No Bridge over Troubled Water? The Gap between 2 Corinthians 1–9 and 10–13 Revisited

Thomas Schmeller
Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Germany

Abstract
2 Corinthians 1–9 and 10–13 are often regarded as two different letters. The arguments usually forwarded in support of this view are observations about the personal relationship between Paul and the Corinthians or about the circumstances reflected in the two parts of the letter. A close examination of the text reveals clear hints of a change in the personal relationship, but we do not find corresponding hints of a change of circumstances. This article suggests that one can account for continuity on the situational level and for discontinuity in the relationship between Paul and the Corinthians on the grounds that both parts of the letter have different aims. Chapters 1–9 and 10–13 do not contradict each other but are complementary. Thus 2 Corinthians can be viewed as an original unity.

Keywords
2 Corinthians, compilation of letters, letter of tears, unity of 2 Corinthians

The main issue in 2 Corinthians 10–13 is Paul’s struggle for the congregation in Corinth. He seeks to win the Corinthians for himself and to turn them against rivals who have arrived from outside the congregation. This struggle, which is being fought with the utmost severity, is in preparation for Paul’s third visit to Corinth (13.1). The issue, and the passionate way in which Paul deals with it, comes as something of a surprise to the reader after chs. 8 and 9, which focus on the issue of the collection. Since the early days of critical Bible scholarship it has been asked whether chs. 10–13 (henceforth ‘B’) can belong to the same letter as

Corresponding author:
Thomas Schmeller, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Grunewaldplatz 1, 60629 Frankfurt am Main, Germany.
Email: schmeller@em.uni-frankfurt.de
chs. 1–9 (henceforth ‘A’). Is the caesura before 10.1 relevant for the division of the letter? Does it point to a seam between two originally independent letters? Do we need—and can we provide—a bridge that crosses the gap between the two main parts of the letter?

2 Corinthians 10–13: An Originally Independent Letter?

Most scholars vote in favour of separating B from A. However, the issue of the chronological order of these letters, or letter fragments, is still open to debate. Is the letter in B identifiable with the letter of tears (cf. 2.3-4; 7.8), therefore older than A, or has B been written later than A, in which case the letter of tears has been lost? The minority of scholars who assume the original unity of 2 Corinthians in its present form—a minority in which I would include myself—has not been able to agree on how to explain the undeniable differences between the two major parts of the letter.

The discussion regarding B as an originally independent letter focuses on two sets of arguments which are in close contact and often cannot be easily distinguished from each other:

1. What kind of image of the personal relationship between Paul and the Corinthian congregation comes into view in A, and which picture emerges from B? Are there any clues to indicate that this relationship has changed? Has it improved or worsened in one direction or another—from mistrust to trust, or from closeness and love to alienation and enmity?
2. Does B presuppose the same situation as A? Are there explicit or implicit hints to suggest that the framework of the relationship between Paul and the congregation is different, so that one part of the letter appears to be older than the other? Among such hints, for example, are statements about persons in one part of the letter that cannot be reconciled with references to them in the other part.

Both sets of questions are closely interwoven. The main difference is that in (1) we look for statements about personal relationships, while in (2) we search for statements concerning facts that are independent of relationships. As I have already noted, distinguishing between these two sets of arguments is not an easy task, although several observations can be made.

Statements about the Personal Relationship between Paul and the Corinthians

Paul, in A, presents his relationship with the congregation as one characterized by love and trust; in B, however, the relationship seems to be one of
mistrust and disapproval (cf. especially 7.5-16 with 10.2-11). The friendly and conciliatory tone of the first part of the letter becomes ironic, polemical and bitter in the second (cf. especially 1.7; 2.3; 7.4 with 11.7, 20; 12.11, 16, 20).\(^1\) The statements about Paul’s relationship with the congregation, which are often very positive in A, seem incompatible with the negative remarks in B. In addition, the image of Paul and his fellow-workers in the eyes of the congregation seems to be different (cf. especially 1.24; 7.7, 15; 8.7 with 10.6; 12.15-16, 20; 13.5-6).\(^2\)

It is certainly necessary to qualify these remarks by saying that there are hints of problems in the relationship in the first part as well as intimations of a good relationship in the second (cf., e.g., 1.13, 17; 2.5-6; 3.1; 5.11; 6.1, 11-13; 7.2-3 with 10.1a; 11.1b; 12.14-15a).\(^3\) A is more shaped by conflict beneath the surface than one realizes when reading these chapters for the first time; the opposite is true for B. Even so, there is no doubt that, according to B, Paul and the congregation are more critical and distant towards each other than is the case in A.

**Statements about the Situation I: Paul’s Opponents**

Different situations may be implied, in particular, by the role of the opponents and by the visits of Titus. With regard to the opponents, no one denies that they are integral to the central issue in B, although they are mentioned only a few times in A (2.17; 3.1; 5.12). However, this observation can lead to very different interpretations. For scholars who identify B with the letter of tears, the references to the opponents are nothing more than an echo of a battle that Paul has previously fought and won.\(^4\) For those who think that A stems from an earlier stage than B, the opponents must have been successful among members of the congregation and must have become a real danger for Paul during the period between the composition of the two letters.\(^5\) According to those scholars who favour the unity of 2 Corinthians, Paul deals, in A, with a reconciliation that has almost been achieved, and only then, in B, turns to the ongoing threat posed by the opponents; both parts bear witness to the same stage of the conflict.\(^6\) None of these arguments, which occur in different configurations, is excluded by the text. That Paul mentions a letter written ‘with many tears’ is the reason why many

scholars identify B, which does not follow A very easily, with this letter of tears. The advantages and disadvantages of this identification are highly complex. It is challenged by scholars on several grounds, which include the following arguments:

1. The one certainty about the content of the letter of tears, namely that it was meant to encourage the congregation to split from the so-called ‘wrongdoer’ (7.12), is not mentioned in B. On the other hand, from reading 2.3-11 and 7.5-12, one would not expect opponents (like the ones with whom Paul is in conflict in B) to show up in the letter of tears.

2. As is signalled by 2.1-4, the letter of tears was meant to replace a visit by Paul, while B obviously prepares for his next visit to the congregation.

3. B cannot be called a ‘letter of tears’, because in these chapters Paul is fighting rather than mourning.

Such objections are rejected by those scholars who favour the identification of B with the letter of tears:

1. The ‘wrongdoer’ is present in B (cf., e.g., 10.7, 11 with 2.5-6). It is true that many aspects of the opposition dealt with in chs. 10–13 are not mentioned in 2.3-11 and 7.5-12, but this has to do with the aim of A: ‘The presupposition is simply untenable, that in an epistle whose aim is conciliatory, the author should refer explicitly to the former object of dispute’ (Welborn 1995: 153).

2. A letter can replace a visit and also prepare for another visit at the same time.

3. B can be seen to reflect the mood of a ‘letter of tears’ insofar as it is possible to determine the kind of mood that one would expect to detect in such a letter.

It is also often argued that distinguishing B from the letter of tears would suggest that Paul wrote two similar letters challenging the opposition in Corinth. In this case we would have to assume that either Titus and Paul must have been very much mistaken in their assessment of the reconciliation reached after A, or that there were two consecutive conflicts of a very similar kind.

---


The arguments cited for or against the identification of B with the letter of tears seem to have reached a stalemate. Plausible arguments can be posited in support of the claim that B must be the letter of tears, but equally plausible arguments can be forwarded to indicate why this cannot be the case. Therefore, we cannot really decide whether A is chronologically earlier than B or vice versa. This situation of stalemate also allows for the possibility that both texts were written concurrently, but this cannot be proven either.

**Statements about the Situation II: Titus’s Visits to Corinth**

We now turn to the statements about visits as a possible indicator of different situations. Paul refers to Titus’s visits to Corinth in 7.6-7, 13-15; 8.6, 17-18, 22; 9.3, 5; 12.17-18. The number and sequence of these visits can be explained in various ways. In most cases, scholars accept one of the following three theses:

1. The first visit is the one mentioned in 12.17-18, which is identical to the one noted in 8.6 and whose aim was to prepare for the collection. The next visit was the one accompanying the letter of tears (7.6-7, 13-15). A third visit was planned in order to collect the contributions (8.6, 17-18, 22; 9.3, 5). This is the thesis preferred by scholars who identify B with the letter of tears. They point to the fact that in 8.17-18, 22 Paul mentions two brothers accompanying Titus, while in 12.18 there is reference to only one brother. These two visits therefore need to be distinguished from one another. Furthermore, it is difficult to associate the letter of tears and the beginning of the collection with the same visit.

2. The remark in 12.17-18 (a real aorist) looks back to the visit which is announced in 8.6, 17-18, 22; 9.3, 5 (an epistolographical aorist), and which is the occasion for Titus’s delivery of 2 Cor. 1–9. Only one visit (the one mentioned in 7.6-7, 13-15) had preceded Titus’s visit. According to this view, B is not the letter of tears but a letter that was later than A. The most important argument in support of this theory is the agreement between the formulations in chs. 8–9 and 12. In addition, 7.14 seems to relate to Paul’s very first visit to Corinth, so that 12.17-18 cannot point to an even earlier visit.

3. In 2 Corinthians the collection visit (8.6; 12) and the visit with the letter of tears are events belonging to the past. They are not necessarily to be identified with each other, but they can have taken place in this

---

11. Barnett 1997: 21-22 has an unusual variation on this line of interpretation. In his opinion 12.17-18 does not contain an epistolographical aorist, and yet these verses must be related to the announcement of a visit in 8.18, 22.
sequence, a second collection visit is announced in chs. 8–9. Thus, according to this view, 2 Corinthians is a unified letter. This thesis avoids the dubious assumptions that 7.14 refers to Paul’s first visit and that the letter of tears was delivered during the visit when Titus began the collection.

These observations about the situation demonstrate, in my view, that although we may not have many hard facts, we do not have to assume a new situation. There are clear hints to indicate that the roles of the opponents or the visits of Titus in A and B are incompatible with each other and that the statements in question cannot belong to the same letter. It is all the more conspicuous that B presents the relationship between Paul and the congregation in a considerably worse light than in A. Although both parts of 2 Corinthians express confidence and praise as well as disapproval and criticism, there is no doubt as to where the emphasis lies. From ch. 10 onwards the tone becomes sharper and more aggressive.

**Interpreting the Evidence**

Why are there clear hints of deterioration in the relationship between Paul and the Corinthians, when there are no obvious indications of a changed situation? It is a reasonable possibility to assume that there were different situations, but that they are not clearly recognizable within the text because everyone knew about them. In other words: it is legitimate to infer a change of situation on the basis of our observations about the relationship between Paul and the congregation. We may not be able to prove it, but we certainly cannot exclude it either.

There is, however, another possible solution. The difference in the statements regarding the relationship between Paul and his congregation does not make it necessary for us to assume a shift in the situation and, as a result, a division of the text into separate letters. An alternative hypothesis, which gives particular emphasis to a textual-pragmatic approach, can be outlined as follows: the same situation is reflected in both A and B, but Paul deals with the situation differently because his aims are different in the two main parts of the letter.

It is not unprecedented to claim that Paul’s statements of confidence (cf. esp. 7.5-16) serve to stabilize his relationship with the congregation—a relationship that has improved as a result of the letter of tears—and to further the process of reconciliation. The tone used by Paul in addressing the Corinthians is more than just an expression of his existing relationship with them. Continuing tensions between them are not included in the letter. Paul rather idealizes the closeness

---

12. Goulder 2001: 245-46 and Lietzmann 1969: 159 claim that there was only one visit during the period before Paul wrote 2 Corinthians. Harris 2005: 59-40 would like to connect 12.18 either with the beginning of the collection (8.6) or with the visit to deliver the letter of tears (7) or with both.
between the Corinthians and himself and shows the collection for Jerusalem to be an opportunity for them to concretize and materialize this close relationship. Thus, his conspicuous statements of confidence have a markedly pragmatic dimension.

In 7.4, for example, we read: ‘I often boast about you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with consolation; I am overjoyed in all our affliction.’ This is hard to reconcile with statements in the immediate context, for in the two preceding verses Paul writes: ‘Make room in your hearts for us; we have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together’ (7.2-3). Does Paul then, in v. 4, suddenly become emotional and express enthusiasm about the congregation? It might be more reasonable to assume that Paul anticipates a complete reconciliation between the Corinthians and himself, a reconciliation that may not exist at present, but which he seeks to bring about through anticipation.

As already noted, this is not a new proposal. Stanley Olson and Ivar Vegge have written extensively in support of this hypothesis.13 Vegge goes further by proposing that both the positive, idealizing statements in A and the critical and distant statements in B have a primarily pragmatic function. The critical statements in B are not so much a description of the actual situation, but an attempt to bring influence to bear. In Graeco-Roman psychagogy and epistolography we find many discussions of how, and under which conditions, frankness and censure can contribute to the ethical improvement of a student or the addressee of a letter.14 Paul already seems to have followed this rigid line of admonition in the letter of tears. According to Vegge, Paul now applies the same tactics, in B, for a second time.15 In chs. 10–13 his relationship with the congregation is painted in a new, more muted light. Whereas Paul highlights and even exaggerates his closeness to the Corinthians in A, he similarly emphasizes and overdoes the distance between them in B. The closeness is meant to be attractive and motivating for the congregation, while the distance is intended to stir and even terrify them. Some passages in A project the image of a reconciled relationship which was, in fact, only a partial reality at the time of the letter’s composition, but, at the same time, belonged to Paul’s attempt to bring about this reconciliation. Certain passages in B picture a relationship that could end in enmity if the congregation does not remove the opponents and align themselves with Paul. Once again, this picture only corresponds to reality in part, but its overarching aim is to prevent what is depicted from becoming reality.

I agree with Ivar Vegge that the idealizing as well as the disassociating statements have a textual-pragmatic function. Nevertheless, his explanation of the

A drastic shift from ch. 10 onwards is problematic. He argues that Paul, in A, prefers ‘soft’ psychagogical means, and then, in B, opts for harsher strategies. It is certainly true that there were voices contemporary to Paul who advocated the use of severe criticism as a last resort. The moral philosophers quoted by Vegge\textsuperscript{16} were of the opinion that the teacher should take into account the situation and character of his addressee(s) and, depending on these factors, should proceed either with hard and frank criticism or with soft and idealizing praise. However 2 Corinthians—if viewed as an original entity—was addressed to identical addressees under the same circumstances. How, then, can we explain Paul’s change in tactics—from a gentle to a much tougher approach—in ch. 10 onwards? Is it really possible to combine both tactics, or does the harsh criticism run the risk of contradicting and even cancelling out the effect of the gentler approach that precedes it?

**A New Proposal**

There is, however, an alternative proposal. Paul, in B, is not simply aiming for the same outcome by different means from those adopted in A. There are two differences between A and B which, nevertheless, are dependent on each other.

1. In A Paul prepares for the visit of Titus, who was probably responsible for delivering the letter. However, in B Paul is preparing for his own visit. The enigmatic words ‘I myself, Paul’ (10.1) signal this transition from Titus to Paul. Both visits had a past history. The earlier visit by Titus was largely a success (7.7, 13-14), but the interim visit by Paul was a disaster (2.5; 7.12; 12.21). If we take these circumstances into account, it is not difficult to understand why Paul deals with the remaining problems by initially using gentle and then harsher means.

2. In A the congregation is being encouraged to adopt the right frame of mind in order to participate in the collection that will be organized by Titus. Here Paul is trying to win the Corinthians for communion with the church of Jerusalem. He himself is offering to act as mediator. The collection project was meant to be the visible expression of this communion. B is also related to the Jerusalem issue, but in a very different way. Paul is here combating missionaries who, in my opinion, functioned as messengers from Jerusalem and sought to set the Corinthians against Paul in the name of the authorities in Palestine.\textsuperscript{17} Paul’s aim is to demonstrate that

---

\textsuperscript{16} Vegge 2008: 256 quotes, e.g., Plutarch, *Adulat* 66A-B; Seneca, *De ira* 1.6.3.

\textsuperscript{17} In 10.12-16 Paul talks about the ‘limits’ of mission and about ‘the field that God has assigned to us’ (10.13), to which he will adhere while the opponents violate their limits. This is reminiscent of Gal 2.9 where the field of mission is divided between Paul and Barnabas on the one side and the ‘pillars’ of Jerusalem on the other. The opponents of 2 Corinthians 10–13 seem to have claimed to be messengers from the authorities in Jerusalem. We cannot judge how far this claim was true.
he alone, not his rivals, can mediate between the Corinthian congregation and Jerusalem. These different relations with Jerusalem are another factor that can explain why Paul first employs gentle then harsher methods.

By taking into account these differences between A and B, Paul’s textual-pragmatic strategy from 10.1 onwards becomes more understandable. The transition to a more critical tone does not necessarily point to the beginning of a new letter but has more to do with Paul’s attempt to deal with the same situation, albeit in two different ways, in order to fulfil two related and yet distinct aims. These aims are intended to prepare the congregation, on the one hand, for the arrival of Titus and the collection and, on the other hand, for the arrival of Paul and the final reconciliation.

Conclusion

2 Corinthians is not a field for simple solutions. Every answer to its major questions must, to a certain extent, rely on speculation. Of course this also applies to the thesis proposed in this present article. Every thesis can only attempt to strike a reasonable balance between the speculation that one is willing to risk and the return for which one hopes. Let me end with the following questions: What are the advantages of the thesis proposed in this article? In what ways does it have more explanatory power than other hypotheses?

It allows us, in a word, to account for the fact that 2 Corinthians seems to attest a worsening relationship between Paul and the Corinthian congregation, while the letter, at the same time, does not exhibit clear signs of a changed situation. The situation cannot, of course, have altered if one accepts the original unity of 2 Corinthians in its present form. However, the relationship has not changed in reality either. The textual signals that point to a deterioration in the relationship are part of a textual-pragmatic strategy. The purpose of these signals is to bolster the closeness between Paul and the Corinthians but also to help overcome the distance that still exists between them. From this perspective they are not necessarily arguments for dividing the text into two separate, independent letters.

References

Aejmelaeus, L.
1987 Streit und Versöhnung Das Problem der Zusammensetzung des 2 Korintherbriefes (Schriften der Finnischen Exegetischen Gesellschaft, 46; Helsinki: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht).

Barnett, P.
1997 The Second Epistle to the Corinthians (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans).

Becker, E.-M.
2002 Schreiben und Verstehen Paulinische Briefhermeneutik im zweiten Korintherbrief (Neutestamentliche Entwürfe zur Theologie, 4; Tübingen: Francke).
Biermger, R.

Black, D.A.

Bornkamm, G.

Brendle, A.

DeSilva, D.A.

Furnish, V.P.
1984 II Corinthians (AB, 32A; New York: Doubleday).

Goulder, M.D.

Gräßer, E.
2002, 2005 Der zweite Brief an die Korinther (2 vols.; ÖTK, 8; Gütersloh: Gütersloher).

Hall, D.R.
2003 The Unity of the Corinthian Correspondence (London: T&T Clark).

Harris, M.J.
2005 The Second Epistle to the Corinthians (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans).

Horrell, D.G.
1996 The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence Interests and Ideology from 1 Corinthians to 1 Clement (Studies of the New Testament and its World; Edinburgh: T&T Clark).

Hughes, F.W.

Klauck, H.-J.
1994 2 Korintherbrief (NEchbt NT, 8; Würzburg: Echter, 3rd edn).

Kruse, C.G.
1987 The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians An Introduction and Commentary (TNCT; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press).
Lang, F.  
1994 *Die Briefe an die Korinther* (NTD, 7; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 17th edn).

Lietzmann H.  
1969 *An die Korinther I–II* (HNT, 9; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 5th edn).

Martin, R.P.  
1986 *2 Corinthians* (WBC, 40; Nashville: Nelson).

Mitchell, M.M.  

Murphy-O’Connor, J.  

Olson, S.N.  


Peterson, B.K.  

Quesnel, M.  

Rolland, P.  

Talbert, C.H.  
1987 *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (New York: Crossroad).

Taylor, N.H.  

Thrall, M.E.  

Vegge, I.  

Welborn, L.L.  

Windisch, H.

Wünsch, H.-M.
1996  Der paulinische Brief 2 Kor 1–9 als kommunikative Handlung. Eine rhetorisch-literaturwissenschaftliche Untersuchung (Theologie, 4; Münster: LIT)
Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.