

Cambridge University Press

0521092515 - The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians

Margaret E. Thrall

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE
FIRST AND SECOND LETTERS
OF PAUL TO THE
CORINTHIANS

* * * * *

CORINTH AND THE FOUNDING OF THE
CORINTHIAN CHURCH

In the course of his second expedition as a Christian missionary Paul travelled as far as Macedonia and Greece. He paid successful visits to Philippi and Thessalonica (Acts 16: 11—17: 4), and then had a less effective encounter with the Athenians (Acts 17: 16–34). Finally he came to Corinth, and stayed there for about two years (Acts 18: 1–18).

Corinth was an important city. In the year 46 B.C. it had been founded as a Roman colony by Julius Caesar, and it was built upon the site of an older Greek city which had been destroyed by the Romans a hundred years earlier. Very little remains of the older city today, except for a ruined temple of Apollo, but the paved streets and main square and the public water fountain which belong to the time of Paul provide a substantial picture of the layout of the city as he knew it. In the first century A.D. it was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia and the place of residence of the proconsul, who administered the affairs of the province on behalf of the Emperor. The view from the steep hill of Acrocorinth which overlooks the ruins suggests another reason for the city's importance. From the summit one can look down on the one side to the waters of the Gulf of Corinth and on the other to the Aegean Sea. The isthmus of Corinth stands between the

Cambridge University Press

0521092515 - The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians

Margaret E. Thrall

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CORINTHIANS

The Founding of the Church

Adriatic Sea and the Aegean, and lies on the direct route between Italy and Asia Minor. Merchants in the first century who were carrying their goods by sea from west to east or east to west were eager to avoid the long and dangerous journey round the Greek peninsula. They preferred to sail to the isthmus of Corinth and then to take their cargoes overland and transfer them to another boat on the opposite side. This central position on a major trade route brought great commercial prosperity to the city. It also meant that it had a very mixed population. Social conditions in Corinth were notable on two counts. First, although the city was wealthy its wealth was distributed unevenly, and the gap between rich and poor grew steadily wider. Secondly, the Corinthians were notorious for their sexual immorality. Greek slang had turned the name of the city into a verb meaning 'to fornicate' (*korinthiazesthai*). Religion was as mixed as the population. The Roman gods were worshipped, but there were in addition innumerable other cults which had been introduced into Corinth from all parts of the Mediterranean world. There was also a community of Jews in the city, who had their own synagogue.

Paul probably arrived there in the year A.D. 50. We are told in Acts that he became friendly with a Jewish Christian, Aquila by name, and his wife, Priscilla, who had recently left Rome because of the edict of expulsion which the Emperor Claudius had passed against the Jews. This edict came into force in A.D. 49. Paul made his home with Aquila and Priscilla, and began his missionary work by holding discussions in the Jewish synagogue. He converted one of the synagogue officials, a man called Crispus, but since most of the Jews adopted a hostile attitude towards him he gave up teaching in the synagogue and concentrated on preaching to the non-Jewish population. There he met with a considerable degree of success. The Jews tried to make trouble for him by dragging him into court before Gallio, the Roman proconsul, and accusing him of illegal conduct. Gallio, however, took the line that this was a purely religious dispute and nothing to do

Cambridge University Press

0521092515 - The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians

Margaret E. Thrall

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Paul's Correspondence*

CORINTHIANS

with the Roman administration. Paul stayed in Corinth for some time afterwards and then returned to his headquarters at Antioch.

PAUL'S CORRESPONDENCE WITH THE CORINTHIANS

How many letters did Paul write to the congregation in Corinth? We might naturally suppose that we could answer this question merely by referring to the list of contents in the New Testament itself. This tells us that there were two letters to the Corinthians. But these letters themselves show us that Paul wrote to Corinth at least four times. In 1 Cor. 5: 9 he refers to a previous letter he had sent which had been misunderstood by its recipients. It seems to have contained a warning against close contact with pagans. Also, in 2 Cor. 2: 4, he speaks of another letter which, he says, 'came out of great distress and anxiety' and over which he had shed 'many tears'. The context shows that it was written to deal with some incident in which his own authority had been defied. The description of this letter fits neither the one referred to in 1 Cor. 5: 9 nor 1 Corinthians itself. Certainly Paul had a number of difficult problems to settle when he wrote 1 Corinthians, but the general tone is not one of extreme sorrow or anxiety. The letter of 2 Cor. 2: 4 must therefore have been another letter. This gives us a total of four: the 'previous letter', 1 Corinthians, the 'painful letter', and 2 Corinthians. There is a further complication, however. The study of our present 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians has suggested to some scholars that each of these is not one single continuous letter but a collection of several different letters put together. This theory requires careful consideration and discussion.

We begin with 1 Corinthians. There are two reasons for doubting whether this is a single continuous letter. First, it is said that it contains contradictory opinions on the problem of idol meat. The Corinthians had asked Paul if it was allowable for a Christian to eat the meat from an animal which had been

Cambridge University Press

0521092515 - The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians

Margaret E. Thrall

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CORINTHIANS

Paul's Correspondence

sacrificed to a pagan god. In chapter 8, and also in chapter 10, verses 23–33, he replied that to do so, and even to take part in a feast in a heathen temple, is perfectly legitimate in itself. It is wrong only if it is likely to lead astray one's less enlightened fellow-Christians. But in chapter 10, verses 1–22, he takes a much stricter view. Such practices are idolatry, and anyone who takes part in them is in danger of putting himself in the power of demons. It is argued that he is hardly likely to have contradicted himself so obviously within the space of a few paragraphs and in a single letter. We must therefore suppose that we have here parts of two different letters, later put together by an editor of the Pauline correspondence because they deal with the same topic. The second reason for questioning the unity of 1 Corinthians is that there appears to be no logical connexion between chapter 8 and chapter 9. Chapter 8 is concerned with the problem of idol meat. At the beginning of chapter 9, with no warning at all that he is introducing a fresh topic, Paul plunges straight into a defence of his own conduct as an apostle, a theme which has nothing whatsoever to do with the previous paragraphs. Again, it is argued that chapter 9 must be part of a separate letter, perhaps the one which contained chapter 10, verses 1–22.

These arguments have not been accepted by the majority of scholars, and alternative solutions of the difficulties have been proposed. In the case of the problem of idol meat, it may be that in chapter 8 Paul is for the moment content to argue with his correspondents on their own terms. They may perhaps be right in principle about the harmlessness of taking part in a pagan sacrificial feast, since the pagan god does not really exist. Nevertheless, in practice their action may have a harmful effect on their fellow-Christians. When he comes to write chapter 10 he realizes that they could be wrong in principle as well. The idols represent demons who can be dangerous to their spiritual welfare. The second reason for suspecting the unity of the letter was the apparent lack of connexion between chapter 8 and chapter 9. But it is not true that there is no

Cambridge University Press

0521092515 - The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians

Margaret E. Thrall

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Paul's Correspondence*

CORINTHIANS

connexion at all. At the end of chapter 8 Paul has maintained that one should not insist upon one's own individual rights if to do so is going to hinder other people from living a Christian life. In chapter 9 he illustrates this principle by pointing to his own practice. He has refused to claim his own rights as an apostle (see pp. 66–70). There is therefore no compelling reason to suppose that 1 Corinthians is a compilation of two or more separate letters rather than a single continuous one.

The evidence against the unity of 2 Corinthians is somewhat stronger. In the first place there is no connexion between the first paragraph of chapter 9 and the opening of chapter 10. Paul concludes chapter 9 by encouraging the Corinthians to give generously to the collection he is making for the benefit of the church in Jerusalem. His tone is entirely friendly. Chapter 10 opens abruptly and obscurely with a vehement outburst of self-justification which has nothing to do with the collection and which at moments suggests that the writer's attitude to his correspondents is almost hostile. It is this complete change of tone which is more significant than the change of subject-matter. This brings us to the second reason for suspecting the unity of the letter. Throughout chapters 10–13 Paul's attitude to his readers is totally different from the attitude he displays in the first nine chapters. The first section of the letter is friendly and conciliatory; the writer expresses the utmost confidence in the people he is writing to. But the last four chapters are vehement and aggressive, and conclude with the threat of punishment. The difference in tone is striking. It can be fully appreciated only by a careful reading of the whole letter. Such a complete alteration of the writer's attitude is barely credible if it is thought to have taken place in the course of writing one single letter, especially as no explanation is given. The lack of logical connexion between the end of chapter 9 and the beginning of chapter 10 might possibly be accounted for by supposing that there had been some slight interruption while the letter was being dictated,

Cambridge University Press

0521092515 - The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians

Margaret E. Thrall

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CORINTHIANS

Paul's Correspondence

so that a new topic was introduced too abruptly when Paul resumed his dictation. But the change of tone is a more substantial difficulty. It looks as though the only credible explanation would be to say that we have two distinct letters, written at different times in response to different situations.

Attempts have nevertheless been made to explain the difference between the first and the second section of the letter while maintaining its unity. It has been suggested that the change of tone is not, after all, so marked and absolute. The first nine chapters contain hints of reprimand (6: 12-13; 7: 2-3) as well as expressions of affection, and the last four chapters contain affectionate remarks (11: 11; 12: 15) as well as rebukes and warnings. This is true enough. But it hardly seems sufficient to counterbalance the general impression produced by the two sections of the letter as a whole. Another argument is that when Paul appears friendly and optimistic in his attitude towards his converts (chapters 1-9) he is concerned only with their co-operative behaviour in respect of one particular incident which had challenged his authority. In chapters 10-13 he is dealing with a more general opposition on their part which reveals itself in their respect for other missionaries who have set themselves up as his opponents. But if this is so we should not expect to find him saying in 7: 16, 'How happy I am now to have complete confidence in you!' This is an expression of general approval, and cannot be confined to their conduct in one matter only. A more plausible suggestion is that after he had dictated the first nine chapters of the letter he received fresh news from Corinth of a disturbing nature which caused him to change his tone and to write the four concluding chapters. But in that case why did he not revise the first part of the letter, which is friendly in its attitude? The answer to this question is perhaps that it would not have been very easy to do so without rewriting the whole thing. Probably there had been very little space left between the lines of writing or at the margin

Cambridge University Press

0521092515 - The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians

Margaret E. Thrall

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Paul's Correspondence*

CORINTHIANS

of the sheets of papyrus where alterations could be made. To rewrite whole sheets at a time would have been a slow process. If the situation in Corinth was urgent, Paul would not want to take time to do this. The letter would be taken to Corinth by one of his personal assistants who could be instructed to explain verbally if any change in the first section of the letter seemed to be desirable.

It is just possible, therefore, to explain the alteration of tone in chapters 10–13 without resorting to the theory that we have two separate letters which were only later put together to form our present 2 Corinthians. Nevertheless, the evidence in favour of the theory is considerable, and its implications need further discussion. If chapters 10–13 are part of some other letter, can we identify it in any way? If 2 Corinthians is a combination of two letters, might it not be a combination of more than two? And how and why did the various letters of which it is composed come to be put together?

Some scholars have identified chapters 10–13 with the 'painful letter' which is mentioned in 2 Cor. 2: 4. The chief reason for doing so is simply that these chapters fit the description of the letter. It was one which had caused Paul some distress of mind to write and which had presumably contained a severe reprimand to the congregation, since it is said to have reduced them to penitence. There is one objection to this identification, however. Nowhere in chapters 10–13 do we find any mention at all of the particular incident which had caused the 'painful letter' to be written. Another suggestion is that these chapters belong to a letter written later than chapters 1–9. This would fit in with various references to Titus which we find in chapters 8 and 12. In 8: 17–18 Titus is about to visit Corinth with an anonymous companion. In 12: 17–18 there is an allusion to a visit which Titus, again with an unnamed companion, has already paid to the city. It looks very much as though it is the same visit which is alluded to in both instances, and in that case chapter 12 was obviously written later than chapter 8. (On the other hand, if we main-

Cambridge University Press

0521092515 - The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians

Margaret E. Thrall

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CORINTHIANS

Paul's Correspondence

tain that 2 Corinthians is a unity, it is just possible to suppose that 12: 17–18 refers to a visit paid earlier than the one mentioned in chapter 8 and not to the same one.) Both these suggestions for identifying the hypothetical letter contained in chapters 10–13 have something to be said for them, but neither is conclusive, and the problem remains obscure.

We have so far spoken of chapters 1–9 as though they constituted one single letter. But if we are willing to divide our present 2 Corinthians into two separate letters we must admit the possibility that it may contain more than two. It has been suggested that 6: 14 — 7: 1 is a further separate fragment, since it fails to fit the context in which it now appears. Some scholars would identify it with the 'previous letter' mentioned in 1 Cor. 5: 9. The contents of 6: 14 — 7: 1 — the prohibition of marriage with unbelievers and the warning against having anything to do with 'the idols of the heathen' — fit in with what we can deduce about this earlier letter from Paul's own reference to it. Part of yet another letter has been detected in the long description of the work of the apostles (2: 14 — 6: 10) which interrupts a series of personal remarks with a digression of some four chapters. If these two suggestions are convincing, we should then be bound to maintain that 2 Corinthians is a collection of at least four separate letters. But at this stage it seems necessary to point out that the kind of argument employed must be used with some caution. Taken to extremes, it would mean that we were ready to detect the existence of a fragment of a separate letter every time we found ourselves momentarily unable to follow Paul's train of thought. But it may be we ourselves who are at fault, in failing to understand the connexion between one paragraph and the next. Or possibly Paul was not always as logical in his train of thought as we expect him to be. In any case, a letter does not necessarily possess the logical coherence which we demand of a philosophical treatise. When we are writing letters ourselves, however serious our intention and our subject-matter, we tend to pass without

Cambridge University Press

0521092515 - The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians

Margaret E. Thrall

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Paul's Correspondence*

CORINTHIANS

explanation from one topic to another, expecting our correspondents to understand the link between them or simply to understand that there is no link. Furthermore, the process of dictating a letter was a slow one in Paul's day. There were no shorthand typists in the first century A.D. In addition, Paul had many other duties to attend to. The composition of a long letter such as 2 Corinthians, or even the composition of the first nine chapters, would take a good deal of time and would be subject to frequent interruptions. These factors might very well account for the apparent lack of connexion between some of the paragraphs. They would not, however, account for the complete change of tone between chapters 1-9 and chapters 10-13. We may doubt whether 2 Corinthians contains more than two letters, but we still have to reckon seriously with the possibility that it does contain two.

This presents us with a further problem. How did two (or more) letters come to be put together as one single continuous letter? If they were originally recognizable as separate letters, because they had greetings at the beginning and farewells at the end, why should they not have been put into general circulation as such? It would be altogether too much of a coincidence if they had all accidentally lost their beginnings and endings so that they were assumed to be different parts of a single letter. The problem presents itself even if we are considering only the combination of the first nine and the last four chapters. We should have to suppose that damage had been done both to the last sheet of papyrus on the roll containing 1-9 and also to the first sheet on the roll containing 10-13. One cannot say that it is impossible for this to have happened, but opinions vary as to whether or not it is really probable that it did happen. There is the further possibility that the combination of several letters into one was not accidental but deliberate. This could only have happened at a fairly late date, towards the end of the first century, at a time when Paul's letters were of interest as authoritative doctrinal treatises rather than as personal communications addressed to a particular circle of

Cambridge University Press

0521092515 - The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians

Margaret E. Thrall

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CORINTHIANS

Date and Place of Composition

readers and dealing with a specific local situation. An editor of the Pauline correspondence who was more interested in the apostle's teaching than in the history of his personal relationships with the church at Corinth might have published several short letters as a single continuous one with the idea that one long treatise would be more weighty and impressive. This theory suggests a comparatively late date for the publication of 2 Corinthians. There is supporting evidence for it in the fact that 2 Corinthians became generally known much later than 1 Corinthians. The First Letter of Clement to the Corinthians, written in A.D. 96, and the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, written during the reign of Trajan (A.D. 98–117), show that their authors are familiar with 1 Corinthians but have no knowledge of 2 Corinthians. We can therefore suggest one plausible explanation of the composite nature of 2 Corinthians if we do not believe that it originated as a single continuous letter.

All that can be said in conclusion, however, is that the evidence is very evenly divided and that a definite decision about the unity or otherwise of the letter is difficult to reach.

It is therefore impossible to give a precise answer to the question of how many letters Paul wrote to Corinth. There were certainly at least four, but there may have been as many as seven.

THE DATE AND PLACE OF COMPOSITION

We turn now to the problem of the date and place of composition of the Corinthian correspondence and the reasons for it.

In the case of 1 Corinthians the answers are fairly simple. We know that it was written from Ephesus because Paul himself tells us that he is staying there: 'But I shall remain at Ephesus until Whitsuntide, for a great opportunity has opened for effective work, and there is much opposition' (1 Cor. 16: 8–9). He implies that this is not merely a passing visit but a stay of some duration. When did it take place?