Philip Suciadi CHIA[1] :

The Theology of "Clothing" in the Epistle of Colossians – A Social Identity Theory Approach –

Abstract.

The epistle to the Colossians articulates a significant theological perspective on Christian identity through the metaphor of clothing. The author uses the concepts of clothing to illustrate the believer's transformation in Christ, framing it as both a decisive act (putting off the "old self") and an ongoing process (putting on the "new self"). This research explores the theological significance of clothing in the Book of Colossians, where attire symbolized social standing, moral character, and religious affiliation. This article employs ancient cultural practices in conjunction with social identity theory.

Keywords: New Testament, biblical theology, clothing, Colossians, Greco-Roman context, social identity theory

---

[1] Research Associate at the Faculty of Theology and Religion of the Department of Old Testament and Hebrew Scriptures, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa, and Director of the Doctoral School of Theology at the Evangelical Theological Seminary of Indonesia; e-mail: pchia275@students.sbts.edu.

Introduction

Grasping the theological significance of clothing in Colossians necessitates an examination of the historical and cultural backdrop of the ancient Greco-Roman world and the early Christian communities. Colossae, a modest yet culturally rich city in the Roman province of Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), was a melting pot where philosophical ideas, pagan religions, Jewish customs, and nascent Christian beliefs converged.[2] In this cultural milieu, clothing served not only practical purposes but also held symbolic meaning. In Greco-Roman society, garments frequently indicated an individual's social standing, profession, ethnicity, or religious identity. The act of changing attire could symbolize a shift in status or identity such as during initiation into mystery religions or when taking on public office.[3] The author utilizes this common cultural understanding by employing the metaphor of "stripping off" the old self and "donning" the new (Colossians 3:9–10), thereby portraying the Christian experience as a profound transformation that redefines both personal and communal identity.[4]

Methodology

This article uses the Greco-Roman context and social identity theory. The Greco-Roman context serves as an essential methodological framework in the study of the New Testament. It encompasses the historical, cultural, philosophical, and socio-political landscape of the Mediterranean region during the Roman Empire, approximately from the 1st century BC to the 2nd century AD, significantly influenced by Greek (Hellenistic) and Roman elements.[5] The New Testament scholars utilize this context to achieve a

---

[2] WRIGHT, Nicholas Thomas (2008): *Colossians and Philemon.* Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove (Illinois), IVP Academic.

[3] MARTIN, Dale Bertrand (1995): *The Corinthian Body.* New Haven, Yale University Press.

[4] GILL, David (1993): Clothes. In: Hawthorne, Gerald F. – Martin, Ralph P. – Reid, Daniel G. (eds.): *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters.* Downers Grove (Illinois), IVP Academic. 144–146.

[5] MALINA, Bruce (³2001): *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology.* Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press; MEEKS, Wayne (1983): *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul.* New Haven, Yale University Press; FERGUSON, Everett (³2003): *Backgrounds of Early Christianity.* Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing; WRIGHT 2008, 113.

more precise interpretation of the New Testament by comprehending the circumstances under which its texts were composed and first understood.

Social identity theory (SIT), formulated by psychologist Henri Tajfel in the 1970s and further developed with John Turner in the 1980s, elucidates the process by which individuals form their self-concept and self-esteem based on their affiliation with social groups. This theory examines intergroup dynamics, prejudice, and discrimination, highlighting the tendency of individuals to classify themselves and others into social categories, which results in favouritism towards their own group and bias against others.[6] At the core of Henri Tajfel's social identity theory are key processes that influence individual self-perception and perceptions of others in group settings. The initial process is social categorization, which denotes the inherent human inclination to organize oneself and others into specific social groups. These classifications may stem from diverse characteristics, including nationality, religion, or affiliations such as sports teams. Although this cognitive organization streamlines the intricacies of social interactions, it simultaneously establishes a foundation for stereotyping, as generalized categories frequently disregard individual variances.[7] The subsequent categorization involves the process of social identification, wherein individuals assimilate the identity of their respective groups. For instance, a person who identifies as a Christian or an American starts to align their self-concept with the norms, values, and behaviours characteristic of that group. This identification not only affects personal conduct but also serves as a crucial element of self-esteem, as individuals gain a sense of belonging and purpose from their affiliation with the group.[8] Once a group identity is formed, the process of social comparison begins. Individuals naturally evaluate their own group (the in-group) against other groups (out-groups), often in a manner that favours their own social category.[9] This comparative evaluation boosts self-esteem but may also result in in-group favouritism, where individuals preferentially support fellow group members, and out-group derogation, where those outside the group are perceived negatively or discriminated

---

[6] TAJFEL, Henri (1979): Individuals and Groups in Social Psychology. In: *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology.* 18, 2. 183–190.

[7] TAJFEL, Henri (1981): *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 13–46.

[8] Op. cit. 41–46.

[9] Op. cit. 62–69.

against. Ultimately, the notion of positive distinctiveness elucidates how groups strive to uphold or enhance their status in relation to others. When a group's status is perceived to be at risk, members may react in one of two ways: they may actively endeavour to improve their group's standing, or they may choose to distance themselves from the group, either psychologically or physically – a phenomenon referred to as social mobility.[10] This dynamic highlights the fluidity of social identity and the extent to which individuals will go to maintain a positive self-image. Collectively, these processes demonstrate the profound connection between group membership and personal identity, self-worth, and intergroup relations. Social identity theory thus offers a robust framework for comprehending the psychological mechanisms that drive group behaviour, ranging from everyday affiliations to broader societal conflicts.

Clothing in the Light of the Epistle of Colossians

This study will not delve into the extensive analysis of "clothing" as presented in the Epistle of Colossians, given that numerous scholars have extensively examined this topic over time and the focus of this article is Greco-Roman context and social identity theory. Rather, this article aims to encapsulate the key aspects of "clothing" within this text.

The Epistle to the Colossians does not emphasize clothing in a literal manner; however, it employs clothing imagery metaphorically to express spiritual truths in Colossians 2:11, 2:15, 3:9, 10, and 12. Both Colossians 2:15 (in singular) and 3:9 (in plural form) use the Greek word ἀπεκδύομαι in aorist participle middle nominative masculine, while Colossians 2:11 uses ἀπεκδύσει or a noun in dative case. In both Colossians 3:10 and 3:12, the Greek word ἐνδύω is used. However, it appears as a participle in 3:10, whereas in 3:12 it is presented in the imperative mood.

Colossians 2:15

The basic meaning of ἀπεκδύομαι is to strip off. Colossians 2:15 refers to it as stripping the rulers and the powers. F. F. Bruce, N. T. Wright, and Peter O'Brien relate ἀπεκδύομαι to the imagery of Roman triumph, depicting conquerors stripping their

---

[10] Op. cit. 90–116.

foes of armour.[11] Although Louse and Käsemann interpret this verse as Christ stripped the powers off himself, as if they had tried to cling to him in the crucifixion.[12] The rationale of this interpretation is the usage of a middle voice that demonstrates personal involvement as both subject and object.[13] In summary, the Greek verb $\dot{\alpha}\pi\epsilon\kappa\delta\acute{v}o\mu\alpha\iota$ signifies the act of stripping, which can represent either a triumph or a display of humility.

Colossians 2:11 and 3:9

Colossians 2:11 has $\dot{\epsilon}\nu\ \tau\tilde{\eta}\ \dot{\alpha}\pi\epsilon\kappa\delta\acute{v}\sigma\epsilon\iota$, in which the preposition $\dot{\epsilon}\nu$ with dative case has a manner function.[14] The Greek noun $\dot{\alpha}\pi\epsilon\kappa\delta\acute{v}\sigma\epsilon\iota$ metaphorically refers to the complete elimination of the "body of the flesh". Such language heightens the depiction of conversion, portraying it as a definitive and irreversible expulsion of the former sinful identity.[15] The term $\dot{\alpha}\pi\epsilon\kappa\delta\acute{v}\sigma\epsilon\iota$ likely references early baptismal practices where candidates would remove their garments, symbolizing a renunciation of their previous life (cf. Col. 3:9–10; Gal. 3:27).[16] In addition, the Greek term $\dot{\alpha}\pi\epsilon\kappa\delta\acute{v}\sigma\epsilon\iota$ conjures baptismal imagery – believers, having shed their old life, are reborn in Christ. The

---

[11] BRUCE, Frederick Fyvie (1984): *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians.* Grand Rapids (Michigan), William B. Eerdmans Publishing. 237; O'BRIEN, Peter (1982): *Colossians, Philemon.* Waco (Texas), Word Press; WRIGHT, Nicholas Thomas (2013): *Paul and the Faithfulness of God.* Minneapolis, Fortress Press. 1419–1421. Cf. Dunn prefers the "disarming" interpretation but situates it within a broader imperial and cosmic confrontation motif. DUNN, James (1996): *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon.* NIGTC. Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing. 171.

[12] Eduard Lohse suggests that $\dot{\alpha}\pi\epsilon\kappa\delta\acute{v}o\mu\alpha\iota$ could reflect Christ's personal struggle, shaking off hostile powers that sought to control him at the cross. See: LOHSE, Eduard (1971): *Colossians and Philemon* (Hermeneia). Philadelphia, Fortress Press. 107–108. Ernst Käsemann interprets this as Christ being liberated from cosmic constraints, which is a component of a wider apocalyptic theology. See: KÄSEMANN, Ernst (1964): *Essays on New Testament Themes.* London, SCM Press. 151–153.

[13] BOAS, Emde Evert van – RIJKSBARON, Albert – HUITINK, Luuk – BAKKER, Mathieu de (2019): *The Cambridge Grammar of Classical Greek.* Cambridge (UK), Cambridge University Press.

[14] WALLACE, Daniel (2000): *The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar.* Grand Rapids (Michigan), Zondervan. 372.

[15] MOO Douglas (2008): *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon.* Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans. 196.

[16] BRUCE 1984, 102.

author employs this potent language of internal transformation to differentiate it from the external rituals advocated by false teachers (2:16–23).[17]

Colossians 3:9 repeats the Greek word ἀπεκδύομαι. This language is commonly linked by scholars to the early Christian practice of baptism, as evidenced in Romans 6:6 and Ephesians 4:22–24 as a physical sign of their new identity in Christ, where individuals would discard their old garments prior to immersion.[18] The function of this participle is causal (cf. NAS and NET Bible). This causal function demonstrates that ἀπεκδυσάμενοι becomes a reason to put off all negative things (3:8) and not to lie to one another (3:9). The usage of a middle voice demonstrates personal involvement (or benefit) as both subject and object.

Colossians 3:8

The author of Colossians emphasizes that followers of Christ should adorn themselves in a unique manner that signifies their identity in Christ. This approach enables them to remain united as one body amidst various competing identities. Their primary reference point for identity is Christ, in whom they are deeply rooted. The manner in which they dress, which marks their affiliation with the body of Christ, is reminiscent of the visual identity construction seen in Augustus and later emperors. Paul uses ἀπόθεσθε in the imperative mood, which indicates removing behaviours incompatible with new life in Christ.[19] Moo asserts that this aorist imperative demands a definitive renunciation akin to shedding old garments that are no longer appropriate for one's renewed existence. The author instructs believers to abandon a range of vices, similar to the way one would dispose of soiled attire.[20] The usage of the middle voice conveys an intentional action by the subject to benefit themselves.

---

[17] Spiritual circumcision in Christ surpasses any human rite, as it entirely eradicates the influence of the flesh. See LOHSE 1971, 97–98.

[18] Lohse interprets ἀπεκδύομαι as a baptismal metaphor, emphasizing the believer's break with the past. See LOHSE 1971, 139. Wright and Moo relate it to God's victory, with the believers participating in His triumph. See MOO 2008, 265.

[19] Bdag states that ἀποτίθημι means 'take off'. In a literal sense, it is taking off clothes. In a figurative sense, it means to lay aside or to rid oneself of. BAUER, Walter – ARNDT, William (³2000): *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Ed. by Frederick W. Danker. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

[20] MOO 2008, 276.

Colossians 3:10

This verse begins with the conjunction *καί* that has a connective function. This conjunction connects two reasons that are presented by *ἀπεκδυσάμενοι* (in 3:9) and *ἐνδυσάμενοι* (in 3:10). Thus, the function of this participle is causal. The imperatives found in verses 8–9 are grounded in two reasons presented in verses 9–10, articulated through a metaphor related to the act of dressing. The author asserts that they have discarded the old self and embraced the new self. Two aspects warrant discussion concerning the author's assertion: (1) the significance of the clothing metaphor (i.e. the phrases "have put off" and "have been clothed") and (2) the implications of the old self and the new self.[21] The usage of a middle voice demonstrates personal involvement (or benefit) as both subject and object. The Greek participle *ἐνδυσάμενοι* serves as a clothing metaphor frequently employed by Paul (cf. Rom 13:14, Gal 3:27, Eph 4:24). It signifies a pivotal spiritual action linked to conversion, likely associated with baptism, during which early Christians would literally remove their old garments and don new ones. Paired with *ἀπεκδυσάμενοι* (3:9), the author articulates ethical transformation as the act of shedding the old self and embracing the new self. This indicates a transformation that transcends mere behavioural change, suggesting an ontological shift – a new

---

[21] While some scholars interpret the participles "have put off" (3:9) and "have been clothed" (3:10) as imperatives ("put off!" and "put on!"), such a usage of participles is exceedingly rare in the New Testament and thus improbable in this context. It is more appropriate to understand them as indicative, thereby elucidating what transpired with the Colossians at their conversion – they had shed the old self and donned the new upon their faith in Christ (cf. 1:4). Although it remains challenging to definitively ascertain the origins of Paul's "clothing" metaphor (whether it is predominantly Jewish, stemming from the Old Testament, or primarily Gentile, arising from aspects of the Greco-Roman religious context), it is evident from Paul's application of the term that the old self signifies humanity as it exists in Adam, under the influence of sin (cf. Rom 6:6, Eph 4:22), while the new self denotes the Christian whose renewed existence is found in Christ. Although the clothing metaphor primarily reflects external actions, it also encompasses a significant internal dimension, as indicated in the latter part of verse 10: being renewed in knowledge in accordance with the image of the Creator. Therefore, Paul's argument is that Christians ought to discard their soiled garments (representing inappropriate conduct) and don clean garments (representing behaviour aligned with the knowledge of Christ), as this transformation has already been realized in a positional sense at the moment of their conversion (cf. Gal 3:27 with Rom 13:14). See NET Bible notes.

identity established in Christ. The term ἀπεκδυσάμενοι denotes the shedding of a sinful identity, while ἐνδυσάμενοι signifies the acceptance of an identity shaped by Christ.[22] Moo states that ἐνδυσάμενοι initiates a renewal process whereby believers are increasingly conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.[23] Thus, 3:11 illustrates the implications of ἐνδυσάμενοι 'the new self': in this new existence, no ethnic, religious, or social distinctions dictate one's identity.[24] Each virtue is communal in focus, meant to foster unity in the new humanity created in Christ.[25] In other words, the act of ἐνδυσάμενοι is not solely an individual endeavour but a communal one, uniting believers into a new humanity in Christ (cf. Eph 2:14–16). In Paul's view, ethics are rooted in identity: our actions stem from our identity in Christ rather than being a means to attain that status (or identity).

Colossians 3:12

The author continues the clothing metaphor used in earlier verses. Here, the author employs ἐνδύσασθε to introduce a list of Christlike virtues the believer must actively adopt. In the imperative mood, this command urges that the believers should mirror the qualities in 3:12–13. The use of the middle voice conveys an intentional action by the subject to benefit themselves. This involves not just outward actions but a deliberate internal embrace of virtues. It is not passive acceptance; individuals must intentionally decide to embody their new identity. O'Brien asserts that Paul draws from baptismal imagery to underscore the decisive ethical shift in identity, now visibly marked by putting on godly virtues.[26]

---

[22] WRIGHT, Nicholas Thomas (²2004): *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*. Louisville (KY), Westminster John Knox Press. 172.

[23] MOO 2008, 282.

[24] Peter T. O'Brien argues that the new man is not an isolated individual but the corporate new humanity, reconciled in Christ. See O'BRIEN 1982, 206.

[25] MOO 2008, 285.

[26] O'BRIEN 1982, 206.

Clothing in the Light of the Greco-Roman Context

Colossae gained renown for producing a striking dark red wool fabric called *colossinum*. This item significantly contributed to the city's commercial success, establishing it as a prominent centre for the wool and weaving sectors in the area.[27] Paul uses the clothing imagery that suits the context of Colossae.

In Greco-Roman culture, attire represented one's identity; donning new garments could indicate a change in status such as following manumission or military enlistment.[28] The conflicts arising from varying identities emerge as one group establishes its identity in contrast to another: Roman versus Greek, Greek versus barbarian, Greek versus Judean, and Roman versus Phrygian.[29] Attire served as a marker of ethnic background, gender, and political standing, and it was utilized symbolically by the Romans to express their cultural identity and ideology.[30] Firstly, particular garments signified Romans as

---

[27] Nevertheless, Colossae's significance as a textile centre waned over the years, especially as Laodicea ascended in economic strength and influence. See: WILSON, Mark (2010): *Biblical Turkey: A Guide to the Jewish and Christian Sites of Asia Minor.* Istanbul (Turkey), Ege Yayınları. 242.

[28] Magistrates, priests, and soldiers were identifiable by their unique attire such as the official "tessera" badge, military armour, or the ceremonial flames worn by the Vestal Virgins. These distinctive uniforms and insignia not only fostered a sense of unity within their respective groups, such as the military's collective identity, but also distinguished these elites from the general populace.

[29] The clothing of Archaic Greece, exemplified by garments such as the peplos and chiton, served as a marker of cultural and ethnic identity, particularly for Athenian female citizens, thereby differentiating Greeks from those deemed "barbarians". In Hellenic city-states, attire also conveyed identity; freeborn Greeks typically donned woollen chitons and himations, while the dress of "barbarian" peoples varied significantly. For example, Greek men and women refrained from adopting Persian trousers or Eastern caftans, as wearing such foreign attire could suggest an ethnic or political affiliation with outsiders. As Rome gradually incorporated Greek territories, fashion began to blend, yet fundamental distinctions, such as the Roman citizen's toga versus the Eastern robe, persisted as indicators of group identity.

[30] The term "Jew/ish" has become contentious when applied to first-century contexts. It denotes individuals with a deep connection to their homeland, Judea, particularly the temple in Jerusalem. However, it can be argued that those residing in Asia Minor during the first century did not perceive themselves as closely linked to Judea. Referring to them as Jewish implies a religious identity that is disconnected from their political and social realities, which does not align with the cultural context of that era. Therefore, this research prefers to use the

Romans: the *toga* represented Roman citizenship. The unique design of the toga set it apart from the Greek himation and the trousers or leggings of the barbarians. Secondly, for Romans, clothing denotes rank, status, office, and authority.[31] Such distinctions included the addition of stripes on the tunic worn with the *toga*, which indicated that the wearer held the rank of equestrian or senator. Senatorial families were differentiated from equestrians by the width of the stripes (*clavi*) on their tunics.[32] Wearing the *latus clavus* signified "becoming a senator". The purple border of the *toga praetexta* identified the wearer as a holder of a magisterial office.[33] These clothing distinctions constituted a visual language that delineated the boundaries of identity and embodied the symbolic representation of power and values. For instance, Agustus (27 BC – 14 AD) formulated a strategy to concentrate the identity within the figure of the emperor.[34] This was executed through representations of the emperor adorned with the virtues of Rome. Augustus and his successors embodied Rome while donning the toga or cuirass. Initially, the creation of these representations was likely concentrated in Rome. However, the significant rise in demand led to the establishment of regional workshops throughout

---

term "Judean", while acknowledging that this designation remains insufficient. HOLMBERG, Bengt (2008): Understanding the First Hundred Years of Christian Identity. In: *Exploring Early Christian Identity.* Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck. For additional insights and discussions, see: HOLMBERG 2008, 3–5. Cf. CANAVAN, Rosemary (2012): *Clothing the Body of Christ at Colossae: A Visual Construction of Identity.* Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck. 3.

[31] In ancient Rome, the toga was exclusively worn by freeborn male citizens, while others were limited to simple tunics. The toga, being both costly and cumbersome, served as a distinct marker of social status. In parallel, respectable married women adorned themselves with the stola, a lengthy woollen garment, layered over a peplos or chiton, whereas women of lower social standing and slaves opted for shorter tunics.

[32] CLELAND, Liza – DAVIES, Glenys – LLEWELLYN-JONES, Lloyd (2007): *Greek and Roman Dress from A to Z.* London, Routledge. 180.

[33] The *toga praetexta* was donned by magistrates and boys of free birth. Cf. CLELAND – DAVIES – LLEWELLYN-JONES 2007, 35.

[34] The use of purples and vibrant dyes indicated social status, with Tyrian purple dye, derived from murex shells, historically linked to royalty and divinity. Emperors and nobles often adorned themselves with purple stripes or entirely purple garments. Furthermore, the width of the stripes on a tunic, whether *laticlavius* or *angusticlavius*, served to differentiate senatorial patricians from the lower classes.

the first century AD, which would craft the portraits based on models produced in Rome, likely utilizing terracotta or plaster.[35] This intentional and systematic approach to identity formation, initiated by Augustus and further refined by the first century AD, provides a fresh perspective on the utilization of clothing imagery in Colossians 3:1–17.

In addition, attire possessed profound symbolic significance that extended beyond its practical use in the Greco-Roman era. It served as a potent indicator of social and cultural identity, reflecting one's status, moral character, and personal evolution.[36] Certain philosophers, such as the Cynics, donned tattered cloaks as a means to denounce materialism. Musonius Rufus, a philosopher from the 1st century AD, articulated the concept of "putting on" virtue akin to donning fine clothing and virtue should be "worn" on a daily basis (Lectures 6). Seneca, in his Epistles 115, draws a parallel between moral decay and the act of wearing soiled rags. Lucian, in The Runaways 17, ridicules those philosophers who superficially "put on" wisdom like a garment without embodying it in their lives. Epictetus, in his Discourses 4.11, encourages the rejection of false personas, akin to shedding a mask. Plutarch, in Mor. 85F, refers to the idea of "clothing oneself in temperance". The Stoics, on the other hand, advocated for attire that was modest yet dignified.[37] Stoics referred to the act of "putting on" self-control or reason akin to donning a garment. In short, philosophers and moral educators have often employed clothing metaphors to explore concepts of ethics and virtue.

Clothing in the Light of Social Identity Theory

As previously stated, this article employs the social identity theory introduced by Henri Tajfel. Henri Tajfel's social identity theory (SIT) posits that individuals categorize

---

[35] ROSE, Charles Brian (1997): *Dynastic Commemoration and Imperial Portraiture in the Julio-Claudian Period.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 57–58.

[36] HARLOW, Mary (2012): *Dress and Identity in the Ancient World.* Oxford: Oxbow Books; EDMONDSON, Jonathan – KEITH, Alison (eds.) (2008): *Roman Dress and the Fabrics of Roman Culture.* Toronto, University of Toronto Press; SEBESTA, Judith Lynn – BONFANTE, Larissa (eds.) (1994): *The World of Roman Costume.* Madison, University of Wisconsin Press.

[37] STOWERS, Stanley Kent ([1]1986): *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity.* Philadelphia, Westminster Press.

themselves into various groups, such as those based on religion, ethnicity, or social class, thereby fostering a sense of collective identity. In this context, clothing acts as a prominent indicator of group affiliation. According to SIT, distinctive attire not only signifies membership within a group but also establishes a clear distinction from those outside it.[38] Individuals often wear specific garments that are uniformly worn by all members of the group, thereby visually reinforcing their belonging. For instance, a sports jersey or uniform serves as an immediate identifier for fans or team members in contemporary society. Historically, clothing has similarly conveyed messages about religious or civic status, ethnicity, or social class. Thus, attire consistently plays a crucial role in reinforcing in-group solidarity while simultaneously marking the boundaries of out-groups.[39] SIT elucidates how such visible indicators like clothing enhance group cohesion and self-esteem by clarifying these distinctions.

Discussions

The section titled *Clothing in the Light of the Epistle of Colossians* provides several pieces of information. Firstly, the clothing imagery found in Colossians 2:15 serves as the basis for the clothing imagery in Colossians 3:8–12.[40]

Table 1. *Comparison*

2:15 (Foundation)	Colossians 3:8–12 (Impact)
ἀπεκδυσάμενος τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας ἐδειγμάτισεν ἐν παρρησίᾳ, θριαμβεύσας αὐτοὺς ἐν αὐτῷ.	[8] νυνὶ δὲ ἀπόθεσθε καὶ ὑμεῖς τὰ πάντα, ὀργήν, θυμόν, κακίαν, βλασφημίαν, αἰσχρολογίαν ἐκ τοῦ στόματος ὑμῶν· [9] μὴ ψεύδεσθε εἰς ἀλλήλους, ἀπεκδυσάμενοι τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον σὺν ταῖς πράξεσιν αὐτοῦ [10] καὶ ἐνδυσάμενοι τὸν νέον τὸν ἀνακαινούμενον εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν κατ᾽ εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν,

---

[38] TAJFEL 1981, 152–183.

[39] Op. cit. 212–247.

[40] See *Table 1*.

¹¹ ὅπου οὐκ ἔνι Ἕλλην καὶ Ἰουδαῖος, περιτομὴ καὶ ἀκροβυστία, βάρβαρος, Σκύθης, δοῦλος, ἐλεύθερος, ἀλλὰ [τὰ] πάντα καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν Χριστός. ¹² Ἐνδύσασθε οὖν, ὡς ἐκλεκτοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ ἅγιοι καὶ ἠγαπημένοι, σπλάγχνα οἰκτιρμοῦ χρηστότητα ταπεινοφροσύνην πραΰτητα μακροθυμίαν

Secondly, the structure of the clothing imagery in Colossians 3:8–12 is organized in a chiastic structure.[41] Thirdly, all instances of clothing imagery in Colossians 3:8–12 utilize a middle voice to highlight the intentional actions of believers for their own benefit. Fourthly, the author of the Epistle of Colossians employs two imperatives, ἀπόθεσθε (Col 3:8) and ἐνδύσασθε to indicate the desired action, while two participles, ἀπεκδυσάμενοι and ἐνδυσάμενοι, serve as the rationale behind these exhortations. These participles reflect actions completed in the past, whereas the imperatives focus on actions that should be undertaken in the present. This suggests the existence of multiple garments: two represented by the participles (ἀπεκδυσάμενοι and ἐνδυσάμενοι) and two represented by the imperatives (ἀπόθεσθε and ἐνδύσασθε).

Table 2. *Literary structure*

Chiastic Structure of 'Clothing' in Colossians 3:8–12
A) Imperative: ἀπόθεσθε (3:8)
B) Participle: ἀπεκδυσάμενοι (3:9)
B') Participle: ἐνδυσάμενοι (3:10)
A') Imperative: ἐνδύσασθε (3:12)

Furthermore, the section entitled *Clothing in the Light of the Greco-Roman Context* illustrates that the clothing imagery presented in Colossians serves multiple functions. Primarily, it symbolizes the original country or the believer's heavenly citizenship (cf. Hebrew 11:9–10.13–16). For instance, the attires of Archaic Greece, including the peplos and chiton, were significant symbols of cultural and ethnic identity, especially

---

[41] See *Table 2.*

among Athenian women, distinguishing Greeks from those labelled as barbarians. As per another example, Greek men and women avoided wearing Persian trousers or Eastern caftans, as adopting such foreign clothing could imply an association with outsiders, either ethnically or politically. As Rome gradually absorbed Greek regions, fashion began to merge, yet essential differences remained such as the toga worn by Roman citizens in contrast to the Eastern robe, which continued to signify group identity.

Additionally, this imagery highlights the new cultural identity and ideology of the believer. The author of Colossians stresses that Christ's followers should dress in a distinctive way that reflects their identity in Him. Their foremost reference for identity is Christ, in whom they are firmly established. The way they present themselves, which signifies their connection to the body of Christ, echoes the visual identity construction observed in Augustus and subsequent emperors. This symbolic attire aims to depict the significant ethical and spiritual transformation that accompanies a relationship with Christ.

Finally, the clothing imagery conveys notions of ethics and virtue, as the concept of adorning oneself with virtue was common in moral teachings, just as manifested by philosophers and Stoics. Paul reinterprets this clothing imagery within a Christian theological framework. In Colossians 3:12–14, he encourages believers to clothe themselves in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, culminating in love, which "binds everything together in perfect harmony". This perspective not only aligns with but also redefines Stoic and moralist principles into a Christ-centred ethical framework grounded in the new creation. In summary, the symbolism of taking off and putting on clothing is intentional; it directly relates to a cultural framework in which altering one's attire frequently signified a shift in social identity or legal standing. In a culture where a liberated slave would ceremonially discard their slave tunic and don a new garment representing their freedom, Paul's choice of words would deeply resonate with his listeners. They were encouraged to perceive themselves as having experienced a profound change – similar to a transition in citizenship or social class – through their connection with Christ.

Henri Tajfel's social identity theory (SIT) provides a significant lens through which to understand the role of clothing as a symbol of social re-categorization. According to SIT, individuals shape their self-identity based on their group affiliations, which not only enhance self-esteem but also create a clear distinction between in-groups and out-groups. In various historical contexts, clothing has consistently served to reinforce

group unity and distinguish between different social groups. Social identity theory (SIT) posits that visible indicators such as attire enhance group cohesion and self-esteem by clearly defining boundaries. As social dynamics evolved, so too did clothing styles. [42] These changes of the clothing illustrate ideological shifts: as Tajfel's theory suggests, when a subgroup, such as Christians, solidifies a new identity, it often creates new dress codes to enhance a sense of belonging. Ultimately, ancient texts reveal that clothing was a powerful emblem of social identity, with Jews and later Christians using garments to signify their covenant and community, while Greeks and Romans categorized attire by class and ethnicity. These trends align with SIT, demonstrating that clothing not only separated in-groups from out-groups but also fostered group pride and adapted to social transformations, making garments far more than mere functional items; they were integral social symbols intricately linked to religious, ethnic, and political life. Applying SIT to the imagery clothing in Colossians 3, Paul encourages them to embrace the ethical attire of a new community. This transition from the "old self" to the "new self" as described in Colossians reflects the transformation of social identity outlined in SIT. The believers are no longer defined by their former associations – be they ethnic, civic, or moral – but are now integrated into the body of Christ, a community whose members embody the character of Christ himself (cf. Gal. 3:27). This newly formed community makes no distinctions, as it transcends divisions of Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, Barbarian and Scythian, slave and free; in this community, Christ is everything and is present in everyone (Col 3:11). As Rosemary Canavan highlights, Paul utilizes clothing metaphor to articulate the identity of this new community, making their shared values and commitments visible.

Conclusions

The letter to the Colossians features some of the most striking metaphors found within the Pauline writings, with clothing imagery being particularly notable for its theological significance and cultural implications. This paper argues that the Apostle Paul

---

[42] The adoption of Hellenistic culture by Jews during the intertestamental period prompted certain sects, like the Hasmoneans, to impose stricter dress codes.

deliberately utilizes the clothing metaphor in Colossians as a purposeful rhetorical and theological instrument. By examining this metaphor through the context of the Greco-Roman cultural environment and Henri Tajfel's social identity theory (SIT), it becomes clear that Paul's expressions of "putting off" and "putting on" clothing signify more than simple moral guidance. Instead, they embody concepts of citizenship, individual and collective identity, moral integrity, and the transition into a new social community.

References:

BAUER, Walter – ARNDT, William (³2000): *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature.* Edited by Frederick W. Danker. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

BRUCE, Frederick Fyvie (1984): *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians.* Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Publishing.

BOAS, Emde Evert van – RIJKSBARON, Albert – HUITINK, Luuk – BAKKER, Mathieu de (2019): *The Cambridge Grammar of Classical Greek.* Cambridge, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press.

CANAVAN, Rosemary (2012): *Clothing the Body of Christ at Colossae: A Visual Construction of Identity.* Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck.

CLELAND, Liza – DAVIES, Glenys – LLEWELLYN-JONES, Lloyd (2007): *Greek and Roman Dress from A to Z.* London, Routledge.

DUNN, James (1996): *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon.* NIGTC. Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing.

EDMONDSON, Jonathan – KEITH, Alison (eds.) (2008): *Roman Dress and the Fabrics of Roman Culture.* Toronto, University of Toronto Press.

FERGUSON, Everett (³2003): *Backgrounds of Early Christianity.* Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing.

GILL, David (1993): Clothes. In: Hawthorne, Gerald F. – Martin, Ralph P. – Reid, Daniel G. (eds.): *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters.* Downers Grove (Illinois), IVP Academic.

HARLOW, Mary (2012): *Dress and Identity in the Ancient World.* Oxford: Oxbow Books.

HOLMBERG, Bengt (2008): Understanding the First Hundred Years of Christian Identity. In: *Exploring Early Christian Identity.* Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck.

KÄSEMANN, Ernst (1964): *Essays on New Testament Themes.* London, SCM Press.

LOHSE, Eduard (1971): *Colossians and Philemon.* Hermeneia. Philadelphia, Fortress Press.

MALINA, Bruce (³2001): *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology.* Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press.

MARTIN, Dale Bertrand (1995): *The Corinthian Body.* New Haven, Yale University Press.

MEEKS, Wayne (1983): *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul.* New Haven, Yale University Press.

MOO, Douglas (2008): *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon.* Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans.

O'BRIEN, Peter (1982): *Colossians, Philemon.* Waco, Texas, Word Press.

ROSE, Charles Brian (1997): *Dynastic Commemoration and Imperial Portraiture in the Julio-Claudian Period.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

SEBESTA, Judith Lynn – BONFANTE, Larissa (eds.) (1994): *The World of Roman Costume.* Madison, University of Wisconsin Press.

STOWERS, Stanley Kent (¹1986): *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity.* Philadelphia, Westminster Press.

TAJFEL, Henri (1979): Individuals and Groups in Social Psychology. In: *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology.* 18, 2. 183–190.
(1981): *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

WALLACE, Daniel (2000): *The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar.* Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan.

WILSON, Mark (2010): *Biblical Turkey: A Guide to the Jewish and Christian Sites of Asia Minor.* Istanbul, Turkey, Ege Yayınları.

WRIGHT, Nicholas Thomas (²2004): *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters.* Louisville (KY), Westminster John Knox Press.
(2008): *Colossians and Philemon.* Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, Illinois, IVP Academic.
(2013): *Paul and the Faithfulness of God.* Minneapolis, Fortress Press.