

PHILIPPIANS, COLOSSIANS, PHILEMON

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WISDOM COMMENTARY

Volume 51

Philippians

Elsa Tamez

Colossians

Cynthia Briggs Kittredge and Claire Miller Colombo

Philemon

Alicia J. Batten

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A Michael Glazier Book

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Elsa Tamez would like to dedicate her portion of this commentary to Miriam Ofelia in her eightieth year, deeply appreciated friend, admirable for her energy and her commitment to the struggles of Third World women.

To women and men imprisoned because they dared to think differently from those in power.

To people who visit prisoners.

A Michael Glazier Book published by Liturgical Press

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
<i>Bib.</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBET	Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
ConBNT	Coniectanea Biblica: New Testament Series
<i>Dig.</i>	<i>Digesta seu Pandectae</i>
<i>Ep.</i>	Pliny, <i>Epistulae</i>
<i>Eph.</i>	Ignatius, <i>To the Ephesians</i>
FCB	Feminist Companion to the Bible
GBS	Guides to Biblical Scholarship

viii *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*

HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HTS	Harvard Theological Studies
IFT	Introductions in Feminist Theology
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JFSR	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i>
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
LEC	Library of Early Christianity
LS	<i>Louvain Studies</i>
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NovT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
NTG	New Testament Guides
NTL	New Testament Library
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
PG	Patrologia Graeca
PNTC	Pelican New Testament Commentaries
<i>Rhet.</i>	<i>Aristotle, Rhetorica</i>
RIBLA	<i>Revista Bíblica Latinoamericana</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLSP	Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers
SNTSMS	Society of new Testament Studies Manuscript Series
SP	Sacra Pagina Series
SymS	Symposium Series
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>

Contributors

Frei Betto is Brazilian, a Dominican brother, liberation theologian, and author of more than sixty books of different genres. He was imprisoned in 1969 because of his participation in the resistance movement against the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964–1985). He is an activist for human rights. His contribution to this book comes from *Cartas da prisão* (*Letters from Prison 1967–1973*) and a personal letter sent for this commentary.

Carolina C. Dionco is the academic dean of the Institute of Formation and Religious Studies (IFRS) in Quezon City, Philippines. She is also a faculty member of the Theology and Religious Education Department at De La Salle University Manila.

Carmiña Navia is a Colombian theologian, poet, and essayist. She is professor of literature in the Universidad del Valle in Cali, Colombia; she is cofounder and director of the Casa Cultural Tejiendo Sororidades (Cultural Center “Weaving Sisterhood”). She has published several books and articles on literary criticism as well as rereadings of biblical texts and theological reflections. In 1994, she was kidnapped by the Colombian guerrilla ELN (National Liberation Army) for twelve days. She sent a letter for this commentary about her captivity in the jungle.

Neila Serrano is Colombian and holds a PhD in pharmacology from the University of Sorbonne in Paris; she studied rheumatology and respiratory allergies at Harvard University. She was imprisoned in the women’s prison El Buen Pastor (The Good Shepherd) in Bogotá (1993–1995) by

the government for paying a ransom to the guerrilla organization M19 (19 Movement, now demobilized). She is a professor at the National University in Bogotá and activist speaker on Bible and science in evangelical churches. Her contribution comes from an interview that she gave for this commentary.

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Foreword

“Come Eat of My Bread . . . and Walk in the Ways of Wisdom”

*Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza
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Jewish feminist writer Asphodel Long has likened the Bible to a magnificent garden of brilliant plants, some flowering, some fruiting, some in seed, some in bud, shaded by trees of age old, luxurious growth. Yet in the very soil which gives it life the poison has been inserted. . . . This poison is that of misogyny, the hatred of women, half the human race.¹

To see Scripture as such a beautiful garden containing poisonous ivy requires that one identify and name this poison and place on all biblical texts the label “Caution! Could be dangerous to your health and survival!” As critical feminist interpretation for well-being this Wisdom

1. Asphodel Long, *In a Chariot Drawn by Lions: The Search for the Female in the Deity* (London: Women’s Press, 1992), 195.

Commentary seeks to elaborate the beauty and fecundity of this Scripture-garden and at the same time points to the harm it can do when one submits to its world of vision. Thus, feminist biblical interpretation engages two seemingly contradictory insights: The Bible is written in kyriocentric (i.e., lord/master/father/husband-elite male) language, originated in the patri-kyriarchal cultures of antiquity, and has functioned to inculcate misogynist mind-sets and oppressive values. At the same time it also asserts that the Bible as Sacred Scripture has functioned to inspire and authorize wo/men² in our struggles against dehumanizing oppression. The hermeneutical lens of wisdom/Wisdom empowers the commentary writers to do so.

In biblical as well as in contemporary religious discourse the word *wisdom* has a double meaning: It can either refer to the quality of life and of people and/or it can refer to a figuration of the Divine. Wisdom in both senses of the word is not a prerogative of the biblical traditions but is found in the imagination and writings of all known religions. Wisdom is transcultural, international, and interreligious. Wisdom is practical knowledge gained through experience and daily living as well as through the study of creation and human nature. Both word meanings, that of capability (wisdom) and that of female personification (Wisdom), are crucial for this Wisdom Commentary series that seeks to enable biblical readers to become critical subjects of interpretation.

Wisdom is a state of the human mind and spirit characterized by deep understanding and profound insight. It is elaborated as a quality possessed by the sages but also treasured as folk wisdom and wit. Wisdom is the power of discernment, deeper understanding, and creativity; it is the ability to move and to dance, to make the connections, to savor life, and to learn from experience. Wisdom is intelligence shaped by experience and sharpened by critical analysis. It is the ability to make sound choices and incisive decisions. Its root meaning comes to the fore in its Latin form *sapientia*, which is derived from the verb *sapere*, to taste and to savor something. Hence, this series of commentaries invites readers to taste, to evaluate, and to imagine. In the figure of *Chokmah-Sophia-Sapientia-Wisdom*, ancient Jewish scriptures seek to hold together belief in the “one” G*d³ of Israel with both masculine and feminine language and metaphors of the Divine.

2. I use wo/man, s/he, fe/male and not the grammatical standard “man” as inclusive terms and make this visible by adding /.

3. I use the * asterisk in order to alert readers to a problem to explore and think about.

In distinction to traditional Scripture reading, which is often individualistic and privatized, the practice and space of Wisdom commentary is public. Wisdom's spiraling presence (*Shekhinah*) is global, embracing all creation. Her voice is a public, radical democratic voice rather than a "feminine," privatized one. To become one of Her justice-seeking friends, one needs to imagine the work of this feminist commentary series as the spiraling circle dance of wisdom/Wisdom.⁴ To imagine the feminist work of this commentary series as a Spirit/spiritual intellectual movement in the open space of wisdom/Wisdom who calls readers to critically analyze, debate, and reimagine biblical texts and their commentaries as wisdom/Wisdom texts inspired by visions of justice and well-being for everyone and everything, Wisdom-Sophia-imagination engenders a different understanding of Jesus and the movement around him. It understands him as the child and prophet of Divine Wisdom and as Wisdom herself instead of imagining him as ruling King and Lord who has only subalterns but not friends. To approach the New* Testament⁵ and the whole Bible as Wisdom's invitation of cosmic dimensions means to acknowledge its multivalence and its openness to change. As bread—not stone.

In short, this commentary series is inspired by the feminist vision of the open cosmic house of Divine Wisdom-Sophia as it is found in biblical Wisdom literatures, which include the New* Testament:

Wisdom has built Her house
 She has set up Her seven pillars . . .
 She has mixed Her wine,
 She also has set Her table.
 She has sent out Her wo/men ministers
 to call from the highest places in the town . . .
 "Come eat of my bread
 and drink of the wine I have mixed.
 Leave immaturity, and live,
 And walk in the way of Wisdom." (Prov 9:1-3, 5-6)

4. I have elaborated such a Wisdom dance in terms of biblical hermeneutics in my book *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001). Its seven steps are a hermeneutics of experience, of domination, of suspicion, of evaluation, of remembering or historical reconstruction, of imagination, and of transformation. However, such Wisdom strategies of meaning making are not restricted to the Bible. Rather, I have used them in workshops in Brazil and Ecuador to explore the workings of power, Condomblé, Christology, imagining a the*logical wo/men's center, or engaging the national icon of Mary.

5. See the discussion about nomenclature of the two testaments in the introduction, page xxxi.

Editor's Introduction to Wisdom Commentary

"She Is a Breath of the Power of God" (Wis 7:25)

Barbara E. Reid, OP

General Editor

Wisdom Commentary is the first series to offer detailed feminist interpretation of every book of the Bible. The fruit of collaborative work by an ecumenical and interreligious team of scholars, the volumes provide serious, scholarly engagement with the whole biblical text, not only those texts that explicitly mention women. The series is intended for clergy, teachers, ministers, and all serious students of the Bible. Designed to be both accessible and informed by the various approaches of biblical scholarship, it pays particular attention to the world in front of the text, that is, how the text is heard and appropriated. At the same time, this series aims to be faithful to the ancient text and its earliest audiences; thus the volumes also explicate the worlds behind the text and within it. While issues of gender are primary in this project, the volumes also address the intersecting issues of power, authority, ethnicity, race, class, and religious belief and practice. The fifty-eight volumes include the books regarded as canonical by Jews (i.e., the Tanakh); Protestants (the "Hebrew Bible" and the New Testament); and Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern Orthodox Communion (i.e., Tobit, Judith, 1 and

2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach/Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, including the Letter of Jeremiah, the additions to Esther, and Susanna and Bel and the Dragon in Daniel).

A Symphony of Diverse Voices

Included in the Wisdom Commentary series are voices from scholars of many different religious traditions, of diverse ages, differing sexual identities, and varying cultural, racial, ethnic, and social contexts. Some have been pioneers in feminist biblical interpretation; others are newer contributors from a younger generation. A further distinctive feature of this series is that each volume incorporates voices other than that of the lead author(s). These voices appear alongside the commentary of the lead author(s), in the grayscale inserts. At times, a contributor may offer an alternative interpretation or a critique of the position taken by the lead author(s). At other times, she or he may offer a complementary interpretation from a different cultural context or subject position. Occasionally, portions of previously published material bring in other views. The diverse voices are not intended to be contestants in a debate or a cacophony of discordant notes. The multiple voices reflect that there is no single definitive feminist interpretation of a text. In addition, they show the importance of subject position in the process of interpretation. In this regard, the Wisdom Commentary series takes inspiration from the Talmud and from *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss [New York: Women of Reform Judaism, Federation of Temple Sisterhood, 2008]), in which many voices, even conflicting ones, are included and not harmonized.

Contributors include biblical scholars, theologians, and readers of Scripture from outside the scholarly and religious guilds. At times, their comments pertain to a particular text. In some instances they address a theme or topic that arises from the text.

Another feature that highlights the collaborative nature of feminist biblical interpretation is that a number of the volumes have two lead authors who have worked in tandem from the inception of the project and whose voices interweave throughout the commentary.

Woman Wisdom

The title, Wisdom Commentary, reflects both the importance to feminists of the figure of Woman Wisdom in the Scriptures and the distinct

wisdom that feminist women and men bring to the interpretive process. In the Scriptures, Woman Wisdom appears as “a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty” (Wis 7:25), who was present and active in fashioning all that exists (Prov 8:22-31; Wis 8:6). She is a spirit who pervades and penetrates all things (Wis 7:22-23), and she provides guidance and nourishment at her all-inclusive table (Prov 9:1-5). In both postexilic biblical and nonbiblical Jewish sources, Woman Wisdom is often equated with Torah, e.g., Sir 24:23-34; Bar 3:9-4:4; 38:2; 46:4-5; 2 Bar 48:33, 36; 4 Ezra 5:9-10; 13:55; 14:40; 1 Enoch 42.

The New Testament frequently portrays Jesus as Wisdom incarnate. He invites his followers, “take my yoke upon you and learn from me” (Matt 11:29), just as Ben Sira advises, “put your neck under her [Wisdom’s] yoke and let your souls receive instruction” (Sir 51:26). Just as Wisdom experiences rejection (Prov 1:23-25; Sir 15:7-8; Wis 10:3; Bar 3:12), so too does Jesus (Mark 8:31; John 1:10-11). Only some accept his invitation to his all-inclusive banquet (Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24; compare Prov 1:20-21; 9:3-5). Yet, “wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” (Matt 11:19, speaking of Jesus and John the Baptist; in the Lucan parallel at 7:35 they are called “wisdom’s children”). There are numerous parallels between what is said of Wisdom and of the *Logos* in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1-18). These are only a few of many examples. This female embodiment of divine presence and power is an apt image to guide the work of this series.

Feminism

There are many different understandings of the term “feminism.” The various meanings, aims, and methods have developed exponentially in recent decades. Feminism is a perspective and a movement that springs from a recognition of inequities toward women, and it advocates for changes in whatever structures prevent full human flourishing. Three waves of feminism in the United States are commonly recognized. The first, arising in the mid-nineteenth century and lasting into the early twentieth, was sparked by women’s efforts to be involved in the public sphere and to win the right to vote. In the 1960s and 1970s, the second wave focused on civil rights and equality for women. With the third wave, from the 1980s forward, came global feminism and the emphasis on the contextual nature of interpretation. Now a fourth wave may be emerging, with a stronger emphasis on the intersectionality of women’s concerns with those of other marginalized groups and the increased use

of the internet as a platform for discussion and activism.¹ As feminism has matured, it has recognized that inequities based on gender are interwoven with power imbalances based on race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity, physical ability, and a host of other social markers.

Feminist Women and Men

Men who choose to identify with and partner with feminist women in the work of deconstructing systems of domination and building structures of equality are rightly regarded as feminists. Some men readily identify with experiences of women who are discriminated against on the basis of sex/gender, having themselves had comparable experiences; others who may not have faced direct discrimination or stereotyping recognize that inequity and problematic characterization still occur, and they seek correction. This series is pleased to include feminist men both as lead authors and as contributing voices.

Feminist Biblical Interpretation

Women interpreting the Bible from the lenses of their own experience is nothing new. Throughout the ages women have recounted the biblical stories, teaching them to their children and others, all the while interpreting them afresh for their time and circumstances.² Following is a very brief sketch of select foremothers who laid the groundwork for contemporary feminist biblical interpretation.

One of the earliest known Christian women who challenged patriarchal interpretations of Scripture was a consecrated virgin named Helie, who lived in the second century CE. When she refused to marry, her

1. See Martha Rampton, "Four Waves of Feminism" (October 25, 2015), at <http://www.pacificu.edu/about-us/news-events/four-waves-feminism>; and Ealasaid Munro, "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?," <https://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus/feminism-fourth-wave>.

2. For fuller treatments of this history, see chap. 7, "One Thousand Years of Feminist Bible Criticism," in Gerda Lerner, *Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 138–66; Susanne Scholz, "From the 'Woman's Bible' to the 'Women's Bible,' The History of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible," in *Introducing the Women's Hebrew Bible*, IFT 13 (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 12–32; Marion Ann Taylor and Agnes Choi, eds., *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters: A Historical and Biographical Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

parents brought her before a judge, who quoted to her Paul's admonition, "It is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Cor 7:9). In response, Helie first acknowledges that this is what Scripture says, but then she retorts, "but not for everyone, that is, not for holy virgins."³ She is one of the first to question the notion that a text has one meaning that is applicable in all situations.

A Jewish woman who also lived in the second century CE, Beruriah, is said to have had "profound knowledge of biblical exegesis and outstanding intelligence."⁴ One story preserved in the Talmud (b. Berakot 10a) tells of how she challenged her husband, Rabbi Meir, when he prayed for the destruction of a sinner. Proffering an alternate interpretation, she argued that Psalm 104:35 advocated praying for the destruction of sin, not the sinner.

In medieval times the first written commentaries on Scripture from a critical feminist point of view emerge. While others may have been produced and passed on orally, they are for the most part lost to us now. Among the earliest preserved feminist writings are those of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), German writer, mystic, and abbess of a Benedictine monastery. She reinterpreted the Genesis narratives in a way that presented women and men as complementary and interdependent. She frequently wrote about feminine aspects of the Divine.⁵ Along with other women mystics of the time, such as Julian of Norwich (1342–ca. 1416), she spoke authoritatively from her personal experiences of God's revelation in prayer.

In this era, women were also among the scribes who copied biblical manuscripts. Notable among them is Paula Dei Mansi of Verona, from a distinguished family of Jewish scribes. In 1288, she translated from Hebrew into Italian a collection of Bible commentaries written by her father and added her own explanations.⁶

Another pioneer, Christine de Pizan (1365–ca. 1430), was a French court writer and prolific poet. She used allegory and common sense

3. Madrid, Escorial MS, a II 9, f. 90 v., as cited in Lerner, *Feminist Consciousness*, 140.

4. See Judith R. Baskin, "Women and Post-Biblical Commentary," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: Women of Reform Judaism, Federation of Temple Sisterhood, 2008), xlix–lv, at lii.

5. Hildegard of Bingen, *De Operatione Dei*, 1.4.100; PL 197:885bc, as cited in Lerner, *Feminist Consciousness*, 142–43. See also Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

6. Emily Taitz, Sondra Henry, Cheryl Tallan, eds., *JPS Guide to Jewish Women 600 B.C.E.–1900 C.E.* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2003), 110–11.

to subvert misogynist readings of Scripture and celebrated the accomplishments of female biblical figures to argue for women's active roles in building society.⁷

By the seventeenth century, there were women who asserted that the biblical text needs to be understood and interpreted in its historical context. For example, Rachel Speght (1597–ca. 1630), a Calvinist English poet, elaborates on the historical situation in first-century Corinth that prompted Paul to say, "It is well for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Cor 7:1). Her aim was to show that the biblical texts should not be applied in a literal fashion to all times and circumstances. Similarly, Margaret Fell (1614–1702), one of the founders of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, addressed the Pauline prohibitions against women speaking in church by insisting that they do not have universal validity. Rather, they need to be understood in their historical context, as addressed to a local church in particular time-bound circumstances.⁸

Along with analyzing the historical context of the biblical writings, women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries began to attend to misogynistic interpretations based on faulty translations. One of the first to do so was British feminist Mary Astell (1666–1731).⁹ In the United States, the Grimké sisters, Sarah (1792–1873) and Angelina (1805–1879), Quaker women from a slaveholding family in South Carolina, learned biblical Greek and Hebrew so that they could interpret the Bible for themselves. They were prompted to do so after men sought to silence them from speaking out against slavery and for women's rights by claiming that the Bible (e.g., 1 Cor 14:34) prevented women from speaking in public.¹⁰ Another prominent abolitionist, Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797–1883), a former slave, quoted the Bible liberally in her speeches¹¹ and in so doing challenged cultural assumptions and biblical interpretations that undergird gender inequities.

7. See further Taylor and Choi, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, 127–32.

8. Her major work, *Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed by the Scriptures*, published in London in 1667, gave a systematic feminist reading of all biblical texts pertaining to women.

9. Mary Astell, *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (New York: Source Book Press, 1970, reprint of the 1730 edition; earliest edition of this work is 1700), 103–4.

10. See further Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838).

11. See, for example, her most famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman?," delivered in 1851 at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Akron, OH; <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp>.

Another monumental work that emerged in nineteenth-century England was that of Jewish theologian Grace Aguilar (1816–1847), *The Women of Israel*,¹² published in 1845. Aguilar's approach was to make connections between the biblical women and contemporary Jewish women's concerns. She aimed to counter the widespread notion that women were degraded in Jewish law and that only in Christianity were women's dignity and value upheld. Her intent was to help Jewish women find strength and encouragement by seeing the evidence of God's compassionate love in the history of every woman in the Bible. While not a full commentary on the Bible, Aguilar's work stands out for its comprehensive treatment of every female biblical character, including even the most obscure references.¹³

The first person to produce a full-blown feminist commentary on the Bible was Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902). A leading proponent in the United States for women's right to vote, she found that whenever women tried to make inroads into politics, education, or the work world, the Bible was quoted against them. Along with a team of like-minded women, she produced her own commentary on every text of the Bible that concerned women. Her pioneering two-volume project, *The Woman's Bible*, published in 1895 and 1898, urges women to recognize that texts that degrade women come from the men who wrote the texts, not from God, and to use their common sense to rethink what has been presented to them as sacred.

Nearly a century later, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe (Westminster John Knox, 1992), appeared. This one-volume commentary features North American feminist scholarship on each book of the Protestant canon. Like Cady Stanton's commentary, it does not contain comments on every section of the biblical text but only on those passages deemed relevant to women. It was revised and expanded in 1998 to include the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical books, and the contributors to this new volume reflect the global face of contemporary feminist scholarship. The revisions made in the third edition, which appeared in 2012, represent the profound advances in feminist biblical scholarship and include newer voices. In both the second and third editions, *The* has been dropped from the title.

12. The full title is *The Women of Israel or Characters and Sketches from the Holy Scriptures and Jewish History Illustrative of the Past History, Present Duty, and Future Destiny of the Hebrew Females, as Based on the Word of God*.

13. See further Eskenazi and Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, xxxviii; Taylor and Choi, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, 31–37.

Also appearing at the centennial of Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* were two volumes edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza with the assistance of Shelly Matthews. The first, *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), charts a comprehensive approach to feminist interpretation from ecumenical, interreligious, and multicultural perspectives. The second volume, published in 1994, provides critical feminist commentary on each book of the New Testament as well as on three books of Jewish Pseudepigrapha and eleven other early Christian writings.

In Europe, similar endeavors have been undertaken, such as the one-volume *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung*, edited by Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), featuring German feminist biblical interpretation of each book of the Bible, along with apocryphal books, and several extrabiblical writings. This work, now in its third edition, has recently been translated into English.¹⁴ A multivolume project, *The Bible and Women: An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History*, edited by Irmtraud Fischer, Adriana Valerio, Mercedes Navarro Puerto, and Christiana de Groot, is currently in production. This project presents a history of the reception of the Bible as embedded in Western cultural history and focuses particularly on gender-relevant biblical themes, biblical female characters, and women recipients of the Bible. The volumes are published in English, Spanish, Italian, and German.¹⁵

Another groundbreaking work is the collection *The Feminist Companion to the Bible Series*, edited by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993–2015), which comprises twenty volumes of commentaries on the Old Testament. The parallel series, *Feminist Companion*

14. *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, trans. Lisa E. Dahill, Everett R. Kalin, Nancy Lukens, Linda M. Maloney, Barbara Rumscheidt, Martin Rumscheidt, and Tina Steiner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012). Another notable collection is the three volumes edited by Susanne Scholz, *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect*, *Recent Research in Biblical Studies* 7, 8, 9 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013, 2014, 2016).

15. The first volume, on the Torah, appeared in Spanish in 2009, in German and Italian in 2010, and in English in 2011 (Atlanta, GA: SBL). Four more volumes are now available: *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (2014); *The Writings and Later Wisdom Books*, ed. Christl M. Maier and Nuria Caldich-Benages (2014); *Gospels: Narrative and History*, ed. Mercedes Navarro Puerto and Marinella Perroni (2015); and *The High Middle Ages*, ed. Kari Elisabeth Børresen and Adriana Valerio (2015). For further information, see <http://www.bibleandwomen.org>.

to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings, edited by Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff and Maria Mayo Robbins (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001–2009), contains thirteen volumes with one more planned. These two series are not full commentaries on the biblical books but comprise collected essays on discrete biblical texts.

Works by individual feminist biblical scholars in all parts of the world abound, and they are now too numerous to list in this introduction. Feminist biblical interpretation has reached a level of maturity that now makes possible a commentary series on every book of the Bible. In recent decades, women have had greater access to formal theological education, have been able to learn critical analytical tools, have put their own interpretations into writing, and have developed new methods of biblical interpretation. Until recent decades the work of feminist biblical interpreters was largely unknown, both to other women and to their brothers in the synagogue, church, and academy. Feminists now have taken their place in the professional world of biblical scholars, where they build on the work of their foremothers and connect with one another across the globe in ways not previously possible. In a few short decades, feminist biblical criticism has become an integral part of the academy.

Methodologies

Feminist biblical scholars use a variety of methods and often employ a number of them together.¹⁶ In the *Wisdom Commentary* series, the authors will explain their understanding of feminism and the feminist reading strategies used in their commentary. Each volume treats the biblical text in blocks of material, not an analysis verse by verse. The entire text is considered, not only those passages that feature female characters or that speak specifically about women. When women are not apparent in the narrative, feminist lenses are used to analyze the dynamics in the text between male characters, the models of power, binary ways of thinking, and dynamics of imperialism. Attention is given to how the whole text functions and how it was and is heard, both in its original context and today. Issues of particular concern to women—e.g., poverty, food, health, the environment, water—come to the fore.

16. See the seventeen essays in Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, eds., *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2005), which show the complementarity of various approaches.

One of the approaches used by early feminists and still popular today is to lift up the overlooked and forgotten stories of women in the Bible. Studies of women in each of the Testaments have been done, and there are also studies on women in particular biblical books.¹⁷ Feminists recognize that the examples of biblical characters can be both empowering and problematic. The point of the feminist enterprise is not to serve as an apologetic for women; it is rather, in part, to recover women's history and literary roles in all their complexity and to learn from that recovery.

Retrieving the submerged history of biblical women is a crucial step for constructing the story of the past so as to lead to liberative possibilities for the present and future. There are, however, some pitfalls to this approach. Sometimes depictions of biblical women have been naïve and romantic. Some commentators exalt the virtues of both biblical and contemporary women and paint women as superior to men. Such reverse discrimination inhibits movement toward equality for all. In addition, some feminists challenge the idea that one can "pluck positive images out of an admittedly androcentric text, separating literary characterizations from the androcentric interests they were created to serve."¹⁸ Still other feminists find these images to have enormous value.

One other danger with seeking the submerged history of women is the tendency for Christian feminists to paint Jesus and even Paul as liberators of women in a way that demonizes Judaism.¹⁹ Wisdom Commentary aims to enhance understanding of Jesus as well as Paul as Jews of their day and to forge solidarity among Jewish and Christian feminists.

17. See, e.g., Alice Bach, ed., *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 2002); Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer, *Women in Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000); Irene Nowell, *Women in the Old Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997); Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001); Bonnie Thurston, *Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary*, Companions to the New Testament (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

18. Cheryl Exum, "Second Thoughts about Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1.8–2.10," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, FCB 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 75–97, at 76.

19. See Judith Plaskow, "Anti-Judaism in Feminist Christian Interpretation," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 1:117–29; Amy-Jill Levine, "The New Testament and Anti-Judaism," in *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 87–117.

Feminist scholars who use historical-critical methods analyze the world behind the text; they seek to understand the historical context from which the text emerged and the circumstances of the communities to whom it was addressed. In bringing feminist lenses to this approach, the aim is not to impose modern expectations on ancient cultures but to unmask the ways that ideologically problematic mind-sets that produced the ancient texts are still promulgated through the text. Feminist biblical scholars aim not only to deconstruct but also to reclaim and reconstruct biblical history as women's history, in which women were central and active agents in creating religious heritage.²⁰ A further step is to construct meaning for contemporary women and men in a liberative movement toward transformation of social, political, economic, and religious structures.²¹ In recent years, some feminists have embraced new historicism, which accents the creative role of the interpreter in any construction of history and exposes the power struggles to which the text witnesses.²²

Literary critics analyze the world of the text: its form, language patterns, and rhetorical function.²³ They do not attempt to separate layers of tradition and redaction but focus on the text holistically, as it is in

20. See, for example, Phyllis A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1984); Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo, eds., *Women and Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

21. See, e.g., Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), whose aim is to engage in biblical interpretation not only for intellectual enlightenment but, even more important, for personal and communal transformation. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (*Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001]) envisions the work of feminist biblical interpretation as a dance of Wisdom that consists of seven steps that interweave in spiral movements toward liberation, the final one being transformative action for change.

22. See Gina Hens Piazza, *The New Historicism*, GBS, Old Testament Series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

23. Phyllis Trible was among the first to employ this method with texts from Genesis and Ruth in her groundbreaking book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978). Another pioneer in feminist literary criticism is Mieke Bal (*Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987]). For surveys of recent developments in literary methods, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, eds., *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

its present form. They examine how meaning is created in the interaction between the text and its reader in multiple contexts. Within the arena of literary approaches are reader-oriented approaches, narrative, rhetorical, structuralist, post-structuralist, deconstructive, ideological, autobiographical, and performance criticism.²⁴ Narrative critics study the interrelation among author, text, and audience through investigation of settings, both spatial and temporal; characters; plot; and narrative techniques (e.g., irony, parody, intertextual allusions). Reader-response critics attend to the impact that the text has on the reader or hearer. They recognize that when a text is detrimental toward women there is the choice either to affirm the text or to read against the grain toward a liberative end. Rhetorical criticism analyzes the style of argumentation and attends to how the author is attempting to shape the thinking or actions of the hearer. Structuralist critics analyze the complex patterns of binary oppositions in the text to derive its meaning.²⁵ Post-structuralist approaches challenge the notion that there are fixed meanings to any biblical text or that there is one universal truth. They engage in close readings of the text and often engage in intertextual analysis.²⁶ Within this approach is deconstructionist criticism, which views the text as a site of conflict, with competing narratives. The interpreter aims to expose the fault lines and overturn and reconfigure binaries by elevating the underling of a pair and foregrounding it.²⁷ Feminists also use other post-modern approaches, such as ideological and autobiographical criticism. The former analyzes the system of ideas that underlies the power and

24. See, e.g., J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993); Edgar V. McKnight and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994).

25. See, e.g., David Jobling, *The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Three Structural Analyses in the Old Testament*, JSOTSup 7 (Sheffield: Sheffield University, 1978).

26. See, e.g., Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); *The Bible in Theory: Critical and Postcritical Essays* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2010); Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

27. David Penchansky, "Deconstruction," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Steven McKenzie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 196–205. See, for example, Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993); David Rutledge, *Reading Marginally: Feminism, Deconstruction and the Bible*, BibInt 21 (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

values concealed in the text as well as that of the interpreter.²⁸ The latter involves deliberate self-disclosure while reading the text as a critical exegete.²⁹ Performance criticism attends to how the text was passed on orally, usually in communal settings, and to the verbal and nonverbal interactions between the performer and the audience.³⁰

From the beginning, feminists have understood that interpreting the Bible is an act of power. In recent decades, feminist biblical scholars have developed hermeneutical theories of the ethics and politics of biblical interpretation to challenge the claims to value neutrality of most academic biblical scholarship. Feminist biblical scholars have also turned their attention to how some biblical writings were shaped by the power of empire and how this still shapes readers' self-understandings today. They have developed hermeneutical approaches that reveal, critique, and evaluate the interactions depicted in the text against the context of empire, and they consider implications for contemporary contexts.³¹ Feminists also analyze the dynamics of colonization and the mentalities of colonized peoples in the exercise of biblical interpretation. As Kwok Pui-lan explains, "A postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible needs to investigate the deployment of gender in the narration of identity, the negotiation of power differentials between the colonizers and the colonized, and the reinforcement of patriarchal control over spheres where these elites could exercise control."³² Methods and models from sociology and cultural anthropology are used by feminists to investigate

28. See Tina Pippin, ed., *Ideological Criticism of Biblical Texts: Semeia* 59 (1992); Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 2007).

29. See, e.g., Ingrid Rose Kitzberger, ed., *Autobiographical Biblical Interpretation: Between Text and Self* (Leiden: Deo, 2002); P. J. W. Schutte, "When They, We, and the Passive Become I—Introducing Autobiographical Biblical Criticism," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 61 (2005): 401–16.

30. See, e.g., Holly Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones, eds., *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009).

31. E.g., Gale Yee, ed., *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Warren Carter, *The Gospel of Matthew in Its Roman Imperial Context* (London: T & T Clark, 2005); *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); Judith E. McKinlay, *Reframing Her: Biblical Women in Postcolonial Focus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2004).

32. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 9. See also, Musa W. Dube, ed., *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000); Cristl M. Maier and

women's everyday lives, their experiences of marriage, childrearing, labor, money, illness, etc.³³

As feminists have examined the construction of gender from varying cultural perspectives, they have become ever more cognizant that the way gender roles are defined within differing cultures varies radically. As Mary Ann Tolbert observes, "Attempts to isolate some universal role that cross-culturally defines 'woman' have run into contradictory evidence at every turn."³⁴ Some women have coined new terms to highlight the particularities of their socio-cultural context. Many African American feminists, for example, call themselves *womanists* to draw attention to the double oppression of racism and sexism they experience.³⁵ Similarly, many US Hispanic feminists speak of themselves as *mujeristas* (*mujer* is Spanish for "woman").³⁶ Others prefer to be called "Latina feminists."³⁷ Both groups emphasize that the context for their theologizing is *mestizaje* and *mulatez* (racial and cultural mixture), done *en conjunto* (in community), with *lo cotidiano* (everyday lived experience) of Hispanic women as starting points for theological reflection and the encounter with the divine. Intercultural analysis has become an indispensable tool for working toward justice for women at the global level.³⁸

Carolyn J. Sharp, *Prophecy and Power: Jeremiah in Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

33. See, for example, Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Luise Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995); Susan Niditch, *"My Brother Esau Is a Hairy Man": Hair and Identity in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

34. Mary Ann Tolbert, "Social, Sociological, and Anthropological Methods," in *Searching the Scriptures*, 1:255–71, at 265.

35. Alice Walker coined the term (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967, 1983]). See also Katie G. Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 30–40; Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: Lura Media, 1988); Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

36. Ada María Isasi-Díaz (*Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-first Century* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996]) is credited with coining the term.

37. E.g., María Pilar Aquino, Daisy L. Machado, and Jeanette Rodríguez, eds., *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

38. See, e.g., María Pilar Aquino and María José Rosado-Nunes, eds., *Feminist Intercultural Theology: Latina Explorations for a Just World*, Studies in Latino/a Catholicism (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007).

Some feminists are among those who have developed lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) interpretation. This approach focuses on issues of sexual identity and uses various reading strategies. Some point out the ways in which categories that emerged in recent centuries are applied anachronistically to biblical texts to make modern-day judgments. Others show how the Bible is silent on contemporary issues about sexual identity. Still others examine same-sex relationships in the Bible by figures such as Ruth and Naomi or David and Jonathan. In recent years, queer theory has emerged; it emphasizes the blurriness of boundaries not just of sexual identity but also of gender roles. Queer critics often focus on texts in which figures transgress what is traditionally considered proper gender behavior.³⁹

Feminists also recognize that the struggle for women's equality and dignity is intimately connected with the struggle for respect for Earth and for the whole of the cosmos. Ecofeminists interpret Scripture in ways that highlight the link between human domination of nature and male subjugation of women. They show how anthropocentric ways of interpreting the Bible have overlooked or dismissed Earth and Earth community. They invite readers to identify not only with human characters in the biblical narrative but also with other Earth creatures and domains of nature, especially those that are the object of injustice. Some use creative imagination to retrieve the interests of Earth implicit in the narrative and enable Earth to speak.⁴⁰

Biblical Authority

By the late nineteenth century, some feminists, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, began to question openly whether the Bible could continue to be regarded as authoritative for women. They viewed the Bible itself as

39. See, e.g., Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Women Partners in the New Testament," *JFSR* 6 (1990): 65–86; Deirdre J. Good, "Reading Strategies for Biblical Passages on Same-Sex Relations," *Theology and Sexuality* 7 (1997): 70–82; Deryn Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Feminist Hermeneutics* (London: SCM Press, 2011); Teresa Hornsby and Ken Stone, eds., *Bible Trouble: Queer Readings at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2011).

40. E.g., Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger, *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, *SymS* 46 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008); Mary Judith Ress, *Ecofeminism in Latin America, Women from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

the source of women's oppression, and some rejected its sacred origin and saving claims. Some decided that the Bible and the religious traditions that enshrine it are too thoroughly saturated with androcentrism and patriarchy to be redeemable.⁴¹

In the Wisdom Commentary series, questions such as these may be raised, but the aim of this series is not to lead readers to reject the authority of the biblical text. Rather, the aim is to promote better understanding of the contexts from which the text arose and of the rhetorical effects it has on women and men in contemporary contexts. Such understanding can lead to a deepening of faith, with the Bible serving as an aid to bring flourishing of life.

Language for God

Because of the ways in which the term "God" has been used to symbolize the divine in predominantly male, patriarchal, and monarchical modes, feminists have designed new ways of speaking of the divine. Some have called attention to the inadequacy of the term *God* by trying to visually destabilize our ways of thinking and speaking of the divine. Rosemary Radford Ruether proposed *God/ess*, as an unpronounceable term pointing to the unnameable understanding of the divine that transcends patriarchal limitations.⁴² Some have followed traditional Jewish practice, writing *G-d*. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has adopted *G*d*.⁴³ Others draw on the biblical tradition to mine female and non-gender-specific metaphors and symbols.⁴⁴ In Wisdom Commentary, there is not one standard way of expressing the divine; each author will use her or his preferred ways. The one exception is that when the tetragrammaton, YHWH, the name revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14, is used, it will be without vowels, respecting the Jewish custom of avoiding pronouncing the divine name out of reverence.

41. E.g., Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: A Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973).

42. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

43. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet; Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 191 n. 3. See above xiv n. 3.

44. E.g., Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992). See further Elizabeth A. Johnson, "God," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 128–30.

Nomenclature for the Two Testaments

In recent decades, some biblical scholars have begun to call the two Testaments of the Bible by names other than the traditional nomenclature: Old and New Testament. Some regard "Old" as derogatory, implying that it is no longer relevant or that it has been superseded. Consequently, terms like Hebrew Bible, First Testament, and Jewish Scriptures and, correspondingly, Christian Scriptures or Second Testament have come into use. There are a number of difficulties with these designations. The term "Hebrew Bible" does not take into account that parts of the Old Testament are written not in Hebrew but in Aramaic.⁴⁵ Moreover, for Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Eastern Orthodox believers, the Old Testament includes books written in Greek—the Deuterocanonical books, considered Apocrypha by Protestants. The term "Jewish Scriptures" is inadequate because these books are also sacred to Christians. Conversely, "Christian Scriptures" is not an accurate designation for the New Testament, since the Old Testament is also part of the Christian Scriptures. Using "First and Second Testament" also has difficulties, in that it can imply a hierarchy and a value judgment.⁴⁶ Jews generally use the term Tanakh, an acronym for Torah (Pentateuch), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings).

In Wisdom Commentary, if authors choose to use a designation other than Tanakh, Old Testament, and New Testament, they will explain how they mean the term.

Translation

Modern feminist scholars recognize the complexities connected with biblical translation, as they have delved into questions about philosophy of language, how meanings are produced, and how they are culturally situated. Today it is evident that simply translating into gender-neutral formulations cannot address all the challenges presented by androcentric texts. Efforts at feminist translation must also deal with issues around authority and canonicity.⁴⁷

Because of these complexities, the editors of Wisdom Commentary series have chosen to use an existing translation, the New Revised Standard

45. Gen 31:47; Jer 10:11; Ezra 4:7–6:18; 7:12–26; Dan 2:4–7:28.

46. See Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, 193–99.

47. Elizabeth Castelli, "Les Belles Infidèles/Fidelity or Feminism? The Meanings of Feminist Biblical Translation," in *Searching the Scriptures*, 1:189–204, here 190.

Version (NRSV), which is provided for easy reference at the top of each page of commentary. The NRSV was produced by a team of ecumenical and interreligious scholars, is a fairly literal translation, and uses inclusive language for human beings. Brief discussions about problematic translations appear in the inserts labeled “Translation Matters.” When more detailed discussions are available, these will be indicated in footnotes. In the commentary, wherever Hebrew or Greek words are used, English translation is provided. In cases where a wordplay is involved, transliteration is provided to enable understanding.

Art and Poetry

Artistic expression in poetry, music, sculpture, painting, and various other modes is very important to feminist interpretation. Where possible, art and poetry are included in the print volumes of the series. In a number of instances, these are original works created for this project. Regrettably, copyright and production costs prohibit the inclusion of color photographs and other artistic work. It is our hope that the web version will allow a greater collection of such resources.

Glossary

Because there are a number of excellent readily available resources that provide definitions and concise explanations of terms used in feminist theological and biblical studies, this series will not include a glossary. We refer you to works such as *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, edited by Letty M. Russell with J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), and volume 1 of *Searching the Scriptures*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza with the assistance of Shelly Matthews (New York: Crossroad, 1992). Individual authors in the Wisdom Commentary series will define the way they are using terms that may be unfamiliar.

Bibliography

Because bibliographies are quickly outdated and because the space is limited, only a list of Works Cited is included in the print volumes. A comprehensive bibliography for each volume is posted on a dedicated website and is updated regularly. The link for this volume can be found at wisdomcommentary.org.

A Concluding Word

In just a few short decades, feminist biblical studies has grown exponentially, both in the methods that have been developed and in the number of scholars who have embraced it. We realize that this series is limited and will soon need to be revised and updated. It is our hope that *Wisdom Commentary*, by making the best of current feminist biblical scholarship available in an accessible format to ministers, preachers, teachers, scholars, and students, will aid all readers in their advancement toward God's vision of dignity, equality, and justice for all.



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Author's Introduction to Philippians

A Political Ideological Feminist Reading

The focus of this discussion of the Letter of Paul to the Philippians is hermeneutical, written from a specific political-ideological and feminist perspective. This feminist approach follows Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in that feminism is not reduced to the subject of women but encompasses the struggle against the kyriarchal¹ system that involves all systemic forms of discrimination. With a desire to see females as subjects who affirm themselves as such, independent of the man-woman relationship, this analysis of the letter is conducted, when possible, outside of the man-woman and female-male binaries, which is to say, outside of theories of equality and difference. This approach is not meant to devalue the excellent contributions of feminist theorists that have been made and continue to be made. But in this commentary, I want to see females as subjects with an autonomy that

1. A word used by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). In *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), she defines it as a neologism “derived from the Greek words for ‘lord’ or ‘master’ (*kyrios*) and ‘to rule or dominate’ (*archein*) which seeks to redefine the analytic category of patriarchy in terms of multiplicative intersecting structures of domination” (211).

has been acquired because of their commitment to the movement of the Resurrected One, independent of their sex and gender. In other words, I wish to see women's participation simply as persons. The letter to the Philippians lends itself to a political-ideological reading.

Such a reading of Philippians implies a creative use of language. Therefore, I speak of the movement of the Resurrected One, of the companions of the movement in Philippi, of Paul as a political prisoner because of the Gospel for which he and others struggled, of tendencies and divisions within the movement, of unity and strength in resistance, of ethics, of justice and care, and of economic problems, among other things. Because this letter comes from a prisoner who is awaiting a possible death sentence, the discussion addresses questions related to censorship, the Roman secret police, the defense trial before the court, and the implications of writing or receiving letters from prison. In this respect, Angela Standhartinger's contributions reflect on the tone of the letter,² as do those of Craig S. Wansink³ and Richard Cassidy.⁴ Taking into account that the document is a writing from prison and analyzing it from a political-religious and feminist perspective using new language helps to re-create the letter as if it were a new document. In this analysis I have endeavored to utilize non-patriarchal, inclusive language, which helps readers to see the contents of the letter with different eyes. Of course, to speak of the Divine instead of God or Father not only goes beyond androcentrism and the paternal household but renews the message of the letter.

I do not underestimate the dissonant voices of Joseph Marchal in seeing the letter as rhetorical kyriarchal and imperialist speech,⁵ especially his critique of the rhetoric of imitation, which Elizabeth A. Castelli deconstructed in the 1990s.⁶ But I believe that when the discourse is read

2. Angela Standhartinger, "Aus der Welt eines Gefangenen: Die Kommunikationsstruktur des Philipperbriefs im Spiegel seiner Abfassungssituation," *NovT* 55 (2013): 140–67.

3. Craig S. Wansink, *Chained in Christ: The Experience and Rhetoric of Paul's Imprisonments*, JSNTSup 130 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996).

4. Richard Cassidy, *Paul in Chains: Roman Imprisonment and the Letters of St. Paul* (New York: Crossroad, 2001).

5. Joseph A. Marchal, *The Politics of Heaven: Women, Gender, and Empire in the Study of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); *Hierarchy, Unity, and Imitation: A Feminist Rhetorical Analysis of Power Dynamics in Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006).

6. Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Nashville, TN: Westminster John Knox, 1991).

from the point of view of a prisoner awaiting a death sentence, other elements come into play that mitigate the readings of Marchal and Castelli. I work within the framework of the biblical scholars of the Latin American Biblical Interpretation Review (RIBLA),⁷ as well as that of the biblical scholars of the Western world such as Richard Horsley, Brigitte Kahl, Neil Elliott, Warren Carter, Davina C. López, and others.⁸ I opt for seeing in Paul's writing a subversive praxis and critical discourse against the Roman Empire. Additionally, I believe that rediscovering liberating aspects in Philippians, such as Paul's presumption of equality with the women from Philippi, empowers women and questions church readings that seek to impose the subordination of women using Paul's letters.

The Rhetorical Situation

In order to give coherence to the discourse of the letter, I visualize its socio-political religious background as its rhetorical context, which I deduce by taking into account the data of the investigation and the implications of documents written by and about the prisoners that I present below. The author of Philippians is a prisoner because he belongs to a social-religious movement that proposes a different way of being and living in the context of the Roman Empire. The founder of the movement is Jesus of Nazareth, the human face of the Divine; his life, manifested in actions and teachings, inevitably led to his arrest and later his crucifixion. But because the Divine vindicated him by raising him from the dead, the movement continued. Therefore, I call this movement the movement of the Resurrected One. The Resurrected One is called Lord and Savior in contrast to Caesar, who claimed himself to be the absolute ruler and demanded submission symbolically represented in the cult of Caesar in all the provinces. In the movement of the Resurrected One,

7. E.g., Milton Schwantes, Carlos Mesters, Severino Croato, Nancy Cardoso, Ivoni Richter Reimer, Cristina Conti, Irene Foulkes, Mercedes López, Néstor Míguez, Pablo Richard, René Krüger, Jorge Pixley, Tirsia Ventura, Silvia Regina Silva, Maricel Mena, Gonzalo de la Torre, and many others.

8. See Richard Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997); Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Reimagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001); Davina C. López, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); and others.

women and slaves all participated actively because in standing before the Divine there are no differences of gender, ethnicity, or class (Gal 3:28). An example of the significant participation of women in the movement is that they are in the Roman colony of Philippi, a community in which women were possibly the majority and therefore had leadership roles (see Acts 16:13-15).

This movement is not a structured organization or a political party connected with a particular ideology but a small and insignificant movement that gathers the aspirations of women and men who are tired of living within a system that is unjust and discriminatory. That is why they speak of the struggle for justice and the practice of mutual care. It is in this context that members of this movement in Philippi receive a letter from a political prisoner named Paul. He is one of the leaders of the movement of the Resurrected One and was put in prison for proclaiming values contrary to those of Roman imperial society. Together with him, striving in the same movement, are the Philippian women, including leaders such as Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2).

There are three groups that oppose the ideals of the movement in which Paul and the community in Philippi participate. The first is Roman society, called “crooked and perverse” (Phil 2:15) for following values that are not in accord with the cause of the Resurrected One. The second group has spread rumors within the movement to distance themselves from Paul because of the extreme way he proclaims his principles, which led to his imprisonment (1:17). The third is a group of Jews within the movement who differ from Paul even more than the second group because of the way they understand salvation and its requirements (3:1). The companions at Philippi have to be careful of the first and third groups. The second group is found in the city where Paul is prisoner.

The recipients of the letter in Philippi are also having difficulties. The Roman police are probably watching them and/or the people who live around them are hostile to them because they belong to a movement whose proclamations are considered harmful. This sector opposes (ἀντικειμένον) them, tries to intimidate them (Phil 1:28), and makes them concerned and worried (4:6). The recipients of the letter also had economic problems.⁹ Nevertheless, knowing that their companion Paul was imprisoned and dependent on friends and family to survive, they sent

9. Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter*, SNTSMS 110 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 77–99.

him economic help. It is worth noting that it is the Philippian community, the farthest away from the prison, that gives him financial help, not the people of the movement in the city where Paul is prisoner. They also sent Epaphroditus to support Paul, and Paul returned him to them with his letter. Timothy will later visit the companions in Philippi; it seems that they had wanted Timothy to come sooner, but his presence and support for Paul were essential as he prepared his defense for the courts (2:19-24).

We can observe a certain tension within the movement. Two strong leaders, Euodia and Syntyche, have unnamed differences (Phil 3:3). In his letter, Paul asks them to be of the same mind and reiterates his exhortation to unity and to remain firm because of the situation of uncertainty and persecution that could easily occur.

Paul does not say much about his suffering in prison. Therefore, understanding his physical and emotional situation requires reading between the lines and visualizing the prison. According to my research, Paul is under military custody (*custodia militaris*), which allows him to have visitors such as Timothy and Epaphroditus and to receive money. Paul is in a continually uncomfortable physical position because he is always chained to one or two soldiers, either with his arms and hands or feet (*manacles* or *pedicles*). He would have dictated the letter or paid a soldier to unchain him enough to write the letter himself. In the letter to the Philippians, Paul speaks of the imperial guard. If he is in Ephesus, he would be within the governor's palace. Prisons were not necessarily buildings constructed exclusively for prisoners; any building could function as a prison for someone. Paul's emotional and psychological situation is indicated by three signs in the letter: his strength in weakness (1:4, 12-14, 16-17, 18b-20; 2:6-11, 18; 3:4-10, 20-21; 4:10a, 11-13, 18); his uncertainty about his sentence (1:21-25; 2:17; 3:10-11); and his worries about his readers struggling to cope with his absence and the hostility around them (1:7-11, 27-30; 2:2-5; 23-24; 3:1; 4:1, 2-3, 4, 6-7). Besides those concerns, Paul was probably hungry, but Phil 4:12 shows that he had learned the secret (*μεμύημαι*) of going hungry and having enough. His experience has taught him to be content with whatever he has (4:11).

One problem prisoners have is what to do with time and the uncertainty of what will happen after the verdict. Paul is in this situation of uncertainty; he doesn't know whether he will be condemned to death or freed. He seems confident that he will be set free because of the prayers on his behalf (Phil 1:19). He seems confident, but he doesn't say anything so as not to worry the readers, in case he is not granted freedom (see 1:25, 26). Even though Paul longs to be with Christ, he prefers to be free from death so that

he can help the community in Philippi (1:22). In repeating the possibility of a death sentence, however, he shows his strength, and it seems that he is preparing himself; he says, “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain” (1:21; 2:17). The prisoner Paul speaks a lot about joy, repeating the word and its derivatives sixteen times in the letter. Speaking of joy is common among prisoners, both to strengthen themselves psychologically and to avoid worrying their companions, in this case, Paul’s supporters in the movement in Philippi. Nevertheless, I imagine that sadness is not absent for Paul, as indicated by his desire to “be with Christ” (1:23).

Analyzing Philippians from the perspective of Paul’s suffering and uncertainty in prison helps us to better understand his theology. In addition, it clarifies phrases and words and points to missing information that reveals strategies used by prisoners subject to censorship. Therefore, all study of the letter to the Philippians should take very seriously the conditions of its chained author. Paul was imprisoned for his ideas, not because he was a debtor or a criminal. He writes in the manner of what we could call today a “political prisoner.” Philippians is not a friendly, inoffensive letter. It is a document that reflects sorrow and, at the same time, strength in a person deprived of freedom and living on the line between life and death. As Robin Scroggs writes,

The Apostle . . . has been arrested by a Roman official on some charge—which would have been brought against him by private citizens and whose successful prosecution carried a penalty of death. At the time he writes the letter, Paul does not know what the result of the trial will be. The desperate ambiguity of life or death explicitly permeates the first section of the letter and must infiltrate every topic Paul addresses; however, some commentators seem to think Paul was on a Sunday outing while he wrote.¹⁰

For all these reasons, I call Paul “the prisoner” throughout my commentary as a constant reminder that he writes in shackles.

The Relationship of the Prisoner with His Recipients

In this analysis, I emphasize that women were the primary recipients of the letter because, as noted above, it is very likely that the followers

10. Robin Scroggs, “Paul the Prisoner: Political Asceticism in the Letter to the Philippians,” in *Asceticism and the New Testament*, ed. Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 187.

of the Resurrected One in Philippi were mostly women and were led by women. We know that in Philippi, Paul and Silas went first to women and that most likely Lydia was one of the founders and thus a leader of the community (Acts 16:11-24, 40). The letter also mentions by name two other great leaders and fighters for the gospel: Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2-3). Therefore, in order to call the attention of my readers to the specific recipients of this letter, I have opted to transgress androcentric linguistic norms by giving grammatical privilege to the feminine gender. I also assume that Paul had in mind the women leaders in Philippi when he wrote the letter. I am not the first to see the Philippian leaders as women. Lilian Portefaix uses literary reception theory to reveal that women are the primary recipients of the letter.¹¹ It is clear that her objective is different from mine: she is interested in reconstructing first-century women's religious and cultural backgrounds in order to deduce their comprehension of Paul's message. She, like the majority of commentators, does not note, however, that the letter is a document written from prison, a setting with implications that must be taken into account.

Therefore, the hermeneutical approach of this commentary is to analyze the discourse of the letter to the Philippians as a document written from a prison in Roman imperial times; it is a letter sent to a primarily female community committed to the movement of the Resurrected One, where the majority of members are women who must struggle and run the same risks in receiving the letter as its writer did in writing it. They had already seen Paul chained in prison, since, before writing the letter to the Philippians, Paul had already suffered jail in Philippi along with Silas. According to Acts,¹² Paul and Silas had been jailed for speaking about a gospel that condemned the practices of exploitive merchants. The basic issue in the case against Paul and Silas was the exorcism of a "spirit of divination" from a slave girl, which meant that her owners could no longer use her powers to earn money for themselves (Acts 16:19). But the argument the owners made before the magistrates was that "these men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe" (16:20-21). Because the crowd began attacking the missionaries, the magistrate ordered the authorities to rip off their clothes, torture them with whips, and then jail

11. Lilian Portefaix, *Sisters Rejoice: Paul's Letter to the Philippians and Luke-Acts as Seen by First-Century Philippian Women*, ConBNT 20 (Uppsala, NY: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1988).

12. I read Luke as a literary text with some useful information regarding prisoners.

and chain them with their feet in stocks in an inner cell, the most terrible place in the jail (16:22-24).

The experience would have been terrifying for the members of the movement in Philippi, above all Lydia, the leader who had opened her house to Paul (Acts 16:15). They surely remembered Paul's suffering in the Philippian jail when they heard of his new arrest in another city. They would read between the lines of Paul's letter to see that Paul was awaiting the death penalty (Phil 1:20) and that he was worried for them, not only because he knew that they were concerned about him, but because they and others in the movement were being intimidated by members of Roman imperial society (1:28).

The prisoner Paul was not exempt from acting within the parameters of patriarchy. As we know, patriarchy was the common manner in which power was exercised in the relationship between the genders, and Paul moved within this patriarchal culture.¹³ Even so, in my analysis of the letter, I note some instances in which elements of equality stand out, and I question others who have implied otherwise. As noted before, in the study of the letter's language, I distance myself from the masculine-feminine binary in order to underline women's autonomy and self-affirmation, which was made possible by the movement of the Resurrected One. My reading is oriented toward empowering modern women and men readers of Philippians who are committed to solidarity and proclaim and practice countercultural values in an imperial, kyriarchal society.

Methodological Procedures

For my analysis, besides the relevant literature on Philippians, I consulted several sources that examine prisons, prisoners, and their writings from the Roman Empire. At the same time, I integrate contributions from Paul Ricoeur, Roland Barthes, and Severino Croato on the wider meanings they offer the texts through a polysemic approach.¹⁴ I also take into account contemporary writings and voices of men and women who, oriented by their religious faith, have been imprisoned for a political cause. These include Dietrich Bonhoeffer, imprisoned from 1943 until his execution in

13. See Marchal, *Hierarchy*.

14. Paul Ricoeur, *Teoría de la Interpretación: Discurso y excedente de sentido*, trans. Graciela Mones Nicolau (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1999); Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Nicolás Rosa (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1980), 1-8; Severino Croato, *Liberación y Libertad: Pautas hermenéuticas* (Lima: CEP, 1987).

1945¹⁵ as a member of the resistance against the dictator Hitler; Nelson Mandela, imprisoned from 1964 until 1990 in South Africa,¹⁶ as an activist against white colonial apartheid; Frei Betto (Carlos Alberto Libanio Cristo),¹⁷ a Dominican friar imprisoned from 1969 until 1973 for his resistance against the dictatorship in Brazil; Karl Gaspar¹⁸ of the Order of the Redemptorists, imprisoned during the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines; Ety Hillesum,¹⁹ a young Jewish woman who wrote letters from a concentration camp in the Netherlands during the German occupation of World War II; Carmiña Navia Velasco,²⁰ a Colombian feminist writer who was kidnapped and held for ransom for twelve days in 1994 by the Colombian guerrilla force ELN;²¹ and Neila Serrano de Barragán,²² a Colombian doctor and Christian leader who was imprisoned by the Colombian government from 1993 to 1995 for paying a ransom to obtain the release of her husband kidnapped by the guerrilla organization M19.²³

The voices of contemporary prisoners contribute meaning, as the French semiologist Roland Barthes has pointed out; the reader should be a producer of meaning in the text and not just a consumer of meanings already formulated. Based on this concept, I privilege in my analysis meaning that emanates from Philippians in relation to contemporary writings as well as biblical texts. "Interpretation" as Barthes defines it is a tool used as a "means of access to the multivalent meanings of the text."²⁴ It is a characteristic that has power to refer to earlier, later, or

15. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Resistencia y sumisión: Cartas y apuntes desde el cautiverio*, trans. Constantino Ruiz-Garrido (Salamanca: Sígueme, 2008), 17.

16. Nelson Mandela Foundation, *A Prisoner in the Garden: Opening Nelson Mandela's Prison Archive*, 1964 (Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2005).

17. Frei Betto, *Cartas da prisão 1967–1973* (Rio de Janeiro: Agir, 2008).

18. Karl Gaspar, *How Long? Prison Reflections of Karl Gaspar*, ed. Helen Graham and Breda Noonan (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1985).

19. Ety Hillesum, *El corazón pensante de los barracones: Cartas* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 2001).

20. Carmiña Navia Velasco, "Unidad en un sueño común: A propósito de la carta de Pablo a las mujeres de la iglesia de Filipos," letter to author, Cali, Colombia, March 30, 2014.

21. Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army) is a guerrilla organization that currently operates in the countryside.

22. Neila Serrano, "Mi experiencia en la cárcel a la luz de Filipenses," interview with the author, Medellín, Colombia, September 2013.

23. The M19 was an urban guerrilla until 1990. It was called M19 (19 Movement) because on April 19 they became known.

24. Barthes, *S/Z*, 5.

external meanings, as well as to other locations of the text or to other texts.²⁵ In this way, interpretation implies taking seriously the plurality of meaning inherent in the text. Therefore, my analysis takes into account not only intratextuality (echoes or reminiscences within a single text) but also intertextuality (echoes or memories of other texts). Thus, I venture into current theories of intertextuality that focus on networks of texts and literature in a transversal, intercultural dynamic without regard to time, space, or circumstances. According to the Spanish author Jesús Camarero, this polysemic approach is an advance in the discipline of Comparative Literature. For him, "The theory of a text network is a global system of understanding and interpretation of literature with all texts included. . . . This is a step toward a comparative literary hermeneutic; in that the human subject reader would be able to take on the interpretation of a large whole or networks of related works . . . or to create relationships between them based on their own interpretation."²⁶

In this way, the network of texts can be converted into a relationship among distinct works and become "a text of texts, a culture of cultures, and a language of languages, and its function would no longer be based on an invention of an original and unique history, but on a textual interaction or the capacity of relationship among different texts."²⁷

Therefore, when we read the prisoner Paul's letter, we also listen to the voices of other prisoners throughout time. For this reason, then, the voices I privilege as coauthors in this commentary are the voices of political prisoners, both women and men.

Because the issues of the literary integrity of *Philippians* and its place of composition are two questions still discussed today, I set them aside in order to concentrate instead on the final redaction. The final version of the *Philippians* letter does not mention the city where Paul's prison is located; it simply says that he is a prisoner.²⁸ Therefore the most important aspect of the analysis of *Philippians* is Paul's particular space in chains because prison becomes a theological location from which the

25. *Ibid.*

26. Jesús Camarero, *Intertextualidad: Redes de textos y literaturas transversales en dinámica intercultural*, Pensamiento Crítico (Barcelona: Anthropos, 2008), 8.

27. *Ibid.*, 10.

28. There is no agreement regarding the place of composition of the letter. The proposals are usually Rome and Ephesus. Rome is the traditional location according to Acts of the Apostles. Ephesus is the other proposal due to its proximity to Philippi and the possible multiple correspondence.

prisoner lays out his christological understanding and offers practical advice to his recipients. Below, I speak of the implications of being in and writing from a prison. The companions in Philippi had heard of Paul's chains and had sent help with Epaphroditus; they were worried, hoping for news of their chained companion.

Prisons in Antiquity

Various contemporary authors have done excellent analyses of the situation of ancient prisons and prisoners.²⁹ If in fact there is little archaeological evidence of prisons in antiquity, there are sufficient sources that concur in describing jails as small spaces packed with prisoners, without much air, very dark and filthy, and posing a danger to prisoners' health—a place where sickness and disease abounded.³⁰

Prisoners suffered greatly. Besides living in poor conditions, they were physically tortured with beatings and whippings along with mental torture such as insults and threats. To be chained was not rare. The case of Antiphilus is mentioned frequently, although he is a character of Lucian's novel *Taxaris*.³¹ Antiphilus was forced to sleep on the floor; at night chains were put on his feet, and during the day an iron collar was placed around his neck and manacles were placed on his arms or hands. The difficulty of sleeping in chains was due not only to the discomfort but also to the clanking of the iron chains as prisoners tossed and turned.³² In some cases, conditions were so terrible that dying seemed more dignified to the prisoner and his supporters. According to research by Wansink and Cassidy, many Romans preferred suicide to living through the humiliation of prison.³³ While there is little data about the number of prisoners or the size of prisons during the Roman Empire, one source speaks of a space where nine mattresses were used by fifty prisoners.³⁴ Other sources speak of the liberation of 248 male and 48 female prisoners from a single prison.³⁵

29. See Wansink, *Chained in Christ*; Standhartinger, "Aus der Welt"; Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*.

30. Wansink, *Chained in Christ*, 33–40.

31. Standhartinger, "Aus der Welt," 147; Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 46–47.

32. Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 36.

33. Wansink, *Chained in Christ*, 58–61; Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 46.

34. See Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 38. This deals with the story of Diodorus's account of the prisoner Perseus in the Alba Fucens prison (Diodorus, *Library of History* 31.9.1–14).

35. Wansink, *Chained in Christ*, 37.

The studies of Wansink are very revealing. There were no individual cells in Roman prisons, so that all the prisoners were together in chains in the same space. There was, nevertheless, an interior room called a Tullianum located in the lowest part of the prison; it was said to be the darkest and most distressing place in the prison. Prisoners were sent there for more intense punishment, to prevent escape, and other reasons.³⁶ According to Acts, Paul was put in the Tullianum (Acts 16). Pionius, one of the Christian martyrs, was sent into the Tullianum cell for failing to pay a bribe.³⁷ According to the Roman historian Sallustio (83–35 BCE), a Tullianum would have been more than three and a half meters below the floor of an ancient prison that still exists in Rome.³⁸ This is where Paul would have been decapitated.

Types of Custody

In his well-known book *Paul in Chains*, Richard Cassidy shows that the severity of imprisonment depended on the type of custody assigned. The law established three types of custody during the time of Justinian, many years after *Philippians* was written, but it is thought that these modalities already existed during the time of Paul. The cruelest custody was the prison (*carcer*) itself, which was mentioned above. There were two other types of custody: one called military custody (*custodia militaris*) and the other called free custody (*custodia libera*).³⁹ Military custody was very common in Paul's time. It consisted of chaining prisoners to one or two soldiers who were under the direction of a centurion. This type of custody was less severe than the *carcer* because it permitted prisoners to write letters and to receive visitors and donations such as food and clothing. The chains on the arms and hands (*manacles*) or on the legs and feet (*pedicles*) were very uncomfortable due in part to the weight of the iron.⁴⁰ The *custodia libera* (house arrest) could be in a prisoner's own house or in one rented for the purpose, and the prisoner could be supervised by a member of the family.⁴¹ According to Angela Standhartinger, free custody was reserved for the elites, senators, and equestrians. The quality of the prisoner's treatment depended on the prisoner's status, with

36. *Ibid.*, 140.

37. *Ibid.*, 37.

38. Sallustio, *La conjuración de Catilina* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1986).

39. Cassidy, *Paul in Christ*, 37.

40. *Ibid.*, 46.

41. *Ibid.*, 42.

a partiality that favored prisoners with influence, power, or wealth. The laws *de jure* or *de facto* ("by law" or "by custom") clearly show the prejudice and partiality of Roman judges and officials in a two-tier system with one tier for the poor and the other for the rich.⁴²

Food, financial help, and moral support were of vital importance to prisoners, above all, to those who suffered the *carcer* and the *custodia militaris*. Family members or friends were usually the ones who were eager to make the confinement of prisoners in chains more tolerable by providing food and clothing. They often provided further comfort by staying with the prisoner and helping with preparations for the prisoner's defense (2 Tim 4:16). Early Christian prisoners had the advantage of having brothers and sisters from the nearby ecclesia who usually took on the responsibility of attending to their needs. Various biblical and extra-biblical letters mention assisting prisoners for the sake of the gospel.

For example, in Philippians, Paul does not hide his great happiness at receiving the economic help and general support from the community at Philippi by way of Epaphroditus, no doubt sent by the leading women of the community (Phil 2:30; 4:10-18). Paul took great comfort as well from the presence of Timothy (Phil 2:19-24). Paul's letter to Philemon mentions the companionship and collaboration of Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, as well as Timothy and Onesimus (Phlm 1:24). But this was not always the case. Some prisoners were abandoned. The author of 2 Timothy, a prisoner in Rome (2 Tim 1:17), writes that Demas had abandoned him (4:10). In addition, Phygelus and Hermogenes from Asia (1:15) were ashamed of his chains and also abandoned him. Only Onesiphorus stayed on (1:16-17).

Charges against Prisoners

The most common crimes that led to imprisonment were robbery, damages to a third party, debts, and threats. There were also public crimes such as subversion (*seditio*) or treason against the emperor (*maiestas*). Paul surely was sent to jail for sedition or treason, which are almost the same thing.⁴³ Paul and Silas were accused in Thessalonica of "acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus" (Acts 17:7). Cassidy says that *maiestas* initially was

42. Elsa Támez, *Contra toda condena: La justificación por la fe desde los excluidos* (San José: DEI, 1991), 63; Wansink, *Chained in Christ*, 41-43.

43. See Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 5-67.

a charge against those who were involved in subversive activities like military revolts or collaboration with an enemy.⁴⁴ Later, it became “whatever kind of conduct . . . damaged the majesty of the Roman people,” meaning the emperor. The change began during the time of Augustus when Roman laws against sedition began to include defamation in the *lex maiestas*.⁴⁵ There were abuses of *lex maiestas* in the time of Tiberius and Gaius. Claudius initially abolished this charge but later restored it and imposed the death penalty on those who were accused. In Nero’s time, the *lex maiestas*, according to Cassidy, “continued as a legal mechanism for protecting the emperor’s position and prerogatives.”⁴⁶

Writing Letters in Prison: Implications

To write in prison was dangerous. There are testimonies of prisoners being put to death because of their guards’ interpretations of their writing as speech against the emperor. Surveillance was continual; often spies were sent by Caesar to expose those with negative attitudes toward the emperor. Standhartinger analyzes the structures of communication among those in charge of prisoners during the Roman Empire. Of interest to her was how prisoners could write and what they could say in the context of constant surveillance and extreme censorship. Prisoners’ writings clearly did not go directly to their intended recipients but first were confiscated by the guards or other warders for scrutiny.

Analyzing the risks of sending letters from a Roman prison reveals the strategies that prisoners used in their writings to circumvent the surveillance. The writings could present two discourses, one public and one hidden. Standhartinger takes up the contributions of James C. Scott from his book *Domination and the Art of Resistance*.⁴⁷ Scott provides tools that help the reader better understand and interpret specific political actions and strategies that subordinate groups who have no power to confront the powerful and who must adopt strategies for survival. He shines a light on the tensions, contradictions, and possibilities within

44. *Ibid.*, 56.

45. See Narciso Vicente Santos Yanguas, “Acusaciones de alta traición en Roma en la época de Tiberio,” *Memorias de historia antigua* 11–12 (1991): 169–70.

46. Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 61.

47. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

asymmetric power relationships.⁴⁸ Even though Scott analyzes power relations among social groups, his strategy applies very well to the study of letters from prison, which Standhartinger applied in her analysis.

Finding two levels of meaning in letters written in prison is hardly surprising. According to Standhartinger, beginning with Augustus there was a web of internal security through the Roman secret police, a spy ring that extended to the provinces under Roman governors and generated lists of suspected persons. Epictetus advises caution when speaking to strangers because a soldier in civilian clothes might begin a conversation against the emperor in order to ferret out a person's seditious thoughts about the emperor so he could arrest and imprison that person.⁴⁹ For this reason, documents that were written in prison had to be composed very carefully in order to prevent interpretations of seditious criticism of the emperor. Often messages were hidden or ambiguous; prisoners also used pseudonyms or foreign languages.⁵⁰ As Standhartinger notes, "Because the letters were in danger of being read by persecutors, they tried to obscure the contents. In antiquity they already had systems of secret writings and cryptography. Opaque techniques included presenting the content as obscurely as possible, using pseudonyms, riddles, puzzles, and writing in another language."⁵¹

The writings had implications for the recipients as well, because explicit phrases, words, and names in prison writings could compromise them too. As Standhartinger has indicated, contact with prisoners who were considered subversive was a risk for those outside the prison, not only with respect to the shame of having a friend or relative in chains, but also because vigilant authorities suspected those who associated with prisoners. The spies of the Roman secret police were everywhere, so prisoners and recipients had to be very cautious in the communication of messages. Anything that might look suspicious could be used against them. It is noteworthy that, in early Christian times, we find that widows and orphans took charge of providing assistance to Christians imprisoned for their faith. In a letter to Cronius, Lucian of Samosata speaks against the Christians and mentions the widows and orphans who provide assistance for Christian prisoners: "and from early morning one could see next to the jail groups of the elderly, widows, and

48. *Ibid.*, xii.

49. Standhartinger, "Aus der Welt," 157.

50. *Ibid.*, 158.

51. *Ibid.* My translation.

orphans waiting.”⁵² Without knowing that leaders of the movement of the Resurrected One also visited the prisoners, it was not surprising to Lucian to see elderly people, widows, and orphans going about this task. Could this have been a strategy of the leaders of the movement to reduce the risk of danger?

“Criminal Record” of Paul

We know that Paul was imprisoned because he wrote about it himself in letters when he was free (2 Cor 11:23) and because he was explicit about his chains when he wrote from prison as in Phil 1:7, 17 and Phlm 1:1, 9. Much later, in Acts, Luke confirms Paul’s imprisonment (16:22-24; 17:6-9; 22:24-30; 24:26–27:1, 41-43; 28:30). Clement of Rome, in his *Letter to the Corinthians* (5.6), affirms that Paul was imprisoned seven times (ἑπτάκις δέσμη).

Though the author of Acts presents a mostly positive view of the Roman Empire,⁵³ we cannot ignore Paul’s suffering as a prisoner of conscience incarcerated for his ideas. Despite the questionable historicity of Acts, it is significant that its narrative contains frequent mention of prisons and tribunals in its narratives about Paul. In Acts, we find a long list of Paul’s difficulties during his missionary journeys to Asia and later in Judea. In Philippi, he was stripped of his clothing, tortured, and chained to a stock because of his preaching about the resurrection of the dead (Acts 22–24). In Corinth, he was taken to the court to engage the proconsul Gallio in a doctrinal discussion (18:12-16). In Ephesus, Paul was almost lynched, and his followers and some authorities counseled that he should go into hiding (19:23-41). When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, the local people seized him to kill him (21:31), but the Roman military put him in prison (21:33). The tribune wanted to flog Paul in order to interrogate him for information about the great protest of the Jews in Jerusalem (22:24). Earlier, the tribune had confused him with an Egyptian who had “stirred up a revolt” and gone into the desert with four thousand followers (21:38). But, when Paul declared that he was a Roman citizen, he was not flogged (22:25-29), only chained (22:30).

In Caesarea, Governor Felix imprisoned Paul for two years without completing his trial, hoping for a bribe for Paul’s freedom that never came (24:26-27). Although bribes were prohibited by Julian law (*Lex*

52. Lucian, *Obras II: Sobre la muerte de Peregrino* (Madrid: Gredos, 1990), 246.

53. See Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1987), 89–105.

Iulia), they were nonetheless a very common practice.⁵⁴ Governor Felix's successor, Porcius Festus, considered sending Paul back to Jerusalem to be judged, but seeing the danger of being assassinated, Paul appealed instead to the emperor (25:10-12). Governor Festus, in consultation with King Agrippa, sent Paul to Rome as a prisoner on a ship with other prisoners (27:1-2). When the ship grounded and wrecked on Malta, the soldiers decided to kill all of the prisoners to prevent escape, but the attendant centurion ordered them to refrain and all were saved (27:42-44). Acts ends with Paul living under the guard of a soldier in a rented house in Rome for two years (28:16, 30).

This summary of Acts gives us a glimpse of the suffering of the apostle in ancient prisons. Oddly, Luke does not conclude Acts with Paul's death, which probably occurred when Emperor Nero condemned Paul to death during his persecution of the Christians in 64 CE.⁵⁵ It is also curious that almost all of the pseudonymous Pauline letters have a prison setting. It seems that the Christian community was determined to remember Paul as a prisoner, an apostle who suffered for the cause of the gospel.

The type of custody that Paul experienced when he wrote Philippians and Philemon was *custodia militaris*. Paul was also held in a *carcer* (Acts 16:22-24), but not under *custodia libera*, as Luke suggests in Acts 28:30-31. According to Standhartinger, it is impossible that Paul, a Jewish craftsman, would have been granted *custodia libera* because it was reserved for the elite.⁵⁶ Military custody was less cruel than the *carcera*, but this doesn't mean that Paul didn't suffer while under military custody, watched over by soldiers and chained permanently to them. Paul had to depend on the character or temperament of the soldier or soldiers to whom he was chained. Paul's military custody was likely similar to that of Herod Agrippa's as narrated by Josephus.⁵⁷ If that is so, it supports Standhartinger's claim that Paul was not held in *custodia libera*, since Agrippa himself did not have the privilege of such custody.

There are also references to incarceration in pseudonymous letters about Paul's missions. In 2 Tim 2:9, the author affirms that he suffers in prison (δεσμῶν) like a common criminal, and in 1:16 he mentions that Onesiphorus was not ashamed of his chains (ἄλυσίν). Similarly, in

54. Támez, *Contra toda condena*, 64 n. 71.

55. Undo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 56.

56. Standhartinger, "Aus der Welt," 142-43.

57. Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 18.6, trans. William Whiston, www.gutenberg.org.

Col 4:18, the author asks his recipients that they remember his chains (δεσμῶν; see also Eph 6:20). This is why I assert that the early church wanted to remember Paul as a leader who suffered in prison because of his commitment to the Crucified One.

Interestingly, Paul's authentic letters written in prison do not often speak explicitly of his chains (Phil 1:7, 13, 14, 17; Phlm 1:10, 13; see also 1:1, 23). His suffering must be read between the lines, as in Phil 1:17-26, where he speaks of his impotence against his adversaries, his uncertainty facing a death sentence, his longing for his companions in Philippi, and in Phil 4:12, where he mentions enduring hunger. Nevertheless, when Paul was free and felt obligated to refer to his experience in prison, he spoke clearly of it, as he does in Rom 16:7.

To be a prisoner meant shame and humiliation,⁵⁸ a serious problem in a culture ruled by patterns of honor and shame. In 2 Tim 1:16, Pseudo-Paul expresses his gratitude that Onesiphorus was not ashamed of his chains, while Phygelus and Hermogenes had abandoned him. All of this leads me to conclude that it is not an exaggeration when Paul speaks to the Corinthians frankly about his terrible experience in the prisons in Asia (2 Cor 1:8-10). It seems that Paul's writing and theology are always conditioned by his life or death situation.

Data on the Letter to the Philippians

As mentioned above, I set aside here the debate over whether Philippians is made up of one or three letters.⁵⁹ Also, since Paul does not mention the city in which he is held prisoner, the geography of the letter will always be uncertain. Although Ephesus seems more probable since it is closer to Philippi and would permit easier communication, there are arguments for and against both Ephesus and Rome, which are the most frequent proposals. I admit to believing that Paul was probably alluding to his problems in the prison in Ephesus when he wrote to the Corinthians (2 Cor 1:18-10). Though for some reason he was set free, I think it is probable that he was condemned to death in Ephesus and related his experience to the community in Corinth (1 Cor 15:32; 2 Cor 1:8-10). According to Standhartinger, there were frequent amnesties when there was a change of emperor, sug-

58. Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 48; Wansink, *Chained in Christ*, 48, 58–60.

59. Some scholars hold that there were three letters called A, B, and C: A contains 4:10-20; B contains 1:1–3:1 and parts of 4:21-23; and C contains 3:2-21 and parts of 4:1-9. See John Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 3.

gesting that when Nero rose to the throne, he could have freed prisoners of conscience like Paul.⁶⁰ With respect to dating, if Philippians was written from a prison in Rome, it would be dated between 60 and 62 CE, after his letter to the Romans. If it was written from a prison in Ephesus, it would have been written between 54 and 55 CE, under the Emperor Nero.

It is important, however, to take into account that Philippi was a Roman colony with Roman war veterans who guaranteed the interests of the emperor in the region. Philippi was strategically situated because it was on the Via Egnatia, it was not far from the sea, and there were gold and silver mines nearby. There were inhabitants who were Roman citizens but, according to Peter Oakes,⁶¹ the majority of the residents were Greek, along with some native Thracians. The Romans owned the land, occupied official positions, were the principal employers of the farmers, and "monopolized wealth and high status."⁶² The Romans were also the major slave owners. The Roman war veterans arrived in Philippi in several waves over the years and were given land as payment for their military service in the imperial army.⁶³

Women Recipients of Letters Written in Prison

Why women? According to Acts 16:11-40, after passing through Neapolis, Paul and Silas arrived at Philippi from Troas, and on the Sabbath they were sent outside the city to the river, either the Gangites or Angites, to a "place of prayer" (προσευχή). There they found some women and began speaking with them. In this group they met Lydia, an outstanding woman leader from Thyatira and a worshiper of God. She was a small merchant who sold purple cloth and had a house that she could offer as hospitality for them. She accepted the message of the Gospel presented by Paul and Silas and was baptized together with her household, all of whom were collaborators in her trade. Lydia was probably a widow, which put her in charge of her own household so it was she, not a man, who invited Paul and Silas to her home (16:15). I believe that, though men, including Epaphroditus, were also present in the community at Philippi, the majority of members were women. Consequently I use feminine language when addressing the recipients of the letter in order to highlight the presence of women.

60. Standhartinger, "Aus der Welt," 150.

61. Oakes, *Philippians*, 54.

62. *Ibid.*, 74.

63. Portefaix, *Sisters Rejoice*, 60.

We must take very seriously the risks for recipients of a letter written from prison when they live in a Roman colony containing the emperor's ex-military men. This is pertinent. The recipients risk being considered accomplices of the friend in prison, seen as an enemy of Roman society and the state. The letter's recipients were not the only ones at risk; anyone who brought help or visited the prisoners could also be in danger. Timothy and Epaphroditus were in this delicate position and had to take precautions when visiting Paul in prison. Accounting for the risk that the recipients ran reveals that a name is missing from the letter to the Philippians. When Paul urges Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind (Phil 4:2-3), he asks an unnamed person to help the two women to be of one accord. Paul calls this person "my loyal companion," literally, "genuine companion of the yoke" (γνήσιε σύζυγε), which is grammatically masculine in Greek. This person was probably a woman, Lydia, as I show in the analysis of these verses below. The use of a masculine expression could be Paul's strategy to protect Lydia from the watchful Roman soldiers.

Prison as a Theological Location: Grace and Praxis

In his letters, Paul elaborated on his theological thought from a specific context. This theological location in Philippians is prison. The same is true for other people imprisoned for the sake of the Gospel. Frei Betto confirms this by stating that incarceration leads to "a deep theological experience."⁶⁴ In Paul's letters from prison, we can observe a dialectic between grace and praxis (practice) rather than a contradiction. For Paul, like any Jew, everything depends on the Divine, but this dependency does not prevent struggle in the movement for defense of the Gospel; all that happens is the will of the Divine. In Paul's particular situation in prison, his faith grows even stronger, and his dependence on the Divine becomes absolute because to be in chains and to feel impotent demands his dependence on God.

Paul's relationship with his companions in the movement in Philippi is also shaped by dependence on the Divine, as indicated by the presence of the Divine throughout the letter. For example, the companions in Philippi are excellent collaborators in spreading and defending the Gospel, but it is the Divine who began and will complete this work through them (Phil 1:6). They must continue to do their work so that all might be saved, but it is the Divine who is "enabling them to will and to work for his good

64. Frei Betto, *Cartas*, 29.

pleasure" (2:12-13). For the cause of the Gospel, the people risk their lives, just as Epaphroditus did because of his solidarity with Paul (2:30).

Furthermore, the prisoner has encountered Christ because he was encountered by Christ (3:9). Here Paul challenges those who place their confidence in their society's laws or in their cultural identity, considering themselves superior to others. To the prisoner, social and cultural status is not important; he has left it all behind (3:5-7). He has chosen another way to serve and live, where the Crucified-Resurrected One reigns. This choice is very different from the expectations of the Roman Empire, particularly that of honoring the emperor's domination over all his subjects (vassals), both in Rome and throughout the entire empire. For Paul, the government of the Resurrected One is founded on the justice of grace and care where mercy is a priority of the Divine.

So it is that the prisoner has chosen to orient his life, practices, and attitudes to an absolute dependence on grace in the midst of hostility and death. The example of the Messiah's life as a leader of the movement as seen in the christological hymn in Phil 2:6-11 gives Paul the strength to continue living under prison conditions. According to the hymn, Jesus experienced all the worst things that a human being could suffer: he became a slave (servant); he humbled himself; and he was condemned to a death on a cross, which was the worst and most humiliating death under Roman law. But the justice of the Divine, which was different from Roman law, vindicated Jesus, exalted him, and made him the Lord of the universe, and with this abolished the authority of all oppressive powers in the world. Narratives of the Divine's solidarity with human life gave meaning to Paul's existence in prison. The power that resurrected the Crucified One gave Paul the strength to continue living because he too expects to be resurrected from the dead (3:11). Paul is able to resist despair in prison because of this promise. If he sees the death of the Crucified One in his own chained body, it is not because he is promoting a sacrificial theology. Rather, his maltreated body indirectly denounces those who sacrifice human beings and gives meaning to suffering that looks forward to the experience of resurrection.

Letters from Prison as a Literary Genre

There is no lack of letters from prison during the twentieth century, letters written by political prisoners such as Rosa Luxemburg, Lolita Lebrón, Nelson Mandela, Frei Betto, Karl Gaspar, and Ingrid Betancourt. There are also documents written by people like Ety Hillesum, Carmiña Navia, and Neila Serrano who experienced other kinds of captivity.

Common elements repeated in the writings of these people and in other prison literature, such as poems or testimonies, suggest that “letters from prison” are a literary genre. According to the typography of Roman epistolary writing, the Letter to the Philippians has been classified as a “Letter of Friendship,”⁶⁵ a “Family Letter,”⁶⁶ or “A Christian Hortatory Letter of Friendship.”⁶⁷ These classifications are inadequate, however, because they fail to take into account the prison context in which Philippians was written and the experience of the prisoner. Considering “letters from prison” a genre written by persons imprisoned for their ideas reveals not only the prisoners’ suffering but also how their beliefs are shaped by being punished for thinking that challenges the *status quo*.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Nelson Mandela, Karl Gaspar, Frei Betto, Etty Hillesum, Neila Serrano, and Carmiña Navia speak from great interior strength; they relativize material things as they live under the uncertainty about their trial and sentence. Constantly concerned for those outside, they theologize from their experience of being deprived of freedom; they give advice to their friends, contemplate their possible end, and are willing to die for their ideals. Truly, to write from prison generates a particular type of literature. With respect to the literary production of prisoners under the Uruguayan dictatorship (1973–1985), Uruguayan writer Alfred Alzugarat observes,

At first thought, nothing seems as fragile as a sheet of paper. Nevertheless, nothing is more durable. When writings are an act of resistance, words remain beyond the reach of executioners. If the prisons of the dictatorship were one of the most emblematic examples of the worst times in this country, we can also affirm that human dignity liberated a hard battle that, among its multiple consequences, left artistic and literary works that are invaluable. In the closed universe of prison, writing had to be reinvented. It was born between sessions of torture with a vocation to bear testimony, growing in the solitude of the cell where there were only memories, sheets of medical instructions, and leaves to smoke. The collective, daily writing of letters, and the immense

65. Loveday Alexander, “Hellenistic Letter-Forms and the Structure of Philippians,” *JSNT* 37 (1989): 87–101.

66. Ben Witherington III, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 17–21.

67. Gordon D. Fee, *Comentario de la Epístola a los Filipenses*, Colección teológica contemporánea, trans. Dora González and Ismael López (Barcelona: CLIE, 2004), 34–48.

quantity of reading that could devour a prisoner, decisively influenced the development of this type of literature.⁶⁸

Throughout this commentary, I present voices of contemporary prisoners that help to better articulate the prison setting of Philippians.

Voices of Contemporary Christian Prisoners

In this section I present the voices of three ex-prisoners who wrote exclusively for this commentary at my request. They are Frei Betto, Neila Serrano Barragán, and Carmiña Navia Velasco, all friends of mine who have had the experience of being in prison. They all responded to my questions about how they understand the letter to the Philippians from their own experience as people who have been deprived of their freedom. These three people are Christians, but they also represent different ideological frameworks: Frei Betto comes from the Catholic liberation theology perspective; Serrano is evangelical Protestant; and Navia is Catholic and feminist. It is easy to find in their writings the characteristic features of all prisoners incarcerated for political reasons or because of injustice. I consider these people and the prison writers who appear later in my commentary, such as ETTY HILLESUM, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Nelson Mandela, to be collaborators in the development in this discussion.

Carlos Alberto Libanio Cristo, known as Frei Betto, is a member of the Dominican Order. He is a liberation theologian and an author of countless books of different genres.⁶⁹ He is still an activist for human rights. When he was a student of theology he was imprisoned in Porto Alegre, Brazil, on November 9, 1969, because of his participation in the resistance movement against the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964–1985). He was released four years later, in 1973. He spent two years in one prison housing other political prisoners and two years in a second prison with a mixed prisoner population. From prison, Frei Betto wrote many

68. Alfredo Alzugarat, *Trincheras de papel: dictadura y literatura carcelaria en Uruguay* (Montevideo: Trilce, 2007), back cover.

69. Some of them, in addition to *Cartas da Prisão*, are *Oração na ação* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1977); *O fermento na massa* (Petropolis: Vozes, 1981); *Batismo de Sangue, Os dominicanos e a morte de Carlos Marighella* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1985); *Fome de pão e de beleza* (São Paulo: Siciliano, 1990); *A obra do Artista. Uma visão holística do Universo* (São Paulo: Ática, 1995); *Entre todos os homens* (São Paulo: Ática, 1997); *Gosto de uva* (Rio de Janeiro: Garamond, 2003); *Oito vias para ser feliz. Introdução as bem-aventuranças do Evangelho* (São Paulo: Planeta, 2014).

letters, which were originally published in two books. The letters were written with passion, compassion, and tenderness. Through them, we see clearly the experience of prisoners facing physical, psychological, and legal issues. For Frei Betto, jail was his theological location, the place where his commitment to the Jesus of the gospels was reaffirmed. He assumed the suffering of Jesus on the cross just as Paul did. The reason for Frei Betto's arrest was for supporting the cause of the kingdom of God as expressed in the option for the poor and persecuted, which was contrary to the cause supported by the military dictatorship in Brazil.

Frei Betto wrote letters to his parents, siblings, friends, and many lay and religious women. He often speaks about women, but in a letter he wrote to Marlene on June 20, 1971, he emphasizes his conversion to the service of others and denounces how society has made women into objects to serve men.⁷⁰ He cared deeply about the recipients of his letters and also for the inmates with whom he lived.

Along with others imprisoned for political reasons, while in prison Frei Betto devoted himself to Scripture reading, prayer, and, above all, helping the other prisoners, not only spiritually, but also by giving classes in theater and teaching secondary school subjects such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, and Portuguese. He also went on a hunger strike to protest prisoner living conditions. Unlike Paul, who had only the solidarity of the community of Philippi, thousands of people around the world were in solidarity with Frei Betto. The solidarity with those outside helped him to keep up his spirits despite the prison conditions.

In one of his letters to his parents on December 25, 1969, Frei Betto wrote,

Prison is the place of criminals, thieves, vagabonds and bandits. For us it is an honor, glory and joy to live part of our lives in this manger. But not everyone will understand that, just as not many understood the mystery of the carpenter's son who suffered between thieves. You can only understand this because of a deep ideal or the light of faith. Those who imprisoned us are unable to understand why we remain strong, cheerful and willing. We never give them the pleasure of seeing us disturbed and saddened.⁷¹

But at other times the tone of his letters is grim, as when he wrote to his friend Maria Christina. In the following paragraph, this grimness is evident if one reads between the lines when he surrounds the phrase

70. Frei Betto, *Cartas*, 107–10.

71. *Ibid.*, 14.

“attempted suicide” with quotation marks and ends the sentence with a suggestive ellipse after DOI-CODI.⁷²

Christina,

Today is Sunday, rainy and sad. Fifty prisoners try to arrange themselves in one cell. Many sleep on the floor on mattresses; there is no space for more beds. The silence reflects the humid climate of this grey day. It is not a silence of calm, inner peace. You feel suffocated. So many together but few speak. Perhaps some would like to shout out loud. But they keep that desire to themselves. Why is that? I do not know, nobody knows. In prison one always waits. It's like a platform in a train station without rails. . . . Today we learned that Friar Tito de Alencar Lima “attempted suicide” in DOI-CODI. . . . Why are we silent? Tomorrow the same thing can happen to any of us. We have no protection or guarantee. Just like the Jews and Communists condemned by the Nazis. Times change, evil endures, oppression gets new names and takes on new forms. Our silence is the same as Mary in front of her Son.⁷³

Frei Betto says that his experience of prison marked him for life. When asked how he understands Philippians from his experience as a political prisoner, Frei Betto sent me the “Letter from Frei Betto” included here.

Letter from Frei Betto

São Paulo, 09 July 2012

Dear Elsa,

I reread the Letter to the Philippians. I am sending you the following observation, which I hope will be useful to you.

1. The “psychology” of the sender’s letter is typical of someone who is incarcerated. The experience of imprisonment is one of total nakedness. The prisoner has no defense against his jailers. He or she is totally

vulnerable. It all depends on them. So you dialogue with death. Life is limited, because the body is imprisoned, even while the mind is free. The whole letter is a tension between the possibility of death and the care for the community of Philippi. At the time, the letter would have been the great legacy that Paul could leave. In it he is attempting to organize things (4:2) so that everything will be all right.

72. Detachment of Operations and Information–Internal Defense Operations Center.

73. Frei Betto, *Cartas*, 23.

2. Philippians is almost a letter-testament (1:23). Paul, the cornerstone of the Philippian community, wants to perpetuate himself through them (1:6, 9-11).
3. The imprisonment of a fighter paradoxically strengthens his companions' will to fight (1:14, 28). It is as if he wins some kind of crown of martyrdom (2:17). The prisoner was officially recognized as an enemy and his cause was something worth fighting for. This magnifies him (1:21). Prison either destroys or uplifts people. In Paul's case, he is strengthened.
4. Paul is a competitor. He wants the best and does not support anyone who wants to plant or harvest what he has sown (1:17-19).
5. This is a letter of thanks (4:10, 16), and thanks from one who faces the immediate possibility of death.

Neila Serrano de Barragán is from Colombia, a doctor of internal and chemical-pharmaceutical medicine from the National University. She holds a PhD in pharmacology from the University of Sorbonne in Paris. She also studied rheumatology and allergies at Harvard University. She is currently a professor at the National University in Bogota and has her own doctor's office for her patients. She comes from a traditional evangelical perspective, and her interest now is to evangelize intellectuals and scientists, showing in her lectures that science and the Bible are compatible. Neila Serrano was jailed from August 4, 1993, until January 31, 1995, in the women's prison El Buen Pastor (The Good Shepherd) in Bogotá. She was sentenced to forty-six months in prison for paying a ransom to free her husband, a successful businessman from an upper-class background who had been kidnapped by the M19 guerrillas (now demobilized). The law against paying ransom to guerillas was repealed in 1994, a year and a half after Serrano was imprisoned. After the guerrillas kidnapped her husband, Neila decided to sell all their belongings to save him. She preferred to go to jail rather than let her husband die in the jungle. Serrano says that the experience of prison changed her life for good.

Those who know Neila know little of her experience in jail because she hardly ever talks about it. However, she agreed to an interview with me in which she shared her impressions of the Letter to the Philippians based on her experience as a prisoner. She recounts her experience both as a Christian and as a woman in the women's prison and compares it with Paul's experience. We recorded the interview in September 2013.

*Interview with
Neila Serrano de Barragán*

ELSA: Neila, What is your impression of the Letter to the Philippians from your perspective as a prisoner?

NEILA: The Letter to the Philippians is a letter filled with joy, where Paul, despite being in prison, gives thanks to God because he has a reason to be proud to be a prisoner. My case in prison was different from other women who were imprisoned unjustly. What I did wrong was to pay a ransom to free my husband, which was illegal. I did it consciously because I wanted to save my husband's life, and he is alive! In that moment, I said it was thanks to me, but no, it was thanks to God. He is alive and still with us, and if the price for him to be alive was for me to go to jail, then blessed be jail. When something justifies an act, it gives motivation and makes it worth paying the price. Paul paid a price for preaching the gospel of the Lord. Therefore, he was proud of being a prisoner, and because of this he said, I am a slave of the Lord. He had a reason to be proud of the chains. I also had a reason to be proud of my captivity.

But the uncertainty that one experiences is great. How do you get a law repealed for just one person? It is very easy to be sent to prison, but getting out is very difficult even if you are innocent and have all the evidence in your favor. Once you are in jail, it is very difficult for the law to recognize that you are

innocent. Then the uncertainty is great because you never know how long you will have to wait. Initially I was sentenced to forty-six months, and forty-six months is almost four years. It is a very long time. They sentenced me without the possibility of a reduction of the sentence. I was a physician. Some of my patients were senators who began the work to free me because I was the first and only person imprisoned for paying a ransom to the guerrillas. But like most things, my case took a year for the senate to study and prove that it was not a crime to pay kidnappers, and then for the president to sign the decree and finally enforce it. I spent more than a year in jail constantly wondering if I would have to stay there for the full four years.

But what I saw in my companions' cases is that having money is the most important thing. Lawyers need to be paid and discovering the truth must be paid for with money. I saw this in the case of two girls who, while they were out on leave from prison, committed suicide because uncertainty can lead one to see that the system has no value, that life has no value, and that we are instruments the system uses to show the strength of those in power. But the person who has a cause feels very differently, even if the cause does not change anything, like in Mandela's case. He knew he was fighting for people's rights and that being jailed was worth it, and that was his incentive. But if

Mandela had been imprisoned for being responsible for a massacre [which he was accused of, but did not commit], his feeling would have been different.

Paul was in prison because he had a philosophy. He said: I am imprisoned for preaching, and that is worthwhile, and it does not matter if I give my life for it. That is the incentive there. So any inmates who are unjustly arrested have to find what motivates them. If the unjust arrest is not a punitive act for a crime, one has to show that one did not commit the violation, which is very difficult. But if the unjust arrest is a punitive act for a crime, then they can say, if you leave, you will commit the crime again. Unjust arrest does not happen only with the people who adopt a cause, but with other common criminals. I will give an example.

One of my friends, a lady sixty-four years of age who had been living happily in prison for sixteen years. She said she was blessed to be in prison because if she got out she would kill her husband again. Her husband had raped three of his daughters. She reported him repeatedly, but she was never believed because no one believes a woman. When she saw that the law did not help, she took the law into her own hands and killed him. She was imprisoned for defending her three daughters who came to visit her out of infinite love Sunday after Sunday.

She said, "It does not matter that I am here for twenty years. I do not care if it was thirty or forty

years," because she feels justified by what she did. She said that what she did was for the best.

She also said, "The law did not help me, and I could not let my husband continue raping my daughters, and he did it in front of me, and I had not the courage to do anything until I got the chance. I got a gun. I threatened him and killed him. I called the police immediately and told them I killed my husband. I explained why, and yet that did not help my defense at all."

Then I noticed that because she had a motivation it made her feel happy to be in jail. She did not spend time worrying that it was undignified for her to be in prison. She said, "I will leave with my head held high; my daughters are fine now." Because what one worries about are those who are outside of the prison.

I, Neila, did not worry about myself because I was all right in jail. I was worried for my husband and my children. After the abduction, my husband had no financial resources. I had always practiced medicine and also taught at the university. With the check I received from the university we helped poor people. Well, that happened to be our way of life. To pay the ransom for my husband, I had to sell everything we had. When my husband was released he was physically and psychologically damaged. He had worked in foreign trade, but now we had no money to buy or export goods. There was no income for the home. I was fine

in jail because I had something to eat, but they had nothing to eat. . . . I had the opportunity to refuse food or start seeing food as something of a luxury. I decided to see it as something delicious, but my children and my husband were hungry.

The brothers and sisters of the church and my patients started to do things like leave a basket of groceries at the door. They would ring the bell; and one of my three children would go to the door, but no one would be there. Or they would leave an envelope with money. They broke the record on prison visits. Like Paul, they visited me frequently. Saturday was visitation for the men, and women came on Sunday. There was no visitation midweek. I told visitors not to bring me anything but to bring me the money they would have spent. With the money they brought to the jail I would maintain my husband and children as much as I was able. We went from owning our home to paying rent. Sometimes our electricity or water services were cut because my family did not have enough money to pay the bills.

My concern was for those outside because inside I did not need anything. I had my motivation. Inside prison, a plastic cup had a huge value because glass was not allowed. I had to keep that plastic cup so that it could be used many times. Small things had a great value. The value is the value of small things in daily life. There was nothing of value in my cell. I

decorated it so it was nice, and it was the place where we gathered to pray.

ELSA: How did you use your time in prison?

NEILA: My professional life before was very active, and I thought, Lord, suddenly you brought me here to rest from so much activity! But it turns out that when I was in jail, I was given two jobs. Everyone works there. One of the jobs I had was to be in charge of the amenities. At 5:00 a.m. I opened the place where the cleaning equipment was kept and gave it to the girls who were in charge of cleaning. I had to supervise their work. So I did ministry with these girls. I taught them that there was nothing more beautiful than cleaning because this was our home. This gave meaning to their life.

All the inmates were divided into different workshops. There were eight workshops with different things to do. The colonel of the jail asked me to motivate the girls in each workshop. I had to go from workshop to workshop for a minimum of thirty minutes each day, bringing an encouraging word. The prisoners in the workshops were making ponchos [warm stoles], cases for needles and thread that were put in hotels, and many other things. They received only 20,000 pesos per month for this work [about 10 US dollars]. Work was compulsory. Remission of time served was given for work based on the number of hours worked. So when they asked me

to do the talk, I had to get up at 2:00 a.m. to do my meditation and prepare the talk that I would give in the workshops. I had to bring the word of God to six or eight workshops, but I had to return very quickly by 12:30, as I had to go to the dungeon and bring that same word to the girls who were punished in the dungeon. The dungeon was terrible. That was the work I did every day. But after a month in prison, the warden, who was listening to the Word, found that it was also important for the guards. So every day at 8:00 a.m., I gave a prayer workshop to the guards and prison staff. This was my job.

Dinner was at 6:00 p.m. At dinner we went with a plastic jar, and they put the food in that, and then we went to eat in our rooms. At noon we ate in the dining room and at night in our room. Then at 6:15 p.m. the gate was closed; it was a terrible, frightening sound. That is a sound I have never forgotten to this day. It is the sound you hear in the movies when the bars of a jail close. It is a sound that shook me and reinforced my loneliness.

Sometimes, after closing the cell doors at 6:15 to 6:30 p.m., a guard would come and take me out of my room to go through the corridors asking if anyone needed medicine. They let me have a small purse with medication for a headache, but most people really just wanted to talk. I remember going through those silent corridors where the majority of people were crying.

There were those who were guilty and those who were not guilty. All felt the loneliness of not being able to be with their children. We were women, most of us with children. It was very hard to see and to hear them mourn as I did my rounds.

The doors are roughly a meter and half thick, and the rest was bars. We were allowed to put up a curtain to keep out the cold wind, as there were bars but there was no glass. Some put up a curtain; others put a blanket to cover the gaps. When I reached the door, I use to ask them what is wrong. They would begin to cry and talk to me. I would listen to them and encourage them. I would then go to my cell around 10:00 or 11:00 at night, and then it would hit me. All day my mission was to smile, lift people's spirits, but I collapsed several times. Once when I broke down and collapsed, one of the guards called the colonel—he was the director—who came and hit me. Scolding me, he said, "You are here to help your companions. You cannot collapse. It is forbidden." Then at times I saw that these people were asking more of me than I could give because the guards, the colonel, and my companions did not take into account that I would get upset or collapse.

I guess that was the same with Paul. Paul spoke of the strength of the Lord, but Paul had to have moments when he felt loneliness and he had to ask, "Is it worth it?" Or "I could die and what if Jesus did not exist?" However

great your faith, there are times when you wonder if there really is a God and ask why am I here suffering this? This happened to me, and I said, why Lord? What did I do? There are moments of confrontation, however great our faith. We fall, and this we have all experienced. I used to see this in the lady who killed her husband. A couple of times I saw her crying and asking herself, "Was it worth it? Was it right?" She replied, "Yes, I did well," and survived. There is a duality in people.

In order to help the others, I used the following strategy. I got them to write on a piece of paper, "These are the reasons I have to live." I think Paul did the same to survive because it is not only in the body that we feel pain. The worst pain you can feel is the pain of absence, such as the absence of my children and husband who are far away. I am wondering how they are doing and what is happening with them. [. . .]

I imagine Paul was thinking about the Lord Jesus: "Did I really see you? Did I actually hear your voice or imagine I heard it? Is this really valuable? Actually, you are my God, not the emperor. Truly all the great things that I, Paul, experienced were worth losing in order to gain something uncertain."

Eternal life is an uncertainty that we, when we are in love with the Lord, have seen in the lives of great people who have died. At the moment they faced death, they wondered whether they had done the correct thing. So that's what I see, in relation to

Paul, as it relates to what I saw among those who are unjustly imprisoned and those who had a motive for being there, which is different from the inmate who had no choice.

ELSA: What do you think about the recipients of the Letter to the Philippians?

NEILA: When one is sent to prison, whether it is for a crime or unjustly, that person is said to be of no value to society. Sometimes people say, "So many people have died in jail," or, "They are prisoners, not human beings." But in our system, as in Paul's day, family and friends are also discriminated against. When they are in line to visit the prisoners, they are treated like prisoners. It is like telling them: you are as guilty as the one inside; you are worthless too. This has an effect on family and friends.

At the time when I was in prison, women who visited the prison were given a vaginal examination to look for drugs. This practice was later discontinued. My daughter, who was a child, had to be subjected to that, and it really hurt me. I also had friends from church who came to see me crying because of the way they were searched. Yet in spite of that they continued to visit, and it was terrible. So when one is in prison, one needs to support those on the outside so that they have the courage to continue visiting and that they do not stop.

Euodia and Syntyche may have had their faith weakened. If a man like Paul was a prisoner,

they might have been thinking at any time, "I too could be put in prison. What about my husband? What about my children?" We do not know the kind of pressure the family members were under. They could have been told, "Stop that. Do not keep preaching. You are going to be put in prison. Look at Paul. Look at where they have put your leader." So those who are inside do not have anything to lose because they have lost everything and they are miserable. They have nothing else to lose. Then they have to look at how to support those outside, and I saw this in all of the prisoners. Whether they were guilty or not, they were always thinking about their family. In the conversations during the visit on Sundays, I observed that the strongest ones were the prisoners because they were the ones who gave encouragement to visitors, saying, "I'm good here, but you can do this and that." But then after the visitors went, all of us prisoners fell apart because, when visitors came, we went around with a smile, but when we saw the children and the family leave crying, it was terrible.

Paul had to encourage his disciples and tell them to enjoy themselves. He did not know if Syntyche, Euodia, Lydia, or some of the men would at any time also become prisoners. He enjoyed the strength they were

giving him, but he had to have many moments of kneeling and crying and asking God, the Lord Jesus Christ, to give him strength. [. . .] To give strength to those on the outside is natural when in that situation.

ELSA: How was censorship in prison?

NEILA: All the letters that that one writes in prison are read. You know that the letters you send are going to be read by the guard assigned for that. Any letter that I sent could have three outcomes. First, it could be vetoed and not sent. Or it could be used to implicate others. And finally, it could reach its destination. One learns as a prisoner to write in a special coded language to say things that the recipients can understand but that the censor cannot. Then when you want to say, for example, I have money saved in a vase, you would say instead, remember that vase and have a look at it. What you are doing is encouraging them to go to that place, but you do not say what you have there. I wrote letters, but what you most want as a prisoner is to receive a letter, and also to express what you feel. You always put a positive spin on things. You have to send those letters unsealed so they can be read. I used codes. In the end, one reads the Philippians letter differently when one takes into account that Paul wrote it when he was in prison.

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In 1994 Carmiña Navia was kidnapped by the guerrilla ELN, Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army), which is still active in Colombia. Although Carmiña Navia lived with her Xaverian sisters in a poor neighborhood of Cali, she was kidnapped by guerrillas because her family was considered to be wealthy. Carmiña Navia's kidnapping was brief. She was held as a hostage in the jungle for twelve days with no communication from anyone. However, this experience marked her for life.

At my request, on March 30, 2014, Carmiña Navia sent me her thoughts on the letter to the Philippians, read in light of her brief kidnapping. She titled it "United in a Common Dream." Although she insists there is a difference between prisoners and hostages, many dimensions of her experience as hostage are similar to that of a prisoner.

***United in a Common Dream:
Reflections on Paul's Letter
to the Women of the Church
at Philippi***

It is very important to place ourselves in Paul's context: He was a political prisoner. From this perspective, the letter will acquire its full meaning. Losing your freedom, being dependent on others who threaten to

take your life, is an experience that colors your actions, your feelings, your vision of the future.

Twenty years ago, I was in a situation where I lost my freedom. In 1994 I was kidnapped by the leader of the ELN, Ejército de Liberación Nacional, José María Becerra. It was a relatively short

74. Among her books: *Judit, Relato feminista en la Biblia* (Bogotá: Indoamerican Press Service, 1988); *La mujer en la biblia. Oposición y liberación* (Bogotá: Indoamerican Press Service, 1991); *La mujer protagonista en la narrativa colombiana* (Bogotá: El Búho, 1992); *El Dios que nos revelan las mujeres* (Bogotá: RELAT, 1998); *Jesús de Nazaret, miradas femeninas* (Quito: Tierra Nueva, 2002); *Guerra y paz en Colombia, las mujeres escriben* (La Habana: Award of Casa de las Américas, 2004).

experience—twelve days—but it has left me with some bad memories. So from this, I can identify with Paul throughout his letter. Depending on others and their weapons and power generates fear, anguish, permanent questions, and a deep uncertainty because of not knowing one's fate. Clearly, if these feelings inhabit our body, they strengthen the bond between ourselves and the people we have momentarily lost but with whom we still interact, strengthening the ties with those we love . . . and more so if these people follow our fate and are committed to us, such as the community of the Philippians to whom Paul writes.

I think there is a profound difference between the experience of being in prison and a kidnapping. Paul could communicate from prison, receive the gestures of solidarity from his friends, write to them and receive their news. . . . A person who is kidnapped has no access to any communication with their own who are on the other side. This is an insurmountable difference between prisoners and those who are kidnapped. It creates much more anguish and pain.

But then and ever since the time of my return, I have been marked by the attitude of those close to me. Of course, if it was possible, I would have written to them. When I returned I knew that they had tried everything possible, especially the leaders

of my congregation. They condemned my disappearance and sent all kinds of messages of solidarity and support. There was definitely a similarity with the situation of the Apostle of Tarsus: the distance and especially the fact that your life is in the hands of others reinforces your sense of belonging to a family, a community, a project. So it is easy to feel in tune with what is expressed in 1:27-30: "You stand firm in one spirit, according to the Gospel, in tune with Jesus Christ."

Equally, the presence of God is the presence that motivates and drives your days. It is that presence that accompanies your nights. . . . It increases in the midst of loneliness, anguish, and pain. Almost all testimonies of those kidnapped appear to be conscious of it. On both sides, from both sides without touching each other's paths they come together; just as between Paul and the Philippians communion is woven and strengthened. . . . Community is palpable. This thought can come in the form of a letter, from other kinds of expressions of love, from the practice of solidarity in struggle and resistance, or in the form of protest and complaint.

In the darkness of the night that surrounds us, growing inside is the Divine Light that sustains our being and gives strength to our days. Surrounded by forces of nature of such intensity in the

Pacific Coast jungle where I was held, Wisdom and Christ became incarnate in the torrent, presenting a new face to me and etching it indelibly on my new life coming out of this experience.

In his letter to the Philippian community, Paul speaks especially to the women leaders. . . . My experience also is loosely connected with various

large groups led by women who showed their strength in the Valle del Cauca in the joyous commitment to the cause of the Gospel.

They are all, equally, situations where the immense power of the Mystery that dwells in the hearts and in history leads us to love, truth, and justice.

Carmita Navia Velasco
Cali, March 2014

Each one of these three captive voices presents a different context in time, space, and grounds for the arrest or kidnapping, but we see that they share similar experiences, such as uncertainty, concern for their loved ones that are outside (family, coworkers, or friends), struggles with time management, and feeling an increase in their inner strength due to their faith in Christ as well as in what they do. They also express a very particular joy that helps them to endure their vulnerability. We find similar experiences for Paul in his letter to the Philippians. In my analysis, I allude to the experiences of the three voices heard here and also to other voices of contemporary prisoners.

It is worth clarifying here that to read the letter to the Philippians from the perspective of a prisoner is only one of many entrances that the text allows us to use. This is why my analysis of the letter is not impartial. On the contrary, in my discussion of each section of the text, readers can see a specific perspective: a political, ideological, and feminist approach.

Philippians 1:1-26

Greetings, Prayers, and Prison

The Greeting (1:1-2)

In a filthy and foul smelling place in a Roman *Praetorium*, Paul begins to dictate his letter to the Philippians, a group of participants in the movement of the Resurrected One, the majority of whom are women. His condition is terrible because he is chained to one or two soldiers as stipulated by military custody rules. Fortunately he has a permanent visitor, Timothy, and a temporary visitor, Epaphroditus (2:25), who was sent by the recipients of this letter. Paul includes Timothy as a sender of the letter. This is not unusual; he often includes others when sending his letters, especially Timothy (see 2 Cor 1:1; Phlm 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1). It is quite possible that Timothy is the one writing the letter as Paul dictates it. With a bribe to the soldier (or soldiers) he is chained to, Paul could have written with his own hand, but he dislikes bribing corrupt authorities (Acts 24:26). Certainly Timothy is not simply a scribe; even though the rest of the letter is written in first-person singular, Paul wants to make the coauthor official. As is common in these cases, Timothy would be conversing with Paul about the things he is writing, taking part in the content and form by clarifying points or expressing them in a better manner. Timothy is well known by the recipients because he has visited them with Paul several times, and, more important, they trust him (Phil

Philippians 1:1-2

¹Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ
Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who
are in Philippi, with the bishops and
deacons:

²Grace to you and peace from God
our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

2:22). In times of insecurity and intimidation by the Roman authorities, trust is vital (1:28). Timothy will soon return to visit the Philippians, maybe after Paul's defense before the tribunal (2:23).

Paul and Timothy call themselves "slaves" (δοῦλοι) of Christ Jesus. This title is very suggestive in a "kyriarchal"¹ society based on slave labor because women and men slaves were considered to be property of their owners and not actual persons. It is suggestive, above all, for the context of Philippi, a Roman colony containing many free inhabitants who enjoy the prestige of Roman citizenship. An intratextual examination reveals that the letter has more coherence if the term δοῦλοι is read literally as "slave" rather than as "servant of God," the honorific title that was assigned to the prophets. The reason is that the Divine took the form of a slave (Phil 2:7) in solidarity with humanity, especially with those who suffered the most discrimination. Paul and Timothy take on this image not to bow their head before the empire but to reject the lordship of the emperor and to affirm the sovereignty of the Divine, who is in solidarity with all slaves. In this letter, Paul totally relativizes his privileges, both his Jewish culture (3:4-7) and the Graeco-Roman culture of his Diasporic upbringing. To be in prison and to be a slave represents a double humiliation in the opinion of free persons. Nevertheless, it seems that for Paul it is a reason to be proud of his solidarity with the Divine.

It is significant that Paul the prisoner presents himself here as a slave and not as an apostle like he did in other letters (Gal 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Rom 1:1). This indicates that his discourse should not be read as a political or social hierarchy or a religious one but should be read as an indication that his authority comes from his vulnerability: a prisoner

1. A term that goes beyond patriarchy, including all systems of oppression and discrimination. It was coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). See p. 1 n. 1.

who voluntarily takes on the title of slave. Paul's discourse points to two conditions: one is political (the prison) and the other is social (slavery). The absence of the title "apostle" implies the absence of religious hierarchy, indicating in this letter that authority comes from below. However, if these conditions are read hierarchically from the perspective of feminism and gender, it is true that androcentrism and patriarchy are not overcome. Patriarchy permeates all social levels and all political and religious positions. Paul, the leader of the movement of the Resurrected One, also participates in the ideology of patriarchy, as I shall show in some parts of his discourse.

Paul calls recipients of the letter "the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi" (Phil 1:1). "Saints in Christ" means that they are people who have rejected the values of Roman society. They have joined the movement of Christ Jesus Resurrected. Though the term "saints" (ἁγίοις) is masculine, it included the women who probably comprised the majority of the Philippian community, including the leaders, as I pointed out in the introduction. Curiously, Paul explicitly says "to all" the saints. To say "the saints" would have been sufficient, but Paul wants to underline "all" of them. It is probable that the reiteration of "all" had to do with explicitly including the women leaders in the opening salutation, as I show below. "Who are" (οὗσιν) is also an ample term: it can refer to any who reside in Philippi even if they come from other cities and are not necessarily citizens of Philippi. Certainly the Christian community included citizens, free residents, slaves, women, and men, but probably fewer Romans than Greeks.²

The community that received the letter also included leaders called supervisors or bishops (ἐπίσκοποι) and deacons or servers (διάκονοι). These terms may allude to specific functions, but this is not clear. In secular writings these are not technical terms but rather refer to those who supervise money and tutors. According to Bonnie Bowman Thurston and Judith M. Ryan, secular use of "supervisor" refers to a commissioner of a new colony. The root of ἐπίσκοπος is "visit," and the term denotes "supervisor" in nonbiblical Greek.³ During Paul's time, ecclesiastical structures were not yet formed in a monarchic manner as happened in the second century and beyond. In the majority of cases, bishops and

2. Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter*, SNTSMS 110 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 61.

3. Bonnie B. Thurston and Judith M. Ryan, *Philippians and Philemon*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, SP 10 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 46.

deacons were simply part of the community and not placed over the community.⁴ Notice the plural of the first term, which means a group of supervisors that could include both women and men to fulfill the tasks. According to Carolyn Osiek, presbyters and bishops were probably synonymous. There were many women presbyters and deacons.⁵ Although they seem to be in high official positions of leadership, in practice they had certain specific tasks. Possibly the bishops took care of and supervised the community in general. The deacons helped with or carried out concrete tasks, including managing the finances.⁶

The masculine gender of the Greek words (ἐπίσκοποι, διάκονοι) does not eliminate the possibility that women could be charged with these tasks. The term διάκονοι indicates a function; it is grammatically masculine because of the androcentric nature of the Greek language. Biblical evidence for the word's inclusive significance is found in Rom 16:1, where the masculine singular διάκονος refers to a woman named Phoebe. In the particular case of Philippians, the arguments that the majority of the deacons (and supervisors) were probably women are convincing. The case of Lydia is not the only one. As the founder of the community in Philippi (Acts 16:13-15, 40), she hosted the communal meetings of the movement of the Resurrected One, and that would involve serving the group in many ways. Euodia and Syntyche, two women mentioned by name, are also recognized as important leaders (4:3). They were co-workers of Paul, who assisted him in the arduous work of spreading the message of Jesus the Resurrected One. The feminist hermeneutical lens magnifies the leadership of the women when they are mentioned by name because this upends common practice in the androcentric language in which the Bible is written.⁷

Paul rarely includes church leaders in his greetings; he has not done so in any other letter. Open letters are usually addressed to the community in general. This fact has implications from various perspectives. First, leadership is seen as a service to the community and not as a hierarchical position because these positions are mentioned only as part of the col-

4. Gordon D. Fee, *Comentario de la Epístola a los Filipenses*, Colección teológica contemporánea, trans. Dora González and Ismael López (Barcelona: CLIE, 2004), 137.

5. Carolyn Osiek, "Philippians," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, Vol. 2, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 43-57.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Ivoni Richter Reimer, "Recordar, transmitir, actuar: Mujeres en los comienzos del cristianismo," *RIBLA* 22 (1966): 43-57.

lective group of recipients, “all the saints who are in Philippi.” Furthermore, they are mentioned only after that main designation simply by means of a prepositional phrase: “with [σύν] the bishops and deacons.”⁸ Second, for some reason Paul wants persons who function as leaders to pay special attention to what he has to say to the group. Third, in his letter Paul goes on to insist on maintaining unity and remaining firm during these times of hostility; consequently it is important that there is harmony between the community and its leaders, as well as within the group of leaders. In his letter he points to certain disagreements (2:14; 4:3) that disrupt the internal unity needed for the whole group to confront hostility from the outside.

The letter’s greeting is also intercultural because, as is commonly known, Paul combines the conventional Greek greeting, “grace,” with the conventional Jewish greeting, “peace.” The Greek salutation, Χαῖρε, which literally means “be joyful,” is changed by giving it a theological turn to “grace” (χάρις). In spite of being a typical Pauline greeting, in this letter εἰρήνη (*shalom*, “peace”) becomes relevant for Philippi because of the community’s need for joy, grace, and peace. They need joy because the community is too anxious about Paul’s situation in prison and the illness of Epaphroditus (Phil 2:16). They need grace from the Divine because women leaders who are concerned for their community and who have worked hard along with Paul in his evangelistic outreach need the confidence and rest that the Divine gives. And they need the social wellness of *shalom*, because they have scarce resources.⁹ Besides all of this, there are both internal (4:3) and external tensions (1:28).

In the attributes Paul gives to the Divine and to Jesus Christ (Phil 1:2), we find patriarchal theological language. The Divine is Father, not Mother, and Jesus is the Lord, not a slave. Nevertheless, we can reread these terms in a political and dialectical manner. Paul presents himself as a slave, and the Divine incarnated takes the form of a slave in order to find strength in the midst of vulnerability. But within the imperial context, this internalized power is not sufficient; power from above is also needed. In this sense we can see the Divine as Father-God; the emperor cannot claim the role of *paterfamilias* to humanity. The same can be said for the title Lord: Jesus is the Lord, not the emperor, even when he is acclaimed as κύριος, “lord.” The unfolding of the identities of the

8. Fee, *Comentario*, 113.

9. Oakes, *Philippians*, 55–76.

Divine as powerful in some cases and weak in others is valid if they are seen as being in solidarity with the oppressed. However, those identities can be dangerous and oppressive if they are applied without taking into account the patriarchal context in which they arise.

Thankfulness and Prayer (1:3-11)

Philippians 1:3-11 is a prayer that expresses thanks to the Divine and remembrance of the Philippian community. The semantic domain of the word *μνεία*, “remembrance” (and *μνημονεύω*, “to remember”), encompasses not only the act of remembering but also the act of mentioning someone in prayer.¹⁰ Prayer is a recurrent personal act for prisoners and a source of energy for survival. The inclusion of a prayer in this particular letter goes beyond the simple formality of many of the Pauline letters. Two moments can be distinguished: thanksgiving for solidarity and prayer for an increase in love, discernment, and the practice of justice.

Thanksgiving for the Solidarity of the Companions in Philippi (1:3-8)

The section on thanksgiving is very emotional and portrays a political prisoner who strongly maintains his ideals. What seems at first to be a common characteristic of the epistles of Paul becomes a strong introduction to the central topics of the letter. While thanksgiving passages commonly contain recurring themes, this time, because of the ambiguous grammatical structure, there are many meanings that require the readers to produce and not simply consume the text’s meaning. As Umberto Eco notes, a text is an open work with multiple entrances.¹¹ Through thanksgiving and prayer, we hear echoes or reminiscences of other parts of the body of the letter. It is not important whether the letter was written in one piece or in three because of this interpretive move from intertextual to intratextual analysis.

Instead of presenting a problem, the ambiguity of the Greek syntax adds to the meaning. In Phil 1:3, Paul gives thanks to the Divine “at every remembrance of you.” The translations are inclined to consider Paul as an active agent, since each time Paul remembers the sisters of Philippi, he gives thanks to the Divine. But it is also possible that Paul gives thanks because his companions in Philippi remember him. The

10. J. P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds, “*μνημονεύω*,” in *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1999).

11. Umberto Eco, *Obra abierta*, trans. Roser Berdague (Barcelona: Ariel, 1979).

Philippians 1:3-8

³I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

grammatical structure allows for both translations. Another fact is that the sisters in Philippi felt Paul was very present to them, so they sent him money so he could survive (4:10-19). It is difficult for a prisoner to hide his happiness at discovering that someone remembers him and knows he lives in very unfavorable conditions. This joy appears in all contemporary prison letters.

In Phil 1:7-8, close friendship is even more explicitly addressed, though different terminology is used. Again the ambiguity of the grammatical structure represents both parties as agents. Who keeps whom in their heart? The phrase to "hold me in your heart" (1:7) could mean "I think about you Philippians all the time" or "we Philippians think about you, Paul, all the time." The translations and the commentaries are divided; some suggest that Paul is doing the holding and others that the Philippi community is doing it. I suggest, however, that the ambiguity indicates that the relationship is one of mutual friendship, independent of gender, whether read from one side or the other. This is the game that texts play with their readers.

In Phil 1:8, it is clear that Paul is the agent of deep love, saying literally that he is "craving in the gut." In the Hellenistic period, the Greek term for "gut" (*σπλάγχνον*) indicated the place where people soften and also where discouragement happened. The "gut" is also the privileged place for maternal love and for feelings in general.¹² From a biblical anthropological perspective, feelings that are in the "gut" are also in the uterus. In this way, Paul is speaking as a woman, a mother, and a friend who cares for his loved ones and is concerned about them. But again, the text surprises us with the genitive because it speaks about the "gut" of Jesus

12. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Diccionario Exegético del Nuevo Testamento, Vol II*, trans. Constantino Ruiz-Garrido (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1996), 1471.

Christ. Love, then, gets some embodiment. It is the “gut” of Jesus Christ that Paul incarnates, together with his longing to be in communion with (συγκοινωνός) his sisters from Philippi. In this passage, Paul is pointing out that it was Jesus, the Christ, who first led him, as Saul, to discover love as a totally different way of life from that of violently persecuting the followers of Jesus. In this way, Jesus himself brought Paul into the movement of the Resurrected One. In Phil 1:8, Paul’s longing affection is expressed in a solemn way by making the Divine a witness.

True communion between the sisters in Philippi and the prisoner Paul can be seen throughout the letter. Communion does not favor any active agent, nor is it reduced to the masculine-feminine binary. Those in Philippi remember him and he them. They carry him in their hearts and he them. This situation makes more bearable both Paul’s life deprived of liberty and the lives of the Philippians who experience intimidation. This communion is expressed here by the term *κοινωνία*, which is a result of their being united in the common cause of spreading the gospel (Phil 1:5, 7), a commitment that led Paul to suffer imprisonment and led the believers in Philippi to suffer overt hostility. For Veronica Koperski, “the relationship between Paul and the community at Philippi was unique insofar as the apostle not only 1) gives evidence of their good qualities and his and their mutual affection, but also because 2) he consistently addresses them in terms of equal to equal, and 3) he is willing to accept financial assistance from them without fear of compromising himself due to 4) the special relationship of *κοινωνία*, which the Philippians share with him as no other community does.”¹³

Besides giving thanks to the Divine for being able to count on these companions who are also comrades in the struggle (Phil 4:3), Paul prays for them all the time (1:4). What more could a prisoner do? In extremely adverse situations of physical and legal impotence, sometimes the only weapon a prisoner has is prayer. In these contexts prayer can be very powerful, even when there is no immediate response. Karl Gaspar, a Filipino political prisoner, describes the miserable space in the prison in which he found himself, concluding with, “In the end it was my prayers, my fasting, and meditation that rescued me and restored my sense of personal dignity.”¹⁴ Paul did not feel alone in prison because he was able

13. Veronica Koperski, *The Knowledge of Christ Jesus My Lord: The High Christology of Philippians 3:7-11*, CBET (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), 79.

14. Karl Gaspar, *How Long? Prison Reflections of Karl Gaspar*, ed. Helen Graham and Breda Noonan (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1985), 12.

to evoke the solidarity of his friends. He felt the companionship and friendship not only of Timothy and Epaphroditus but also of the Divine, with whom he conversed in prayer to ask for protection and give thanks.

In Phil 1:4 the word “plea” (δέησις) occurs twice, and the topic of “happiness” or “joy” (χαρά) is introduced. It is reiterated sixteen times in the letter, a redundancy that clarifies the meaning of the text. Normally joy and celebration correspond naturally, especially when there is good news. But for a prisoner awaiting the death sentence, sadness, anxiety, and hopelessness are expected. In the letter to the Philippians this is not the case. The prisoner does not consider himself a criminal but instead someone involved in a movement for which he is willing to give his life. This kind of prisoner experiences a power that comes from faith and allows him not to succumb to despair. There are three features that can be observed in the letters of prisoners who have faith of some kind, especially contemporary political prisoners: (1) the inner strength achieved by ideological convictions; (2) the joy in any unusual little thing in prison, such as a ray of sunshine, for example, or chocolates that were brought by a family member or friend, and especially the news received from their loved ones; and (3) continuing concern for their loved ones, whether family members, friends, or colleagues in the same movement. In the presence of supporters, the prisoner feels a need to show his strong side of happiness and joy. Hence the tendency to repeat “Rejoice,” “I’m fine,” “Don’t worry about me,” “I feel free.”

On April 30, 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from Tegel Prison: “during these weeks it will be necessary to have a great inner strength.”¹⁵ Later, on May 19, 1944, from the same prison he wrote: “I cannot possibly describe to you the joy that your visit has caused me. . . . I regretted very much causing you alarm and I was surprised you were here, and breathed with gratitude and relief when I received your call.”¹⁶ And in many places in his letters he is very grateful for the little things that were brought to him, as is stated in this letter: “every week I receive from you the most beautiful food. . . . Is there much hunger among you? That would be terrible! As for me I do not need anything except all of you.”¹⁷ Rosa Luxemburg, socialist activist of Polish-Jewish origin, was imprisoned for her ideas in 1915. She described the prison where she was

15. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Resistencia y sumisión: Cartas y apuntes desde el cautiverio*, trans. Constantino Ruiz-Garrido (Salamanca: Sígueme, 2008), 149.

16. *Ibid.*, 169.

17. *Ibid.*, 83.

held in Breslau in a letter to her friend Sophie Liebknecht on the night of December 24, 1917: "Here I am quiet and alone, enveloped in multiple layers of black darkness, of the boredom of captivity in wintertime; and in these moments my heart beats with a strange and indefinable internal happiness, as if I were walking amid the rays of a brilliant sun in a field of flowers. And in the darkness I smile at life, as if I had a magic secret that could refute everything bad, everything sad, and convert it into an abundance of light and happiness."¹⁸

In Phil 1:4, Paul prays for his companions with joy. The context evokes the communion among himself, his companions, and the Divine. Most of all, the text evokes the happiness Paul finds in the fact that he is able to count on them.

Paul's reasons for giving thanks are shown in Phil 1:5 and 7. The two verses are about the participation (*κοινωνία*) of the sisters in the movement at Philippi, first in relation to the gospel (1:5) and then in relation to those things that held them back. The use of the word *κοινωνία* in the two cases is significant. Paul gives thanks to the Divine for the involvement of his companions in the movement of the Resurrected One, that is, the gospel, because, as I pointed out in the introduction, the gospel is the proclamation of the Crucified and Risen One who invites us all to new life and a new way of living. Participation of women and men in the movement had been constant since these people heard of it through Paul when he first visited the city of Philippi. It continued until the date when the letters were written. But Paul does not want to claim that it is thanks to him that these women are in the movement; rather, he says that their active and effective participation has been the work of the Divine (1:6) who accompanies them in practice so that their good work can be effective and brought to perfection at the end of time. The "day of Jesus Christ" (1:6) is how the gospels refer to the coming of the reign of the Divine in its fullness, a utopia where there will be no more violence against women and no more racism, classism, homophobia, or persecution for being different.

The second reason for gratitude is given in Phil 1:7: the partnership or solidarity (*συγκοινωνός*) of the Philippians with Paul in his chains (*δεσμοίς*). This solidarity includes the defense of his case before the court and the appropriate testimony or confirmation that what he says about the gospel is true. The term "defense" (*ἀπολογία*) is a legal term, and "con-

18. Jörn Schütrumpf, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg o el precio de la libertad* (Berlin: Karl Dietz Berlin, 2007), 59.

firmation" (βεβαίωσις) is not only the positive presentation of the evidence of truth but the confirmation of a statement given.¹⁹ "Defense" (ἀπολογία) can also be used without the connotation of jurisprudence in the sense that the Philippians participated in the defense and confirmation of the gospel before Paul was taken prisoner. Since in Phil 1:5 Paul has already spoken of their partnership with the gospel, it is more likely that 1:7 refers here to his court case. He has to prepare his defense (2:23) because he is awaiting trial. Apparently the community has closely followed Paul's case, and they are active in the whole process. Solidarity, then, is not only the provision of specific support (4:10-19) but something additional that makes the community at Philippi suspect under Roman justice. They are seen as complicit because of their communion with the gospel, the same cause that put Paul in prison. Clearly, this kind of close relationship could put Paul's partners in Philippi at risk.

As noted above, the two reasons for giving thanks both use the Greek term (κοινωνία/συγκοινωνός) for communion. This communion is something that manifests itself in concrete actions. For example, the term is also used for an offering, as seen in Phil 4:14 and in other letters that talk about the collection for the poor in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:4). Paul sees what he is going through now as a moment of "grace" (χάρις). This means that he does not consider it shameful to be in prison, as it would be according to the values of Roman society. Perhaps he considered imprisonment to be a privilege because he sees on his body the wounds of Jesus (3:10) and wants to preach with his body. But this interpretation is dangerous for modern readers because it masks what his physical situation really is: an injustice that should be denounced.

Another topic present in the thanksgiving and repeated throughout the letter is expressed by the term φρονέω, "to think" or "reflect" in a practical way (Phil 1:7).²⁰ This word occurs ten times, indicating that it is an important term to be taken into account. Semantically it can mean different things. Here it means "to think" or "feel something" for others. "It is right," Paul says, "for me to think this way about all of you (Phil 1:7). "This" refers to everything he says to his sisters in 1:3-6.

19. Angela Standhartinger, "Aus der Welt eines Gefangenen: Die Kommunikationsstruktur des Philipperbriefs im Spiegel seiner Abfassungssituation," *NovT* 55 (2013): 151.

20. Stephen Fowl, "Christology and Ethics in Philippians 2:5-11," in *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Brian J. Dodd (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 145-48.

Prayer That They May Have More Love, Discernment, and Practice of Justice (1:9-11)

In Phil 1:9-11, the reasons for this prayer emerge more directly. In 1:3-4, Paul gives thanks to the Divine every time he remembers his companions in Philippi, and he prays for them continually, that they would have good health and be protected, because they were very committed to the gospel. Now, in the second part of the thanksgiving, he explicitly mentions the reasons for his prayer and divides them into three important areas for those involved in the movement of the Resurrected One: (1) love (*ἀγάπη*); (2) knowledge (*ἐπίγνωσις, αἴσθησις, δοκιμάζω, διαφέρω*); and (3) the practice of justice (*δικαιοσύνη*). In 1:5, Paul gives thanks to the Divine for their partnership in the cause of the gospel.

Being in partnership is, however, just one side of the coin; it is not enough. This commitment must also be expressed concretely, above all, in contexts of repression and persecution. Paul's companions in the movement have shown this because the letter itself mentions their economic support for the prisoner as a concrete manifestation, the fruit of the ethics of justice and care. Paul's prayer is that the love they have for each other may increase "more and more in knowledge and full insight" (1:9). One would expect Paul to pray that this love may abound more and more in good works or in acts of justice (1:11), but interestingly, he emphasizes the importance of the cognitive dimension in the practice of justice and links this closely to the action of loving. He uses four terms from the cognitive domain: "knowledge" and "insight" as well as testing things out well in order to "determine" what is truly valuable. This strongly suggests that Paul is praying for his companions to have greater understanding of the implications of their participation in the movement of the Resurrected One. Discernment is essential in a society where values are turned upside down, where "wickedness and injustice suppress the truth," as Paul outlines in Rom 1:18. Also, when people engage in countercultural movements, they need to have a clear understanding of the situation so as not to act naively.

For example, people who do not share the values of the community of the Resurrected One could see Paul's imprisonment as shameful. A person who does not understand or does not have discernment cannot define things very well or choose what is truly worthwhile. Social scientists maintain that reality is opaque and engaging reality requires the knowledge and insight that comes from analysis. In imperial times the propaganda about peace (*pax*) was very appealing. Could it be possible

Philippians 1:9-11

⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

that some preachers in the Roman Empire believed the emperor's "gospel" that he was a savior, lord, and prince of peace, while at the same time proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ? This is a remote possibility for followers of Jesus at that time. This could be an explanation for why Paul was so insistent that they see Jesus as Lord and Savior. The behavior of members of the movement could be influenced by the values of Greco-Roman society that privileged power and status rather than those who "came not to be served, but to serve," as Jesus put it in Mark 10:41-45.

Participating in the movement of the Resurrected One requires coherence between thinking and doing, producing actions motivated by love, justice, and care for one another. In this way there is transparency and sincerity (ειλικρινής), and no harm is done to anyone (ἀπρόσκοπος). In addition, the result will be visible: good works of justice produced by those who participate in the movement. In short, everything is interwoven: the practice of justice (δικαιοσύνη) cannot happen without love because when the pursuit of justice departs from the ethics of care and merciful love, violence results. Yet love cannot arise without knowledge and discernment because it may end up being ineffective. These are the attitudes and actions that will be judged by the Divine at the end of time, in the Day of Judgment (Matt 25:31-46; Rom 2:16). Eschatological justice must be something important to the prisoner because "the day of Christ" is mentioned twice (1:6, 10) in this short section. Solidarity and commitment here on earth is what glorifies and praises the Divine (1:11).

Power Relations from a Feminist Perspective (1:9-11)

In Phil 1:3-8, we saw that the relationship between Paul and his female companions in Philippi was a relation of surprising equality. The ambiguity of the syntax reinforces this egalitarian communion. The women are not seen as benefactors of Paul the apostle, nor did Paul view them from a top-down perspective. Yet in 1:9-11, when Paul prays for them,

his role as a leader comes out, since it is unlikely that they would pray for Paul like he prays for them, suggesting that his love should display knowledge and discernment or that his actions should become genuine, irreproachable, and filled with the fruits of righteousness. They could not speak so frankly on a horizontal plane to a man they knew as an apostle. Power relations leaned toward the leader. Members of a movement could pray among themselves for their leader, but it is doubtful that they could tell him directly what they thought he needed to do. In 1:9-11, Paul is definitely the leader, even though he does not use the title apostle here, and the reader senses his authority over the community. But that is typical of a leader in a traditional leader-movement paradigm. This patriarchal language commonly used among men also appears in Frei Betto's letter when he says that Paul is the cornerstone of the Philippian community who wants to perpetuate himself through them.

What is rather surprising is the tone of communion in 1:3-8. Is this communitarian tone simply the result of the rhetoric in Paul's thanksgiving that is aimed at earning the goodwill of his readers? Or does it mean that, if authority comes from a prisoner slave, as Paul represents himself, traditional hierarchical rules need to be rethought? As leaders in their communities who have not been imprisoned but nonetheless suffer the hostility of Roman religious policy, the readers at Philippi naturally pray for Paul, probably saying, "stand firm," "the Divine is with you," "persevere to the end," "don't get involved in the common practice of corruption in prisons." As Neila Serrano de Barragán says in the interview about her experience in prison, "Money is the most important thing. Lawyers need to be paid and discovering the truth must be paid for with money."²¹

News from Prison (1:12-26)

After the greetings and words of thanks, the first thing that generally follows in a Pauline letter is information about the situation of the sender, usually saying something like "thanks to the Divine I am fine; do not worry about me." In the case of this letter, Paul says the same thing but not in relation to himself and his poor conditions—he leaves that to second place—but in relation to the cause of the Resurrected One, for which he has been imprisoned. News from prison is both good and bad. On the one hand, the gospel message is becoming widely known, both inside and outside of the *praetorium*. Strangely, his chains have helped.

21. See Introduction, p. 27 above.

On the other hand, Paul's news is not so good because the prospect of his liberation from prison is unclear. Seeing the level of suffering experienced by the prisoner requires reading between the lines. Uncertainty reigns, and Paul is starting to think about the possibility of a death sentence and his attitude regarding the future verdict.

Repercussions of Imprisonment (1:12-18)

Going to jail always has negative and positive impacts, particularly when a person is imprisoned for political and ideological reasons. For example, in the case of Frei Betto, who was imprisoned by the military dictatorship (1969–1973), the church in Brazil was divided. For some, he was a young man who strayed from the faith and became involved in politics. For others, his faith was what led him to oppose the dictatorship. What these two opinions reveal is the existence of different concepts of what constitutes the gospel. The recipients of Frei Betto's letters were usually relatives, communities, or individuals who sympathized with his cause. They were anxious to receive news, they experienced the same feelings of uncertainty that prisoners did, and they saw the prisoner's situation as a very unfortunate yet heroic act. Something similar may have been happening to Paul's own reaction to being in prison.

SHARING THE NEWS ABOUT THE MOVEMENT OF THE RESURRECTED ONE (1:12-13)

The phrase "I want you to know" is used to emphasize what the speaker is about to say. However, there is a deeper meaning. It is significant that "knowledge" was a matter of prayer in Phil 1:9 because the reiteration of cognitive verbs emphasizes what the recipients know and understand: the events that resulted in Paul's being in prison and how the plans of those who imprisoned him, in this case the Romans, were disrupted. Instead of serving as a punishment or a warning, Paul's imprisonment actually helped to spread (εἰς προκοπή) the gospel (1:12). The term προκοπή, meaning "progress," has a military connotation: the gospel, personified, advances like a squad that strikes down and removes obstacles in its way. Yet, as Joseph A. Marchal argues, military images are not helpful because they are bloody, cruel, and entail death.²² But Paul

22. Joseph A. Marchal, *Hierarchy, Unity, and Imitation: A Feminist Rhetorical Analysis of Power Dynamics in Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 50–64.

Philippians 1:12-13

<p>¹²I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, ¹³so that</p>	<p>it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ.</p>
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is using the term metaphorically, if he even has the military context in mind at all. The risk is that the metaphor can lead to incorrect actions, as happened in the case of the Crusaders or the conquerors of Latin America, who used their military victories as a means to impose their religion on the vanquished.

In the case of *Philippians*, Paul is talking to a small political-religious movement that sought to transform human relationships and challenge people to live differently from the dominant Roman culture. To speak of the gospel in this way involves using the language of political militancy. The word “militant” is not the best term because of its reference to military force and the use of weapons, but in fact the gospel movement is a political activity, paradoxically unarmed, or rather, using other means that do not kill but have the ability to save lives. What Paul does in this case is use the military metaphors against the military, but without weapons.

For example, in Eph 6:10-17, Jesus’ followers are presented with the image of a uniform of an anti-Roman soldier, where the belt is the truth, the breastplate is the garment of justice, the sandals are peace, and the sword is the Word of life. In prison, Paul lives in a military context because he is chained to soldiers twenty-four hours a day; the soldiers change according to the four turns laid out in Roman imperial rules for the changing of the guard.²³ It is true that there is an anti-imperial logic in many of the texts of the New Testament, and this produces conflict between two powers, two masters, two rescuers, two princes of peace, and two kingdoms. The problem comes when later readers take another step with Paul’s logic and talk about other situations involving two armies and two empires as if Paul’s logic applied there too. While readers can point to two armies in this letter—contrasting the Roman army with the movement’s “army” of believers—there are not actually two empires in this letter, since the Divine Reign is by definition anti-imperial.

23. Richard J. Cassidy, *Paul in Chains: Roman Imprisonment and the Letters of St. Paul* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 46.

In the story of the birth of Jesus in Luke 2, Jesus is called Lord and Savior, and in the sky an “army” of heavenly hosts appears to a few shepherds, announcing peace on earth through a baby laid in a box of straw intended for the animals of a peasant family’s dwelling. The source of power in the two lords, Roman and Christian, is distinct: The lordship of one is destined to serve others, as seen in his solidarity with people who are dispossessed and discriminated against. In contrast, for the other self-designated lord, power is for dominating others, especially the powerless, and requiring them to serve him. Therefore, it is important to realize that Paul’s strength comes from the Crucified One, “the slave” (2:7-8). This is the key to understanding Paul’s strength and the spread of the gospel among the soldiers guarding him.

The advance of the gospel occurs because the soldiers who guard the *praetorium* and other residents of the palace (Phil 1:13) know that Paul is in prison not for any criminal matter but for the gospel. Apparently it has made an impact on the soldiers that someone like Paul is suffering in chains because he believes that a person who was crucified as a traitor was vindicated when the Divine raised him from the dead. Whether or not Paul deliberately used the expression “in [ἐν] Christ” in 1:13 rather than the more common “for [ὑπερ] Christ,” the ambiguity of this discourse saturates the senses. While Paul wears chains because of Christ, it can also be true that these chains mean that Paul is in tune with the suffering of Christ. The pain from the handcuffs could move this chained prisoner to enter into communion with the wounds of the Crucified One, enabling Christ himself to become evident in Paul’s tortured body. With his chained body and probably also with his words, Paul became a herald of the Word in prison. So imprisonment, which was intended to bring about a bad result for the gospel and for Paul, actually turned out to be something positive because it helped spread the cause that both Paul and his companions were committed to. The spread of the gospel did not take place due to influences from some Roman citizen sympathizer but because of Paul’s adversity itself.

The comparison of the gospel proclaimed by Paul in prison to a “Trojan Horse” within the governor’s residence or palace is not the best analogy.²⁴ In Homer’s story, soldiers were hidden inside the horse. Once the “gift” was inside the city walls, they jumped out of the horse, killed the guards, and opened the city gates to the Greek army that immediately

24. J. L. Houlden, *Paul’s Letters from Prison*, PNTC (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 58.

invaded and killed everyone in the city. The image alludes to a deceptive infiltration in order to triumph over another people. Paul does not deceive people about why he is in prison: he is there because of his faith, and this faith does not allow him to deny the gospel as required by the Roman Empire or to accept a way of life contrary to the lifestyle proclaimed in the gospel.

ANNOUNCING THE GOSPEL WITH VALOR, WITHOUT FEAR (1:14-18b)

Paul's chains also impacted followers of the movement in the city where he was imprisoned in Ephesus (or Rome) and inspired them to spread the good news about the Resurrected One. Paul uses several terms that indicate the repressive context in which those involved in this movement lived. He tells his companions to be "confident" (*πεποιθότας*), "daring" (*τολμᾶν*), and "fearless" (*ἀφόβως*) about speaking the Word (Phil 1:14). With these three words Paul makes it clear that the repression was cruel. I infer from this that before Paul became a prisoner, people were afraid to speak out, as happens regularly in contexts of persecution. Because they feared violence from the empire, members of the movement lacked confidence, as well as courage or audacity, to act in ways that might bring them harm or opposition. So what was motivating the communities around Paul to spread the gospel now? According to Paul it was "my imprisonment" (*δεσμοῖς*, 1:14), the fact that he had been arrested and chained and was ready to defend the cause of the gospel in Roman courts. In other words, Paul attributes their courage to his own testimony.

Those receiving the letter were relieved to know that Paul was doing well, but what was important to his companions in the movement in the city around him was that Paul's imprisonment gave them courage to continue to withstand the suffering that was inflicted on them because of "their lack of loyalty to the emperor."²⁵ The participants in the movement who preached the gospel boldly called themselves sisters and brothers to indicate that they were part of the movement of the Resurrected One. Apparently this group represented a trend within the movement, different from others in the movement who Paul thought proclaimed the gospel because of inferior motives (Phil 1:15, 17).

The chiasmus in Phil 1:15-17 helps us observe the contrasting profiles of the two groups: the supporters of Paul and those who did not support him.

25. Fee, *Comentario*, 166.

Philippians 1:14-18b

¹⁴and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

¹⁵Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill.

¹⁶These proclaim Christ out of love,

knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. ¹⁸What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

A non-supporter v. 15a (envy, rivalry)

B supporter v. 15b (goodwill)

B' supporter v. 16 (love)

A' non-supporter v. 17 (selfish ambition, not sincere)

According to Paul, the brothers who disagreed with him were jealous, and their proclamation of the gospel was done in an effort to cause a row (ἔρις). Additionally, they were not honest, as they put their personal interests first. Paul sees supporters as those who are motivated by goodwill because their proclamation is inspired by love. The terms “envy” and “rivalry” are idiomatic expressions that occur frequently in discussions within liberation movements. Ἔρις, according to John Reumann, relates especially to political strife and a recognized topic within the dissensions.²⁶ Therefore the important thing here is to analyze the problem of division using the epithets Paul applies to groups that do not think as he does.

The text is not clear regarding a political reason for the enmity, but it probably has to do with Paul’s situation in prison and possibly with the Roman authorities. Paul’s supporters agree that he is in prison due to his mission of proclaiming the gospel. Non-supporters of Paul possibly resent that he is in prison, and they probably say so when they proclaim the gospel. However, even these people do not make a proclamation lightly; they also “dare” to proclaim it (1:14). Perhaps for them, being imprisoned is not an honor. Paul believes that they think or imagine (οἰόμενοι) that they add to his oppression (θλίψις), increasing his pain

26. John Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 200.

in prison. When Paul says they think they “increase” his oppression, he implies that he suffers just like any other prisoner (1:17); he does not say this explicitly because he usually does not like to talk about his sufferings. The non-supporters probably belong to one of the non-Pauline trends found in non-Pauline texts, such as the Johannine writings or Jewish-Christian literature.²⁷ In the city where Paul was a prisoner, there were certainly diverse and controversial ways of seeing, proclaiming, and living the gospel.

Frei Betto interprets this enmity between Paul and others who proclaim Christ in a different way. One of the points he makes in his introduction to his letter to me is that “Paul is a competitor. He wants the best and will not allow anyone else to sow or to reap his harvest (1:17-19).” While we do not know whether Frei Betto sees Paul’s competitiveness as positive or negative or simply as something he perceives in the letter, Paul’s competitiveness is, in my view, a sexist and patriarchal attitude.

Paul recognizes the plurality of positions in the movement. The participants are called sisters and brothers, and most of them boldly proclaim the gospel. Here, Paul is right; what really matters is not a parade of personal accomplishments but the cause itself; that is what motivates the struggle (1:17). The spread of the gospel both inside and outside the prison brings joy to the prisoner (1:18). This is a joy that helps him stand firm in the face of adversity. This is also good news for his female companions who are part of the same movement.

Between Life and Death (1:18c-26)

In Phil 1:18c-26, the prisoner speaks about himself. He needs to be careful and measure his words because of his status as a prisoner and also because of the emperor’s spy network (see my Introduction).

Political prisoners know that their loved ones are extremely concerned about their personal situation in prison. A prisoner’s family, friends, and companions want to know if he or she is being mistreated, has enough to eat, and is sad. The supporters actually take risks going from one office to another to inquire about a prisoner’s present and future situation, looking for people with influence to help. If the supporters are highly committed to or engaged in the movement, they avoid being arrested by sending others in their place to find out about the status of the prisoner.

27. *Ibid.*, 202.

Philippians 1:18c-26

¹⁸Yes, and I will continue to rejoice,
¹⁹for I know that through your prayers
 and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ
 this will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰It
 is my eager expectation and hope that I
 will not be put to shame in any way, but
 that by my speaking with all boldness,
 Christ will be exalted now as always in
 my body, whether by life or by death.
²¹For to me, living is Christ and dying
 is gain. ²²If I am to live in the flesh, that

means fruitful labor for me; and I do not
 know which I prefer. ²³I am hard pressed
 between the two: my desire is to depart
 and be with Christ, for that is far better;
²⁴but to remain in the flesh is more nec-
 essary for you. ²⁵Since I am convinced
 of this, I know that I will remain and con-
 tinue with all of you for your progress
 and joy in faith, ²⁶so that I may share
 abundantly in your boasting in Christ
 Jesus when I come to you again.

The prisoner knows this, and because of this, even if he or she is suffering torture or going through hardships, he or she will tell family and friends that everything is okay, do not worry, everything will be fine, be content, I am happy. Communication with members of the movement may vary slightly. The prisoner will still not talk much about the details of his or her personal situation, like the lack of food, and will relativize the torture. He or she will speak, if cautiously, about the gospel as a resistance movement and about the hope that the cause they are fighting for will be made known to all people. Prisoners say firmly that the Divine is with them, suffers with them, and struggles alongside them. Exhortations are directed to the recipients of letters and messages to encourage them to take care of each other at the same time that they continue to stand firm in their convictions. Death is a theme for almost all political prisoners. The tone is usually not one of resignation but of courage: even when faced with death, I will not give up. Nelson Mandela wrote in April 1964: "During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to the struggle of the African People. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against Black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."²⁸

In prison, it is a common occurrence that political prisoners become more radical despite their powerlessness, because death for them is no

28. Nelson Mandela Foundation, *A Prisoner in the Garden: Opening Nelson Mandela's Prison Archive*, 1964 (Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2005), 66–67.

longer a major concern. The fundamental thing is the project of greater liberation to which they have dedicated their lives. When they are alone, the possibility of death often enters their heads, especially when they see their companions die in prison. They also plan for the future, even though they see no sign of being released. All of these ideas come and go because time has stopped, the space they are allowed is limited, anything new is outside the prison, and managing their own time inside becomes difficult. The arrival of letters or visitors provides a momentary break in the passage of time in prison. Different thoughts usually come and go, without order, but when prisoners write, they do so with much care. They avoid describing the reality of prison life, trying to cause the least amount of worry for the recipients of their letters and of course taking into account the censorship to which letters from prison are subjected. It is likely that Paul also lived through many experiences like these.

THE LONGING OF A PRISONER (1:18c-20)

Paul does not speak in the present tense in the letter. He feels it could produce anxiety in his companions in Philippi because, emotionally, they will enter into his present experiences as he recounts them in the letter. When speaking in the past tense, about events that had taken place, Paul's narratives are peaceful, even though they are also somber.²⁹ Paul used the present tense in the previous section where he was talking about the spread of the gospel in order to cheer, comfort, and encourage his companions. The future does not produce anxiety for him because the events have not yet occurred, and change is always possible. But uncertainty for the future creates anxiety for the reader. When Paul chooses the future tense, he handles it in such a way that he creates a sense of hope and security. Although he is speaking about the possibility of his death, he does so with serenity, like many political prisoners do. Paul speaks with conviction in this section. To begin with, he uses the word "rejoice," but in the future tense: "I will continue to rejoice" for what is to come, possibly at short notice (Phil 1:18c).

The first reason for his joy is his possible release. The term σωτηρία encompasses the religious sense of "salvation" along with the secular sense of "liberation." Although the soteriological sense is possible, here Paul is talking about himself as a prisoner who is in the process of preparing

29. Emile Benveniste, *Problemas de lingüística general*, trans. Juan Almela (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1971), 176.

his defense for court and who hopes to be liberated so that he can visit his companions (Phil 1:26). They are praying for him (1:19), not for him to be saved, but to win his case and be released. He believes in the power of their prayers and in the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, who has been provided to him (ἐπιχορηγία) by the Divine. Therefore he claims that he knows (οἶδα) that his release will take place. It is like saying to them, "So, please don't worry about me; the Spirit of the Resurrected One is with me, and your prayers will be heard by the Divine."

A release from prison is not, however, what he most desires at the moment; instead, he wants the help of the Divine in preparing for his defense. Two strong Greek words mark his true longing and hope: ἀποκαρδοκία, a term that refers to a craving, and ἐλπίς, which indicates a hope that something beneficial awaits, therefore enabling a person to live confidently. In Phil 1:20, Paul could possibly be talking about the defense he is preparing for his upcoming trial. In his speech before the courts he will not water down the message of the gospel in order to save himself. He will speak freely and frankly (παρησιία) in public, that is, clearly, boldly, and without fear, because what he expects is that the Crucified-Resurrected One (and not Caesar) will be recognized by his audience. "In my body" (1:20) is an expression that refers to the whole being, so it can mean "in my whole being, in everything I say and do."³⁰ Using the passive voice (divine passive), Paul affirms that the Divine will magnify Christ. This is so because, as he states in 1:19, the Spirit of Jesus has promised to all who face interrogation in court that she will guide their response (see Mark 13:11).

Paul's hope, expressed in the negative, is that the Divine will not let him down when he is judged in court because he gives all of himself so that the Crucified and Resurrected One will be honored. Reading the text in this way, Ernst Lohmeyer is correct in saying that there are signs of a desire for martyrdom in the text.³¹ Maybe not throughout the whole letter, but when it comes to his legal defense, Paul is putting his life at risk. We perceive this at the end of 1:20. It is not that he wants to die or is preparing a defense to achieve martyrdom. But the chances of being sentenced to death for his defense are very real, and he knows it. It is

30. I-Jin Loh and Eugene A. Nida, *A Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1977), 30.

31. Ernst Lohmeyer, *Die Briefe an die Philipper, Kolosser und an Philemon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1964), 17–38.

like hearing him say, "Whether I end up alive or dead, I'm not backing down on my commitment to the movement of the Resurrected One."

It is impossible not to hear echoes of Job 13:16, as several commentaries have noted. Although the character in Job is not in chains, rhetorically he is in court. His "friends" accuse him before the Divine because, to them, he is guilty. Job appears in the court of the Divine and also expects her to hear and understand his defense. Frankly and fearlessly, Job presents his arguments that he believes will enable him to win the case. Even if he dies for it (13:15), he insists that he will not be intimidated. Charged before the Divine, Job hopes that she will vindicate him before his accusers. This intertextual parallel suggests that Paul wants to be vindicated, not only before the Roman authorities, but also before the Divine, and especially before those who, in proclaiming the gospel, criticize the fact that he is in prison (Phil 1:15-17).

BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH (1:21-24)

Like all political prisoners, Paul thinks about death. These verses have been shaped by the possibility that he might be put to death. If in Phil 1:18 Paul was anticipating his release, there is no doubt that he affirmed his liberation in order to comfort his readers and dispel their doubts about the possibility that he would be put to death. After manifesting his defense strategy, however, and presenting the gospel as it really is, quite different from the gospel of Caesar, the possibility of a death penalty could become more real. So he has to deal with this directly, balancing what could be gained and what lost. Here he has to confess his belief, maybe even to convince himself, that the verdict is not important as long as the cause of the movement wins. "For to me, living is Christ" (1:21) is easy to understand, since it implies the dedication of one's life to the cause of Christ.

However, "dying is gain" is more complex and difficult to understand (1:21). For most people, there is no gain in death except to end terrible suffering, to be released from a terminal illness, or to be released via suicide from a tormented mind. For a political prisoner, however, or really any prisoner, death can be a gain for two reasons: on the one hand, a prisoner becomes a hero or a martyr for a cause, which is a great personal satisfaction; on the other hand, as a consequence of public martyrdom, the cause will then become even more widely known and grow. When Paul speaks of death as gain, this may mean something similar in the sense that he gives his life for the cause of the movement of the Resurrected One. This is a great testimony and will help to advance the spread of the gospel. It is also an occasion of joyful anticipation (1:18c; 2:17-18).

In Phil 1:23, Paul makes clear why the gain is to die. He uses the euphemism “depart” (ἀναλῦσαι), or leaving to be with Christ. “Leaving” means to be absent from this particular world, and, according to indigenous thinking in the Americas, it involves entering another world, that of the dead. But in the biblical world of the New Testament, there is no world of the dead as understood by indigenous people. There is also no clarity in the letter about what this new way of being absent could be. While there is no talk in the letter of going to heaven to meet Christ, Paul clearly wants and considers it best for him personally to be with the One who was crucified by the Roman authorities but who was vindicated and resurrected by the Divine.

So what Paul wants is to be like Christ: absent in the flesh but present in the midst of the movement through his Spirit. Not only that but Paul’s desire is to go through the same thing that Jesus went through after his death: to be vindicated by the Divine and rise again. Thus his absence will be manifest in the movement through his living presence with the Spirit of the Resurrected One. The belief that a beloved leader of a movement did not die is common in revolutionary movements. Some people say, for example, that Zapata and Pancho Villa, leaders of the Mexican Revolution, are still living today. There are myths like that of Tupac Amaru, the indigenous leader of Perú who fought against the Spanish, or Mackandal, the legendary Afro-Caribbean who led the resistance against the French. Often, people say these leaders are seen at night, or riding a white horse, or that they are embodied in free-roaming animals.

While entering the world of the dead makes sense in many cultures, it sounds strange to Western Christians. More convincing would be the “desire to be with Christ,” which is another euphemism for death. It is an extension of the euphemism “leaving,” giving a positive sense to “the leaving” and reiterating the affirmation that “to die is gain.” On May 13, 1972, Frei Betto wrote from cell 17 in Tiradentes Prison, Brazil, that “at 6.00 am the jailer knocks on each door until the prisoner answers, to make sure he did not die during the night. . . . I spend most of the time praying. . . . I am happy to experience this level of solidarity with the hungry of the earth. I ask the Lord to give us enough strength and courage. If life is over here it was worth it.”³²

Even though it is common for political prisoners to be willing to die for their cause, it is unusual that Paul would desire martyrdom at this early

32. Frei Betto, *Cartas da prisão 1967–1973* (Rio de Janeiro: Agir, 2008), 130.

stage of the origins of Christianity because martyrdom was relatively uncommon until the second century. Perhaps, conditioned by the concern of his readers, Paul proposes that, though his condemnation to death is a possibility, if it occurs, it will be brought on by his own will and, rather than something negative, is actually a gain. In any case he is quick to say that the best alternative is not to be condemned to death but to be released. Then, alive, he can go on to make a valuable contribution and promote the work being conducted by the movement of the Resurrected One (Phil 1:22). Facing these two alternatives, both considered positive, Paul considers it preferable (*ἀναγκαῖος*) to live, in order to be of service to his companions in the movement in Philippi (1:24).

But nothing is decided, either on the part of the Roman authorities or from Paul's side. Paul did not know which to choose (Phil 1:22), whether to keep on living for the cause or to die. The term *αἰρήσομαι*, "will choose," is in first-person, future, active (deponent verb: passive form but active meaning); Paul literally states that he can choose the outcome of the trial. But the decision does not depend on him. At the trial, the judgment is made by the judges, and Paul will have to accept the outcome. Paul could have chosen suicide to fulfill his wish. Even though in antiquity prisoners did commit suicide to relieve themselves of their suffering (see my Introduction), it makes no sense to apply this to Paul. This letter does not allow for suicide because Paul's optimism permeates the letter from beginning to end, as is seen even in this section.

There are, however, two other ways of taking literally the verb where Paul is the subject agent of the decision to live or die. The key is to consider that Paul may well influence the outcome of the Roman trial depending on how he builds his defense before the court. This can be done in two ways: first, he does not defend himself or the gospel and instead remains silent.³³ This is not unreasonable, since, when Jesus was facing Pilate, he decided to remain silent when he was questioned about the accusations against him (Matt 27:12-14) and was sentenced to death on the cross.³⁴ This position would fit with Paul's theology of the imitation of Christ.

The other, more interesting option, which articulates better intra-textually, is that he intends to set out the defense of the gospel very freely and forcefully without allowing himself to be intimidated, explaining

33. Craig S. Wansink, *Chained in Christ: The Experience and Rhetoric of Paul's Imprisonments*, JSNTSup 130 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 120–21.

34. *Ibid.*, 122.

the principles of what it means to belong to the movement of the Resurrected One. In secular terms, Paul's rejection of imperial impositions and the deification of Caesar would be his political platform. In this case, he would be exposing himself and hastening his death. The hymn that he chooses to include in his letter (Phil 2:6-11) is a political statement that could also lead to death.³⁵ We wonder whether the christological hymn will form part of his defense of the gospel because that is the gospel that he will defend. Knowing that the hymn was at high risk of censorship, the inclusion of the hymn in this letter is an indication that perhaps Paul chose "to leave" prematurely, before his time.

This section is very intense and emotional, full of rhetorical devices. Apparently there is no notable thread to be followed that would help us to truly understand what the prisoner was thinking. This is very often the case in letters from contemporary political prisoners. But what is everywhere evident in Paul's letters is his total dependence on the Divine. In the jungle where she was kidnapped, Carmiña Navia Velasco gave herself to the Divine when she said, "In the darkness of the night that surrounds us, growing inside is the Divine Light that sustains our being and gives strength to our days. Surrounded by forces of nature of such intensity in the Pacific coast jungle where I was held, Wisdom and Christ become incarnate in the torrent, presenting a new face to me and etching it indelibly on my new life coming out of this experience."³⁶

JOY OF BEING WITH COMPANIONS OF THE MOVEMENT IN PHILIPPI (1:25-26)

This section ends with news from the prison emphasizing with conviction that Paul will be released from prison and will soon be with the whole community. To make his conviction clear, Paul uses a play on words with the lemma *μένω*: in 1:24 he writes "but to remain [*ἐπιμένειν*] in the flesh is more necessary for you," and in 1:25 he says, "I know that I will remain [*μένω*] and continue [*παραμένω*] with all of you." He speaks so forcefully that it seems that what he said previously about death and life is consigned to the past, and he wants the readers to forget it. This

35. Angela Standhartinger, "Die paulinische Theologie im Spannungsfeld römisch-imperialer Machtpolitik: Eine neue Perspektive auf Paulus, kritisch geprüft anhand des Philipperbrief," *Religion, Politik und Gewalt*, Kongressband des XII Europäischen Kongresses für Theologie (Berlin: Güthersloher Verlagshaus, 2005), 369–75; Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 178–84.

36. Carmiña Navia Valesco, "Unidad en un sueño común: A propósito de la carta de Pablo a las mujeres de la iglesia de Filipos," letter to the author, Cali, Colombia, March 30, 2014, 2.

manner of speaking is not alien to prisoners. At times they enter into deep discussions about death; their reflections emerge at a crucial time in prison that space, time, and solitude bring about. Then they write these thoughts in a letter, but very soon afterward they begin to speak about their future plans. At the moment Paul is concentrating on the present situation and especially on bringing hope and encouragement to the Philippians.

In these verses, Paul again takes up the theme of the “spread” (προκοπή) of the movement of the Resurrected One (Phil 1:12). Here, the “spread” of the gospel is not due only to Paul but also to the work of the whole community at Philippi, working together with him and experiencing “the joy in faith” (1:25). The phrase “spread the faith” in 1:12 is equivalent to the phrase “your progress and joy in faith” in 1:25. To be in the movement spreading the gospel together and seeing the bond that is created is a cause for rejoicing, even in the midst of the hostility suffered in Philippi, as I discuss below.

Philippians 1:26 paints a picture of Paul that looks quite arrogant to our contemporary eyes. He seems to say that, on leaving prison, he will come to Philippi with his companions, and his arrival will give them all more reasons to be proud of him (ἐν ἐμοί, “in me”). Another possible reading, somewhat softer, would be to give weight to the expression “in Christ” instead of to the phrase “in me.” “In me” would relate to his release from prison and his arrival at Philippi. That is, the Philippians will feel even prouder to be in communion (in Christ) with the movement of the Resurrected One when they see Paul freed from prison. This second interpretation is more in line with what has been discussed so far. Practice often shows, however, that people in leadership positions, men and women, become arrogant. This is understandable, because leaders need to be strong in character.