2 Corinthians

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Published Citation
2 CORINTHIANS

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Introduction

Second Corinthians has impressed itself on scholars as a collection of originally separate Pauline writings, a quilt made of several letter fragments. The integrity of the letter has so been put in doubt that even Paul's authorship in the case of one passage (6:14—7:1) has, for plausible reasons, been called into question. The letter as we read it today appears to have seams, to have been sown together at a time unknown by an editor unnamed. Note the abrupt and, by current standards, inexplicable transitions between 2:13 and 14; 6:13 and 14; 7:1 and 2; 7:16 and 8:1; 8:24 and 9:1; and 9:15 and 10:1. For many interpreters, these appear to be awkwardly stitched together texts hinting at a history of compilation. And so it is frequently said that 2 Corinthians lacks argumentative flow. The simplest explanation is that the letter never possessed rhetorical unity since it was not in the strict sense a letter penned by Paul. This is the dominant scholarly opinion today, and it renders naïve any questions about the meaning of the letter considered as a whole, either in the first century, in the history of interpretation, or for modern readers.

Yet there is another way of reading 2 Corinthians, one that is not alarmed when letters written in or near the first century shift from topic to topic or change tone without warning (for the "mixed" type of letter, see Malherbe 1988, 73, 81). This approach bolsters the case for integrity by highlighting the continuity of themes and key terms across the letter. Along these lines, we might observe that the contrast Paul draws between himself and his opponents over severity and gentleness in leadership style runs throughout the letter, from 1:12 to 13:10 to be precise. Most importantly, this alternative way of reading defers final judgment concerning the letter's unity until it reconstructs events and emotions between Paul's sending of 1 Corinthians and his composition of 2 Corinthians. This present approach presumes the letter's unity and uses passages throughout to imagine a
complicated situation between Paul and the church at Corinth, which only a complex letter, appearing to some readers as having seams, could even hope to address.

It appears, then, that we have arrived at a method of reading the letter. First, there is a need to discern the situation and then observe what Paul has to say to it. But a word of warning is in order: not only must our reconstruction remain tentative and open to revision, but we must also admit that the story of Paul and the Corinthians is entirely a Pauline fiction. (Actually, it is my fiction about Paul’s fiction.) That is, there is no way for us to see through the letter to “what really happened” between the two Corinthian letters. All we have is the way Paul wants his readers to see what happened and what it all means. A clear division between context and text or between occasion and rhetoric is therefore an illusion. Paul’s construal of persons, events, and emotions is rhetorical from the very start. That does not make the backstory of 2 Corinthians narrated below any less interesting. It does demand, however, that any interpretation, and that certainly includes this essay, confess that it is a fiction, provisional, and risks being taken in unanticipated directions. I emphasize this demand at the beginning of the essay, since habits of the biblical commentary genre will induce me to write as if I had forgotten it.

So where to begin in imagining the events and emotions as Paul wants his first readers to think of them? Second Corinthians 1:8-9 tells a dismal tale of Paul’s journey in Asia, one of melancholy and thoughts of suicide. Christian writers of the fourth century, perhaps alarmed at the sadness of the apostle, thought Paul was describing external events: his arrest, a court’s death sentence, and the apprehension anyone would feel in such circumstances (see Fredrickson 2000). But the phrase “we ourselves in ourselves had the sentence of death” (here and below, my own translation) would more likely have been understood in the first century as self-condemnation, the feelings that overwhelm the soul with regret or remorse. Regret arose from the paradox of the stern judge and convicted offender inhabiting the same body.

What did Paul have to regret? In 2 Cor. 7:8, he speaks plainly about the matter: he had written a letter to the church powerful enough to induce pain in the readers. He refers to this letter in 2:3-4 as he denies that it was his intention to cause grief, thus, of course, reinforcing our sense that he did. This is the so-called letter of tears, which has puzzled interpreters for centuries. John Chrysostom thought this letter was 1 Corinthians itself. Today some scholars identify it as 2 Corinthians 10-13, although a third opinion, one the present essayist shares, holds that the letter is lost and not to be identified with any extant Pauline writing and therefore a bit of a mystery (see Furnish, 163-68). But thanks to Ps.-Libanius and Ps.-Demetrius, unknown authors of the two surviving ancient epistolary handbooks, there are some helpful clues (see Malherbe 1988, 30-41, 66-81). These handbooks gave instructions on how to write a grieving letter (epistolē lypētikē), and when the many actual letters of grief in antiquity (e.g., Ps.-Demosthenes, Ep. 2) are also consulted, we learn that a letter writer’s grieving self-presentation was intended, and understood by recipients, as stinging moral reproof (see Fredrickson 2001). To paraphrase the critical portion of these letters: “The tears through which I write are evidence of the grief your behavior has caused me.”

What did the church at Corinth do to cause Paul pain? Paul hints in 2:1 at an unplanned visit to Corinth. He made this trip presumably because 1 Corinthians, the letter carried by Timothy, did not have its desired effect of discouraging the elite from displaying their social status, the main
problem addressed in that letter. During this impromptu visit, Paul was injured or treated unjustly by some member of the church (Barrett 1970). He alludes to this event tactfully in 2:5 and mentions the offender directly in 7:12 (“the one who injured”), though still without naming him. He refers to himself as “the one injured.” Here is the point: the church, for its part, took no action against the one who had treated Paul unjustly during his unplanned visit. So Paul fled to Ephesus and from a distance wrote the “letter of tears,” rebuking the community for its indifference to the injury he suffered. Titus took this epistle to Corinth.

As Paul tells this story, when the letter arrived in Corinth under Titus’s care it had a double effect. On the one hand, it caused the Corinthian church grief, yes, but a “grief according to God,” as Paul assures his readers, since the letter’s severity issued in their repentance. That is, it aroused the readers’ zeal for Paul (7:7, 11-12). On the other hand, the community’s newfound resolve to discipline the offender was excessive; note the term “vengeance” (ek dikēsîs) in 7:11. In its response to the letter of tears, then, it seems that the church swung around wildly from its former indifference to the offense committed against Paul. The harshness of their treatment of the offender is indicated in the term epitimia, which stands behind the English term “punishment” in 2:6. Epitimia held a special place in Greco-Roman moral exhortation. It was moral chastisement intended to cause shame, a particularly extreme measure in the honor-seeking society of the first century, especially if it was delivered in public (see Malherbe 1983). It was a commonplace worry for ancient moral guides in antiquity, except among harsh Cynics (see Malherbe 1989), that public reproof, particularly of young men, might result in suicide (see, e.g., Plutarch, How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend 70F-71C). It is no wonder, then, that Paul expresses concern for the offender; he is liable to being “drunk down by excessive grief” (2:7), a euphemism for suicide.

The letter of tears had one more effect, though if we are to understand it, one more set of players in Corinth must be introduced. As if the relationship between Paul and the church were not complicated enough, missionaries critical of Paul’s manner of ministry entered Corinth, most likely after his flight to Ephesus. In his absence, they competed with him (and with one another? see 2 Cor. 10:12) for the community’s allegiance. Paul calls them “super-apostles” (2 Cor. 11:5 and 12:11) and characterizes them in terms reminiscent of harsh Cynic philosophers who sought to dominate those they led (Malherbe 1970). Again, it must be emphasized that this depiction of his rivals is Paul’s; his portrayal of them as severe moralists accentuates his own image as conciliatory, gentle, and gracious. Yet the issue of Paul’s free speech was far broader than Paul and his relationship with the Corinthians. A fundamental disagreement about the nature of frank speech raged (sometimes within the same author) from the Hellenistic period well into late antiquity: Was it to be viewed as the verbal expression of the wise man’s moral independence, or was it to be regarded as a means to improve others in the context of friendly relations? (For a study in parrēsia as display of freedom and as the art of moral improvement, see John Chrysostom’s encomium of Babylas, De sancto hieromartyre Babyla [PG 50:541-46]).

What did these rival apostles think of the letter of tears? They praised it for its severity; but they also contrasted the letter’s power at a distance with Paul’s deficient physical presence and his ironic and deceptive spoken words. In what might be regarded as the earliest commentary on the Pauline Epistles, 2 Cor. 10:9-10 describes the characterization of Paul’s own letters that he attributes to his
rivals. The passage is saturated with terminology from ancient rhetorical handbooks and treatises. “To frighten,” “weighty,” and “strong” are the markers of “forcefulness” (deinotês), a style of speaking in which orators, most notably in the ancient world Demosthenes (see Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Demosthenes 22), overwhelmed audiences. Two additional phrases indicate the super-apostles’ familiarity with ancient rhetorical and literary criticism: “presence of the body” and “attenuated speech” (ho logos exousthenemos, my translation: see Fredrickson 2001). “They say” Paul’s physical presence, a reference in rhetorical terms to oratorical delivery, is weak, and that he intentionally makes his speech less forceful than he could (as judged by the letters) and more like the utterings of persons of low esteem, much in the style of Socrates, whose ironic self-deprecation pricked holes in puffed-up dialogue partners. So the letter of tears was just one more piece of evidence that Paul in the church’s presence was deceptive and lacked the frank speech, the quality of deinotês, that marked true apostles. This charge of disparity between words and deeds Paul vigorously disputes in 10:10 and throughout the letter, as we will see below.

So here are the issues facing Paul on the eve of 2 Corinthians. First, Paul is in an impossible position. He must assert that he possesses frank speech, but the medium for his apology is a letter, and as he writes from a distance, he runs the risk of convicting himself of the very charges summarized in 10:9–10. This problem he takes up in 2 Cor. 2:14–4:6. Second, the individual who wronged Paul has been isolated from the community; Paul exhorts the community to bring him back in 2:5–11. Third, even though the church responded to the letter of tears positively by disciplining the offender, the grief (or was it resentment or vexation?) lingered on; Paul confronts this issue in 4:7–7:16 as he places his frank speech into the ancient tradition of friendship, stresses his love for the church, and appeals for reconciliation. To further assuage hard feelings, he accentuates his regret for ever having written the letter (1:8–9 and 7:8). The final purpose of 2 Corinthians, if the present reconstruction of the letter’s occasion is at all plausible, is to dissuade the church from recognizing the legitimacy of the super-apostles and their harsh form of leadership; this he does sporadically in Corinthians 1–7 and pointedly in chapters 10–13.

Nothing has yet been said about 2 Corinthians 8–9. These chapters deal with the collection for the saints in Jerusalem. In 1 Cor. 16:1–9, Paul had tailored his travel plans around his pivotal role in organizing a fund from the churches of Galatia, Macedonia, and Corinth for the relief of communities in Jerusalem. The problem for Paul was how to encourage the Corinthians to make good on their promise to contribute without reinforcing the patron-client ideology that permeated all charitable activities in the Roman period. Gift-giving in general symbolized the social difference between giver and recipient and announced the former’s power and superiority while emphasizing the latter’s neediness and obligation to repay the gift through public glorification of the giver. This is precisely the problem Paul attacks so energetically in 1 Corinthians. It also explains why Paul shuns the financial support of the Corinthian elite in 2 Corinthians 10–13: simply put, he doesn’t want to be owned (see Marshall). Finally, it is worth considering that domination hidden in the gift-giving of ancient society and potentially, Paul fears, in the collection for the saints in Jerusalem resembles the sovereignty in disciplinary matters that the super-apostles exhibit. In other words, patronal power and super-apostle severity are two instances of domination. Paul’s opposition to any form of
lordship that is not inhabited by the crucified Messiah is a central feature in all of his letters and especially here in 2 Corinthians. This makes him a sharp, if indirect, critic of empire.

2 Corinthians 1:1-7: The Sound of P

The Text in Its Ancient Context

The Greek letter π (p) is repeated twenty-six times in these verses. There is comfort in the repetition of sounds, as in the sincere utterance of “there, there.” Each time the letter π is pronounced, lips meet, puffing a bit of breath toward the other person. An intimacy adheres to these hesitant vocalizations, a gentle insistence of breath. Parakaló and its noun cognate paraklēsis together occur ten times. Perhaps Paul entreats, or does he exhort? Parakaló could mean either, and it is impossible to say with certainty which is meant here. Another word starting with π in this passage is pathēma. This word bears a double character also: it meant suffering, but included both exterior and interior aspects. Thus it signifies pain inflicted on Paul from without (beatings or maltreatment, for example), or it could refer to emotions themselves, like love, or regret (cf. Rom. 8:18; Phil. 3:10). It, with its cognate paschein (“to suffer”), occurs four times.

Paul clearly departed from his usual practice of beginning a letter by thanking God for the very issues he addresses in the rest of the text (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:4-9; Phil. 1:3-11). Does this mean that 1:3-7 is unrelated to the rest of the letter? Not at all. Parakaló (“I exhort” or “entreat”) in its second sense anticipates the grace, gentleness, and forgiveness in Paul’s manner of leadership in contrast to the severity of the super-apostles. Yet the dueling meaning within the one word also anticipates the movement of Paul between the reproof of the letter of tears and his begging for reconciliation.

Note further that in 1:3 Paul links his manner of ministry to divine names: the father of compassionate feelings (oikērmos suggests the vocalizations of ritual lament, “keening” in other words) and the God of all exhorting/entreating. The association of Paul’s grace in ministry with God’s grace is the primary form of Paul’s apology through the letter (e.g., 5:18—6:2). Similarly, in 1:5, Paul and Christ are, insofar as emotions (pathēmata) are concerned, indistinguishable (cf. Phil. 1:8), and that goes a long way to defending his form of ministry. Paul develops the motif of his sharing of emotions/suffering with Christ throughout the letter and includes the Corinthians in 1:6-7. Finally, in verse 7, he states his hope about the community; this is yet another way of exhorting/begging. The content of his hope (there is, incidentally, another π in the middle of elpis) is unstated at this point, but the position of paraklēsis at the end of the sentence suggests the church has its own comforting to do by restoring the offender (2:7) and continuing to mend fences with Paul (1:13-14; 4:14-15; 6:20—7:4).

The Text in the Interpretive Tradition

Early Christian commentators took from these first verses clues to the nature of the whole letter and emphasized the “consolation” in the midst of suffering that Paul proclaims. Pelagius, however, focused on Paul’s setting his name before his recipients, adopting “the custom of secular judges,”
because “he is an apostle who is writing to those who are accountable to him”; he thus emphasized the element of correction throughout the letter (Commentary).

It is also the case that commentators diminished the passionate side of many Pauline terms in this letter (e.g., see below on “weakness” in 13:4). Their treatment of pathémata in 1:1-7 is no exception. I translated the word above as “emotions.” The English “sufferings” expresses the view of early commentators that Paul has in mind things done to him, shipwreck or imprisonment for example, not stirrings within his soul difficult or impossible to control like grief or desire (see John Chrysostom, In epistulam ii ad Corinthios [homiliae 1-30, PG 61:579]; but for a combination of the inner and outer aspects see Theodorus Studites, Epistulae 252.15). A similar downplaying of passion can be seen in the case of oiktirmos (1:3). In the interpretive tradition, the word came to be defined by the benefactor and his philantropia (“love for humanity”). This redefinition dulled the sharp edge of violent emotion conveyed by the word in the case, for example, of the widow or childless mother keening the death of her loved one (see John Chrysostom, De corruptoribus virginum [PG 60:744]). The New Testament itself is partly responsible for adding a sense of condescension to this term (see Luke 6:36), but beginning with Clement of Alexandria (Protrepticus 1.8.4), the Christian tradition substituted a philanthropic wish on God’s part to save humanity and show it mercy for a divine desire for communion with humanity.

The Text in Contemporary Discussion

The “Father of all compassionate feelings and the God of all entreaties” (2 Cor. 1:3) is a weak and unsuitable God for those who, like the super-apostles, see church leadership in terms of issuing divine commands from a position of dispassionate invulnerability. The adequacy of the philosophical idea of impassibility for the representation of God in the Old Testament has been called into question by biblical interpreters (see, e.g., Fretheim). Christian theology’s comfort with a self-constituting and self-sufficient God has been sharply critiqued by Jürgen Moltmann (1974) as he put a question to the tradition seldom asked in Christian theology: What did the death of the Son mean for the Father?

2 Corinthians 1:8-13: Reconciliation as Resurrection

The Text in Its Ancient Context

As previously noted, in 1:8-9 Paul uses the ancient rhetoric of regret to communicate to the church his turbulent emotional state after he sent the letter of tears but before he met up with Titus in Macedonia. Such self-disclosure might have itself been seen as a gesture of reconciliation (see Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 1110b 18-30), since Paul implies that he did not delight in criticizing the church. In fact, the uncertainty of his relationship with the community after he wrote severely weighs Paul down to the point of considering suicide, if his readers are to believe these self-revelations, as he makes his way through Asia.

Unlike those whose confidence is based on themselves (perhaps a dig at the super-apostles; see 3:5 and Phil. 3:2-4), Paul’s boldness for life and ministry resides in his relationship to the church (see 1:14; cf. Phil. 4:1; 1 Thess. 2:19-20). For this reason, his report of rescue by the God who raises the
dead is a theological interpretation of the Corinthians' change of heart reported by Titus (see 7:6-7). The church's (tentative?) steps toward Paul are portrayed as the working of God (cf. Phil 2:13), and in verses 10-11 he hopes for further rescue/reconciliation. Finally, it is significant that, located between two theologically rich understandings of the church as communion (1:11 and 14), we find the charge of "fleshy wisdom" leveled at Paul by the super-apostles. What Paul understands as a ministry growing out of the bonds of friendship, whose speech embodies "openness" and "sincerity" (both synonyms for parrésia) and exhibits "the grace of God," his opponents characterize as rhetorical trickery. That fundamental tension between Paul and his rivals runs through 2 Corinthians from beginning to end.

The Text in the Interpretive Tradition

Early Christian commentators took Paul at his word when he declares his sincerity (eilikrineia), a term that in conjunction with haplotēs ("frankness," NRSV) in rhetorical theory was a matter of straightforward and clear language in contrast to artificiality and the concealment of figured speech (see Smiley, 219-24). John Chrysostom praised Paul for this very reason (Homilies in 2 Cor. [PG 61:405-6]). Theodoret of Cyrus was likewise impressed: Paul "teaches only what he has been taught by the grace of God, adding nothing of his own to it... The facts speak for themselves and prove that he is right" (Commentary). The fathers' enthusiasm for Paul's eilikrineia may have come from the central role this term played in ancient rhetorical handbooks, where it connoted the opposite of irony, flattery, and particularly the moral criticism carried out under cover of rhetorical figures (Fiore). In short, early interpreters thought Paul's sincerity was synonymous with his parrésia.

The Text in Contemporary Discussion

One dramatic difference between early Christian commentary on Paul's letters and contemporary scholarship is the attention given in the latter to Paul's persuasive speech, that is, rhetoric. Rather than presuming, for example, that Paul really has despaired of life and seeking to identify the "affliction" he suffered (1:8), scholars ask about the rhetorical effect of such claims. While this approach has proven very fruitful, and is employed in this essay, it sometimes raises the question of whether Paul was manipulative, since today's readers often associate "rhetoric" with speech that gets its way dishonestly. That there is no easy response, or perhaps no response at all, to this modern doubt about Paul is indicated by the undeniable similarity between his self-revelations in 1:8 (and in 7:8-12) and the contemporary rhetoric of domestic violence: "I know I hurt you; it pains me that I hurt you; but I only wanted to show my love; I will harm myself if you do not forgive me." Rhetorical analysis cannot by itself determine whether Paul meant what he said, only how it might have been heard by a first-century audience.

2 Corinthians 1:15—2:4: If I Am a Flatterer, Then So Is God

The Text in Its Ancient Context

A pattern in Paul's argumentation is emerging. Paul's style of ministry mimics God's; his emotions are indistinguishable from Christ's. To fault him is to fault God. To oppose him is to oppose Christ.
In this passage Paul deflects the super-apostles’ charge of flattery by implicating God in the same yes-saying that he, Silvanus, and Timothy make the core of their preaching (for the “light touch” in 1:17 as a sign of flattery see Plutarch, How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend 65B; 71F). The topic of flattery here is not in question, since from Cicero (De amicitia 93) we learn that the phrase “Yes, yes and No, no” had broad circulation as early as the first century BCE. It was a proverbial expression for the flatterer’s malleability and desire to please and had been lifted from its original literary context of a play by Terence. The flatterer is devious; he wins victims over by posing as a friend and telling them what they want to hear. Flatterers transform themselves into the ones they seek to please, a behavior Paul’s adaptability in 1 Cor. 9:19-23 dangerously approaches. Paul, however, argues that his change of travel plans (1:15-16) is not evidence of flattery but proof of his desire to spare the church further grief, a point he reiterates in 1:23—2:4.

In 1:18-22, Paul presents himself and God not as flatterers, though they do say only “yes,” but as friends, as the term ἀμελεῖς (“faithful”) in verse 18 and the verb ἄδημπτος (lit., “I make firm or constant”) in verse 21 indicate. These two terms were commonly associated with the motif of friendship (see Xenophon, Memorabilia 2.6.20; and Lucian, Toxaris 6–7, 9, 20, 35, 63) and now in Paul’s use define the relationship of God with the community and the community with Paul.

The Text in the Interpretive Tradition

What did the early church make of Paul’s letter of tears (2:4)? John Chrysostom made a proposal that persuaded many later commentators: the letter of tears is actually 1 Corinthians. Chrysostom thought the offender mentioned in 2 Cor. 2:5-11 was the same person singled out for discipline in 1 Cor. 5:1. While this solution has several obvious deficiencies, which modern commentaries do not fail to point out, one cannot keep from admiring its simplicity. But the chief problem with the proposal is this: in 1 Corinthians, Paul does not present himself as grieving. There is no reason to categorize it as a grieving letter (ἐπιστολὴ ἱπτήκη).

The Text in Contemporary Discussion

Some scholars have suggested that we look no further than 2 Corinthians 10-13 to find Paul’s “letter of tears” (see Watson). This would be a simple solution if it were not the case that in this portion of the letter Paul does not present himself as grieving, aside from the possibility of lament he mentions in 12:31. Furthermore, the “letter of tears” dealt with an individual’s unjust act, but 2 Corinthians 10-13 concerns the super-apostles’ rivalry with Paul. (For additional reasons to doubt identification of the “letter of tears” with chapters 10-13, see Amador.)

2 Corinthians 2:5-11: Shame and Satan

The Text in Its Ancient Context

This passage is the gateway to the rest of 2 Corinthians 1-7. Later arguments are anticipated as Paul seeks to persuade the community to forgive and accept the offender who had been disciplined and put to shame. Paul turns the injury from himself (2:5, 10) and stresses that now the community
must forgive and confirm love. Here Paul is performing, and asking the church to enact, the inconsistency that the super-apostles perceive in Paul’s ministry. A true apostle, they would assert, is severe (see 13:3), and the true church would enforce discipline without reprieve. But Paul detects the bullying and begrudging Satan (2:11) in such a one-sided approach to pastoral care. Paul sees the face of Christ, however, in the act of forgiveness (2:10). And then, in order to ground his ministry in Christ’s lordship (which does not exclude weakness) and God’s grace, Paul takes his readers on an extensive literary digression in 2:12—7:4, which echoes his painful procession to reunite with Titus in Macedonia.

The Text in the Interpretive Tradition

Paul’s characterization of Satan as an envious bully (2 Cor. 2:11) would become a stock theme in early Christianity. Envy (I) entered the garden to corrupt Adam and Eve and their descendants (see Theophilus, Ad Autolycum 2.29; Epiphanius, Panarion 3.416.1; Antiochus Monachus, Pandecta scripturae sacrae 55). In this regard, there is an intriguing overlap in Christian and Hellenistic traditions as they grow and influence one another in late antiquity. Envy, understood as begrudging the happiness of another, was a prominent theological explanation among Greeks for human disappointment and loss (see Plutarch, Consolatio ad Apollonium 105B). In erotic relationships, personified Envy was blamed for separations (see Chariton, Chareas and Callirhoe 1.1.16; Nicetas Eugenianus, Drosilla and Charicles 1.52–53).

The Text in Contemporary Discussion

Readers interested in connecting Paul’s concern about the shaming and isolating effects of punishment with current criticism of the American criminal justice system might consult the recently adopted social statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (see “The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries,” at http://www.elca.org/en/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Criminal-Justice). The complicity of some Christian beliefs in the needless worsening of offenders’ lives is slowly coming into general consciousness. For centuries, Christians have promoted biblical texts that view the purpose of punishment to be the isolation and destruction of offenders (see, e.g., 2 Peter). Christians elect state and federal legislators who pass laws requiring or enabling mass incarceration, mandatory sentencing, the location of prisons far removed from families and other systems of support, solitary confinement, and other collateral punishments that work through the harsh logic of isolation. It is sobering to think that Paul regards the self-destructive results of enforced isolation as the work of Satan.

2 Corinthians 2:12—3:3: Topography of an Apostle’s Heart

The Text in Its Ancient Context

This is a provocative definition of the rhetorical unit since, as I noted above, many scholars detect a seam between verses 13 and 14. They suggest that 2:14—7:5 (with the possible exception of 6:14—7:1) was taken from another Pauline epistle and inserted into an opening created by cutting
between 2:13 and what is now 7:5. Attractive as this theory might be (it accounts for what would otherwise be a delayed thanksgiving period in 2:14), there are thematic continuities that make the proposal of interpolation unnecessary. Note the place names in verses 12-13 (Troas and Macedonia) and Paul’s reference to “every place” in verse 14. Along these lines, the term thriambeuein (“to lead in triumphal procession”) suggests movement, while in verses 12-13 Paul discuss his travel in some detail. But the most striking connection between the writing before and after the conjectured seam is the resonance between Paul’s having “no relief” at not finding Titus and the apostle’s being led in a triumphal procession. A brief explanation of the Roman triumph, and of its adaptation by ancient erotic writers (primarily in poetry and ancient romance), is in order.

Roman generals had the practice of degrading foreign nobility captured in military campaigns by parading them as slaves through the streets of Rome. For poets and novelists, Eros conquered, enslaved, and forced the rejected lover, or the one uncertain of the beloved’s response, to march in an equally humiliating procession (see Ovid, Amores 1.2.19–52; and Miller). Two other motifs, both of which figure prominently in 2 Corinthians, were often allied with the lover led in triumph. Servitium amoris (the slavery of love; see Murgatroyd) depicted the lover’s paradoxical “voluntary slavery” (e.g., Plato, Symposium 184C), degrading loss of self-control (Zagagi), and lovesickness even to the point of death (Xenophon, Symposium 4.14; Achilles Tatius, Leucippe and Clitophon 1.7.2–3). Paul deploys the other popular motif, Amor vincit omnia (“Love conquers all”), in 2:14 and extensively in 2 Corinthians 10–13.

So, how does Paul turn the erotic connotations of the triumph motif to his rhetorical aim of conciliating the Corinthians to himself? The metaphor presents Paul suffering a lover’s pain, the grief of separation from his beloved community, and, more significantly, apprehension over its response to his stinging reproof in the letter of tears. He presents himself suffering with self-accusation and worry, not unlike the unrequited lover of Latin elegy, whose every thought is about the beloved’s rejection. Moreover, note that God leads Paul in this triumphal procession. This is striking not only because readers knew that Eros plays the part of conquering general in love poetry but even more because knowledge of God is apparent for all who see into Paul’s experience, which he has been narrating since “our affliction” in 1:4. Some, of course, will smell nothing but the odor of death; presumably Paul wants readers to think of the super-apostles here. Paul’s readers, however, if and as they remain true to him, will perceive the fragrance of life in his socially demeaning and soul-draining love for them.

The Text in the Interpretive Tradition

For over a thousand years, “Love conquers all” lay dormant, but when it awoke in the Middle Ages it was applied to Pauline texts with vigor. Even God is vanquished by love for humanity, according to Bernard of Clairvaux (Sermon 64.10 [PL 183:1088]). Hadewijch of Antwerp thought so too.

What seems to the loved soul the most beautiful encounter
Is that it should love the Beloved so fully
And so gain knowledge of the Beloved with love
That nothing else is known by it
Except: “I am conquered by Love”
But he who overcame Love was rather conquered
So that he might in love be brought to naught
God the lover is victim of love. (Poems in Stanzas 8.71–77)

In the fourteenth century, the Byzantine theologian Nicholas Cabasilas, writing about the christological topic of *kenosis* (“emptying”), likens the God emptied by *erōs* first to the “locked out lover,” perhaps the most popular ancient cliché depicting the slave of love, and then to the “lover led in a triumphal procession” (*thriambeuein erastēn: The Life in Christ* 6.3). Even though it took over a thousand years, the erotic motif of triumph in 2 Cor. 2:14 opened a way into the passion of God that had been foreclosed by the philosophically inspired doctrine of divine impassibility.

### 2 Corinthians 3:1–18: Frank Speech and Moses’ Face

#### The Text in Its Ancient Context

This section is a carefully crafted argument resting to a great degree on Paul’s playfulness with the Greek language, and therefore difficult to appreciate in English translation. Nevertheless, some points can be made. In 3:12, Paul claims to use the very *parrēsia* (“frank” or “free speech,” not “boldness” as the NRSV translates; see Fredrickson 1996) that his opponents charge that he lacks. Paul’s rhetorical predicament lies in the fact that he makes this claim at a distance, through a letter; for Paul simply to assert his free speech would be to confirm the criticism directed against him. His solution is this: rather than giving proof of his confidence based on his own power (3:5), Paul appeals to the Spirit, whose work was to inscribe the Corinthians in his heart (3:2–3; for the eroticism of such writing, see Greek Anthology 12.57).

The Spirit is life-making precisely in this way, by its deepening of *philia* (“friendship”) to the point of love (*erōs* or *agapē*). *Parrēsia* of this kind is the language of friendship, as Plutarch once remarked (*How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend* 51C), not the verbal expression of an individual’s freedom attained through self-control and moral accomplishment, as many philosophers (and most likely the super-apostles) taught. If *parrēsia* is a function of friendship, Paul argues, then the new covenant (literally “new arrangement”), which is love and longing for communion kindled by gazing at another’s face and being looked upon (cf. 1 Cor. 13:12), guarantees free speech to all, wherever the Spirit is. The covenant of death, though having a glory of its own, is the application of written laws and commands; it does not create friendship and is unable to kindle the gaze upon the face of another and experience the other in his or her singularity, as the sons of Israel discover (3:7).

Moses’ face plays an equally important role in the second of the proofs of Paul’s *parrēsia* (3:12–18). The argument here is structured according to the rhetorical technique of comparison (synkrisis), using negative and positive examples. Paul is not like Moses, who covered his face, a movement in Greek culture associated with shame. Moses veiled his face so that the “sons of Israel” might not gaze upon the *telos* (“end,” in the sense of intended result) of “that which is being nullified,” presumably the old covenant. The shaming effect of that which is written on stone was alluded to in 3:9 in two ways. First, the word Paul uses to describe the end result of the new covenant, *glory,* was
generally understood as the opposite of shame. Second, the old covenant is described as a ministry of condemnation. It is tempting to think that Paul is describing the situation of the disciplined offender in 2:5-11. He, Moses, the “sons of Israel” (3:14-15), and perhaps Paul himself—as he made his way through Asia to Macedonia, despairing of life over the alienation he feared his grammata (“letters”) had worked on the Corinthian church—they are all caught up in the ministry of death.

But Moses’ face does not remain veiled. Verse 16 should be translated, “whenever he [not “one”] turned to the Lord, the veil was taken away.” The “he” is Moses in his role as positive example. Paul, indeed the whole church, is just like Moses, who in that moment of face-to-face intimacy with the Lord, an intimacy created by the Spirit, is free, and if free, then bold of speech, since the two words eleutheria and parrésia were nearly synonymous. So once again Paul bases his free speech not on individual power or accomplishment but on a Spirit-made intimacy in which “we all” (3:18) are free in the moment of an uncovered face, as in the climactic instant of the ancient Greek wedding when the bride—her veil swept aside in the moment of apokalypsis—and groom gazed without shame on each other’s face. The political consequences of 3:18 are staggering when contrasted with the ancient world’s limitation of freedom and frank speech to elite male citizens. In the phrase “we all,” Paul envisions a community of any and all persons, all equally free to speak their minds, as they simultaneously gaze upon one another as if in a mirror and in this way are transformed into what they see, Christ the image of God (cf. 4:4).

1 The Text in the Interpretive Tradition
“For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (3:6). No other Pauline phrase so profoundly set the course of Christian biblical interpretation and theology. Early on, Paul’s distinction between letter and Spirit, in which he clearly prefers Spirit over letter, was interpreted as the difference between text and the author’s intention (see Grant). At least three consequences flowed from this reading: first, it paved the way for the phonocentrism of Greek philosophy to overtake Christian theology. What is phonocentrism? Jacques Derrida has analyzed texts in the Western intellectual tradition, from Plato (see especially Phaedrus 275C-276E) to the twentieth century, and has pointed out the tradition’s unjustified preference for voice over writing. Yet it is not Derrida’s point simply to reverse the two by awarding to writing a privileged status over voice. Rather, he shows that what philosophers understand as the deficiencies (Derrida would not use this term) of writing affect the voice as well, but very few thinkers ever admit this. For example, it is generally agreed that writing inevitably destabilizes meaning, since the mortality of the author and that of the reader leave no enduring witness to what was meant when the text was composed. The move that characterizes phonocentrism is to claim that the everyday experience of hearing oneself think or the perceived immediacy of speaking one’s thoughts proves that voice mitigates the danger of contaminating one’s thoughts. The voice holds and protects the idea from contamination, so it is claimed in phonocentrism, as it travels from one’s mind through the external world through another’s ear and ultimately to his or her own interiority. In short, phonocentrism thinks of voice as a somewhat successful substitute for the thinking one does silently in one’s head; but writing, in this view, as a phonetic system representing voice in the speaker’s absence, is merely a substitute for a substitute and thus two steps removed.
from self-present thought (see Culler, 89–110). From the phono-centric perspective, then, the letter kills in the sense that it fails to live up to the voice’s power to deliver the speaker’s thoughts. Second, the misconstrued distinction between letter and Spirit enabled Christians to appropriate the allegorical method employed by Stoics (and others) in the interpretation of Homer and thus created a special class of spiritual persons who presumed they could read past the literal meaning of texts into God’s mind. Third, the distinction between letter and Spirit contributes to animosity against Jews, who, according to the Christian interpretation of Paul’s distinction, are incapable of knowing the meaning of their own Scriptures.

The Text in Contemporary Discussion

Paul’s reasoning from friendship and the face here bears an intriguing resemblance to recent approaches to ethics by writers influenced by Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas (see, e.g., Caputo 1993; for the related idea of *perichôrêsis* in recent trinitarian theology and ecclesiology, see Moltmann 2000). Nevertheless, Derrida’s wariness of the reduction of friendship to brotherhood in Western political philosophy, which buys the communion of some at the price of excluding others, must be kept in mind (Derrida). Does Paul himself fall into the trap of building a community on the backs of others, that is, on the exclusion of “the sons of Israel” (3:7)? This question, which can only be raised here and not answered, is crucial in light of the comparison Paul makes between the two covenants in 3:4-18. It is not possible to rescue Paul from the charge of anti-Judaism simply by pointing out that it is the old covenant that is nullified (3:14) and not Judaism itself. Is there a difference between covenant and Judaism, or enough of a difference between the two so that Christ’s nullification of the former does not mean the destruction of the latter?

2 Corinthians 4:1-6: Your Slaves

The Text in Its Ancient Context

In 4:1-3, Paul reiterates his claim that he possesses all the boldness and openness necessary for an apostle of Christ, and if anyone (think super-apostles here) thinks his gospel is hidden or that he is playing tricks on the Corinthians with his talk of grace and forgiveness, then it must be that the god of this age (think Satan here) has blinded their minds. A word about the two major ancient theories of vision might be helpful at this point. One theory, which posits that very small bits of objects break off and pass through the air into the soul via the eyes, plays no role here. The other imagines a light in the soul or mind, burning like a lamp and sending out its rays through the eyes to illumine external objects. From this latter perspective, to be blinded is to have one’s internal fire extinguished. That is what Paul says the god of this age has done to his opponents. They have no fire. In them, no beams of light proceed from an internal fire, and this suggests that they lack love or desire, which was also conceptualized as burning within the innards (cf. 1 Cor. 7:9; 2 Cor. 11:29). They do not love the Corinthians as Paul does; rather, Paul implies, they preach themselves as lords over the community (cf. 2 Cor. 1:24; 11:20).
In contrast, Paul preaches himself as the community’s slave (4:5). Paul once more alludes to the servitium amoris motif so popular in the erotic literature of the ancient world (see comments on 2:14 above). He loves the Corinthians madly and without regard for his own dignity, and he does so in imitation of Jesus (“on account of Jesus”), who took the form of a slave (see Phil. 2:7).

**The Text in the Interpretive Tradition**

The Christian tradition by and large has suppressed Paul’s vision of a lovesick, servile Christ who is here Paul’s model for imitation. The authors of Colossians and Ephesians, for example, eliminated the motif of Christ as slave as they revised Paul’s theology and substituted their philosophically influenced gospel of self-control. But there are moments in the tradition when poetry returns Christology to Paul’s daring appropriation of the slavery motif, which we find in Phil. 2:7 as well. Guerric of Igny (1080–1157) is a good example of a writer turning Christ’s slavery away from obedience to God the Father and toward humanity.

“I will not serve,” man says to his Creator. “Then I will serve you,” his Creator says to man. “You sit down. I will minister, I will wash your feet. You rest; I will bear your weariness, your infirmities. Use me as you like in all your needs, not only as your slave but also as your beast of burden and as your property.” (Sermon 29.1; Monks of Mount Saint Bernard Abbey, 2:55–56)

At the end of the thirteenth century or the beginning of the fourteenth, the Italian mystic Jacopone da Todi spoke to Jesus in a way that likely would not have displeased Paul.

You went about the world as if you were drunk,
Led by Love as if you were a slave...

**The Text in Contemporary Discussion**

Paul’s introduction of slavery into his discourse about Christ and about his own ministry have not gone unnoticed by contemporary scholars. Some quite correctly criticize the way the idea of Jesus as a slave (to God, as it is almost always assumed) has legitimized various forms of domination within the church and in secular social institutions influenced by Christianity (Briggs). Recognition that the figure of the popular leader (demagogue) in ancient democracies was frequently described in servile terms (Martin 1990) goes some distance in undermining the oppressive potential of this motif. For many other scholars, however, Jesus’ slavery to God is not at all problematic—quite the opposite, since they think his obedience as the “new Adam” reverses the disobedience of the first Adam, thereby offering salvation and a model of Christian behavior to the church (see Barth, 63–64).

The erotic motif of servitium amoris in 2 Cor. 4:5 and throughout the epistle has important consequences for the interpretation of Paul’s Christology, understanding his hopes for the political culture of the churches he established and, ultimately, the contemporary appropriation of Pauline thought for contemporary Christianity. First, the “work of Christ” (a standard phrase used by theologians to speak of the role of Jesus in their theological systems) will have to include his passionate longing for communion, his slave-like devotion to humanity. Second, church leaders, who often
claim to pattern themselves after Paul, would have to question the prevalent view of Paul as an authoritarian leader and imitate instead his imitation of Christ as a slave of love. Finally, ecclesiastical regimes of oppression that legitimate themselves by an appeal to Jesus’ obedience to the Father, or in the case of secular institutions by obedience to higher authority, would have to be challenged (see Fredrickson 2013).

2 Corinthians 4:7—5:10: More Body

The Text in Its Ancient Context

To review: in the face of charges that he is a deceptive flatterer lacking courage to speak his mind, Paul asserts his parrésia (3:12, 4:1), placing it in the context of friendship and love but also contrasting it with the speech of the super-apostles who, like the Cynics, are harsh moral critics. In 4:7—5:10, he further develops the idea of frank speaking based on friendship. In language that anticipates the weakness he will describe as his experience in the aftermath of his abduction into paradise in 12:1–10, Paul’s hardships in 4:8–12 remind him that the power he possesses in excess is not the force of command but the enslaving power of love, which God has enkindled in his heart to illumine the glory of God that Paul sees on the face of Christ (4:6). The slavery motif is developed in 4:10–12, where the bearing of the master’s death in one’s own body goes to the heart of servitude, as verse 12 powerfully states. Paul’s servitium amoris to Christ is inseparable from his slavery to the church in Corinth. It is out of this relationship with the church, not his own moral virtue, that his speech flows freely (4:13).

The topic of 4:14—5:10 is increased intimacy in the parrésia-generating relationship Paul has with the Corinthians. He begins in 4:14–15 by repeating the topics of resurrection and transformation (see 1:10–11, 14, 21; 3:18). Abruptly, however, as if Paul had a conversion to the philosophic doctrine of the immortality of the soul, 4:16—5:1 introduces stock themes about the afterlife as it was described in Platonism and accepted by a few of the later Stoics. These themes include the inner and outer human being; the insignificance of present suffering in comparison with the soul’s perfection; the eternity of things unseen; and, most significantly, the body as prison or temporary dwelling place of the soul (See Seneca, Ep. 102.23; 120.14). New Testament scholars have for decades pointed out the profound difference between immortality of the soul and resurrection of the body. So why has Paul conflated the two notions here? Quite possibly Paul speaks like a philosopher in 4:16—5:1 in order to undermine philosophy’s commitment to the survival of the separated self that lives in unchanging and serene contemplation of the universe when the external influence of its body has been removed. By temporarily passing as a philosopher in 4:16—5:1, he gives his attack on philosophical reason all the advantages of stealth.

Having drawn his readers’ attention to the isolated self-sufficiency of the wise man’s soul (see 3:5), note in 5:2–5 how powerfully Paul rejects the philosophical idea of death as the soul stripped of flesh (see Seneca, Ep. 102.24–25). He groans and longs for more clothing, for more body, not less. Life after death for Paul is not the eradication of death (that is philosophy’s delusion in the teaching of the immortal, bodiless soul), but the drinking down of death by life (NRSV “swallowing up,” cf.
1 Cor. 15:53-57), an unimaginable event and an impossible possibility (5:4) rightly given over by Paul to the name of God, who gives the Spirit (cf. 1:20-22).

**THE TEXT IN THE INTERPRETIVE TRADITION**

Interpreters up to the tenth century understood the “inner person” (4:16) as Paul’s reference to the soul just as the “outer person” designated the body (Suda, *Lexicon Epsilon* 3170). Yet if it is the case, as discussed above, that Paul plays with the philosophical commonplace of body as the house (or prison, or crypt) of the soul in order to challenge the very notion of a bodiless soul, the interpreters of the early church and the Byzantine period mistook his rhetorical strategy in 4:16—5:1. They thought he was advocating asceticism as the path to spiritual perfection. In fact, with great regularity, they slightly misquoted the Pauline text as follows: “as much as the outer person is destroyed, to this extent the inner person is renewed” (emphasis mine: see Basil, *Quod deus non est auctor malorum* [PG 31:337]; Ephraem Syrus, *In sermonem, quem dixit dominus, quod: In hoc mundo pressuram habe­bitis, et de perfectione hominis 335*; Michael Choniates, *Epistulae* 2.132.269).

**THE TEXT IN CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSION**

In recent years there has been a growing interest in possible intersections of Pauline thought and contemporary philosophy (see Caputo and Alcoff; Frick). Second Corinthians 4:16—5:10, in its complex engagement with Platonic themes, is a natural site for these modern conversations to take place. Three Pauline themes (there are certainly others) in this passage invite comparison with postmodern philosophy, which has its own complex engagement with Platonism that at least on some points runs parallel to Paul’s. First, the thought of death swallowed down by life, discussed above, and the accompanying thought of resurrection did not fall on an unsympathetic ear in the case of Jacques Derrida (Kearney); indeed, for Derrida, dreaming the impossible is always the way to start any undertaking whatsoever, but especially in the case of philosophy, theology, and justice (see Caputo 1997, 20–26). Second, the famous Pauline phrase “for we walk by faith not by sight” (5:7) reads almost as a motto for some postmodern critiques of foundationalism (Caputo 1997, 41–48). Third, the eschatological desire for a future that cannot be known or described is indicated by the groaning, longing, and wishing of 5:2, and this passion correlates with the aim of deconstruction: to impassion a wish for something totally other in those of us whom tradition, theology, and social systems have trained not to expect the unexpected and not to welcome surprises (Caputo 1997, 134–49).

**2 Corinthians 5:11-19: The Madness of Saint Paul**

**THE TEXT IN ITS ANCIENT CONTEXT**

In 5:13, Paul admits that he went insane (*exestêmen*), a moment of candor whose significance is not apparent. The present essay has stressed Paul’s consistent description of the opponents’ Cynic-like moral severity and their complaint against him that he is bold in letters but deceptively weak in the church’s presence. If this is the situation, then 5:13 might be read as Paul’s admission of
inconsistency and his explanation of it. Going mad with violent emotion in rhetorical performance was, in fact, an important element in the style of speech called deinotes (see the comments above on 2 Cor. 10:9-10; and Voit), and presumably the opponents would have approved of Paul's blast of anger in the letter of tears. The style of speech contrasting with deinotes was known as "grace" (charis). To achieve this style, the speaker must do precisely what Paul says he did when he returned from his madness and is still doing as he writes: "we are temperate" (stéphronoumen: see Van Hook, 32). The purpose of this calm self-presentation was to persuade and win over (as Paul says he aims to do in 5:11) rather than to overwhelm hearers as in the case of deinotes.

Following on Paul's confession of madness are two applications of the motif of friendship, one to Christ (5:14-17) and the other to God (5:18-19). In each instance, the point is to distance Paul's ministry from flattery and associate it as closely as possible with divine grace (cf. 1:12). The "love [agape] of Christ" in 5:14 will be misunderstood if readers interpret it through the influential but problematic work of Anders Nygren's Agape and Eros, which rules out of order the porous border between agape and philia running throughout the present commentary (for a trenchant critique of Nygren, see McGinn). There is one point about friendship in antiquity, however, that Nygren properly underlines: its exclusivity. There was in Paul's day the widespread opinion that friendship was dyadic; if anyone had more than one, or possibly two friends, that person might well be thought of as a flatterer and guilty of polyphilia, the vice of having many friends (see Plutarch, On Having Many Friends 93B-97B). Read against this aversion to polyphilia, the quasi-hymnic writing in 5:14-15 trades on the commonplace that "friends have all things in common" (how else would all die or all live unless all share all things with Christ?). There is a "new creation" (5:17) in which having many friends is the very nature of things, not a symptom of flattery and deception.

Paul shifts in 5:18-19 from a christo-logic to a theo-logic, but the point remains the same. The new, many-friendied creature that Paul is legitimates his manner of ministry in which reconciliation (in the sense defined below) and forgiveness take center stage. This new creation applies to God also, although interpreters rarely notice this. The Greek word translated "reconcile" does not refer to a restoration of a previous relationship so much as the initiation of new friendship (see Fredrickson 1997, 171-74) in which all things are shared. God's yes-saying in Christ (1:18-20) is matched by God's having all things in common with the kosmos and placing in "us" (Paul? Paul and his co-writers? the readers, too? the world?) the logos (word? logic?) of reconciliation.

II. THE TEXT IN THE INTERPRETIVE TRADITION

Various commentators have wanted to protect Paul from the meaning of his own words. Typical is John Chrysostom, who rendered the sense of Paul's statement hypothetical: "What Paul means is that even if people think he is mad, everything he does is for the glory of God" (Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 11.2, emphasis added). Other interpreters have construed Paul's madness as prophetic truth-telling, since they read exestèmen in 5:13 in light of Ps. 116:11: "I said in my consternation [en tê ekstasei mou] 'Everyone is a liar'" (see Eusebius, Commentaria in Psalmos [PG 23:353]). The latter reading supports the explanation given above. Finally, in the early church there was another interpretation of Paul's madness, and this one plays an important role in present-day discussions. It is that 2 Cor. 5:13 refers to Paul's vision of the Lord recounted in
12:1-10 (see Athanasius, Expositiones in Psalms [PG 27:301]; and Cyril of Alexandria, Expositio in Psalms [PG 69:1156]).

The Text in Contemporary Discussion

Paul's madness (5:13) is difficult to understand. An influential explanation among today's scholarly readers is that Paul's opponents, influenced by Gnosticism or by the ideal of the "divine man," had accused him of not having ecstatic experiences, validations in their view of an apostle of Christ (Schmithals, 187–89; Georgi, 252, 280–83). This verse would thus be Paul's rebuttal. As we have seen, there is indeed support in the early church for one portion of this claim, Paul's possible allusion to visionary experience. Yet the larger assertion, that a demand had been placed on Paul, depends on our viewing the opponents as seekers of ecstatic visions or speaking in tongues, for which there is scant evidence in 2 Corinthians and silence in the interpretive tradition (see Barrett 1973, 166–67; Furnish, 324–25).

2 Corinthians 5:20—7:4 God Entreating through Us, Not Them

The Text in Its Ancient Context

In a tender and urgent reminiscence of 1:3–7, where it was likewise not possible to distinguish between God's entreaty or exhortation and Paul's, so also in 5:20—6:2 Paul pleads for the community to be reconciled (in the full sense of the term) to him. If the Corinthians withhold forgiveness, then Paul's ministry itself becomes the cause of offense (6:2) in spite of the proof of its validity provided by the hardships he suffers (6:4–10). With an open mouth (6:11), an allusion to parrésia (see Isocrates, Oration 12.96), he entreats the church, calling them by name ("Corinthians"). His heart is wide, a sign of joy and the holding of another in one's heart as in 3:2–3. Holding another in one's heart is a sign of friendship, according to John Chrysostom (PG 61:491), but the community's grief has narrowed (6:12) their souls (see Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Illustrious Philosophers 7.118) and forced Paul out of their "innards" (tois splanchnois). He pleads with them (6:13) to make room for him.

Paul then pleads with the church in Corinth not to align itself with the super-apes. Scholars have correctly identified "mismatched" (heteroygyountes) as nuptial imagery. Their assessment is confirmed by the terms denoting union, which follow in verses 15–16, especially koinōnia, which was widely employed; marriage was defined, in fact, as a koinōnia of bodies, wealth, and children. And yet the way the same scholars deal with apistoi (translated by the NRSV as "with unbelievers") leads them to conclude that Paul here warns church members not to marry outside the community (cf. 1 Cor. 7:12–16 for a more complex view on the matter held by Paul himself). There is another way to read this text. The term apistos in 4:4 likely refers to the disloyal super-apes. Moreover, not only did the yoke (zygos) function in marital contexts, but it was also a metaphor for the pulling together of friends. Paul uses it in Phil. 4:3 to persuade the readers of that letter to financially support the missionary work of Euodia and Syntyche as the church had supported him. Paul's plea, then, not to be "otherwise-yoked" with the unfaithful ones might be interpreted as his warning not to support the super-apes.
The Text in the Interpretive Tradition

Interpreters in the early church sometimes found themselves in the uncomfortable position of making sense of texts that, from the perspective of the tradition’s adherence to the *apatheia* (impossibility) of God, could not mean what they say. “The word *became flesh*” (emphasis added) in John 1:14 is a good example. Here the threat to the unchangeable, eternal Word comes not from heretical teaching but from the biblical text itself. The recourse of substituting “take on flesh” for “become flesh” was the preferred solution to this problem (see Theodoret of Cyrus, *Eranistes*, passim). Another famous example is Gal. 3:13, where we read that Christ “became a curse for us”; Jerome explained (*Commentarius in Epistolam S. Pauli ad Galatas* 2 [PL 26:387–88]) that this should not be taken literally—to Luther’s irritation (*Lectures on Galatians* [LW 26:276]). This brings us to 2 Cor. 5:21, which Athanasius (*Oratio II contra Arianos* 47.2) recognized was as problematic as John 1:14 and Gal. 3:13. The stakes are high, however, since this verse undergirds Paul’s plea for reconciliation in 5:20 and presents readers with a shocking idea: God made Christ “to be sin.” Gregory of Nyssa (*Contra Celsum* 1.69) softened the offense by claiming that Paul wrote *sin* but meant *flesh*. Eutherius (*Constitutiones quarundam propositionum* 4) took a different approach and applied what interpreters in the tradition had learned in dealing with John 1:14: Christ was not altered to be sin but “took our sin and caused it to disappear” (*apanisati*). Theodorus Studites (*Parva Catechesis* 30) similarly emphasized that Christ “put on” human nature corrupted by sin.

The Text in Contemporary Discussion

What do love (*agape*, 5:14) and justice (*dikaiosyne*, 5:21) have to do with one another? This important question, especially in the context of Christian responses to the criminal justice system in the United States, has been sidelined by Nygren’s approach to love and by translators insisting on using “righteousness” to represent *dikaiosyne*. Even when the question is asked, however, justice is often reduced to calculation or the equitable enforcement of rules, and love is reduced to mercy’s smoothing the rough edges of justice. But Paul holds the two tightly together, each indeed as an example of the other, not only in 2 Corinthians 5 but also in Gal. 5:5–6 and, by extension through nuptial imagery, in Phil. 3:7–11. Justice and love share at least two things in Paul. First, each is constituted by openness to the future (see especially Gal. 5:5–6). Just as one would never say of a beloved, “I have loved enough,” so justice forbids saying, “justice has been done.” The second thing love and justice share is that they spring from the singularity of the other; it is always the face of *this one* that calls forth my love just as it is the call of *this one* that moves me to response. For these reasons, both love and justice are pure gifts.

2 Corinthians 8:1—9:15: By Poverty Enriched

The Text in its Ancient Context

In the ancient world, gift-giving displayed social status and obligated recipients to repay benefactors with gratitude and honor (see Danker). While Paul challenges the elite of the Corinthian church in these two chapters to contribute to the fund for the saints in Jerusalem, he nevertheless seeks
to persuade them not to participate in a system of benefaction that would shame the poor in the Corinthian church (since they had nothing to give) and would establish the churches of Greece and Asia as patrons of the struggling client church in Jerusalem. Paul has a difficult task in front of him: to disrupt the circle of gift and gratitude without ruining the collection itself.

Paul shames the Corinthians by praising the generosity of the impoverished Macedonians (8:1-6). Yet there is more to it than this. First, an impossible logic about the Macedonian gift loosens, if not dissolves, the connection between giving and the display of social status. How so? In verse 2, the strange condition that makes gift-giving possible is “profound poverty.” It is not the case, then, as it is with Corinth’s wealthy elite, that the Macedonians give out of their fullness, as if their gift testified to their invulnerability. Like the widow in Mark 12:41-44, the Macedonians give out of their emptiness.

In 8:9, the “gift [charis] of our Lord Jesus Christ” follows the same unexpected pattern of giving out of poverty, in language that echoes the Christ hymn in Phil. 2:5-11. Paul writes, “by the poverty of that one you got rich.” Next, in 8:13-15, Paul tries a second strategy, manipulating the well-known philosophical topic of proportional equality (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 1130b-1132b). Instead of the expected notion of equality as distribution according to status (that is, equality is achieved when superior persons receive more), however, Paul implies that the very act of giving is the admission that one might one day be in need. Equality understood in this way exposes human frailty, even that of the elite, within any system of economic exchange.

To the ears of modern readers, chapter 9 simply repeats chapter 8. One prominent scholar has argued that the two chapters circulated independently before the final compilation of 2 Corinthians (see Betz). But to repeat oneself was not necessarily a fault in ancient letters (see Phil. 3:1). And although it is the case in chapter 9 that Paul again undermines the patron-client structure that had monopolized the act of giving in the ancient world, he does so in a different way, using a theological argument: God’s justice is God’s scattering, and this is good news for the poor, as the quotation of the Psalm in 9:9 suggests. Such a definition of justice (NRSV translates “righteousness”) must have been shocking, since in the wake of Plato (Republic 433B-435B), justice was understood as a harmony of interests or a strict limitation on individuals to perform assigned roles within an unchallenged gradation of social power. In short, 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 does not credit God with preserving the patron-client relationship, but with deconstructing it. The wildly accountable dissemination in verses 10-11, just another instance of scattering, does indeed produce gratitude to God, but what is one to be grateful for (note the “indescribable gift” in 9:15) at the scene of such dispersion accomplished by God’s giving? Might it be the generosity (haplotēs), made possible by God’s grace, of shaking things loose? Thus, in the end, it is not gratitude that Paul imagines the poor in Jerusalem will feel toward the church in Corinth: it is longing for communion (vv. 13-14).

The Text in Contemporary Discussion

Paul’s probing of the ideology of the gift (charis), which might also be translated as “grace,” bears a remarkable resemblance to recent philosophical and theological discussions of gift-giving (see
Horner; Walters) that have been inspired, at least in part, by Derrida’s critical analysis of Marcel Mauss’s 1925 anthropological study *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies.* What is the connection between the first-century apostle and recent philosophers, at least the ones for whom the language of religion has proven indispensable? Very briefly stated, for Derrida, the gift in a pure sense is impossible: it refuses to let itself be intended by the gaver or perceived by the recipient. In the moment that a gift either generates the expectation of repayment or a feeling of obligation, it ceases to be a gift. Thus the very possibility of a gift (for which there needs to exist a giver, a gift, and a recipient) also makes gift-giving impossible (see Caputo 1997, 160–64). This is not a mere word game, as Paul’s ingenious and impassioned attempt to free the collection from the ancient system of benefaction shows. Christ’s poverty, God’s disseminative justice, and the gift’s indescribability all reflect Paul’s efforts to keep the elite from capitalizing on the collection and dominating the Corinthian church.

**2 Corinthians 10:1–18: Miles Gloriosus: Militia Amoris**

*The Text in Its Ancient Context*

In the first five words of 10:1, Paul manages to say “I” three times and to write “Paul” once for good measure. His audacity, mentioned in 7:16 but kept under wraps in chapters 8 and 9, now bursts forth: Paul is a warrior! But unlike the stock figure of the miles gloriosus of Roman comedy (see Plautus, *The Swaggering Soldier*), whose penchant for comparing himself to others and commending himself (see 10:12–18) sets the stage for Paul’s appearance in chapters 10–12, and in whose image Paul creates the super-apostles, Paul is a soldier in Love’s campaign. Rather than boasting in personal power, he swagers in his weakness (10:10; 11; 21, 29, 12:9–10; 13:3–4, 9). This is not, however, weakness in a general sense, that is, an incapacity that could be remedied with extra effort or training. Rather, the erotic motifs woven into the discourse of these chapters suggest that Paul’s weakness is the kind ancient love poets wrote about: desire for a communion that appears impossible. Second Corinthians 10–13 is a complex argument, ironies captured within ironies, a pretended and demented bragging about those desperate emotions about which no one but a crazed lover would ever boast. Paul’s boasting in his weakness was intended to expose his opponents’ severity and to commend Christ’s gentleness and reasonableness that the apostle seeks to emulate.

Once again, the charge of duplicity rears its head: 10:1 incorporates into its own discourse the opponents’ complaint that Paul is bold at a distance but *tasteinos* (“lowly,” connoting, from the perspective of elites, marginalized persons of low social class) when present. Fighting words! Note the military terms marching forward: “I am bold” (10:2), “daring” (10:2), “wage war” (10:3), “weapons of our warfare” (10:4), “take down strongholds” (10:4) and “elevated heights” (10:5), “taking captive” (10:5), “obedience” (10:5,6), and “avenge disobedience” (10:6). Paul is conducting a campaign, to be sure, but first-century readers, especially those who remembered the motif of the triumphal procession in 2:14 and its association with the motif *servitium amoris*, would see the amatory point: Paul portrays himself as Eros taking captive and subjecting to servitude the high-minded, philosophical
despisers of love, who in ancient amatory literature often reversed course and fell especially hard in love through Eros’s avenging intervention (see the opening chapter of Xenophon of Ephesus, An Ephesian Tale; Philostratus, Ep. 12; Greek Anthology 5.294). Verse 6 marks a pause in the general campaign; only when the Corinthians’ obedience to Christ (obedience of love, that is, another instance of servitium amoris) is complete will Paul turn to the others. Yet, lest anyone take his feigned belligerence in 10:1-6 seriously, in 10:8 he denies intent to pull anything or anyone down. He wouldn’t want to frighten anyone (10:9)!  

II The Text in the Interpretive Tradition  

According to 10:9-10, Paul’s letters written before 2 Corinthians had already entered an interpretive tradition of considerable sophistication. As I noted in the introduction, the super-apostles evaluated Paul’s letters and speech according to the literary and rhetorical standards of the time; his speech in the presence of the community, they said (10:10), was “attenuated” (exouthenemos). The Rhetorica ad Herennium (4.11.16) equated attenuated speech with the simple style that employed everyday language and could, if handled skillfully, achieve elegance. If mishandled, however, it was debased and merely ordinary, and as Cicero noted (De oratore 20; see also Quintilian, Institutio oratoria 9.2.3), it was furthest from the forceful style (deinotés). In short, we might infer the opponents charged that Paul in the presence of the church used irony (eironéia), not in the modern sense of saying the opposite of what one means but in the ancient sense. That is, he talked the way poor people and slaves talked (cf. 1 Cor. 1:28), although he was capable of much more, and did so in order to ridicule others (see Dio Chrysostom, Oration 42.1-3). John Chrysostom (In illud: Utinam sustineretis modicum [PG 51:304]) had no doubt that Paul’s opponents accused him of irony. In fact, Chrysostom’s reading of 2 Cor. 10:9-10, and particularly his detailed explanation of Paul’s “attenuated speech,” lines up with the discussion of this topic in rhetorical handbooks and literary treatises (for a deep appreciation of Chrysostom as a Pauline interpreter, see Mitchell).  

III The Text in Contemporary Discussion  

Such talk about lowliness, weakness, love, and slavery in Christian discourse forced Friedrich Nietzsche to cry out, “Bad air! Bad air!” (Nietzsche, 24). Hatred, revenge, envy—these terms taken together translate resentiment, the word Nietzsche deployed against what he perceived to be the stench of Jewish and Christian souls deformed by the “revaluation of values.” In a “slave revolt,” he complained, the weak of the world seek “spiritual revenge” against the strong and their spontaneous affirmation of life; by promoting guilt, pettiness, and duties, the priestly class prevails by sullying the heroic embrace of life (Nietzsche, 19-33). This is not the place to assert or deny that Paul’s weakness or the servitium amoris motif were examples of resentiment, but the question might at least be raised whether the eroticism Paul weaves into his self-presentation and into his Christology entails a spontaneous and infinite affirmation of the other and thus even a slight chance for a rapprochement with Nietzsche’s “yes-saying.” (For a reading of the philosopher that might facilitate such an unexpected meeting of minds, see Caputo 1993, 42-68.)
2 Corinthians 11:1-4: Zealous to Preserve Christ’s Marriage Bed

The Text in Its Ancient Context

Here Paul raises the stakes on the church’s flirtation with the super-apostles. He has married the Corinthians off to Christ; for them now to shift their allegiance to his rivals would be the same as abandoning their nuptial union with Christ. Paul makes a similar move in his letter to the Galatians (1:6-9), where a note similar to verse 4 can be heard.

The Text in the Interpretive Tradition

Paul, in unconscious cooperation with the Song of Songs, had perhaps no more profound influence on later doctrine than in the nuptial imagery he employs here for the relation of Christ and the church (for the early church, see Elliott; for a medieval example, see Gilbert of Hoyland, Sermons 2.5). Luther’s notion of the “joyous exchange” comes out of this tradition (see, e.g., his The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ and the Brotherwoods [LW 35]).

The Text in Contemporary Discussion

Unlike their medieval counterparts, today’s readers are no doubt bewildered or put off by the conceptual framework of Christ as bridegroom and the church as bride. To be sure, definite risks accompany this way of imagining Christian doctrine and piety. First of all, there appears to be a bias toward heterosexual marriage that abets heterosexism in contemporary culture (on which see Jung and Smith). To counter this impression that Paul is a champion of heterosexual marriage, one need only read his tepid commendation of marriage in 1 Thess. 4:3-8 and 1 Corinthians 7 (see Martin 2006). Moreover, nuptial imagery actually has the potential of deconstructing the binary opposition of male and female—think of Corinthian manbrides! (See Fredrickson 2013, 129-49). Finally, a clear distinction must be made between Paul’s use of nuptial imagery in his genuine epistles and that found in the pseudonymous letters (Colossians, Ephesians, and the Pastorals). In the former, Paul emphasizes the ritual of marriage, the wedding, and does so in the context of eschatological expectation. Furthermore, standard motifs of friendship (the theme of koinōnia, for example) define what it means to get married. In the pseudonymous letters, however, marriage is placed within the ancient Greek household (see Balch) and illustrates the same hierarchical relation that obtains between head and body and Christ and church, the very relations of power and authority that the genuine Paul says Christ is presently nullifying (see 1 Cor. 15:24; for the brazen misconstrual of this verse to legitimate hierarchy, see Eph. 1:20-23).

2 Corinthians 11:5—12:10: Dog Apostles, Hardships, and Weakness

The Text in Its Ancient Context

As God is his witness, Paul loves the Corinthians (11:11). For that reason, they should take his refusal of financial support not as an insult but rather as witness of his affection. But there is more
to his refusal than this. Paul is setting up an extended comparison between himself and the super-
apostles in 11:12—12:13, just what he said in 10:12 he would not do. The comparison hinges on
the opponents’ Cynic-like behavior. In this connection, note in 11:9 that he refuses the Corinthians’
aid in order that he might keep himself in every way “without weight” (abarê). The term “weighty”
(bâros) was often associated with Cynic philosophers (Malherbe 1970) whose harsh criticism was
felt to be oppressive. Cynics also had the reputation of throwing their weight around in another way:
by demanding lodging from the very people they rebuked. And then they ate them out of house and
home (see 11:20: “preys upon you” might also be translated “eats up” or “devours”). Cynics, in short,
had big jaws (see Billerbeck, 113).

Paul compliments himself perhaps too much (or is his sense of humor very dry?) when he
explains the reason for this comparison with the super-apostles: he wants to prevent them from
“being found as he is” (11:12). It turns out that Paul is a wreck, but before he enumerates his hard-
ships (11:23–33) and exposes his weaknesses (12:8–10), he alludes in 11:13–15 and 20–21 to behav-
ioral traits frequently associated with Cynic behavior. (The name “Cynic” is related to the Greek
word for dog; for these traits, see Epictetus, Diatr. 2.12.24; 3.22.23–25, 45–50; 4.8.6–20; Lucian,
Fugitivi 12–19; Piscator 31; Aelius Aristides, Oration 3.663–68, 671, 676, 682–83; Julian, Oration
6.201A.) He implies that the Corinthians ought to be horrified in discovering the super-apostles’
real identity and ashamed not to have seen it before. Perhaps most important here is that the dog-
like apostles are portrayed as minions of Satan (11:14–15), whom we have encountered before in
this letter when severity threatens to drive an individual through shame to suicide (2:5–11).

Ancient philosophers listed their hardships for three reasons: to display their moral virtue; to
describe training in moral virtue; and, less frequently, to show their kindly attitude (philanthropia)
toward the ignorant masses they sought to improve (see Fitzgerald). In 11:23–33, Paul mimics the
philosopher’s occupational hazards; but in verses 28–29 he slips in sentiments illustrative not of a
moralist’s day-to-day troubles but of the emotions of those who care for and fret over a beloved,
even to the point of burning (cf. 1 Cor. 7:9).

Second Corinthians 12:1–10 is a tour de force in which Paul makes the following point, represen-
tative of the entire letter, by having the Lord himself say it (12:9): weakness—the lover’s sicken-
ness of body and soul when separated from the beloved—perfects divine power. The Lord should
know of what he speaks, since he was crucified “out of weakness” (13:4). But why, from first-century
perspectives, does Paul stage the event of his abduction into paradise in such dramatic terms? It is
not an overstatement to say that in the ancient Greek world, anyone who had something important
to say, especially about the great transitions of individual or community life, what anthropologists
call liminality, told a story of erotic abduction. Consider Homer’s Iliad, the founding of Europe,
Zeus’s love for Ganymede, Eos’s desire for Tithonos, the educational experience of the young men
of Sparta and Crete, the tolerance of forced marriages by abduction, and the bitterly protested mar-
rriages to Hades at death. It is not unreasonable to suppose that Paul could not have told the most
important story of his life and of his ministry without narrating rapture into paradise (for erotic
abduction and sexual violence in ancient culture, see Fredrickson 2013, 85–104). But in this myster-
ious event, this apocalypse, he refuses to boast. Of course, by saying that he won’t talk about it, he
speaks volumes.
The Text in the Interpretive Tradition

The eroticism of these verses has faded from view in the modern period, but some readers, especially medieval mystics and monastics, experienced a reawakening of friendship in theology and in their communal life and treasured Paul’s abduction (harpentà in v. 2 and hērpagē in v. 4) into paradise, the unspeakable, wordless intimacy, and his disorienting and grief-filled return to earth. Paul’s story matched their brief ecstasies and then the long and hollow periods of Christ’s absence. There was a particular interest in Paul’s experience of hearing “wordless words” (arrēta remata, 12:4), which was understood as erotic and an example of apophaticism (see John of Ford, Sermons 4.1; 45.2, 5; 94.9; 100.5).

The Text in Contemporary Discussion

Apophaticism, or negative theology, is a kind of theological discourse that denies, inconsistently, that it is possible to speak about God. God is beyond being, it is claimed, and therefore to speak about God violates God, and yet this very impossibility impassions more and more words spoken and written about God. Robust in the medieval period, when Paul’s loquacious silence about his encounter with Jesus in 2 Cor. 12:4 served as a kind of proof text, apophaticism is making a comeback in postmodern philosophy and theology thanks to the fascination the contradiction between speaking and not speaking held for Jacques Derrida. Derrida did not, however, share negative theology’s confidence that it could rest in the God beyond being, beyond linguistic signification. Quite the opposite. In an uncanny and certainly unintended parallel to Paul’s return to earth (12:7-10), where divine power happens in weakness, that is, in Paul’s troubled, loving relation to the Corinthians, Derrida generalized the impossibility and passion of the speaking about God to the speaking about every other. “Deconstruction is rather the thought, if it is a thought, of an absolute heterogeneity that unsettles all the assurances of the same within which we comfortably ensconce ourselves. That is the desire by which it is moved, which moves and impassions it, which sets it into motion, toward which it extends itself” (Caputo 1997, 5).

2 Corinthians 12:11—13:10: A True Apostle

The Text in Its Ancient Context

The letter is coming to an end. Paul must first extricate himself from his pretense of boasting and comparison with the super-apostles. This he accomplishes in 12:11-13 by shifting blame: the Corinthians themselves forced him to act the part of a bragging fool.

In 12:13-15, he deals one last time with the implications of his refusal of financial support. First, he seeks (the Greek term zētēō has erotic connotations and might also be translated “desires”) them, not their things. Second, he is their parent (cf. 1 Cor. 4:14-15). The last reason (v. 15) can of course be read in terms of economics, but the words carry an erotic connotation as well, which should not be unexpected given the emphasis on love at the end of the verse. The words in question here are dapanāo and ekdapanāo (NRSV: “spend and be spent”). The first term might reasonably carry only economic meaning, but the fact that the second is used in the passive voice means that Paul himself
is expended for their lives. There is continuity with the motif of *servitium amoris* running throughout the letter. Two obvious parallels are 1 Thess. 2:8 and Phil. 2:17. A more subtle parallel is Phil. 2:7, in which Christ is said to have "emptied himself." In Greek and Latin love literature, longing for communion with a beloved causes the lover to melt and then drain away, in other words to be poured out or expended (see Fredrickson 2013, 45-83; for a much later example of *dapanao* used in this erotic sense, see Theodorus Prodromus, *Rhodanthe and Dosicles* 8.179: "the hearts of those who long are expended").

Before he bids farewell in a proto-trinitarian formula (13:13), which is itself significant in its repetition of Paul's emphasis throughout the letter on love, grace, and communion, Paul concludes the body of the letter with three final contrasts between himself and the super-apostles. First, in 12:20, as he returns to the ethical and social class issues he had addressed in 1 Corinthians (likely linked through elite male privileges), Paul makes a surprising turn: the church's bad behavior will be the occasion of God driving him once again into melancholy and causing him to lament. Reading verse 21 first and then going back to the first half of verse 20 raises a question: Is Paul suggesting that their finding him "not as they wish" means that they will find him weak and lacking in the severity of the super-apostles? Second Corinthians 13:3 hints that this was the case. The second contrast is the oblique criticism in 13:5-10 that Paul's rivals engage in moral exhortation in order to burnish their own reputations for frank speaking. Paul claims to have no stake in the Corinthians' progress other than their improvement. The final contrast, which ends the body of the letter, has Paul locating the purpose of his authority not in harsh criticism (the Greek phrase connotes "cutting") but in building up.

4 The Text in the Interpretive Tradition

In a stunning turn, the very weakness (*asthenia*) Paul seeks mightily to preserve in the face of the super-apostles' harshness, even to the point of his adopting the guise of a warrior, became an embarrassment to the apostle's later interpreters. But Paul plainly *does* connect his weakness to Christ's in 13:4: "he [Christ] was crucified from weakness" and "we are weak in him." The subtle adjustments made to the first phrase by exegesis betray their nervousness over its dogmatic implication that weakness pertains to the whole Christ, a view that the fathers worried the uneducated reader might erroneously entertain (John Chrysostom, *In epistolam ii ad Corintos* [PG 61:598–600]).

One solution to the perceived threat to the *apatheia* of God, a nonnegotiable point in Christian theology as soon as ancient philosophy was let in, was to assign the weakness mentioned in 13:4 to Christ's "human part" or "nature" or to his "flesh." His resurrection, power, and life were referred to the divine (see Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* 3.4.10). A related strategy was to deny any passivity in Christ. In Eusebius's words, "He himself made himself weak, not being conquered by another" (*Commentaria in Psalms* 23.309). Christ's voluntary weakness made it not weakness in the usual sense (see Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catacheses ad illuminandos* 14.8). Finally, weakness might be understood simply as a matter of suffering persecution or plots (see John of Damascus, *Commentarii in epistulas Pauli* [PG 95:773].
THE TEXT IN CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSION

Second Corinthians begins (1:3) and ends (13:4) with divine suffering. The interpretive tradition's discomfort with Paul's straying outside the lines drawn for theology by the doctrine of the *apatheia* of God, a doctrine inspired by Greek philosophy, make Paul's weakness, his passions, all the more interesting. On several occasions in this essay, it was pointed out that Paul's subtle use and critique of Greek philosophical ideas make his writings a site of exploration for postmodern philosophers, especially those, like John Caputo, influenced by Jacques Derrida.

If we shift from God to Paul, a distinction that Paul himself obscures throughout the letter (see, e.g., 5:20-21), we note that the interpretive tradition generally characterized Paul's suffering as his endurance of hardships or opposition not unlike the wise man's training in virtue. Yet here are good reasons to think that his suffering was in fact the vulnerability opened up in him by loving the Corinthians: weakness, in other words. We have seen that Paul aligns himself with the weakness of Christ, and this leads him to a pastoral practice of adaptability, grace, and forgiveness, none of which compromises frank speech from Paul's perspective, as the harsh super-aposles charge, but that works in concert with truth-telling and justice. Paul insists on the "slavery of love" (*servitium amoris*) and related motifs drawn from erotic literature to unify the argument of the letter and persuade the Corinthians to accept his ministry and to reject that of his rivals. Finally, we observed how the letter's critique of the severe disciplinary practice that had the effect of isolating the individual who wronged Paul challenges the contemporary church to examine its understanding of punishment and the isolating practices of the American system of criminal justice.

Works Cited


