

2 Corinthians 8 and 9

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Background. The role that 2 Cor 8 and 9 play in the Corinthian correspondence has long been questioned. In 1776, Johann Semler wondered why Paul repeats in chapter 9 the same argument he has just made in chapter 8.¹ Early in the 20th century, Johannes Weiss concluded that 2 Cor 8 originally stood as its own letter. Weiss argued that because Paul's praise for the Corinthians in chapter 8 is effusive, it must have been composed prior to everything else in 2 Cor (except 6:14-7:1, which he saw as a fragment of the letter mentioned in 1 Cor 5:9).²

In his 1924 commentary, Hans Windisch proposed that both 2 Cor 8 and 9 were independent letters focused on the collection. Chapter 8, he argued, was the earlier of the two. Noting that Paul refers to Achaia in 9:2, Windisch suggested that chapter 9 had originally been sent to the churches in that province rather than to Corinth.³ In 1985, Hans Dieter Betz concluded that both letters were composed after the crisis between Paul and the community had been resolved: chapter 8 was sent to Corinth to restart the collection, while chapter 9 was sent to the other churches in Achaia.⁴

Early in the 21st century, Margaret Mitchell revived Weiss's idea that 2 Cor 8 is the earliest letter in 2 Cor, and offers a window into the beginnings of the Corinthian crisis.⁵ Particularly noteworthy was her recognition of the difference between Paul's instructions for the collection in 1 Cor 16 and in 2 Cor 8. In 2 Cor 8, Paul seems to have reneged on his offer in 1 Cor 16:1-5 to allow the Corinthians to choose who would accompany the collection to Jerusalem. For Mitchell, this ultimately results in the crisis behind 2 Cor. I here argue that if chapter 8 is an early letter, as Weiss and Mitchell suggest, then chapter 9 is an even earlier one. First, I will show that Windisch's suggestion that chapter 9 is a circular letter to all the churches of Achaia except Corinth (approved by Bornkamm and Betz) is not viable. Second, I will show that the Macedonian effort was incomplete when chapter 9 was written, despite Paul's claim that "Achaia has been ready since last year" (9:2). I will conclude with a chronology of the collection from its beginnings in Corinth to the time when Paul wrote 2 Cor 8.

¹Semler **Paraphrasis II**, summarized in Betz **2 Corinthians 8 and 9**, 3-4.

²Weiss **Earliest** 353-357.

³Windisch **Zweite** 287f. Günther Bornkamm also raised the possibility that 2 Cor 8 and 9 were separate letters; he believed that 2 Cor 9 was composed after the conflict between Paul and the community (evident in much of 2 Cor) had been resolved; **Vorgeschichte** 186f.

⁴Betz **2 Corinthians 8 and 9**, 92.

⁵Mitchell **Korintherbriefe; Correspondence; Letters**.

2 Cor 9: A Circular Letter?

Windisch's proposal that mention of Achaia in 9:2 indicates the circular nature of that letter solves the problem of repetition of collection material in chapters 8 and 9.⁶ But except for Cenchræe (the eastern port of Corinth, mentioned in Rom 16:1), there is no solid evidence for other churches in Achaia in Paul's time. If such churches did exist in Achaia, where might they have been? The usual answer is, Athens. But though Paul in 1 Thess 3:1 recounts a stay in Athens, he makes no mention of a church there. According to Acts, Paul preached at the Areopagus in Athens and converted several (Acts 17:34). But this is undermined by Paul himself, who notes in 1 Cor 16:15 that those in the household of Stephanas (in Corinth) were his first converts in Achaia.⁷

In the epistolary introduction in 2 Cor 1:1, Paul addresses both the community in Corinth and also "all the saints throughout Achaia." But this may be an exaggeration,⁸ as is Paul's use of the same adjective, ὅλος, in Romans 1:8, where he claims that the faith of the Roman church "is proclaimed throughout the *whole* world" (ἐν ὅλῳ τῷ κόσμῳ). We can presume only that there existed a few communities in Achaia in addition to Corinth and Cenchræe. Furnish puts forth the possibility of Pauline churches in Cleonæ, Crommyon, Tenea, and Schoenus, settlements close to Corinth mentioned by Strabo (8/6:22).⁹ But any churches in such rural communities would have been small. A collection letter sent *only* to them would seem to be unproductive.

Paul in 9:2 says, "I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year." His use of the provincial name "Achaia" instead of Corinth can be easily explained: it parallels his use of the provincial label "Macedonians" earlier in the same verse.¹⁰ When referring *to the collection*, Paul consistently speaks in terms of provinces rather than cities. For example, he refers to Macedonia (8:1) and the Macedonians (9:2 and 9:4) in 2 Cor 8 and 9. Nowhere in these chapters does he mention the Philippians or the Thessalonians in connection with the collection.¹¹ We should thus not expect him to refer to Corinth or the Corinthians, but rather to Achaia or the Achaians. Likewise, Paul uses provincial labels in Rom 15:16, when he says that "Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor . . ." ¹² In sum, Paul's use of "Achaia" in 9:2 to represent Corinth is consistent with his practice everywhere else.

⁶Windisch considered the phrase in 2 Cor 1:1, σὺν τοῖς ἀγίοις πᾶσιν τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ Ἀχαΐᾳ to have been an expansion of the original address as a result of chapter 9 (**Zweite** 288). See also Georgi **Remembering** 93-109; Betz **2 Corinthians 8 and 9**, 92.

⁷Thrall suggests that Paul could mean the first household rather than the first individuals (**Second** 99), but that argument seems contrived. Compare Pervo **Acts** 442.

⁸Thrall **Second** 87. For an argument that this letter is unlikely to have been carried over long distances, see also Windisch **Zweite** 34-38; Barrett **Second** 56; Furnish **II Corinthians** 106.

⁹Furnish **II Corinthians** 106.

¹⁰Furnish **II Corinthians** 431; Harris **Second** 619; Thrall **Second** 565.

¹¹Paul does mention the Corinthians in 6:11, but there he is not focused on the collection.

¹²See also 1 Thess 1:7-8, where Paul pairs Achaia and Macedonia outside the context of the collection.

Finally, let us assume that chapter 9 was indeed sent to all the Achaian churches except Corinth. It is easy to imagine Paul expressing his pride in them by saying, “*You Achaians* have been ready since last year.” But it is difficult to believe that Paul would have told *the Macedonians* (as he says in 9:2) that Achaia had completed its collection, knowing that Corinth – Achaia’s capital, largest city, and greatest potential contributor – had not. If Paul *said* “Achaia” but *meant* all of Achaia *except* Corinth, he must have known that the Macedonians would have heard something very different. He must also have realized that the truth would eventually emerge. If he traveled to Achaia with some Macedonians (as 2 Cor 9 suggests), would he have taken them to Cenchreae and perhaps other small villages, *but not* to Corinth? Such a scenario seems unlikely.

For these reasons, the hypothesis that 2 Cor 9 was composed as a circular letter to all the Achaian churches except Corinth cannot stand. While it is reasonable to suppose that chapter 9 was intended as a circular letter to all the churches of Achaia (even if this meant only a few communities besides Corinth), it is *unreasonable* to suppose that the capital of the province would have been excluded from its addressees. We must thus conclude that the letter was addressed to Corinth (and its environs).

But when would it have been sent? I suggest that Paul’s comments about both the Macedonian and the Achaian collections can help us at this point.

The Collection in Macedonia

In both 2 Cor 8 and 9, Paul refers to the collection in Macedonia. In 2 Cor 8:1-4, he tells the Corinthians of the remarkable achievement of the Macedonians:

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and extreme poverty overflowed (ἐπερίσσευσεν) in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, according to their means and even beyond their means, they begged (δεόμενοι) us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints . . .

The impression that one gains from reading this passage is that, by the time Paul composed it, the Macedonians had completed their collection.

This impression is supported by Paul’s use of the aorist verb in 8:2, where Paul indicates that both the joy and the poverty of the Macedonians overflowed in a “wealth of generosity.” Since this obviously refers to their contribution to the collection, the aorist tense of the verb suggests the completion of that collection in Macedonia.¹³

When we turn, on the contrary, to Paul’s reference to the state of the collection in Macedonia in 2 Cor 9, we see something very different. Verse 2 in that chapter suggests that the collection in Macedonia had *not* yet been finished:

For I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year (ἀπὸ πέρυσσα), and your zeal has stirred up many of them.

¹³The present participle (δεόμενοι) in 8:4 is linked to the verb, and its tense indicates that its action is temporally coincident with that of the verb (past and completed).

This verse suggests that Paul's boast to the Macedonians about the Achaians was made at a time before the Macedonian collection had made much (if any) progress. The apostle's goad, that Achaia had been ready "since last year," consequently served to effectively jump-start the collection in Macedonia, as Paul surely intended. As he notes, it "stirred up" many of them. But whether "many" or with other translations "most,"¹⁴ 2 Cor 9:2 suggests that the collection in Macedonia was still underway. If 2 Cor 8 indicates that the collection in Macedonia has been completed, and 2 Cor 9 tells us that it was underway, that suggests that 2 Cor 9 was written *before* 2 Cor 8.¹⁵

The Collection in Achaia

Assuming the priority of chapter 9 raises the problem of the collection in Achaia. In 9:2, Paul says "Achaia has been ready since last year," but 2 Cor 8:7 and 11 indicate that the Achaian collection had *not* been completed. This suggests that chapter 8 must be earlier than chapter 9, the opposite of what I am arguing. But does chapter 9 really indicate that the collection in Achaia was completed? In 9:2 Paul tries to pressure the Macedonians into action by telling them "Achaia has been ready since last year," but the verses that follow (9:3-4) show us that Paul is *unclear* about Achaia's readiness:

But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting to you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; otherwise, if some Macedonian come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated – to say nothing of you – in this undertaking.

The verb *παρασκευάζω* "to prepare" by itself need not suggest completion,¹⁶ but its appearance in the perfect tense in 9:2 does point to a completed action. On the other hand, if Paul had meant that the collection had begun in Corinth but had not been completed, he would have had no reason for concern about shame and embarrassment were he to come to Corinth with Macedonians (9:4). Rather, his honor and credibility would remain intact if the Corinthians had *begun* their collection. But as 2 Cor 9 clearly indicates, Paul is indeed concerned about shame and embarrassment.

In my opinion, the only way to explain the inconsistency between 9:2 (where Paul says the collection was completed) and 9:3-4 (where he is unsure of its completion) is to assume that Paul had no true knowledge about the state of the collection in Corinth when he wrote 2 Cor 9. His confident boast in 9:2, I suggest, was the result of his assumption that the Corinthian collection had been completed, based on the instructions that he had given in 1 Cor 16:1-4.

¹⁴Most translations render τοῦς πλείονας as "most of them." But since the comparative πλείονας (πλείους) can simply indicate "many," there is no reason for us to assume that the majority of the Macedonians responded to Paul's boast; see BAGD sv πολὺς II.2.1.a.

¹⁵Windisch recognized that 9:2 seems to indicate that the collection in Macedonia was still in progress in chapter 9 but completed in chapter 8, and suggested that this could be an argument for the temporal priority of chapter 9 over 8. In light of other factors, he ultimately decided that chapter 8 must be chronologically prior (*Zweite* 287). Others who reckoned chapter 9 as earlier than chapter 8 include Bultmann (*Second* 256), and Héring (*Second* xiii).

¹⁶Hans Dieter Betz had suggested that the verb is a military term describing preparation for military action; not its completion; *2 Corinthians 8 and 9*, 92.

On that assumption, Paul then boasted to the Macedonians, “Achaia has been ready since last year.” But despite the confidence that Paul displayed to the Macedonians, it is obvious (from 9:3-4) that Paul was not really sure if the collection had indeed been completed in Corinth. It is that uncertainty that is his reason for sending the brothers (9:3ff). 2 Cor 8, on the other hand, shows no uncertainty in the apostle’s mind about the state of the collection. He knows, to his regret, that the collection in Corinth had not been completed.¹⁷

To sum up the argument thus far, 2 Cor 9:2 suggests that the collection in Macedonia had not been completed when Paul composed that letter. Chapter 8, on the other hand, indicates that the Macedonian collection had been finished (8:1-5). This suggests that chapter 9 was written before chapter 8. Paul’s claim in 9:2 that “Achaia has been ready since last year” provides no obstacle to this supposition, since Paul was clearly uninformed about the progress of the Achaian collection when he wrote chapter 9. He had merely assumed – in response to his instructions in 1 Cor 16:1-4 – that the Corinthians had moved forward with the project.

Chronology of Letters and Events

The beginnings of the collection in Corinth are not clearly known.¹⁸ The earliest reference that we have appears at the end of 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 16:1-4) where the apostle gives instructions to the community to set aside funds each week. That passage indicates that Paul had intended to come to Corinth and make arrangements, in consultation with the Corinthians, for the transportation of the collection to Jerusalem.

Following the verses that explicitly focus on the collection in Corinth, Paul gives his future travel plans:

I will come to you after passing through Macedonia – for I intend to pass through Macedonia – and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may see me on my way, wherever I go. I do not want to see you now just in passing, for I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

Because these plans immediately follow Paul’s instructions for the collection, it is likely that the purpose of the upcoming journey to Macedonia and Corinth mentioned in these verses would be to oversee the transportation of the collection to Jerusalem.

¹⁷Assuming (as do most) that the letters were written within a short span of time, It is possible to argue that Paul knew the collection was unfinished (8:6) and sent 2 Cor 8 with Titus and the brothers to encourage the Corinthians to complete it. After sending that letter, he assumed that the Corinthians would complete it with the help of Titus and the brothers, and it is this assumption that we encounter in 9:2. Though this sequence is possible, it is difficult to imagine that the apostle would have simply assumed that the Corinthians had completed the collection (based on the letter contained in chapter 8), since he had previously sent instructions (in 1 Cor 16:1-4) and those had not achieved the desired result. Why would he think a second letter (2 Cor 8) would make any difference?

¹⁸A number of scholars believe that the collection had already begun prior to the arrival of 1 Corinthians; Plummer **Second** 237, Conzelmann **First** 295, Betz **2 Corinthians 8 and 9**.

Since in vv 5 and 6 Paul mentions traveling to Corinth via Macedonia, it seems likely that he had planned to arrive in Corinth (from Ephesus) with the Macedonian collection in hand.¹⁹ The possibility of a winter stay in Corinth (16:6) would depend on the time of his arrival at Corinth. If he arrived in the late fall, travel to Jerusalem would have to wait until spring, since sea travel was suspended in the winter.²⁰

How long a period of time did Paul anticipate would pass before he returned to Corinth to oversee the collection's conveyance to Jerusalem? In 1 Cor 16:8, he indicates that he would stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, that is, until sometime in the spring. Unfortunately, we have no reliable evidence to tell us how long Pentecost was from the time that he wrote 1 Corinthians.²¹ It could have been a few months, but was probably longer. Obviously, Paul would want to give the Corinthians sufficient time to accumulate funds week by week, as he had instructed them in 1 Cor 16:2.

Regardless, some time following Pentecost, Paul left Ephesus and arrived in Macedonia according to the plan laid out in 1 Cor 16:5-8. Upon his arrival, he found that the Macedonian collection had barely (if at all) begun. He consequently decided to stay in Macedonia to help with the collection there, before going on the Corinth. In order to inspire the Macedonians to complete their collection, Paul made his boast about the Corinthian efforts in 9:2 ("Achaia has been ready since last year"), assuming that the Corinthians had followed his previous instructions (1 Cor 16:2). Meanwhile, since Paul had not been in communication with Corinth in some time, he wanted to make certain that the Corinthian collection was ready. Consequently, in order to avoid the same predicament in Achaia that he had encountered in Macedonia, he wrote the letter now found in 2 Cor 9, and dispatched it with "the brothers" (9:3). If by some chance the collection in Corinth was not ready, then "the brothers" would do what they could to correct the situation. As he said in 9:5:

So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you, and get things ready in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised . . .

Apparently this is what actually occurred.

When "the brothers" arrived, they found the situation in Corinth similar to that which Paul had encountered in Macedonia. The collection was not ready. As a result, "the brothers" remained in Corinth for a while to get the project underway. They then returned to Paul in Macedonia. One of the brothers was probably Titus, credited (in chapter 8) for getting the collection started. Following the completion of the Macedonian collection (2 Cor 8:2-6), Paul sent Titus with two brothers to Corinth (along with 2 Cor 8) to complete the Achaian collection prior to his own arrival there.

All this implies the letter sequence 1 Cor 16, 2 Cor 9, and finally 2 Cor 8, with the allusion to the collection in Romans coming last of all.

¹⁹In 2 Cor 2:26 (in Paul's last letter to Corinth, the letter of reconciliation), Paul mentions the itinerary in reverse: "I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on to Judea." This was a later, revised version of the plan, following Paul's own visit to Corinth, after which he probably returned to Ephesus.

²⁰Between October and March, sea travel was suspended as too risky; see Rapske *Acts*.

²¹Nor do we know the date of 1 Corinthians; most would place it in late 53 or early 54.

Comment*The Editors*

Further support for this scenario may be found in William O Walker Jr's essay identifying Apollos [leader of a rival faction at Corinth] and Timothy [a close associate of Paul] as the two unnamed "brothers" 2 Cor 8:18-24. The election of Apollos by the Corinthians satisfied the doubts of some (reflected in 2 Cor) as to Paul's competence or honesty, and allowed the collection to proceed. This explains why 2 Cor 8, noted by commentators as the more positive of the two collection letters, is also the second in order of composition. 2 Cor 8 represents a problem solved.

Finally, may not the action of Paul's editors, in placing the awkward 2 Cor 9 after the serene 2 Cor 8, be analogous to their placing the contentious 2 Cor 10-13 after the more collegial 2 Cor 1-7, in both cases presenting the happier material first?

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