

Mark D. Ellison: *The Visual Rhetoric of the Married Laity in Late Antiquity. Iconography, the Christianization of Marriage, and Alternatives to the Ascetic Ideal*. London/New York: Routledge 2024 (Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World). XVI, 334 pp., 100 ill., 2 tables. £ 145.00. ISBN: 978-1-032-54648-3.

Rather off-puttingly, the first thing one reads in this book is a page of glowing recommendations by several experts. One is used to such quotes on the back covers and in the pages of mass-produced popular books, but to be confronted with them in this way in a scholarly work seems something new, though this is not the fault of the author of course. I moved on, determined to make up my own mind, but wishing also that Routledge returned to covers with images related to the contents of books rather than random patterned coloured covers. One would think an attractive and individual cover image would also have a part to play in selling a book. In the case of this book an appropriate visual image on the cover would seem even more desirable as it is concerned with late antique images relating to the married Christian laity (published as part of the series “Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World”). Mark D. Ellison has set himself a very worthy and interesting goal, to attempt to identify the views of Christian married laity about marriage in relation to their identity as Christians. As he discusses clearly, evidence relating to early Christianity is largely concerned with asceticism, as a practice and as an ideal. The married laity can be seen as second-class Christians, and their voices are rarely heard; they form a silent majority. Ellison seeks to access this voice through examination of the visual evidence. Focusing primarily on Rome itself and its environs, and on the third and fourth centuries AD, he sets out his analysis in a very clear and methodical way.

There are seven chapters, which include an Introduction and Conclusion, each followed by the Notes. There is also, however, a short Prologue, titled “The Monk and the *Matrona*” (pp. 1–4). Through case studies (Jerome on marriage, and a marble sarcophagus for Flavius Julius Catervius, husband of Septimia Severina), the Prologue sets out very quickly and effectively the quest of the book, namely to foreground and explore “two dissonant strands of early Christian tradition – a holiness based on ascetic practice and a more moderate and socially engaged piety” (p. 3). Having whetted our appetite, Ellison moves on to the Introduction proper, titled “Recovering the Voices

of ‘the Silent Majority’” (pp. 5–33). He emphasises the importance of the visual evidence for accessing these voices, and declares that his book is “the first attempt at a sustained, systematic examination of the corpus of Roman Christian marital iconography, with an eye particularly on its rhetorical engagement with early Christian discourses and practices related to marriage and celibacy” (p. 8). He provides an overview of the types of material evidence that form the corpus: sarcophagi, catacomb paintings, gold glass and other glass vessels, small personal objects (jewelry, gems, seals), and silver luxury items. He discusses approaching artifacts as visual rhetoric, and poses the intriguing question of whether the evidence testifies to “resistance to the ascetic ideal or a relatively calm, confident assertion of alternatives” (p. 14). He reflects on the intentions of patrons and the responses of viewers. He raises the issue of whether portraits of married Christians were just cast in traditional Roman ways, “a valid question” he accepts (p. 17), and one his analysis of the material will answer. Having addressed limitations and clarifications of his study (time and geography; proportion of the population; male bias and female voices; laity, *saeculares*, clergy and ascetics; ideals, paradigms and realities) he then provides an overview of what the other chapters will cover.

Chapter 2, “Competing Visions: Early Christian Thought on Marriage and Celibacy” (pp. 34–55), provides the vital context for the discussion of the visual evidence that follows in the subsequent chapters. He surveys (and he does love a survey) the development of views about marriage and celibacy from the Bible to the later Roman empire, and shows that opinions could be divided, some more favourable to marriage (e.g. Clement of Alexandria) than others (e.g. Tertullian). He notes testimony of opposition to extreme ascetic attitudes (e.g. the Synod of Gangra that opposed the teachings of Eustathius of Sebaste). He remarks on the rise of nuptial blessings, which could be seen to “stand in opposition to the denigrations of ascetic rhetoric” (p. 46). He finishes by addressing the writings of Augustine on marriage and virginity, noting that he marks “a middle ground [between Jovinian and Jerome] that became normative” (p. 47). As noted, Ellison is especially concerned with the West, and the location of Rome in particular, and he does acknowledge that the “[a]scetic anxieties about marriage and sexuality and the sharp disputes over the religious merits of marriage that played out in the West stand in contrast to the somewhat more positive view of marriage and family life seen in the homilies of John Chrysostom in the East” (p. 48).

In the long Chapter 3, “Centering Christ: Adaptations of *Dextrarum iunctio*, *Concordia Pronuba*, and *Coronae impositio* in Spousal Portraits” (pp. 56–113), Ellison moves on to the visual evidence. He examines how Christians adapted Roman portraiture: the joining of right hands, a figure or symbol between the couple, and the placing of crowns on their heads. He also covers subsequent developments in iconography on Byzantine jewelry, namely rings and marriage belts in the sixth and seventh centuries (he does have a tendency to go beyond his chronological and geographical parameters to include Byzantine material, e.g. later on considering images of the *anastasis* in relation to the subject of Adam and Eve), observing that these “speak to the symbolic values Byzantine Christians perceived in those earlier forms, on which they elaborated” (p. 83). Having described the material Ellison then provides an interpretation of it, suggesting that there is seen “the emergence of distinctively Christian notions about marriage and the efforts of married Christians to use visual art to assert their religious merits” (p. 85). He argues “Christians were seeking visual ways to express the concept that their marriages were ‘in Christ’” (pp. 100–101).

Chapter 4, “Learned, Encircled, Worshipping: Other Forms of Double-Portraits and Self-Representation” (pp. 114–171), moves on to consider other iconography: learned figures, double-portraits in circular frames (*clipei*), and Christian spouses worshipping at Christ’s feet, the last constituting “the innovation of a distinctively Christian image”. The intellectual-type spousal portraits raise gender issues again, an integral topic for the book, and Ellison remarks on the “early Christian valorization of the learned woman” (p. 120). He wonders if images of “learned spouses in family groups may even represent a form of visual rhetoric *against* ascetic extremes” (p. 135). On the double-portraits of spouses in circular frames he observes that these are “the most frequently attested form of spousal representation in early Christian art” but that “they have often been passed over in sarcophagus scholarship” (pp. 139–140). On the third type he considers he asserts “[t]he figures of worshipping spouses antedate the convention of donor portraits in medieval art, which similarly place small-scale adoring figures at Jesus’s feet” (p. 147). He sees in these images “a self-concept of married Christians’ devotion not defined or devalued on the basis of ascetic criteria”, a claim to have a “place close to Christ” (p. 156). He concludes that “[t]he variety of iconographic styles surveyed in this chapter indicates a range of strategies married Christians employed for representing their own pursuit of holiness” (p. 157).

Chapter 5, “In the Beginning: Married Christians Putting Adam and Eve to Work” (pp. 172–217), focuses on iconography related to this famous and fundamental biblical couple. As Ellison makes clear, it was not just as sinners that Adam and Eve had meaning. The allocation of labours scene is particularly resonant with regard to married couples, raising again the issue of gender and gender roles. He observes that there was a “conscious sense that married Christians were in certain ways successors of the biblical first parents” (p. 186). Once again, Ellison’s prioritisation of Rome is clear but can be disconcerting: discussing the fourth-century Velletri Plaque he comments that the scene of the fall of man “had already developed and proliferated (as far away as Dura-Europos in Syria)” (p. 187), which suggests some alien rather than deeply-interconnected world. It is in relation to Adam and Eve’s association with salvation that he returns to Byzantium again, considering images of the *anastasis*, with Fig. 5.12 being a fourteenth century example (p. 196). He emphasises that Adam and Eve can have “positive symbolic value” (p. 195), and can “cooperate with deity in the work of creation” like “their fourth-century successors” (p. 204).

Chapter 6, “After the End: Marriage, Death, and the Afterlife” (pp. 218–277), is the final main chapter and appropriately focuses on funerary evidence, though as Ellison notes much of the corpus is funerary anyway. Foregrounded are issues of devotion after death and hopes for the afterlife. Before examining the visual material, he surveys notions of the afterlife and how these could conflict. He opines that “Christian notions regarding familial relationships in the hereafter, though nuanced, were more affirming of postmortem reunions and enduring bonds than has often been supposed” (p. 221). In this chapter in particular there is the sense that Ellison’s analysis builds across the whole book, and returning to iconographic types and even specific works of art solidifies and coalesces his views and arguments. He discusses how Christian sarcophagi, “often commissioned by a surviving spouse”, could feature “biblical vignettes alluding to Christian concepts of salvation and afterlife” (p. 237). Slightly oddly, in this chapter Ellison turns to a consideration of Christian literary sources on marriage after death after having reviewed the visual evidence. Some eastern material is included, Chrysostom surfacing again, though the characterisation of him as being concerned about being perceived as a “cranky old fellow” (p. 260) is rather out of keeping with Ellison’s usual smooth and measured style. Especially arresting is Jerome’s description of “the heavenly reunion of married couples

as nonsexual and therefore more glorious than mortal marriage” (p. 261), and Ambrose’s anticipation of Theodosius I reuniting with family members in the afterlife. In the conclusion to the chapter Ellison sketches out the general views that marriage was an earthly institution, not one for the afterlife, and also that sexuality was incompatible with heaven, but he then raises the possibility that there was a “potential disconnect between the finer points of church doctrine and people’s intuitive expectations”. His final observation is that “[t]he ideal of permanent marriage drew strength by being grafted onto the Christian afterlife” (p. 264).

Chapter 7 constitutes the overall Conclusion, and is subtitled “Image and Word in the Conversations of the Christian Past” (pp. 278–284). This is a comparatively short conclusion to such a weighty book, and provides a summary of its whole. As such Ellison provides a very useful review of his own book. He reiterates his main point, that analysing the visual evidence is a way of attempting to recover the perspectives of the married Christian laity. He notes again the tension that could exist between literary and visual evidence, and the “moderating of extreme positions over time”. His final sentence sets out the core of his mission: “Taking up material and visual evidence, and integrating it with literary evidence, enables the cultural historian to see people who might otherwise be invisible and hear voices that might otherwise be silent” (p. 284).

Overall, this is a very rich and rewarding book, and one that can be hard to do justice to even in a longer than normal review. It takes a central aspect of Christian life in Late Antiquity and seeks to illuminate it through analysis of visual evidence. It focuses on a wealth of diverse evidence, some familiar some not so familiar, and provides some detailed analysis of case studies. While some of the debates and evidence are familiar, the overall goal of the book is larger and more significant. It is assured, informed and convincing. While one might wish it took a broader perspective in terms of location and time the core is well-defined, and perhaps Ellison will expand the scope in future. Indeed, it is to be very much hoped that he will: this is one of the most enjoyable and useful academic books I have read in a long time. The praise by the experts at the start of the book was thoroughly deserved. More than this though, given the significance of its subject matter and its engaging style this book deserves to reach a mass audience.

Shaun Tougher, Cardiff University
Professor of Late Roman and Byzantine History
TougherSF@cardiff.ac.uk

www.plekos.de

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Shaun Tougher: Rezension zu: Mark D. Ellison: *The Visual Rhetoric of the Married Laity in Late Antiquity. Iconography, the Christianization of Marriage, and Alternatives to the Ascetic Ideal*. London/New York: Routledge 2024 (Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World). In: *Plekos* 27, 2025, S. 143–148 (URL: <https://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2025/r-ellison.pdf>).

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