“A man may not put on filthy clothes:” Impurity, clothing, and ritual agency in the Book of the twelve and beyond (Aadland)

What do filthy clothes signify? What does a filthy robe represent and how does it relate to the body wearing it?

The value of metaphorical language as interpretation and reception of purity regulations is easily overlooked. A filthy cloth can mean different things in different contexts, and impurity language in prophetic literature may or may not allude directly to an operative purity system. However, the significance of wearing clean clothes is repeated in the Hebrew Bible and in Qumran, and these regulations and the rituals they apply to seem to have produced conventional ideas and language about impurity. (Some of them are still efficient in religious language of today.)

The Hebrew Bible does not present one coherent purity system, but contains various regulations, as well as stories and imagery that evoke purity language. The latter is found relatively often in the prophetic literature, in particular within moral (and ritual) discourse. Ideas about purity, arguably affect language about ritual in the prophetic literature. Moreover, ideas about purity and ritual produce ideas about bodies. In this way purity language intersects with language about bodies and gender.

This paper examines prophetic literature that makes use of impurity language. Reading with an intersectional lens, I will focus on the intersection of gender and purity in moral discourse. As a case, this paper examines (un)dressing rituals and (un)dressing metaphors in Zech 3:3–5 and Isaiah 3:16–26. How are morality, ritual agency, and bodies represented in these texts?