

ROMANS 16: A CALL TO EMBRACE ONE ANOTHER IN LOVE

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ABSTRACT

As a storyteller performs biblical compositions for live audiences, the way in which the body moves will not only communicate meaning to the audience in the live performance moment, but also to the storyteller through preparation, performance and reflection. This article considers how the body *moves*, *speaks* and *feels* as invitation to an audience to also move, hear and feel—and thus enter the call to enact relationships of mutual embrace as followers of Christ themselves. As the body *moves*, the repeated gestures of embrace in Romans 16, extending the hands in “welcome” or “embrace” will challenge accepted interpretations, as well as translation (the Greek $\alpha\sigma\pi\alpha\sigma\tau\eta$ *aspasasthe* from $\alpha\sigma\pi\acute{\alpha}\zeta\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$ is most often rendered in English as “greet greet”). In hearing the body *speaks*, this performance employs an elevated tone of joy and reverence in celebration of God’s love for all. This tone carries the flow of this chapter (Romans) to respect its integrity as a whole, and is integral to the entire letter with its teaching on a body richer for its diverse gifts. The body *feels* emotions of joy and love throughout Romans 16, enhancing the performer’s understanding of Paul’s love for his fellow followers of Christ. As the performer feels and thus knows that Paul cares deeply for these people, their lives, and their witness to the Liberator Jesus as a community of love, she interprets the “admonishments” not as words from an angry preacher, but as concerns of a loving pastor. This article demonstrates through the discussion outlined here—together with a linked video recording of a performance of Romans 16—an embodied performance approach to biblical interpretation that honours the body, emotion and audience as lenses through which to make meaning of these compositions.

Keywords: performance criticism; embodiment; emotion; audience; Bible; Romans

INTRODUCTION

This article is based on my PhD, which was an exploration, as a scholar, of my practice as a storyteller; a storyteller being one who learns a story and tells it by heart for a live audience. As I was learning and embodying biblical stories for performance—usually in worship gatherings—I noticed that my instinctive gestures, my felt emotions, and the context and live responses of the audience were pointing me towards meaning in these compositions in new or different ways to traditional biblical interpretation. Not only that, but my embodiment of the texts would pose questions to explore with “traditional” hermeneutical approaches, in a rich and dynamic process of making meaning for the audience before me.

Biblical Performance Criticism is a relatively new interpretive approach, mostly employed by scholars in or from the USA, but with growing numbers in other parts of the world. The annual Society of Biblical Literature meeting has featured the Bible in Ancient and Modern Media seminar, for example, for a number of years, and Cascade has a series dedicated to Biblical Performance Criticism (see, for example, Hearon and Ruge-Jones 2009). I had hoped that this method might help me to explore and understand my experience, employing the techniques a performer utilises as a means of interpretation. Perhaps coming closest to what I hoped for is Hearon (2014), exploring character in the Gospel of John with a comparison of narrative and performance approaches, which begins, in its application of performance criticism, to foreground the performer as interpreter of a composition for contemporary reception. What I found, however, was that Biblical Performance Criticism is focused on the performed or oral history of the biblical texts, even that “Performance Criticism is a historical analysis” (Oestreich 2016). I am, therefore, attempting to develop a methodology based on my practice that will help performers or storytellers to discuss their embodied and performed interpretations in ways that add to broader scholarly conversations about biblical compositions. My approach of beginning with the embodiment of the text differs from that of most performer-interpreters who engage in analysis of a composition in preparation for performance, such as Peter Perry’s process of “prepare, internalise, perform” (Perry 2016).

I would like to introduce this attempt with a performance of Romans 16, and some brief observations about how I interpreted the text by embodying it for performance. Please follow the link to see a recording of Romans 16 in performance.

As we look at various portions from the letter, we will encounter some of my transpositions of language, deliberately provocative so as to invite listeners to hear without having to wade through the mountains of baggage this letter carries. The text of Romans 16 is an adaptation of the NRSV translation. The author urges the reader not to follow the text while watching the recording, but to give close attention to the performance. The point of oral storytelling is to communicate as live embodied beings; here together in this time and place. For our purposes, a recording of the experience will have to suffice.

PERFORMANCE OF ROMANS 16

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpg-PRHGP60>

What follows are the script and glossary of translation choices, for reference.

Romans 16: 1

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae,

²so that you may welcome her in the Liberator as is fitting for the devoted,

and help her in whatever she may require from you,

for she has been a benefactor of many—and of myself as well.

³Embrace Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Wisdom Jesus, ⁴and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.

⁵Embrace also the church in their house.

Embrace my beloved Epænetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Wisdom.

⁶Embrace Mary, who has worked very hard among you.

⁷Embrace Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Wisdom before I was.

⁸Embrace Ampliatus, my beloved in the Liberator.

⁹Embrace Urbanus, our co-worker in Wisdom, and my beloved Stachys.

¹⁰Embrace Apelles, who is approved in Wisdom.

Embrace those who belong to the family of Aristobulus.

¹¹Embrace my relative Herodion.

Embrace those in the Liberator who belong to the family of Narcissus.

¹²Embrace those workers in the Liberator, Tryphaena and Tryphosa.

Embrace the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Liberator.

¹³Embrace Rufus, chosen in the Liberator;

and embrace his mother—a mother to me also.

¹⁴Embrace Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas,

and the brothers and sisters who are with them.

¹⁵Embrace Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas,

and all the devoted who are with them.

¹⁶Embrace one another with a holy kiss.

All the churches of Jesus embrace you.

¹⁷I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offences, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned.

Avoid them—¹⁸for such people do not serve our Liberator Wisdom,

but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the innocent.

¹⁹For while your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you,

I do want you to be wise in what is good, and guileless in what is evil.

²⁰The Holy One of peace will shortly crush the Evil One under your feet.
The grace of our Liberator Jesus Wisdom be with you.

²¹ Timothy, my co-worker, embraces you;
so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my relatives.

²² I Tertius, the writer of this letter, embrace you in the Liberator.

²³ Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, embraces you.

²⁴ Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, embrace you.

²⁵ Now to Holy One who is able to strengthen you
according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Wisdom,
according to the revelation of the mystery
that was kept secret for long ages ²⁶but is now disclosed,
and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles,
according to the command of the eternal Holy One,
to bring about the obedience of faith—
²⁷to the only wise Holy One, through Jesus Wisdom, to whom be the glory for ever! Amen.
Glossary of translation

NRSV translation	Author Transposition	Notes
God	Holy One	
Father	Creator	
He	They	
His/God's Son	their Son	when relation to Holy One/God
Christ	Wisdom	
(the) Lord	(the) Liberator	
sin	Tyrant	
sin	participating in	when sin is the noun
sinner	tyranny	when sin is the verb
righteous	participant in tyranny	
justification	holy	
justified	welcome into holiness	
saints	welcomed into	
repentance	holiness	
apostleship	the devoted /	
reckoned	devotees	
greet	turn towards holiness	
sanctification	membership	more current use of language with an accounting sense
	credited	
	embrace	
	liberation from tyranny	to be sanctified is to be made pure/free from sin

CRITICAL REFLECTION

The letter to the Romans opens with Paul’s own commitment to a relationship of mutual encouragement with the churches of Rome in Romans 1:12. From there, the letter builds from expounding the implications of God’s welcome for all, through “our” welcome of each other differences and all; to the practical, repeated request for actual enacted embrace—welcome—for specific members of the community in Romans 16. This is not simply a nice idea, it is actually an invitation to get up from your place of comfort, cross the divides and embrace followers of Christ with whom you differ in practice and interpretation.

Romans 16:1–2 is not only the commendation of the letter bearer, but a presentation of one who herself embodies the mutual care and respect for all that the letter exhorts of its hearers. Romans 16 follows the discussion of welcome for all with a climactic call to embrace, physically, real people; an embodying of the command of Jesus, which is a fulfilment of the ancient Jewish law to love.

Observing the way the body *speaks, moves, and feels* in embodied performance, we will hear the elevated tone of celebration of God's welcome for all; find Paul's repeated call to "embrace" to be a climax to his theme of mutual relationships of care; and feel the joy and love in the letter, which invites listeners of every time and place, followers of Jesus all, to embrace one another with a holy kiss, for love and honour of God.

THE BODY SPEAKS

At many points in the performance of the letter, my body assumes a posture of elevation—think Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech. I am lifted, head higher, back straighter, eyes open wider, arms out or up and often standing on my toes. This posture speaks, saying, "Listen! These words are important." It says, "Come with me," as an open posture through which the performer invites God-self to speak, and the people to come into the story, having understood the impact of God's message in her preparation for performance.

I employ this elevated tone and posture at, for example, Romans 1:7, where the words are a kind of blessing, which I speak as I do when presiding as a minister. Romans 5:18 offers a good example of the elevated tone, where Paul is describing the effect of Jesus' life, death and resurrection as leading to the welcome into holiness (justification) and life for all (*life* spoken with a particular emphasis and elevation). Romans 15:5–6 also evokes such elevated awe and reverence, in a prayerful hope for corporate love and honour (glorification) of God.

For the most part, these are liturgical, doxological type phrases, in which Paul is ascribing honour to God. I will address joy separately, but it is intrinsic to these statements of awe and praise.

In Romans 16:25–27 we have elevated tone in another doxological moment, the final ascription of glory to God for this letter. Every time I perform these verses, they catch me up in genuine praise, shifting my gaze "heavenward." As my gaze shifts, I sense the audience following that gaze, and, hopefully, entering into that moment of praise themselves.

Interestingly, I also employ something of an elevated tone through Romans 16:1–2. Embodying these verses, I became aware of Paul's relationship of mutuality with Phoebe as an example of the mutual embrace Paul exhorts for the Christians of Rome. Paul does not—and I am sure would not want audiences today to—worship Phoebe. He does present Phoebe with commendation—with honour; and may be understood to be offering her as an example of one who embraces others (sister), welcomes others (servant) and loves others (benefactor) with openness and generosity.

THE BODY MOVES

I employ a gesture for mutuality throughout the full performance of the letter, which both highlights for me in rehearsal this recurring theme, and in performance links the theme visually for the audience.

Paul signals from the beginning that this is a direction in which his argument will move, though for much of the first half it is implied rather than seen or heard explicitly. It is much more apparent in the later chapters, where we see the gesture and theme of mutuality in Romans 12:5, 10 and 16, with that chapter's strong affirmation of the dignity and value of all within the community. We see it again in Romans 13:8–9, 14:19, and 16:16a.

For the remainder of Romans 16, where Paul exhorts the community repeatedly to *aspasasthe* various members, I employ an abbreviated form of the gesture of mutual love and welcome. Even with this gesture, I felt that the NRSV translation “greet” was not expressing the meaning I had discerned—it seemed more dynamic than “greet,” which may be a reflection on my understanding and use of the English “greet.” This letter is woven through with the theme of mutuality. The repeated invitation in Romans 16 felt to me to be a culmination of that message to welcome one another in love, as Christ has welcomed you (Rom 15:7). This welcome is about making space for each other's differences, accommodating the neighbour (Rom 15:2). So I experimented with possible translations for *aspasasthe*, and settled on “embrace.” Moreover, it is a joyful embrace; a celebration of the various gifts each member brings into a vital, dynamic and healthy community, in order to keep it so. Further, for example when I perform Romans 14:17, in the midst of its discussion of food practices, I smile intuitively as I say “for the realm of Holy One is not food and drink,” and even more feel the joy of “but holiness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

There is much language of love and kinship throughout Romans 16, suggesting that the welcome and embrace to offer, that will be “fitting for the devoted” (Rom 16:1) is the welcome and embrace one offers to family—like a big warm hug, or a gentle but intimate cupping of the face of a beloved sister or brother. Either way, it is a reaching for, a drawing together—an embrace.

THE BODY FEELS

I feel love flow through Paul's words. Love for God and for the people to whom he writes. This helps when I reach Romans 16:17–20, which has struck many interpreters as an interruption (e.g. Jewett 2007; Keck 2005). For me, his call to embrace one another naturally reminds him of those who would, as he says, “cause dissensions and offences” (Rom 16:17). In my imagination, as he signs off, he has to express again his concern for these followers of Christ that they would protect themselves and each other (and he has confidence of their ability to instruct one another, Rom 15:15) from those who would do harm with their selfishness and deceit (Rom 16:18). As Wright observes, perhaps we see evidence of Paul's keen awareness of the potential for dissension, for deceivers, in any church at any time (Wright 2002)?

Overwhelmingly love—and joy—are the emotions of Romans 16, and I experience them both throughout the whole letter.¹ To highlight a few examples of joy: where Paul says “eternal life” as the reward of those baptised into Christ at Romans 6:22, is a moment of joy! Where he answers his own question in Romans 7:24–25 of where will the wretched human find hope—in God! That is joy! Then there is Romans 8:38–9:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of Holy One in Wisdom Jesus our Liberator.

In performance, I am on my toes. I have a big smile, open arms, seeking to catch the audience up in the joy of life with Jesus, Wisdom, Holy One.

Feeling and expressing joy at Romans 16 links the embrace of these members with the joy of God’s welcome for all, about which we have already heard much. As we receive it today, Romans 16’s repeated invitations to embrace, are an invitation to embody Paul’s teaching—the Way of Christ—in our living, in our relationships with one another. And it is a joyful invitation. Can I say “Embrace the beloved Epanaetus” without smiling? No. Can I say, “Embrace Rufus’s mother, who has been a mother to me also” without smiling in gratitude for her motherly love? No. As I embody the letter to Rome, the greetings of Romans 16 become not a formality, but rather a fulfilment of the letter’s very call to welcome one another in love.

CONCLUSION

Emotions, gestures, and words of joy and love connect Romans 16 with the repeated theme of mutual welcome as God in Christ welcomes all, and help us receive the letter as it has been handed down to us as a whole, with integrity and sense. Embodying the letter as a whole builds from theological reflections on how Torah-observers and non-Torah observers are *all* welcome in the community of Christ; through practical exhortations to celebrate and welcome each other with differing gifts, strengths and abilities; to this climax of repeated, joyful invitation to embrace one another; different, loved, for the strength of the community, and for the glory of God.

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¹ For example: Romans 2:29, 5:21, 8:18, 13:12, 14:17, 15:4, 15:10, 16:9, 27.

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