

Introduction

From Homer to Paulus Silentarius, it melted innards and emptied the liquefied self unto death. It drove the plot of ancient novels from the first century to the eleventh. Famous letter writers like Cicero and John Chrysostom, obscure ones (only from the West's perspective) like Nikephoros Ouranos and Theodoros of Kyzikos, and the forgotten correspondents of Greek papyri—all wrote to allay it, unsuccessfully. Doctors knew it was a disease with no cure save one. This *pathos* transformed desolation into song, gave birth to sculpture one night at a potter's house in Corinth, erected gravestones, and even tilted the great Alexander's head. It was a god—not Eros but his twin brother. Or, it *was* Eros with covered face mourning his beloved. Paul declared it lodged in the innards he shared with Christ. Epaphroditus suffered it, too. The Greeks called this love infused with grief *πόθος*. The Romans wrote *desiderium*. In English, it is longing.

There once was a time when Paul's letter to the Philippians was read through *pothos*. Longing played an important role in the reception of Philippians among fourth-century Christians and, to a greater extent, authors of the middle and late Byzantine periods and Latin writers including Bernard of Clairvaux, Gueric of Igny, and Gilbert of Hoyland, the last three of whom John of Ford (1140–1214) called “noble friends of the spouse and attendants to the bride.”¹ Why did John award these writers such high honors? Each had expounded the biblical poem Song of Songs. Yet it was more than their labor he praised. Each also had discovered an entry to profound theology in that poem's eroticism. Their exegetical training, which John reports took place in a marriage chamber, was an experience too intimate to relate yet powerful and contagious.² Unlike modern interpreters, these writers were attentive to Paul's *desiderium* for Christ and the church. They read the Christ Hymn as if it were a narrative of longing, as if the motivation for the incarnation, life, and death of Jesus had been the Son of God's impossible desire for communion with humanity. Now, it must be admitted that the same writers at times portrayed Paul as an authoritarian leader and the Christ Hymn as an exemplary story of humble submission to the will of the sovereign Father. In this respect they anticipated what most scholars today say about Paul and Paul's God. Unlike their modern counterparts, however, these older authors allowed two distinct readings, one ruled by sovereignty and the other by longing, to occupy

their minds and sometimes to stand next to each other on the same page. Their openness to love makes plausible the hunch motivating this book that erotic motifs influenced the composition of Philippians and the letter's earliest reception.

Premodern interpreters offer us something quite valuable, since they read Philippians as if it were written poetically. That is to say, they heard motifs from ancient love poetry in Paul's words. They were unafraid to construe the apostle's emotion as the *erōs* of secular literature even though they knew such readings were out of bounds or, in the words of Baldwin of Ford (c. 1125–1190) that such untamed authority was “unworthy and unsuitable.” Still, if pagans experienced love, Baldwin reasoned, and if their love poetry illumines Scriptures, they ought to be consulted. Sappho, for example, knew love. Born in the later part of the seventh century B.C.E., she was the first witness of love's violence perpetrated against the lover. Although she was a most unlikely tutor to Christian exegetes, writers in the Middle Ages nevertheless learned from her about the suffering of love, and hers was not the only voice. Puzzling over the conflicting emotions love brings to the soul, Baldwin appeals to Ovid to defend the propriety of the Bride's words “because I am afflicted with love” from Song of Songs:

Love is an affliction, and the suffering of a soul that is sick. The authority of the poet—even though it seems unworthy and unsuitable— affirms the truth of this, when he says: “Woe to me, for no herb can cure love.” But for religious minds, it should be enough that this is the voice of the bride. She states what she feels and says: “I am afflicted with love.”³

Baldwin recognized in biblical love the quality Sappho called “sweet-bitter.”⁴ Baldwin writes, “love is obviously an affliction. Someone who loves, burns and yearns and sighs; he does not have what he wants, and if he is kept from the coveted embraces of the bride, he is tormented by this very fact.”⁵ In order to place the Bride's spiritual illness within Christian faith, Baldwin developed a typology of love far different from the tripartite division invented by Anders Nygren (*erōs*, *philia*, and *agapē*), which would have excluded her erotic suffering from proper Christian theology. Baldwin cites Phil 1:22, 29; 3:8 as further proof that Ovid's lovesickness is biblical and therefore valid as a form of piety.⁶ Paul and Ovid, twin authorities!

Ancient poets called the torment of *pothos* lovesickness. Sappho's list of the lover's physical symptoms was famous in antiquity and inspired the poetic *topos*

“love as a disease” lasting well into the middle ages.⁷ When lover looks upon beloved the tongue is tied, skin burns, eyes and ears fail, cold sweat breaks out and shaking takes control, and the victim of Eros appears to herself as dead.⁸

The ancients feared Eros. Hesiod tells us why. Like Sleep (in a small way) and Death (in a big way), Eros loosens limbs and tosses the mind from the body:

In truth, first of all Chasm came to be, and then broad-breasted Earth, the ever immovable seat of all the immortals who possess snowy Olympus’ peak and murky Tartarus in the depths of the broad-pathed earth, and Eros, who is the most beautiful among the immortal gods, the limb-melter—he overpowers the mind and the thoughtful counsel of all the gods and of all human beings in their breasts.⁹

Eros revealed to the ancients that they were not masters of their lives. Autonomy flies out the window when your beloved, your all in all, your happiness and the host of your wandering soul walks in the door, or worse, threatens to walk out.

This book is not directly about *erōs*. It is about longing, Paul’s longing for the church and for Christ and Christ’s longing for mortals. Yet, to get at *pothos* in Paul’s letters it will be necessary to acknowledge Eros’s dual role in the lives of ancient people: the god was maker of communion and frightful menace. Erotic misfortunes fell upon victims in various ways. Often in formulaic terms, ancient funerary inscriptions recorded an obvious cause of longing: the death of a spouse, children, parents, or friends, and as painful as these deaths were, the beloved’s disinterest was even worse.¹⁰ Nothing hurt more than to be told no. *Erōs* was drained of presence and transformed into *pothos* in a mightier way still, through separation; travel broke many hearts in an age without cell phones and jets. The letter to the Philippians and the Christology it contains needs to be reimagined through the space separating Paul and the community. We need to learn how to read through longing.

To that end, this book adopts a reading practice similar to that of Baldwin and his contemporaries. Like them, I listen for echoes of ancient poetry in the language of Philippians and acknowledge the influence of Sappho and the tradition she inspired. She was one of the first to mark love’s effect on the body of the lover, and when Paul speaks of love he may be speaking of the physical event she so famously described. Love heated, melted, and finally emptied the body even as sickness wastes human flesh. The openness of Byzantine

and medieval Christian writers to erotic suffering is a departure from today's approaches to Paul's letters. Modern interpreters not only subordinate love to sovereignty when speaking about God but also prefer philosophy and religion to poetry when they imagine the composition and reception of Pauline texts. While it has become commonplace to grasp a Pauline letter in one hand and the writings of the Hellenistic philosophers, or the documents of ancient Judaism, in the other and read back and forth, the same cannot yet be said in modern scholarship for ancient poetry and Paul.¹¹ I hope to change that situation in a small way.

It is not just Pauline interpreters' preoccupation with sovereignty that stands in the way of Christology based on longing desire. When it comes to sex and marriage, Paul's own anti-eroticism is well recognized and threatens to stop the present inquiry in its tracks. It might very well be asked why we should seek out erotic allusions in Paul's discourse when we already know that he opposes desire.¹² It is, after all, better to marry than to burn (1 Cor 7:9), not a glowing recommendation of romantic love. Given Paul's reputation in matters of sex, our proposal to interpret his writings in terms of *erōs* appears counterintuitive.

The following distinction, therefore, needs to be made. In Philippians, Paul does not concern himself with the management of bodies, a topic he covered in 1 Thessalonians 4, Romans 1, and 1 Corinthians 6–7 in ways remarkably similar to the anti-erotic writings of Greek and Roman moral philosophers. When it comes to matters of sex and marriage, Paul's writings rehearse philosophic clichés about avoidance of shame through self-control. Philippians, though, is about the relationship *at a distance* that Paul in company with Timothy, Epaphroditus, Euodia, and Syntyche had with a community of persons. This relationship *in absence* opens on to Paul's longing for Christ, Christ's desire for communion with the church and the world, and, finally, God's own loving relatedness to all of creation. The distinction that needs to be made, then, is between personal ethics, with its concern for the management of bodies and a Christology and ecclesiology that take loss and grief seriously. Paul's antipathy for *erōs* in sex is overshadowed by his passion to apply *erōs* to Christ. Not to make this distinction and to reject the possibility of erotic meanings in the letter is to throw out the baby, as Eros often was pictured, with the bathwater.

If it is the case that Paul's dim view of *erōs* reached only to sexual ethics, then we are free to ask about its significance for his Christology. But does Paul's letter to the Philippians in fact contain erotic terminology?¹³ This door having been opened, it would be disappointing to discover that we have walked into an empty room. The burden of this book is to show that Paul did indeed take advantage of ancient culture's tumultuous love affair with *erōs*. To make

this point, I will situate Paul's words about Christ in the history of longing as it appears in poetry, novels, letters, medical texts, grave inscriptions, and Christian reception of Pauline texts. These are texts usually considered the turf of classicists and experts in the literature of late antiquity and the medieval period and seldom given attention by New Testament scholars. An expert in none of these fields (and painfully aware of it), I nevertheless ask readers to follow the trail of longing wherever it takes us.

Why has *pothos* not drawn the attention of Pauline scholars, who seek as do I to reinterpret Paul by expanding the horizon of his texts? Perhaps it is because of the company *pothos* keeps. As I emphasized above, *pothos* has no existence apart from *erōs*, for only those who exult in the presence of the beloved ache in the time of absence. In the *Cratylus*, Socrates played fast and loose with linguistic data, but his fanciful etymology revealed a widely held belief about longing's connection to erotic desire: "πόθος (yearning) signifies that it pertains not to that which is present, but to that which is elsewhere (ἄλλοθί που) or absent, and therefore the same feeling which is called ἕμερος when its object is present, is called πόθος when it is present."¹⁴ When the beloved is not there, physically or emotionally, *pothos* arises. *Pothos* is linked to *erōs* as a shadow is to its body. Longing and love must be related, but they must also be distinguished, and in both tasks biblical scholars have fallen short.¹⁵

For this reason, *pothos* has fared only as well as *erōs* has, and lately it has not gone well for *erōs*. Somewhere along the way biblical interpreters and longing have gotten separated. It was Eros's fault. By the mid-twentieth century, *Pothos's* twin brother had acquired a reputation for carnality pure and simple. Indiscriminate condemnation brought them both down from their celebrated places in earlier periods of the church; many biblical interpreters now would find the suggestion of an erotic Paul, if it ever were offered, unsavory and ludicrous. This is unfortunate. Although *erōs* might feel like an objectifying concept, it need not be. A broad range of human emotions disappear when erotic experience is limited to sex as a targeting behavior. When some classical scholars speak of *erōs*, they are referring to a reality larger than the acquisition of a partner in sex.¹⁶ Writers from the church's past likewise had a broader imagination, recognizing that *erōs* is about communion. Dionysius the Areopagite writes,

To those listening properly to the divine things the name "love" is used by the sacred writers in divine revelation with the exact same meaning as the term "yearning" (τὸ τῆς ἀγάπης καὶ τοῦ ἔρωτος

ὄνομα). What is signified is a capacity to effect a unity, an alliance, and a particular commingling in the Beautiful and the Good.¹⁷

Erōs seeks connection, the sharing of lives, and the knowing and being known face to face. So, if, as this book argues, Paul intensified the literary representation of his loving Christ and Christ's loving the world by expressing their common passion in poetic diction, contemporary scholars do the apostle an injustice by thinking just of sex when he uses words implying *erōs* in its fullest sense.

A permeable border separates *erōs*, *agapē*, and *philia*, three ancient forms of love that for the past sixty years Christian preachers have been admonished by professors of New Testament, theology, and homiletics to keep apart. *Agape and Eros*, by Anders Nygren, a book whose influence on preaching since the mid-twentieth century has been considerable, drove a wedge between *agapē* on one side and *erōs* and *philia* on the other. To establish his case for the unique status of *agapē*, Nygren mischaracterized *erōs* claiming that it is selfish.¹⁸ *Erōs* simply uses another human being to satisfy the physical and spiritual needs of the lover. Now, there are indeed ancient texts that support Nygren's view, but one need only breeze through Sappho's fragments to realize that there is something wrong with his notion of *erōs* as *only* other-consuming. There is more to the story of love than Nygren imagined. *Erōs* ate away at the soul, burning and piercing the lover's heart; poets in antiquity testify how frighteningly *self-consuming* *erōs* was. Furthermore, *agapē*, whose sole ownership by Christians it has been many a preacher's proud moment to proclaim in order to belittle lesser loves, turns out to be a fairly reliable synonym for *erōs* after all. As for *philia*, it never was far removed from *erōs*, as Seneca wrote, "Beyond question the feeling of a lover has in it something akin to friendship; one might call it friendship run mad."¹⁹ Nygren's tidy divisions just don't hold up.

In the ancient geography of the human heart, the long and unguarded border between *erōs* and *philia* was difficult to draw even when there was interest to do so. Definitions rarely sparked the creativity of ancient Greek poets. Their interests lay elsewhere. Rather than limiting *erōs* to sex, some wondered whether love might actually explain the nature of the entire universe. Might it be, they wondered in amazement, that what holds the cosmos together is the same force that binds lover to beloved and ties friends fast? In the third century B.C.E., the god Eros invited the entire world to confess him as Lord in an epigram of Simias of Rhodes that adumbrates Paul's celebration of Jesus as Lord in Phil 2:11. Eros speaks:

Look on me, the lord of broad-bosomed Earth, who stablished the Heaven elsewhere, and tremble not if, little though I be, my cheeks are heavy with bushy hair. For I was born when Necessity was ruler, and all creeping things and those that move through the sky yielded to the dire decrees of Earth. But I am called the swift-flying son of Chaos, not of Cypris or of Ares, for in no wise did I rule by force, but by gentle-voiced persuasion, and the earth and the depths of the sea and the brazen heaven yielded to me. I robbed them of their ancient sceptre and gave laws to the gods.²⁰

Eros is Lord, yet his reign relies not on violence but persuasion.²¹ He makes the world work through attraction rather than necessity and the “dire decrees of Earth.”²² It would be a shame to allow sex, especially the ancient world’s subject-object dichotomous version of it, to get all the attention and for this reason bar *erōs* from Pauline meanings. So much would be missed. If Simias is to be believed, the whole world and its Lord.

Notes

1. John of Ford, *Sermon 24.2*. Translation is from *Sermons on the Final Verses of the Song of Songs, II*, trans. Wendy Mary Beckett, Cistercian Fathers Series 39 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1982), 135. Richard of St. Victor is also named, but his work does not play a significant role in the present study.

2. John of Ford, *Sermon 24.2* (*Sermons on the Final Verses of the Song of Songs, II*, 135–36): “It was in the marriage chamber that they learned to understand the marriage song, and only then did they become able to explain this sacred love to us. Even so, they could hardly expound in words more than the slightest part of the great things they had learned in their hearts. Still I receive them as angels of God, and I listen to them with my whole heart as to Seraphim, a name that is said to mean those who both burn and set others afire.”

3. Baldwin of Ford, *Spiritual Tractates 14*. Translation is from *Baldwin of Ford: Spiritual Tractates, II*, trans. David N. Bell, Cistercian Fathers Series 41 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1986), 141. On this passage, see Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great through the Twelfth Century*, vol. 2 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 303–5. See also Baldwin of Ford, *Spiritual Tractates 8*, where Virgil’s description (*Aen.* 4.1–2) of Dido’s wounded heart is admired. See also Theocritus, *Id.* 2.84: “some burning disease wiped me out” (μέ τις κατῦρὰ νόσος ἔξελάτταξε) (my translation). Lovesickness is a favorite theme of erotic fiction. See especially Xenophon of Ephesus, *Ephesiaca* 1.5–6, on which see Peter Toohy, “Dangerous Ways to Fall in Love: Chariton I 1, 5–10 and VI 9, 4,” *Maia* 51 (1999): 259–75. See also Longus, *Daphn.* 1.13–14, 17–18; 2.7–8; Heliodorus, *Aeth.* 3.7; 4.7, 10. For the intersection of poetry and medicine in this matter, see Mirko Grmek, *Diseases in the Ancient Greek World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 36–37, 43–44; Mary Frances Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The Viaticum and Its Commentaries*, Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 1–18. For Greek medical texts in Arabic sources, see Hans H. Biesterfeldt and Dimitri Gutas, “The Malady of Love,” *JAOs* 104

(1984): 21–55. The most comprehensive study is Donald A. Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella, *A Treatise on Lovesickness: Jacques Ferrand* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990).

4. See chapter 2.

5. Baldwin of Ford, *Spiritual Tractates* 14. Bell, *Baldwin of Ford*, 143.

6. See also Baldwin of Ford, *Spiritual Tractates* 3.

7. See note 3 above.

8. Sappho, *Frg.* 31.

9. Hesiod, *Theog.* 116–22. It is telling that Eros's effects on the body were indistinguishable from those of Hades, god of death. See *Greek Anthology* 12.73.

10. Longing was sometimes declared as the motive for erecting gravestones: "Pothos has set this work up before the eye" (*Steinepigramme* 16/31/98). For more examples, see *Griechische Vers-Inschriften* 227, 568, 1745, 2035; *Steinepigramme* 9/6/15; 9/9/15; 14/2/8; 14/3/3.

11. For an important exception, see Christopher Smith, "'Εκκλείσαι' in Galatians 4:17: The Motif of the Excluded Lover as a Metaphor of Manipulation," *CBQ* 58 (1996): 480–99.

12. Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006); David E. Fredrickson, "Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24–27: Paul and the Philosophic Critique of Eros," in *Homosexuality, Science, and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture*, ed. David L. Balch (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 197–222; and idem, "Passionless Sex in 1 Thessalonians 4:4–5," *WW* 23 (2003): 23–30.

13. There is a quick way to answer yes. In the second century c.e., the scholar and rhetorician Julius Pollux did a favor for public speakers who wished to measure up to attic standards. In his *Onomasticon*, Pollux collected classical terminology on a wide range of subjects. Here are selections from the entry for ἐρᾶν (3.68–72): longing (πόθος); to burn with longing (φλέγεσθαι τῷ πόθῳ); to be a slave (δουλεύειν); voluntary slave (ἑθελόδουλος); desire (ἐπιθυμία); one who desires (ἐπιθυμήτης); taking thought for (φροντίζων); to be seized (κατειληφθαι); loving (ἀγαπῶν); beloved (ἀγαπώμενος). When this list is compared with the vocabulary of Philippians, the following shared terms may be noted: ἐπιποθῶ (1:8); ἐπιποθῶν (2:26); ἐπιπόθητοι (4:1); δοῦλοι (1:1; 2:7); ἐδούλευσεν (2:22); ἐπιθυμίαν (1:23); φρονεῖν ὑπέρ (1:7; 4:10); ἀγάπη (1:9; 16; 2:1); ἀγαπητοί (2:12; 4:1); καταλάβω, κατειλήμθην, κατειληφέναι (3:12–13).

14. Plato, *Crat.* 420A. Cf. Plutarch, *Amat.* 759B.

15. With notable exceptions; see L. William Countryman, *Love, Human and Divine: Reflections on Love, Sexuality, and Friendship* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2005); and David M. Carr, *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

16. See Claude Calame, *The Poetics of Eros in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

17. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names* 709CD. Translation is from *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, CWS (Mahwah, NJ: 1987), 81. Yet God does not experience *erōs* in the same way as humans do according to the Areopagite. Divine *erōs* becomes love-patriarchalism as it binds "the things of the same order in a mutually regarding union" and moves "the superior to provide for the subordinate, and it stirs the subordinate in a return toward the superior" (709D). Glimmers of passion do survive, however: God "is, as it were, beguiled by goodness, by love, and by yearning and is enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide within all things, and he does so by virtue of his supernatural and ecstatic capacity to remain, nevertheless, with himself" (712B).

18. For a helpful alternative to Nygren's categories, see Bernard McGinn, "God as Eros: Metaphysical Foundations of Christian Mysticism," in *New Perspectives on Historical Theology: Essays in Memory of John Meyendorff*, ed. Bradley Nassif (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 189–209.

19. Seneca, *Ep.* 9.11.

20. *Greek Anthology* 15.24.

21. For other confessions of Eros as Lord, see Menander, *Sam.* 632: "Love, ruler of my heart" (ὁ τῆς ἐμῆς νῦν κύριος γνῶμης, Ἔρω). Cf. Plutarch, *Amat.* 768AB: "when Love enters as

sovereign, men are ever after free and released from all other lords and masters and continue throughout their days to be, as it were, slaves of the god.” Cf. Xenophon of Ephesus, *Ephesiaca* 1.4; and *Greek Anthology* 12.28. See Neta Zagagi, *Tradition and Originality in Plautus: Studies of the Amatory Motifs in Plautine Comedy*, Hypomnemata 62 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), 116.

22. Cf. Aeschylus, *Suppl.* 1034–42.