

## Paul: Appearance and Health

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In New Testament Studies, Paul and his physical appearance and health have (until relatively recently) seldom taken centre stage.<sup>1</sup> Scholarly ‘portraits of Paul’, despite the visual cues assumed in this signifier, more often than not have focussed on Paul’s thought, leadership, missionary strategy, and emerging theology. As such Paul’s intellectual legacy attested in literature, rather than constructions of his body,<sup>2</sup> have most often dominated enquiries. Ancient physiognomic conventions however, were not so quick to dismiss the physical body’s appearance and health: these charted how a person’s exterior form provided insights into their ethics and character, according to which gender, ethnicity, social status, and morality could effectively be plotted.<sup>3</sup> Physiognomy was common within the ancient world, including within many medical and philosophical treatises. This practical and technical art was grounded in the confidence that bodily events and forms affected the soul, and emotions took on perceptible materialization in facial expressions, movement, and somatic features.<sup>4</sup> Grounded in Aristotelian thought physiognomic reason contended that:

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<sup>1</sup> This is despite a broader turn to the body in many humanities disciplines. Roger Cooter notes that interest in body history (or more particularly ‘the historicised body’) was accelerated through Foucauldian perspectives which underlined the socially-constructed nature (rather than the biological essentialism) of the body. See Roger Cooter, ‘The Turn of the Body: History and Politics of the Corporeal’, *ARBOR Ciencia, Pensamiento y Cultura* CLXXXVI 743 mayo-junio (2010), 393-405, 393. In biblical studies, feminist, queer, and post-colonial criticisms in particular have focussed attention on the body. In researching this essay, I was struck by the number of female authors (and albeit to a lesser degree, those from the Global South) that I cited on embodiment. The gender/geographical ratio would no doubt be very different if concentrated on topics such as Paul’s (disembodied) theology and/or attitude to the law. On representation in biblical studies see Sara Parks “Historical-Critical Ministry? The Biblical Studies Classroom as Restorative Secular Space” *Blackfriars* Vol 100 (2019), 229-244. On politics of citation more broadly in the academy see Carrie Mott & Daniel Cockayne, ‘Citation matters: mobilizing the politics of citation toward a practice of ‘conscientious engagement’, *Gender, Place & Culture*, 24:7 (2017), 954-973.

<sup>2</sup> Dale Martin’s, *The Corinthian Body* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1995) was a pivotal work in starting to redress the relative lack of interest in embodiment in relation to the Pauline corpus. Other texts which have focussed on Paul’s body since include: Jennifer A. Glancy, “Boasting of Beatings (2 Corinthians 11:23-25),” *JBL* 123 (2004): 99-135; J. Albert Harrill, “Invective against Paul (2 Cor 10:10), the Physiognomics of the Ancient Slave Body, and the Greco-Roman Rhetoric of Manhood,” in Adela Yarbro Collins and Margaret M. Mitchell (eds) *Antiquity and Humanity: Essays on Ancient Religion and Philosophy Presented to Hans Dieter Betz on His 70th Birthday* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 189-213; Jennifer Larson, “Paul’s Masculinity,” *JBL* 123 (2004): 85-97; and Karl Olav Sandnes, *Belly and Body in the Pauline Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Callie Callon, has recently probed how physiognomic thought was used discursively as a strategy of persuasion in early Christian discourse: variously employed to smear or reject rivals (as heretics and imposters), or to enhance constructive self-portrayal and moral superiority (and metaphorical bodies presented therein). See Callie Callon, *Reading Bodies: Physiognomy as a Strategy of Persuasion in Early Christian Discourse* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Marke Ahonen, ‘Ancient Physiognomy’ in S. Knuuttila, & J. Sihvola (eds), *Sourcebook for the History of the Philosophy of Mind* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013) 623-631.

Soul and body affect each other sympathetically. A changed state of the soul changes also the appearance of the body; and again, a changed appearance of the body changes the state of the soul.<sup>5</sup>

Assessing the appearance and health of an ancient figure like Paul, known only to us through written evidence, inevitably means we encounter textual bodies<sup>6</sup> – literary portraits<sup>7</sup> – purposefully curated, shaped, and constructed within, and for, different contexts and cultures. Such a realisation reflects an increasing awareness of the shifting position of the ancient body as a historiographical category. As Dominic Montserrat notes:

Recent studies on the ancient body are withdrawing from the idea of ‘the body’ as undifferentiated, nomothetic category and are beginning to examine diversity and complexity of attitudes, practices and contexts. Concentrating on ideas surrounding change, modification and transition . . . [reveals] the plurality of the ancient body.<sup>8</sup>

This invites the researcher to ask in what ways a body is altered and how it conveys meaning in different texts and circumstances? Paul’s posture and gait, body modifications, dress, sensorium, voice, and perceived health or otherwise, are key registers by which he and others strategically present his body and character for appraisal. It is equally important though, that the researcher too is aware of their own ideological contexts and assumptions with regard to the historical subject being studied. Celebrated charismatic leaders and heroes, such as Paul, are often visually conceived (re-remembered) in positive ways in Western scholarship.<sup>9</sup> Stephen Moore notes that frequently Christ and others are discursively treated in *God’s Beauty Parlor* so as to ‘conform to cultural canons of attractiveness’.<sup>10</sup> Paul it seems, for many interpreters, is no exception. Yet, an image of Paul that comfortably resides ‘among us’<sup>11</sup> (historical critical scholars: largely male, able-bodied, white, epistemological products of the Global North) is, or

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<sup>5</sup> *Ps. Aristotle* cited in Alessandro Stavru, ‘Pathos, physiognomy and ekphrasis from Aristotle to the Second Sophistic Physiognomy and ekphrasis: Some methodological observations’, 147. Available online at: <https://www.degruyter.com/downloadpdf/books/9783110642698/9783110642698-007/9783110642698-007.pdf>,

<sup>6</sup> Lori Leftowitz defines this as ‘the situation and treatment of the human body in particular texts’. See Leftowitz, ‘Introduction’ in Lori Lefkowitz (ed) *Textual Bodies: Changing Boundaries of Literary Representation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 1-17, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth C. Evans, ‘Literary Portraiture in Ancient Epic: A Study of the Descriptions of Physical Appearance in Classical Epic’, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, Vol. 58/59 (1948), pp. 189-217.

<sup>8</sup> Dominic Montserrat ‘Introduction’ in Dominic Montserrat ‘Changing Bodies, *Changing Meanings: Studies on the Human Body in Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1-10, 1.

<sup>9</sup> ‘mythic figuration[s] of the hero thrives in contemporary [Western] culture, functioning as both an unattainable ideal against which contemporary masculinity is measured and a mythic means of assuring survival.’ Kevin Alexander Boon ‘Heroes, Metanarratives, and the Paradox of Masculinity in Contemporary Western Culture’ *Journal of Men’s Studies* Vol 13 (2005), 301-312, 301.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Moore, *God’s Beauty Parlor: And Other Queer Spaces in and Around the Bible* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Walsh, *Finding St. Paul in Film* (T&T Clark, 2005), 9.

at least should be, troubling in its familiarity. As Richard Walsh in his study of audio-visual receptions of Paul notes:

[we must admit] the constructed nature of all our Pauls and seek to pit Pauls against one another. Critical debate has revealed serious cracks in the façade [/face?] of Paul. . . . Paul devoid of his sainthood is condemned to meaning. The ideology that ‘construes’ Paul provides his meaning . . . we need constant lessons in politics and the cracks in our ideology.<sup>12</sup>

In seeking to respond to this call, here attention will be focussed on three traditions which seem to offer specific material on Paul’s appearance and/or health: (a) The Book of Acts (b) Paul’s Corinthian Correspondence (c) Acts of Paul and Thecla. A selected review of these traditions and scholarship on them, will reveal a dominant trend to view Paul’s appearance and health as strategically endorsing or recovering elite bodily ideals. However, contra this dominant interpretative stream, an alternative position will be proposed here: namely that in all three traditions surveyed, Paul’s body is less-than-perfect, even aberrant. His appearance will be seen to purposely incorporate various aspects of publicly ascribed abnormalities of ‘those who are socially ill positioned’:<sup>13</sup> women, slaves, the poor, the ugly, and disabled. Moreover, it will be proposed that it is these ‘ambiguous physiognomies’<sup>14</sup> centred on emasculation, disability, weak speech, bodily marks of enslavement, and unattractiveness (rather than more ‘normative’ Roman and Greek elite physiognomic models) which are most fundamental to the management of Paul’s appearance and health in the respective traditions under review.

### **Emasculation and Disability: The Book of Acts**

Classicists and ancient historians have offered biblical interpreters important insights on the appearance-management of masculinities in the ancient world. Textual, visual, and material evidence (mostly dealing with ruling elite) influenced the performances of gendered bodies of the time. Many note how masculinities were confirmed in different arenas (debate, athletics, warfare, sexuality etc.) by being active and dominant, rather than passive and submissive. Moreover, in a performance-orientated, agonistic culture, it was ‘citizens of the Greco-Roman elites [who] had easier access to maleness than what might best be labelled “unmen”’: females, boys, slaves (of either sex), sexually passive or effeminate males, eunuchs, barbarians, and so

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<sup>12</sup> Walsh, *Finding*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Montserrat ‘Introduction’, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Wytse Hette Keulen, *Gellius the Satirist: Roman Cultural Authority in Attic Nights* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 100.

on.<sup>15</sup> Morality too was gendered. Honour was part of being a good man, and associated virtues of courage<sup>16</sup>, self-control and endurance flowed from this.<sup>17</sup> But a character's status as a man, was not won in a single moment but rather needed ongoing supervision. As Colleen Conway attests:

From the ancient perspective the body lacked stability; there was no certainty that a masculinity earned was a masculinity saved. The specter of lost manliness, of a slide into effeminacy, was frequently raised [as a warning] before the eyes of the literate male audience.<sup>18</sup>

Luke's construction of Paul is often understood to bolster Paul's identity as an 'ideal' man. Writing from a well-educated social position, in an urban setting in the Eastern Mediterranean, and influenced by honour and patronage conventions of a Hellenised cityscape, it is often assumed that Luke manages Paul's appearance in purposeful ways to appeal to readers who wish to find in him 'an example of those who were seeking to increase or maintain their social status.'<sup>19</sup> Paul's Damascus road encounter (referred to thrice in Acts 9:1-19; 22:4-16; 26:12-18) is seen as critical in producing Paul's transformation from persecutor to missionary and indexing his elite, masculine credentials; John Lentz is typical of such a position when he writes:

It is significant that Paul confesses that while he was a persecutor he was enraged and embittered. Yet, after his conversion Paul becomes a man of sobriety and self-control (26:25). These two qualities would have been recognised as cardinal virtues.<sup>20</sup>

Acts 21-28 is also often cited as drawing particular attention to Paul's virtues as aligned with Greco-Roman ideals. Before earthly and political authorities, Paul established his citizenship, his Pharisaic heritage, moreover, in tribunals and appeals authorities ultimately defer to him as a man of reputation and distinction. Paul in such models is figured by Luke as heroic, ably armed with spiritual power and apostolic legitimacy.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Luke's Paul is also able to

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<sup>15</sup> Moires Mayordomo Marin, 'Construction of Masculinity in Antiquity and Early Christianity' *lectio difficilior* (2006) 1-35, 5. Available online at: [http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/06\\_2/PDF/marin\\_construction.pdf](http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/06_2/PDF/marin_construction.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Dimensions of 'manly' courage are helpfully explored by contributors in Ralph Rosen and Ineke Sluiter (eds), *Andreia: Studies in Manliness and Courage in Classical Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> On masculinities in the New Testament see: Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson (eds), *New Testament Masculinities* (Semeia Studies SBL, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Colleen Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 17.

<sup>19</sup> John Clayton Lentz, *Luke's Portrait of Paul*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 19.

<sup>20</sup> Lentz, *Luke's*, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Mary Rose D'Angelo 'The ANHP Question in Luke-Acts: Imperial Masculinity and the Deployment of Women in the Early Second Century' in Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (eds), *A Feminist Companion to Luke* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 44-69, 48.

resist the violent challenges launched against his body (particularly in Acts 14 where he is stoned and dragged almost lifeless from the city (v.19) and Acts 16 in which Paul recalls his public beating and arrest (v.37-39) but ultimately wins an apology from his captors. Thus, Paul recovers and defends his masculinity against the potential feminising or impotence which could be perceived in Paul's depiction. As Conway notes, 'In this world [Luke's] characters enact esteemed versions of masculinity regardless of the violence done to them'.<sup>22</sup> So too for Christina Petterson,

He [Paul] acts appropriately according to his citizen's status, speaks publicly and is according to commentaries, a good, noble, fearless man. Acts has portrayed its hero well, according to Aristotle's criteria of character.<sup>23</sup>

Brittany Wilson has however recently, and persuasively, challenged this position. Instead of Luke defending Paul's ideal manhood according to elite conventional models, Wilson argues that within the Acts narrative the character of Paul is persistently emasculated in various ways. Wilson posits Paul as an 'out of control convert' with a number of status inconsistencies: 'well-educated Roman citizen with access to money' yet at the same time 'a tentmaker, (18:3) who works with his hands to support himself (20:34)'.<sup>24</sup> Focusing on the Acts 9 account Wilson notes that the Damascus road incident, was a hugely emasculating drama, which prompts an involuntary loss of self-control and ascribes the disability of blindness to Paul's body. Such ascriptions of 'physical or sensory impairment . . . place[ed] the impaired body in a position of degradation equating it with one of servitude or shame'.<sup>25</sup> Theorists often posit masculinity and disability as conflictual: the former is allied with control and self-sufficiency, whereas the latter is allied with vulnerability and dependence.<sup>26</sup> Paul's appearance, rather than valiant, actually shows his subjugation to the crucified Lord. Contra the dominant interpretative paradigm therefore, Wilson contends: 'Paul moves from exerting control over other people's bodies (pre-conversion) to having others exert control over his body (post-conversion) . . . faithful followers are slaves of God . . . for Luke dependence not self-control – is the necessary

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<sup>22</sup> Colleen Conway 'Taking the Measure of Masculinities in Acts' in Eric Barretto, Matthew Skinner and Steve Walton (eds) *Reading Acts in the Discourses of Masculinity and Politics* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2017) e-edition, no pages.

<sup>23</sup> Christina Petterson, 'The Language of Gender in Acts' in Eric Barretto, Matthew Skinner and Steve Walton (eds) *Reading Acts in the Discourses of Masculinity and Politics* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2017), e-edition, no pages.

<sup>24</sup> Brittany Wilson, *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke-Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 156.

<sup>25</sup> Louise A. Gosbell "The Poor, the Crippled, the Blind, and the Lame": *Physical and Sensory Disability in the Gospels of the New Testament* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 75.

<sup>26</sup> Russell Shuttleworth, Nikki Wedgwood, and Nathan J. Wilson, 'The Dilemma of Disabled Masculinity' *Men and Masculinities* 15(2) 174-194, 174.

disposition of discipleship.<sup>27</sup> It is Paul's debasing acknowledgement of Christ's supremacy, not his presumed masculine status – that establishes his identity.<sup>28</sup> She further notes that blindness was often a sensory disability inflicted on men, to discursively feminise them:

Blindness also tends to be gendered in that men, rather than women, are the ones who are punished with blindness, men are the ones who correspondingly have power taken away. When this occurs they are effectively feminised for they are descending to the level of women, who do not exercise the right to gaze in the first place.<sup>29</sup>

Charles Hartsock's study of physiognomy and blindness is also insightful here.<sup>30</sup> He investigates the associations of the reference to 'scales' on Paul's eyes, as zoological (reptilian) physiognomy, often used in reference to lizards or dragons, whose danger is suppressed through conquering and subjugation.<sup>31</sup> For Hartsock therefore, not only the disability (scaled eyes), but also the cure (vanquishing of reptilian features through surrender), involves Paul's emasculation: 'Saul is a dragon that God must tame and bring under his domain [to use] Saul as the vessel for the impending Gentile mission'.<sup>32</sup> As such Luke destabilises norms of masculinity and ability, for 'according to Luke, being a "man" of God involves reneging self-control and serving a persecuted "Lord."'<sup>33</sup> Rather than being aligned to elite masculine ideals, Paul actually embodies debility and alterity.<sup>34</sup> He is humbled by his encounter with the crucified Lord, and his unbounded, unpredictable, and susceptible body dramatically reflects this. Rather than the bounded, controlled, self-command of one's physicality, Luke's Paul's body is violable, beatable and one disciplined through disability and servitude.

### **Weak Speech, and an Enslaved and Pierced Body: The Corinthian Correspondence**

Paul's own writings give a unique insight into his own physical self-representation. It is perhaps no coincidence that the most explicit commentary on his own appearance and demeanour

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<sup>27</sup> Brittany E. Wilson, 'The Blinding of Paul and the Power of God: Masculinity, Sight, and Self-Control in Acts' *JBL* 133, No. 2 (2014), 367-387, 386.

<sup>28</sup> Wilson, *Unmanly*, 185.

<sup>29</sup> Wilson, 'The Blinding', 379.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness in Luke-Acts* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 125-165.

<sup>31</sup> "'Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord . . .'" read in light of reptilian imagery, Saul suddenly sounds like a fire-breathing dragon.' Charles Hartsock, *Sight and blindness as an index of character in Luke-Acts and its cultural milieu*. PhD Thesis, Baylor, (2007), 240. Available online at: [https://baylor-ir.tdl.org/bitstream/handle/2104/5058/Chad\\_Hartsock\\_phd.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y](https://baylor-ir.tdl.org/bitstream/handle/2104/5058/Chad_Hartsock_phd.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y)

<sup>32</sup> Hartsock, *Sight*, 244.

<sup>33</sup> Brittany E. Wilson 'Destabilizing Masculinity: Paul in the Book of Acts and Beyond' *Journal of the Bible and its Reception* 2 (2015): 241-61, 241.

<sup>34</sup> Mikael Parsons among others has shown how the physiognomy is part of the world view of Luke, but also how Luke subverts the typical physiognomic paradigm in particular ways: through the image of Jesus Christ. See Mikael Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke-Acts: The Subversion of Physiognomy in Early Christianity* (Baylor University Press, 2011). See also Gosbell, *The Poor*, 75.

comes within his Corinthian correspondence in contexts of persuasion, conflict, and/or opposition. Norms of the day deemed that ‘cultural capital tend[ed] to be incorporated in particular individuals who must compete directly with each other to establish relationships of dominance and authority’.<sup>35</sup> Appearance and voice were important tools in such quests: the art of speaking well (embracing masculine voice and tone, aesthetic beauty, morality, and persuasiveness) was central.<sup>36</sup>

In responding to accusations and slurs against his appearance and speech Paul strategically attempts, what Erving Goffman would term, to manage his ‘face’.<sup>37</sup> Goffman was sensitive to the ways in which when some-body encounters another, they will endeavour to influence the impression given by their body: adjusting or establishing elements of appearance, form and manner.<sup>38</sup> This sociological insight was based within a dramaturgical framework:

[just as] in a play, actors try to convey to an audience a particular impression of the world around them. Through the use of scripted dialogue, gestures, props, costumes and so on, actors create a new reality for the audience to consider.<sup>39</sup>

In 1 Cor 2, Paul makes explicit his own feebleness and apprehension, presumably perceivable to others through his communication and comportment:

And I came to you in weakness (ἀσθενεία) and in fear (φόβω) and in much trembling (πολλῶ ἐγενόμην). My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. (1 Cor 2:3-5)

Commentators variously account for this description (particularly due to ἀσθενεία frequently denoting infirmity or sickness) as physical and/or social deviance: ‘a repellent physical malady, his toiling with his hands, his relative impoverishment, [and] his vulnerability to persecution.’<sup>40</sup> Alongside such suppositions, is often laid the claim that Paul’s appearance conflicts with normative ancient expectations of rhetors, marked by self-assurance, eloquence, a persuasive

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<sup>35</sup> Maud W. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton University Press, 2008), xxiv.

<sup>36</sup> Laurent Pernot, *Rhetoric in Antiquity* (Catholic University America Press, 2005), x.

<sup>37</sup> ‘face may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself’ in Erving Goffman ‘On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction’ *Psychiatry* 18 (1955), 213-231, 213. | See also Heather Laine Talley, *Saving Face: Disfigurement and the Politics of Appearance* (New York: New York University Press, 2014). For the bible and face-work see John Pilch, ‘Insults and Face-Work in the Bible’ *HTS Theological Studies* (2014), no pages. Available online at: [https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/43583/Pilch\\_Insults\\_2014.pdf;sequence=1](https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/43583/Pilch_Insults_2014.pdf;sequence=1) - scielo.org.za

<sup>38</sup> Goffman, ‘Face-Work’, 214.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Kivisto and Dan Pittman, ‘Goffman’s Dramaturgical Sociology: Personal Sales and Service in a Commodified World’ in Peter Kivisto (ed), *Illuminating Social Life: Classical and Contemporary Theory Revisited*, (Sage Publications, 2012), 297-317, 298.

<sup>40</sup> David E. Garland, *First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 85.

voice, and an imposing masculine presence. Instead Paul's performance more readily aligns with those anxious performers or speakers of lowly status, described by Plutarch as 'ugly, servile, needy, dishonoured, and unlearned (*Frat, amor* 485D)'<sup>41</sup> In 2 Cor 10-13, similar attacks on Paul's 'weak' bodily presence (10:10) are evident, so too are slurs on his own personal character purposely designed to attack his ministry. Jennifer Larson understands Paul's opponents to be employing prejudicial assumptions concerning non-elite and/or non-normative bodies:

Physical unattractiveness or disability detracted from one's ability to lead and persuade others, as did indicators of low social status such as a lack of education or participation in manual labor. In their invective against Paul, the opponents conformed to widely recognized rhetorical strategies, tactics with which first-century Corinthian audiences must have been quite familiar.<sup>42</sup>

As a result, Albert Harrill convincingly argues that reference to 'weak bodily presence' conjured up for the ancient Mediterranean – the embodiment of a slave. In contests of power, by naming an adversary as 'slavish' one questioned their place in the hierarchical social order.<sup>43</sup> While the free body exhibited vigour, decorum, and comportment reflective of citizenship, the slave body displayed vulnerability, shame, and submissiveness.<sup>44</sup> Emerging studies of walking cultures in antiquity have also revealed how slavish bodies moved and gestured differently to the elites. Jan Bremmer's work on ancient Greek culture for example, builds upon Aristotelian physiognomic tracts to reveal that:

The body served as an important location for self-identification and demonstration of authority. By its gait, the Greek upper-class not only distinguished itself from supposedly effeminate peoples such as Persians and Lydians, but also expressed its dominance over weaker sections of society such as youths and women . . . [whilst there is no] literary evidence that slaves could not display an upright carriage either, it seems important to note that on vases and reliefs they are regularly portrayed as sitting in a squatting position or as being of smaller stature.<sup>45</sup>

Connected to this Paul's comportment and gait too become weapons for his opponents to deride Paul's authority and posit him as unworthy to follow. Stephan Joubert contends that Paul's rivals in 2 Corinthians 10-13 humiliated him publicly on account of his inability to walk as a

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<sup>41</sup> B. J. Oropeza, *1 Corinthians* (Cascade Books, 2017), 31-32.

<sup>42</sup> Jennifer Larson, 'Paul's Masculinity' *JBL* 123 (2004) 85–97, 85.

<sup>43</sup> James Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Fortress Press, 2006), 36.

<sup>44</sup> Harrill, *Slaves*, 37.

<sup>45</sup> Jane Bremmer, 'Walking, Standing and Sitting in Greek Culture' in Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenberg (eds) *A Cultural History of Gesture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 15-35.



leader in Corinth with his weak body and movements. Paul's scars (derived from whippings 11:23-25) also bolstered the opponents' invective against him.

Once it could be established that his *soma* did not live up to the expectations of an able-bodied apostle, they had a strong case to effectively disparage all facets of his work. Therefore, they emphasised that Paul's rhetorical skills were insufficient (1 Cor 1:20) and his speech 'contemptible', whilst he also lacked wisdom (1 Cor 1:17; 2:1-4).<sup>46</sup>

However, rather than rebutting these criticisms, Paul strategically embraces and builds upon the image of himself as flogged and suffering (2 Cor 11:23-25), indexing his physical appearance as echoing that of an enslaved body.<sup>47</sup>

By Roman custom, flogging was reserved for noncitizens, except in the army, and was particularly associated with the chastisement of slaves. . . . Paul proclaimed to the Corinthians that his bodily integrity, a prerequisite of masculine dignity as well as social and political status, had been violated on numerous occasions.<sup>48</sup>

The 'scars left by whippings and beatings with rods were recognised as insignia of weakness and degradation'<sup>49</sup> and become important touchpoints for Paul's identification with the sufferings of Christ.

If Paul's ambiguous physiognomy is an important part of his self-reflection in the Corinthian correspondence, so too is his ambiguous 'picture of health'. The mysterious reference to a 'thorn in the flesh' (2 Cor 12:7) has particularly generated both metaphorical caché for Paul's assumed sufferings and/or rejected apostleship, but also a host of affliction, illness and disability-related proposals among commentators:<sup>50</sup>

Paul was [according to different interpreters variously] afflicted by migraines, epilepsy, a speech impediment, rival teachers, demonic possession, persecution by Satan, repressed homosexual urges, frustrated heterosexual desires, astigmatism, bipolar disorder, the evil eye, a nagging wife, psychic trauma, chronic fatigue, unrequited love, earaches, hearing loss, persistent hiccups, gangrene, arthritis, Maltese

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<sup>46</sup> Stephan Joubert, 'Walking the Talk: Paul's Authority in Motion in 2 Corinthians 10-13' *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi*, Vol 49, No 2 (2015). No pages. Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v49i2.1899>.

<sup>47</sup> Kathy Ehrensperger, 'Embodying the Ways in Christ: Paul's Teaching of the Nations' in Jason M. Zurawski and Gabriele Boccaccini (eds), *Second Temple Jewish "Paideia" in Context* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 239-54, 245.

<sup>48</sup> Larson, 'Paul's', 94. On boasting and beatings see also Jennifer Clancy, *Corporal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>49</sup> Jennifer Clancy, 'Corporal Ignorance: The Refusal of Embodied Memory' in Yvonne Sherwood and Anna Fisk (eds), *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 390-400, 391.

<sup>50</sup> For a review of these proposals see Adela Yarbro Collins, 'Paul's Disability: The Thorn in his Flesh' in Candida Moss and Jeremy Schipper (eds), *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 165-183.

fever, sciatica, gout, malaria, ringworm, lost self-esteem, depression, and leprosy - and this is only a partial list.<sup>51</sup>

Diagnosing the dead, especially those only known to us through literary texts, is of course a hazardous hermeneutical enterprise. More persuasive are approaches which seek to contextualise Paul's rhetoric within health cultures of the ancient world, including ancient medicine. Candida Moss for example, has fruitfully probed 2 Cor 12:7-10 in relation to medical theories of the body and possession.<sup>52</sup> Given that Paul identifies the purpose of the thorn to mitigate his own self-exultation (2 Cor 12:7), moreover it is immovable, Paul embodies weakness so that 'Christ may live in him' (12:11-15). The 'thorn' takes on two roles according to Moss: an innovative therapeutic function that diverges from physiological assumptions of his accusers, and the means by which Paul is occupied by Christ's power. She notes that the imagery of puncturing (or penetrating) by the thorn as both disorder and remedy: evoking ancient surgical models of lancing the potential for this own 'puffed' up self-importance. She cites Epictetus too, who saw surgery as a metaphorical vehicle of philosophy: "The school of a philosopher is a surgery. You are not to go out of it with pleasure, but with pain; for you do not come there in health; but one of you has a dislocated shoulder; another, an abscess; a third, a fistula; a fourth, the headache" (3.23.30).<sup>53</sup> Bodies invaded or penetrated of course were also feminized. Moss notes that the lanced body offers an entry point for possession by Christ. Paul in this way is like Aelius Aristides, who posited sickness as assisting a more intimate relationship with the divine; Paul seems to imply that his own (feminised/enslaved) skin scarred/pierced/penetrated/lanced offers the same transformative potential. Thus for Moss,

Medical logic supplies the underpinnings for Paul's claims that, despite his weakness . . . as he writes in v. 9, "he will boast gladly in his weaknesses that the power of Christ will dwell in me."

Such self-stigmatisation enables Paul to discredit the discrimination his anomalous un-bounded body invites. Allied to this many also see Paul adopting a rhetoric of reversal: as David Garland submits 'He [Paul] does not relish being weak but has learned to embrace it as the means by which God's power is revealed in him'.<sup>54</sup> Joubert too notes that even as Paul discursively

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<sup>51</sup> Patrick Gray, *Paul as a Problem in History and Culture: The Apostle and His Critics through the Centuries* (Baker Academic, 2016), 5.

<sup>52</sup> Candida Moss, 'Christly Possession and Weakened Bodies: Reconsideration of the Function of Paul's Thorn in the Flesh (2 Cor. 12:7-10)' *Journal of Religion Disability and Health* 16:4 (2012), 319-333.

<sup>53</sup> Epictetus cited in Moss, 'Christly', 330.

<sup>54</sup> Garland, *First*, 85.

engages with his opponents' opinions, he concurrently disregards them on account of his spiritual authority:

A new form of spiritual authority, which is also embodied in the weakness of Christ on the cross, surfaces in Paul's own bodily humiliations and apparent powerlessness . . . to know Jesus in such a way, is to know him κατά σάρκα (5:16). Paul's understanding of the weakness of Jesus (e.g. 4:7-12; 13:4) fundamentally challenges this view of a glorious Jesus clothed in physiognomic perfection.<sup>55</sup>

As such some interpreters posit Paul in form and substance embodying an 'anti-rhetor' model, or espousing an 'anti-physiognomic approach': 'a radically new form of physiognomy from the perspective of the cross'<sup>56</sup> specifically designed to subvert elite masculine models. Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner have, in this light, encouraged reflection on how atypical, irregular, strange and anomalous bodies with ambiguous physiognomic indexes, might also be capable of realising specific rhetorical goals that could not be achieved by more normative embodiments.<sup>57</sup> Citing Maud Gleason's study on *Making Men*, in which she correlated physiognomic reasoning, ancient oratory and models of masculinity and virility, Stichele and Penner introduce Favorinus, a second century philosopher and rhetorician (active in Rome, Athens, Corinth and Ephesus), who (precisely because) he was born a congenital eunuch, was highly esteemed for this learning and eloquence.<sup>58</sup> He, like Paul, seems to have been a character who won audience endorsement, through his atypical bodily appearance, speech, and performance:

The famous orator Favorinus . . . had the upper hand against his frequent opponent Polemo, even though the former was effeminate in many of his public performances . . . Favorinus was able to use effeminate body markers (eg. pitch, voice, movement, of the body, style of dress) to outperform his opponent and to obtain the overwhelming approval of the crowds in the process.<sup>59</sup>

Gellius' narration of Favorinus, purposefully focusses on contentious features of Favorinus' reputation (as Paul himself does in his Corinthian correspondence) in order to 'invit[e] the audience to perform an act of "mental collaboration" by bridging a logical gap'<sup>60</sup> in this case his unmanliness, 'which was the result of being born without testicles and made his voice sound

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<sup>55</sup> Joubert, 'Walking'.

<sup>56</sup> Joubert 'Walking'.

<sup>57</sup> Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner *Contextualizing Gender in Early Christian Discourse: Thinking Beyond Thecla* (T&T Clark International, 2009), 47.

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Favorinus>

<sup>59</sup> Stichele and Penner, *Contextualizing*, 47.

<sup>60</sup> Keulen, *Gellius*, 97-98.

like a woman's'<sup>61</sup> In his own *Corinthian Oration* (Dio 1-147, 35), Favorinus compared his vilification to Socrates who also 'suffered as a result of physiognomical readings of bodies.'<sup>62</sup> Interestingly Favorinus, too, rhetorically responds to those who overthrew a statue/image of him, by proposing a play-acting trial in which at different times he takes on the role of the statue, or its advocate, thus creating 'grammatical ambiguity.'<sup>63</sup> Paul too echoes accusations against him in the third person: 'they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible"' (2 Cor 10:10), allowing a distance to open up between him and his body. Paul goes on to rebut the thought that he is inferior to the appearance of other superapostles: 'I may be untrained in speech, but not in knowledge; certainly in every way and in all things we have made this evident to you' (2 Cor 11:6). He uses an alternative physiognomic logic, by exposing the deceit of his own accusers' appearances and intentions:

For such boasters are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ? And no wonder! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his ministers also disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness. Their end will match their deeds. (2 Cor 11:13-15)

In the Corinthian correspondence, weak speech, marks of an enslaved body, and a feminised form through piercing/penetration, become important aspects of how Paul sharply manages bodily impressions within interactions and a provocation to identify a union between the embodiment of Paul and the crucified Christ: 'a unity effected by disability itself.'<sup>64</sup>

### **Paul's Unattractiveness: Acts of Paul and Thecla**

For well-born Greeks and Romans one could not be good without being handsome. Platonic dialogues attest that 'ugliness, discord, and disharmony go hand in hand with bad words and bad nature while the opposite qualities are the sisters of good, virtuous characters' (Republic

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<sup>61</sup> Keulen, *Gellius*, 97-98. Jennifer Larson notes too that 'Male health, closely linked with masculinity, depended on the circulation of pneuma, a vital substance taken in through breathing and through the pores of the body. Speaking in low tones aided in the distribution of pneuma, while using a high-pitched voice constricted the pneuma. For this reason, men were cautioned to limit vocal exercises in which the pitch was progressively changed (as in piano scales). Likewise, the "weaker" voices of children, women, and eunuchs, as well as ill persons, were attributed to a deficiency of pneuma. Aristotle, Cicero, and Plutarch bear witness to the fact that a low, deep voice was thought to reflect a man's nobility.' See Larson, 'Paul's', 89-90.

<sup>62</sup>Keulen, *Gellius*, 128ff.

<sup>63</sup> Michelle Ballif and Michael G. Moran, *Classical Rhetorics and Rhetoricians: Critical Studies and Sources* (Greenwood Press, 2005), 159-160.

<sup>64</sup> Martin Albl, "Whenever I am Weak, then I am Strong: Disability in Paul's Epistles." In H. Avalos, S. Melcher, and J. Schipper (eds). *This Able Body: Rethinking Disability and Biblical Studies*. Semeia Studies (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 154.

III 401a).<sup>65</sup> The single most direct and graphic ‘literary portrait’ of Paul is found in The Acts of Paul and Thecla (a text likely emerging from Asia Minor in the later second century) wherein he is presented as ‘a man small of stature, with a bald head and crooked legs’ with ‘eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked’.<sup>66</sup> If ‘beauty, stature, agility, [and hair!] were considered the natural concomitants of men of honour’<sup>67</sup> this particular portrayal does not seem to follow suit. Many commentators have nonetheless treated Paul in the discursive ‘beauty parlour’, and set out to retrieve and/or construct a more positive appearance according to physiognomic logic. Hartsock notes that Ps-Aristotle links small stature to speed and intelligence (813b:8-12) and accordingly avers that ‘Paul demonstrates great intelligence throughout the document, proving to be an effective orator who is able to construct persuasive speeches about the gospel and also able to construct moving defence speeches’.<sup>68</sup> Likewise for Hartsock, whilst baldness is typically negative (for manliness demonstrated with hair is linked to virility) in the context of an ascetic work such as The Acts of Paul and Thecla Paul’s appearance can be understood far more positively: it ‘is important that [a bald] Paul be portrayed as one who lacks—or better, controls—sexual appetites.’<sup>69</sup>

In an allied recovery of Paul’s appearance here, Robert Grant draws on perceived parallels with a laudatory passage describing generals from Archilocus, and sees the description as establishing Paul metaphorically as a military leader.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Abraham Malherbe notes that small stature, hooked nose, and meeting eyebrows, were also evident in Suetonius’s description of Augustus: thus Paul here is aligned in part to an ideal political leader. Malherbe also notes heroic parallels with Heracles.<sup>71</sup> Heike Omerzu, sees this physical description

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<sup>65</sup> Plato cited in Mira Balberg, ‘The Emperor’s Daughter’s New Skin: Bodily Otherness and Self-Identity in the Dialogues of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hanania and the Emperor’s Daughter’ *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 3, Rabbis and Others in Conversation II (2012), 181-206, 189.

<sup>66</sup> Acta Pauli et Theclae 3 (AAA; reprinted Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1959) 1. 237 lines 6-9. The translation is that printed in NTApoc, 2. 354. Cited in Abraham J. Malherbe, ‘A Physical Description of Paul’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 79, No. 1/3, 170-175, 170. Malherbe further notes ‘Early portraits of Paul from the catacombs and elsewhere, showing him with a sparsely covered head, have been taken to represent more or less accurate knowledge.’ Malherbe ‘Physical’, 171.

<sup>67</sup> Mark Finney, *Honour and Conflict in the Ancient World: 1 Corinthians in its Greco-Roman Social Setting* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 49.

<sup>68</sup> Hartsock, *Sight*, 167-168.

<sup>69</sup> Hartsock, *Sight*, 167-168.

<sup>70</sup> Robert M. Grant ‘The Description of Paul in the Acts of Paul and Thecla’ *Vigiliae Christianae* Vol. 36, No. 1 (1982), 1-4.

<sup>71</sup> ‘Suetonius used such physiognomic descriptions, which have parallels in the handbooks, to describe his ideal political leaders. Meeting eye brows were regarded as a sign of beauty, and a person with a hooked nose was thought likely to be royal or magnanimous. Tallness was preferred; nevertheless, since men of normally small height had a smaller area through which the blood flowed, they were thought to be quick. The main things were that one not be excessive in either direction, and, as in the case of Augustus, that one be well proportioned.’ Malherbe, ‘Physical’, 173.

contributing to apostolic identity, and Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey see within it the construction of Paul as an ideal Roman citizen: ‘His meeting eyebrows suggest manliness and beauty; his longish nose, virtuousness and handsomeness. Being full of grace indicates a favored person suitable for a public role.’<sup>72</sup> Callie Callon proposes that the Acts of Paul and Thecla seeks to positively establish Paul as the image of an ancient Socratic philosopher.<sup>73</sup> She probes the reference to eyebrows that meet (the so-called unibrow) as echoing traditions surrounding a knitted brow (perhaps a ruffled forehead) demonstrative of high intellect.<sup>74</sup> For Joan Taylor too The Acts of Paul and Thecla’s physical sketch of Paul determines him as steadfast and wise (though ‘not handsome’). She notes that the ‘face of an angel’ reference encouraged readers to look beyond Paul’s physical appearance to his spiritual authenticity, for as she pointedly puts it: ‘Angels were gorgeous; the assumption is that Paul was not.’<sup>75</sup>

In marked distinction from the models surveyed above that wish to align Paul with positive body models, could this text instead be consciously engaging with what could be termed an index of ‘unattractiveness’ as a vehicle of destabilisation of physiognomic logic in the narrative to underscore the rhetorical incongruity between looks and merit? János ‘Bollók has been a prominent deflector from any physiognomic idealising pictures of Paul in the Acts of Paul and Thecla. Closely reading physiognomic catalogues of features alongside the description of Paul, Bollók plots Paul’s ‘unattractiveness’ according to conventions set: meeting eyebrows represented crudeness or imbecility; a hooked nose represented slyness or cunning; bandy legs denoted cowardliness and weakness and small stature, unimportance and insignificance.<sup>76</sup> Finding similar indexing of unattractiveness classicist, Daniel Maclean, helpfully shows how descriptions of Socrates’ atypical bodily appearance was widely examined and cited: snub nosed; thick lips; potbellied; bulging eyes; bald.<sup>77</sup> Yet, in spite of (or maybe precisely because of) these features, Socrates was also alluded to as one of the wisest

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<sup>72</sup> Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Ancient Personality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 148.

<sup>73</sup> Callie Callon, ‘Unibrow at Never Was: Paul’s Appearance in the Acts of Paul and Thecla’ in Kristi Upson-Saia, Carly Daniel-Hughes and Alicia J. Batten (eds), *Dressing Judeans and Christians in Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2016), 99-116.

<sup>74</sup> Callon, ‘Unibrow’, 111.

<sup>75</sup> Taylor submits that ‘this image is also remarkably consistent in representations of Paul in early Christian art, as we see in the fifth-century portrayal of Paul in the Cave of Paul and Thecla in Ephesus. In this image, Paul is actually shorter in height than accompanying woman, Thecla’s mother and has a balding head.’ Joan Taylor, *What did Jesus Look Like?* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2018), 11-12.

<sup>76</sup> János ‘Bollók ‘The Description of Paul in the Acta Pauli’ in Jan Bremmer (ed), *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing, 1996) 1-15, 9

<sup>77</sup> Daniel R. McLean ‘The Socratic corpus: Socrates and physiognomy’ in Michael Trapp (ed) *Socrates from Antiquity to the Enlightenment* (London: Ashgate, 2007), Chapter 5. Available online at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9781315242798/chapters/10.4324/9781315242798-13>

and just individuals of his time. As such, in Maclean's terms, Socrates 'seemed to stand as a vigorous rebuttal of societal prejudices that linked physical beauty to ethical worth.'<sup>78</sup> Aesop too is a figure who is frequently presented as physically unattractive, yet demonstrates wisdom. Jeremy Lefkowitz argues:

Physical badness can detract from what is beautiful and it can also serve as a foil to the beautiful, effacing its effects. In Aesop's case, as he himself insists, his ugliness serves a third function: his is a kind of heuristic ugliness, a prompt or goad to look beyond the surface and to draw meaning out from under the veil of appearance.<sup>79</sup>

L. L. Wellborn builds on such 'unattractive' traditions and talks about Paul being imaged in The Acts of Paul and Thecla as a vehicle for critical truth. Just as the Socratic model questioned traditional links between insight and exterior form, and Aesop, the unattractive slave, overcomes his perception by others through intelligence, so in Paul's undistinguished bodily appearance was a bold corrective to the persistent tendency to generalise character on appearance.<sup>80</sup> Jan Bremener's suggestion that the author of the Acts of Paul and Thecla may have made 'Paul less than physically ideal so as to make it clear that Thecla [fell for] Paul's words not beauty'<sup>81</sup> is 'insightful' in this regard.

Those positive images surveyed above (Paul as leader, warrior, intellectual or sage) could also be critically exposed as typical (and ableist) strategies in Western scholarship which tend to generate pictures of Paul 'shaped by contexts of production in the white, Christian West'<sup>82</sup>, involving a certain 'white-washing' of Paul in particular ways to conform to Western models. What if we were to take Paul and Thecla's description of Paul's appearance not only as engaging with the register of ugliness, but also so-called ethnic physiognomy?<sup>83</sup> Such reasoning posited the Greeks and/or Romans as the criterion by which all other ethnic groups were gauged, and next to which all 'other' ethnic groups were found to fall short:

In this paradigm the Jews were identified, like other Semitic peoples, as inferior in body and stature, not only because they presented somewhat different physical features (they were often shorter with darker skin than the Greeks and Romans) but also

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<sup>78</sup> McLean, 'Socratic'.

<sup>79</sup> Jeremy Lefkowitz, 'Ugliness and Value in the Life of Aesop' in Ineke Sluiter and Ralph Mark Rosen (eds), *Kakos: Badness and Anti-value in Classical Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 59-82, 76.

<sup>80</sup> L. L. Wellborn Paul, the Fool of Christ: A Study of 1 Corinthians 1-4 in the Comic-Philosophic Tradition (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 122.

<sup>81</sup> Stichele and Penner, *Contextualizing*, 47.

<sup>82</sup> David Horrell, 'Paul, Inclusion and Whiteness: Particularizing Interpretation' *JSNT* 40, 123-147, 123.

<sup>83</sup> Bollók mentions in passing the 'ethnic typology' of a typical Jew but does not develop this. 'Bollók, 'Description', 2.

because their very position as subordinated and subjugated to the Romans implied inferiority.<sup>84</sup>

Mia Balberg, in her study of R. Yehoshua and the emperor's daughter's dialogue in the Babylon Talmud, where the daughter contrasts beauty of Torah and ugly (rabbinic) vessel in which it is contained (and transmitted), notes how stereotypes surrounding Jewish appearance were rife. In this text and others, Balberg suggests that rabbis subversively adopted negative stereotypical identifications of their bodies by others to subversively mark themselves as 'an elite Jewish group by emphasising their complete failure to meet Greco-Roman aesthetic ideals'.<sup>85</sup> It is perhaps no accident that in the trial of Paul at the Incomium (ch.3), Paul's foreignness too is underlined:<sup>86</sup> Thamyris talks of Paul as a 'stranger' who has 'perverted' the entire city and Dema and Hermogenes see him pedalling a dangerous new religion. Might his appearance earlier in the text, serve to inscribe this 'otherness' to his character? It is also notable that the main protagonist in the text, a 'highborn Greek woman who courageously defies the social order by opting for ascetic Christianity'<sup>87</sup> also transgressively undergoes body modifications from beautiful, elite, wealthy, female, within the narrative to an 'aberration of beauty', cut hair, male clothes etc. and ultimately shameful exposure within the arena. Yet through this resistant embodiment, Thecla's appearance (like Paul's) 'speaks back' to the Roman Empire and resists its transcripts and bodily logic.<sup>88</sup>

### **'Looking in the Mirror Darkly': Paul's Appearance and Health**

In all three literary portraits surveyed here, perception and management of appearance and health, play a strategic and meaningful part in the respective texts' plots and messages. This is unsurprising given the importance of physiognomic reasoning in both Greek and Roman education and culture at the time. Of course, the various social, political and rhetorical projects of body management within each text, are hard (if not impossible), to equate with any firm historical Paul; one is only looking in a mirror darkly. What one can index however, are how

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<sup>84</sup> Mira Balberg, 'The Emperor's Daughter's New Skin: Bodily Otherness and Self-Identity in the Dialogues of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hanania and the Emperor's Daughter' *Jewish Studies Quarterly* Vol. 19, No. 3 (2012) 181-206, 194.

<sup>85</sup> Balberg, 'Emperor's', 196.

<sup>86</sup> K Zamfir, 'The Acts of Paul and Thecla Ecclesial, Social and Political Context' *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 92/3 (2016), 355-380.

<sup>87</sup> Shelly Matthews 'Thinking of Thecla: Issues in Feminist Historiography' *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* Vol. 17, No. 2 (2001), 39-55, 39.

<sup>88</sup> Rosie Ratcliffe, 'Violating the Inviolable Body: Thecla Radically Altered' in Irmtraud Fischer and Daniela Feichtinger (eds), *Gender Agenda Matters: Papers of the "Feminist Section" of the International Meetings of The Society for Biblical Literature* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 224-241, 222.



specific portrayals interact with wider cultural narratives surrounding appearance and health. The question can never be ‘What did Paul look like?’ but rather ‘How did Paul and others want us to imagine he looked like and why?’

Interestingly in all three texts, despite a strong interpretative trend to recover socially endorsed elite bodily ideals, in most instances Paul’s appearance and health seems also provocatively anomalous, atypical and deviant. The Book of Acts, rather than manufacturing Paul as an ideal man, emasculates and disables him in particular ways to subdue and subjugate him to the authority of Christ. In Paul’s own self-reflections in his Corinthian correspondence, he ascribes his body with weak communication, marks of enslavement and lancing of self-pride. The Acts of Paul and Thecla too indexes Paul with unattractiveness, purposefully undercutting the common appellation of being ‘handsome and good’<sup>89</sup> and strategically echoing the ethnic physiognomy which cast Paul’s Semitic form as inferior in stature (both physically and politically) to Roman power. His, and Thecla’s, ‘ambiguous physiognomies’<sup>90</sup> embody a different and defiant perspective primarily through their bodies.

Alternative narratives of the body in Pauline traditions and receptions posed important challenges to dominant elite bodily scripts, but they also crucially transformed the perceptions, and embodiments of those hearing and reading these texts. For these receivers, emasculation, disability, weak speech, bodily marks of enslavement, and unattractiveness, marked not only Paul’s, but their own appearances as, they embodied the Christian way. More fundamentally these appearances of Paul which mirror physical attributes of the bodies of those ‘poorly social positioned’ stand as important counterpoints to scholarship, which, often uncritically or unconsciously, feels more comfortable with a Paul aligned in some way to the (normative) bodies of leaders and heroes, than those bodies deemed ‘other’.

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<sup>89</sup> Balberg, ‘Emperor’s’, 188.

<sup>90</sup> Keulen, *Gellius*, 100.