

16 2 Corinthians. God's Solidarity with the Weak and the "Crazy"

Analytical Outline (---- = possible divisions between letters)

1:1-11 Preamble: addressees, greetings, thanksgiving, blessing

1:12--2:13 Paul's motive for changing his travel plans....

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| (2:14--6:13 Digression: the apostolic ministry, from Troas to Macedonia....

| [6:14--7:1 Purity and Separation (non-Pauline fragment?)]

| 7:2-4Digression concluded)

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7:5-16Summary of travel plans: Paul in Macedonia, where he meets with Titus

8:1--9:15 Organization and administration of offering for the poor

8:1-24 To Corinth (distinct letter?)

9:1-15 To Achaia (distinct letter?)

10:1--13:10 Paul's defense: human weakness and divine strength

10: 1-11 Response to the accusation of weakness

10:12-17 Response to the accusation of ambition

11:1--12:10 Discourse of a "fool": Paul obligated to boast about himself

12:11-13 Signs of an authentic apostle

12:14-21 Concern for the Corinthians

13: 1-10 Warnings and exhortations

13:11-13 Conclusion: recommendations, final greetings

Introduction Although 2 Corinthians was written ca. 57 AD, without doubt by Paul, perhaps from Macedonia (or in part, from Ephesus), most specialists question the document's unity and believe 2 Corinthians to be a collection of Paul's letters. However, no consensus has been achieved regarding the number of letters, their order and mutual relationship. Johann Salomo Semler's research (1776) marked the beginning of a long history of hypotheses concerning the number and order of the letters.

Now, surprisingly, in the 1990's, the possibility of 2 Corinthians' unity has gained support. Recent studies of the techniques of ancient rhetoric point out that abrupt changes in emotional tone do not necessarily indicate seams signaling distinct documents. Consequently, especially for an initial approach to 2 Corinthians, it seems preferable to accept tentatively the tradition of the unity of the letter. At the same time we should recognize that certain divisions in the letter are so abrupt that they may indicate seams of originally distinct letters from Paul.

1. The Poor and Poor Paul. Paul had made it clear in 1 Corinthians that the Corinthian church was primarily poor (1:26-29; with many women and slaves, 11:17-21), but nevertheless able to participate in the ecumenical offering for the "poor saints" (Christian Jews) in Jerusalem (16:1-4). In 2 Corinthians the apostle dedicates two entire chapters to the theme of the administration of this offering (8 and 9), which some consider to have been originally two distinct letters. In 8:9 Paul portrays Jesus as one who was rich, who "became poor" (through the incarnation) and is thus the paradigm for the communities of his followers, the poor and those expressing solidarity with them in love:

“For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”

Notably, in church history 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 have been cited to solicit economic support for innumerable projects: pastors’ and missionaries’ salaries, construction of --often luxurious--buildings. However, the institutional Church has tended to suffer amnesia regarding the original context and purpose of the offering. Similarly, we cite Paul’s words concerning the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23-26), but omit the original context, where the Supper clearly was a gesture of solidarity with the poor (1 Cor. 11:17-22). In the same way churches continue citing texts from 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 to encourage generosity in offerings, while overlooking the fact that the offering requested by Paul was solely to help the poor in Jerusalem (Jewish Christians who were persecuted and oppressed; Romans 15:25-28; Acts 11:29-30; 24:17; Galatians 2:10; 1 Cor. 16:1-4).

In 2 Corinthians Paul faces a church crisis, deploying an entire repertory of administrative instruments: personal visits, sending of delegates, and letters with memorable rhetoric. Concerning the “fool’s speech” (2 Corinthians 11:1--12:10), Hans Dieter Betz comments: “In a brilliant parody, the apostle demolishes the suppositions of his adversaries. By acting as a fool, without being one, he demonstrates the conduct [of praising oneself to defend oneself against slander] that he considers to be inappropriate.”¹ This “fool’s speech” is the culmination of the defense Paul makes of his office as apostle, the dominant theme of the letter.

For the administration of the offering, Paul seeks to avoid accusations of misappropriation of funds (2 Corinthians 12:16-17) by insisting on scrupulous supervision by three men. This group included a brother of the Corinthian church, elected democratically by the majority (who showed their approval “with the hand,” 2 Corinthians 8:18-20, Greek literally).

Thus the three delegates are called “apostles” (8:23), a term which for Paul means only “missionary, messenger, delegate,” and does not refer to the twelve men of the Gospels (1 Corinthians 9:5; Romans 16:7).

Material riches frequently are denounced in the Gospels as a spiritual force that corrupts (Mark 10:17-25; Matthew 6:25-33; Luke 6:20; see James 2:2-6; 1 Timothy 6:6-10). In 2 Corinthians, however, Paul presents the other side of the dialectic: wealth may be a divine blessing that ends degrading dependence and empowers us to serve others (2 Corinthians 9:8). Paul does not ask the Christian community in Corinth to practice the primitive communism of the first church in Jerusalem (Acts 2:4). Nor does he demand that everyone sell all and give the proceeds to the poor. Rather Paul describes the Corinthians as partakers of divine riches (9:8-11; 8:7) and exhorts them to be generous with those who are in need (see 1 Timothy 6:17-20).

Of the seven “catalogs of suffering” that commentators have discovered in Paul’s letters, four are in 2 Corinthians (4:8-10; 6:4b-10; 11:23b-29; 12:10; see 1 Corinthians 4:10-13a; Romans 8:35; Philippians 4:12; cf. 2 Timothy 3:10-13). In fact, these “catalogs of suffering” might better be called “catalogs of oppression,” since the sufferings enumerated by Paul are mainly consequences of the injustices and violence of the authorities and the socially powerful groups.² Specific vocabulary for oppression is common in 2 Corinthians: 1:4-10, 24 (“lord it over”); 4:8, 17; 6:4; 7:2 (“oppressed, harmed, defrauded”), 4-5 (“oppressed”), 12 “one oppressing...one suffering oppression”); 8:2, 13-15; 11:20, 23b-33; 12:10, 13, 18.

As in the Exodus paradigm and commonly throughout the Hebrew Bible, Paul sees oppression as the fundamental cause of poverty: 6:4, 10; 8:2, 13-15; 11:9 with 23b-33. And since poverty is most commonly caused by oppression, liberating justice (both divine and human) is the appropriate response:

- as in the Exodus, liberating justice characterizes God's actions in history, and this God is described not as a blindfolded passive goddess, but as a warrior, responding militantly to oppression with power and weapons of liberating justice (6:7, 14);

- "indignation...readiness to see liberating justice accomplished" (7:11; similarly, 10:6);

- Paul's hope for the church reflects God's distribution of manna (Exodus 16) and land (Joshua 13--21; the Jubilee year, Leviticus 25), so liberating justice is to result in basic equality (isotes) in the new community (8:13-15);

- giving to the poor is not viewed primarily as charity, but as liberating justice (2 Cor. 9:8-10, citing Psalm 112:9);

- perhaps Paul's reference to those who masquerade as "just" reflects Jesus' ironic description of "self-righteous" hypocrites, who promise freedom but actually enslave (2 Cor. 11:15, 20; --> Mark 2:17);

- for Paul "salvation" includes deliverance from oppression (2 Cor. 1:6, 10-11);

- liberating justice is the fundamental work of God's Spirit (3:8-9) and where the Spirit of the Liberator-God is present, liberation and freedom result (3:16);

- Jesus was made sin (or sin offering) "that we might experience God's liberating justice in him" (5:21).

From his seven catalogs of oppression we may see that Paul, more than any other figure in the New Testament, approaches Jesus' life style: a poor itinerant prophet with neither home nor wife (for the case of Jesus, see the Luke and Matthew texts attributed to "Q" source). The only notable difference is that Jesus apparently depended totally on the hospitality and support of others (women in Luke 8:1-3), while Paul performed manual labor (making leather tents) in order to not overburden the struggling new communities in less hospitable Gentile territories.

In 2 Corinthians Paul's enemies who slander him appear to differ from those of 1 Corinthians. During the brief interval between the two letters (56 and 57 AD), apparently another group of "false apostles" arrived who were more dangerous than those referred to in 1 Corinthians. In Galatians Paul had opposed a sector of Jewish Christians who wanted to impose circumcision and Moses' law on the Gentiles. And he spoke in 1 Corinthians of factions among the Corinthians themselves who threatened the unity of the church. In 2 Corinthians, however, those who created problems were intruders from outside the church (although apparently connected with someone in Corinth; see "the one who did the wrong," 2 Corinthians 7:12). The Jewish-Christian missionary intruders emphasized Jesus' miraculous powers and demanded miracles and revelations from Paul to authenticate his ministry as an apostle (2 Cor. 12:1, 7, 12; 13:3). They also accused him of misappropriating offering funds for personal enrichment.

2. The Weak, Sick and Physically Challenged. More than any other book of the New Testament, 2 Corinthians emphasizes human weakness--especially that of Paul himself--and God's solidarity with the weak (see the Greek sarx, "flesh" which is weak):

- 1:3-11 suffering, affliction, tribulation, oppression, condemned to death (Paul and co-workers)
- 3:14-18 a veil over their minds (image of the blind)
- 4:3-4, 6 the veiled gospel...the god of this age blinds them [image]...darkness
- 4:7-10 clay jars...we always carry in our bodies the death of Jesus
- 4:16 "our outer nature is wasting away"
- 5: 1 "if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed"
- 5:16-17 "we regard no one from a human point of view...Christ from a human point of view...in Christ there is a new creation"

- 10:10 Paul's body is weak (according to his critics)
- 11:23-25 Paul: five times received 39 lashes...three times beaten with rods
- 12: 5-10 Paul: "I will boast...of my weaknesses....a thorn was given me in the flesh [an eye affliction?]..... "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness....whenever I am weak I am strong."
- 13:3-4 Christ "was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we...weak...with him by the power of God."

In patriarchal culture, women were considered to be "the weaker vessel" (1 Peter 3:7). However, in 2 Corinthians Paul himself admits to having his "thorn in the flesh" (12:7) and as someone "weak," but strengthened by divine grace:

"[God] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness'for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." (12:9-10).

The entire theology of 2 Corinthians is summarized in this dialectic between human weakness (not only of women) and divine power. And God's power manifests itself in history in liberating justice, salvation, forgiveness, reconciliation and healing--provisionally in the church, but eventually for the entire cosmos.

3. Women. With the exception of the symbolic/theological usage of the church and of Eve (11:2-3), 2 Corinthians does not explicitly speak of women. Nevertheless, from 1 Corinthians we know that women played an important role in church leadership (1 Cor. 1:11; 11:2-26; 12--14). Therefore, we may conclude that when Paul spoke to "the church" in 2 Corinthians (1:2, etc.) he included the women. One exhortation might seem to be directed only to men: "be men of courage [lit., play the man = have courage] , be strong" (1 Cor. 16:13). However, in reality it is directed to the entire church, women included, and thus indicates

flexibility in gender roles (see Priscilla, Romans 16:3 -4). Such flexibility complements the apparent rigidity in Paul's teaching concerning women's head coverings (1 Cor. 11:2-16).

Furthermore, 2 Corinthians provides us with the most explicit example of inclusive language in the New Testament. In 6:18 Paul quotes 2 Samuel 7:14 where the original Hebrew speaks solely of "sons." However, the apostle modifies the citation in 2 Corinthians to explicitly include women, giving us a kind of "feminist relectura": "I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the almighty Liberator-God" (cf. Isaiah 43:6). If Paul could exhibit such freedom and flexibility when citing and interpreting Sacred Scriptures, do we not follow him most faithfully when (to achieve greater clarity concerning God's liberating justice and the inclusivity of the New Order) we do the same? In 2 Corinthians, as in Galatians, Paul insists that the mark of the authentic "charismatic" Christian (guided and empowered by God's Spirit) is not passive conformity to oppressive traditions and structures, but freedom: "...where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17; see Galatians 5:1; 2:4).

The theology of suffering in 2 Corinthians is amply discussed in feminist theology. Jouette Bassler concludes that 2 Corinthians' theology of the cross is powerful, but also potentially dangerous for women. We may appreciate Paul's interpretation of the cross here as an astute defense against rivals in Corinth, effectively subverting their slander. Paul's theology of suffering, however, does not justify passivity in the face of meaningless suffering or oppression.³

Bassler points out that Paul also used the figure of Eve (the only woman named in 2 Corinthians) as the deceived (11:3) to strengthen the patriarchal prejudices in regard to women and their supposed susceptibility to deception (1 Timothy 2:14). In the same text Paul speaks of being jealous with a "divine jealousy," although in his lists of vices the apostle describes

jealousy as a work of the flesh and sinful (illustrating the error of reading the vice lists as if they were universal absolutes of Greek “ethics,” cf. Galatians 5:20).

4. Sexual Minorities. The catalogs of suffering demonstrate that Paul frequently was the victim of slander, injustice, oppression and violence. As in the case of widows, orphans and single women, an itinerant foreigner like Paul could not count on relatives’ protection. Therefore, he suffered defamation and slander that caused the authorities to punish him unjustly. Unlike most Protestant missionaries today, Paul remained unmarried. 2 Corinthians comes from Paul and his companion Timothy (1:1, 19), does not name any contemporary woman (cf. Eve in 11:1-3), and, aside from Timothy, speaks only of Titus (2:13; 7:6-16; 8:23, also deeply loved), Silvanus (1:19) and the unnamed man elected as an apostle-delegate (8:18, 23).

Although today we often hear the Bible cited in support of traditional family values, nuclear families are virtually nonexistent in the New Testament, where the single life of Jesus and his followers like Paul is presented as the new norm (cf. the patriarchal households dominant in the Hebrew Bible). In Genesis (1:28) the couple Adam and Eve constitute God’s image, but in the New Testament the unmarried Jesus is God’s image (sometimes with his followers, also primarily persons without families or those who had abandoned their families to follow Jesus (Luke 14:26; 18:29; --> Colossians, Ephesians). As elsewhere in the New Testament, in 2 Corinthians not the patriarchal family but the church constitutes the center of God’s presence and praxis in the world. This church, whose members primarily are not married couples but sexual minorities, is a counter-culture community characterized by friendship and love.⁴ (--> 1 - 3 John.)

5. Anti-Judaism: The Hebrew Scriptures and “The Old Testament.” It has been customary since Melito, bishop of Sardis (ca. 190 AD), to call the Hebrew Scriptures “The Old Testament,” with the implication of something inferior and surpassed. The New Testament

itself, however, NEVER refers to the Hebrew Scriptures with this pejorative term (see 2 Timothy 3:14-17). Rather the New Testament books refer to the Hebrew Bible simply as “the Scriptures” and similar honorific expressions (“the Sacred Letters”). The contrary tradition of dismissing the Hebrew Bible as the “Old” Testament is but one of many manifestations of anti-Judaism, almost always unconscious, in the history of the church, which culminated in the Nazi Holocaust with the death of six million Jews and other minority groups (homosexuals, gypsies, communists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, etc.). Such pejorative verbal expressions that cause offense commonly form part of our standard vocabulary and the very structure of our language. We use them without thinking of their destructive impact (God only as “Father,” “Old” Testament, queer, fairy, blind, son of a bitch, faggot, etc.; --> James and the tongue).

Many mistakenly attribute to 2 Corinthians the tradition of referring to the Hebrew Scriptures as the “Old Testament.” However, when Paul mentions the “old covenant” (2 Cor. 3:14) he refers not to the books of the Hebrew Scriptures but to the covenant God made with Moses, in contrast to the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah (31:31-34), a prophecy that also forms part of the Hebrew Scriptures (see the quotations in Hebrews 8 of the New Testament).

Beginning with the disdain for the Hebrew Scriptures as the “Old” Testament (the only “Bible” that Jesus and Paul knew), for centuries many churches customarily stand in respect for the reading of the Gospel but remain seated for the reading of the Hebrew Bible (and also for the other books of the New Testament). Standing to honor Jesus during the reading of the Gospel may be an appropriate Christian gesture. But since Jesus himself and Paul recognized only the Hebrew Scriptures as “Bible,” is it respectful to remain seated for their Scriptures, the Hebrew Bible? The terminology today varies: some prefer to speak of the “First Testament” instead of the “Hebrew Scriptures” and “Second Testament” instead of the “New Testament.” If we decide to maintain the traditional terminology and ritual (standing), at the least we need to be aware of

the dangers in this tradition and recognize that such a tradition has no basis in the New Testament (--> 2 Timothy 3:14-17). In contrast, in 2 Corinthians, Paul (always a Jew), dedicates two chapters (8 and 9) to his project of carrying an offering from the Gentiles to the poor saints (fellow Christian Jews) in Jerusalem (multiple identities were common in the New Testament).

Bibliography (* = number of letters)

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Summary of Commentary Positions Regarding Number of Letters in 2 Corinthians :

- 1 letter: Paul Barnett; Shelly Matthews; Francis Young and David Ford; Frederick Danker.
- 2 letters: Ch. 1-9, ca. 55 AD, autumn; + 10-13, ca. 56 AD. Implication: a pessimistic perspective in terms of the relationships between Paul and the church
- Victor Paul Furnish, Ralph P. Martin, Jerome Murphy-O'Connor.
- 3 letters: A: 2:14--6:13 + 7:2-4 = the first apology (+ 6:14--7:1?)
+ 10:1--13:10 = the "letter of tears" [2:3-4];
B: 1:1--2:13 + 7:5-15 + 13:11-13 = the letter of reconciliation;
C: 8--9 = the offering and its administration.
Implication: an optimistic perspective concerning Paul and his relationships with the church - H. Koester; Dieter Georgi.
- 4 letters: The three letters of position #3, but treating ch. 8 and 9 as distinct letters concerning the offering.
- 5 letters: The four letters of position #4, but treating 10:1--13:10 (the "letter of tears") as distinct.
- 6 letters: The four letters of position #4, but considering 6:14--7:1 as a non-Pauline fragment, or as a fragment from the Qumran (with concepts and vocabulary typical of the separatist sect) that Paul incorporated into his own letter(s).

Note: Margaret Thrall concludes that 2 Corinthians consists of three letters (1-8; 9; 10-13; with 6:14-7:1 accepted as also from Paul), but her understanding of the order follows the more pessimistic reading characteristic of those who argue for two letters in the traditional order.