

Bible Translation and Ancient Visual Culture:

Divine Nakedness and the “Circumcision of Christ” in Colossians 2:11

Yancy W. Smith, PhD

As a teacher, David L. Balch changed his students’ paradigm for reading Scripture by linking it with relevant yet hidden cultural assumptions. He helped them uncover those assumptions by bringing a broad array of ancient Hellenistic and Jewish texts, as well as art and household remains, into a mutually critical dialogue with modern social science models of culture. Balch advocated a bold approach, “Take a position and defend it.” His own bold approach to the household codes¹ liberated those of us who had previously read Paul through the lenses of the deuterio-Pauline epistles to reverse the order. I remember often coming from his lectures with the dizzying thought, “This changes everything.” Balch constantly reminded his students and readers that in the nitty-gritty of Biblical exegesis the gaze falls almost exclusively upon written texts as the primary means to reconstruct the ancient visual context. The ancient urban readers’ gaze most often fell upon art and monuments. Texts were secondary. For those of us who have been and are his students, Balch engineered many escapes from the intensity of our textual worlds. To do so often is healthy for our textual endeavors. But I also recall Balch’s care for the individual student, his concern for the oppressed and the

¹ Balch, “Household Codes” *AB*, 3:318 summarizes: “In the mid-seventies, three scholars—D. Lührmann, K. Thraede, and D. Balch—independently rejected ... [previous] hypotheses [about the origin and meaning of the household codes], suggesting instead that the NT codes are related to the stereotypical Hellenistic discussion of “household management” (*peri oikonomias*), especially as formulated by Aristotle (*Pol.* 1.1253b.1–14). This Aristotelian text (cf. *Mag. Mor.* 1.1194b.5–28) is parallel to the form of Col 3:18–4:1 and Eph 5:21–6:9 ...”

marginalized. Perhaps his greatest achievement was to make our reading of Scripture more humane and, thus, more godly.

[A]The Problematic Text as Theoretical Journey

Reading Colossians 2:11-12 is disconcerting, like taking a pilgrimage, a *θεωρία*,² to observe the religion and customs of a strange land. The difficulty of this text, with all its multiple possible meanings and referents, however, goes beyond the tortuous metaphor. It equates conversion to Christ with “circumcision.” In this way it applies a well-known symbol of barbarism and slavery to the conversion of both males and females.³

Balch and Osiek argued that the author of Colossians belonged to a second generation of Paul’s followers.⁴ A clear difference in Paul’s and Colossians’ approach to gender relations may be seen in the translation⁵ in Colossians of the baptismal confession represented in Galatians 3:27-28: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” The confession is repeated in Col 3:10-11 but “no longer male and female” has gone missing.⁶ The change, they argue, is in line with the Augustan moral revolution that emphasized

² See Liddell and Scott et al., Greek-English Lexicon, s.v. “θεωρέω,” “θεωρία.”

³ Thus the shift, observed also in *GThomas* 21-22, of reconceptualizing the female as male, serves the interest in seeing humanity eschatologically as one new creation. The difference between *GThomas* and Colossians is that the latter thereby endorses male dominated hierarchy. The female becoming male may symbolize the transformation of the earthly and perishable (i.e., the female) into the heavenly and imperishable (i.e., the male). See Marvin W. Meyer, “Making Mary Male,” 554-70.

⁴ Balch and Osiek, *Families*, 123.

⁵ I use “translation” here not simply in its modern linguistic sense, but in the way Cicero “translated” the Greek rhetors and recontextualized their Greek ideas to a Latin audience. In effect, the author(s) of Colossians and Ephesians are “translating” an iconic Paul, domesticating his texts to fit the authoritarian structure of the Hellenistic household and imperial values. The text of Paul himself achieved an unassailable iconicity from ancient times (2 Peter 3:15, 16). As Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers*, 150-1, 170, 188, 203, shows, the Latin word *translatio* was early used among Christians as holy, ceremonial transference of the bones of saints to centers of power that could benefit from accumulating such relics.

traditional, hierarchical family values.⁷ The procedure Colossians uses to transform the earlier, more radical confession is the adoption of the typical Aristotelean household code with its structure of three interconnected relationships within the household: (1) masters and slaves, (2) husband and wives, (3) parents and children.⁸ That code contradicts the earlier confession and asserts that the differences in the household still exist and are still important for the proper function of the household.⁹ They explain:

As the eschatological urgency wanes and the church acculturates socially, the social reversals that Jesus and Paul's eschatological thought had hoped for disappear, with corresponding changes in both baptism and Christian ethics.¹⁰

In its adaptive translation of the previous confessional statement, Colossians especially expands the part of the code on the master/slave relationship; the world would have to wait for the industrial revolution for Christians to effectively challenge the justice of that relationship.¹¹ In a similar way, Col 2:11 transforms the “death, burial, and resurrection” sequence of conversion in Rom 6:1-3, substituting a male gendered metaphor in the place of the more inclusive “death.”

The text is a doorway to a foreign social world.¹² I propose to look at Col 2:11, a short but problematic text, in terms of the visual *realia* of what I take as its references based upon reflections of metaphorical themes found in Galatians 6:11-17, that is

⁶ Ibid., 120.

⁷ The Augustan moral revolution, included more rigid social stratification, submission of wives to husbands and slaves to masters. See Balch and Osiek, *Families*, 63-119. The idealized structure of the Aristotelian household code reinforced by Augustus called for, in the words of Octavian “to conquer and rule all mankind, to allow no woman to make herself equal to a man” (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 50.28).

⁸ See David L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive*, 14-15.

⁹ Balch and Osiek, *Families*, 120.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ While Colossians and Ephesians represent an acculturation to some Augustan values, they may retain some of the challenge to imperial values by Jesus and Paul.

circumcision, crucifixion, new creation, and the rhetorical power of nudity connected with circumcision and suffering.

[A]“Reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor.”¹³

To borrow another thought from Aristotle, metaphors breathe the air of unfamiliarity: τὸ ξενικόν, (cf. Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric* 3.2.9 [1405a8]). They are memorable because of their novelty and emotional impact. They strike the reader with a sense of clarity and aptness or, perhaps, obscurity, and revulsion. Aristotle’s appeal primarily to the visual sense to explain metaphor gives priority to the compelling argument in metaphors that sets something “before the eyes” (πρὸ ὀμμάτων 3.2.10 [1410b]).¹⁴ In a similar vein, Hellenistic writers like Dionysius of Halicarnassus described a well-known stylistic effect they observed in the court speeches of Lysias known as “vivid description” or ἐνόργεια. The speaker appeals to the senses of the listener and he describes attendant circumstances in such a way that the listener will be beguiled into thinking he or she has become an eyewitness.¹⁵ The listener identifies with the speaker, is persuaded, and transformed by that identification. Dionysius of Halicarnassus suggests that readers who cannot respond to a speech or text in this way are “clumsy, fastidious, and slow-witted.” Quintilian discusses effectual ἐνόργεια in Cicero’s *Verrine Orations* in which Cicero gave a brief sketch of Verres’ relationship with his mistress. He readily admits that his mind adds details that are not in the text;

¹² See Balch, “Acculturation in 1 Peter” in *Perspectives on First Peter* (Charles H. Talbert, ed., reprint 1986 ed. Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010), 79-101 for a judicious approach to social science theories to Biblical interpretation.

¹³ Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, 204.

¹⁴ See the important study by Collins, *The Power of Images in Paul*, 1-10, for a discussion of Paul’s use of metaphor. This is a very helpful book. It is puzzling, however, that not one reference can be found in the book to any artifacts of ancient visual culture, despite the similarity to the title of Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*.

however, he also explains that such imaginative reading is, in fact, normative. He asks, “Is there anyone so incapable of forming images of things that he does not seem to see?”¹⁶ That is, Quintilian presents such reading and hearing as the kind of participation speakers and authors expect of their ideal audience.¹⁷ Quintilian thus associates ἐνάργεια with painting (*Training of the Orator* 8.3.61; 12.10.6), a quality of good oratory he admires and discusses at length (6.32; 6.2.34-36; 8.3.64-65).¹⁸ Jesus himself tells his disciples, “See what you hear” (Mk 4:24), and Paul declared that the effect of his preaching of the gospel in Galatia was that “before [their] eyes ... Jesus Christ was graphically portrayed as crucified!” (Gal 3:1).¹⁹

In the aesthetic world of the New Testament visual communication was more important than textual.²⁰ Adding an appreciation of relevant visual culture brings life to the text. With the appropriate visual dimension texts like Col 2:11 may take on new meaning.²¹ Surely visual culture is relevant to phrases like “circumcision” or “stripping [off] the body of flesh.” Such questions about the visual registry of reference in a text helps the translator better approximate the profile of the ideal reader that ancient authors expected to meet. Such knowledge may greatly enhance the translator’s ability as an exegete to enjoy textual endeavors and to produce a text that is both helpful and enjoyable for her readers. Visual references (in both metaphor and in figured speech

¹⁵ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Lysias* 7; cited and discussed in Zanker, “Enargeia,” 297.

¹⁶ Emphasis mine, YWS.

¹⁷ Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis*, 21.

¹⁸ Benediktson, *Literature and the Visual Arts*, 175-176.

¹⁹ Balch, *Roman Domestic Art*, 86.

²⁰ Most people could not read well or did not read at all and made their way through life by means of visual and oral cues. See Balch, “Zeus, Vengeful Protector,” *Roman Domestic Art*, 109-136.

²¹ The problem is not only a pressing issue in translation studies, but is a live issue in ethnography. See Banks, “Visual Anthropology,” in *Image-based Research*, 9-23; Harper, “An Argument for Visual Sociology,” in item, 24-41.

[Greek, ἔμφασις]) are a significant part of the relevant cognitive environment of the source text, even when the direct discussion of artifacts of visual culture, a rhetorical genre known as *ekphrasis*, is not the topic of the source text.²²

In Col 2:11 is a delicate case of the Greek rhetorical figure known as ἔμφασις, that is quite different from the English “emphasis.” The figure of ἔμφασις is speech that depends for its rhetorical power upon indirectness, avoiding explicit statements. Irony and indirectness is very difficult for translators and exegetes because it is so difficult to identify. When a speaker or author uses ἔμφασις, he speak indirectly and may even appear to speak unwittingly using the rhetorical virtue of δεινότης, or “craftiness,” a virtue greatly admired and cultivated, if not always feared, in the ancient world.

Demetrius (*On Style* 287) says: “That which is call “figured” in speech present day orators use for humorous effect. They combine it with vulgar and *suggestive emphasis*. But genuine figured speech has these two goals in mind: good taste and the [speaker’s] safety (ᾠσφάλεια).”

Demetrius saw two legitimate uses for ἔμφασις, the maintenance of good taste (in discussing delicate matters) and preserving the speaker’s safety in situations in which a speaker may offer critique of people that have the power to retaliate against him.²³

Quintilian notes that ἔμφασις is used “a great deal nowadays” (*Inst. Or.* 9.2.65), and he adds a third use to Demetrius’ two uses of ἔμφασις. It is similar to a third (but non-“genuine”) use of ἔμφασις suggested by Demetrius, when ἔμφασις is adopted for pleasurable effect (9.2.66). ἔμφασις, then, would be a way of speaking that operates by

²² On *ekphrasis*, see Aune, *Dictionary of New Testament and Early Christian Literature and Rhetoric*, 143-145.

depending on implicitness for social and rhetorical reasons.

[B]Crucifixion and Nakedness

The mention of “circumcision” and “putting off the body of the flesh” is vivid, emphatic speech, in the Greek sense. As such both figures are simply ways of describing death by crucifixion. Public crucifixions were common in the period from Julius Caesar to Nero,²⁴ and it is likely that the mention of crucifixion conjured up for the readers an image, not simply of a man hanging in pain on a cross, but stripped naked to die in shame.²⁵ Crucifixion was an exemplary punishment to dissuade dissent and foster acquiescence during the monstrous regime of the *Pax Romana*.²⁶ In the *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Artemidorus (2nd century C. E.) considered it particularly inauspicious for a wealthy man to dream of crucifixion, since, “the crucified are stripped naked and lose their flesh,” τὰ δὲ κρυπτά ἐλέγχει· ἐκφανῆς γὰρ ὁ σταυρωθεὶς. τοὺς δὲ πλουσίους βλάπτει· γυμνοὶ γὰρ σταυροῦνται καὶ τὰς σάρκας ἀπολλύουσιν οἱ

²³ Not genuine, he says, is the ἔμφασις used by orators for humorous effect.

²⁴ It was the “slaves’ punishment,” *Valerius Maximus* 2:7.12. Appian reports that during the slave rebellion of Spartacus, Crassus had six thousand slaves crucified on the Via Appia leading into Rome (*Bella Civilia* 1:120). Josephus tells that the Roman General Titus had 500 Jews a day crucified (*Jewish War* 5.11.1).

²⁵ Whether or not the historical Jesus himself was crucified naked is perhaps debatable but plausible (Mat 27:35; Mk 15:25; Jn 19:23). For Mark, the nudity (partial or total) fulfills Scripture (Ps 21:16 LXX). John states: ἔλαβον τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ, “they took his clothing.” Mt 27:28 (cf. Lk 10:30) state that the Roman soldiers “stripped” (ἐκδύσαντες) Jesus prior to the crucifixion. That may mean they took away all of his clothing, including his loincloth, but not necessarily. Two reasons might seem to support a more modest crucifixion: (1) John 21:7 records another man who was naked but probably with a loin cloth: “That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked (ἦν γὰρ γυμνός), and jumped into the sea.” (NRSV). Working in the nude on a boat is disadvantageous and dangerous. “Naked” is not necessarily totally naked. (2) Out of respect for the sensibilities of the Jews the Romans might have allowed those they crucified a loincloth. These reasons, however, seem rather weak in the face of rapacious Roman brutality in Judea during the first century. Not until the time of Hadrian were limits placed upon what torturers and executioners could take from those condemned for treason (*maiestas*) to their personal effects with them. Before that time all his goods were taken into the imperial treasury. (Tacitus *Ann.* 6.29; Justinian *Digest* 48.4.11 [critical text and translation in Mommsen, Krueger, and Watson, eds., *The Digest of Justinian*, 4:804].) See the discussion in Collins, *Mark*, 745.

σταυρωθέντες.²⁷ What is more the cross “exposes things that are hidden: because the person who is crucified is disclosed.”²⁸ One may compare this language with Col 2:11 ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός, “in the stripping of the body of the flesh” as a verbally graphic depiction of death on a cross. Thus, both shameful nakedness and the loss of flesh (an image of death and disfigurement either through rotting, violence or to vermin) were likely part of crucifixion.

Early Christians were apparently certain that Jesus was naked on the cross, or so they appear to have imagined him. For example, Melito of Sardis, *On the Passover* 740-3 writes:

“The Lord was made a mockery, “dressed” in his naked body. And it not even deemed worthy of any covering at all so that no one would look upon it. For this reason the stars went out and the day became darkened, so that the one stripped naked on the cross might be covered, though not to darken the body of the Lord, but to keep the eyes of human beings from seeing these things.”²⁹

The earliest graphic representations of Christ crucified are from the late second or early third century C. E.³⁰ and they emphasize a naked Christ on the cross.³¹ In these

²⁶ On the systematic use of violence for pleasure and profit in ancient Rome, see Auguet, *Cruelty and Civilization: Roman Games*. Images of violence and oppression were common themes in the wall paintings of Roman homes. See Balch, *Roman Domestic Art*, 132-6, 202-13.

²⁷ Pack, ed., “*Artemidori Daldiani onirocriticon libri v*,” Leipzig: Teubner, 1963.

²⁸ Translation YWS.

²⁹ Translation YWS. Ὁ δεσπότης παρεσχημάτισται γυμνῶ τῷ σώματι καὶ οὐδὲ περιβολῆς ἡξίωται ἵνα μὴ θεαθῇ. Διὰ τοῦτο οἱ φωστήρες ἀπεστράφησαν καὶ ἡ ἡμέρα συνεσκότασεν, ὅπως κρύψῃ τὸν ἐπὶ ξύλου γεγυμνωμένον, οὐ τὸ τοῦ κυρίου σῶμα σκοτίζων, ἀλλὰ τοὺς τούτων ἀνθρώπων ὀφθαλμούς. Text from Perler, ed. *Meliton de Sardes: Sur la Pâque et fragments*.

³⁰ Some have objected to the early dating of the Palatine inscription on the supposition that Christians did not revere the cross until the 4th or 5th century. It is impossible to establish that supposition either way; early Christians like Alexamenos did not necessarily have to worship images in order to be caricatured as worshipping a crucified Jesus. See Balch, *Roman Domestic Art*, 104-5.

³¹ Solin and Itkonen-Kaila, “Graffiti del Palatino I. Paedagogium,” 209-12; Graydon F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 60. A second image, comparable to the Palatine graffito is on an amulet from Syria in the late 2nd or early 3rd century (in the British Museum, Department of Prehistory and Europe, London [MME 1986.05-01.1]), from the collection of Roger Pereire, Paris. Jesus is portrayed as nude, bearded and with long hair, arms stretched out beneath the *patibulum* and tied to it by strips at his wrists. He is shown body forward but

representations the starkness of the positioning of the body, emphasizing his nudity, is antithetical to the triumphal symbolism of Christ that appears in later centuries.³² It is natural, then, to assume that the body references in Col 1:20, 22 and in 2:11 depend upon a graphic imagination of the crucifixion of a naked Jesus.³³ “Graphic imagination” does not depend on whether the historical Jesus was crucified naked or not, but on whether the writer of Colossians and the readers were likely to have imagined him so. Whether or not every mention of circumcision in 2:11 refers to what happens to believers who experience union with Christ, circumcision is mentioned because the death of Jesus involved him being stripped, exposing what Romans would consider his barbaric and shameful, circumcised penis.³⁴ Since the metaphorical nexus of circumcision, crucifixion and ancient Christian baptism is *nakedness* (total or partial, real or metaphorical) on the level of the human experience of honor and shame,³⁵ perhaps it is a clue to understanding

in profile and turned to the left and bent at the knee as if seated upon a bar or peg. See the high resolution images and discussions in Spier, *Picturing the Bible: the Earliest Christian Art*, 227-8.

³² Spier, *Picturing*, 228.

³³ For a discussion of ancient attitudes toward the complex symbolism of nudity, see Hallett, *The Roman Nude*, chapters 1-3. Jeffery M. Hurwit, “The Problem With Dexileos,” 35-60. See also Paul Zanker, *The Mask of Socrates*, 4, 6, 24-25, 28-30. 33, 63-64, 136, 163, 176, 178, 226, 299, 368 n60. The treatment and exposure of the penis, as seen in Greco-Roman art, was the object of care and a means of non-verbal communication. On the κυνοδέσμη, pin or teather for binding up the penis, see *ibid.*, 28-30. An uncircumcised male ran the risk of being abusively called κόλλοψ, or ψῶλος “penis head,” “hard-on-bare glans,” *ibid.* 28, 374 n44. (For ψῶλος see the following note.)

³⁴ See Hodges, “The Ideal Prepuce,” 375-405. His comment on 392-3 is particularly apt:

“In the classical era, the association between the denuded glans and criminal impropriety is reflected in the vernacular, for in the plays of Aristophanes [Aristophanes, *Birds* 502–9, in *Aristophanes: Birds*, 81; Aristophanes, *Knights* 963–64, in *Aristophanes: Acharnians, Knights*, ed. and (trans. Jeffrey Henderson; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 347. See the commentary on *psolos* in Henderson, *Maculate Muse* n. 16, 110–11; n. 17, 111.] we find use of the derisory adjective *psolos* (ψῶλος). The scholiasts suggest that *psolos* can simply mean ‘having an erection,’ [See references in Hodges] a situation that can inadvertently cause the prepuce to evert, exposing the glans, but this definition does not take into account the varied contexts in which the word is used. The *psolos* male need not necessarily be circumcised either, as in the following slander: “He’s come back here with an old man who’s filthy, hunchbacked, wretched, wrinkled, bald, toothless, and, by God, I think he’s *psolos* too!” [Aristophanes, *Wealth* 265–67] When applied to certain foreigners of ill repute, however, *psolos* can very well imply that circumcision is the cause of the offender’s lewdness.”

³⁵ Guy, “Naked Baptism in the Early Church,” 133-142. Guy argues that, though baptism was not likely commonly practiced with the baptizand totally in the nude, the language of nudity connected with it in the

the significance and complexity of the argument of the letter to the Colossians. Indeed, given the concrete references to the physicality of crucifixion in 1:15-22 (“the blood of the cross,” “reconciled in his fleshly body through death”), an implied nakedness links 1:15-22 and 2:9-15. In this context the reference to circumcision and putting off the body of flesh represents “emphatic” or “figured” speech that would have a powerful, evocative vividness in its context. Its dependence upon a visual register well known to the audience suggests a vital, if neglected, strategy for understanding the rhetorical force of the passage.

[B]Artistic, Rhetorical Functions of Nudity and Circumcision

Nudity in Greco-Roman art and life is a rhetorically complex issue.³⁶ Nudity with various functions immediately confronts the person who enters a Roman *domus*. Abundant wall art represents nudity for a wide variety of purposes: comical and apotropaic effect, to portray ranges of meaning including sexual innocence or experience, vulnerability or divinity, nobility or venality, virtue or eroticism and dissipation, *joie de vivre* or tragic loss, strength and victory in battle, or loss and cowardice.³⁷ Art historians have often considered as a stylistic failure the Roman habit of copying the Greek ideal nudity of the human body and placing atop such sculptures realistic, but mismatched, heads of men and women.³⁸ Nevertheless, nudity conceived in the way Roman portraiture

patristic sources was the only language adequate to match the dramatic power of the ritual and the radical change it signified.

³⁶ Balch, *Roman Domestic Art*, 209 alludes to this variety of functions, noting “heroic nudity” of (209, CD #205a) and the naked blessedness of Endymion is a *topos* in Greco-Roman authors, e.g. Cicero (*Tusculan Disputations* 1.38.92; *Amicitia* 1.13.42-44). Propertius II.15.15-16 (c. 54 B.C.E.) emphasizes his nudity in ekphrastic comments.

³⁷ See the various beautiful color representations in relation to the experience of the Roman *domus* in Bettina Bergman, “Roman House as Memory Theater,” 225-56.

³⁸ Hallett, *The Roman Nude*, 3, refers to the prevailing attitude of seeing Roman nude portraiture as “aesthetic catastrophe.”

represents it is a type of costume, a means of communicating social values and status.

In his *Wars of the Jews*, Josephus recounts how Antigonus, the son of Aristobulus, tried to cast Antipater in a bad light. Though both these men had been enemies of Caesar, they tried to ingratiate themselves to him. Antipater, at a climactic moment, “threw away his garments, and showed the multitude of the wounds he had, and said, that as to his good-will to Caesar, he had no occasion to say a word, because his body cried aloud, though he said nothing himself; ...” (*Wars* 1.10.2). Nudity in this case functions as an artistic proof of heroic, even Herculean, virtue, and loyalty. In a similar way, Paul the apostle invokes the image of virtuous, rhetorical nudity when he says, in the climactic argument from pathos in the letter to the Galatians: “From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body” (Gal 6:17). In this case, “the marks of Jesus”—most probably referring to Paul’s battle scars acquired in preaching the Gospel—are an affective argument to recapture the loyalty of the Galatians as well an exemplary replacement for circumcision.³⁹ Thus, the understated reference to his nude body exposes Paul’s theological point of view that the wounds of the cross are a sufficient and necessary substitute, at least for non-Jews, for circumcision.⁴⁰ Indeed, since it is because of faith in the power of the cross of Jesus that “the world has been crucified

³⁹ See Betz, *Galatians*, 323-4, who does not, however, link the τὰ στίγματα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ to the argument on *circumcision*, but to the deliberate case for accepting a stance that will result in the audience’s persecution, even as it did for Paul (Cf. Gal 1:23; 4:29; 5:11; 6:12.). Quintillian (6.1.21) notes Cicero’s effective use of reframing devices (περιστάσις) such as this to alter the perception of an issue (ὑποστάσις). Bringing up matters such as “worth, his manly pursuits, the scars from wounds received in battle ...” were a way of shifting focus as a means of recommendation to the judge.

⁴⁰ Paul approaches conversion and faith in a similar manner in Romans 2:28 (NRSV), arguing “a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical.” By implication dying with Christ and becoming “obedient from the heart to the form (τύπος) of teaching to which you were entrusted” (Rom 6:17) are already likely seen, in the case of non-Jews at the least, as a *substitution* for physical circumcision early in the development of the theology of the Pauline circle. On Rom 6:17b as an expression of later reflection on Paul’s letter, see Jewett, *Romans*, 417. Against this view, see Gagnon, “Heart of Wax and a Teaching That Stamps: τύπος διδασχῆς (Rom 6:17b) Once More,” 667–87.

to [Paul], and [he] to the world” (Gal 6:15), for Paul, the cross was “the true circumcision” (Rom 2:28; Phil 3:1-3). The conclusion resulting from this reflection is that “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything” (v. 16). Barbarian, Jew and Greek, male and female might appropriate such “circumcision” as equals.⁴¹ This ideological separation from “the world” was a replacement for physical circumcision. Thus, the use of the term “circumcision” to refer to identification with Christ and de-identification with “the world” would have a deeper significance. It implies that a similar opprobrium attaches to identification with Christ. In effect, an uncircumcised Greco-Roman male who experienced conversion as a “circumcision” of his excluded “old identity” (τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον Col 3:9) became a barbarian to his former self. At the same time, it becomes appropriate to describe the new life as ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν κέκρυπται σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ ἐν τῷ θεῷ “your life is hidden with Christ in God.” Reading Col 3:2 in the light of Col 2:11 and Rom 2 and 6, suggests “hidden” has the sense Paul gave the it in Rom 2:28, ἀλλ’ ὁ ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ Ἰουδαῖος, “the Jew who a Jew in the hidden [sense].”

A third literary portrayal of nudity demonstrates the dishonor attached to circumcision. Though Hellenistic and Roman societies practiced public nakedness in certain times and places (i.e. the *gymnasion*, “the place of nakedness,”), they abhorred exposing the glans, the tip of the penis. Exposing the glans was considered vulgarly humorous, indecent or both. Together these attitudes represented a devastating exclusion for Jews.⁴² Artistic representations of male nudes feature an ideal and artistically

⁴¹ One imagines that even ancient women were at an advantage over Westerners in appropriating this image.

⁴² Hall, “Epispasm: Circumcision in Reverse,” 52.

emphasized πρόσθη or prepuce.⁴³ Artistic representations of the circumcised prepuce that exposes the glans show that it was considered “shameless and dishonorable, something we see only in depictions of slaves and barbarians.”⁴⁴ Hodges extends this interpretation of Greek attitudes, adding that literary mentions of the *psolos* (ψόλος) include the artistic representations of glans-revealing men: “ugly, decrepit old men, barbarian slaves, lecherous old satyrs,” and comically lewd characters.⁴⁵ Suetonius, *Domitian* 12, depicts this attitude in describing the shameful fate of a man suspected of avoiding paying the tax levied upon Jews and Christians.⁴⁶ He recalled “being present in [his] youth when the person of a man ninety years old was examined before the procurator and a very crowded court, to see whether he was circumcised.”⁴⁷

[A]The *Crux Interpretum* of Colossians 2:11

The key to understanding Col 2:11 is to relate circumcision to the vision of Christ on the cross as preached in the Christian gospel.⁴⁸ The meanings and precise referents of every phrase are the topics of interminable dispute.⁴⁹

Ἐν ᾧ καὶ περιετμήθητε
 περιτομῇ ἀχειροποιήτῳ

⁴³ Hodges, “Ideal Prepuce,” *passim*, conveniently gathers several striking images.

⁴⁴ Zanker, *Mask of Socrates*, 28 (n. 25).

⁴⁵ Hodges, “Ideal Prepuce,” 393, suggests that in certain contexts the bawdy epithet ψόλος may at times refer to uncircumcised males, e.g. Aristophanes, *Birds* 502–9.

⁴⁶ Louis H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, 100, argued that the success of Christian (and Jewish) proselytism led to the harsh prosecution of this tax.

⁴⁷ John Rolfe Carew, ed. *Suetonius: The Twelve Caesars*, 367.

⁴⁸ Balch, *Roman Domestic Art*, 80–81 used abundant images of the suffering of Isis/Io found on the walls of Roman houses in Pompeii and Herculaneum not to explain Paul’s text, but how his auditors and spectators might have heard his proclamation. Here I go a step further and suggest that the author of Colossians starts with the known, a common image of naked crucifixion, to vividly portray in laconic fashion the indecency of the cross. Colossae has never been excavated, but the likelihood is extremely high that homes were decorated with scenes similar to those found in Pompeii, Herculaneum, Ephesus and elsewhere.

⁴⁹ See Harris, *Colossians and Philemon: Exegetical Guide*, 97–116, for discussion of the pericope. A more complete summary of exegetical possibilities is given King, *An Exegetical Summary of Colossians*, ad loc.

ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός,
ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ

Here I give my own fairly literal translation:

- A *“In him also you were circumcised*
A1 *with a circumcision not [performed] by [human] hands,*
B *in the denuding [or stripping] of the body of the flesh*
A2 *in the circumcision of Christ ...”*

The function of these words in the flow of thought seems clear enough: they serve to articulate, through symbolic relations, the means by which believers enjoy the completeness of blessing (καὶ ἔστε ἐν αὐτῷ πεπληρωμένοι) that v. 10 asserts they have received “in Christ” as members of Christ’s imperial household.⁵⁰ The means is “circumcision, circumcision, circumcision (A, A1, A2). Though it might seem odd to bring up circumcision at this point in the letter, 2:20 and 3:3 plainly develop the parallel theme of death in a way that shows circumcision is a symbol for death that occurs through the identification with Christ through faith. In Col 1:12 this identification is described as transferring believers from one reign to another. The symbol of circumcision is apt as a marker of this transference from one world, one kingdom, to another. Jewish notions of circumcision point to entry into an exclusive covenant relationship with God, like the sign that bound the descendants of Abraham to God (Gen 17).⁵¹ Nevertheless, such aptness does not fully explain its appearance here nor its displacement of dying with Christ in this text. To fully explain the appearance of circumcision is to give an account

⁵⁰ Sumney, *Colossians*, 135.

⁵¹ Sumney, *Colossians*, 136.

of the invention of the metaphor as well as the most relevant ways the implied Colossian audience might have heard it. Furthermore, if *burial* is itself a symbol for baptism (2:12),⁵² then it seems circumcision cannot be strictly equated with baptism, but rather with a previous identification with Christ through conversion of the heart and faith.⁵³ Jewett's comment on Rom 6:2 is appropriate here. "For a first-generation audience of converts, this moment is usually assumed to be each individual's conversion event associated with baptism. It is significant, however, that Paul refers here not to baptism but to death."⁵⁴ In the case of Col 2:11 circumcision also equals death. Indeed, one expects the author to base the full blessedness of believers on participation in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, as in Romans 6. But in grounding the fullness of blessing in *circumcision*, co-burial (συνταφέντες) in baptism and co-resurrection (συνηγέρθητε) by faith in God's power the argument takes a distinctive and significant turn. The oddness of the statement logically provokes the question: what makes the equation of circumcision with death relevant? And, is the circumcision in some sense a co-circumcision with Christ? The image of Christ as the one who performs the circumcision on believers would be out of place entirely. Since the letter contains no sustained polemic against circumcision, only this passing reference, the purpose of the reference is not polemical. Rather, though the author may be innovative in his language, the substance of his thought seems to be part of the common ground of belief and practice the writer can confidently assume his readers share with him.

⁵² The connection may seem obvious and inevitable, Cannon, *The Use of Traditional Materials in Colossians*, 41-43. However, the passage does not equate circumcision with baptism. Rather, baptism is equated with burial, as in Rom 6. Pace, MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 99.

⁵³ Robert Jewett, *Romans*, 395.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Rather than take Christ as performer of this circumcision or see this representing Christ's circumcision as a little child,⁵⁵ it is best to see the "circumcision of Christ" as referring to a visual image of Christ's circumcision revealed in his nude body on the cross.⁵⁶ As such, it is a metaphor for the believer's death with Christ is a symbol of the initiatory experience of beholding by faith the εἰκών of God (ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, 1:15). The believer sees the εἰκὼν of God in a crucified Jewish teacher and rabble-rouser. With the preaching of the gospel the unsavory image becomes transformed into the glorious image of God. The experience is based in the concretely imagined physical body of the crucified and subsequently resurrected one (ἀποκατήλλαξεν ἐν τῷ σώματι τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ διὰ τοῦ θανάτου 1:22).⁵⁷ Such beholding works transformation by appropriation of Christ's circumcision revealed in the image of his nude crucified body. Theologically one may say that the Spirit works this appropriation through renewing the beholder "according to the image of his Creator" κατ' εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν (Col 3:10), that is, Christ, perhaps thought of as the new Adam.⁵⁸ A similar thought can be discerned in the authentic Pauline letters. Just as artistic representations of Narcissus are transformative, catching a vision of God in the cross of Christ is similarly transformative. 2 Cor 3:18 is a profound example of this theology. In Galatians the miscarriage of the gospel is the failure of those who beheld Christ graphically portrayed before their eyes as crucified (κατ' ὀφθαλμοὺς Ἰησοῦς

⁵⁵ For a discussion of the history, see Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy*, 63-9.

⁵⁶ Andrew T. Lincoln, "Colossians" in J. Paul Sampley et al., *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 11: 623.

⁵⁷ Paul refers to this transformation in his own life in "we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way" (2 Cor 5:16 NRSV).

⁵⁸ See Wiessenrieder, "Der Blick in Den Spiegel," 313 for a description of ancient perspectives in which beholding is transformation.

Χριστὸς προεγράφη ἑσταυρωμένος) to be fully transformed by the Spirit that is at work among them (Gal 3:1, 3). To Paul's chagrin, instead of standing in their status as sons and daughters of God (3:26), the Galatians were falling under the spell of slavery to the law (4:1, 7, 22, 30, 31; 5:13).⁵⁹

To properly understand the progression of believers death as "circumcision," burial, and resurrection, it is necessary to return to the source of the metaphor, the vision of the glorified One who is also the crucified Christ to which the author alludes in 1:22. Salient features of that death that could not be missed by a Greco-Roman audience are an ignominious crucifixion including the exposure of bodily nakedness, and especially, the fact that Jesus was a circumcised Jew. That a circumcised, crucified barbarian should be elevated to divine status as the very image of God was ludicrous to Greco-Roman sensibilities.

A Vivid Ambiguity

In 2:11 the first two lines A and A1, then, are a shocking application of the death of Christ to the life and identity of the readers.

A *"In him also you were circumcised*

A1 *with a circumcision not [performed] by [human] hands,*

The phrase ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός, however, seems deliberately and vividly ambiguous and can be understood as (1) a reference to shameful nudity, violently imposed upon the victim, (2) a way of speaking of violent physical death, understood graphically as the stripping off of Christ's fleshly body on the cross to reveal his deity as in 1:15-22 or (3) it can be understood as a metaphor for the death of

⁵⁹ Balch, *Roman Domestic Art*, 57-108.

the sinful nature of the believer. English translations vary but usually attempt to limit the reader's choices: the taking away "*selfish desires*" (CEV) or the "cutting away/stripping away/putting off" of "*the sinful nature*" (NLT/NIV/REB) or "the stripping away of *the old nature*" (REB). These translation strategies are designed to ease the reader's processing load so that the reader will at least find some meaning. The NET Bible attempts to lose nothing in translation and gives the rather literal and enigmatic "the removal of *the fleshly body*" itself (NET), which might cause the reader to ponder, "Whose body?" The reader has no apparent way to answer the question decisively one way or the other. In Greek the phrase ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός generates a series of poetic effects in which various senses and resonances of the phrase are more or less weakly signaled.⁶⁰

On the other hand, the deliberate, vivid ambiguity invites the reader to see Christ's experience of shame, nakedness and death as his or her own and to experience a cathartic transformation analogous to Christ's death, burial, and resurrection in their lives. It is an experience, to borrow a phrase from Miroslav Volf, of exclusion and embrace.⁶¹ It is designed to evoke in the non-Jewish audience the worst responses of exclusion and bigotry, so that the best in the reader may stand up and admit to its evil. Accordingly, the phrase "the circumcision of Christ" is also a deliberately vivid metaphor, another delicious synecdoche for the entire crucifixion. The gospel as preached by the writer of Colossians in his prayer (1:11-23) fixes the imagination on the Divine

⁶⁰ For the notion of poetic effects and more or less weakly signaled meanings, see Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, 217-24.

⁶¹ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 29, "The practice of 'embrace,' with its concomitant struggle against deception, injustice, and violence, is intelligible only against the backdrop of a powerful, contagious, and

One who reconciled all things through a shameful death on a Roman cross. Similarly the writer invites the readers to contemplate the Divine One (2:9) whose utterly shameful death and vindication is the source of their blessing. That spiritual gaze created rhetorically by the author is a transformative gaze in which Christ's own death, which left him naked and exposed becomes their own. His exposed circumcision becomes a way of speaking of their embrace of the rejection experienced by Christ. It is simultaneously Christ's circumcision and a circumcision experienced by those who see the glory of the crucified Christ. It is an exclusion of an old life and an embrace of reconciliation with the Father of Jesus Christ in a new life in the community of Christ made possible by the forgiveness of sins. It stands in this case in the place of co-crucifixion and both of these images are thereby related in 2:12 to baptism/burial and resurrection/faith in God's power. Hanging in the air, however, is the question: just how did Nympha (4:15), a female leader in the church in Colossae, read and appropriate the circumcision of Christ?

[A]Conclusion

A comparison of English translations of Col 2:11 reveals the most diverse ways of relating the clauses and filling in the gaps left by the authors vivid, emphatic speech. Translators usually do not have the luxury of sitting on the proverbial fence in exegesis. They must often choose the meaning to present to their audience and neglect those that remain implicit in the original text. The *Good News Translation* gives a clear, but I believe mistaken, understanding: "In union with Christ you were circumcised, not with the circumcision that is made by human beings, but with the circumcision made by

destructive evil I call 'exclusion ... and is for Christians possible only, if in the name of God's crucified Messiah, we distance ourselves from ourselves and our cultures in order to create a space for the other.'

Christ, which consists of being freed from the power of this sinful self.”⁶² It reverses the order of the last two phrases and ultimately divorces “circumcision” from the idea of death, introducing the notion of freedom. My suggestion would be to retain both the connection of “circumcision” and death and keep the order of the phrases that helps express the double entendre of the last two phrases: “In union with Christ you were circumcised. No human being performed it. Rather, it happened by the fleshly body being stripped naked, when you contemplated the circumcision of Christ.”

It is likely that Col 2:11 was vivid and allusive in the primary context. It is a mysterious saying, like that of Ephesians 5:30-33. The mystery (Col 1:26, 27; 2:2; 4:3) is the transformative experience of seeing the face of God in a naked Jewish man hanging on a cross. It shares with its context, where mystery religions abounded, the dynamic of personal transformation in the contemplation of suffering. That context was greatly enhanced by the richness of communication in the surrounding visual culture. Words like “circumcision” bristled with power and provoked visceral reactions. The use of ancient art to enhance our ability to catch the visual allusions greatly enhances our ability to use imagination critically as we read Scripture. We owe a debt of gratitude to David Balch for opening our eyes to the possibilities.

⁶² American Bible Society, *Good News Bible: with Deuterocanonicals/Apocrypha* [Good News Translation] (American Bible Society, 2001).

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