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Abstract: Given that the documents that later formed the canon of the New Testament were intended to be persuasive, it is a relatively safe assumption that the lector reading these texts would have added some vocal modulation and gestures at appropriate places during his recitation. Reading, acting, and rhetorical delivery were considered related skills. Following a summary of the nature of oral societies, a discussion of ancient public speaking, and an overview of the letter of Philemon, we will examine the letter for clues that indicate the lector may have made use of his voice and body to strengthen the message of this short letter. We will propose that the reading of Philemon was likely accompanied by hand and body gestures communicating affection, dependence on God, and to evoke pity. In addition, the lector's eyes and tone of voice may have been utilized to enhance the vocalization of joy, admiration, and pity.

Key Words: Biblical Performance Criticism, Lectors, Oral Cultures, Philemon, Rhetorical Criticism

Introduction

Given that the documents that later formed the canon of the New Testament were intended to be persuasive, it is a relatively safe assumption that the lector reading these texts would have added some vocal modulation and gestures at appropriate places during his recitation. Reading, acting, and rhetorical delivery were considered related skills.¹ Part of the methodology of Biblical Performance Criticism is to examine the New Testament writings for any indication that a lector might have utilized some

1. Whitney Shiner, "Oral Performance of the New Testament," in *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance*, eds. Holly E. Hearon and Phillip Ruge-Jones, Biblical Performance Criticism 1 (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 52.

form of theatrics to support his reading.² While the analysis of New Testament texts through the lens of rhetorical criticism has a long history, the approach of this present study is focused on the last step of that analysis, the delivery.³ Following a summary of the nature of oral societies, a discussion of ancient public speaking, and an overview of the letter of Philemon, we will examine the letter for clues that indicate the lector may have made use of his voice and body to strengthen the message of this short letter. We will propose that the reading of Philemon was likely accompanied by hand and body gestures communicating affection, dependence on God, and to evoke pity. In addition, the lector's eyes and tone of voice may have been utilized to enhance the vocalization of joy, admiration, and pity.

Oral Cultures and the New Testament Church

Most public communication in the ancient world was oral. Consequently, most ancient texts were composed with their aural and oral potential in mind, and they were meant to be orally delivered when they arrived at their destinations.⁴

The oral nature of the ancient world was due in part to the low literacy rate. In his extensive study of ancient literacy, William V. Harris concludes that the overall level of literacy in the first century ancient eastern Mediterranean world was below fifteen percent.⁵ Catherine Hezser believes that the literacy rate among Jewish individuals may have been as low as three percent, depending on how one understands and defines "literacy."⁶ Supporting the view that the ability to read appears to have been rare in antiquity are the remarks of the character Trimalchio in Petronius' *Satyricon*, who mentions the unusual talent of a servant who could read books by sight (75).⁷ Some merchants of long-distant trade may have had a limited

2. For examples of studies which apply Biblical Performance Criticism to New Testament texts, see Whitney Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA 2003); Kelly R. Iverson, "A Centurion's 'Confession': A Performance-Critical Analysis of Mark 15:39," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130 (2011): 329–350; Holly E. Hearon, "Characters in Text and Performance: The Gospel of John," in *From Text to Performance: Narrative and Performance Criticisms in Dialogue and Debate*, ed. Kelly R. Iverson, *Biblical Performance Criticism* 10 (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014) 53–79; Bernard Oestreich, *Performance Criticism in the Pauline Letters*, trans. Lindsay Elias and Brent, eds. David Rhoads, Holly E. Hearon and Kelly R. Iverson, *Biblical Performance Criticism* 14 (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016) esp. 152–183; Peter S. Perry, *Insights from Performance Criticism*, ed. Mark A. Powell, *Reading the Bible in the 21st Century: Insights* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), esp. 173–184.

3. Hans D. Betz represents one of the first major sustained attempts to apply rhetorical criticism to the New Testament (*Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

4. Ben Witherington III, *What's in the Word: Rethinking the Socio-Rhetorical Character of the New Testament* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2009), 35.

5. William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 267.

6. Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*, *Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism* 81 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 496.

7. Lee A. Johnson, "Paul's Letters Reheard: A Performance-Critical Examination of the

capacity to read and write for their work, or they hired literate employees to carry out these functions.⁸ Further, practical matters such as the absence of eyeglasses and the presence of eye diseases with minimal remedies, would have prevented many from reading regardless of their literacy level.⁹ While low literacy rates contributed to the popularity of oral recitation, even highly literate persons were accustomed to listening to passages read out loud, especially when the availability of texts was limited (e.g., Pliny, *Epistulae* 9.34). Seneca articulated the added benefit of listening to something recited even if a person was fully literate, when he asked and answered “Why should I listen to something I can read? Because the living voice contributes so much.” (*Epistulae morales* 33.9).¹⁰

Because vocalization of ancient Greek texts required navigating through a “river of letters”—uninterrupted and unpunctuated streams of capital letters, not only would a speaker need to be literate, but he would also have to be well acquainted with the work prior to standing before listeners to recite it, dedicating some time to regular practice (Plutarch, *Demosthenes* 8).¹¹ It appears that in the first-century there was some level of shame associated with committing verbal slips of the tongue during public speech (Lucian, *A Slip of the Tongue in Greeting* 1).

In addition to the low literacy rate, the spoken word was preferred because texts were enormously expensive to produce—things such as papyrus, ink, and scribes were costly.¹² During the first century, it cost two drachmas to get a letter copied, which was the amount it cost to hire a foreman or industrial worker for two to three days.¹³ In the second century C.E., one sheet of papyrus cost two obols, about one third of the average daily wage for an Egyptian worker.¹⁴ Since documents and reading material were scarce, people were adept at remembering what they heard—memory was the storehouse of information rather than books.¹⁵ Seneca boasted that he could repeat two-thousand names in the order they were given to him and recite from memory numerous lines of poetry (*Controversiae* 1, 2, Preface).¹⁶

Preparation, Transportation, and Delivery of Paul’s Correspondence,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 79 (2017): 60–76, here 67.

8. Joanna Dewey, *The Oral Ethos of the Early Church Speaking, Writing, and the Gospel of Mark*, ed. David Rhoads, *Biblical Performance Criticism* 8 (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 10.

9. Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*, 463.

10. Rex Winsbury, *The Roman Book. Books, Publishing and Performance in Classical Rome*, ed. David Taylor; *Classical Literature and Society* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 2009), 112.

11. Winsbury, *The Roman Book*, 113.

12. Witherington, *What’s in the Word*, 7.

13. Pieter J. J. Botha, *Orality and Literacy in Early Christianity*, *Biblical Performance Criticism* 5 (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 48.

14. Robert A. Derrenbacher, “Writing, Books, and Readers in the Ancient World,” *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 52 (1998): 205–229, here 207.

15. Margaret Ellen Lee, and Bernard Brandon Scott, *Sound Mapping in the New Testament* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2009), 92.

16. Winsbury, *The Roman Book*, 121.

For our purposes, a final characteristic of oral societies is their communal nature. Literature can be read in private. When read privately, texts allow for considerable spatial distance between the author and the reader. In contrast, literature intended to be recited out loud, was experienced in community and in a more intimate fashion with the performer, which allowed the listener to experience his facial expressions, voice inflection, and body language.

The Bible affirms that the early church was situated in predominately an oral culture. This is apparent based on the author's remark in Revelation 1:3: "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear..."¹⁷ Other New Testament texts also give explicit instructions to read the letters aloud in the churches (1 Thess 5:27, Col 4:16, 1 Tim 4:13). The congregations likely included both slaves and slave owners. Those slaves who were clerks may have been literate. For the most part, reading was sometimes considered physical labor and carried little or no status. Pliny the Younger, who could read, spoke of hiring one of his slaves, who was a slightly better reader than himself, to publicly recite his poetry for him (*Epistulae* 9.34). Thus, it is possible that someone from the church community, with an appropriate amount of preparation, would have been able to read the documents that later became the New Testament. However, Harry Gamble argues that in a time when the ability to read was rare, perhaps Paul's letter carrier would have been required to read the letter's content upon his arrival at the church, not knowing if there would have been a proficient reader present.¹⁸

Reading the Manuscript: The Lector

To obtain the most convincing argument, lectors probably borrowed some of the tactics of the orator's craft, and adapted them for their public recitations. The techniques of the orator set the standard for all kinds of public speech. According to the ancient philosopher Theophrastus, the delivery of oral material was concerned mainly with two features: voice and gesture (Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 11.3.14).¹⁹ Gesture appealed to the eye; the voice appealed to the ear—two senses by which emotion reached a person's soul (Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 11.3.14). Gestures can be defined as deliberate, conscious movements, governed by an intention to say or to communicate something.

Quintilian stated that one should not only use the voice, but the whole carriage of the body for the effective delivery of a speech (*Institutio oratoria* 11.3.2). Pliny remarked that when a person read while he was seated, and while he held a scroll,

17. All scriptural quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

18. Harry Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University, 1995), 97.

19. Shiner, *Proclaiming*, 79.

then the two main aids to effective delivery and pronunciation were hindered, the eyes and the hands (*Epistulae* 2.19.4).

Richard Ward and David Trobisch describe an ancient painting on the wall of a Roman villa in Pompeii, Naples, depicting a typical oral performance.²⁰

A robed figure is standing, speaking and clasping a scroll in the left hand. The performer's right hand is lowered, loose and at rest; an extended forefinger points to the floor of the stage. The artist has draped a toga across the left arm. The performer's face, unmasked, is a thoughtful countenance, revealing that the piece being presented is no comic diversion; its subject is serious.

From the image, it is apparent that the right hand remained free for gestures. Orators used gestures for surprise, indignation, entreaty, anger, adoration, reproach, grief, insistence, emphasis, laughter, irony, and aversion (*Rhetorica ad Herennium* 3.14–15; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 11.3.92–102). The picture also reveals that facial expressions can convey emotions that correspond with the text being recited. Gestures can lend support to the words spoken to render them more meaningful and emotional. While the gestures described in the ancient rhetorical handbooks were used by orators, many of them were widespread in Roman society, even among the poor.²¹ Given the constant exposure to orators, the public would have likely been well-equipped in interpreting the gestures and responding to them.

Philemon: Plot Summary and Audience

Ernst Wendland labels Philemon as a letter of intercession, where the writer intercedes on behalf of one person to repair the relationship between that individual and the recipient of the letter.²² The letter can be outlined as follows: (1-3) introduction, (4-7) thanksgiving, (8-20) body, and (21-25) conclusion.

Behind the letter lies a narrative where the plot of the story might have unfolded in the following sequence. Onesimus, was a slave who had encountered some domestic trouble with his master Philemon. The life conditions and careers of slaves in the first-century Mediterranean world varied. If a slave worked in the mines or on galleys, life was miserable and in many cases, would have resulted in death. In contrast, the life of a house slave in a city could be relatively comfortable.²³ Paul,

20. Richard F. Ward, and David J. Trobisch, *Bringing the Word to Life: Engaging the New Testament through Performing It* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 3.

21. Gregory S. Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations in Ancient Rome* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1999), 50.

22. Ernst Wendland, “‘You Will Do Even More Than I Say’: On the Rhetorical Function of Stylistic Form in the Letter to Philemon,” in *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter*, ed. D. Francois Tolmie (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 79–111, here 83.

23. Risto Saarinen, *The Pastoral Epistles with Philemon & Jude*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 199.

who was in prison (1, 9, 23), is sought out by Onesimus to serve as his *amicus domini* (friend of the master) to intervene on his behalf in the hope he would be restored to his former status in Philemon's household.²⁴ Roman law allowed a slave who was in trouble with his or her master to seek arbitration with a colleague or friend of that master. In such instances, the slave was not considered to be a fugitive and could be granted sanctuary under the mediator's care until the difficulty was resolved (*The Digest of Justinian* 21.1.17.4).²⁵ For Onesimus to be able to visit and interact with Paul, suggests the apostle must have been in *custodia libera* (liberal detention), something akin to house arrest where a soldier was present.²⁶ Upon finding Paul, Onesimus became a Christ follower (10). Paul then sends Onesimus back to Philemon (12) with a letter of intercession to accept Onesimus back, while offering to pay Philemon for any loss he has suffered (17–19a).

The primary recipient of the letter, Philemon, was hospitable, since the church met in his house (2, 5–7). Ownership of a home large enough to accommodate a group of individuals, and with a guest room also suggests that he was also a person of wealth (2, 22). He possibly was the leader of the church meeting at his house, as he had a hand in ministering to other believers (5, 7).

While Philemon was the primary addressee of the letter, the other recipients were not mere bystanders. They would have played an active a role as observers, watching Philemon intently to see what he will do in response to Paul's request.

The repetition of the plural pronoun *hēmōn* (our) in the opening address (1, 2, 3) and the language used to describe the relationship among the authors and recipients (co-workers [1], dear [1], fellow soldier [2], brother [1], and sister [1]), express that the group enjoyed a close intimate relationship with each other.²⁷ Further, in addition to Paul, Timothy, Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the entire church, God and Christ also inhabited this specifically defined community space, for they served, along with Paul and Timothy, as co-dispatchers and co-authors of the epistle (3).

Philemon Delivered

The reader of Paul's brief, but passionate letter becomes the author's means of being present in the Christian community. This presence is embodied by the lector who

24. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 34C (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 18.

25. Alan Watson, ed., *The Digest of Justinian*, vol. 2, trans. Alan Watson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1985), 148.

26. Roy R. Jeal, *Exploring Philemon: Freedom, Brotherhood, and Partnership in the New Society*, *Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity* 2 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2015), 83.

27. Lee, *Sound Mapping*, 227; Pieter G.R. De Villiers, "Love in the Letter to Philemon," in *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter*, ed. D. Francois Tolmie (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 181–203, here 183.

has at his disposal his body, his facial expressions, and his voice to deliver the words to the church in the most persuasive manner while serving as Paul's substitute. In this portion of the analysis we will explore places in the text where expressions of admiration, joy, pity, and dependence on God could have been supplemented with gestures, a modulated voice, and eye contact to strengthen Paul's persuasion of Philemon and to bolster other significant portions of the letter.

Admiration for Philemon

From verse 4 through verse 21, the pronoun "you" (*sou*) is singular, indicating that in these verses Paul is speaking directly to Philemon. While there are several places in this section of the letter that convey Paul's appreciation for Philemon (4, 5, 7, 9, 12, 16), we will only mention one. It is located early in the letter when the apostle says, "When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ" (4–6). According to Peter Lampe, the three terms, *pantote* ("always" [4]), and *pantos* ("all" [5, 6]) are hyperbolic and serve to intensify Paul's feelings of affection toward Philemon.²⁸ Paul's words are strongly motivated by his love for Philemon as a valuable member of the family of God.

Given the prominent language that reflects Paul's affection and admiration for Philemon, it seems entirely fitting that the reader, during some of Paul's affectionate statements, would have communicated these feelings not only with a soft and gentle voice when reading, but also through physical touch. In ancient Athenian art, placing one's hand on the chin of another person seems to have been a common sign of affection or unity between two people.²⁹

In addition to physical touch, affection for an individual, both for us and for the ancients, is typically associated with increased eye-contact. The ancient belief of vision, especially among the Greeks, was that seeing, or gazing at another person was a material process analogous to touch.³⁰ In the ancient world, there were a variety of theories concerning the mechanics of vision. Two extreme theories referred to by moderns as "extramission" and "intromission" suggest that ancient viewers tended to think of the meeting of eyes between two people as far more active and physical than

28. Peter Lampe, "Affects and Emotions in the Rhetoric of Paul's Letter to Philemon: A Rhetorical-Psychological Explanation," in *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter*, ed. D. Francois Tolmie (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 61–77, here 65.

29. E.g., Angelos Chaniotis, Nikolaos E. Kaltsas, and Ioannis Mylonopoulos eds. *A World of Greek Emotions: Ancient Greece, 700 BC–200 AD* (New York: Onassis Foundation USA, 2017), 154. See also Alan Boegehold, *When a Gesture was Expected: A Selection of Examples from Archaic and Classical Greek Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1999), 18.

30. Susanne Turner, "Sight and Death: Seeing the Dead through Ancient Eyes," in *Sight and the Ancient Senses, The Senses in Antiquity*, ed. Michael Squire (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 143–160, here 156.

we do today.³¹ Both theories considered that the eyes were constantly either giving out or receiving streams of tiny particles through which emotions like love or hate could travel. In ancient thinking, sight was tactile. Given this view, the lector surely would have, at certain places during the recitation of the letter, made and sustained direct eye contact with Philemon to more effectively communicate Paul's affection and appreciation for him.

Paul's Joy

Paul discloses that he has experienced much joy and encouragement upon hearing that Philemon had refreshed the hearts of God's people (7). While translations of the letter typically render *splanchna* (7) as "heart," the word more literally means "entrails," "viscera," or "inward parts," and thus, refers to the feeling in one's stomach.³² Ancient people likely associated emotions to their internal organs such as the stomach because that is where they were physically experienced.³³ Paul is joyful upon hearing that the deepest innermost part of God's people have been healed, ministered to, renewed, and refreshed because of Philemon. Joy is a characteristic of the Holy Spirit's own nature and a manifestation of his indwelling presence (Rom 14:17; Gal 5:22). To experience joy is to have a sense of well-being, gladness, intense satisfaction, and exultant delight. These feelings can find expression in poetry, elated vocabulary, gestures, dance, celebration, humor, music, laughter, song, and gratitude.

Peter Arnott has noted that in the Greek theater, joy was expressed by some passionate, ecstatic rapid movement of the body.³⁴ For example, in *The Libation Bearers*, Electra is told by her brother Orestes to contain herself and to not go mad with joy (230). Given that Christian joy is in part a result of the Spirit's presence in an individual, the reader may have recited Paul's statements of joy in a tone of voice different than he does elsewhere in the letter. Upon hearing that the ministry of Philemon provided rest to the very innermost being of the redeemed, the lector likely articulated these words in an excited, slightly ecstatic manner, with increased tempo and volume that usually accompanies vocalization of exuberant joy.

31. Michael Squire, "Introductory Reflections: Making Sense of Ancient Sight," in *Sight and the Ancient Senses*, The Senses in Antiquity, ed. Michael Squire (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 1–35, here 16–17.

32. Frederick W. Danker, et al., "σπλάγχνον," BDAG 938.

33. See the research discussed by Mark S. Smith ("The Heart and Innards Israelite Emotional Expressions: Notes from Anthropology and Psychobiology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117 [1998]: 427–36).

34. Peter D. Arnott, *Public and Performance in the Greek Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 66.

Acknowledging God

Three times in Philemon God is acknowledged. Twice he is mentioned directly (3, 4) and once he is referred to in a divine passive (15; *echōrithē*). In Scripture, the act of communicating with God is often accompanied by raising the arms or spreading of one's palms (e.g., 1 Kings 8:22, 54; 2 Chron 6:13; Ps 28:2; 44:20; 63:4; Isa1:15). David Calabro suggests that this gesture communicates a person symbolically seeking to establish a bond with the divine.³⁵ Like the posture of an infant reaching towards his or her mother for care, the prayer posture of an individual with outstretched arms and palms open toward the heavens, similarly acknowledges dependence on God. In Philemon 3 it is noteworthy that God is referenced as "father." In verse 4 God is thanked for his role in Philemon's love for the saints. Finally, the Greek word translated as "separated" (*echōrithē*) discussing Onesimus' departure and conversion is in the passive tense, insinuating God's providential involvement in Onesimus's and Philemon's circumstances (15).³⁶ In any one of these three references to God, the reader properly could have recognized God with extended arms and palms open toward the heavens.

Admiration for Onesimus

Love is a strong, self-giving affection that stands at the heart of Christianity. This affection finds vivid demonstration in Paul's willingness help Onesimus and more specifically to financially intercede for any debt Onesimus owes Philemon. Paul's self-giving love is emphasized in the text when he repeatedly refers to himself ("I") at the beginning of three succeeding clauses, creating a sort of staccato affect: "I Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about you owing me even yourself" (19). The reference to Paul's personal involvement in the actual composition, function as a guarantee of payment and likely insinuates that Paul had a secretary write the rest of the letter. More importantly it is apparent that Paul did not hesitate to express his willingness to repay any debt due Philemon on behalf Onesimus.

Here it would be entirely appropriate for the reader to gesture towards himself each time he recites the pronoun "I." Further, a gesture toward the manuscript he is holding would underscore Paul's guarantee of payment. Paul is in a small way modeling Jesus' demonstration of love for sinners by offering to help pay for the consequences of Onesimus' offence against Philemon (19).

35. David Calabro, "'When You Spread Your Palms, I Will Hide My Eyes': The Symbolism of Body Gesture in Isaiah," *Studia Antiqua* 9 (2011): 16–32, here 31.

36. James W. Thompson and Bruce Longenecker, *Philippians and Philemon*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 184.

Pity for Paul

Paul attempts to persuade Philemon by evoking feelings of sympathy towards the apostle. First, by stating that he is imprisoned and advanced in age, Paul presents himself as an object of pity (1, 9, 13, 10, 22, 23). Given that Paul's remark about his old age is parallel with his status as a prisoner (9), suggests that rather than being an attempt to assert his authority, the reference to his advanced age implies that it was a self-humbling gesture.³⁷

The references to Paul's advanced age represent an aspect of his physicality (9).³⁸ In addition to allowing the audience to become sensitive to and experience the bodily presence of the author, it also reflects an attempt by the apostle to pull at Philemon's heartstrings and cause him to feel sympathy towards him and his appeal. The lector could impersonate people through various means, including, but not limited to, consideration of the person's age, sex, and, social status. The reader may have imitated Paul as an elderly man by bending slightly over, slowing down the tempo of his speech and using a tremulous voice.

A second means by which Paul seeks to stir feelings of pity are through his requests to Philemon, which give the impression that the apostle is dependent on him (9, 10). Paul pleads with Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, providing him with a persuasive motive: "I am appealing to you for my child (*tou emou teknou*), Onesimus (*Onēsimon*), whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless (*achrēston*) to you, but now he is indeed useful (*euchrēston*) both to you and to me" (10–11). In the Greek, Paul's statement concerning his spiritual fathering of Onesimus and the child's transformation exhibit both a balanced rhythm and rhyming. The rhythm and the rhyming directs attention to Paul's plea and Onesimus' spiritual transformation from slave to brother and from one who was once useless for the cause of the gospel to one who is now beneficial. The sound features of the letter were important for audiences listening to the letters recited and here stress Paul's passionate appeal on behalf of the estranged slave.

The appeals that Paul made on behalf of Onesimus, serve as a "rhetorical prostration" (9–11).³⁹ A supplicant often realizes that a verbal plea for pity requires much more than a request to succeed—a kneeling position would serve to reinforce the vocal plea. Ancient Greek dramas exhibited physical acts of supplication. For example, in Euripides' drama *The Suppliants*, the scene opens with aged, grey-haired, Argive women kneeling at the feet of Aethra, appealing for help in retrieving the unburied bodies of their sons who have perished in battle (1–40).⁴⁰ Their posture,

37. Lampe, "Affects and Emotions," 65 n. 10.

38. Bernard Oestreich, *Performance Criticism in the Pauline Letters*, trans. Lindsay Elias and Brent Blum, eds. David Rhoads, Holly E. Hearon and Kelly R. Iverson, *Biblical Performance Criticism* 14 (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 84.

39. Lampe, "Affects and Emotions," 70.

40. David Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical*

along with their age, enhanced their plea and the pity that was felt towards them. To further persuade, the reader may also resort to physical contact that creates a bond between Paul and Philemon. Besides demonstrating affection, the gesture of placing one's hand on another's chin, also depicts an act of supplication or pleading with another individual.⁴¹ Consequently, we might imagine the reader kneeling before Philemon and/or touching his chin at certain points in the recitation to strengthen Paul's appeal for Onesimus.

Conclusion

We do not know who read the letter of Philemon to the congregation. We do know that the epistle contains Paul's emotional language, which was potentially read with modulation in voice, dramatic gestures, and eye contact. Beyond a mere recitation of the correspondence, we have suggested how the reader may have communicated affectively, the community's dependence on God, and the emotions of joy, admiration, and pity. All with the goal to enhance Paul's message and to convince Philemon to forgive Onesimus and warmly welcome him back not as a slave, but as a brother in the Christian community.

Literature (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2006), 206.

41. Boegehold, *When a Gesture*, 19.