

THE BLUE, THE PURPLE AND THE SCARLET. THE MAKING AND MEANING OF THE COLOURED  
FABRICS OF THE TEMPLE.

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‘And you shall make a veil, *pārōktheth*, of blue, *t<sup>e</sup>khēleth*, and purple, *’argāmān*, and scarlet, *tōla’ath šānī*, stuff, and fine twined linen, *šēš mošzār*; in skilled work, *ḥošēbh*, shall it be made, with cherubim’ (Exod.26.31).

‘You shall make the tabernacle of ten curtains, *y<sup>e</sup>ri’oth*, of fine twined linen, *šēš mošzār*, and blue and purple and scarlet stuff; with cherubim skilfully worked, *ḥošēbh*, shall you make them’ (Exod.26.31).

A door curtain was made from the same coloured threads and fine twined linen, but it was the work of a weaver of colours, *roqēm*, with no mention of the ‘skilled work’, *ḥošēbh*, (Exod.26.36)

These prescriptions are repeated at Exodus 36.8, 18, 35.

The Deuteronomist does not mention fabrics in the description of Solomon’s temple (1 Kgs 6--8), but the Chronicler does. Since the Septuagint title for the books of Chronicles is ‘the things left out’, the ancient writers must have considered the Deuteronomist’s silence an omission. And since the Deuteronomist also failed to mention the cherub throne - which the Chronicler included (1 Chron.28.18) – the Deuteronomist’s omission may have been deliberate. In other words, the veil and the throne may have been part of what the Deuteronomists tried to suppress. We shall return to this.

The Chronicler described the veil of blue, purple and crimson, *karmīl*, rather than scarlet, and fine linen, *būš*, rather than fine twined linen, *šēš mošzār*. Upon it were cherubim, but no mention of the ‘skilful work’.

Apart from the linen thread, the fibres are not known. Only the colours are given in the Old Testament, but they are distinguished from the linen and so, presumably were not linen. Josephus mentions wool: ‘wool dyed [purple] with the flowers mentioned above...’ (*Ant.*3.6.1), but no earlier texts mention wool. Wool and flax, were however, products of the land (e.g. Hos. 2.5, 9; Prov.31.13), and the temple fabrics, remembered also as the fabrics of the tabernacle, are likely to have been the produce of the land.

When the temple was sacked by the Romans, they took away ‘much purple and scarlet, kept for the needs of the [temple] veil’, according to Josephus (*War* 6.390); and in the *Infancy Gospel of James* XI, the young Mary was described as a temple weaver. When the priests decided to make a new veil for the temple, she was allocated the purple and scarlet to spin, presumably from what they had in store. Again, the text does not say that it was wool.

The temple veil was probably woven with wool on a linen warp. The linen would have been strong enough to bear the weight of a large piece of fabric. It was, however, forbidden for anyone but a priest in the temple to wear a garment of mixed fibres: ‘You shall not wear a mixed fabric, wool and linen together (Deut.22.11). This suggests that the mixture of wool and flax was symbolic, because a priest who wore the fabric of mixed fibres was exempted from other clothing rules.<sup>1</sup>

Items prepared for the temple could not be used elsewhere. For example, it was forbidden to use the special tabernacle incense outside the tabernacle, and it was forbidden to use the perfumed oil outside the tabernacle just as a perfume (Exod.30.32-33.37-38). The Talmud says that it was forbidden to make a menorah with seven branches for use outside the temple; other forms were permitted - five, six or eight branches - but not seven. Similarly, nobody was allowed to copy the showbread table.<sup>2</sup> If it was forbidden to copy temple perfumes and temple furnishings, the prohibition on a fabric of wool and linen may have been another of these restrictions, implying that this fabric was unique to the temple and part of its symbolism.

Several aspects of the tabernacle/ temple are described in detail the Old Testament – perfumes, golden objects, complex fabrics, rituals, movements - and yet none is explained. This is because the meaning of all these aspects of the temple was the secret and sacred knowledge of the high priests. It was known as ‘every matter concerning the altar and the holy of holies’ [literally ‘the house of the veil’] which was entrusted to the high priesthood and had to be preserved by Aaron and his sons (Num.18.7). This tradition of secret priestly knowledge passed in Christianity. There is a saying attributed to Jesus, although not in the New Testament: ‘Keep the mysteries for me and the sons of my house.’<sup>3</sup> The story is that Peter quoted it to Simon Magus when he had been questioning him about the bare facts of Christianity: ‘To you who do battle with us, and examine nothing else but our statements, whether they be true or false, it would be impious to state the hidden truths’. Jesus had forbidden it, and he himself taught the mysteries of the Kingdom only to his disciples. The writer of Hebrews, as we shall see, assumed that the early Christians knew the meaning of the temple veil.

The temple mysteries were a theme later taken up by Dionysius the Areopagite. He taught that they could only be understood within the temple world view. ‘Because of divine enlightenment’, he explained, ‘we now grasp these things in the best way we can, and as they come to us, wrapped in the sacred veils of that love towards humanity with which scripture and hierarchical traditions cover the truths of the mind with things derived from the realm of the senses.’<sup>4</sup> The role of fabrics in the temple was to veil the mysteries. Thus the Levites who carried the tabernacle furnishings in the desert were not allowed to see them. The high

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<sup>1</sup> Babylonian Talmud *Menahoth* 43a ‘As priests are permitted to wear mingled stuff they are exempt from the law of the tassels.

<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud *Abodah Zarah* 43a.

<sup>3</sup> *Clementine Homilies* 19.20.

<sup>4</sup> Dionysius, *Divine Names* 592B.

priests wrapped them in cloths of blue, purple and red before covering them with goat skins. Only then were the Levite porters allowed near them (Num.4.1-15).

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Three colours were used for temple fabrics: blue, purple and red, and each had a meaning. Further, all the sources of temple dyes were unclean creatures: sea snails and worms. What was forbidden outside the temple was permitted within it.

The blue dye, *t<sup>e</sup>khēleth*, came from a sea snail, *murex trunculus*, but the technique for making the dye was lost long ago.<sup>5</sup> A small piece of cloth has been found south of the Qumran caves that had been dyed with *t<sup>e</sup>khēleth*. Some text evidence also survives: the dye was made from ‘the blood of the *hillazon*, boiled with other ingredients’<sup>6</sup> It was very expensive to make, as the creatures were said to appear only once in seventy years.<sup>7</sup> It was absolutely forbidden to use a cheaper substitute such as the common *indigofera tinctoria*, whose leaves were boiled for indigo: ‘The Holy One distinguishes [a man’s] garment threads dyed with plant dye, who maintains it is real blue’.<sup>8</sup> The blue was the colour of lapis lazuli, the colour of the night sky and of the sapphire stone beneath the throne of Glory.

The purple dye, *’argāmān*, also came from a sea creature, a large predatory snail known as the purple dye murex, *bolinus brandaris*. About 10,000 snails were needed to produce one gram of dye, which was most famously produced in Tyre. From about 450 BCE and for about 700 years, the murex shell appeared on the coins of Tyre. Phoenicia gave its name to the colour purple, *phoenix*, or vice versa, and it was a craftsman from Tyre, Hiram-abi, who supervised the building of Solomon’s temple. Among his many skills were work in purple, blue and crimson fabrics, and fine linen (2 Chron.2.14). Pliny gave a detailed account of the purple dye process. The sea snails were harvested in the spring, the mucous secretion which made the dye was extracted, and the fleeces were dyed whole.<sup>9</sup> Josephus mentions dyed sheep skins among the gifts offered for making the tabernacle.<sup>10</sup>

The scarlet dye, *tōla ’ath šānī*, ‘worm scarlet’, came from a worm that lived on oak trees, *coccus ilicis*. When it dies, it produces a scarlet substance which was used to make scarlet dye.

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How were the fabrics woven?

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<sup>5</sup> There is now huge interest and concern among Jews to recover the authentic colour for the blue threads of prayer shawls.

<sup>6</sup> Babylonian Talmud *Menaḥoth* 42b.

<sup>7</sup> Babylonian Talmud *Menaḥoth* 44a.

<sup>8</sup> Babylonian Talmud *Baba Metzia* 61b.

<sup>9</sup> Pliny, *Natural History* IX.61-65.

<sup>10</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.6.1.

According to the Mishnah, the veil was woven by young girls, which agrees with the description of Mary as a temple weaver. But young girls would not have been able to handle a heavy loom or a heavy fabric, and this must be borne in mind when trying to make sense of the description of the weaving that follows. It *seems* to say that the veil was woven in 72 strips, and that each strip was one handbreadth wide. Each strip had 24 warp threads.<sup>11</sup>

The length of the veil fabric was 40 cubits and its breadth was 20 cubits. Reckoning a cubit as 450 mm [18"], this means that the veil was 9 metres [10 yards] wide and 18 metres [20 yards] long. Josephus says that the holy of holies in his time was 20 cubits wide<sup>12</sup> which corresponds to the width of the veil, but he gives no indication why the veil should have been 40 cubits long. For 72 strips of fabric to make a width of 9 metres [10 yards], each would have been about 125 mm [5"] wide, implying that the veil was woven on braid looms that young girls could have worked. The warp threads would have been approximately 5mm apart, not impossible for a heavy fabric such as the veil. If the veil became ritually unclean, it was immersed in water and 300 priests were needed to lift it when wet.<sup>13</sup>

Josephus says that the fabric of the outer curtain of the temple veil was ‘Babylonian tapestry’.<sup>14</sup> Presumably, this was the style of weaving indicated in Exodus by the ‘work of a weaver in colours’, *roqēm* (Exod.26.36). Josephus says that this outer door curtain, *peplos*, depicted the whole heaven but not the zodiac.<sup>15</sup> And what did that mean? He did not say.

The inner curtain, the veil of the holy of holies, was woven differently. The work was called *hošēbh*, which the Lxx understood simply as ‘woven’, *huphanton*, but in each case there was the word ‘cherubim’; woven with cherubim, perhaps, but what did that mean? A pattern? Josephus gives no detail of the inner curtain.

There is very little information about the girls who made temple fabrics. There had been women weavers in the first temple who made linens for Asherah. The Greek text here has the women weaving garments or tunics, which suggests that the Hebrew was originally ‘linen garments’, *baddīm*, for the Lady rather than ‘houses’, *bottīm*, which is what the Hebrew now says. And these were garments for holy ones, angel priests, *q<sup>e</sup>dôšīm*, not male prostitutes, *q<sup>e</sup>dēšīm*, which is what the Hebrew now says. Josiah tore down the place where the women made their cloth and burned the Asherah for whom they were weaving. This would be consistent with the Deuteronomist not mentioning the veil in his account of Solomon’s temple. There was something about temple weaving that was better forgotten.

Josiah’s purges in the temple cast a long shadow. The Mishnah, which records the ways of Judaism at the end of the second temple era, says it was forbidden to make a weaver’s shuttle from the wood of an Asherah tree, and any cloth woven with it was forbidden as was any

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<sup>11</sup> Mishnah *Shekalim* 8.4-5.

<sup>12</sup> Josephus, *War* V.219.

<sup>13</sup> Mishnah *Shekalim* 8.4-5.

<sup>14</sup> *War* 5.212.

<sup>15</sup> *War* 5.214.

cloth that even touched the forbidden cloth. In the time of Jesus, we may assume, some people were still making sacred shuttles and weaving the forbidden cloth.

The *Infancy Gospel of James* knew of temple weavers. Pure virgins of the tribe of David, of whom Mary was one, were employed to make the new temple veil<sup>16</sup>. Someone who called himself Baruch was writing at about the time the *Infancy Gospel* was written - just after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE - and he called on the weaving girls to set fire to their fabrics rather than have them fall into enemy hands:

And you, virgins who spin fine linen,  
And silk with gold of Ophir,  
Make haste and take all things and cast them into the fire,  
So that it may carry them to him who made them.  
And the flame sends them to him who created them,  
so that the enemies do not take possession of them.<sup>17</sup>

But they did fall into enemy hands: Titus celebrated the conquest of Jerusalem by taking the temple furnishings to Rome, where the emperor Vespasian had the golden vessels put into the new Temple of Peace, but the scrolls of the Law and the purple curtains of the sacred place, he kept in the palace.<sup>18</sup> He deemed the veil of the temple as important as the scrolls of the Law. A second century Rabbi saw it there, and noticed the bloodstains where it had been sprinkled on the day of atonement. ‘Said R. Eleazar b. R. Yose, “I myself saw it in Rome, and there were drops of blood on it”. And he told me, “These are the drops from the day of atonement”’<sup>19</sup>

Antiochus Epiphanes had also taken the veil as loot when he sacked the temple in 169 BCE (1 Macc.1.22). It seems that he took the veil as an offering to Zeus at Olympia, because Pausanius, writing some 300 years later, said that in the temple there was ‘a woollen curtain, adorned with Assyrian weaving and Phoenician purple, which was dedicated by Antiochus.’<sup>20</sup>

When the high priest entered the holy of holies, he passed from the darkness of the material world into the light of the divine presence. Jesus spoke of returning to this state of glory beyond time and matter when he prayed on the night before he died: ‘Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory I had with thee before the world was made’ (John 17.5). Those who entered this state saw not only the light of glory; they also saw the other side of the veil. One of the Enoch texts describes how R. Ishmael the high priest was met in heaven by Metatron, the great angel who on earth had been Enoch. He learned about the curtain:

Metatron said to me: Come and I will show you the curtain of the All-Present One, which is spread before the Holy One, blessed be he, and on which are printed all the generation of the world and all their deeds, whether done or to be done, till the last generation. I went

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<sup>16</sup> *Infancy Gospel of James* X.

<sup>17</sup> *2 Baruch* 10.19.

<sup>18</sup> Josephus *War* 7.162.

<sup>19</sup> *Tosefta Kippurim* 2.16.

<sup>20</sup> Pausanius, *Description of Greece* V.12.4.

and he showed them to me with his fingers, like a father teaching his son the letters of the Torah.<sup>21</sup>

The same R.Ishmael is mentioned in some of the texts about the temple mystics, what they saw and heard in their ecstasies as they stood before the *merkavah*, the throne.

R Ishmael said:

When my ears heard this great mystery,  
The world was changed around me into a shining place  
And my heart was as if I had come into a new world  
And every day it seemed to my soul  
As though I was standing before the throne of glory.<sup>22</sup>

R Ishmael here experienced the shining that transformed him, an experience also described by Enoch who stood before the throne and felt himself transformed into an angel.<sup>23</sup>

Isaiah knew this transformed perception. When he was standing before the throne, he cried out: ‘The whole earth is full of his glory’ (Isa.6.3); and a later disciple, now known as the Second Isaiah, had the same holy of holies experience. He stood ‘in the beginning’ that is, in the holy of holies that represented the source of all creation, and he saw the future of his people:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
Has it not been told you from the beginning?...  
It is he who sits above the circle of the earth...  
Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain...  
Who brings princes to naught  
And makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. (Isa. 40, 21-23).

Jesus, in his struggle with the devil, saw all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time (Luke4.5). It was the same experience.

The symbolism of the veil and those who passed beyond it could be part of that first temple belief in heavenly ascent and *theosis* which the Deuteronomists tried to suppress. They discouraged belief in heavenly ascent to bring knowledge to earth, offering instead the law of Moses:

The secret things belong to the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all these words of the law...  
‘[This commandment] is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up for us to heaven and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ (Deut.29.29; 30.13).

This would explain why the Deuteronomists did not mention the veil in Solomon’s temple.

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<sup>21</sup> 3 *Enoch* 45.1-2.

<sup>22</sup> *Merkavah Rabbah* 680.

<sup>23</sup> 2 *Enoch* 22.

Temple fabrics were also used for the high priests' garments, and here we consider only the coloured garments of the high priest, which represented his role as the one who entered the holy of holies and emerged in a transformed state, bringing knowledge from heaven.

The high priest's coloured garments were made from the same type of fabric as the veil of the holy of holies, although, for practical reasons, they must have been made from a lighter weight of fabric than the veil. The specification in Exodus is the same: *ḥošēbh*, using blue, purple, scarlet and fine twined linen, but with the addition of gold for the high priest. The gold represented what the high priest brought through the veil and into the world. These were his golden garments, the 'garments of holiness' made for 'for glory and for beauty' (Exod.28.2). Later tradition understood 'woven work' to mean that the garments were woven to the exact size needed, not cut from previously woven cloth. If they became seriously soiled, they could not be washed with *natron* or *ahal*, used at that time for soap,<sup>24</sup> but had to be replaced.

The high priest had four coloured garments in addition to the linen clothes worn by other priests. He wore a blue robe, *m<sup>e</sup> 'il*, not quite so long as his linen under-robe, and then a breastplate, *ḥōšen*, an ephod, *'ēphôdh*, and a sash, *'abhñēt*, woven from the four colours and gold. The description of the garments in Exodus and in Josephus is far from clear: the blue robe was made in one piece with a reinforced selvedge at the neck, it would seem, and was weighted around the hem with a bobble fringe – 'pomegranates' - of red, blue and purple. The Talmud implies that each pomegranate was made of all three colours.<sup>25</sup> Between the pomegranates were small gold bells, and here the Talmud records two opinions: there were 72 bells, or there were only 36.<sup>26</sup> 'Its sound shall be heard when he goes into the holy place before the LORD.' (Exod.28.35). Over this blue robe he wore an ephod, which Josephus describes as a short coat with sleeves, about waist length ['the depth of a cubit'], with an open front to which was attached the breastplate. This was an elaborate item about half a cubit wide that was made of fabric, and set with the twelve precious stones that represented the tribes of Israel. The sash was about four fingers wide and loosely woven so that it resembled snake skin.<sup>27</sup>

The vestments were kept in the temple, in a chamber to the north of the eastern gate, the chamber of Phineas.<sup>28</sup> When Herod rebuilt the temple, he took possession of the vestments and only released them to the high priest seven days before a festival, so that they could be purified for temple service. The vestments were in effect held hostage for the good behaviour of the people.<sup>29</sup> No great temple ritual could take place without the high priest's vestments, because they were, in some sense, the priesthood: 'When wearing their garments, they are vested with their priesthood, when not wearing their garments, they are not vested with their

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<sup>24</sup> Babylonian Talmud *Zebaḥim* 88a.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 88b

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.7.

<sup>28</sup> Mishnah *Middoth* 1.4.

<sup>29</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.4.3.

priesthood.<sup>30</sup> Further, it was said that since Leviticus listed the rules for sacrifice immediately before the rules for the vesting and anointing the high priest (Lev.7—8): ‘as sacrifices make atonement, so do the priestly vestments make atonement.’<sup>31</sup>

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What did these fabrics mean?

Here, we consider only the *ḥoṣēbh* work which was the fabric of the veil and also of the high priests’ vestments. I assume that the meaning of the fabric was the same in both instances.

The word *ḥoṣēbh* is variously translated: ‘skilled work’ in the RSV. ‘cunning work’ in the AV, ‘finely embroidered’ in the Jerusalem Bible, ‘decorated with embroidery’ in the Good News Bible. The root word means ‘think, devise, invent’, and BDB<sup>32</sup> suggests that *ḥoṣēbh* means ‘ingenious work’. When Philo described the vestments of the high priest, he said that the ephod was made with perfect knowledge, *epistēmē teleiotatē*,<sup>33</sup> suggesting that he understood the Hebrew word *ḥoṣēbh* to mean knowledge which was rather more than technical skill. The ephod, according to the Hebrew of Exodus 28.6 was *ḥoṣēbh* work, and according to Exodus 26.31, the veil was of *ḥoṣēbh* work, cherubim’. What the cherubim are doing here is not clear.

It may be that cherubim were woven into the fabric of the veil as a pattern, but ‘cherubim’ is another word whose etymology is not known, even though cherubs formed the throne in the holy of holies and were represented as winged creatures. According to Philo, cherubim meant aspects of knowledge: ‘great recognition’, *epignōsis pollē*, and ‘knowledge poured out in abundance’, *epistēmē plousia kai kechumenē*.<sup>34</sup> This is not obviously derived from any Hebrew words, and so presumably is what they represented rather than an etymology. ‘Cherubim’, then, had a meaning very similar to *ḥoṣēbh* work.

Bear this in mind as we look at the colours. There is nothing in the Old Testament about the meaning of the colours, but then there is nothing about the meaning of anything in the temple. They were, however, very precisely prescribed. At the end of the second temple period, Josephus and Philo agreed that the four colours woven together represented the four elements from which the material world was created, earth, air, fire and water. The veil represented matter, which concealed the pre-created light from mortal eyes.

This is Josephus:

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<sup>30</sup> Babylonian Talmud *Zebaḥim* 17b.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.88b.

<sup>32</sup> F Brown, S R Driver, C A Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.

<sup>33</sup> *Moses* II.111.

<sup>34</sup> Philo, *Questions on Exodus* II.62; also *Life of Moses* II.96.

Thus the fine linen appears to represent the earth, because from it springs up the flax, and the purple the sea, since it is dyed with the blood of a fish, and the air must be indicated by the blue and the crimson will be a symbol of fire.’<sup>35</sup>

And this is Philo, answering the question: ‘Why are the curtains of woven linen and of hyacinth and purple and woven scarlet?’

What is spoken of is the workmanship [of the threads] woven together: they are four in number, and are symbols of the four elements - earth, water, air and fire - of which sublunary things are made, while the celestial sphere is made of a special substance...

Its hidden meaning is that the earth is linen, for linen is earthly and from the earth, and water is purple, since water produces this, and the air is dark blue... and the fire is scarlet, for its colour is fiery. And so [Moses] thought it right that the divine temple of the Creator of all things should be woven of such and so many things as the world was made of...<sup>36</sup>

Both Josephus and Philo were from the high priestly family, and so their explanation is likely to be correct. This is how the veil was explained in the time of Jesus, and since the two agree, it could well be the traditional reason for the four colours. The tabernacle, and later the temple, represented the creation, and so the fabric of creation was the fabric of the holy place.

Using the six-day pattern of creation in Genesis 1 and linking this to Moses’ setting up the tabernacle in Exodus 40, the veil of the holy of holies represented the firmament that separated what was above from what was below. The firmament was called ‘heaven’ (Gen.1.6-8). On the fifth day, birds were created to fly over the earth and *in front of* the firmament of heaven (the natural way to translate Gen.1.20). The writer imagined the birds flying *in front of* the veil. In Exodus, the veil was to separate the holy place from the most holy place (Exod.26.33), and so it too represented ‘heaven’, the boundary between the material, temporal creation and the divine presence which was beyond both time and matter and yet within them.

The firmament was heaven, as can be seen in the parallelism of this psalm:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;

The firmament proclaims his handiwork (Ps.19.1)

The firmament was also the sanctuary of God.

Praise God in his holy place

Praise him in his mighty firmament (Ps.150.1, my translation).

The firmament was imagined as a solid dome above the earth, (e.g. Job 37.18), but the heavens were also compared to a tent. The word firmament means ‘something spread out’, usually something beaten out, but Isaiah, without using the word firmament, says: ‘He stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in (Isa.40.22). The curtain formed God’s dwelling place, as it did in the tabernacle/temple. For Ezekiel, the firmament was a crystal canopy through which he saw the throne (Ezek.1.22, 26; 10.1).

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<sup>35</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.183.

<sup>36</sup> Philo, *Questions on Exodus* II.85.

The veil represented matter which concealed the most holy state. The most holy in the temple - 'the holy of holies' – housed the cherub throne. It was the place where the LORD reigned, and this is why Jesus said to some Pharisees: 'The kingdom of God is in the midst of you' (Luke 17.21). The veil concealed the divine within.

The *ḥoṣēbh* work was also used for the coloured vestments of the high priest, where they also represented matter concealing the divine within. The high priest did not wear his coloured vestments when he was in the holy of holies. This was beyond matter, and he wore only the four garments of white linen, the dress of angels (Lev.16.4). In the world, however, he wore a garment that represented matter clothing a divine being.

The high priest's vestment, however, was made of *ḥoṣēbh* work interwoven with gold (Exod.28.5-6). It represented matter interwoven with something else. Josephus said the gold represented the splendour by which all things are enlightened,<sup>37</sup> and so the golden garment indicated the high priest's transformed state. He was now a son of God, transfigured because he had been in the divine presence. In the first temple, the Davidic high priest was the LORD with his people: Immanuel.

Ben Sira described Simon the high priest when he emerged from the holy of holies into the temple court, and the people worshipped him:

How glorious was he when the people gathered round him,  
As he came out of the house of the veil,  
Like the morning star among the clouds...  
Like the sun shining...  
Like the rainbow gleaming in glorious clouds...  
When he put on his glorious robe  
And clothed himself with superb perfection  
And went up to the holy altar,  
He made the court of the sanctuary glorious...  
Then all the people together made haste  
And fell to the ground upon their faces  
To worship, *proskunein*, their Lord  
The Almighty, God Most High. (Ben Sira 50.5,6,7, 11, 17).

This was the high priest dressed in what Exodus called 'the garments of glory and beauty,' but the imagery in Ben Sira is significant. It implies divinity. The 'morning star' was a title of the one anointed as the divine son. The damaged Hebrew text of Psalm 110.3 originally described the heavenly birth of the Davidic king in the holy of holies: he became the Morning Star, Melchizedek, and he was the divine Son. This was also a title used for Jesus in Revelation: 'I am the root and offspring of David, the bright morning star' (Rev.22.16), and it was the title and status promised to the faithful Christian: 'I will appoint him as the Morning Star' (Rev.2.28).

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<sup>37</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.184.

The high priest was a divine figure, an angel. This is how the Greek writer Hecataeus in about 300 BCE, described a high priest in the temple court:

They call this man the high priest, and they believe that he acts as a messenger/ angel to them of God's commandments. It is he, we are told, who in their assemblies and other gatherings, announces these commandments and the Jews... who straightway fall to the ground and worship [*proskunein*] the high priest when he expounds the commandments to them.<sup>38</sup>

Revelation depicts Jesus as the high priest: in the first chapter he stands as the centre stem of the menorah, wearing the long robe and the golden girdle, his face shining like the sun (Rev.1.12-16) and he instructs John to send teaching to the seven churches. John fell at his feet. Later he appears as the mighty angel, wrapped in cloud and wreathed with a rainbow, his face like the sun, and again he gives John some new teachings (Rev.10.1).

In the first temple, as we have seen, there were women - devotees of the Lady - who wove fabric for the angels, that is, the angel priests, and in one of the *Hymns for the Sabbath Sacrifice* found at Qumran, the great angels serving before the throne are wearing *ḥoṣēbh* garments. Although described as angels, they are in fact the temple high priests serving the liturgy in which they were the angels before the throne.<sup>39</sup> The text is far from easy to translate, but this is the gist:

Spirits of colours in the midst of the appearance of whiteness and the likeness of the spirit of glory is like gold work shedding light, and all their *ḥoṣēbh* [fabrics] are purely blended [like the incense in Exod.30.35], *ḥoṣēbh* like the work of a weaver, the chiefs are gloriously clothed for service...<sup>40</sup>

What is clear is that *ḥoṣēbh* fabric was the dress of angels and high priests.

The outer vestment of the high priest represented matter. He emerged from the holy of holies, what Ben Sira called 'the house of the veil', and appeared in a robe of matter interwoven with the gold of enlightenment. The high priest also wore on his forehead the four letters of the Name because he was the presence of the LORD with his people. In the days of the Davidic priest kings, he was called Immanuel, God with us, and the coloured vestment represented incarnation as the one who emerged through the veil and came into the world.

*The Infancy Gospel of James* depicts Mary as a temple weaver. She was spinning wool when the angel told her she would be the mother of Jesus, and so she was making the new temple veil while she was pregnant with her child.

This imagery runs through the New Testament. The first Christians knew about the vestments of the high priest and what they represented. The flesh of Jesus is described as the temple veil, matter: 'We have a great high priest' (Heb.4.14), said the writer of Hebrews, and

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<sup>38</sup> Hecataeus in Diodorus Siculus XL.3.5-6.

<sup>39</sup> See C Fletcher Louis, *All the Glory of Adam*, Leiden: Brill, 2002, p.359.

<sup>40</sup> 4Q 405.23.ii.10-11.

then used imagery that his hearers must have recognised, because he does not explain it: ‘The new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh’ (Heb.10.20). The first Christians described Jesus as their high priest and his flesh as the stuff of the temple veil, matter. When Jesus died, the veil of the temple was torn (Matt.27.51).

So too in John’s gospel. ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us’ (John 1.14) describes how the Word emerged from the holy of holies - ‘the beginning’ - and became incarnate. The Word coming forth had been ritualised in the Temple as the high priest coming forth from the holy of holies on the day of atonement. John then described the glorious high priest in his golden garments: ‘We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father...’ John had Jesus describe himself as ‘the one whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, the Son of God’ (John 10.36). Jesus wore a seamless tunic, another link to the priesthood (John 19.23), and according to Luke, the woman who touched the fringe of Jesus garment was healed. She had touched the high priest’s garment (Luke 8.44).

The garment of the high priest was *ḥoṣēbh* work interwoven with gold, and we have seen that *ḥoṣēbh* means something like knowledge or skill. There is an early Christian wisdom text, which has a startling description of the high priest’s vestment given to every Christian. *The Teaching of Silvanus*, a part of which was later attributed to St Anthony, is one of the texts found at Nag Hamadi in 1945.

Wisdom summons you in her goodness, saying, Come to me, all of you, O foolish ones, that you may receive a gift, the understanding which is good and excellent. I am giving you a high priestly garment which is woven from every wisdom...

Clothe yourself with wisdom like a robe, put knowledge upon you like a crown and be seated upon a throne of perception.<sup>41</sup>

A cloth woven of wisdom could well have been the original meaning, or part of the double meaning of the word *ḥoṣēbh*. Here it is Wisdom’s gift to her children.

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Vestments are linked to incarnation in later Christian discourse. Three examples:

The Talmud taught: ‘as sacrifices make atonement, so do the priestly garments make atonement.’<sup>42</sup> In other words, the divine presence clothed in matter was a means of atonement. The imagery appears in St Athanasius’ treatise *On the Incarnation*:

Through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, all men were clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection’.<sup>43</sup>

This is often summed up with the words: ‘What is not assumed is not redeemed’.

St Symeon of Thessalonike, writing in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century *On Prayer*, said this:

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<sup>41</sup> Silvanus, CG VII.4.89.

<sup>42</sup> Babylonian Talmud *Zebahim* 88b.

<sup>43</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 9.

The priest coming out of the sanctuary and his descent to the centre of the nave signifies the descent of Christ from heaven and his humility. That the priest wears sacerdotal vestments signifies the incarnation.<sup>44</sup>

And perhaps more familiar to us there are the words of Charles Wesley:

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,  
Hail, the incarnate Deity!  
Pleased as man with men to dwell,  
Jesus our Immanuel...,,

The role of fabrics in the temple was to veil the mysteries, but also, by transfiguring the veil of matter with the gold of divine light, to clothe the glory in transfigured matter and make it visible in the world.

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<sup>44</sup> Symeon, *On Prayer* 41.