Rosemary Canavan

Clothing the Body of Christ at Colossae: A Visual Construction of Identity

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In this dissertation done at Flinders University in South Australia, Canavan uses the term “visual exegesis” to describe the approach of connecting text and image. She sets out to interpret Col 3:1–17 in dialogue with the material culture of the first century CE and proposes that the imagery of clothing the body in those verses “parallels and critiques a systematic visual construction of identity in the cities of the Lycus Valley” (6). In other words, the author of Colossians “clothes” the body of Christ in deliberate contrast to the images of the body depicted in the dominant Roman culture. The book is arranged in four parts.

Part 1 addresses the context of Colossae and the letter, as well as the scholarly context and methodology (introduction, chs. 1–3). Since Colossae has not been excavated, Canavan argues that visible images from neighboring (Laodicea, Hierapolis) and “strategically connected cities” (Aphrodisias, Ephesus, Smyrna) can be used in lieu of direct evidence from Colossae. The latter were partner cities with which Colossae had alliances and trade relationships. Following Harry Maier, she argues that from the time of Augustus imperial iconography tried to portray Roman piety, benefaction, and order as divinely appointed. “This was a deliberate process of acculturation of local urban cultures” (35). While Roman use of imagery was focused on the emperor, Canavan recognizes that it also affected the predominantly Hellenistic imagery of the civic elite who became Roman
citizens. Thus, she examines the use of “clothing” and “body” to construct identity on statuary, funerary monuments, stelae, reliefs, and coins from the Lycus Valley and beyond, then asks how this informed the use of clothing and body metaphors in the letter to the Colossians.

Part 2 turns to constructing identity in the first century using clothing and body imagery (chs. 4–5). After a brief discussion of Greek and Latin terminology, Canavan begins with imperial statuary from Ephesus, Aphrodisias, and Smyrna. Augustus made both the physical body and images of the emperor sacrosanct and worthy of equal honor. Both came to represent the state and empire, with the emperor as head of both. Because body types were standard and idealized, an emperor’s specific identity was located in the head. The best first-century remains come from Aphrodisias. Most of the statues and relief panels from the Sebastion survive. Nude Roman emperors are depicted as Olympian gods standing over shamed naked women representing conquered nations. The clothing of the emperor was meant to convey the Roman virtues of *virtus*, *dignitas*, *humanitas*, *gravitas*, and *pietas*. In contrast, nudity projects raw power on the one hand and subjection on the other. But after being stripped of its clothing, a conquered nation could be reclothed after the manner of the female personification of Rome or the emperor’s wives, symbolizing a change of identity from barbarian to civilized nation. Ethnos of Crete, “fully clothed in classical dress with veil,” is depicted as one such nation (83). These illuminating points are confirmed by first-century coins from Laodicea and Hierapolis. Nero is associated with the gods and pictured subduing nations. In a series of coins minted in Rome during the reign of Liberius, virtues (*pietas*, *iustitia*, *salus augusta*) are actually inscribed beside a suitably attired Livia (111).

All of this was part of Rome’s strategy of imposing its cultural and moral values on the provinces. Canavan argues that there was considerably more of this in western, coastal cities such as Ephesus than in the Lycus Valley, at least until the second and third centuries, when imperial statuary and monuments began to “proliferate” (180). The majority of funerary stelae and monuments from Asia Minor are in Greek/Hellenistic style. An early exception is a 30–20 BCE funerary monument from Aphrodisias. A freedman benefactor called Zoilos who became a Roman citizen is clothed in a toga that is reminiscent of an *himation*. Other elements in the monument point to “a shift to incorporate Roman dress and accompanying virtues into the civic honour visual imagery” of the inland cities (113).

Part 3 then proceeds to exegesis of Col 3:1–17 using a sociorhetorical approach (ch. 6). Having examined the visual imagery of identity formation, Canavan uses an adaptation of the complex sociorhetorical criticism of Vernon Robbins to interpret Col 3:1–17. The inner, inter-, social and cultural, ideological, and sacred textures of the passage are all
examined. She finds three inner textual emphases: the Colossian believers’ lives are in Christ (vv. 1–7); as the body of Christ they are to be clothed with the attributes of Christ (vv. 8–14); and they are to be as Christ (vv. 15–17). The verbs of taking off and putting on clothing in the middle section, ἀποτίθημι (v. 8), ἀπεκδύομαι (v. 9), and ἐνδύομαι (vv. 10, 12, and implied in v. 14), create a visual image of a new identity centered in Christ.

Intertexture, or the interaction between the text and the visual material culture (and historical events, texts, customs, values, institutions, etc.) of the outside world, lies at the heart of Canavan’s thesis and is the reason for her choice of Robbins’ method (147, 195). In this section she looks at the language of clothing and the use/occurrence of “body,” χριστός, and lists of virtues in other texts. The use of “body” as a metaphor for the state or cosmos was common in antiquity, and as the emperors were head of the body, so is Christ in Colossians. Being clothed with Christ/his attributes/the new self occurs in Romans and Galatians, and there are many other possible allusions to Roman, Jewish, and Greek writings. The many references to clothing in the Septuagint surely played a part, one that might have been explored and acknowledged more fully without detracting too much from the thesis. The Roman ritual of putting on the toga virilis, the rite of passage for a boy’s coming of age, is another possible intertextual influence.

In the social and cultural intertexture section Canavan considers the need for the different ethnic and cultural groups in the Christ community constantly to renew their new identity against the dominant culture in ways that manage “tension between previous identity boundaries” (170). This is where the philosophical challenge of Col 2:8 might have been discussed in relation to 3:1–17. Instead, it is interpreted simply as a challenge to the community’s honor and well-being. The competing ideology is counteracted in Christ, in whom all ideological meaning is found. Being clothed in Christ-like virtues “is the means of holding the body together” (176). The sacred texture of Col 3:1–17 is in the chosen and holy nature of the new identity that is renewed in knowledge according to the image of the creator (3:10). Finally, Canavan argues that, when all of the sociorhetorical parameters of the metaphor of being clothed in Christ are understood, clothing was the only “boundary marker” of identity that the Colossian believers required (177).

The fourth part moves to visual construction of identity and further research (chs. 7–8). The paucity of imperial imagery in the first-century Lycus Valley implies a difference in experience “between the implied writer [in Ephesus or Rome] and implied reader or hearer [of the letter]” (180). (The full implications of this interesting disconnect for readers in Colossae are, unfortunately, not explored.) However, while first-century Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae were not centers of the imperial cult, “the proliferation of statues and monuments” in the second and third centuries and the
evidence from Aphrodisias “may suggest a continuity of identity formation” (180). Most of the first-century imagery in the Lycus Valley was Greek/Hellenistic, so images of the emperor and Roman monuments were strategically integrated in order to give them precedence. The resulting “image network” contributed to identity formation. The use of clothing and body in “both image fields, emperor and Christ, allowed a contrast and comparison between the images and the text” (181). For Canavan, Christ as the head of the body is unique to Colossians (157–58), and in her visual construction of identity she finds a contrast between Christ and Nero in particular. Nero, the last of the Julio-Claudian emperors, emulated Augustus and styled himself head of the body/empire. Likewise, the metaphorical use of clothing and the body in the text reacts to the visual culture of the Lycus Valley (or Ephesus or Rome?). Instead of being stripped of their identity and humiliated by Rome, believers are to be stripped of their vices and clothed in virtue and love. Power, hierarchy, and oppression characterized Roman identity in the emperor, but these are eliminated in Christ. The “transformative action of clothing in Colossians” transcends social and ethnic boundaries, “opening the way for all to belong irrespective of status” (186). Clothing describes the virtues that maintain the new identity and the love relationship between members of the body of Christ. Instead of the ideology of conquest evident in Roman imagery, and in the face of a threat to the identity of the Christ community (which merited a more extensive treatment), the believers are told to let peace reign in their hearts (3:15). Their identity in the all-powerful Christ is secure against all challenges and opposing powers.

The book concludes with five useful appendices (“Christ’s identity progression in Colossians”; a list of “clothe” references in the Old Testament, Apocrypha, and New Testament; literary outlines of Colossians in four commentaries; a table of biblical references to virtues as descriptors or qualities of God; and a glossary of terms) and helpful scripture, ancient text, modern author, and subject indices.

In sum, Canavan’s demonstration of “visual exegesis” draws significant new insights from the complex visual and social world of the letter to the Colossians. The argument is lucid and the methodology impressive. One is left, nonetheless, with the sense that her close exegesis of the passage in question could have benefited from deeper interaction with key issues in the wider text, such as, alternative understandings of the “worship of angels” (2:18). Examination of this and other related issues might also have suggested a greater Jewish influence on Col 3:1–17. In addition, there is something to be said for turning dissertations into books before publication. In terms of literary presentation, the elimination of repetition and the not infrequent typographical errors would have improved the final product. These criticisms, however, do not detract from what is a valuable and pioneering contribution.