

SECOND EPISTLE OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS

Approximate date: Winter 56 or 57 C.E.

Time period: season of extreme growing pains for the Corinthian congregation, in the midst of many challenging Paul's apostolic authority

Author: the Apostle Paul

Location of author: Macedonia or Ephesus

Target audience and their location: Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Corinth

People:

Paul, Timothy, Silas, Titus

People mentioned:

Yeshua the Messiah, Moses, Eve, Abraham, King Aretas

Places:

Corinth, Achaia, Asia, Macedonia, Judea, Troas

Places mentioned:

Damascus

Key Themes:

comfort available from God during times of great distress / Paul's traveling plans in relation to the Corinthians / the ministry of the new covenant compared and contrasted to the ministry of the old covenant / the power of God to perform miraculous deeds / eternal things available for Believers / the ministry of reconciliation to see that individuals are redeemed through Yeshua / the ministry hardships of Paul / not being yoked with unbelievers / godly sorrow bringing people to repentance / the need to be generous / Paul defends his ministry abilities / warnings about false apostles / Paul summarizes the things he has faced in ministry / a vision of Heaven / admonition to the Corinthians to see if they are truly in the faith

Key Scriptures: 2 Corinthians 1:5-7; 3:1-3; 4:5-6; 5:1-4, 8-10, 17-20; 6:14-17; 7:10; 10:3-6; 11:2, 13-15, 23-33; 12:20-21 / **Greeting and Thanksgiving** (1:1-11);

The Apostle's Ministry (1:12; 7:16); The Collection Scheme (8:1-9:15); Paul's Vindication of His Apostleship (10:1-13:10)¹

Theological Summary: The text that is often called 2 Corinthians is unanimously agreed by today's conservatives and liberals to have been written by the Apostle Paul (1:1; 10:1), even though Timothy is listed as a co-sender (1:1). Perhaps unlike any of his other letters, 2 Corinthians contains more autobiographical material, and we learn much about Paul the person in this composition. Pauline authorship of 2 Corinthians has not been substantially challenged, but it was not as well known to the Second and Third Century Christian Church, compared to some of Paul's other letters.

A huge part of the debate among interpreters regarding 2 Corinthians, concerns whether 2 Corinthians is a single letter, or is actually some kind of a composition of several letters or pieces of letters.² Conservatives generally argue for some kind of unity for the epistle, whereas liberals tend to think that 2 Corinthians is a composition of several letters and/or fragments of correspondence.

According to some scenarios, 2 Corinthians may be the fourth letter that Paul wrote to the Believers in Corinth. Harris validly points out, "There is probably no part of Paul's life more difficult to reconstruct accurately than the period of thirty or so months he spent in and around Ephesus (perhaps from the fall of A.D. 53 to the spring of A.D. 56)" (*EXP*).³ For certain, the bulk of Paul's writing the Corinthians was to rebuke and admonish them for the problems that they faced. 2 Corinthians 2:4 indicates, "For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you." This does indicate that a previous piece of writing preceded his writing in 2 Corinthians, but what that piece of writing was, has been debated by expositors.

The first and most obvious candidate for the piece of writing referenced is the letter of 1 Corinthians. There are other interpreters, though, who think that it may be a lost letter of stern rebuke. Gundry summarizes, "After writing 1 Corinthians from Ephesus, Paul found it necessary to make a 'painful visit' to Corinth and back—painful because of the strained relation between him and the Corinthians at the time. Luke does not record this visit in Acts. It is to be inferred, however, from 2 Corinthians 12:14; 13:1-2, where Paul describes his coming visit as the 'third.'"⁴ The existence of 2 Corinthians as a "fourth letter" creates some problems for exegetes trying to recreate the circumstances by which 2 Corinthians was composed.⁵ Of course, more than anything else, if 2 Corinthians were indeed a fourth letter in

¹ Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 462-464.

² S.M. Gilmour, "Corinthians, Second Letter to the," in *IDB*, 1:694-695; L. Morris, "Corinthians, Second Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 1:780-781; Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 437-453; Hans Dieter Betz, "Corinthians, Second Epistle to the," in *ABD*, 1:1148-1150; John T. Fitzgerald, "Corinthians, Second Letter to," in *EDB*, 283; John Barclay, "2 Corinthians," in *ECB*, pp 1353-1356; Carson and Moo, pp 429-442.

³ Murray J. Harris, "2 Corinthians," in *EXP*, 10:302.

⁴ Gundry, "The Major Epistles of Paul," in *A Survey of the New Testament*, 369; cf. Morris, "Corinthians, Second Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 1:779.

⁵ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 451-452.

a series that Paul wrote to the Corinthians, it indicates once again how spiritually immature these people were, and how they indeed had some major problems.

Another proposal that some have suggested is that 2 Corinthians chs. 10-13 make up the sorrowful letter that Paul refers to earlier in the text. While many conservatives are agreed that chs. 10-13 are a part of the original text, or yet another piece of text written later, this is a useful possibility that deserves some consideration when examining the whole of 2 Corinthians. In the most extreme case, this would mean that Paul wrote a total of five letters to the Corinthians, including: Letter A—the non-extant first letter; Letter B—1 Corinthians; Letter C—a non-extant third letter; Letter D—the canonical 2 Corinthians or 2 Corinthians chs. 1-9; Letter E—2 Corinthians chs. 10-13. Still, in spite of all this possible writing, the epistle we have known as 2 Corinthians “was written out of Paul’s deep thankfulness for the favorable turn in his relations with the Corinthians...Paul was a realist [however]. He knew that the worst of the trouble was over, but that did not mean there was no further cause for concern” (Morris, *ISBE*).⁶

The Epistle of 2 Corinthians was composed some time after the Epistle of 1 Corinthians, probably about six months or so afterward, but no more than a year.⁷ If we can assume that Paul’s travels detailed in 1 Corinthians 16:5-8, point to a Spring 56 or 57 C.E. timeframe, then it is likely that 2 Corinthians was written sometime in the following winter. A likely place of composition is Macedonia (2:13; 7:5),⁸ although some also favor Ephesus.

Like the Epistle of 1 Corinthians, no original composition in Hebrew or Aramaic has ever been proposed by anyone in the scholastic community for the Epistle of 2 Corinthians. It is only limited to those in the Messianic community who want it to be so. It is an historical impossibility.

When coupled with the Epistle of 1 Corinthians, and compared with the background material of Acts 18 and the late First Century composition of *1 Clement*, the Epistle of 2 Corinthians gives us a good idea about many of the internal dealings in the First Century community of faith. It specifically gives us a framework for many of the interpersonal and societal issues that faced the *ekklēsia* at large. 2 Corinthians also gives readers a wide amount of insight into the Apostle Paul as a person, and how he handled difficulty.

Why Paul composed this letter to the Corinthians is a slight challenge for some interpreters, but should not be too difficult to determine. It is often proposed that the purpose for Paul writing 2 Corinthians was that his admonitions laid out in 1 Corinthians, and likely other previous communications, were not met. Paul made a brief visit to Corinth to try to remedy the situation, which did not help, because false teachers and false apostles had entered in and were challenging his authority (11:4; 12:11). After Paul’s visit, which was mainly a disaster, he then wrote the Corinthians a severe letter (2:4). This letter may be non-extant, or as some have proposed may be 2 Corinthians chs. 10-13. Later, we see that Paul met Titus in Macedonia (7:6-7), who brought a good report from Corinth, and this improved situation necessitated the writing of 2 Corinthians.

⁶ Morris, “Corinthians, Second Epistle to the,” in *ISBE*, 1:780.

⁷ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 458-459.

⁸ Morris, “Corinthians, Second Epistle to the,” in *ISBE*, 2:780.

Chs. 10-13 present the biggest challenge for the interpreter because it is a severe rebuke that seems to be disjointed from the larger, more positive context of the letter. Those who see 2 Corinthians as a whole work, rather than two letters or multiple pieces redacted together, think that Titus did bring some negative news with him to Paul as well, and chs. 10-13 address this. Some evangelical scholars, though, think this is another letter written to the Corinthians, at a later date by Paul, and then was added to the document that became known as 2 Corinthians. Also not to be overlooked is the possibility that the Epistle of 2 Corinthians was finished in stages, making the letter a whole composition, but not written all at once. There may have been a period when the letter was left unfinished for weeks due to the ministry work conducted by Paul in Macedonia, and later the material was picked up again.⁹

Regardless of what theory or position one holds regarding the composition of 2 Corinthians, if 2 Corinthians was originally several letters or pieces of correspondence edited together—readers still have the responsibility to deal with the text in its final, canonical form.

For your average Christian today encountering 2 Corinthians, the letter serves to tell whether or not the problems seen in Corinth were at all resolved.

What do today's Messianic Believers do with the Epistle of 2 Corinthians? Most of the discussions surrounding the composition of 2 Corinthians, and whether it is a single letter or a redacted series of letters, will be viewed as academically interesting, but not that important in terms of the larger issues of interpreting the text of 2 Corinthians. What will draw the most attention for Messianic readers of 2 Corinthians concerns the various vignettes issued on topics important to the Corinthian situation, and whether the problems encountered in 1 Corinthians were at all resolved. A section of difficulty for many Messianics regards the issue of Moses, the veil, and the Old Covenant in ch. 3.¹⁰ Is the Old Covenant to be regarded as the Torah and Tanach Scriptures passing away, or the ministry of death and condemnation nullified by Yeshua's sacrifice, for those who are in Him?¹¹

There is definitely much need for improvement in Messianic appreciation and understanding of 2 Corinthians.

Bibliography

Barabas, Steven. "Corinthians, 1 and 2," in *NIDB*, pp 235-236.

Barclay, John. "2 Corinthians," in *ECB*, pp 1353-1373.

Betz, Hans Dieter. "Corinthians, Second Epistle to the," in *ABD*, 1:1148-1154.

Carson, D.A., and Douglas J. Moo. "1 and 2 Corinthians," in *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp 415-455.

Fitzgerald, John T. "Corinthians, Second Letter to," in *EDB*, pp 283-285.

Georgi, D. "Corinthians, Second," in *IDBSup*, pp 183-186.

Gilmour, S.M. "Corinthians, Second Letter to the," in *IDB*, 1:692-698.

Gundry, Robert H. "The Major Epistles of Paul," in *A Survey of the New Testament*, pp 359-389.

Guthrie, Donald. "The Corinthian Epistles," in *New Testament Introduction*, pp 432-464.

⁹ Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 457; Carson and Moo, pp 428-429.

¹⁰ Cf. S.J. Hafemann, "Corinthians, Letters to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 169-170.

¹¹ Consult the author's article "What is the New Covenant?" (appearing in *The New Testament Validates Torah*).

Hafemann, S.J. "Corinthians, Letters to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 164-179.
Harris, Murray J. "2 Corinthians," in *EXP*, 10:301-406.
Morris, L. "Corinthians, Second Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 1:779-782.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON 2 CORINTHIANS:

- 1. Of all of the specific issues that Paul addresses in 2 Corinthians, which one struck you as being the most important, or requiring more reflection/study on your behalf?**
- 2. Examining 2 Corinthians 3:7-18, what is the Old Covenant compared and contrasted to the New Covenant? Do you think that this is written Scripture, or a spiritual condition/force? Explain your thoughts.**
- 3. What does Paul say about our ministry work as Believers in 2 Corinthians? What do you need to improve upon in your own life?**
- 4. Having just examined *both* 1&2 Corinthians, have you ever encountered a Messianic fellowship or congregation like the one Paul wrote to in Corinth? If so, what were its strengths and weaknesses?**

REFLECTION ON 2 CORINTHIANS' PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading Paul's second (extant) letter to the Corinthians: