



Second Corinthians

Introduction

Paul's 2 Epistle to the Corinthians is a rich letter filled with striking imagery and powerful rhetoric, yet it lacks the coherence of some of Paul's other writings. It does not respond to a particular issue, as does Galatians. It does not develop a complex theological argument, as does Romans. It does not respond to a series of pastoral problems, as does 1 Corinthians. Instead, it falls into three large blocks that each has a very different feel. The first, from 1:1-7:16, within a framework that comments on Paul's situation and travel plans, offers a series of images that interpret Paul's apostolic mission and celebrate reconciliation between he and his congregation. Chapters 8 and 9 both deal with the practical issue of fundraising in slightly different, but somewhat overlapping ways. These chapters show Paul engaged in keeping the promise he made to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem to remember the poor in Judaea (Gal 2:10). Chapters 10-13 contain Paul's most stridently polemical passages in which he defends his apostolic activity in the face of rival apostles. These three blocks do not hang together well as a single letter. It is especially unlikely that Paul could engage in such a rancorous apology (Ch. 10-13) after encouraging people to give generously to the collection he was taking up.

To study 2 Corinthians we need to wrestle with this complex situation. One could read the letter in its canonical form, and it is a good idea to do that at least once. Most readers find that experience somewhat baffling. So in this study we will attempt to situate the parts of 2 Corinthians within the context of Paul's fluctuating relationship with his Corinthian community.

Situating 2 Corinthians

The difficulties caused by the obvious surface tensions within 2 Corinthians have led to numerous hypotheses about its composition. Some scholars resolve the tensions by viewing the letter as something that was composed over a period of time, during which the situation with the Corinthian church would have changed. While that is possible, it leaves the question open of why one would ever send such a disjointed letter. Another and, more likely possibility, is that 2 Corinthians as we have it was created by the editors of the Pauline letter collection, which was probably brought together after Paul's death, which took place in approximately 64 CE. The precise rationale for putting the letter together in this way is also unclear, although it may have had something to do with the editorial strategy for the collection as a whole. The

polemical portion of 2 Corinthians coheres thematically with the argumentative, but less polemical epistle Galatians, which follows 2 Corinthians in all the witnesses to the collection.

If, as is likely, 2 Corinthians is a collection of fragments of Pauline letters, the challenge is to identify how many such fragments are there, and how they fit into the development of Paul's relationship with the community at Corinth. Scholars have made numerous proposals to sort out this difficult problem. The following solution offers a reasonable reconstruction of Paul's interaction with his Corinthian disciples and the major evidence for each stage.

1. Paul comes to Corinth for the first time and engages in evangelism in collaboration with Prisca and Aquila around 53 CE.
 - Acts 18 provides an account of the start of Paul's mission in Corinth.
2. Other missionaries, including Apollos of Alexandria, visit Corinth
 - 1 Cor 3:6: "I planted, Apollos watered"
3. Paul writes a letter to Corinth, which has not survived (= Letter A)
 - 1 Cor 5:9: "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons"
 - 2 Cor 6:14–7:1: This passage is odd in the context of the first seven chapters of 2 Corinthians. It does not deal with the issues addressed in Ch. 10-13. It warns against being involved with lawless unbelievers. Some scholars suspect it may have been a part of another letter, perhaps the lost letter A.
4. A delegation from Corinth brings a report and a letter to Paul, probably in Ephesus
 - 1 Cor 1:11; 11:18, Paul refers to the delegation, "Chloe's people," perhaps slaves or freedmen belonging to a household presided over by a woman named Chloe.
 - 1 Cor 7:1: Before addressing an issue, Paul refers to "the matters about which you wrote."
5. Paul writes 1 Corinthians (= Letter B)
 - 1 Cor 16:8: Paul is in Ephesus, before Pentecost, probably in the year 54 CE.
 - 1 Cor 16:1-4: Paul has begun the relief collection for the poor in Jerusalem.
6. Paul's emissaries are at work in Corinth
 - 1 Cor 4:17, 16:10: Paul promises to send Timothy.
 - 2 Cor 8:6: Titus, "Made a beginning" on the collection, perhaps at this time.
7. Other "apostles" (= missionaries) arrive in Corinth, late 54 or early 55 CE.
 - 2 Cor 11:5-22, mentions them and indicates the kind of claims they made
 - 2 Cor 3:1: Paul alludes to the fact that "some people" used "letters of recommendation." He may have these other "apostles" in view.
8. Paul pays a "painful" visit to Corinth, probably in spring or summer 55 CE.
 - 1 Cor 16:3-4: Paul anticipates coming for a visit.
 - 2 Cor 2:1: Paul had made a "painful" visit that he did not want to repeat.
 - 2 Cor 13:2: During his "second" visit, Paul had given the Corinthians a warning.
 - 2 Cor 12:14: Paul plans another, "third" visit.
 - 2 Cor 2:5; 7:12: An individual person has "caused pain" and "did wrong." It is likely that this encounter took place during the "second" = "painful" visit, and

was the cause of the pain. Paul's language is allusive and what this individual did is not totally clear. It may have had something to do with the situation Paul addressed in 1 Cor 5:1-5, where Paul advised "handing over to Satan" a man who had been sexually involved with his stepmother, something of which Paul disapproved. Whoever it was, this individual apparently sided with the new "apostles" and challenged Paul.

9. Paul writes another, "tearful" or emotional letter (Letter C = 2 Corinthians 10–13?)
 - 2 Cor 2:3-4: "I wrote to you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears."
 - 2 Cor 7:8–10: "For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it."
10. Paul decides to keep his distance.
 - 2 Cor 12:13; 13:1: At the time he wrote these chapters he was planning a "third visit."
 - 2 Cor 2:1: "I made up my mind not make another painful visit."
11. Paul instead sends Titus to mediate, probably late 55 or early 56 CE.
 - 2 Cor 2:12-13: Paul went to Troas (northwestern Turkey) hoping to meet Titus, but he was not there.
12. Titus brings good news:
 - 2 Cor 7:6: Titus arrived.
 - 2 Cor 7:14: Paul had "boasted" of the qualities of Titus and was not disappointed.
13. Paul writes celebrating the restoration of relations with Corinth (Letter D = 2 Cor 1-7).
14. At some point in his relationship with Corinth Paul sends, or adds to, another letter, instructions for proceeding with the collection (Letter E = 2 Cor 8; Letter F = 2 Cor 9). It is possible that one of these sections was with Paul's first letter (Letter A), with his letter of consolation (Letter D), or as a separate note after the difficulties between Paul and his community had been resolved.
15. Paul finally makes a "third" visit to Corinth to conclude the collection and prepare for his next missionary mission, probably spring or summer 56.
 - Rom 15:26-27: Paul writes Romans in Corinth, gathering the funds from the collection, which he aims to deliver in Jerusalem before going to Rome.

Studying the Letter

This reconstruction of the situation surrounding 2 Corinthians dictates the order in which this study will proceed. On the basis that 2 Corinthians 10-13 is probably the earliest major segment of the overall letter (although there may be a fragment of Letter A embedded in 1 Cor 6:14-7:1), we will start with those chapters, reflecting on the position of Paul's rivals and the response he makes to them.

The various parts of the letter reveal much about the personality of the apostle and some of his major theological and pastoral concerns. In 2 Cor 10-13, he distinguishes himself from other apostles primarily by his commitment to the significance of Christ crucified, a principle he had established in 1 Cor 2:2. He subjects their reliance on the pedigree and their spiritual

accomplishments to a vigorous critique, using rhetoric of biting irony. In his letter of reconciliation (2 Cor 1-7) Paul reveals his emotional attachment to his Corinthians. He also displays another literary skill, the ability to express his thoughts in evocative imagery, much of it involving travel and the realities of his role as an apostle. Finally, in his administrative letters (2 Cor 8-9) dealing with the issue of fundraising, he reveals his more practical, administrative side. Despite their complexity, the pieces that comprise 2 Corinthians constitute a rich source of insight into Paul and his understanding of the Gospel of Christ.

Further Reading:

Victor P. Furnish, *II Corinthians* (Anchor Bible 32A; New York: Doubleday, 1984).

John Proctor, *I and II Corinthians* (Westminster Bible Companion; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

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