SPECIAL SECTION: VISUAL EXEGESIS

VISUAL EXEGESIS: INTERPRETING TEXT IN DIALOGUE WITH ITS VISUAL CONTEXT

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Introduction

The term “visual exegesis” has been adopted by the world of art to mean, in its broadest sense, the exegesis or interpretation of an image or picture. This mode of interpretation involves both analysis of the discrete units of the image as well as a synthesis of its meaning. Art historians engage this term for images that interpret text, especially sacred text, such as illustrated manuscripts. More recently it is applied to interpretation of the biblical text in dialogue with its visual context. The terminology of “visual exegesis” sits easily amongst a growing compendium of biblical exegetical methods. How does it sit, though, with the method in the art world? In investigating how visual exegesis of the biblical text and its visual context operates I hope to further the conversations that will allow this terminology to encompass all that it refers to and yet also be sufficiently detailed in discrete areas of application.

Engaging Visual Exegesis

When I embarked on my doctoral study I encountered a growing field of scholars reading biblical texts interactively with the visual material world in which they were written. My own fascination emerged from my experience of exploring the archaeological sites of the biblical lands, especially the ancient site of Colossae located in south western Turkey, and its relationship with the Letter to the Colossians. As a student of the Theology Department of Flinders University (Adelaide College of Divinity) I was associated with the Colossae Project led by Rev. Dr Michael Trainor AM and his collaborators Rev. Dr Alan Cadwallader and Professor Claire Smith. The focus of this project was to bring archaeology and theology together in the survey and eventual excavation of Colossae in Turkey.

1 Rosemary Canavan, Visual Exegesis: Interpreting Text in Dialogue with its Visual Context
In the process of this research I engaged primarily an adapted socio-rhetorical interpretation in conjunction with social identity theory to provide a “visual exegesis.” The scholarly context of this work included a range of practitioners experimenting across disciplines to find instruments to read images and texts together effectively.

In this article I wish to draw together the strands of a varied and expanding field that might be best described under a title such as “visual exegesis.” This field brings together such well known areas as iconography, semiotics, art history, biblical exegesis and much more. Since my early exploration in this field I have encountered a growing tapestry of endeavour, especially through Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) working groups. In surveying the current field it is my hope to encourage further conversation and development, especially in the common language and methodologies that promote what is vital to the understanding of biblical text: its visual environment.

**Brief History**

It is difficult to pinpoint a moment when the interrelation of texts and images as a means of interpretation began. Certainly it is possible to recognize works such as those by Adolf Deissman and Jack Finegan as providing information for the context of biblical writings. Deissman, offering over eighty illustrations of ostraca, steles, tombstones, letters from the papyri and honorific inscriptions, focused our gaze on the visual context of biblical texts so that one might shed light on the other. Finegan set out to “give a connected account of the archaeological background of Judaism and Christianity.” His work came on the wave of archaeological discoveries in the Middle East.


5 Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*, vii.
He stated emphatically “to see that world come vividly and startlingly alive is to find biblical and early Christian history invested with a fresh sense of reality and interest.” His volumes are interspersed with illustrations and photos of the visual material culture. This style of interplay between image and text continued. In recent years compilations of imagery have been published for particular subjects such as the study of Paul. These studies interpret the visual landscape and juxtapose it with biblical text allowing the reader/viewer to make the connections. The significance of the images to understanding the writings of the Old and New Testaments was obvious. The resource bank from these studies provides rich material for the student of the biblical text.

Interpretation of the Old Testament has been greatly enhanced through the use of visual data, especially by the Near Eastern Iconography group of the SBL and scholars of “The Freiberg School.” The latter emphasized the need to interpret image and text separately with a view to studying the relationship between them in a later step. The art historian Erwin Panofsky’s model seeks to understand the meaning of motifs and their attributes in an image and how they connect with themes and concepts. The identification and classification of an image in this way is in major part achieved through “literary knowledge” and leads to iconographic interpretation. Recent scholarship in this area indicates the emergence of “iconographic exegesis” which is defined as “the explanation of texts with the help of pictorial method.” “Explanation” is not likely to be the best descriptor for the process here; rather an “understanding” or “interpretation” might serve this better.

My focus is firmly on the New Testament where the options for new investigations engaging the visual image and text through iconography,

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6 Finegan, Light from the Ancient Past, vii.
8 Harry Maier introduces this in his overview of exegesis, imperial image and imagination, noting the proliferation of studies as “several hundred” which are concerned with interpretation of Hebrew texts in relation to ancient near eastern images. See Harry O. Maier, Picturing Paul in Empire: Imperial Image, Text and Persuasion in Colossians, Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 16–17.
11 Harry Maier quotes Izaak de Hulster and qualifies the working definition. See Maier, Picturing Paul in Empire, 16.
socio-rhetoric and semiotic interpretation, re-imagination, mimicry and a plethora of methods are coming into their spring. Foundational for thought in this area is Michael Foucault who recognizes that in the matter of interpretation of antiquity it was necessary to understand the relationship between image and text. Such an engagement between image and text necessitated the learning of the particular language of both, and perceiving images as both “objects” and “acts” of interpretation.

For the Roman Imperial imagery that is the context of New Testament writings, notable scholars began a systemization of imagery in terms of its own language opening the way to the dialogue between image and text. Tonio Hölscher speaks of a “language of images.” Simon Price brought together anthropology, numismatics, archaeology and history to show how the rituals, images and architecture pervaded the collective psyche to assist Greek cities to adapt, adopt, and/or resist their subjection to Rome. This language of imagery was a language also of persuasion, power and influence. Paul Zanker refers to a “system of signs” including the mass production of small personal items which assisted in the internalization of political imagery. What all this has led to is the development of a process that, as Harry Maier describes, “stresses rather the role of imagery in imagination and persuasion in the ancient world and to demonstrate the critical importance of visual evidence in the exegesis of biblical texts.”

Recent Studies—Developing Methods

This very incomplete and brief history serves to paint a context for the exciting groundbreaking scholarship that is engaging as many levels of the research and interdisciplinary expertise as is possible.

I was first attracted to the methodology of Harry Maier who read the text of Col 3:11 in the context of the fullness of the visual imagery of imperial

13 Annette Weissenrieder and Friederike Wendt offer Foucault’s notion as a starting point. See Weissenrieder and Wendt, “Images as Communication,” 3.
17 Maier, Picturing Paul in Empire, 16.
iconography. This included “architecture, the imagery of imperial coins, clothing, strategic deployment of images of the emperor and the symbols associated with his reign and ritualized state ceremony.” The pictorial storyboard that emerged was key to the process of acculturation, educating viewers to instantly recognize the imperial image of an empire, socially constructing the identity of all who belonged. The systemization of images concerning clothing and body were of particular significance to my study of Col 3:1–17. The depictions of imperial clothing conveying values and virtues of the empire were a primary source for my investigation along with images of defeated nations, stripped and naked. The panel shown below (fig. 1) is one from the Sebasteanion at Aphrodisias, fashioned as a new “Roman-style Corinthian Temple” for the worship of Aphrodite and the Roman emperors around 20–60 CE. This three-tier construction communicated the power and dominance of the Roman regime over the conquered people and lands. It incorporated 200 panels of life-size statues including emperors from Augustus to Nero. The one shown here is of Nero’s conquest of Armenia. Armenia is shown as a naked female, unable to stand, held by the naked hero depiction of Nero who towers in might and strength above the shamed female figure. Nero’s hand on Armenia’s arm can be seen as a “hand up,” a beneficent gesture on the part of Nero and Rome, yet the overriding message is that of submission. Taking the hand-up will have significant conditions on the relationship of Armenia to Rome. Restoration from this shamed position can only occur in a compliant arrangement loosely covered in the umbrella of Roman peace. These graphic engravings contrast with the text of Colossians which urges the Christ followers to clothe themselves with the heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and love (Col 3:12, 14). Their clothing in this way re-members them to the body of Christ where “the peace of Christ” will rule in their hearts (Col 3:15).


Figure 1: Nero and the personification of Armenia. Sebasteion of Aphrodisias (first century CE), Aphrodisias Archaeological Museum, Aphrodisias. (located near the modern city of Geyre, Turkey.)
Exploring other work in this field I encountered Brigitte Kahl and Davina Lopez who embarked on a semiotic method using the semiotic square developed by A. J. Greimas. The semiotic square maps binary oppositions, which Kahl and Lopez use to map the semiotic codes of imperial iconography. More recently Kahl has embarked on the examination of the cruciform shape of the trophy and its relationship to the cross. The use of this model assists greatly with the power relationships and with reading images.

Choosing to enter this field of investigation I was introduced to Vernon Robbins’ socio-rhetorical analysis. This I found to offer multi-layers for the dialogue I wished to demonstrate between image and text. Robbins describes his approach as a “multi-dimensional approach to texts guided by a multi-dimensional hermeneutic.” It is the five arenas of texture that Robbins elucidates within the text that provide the three dimensional weaving of textures in and out of an interactive array of colour that were attractive to me to manage the dialogue between image and text. My adaption of Robbins’ model is shown below (fig. 2). The five arenas of texture, inner, social and cultural, ideological, intertexture and sacred, are shown as interactive with each other in the text and also with the represented world and verbal signs. The dashed lines of the circles indicate that communication and meaning pass between the realms of the text, the Graeco-Roman world and the world of the interpreter. Integral to this model, and Robbins’, are the intersecting axes: vertically, the mimetic axis of representation, and, horizontally, the rhetorical axis of communication.

The arena of intertexture most directly engages “the interaction of the language in the text with ‘outside’ material and physical ‘object’, historical events, texts, customs, values, roles, institutions and systems.” I did not limit my study to this arena of texture but engaged systematically as many arenas and levels as I could.

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22 Brigitte Kahl initiated this method in relation to re-imagining the visual context of the Letter to the Galatians and following her, Davina Lopez used the same method, re-imagining Paul’s mission to the conquered nations. See Brigitte Kahl, Galatians Re-imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009); Davina Lopez, Apostle to the Conquered: Re-imagining Paul’s Mission (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008). For use of Greimas’ semiotic square, see Kahl, Galatians Re-imagined, 89.


27 Robbins, Exploring the Texture of the Texts, 40.
Figure 2: Adapted Socio-Rhetorical Approach

28 Canavan, *Clothing the Body of Christ*, 40, fig. 2.
In conjunction with the development of this socio-rhetorical approach was the introduction of six “rhetorolects.” Robbins explains this term as a contraction of “rhetorical dialect” and as “a form of language variety or discourse identifiable on the basis of a distinctive configuration of themes, topics, reasonings, and argumentations.” Robbins has worked from the foundation that “six major socio-cultural-religious frames guided first century Christian Rhetoric: wisdom, prophetic, apocalyptic, pre-creation, priestly and miracle.” The publishing of the detail of these rhetorolects is testament to years of work refining and defining the framework to interpret meaning from the text.

As the socio-rhetorical approach focuses on social and geographical locations as well as bodies, households, cities and more, the move to what Robbins calls “rhetography” becomes obvious. This term emerges from eliding the words “rhetoric” and “graphic” to form “rhetography.” This he defines as “the graphic images people create in their minds as a result of the visual texture of a text.” Rhetography involves the use of “ekphrasis,” that is, vivid language that enlivens the imagination. Maier explains this via its ancient context, known from the Progymnasmata, rhetoric exercises, with a definition given by Aelius Theon “ekphrasis is descriptive language, bringing what is portrayed clearly (ευαργῶς) before the sight.” Maier makes clear that the vivid speech (ekphrasis) is only made clear through “enargeia,” bringing before the eyes. Maier goes on to conclude that “the Pauline

32 Roy Jeal, “Visual Interpretation: Blending Rhetorical Arts in Colossians 2:6–3:4 (paper given at “Visual Exegesis: Images as Instruments of Scriptural Interpretation and Hermeneutics,” Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar, Emory University, Atlanta, 2013). Robbins explains that with these foci interpretation needs to include not only “rhetology” (the logic of rhetorical reasoning) but also rhetography. See Robbins, *The Invention of Christian Discourse*, 16.
corpus in general, and the letters ... are nothing if not skilled applications of enargeia or vivid language in the service of persuasion.”\textsuperscript{36} Of course, this is just the beginning for Maier, who then demonstrates the power of the imperial image in text and persuasion in Colossians, Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles. He does this in relation to known visual material culture and in conjunction with theories that will best serve our understanding such as Michel de Certeau’s “making do,” Homi Bhabha’s model of imperial mimicry and Edward Soja’s notion of “thirdspace.”\textsuperscript{37} Maier demonstrates, through his applications of these ideas, the rich resource that the imperial imagery provides for the art of persuasion deftly employed by Paul and his “school.” Maier gives us a convincing insight into how the early Christ communities were able to construct their identity within the prevailing powerful regime of the Roman Empire.

**Conclusions and Future Directions**

I began this article with two objectives. The first was to open the way for further conversation for the use of the terminology of “visual exegesis” both in the art world and biblical interpretation. The means of achieving this was the subject of the second objective: to elucidate the methods and development of visual exegesis of the biblical text.

Biblical visual exegesis begins with the biblical text. The interpretation relies on the analysis of visual material such as statuary, coins and monuments which operate in a network of meaning, a schema of propaganda and persuasion, to communicate the power of the empire. The first century images and their meaning are interwoven in the words of the text and are part of the language of its communication. This is a context that is not outside the text but drawn in the text itself, in the metaphors and images employed in the narrative and discourse. The key is in identifying how the biblical text evokes these images and reuses them for its own purpose.

I have touched on a few of the current endeavours which are in themselves complex and multi-layered. It is the tip of the iceberg. From my perspective, this is a method that is revolutionizing biblical interpretation. It does not isolate itself from any other method, but uses as many means of interpretation as possible in the process. The rich fruits of these labours offer both an insight to the past and a way for communication in the present.

\textsuperscript{36} Maier, *Picturing Paul in Empire*, 31.
\textsuperscript{37} Maier introduces his work in the introduction of his monograph. See Maier, *Picturing Paul in Empire*, 33.
With each new venture into visual exegesis there is an active pursuit of how to systematize the communication between image and text. The common ground of the visual exegesis of biblical text and the visual exegesis of the art world are a little ploughed field. The two areas of visual exegesis came together in a seminar in 2013 run by Emory University.\textsuperscript{38} This marked an auspicious moment for a growing field of interpretation in biblical exegesis. The respondent articles in this volume offer another opportunity for discussion.

\textsuperscript{38} “Visual Exegesis: Images as Instruments of Scriptural Interpretation and Hermeneutics,” (Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar, Emory University, Atlanta, 2013).