

CLOTHING THE BODY OF CHRIST AT COLOSSAE:  
A VISUAL CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

Rosemary Canavan

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*Clothing the Body of Christ* is a published version of Rosemary Canavan's doctoral thesis submitted to Flinders University. It is a fruit of the interdisciplinary Colossae project which embraces both theology and archaeology.

It is a work of four parts. In Chapters 1–3, a methodology is developed which draws on theories of identity and visual imagery, which will inform the reading of Col 3:1–17 through the lens of archaeological artefacts from the Lycus valley. This methodology also embraces, and alters subtly, the socio-rhetorical approach of Vernon Robbins to allow for the application of the visual to the reading of the text. Canavan is very thorough in her elucidation of this methodology. The only chink in the armour is peripheral. She argues for the early circulation of a collection of Paul's letters, based on an early dating of 2 Pet 3:15–16. Given the breadth of disagreement over the date of Second Peter, the assertion of an early date is by no means conclusive. However, this does not have a major impact on the thesis presented.

The second section of the work describes the variety of public art available (ch. 4) before turning to a reading of the imagery found in these forms. These types are replete with indications of status and honour, and Canavan explores how body type, clothing and size all have social and political meanings. These chapters are accompanied by clear and helpful illustrations and photographs, a number of which are labelled to highlight the symbolic references.

In the third section, Canavan introduces the Letter to the Colossians using the categories of "texture" from socio-rhetorical criticism to produce a reading which both respects the intertextual dimension of the text, in particular through reference to the First Testament, as well as the visual imagery of the Lycus Valley. Given the previous focus on the physical evidence, the appearance of First Testament material marks a fresh departure, and bears with it the not unreasonable assumption that Paul's audience would have been familiar with the imagery of clothing and vesture known from such writings. However, we might well ask if non-Jewish members of the Lycus

Valley communities might not have “read” Paul more through the visuals, which is after all a key point being made, than through intertextual references. I find myself asking if this is material “had to be included” because the nature of guild studies demanded that the thesis be seen to include such references. Certainly, Canavan’s reading of Col 3:1–17 through visuals does not depend on such intertextuality being included. The presence of such material might raise the question of whether visual reading is compromised by the inclusion of such textual material, given the tendency for text to be prioritized in biblical and theological studies. However, this does not appear to be the case. Chapter 7 provides a summary of the visual imagery, in which the intertextual is seen only to provide a link to the collective memory of the First Testament, indicating a structural alignment to Christ which includes non-Jews (p. 186). Yet, the message of inclusion is already present without this reference (“the transforming action of clothing in Colossians transcended the social and ethnic boundaries,” p. 185).

It may seem pernicky to focus on this one point, but it is significant. Canavan’s work shows that the new nature of Christian community can be read and understood by those who could read their local landscape, and need not depend on an awareness of the First Testament. Given that she will later point out that a key task facing today’s church is a “renewal of identity” (p. 194), the precedent shown in her beautifully contextualised reading of Colossians reveals such a renewal can be accomplished using live contemporary visual imagery alone without “Scriptural knowledge.”

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