# Introduction to 2 Corinthians

*The following is adapted from Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes,* Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians *(Provo, UT: BYU Studies, forthcoming).*

This epistle commends itself to all who take Paul seriously and see in his writings the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle promotes a practical religion that translates into everyday actions and conduct both in his time and in ours.

Furthermore, he never loses sight of the eternal consequences of gospel living that modern disciples must also keep in mind. God designed such living to buoy them up and strengthen them during this time of trial and preparation.

## Origins

Due to its internal evidence and wide circulation, from the earliest period the Christian community has accepted 2 Corinthians as an authentic epistle of the Apostle Paul. Among modern scholars, however, it is unique in that it is the only one that some have suggested is actually a composition of pieces of at least two if not more different letters.

That the current document may be a composition of several fragments pieced together at some point in the past is not beyond question. It is possible that out of respect for Paul, certain Saints preserved fragments of his work which someone (at a later date) compiled into this rather short letter. However, such a scenario seems tenuous at best, especially when one takes Paul's rather clamorous relationship with the Corinthians into account. Indeed, a stark piece of evidence against the notion of compilation is that as it stands, the letter has one major theme—Paul's defense of his authority and doctrine—that runs from

beginning to end, uniting all the pieces. Given the tension between Paul and the Corinthian Saints and the pall it casts over them, it is a wonder anyone decided to preserve the epistle at all let alone fragments of it.

## Themes

Paul's thrust in 2 Corinthians, as in 1 Corinthians, is the paradox of strength growing out of weakness, a theme his readers would understand but not relish. In a community enamored with prestige and power, Paul's argument would not have found easy footing.

Three golden strands run through the epistle, binding it together. The first is that of the authenticity of Paul's apostolic office. Certain individuals had come to Corinth, apparently from congregations in the east, and had joined with Paul's Corinthian detractors in denying the Apostle's authority, denigrating his works, and spurning his doctrine. From beginning to end, Paul makes an excellent defense of his quality of life, the authenticity of his teachings, and the legitimacy of his apostolic office.

The second thread is that of Paul's theology. When Paul's antagonists arrived in Corinth, they brought with them what the Apostle calls the preaching of "another Jesus" along with doctrine contrary to that taught by Him. The result was the introduction of a different spirit than that which the community already enjoyed (2 Corinthians 11:4).

The third thread is Paul's eschatology—that is, his view of the nature and purpose of mortality in light of his understanding of death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul. He states his core belief in 4:18–5:10. In his view, the life of the Christian in mortality is little more than a burden on the soul coupled with anxiety and fear, while life in immortality is coupled with light and power (5:2–3; see also 1:4–5).

## Old Testament Connections

To bolster his arguments, Paul appeals to scripture directly eleven times in 2 Corinthians and makes oblique allusions to others. The text that he used, however, was not that preserved in Hebrew but in Greek. Known today as the Septuagint (often denoted by the roman number LXX), this work was a translation of Old Testament documents completed sometime between 300 and 100 BC. Being from Tarsus, a city in the province of Cilicia (today a portion of southeast Turkey), Paul spoke Greek and was well acquainted with the LXX. His knowledge and use of this work may have helped him during his ministry since proselytes, God-fearers, and Jews living in what is called the diaspora all spoke Greek and, therefore, would have preferred this version of the Old Testament. Further, both Jewish and gentile converts would have seen the Old Testament writings as both authentic and binding. Thus, Paul often appealed to them in his teachings and directions.

Paul was trained within the rabbinic circle and was thus very familiar with their way of understanding and interpreting the biblical texts (Acts 23:6; 26:5). His commitment to the scriptures clearly parallels theirs.

There was a point at which Paul broke from the rabbinic circle. Through the stunning incident that triggered his conversion, he realized the Old Testament was more than a catalog of divinely inspired performances, ordinances, laws, statutes, and commandments. It was a primary source that revealed the nature, work, and ministry of Jesus Christ.

The proper understanding of the Old Testament, however, demanded it be read in a certain way. If it were not, then it could bring death and not life (2 Corinthians 3:6). Paul realized that the coming of Jesus gave the Hebrew writings new importance as a window in understanding who and what the Messiah Jesus was for the Christian community. The Apostle, with others, saw that events of both the Savior's life and station were mapped out in the old record. Therefore, Paul freely appealed to them as authoritative witness to the gospel message. However, in doctrine and practice, there was a definite break between the old covenant and the new. This opened the way for the scriptures to be used as a polemical weapon, and Paul mastered the technique.

## Objectives

Though this is the most personal and self-revealing of all Paul's letters, the way the Apostle binds the gospel to his defense must not be overlooked or underplayed. He fully understood that what was at stake in Corinth was the essence of the gospel message expressed in the Atonement of Christ that enabled God to put His seal upon them and give them His Spirit in their hearts as a guarantee of their salvation (1:21–22).

Paul's objective is primarily to bring the Church to a unity under Christ. A major way he attempts to do this is by changing the primary socializing agent in many of the converts' lives, specifically, the greater Corinthian culture with its values and mores. His means of doing so is to bind them more closely to one another in the context of the gospel (his emphasis in 1 Corinthians), and to himself (his emphasis in this epistle).

What was at stake and what he needed to pin down while the majority of members were still filled with godly zeal toward him was his apostolic authority. The total epistle, from the opening section (1:1–2, 17; 3:1–7:16) through the section dealing with the Jerusalem contribution (8:1–9:15) and especially his closing defense (10:1–13:10), underscored but one theme: the legitimate nature of Paul's authority. Therefore, what constitutes the proof of a true Apostle and the range of that authority was the question at issue (13:1–6). In short, the question was what could be granted as the authentic evidence that a claimant had authority.

At stake also was the crucial question of the source of doctrine. Paul's adversaries insisted that they had approved authority for their teachings—they came with letters of recommendation (3:1)—but their "gospel" ran diametrically opposed to that taught by Paul not only in content but also in application. Paul insisted that his doctrine was based on his apostolic call, authority, and conformance with Church practice. In doing so, he set the authority for directing Church affairs on the foundation of apostolic supremacy and divine revelation.

Because the challenge was immediate, Paul did not have time to appeal to Church authority. Instead, he turned to an even more impressive and immediate proof of his apostolic power. This proof was in his bequeathing of the power of the Holy Spirit. His appeal to this glorious gift suggests that for him and many of the Saints, it was the singular and most important sign that a new era had commenced and that, though not yet fully realized, its sanctifying power was already manifest in the lives of his readers. The challenge was that it would continue to remain so only if they continued in faithfulness (3:17–18). Further, its reception was the guarantee that they had a share in the present reality of the new Christian age and that they would receive a full share of glory in the world to come (5:17–6:2). Thus, he used the undeniable presence of the Spirit to validate his authority as an Apostle of the Lord and thereby the authenticity of his teachings.

## Language and Rhetorical Devices

Paul used metaphor, irony, parody, diatribe, comparison, invective, and paradox to get his point across to his primary audience, the Corinthian Saints. He never addresses his antagonists directly, and thus they ever remain in the background. But we feel their menace behind what Paul writes. All the means he used reveal the intensity of the Apostle's feelings as he writes his defense. All to the end of reinforcing the Christians' faithfulness and devotion to the Lord and the divine reconciliation made possible by the loving act of their Savior.

Paul used standard Koine Greek in his epistles, but in a way that revealed his education and skill as a writer and dictator. He was completely fluent and comfortable in Greek and was, therefore, able to utilize the full capacity of that remarkably flexible language to clarify and explain his messages to his audience. The general fluency of his Greek, in addition, allowed him to see and understand the implications and nuances of the Septuagint, his primary Old Testament text, which he skillfully put to full use. Compared to his use of the Greek in some of his other epistles, especially Romans and 1 Corinthians, however, the Greek of 2 Corinthians is rougher, thus supporting that idea that the letter was dashed off and therefore did not receive the polish that Paul's other epistles did. As a result, it contains some of the most difficult Greek in the New Testament to translate.

## Credits

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