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# Reassessing the Significance of Gendered Embodiment in Paul: Beyond Reception-Historical Impositions<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Planetary entanglement is often tangential to if not totally absent from the Pauline letters. Traditionally, the letters are interpreted as originating from an apostolic author with an eschatological and apocalyptically driven focus, resorting to a Platonic body-soul dichotomy and largely alienated from society and this world and its concerns. However, considering how Pauline rhetoric, especially when read in its socio-historical context, involves and at times even is based on embodiment and gender awareness, shows the Pauline letters in a different light, with strong, if at times covert and assumed, inter-personal, communal, and terrestrial entanglements or intersectionalities. Textual examples from Paul are provided for each of these three intersectionalities to show that reassessment of gendered embodiment in Paul holds promise for theological reflection from biblical perspectives in general and for socially engaged theology in relation to the Anthropocene, in particular.*

**Keywords:** Pauline rhetoric; Embodiment; Intersectionalities; Gender; Necropolitics

## Introduction

Planetary entanglement is often considered tangential to, if not totally absent from, Paul's letters in the NT; their connection as a contradiction in terms. The Pauline letters feature prominently in theological discourse and confessional statements but often are largely – and strangely – absent in socially engaged discussions and interactions.<sup>2</sup> If ever there has been a poster boy for the sentiment that “Christianity has a reputation for hating the body, valuing the soul over the body, and seeking to control the body by way of the soul” (Tonstad 2018:23 epub), it is Paul.<sup>3</sup> The apparent loud silence from Paul on everyday – and especially corporeal – affairs, some exceptions notwithstanding, may at times come up for scrutiny. But then again, as will be explained, many would not think of the period of the Anthropocene as the most appropriate time for (human) corporeal

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<sup>1</sup> Edited version of a paper read at an annual PThU / UWC / SU conference on *Planetary Entanglement: Theology and the Anthropocene*, in Amsterdam or Groningen from 27 – 29 October 2021 (online).

<sup>2</sup> This has already been the case with the Pauline letters being largely absent, e.g., in the development of Liberation Theology and more specifically, in the use of the Bible in the struggle against Apartheid (e.g., De Gruchy 1986; Jones 1984; Loubser 1987).

<sup>3</sup> “Paul’s discussion in Romans 7 of not doing what he wants and doing what he does not want has become a classic scriptural source describing this experience—an experience that is in some ways familiar to many of us, even if the psychology and concerns that explain that experience are different between our context, Paul’s, and Augustine’s” (Tonstad 2018:24 epub).

appreciation. It will suffice to note that the Anthropocene is understood here to refer to the current geological period determined and shaped by humans and their activities on all scales. Although contested as a notion,<sup>4</sup> also in terms of time period and its onset, and uneven human involvement amid the Global South-North divide, scholars agree on the current age irrefutably being impacted by people more than any other agent(s), to the (geological) extent that the *homo sapiens* species determines the contemporary period. Planetary entanglement, too, can have many explanations, but is taken here to refer to human beings' indissoluble relation to and interdependency on the material reality in which we live as embodied beings in interpersonal, communal and terrestrial ways. Engagement with and within the Anthropocene prompts reflection on Pauline bodies, a topic which has been disproportionately impacted by interpretive traditions. In this contribution, I argue for coming to terms with Pauline interpretive history, to allow an appreciation of (not always unproblematical) embodiment in his letters, as demonstrated in his texts at three levels, before concluding with the challenges and concerns that Pauline corporeality ushers in.<sup>5</sup>

### Disentangling interpretive histories

As the scholarly world becomes more perceptive of how traditions or conventions settle into place over time, theologians have noted, for example, how popular depictions of Jesus can be understood as the accumulation of centuries of previous representations. Such images do not so much reflect the historical Jesus but rather what people think or even hope Jesus was like (e.g., Morgan 1998). So too, other interpretive traditions may be expressions of theological reflection or anticipation rather than responsible and accountable engagement with biblical texts. The Pauline letters have traditionally been interpreted as originating from an apostle with an eschatologically and apocalyptically driven focus, resorting to a Platonic body-soul dichotomy, essentially alienated from society and this world, and with interpretive categories defined by and caught up in long-standing insistence on dogmatic-theological frameworks.<sup>6</sup> In short, the strange absence

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<sup>4</sup> It has been argued that the Anthropocene is not so much a period on its own as part of Holocene (which together with the Pleistocene, forms part of the larger period of the Quaternary), with scholars pointing to Western industrialisation (and even more specifically, the steam engine) or post-World War 2's "great acceleration" or even the agricultural revolution of ten millennia ago as its onset. The concept is challenged for implicating humanity as a whole, as if serious distinctions do not exist between societies and communities, with their vulnerability to and impact on the planetary ecosystem being vastly disproportionate, especially in terms of the Global South and North divide(s) (Marak 2019:19–23). Haraway (2016:185 n53) resists the use of the term in favour of Chthulucene for several reasons but also "to stay with the trouble" of living in and dealing with the present. Cf also (Scerri 2019) on the Anthropocene.

<sup>5</sup> The connection I postulate between the call for reconsidering Pauline bodies and the Anthropocene is that the former feeds into or even co-constitutes the pre-cognitive perception of phenomena which even more than a theological concern, is (also) a political one. The political is understood not as consensus, but since it is "both a residue of past practices and relations and an emergent phenomenon", and situated "at the threshold of perceptibility and knowability, in spatial, temporal and sensorial terms, more attention is required for what precedes consensus: precognitive attunement to rhythm and patterns, shared space and time, divergent perceptual habits, affect and the correspondingly divergent ideas about *what constitutes the commons*" (Lushetich 2018:3).

<sup>6</sup> A classic example, of course, is the work by Herman Ridderbos (1975), which determined theological thinking about Paul for a long time, with possible lingering effects to this day; traces of Ridderbos' thoughts about Paul may still be present in recent works of prolific authors such as Wright (e.g., 2013), which shows the tenacity of particularism-universalism and other frameworks.

of Paul in contemporary social concerns, then and now, has been regulated and normalised through conventions – some of which go back to the early Christian Church.<sup>7</sup>

At times, the received Paul, the Paul of reception history, can be miles apart from the figure of Paul emerging from the (authentic) Pauline letters.<sup>8</sup> In the spirit of open discussion and theological integrity, I need to acknowledge that my reading is neither concerned with tradition (of interpretation)- or convention-aligned hermeneutics, nor with uncritically rescuing and whitewashing Paul through exegetical prowess. Responsible and accountable exegesis and hermeneutics require socio-historical and literary and theologically appropriate engagement with texts and their interpretive history.<sup>9</sup> Without postulating an unadulterated, unnegotiated, not to mention neutral or contextless figure, the Paul constructed from his letters can be decidedly different from traditions that developed over centuries – rendering a vexed portrayal at that. In his letters, Paul, for example, self-presents as proudly Jewish (Phil. 3; Rom. 12), without holding that as a prerequisite for God’s grace (Gal. and Rom.); as decidedly celibate (1 Cor. 7), without insisting on the same from his readers (1 Thess. 4); intensely awaiting the Parousia (1 Thess.), yet dealing with the authorities of the day (Rom 13); and so on. So too, Paul can ambiguously refer to (Phil. 5) and even praise women co-workers (Rom. 16), while calling for women’s or wives’ (contemporaneous) appropriate demeanour (1 Cor. 11) or even silence in gatherings (1 Cor. 11); or calling the wrath of God down on the authorities (Gal. 6), but also pointing to them as divinely appointed (Rom. 13). Such tensions in the Pauline letters are perhaps nowhere stronger than with regard to bodies and corporeality, also because in terms of his own body, a complex scenario exists. Paul described his body variously as disabled in the sense of weak (2 Cor. 10:10), ailing (Gal. 4:13–15), afflicted (12:7b–10); as marked (Phil. 3:5, Gal. 6:17); as enslaved (Gal. 1:10, Phil. 1:1, Rom. 1:1, 1 Cor. 9:19, 2 Cor. 4:5); and as maternal (1 Thess. 2:7b–8 [nursing], 1 Cor. 3:1–3 [feeding], Gal. 4:19 [bearing]).

Considering gendered embodiment in Paul holds promise for theological reflection in general, and in particular for socially engaged theology. Rather than strengthening socio-political responsibility, the anti-corporeal Pauline traditional readings have worked in favour of a world-alienated(-ing) theological approach, energetically focussed on matters eschatological and devoid from corporeal and material exigencies which were relegated to the all-consuming, other-worldly salvation and its consequences. A focus on the embodied approach of Paul – notwithstanding certain Pauline corporeal sentiments and actions from which readers today would dissociate – allows for thinking about planetary engagements and contemporary deadly workings of power from a bodily perspective: “why and how it matters, interpersonally, personally, locally, nationally,

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<sup>7</sup> A whole range of publications can be listed here, but good summaries of interpretive trends in Pauline interpretation can be found in more comprehensive multi- and single-author volumes (e.g., Babcock 1990; Beker 1991; Elliott 1994; Harrill 2012; Horsley 1995). “Paul” is shorthand for the Pauline letters and at times for the traditions dependent upon and developing out of, or better, with reference to these letters.

<sup>8</sup> More in terms of a circularity than a reciprocity, perhaps, claims about the author and his writings tend to impact the overall interpretive framework for the corpus, and the other way round. The Pauline letter collection and its history of interpretation often get to determine those (theological) hermeneutical patterns considered appropriate for interpreting the letters.

<sup>9</sup> And of course, as much as a certain perceptions and portrayals of Paul, in the sense of apostle or corpus of letters or both, determine Pauline interpretation in direction, nature and substance, so too does hermeneutical theory and stance produce a certain rendering of Paul, his letters and their interpretive tradition.

globally, and, always, politically that bodies are performative, excessive, and ontologically (in)secure, coming to be known and to function simultaneously as individual bodies and (body) parts of the lively collective body politic and feeling their way within a blatantly local-global necropolitical landscape” (Purnell 2021:1).<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps, then, amidst the ambiguity that characterises the Pauline letters, all the more so if the deutero-Pauline letters are added, it is not surprising to find a Pauline reception history that at once has solidified a specific (anti-Jewish, universalist, otherworldly pietist, etc) tradition, mollycoddling over tensions and difficulties in the Pauline corpus itself.<sup>11</sup> However, Pauline rhetoric, especially when read in its socio-historical context, is strongly related to embodiment, often in gendered perspective, and shows these letters in a different light, with various intersectionalities, explicit as well as covert and assumed.<sup>12</sup> Retaining focus on the rhetoric of his letters rather than on secondary, confessionally driven constructions of the historical Paul makes room to move beyond theology-exclusive or solipsistic theological readings, beyond the often treasured eschatological-apocalyptic focus or point of orientation.

### **Pauline bodies**

Some Pauline letters very explicitly address everyday or, so to speak, body-related concerns, often indicated in translated Bibles’ headings, as well as in commentaries as practical concerns or similar matters. However, the overall relative scarcity of images related to the contemporary world, or the few explicit references to the natural world (e.g., Rom. 8), combined with past theological interpretive frameworks with their emphasis on eschatology and dogmatically framed concerns with spiritual salvation and the hereafter, have presented or posited the Pauline letters as disinterested with contemporary, everyday concerns. These and related topics and their particular framings have imposed an otherworldliness on the Pauline corpus, but perhaps none more so than on the portrayal of corporeality or bodiliness in these letters. The neglect of Pauline sentiments of the body, or better, bodies is particularly telling in the Anthropocene age, characterised as it is by human activity as the dominant global influence on the environment and climate. Corporeality is not a concern in Pauline studies only, as we are reminded of challenges to liberal humanism’s trumpeting of the human mind, for which the body is the mere vehicle, such as by “the posthuman nomadic subject [which] is materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded” (Braidotti 2013:188).

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<sup>10</sup> Power in the postcolony, in itself a “terror formation”, can be described as necropolitics, as “it makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective” (Mbembe 2003:12). Using Fanon’s work, Mbembe (2001:25–35) suggests that people-classifying exercising of power takes the form of commandment as it incorporates the colonisation of its subjects into its murderous projects of conquest in the colony, and the new, contemporary “governmentality” is “more tragic because more extreme” (Mbembe 2019:86).

<sup>11</sup> For an appreciation of Paul’s Jewishness in person, letter content and context, see the essays in Segovia and Boccaccini (2016).

<sup>12</sup> Challenging identity politics, intersectionality maps out how especially gender, race and class in different ways have been involved in discrimination. The realisation that these notions intersect, both in coalescing but also in diverting from each other, allows for significant criss-crossing reconfigurations of gender, race and class (Crenshaw 1991:1241–99). More broadly, intersectionality allows one to account for subjectivity through “multiplicative” vectors at the nexus of inequality, such as class, status, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race and religion (Nash 2008:1–15). The vectors are multiplicative in the sense of being mutually reinforcing, since they are not merely accumulative, not simply adding to the marginalisation but also in the sense that each intensifies the effects of the others (Friesen 2014:209).

Recognising the central role of bodies in the Pauline letters may sound symptomatic of the Anthropocene itself but trying to shun corporeality is impossible and counterproductive.

“Try as we might to rid ourselves of it, in the end everything brings us back to the body. We tried to graft it onto other media, to turn it into an object body, a machine body, a digital body, an ontophanic body. It returns to us now as a horrifying, giant mandible, a vehicle for contamination, a vector for pollen, spores, and mold” (Mbembe 2020).

Not only has and will corporeality be part of life, human and otherwise, the Pauline letters do not show glorifying or self-righteous stances towards bodies. To the contrary, Paul’s self-reflection appears to be decidedly anti-narcissist, associating himself with Jesus’ crucified body (1 Thess. 2, Phil. 3, 1 Cor. 2), fleshly weakened (Gal. 4:13) and stigmatically scarred (Gal. 6:17), and describing himself even with trauma-filled, body-defiling and unmasculine traits (2 Cor. 10–13).<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to a(anti-)corporeal Pauline traditions, Pauline rhetoric, especially when read in socio-historical context, involve and at times are even based on embodiment, often in gendered perspective<sup>14</sup> – not unlike the biblical tradition generally: “The Christian Scriptures naturally have embodiment at their heart” (Isherwood and Stuart 1998:11). Alertness to the rhetoric (and theology) of embodiment shows the Pauline letters in a different light, with strong inter-personal, communal, and terrestrial intersectionality – explicit as well as covert and assumed. If gender studies taught us nothing else, scholars today generally acknowledge the constructed nature of embodiment, and thus the need to move beyond essentialist simplicities in order to understand gendered, sexual, and embodied subjectivity as “a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint” (Butler 2004:1, 15). Gender is a cultural and ideological category, not a biological given, and as a socio-political construction, ascribes meaning and inscribes power.<sup>15</sup> Texts, together with their specific subjects, are situated discourses (Robbins 1997:24, 29), and by ascribing gender they assign bodies socio-political relations and construct bodies through language (e.g., Laqueur 1990). In Paul’s letters, bodies are profiled in at least three levels.

### ***Inter-personal intersectionality***

Paul’s use of the body as a metaphor to describe the life of Christian communities (Gager 1982:350) attests to his concern with the body. His “in-Christ” terminology is a vital part of his argument on linguistic, theological and rhetorical levels (Lategan 1991).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> However, situating these discourses in the First-Century Mediterranean world shows also the intrusion and at times prevalence of mimetic politics (Castelli 1991) and rhetorical manipulation (Marchal 2020) when it comes to bodily existence.

<sup>14</sup> Perhaps, given the Hellenistic world’s concern for “knowing yourself”, the intra-personal or simply personal is not to be underestimated in its significance for personhood.

<sup>15</sup> And as is inevitably the case when bodies are involved, even if gender is performativity and neither inherent nor to be summarily read off bodies, real-life bodies are gendered bodies.

<sup>16</sup> “Paul’s vision of ‘identity in Christ’ is one that is embodied and ritually performed: by doing certain things and by not doing them, and also by understanding the things that are being done (e.g., circumcision) in a particular way, specifically in relation to the activity of Christ in the Spirit. Ritual failure, initially sparked by

Sometimes the focus is on the body of Christ, presented as exemplary and even regulatory: “The excessively dominant and in that sense ‘elitist’ behaviour of certain Corinthian Christ devotees is curtailed by means of an appeal to the body of Christ: that body and its behaviour (self-giving; pro-existence) are normative, not the maintenance of gendered social hierarchies in the community” (Smit 2019:17). The Pauline letters, however, do not elaborate on corporeality or personhood as such and present no somatology or anthropology, much to the disappointment of some. Even regarding Rom. 7, there is little consensus about the identity, agency, motives, or context of the ἐγὼ in question. Paul’s embodied approach emerges clearly in inter-personal matters, even if not always by invoking the body of Christ.

In Paul’s bodily-busy world, inter-personal relationships feature in vital ways, and two such sets stand out: family notions and fraternity. Paul’s employment of sibling terminology resembled patterns common among contemporary authors, including the Qumran texts, 4 Maccabees, Hierocles, Valerius Maximus, and in particular, Plutarch and his essay *περὶ φιλαδελφίας*<sup>17</sup> (Aasgaard 2002). While early Jesus follower groups were often portrayed as family in the New Testament, it was not an exclusive designation, as they sometimes were attributed other identities, including holy community, group of special philosophers or unique people (see for example Van Henten 2000). In the undisputed Pauline epistles, too, early Jesus followers are portrayed in different ways,<sup>18</sup> and in some letters the one-body-with-many-parts metaphor (e.g. Rom. 12:4–5; 1 Cor. 12–14) is particularly prominent. The use of fraternal language is particularly pervasive in the Pauline letters, attested to by the hundred appearances of the ἀδελφ-lemma in the seven authentic letters (e.g., Aasgaard 2004:2–22; Bartchy 1999:70; Horrell 2001:311).<sup>19</sup> Word studies with a focus on lexicographical markers, such as the ἀδελφ-lemma, are borne out by corresponding cognate notions and the socio-cultural embeddedness of words. Paul’s fraternal language, while not evoking equality, was focussed on concerns about unity and harmony (Osiek 2009:147; see Aasgaard 2004:75–79, 108–16), but so too, did an appeal to “universal brotherhood” play a role in how Paul exercised authority and control (see Telbe 2008:133–34). In the end, it was the embodied persons in the Pauline communities that drove the family and fraternal language, and construction of social roles.

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Paul’s encounter with Christ in the Spirit, and which gave rise to ritual negotiation and innovation, became the catalyst for the development of Paul’s embodied theology, and for what he perceives to be the theologically and ritually appropriate way of performing identity in Christ” (Smit 2017:96)

- <sup>17</sup> Plutarch aimed in the first seven chapters of his essay on brotherly love to show that it is in accordance with nature. In the next eleven chapters (9–19) he prescribes proper conduct between brothers in four scenarios: while the parents are alive; when they are dead; when the brother is the inferior one; and when he is the superior one. He also treated some reasons for quarrels and the treatment thereof. He concluded his essay (20–21) with some congenial accounts of affection for brothers’ children.
- <sup>18</sup> “For Paul the church was a family” (Hellerman 2009:16), but not only a family. Other metaphors include, e.g., the believers as God’s “building” (οἰκοδομή) and “[cultivated] field” (γεώργιον, 1 Cor. 3:9).
- <sup>19</sup> Although brother- and sister-terms occur throughout the NT, it is only in the letters of 1 John (2:9, 10; 3:10, 12, 13, 15, 17; 4:20, 21; 5:16) and James (1:2, 9, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14, 15; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19) that similar frequent use of metaphorical or symbolic sibling language occurs. Scholars contend that Paul’s use of sibling language is more varied than even those of 1 Jn or Jas (see e.g., Aasgaard 2002:517) and that no contemporary extra-biblical author used metaphorical sibling language to the extent and with the variety that Paul did in his letters (Schäfer 1989:135; cf. Harland 2005).

### ***Communal intersectionality***

Earlier remarks already alluded to Paul's understanding of the community as body. Recently, scholars have demonstrated also how early Jesus-follower rituals were intellectualised or taken up into reflecting doctrinal positions and confessional lines of faith, which meant that the vitality and embodied nature of a notion such as circumcision were neglected or even ignored. If in Corinthians Paul's concerns about circumcision are less about theological concepts or symbols and more about lived, embodied identity (Smit 2017:91), the focus shifts from the intellectual to the corporeal, even from the personalised to the communal, and negotiating and performing identity as a group or community.<sup>20</sup> The communal setting shows up the gendered Pauline body but also the trend towards emulating a greater masculinity, enhanced by Paul's preference for celibacy and virginity (1 Cor. 7), a trend which lasted well into the second century CE, when women were urged to reject culturally prescribed roles (cf 1 Tim. 5:3–16). The ambiguities that saw women emboldened by masculinity appear to have led to a sense of invulnerability to hostile spiritual forces (1 Cor. 11:2–16) and engaging in public roles reserved for men (14:34–35), and saw Paul invoking counter-mechanisms for a situation to which he probably contributed. The masculinisation of the Corinthian congregation is suggested in the community's claims to authority (4:6), wisdom, strength and honour (4:10); freedom (9:1); and knowledge (8:1) (see Punt 2010).<sup>21</sup>

Where it concerns bodies in communal contexts, Paul's position also comes up for scrutiny, in particular for how he stigmatised sexually dissident bodies. "Paul projects his own abjection and stigmatization as being 'feminine' and 'morally corrupt' onto women and other sexual dissidents" (Liew 2008:95). While Paul on the one hand worked against exclusion and marginalisation and welcomed people into the Corinthian community, he on the other hand complacently confirmed and actively replicated and reinforced colonial structures of Othering through vilification.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Terrestrial intersectionality***

Unlike the extra-terrestrial, Pauline bodies are most neglected when it comes to the terrestrial. His apocalyptic optic challenged his contemporary world and its values from the position that creation presupposes God's responsibility for and ultimate rule of the

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<sup>20</sup> "The stress on circumcision as the definitive marker of Jewish identity in antiquity is much more the result of distinctly Christian interpretations than the lively and long-lasting discussions about the meanings and practices of Judaism(s) among Jews. Historically, this stress is more characteristic of manifestly anti-Jewish polemics, starting with Justin Martyr and influencing figures like Augustine and Martin Luther, each building their claims on Pauline argumentation" (Marchal 2020:95).

<sup>21</sup> "[B]y intentionally looking for bodiliness, it becomes possible to see how physical experiences (hunger, drunkenness – also weakness, illness and death) are a source of and a starting point for Paul's theology. ... The dimension of bodiliness did not only appear to be the starting point of Paul's thinking, but also an important aspect of his strategy for reordering the gathering of the Corinthian community" (Smit 2019:16; see also Punt 2005).

<sup>22</sup> "Paul greatly compromises his resistance against colonization and racialization. He has, in a sense, himself become those who oppress him or what he hates. He is building community on the backs of those whom 'everyone' can agree to marginalize and stigmatize" (Liew 2008:95). And, "...the abjection and stigmatization of colonized people does not prevent these kinds of arguments; rather, their colonized mindset explains how people like Paul would duplicate and displace Roman imperial figurations of sexually barbaric Others, away from themselves and onto their own Others. This explains, without excusing, the redeployment of various figures of vilification in Paul's letters" (Marchal 2020:192).

world (Wright 2005:70). However, it is significant that he expressed his future hope in Romans 8:18–30 for a restored creation in bodily terms as τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν τοῦ σώματος ἡμῶν (the redemption of our body, Rom 8:23).<sup>23</sup> Describing the turn-around of the cosmos in bodily terms shows the extent to which he contemplated the body as the means for communicating and interacting in the world. In Paul’s understanding, bodies are not omitted from the change-over, which makes it impossible to see the change-over as implying any disparaging of the body. As probably hinted at by the singular use of the noun, Paul’s hope was neither for redemption from the body nor for an individualistic notion of detachment from the corruptibility of the current world. It reminds of the posthuman sentiment: “The ethical imagination is alive and well in posthuman subjects, in the form of ontological relationality. A sustainable ethics for non-unitary subjects rests on an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the nonhuman or ‘earth’ others, by removing the obstacle of selfcentred individualism on the one hand and the barriers of negativity on the other” (Braidotti 2013:190). Paul’s hope for the new creation was “for a socially transformed corporeality within the context of a transformed creation that is no longer subject to ‘corruption’” (Jewett 2004:45). Giving fuller meaning to bodily existence in future expectation, Paul also bestowed a specific identity upon the followers of Christ. By the use of a Roman military term (ἀπολύτρωσις) that denoted the liberation of captives or prisoners of war by either victory or the payment of a ransom, people of status and means are implied.<sup>24</sup> Amidst the ambiguous discomfort of the current existence of the latter, issued in by an apocalyptic mindset, Pauline rhetoric rests on the corporeal, also in his understanding of the terrestrial (Jewett 2004:45; cf Keesmaat 1999:97–135; Westerholm 1997:94–100).

### **Lingering challenges and concerns**

Much more can be argued for the Pauline letters’ concern with inter-personal, communal, and terrestrial embodiment. What is clear is that in the age of necropolitics in its double sense of meaning – sovereignty that resides in the power to “dictate who may live and who must die”, and necropolitics as “generalized instrumentalization of human existence” and “material destruction of bodies and populations” (Mbembe 2003:11, 14) – rethinking Pauline bodies raises challenges and concerns. While the use of body as metaphor shows the importance of bodiliness in Pauline thought, and for his body theology, to what extent did the metaphorical body contribute to the neglect and disavowal of the real-life body in later Christian tradition, and to this day? (see Punt 2010).<sup>25</sup> Particularly in a time when not only life but also death is in danger of losing its

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<sup>23</sup> With first-century belief in Christ framed in bodily terms, Jude even urged “control of the body as an indication of orthodox theology” (Neyrey 1996:100), although this may verge on too linear a relationship between the two and not admitting fully to the reciprocal relationship between moral injunctions and faith.

<sup>24</sup> “Given the presumption of powerlessness on the part of the underclass represented by most of the Roman house and tenement churches in a dictatorial society, such prospects [sc the ultimate restoration of creation] would have appeared grandiose and unrealistic if undertaken without the foundation of eschatological hope” (Jewett 2004:46). Some centuries earlier, during the Maccabean period and in response to their plight and suffering, the apocalyptic approach set in among Second Temple Jews. Soon bodily resurrection, in addition to having become a quintessentially Jewish notion by the first century, came to serve the further purpose of distinguishing between the oppressed and the oppressors (Segal 2004:269).

<sup>25</sup> Ironically, for all Paul’s agitation against a focus on fleshiness, his argument is driven exactly by his emphasis on a fleshly practice. “...flesh is tainted by its association with desire, weakness, enslavement, inferiority, or, in short, the feminine, all qualities that the eunuch figure potently signifies for elite Roman imperial males.

meaning: “In a society preoccupied with accelerated accumulation and rampageous consumption, death has no value as it can be neither accumulated nor consumed” (Lushetich 2018:1). As new forms of cosmopolitan neo-humanism emerge from post-colonial and race studies, as well as gender analysis and environmentalism, the (what some are calling) posthuman condition raises the challenge of working towards new social bonding and community building, while pursuing sustainability and empowerment. As one scholar has argued, “Far from being a flight from the real, posthuman thought inscribes the contemporary subject in the conditions of its own historicity” (Braidotti 2013:189).<sup>26</sup>

Androcentrism and male bias, while neither unknown nor unrelated to the Roman imperial, Hellenistic or Jewish cultural contexts of the First-Century CE context, cannot simplistically be disentangled from Paul, nor from Christian traditions through which such bias was refracted over many centuries. Ancient bodies were at best of times characterised by ambivalence, and even more so or with higher stakes, the bodies of men being ambiguous in ancient masculinity (see e.g., Martin 2001). Bodies are gendered, and as much as gender may be undone today (Butler 2004), its persistence with regard to bodies has become, if anything, more pronounced if inevitably performative. While Paul’s instructions in his letters may be read as focussed on discipline and order, even kerygmatically so, or with evangelising motives, his masculinity inevitably remained in play, and the extent to which it was structured or modified to accord not only with the characteristics of Christ’s self-giving body but also with a subverted hierarchy, remains a moot point.<sup>27</sup>

How do we deal with Pauline bodies and the appeal of (even) appalling bodies (Marchal 2020)? The mind-body dualism that has bedeviled Pauline bodies seems to have been built upon a foundationalist philosophy of meaning, which inscribed people in essentialist categories, even if ironically ascribing permanence to the transcendental mind which replaces the bodily as the basis for immanence. Body is relegated to secondary status and an inferior role, in contrast to the notion of person that is given substantial meaning based on its assumed unchanging consciousness. Human consciousness rather than the body gives stability, calling forth also its corollaries, namely closure and immutability, in the continuing essentialist understanding of personhood. Mind-body dualism works hand in hand with other dualisms, such as essential-peripheral, real-illusionary, necessary-contingent, created and nurtured, rational-emotional, reason-passion and so forth. Mind-body dualism is implicated in the

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The vilification is ironic, considering Paul’s particular focus on the phallic flesh of the foreskinned males in the community” (Marchal 2020:102).

<sup>26</sup> Contemporary manifestations of neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism require transnational frameworks that foreground questions of colonialism, political economy, and racial formation. The heteronormative regulatory practices of modern state formations require scrutiny through reconceptualising modernity, and gender theoretical investigation of the spiritual dimensions of experience and the meaning of sacred subjectivity (Alexander 2005).

<sup>27</sup> “The body of Christ, as the body of the *κύριος*, occupies the ‘top’ position and all other bodies need to submit to it and align their behavior with the demands of this body. Whereas this could be the simple replacement of one kind of (masculine) ‘top dog’ with another, the characteristics of Christ’s body, i.e., the manner in which it performs being this body, prevents this: the salvifically self-giving character of this body does not position it at the top of the hierarchy, but also subverts the structure of this hierarchy: control over others is no longer decisive, but instead self-giving (with implied self-control) is” (Smit 2019:17).

hierarchy of gender, related to the dualisms of culture-nature, public-private and so on (J. N. Vorster 2000:105–7).<sup>28</sup>

Have Protestant Reformed traditions with their strong modernist influences of a strong introspective conscience (Stendahl) with its ideological-intellectual underpinnings of universalism, objectivity and neutrality not been so conventionalised, normalised indeed, that hermeneutical frameworks have become warped? Has the emphasis on sinfulness disallowed perception of the good in the world? Has criticism of homelessness, poverty and famine come from positions of comfort and surplus? Frowning on non-conforming gender and sexuality, ostensibly in the interest of families and children? One scholar recently asked, “the question for me is not whether the biblical can be used in arguments about bodies, but how could the biblical still be engaged and used to counter the stigmatizing and dehumanizing treatment of intersex people beyond rather fraught processes of identification”? (Marchal 2020:111).

While a hermeneutical approach so theologically laden that texts become substantiation for positions, overtly or otherwise, is best avoided, it does not imply the denial of a theological thrust in the Pauline letters. Resisting or rethinking theological tradition does not imply total denunciation of past efforts nor unbridled optimism for current or future interpretive work. It does, however, mean a break with biblical studies’ emphasis on meaning rather than meaning-making, which all too often still is the driving force, even if subtly or covertly so, in search of the hidden semantic value of words, only but so definitely recoverable through intensive decoding.<sup>29</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Is it useful to invoke the Anthropocene in contexts where it resonates as an ideologically purposed notion rather than as an ethically connected concept able to expose and raise consciousness? Life in the Anthropocene does not imply a disregard for human bodily existence or embodied humans. Since power is produced and exercised in an embodied form, and seeing that power is above all tangible (Mbembe 2001:166–67),<sup>30</sup> in our day and age where necropolitics shapes the conditions “for the acceptability of putting to death” (Mbembe 2003:17, referring to Foucault), embodiment’s significance cannot be seen as simplistic affirmation of the Anthropocene – even if a necessary effect of it. A young 21-year-old, transgender man Moss Blomerus recently remarked: “I was like, ‘I like my body, this is a nice body, but why do I hate it so much?’” (Hako 2021). Too often in the past, Paul and the human body in all its ambivalence were juxtaposed only in as far as the corporeal could (and from such readings, should) be criticised, demeaned, and preferably eschewed, and materialist existence relativised for selfish reasons. The body, in as far as it retained a presence, was (a necessary) evil, only to be corrupted further by a corrupted world. The persistence over many years of a disembodied perspective at best

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<sup>28</sup> See also Vorster’s other important studies on gendered embodiment (Vorster 2002; 2011; 2014).

<sup>29</sup> “[T]he etymological conviction, still regnant, that there is something of surpassing value hidden ‘beneath’ the words, a something that is essential, as opposed to the verbally accidental, and that may be uncovered only by decipherment” (e.g., Smith 2001:134). In fact, some scholars have also pointed out that, unlike meaning often implying finality (à la Foucault), the problem of meaning-making may be a more interesting focus than meaning (McCutcheon 2003:28).

<sup>30</sup> “In the postcolony, touching one’s subjects takes multiple forms, from the ceremonial of punishment and forced labor to everyday forms of torture, harassment, fatigue, and execution” (Mbembe 2001:166–67).

and at worst an anti-body view on the Pauline letters, and what some call Pauline theology, ironically supported and fomented an anthropocentric, cosmo-abusive theology. Reassessment of gendered embodiment in Paul holds promise for theological reflection from biblical perspectives in general, and in particular, for socially engaged theology in (relation to) the Anthropocene.

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