

The Body of Christ:
Medieval Representations and Repercussions

An Independent Study
Presented to Professor Kirk Ambrose
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Modern scholars around the world have speculated the transformation of the imagery of Christ preceding the fall of the Roman Empire for decades. Theories such as the ‘Emperor Mystique’ have been proposed by Ukraine scholar, André Grabar, and in turn refuted by American professor and scholar, Thomas Mathews. The latter figure argues in favor of a theory which revolves around a handful of distinct fundamental adaptations, as opposed to the supposed imperial derivatives argued by Grabar. Mathews’ 1993 extended analysis, *The Clash of Gods*, claims that the imperial insignia upon which Grabar formulates the basis for his theory “are in fact totally lacking”¹. In his book, the author focuses upon a variety of recurrent elements observed within early images of Christ from late Antiquity. He analyzes highly specific features of these images to make his case which range from the folding of the garments which clothe Christ’s body, to the mere height of his throne, and even the aesthetic details of his beard—which he claims to be notably reminiscent of that belonging to the Greek god, Dionysus. Mathews proclaims that it is these details which provide the basis for what he deems the necessary and complete re-assessment of early Christian art².

One of Mathew’s most fascinating and controversial arguments lies within the apparent physical feminization of Christ. The author discusses several images of Christ as physically feminized including the Vision of Ezekiel mosaic in the Blessed David chapel at Thessalonica (figure 3) as well as the Baptism of Christ mosaic in the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna (figure 1). I will use these images to modify Mathews’ theory: I believe that the former image of Christ appears undeniably and physically feminized; Yet, Mathews’ argument for the feminization of the latter image seems to fall short. To place a blanket term of a feminized Christ under the

¹ Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 21.

² Ibid, 121.

umbrella of this time period seems an obvious stretch. Furthermore, Mathews' lack of discretion between the gender of Christ and his presumed sexuality only furthers this questionable aspect of his proposition for an entirely feminized Christ. Despite these confounding variables, however, Mathews, perhaps unconsciously, justly draws attention to Christ's physical body as an irrefutable point of focus in early Christian art—an emphasis which remained throughout the Middle Ages. It is through this lens that I will investigate the *why* behind this fleshly focus, *what* it meant to religious followers, and *how* it may have consequently impacted Medieval society.

First using the aforementioned images to contextualize my argument, one must look to the chapter of Mathews' book titled, "Christ Chameleon". The author dedicated this portion of his book to present evidence for the apparent feminization of Christ's physical form. Beginning with the framing of Christ as feminized in the Baptism of Christ mosaic in Ravenna, his physical body no doubt contrasts that of his "hulking male"³ counterparts who flank each side of his naked body (figure 1). Both the god who represents the Jordan River to the left of Christ and John the Baptist at his right are "heavily bearded and broad-chested, robust males"⁴; Whereas, Christ remains "beardless with slender shoulders, girlish breasts, and a smoothly modelled body"⁵. However "de-masculinized" this depiction may appear, the complete appropriation of this image of Christ as female is impossible due to his male genitalia exposed beneath the transparent wash of water (figure 2), which deems this depiction of Christ as arguably intersex at best. Although certainly not presented as necessarily strong or "godly", Mathews describes this image as the "most strikingly ambiguous image in Ravenna"⁶. While this statement may be true

³ Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 134.

⁴ *Ibid*, 135.

⁵ Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 135.

⁶ *Ibid*, 134.

pertaining to its specific location, I believe there is better evidence for a feminized Christ in the aforementioned mosaic in Thessalonica (figure 3).

Mathews introduces this image with a synopsis of the legend regarding its creation at the Stonecutters' Monastery, now called the Blessed David. This Blessed David Christ is the first, and strongest, evidential image which Mathews used to demonstrate his theory. The legend goes that the mosaic was originally intended to be an image of "the pure Mother of God" for use as a private point of prayer by the "crypto-Christian"⁷ daughter of the pagan emperor of the region. When the mosaicist came to finish his work one day, he saw that the female figure he created had somehow transformed into Christ "on a luminous cloud and on the wings of the wind"⁸—in many ways resembling the description of the character Ezekiel's vision of God in the Old Testament⁹:

"...And I saw... a great cloud, and a fire infolding it, and brightness was about it: and ... out of the midst of the fire, as it were the resemblance of amber... and they sparkled like the appearance of glowing brass... the resemblance of fire shining round about... As the appearance of the rainbow when it is in a cloud on a rainy day: this was the appearance of the brightness..."

The mosaic appropriately parallels the attention drawn to the glowing and radiant light, as described in the Biblical passage above, to such an extent that the setting for a "hallucinatory vision that might easily have suggested miracles to a believing eye"¹⁰ to take place was created (figure 3). This notion is supported by the extension of the same legendary account which involves an Egyptian monk named Senouphios. It is said that his experience upon first encounter

⁷ Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 115.

⁸ Ibid, 115.

⁹ Douay-Rheims Catholic Bible (RHE), Ezekiel 1:4-28.

¹⁰ Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 116.

with the Blessed David Christ resulted in the event of his ecstatic death¹¹. Additional parallels are seen within the cloud, as described in the passage and represented in the mosaic, as a “great transparent disk” surrounding Christ with “rays of shining white, pastel pinks, and blues”¹². Christ’s seat upon the “arc of a luminous rainbow,” in combination with the “halo of warm gold light”¹³ surrounding his head, further establishes the ambient depiction of this vision as Biblically accurate.

The mosaic differs largely, however, on terms of the Biblical impression of Christ as the “fearful Lord in Ezekiel’s vision” (figure 4). Mathews describes the Blessed David Christ as instead “mild as milk” and devoid of any “masculine vigor”¹⁴—a figure with narrow and sloping shoulders, notably broad hips, and a soft and beardless face surrounded by light, shoulder-length hair¹⁵ (figure 4). Each of these characteristics are undeniably present and equally reminiscent of features that have been widely and socially established as “feminine”.

Mathews labels this transformation a “miraculous sex change”¹⁶ and speculates the reasoning behind the “metamorphosis of the Virgin into her divine Son”¹⁷ by unjustly deeming it a “question that involves the sexual identity of Christ”—one which he claims is “an issue of profound religious importance”¹⁸. While Mathews is not the first scholar to proclaim Christ’s feminization in early Christian art, he fails to provide any necessary discretion between Christ’s gender and his speculated sexuality as derived from these images specifically. Art historian, Heather D. Walker, bolstered the argument for a recurrent feminine Christ throughout the Middle

¹¹ Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 115.

¹² *Ibid*, 115.

¹³ *Ibid*, 115.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 118.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 118.

¹⁶ Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 118.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 116.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 116.

Ages by appropriately acknowledging the difference between his gender ambiguity and his supposed sexuality in her thesis titled, “The Goddess Jesus”.

Like Mathews, Walker investigates the phenomenon of feminized depictions of Christ in the Middle Ages by delving into a number of images which portray the similarly “feminized” qualities of wide hips and breast-like mounds of flesh as seen in the Blessed David Christ. While the two scholars align in their acknowledgment of these features, Walker promptly and justly establishes the need for a distinction between the realms of gender and sexuality; Whereas, Mathews simply lumps the two together. She argues that, “by removing the sexual connotations of genitalia, it is possible to examine this [feminine] emphasis from another angle”¹⁹. Such angles lead to potential explanations for the genesis of this phenomenon. Cyclically enough, these explanations become accessible only by first establishing these two terms as autonomous entities.

It is imperative to address this flaw within the jargon of Mathews’ argument since not infrequently does he swap the term “gender” with “sexuality” throughout the entirety of his analysis. Nowhere in Mathews’ case is sexuality a warranted element for discussion as he focuses solely upon visually palpable, yet, in some cases, undeniably present, feminized features of Christ within his selection of evidential images. The mere physical appearance of Christ’s body and genitalia in these pieces yields Mathews little to no agency to speak upon any type of his speculated sexuality. In fact, any mention of sexuality is rather irrelevant to his argument altogether since he makes no confounded statements regarding the sexual identity or orientation of Christ. Instead, the interchangeable attitude with which Mathews addresses these terms appears to be his sincere, yet detrimental, failure to acknowledge any disparities between the

¹⁹ Heather D. Walker, *The Goddess Jesus: The Feminization and Sexualization of Images of Christ in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (California State University Long Beach, 2006), 14.

two. This retracts a great deal of credibility from his theory, especially in the dawn of heightened gender awareness of today.

This topic of gender studies prevails only increasingly complex, yet equally as important, as we progress further into our human existence. However large an undertaking, some elucidation is essential for the synthesis of new ideas to stem from the theory at hand. Sherry C.M. Lindquist helped to establish a conversation regarding gender and sexuality within the realm of Medieval nudity in her book, *The Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art*. This collection of essays from various scholars, sought over and edited by Lindquist, helps to provide some insight into the pertinent topic of Christ's gender as artistically portrayed by his nude body in early Christian art.

Scholar and professor Kirk T. Ambrose analyzes the purpose of nudes in the early art world in his featured chapter titled "Male Nudes and Embodied Spirituality in Romanesque Sculpture". In his analysis, Ambrose appropriately acknowledges the artistic gendering of holy figures as "the subject of a lively debate"²⁰. He then moves on to establish the role of nudes in the 11th and 12th centuries as "exempla of piety"²¹, as opposed to symbols of sexuality as inferred by Mathews via his undifferentiated rhetoric. Ambrose continues to present evidence and explanation for Medieval focus upon the corporeal nature of Christ, as well as that belonging to other male religious figures in this time period: He proclaims that this focus provided a means to "tangibly evoke a connection between the body of the faithful and that of Christ"²². Ambrose even speaks specifically upon "Christ's prominently displayed penis", seen in the same

²⁰ Lindquist, S. C. M., & Ambrose, T. Kirk (2012). *The Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art*. "Male Nudes and Embodied Spirituality in Romanesque Sculpture" (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012), 67.

²¹ Ibid, 67.

²² Ibid,73.

previously discussed mosaic in Ravenna (figure 1), as a function to “assert his human nature”²³. Upon this premise, artistic representations of Christ’s body then become the bridge to merge the “divide between the human and the divine”²⁴. This link represents the exact manner in which Christ is Biblically understood and described²⁵:

“...For let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who being in the form of God... being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man...”

This body of God incarnated, feminized or not, provided believing viewers, such as Senouphios, an “intimate and indissoluble link to God”²⁶. In his exploration, Ambrose accredits scholar, Cynthia Hahn, for her persuasive argument regarding the emphasis upon the body in religious Medieval art and its capacity to make religious figures, namely Christ, “all the more palpable and accessible for medieval viewers”²⁷. Christ’s nude body provided these visual exemplum of piety to those who were “enjoined to model themselves bodily and spiritually”²⁸ after him, e.g. Senouphios, among others who paralleled his religious reverence.

It is with the latter philosophy that we can loop back to the dormant crux of Mathews’ argument for Christ’s physical body, instead of his ubiquitous femininity, as an artistic and spiritual Medieval focal point. We can, however, use the sentiment from Mathews’ female focus to incorporate an additional element of complexity to the conversation regarding the role of Christ’s physical body in the lives of the religiously devout, by focusing specifically upon the lives of faithful Medieval females. Female scholar, Caroline Walker Bynum, has dedicated much of her academic career to examine Medieval reverence for the physical body in the context of

²³ Lindquist & Ambrose, *The Meanings of Nudity*, “Males Nudes and Embodied Spirituality”, 69.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 73.

²⁵ The Bible (RHE), Philippians 2:5-7.

²⁶ Lindquist & Ambrose, *The Meanings of Nudity*, “Males Nudes and Embodied Spirituality”, 73.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 73.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 73.

theology and spirituality—specifically drawing focus upon women and their lifelong spiritual pilgrimages towards their ultimate perception of piety as influenced by the corporeal emphasis upon Christ’s body.

In her book, *Jesus as Mother*, Bynum formulates the hypothesis that the aspect of Christ’s body which appealed most to women throughout the Middle Ages was his maternal nature: Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection paralleled the female events of pregnancy and breastfeeding to pious women throughout Western Europe. Furthermore, the overarching loving nature, with which Christ was Biblically and historically represented, was especially revered by his female followers. Bynum cites Benedictine monk, Anselm of Canterbury, to solidify the idea that engendering Christ as “the mother who gives birth, even dying to give the child life”²⁹, served to highly contrast the traditionally male assumption of God which in turn worked in favor to reach female believers; Framing “the father as the ‘one who rules’ and the mother, the ‘one who loves’”³⁰.

In this way, Bynum’s theory may appear to support Mathews’ argument for an entirely artistically feminized Christ as she practically provides evidence for his further rhetorical feminization through her mention of how maternal, and therefore feminine, imagery was intentionally applied in theological writing throughout the high Middle Ages in various religious orders to “male religious authority figures, particularly abbots, bishops and the apostles, as well as to God and Christ”³¹. However, as proven vis-à-vis the Baptism of Christ mosaic in Ravenna, “it would be precipitate”³², as Walker puts it, to assume or apply the complete feminized

²⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 113.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 113.

³¹ *Ibid*, 112.

³² Walker, *The Goddess Jesus*, 74.

representation of Christ, for implications of the maternal or otherwise, modes artistic, theological, or rhetorical, to the entirety of the Middle Ages.

This notion is likewise advanced by Bynum herself via another theory which she presents in her 1987 text, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. In this book, Bynum focuses upon female reverence for Christ's body as food as it was Biblically represented by the visceral imagery of the Holy Eucharist³³:

“... I am the living bread... If any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world... He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath everlasting life... For my flesh is meat indeed: and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood abideth in me...”

It is through this lens of understanding the body and blood of Christ which Bynum sought to examine the spiritual paths taken by the Medieval women who perceived and were affected by it. Food often became a point around which a great deal of somatic penitence revolved for religious men and women throughout the Middle Ages. These penitential practices became vehicles for the imitation of Christ's own suffering for the purposes of embodying his pious exemplum as his physical body epitomized. Specifically, the Franciscan order, founded in the central Italian town of Assisi by Saint Francis, was established upon the premise of complete rejection of all secular wealth as a way to simulate the life and ministry of Christ. The ensuing extreme poverty, adopted by monks and nuns belonging to the order, included the relinquishment of all ownership of property—leaving them to beg in the streets for any tangible food that would enter their bodies. However radical this appears to “casual modern observers”³⁴, Bynum argues

³³ The Bible (RHE), John 6:51-56.

³⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 5.

that it was this opportunity to replace all secular means of sustenance wholly with that of Christ's Holy body, which specifically led women throughout Medieval Europe to embark upon a life of complete religious devotion to become First, Second, or Third Order nuns.

Bynum concentrates on “women whose life stories and writings survive” in sufficiently traceable detail to delve into these “rich and paradoxical meanings of eating and not eating”³⁵ in her book. Female tertiary Franciscan, Saint Angela of Foligno, becomes a frequently cited figure as her story survives in the form of her quasi-autobiographical text, *Il Libro della Beata Angela da Foligno*, bowdlerized by male Franciscan scribe known as “Friar A”. In her memoir, the moment of Angela's ultimate religious conversion in the basilica of St. Francis, is described as notably reminiscent of monk Senouphios' spiritual acme: Upon her encounter with a stained-glass window, which portrayed an image of Christ supporting a rather child-sized and presumably, suffering, body of St. Francis (figure 6), Angela broke into an unapologetic and equally hysteric screaming fit. This bout of hysteria presented Angela the only remaining somatic element that was needed to satiate her all-encompassing connection to God. She thenceforth fully committed her life to one of absolute religious devotion as a Third Order nun until her death, and ultimate union with God, in 1309.

While the disparities between Angela's spiritual paramount and that of Senouphios are many, i.e. time in history, geographical location, gender of each figure, and the ultimate fate of the two, the commonalities are compelling enough for some conclusions to be drawn. Ultimately, a formula which has the potential to summate to spiritual experiences, similar to those held by Angela and Senouphios, can be derived from study of each account—the key ingredient remaining as immense Medieval-esque priority to be placed upon Christ's physical body. The

³⁵ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 5.

next essential component, being supplement to Christ's body as focal point, is that of the "believing eye"³⁶ which Mathews referred to in his initial account of Senouphios' story. And the catalyst which delivers this spiritual recipe to climatic fruition relies less upon the actual artistic rendering of Christ's own body, but more upon the rather mystical psyche, as primed by the viewer, who would ultimately have perceived these images.

Angela is noted to have, intentionally or not, primed herself during her pilgrimage, via penitential fasting, for her hysteric reception of the body and bread of Christ as alternative sustenance in Assisi. The illumination from the vibrant stained glass, as it was shone down upon by the Italian summertime sun, her inescapable surroundings of Biblical Giotto frescoes, combined with the high jacking of her visual and olfactory senses by the haze of incense, and having endeavored a long day's travel despite her lack of food intake, allowed Christ depicted to take physical form as Angela Biblically understood him. In the same way, the exaggerated luminosity of the Vision of Ezekiel mosaic both sensationally and viscerally overwhelmed Senouphios to the extent of his own death in Thessalonica centuries prior. The question becomes clear that the crux of the conversation lies not within the imperial, gender, sexual, maternal, or alimentary status of Christ, but rather within his status as a *humanized* God—a corporeal savior who became physically accessible to those who desired nothing more, men and women alike, across the considerable distance of time and geography which encompassed what is ambiguously understood as the Middle Ages. Medieval imagery of Christ's *human* body then became the artistic conduit through which spiritual seekers of the time could tangibly interact with their God.

³⁶ Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 116.

Figures



Figure 1: The Baptism of Christ, mosaic in the Arian Baptistery, Ravenna, first half of the sixth century.



Figure 2: The Baptism of Christ, mosaic in the Arian Baptistery, Ravenna, first half of the sixth century.



Figure 3: The Vision of Ezekiel, apse mosaic in Blessed David, Thessalonica, c. 425-50.



Figure 4: The Vision of Ezekiel, apse mosaic in Blessed David, Thessalonica, c. 425-50.

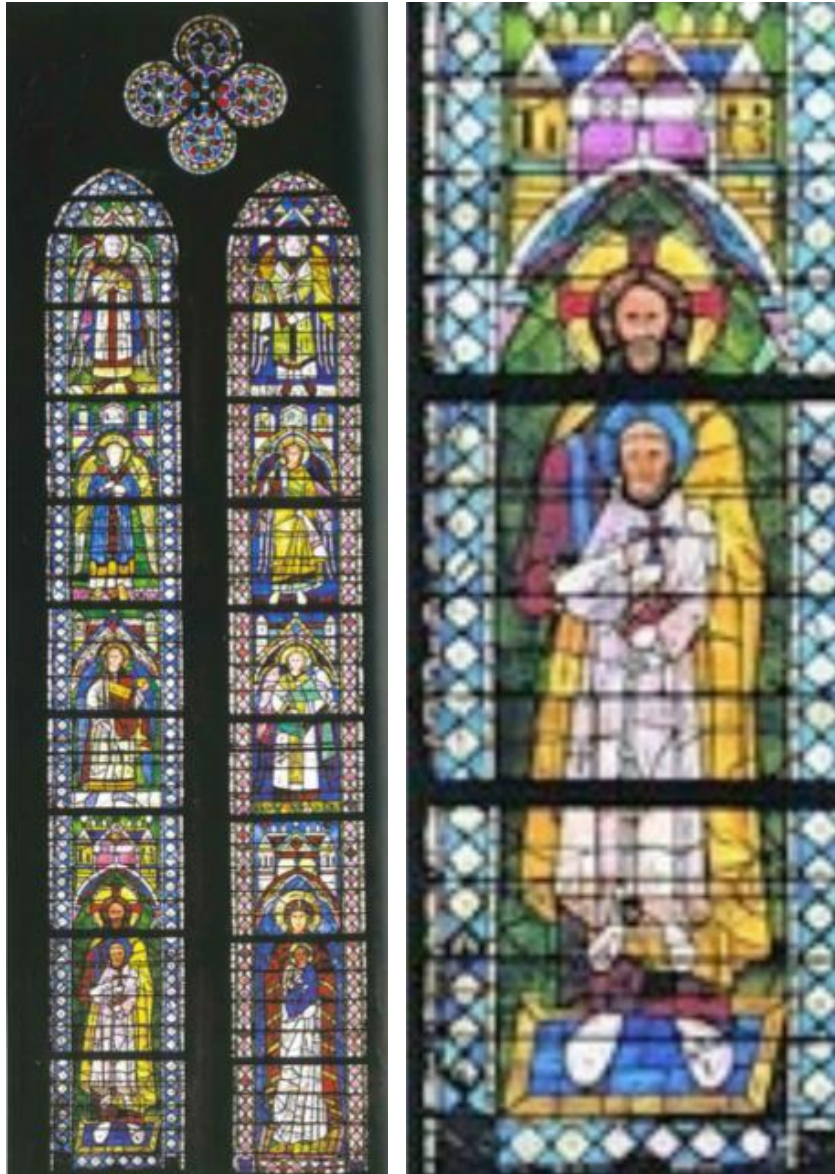


Figure 5: Angel Stained Glass Window, 1270s, Upper Basilica of San Francesco, Assisi.
(Source: Professor Adrian Hoch)

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