestments and dishevel his hair because of his status among the people. In Leviticus 10:1–7, Moses commands Aaron and his sons not to tear their garments and dishevel their hair at the death of Nadab and Abihu who were slain because they offered unholy fire before the Lord. These three texts of Leviticus will be useful in the understanding of passages where tearing clothes is discussed.

A study of these passages is organised under the following headings: the actors and their social status, a reason for tearing garments, the type of garments involved, verb of action used in the narrative and other actions performed with the tearing of clothes.

Social status of actors

The first occurrence of the practice of tearing clothes in the *Pentateuch* is in the story of Joseph. There are three instances and three categories of individuals who tore their garments in this long narrative (Gn 37–50). Reuben, the first son of Jacob, with some sense of responsibility as the eldest son (Gn 37:29) (Westermann 1987) saved Joseph from death. He acted in the capacity of the first in the family of many brothers. Second is Jacob (Gn 37:34), the father of the house. The third group consists of the ten brothers of Joseph (Gn 44:12–13). The action of tearing clothes by these three categories of individuals revolves around the person of Joseph.

The only occurrence of tearing garments in the *Pentateuch* outside Joseph's story is in Numbers 14:1–9 which recounts how Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephuneh tore their garments. They were trusted men and Israelite spies sent by Moses to reconnoitre the Land of Canaan. They were respected and honoured by the people for they were living symbols of fervent faith and trust in God. Furthermore, they were very optimistic about being able to possess the Promised Land.

Besides these two reconnoitres who were motivators of faith in God, Israelite leaders were frequently involved in tearing of garments for various reasons which will be pointed out in the next section of this article. Their actions are seen mostly in the *Former Prophets* or the historical part of the OT.

These leaders include Joshua who was the immediate successor of Moses (Jos 7:1–6); Jephthah, a judge (Jdg 11:34–35); David and his close associates, who were most likely to be the king's eminent officials (2 Sm 1:11–12; 13:30–31); Joab, an army general, and fellow soldiers (2 Sm 3:31); Hushai of Archite who was King David's friend (2 Sm 15:32); Ahab, king of Israel (1 Ki 21:20–27); Prophet Elisha (2 Ki 2:12); a king of Israel (2 Ki 5:7–8; 6:26–30); Queen Athaliah of Judah (2 Ki 11:14); Eliakim, Shebna and Joab who were officials at the king's palace (2 Ki 18:37); King Hezekiah of Judah (2 Ki 19:1); King Josiah of Judah (2 Ki 22:11). Still, in the Former Prophets, others who were not leaders but involved in tearing their garments include Tamar, daughter of David and sister of Absalom (2 Sm 13:19), and an unidentified man from the tribe of Benjamin mentioned in 1 Samuel 4:12. Perhaps, leaders are mostly mentioned as tearing their clothes in this section of the Bible because its varied narratives concentrate more on their actions as those at the helm of national affairs.

In the Latter Prophets, some of the examples of tearing clothes have their parallels in the Historical Books: the episode narrated in 2 Kings 18:37 on how Eliakim, Shebna and Joab tore their garments is the same in Isaiah 36:22. Similarly, Hezekiah's tearing of garments in 2 Kings 19:1 is seen again in Isaiah 37:1. In addition to these, there is only one record of the actual tearing of garments and it was by 80 men from Shechem, Shiloh and Samaria (Jr 41:5). These men have been described as pilgrims who were on their way to Jerusalem (Holladay 1989). There is an instance where King Jehoiakim and his servants were expected to rend their garments but they did not care to do so (Jr 36:21–24). Finally, in Joel 2:13, the prophet admonishes his addressees to rend their heart and not their garment. The second stich of this verse (:הוּא אֶרְדָּ אֵלַיִם וְרַב־תְּסִד וְנָקַם עַל־הָרָעָה) elucidates the meaning of the prophet's injunction: it was a call for repentance.

Just as in the Latter Prophets where some of the narratives have their parallels in the Historical Books, two examples of tearing garments in the writings are also narrated in the Former Prophets. These are 2 Chronicles 23:13 (cf. 2 Ki 11:14) which is about Queen Athaliah and 2 Chronicles 34:19 (cf. 2 Ki 22:11) on Josiah, King of Judah. Other example of tearing garments in the writings is Job, presented as an affluent righteous person who was unjustly afflicted (Job 1:20).

In the Deuterocanonical books, leaders who participated in the tearing garments are included: Bagoas, an official at the Babylonian palace (Jud 14:16); leaders of the Assyrian army (Jud 14:19); Mattathias, a priest, and his sons (1 Macc 2:14); Judas, who was also called Maccabeus, and his brothers; he was a leader of the people (1 Macc 3:47; 4:39); Jonathan, a leader of the people (1 Macc 11:71). The whole population of Gazara, a gentile city (1 Macc 13:45), also tore their garments.

If Jacob and his sons are considered as special leaders of the people because of their status as the eponym and ancestors of the Israelites, respectively, the predominant social condition

of persons involved in tearing clothes in OT is leadership, persons of a high social standard, to which one can add the princess Tamar. The prevalence of this practice among prominent individuals can be attributed to the narrators' deliberate focus on the leading class of the people. The next step in our study could shed more light on this.

Tracing the reasons for tearing clothes in the Old Testament

The following cursory reading of the texts where persons tore their garments in the OT is aimed at eliciting the various reasons for this ritual. Reuben tore his garments (Gn 37:29) when he was convinced that his plan to save Joseph had been foiled by his brothers. He seems to nurture some affection for Joseph in spite of the conjoint conspiracy of Jacob's sons to eliminate Joseph. His determination to prevent fratricide as well as his deep sorrow at Joseph's apparent death corroborates this. Two things must have motivated Reuben's action of tearing his clothes at Joseph's seeming death: first was his position as the eldest of his brothers and second was his love and concern for Joseph whom he referred to in the narrative as *hayyeled*, 'the boy', indicating the tender age of his younger brother.

When the story of the feigned death of Joseph reached their father Jacob, his immediate reaction was to rend his garments (Gn 37:34). He did so at the news of the death of a son whom he manifestly loved more than his other sons. What is at play here is the strong father-son bond which Jacob thought that death had severed. A father feels the pain of the death of a most cherished son.

The third instance of tearing clothes in Joseph's story occurs in Genesis 44:12–13 and it was performed by the 10 sons of Jacob. Their persuasive words made Jacob allow them to return to Egypt with Benjamin at the request of Joseph whose identity was still concealed from them. They were in utter confusion when, as planned by Joseph, Benjamin was convicted of stealing the Egyptian governor's cup. Punishment for the culprit was already announced before their sacks were searched (Gn 44:9); Benjamin would die and they themselves would become slaves of this governor. The thought of losing the second brother and consequently not fulfilling the promise they made to their father incited their rending of clothes. They felt responsible for protecting the life of Benjamin and preventing further grief of their father. This responsibility was greatly threatened and life was in danger (Liubov 2014).

Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephuneh tore their garments (Nm 14:1–9) because the Israelites rebelled against God and manifested lack of faith in him. This was in contrast to the ardent faith of these two men and their eagerness to enter and possess the Promised Land. Their fellow countrymen wanted to go back to Egypt. They tore their garments (Nm 9:6) in dismay at the people's faithlessness. They were disappointed at the disbelief manifested by others. That which they cherished so much was greatly endangered.

The death of 36 Israelites killed by the men of Ai as a divine punishment for the sin of Achan son of Carmison who incurred God's anger by defiling sacred things (Js 7:1-6) made Joshua rend his garments (Js 7:6). As the leader of the people, he was greatly moved by the death of those under him. These ill-fated men lost their lives; they were among those who went to fight the enemy. Death of his subjects motivated Joshua's action of tearing his clothes.

Would Jephthah have torn his clothes if another person other than his only daughter had been the first to meet him? This valiant judge warrior vowed to God to sacrifice the first person who would meet him in his house when returning victorious from his war expedition with the Ammonites. Unfortunately for him, it was his only child that came out of the door of his house to meet him. He tore his garments at the pain of losing his daughter (Jdg 11:29-40). He articulated his emotions in these words to his daughter (Jdg 11):

Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow. (v. 35)

Jephthah tore his garment because of what he was convinced would befall his daughter.

In 1 Samuel 4:12, a man of the tribe of Benjamin tore his garments because of the great calamities that befell Israel: the Philistines defeated them killing 30 000 foot soldiers; the ark was captured, and the two sons of Eli – Hophni and Phinehas – also died (1 Sm 4:10-11). His action was a reaction to an event that had occurred. He mourned as he ran to bring the sad news to the city, particularly to Eli.

An Amalekite, whom Saul asked to kill him, accomplished the deed but tore his garment at the horror of what had happened (2 Sm 1:1-10). Tearing his clothes was for him a means of expressing his sorrow at the death of the king or a feeling of remorse for having quickened the death of Saul, even though Saul himself wanted it so.

Rending of garments by David and his officials at the death of Saul and Jonathan was also a sign of mourning (2 Sm 1:11-12). They bewailed an event that had already happened. Strong feelings of the loss of dear ones made them do this.

In 2 Samuel 3:31, we have an instance where one is commanded to tear his garment for having killed another person. Joab killed Abner in revenge for the offence Abner committed against him; Abner killed Joab's brother (2 Sm 3:30) (Hamilton 2004:308). David considered this murder an unjust course and compelled Joab to rend his garments as a sign of mourning. It is taken for granted that Joab obeyed the king's command, even though the narrative is silent about this. Joab could not have disobeyed David's command. Tearing garments in this context is taken as a necessary sign of mourning for the dead, even when it had to be imposed by a higher authority.

David's daughter, Tamar, tore (2 Sm 13:19) her royal 'long robe with sleeves' (2 Sm 13:18) out of grief for the violence she suffered from her half-brother, Amnon. Amnon sexually violated and repudiated her (2 Sm 13:15-17), in spite of all her pleadings. Tamar's grief was twofold: loss of virginity and failure on the part of Amnon to compensate her by marriage (Anderson 1989:175). She tore her robe to show her anguish. Her action also foreshadowed the disintegration of the fabric of David's family after Absalom plotted and took his revenge (Vamosh 2007:76).

Death of his son, Amnon, was the reason for David tearing his garments (2 Sm 13:30-31). The death of Amnon had already taken place. Absalom revenged his sister Tamar by conspiring against and killing Amnon. However, the news that David received was a rumour that all his sons were murdered. He could have all the same torn his garment even if it were only Amnon that died.

Hushai the Archite tore his garment and mourned the misfortune of King David his friend (2 Sm 15:32). David had to flee from his son Absalom and Hushai knew what this meant for the king. He showed his displeasure at this by tearing his garments. Torn garments in this text is a sign of mourning for an unpleasant situation of a loved one.

King Ahab tore his garments (1 Ki 21:27) when he heard the divine judgements pronounced by Elijah because of the atrocities committed by the king and his wife Jezebel (1 Ki 21:17-29). The climax of their evil deeds was the killing of Naboth for selfish interest. Ahab's gesture of tearing garments and other accompanying actions were considered as humility (1 Ki 21:29); therefore, the punishments would not become effective in his time. Is tearing garments in this context a sign of humility, or 'regal self-judgment' (DeVries 1985:258) or repentance? (Eileen 1972). It seems all these can be deduced from what Ahab did besides torn garments: he put on sackcloth over his bare flesh; he fasted, lay in the sackcloth and went about dejectedly (1 Ki 21:29). All these are gestures of a repentant person.

Separation from a close companion, not necessarily the thought of death, made Elisha tear his garments in two (2 Ki 2:12). Elijah was like a father to him, or so highly respected that he had to address him with the title 'father' (Hobbs 1985), and he was taken away from him. In tearing his garments, Elisha expresses grief at the separation.

The king of Israel, to whom the Aramean king sent a letter to help Naaman obtain healing (Ska 2000), was panic-stricken such that he tore his garments (2 Ki 5:7). He thought that the king of Aram was trying to pick a quarrel with him (2 Ki 5:7). Tearing garments was also as a result of a fearful feeling of imminent danger.

In 2 Kings 6:26-30, the devastating condition generated by hunger made some people begin to practise cannibalism. When the king heard about this, he tore his garments because

of sorrow for the situation of his people. One can tear one's garments out of distress for a particularly awful situation.

Queen Athaliah tore her clothes (2 Ki 11:14; 2 Chr 23:13) when she became aware of the conspiracy against her and the consequences of such an evil plot. Her fear was not unfounded for she was eventually killed by those who opposed her. In this context, tearing clothes was also an expression of an inner feeling of imminent danger.

Eliakim, Shebna and Joab in 2 Kings 18:37 (Is 36:22) tore their garments when King of Assyria threatened to destroy Jerusalem. The looming national catastrophe (Liubov 2014) made these officials and King Hezekiah tear their garments (2 Ki 19:1; Is 37:1).

In 2 Kings 22:11 (cf. 2 Chr 34:19), King Josiah tore his garment when he heard the words of *The Book of the Law* discovered in the House of the Lord. He explained the reason for his action in these words (2 Ki 22):

for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us. (v. 13)

In tearing his clothes, he expressed sorrow at the infidelity of his people and fear of the punishment because of their sin. Hobbs (1985:326) reveals that Josiah's move was also a gesture of despair, anger and of repentance.

Eighty men from Shechem and Shiloh and Samaria who tore their garments (Jr 41:5) after the destruction of Jerusalem and the murder of Gedaliah who was appointed the governor in Israel by the king of Babylon meant to mourn their leader and also mourn for the destruction of Jerusalem (McKane 1996). It was a mourning gesture for the devastation their nation was experiencing.

When all his children died and he also lost all his possessions, Job expressed his mental agony by tearing his garments (Job 1:20). Similarly, his three friends – Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar – did the same (Job 2:12) when they came to condole with him and observed that his body was full of sores. Tearing clothes can be an expression of empathy for another person's pitiable condition.

Mordecai tore his garments (Es 4:1) when there was a conspiracy to exterminate the Jews. His love and devotion to the welfare of his people moved him to some actions which tearing his garments symbolically initiated.

The unfaithfulness of his people made Ezra rend his garments and mantle (Ez 9:5). He was highly dramatic and the action could have been so planned in order to attract public attention to his protest (Blenkinsopp 1989) and to incite the people to repentance.

In Judith 14:16, Bagoas, an official at the Babylonian palace, and leaders of the army (Jth 14:19) tore their garments on discovering the death of Holofernes, who was beheaded in

his house. Horror and fear of the sight, as well as the consequences of the dead of their leader, made them tear their garments. They tore their garments as they mourned for him.

Mattathias and his sons tore their garments (1 Macc 2:14) because of blasphemies being committed in Judah and Jerusalem (1 Macc 2:6). Their patriotism made them express their displeasure at the happenings. Tearing their clothes appears an outward manifestation of their grief and lamentation.

In 1 Maccabees 3:47, Judas who was called Maccabeus and his brothers tore their garments as part of their spiritual preparation for battle. This gives us further insight into the significance of tearing clothes in the biblical world.

Judas and his brothers expressed their grief by tearing their garments (1 Macc 4:39) when the temple was profaned by infidels. They mourned for the desecration of the holy place which was the focus of their life and relationship with God. Tearing their clothes was for them a way of expressing their agony.

When deserted by the men with him in his military campaign, Jonathan tore his garments (1 Macc 11:71) as a sign of distress for their action (McEleney 1992). He prayed and tore his garments. Unpleasant life situation can induce one to rend one's garments.

In 1 Maccabees 13:45, all the inhabitants (men, women and children) of a gentile city, Gazara, tore their garments before the victorious Hasmonean Simon who was about to besiege their city. Fear and horror provoked their actions.

Types of garments

It is observed that there are various types of garments involved in the practice of tearing clothes in the OT. The most common garment mentioned is *beged* employed frequently in the plural form, *b^egādīm*. It is in the plural because this word is a generic term for clothing; the plural form could refer to all other clothing together. This means that not just one garment is torn. The only exception is in Ezra 9:5 where the singular form is used; Ezra tore his *beged* and another called *m^e'îl*. This implies that he tore two different types of the garment which he was wearing, perhaps to show the depth of his distress. Apart from Ezra 9:5, *m^e'îl* occurs again in Job 1:20; 2:12. In these texts, it is construed in the singular form. As *m^e'îl* is a special type of clothing, a mantle worn by distinguished persons; it can only be one at a time. Another type of clothing is *šimlāh* occurring only in Genesis 37:34; 44:12–13; Joshua 7:1–6, and always in the plural form, perhaps because it is also a generic term for clothing. A garment called *mad* appears just once and in plural (cf. 1 Sm 4:12); it was torn by a man of the tribe of Benjamin who came from the battlefield, bringing news of the massive defeat of the Israelites by the Philistines. *Mad* could be used because it is a term associated with battle; in fact, 'it refers to battle dress' (Fabry 1997). Tamar's royal robe which she tore (2 Sm 13:19)

out of distress is called *ktōnet happassim*. It occurs only here in the OT practice of tearing clothes. A simple *kuttōnet* 'tunic' occurs in the singular form in 2 Samuel 15:32 and in the Greek (γυτών) of Judith 14:19.

Beqed, which is a common OT term for garment or clothing, can occur in both singular and plural forms. In all its occurrences in tearing clothes, except once in Ezra 9:5, the plural form is always used. It has been observed above that Ezra also had his royal mantle, that is to say that he had two different types. The plural use in tearing clothes most probably indicates that the individual tore more than one type of clothing. A similar explanation can also be given to another common word for clothing in OT, *šimlāh* which occurs in plural form in the practice of tearing garments. Specific garments like *m'ūl* and *kuttōnet* are in singular and just that was torn and no other.

The verb of action in tearing clothes

With the exception of Leviticus 10:1–7 that uses the verbal root פָּרַם 'to tear clothes into pieces', the OT is consistent in using the root קָרַע 'tear, rend', in the qal for the action of tearing clothes. This Hebrew root is associated with the ritual of tearing of clothes in the OT (Thiel 2004). Very little is known in the OT on how the garments were torn. It is only in 2 Kings 2:12 that Elisha tore his garment into two. A certain study of the verb of action, קָרַע, offers this observation: 'an examination of its use shows conclusively that a violent action of tearing is denoted by it' (Morris 1900:23). This makes sense if tearing clothes is 'an expression of fear, horror, consternation, or dismay over a calamity that has directly or indirectly affected the person performing the action, or threatens to do so' (Thiel 2004:175). It is said of Jacob, for instance, that after tearing his clothes, he put on sackcloth on his loins (Gn 37:34). This could mean that his body was indeed exposed by the tearing of clothes. It is also said of Ahab that he put sackcloth on his bare flesh. Tearing of clothes must have been performed in such a way that one was almost naked and needed another covering.

Other actions performed with the tearing of clothes

One of the outstanding actions that accompany tearing of garments is 'to put on sackcloth'. Sack (*šak* in Hebrew) is 'a rough fabric woven of hair, dark in color, used among other purposes for grain bags' (McKenzie 1965:753). It is a poor-quality material of goat hair which is coarse in nature (De Vaux 1994). Its texture and color must have made it both uncomfortable to the skin and unpleasant to the sight. Those who used it as part of the ritual of tearing garments include: Jacob (Gn 37:34); Ahab put it on and also lay on it (1 Ki 21:20–27); king of Israel (2 Ki 6:26–30); King Hezekiah covered himself with sackcloth (2 Ki 19:1); Mordecai (Es 4:1); Mattathias and his sons (1 Macc 2:4); Judas and his brothers (1 Macc 3:47). The quality of the material denotes a feeling of affliction on the part of the mourners.

Another action is 'to put dust or ashes on one's head'. Joshua and the men with him put dust ('*āpār*) on their heads as part of their mourning (Jos 7:6). Others were: a man from Benjamin (1 Sm 4:12); an Amalekite (2 Sm 1:2); Tamar (2 Sm 13:19); Hushai the Archite (1 Sm 15:32); friends of Job (Job 1:12); Mordecai (Es 4:1); Judas and his brothers (1 Macc 3:47; 4:39). Disheveling of one's hair (cf. Lv 10:1–7; 13:45; 21:10) is also in this category of disfiguring one's appearance as a sign of mourning.

Inflicting corporal punishment on oneself also accompanies the ritual of tearing clothes. On two occasions, we see individuals who fasted. David and his officials fasted when they mourned for Saul and Jonathan (2 Sm 1:11–12). The second text is 1 Maccabees 3:47 where Judas and his brothers abstained from food as part of their preparation for battle. Another form of self-imposed punishment is to gash one's body as the 80 men from Shechem, Shiloh and Samaria did (Jr 41:5). There are also instances where some shaved their head and beard as a sign of mourning (Jr 41:5; Job 1:20).

Taking postures of prayer and actually praying also go with tearing garments. Hezekiah went into the house of God with his torn clothes and prayed to God (2 Ki 19:1). Job fell on the ground and worshipped God (Job 1:20). Ezra fell on his knees, spread out his hands to the Lord and prayed (Ez 9:5). Jonathan prayed when deserted by the men with him in his military campaign (1 Macc 11:71).

Others cried out or shouted because of their terrifying situations. Athaliah, for instance, cried out when she noticed the plan against her (2 Ki 11:14; 2 Chr 23:13). Bagoas and leaders of the army cried out with a loud voice, wept, groaned and shouted (Jud 14:16, 19). Inhabitants of Gazara cried out with a loud voice when their city was in danger.

Towards a synthesis of the practice of tearing clothes in the Old Testament

Garments are a human necessity for covering. They can be expensive because of the material from which they are made and because of labour involved in producing them. A garment signifies the identity of the person who wears it. In other words, the worth of a person is known for his or her dress; garment communicates one's personality. Generally, garments and act of clothing belong to human sphere, for animals are not concerned about what to wear and how to wear it. Garments have some affinities with human respect. Furthermore, a garment typifies modesty and positive pride of self.

When one rends one's clothes, one strips oneself of all these different aspects of the significance of clothing in human life. There seems to be a voluntary and spontaneous self-humiliation associated with tearing one's garments, and to some extent dehumanisation. That which is fundamental to human is adversely affected. When comfortable, expensive

and fine clothing is replaced with coarse and unattractive sackcloth, the person acts out his or her inner life experience. There is a kind of transformation from a joyful mood to a painful state. Tearing one's garment expresses in a powerful gesture, which can be violent and spontaneous, a sudden drastic change.

Only doleful life situations of various types can induce one into tearing one's garments. Conspicuous among these is the real or imagined death of a loved one. It is a separation in this present world and tearing clothes signifies both the reality of the separation and the psychological status of the bereaved. It is a condition of intense distress that does not deserve comfortable fine garments. Because garments are readily at hand, the mental agony and anger of the sufferer are vented on what is very close.

Humiliation and repudiation experienced from others, like in the case of Tamar (2 Sm 13) and perhaps by Joseph's brothers (Gn 44:12–13), are painful and such degrading condition can be represented by rending garments. Just as humiliation renders one less human, torn clothing manifests the frustrating emotion of the person affected.

Fear and horror of imminent danger is also another life situation that leads to tearing garments. There seems to be in the torn garments of the sufferer an anticipation of what will happen. The person experiences or lives in the present what he strongly believes will befall him. Such inner feeling must have led Athaliah to tear her garments (2 Ki 11:14). King Hezekiah and his officials imagined the reality of national disaster (2 Ki 19:1). The inhabitants of Gazara lived in the present an imminent danger that would be like violent dehumanisation (1 Macc 13:45).

Firm and unalloyed adherence to God's law and promises denotes life for his faithful (Ps 1; 119). In contrast, deviation from God's way is tantamount to a disaster that leads to death, which begins already in this world with some corrective measures from God; the faithful shudder at those who infringe on God's law. Joshua and Caleb tore their garments (Nm 14:1–7) in amazement at those who were unbelieving in God's promise of the Land. King Josiah manifested his anger by tearing his garments (2 Ki 22:11) because the dictates of the law were ignored by his people. The ritual of tearing clothes by both the king and reconnoitres denotes the consequence of unbelief on the part of those who should have had strong faith in God. Josiah articulates it in these words: 'for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this book' (2 Ki 22:13).

Conclusion

The writers of Sacred Scripture were rarely engaged in a systematic treatise on some ancient customs. Readers have to scan closely through the texts and the extant extra-biblical writings in order to understand the nature and the meaning of such practices. Lack of sufficient information can make the

significance of these ancient customs very elusive. Moreover, some of the ancient practices are so interwoven that they make them difficult for modern readers to differentiate one from the other. Tearing garments in the OT is a case in point which is the subject of this research. Its use in the OT is so multifarious for it occurs in varied painful life situations of those who practised it. Clothing is identified with the person who wears it. It is also observed that anyone in any kind of mournful or threatening situation could rend his or her garments in order to release or forcefully express his or her strong emotions. Persons in the position of authority or responsibility feature most in this practice. This can be attributed to the prevalent projection of leaders in the OT. It is most likely that common people also tore their garments, even when they are not recorded in the OT.

The mode of tearing clothes is also not clear in the OT. Besides Elisha who tore his mantle in two, the writers did not record how this ritual was carried out. They, however, were very consistent, with the exception of Leviticus, in using the verb קרע 'to rend, tear', which does not also convey the mode of rending garments. One thing certain about the practice, which is sometimes accompanied by other gestures such as wearing sackcloth and putting ashes on one's head or praying, is that it occurred invariably at an unpleasant moment in a person's life. Our close reading of the texts shows that it denotes the rending of the inner being of a person.

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The authors declare that they have no competing interests with regard to the writing of this article.

Authors' contributions

O.M.J carried out this research. F.C.U. provided editorial assistance for the article.

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