

# Bringing the Apostle Down to Earth: Emily Dickinson Wrestles with Paul

Caroline Blyth  
c.blyth@auckland.ac.nz

---

## ABSTRACT

While Emily Dickinson included many allusions to the biblical texts in her writing, this article focuses on her engagement with one particular biblical writer—the apostle Paul. Dickinson makes a number of references to Paul in her letters and poetry, often in ways that thoroughly unbalance what she considered to be his spiritual and heaven-centred gaze, thrusting it earthwards to bring new and unexpected meaning to matters such as friendship, love, death, suffering, and desire. Through taking a closer look at her writings in which she engages with the apostle, I consider Dickinson's obvious desire to engage with Paul's writings and her regular rejection of certain features of Pauline theology in favour of her own earth-centred spirituality. In particular, I explore the ways in which Dickinson's faith stands at times uneasily alongside that of Paul, in her focus on the dreaded uncertainty of life after death and her unshakeable delight for a world in which both pain and paradise could be encountered.

## KEYWORDS

Emily Dickinson, Paul, literary criticism

---

In one of her poems, Emily Dickinson describes the Bible as “an antique Volume—/Written by faded Men/At the suggestion of Holy Spectres.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, in another poem, she alludes to the dangerous potential of this “antique volume,” referring to it as “a word/Which bears a sword.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout her writing, Dickinson holds in tension these two disparate appraisals of the biblical traditions, as she enthusiastically critiques them, parries with them, and even playfully rewrites them in order to express her own distinct (and at times unorthodox) spirituality. Challenging the claims of nineteenth-century Higher Criticism—that the biblical texts held a single, “correct” meaning—she preferred to embrace what Alicia Ostriker refers to as a “hermeneutic of indeterminacy,” recognizing each text's potential to hold multiple meanings and to be reshaped and rephrased in ways that would better echo her own life experiences and spiritual contemplations.<sup>3</sup> As Ostriker explains, Dickinson's interpretation of scripture:

may be powerfully persuasive yet retains an irreducible element of the willful, the made thing, the playful poetic fiction: interpretation never collapses back into the text, never makes what philosophers call “truth claims” ... To read Dickinson on God (etcetera), then, is to divest oneself of the desire for a single “correct” interpretation of scripture, to accept willy-nilly a plurality of interpretations, and to begin to realize that the Bible asks to be read like this, to be plurally and not singly interpreted.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, Dickinson refused to be constrained by the authoritative reputation of the biblical texts with which she was so fond of engaging; rather, she looked upon scripture as “a flexible textual construct,”<sup>5</sup> whose authority was contestable and whose words she was free to parody, remodel,

---

4 Ostriker, “Re-playing the Bible: My Emily Dickinson,” 165.

5 Marietta Messmer, *A Vice for Voices: Reading Emily Dickinson's Correspondence* (Amherst, MA: University of



and challenge.

While Dickinson engaged with many of the biblical traditions in her writing, I focus in this article on her engagement with one particular "faded man"—the apostle Paul. Dickinson makes a number of references to Paul in her letters and poetry, often in ways that thoroughly unbalance his spiritual and heaven-centered gaze, thrusting it earthwards as though compelling the apostle to engage with worldly elements such as friendship, love, death, suffering, and desire. Taking a closer look at Dickinson's engagement with Paul, I consider the ways she evokes her own earth-centred spirituality to take certain aspects of Pauline theology to task. Specifically, I explore how Dickinson's faith sometimes stands uneasily alongside Paul's as she explores the dreaded uncertainty of life after death and her unshakeable passion for a world in which both pain and paradise are encountered. First, though, let me briefly outline the social and religious contexts from within which Dickinson interacted with the biblical scriptures.

### "My Wars are laid away in Books": Dickinson's social milieu

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) was born in the small New England town of Amherst, Massachusetts. Her life coincided with a time of great social and religious upheaval in the United States, including industrialization, scientific discovery, religious revivalism, sectarianism, civil unrest, and the grimness of a bloody Civil War. This shifting and troubled landscape had a considerable impact on Dickinson's writing; although renowned for her self-sequestered lifestyle,<sup>6</sup> her engagement with the socio-political world of nineteenth-century America sings out in her poetry and correspondence, including those wherein she explores the biblical material.<sup>7</sup> It may be no coincidence that her literary output reached its peak during the period spanning from the late 1850s to the mid 1860s—a time in American history that was marked by the Civil War, the concomitant growth of the Abolitionist movement, and the development of the women's rights movement, following its inaugural meeting in 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York.<sup>8</sup> It is as though this especially turbulent social and political milieu within which Dickinson existed—cloistered as she was—acted as a traumatic catalyst for her literary endeavours, demanding that she re-evaluate anew the significance of issues such as war, class, race, death, theodicy, and justice.<sup>9</sup>

---

Massachusetts Press, 2001), 162–63.

6 By the late 1850s, Dickinson had essentially withdrawn entirely from social life, rarely leaving her family home.

7 Shira Wolosky, "Public and Private in Dickinson's War Poetry," in *Emily Dickinson* (Bloom's Modern Critical Views; ed. Harold Bloom; New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), 169–70; see also Wendy Martin, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge Introduction to Literature; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 24–39, 58–70; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "A Woman—White: Emily Dickinson's Yarn of Pearl," in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (2d ed.; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 581–650.

8 Wolosky, "Public and Private," 172.

9 Wolosky, "Public and Private," 173–75. Wolosky offers many examples from Dickinson's poetry that illustrate her engagement with contemporary social issues (ibid., 169–90). See also David S. Reynolds, "Emily Dickinson and Popular Culture," in *Emily Dickinson* (Bloom's Modern Critical Views; ed. Harold Bloom; New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), 111–34; Faith Barrett, "Slavery and the Civil War," in *Emily Dickinson in Context* (ed. Eliza Richards; New York:

On occasion, Dickinson also turns her gaze towards her own gendered location, contemplating her place as a woman within the highly patriarchal social milieu of nineteenth-century New England. Yet her flexible and ever-changing voice defies attempts to categorize her easily as either a “proto-feminist” or an “anti-feminist”; in a sense, she gives voice to both sentiments, her writings mixing and conflating traditional gender stereotypes, which she then presents in new and radical poetic form.<sup>10</sup> She appeared to eschew any involvement in the traditionally masculine spheres of civic and religious life, preferring to embrace her positioning within the more restrictive domestic realm prescribed by the social gender codes of her day.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, behind the trim curtains of her Amherst home, she created a space that fizzed with literary creativity and social confrontation, using her literary outputs to address, with honesty, both her own private life and faith *and* the public life of American society, religion, and politics.<sup>12</sup> And, although she may have refused to entertain a more public stage for her literary engagement with socio-political discourse (declining even to have the majority of her work published during her lifetime),<sup>13</sup> her writing still became a boundary-crossing conduit through which she, as a woman, was able to articulate her opinions on important social and political issues of the day.

### **“We both believe and disbelieve a hundred times an hour”: Dickinson’s religious milieu**

Although Dickinson never officially professed a Christian faith, she was doubtless influenced by the Puritan Calvinist heritage of the Trinitarian Congregational Church, a heritage that had seeped indelibly into the warp and woof of New England’s religious life during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>14</sup> This Puritan tradition followed the Reformation doctrine that salvation could only be attained by a predestined few through faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ’s death, and *not* through good works; humanity was inherently corrupt as the consequence of Original Sin and incapable of salvation without intercession from a transcendent, inscrutable, and typically vengeful God. The

---

Cambridge University Press, 2013), 206–15.

10 Reynolds, “Emily Dickinson and Popular Culture,” 128. Examples of Dickinson’s poems where she engages with social and religious ideologies of gender include “This World is not Conclusion” (Bianchi and Hampson, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 195); “I’m ‘wife’—I’ve finished that—” (135), “She rose to His Requirement—dropt” (136), “Title di-vine—is mine!” (154).

11 Wolosky, “Public and Private,” 169; Sharon Leder and Andrea Abbott, *The Language of Exclusion: The Poetry of Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti* (Contributions in Women’s Studies 83; New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 151. Despite the dominant gender expectations of this period that demanded women not encroach upon public or political life, a growing number of American women in the latter half of the nineteenth century were involved in advocacy issues pertaining to education, religion, social reform, urban planning, and women’s rights. See Shira Wolosky, “Gendered Poetics,” in *Emily Dickinson in Context* (ed. Eliza Richards; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 171.

12 Wolosky, “Public and Private,” 170–73; idem, “Gendered Poetics,” 169–70; Martin, *Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, 24.

13 Dickinson thus stood in contrast to other contemporary women writers, for example, Louisa May Alcott, Lillie Devereux Blake, Elizabeth Stoddart, Harriet Prescott Spofford, George Eliot, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, who did endeavour to have a more public writing life.

14 Jane Donahue Eberwein, “New England Puritan Heritage,” in *Emily Dickinson in Context* (ed. Eliza Richards; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 46–48. Also see James McIntosh, “Religion,” in *Emily Dickinson in Context* (ed. Eliza Richards; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 151–59.

earthly domain was considered, like humanity, to be eternally stained by sin, an irredeemable and undesirable mess compared to the glorious and numinous heavenly realm.

Living through no fewer than eight Congregational Church revivals in her hometown of Amherst, and seeing a number of her family, neighbours, and friends undergo the conversion experience, Dickinson may have felt a certain pressure from those around her to convert. Certainly, some of her friends and family wrote to her expressing their concerns that her unconverted state would prevent her from gaining access to heaven.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, she retained a strong desire to preserve the freedom of her own less conventional spiritual convictions and refused to "give up the world" by undergoing any official conversion experience.<sup>16</sup>

Dickinson may also have been influenced by the religious liberalism that was being fostered in many parts of North America during the nineteenth century. Even in conservative corners of Massachusetts such as Amherst, religious life was becoming increasingly complicated by revivals, dissents, schisms, and the formation of new Churches and movements, thereby fostering an environment of religious multiplicity.<sup>17</sup> Dickinson was certainly familiar with the doctrines of the Unitarian Christian Church, which had a presence in New England, preferring its less pessimistic and more redeeming views of human nature and the natural world, as well as its stress on the humanity of Christ.<sup>18</sup> She was also drawn to an offshoot of the Unitarian Church, Transcendentalism, which offered an optimistic vision of the world and humankind, while extolling humanity's ability to relate to God directly through meditation, intuition, and communing with the natural world, rather than through the intercession of priest or church.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Dickinson's exposure to and knowledge of religion was not unilateral; rather, she held traditional Puritan Calvinism alongside a newer, liberal Christianity. As James McIntosh notes, Dickinson had the cultural resources to think about religion—and the biblical traditions—"idiosyncratically and flexibly," particularly during those traumatic times of war and unrest when so many of her assumptions and beliefs appear to have been sorely shaken.<sup>20</sup>

Given this richness of religious diversity present within her social milieu, it is therefore little wonder Dickinson's elucidations about spiritual matters and her interpretation of biblical texts are notoriously multifaceted, even paradoxical. She grapples repeatedly in her poetry and letters with the ways Puritan Calvinist orthodoxies rubbed up against her own beliefs, using the medium of writing to voice the complexities and contradictions inherent within her spirituality and faith. At times, she appears to conform to the tenets of Puritan Calvinism, while at other times, she eschews such orthodoxies,

---

15 Martin, *Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, 26.

16 Written in a letter to her schoolfriend Abiah Root, 16 May 1848. See Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (3 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1958), 1:67. Many of Dickinson's letters are also published in Mabel Loomis Todd, ed., *Letters of Emily Dickinson* (2 vols.; Boston: Robert Brothers, 1894), which can be found online at the Hathi Trust Digital Library (cited 12 July 2014). Online: <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011225228>. I will cite, in the main, from this more freely accessible volume unless the letter in question is not published therein.

17 Rowena Revis Jones, "'A Taste for Poison': Dickinson's Departure from Orthodoxy," *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 2 (1993): 47–64.

18 McIntosh, "Religion," 153–54.

19 Martin, *Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, 32–34.

20 McIntosh, "Religion," 153.

challenging and subverting them in sometimes unexpected and outspoken ways. For Dickinson, the poet is one who “Distills amazing sense/From ordinary Meanings.”<sup>21</sup> She used this “amazing sense” to affirm both her religious compliance with traditional Christian dogma and her willingness to challenge that same dogma. With the “boldness of a prophet,”<sup>22</sup> she consciously let her very human fluctuations in faith lie in tension with each other, reflecting her own desire to keep belief alive through questioning it, exploring it, and confronting it head on. As she says in a letter to her close friend Judge Otis Phillips Lord, written on 30 April 1882, “We both believe and disbelieve a hundred times an hour, which keeps Believing nimble.”<sup>23</sup> Dickinson thus saw doubts and challenges not as the death knell of faith, but as *essential* to faith. Unwilling to either accept or reject absolutely the traditional tenets of Calvinist Christianity, she was, in the words of Shira Wolosky, “a poet of religious engagement, whose very criticism of religion reflects her deep involvement in it ... Dickinson’s work as a whole ... at once asserts a possible faith, and no less painfully, questions and denies such faith.”<sup>24</sup>

Within her verse and letters, Dickinson therefore tackled a number of perennial questions that, for her, pervaded the Christian community she encountered within her own cultural milieu: how to make sense of an inscrutable God, the paradox of human suffering and loss, the enigma of death, and the hesitantly hoped for possibility of immortality and resurrection. She appeared to search for a sense of intimacy in her relationship with God, but was ever frustrated by the omnipotent and inscrutable Calvinist deity who sat high above in the heavens, seemingly distanced from and indifferent to human life, suffering, and need.<sup>25</sup> This may have been brought home to her all the more acutely by the suffering and death wrought by the grim years of Civil War. While she never seemed to doubt the existence of God, she did, at times, appear disenchanted with Calvinist pietistic approaches to a deity who appeared to her as unknowable and as insubstantial as an “Eclipse.”<sup>26</sup> Such disenchantment, however, only fuelled her desire to interact with, challenge, and question God. As Roger Lundin so

---

21 Bianchi and Hampson, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 281.

22 Carol J. Cook, “Emily Dickinson: Poet as Pastoral Theologian,” *Pastoral Psychology* 60 (2011): 429.

23 Johnson, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 3:728.

24 Shira Wolosky, “Emily Dickinson: Being in the Body,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson* (ed. Wendy Martin; Cambridge Companion to Literature; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 132. According to Karl Keller, *The Only Kangaroo among the Beauty: Emily Dickinson and America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979), 78, Dickinson’s religious state was one of “liminality ... caught between institutions and free form ... [She] could therefore move out of religion without moving away from it.” See also Jane Donahue Eberwein, “‘Where – Omnipresence – fly?’ Calvinism as impetus to Spiritual Amplitude,” *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 14 (2005): 13.

25 Magdalena Zapedowska, “Wrestling with Silence: Emily Dickinson’s Calvinist God,” *American Transcendental Quarterly* 20 (2006): 365–98, especially 382. See also idem, “Citizens of Paradise: Dickinson and Emmanuel Levinas’s Phenomenology of the Home,” *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 12 (2003): 70; Jane Donahue Eberwein, “‘Is Immortality True?’: Salvaging Faith in an Age of Upheavals,” in *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson* (ed. Vivian R. Pollack; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 67-102. Dickinson’s thoughts on the inscrutability of God are voiced in poems such as “‘Heavenly Father’—take to thee” (Bianchi and Hampson, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 258), “I know that He exists” (39), “I reason Earth is short—” (166), and “Those—dying then” (Johnson, *Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 646). Also, in a letter to her friend Maria Whitney, written in late June, 1883 after Whitney failed to keep some promise, Dickinson wrote, “You are like God. We pray to Him and He answers ‘No’. Then we pray to Him to rescind the ‘no’, and He doesn’t answer at all, yet ‘Seek and ye shall find’ is the boon of faith” (Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:342).

26 In a letter to her friend Thomas Wentworth Higginson (a writer and civil rights activist, formerly a Unitarian minister) dated 25 April 1862 (Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:302).

eloquently puts it, "She wrestled with God all her life."<sup>27</sup> Ignoring Calvinist appropriations of the apostle Paul's writings, which the Church used to prescribe women's submission to both men and God (e.g. 1 Cor 11:3, 7; 14:34; Eph 5:22–23; 1 Tim 2:11–14), Dickinson shockingly sought a relationship with a male deity that was based instead on some sense of equality, or at least recognition and respect, insisting that the God of her faith grant her honest answers to her very earthly questions, rather than hiding from view in the far-flung heavens.<sup>28</sup> Refusing to accept her mandated and gendered social script "as written," she invoked her poetry to articulate both her submission *and* rejoinder to the prescriptive tenets of New England Puritan Calvinism—her embodiment *and* rejection of their gendered constraints, and her declaration of her own empowerment as both a woman and a member of the human community.<sup>29</sup> As Joanna Yin asserts, "Dickinson uncovers a Calvinist God reflected by an insidious sign system that ensures his glorification on earth and entices his creatures toward an uncertain eternity in heaven. Simultaneously, she constructs a language that asserts the worth of the individual soul as well as the worth of women in particular."<sup>30</sup> In other words, it is in Dickinson's private world of writing that she had the freedom, as a woman, to wrestle with her faith and to confront the distant, vengeful God and the wretched reputation of humanity that Calvinism had bequeathed her.<sup>31</sup> Or, in the words of Adrienne Rich, Dickinson always engaged with God "on *her* terms."<sup>32</sup>

### "Apostle is askew!" Dickinson's engagement with Paul

Dickinson's very complex engagement with her faith and with the Bible is demonstrated effectively in her poems and letters that allude to material from the Pauline epistles. As space does not permit me to explore every reference to Paul that Dickinson made in her writing, I focus my inquiry here upon two related topics that seem of particular interest to Dickinson in her reflections on Paul's theology: her insistence on the paradisiacal nature of life on Earth and her anxious uncertainty about the resurrection. I consider the ways in which Dickinson's own spiritual approach to these two subjects interacts with and shapes her reading of and response to the Pauline epistles.

Before beginning, it is worth noting that, while Dickinson never specifically addresses Paul's prescriptive writings about women's roles in Church and society (e.g. 1 Cor 11:3, 7; 14:34; Eph 5:22–23; 1 Tim 2:11–14), which were inscribed in the conservative traditions of her Puritan Calvinist milieu,<sup>33</sup> her engagements with the biblical texts nevertheless carry gendered implications. As a woman, she would have doubtless felt an outsider to the traditionally male-dominated "Academy" of biblical scholarship

27 Roger Lundin, *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 4.

28 See, for example, her poems, "Of course—I prayed—" (Bianchi and Hampson, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 296); "I meant to have but modest needs—" (*ibid.*, 20); "Papa above!" (*ibid.*, 255).

29 Joanna Yin, "'Arguments of Pearl': Dickinson's Response to Puritan Semiology," *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 2.1 (1993): 74; see also Dobson, *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence*, 56–77.

30 Yin, "Arguments of Pearl," 67.

31 Zapedowska, "Wrestling with Silence," 394.

32 Adrienne Rich, "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson," in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* (London: Virago, 1980), 162 [original italics].

33 Yin, "Arguments of Pearl," 65.

with its adherence to the objective and detached rigors of Higher Criticism; yet she chose to be a tremendously *engaged* outsider, offering a deeply personal and contextual reading of the biblical traditions that would have grated against the exegetical orthodoxies of her day. Perhaps the conventionally feminine and intensely familiar domestic location she occupied gave her the confidence to eschew these orthodoxies, bringing to the text instead her gender, her faith, and her socio-historical location—with all their concomitant “baggage”—and using these, as feminist theologians and biblical scholars do today, to read the Bible from the margins, unencumbered by formal convention. In so doing, Dickinson makes her own radical entry into biblical studies, applying her “hermeneutic of indeterminacy”<sup>34</sup> to the biblical texts in order to bring to the ancient traditions a new pair of eyes—women’s eyes—and a fresh breath of humanity.<sup>35</sup>

### “Earth is Heaven”: Dickinson’s affirmations of a paradisiacal world

Within Dickinson’s writings, the reader is offered vivid testimony to her love of the world around her; in her poetry and letters, she is vociferous in her praises of nature—the towering mountains, the singing brooks, the voluble sun, the chattering birds, the sociable meadows, and the flowers in her beloved garden. While some of her work does echo her hopes for the reality of a heavenly paradise, she bears a much more powerful witness to the joys and delights of the senses and the flesh available to her here on earth. Indeed, compared with traditional devotional poets of the nineteenth century who looked heavenward for the source of their spiritual inspiration, it was through the blissfully immanent and powerful presence of these very earthly delights that Dickinson gained a sense of the heavenly and the sacred.<sup>36</sup> As Paula Bennett notes, nature was for Dickinson “an alternative religion as well as a source of poetic strength,” which took on a revelatory power, “the equivalent of experiencing heaven.”<sup>37</sup> The beauty of the world was to be treasured, experienced, and revered as hallowed in its own right. Thus, in her poem “Heaven has different signs—to me,” the garden becomes her “church,” the birds her Sabbath choir.<sup>38</sup> Throughout the poem, she employs sacred language to summon those achingly beautiful fixtures of the world around her in which she saw the paradisiacal: “The Orchard when the Sun is on—/The Triumph of the Birds,” the “Awe” of the dawn, and “The Rapture of a finished Day—/ Returning to the West—” all remind her of “the place/That Men call ‘Paradise.’”<sup>39</sup> Likewise, in her poem, “‘Heaven’—is what I cannot reach!” Dickinson identifies “The Ap-

---

34 Ostriker, “Re-playing the Bible,” 165.

35 Zapedowska, “Wrestling with Silence,” 394.

36 Wendy Martin, *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 131. See also Roxanne Harde, “‘Who Has Not Found the Heaven—Below—/Will Fail of It Above—’: Emily Dickinson’s Spirituality,” in *Things of the Spirit: Women Writers Constructing Spirituality*, (ed. Kristina K. Groover; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 156.

37 Paula Bennett, *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 105. Likewise, as Wendy Martin notes, “Heaven and God become secondary to the natural world and its tiny creatures, and love of nature becomes faith ... Life in its minutest details and briefest experiences is what interests Dickinson as the greatest of treasures” (*Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, 66).

38 Bianchi and Hampson, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 304.

39 Bianchi and Hampson, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 304.

ples on the Tree—" and "The Color on the Cruising Cloud—" as immanent signs of "Heaven."<sup>40</sup> These sentiments are also given ample voice in her letters. Writing to her close friend and confidante Elizabeth Holland in early August 1856, she observes, "If God had been here this summer and seen the things I have seen—I guess that He would think his Paradise superfluous."<sup>41</sup> Within her writing, Dickinson repeatedly fostered a vision of a world in which the complexity and sacredness of nature were embraced and celebrated. Thus, according to Wendy Martin, "When trying to imagine how 'Heaven' could be more glorious than the earth, Dickinson's imagination fails. She sees the earth's revelations as her senses experience them, instead of imagining potential glories beyond them."<sup>42</sup> Dickinson thus echoes and prefigures the sentiments of contemporary feminist theologies of embodiment, which refuse to focus exclusively on the otherworldly but instead celebrates the sacredness and sanctity of life in the here and now.<sup>43</sup>

Consequently, Dickinson's love of an earthly, experiential creation stood in stark contrast to the Puritan Calvinist traditions of nineteenth-century New England, which undermined the earthly as corrupted by sin in favour of the purer and more sacred heavenly realms. Following some of the tenets of the Pauline epistles, the Calvinist orthodoxy of Dickinson's religious milieu considered the world to be mere vanity, while the human body and mind were lowly, despicable, and prone to sin and guilt. Within his epistles, Paul's line of vision was often directed heavenward and his appreciation of the present created order—"groaning" as it was (Rom 8:22)—tended to be more muted in comparison to his anticipatory adulation for the new heavenly creation that would dawn in an eschatological age.<sup>44</sup> In some of her engagements with Paul's writings, Dickinson therefore takes the apostle to task for what she considered to be his overtly spiritual and heaven-centered gaze, appropriating his own writings in order to challenge him to look earthwards and thus acknowledge the inherent value and paradisiacal delight that could be encountered in *this* world.

Thus, in another letter to her friend Elizabeth Holland written in the early summer of 1873, Dickinson mentions that her sister Lavinia (whom she referred to as Vinnie), on returning from her visit to the Hollands, had described the beautiful location of their home as "paradise."<sup>45</sup> Dickinson tells Holland that she has never believed paradise to be "a supernatural site"; contemplating the delights of her own locality that very afternoon, she writes, "Eden, always eligible, is peculiarly so this noon. It would please you to see how intimate the Meadows are with the Sun."<sup>46</sup> Dickinson thus sees here the spir-

---

40 Bianchi and Hampson, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 42. Dickinson employs religious language in a number of her poems to reflect on the paradisiacal or sacred nature of the world. In "The Gentian weaves her fringes—" (90), she uses the language of liturgy and formal worship in her depiction of the summer morning, ending with the final liturgical response, "In the name of the Bee—/And of the Butterfly—/And of the Breeze—Amen!" Similarly, in "These are the days when Birds come back —" (106–7), she employs eucharistic imagery, naming the "sacred emblems" of "consecrated bread" and "immortal wine" that she seeks to partake of in the "Sacrament of summer days."

41 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 169.

42 Martin, *Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, 69.

43 Roxanne Harde, "Some—are like My Own—": Emily Dickinson's Christology of Embodiment," *Christianity and Literature* 53 (2004): 317.

44 E.g. Rom 3:10–11, 23; 5:12–21; 8:7–8, 18–25; 1 Cor 15; 2 Cor 4–5; Gal 6:6–16.

45 Johnson, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:508.

46 Johnson, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:508.



itual, the Edenic, and the “heavenly” in the world around her, eschewing any future immortality in favour of that which she can see, taste, and feel in the here and now.<sup>47</sup> She then alludes to the Pauline teaching of the corruptible and perishable nature of this current life in 1 Cor 15:53, where Paul states that the corruptible “must put on incorruption” at the time of the resurrection. Speaking of her sister Vinnie and her father Edward Dickinson, both converts to the Trinitarian Congregational Church, Dickinson avers to Holland, “While the Clergyman tells Father and Vinnie that ‘this Corruptible shall put on Incorruption’—it has already done so and they got defrauded.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, Paul, the architect of this “fraud,” invites believers such as her father and sister to look forward to the imminent coming of the incorruptible Kingdom of God, where “Death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor 15:54). Dickinson, however, challenges the apostle’s heavenward gaze and insists that paradise is a divinely-created earthly domain to be enjoyed now, rather than an unknowable, uncertain, and intangible “supernatural site” that will only be revealed in some distant, numinous future. As she says in a poem written to her brother Austin in 1877, “Earth is Heaven—/Whether Heaven is Heaven or not.”<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, in the letter sent to Elizabeth Holland in the summer of 1856, Dickinson again alludes to a Pauline epistle in order to affirm her great love of the world around her.<sup>50</sup> In the letter, she expresses her delight in the beauty of the passing summer months, noting (as quoted above) that it was enough to make God consider *his* paradise “superfluous.” She then continues, “Don’t tell Him, for the world, though, for after all He’s said about it, I should like to see what He was building for us, with no hammer, and no stone, and no journeyman either.”<sup>51</sup> These last remarks allude to Paul’s attestations in 2 Cor 5:1 that, although earthly buildings may decay and be destroyed, God will provide believers with a superior, everlasting home, which will be “not made by human hands, eternal, and in heaven.” Paul’s argument rests upon his oft-visited theme of the lasting supremacy of all things in the heavenly realms over the impermanence and perishability of earthly life and existence. Dickinson teases Paul here, both by contesting his claims to the superiority of heaven over the delights offered during the earthly summer months and (tongue firmly in cheek) by questioning his claims about the quality of any heavenly home that is apparently built without the benefits of tools, materials, or craftsmen. Reading his words quite literally, it is as though she winks playfully at his solemnity, thus destabilizing his message of heavenly supremacy in order to affirm once more the joys of this earthly existence.

Dickinson’s whimsical undercutting of Paul’s message and her appropriation of his words to present

---

47 Similarly, in a letter to her brother Austin on 25 October 1851 she describes her own home as “a bit of Eden which not the sin of any can utterly destroy” (Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 1:75). This again alludes to the Calvinist traditions of New England Puritanism, which followed the tenet of Original Sin being the cause of humanity’s loss of paradise and the inevitable, ongoing degradation of the earthly realm.

48 Johnson, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:508.

49 Johnson, *Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 602. In her poem which begins, “Going to Heaven!” (Bianchi and Hampson, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 175), she states a preference for “curious Earth” over the unknown Heaven, while in “Nature is what we see—” (ibid., 233), she boldly declares that “Nature is Heaven.” In a poem written in a letter to her friend Thomas Wentworth Higginson (a writer and civil rights activist, formerly a Unitarian minister) on the occasion of his brother’s death (March, 1872), she writes, “Of Heaven above the firmest proof/We fundamentally know/Except for its marauding Hand/It had been Heaven below” (Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:321).

50 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 1:141.

51 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 1:141.

her own contradictory point of view is demonstrated again in another of her letters, this time to her close friends Samuel Bowles and his wife Mary.<sup>52</sup> Here, she describes the pleasures of a morning ride she had taken with her brother Austin: "I rode with Austin this morning. He showed me mountains that touched the sky, and brooks that sang like Bobolinks. Was he not very kind? I will give them to you; for they are mine and 'all things are mine' excepting 'Cephas and Apollos,' for whom I have no taste."<sup>53</sup> Here, Dickinson quotes from 1 Cor 3:21–22, Paul's message to the Corinthian Christian community concerning unity. In this section of the epistle, the apostle urges his audience to avoid having any special loyalty or allegiance to particular human teachers or preachers, insisting that all things in this world are in the service of the church, gifted by the grace of God through the death of Christ.<sup>54</sup> "All things belong to you," he avers, dismissing the claims made by some Corinthian Christians that they "belonged" in terms of loyalty or service to a particular apostle (1 Cor 1:12). Naming three of these apostles—Paul, Cephas, and Apollos—Paul then asserts that *they* "belong" to the Church, not vice versa: "whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you" (1 Cor 3:22). Again, we see Dickinson take but one element of Paul's message here and use it creatively to express her *own* viewpoint, which sits out of context with regard to the apostle's priorities. Her desire is to share the joys of a beautiful morning ride with her friends and she appropriates Paul's words to validate her right to such a sharing; her mischievous rejection of Cephas and Apollos deflects from the apostle's own message of church unity, bringing his words firmly down to earth and situating them within the earthly joys of the soaring mountain skyline and the babbling brook.

As well as being empowered and inspired by the natural world around her, Dickinson's spirituality and faith were also heavily invested in the companionship, loyalty, and love of those friends and family whom she held dear. It was in these friendships that, once again, she seemed to find a sense of the paradisiacal. In a letter to her friend Adelaide Hills, written in the Spring of 1871, she writes that "to be loved is heaven,"<sup>55</sup> while in another correspondence to her cousins Louisa and Frances Norcross in April 1873 she asserts, "Each of us gives or takes heaven in corporeal person, for each of us has the skill of life."<sup>56</sup> Such beliefs again led her on occasion to engage with some of Paul's teachings and, in particular, to challenge or subvert what she regarded as his prioritizing of a future heavenly life over humanity's present earthly existence.

Thus, in a letter to her close friend and sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson written on 9 October,

---

52 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 1:212. The letter is dated June 1858. Samuel Bowles was editor of the local Amherst newspaper the *Springfield Republican*.

53 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 1:212.

54 For further discussion of this passage, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries 32; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 208-9.

55 Johnson, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:487. Adelaide Hills spent her summers in the house next door to the Dickinson's in Amherst. She never actually met Dickinson, who by the time they began to communicate, had become increasingly reclusive, barely leaving the house. Their friendship was carried out entirely by correspondence. See Alfred Habegger, *My Wars are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Random House, 2001), 540.

56 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:278. Louisa and Frances Norcross were Dickinson's much beloved first cousins, daughters of her mother's sister Lavinia Norcross.

1851,<sup>57</sup> Dickinson again selectively paraphrases one of Paul's statements in a way that affirms her own deep regard for human rather than heavenly affairs.<sup>58</sup> Singling out a phrase from the apostle's triumphant assertion of the power of Christ's love for humankind (Rom 8:38–39), she utilizes it instead to champion the very earthly love she feels for her friend. Paul's conviction is rooted firmly in the supremacy and inexhaustibility of divine love; nothing at all, "height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation" will be able to separate believers from the love of God that is in Christ (v. 39). Such a heady affirmation is adopted by Dickinson for a much more corporeal purpose; to stress to her beloved sister-in-law that, even when she was away (Susan was in Baltimore), Dickinson was still able to write to her: "Susie, *did* you think that I would never write you when you were gone away—what made you? ... I should be *constrained* to write—for what shall separate us from any whom we love—not '*high* [sic] nor depth.'" <sup>59</sup> Here, Dickinson once again appropriates a Pauline affirmation to meet her own purposes, which remain very much rooted in the earthly domain; what for Paul is a credo of faith in the all-powerful love of God becomes, in her hands, an assertion of faith in the precious and just as enduring power of human friendships.<sup>60</sup>

In another instance, Dickinson critically engages with Paul's assertions in 1 Cor 15:51–53 that the resurrection of Christ leads to the great "mystery"; that is, the resurrection of the dead and immortality. In her April 1873 letter to Louise and Frances Norcross (mentioned above), she describes George Eliot (Marian Evans), an author whose writing she greatly admired, as a "mortal" who "has already put on immortality," noting that "the mysteries of human nature surpass the 'mysteries of redemption,' for the infinite we only suppose, while we see the finite."<sup>61</sup> Here, she destabilizes Paul's affirmations of human "corruptibility" and fallibility and rejects his insistence on the superiority of the infinite soul over the finite, physical body, boldly stating her preference for human nature in all its encounterable corporeality and mortality over an uncertain and ultimately unknowable future immortality. For Dickinson, people such as George Eliot had value and worth in the here and now, not just in some

---

57 Susan Dickinson (née Gilbert; Dickinson often addressed her as Sue) was married to Dickinson's brother Austin and was, for a number of years, one of Dickinson's closest friends. A writer herself, she was also the recipient of over 250 of Dickinson's poems (Habegger, *My Wars are Laid Away in Books*, 375–82).

58 Johnson, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 1:143–45.

59 Johnson, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 145.

60 It was not only Paul's words that Dickinson appropriated in order to make her own powerful affirmation of human friendship. For example, in a letter to her close school friend Abiah Root, written 19 August 1851, she takes the words spoken by Jesus to his disciples during the last supper (John 16:16) and uses them to speak about her sense of separation from her friend: "'Yet a little while I am with you, and again a little while and I am not with you' because you go to your mother" (Johnson, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 1:129). As Martin states, for Dickinson, "Worship is owed not to God but to friends, especially to her female friends" (*Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, 64).

61 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson* 2:279. Dickinson felt great affinities with Marian Evans, both as a woman writer but also because the two women shared similar experiences relating to family dynamics, upbringing, and their engagement with traditional Christian religion. Moreover, she admired Evans's great success as a writer and her willingness to contravene socially constructed gender boundaries, not least of all by occupying a place within the male-dominated sphere of literary creativity. Dickinson's great appreciation of Evans's writing also shows through her own poetic output; as a number of scholars have noted, some of her work appears to converse with Eliot's own writings in its themes, imagery, and language. For further discussion of Dickinson's engagement with and enthusiasm for Marian Evans, see Eleanor Elson Heginbotham, "'What do I think of glory—': Dickinson's Eliot and Middlemarch," *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 21 (2012): 20–36; Margaret H. Freeman, "George Eliot and Emily Dickinson: Poets of Play and Possibility," *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 21 (2012): 37–58.

unforeseeable, heavenly future. Eliot's "immortality" lay in her glorious writing; her "mystery" was wrapped up in her human nature, not in any potential redemption she may receive in times to come.

Dickinson also uses one of her poems to question another of Paul's statements on the fallibility of the flesh in I Cor 15, thereby again asserting her belief in the infinite worth of human life and human community.<sup>62</sup> This time, she takes to task the apostle's claim in vv.42–43 that the body is "sown in dishonour" and "sown in corruption," prior to its being raised in glory, incorruptibility, and power through the resurrection. She thus challenges the apostle's adherence to the doctrines (embraced by Puritan Calvinism) of human sinfulness and Total Depravity; his understanding of human life as inherently corrupt and dishonourable. "Sown in dishonor! / Ah! Indeed!" she exclaims, "May *this* dishonor be?"<sup>63</sup> Dickinson's tone within this poem is a mix of doubt and incredulity; she cannot accept that this life she so cherishes is rooted in sin and dishonour. Citing the biblical text using her own language of doubt and protest, her emphatic "*this*" in the second line of the first stanza refers perhaps to her own poetic activity here; her recognition that, in the eyes of traditional Pauline orthodoxy, all earthly activities, including her "resurrection" of the words of the apostle within this poem, may stand accused of being a dishonouring event, tainted as they are with her own inherent human sinfulness.<sup>64</sup>

Yet Dickinson resists such an appraisal of her activity, as her critique becomes more explicit and more specifically directed towards Paul in the second stanza: "Sown in corruption! / Not so fast! / Apostle is askew!"<sup>65</sup> Here, she applies the brakes to Paul's assertions of human depravity and degradation; humankind is not, in her mind, innately dishonoured, corrupt, or sinful. Her brief mention of the "circumstance or two" that she suggests Paul "narrates" in 1 Cor 15 to substantiate his belief in human corruptibility does nothing to inspire our confidence in his claims.<sup>66</sup> For Dickinson, the incorrupt body that, according to Paul, Christians will share with the risen Christ through their resurrection is of secondary concern; as with her other writings mentioned above, she disrupts and destabilizes the priority given by Paul to the heavenly dominion, preferring instead to delight in the pleasures and wonders of humanity in this earthly life.

### **"Run—run—My Soul!" Dickinson's wrestling with death and the afterlife**

Dickinson's belief in the intrinsic value of life on earth was not, however, without its bitter notes. She encountered too often the pain of loss, which made life less than Edenic—the death of beloved friends and family plagued her throughout her life and grieved her to her heart. Even the untimely demise of her cherished garden flowers during a "fatal season" wrought by destructive worms and a "Midwinter Frost" inspired a rueful lament in a letter to her aunt Catherine Sweetser, dated January

62 Bianchi and Hampson, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 257.

63 Bianchi and Hampson, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 257. [original italics].

64 Bianchi and Hampson, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 257; Linda Freedman, *Emily Dickinson and the Religious Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 171.

65 Bianchi and Hampson, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 257.

66 Bianchi and Hampson, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 257.

1882, in which, again, we see her retort bitterly to Paul's prioritizing of all things heavenly.<sup>67</sup> Here, even the apostle's central assurance of the power and omnipotence of the Godhead, which he proclaims in Rom 8, does not escape her subverting scrutiny. "When God is with us, who shall be against us?" she writes, citing Rom 8:31, before adding, "but when he is against us, other allies are useless."<sup>68</sup> Paul's rhetorical question here in Rom 8:31 is brimming with enthusiasm and jubilation. It is a statement of absolute faith in the power of God that requires no answer. Dickinson disrupts this question, however, to confront his assertion with the bitter reality of earthly death and decay and the divine propensity towards destruction. The apostle may have been looking forward to a "new creation" in a glorious eschatological age (Rom 8:18–25), but Dickinson's heartfelt response to her ruined flowers demands recognition that *this* creation still suffers cruelly and, to her mind, unjustly under the weight of the divine hand.

While Dickinson was speaking only of her flowers in this letter, her lament over their untimely "death" may also reflect her instinctive feelings of loss and grief for those people in her life—also part of God's creation—who too had perished prematurely.<sup>69</sup> Dickinson grappled continually throughout her life with the issues of death, mortality, immortality, and resurrection. As I discussed above, her spirituality appears at times rooted in her joyful appreciation of the sheer spiritual life force of nature and the human community rather than in any faith in a distant and infinitely unknowable heavenly realm. She once noted in a letter to her good friend, writer and civil rights activist Thomas Wentworth Higginson, that "the mere sense of living is joy enough"; life was a sufficient source of "ecstasy" for her, without needing reassurances of a heavenly realm.<sup>70</sup> Such sentiments are also given eloquent expression in her poem, "To be alive—is Power—" where she declares that, irrespective of human finitude, existence is still "Omnipotence—Enough—" and each person as "Able as a God—/ The Maker—of Ourselves."<sup>71</sup> As Martin notes, "With no certainty of an afterlife, Dickinson chooses to treasure this life's potential to its fullest."<sup>72</sup> While she did at times express a tentative and fluctuating hope in some form of life after death, such hope often served to "disquiet" her<sup>73</sup> and to inflict upon her the torment of simply not knowing.<sup>74</sup> She appeared on occasion to take little comfort from the thought that those so dear to her whom she had lost were now in some distant heavenly Paradise beyond her own realm of the senses; as she writes in one of her poems on this subject, "Their Height in Heaven comforts not—/ Their Glory—nought to me—/ 'Twas best imperfect—as it was/ I'm finite—I

---

67 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:409.

68 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:409.

69 Patrick J. Keane, *Emily Dickinson's Approving God: Divine Design and the Problem of Suffering* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 130.

70 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:315. The letter is dated 16 August, 1870.

71 Bianchi and Hampson, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 225.

72 Martin, *Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, 45.

73 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:363. Dickinson wrote this in a letter to Charles H. Clark in mid-October, 1883. Clark was an acquaintance of Dickinson's, whom she had met through their mutual friendship with one of Dickinson's dearest friends, the Reverend Charles Wadworth.

74 Theodora Ward, "Death and Immortality," in *Emily Dickinson: Critical Assessments* (ed. Graham Clarke; 4 vols.; Helm Information: Mountfield, 2002), 3:319.

can't see—."<sup>75</sup>

Nevertheless, despite her unwillingness to accept the factuality of resurrection and immortality blindly, Dickinson refused to discard them entirely. Her writings therefore give voice to a range of emotions and beliefs—rooted in both faith *and* doubt—about death and immortality, reflecting perhaps her deep desire to wrestle with their mystery.<sup>76</sup> As Jane Donahue Eberwein states, "Death presented itself as a barrier, a closed door; but she insisted on trying the lock in any way she could to discover whether she could trust the Christian promise of eternal and intensified life."<sup>77</sup>

Such personal frustrations and uncertainties surrounding the themes of death and immortality perhaps inevitably led Dickinson into critical engagement with a number of Paul's writings. Despite her desire to find Paradise on earth and despite her rejection of what she regarded as Paul's prioritizing of the immortal over the mortal, Dickinson was nevertheless intrigued by the spiritual possibilities to be found within Paul's discourses on resurrection. She again turned her attention to 1 Cor 15 to engage specifically with Paul's claims about the "mystery" of resurrection (v.51). Within her letters and poems, this "mystery," so central to Christian belief, becomes a source of both anxiety and hope, both faith and doubt, and always, constant questioning.

Dickinson's interest in and desire to engage with Paul's discourse on resurrection in 1 Cor 15 is sharply illustrated by a comment she made about it in a letter, written around 1878 to an unknown recipient.<sup>78</sup> Within the letter, she quotes 1 Cor 15.51, where Paul is elucidating his belief in the eschatological "mystery" of the glorious bodily transformation that he anticipates at the time of the Parousia. "We shall not all sleep," he states, "but we will all be changed." The ensuing verses suggest that this "change" involves a transformation of sorts that will enable the living and the dead to achieve incorruptibility and immortality. Clearly intrigued by the apostle's words here, and frustrated, perhaps, by their seeming obtuseness, Dickinson writes, "Were the Statement 'We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,' made in earthly Manuscript, were his Residence in the Universe, we should pursue the Writer till he explained it to us."<sup>79</sup>

Despite the apostle's maddeningly enigmatic remarks about resurrection in 1 Cor 15, Dickinson nevertheless made other references to this intriguing passage in her poetry, where she overlooks the Pauline ambiguities therein and finds her own meanings for it in a way that once again meets her particular contextual and spiritual needs. Thus, for example, in a letter sent to her second cousin Perez

---

75 Bianchi and Hampson, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 181.

76 Roxanne Harde, "Some—are like My Own—," 317. See, for example, her letter to her cousin John Graves written in late April, 1856 (Johnson, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:327-28), where she seems to speak with a mixture of hope *and* scepticism about the notion of resurrection: "It is a jolly thought to think that we can be Eternal—when air and earth are *full* of lives that are gone—and done—and a conceited thing indeed, this promised, Resurrection!" [original italics]

77 Jane Donahue Eberwein, *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts, 1998), 199.

78 Johnson, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:621.

79 Johnson, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:621.

Dickinson Cowan after the death of his infant daughter Margaret in October 1880,<sup>80</sup> Dickinson turns to 1 Cor 15:35, where, in the midst of his affirmation of the truth of resurrection, Paul cites two questions asked of him by sceptics: “How are the dead raised? With what type of body do they come?” In subsequent verses, Paul attempts to elucidate the futility of such questions, as he emphasizes the discontinuity between the present earthly body and the future resurrection body; the former, he claims, has limited glory, being perishable and temporary, while the latter will be wholly different—spiritual, eternal, and far more glorious than its mortal counterpart. Exactly what visible or cognizable form these “differences” will take is left unexplained by Paul; however, in a poem included in the letter to her grieving friend, Dickinson brings her own meaning to the Apostle’s words in her attempt to “revision”<sup>81</sup> the familiar, earthly body as the eternal home or embodiment of the soul:

“And with what body do they come?”—  
Then they *do* come—Rejoice!  
What Door—What Hour—Run—run—My Soul!  
Illuminate the House!

“Body!” Then real—a Face and Eyes—  
To know that it is them!—  
Paul knew the Man that knew the News—  
He passed through Bethlehem—<sup>82</sup>

The poem radiates excitement and delight—the punctuation accentuates the series of short exclamations that pile up one after the other and give the verse a breathless, eager tone.<sup>83</sup> Dickinson hones in on just those few words of Paul’s which, for her, offer some glimmer of “proof,” or “hope” at least, in the return of those who have died: “Then they *do* come—Rejoice!”<sup>84</sup> Unlike the apostle, she does not prioritize attention on the *changes* that will occur to the earthly body at the time of resurrection; nor does she acknowledge, as he does, a superiority of the resurrected body in terms of its glory and incorruptibility. On the contrary, Dickinson celebrates here the familiarity and corporeality of the immortal soul, which retains the same body, face, and eyes, thereby enabling each person to recognize, always, those they have previously loved and lost—the “flesh and blood inheritance” that she so yearns for.<sup>85</sup> In other words, it is the possibility of the *similarity* between the body before and after death and the recognizability of the resurrected body that thrills her: “‘Body!’ Then real—a Face and Eyes—/ To know that it is them!”<sup>86</sup> Even Dickinson’s own soul is embodied here, with legs that will “run” to prepare the house for those who *will* return.<sup>87</sup> Dickinson therefore subverts and revises Pauline priorities in this passage, having little need for his insistence of the radical newness

---

80 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:334-35.

81 Harde, “Who Has Not Found,” 167.

82 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:335 [original italics].

83 Freedman, *Emily Dickinson and the Religious Imagination*, 170.

84 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:335 [original italics].

85 Harde, “Some—are like My Own—,” 321.

86 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:335.

87 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:335.

of the resurrected body or his de-prioritizing of the earthly body; even Jesus, the source of this great resurrection promise, is simply "the Man" in her eyes here—an earthly character who "passed through" Bethlehem bringing promises of eternal life—rather than a more lofty, inaccessible heavenly Christ.<sup>88</sup> Such a reading appears to adumbrate later feminist Christology, which emphasizes the salvific potential of Jesus' *humanity* for both men and women and which rejects the designation of the human body as inherently corrupt.<sup>89</sup> Thus, while she makes use of Paul's own words, Dickinson nevertheless imbues them with her own significance, using a "hermeneutic of indeterminacy"<sup>90</sup> in order to re-vision the text and consequently actualize its potential to offer to her friend (and perhaps herself) a heart-stopping glimpse of hope in a resurrection and reunion event—when those who have been loved and so sorely lost will again be illuminated with light and recognized in all their glorious bodily familiarity.

Dickinson likewise turns to the Pauline epistles in order to give expression to her own personal loss, again re-visioning his words to voice her uncertainty about the reality of immortality after the death of her mother in 1882. In a letter to her friend Maria Whitney, written in the Spring of 1883, she alludes to a passage from 2 Cor, where Paul urges his readers not to be discouraged despite corporeal suffering, decay, and hardships.<sup>91</sup> For, claims Paul, any human affliction and suffering borne in this life will seem inconsequential and fleeting compared to the weight, or abundance,<sup>92</sup> of glory that awaits Christians in the eschaton. As he tells his Corinthian audience, "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen" (2 Cor 4:17–18a).

In her letter, Dickinson picks up just one of Paul's phrases and alludes to it in reference to the splendid Spring weather: "The sunshine almost speaks, this morning, redoubling the division, and Paul's remark grows graphic, 'the *weight* of glory.'"<sup>93</sup> Dickinson's precise meaning here, and the nature of her engagement with Paul's remark, is not obvious on first inspection. As noted above, she did at times challenge and subvert Paul's emphasis on the transience of earthly things and his prioritizing of that which is unseen and eternal. Here, however, she may be reaching for this very message as a way of finding comfort in the midst of unbearable grief and loss; the "division" between this life and the next that separated her from her beloved mother. Thus, according to McIntosh:

The Bible offers a language of faith in immortality that consoles her for this inscrutable loss ... Dickinson finds the promise of glory not only in Paul's words but also in the speaking sunshine itself ... [D]espite her division from her mother, with part of her mind she would overcome her affliction by a faith in a glory that manifests itself in the heaven below as well as the heaven above.<sup>94</sup>

---

88 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:335.

89 Harde, "Some—are like My Own—," 321–24. For further discussion of feminist christologies, see Arnfrítur Gutmundsdóttir, *Meeting God on the Cross: Feminist Christologies and the Theology of the Cross* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

90 Ostriker, "Re-playing the Bible," 165.

91 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 340–41.

92 The Greek word *baros* literally means *weight* but can be used to convey a sense of *fullness*.

93 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 341.

94 James McIntosh, *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan



Nevertheless, McIntosh also notes that, like Dickinson's other discourses on consolation in the face of human mortality and loss, this passage has an "ambivalent edge" to it.<sup>95</sup> My own interpretation of her words here is that the sun, in all its glory, fails to offer Dickinson her usual delight because it reminds her only of the "division" that exists between her mother and herself; in the beauty of the day, with the vociferous sun, she feels her loss that much more keenly as she becomes ever more aware of the absences in her life, those departed family and friends with whom she may have sought to share days such as these. Thus, the "glory" of the sun takes on the weight of her loss; her allusion to Paul's "weight of glory" may consequently not reflect her hopeful anticipation of resurrection and immortality, but may be used here ironically to denote the weight of sadness with which she is greeting that which she would usually find glorious. To be sure, she includes a poem in the letter, which does suggest some belief or hope in her mother's heavenward transit ("To the bright east she flies/Brothers of Paradise/Remit her home").<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, the letter is infused with a heavy sadness, as Dickinson strives to find meaning in her loss: "Grief of wonder at her fate made the winter short, and each night I reach finds my lungs more breathless, seeking what it means."<sup>97</sup> If, within the words of this letter, there is hope and joy in the eternal weight, or fullness, of glory that awaits those who die, it is not easy to see. The comfort and joy that Dickinson usually receives from her earthly paradise seem to be extinguished here and she is left straying through each day, "Homeless at home."<sup>98</sup>

## Conclusions

This article has taken but a brief journey through some of the complexities of Emily Dickinson's spirituality and faith, in particular, her engagement with and responses to the apostle Paul. Above all, I have outlined her challenges to Paul's prioritizing of the heavenly at the expense of the earthly, as well as taking him to task for his doctrines of human sin and human corruptibility that so affronted her great love of and respect for humankind. Dickinson gently probed with uncertainty *and* hope Paul's claims of resurrection and immortality. She quoted him often, at times with humour, at other times in disbelief or even despair, but always with a consuming interest in and engagement with what he had to say. Through the language and words of her poetry and epistles, she thus explored, confronted, questioned, and—from time to time—engaged playfully with the words of the apostle, in order to give rich timbre to her own unique faith, whose roots were so firmly and deeply embedded within the world around her and within the comfort and joy of her own domestic domain. At times, she thoroughly unbalances the spiritual and heaven-centred gaze of this "orator of Ephesus,"<sup>99</sup> thrusting it earthwards to confront and engage with those very earthly elements such as friendship, love, death, suffering, and desire. Through her subversion of Paul's teachings, along with her absolute commit-

---

Press, 2000), 87.

95 McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 87.

96 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:340.

97 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:340.

98 Todd, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2:341.

99 Johnson, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 1:92.

ment to her place within this earthly life, Dickinson exudes a spirituality that gives "full recognition and exploration of lived and felt experience."<sup>100</sup> Her relationship with Paul is complex, audacious, and utterly fascinating in its bold refusal to acquiesce or accept unquestioningly the apostle's teachings. As a woman writing from the "margins" of nineteenth-century male-dominated biblical scholarship, using poetry as her exegetical medium, she had the freedom to eschew the prescriptive orthodoxies of Higher Criticism and re-contextualize Paul's teachings within her own unique location—the gendered spaces of home, garden, and family. To paraphrase Adrienne Rich,<sup>101</sup> Dickinson always wrestled with this particular "faded man" very much on *her* terms.

## Bibliography

- Barrett, Faith. "Slavery and the Civil War." Pages 206–15 in *Emily Dickinson in Context*. Edited by Eliza Richards. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Bennett, Paula. *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990.
- Bianchi, Martha Dickinson, and Alfred Leete Hampson, eds. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1937. Project Gutenberg. Cited 14 September 2014. Online: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12242/12242-h/12242-h.htm>.
- Cook, Carol J. "Emily Dickinson: Poet as Pastoral Theologian." *Pastoral Psychology* 60 (2011): 421–35.
- Dobson, Joanne. *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence: The Woman Writer in Nineteenth-Century America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Eberwein, Jane Donahue. *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts, 1998.
- . "'Is Immortality True?': Salvaging Faith in an Age of Upheavals." Pages 67–102 in *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson*. Edited by Vivian R. Pollack. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- . "New England Puritan Heritage." Pages 46–55 in *Emily Dickinson in Context*. Edited by Eliza Richards. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- . "'Where – Omnipresence – fly?' Calvinism as Impetus to Spiritual Amplitude." *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 14 (2005): 12–23.
- Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries 32. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008.
- Freedman, Linda. *Emily Dickinson and the Religious Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Freeman, Margaret H. "George Eliot and Emily Dickinson: Poets of Play and Possibility." *The Emily*

100 Roxanne Harde, "Who Has Not Found," 174.

101 Rich, "Vesuvius at Home," 162.

*Dickinson Journal* 21 (2012): 37–58.

- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. 2d ed. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000.
- Gutmundsdottir, Arnfrítur. *Meeting God on the Cross: Feminist Christologies and the Theology of the Cross*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Habegger, Alfred. *My Wars are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson*. New York: Random House, 2001.
- Harde, Roxanne. "Some—are like My Own—": Emily Dickinson's Christology of Embodiment." *Christianity and Literature* 53 (2004): 315–36.
- . "'Who Has Not Found the Heaven—Below—/Will Fail of It Above—': Emily Dickinson's Spirituality." Pages 155–80 in *Things of the Spirit: Women Writers Constructing Spirituality*. Edited by Kristina K. Groover. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004.
- Heginbotham, Eleanor Elson. "'What do I think of glory—': Dickinson's Eliot and Middlemarch," *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 21 (2012): 20–36.
- Johnson, Thomas H., ed. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. New York: Back Bay Books/Little Brown and Company, 1960.
- . ed. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. 3 vols. The Belknap Press: Cambridge, MA: 1958.
- Jones, Rowena Revis. "'A Taste for Poison': Dickinson's Departure from Orthodoxy." *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 2 (1993): 47–64.
- Keane, Patrick J. *Emily Dickinson's Approving God: Divine Design and the Problem of Suffering*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008.
- Keller, Karl. *The Only Kangaroo among the Beauty: Emily Dickinson and America*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979.
- Leder, Sharon and Andrea Abbott. *The Language of Exclusion: The Poetry of Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti*. Contributions in Women's Studies 83. New York: Greenwood Press, 1987.
- Lundin, Roger. *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.
- Martin, Wendy. *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich*. Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1984.
- . *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge Introduction to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Messmer, Marietta. *A Vice for Voices: Reading Emily Dickinson's Correspondence*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001.
- McIntosh, James. *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000.
- . "Religion." Pages 151–59 in *Emily Dickinson in Context*. Edited by Eliza Richards. New York:

Cambridge University Press, 2013.

- Ostriker, Alicia. "Re-playing the Bible: My Emily Dickinson." *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 2 (1993): 160–71.
- Reynolds, David S. "Emily Dickinson and Popular Culture." Pages 111–34 in *Emily Dickinson*. Edited by Harold Bloom. Bloom's Modern Critical Views. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson." Pages 157–83 in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*. London: Virago, 1980.
- Todd, Mabel Loomis, ed. *Letters of Emily Dickinson*. 2 vols. Boston: Robert Brothers, 1894. Hathi Trust Digital Library. Cited 12 July 2014. Online: <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011225228>.
- Ward, Theodora. "Death and Immortality." Pages 318–20 in *Emily Dickinson: Critical Assessments*. Edited by Graham Clarke. Vol. 3. Helm Information: Mountfield, 2002.
- Wolosky, Shira. "Emily Dickinson: Being in the Body." Pages 129–41 in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*. Edited by Wendy Martin. Cambridge Companion to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- . "Gendered Poetics." Pages 169–78 in *Emily Dickinson in Context*. Edited by Eliza Richards. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- . "Public and Private in Dickinson's War Poetry." Pages 169–90 in *Emily Dickinson.*: Edited by Harold Bloom. Bloom's Modern Critical Views. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008.
- Yin, Joanna. "'Arguments of Pearl': Dickinson's Response to Puritan Semiology." *Emily Dickinson Journal* 2 (1993): 65–83.
- Zapedowska, Magdalena. "Citizens of Paradise: Dickinson and Emmanuel Levinas's Phenomenology of the Home." *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 12 (2003): 69–92.
- . "Wrestling with Silence: Emily Dickinson's Calvinist God." *American Transcendental Quarterly* 20 (2006): 379–98.