Paul, Imprisonment and Crisis: Crisis and its Negotiation as a Lens for Reading Philippians

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Abstract
COVID-19 has stimulated reflections on crisis as a catalyst for interpretation in both the present and the past. This article reads Philippians as embedded in different forms of crisis, most specifically the negotiation of Paul’s own context of crisis: his imprisonment. The bodily, social and spiritual dimensions of this liminal incarceration experience are here set out and the ways in which these influence the fulfilment of mission within the epistle are outlined.

Keywords
Paul, Philippians, imprisonment, crisis, COVID-19, body

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is a text born out of crises and embedded in the context of overarching crises. Paul is in a crisis situation due to his imprisonment, the Philippian community is in crisis due to internal strife and external pressures, while the past and future of both Paul and the Philippians is determined by, on the one hand, the crisis of the crucifixion and, on the other hand, the crisis of the upcoming eschaton. The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing humanitarian and political crises worldwide, as well as the political crisis due to racism in the USA (with its global repercussions), heighten exegetical sensitivity to the topic of crisis. This article proceeds to explore how especially the crisis caused by imprisonment plays a role in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, how this situation

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is presented and how it is negotiated. In doing so, the letter is discussed in relation to its ancient context (particularly regarding imprisonment), and attention is given to the urgency of the topics addressed in the letter and the situations (of Paul and the Philippians) to which it belongs. Crisis thus serves as a heuristic tool for the exegesis of the letter, and what follows can be understood as a heuristic experiment with this tool, in part following David Horrell’s lead arguing that the context of crisis functions as a catalyst for (contextual) reinterpretation of classics (Horrell 2010: 3-30); the focus on Philippians also serves to broaden the perspective on ‘crisis’ in the Pauline epistles, given that much attention has, so far, been given to the ‘Galatian crisis’, but other texts have not been addressed through this lens as much. Particular attention will be given to the body as the site in which a crisis are played out; this is done due to a general lack of attention to physicality in New Testament exegesis, also when it comes to discussing crisis, and we wish to draw attention to precisely this dimension of crisis in the context of both the global COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict concerning racism.

In doing so, we understand crisis as an emergency situation in which the functioning of a system (of whatever kind) is seriously disturbed, resulting in insubstantial uncertainty as to the outcome of the situation. This uncertainty leads to pressure on, and a sense of urgency for, those needing to position themselves in the context of this situation, given that the situation is experienced as being decisive for the future – emotions associated with crisis range from anger to acceptance, from joy to depression. A crisis can, accordingly, also be described as a

1. In this sense, the present contribution has an approach akin to that of Cassidy (2001), when he stresses that he focuses on ‘select aspects of Roman imprisonment with the objective of engendering a basic appreciation for what Roman imprisonment could involve’ (p. 36; emphasis in original). Also, the paper lives up to the demand made by Heike Omerzu 2015: 176: ‘In jedem Fall sollte aber die Tatsache, dass Paulus den Philippberbrief als Häftling geschrieben hat, bei jedem Interpretationsversuch bedacht sein.’ Here, this is pushed a little further than in the case of Omerzu by taking into account more or less typical circumstances of imprisonment in antiquity.

2. Horrell refers to Käsemann’s statement ‘whenever he [the real Paul] is rediscovered – which happens almost exclusively in times of crisis – there issues from him explosive power’ (without precise reference, Horrell 2010: 4). Another example would be Cruz-Villalobos 2020, which appeared too late to be taken into account here.

3. Illustratively, in Sim and Allen 2014, a chapter is dedicated to Galatians, but not to Philippians. In addition, in ‘Galatian studies’, the term ‘crisis’ is often used in a very loose sense in appertaining studies; a study such as Wilson 2007, uses the term prominently, but does not define it; for an exception, see Livesey 2016.

4. In a way, this amounts to proposing a further ‘model’ for understanding Philippians, which is, as Schliesser also intimates, a question of contextuality and, to a certain extent, of ‘fashion’ (2015: 33-120).

5. In Sim and Allen 2014, for instance, the body plays a very minor role. This is different in Cruz-Villalobos 2020.

6. For coping with trauma in the sense of a crisis situation in contemporary theory and Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, in which these themes are highlighted, see Cruz-Villalobos 2020.
situation characterized by liminality, in which persons, groups and institutions have been separated from their pre-liminal security and have not yet become assimilated into a new, more or less stable situation. Naturally, given the lack of information as to Paul’s imprisonments in general and the one that resulted in authoring his letter to the Philippians in particular, our undertaking in this article involves some creativity and imagination, however, as has been shown by, for example, Peter Oakes in his attempt to relate Romans to the concrete physical and social circumstances prevalent in Pompeii (Oakes 2013: 145). Precisely such an approach can make a heuristic contribution to illuminating our understanding of how an ancient text may have been tied to its context.

Given the limited space permitted by an article, this contribution will focus on aspects of selected pericopes from Philippians, namely Phil. 1 (in connection with the hymn in Phil. 2.5-11) and Phil. 3, as they contain topics that can be well related to the conditions of imprisonment, such as death (possibly suicide), honor and shame, as well as dirt(iness) and loss. Not all aspects of Paul’s negotiation of the crisis in which he finds himself can be discussed here; it would have been interesting, for instance, to pay more attention to the strategy of delegation that Paul employs with the aid of Timothy and, later, with regard to Epaphroditus, sending at least one aliis Paulus and maybe two aliis Pauli to Philippi (see Kensky 2014: 35-67) and thereby transcending the boundaries of his imprisonment. The crisis in which the Philippian community seems to find itself, at least according to Paul, will also have to be left out of consideration here, as will all the other reasons that Paul had for writing his letter (Cassidy 2001: 164-67). Yet, it has been convincingly argued that the negotiation of his situation affects virtually all aspects of the letter (Cassidy 2001: 168).

Having outlined the focus of this article, we will begin with a consideration of the definition of ‘crisis’, and a review of pertinent aspects of imprisonment in Antiquity, before discussing selected passages from Philippians. The selected passages are: (a) the letter as a whole, considered in relation to the question of letter-writing in prison, (b) Paul’s negotiation of being ‘in chains’ in ch. 1, including his reflection on being released or being convicted, and (c) his autobiographical exposé in ch. 3. Other texts could also have been discussed, such as his reflection on autarky in Phil. 4.11-13 (and the negotiation of the Philippians’ support in 4.10-20 at large), but the character of this article as a heuristic experiment legitimates focusing on a few texts only.

7. The ‘already-not yet’ situation of early Christianity in general can, of course, be characterized as ‘liminal’, as can a situation such as the Galatian crisis (however defined or understood); e.g. Wilson draws on both kinds of liminality when discussing the Galatian situation (Wilson 2004: 550-71).
Crisis as a Lens: Towards a Definition

When considering Paul’s letter to the Philippians from the vantage point of crisis, it is possible to use a contemporary understanding of crisis, quite apart from the terminology and conceptuality of Antiquity (a modern understanding of history was equally absent in Antiquity, for instance). In this manner, i.e., by using one clear definition, we hope to avoid the confusion that sometimes surrounds the term – as has occurred, for instance, in classical studies (Dey 2009: 643-47) – and to make the heuristics of this essay as transparent as possible.

A promising understanding of crisis, which is both theoretically sound and compatible with what has been proposed so far in the fields of ancient history and early Christianity, can be found in the field of disaster studies and public administration. Following the lead of this field, crisis can be defined as ‘a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making vital decisions’ (Rosenthal, Charles and ’t Hart 1989: 10).

As they note, this definition can cover ‘a wide variety of adversity’; here, the attempt will be made to also understand Paul and ‘his’ Philippians from this vantage point. Boin and ’t Hart note further that all the various situations covered by this definition ‘create impossible conditions for those who seek to manage the response operation and have to make urgent decisions while essential information about causes and consequences remains unavailable’ (Boin and ’t Hart 2018: 43). Key components of a crisis are, accordingly, threat, uncertainty and urgency. Leaders ought to respond to this, as Boin and ’t Hart outline, by sense making, (critical) decision making, meaning making, the solution (or termination) of the crisis and learning from a crisis (Boin and ’t Hart 2018: 43). These are, of course, only broad contours, which can be refined. Yet, the current exegetical experiment will take this understanding of crisis as its point of departure. In doing so, we note the compatibility of this understanding of crisis with, for instance, that of ancient historian Wolf Liebeschuetz; he favors an understanding of crisis as a situation of drastic deterioration of (social and political) circumstances and argues that this was the case in the third century in the Roman Empire (Liebeschuetz 2015: 19-28). Similarly, the understandings of crises in the work on early Jewish and Christian crisis management edited by David Sim and Pauline Allen (2014), fits this definition well, as does the understanding of crisis in Nina Livesey’s study (2016) of the ‘rhetoric of crisis’ in Galatians that follows the earlier approach of Cecil Wooten to Cicero’s Philippics (Wooten 1983).

Impressions of Imprisonment as Crisis

As outlined above, we take Paul’s imprisonment here as the key factor in the crisis he is experiencing when writing Philippians. While the exact conditions under which Paul was kept as a prisoner are obviously unknown, it makes sense
to start with a general impression of what imprisonment was like according to ancient sources, especially in its effects on bodies. Scholars have generally imagined Paul to have lived under more privileged circumstances, as we will discuss below, but there is no a priori reason to assume he would not have experienced the prison environment that most of our evidence indicates was typical. In other words, we intentionally consider Paul as a relatively average prisoner and seek to avoid either being drawn in by his rhetorical negotiation of his situation or a projection of his Roman house arrest (Acts 28) onto his situation when writing Philippians.8 This has consequences for the perception of imprisonment: while the idea of Paul’s imprisonment may evoke Rembrandtesque images of a man sitting in lonely contemplation, the reality of confinement would more likely have been heat, foul air, noise and filth, along with shackles, darkness, hunger, thirst, illness and lack of sleep (Krause 1996: 271-88; Cassidy 2001: 36-54; Robinson 2007: 113; Standhartinger 2015:107-40, 108-24; Wansink 1996: 37). Ancient prison, similar to experiences of lockdown or sheltering in place for many people recently, meant a throng of bodies in close proximity.9 Unlike contemporary prisons, an ancient prison was generally not meant for custodial sentences, but was rather a holding place where people were forced to await their judgment and sentencing, so that they could be swiftly produced when needed, without being able to escape.10 This was most likely the circumstance of Paul’s imprisonment while he was writing to the Philippians, since he is waiting ‘in chains’ to find out what will happen to him.11 Rather than a prison term, sentences usually consisted

8. This, naturally, also means that we do not read Philippians as having been written from Rome. A recent and convincing discussion of this position hinges on the reference to the ‘praetorium’ in Phil. 1.13 and comes down in favor of a location in (the Roman province of) Asia, possibly Ephesus (Flexenhar 2019: 18-45). Flexenhar also stresses that a conflation of Phil. 1 and Acts 28 has dire hermeneutical consequences for the interpretation of the circumstances of Paul’s imprisonment. This, unfortunately, affects many interpretations of the imprisonment out of which Paul penned his Philippian epistle, including Cassidy 2001: 190-210 (for his argument for a Roman imprisonment, see 2001: 124-44).

9. Cassidy helpfully distinguishes between three types of imprisonment: ‘carcer’, ‘custodia militaris’ and ‘custodia libera’; as the latter operated without chains, it is less likely to have been the kind of imprisonment at stake in Philippians; the penultimate form of custody was, as the name suggests, related to the military (and seems to have involved prisoners with elite status) (Cassidy 2001: 39). Only the first and most unpleasant kind of imprisonment remains as a plausible background for Paul’s incarceration, as it is the topic of this article.

10. Krause explains that people could still spend months or years in prison, because courts were overworked or could take a long time to gather information about cases. Prisoners are often described as wearing rags and having long unkempt hair, suggesting long imprisonment; see Krause 1996: 223-34; also Hillner 2015: 120.

11. For this reason, it might be preferable not to speak of Paul’s imprisonment, but of his being kept in custody, the term used for those detained prior to sentencing today – kind suggestion of Adrian Snijders, MA, LLM, lecturer of canon law at the Old Catholic Seminary, Utrecht.
of fines, corporal punishment, banishment, forced labor or the death penalty in various forms (Robinson 2007: 195). Also, the type of punishment allotted in Roman times depended more on a person’s social position than on the crime committed. As Matthew Larson notes, ‘bodies of elite persons were to be left whole and unbroken, bodies of persons of lower social status were not’ (Larsen 2019: 548). Against this background, the fact that Paul, a lower-class person, although not an enslaved person, is in prison is probably more important than the precise reason why, which is, in fact, something that Paul himself lets disappear behind the expression ἥστη τοὺς δεσμοὺς μου φανερω λὲν Χριστῷ γενέσθαι εν ὅλῳ τῷ πραιτωρίῳ (1.13): Paul may well wear his chains because of Christ, but this was probably not the wording of the accusation against him. All of this means that a prison is a place of uncertainty, a liminal space; how one will emerge out of it and what one’s destination will be is not clear.

During their confinement, prisoners could be tortured and maltreated in different ways, both by guards and by their fellow prisoners. Torture, including forms of food deprivation, isolation and continuous enchainment (Cassidy 2001: 43-47), was often used as a way to gain evidence and confessions, and to discover the involvement of other people in the criminal act. It was thus a common experience for those who were accused of a crime (Robinson 2007: 107). Since it inevitably led to physical vulnerability and loss of control, imprisonment was seen as deeply shameful and could be a taken as a reason for suicide (Wansink 1996: 48-60, 135). The experience was worsened by the fact that other prisoners often played a role as informer, even if only to alleviate their own upcoming sentence – no one could be trusted (Cassidy 2001: 47-48). Social precariousness was matched by physical vulnerability and was combined with the mental stress of uncertainty and humiliation.

Imprisonment in Antiquity would, therefore, certainly be a situation that matches the definition of crisis as outlined above, of a serious threat to structures, values and norms, which necessitates making vital decisions under uncertain circumstances and pressures of time (Rosenthal, Charles and ‘t Hart 1989: 10). Accordingly, mechanisms of meaning making are likely to be invoked to help negotiate and cope with this situation, which can be characterized as one of both loss of face and status and one of multi-layered uncertainty (e.g., the uncertainty of the sentence, the untrustworthiness of fellow prisoners, the continuous threat of deprivation and torture, etc.).

12. As Standhartinger (2015: 143) has it: ‘Ein Gerichtsprozess wird angedeutet, aber Anklage und Verlaufen hinter den schwer zu interpretierende Formulierungen: ἐν τῇ ἀπολογίᾳ καὶ βεβαιώσει τοῦ ἐυαγγελίου (1:7); ἐς προκοπὴν τοῦ ἐυαγγελίου (1:12); τοὺς δεσμοὺς μου φανερω λὲν Χριστῷ γενέσθαι ἐν ὅλῳ τῷ πραιτωρίῳ καὶ τοῖς λοιποῖς πᾶσιν (1:13) verborgen. Man behilft sich, indem man je nach Annahme des Haftortes in Ephesus, Caesarea oder Rom vermutet, Paulus sei wegen Aufruhrs in der Silberschmiede oder “der Juden” in Ephesus oder in Jerusalem verhaftet worden.’
The impact of imprisonment on those undergoing it is illustrated by the role of suicide in ancient prisons. In his study of prisons in the Roman Empire, Jens-Uwe Krause notes that many ancient sources discuss the suicide of prisoners, or of people anxious to avoid either prison, torture or sentencing because of the horrors awaiting them (Krause 1996: 302-303).

In many cases, prison was literally taken to be a fate worse than death. Suicide could present a way out that prevented further loss of honor, and members of the elite were sometimes allowed to choose to end their own life, rather than face punishment. Another reason for voluntary death, particularly for the wealthy, was to ensure that their children would legally inherit their property, which could be confiscated after sentencing (Krause 1996: 68). In some cases, guards were specifically tasked with preventing prisoners from taking their own life, because this was a known risk (Wansink 1996: 58). When Paul talks about choosing death, a topic to which we will return below, this is thus not surprising given his circumstances, and the willingness to do so could be seen as a strategy to preserve his honor.

That some people were reported to have committed suicide even after being released from prison is further evidence for the trauma associated with it (Wansink 1996: 59-60; Cassidy 2001: 53-54). This trauma may be further exacerbated by the fact that the violence and humiliation that accompanied imprisonment could also have a sexual component. Executioners could be ordered to rape convicted women, since female virgins were exempt by law from the death penalty. After their rape, the women could then be legally put to death.\(^\text{13}\) It seems unlikely that only women would have been the victims of sexual violence in prison, even though primary sources do not make the threat to male bodies explicit. Given the general discomfort with male physical vulnerability, it is perhaps unsurprising that scholarly literature is silent on this issue, with a few notable exceptions, none relating directly to Paul.\(^\text{14}\)

Against this background, it is easy to see how a situation of detention can be considered as a crisis, especially in the light of the aforementioned definition: it is a situation characterized by threat, uncertainty and urgency, in which it is necessary, especially for those who want to present themselves as leaders, to make decisions and respond to the situation at hand, even if key information concerning causes and effects is not available. As will be considered now, the study of Philippians from this perspective will show that Paul also responds to his situation by employing strategies that are recognizable as responses to crisis from the

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\(^{13}\) Cassius Dio describes the case of a daughter of a praetorian prefect under Tiberius (Roman History 58.11). Further sources are discussed by Wansink 1996: 56-57.

\(^{14}\) Tombs 1999: 89-109; Glancy 2005: 107-36. Both Krause and Wansink have a separate section on women in prison where they discuss sexual assault, but they do not extend this to men. See Krause 1996: 170-79; Wansink 1996: 55-58.
point of view of a contemporary (i.e., twenty-first-century) understanding of crisis: he engages in sense and meaning making, thereby presenting himself as a leader, and looks for resolutions to the crisis while weighing their pros and cons.

**Impressions of Pauline Imprisonment in Current Scholarship**

While scholarship on Philippians has devoted a great deal of energy attempting to determine in which city Paul was imprisoned, considerably less attention has been given to asking what his physical circumstances would most likely have been while in prison. The reasons for this lack of attention have recently been discussed by Angela Standhartinger in her analysis of Philippians as hidden transcript: exegetes have tended to draw their understanding of Paul’s imprisonment from Acts’ description of his respectful treatment by authorities and his house arrest (Acts 16:35-40; 23–24; 28:30) and have therefore imagined him as living under relatively benign conditions, his freedom of movement unimpeded and his dignity intact (Standhartinger 2015: 108-14). Acts, according to Standhartinger, ‘both places Paul’s imprisonments at the center of attention and at the same time systematically minimizes their effect on the apostle’ (Standhartinger 2015: 108), and much of scholarship has followed suit. Yet as Standhartinger rightly argues, this idea is implausible given that Paul was ‘a more or less ordinary provincial citizen with a manual occupation’ and not a member of the absolute elite, who could rely on their social standing not to be submitted to ordinary prison conditions (2015: 110). It moreover contradicts Paul’s own testimony to being in chains (Phil. 1:7, 13, 14, 17; also Phlm 10, 13) – a common shorthand for prison, which often involved being put in physical chains – as well as of beatings, imprisonments, sleepless nights and hunger (2 Cor 6.4-5, also 11.23-27; 12.10) (Wansink 1996: 46). Even Acts, although it makes a point of Paul’s treatment being incompatible with his status as a Roman citizen, describes him being stripped, beaten and put in the stocks in the inner prison, where conditions would have been worst (Acts 16.22-24).¹⁵

Most scholars accept that it is advisable to distinguish between the portrayal of Paul by Acts and his self-presentation in his letters, but this is even more important when it comes to his experience in prison: Acts and Paul’s letters each have a distinct strategy for dealing with the humiliating reality of Paul’s torture and imprisonment. While Acts acknowledges that Paul is beaten and sent to prison as any ordinary person in the Empire might be, this is presented as a breach of his rights as a Roman citizen. The people in positions of authority quickly attempt to redress Paul’s situation, once they discover his status. In this way, the instances where Paul appears to be physically violated and

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¹⁵. Exceptions to this rule exist, of course, such as the work of Cassidy (2001), yet it also serves to prove the rule that Standhartinger identified.
vulnerable become occasions for the author of Acts to show how well respected he actually is by those in power. It is worth noting here that Luke is the only gospel not to mention Jesus’ flogging by Roman soldiers. This omission can be taken as an indication that beating and physical humiliation at the hands of other men was in conflict with the image of Jesus that Luke wanted to portray. The same might apply for Paul. Since, in the case of Jesus, a similar strategy of appealing to citizenship would not have been available, not including any reference to his ordeal was apparently an acceptable solution, whether consciously chosen or not.

Like Acts, Paul also suggests that he impresses those around him while in prison, not through his citizenship but rather because of the power of his message. Paul’s letters make sense of his physical suffering by suggesting that this experience gives him credibility and by interpreting it in light of the suffering of Christ. Paul’s imprisonment is connected to the reversal of high and low positions which is characteristic of his thought and which is also used to give meaning to Jesus’ crucifixion. As we will discuss in more detail below, Paul’s meaning making relies on showing that his humiliating situation is voluntary and in line with the experience and expectation of Christ and therefore invites imitation by fellow believers.

These two different strategies employed by Acts and Paul confirm the humiliation attached to imprisonment in ancient eyes. Both Luke and Paul need to make sense of this somehow in order to preserve Paul’s authority and leadership. Unfortunately, the same tendency seems to play out in scholarship, where Paul is implicitly presented as having an elite body that remains whole and dignified. Paul’s physical vulnerability appears to be an unpleasant reality that interpreters often prefer to overlook or theologize, rather than take seriously as an experience that may have influenced his writing.

The Crisis of Writing in and from Prison

The physical reality of prison is thus not often considered in scholarship on Philippians or Paul more generally, with the exception of the work of Wansink, Cassidy and Standhartinger, discussed above. And while these authors do take these circumstances into account, they direct their attention specifically to what such circumstances mean for how Paul would be seen by his audience. As the title of her article indicates, Standhartinger (2015) asks what this letter from prison ‘Tells us about the people at Philippi’.

This focus makes sense, since it is possible to reconstruct Paul’s readers’ general understanding of prison with reasonable confidence. But we cannot with any certainty know what Paul’s own exact circumstances would have been. We can conclude from the argument above, however, that there is little reason to take as our interpretative starting point the fact that Paul would not
have been dictating this letter while experiencing some degree of physical danger or discomfort.

If we do assume that Paul was in a crowded prison cell, restrained by chains and under the control of prison guards, what does this mean for how we imagine the actual process of the writing of the letter? In itself, writing does not seem to have been an exceptional activity under these circumstances. There is evidence that people conducted business or wrote in prison, with Socrates being no doubt the most famous example (Wansink 1996: 68-69). Several ancient letters written by prisoners have survived, some asking for help or support, others requesting freedom. Writing letters would have required certain materials and, in some cases, the help of a scribe. Many sources attest to the possibility of visitors, who could bring food and other forms of comfort and support. According to Krause, it was a sign of added punishment or of the guards’ particular cruelty if a prisoner was not allowed to receive visits from family, friends and associates. Krause mentions ‘ein recht freier Besucherverkehr’ (Krause 1996: 288-89). Given the power of the guards, access to prisoners would sometimes have involved bribery, and some personal risk. There was always the possibility of being implicated in crimes for anyone who voluntarily entered a prison, or of confusion of identity (Wansink 1996: 83-84). Under conventional prison conditions, it is thus certainly possible that Paul could have been visited by a scribe on one or more occasions, who would have written down his words and made sure they reached an audience on the outside, even if this might have involved some degree of danger.

If we imagine Paul dictating the content of the letter, or possibly multiple parts over a longer period of time, under these circumstances, we have to correct the assumption we may have that this was a private activity. Instead, the process would most likely have taken place in the presence of others – fellow prisoners, guards, other visitors – who would be listening in. Paul was thus apparently willing to speak to an unintended audience of fellow prisoners, about being torn between life and death, about being circumcised on the eighth day and about being content with whatever he has. While the implications of this are not immediately clear, it is an aspect to keep in mind as we turn to the details of various parts of the letter.

16. Examples of this type of letter are PSI 4.416 (3rd c BCE, Philadelphia); P.Petr. 3 36 R (3rd c BCE, Herakleopolites); P.Petr. 3 36 V (3rd c BCE, Arsinoites); PSI 7.807 (3rd c CE, Oxyrhynchos), see Standhartinger 2015: 116, 124-30; Cassidy 2001: 51-53.
17. Standhartinger assumes that risk associated with writing from prison led Paul to code his message to some extent. Standhartinger 2015: 126.
Negotiating the Crisis of Imprisonment

Having considered the issue of writing from prison, attention can be given to aspects of Paul’s negotiation of his incarceration in the letter itself. Here, we shall examine the following elements from Phil. 1: (a) isolation and fellowship, (b) custody as a catalyst for the gospel, (c) imprisonment as struggle and (d) exit strategies, including his (apparent) contemplation of ending his own life. The subsequent discussion does not rely on a particular resolution of two aporia that haunt the interpretation of Paul’s situation: where and why he was imprisoned. Rather, we focus on the situation of imprisonment as such and as treated by Paul.18

a. Isolation and Fellowship

The topic of Paul’s (forced) separation from the Philippians due to his imprisonment is present in his writing from the very start, where one finds a contrast between, on the one hand, the spiritual, social and economic connections between Paul and the Philippians19 and, on the other hand, the physical separation between them. As he states, Paul would much prefer visiting the Philippians in person, but his incarceration prevents him from doing so (e.g., 1.8, 25; 4.1, cf. 2.12). Physical separation, therefore, occasions the letter; in this sense, Paul’s body is the starting point of his theologizing.20 Addressing the separation and expressing his longing to be present among his correspondents (parousia motif), as Paul does, is a major topic in ancient letter writing and allows Paul to stress his friendship with the Philippians (Fitzgerald 2007: 284-96). This is also a rhetorical ploy (Johnson 2006: 481-501), through this does not diminish the importance

18. That Paul and the Philippians must have had knowledge of these and other matters is very likely, Cassidy notes. Yet, this knowledge is no longer available to contemporary interpreters of the letter. Cassidy 2001: 167.
19. Given the fact that ‘inmates’ had to provide for their own needs and Paul’s economic situation, as an itinerant (and hence foreign) artisan, was precarious to begin with, the importance of the economic tie with the Philippians as a concrete form of their ‘fellowship’ is hard to overestimate. For the dependence on family and friends of prisoners, cf., e.g., Krause 1996: 280-83; Cassidy 2001: 48-51.
20. For emphasis on the body, see Becker 2019: 310-31, 326: ‘[Paulus beschreibt] in Phil 1,3 seinen eigenen Leib (ἐν τῷ σώματί μου, 1,20) als den notwendigen, ja den konkreten religiösen Ort, an dem die Größe und Erhabenheit Christi sich zeigen.’ See also Standhartinger 2015: 152: ‘für ihn die leibliche Existenz das Verkündigungsmedium. Es geht nicht um souveräne Überlegenheit über die äußere Situation, sondern die Verkündigung des Gekreuzigten spiegelt sich in Bedrängnis, Verfolgung, Unterdrückung (2 Kor 4:8-9), in Hunger, Durst, Blöße und geschlagen, als Abschaum aller Menschen (1 Kor 4:11-13) und im Gefängnis und vor dem Statthaltergericht.’ Elsewhere, Paul is also very much a theologian of the body, particularly when it comes to the situation at the Lord’s supper in Corinth, his starting point consists of physical experiences of hunger and thirst. See Smit 2019: 1.
of the separation (or even isolation) of bodies from each other as a fundamental part of the setting of the letter. The letter emerges out of the experience of physical (and, therefore, also social) distance. Although Paul likely draws consolation from his friendship with the Philippians (cf., e.g., the prayerful commemoration of the Philippians mentioned in 1.3-4) (Becker 2019: 317), being separated from them also adds to Paul’s isolation. In Phil. 1 alone, four ways of negotiating the physical separation between Paul and the Philippians can be identified. First, employing the language of friendship, Paul stresses the special relationship between himself and the Philippians time and again. Verse 7 is illustrative: καθώς ἐστιν δίκαιον ἐμοὶ τὸν φρονεῖν ὑπὲρ πάντων ὑμῶν διὰ τὸ ἔχειν με ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμᾶς. Second, rather than dwelling on past experiences of such fellowship, Paul looks forward to encountering the Philippians again ‘in the flesh’, even deciding to postpone ‘being with Christ’ in order to continue his earthly pilgrimage for the benefit of the Philippians (cf. esp. the synkresis in vv. 21-26; his yearning for the Philippians occurs in v. 8). Third and fourth, and partially as a consequence of the first point, Paul considers how he experiences the fellowship with the Philippian Christ votaries: (a) he stresses thinking of them, particularly in the sense that he remembers them before God in prayer (esp. vv. 3-4), and (b) he acknowledges the concrete aid that the Philippians give him during his incarceration (vv. 5 and 7, cf. 4.10-20). Thus, physical isolation from the Philippians (likely not from Timothy, Epaphroditus or [other] inmates) is addressed emphatically by Paul and negotiated in four distinct ways. He draws on the past, present and future of their fellowship and addresses the social, economic and spiritual dimensions.

b. Custody as a Catalyst for the Gospel

Incarceration as something that is shameful and disadvantages a person – for example, regarding a person’s authority and goals in life – is another topic that is of key importance in Phil. 1. In fact, Paul engages with this subject from the very first words of his letter. As Standhartinger observes (2015: 147) the reference to Paul and Timothy as ‘slaves of Christ Jesus’ (δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ, 1.1) indicates a situation of bodily captivity (a slave’s body is not his or her own), which is analogous to imprisonment. At the same time, the negotiation of such a situation also begins in these three words, given that ‘ownership’ of Paul and Timothy is shifted from those in charge of the prison to Christ, who, as the reader will discover in what is now Phil. 2.5-11, can also be seen as a slave, belonging

21. The issues arising from this, such as the impact that the reception of aid has on Paul’s standing in relation to the Philippian community, cannot be discussed here. For a recent treatment, see Willis 2019: 174-90.
22. The question of authority and its reestablishment by way of Paul’s self-identification with Christ’s ‘career’ (Phil. 2:5-11) is, for instance, discussed in Smit 2019.
and living in obedience to the Most High. Rhetorically (and existentially), Paul radically reshapes his situation: he no longer belongs to his jailers, but to God. Such rhetorical shifts regarding Paul’s imprisonment will occur throughout the letter, also in the remainder of ch. 1.

A first example of this occurs in v. 7, where Paul refers to the Philippians as his partners (συγκοινωνοῦς). This, indeed, the Philippians are during his imprisonment (ἐν τε τοῖς δεσμοῖς μου) as well as during his defense and confirmation of the gospel (ἐν τῇ ἀπολογίᾳ καὶ βεβαιώσει τοῦ εὐαγγελίου). While Paul’s chains will be referred to as ‘in Christ’ in v. 13, here it seems likely that Paul’s defense of himself is already cast as a defense of the gospel, not just of the individual Paul of Tarsus. An ‘apology’ (ἀπολογία) is a common term in such instances, which also applies to the ‘confirmation’ (βεβαιώσεις) that Paul mentions. In other words, the court proceedings are really about the gospel. This means that the Philippians are also partners in this trial, while Paul becomes more akin to being an advocate of the gospel, rather than a helpless inmate. This line of thought continues in vv. 12-18, where Paul argues that his imprisonment has contributed to the proclamation of the gospel – the readers never learn what the precise accusation may have been (in fact, τὰ κατ᾽ ἐμὲ in v. 12 can be seen as obscuring this). If v. 13 refers indeed to the ‘praetorium’ as the place where Paul had to account for himself, then he seems to indicate that he has turned the courtroom into his pulpit, which is certainly the way he presents his situation to the Philippians.

23. As this text was likely known to the Philippians (its quotation as a probably known tradition in support of Paul’s argument rather suggests this), it may well be that the idea of Christ as God’s slave was already evoked by the reference to slaves in 1.1. Of course, the reference is polyvalent; a self-understanding as ‘slaves of YHWH’ was also part of the tradition of Israel; both intercultural and ‘religious’ hybridity plays a role in what Paul does in the first words of his epistle’s salutation.

24. Of course, Paul also seems to assume that the Philippians are relatively well-informed with regard to his trial; ‘obscuring’ may, therefore, be felt to be too strong an impression. Yet, the impression allows Paul not to have to mention any details about his trial except for his own, quite considerable spin on it. Only his perspective is represented in the text, and he does not even attempt to represent the point of view of those holding him captive. If he would have tried, as he does with other adversaries in ch. 3, he may have turned out to be less than objective, but it would still amount to an acknowledgment of the others’ position; concerning his trial, he lets the voice of his foes disappear behind his own interpretation of the events.

25. Standhartinger 2015: 147. This point also remains valid when assuming Roman imprisonment; cf., e.g., Cassidy 2001 168-69. See esp. the argument of Flexsenhar 2019.

26. Standhartinger (2015: 153) stresses that Paul identifies his suffering in prison ‘mit dem Inhalt der Botschaft, dem Leiden und Sterben Christi. Dies erklärt vielleicht auch die schwer verständliche Nachricht, die Paulus der Gemeinde übermittelt, nämlich dass seine “Fesseln in Christus” im ganzen Prätorium und bei den übrigen offenbar geworden seien (1:13). Jedenfalls nennt Paulus überall sonst Gefängnis, Schläge und Folter in einem Atemzug und macht sie provokativ zum Zeichen seines Dienstes als Apostel Christi.’
The gospel, which is on trial (v. 7), in fact finds a catalyst for its own proclamation in the court proceedings through its representation by Paul.

In the course of all this, Paul’s status can also be seen to change: while he recounts how his arrest, imprisonment and trial are in fact all about the gospel and facilitate its proclamation, he does not only tell the story of his (apparent) crisis from the vantage point of a value system in which such a proclamation is a good thing. He also succeeds in highlighting his role in all of this. Rather than being a source of shame, his imprisonment is a badge of honor and a tool in the hands of a successful missionary (Cassidy 2001: 168). The scope of the statement in v. 12 ‘that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel’ (NRSV; all quotations are from this translation unless indicated otherwise) is illuminated in v. 23, while vv. 14-18 reveal something about its agents, those who have a positive or a negative attitude toward Paul. He, however, is at the center of things and can state, rather magnanimously: ‘What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way’ (v. 18). Paul is, accordingly, a highly successful agent of the gospel. He empowers and inspires others (even those who dislike him!) and can position himself above the strife that (apparently) surrounds him, by focusing on the proclamation of the gospel. In a way, we have come full circle here: Paul has been imprisoned because of Christ, and his trial is really that of the gospel. The enmity of others only furthers the gospel, however unpleasant it may be for Paul himself. Yet, it is precisely in enduring this unpleasantness, or even crisis, that Paul is able to reinterpret and thereby negotiate the dire straits that he finds himself in.

c. Imprisonment as Struggle

Having discussed two possible ‘exit strategies’ with regard to his imprisonment, Paul ends the first part of his letter with a peroration-like statement in vv. 27-30 (which continues in a much longer exhortation that runs until 2.18 and includes the famous ‘hymn’, which both substantiates what has preceded it and lays the foundation for what follows in terms of paraenesis).

In fact, in vv. 27-30, Paul continues the reinterpretation and, with that, the renegotiation of his imprisonment. A key tool for this is his use of the (common) concept of the ἀγών, together with the use of himself as an example (παράδειγμα). He combines this understanding of his own suffering and his crisis in prison with a presentation of himself as an example, all in the scope of one verse: 1.30. Leading up to this, he has summed up the qualities that he would like to see among the Philippians (vv. 27-28) and stated that being permitted to suffer for Christ is a gift (ἐχαρίσθη, v. 29). In doing so, the Philippians participate in the

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27. See, for a recent survey of Paul and athletic metaphors, Durbin 2020: 1-16.
28. The use of a passive tense here leaves open who the agent of the giving is; it may be God, but the situation at hand also suggests that other agents are involved (subordinate to God, even
same ἀγών that they have observed in Paul (presumably in the past: τὸν αὐτὸν ἀγώνα ... οἷον εἰδεῖτε ἐν ἐμοὶ) and of which they now learn through his letter (καὶ νῦν ἀκούετε ἐν ἐμοὶ). Such a common struggle, of course, further strengthens the bond between the Philippians and Paul. It works in two directions: Paul suggests that his struggle is that of the Philippians and also indicates that their struggle is his struggle.

Casting his own imprisonment and trial as an ἀγών has a number of effects. As soon as an incarceration and court proceedings are termed a ‘struggle’, the one undergoing it becomes an active rather than a passive participant. In negotiating his crisis-like custodial experience in this way, Paul creates at least a toehold for the exercise of agency and a sense of control over a situation that may otherwise feel helpless. Paul is no longer simply undergoing a trial; he is struggling with his adversaries, in a manner similar to an athletic contest or even a battle. This may affect how he sees himself and how others see him, no longer as a loser, but as a potential winner. The jury is, nearly literally, still out. Indeed, Paul has presented himself as a formidable athlete thus far. He has turned the tables on those prosecuting him, given that the gospel is being proclaimed due to his trial. He now finds himself in a situation in which he cannot possibly lose (according to vv. 21-26 even a capital sentence would mean that Paul wins), though he is confident that he will walk out of jail a free man. The use of the image of the ἀγών thus can be seen as a very important tool that Paul uses to deal with his crisis situation: it enhances his agency and sets himself up as a guaranteed winner, rather than as a potential loser. In other words, it allows him to change from someone that one ought to be ashamed of into someone who is to be emulated, because, as was indicated above, in v. 30 Paul even presents his own struggle as something that the Philippians can identify with and might be comforted by.

d. Exit Strategies

However eloquently Paul negotiates his imprisonment, its stark reality is never far away. That is clear from 1.21-26, the verses in which Paul considers whether living or dying would be more beneficial to him than living. He is, most likely, uncertain about what might happen to him (and his body) in the imminent future and is confronted by considerable physical and social distress. The introspective

God’s instruments), possibly Philippian authorities or the missionaries competing with Paul that are a key topic of discussion in ch. 3. An avoidance of a direct reference to God out of piety (‘divine passive’) seems unlikely, given that Paul does not shy away from direct references to God at all. See, for a call for caution with regard to the passivum divinum, Smit and Renssen 2015: 3-24.

29. During the Principate, juries went out of use in the Roman judicial system, to be sure, although they were common during the era immediately preceding it.
reflection on which Paul reports in Phil. 1.21-26 has, therefore, a very real context. As Becker has noted, such reflection occurs precisely (and typically) in the context of a potentially lethal situation and serves to negotiate it (Becker 2019: 323).

The text under consideration here, Phil. 1.21-26, has led exegetes to wonder whether Paul is contemplating suicide. This view is accepted by a minority of scholars currently; the majority takes a different position, usually on the basis of the rhetorical function of this text. It is seen as a synkresis aimed at stressing the ties between Paul and the Philippians and Paul’s desire for death is, in the end, seen as a rhetorical ploy.30 When approaching this text with knowledge of the (typical) conditions of imprisonment, however, and of the mental, social and physical duress it caused, as well as of the fact that suicide did occur with some frequency in prison, while someone like Cicero reflected on his preference for death while (only) in exile (although he ended up not choosing it, cf. Cicero, Qfr 1.3) (Wansink 1996: 108-12), the question of Paul’s desire for death becomes less rhetorical and non-committal and instead becomes more real and existential. No longer being in the hands of others and under their control by terminating one’s physical existence and, by that route, being able to ‘be with Christ’ instead, as Paul puts it (1.23), would mean a liberation from a very undesirable physical space and an equally undesirable social location simultaneously. The attraction of such an ‘exit strategy’ is only augmented by the entry into (a more complete) fellowship with Christ that it leads to.

While considering his position, Paul focuses on his body, which is, of course, what is the most clearly imprisoned (his mind, as his letter shows, is anything but a captive). Paul’s future will be determined through his body’s punishment (or even execution) or liberation; many forms of punishment (all forms of corporal punishment, but also exile or banishment, etc.) also lead to shame. One way of avoiding shame is by removing one’s body from imprisonment oneself: through suicide. In this context, Paul’s longing for death is quite understandable. Prior to reflecting on this, however, he has also made clear that he has, as it were, immunized his body against shame: τι ἐν οὐδενὶ αἰσχυνθήσομαι ἀλλ’ ἐν πάσῃ παρρησίᾳ ὡς πάντοτε καὶ νῦν μεγαλυνθήσεται Χριστὸς ἐν τῷ σώματί μου, εἴτε διὰ ζωῆς εἴτε διὰ θανάτου (1.20). Paul has become convinced that Christ can be glorified in, or ‘by means of’ (ἐν + dative can be instrumental here), his body while enduring his imprisonment and its aftermath, whether that involves execution, some other form of corporal punishment or his release from prison. This gives Paul, then, the

30. For a survey and an example of this kind of position, cf. Smit 2013: 113-18. When approaching this text from the vantage point of the rhetoric of crisis, as one might do in the footsteps of Livesey 2016, Paul’s statements here could also be seen as exaggerated, a typical feature of such rhetoric. However, this seems unlikely when reading them against the background of the conditions of imprisonment in antiquity.
freedom to choose to remain in his imprisonment and not to terminate it (and himself). As he is sure of a positive outcome of this liminal situation (he will glorify Christ through his body no matter what), he can also negotiate its uncertainty. Furthermore, Paul tips the scales of his deliberation in favor of the Philippians, rather than himself: although it would have been preferable for him to die (whether by suicide or capital punishment), he settles for the option that is less preferable for him, so that he may be of service to the Philippians. In communicating this, Paul reverses commonly held values about the outcome of an imprisonment and a trial (for him, release is less preferable than suicide or capital punishment) and then decides against what would be most attractive for him due to his bond with the Philippians. This is quite a feat in terms of Paul’s negotiation of and coping with his imprisonment.

To conclude, we can maintain that considering Phil. 1.21-26 and Paul’s sharing with the Philippians of his (introspective) reflection can be read on two levels. The first level is that of the rhetorical function of the *synkresis* that Paul presents here: it serves to express the bond between the Philippians and himself and to stress the fact that he is willing to take the burden of life upon himself (rather than to die and to be with Christ) for the benefit of the Philippians. Beyond this, the background of Paul’s imprisonment provides a second level of interpretation. Even if the figure of the *synkresis* remains firmly in place, the reality of imprisonment and the fact that it led to very real suicides in other situations certainly gives a kind of existential relief to Paul’s considerations. Ending one’s imprisonment by taking one’s own life was a real option in ancient prisons, and knowledge of this may have been evoked by the readers (hearers) of Paul’s letter. Thus, Paul’s indication of his longing for death, either by the hand of an executioner or his own, is, when considered against the background of imprisonment, much more than just a non-committal reflection. Rather, the desire for the resolution of his situation that is implied in this longing is an expression of a very real desire in the depths of the crisis that imprisonment is.

**Philippians 3: Prison and Shit**

If we read ch. 3 of Philippians from the perspective of a crisis, with all the autobiographical self-fashioning that it contains, two things leap out. The first is the fact that Paul writes quite openly about a conflict regarding the question of whether male non-Jews need to be circumcised. The second is that we find language and imagery that remind us of the prison conditions described above. We will discuss each of these aspects in turn and see how Paul gives meaning to his critical predicament.

31. For an account of the reshaping of biographies under the conditions of contemporary imprisonment, see Maruna, Wilson and Curran 2006: 161-84.
If we take Paul’s vulnerable and tenuous position as our point of interpretation, the boldness with which he gets into the issue of circumcision becomes rather surprising. He warns his audience to ‘beware of the dogs, beware of the evil-doers, beware of the mutilation’ (lit. ‘cutting off’ rather than ‘cutting round’, in a play on περιτομή, circumcision; Βλέπετε τοὺς κύνας, βλέπετε τοὺς κακοὺς ἐργάτας, βλέπετε τὴν κατατομήν) and clearly takes position against people with a different view, whose authority he questions (Phil. 3.2-4). Such a combative stance, which includes some nasty name-calling, on the topic of whether or not non-Jewish men should be circumcised, could easily have upset the authorities who placed Paul in confinement. While we do not know the exact reason for Paul’s imprisonment, creating unrest could easily have been part of it (as in Acts 16.20-21). It was a priority of Roman rule to preserve public order, and governors of provinces were charged with taking out anyone who was disturbing the peace (Fuhrmann 2012: 150-51). In this light, it seems remarkable that Paul, in a letter from prison, written under the semi-public circumstances sketched above, would bring up any group conflict, much less one centering on men’s genitals.

The general Greco-Roman dislike of circumcision is well attested, and the foreskin was a valued part of the male anatomy (Hodges 2001: 381-83; Neutel 2016: 373-96). Paul here claims circumcision as a collective term for himself and others, refers to his own circumcision on the eighth day, and also engages in wordplay not only in connection with circumcision, but probably also in calling his opponents ‘dogs’, which was a slur associated with the penis. Paul plays on the term περιτομή, changing the preposition ‘around’ to ‘down’, or ‘off’ (κατατομή), conjuring up the image of a cut that would be unpleasant to both non-Jews and Jews. While based on the combined evidence of Philippians, Galatians and Romans, we can see that Paul rejects proselyte circumcision and opposes those who advocate this ritual for Gentiles. He therefore holds a position that would not challenge the general distaste for circumcision, though a casual reader who is not familiar with the discussion might not immediately recognize this.

In these lines, Paul thus shows no awareness of or concern for the fact that the content of his letter may have been accessible to other ears and eyes, either during or after composition. He appears to address himself only to those already familiar with the conflict about circumcision and attempts to influence their attitude without any apparent consideration for how this might affect his current predicament. His only focus seems to be to discredit his opponents and to boost

32. Collman (2021) argues persuasively that the term ‘dogs’ is used by Paul here as a ‘phallic epithet’ for his opponents, since this term was associated with the penis. This interpretation would suit equally genital interpretations of κοιλία in 3.19. See Cassidy 2001: 173-74.
his own position, thereby steering the controversy towards the desired outcome. That he rebukes those who hold a different view on Gentile circumcision in such harsh terms may be explained by his own position of powerlessness. However, since he uses a similar style of rhetoric in Galatians, it is difficult to argue that this would necessarily have played a role.

**Shit in Chains**

These circumstances of his imprisonment appear to be relevant in the next verses in the chapter, where Paul talks about losing everything and mentions σκύβαλα, a term used for excrement or filth (Phil. 3.4-9).33 His discussion of having confidence ‘in flesh’ (ἐν σαρκί, Phil. 3.4) has often been seen as a reckoning with his Jewish past, or with status markers more generally.34 However, seen from the perspective of crisis and imprisonment, our attention is drawn not to Paul’s lineage and relationship to the law, but rather to his emphatic mention of loss and filth. It is striking that Paul uses this particular word, σκύβαλα, only once in all his letters, when he quite possibly is both literally and metaphorically in a shitty situation. The harsh words that he uses come close to a description of his current prison circumstances. He has lost all things, including his freedom and control over his body and wellbeing. If he is confined day and night together with other people, the presence of actual σκύβαλα is highly likely.

In this light, his description of loss appears as a reframing of an intensely negative and humiliating experience: in the opening of the letter, Paul maintains that his imprisonment is because of Christ and that not only he, but everyone around him is aware that he is ‘in chains for Christ’ (τοὺς δεσμούς μου φανεροὺς ἐν Χριστῷ γενέσθαι, Phil. 1.13). This is obviously not the formal reason for his imprisonment but is rather a reframing of it in terms that work in the context of crisis management. In ch. 3, he then builds on this reframing by suggesting that his current circumstances actually match his own assessment of what matters to him. He has lost everything, but this is not against his will. He was willing to lose all, because it is of less value than what he has to gain.

It is unlikely that his status ‘in the flesh’ would have landed Paul in prison, had he not started proclaiming Christ to the Gentiles. Neither his lineage nor his circumcision nor his zeal for the law, for which he was ‘blameless’ (ἄμεμπτος, Phil. 3.6), would have gotten him in trouble with authorities. It was rather his upsetting message to Gentiles to abandon their gods that meant that he was seen as an agitator who needed to be stopped. What Paul describes here, his willingness to

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33. On the offensiveness of the term, and the way scholars have often tiptoed around this, see Punch 2014: 369-84.
34. Eisenbaum argues that Paul’s point here is ‘not terribly complicated or subtle’. It is simply that people should not be impressed by claims to privilege or status (2009: 140).
lose everything and end up with shit, is what has actually happened. But this has now, in Paul’s reconfiguration, become a voluntary act, rather than something imposed against his will.

Seen in terms of meaning making and the need to ‘provide an authoritative account of what is going on and why it is happening’, Paul does exactly what is required of a leader. If he wants to influence his audience in Philippi, he has to interpret his and their crises in a way that gives them meaning and allows him to retain his authority. He does so by suggesting that what has happened to him is not a sign of weakness on his part: it is not a sign of outside control, but rather reflects his own appraisal of what matters.

Paul can connect his own experience here to his already well-established reconfiguration of Jesus’ crucifixion. This is also an event that would seem to be humiliating but becomes a show of God’s power. If Paul now suffers a similarly humiliating fate, he can compare himself to Christ: ‘I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death’ (Phil. 3.10). Ultimately, however, he will be victorious: ‘I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus’ (Phil. 3.14). Paul explicitly presents this understanding of the situation as one that everyone should accept: ‘All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things’ (Phil. 3.15). He urges his audience to let his interpretation of the current crisis be the dominant one.

Beyond sharing his point of view, Paul invites his audience to follow his example:

Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform the body of our humiliation to be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself. (Phil. 3:17-21)

Through the focus on Paul’s bodily crisis, our attention in this passage is drawn particularly to the notion of the ‘body of our humiliation’ (τὸ σῶμα τῆς
Neutel and Smit

ταπεινώσεως ἡμῶν) and its contrast with the ‘body of Christ’s glory’ (τῷ σώματι τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ). While some have argued that Paul here refers to a general characteristic of human bodies as weak and vile, or alternatively that he encourages an attitude of humility, these types of interpretations tend to ignore the humiliation of imprisonment. As argued above, degradation and shame were closely associated with ancient prison, to the point that choosing death over incarceration was a way to preserve one’s honor. This passage suggests a different way out, by offering the perspective that any current physical humiliation is only temporary and will ultimately be replaced by glory.

In this light, Paul’s admonition to his audience to take him as a model, without paying attention to earthly circumstances, becomes another strategy to avoid having his current powerless position work against him. It makes an advantage out of an apparent disadvantage, by allowing Paul to maximize the contrast between the present and the future, between humiliation and glory.

Conclusions

In concluding our exegetical and heuristic experiment, the following can be maintained.

First, using ‘crisis’ as a perspective for considering Philippians has served to highlight the extent to which the letter is written out of a crisis (that of Paul’s imprisonment) and seeks to negotiate it. Taking imprisonment seriously in all of its (unpleasant) dimensions – as a situation that is in equal measure unsettling, uncertain, humiliating and threatening with regard to the mental, spiritual, social and physical dimensions of an ‘inmate’ – has proven to be a way of furthering the exegesis of Philippians.

Second, the definition of crisis of Boin and ’t Hart, as it was used to clarify what would be understood as a ‘crisis’, proved to be both heuristically helpful and in accordance with ancient sources. The definition highlights relevant aspects of crisis and aids the identification, in this case, of forms of crisis in Paul’s letter to his beloved Philippians.

Third, this perspective on Philippians has also shown how important the body and its situation are as a starting point for Paul’s (theological and existential) reflections; from beginning to end, his letter is preoccupied with interpreting his

35. For an overview of translations and interpretations of this phrase, see Doble 2002: 3-27. Doble concludes that humiliation here ‘has nothing to do with disparaging bodiliness nor with being humiliated; it has nothing to do with self-inflicted suffering’, but rather with ‘embodied selves whose lives, whose citizenship (1.27; 3.20), are characterized by their embracing “humility”’ (pp. 25-26).

36. Standhartiger sees a similar motivation here and suggests that the hope expressed in the passage ‘could also be understood against a backdrop of torture and mortal fear’ (2013: 432).
own imprisoned body in such a way that it can be a believable vehicle for the proclamation of the gospel.37

Fourth, a key tool for the negotiation of crisis in Paul’s case has proven to be his reinterpretation of what has befallen him from the vantage point of his worldview, particularly his faith. This enables him both to take fully into account the fact that he is in prison and that he sits in the dirt, and to wear this situation as a badge of honor, even to the extent that he views his imprisonment as a tool for fulfilling his mission and the liminality of his situation as something that can only have a beneficial outcome.

Fifth, as this article has focused mainly on Paul’s own crisis, we can also argue that using the lens of ‘crisis’ for understanding the situation in which the Philippian community finds itself may also be a fruitful way of researching Paul’s letter to this congregation of Christ devotees.

Sixth, as this essay set out to investigate Paul and crisis against the background of the COVID-19 crisis and as it has led to new insight into the letter under consideration, it is worth affirming that attention to contextuality, both present and past, functions as a catalyst for interpretation.

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