

2 Corinthians

Fall 2008

Introduction

Author

The human author was the Apostle Paul, although the letter is also said to be from Timothy, the spiritual son of Paul (1:1). Often in the letter Paul uses the pronoun “we” and sometimes “I.”

Location

- Corinth was one of the most strategically located cities in the ancient world. It was situated on a plateau, at the foot of Acrocorinth [an Acropolis (lit. “a high city”), which rises cliff-like 1,886 feet], overlooking the Isthmus of Corinth, about two miles from both the eastern Saronic Gulf and from the western Gulf of Corinth. Corinth commanded all of the land routes from central Greece into the Peloponnesus Peninsula along the isthmus (a narrow strip of land that joins two larger areas of land). It also had a port on the two seas, which made it the center of commerce between Asia and Europe.
- There were good harbors on both sides of the isthmus. In ancient times, ships were dragged across the isthmus on rollers in order to avoid the long and dangerous 250-mile passage around the southern tip of the Peloponnesus. Larger ships would unload and transport their supplies across land while the empty ship went around the peninsula, to be reloaded on the other side. A spectacular canal through solid rock was completed in 1893.
- Corinth and Athens were opponents. They competed in commerce and for acquisition of foreign markets, which resulted in an eventual predominance of Athens. The Acropolis of Athens was clearly visible from the Acrocorinth at a distance of 45 miles to the east. The Isthmian games were hosted by Corinth and were only exceeded by the Olympian games in Athens.

History

- A reminder—the Babylonians conquered Judah in 586 B.C. The Babylonians were then conquered by the Medo-Persian Empire in the 400s B.C. The Persians were conquered by the Greeks in the 300s. At this time lived the great Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Alexander the Great died in 323 B.C., leaving no heirs. His empire was divided between four generals: one ruled in Greece, one in Asia Minor (Turkey), one in Syria (area just north of Israel), and one in Egypt. In about 50 B.C., Rome, under Julius Caesar, rapidly became the next dominant world empire.
- The prosperous city-state of Corinth emerged in the 8th century B.C. After the conquest of Greece in 196 B.C., the Romans declared Corinth a free city. However, the city was completely destroyed in 146 B.C. because of its revolt against Rome. All its citizenry was killed or sold into slavery.
- Corinth lay in ruins for 100 years until Julius Caesar decreed in 46 B.C. that it should be rebuilt. A Roman colony was founded on the site, which later became the capitol of the province of Achaia, from which seat Gallio, as procounsul, would allow Paul’s proclamation of the Gospel (Acts 18:1-17).
- Its population was made up of local Greeks, a large number of Jews, freedmen from Italy, and Roman government officials and businessmen. Estimates are 100,000 to 600,000 people at the time of Paul.
- It was destroyed by the Goths in A.D. 521, was refounded by the Emperor Justinian, and held in the Middle Ages by Normans, Venetians, and Turks.

- The ancient site was abandoned in 1858 because of a severe earthquake. A new city was built near the gulf and further to the East in the modern country of Greece.

Culture

- From its beginnings, Corinth had a reputation for vulgar materialism.
- It was linked with wealth (Homer, *Iliad* 2, 569-70) and immorality. Plato referred to a prostitute as a “Corinthian girl” (*Republic* 404d). Aristophanes coined the verb *korinthiazomai* to refer to fornication (*Fragment* 354). According to Strabo (*Geography* 8.6-10), much of the wealth and vice in Corinth centered around the temple of Aphrodite (the Greek goddess of love), located on the highest peak. It had a thousand temple priestesses, who were “religious” prostitutes who lived and worked at the temple and would come down into the city in the evening to offer their services to male citizens and foreign visitors. Later the temple was Christianized as a church and then became a mosque.

Paul’s Contacts and Correspondence

The order of events and correspondence is debatable, but it seems to be as follows:

1. Paul first visited Corinth on his Second Missionary Journey (Acts 18) in A.D. 51. He stayed 1 ½ years. He was assisted by two Jewish believers ousted from Rome named Priscilla and Aquila, with whom he lived for a while, who were fellow tentmakers. Then he sailed for Ephesus in 52, enroute to Jerusalem. Priscilla and Aquila accompanied Paul to Ephesus (on the coast of modern day Turkey), where they remained to meet and instruct Apollos (from Alexandria, Egypt). Apollos was then sent to Corinth for ministry there (Acts 18:18-28).
2. While Apollos ministered in Corinth (Acts 19:1) in the Fall of 53, Paul returned to Ephesus on his Third Missionary Journey. Paul stayed there 2 ½ years. The letter mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9 (a letter misunderstood by the Corinthian believers—1 Corinthians 5:10-11—and now lost) was probably written during the early time of this Ephesian ministry.
3. Paul learned of the misunderstanding and of additional problems in the Corinthian church from members of the household of Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11). He then received an official delegation in the form of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (1 Corinthians 16:15-17), who brought corroborating news and specific questions on issues dividing the church. First Corinthians, Paul’s second letter to the church, was written to address these matters, probably around 54 or 55.
4. But apparently the problems in the church were still not resolved. It is possible that Timothy (1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:10) was the bearer of this news. Paul decided to pay the church a second visit, sailing directly from Ephesus to Corinth. This seems to be the painful visit referred to in 2 Corinthians 2:1, apparently because of the action of the man mentioned in 2:5 and 7:12, and the failure of the Corinthian believers to support Paul.
5. After this visit and Paul’s return to Ephesus, he sent a third letter to the Corinthians (now lost, like the first letter), carried to them by Titus. It grieved Paul deeply to write this (2 Corinthians 2:3-4) because of its disciplinary nature (7:8-9).
6. After a riot in Ephesus, provoked by the silversmiths (Acts 19:23-41), Paul left Ephesus in the Spring of 56, bound for Macedonia (Acts 20:1), with a stop in Troas, where he hoped to rendezvous with Titus (2 Corinthians 2:12-13) and receive news from him about the situation in Corinth. Because he could not find Titus there, he anxiously went on to Macedonia, apparently with grave concern about Titus’ safety (7:5-7). There, he met Titus, who brought good news

about the general well-being of the Corinthian church but bad news about a group opposed to Paul.

7. From Macedonia, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians (his fourth letter to them) and followed it up with his third visit during the Winter of 56-57 (Acts 20:1-4).

In summary:

1. First visit to Corinth, when he stayed for 1 ½ years
2. First letter to Corinth (now lost—1 Corinthians 5:9)
3. Second letter to Corinth (1 Corinthians)
4. Second visit to Corinth (a painful visit—2 Corinthians 2:1)
5. Third “painful” letter to Corinth (now lost—2 Corinthians 2:3-4; 7:8-9)
6. Fourth letter to Corinth (2 Corinthians)
7. Third visit to Corinth

The two lost letters were obviously not intended by God to be part of the Bible.

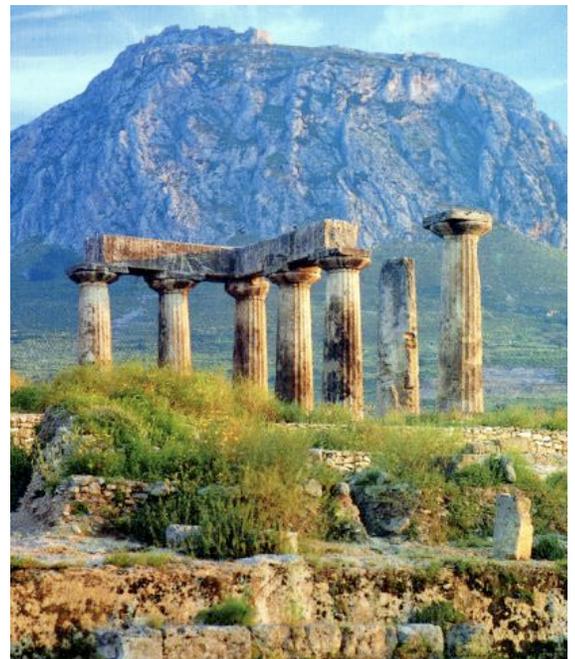
The Purpose and Nature of 2 Corinthians

No letter of Paul’s is more personal and intimate than 2 Corinthians.

What concerned Paul was the presence of false teachers, claiming to be apostles, who had entered the church. They promoted their own ideas and at the same time sought to discredit both the person and message of the apostle. Second Corinthians was written to defend the authenticity of both his apostleship and his message.

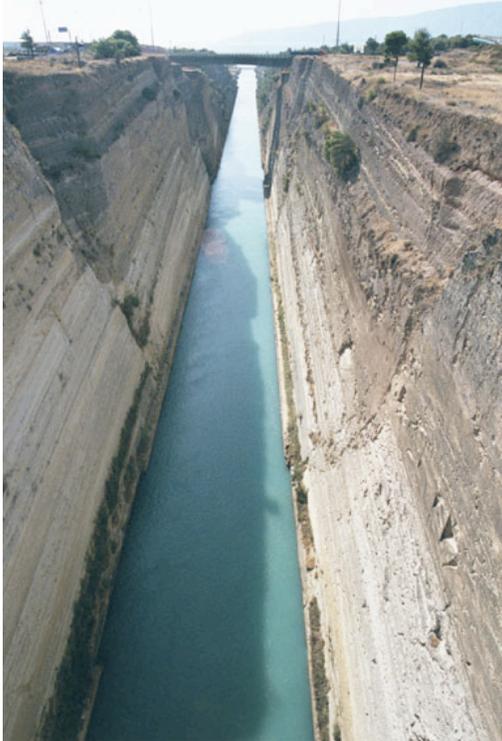
This letter is less well arranged than 1 Corinthians (which addressed major problems of behavior and of doctrine). This letter reveals a range of emotional extremes in Paul. Throughout this letter, he is forced to defend his doctrines, his ministry, and his character.

1. Chapters 1–7 express joy at the favorable response of the church to Paul’s ministry.
2. Chapters 8–9 remind the believers of their commitment to the offering for the Christians in Judea.
3. Chapters 10–13 Paul defends his apostolic authority and denounces those who opposed him and Christ.



The Acrocorinth in the background and the ruins of ancient Corinth in the foreground.

The Corinthian Canal



4 miles long and 69 feet across, highest land point is 260 feet above water. Nero used 6,000 Jewish prisoners of war to begin building the canal in 54-69 A.D., but the project was abandoned when he died. After the Suez Canal opened in the 1870s, some French started building this canal but quit for financial reasons. Then some Hungarian architects, who had worked on the Panama Canal, planned this canal, and it was built by the Greeks between 1881-93. It saves ships 250 miles around the Peloponnese Peninsula. In ancient times, cargo was off-loaded and carried across this area, while a ship would sail empty around the peninsula and then re-load on the other side.

Today, the canal is too narrow for most freighters. However, about 11,000 small ships and pleasure boats cross through the canal each year.

