

REVISED and EXPANDED EDITION

PAIN
AND
PARADOX
IN
2 CORINTHIANS

THE TRANSFORMATIVE
FUNCTION of
STRENGTH in WEAKNESS

B. G. WHITE

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A CRISIS IN THE INTERPRETATION OF 2 CORINTHIANS

‘PAUL NEVER SPOKE OTHER THAN AS A PASTOR.’¹ While this claim by Dunn may be overstated, Paul’s deep interest in his communities – not least his effort to see others transformed by his gospel concerning Jesus Christ – has been a recent point of scholarly emphasis.² The apostle carries an undeniable ‘anxiety for all the churches’ (2 Cor 11:28).³ Nonetheless, in studies that focus on 2 Corinthians, Paul is depicted in a manner that is not easily reconciled with this portrayal: he is so self-focused, stern, and defensive that one might wonder what has happened to him. Interpreters point to the Corinthians, who are rebelling against Paul’s leadership due to the claims of opponents that he is weak in appearance and speech (e.g., 2 Cor 10:10).⁴ In response, Paul is widely understood to offer a ‘defense’ of the apostolic ministry.⁵ He even formulates a ‘rhetorical flourish’ to turn

¹James D. G. Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 626.

²Richard Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 6; John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015), 573–74; Brian S. Rosner, Andrew S. Malone, and Trevor J. Burke, eds., *Paul as Pastor* (New York: T&T Clark, 2017), xi; Tom Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (London: SPCK, 2018), 404–5.

³Unless stated otherwise, the translations of NT texts are mine and based upon NA28. Translations of classical sources follow the Loeb Classical Library where possible.

⁴E.g., Dieter Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians*, SNTW (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 1–10; Jerry Sumney, *Identifying Paul’s Opponents: The Question of Method in 2 Corinthians* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 9–12.

⁵See, e.g., Timothy Savage, *Power Through Weakness: Paul’s Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians*, SNTSMS 86 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 99; John T. Fitzgerald, *Cracks in an Earthen Vessel: An Examination of the Catalogues of Hardships in the Corinthian Correspondence*, SBLDS 99 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 1988), 160; Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians: From Biblical Text to Contemporary Life*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 21; Hans Dieter Betz, *Der Apostel Paulus und die sokratische Tradition*:

the tables: his experience of the strength in weakness paradox.⁶ This paradox possesses both literary and theological dimensions,⁷ and it is presented using a variety of closely related terms. Paul refers to his possession of the ‘treasure [θησαυρός] in jars of clay [ὄστράκινος σκευός]’ (2 Cor 4:7), his experience of receiving the ‘sentence of death [θάνατος]’ only to be saved by ‘the God who raises [ἐγείρω] the dead [νεκρός]’ (2 Cor 1:8-11), or his revelation that ‘power [δύναμις] is perfected in weakness [ἀσθένεια]’ (2 Cor 12:9).⁸ In most cases, one could minimally understand Paul’s paradox to be two opposed realities that are simultaneously true.⁹ This includes 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, where the paradox is widely seen as the ‘summit’ of 2 Corinthians.¹⁰ It proclaims that Paul experiences divine power in his weakness: ‘when I am weak, then I am strong’ (2 Cor 12:10). However, as I show below, interpreters rarely develop the paradox’s potential implications for the Corinthian community despite its prominence in Paul’s

Eine exegetische Untersuchung zu seiner Apologie 2 Korinther 10–13, BHT 45 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1972), 132.

⁶Thomas D. Stegman, *Second Corinthians*, CCSS (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 250. Also Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994), 35–68, and Fredrick J. Long, *Ancient Rhetoric and Paul’s Apology: The Compositional Unity of 2 Corinthians*, SNTSMS 131 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 230.

⁷The context will generally indicate whether I am using the term ‘paradox’ to refer to one dimension or the other. As the study progresses, my analysis is increasingly theological. See esp. 3.4.3.

⁸See 2.4.1.1 for further discussion on why passages that lack the *δυν-* or *ἀσθεν-* word groups can be read as examples of the strength in weakness paradox.

⁹Gerhard Hotze, *Paradoxien bei Paulus: Untersuchungen zu einer elementaren Denkform in seiner Theologie*, Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen 33 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1997), 27–30, 35. Also Edmund B. Keller, *Some Paradoxes of Paul* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1974), 11 and Karl A. Plank, ‘Confronting the Unredeemed World: A Paradoxical Paul and His Modern Critics,’ *Anglican Theological Review* 67, no. 2 (April 1985): 127–36 [131]. This definition is a slightly developed version of the definition often given to a literary or theological paradox. For instance, A.G. Lee in his introduction to Cicero’s *Paradoxa Stoicorum* (London: MacMillan, 1953): ‘The word [paradox] is applied to a statement “seemingly self-contradictory or absurd, though possibly well-founded or essentially true”’ (p. ix). For more on rhetorical paradox in antiquity, see Hotze, *Paradoxien*, 48–59. More generally, see Henning Schröer, *Die Denkform der Paradoxalität als theologisches Problem. Eine Untersuchung zu Kierkegaard und der neueren Theologie als Beitrag zur theologischen Logik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), 28.

¹⁰Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1962), 451. Also e.g., P. J. Gräbe, ‘The All-Surpassing Power of God through the Holy Spirit in the Midst of Our Broken Earthly Existence: Perspectives on Paul’s Use of Dynamis in 2 Corinthians,’ *NeoT* 28, no. 1 (1994): 147–56 [150]; Savage, *Weakness*, 1; Hafemann, *Corinthians*, 465. For more on the paradox’s occurrence throughout 2 Corinthians, see 1.3 and 2.4.1.

argument. In fact, Paul's emphasis on his own experience leads to Hafemann's representative conclusion that the apostle is 'didactic' in 1 Corinthians, but he embraces 'apologetic' in 2 Corinthians.¹¹ This distinction raises the question: is Paul only defending his ministry in 2 Corinthians or is he also actively ministering to the community? If the latter, how might the Corinthians benefit from hearing about Paul's strength in weakness?

To be clear, I do not intend to create a dichotomy between Paul's apologetic impulses and his broader pastoral agenda; in fact, most interpreters rightly conclude that the apostle's defense is meant to build up the Corinthians (e.g., 2 Cor 12:19).¹² But as I explain below, the field continues to classify the material largely as a defense or an exposition of the apostleship and, above all, fails to investigate the overarching framework which Paul's argument is said to serve.¹³ So the question of whether Paul is defending his ministry or actively ministering is a matter of penetrating to the *purpose* of 2 Corinthians. There are undeniable points of defense and rebuke (e.g., 2 Cor 3:1-3; 11:1-6); nonetheless, my project considers whether Paul moves beyond these elements – whether he consoles, instructs, and explains how Christ redeems the community's brokenness. In this sense, I consider whether 2 Corinthians speaks more *directly* and *deeply* to the community than previously thought. To grasp the significance of this focus, one must further consider 2 Corinthians scholarship, where the apologetic reading forms a paradigm that permeates the field.¹⁴

1.1 AN APOLOGETIC PAUL: THE PARADIGM OF 2 CORINTHIANS STUDIES

The material constituting 2 Corinthians is typically described as 'explosive' and 'incendiary'.¹⁵ After discussing a variety of issues in 1 Corinthians, it

¹¹Hafemann, *Corinthians*, 29.

¹²See, e.g., Margaret Thrall, *II Corinthians 8–13*, vol. 2, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 860–61; Stegman, *Corinthians*, 282; Hafemann, *Corinthians*, 487.

¹³See 1.1 below. For further discussion, see 5.5.3.

¹⁴The language of 'paradigm,' 'anomaly,' and 'crisis' in this chapter are borrowed from Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 35–65.

¹⁵E.g., Calvin J. Roetzel, *2 Corinthians*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 13. Savage prefers 'offensive' (*Weakness*, 99).

is commonly held that the conflict between Paul and Corinth escalates due to two events: an offense committed against Paul's authority that pains both apostle and community (2 Cor 2:1-7; 7:5-16) and the arrival of a mysterious group of opponents labelled 'super-apostles' (2 Cor 11:5).¹⁶ Barth describes the dominant approach to 2 Corinthians with the quip that the letter is the 'harassed, long-drawn-out sigh' of a beleaguered apostle.¹⁷ The Corinthians are in danger of abandoning Paul, and he appears to respond with a series of crisis arguments, goading the Corinthians to re-affirm their commitment (e.g., 2 Cor 6:10-13; 12:14-15). This view is so influential that *none* of the major interpreters of the last century fail to characterize the material as largely or wholly apologetic. The only exception are those interpreters – headed by Gorman and Stegman – who take the material to be an exposition of the apostleship, where Paul explains his Christ-like behaviour and tries to instill it in Corinth.¹⁸ But for a variety of reasons, not least being that they remain fixated on Paul's experience, these interpreters do not escape the prevailing paradigm.¹⁹ This uniformity of opinion allows Bultmann to conclude that 'the only question of introduction that needs mentioning concerns the situation from which 2 Corinthians was written.'²⁰ Plummer insists that Paul's focus is 'plain enough' and 'sure ground': he deals with a 'very serious

¹⁶See, e.g., C. K. Barrett, 'Ο ΑΔΙΚΗΣΑΣ (2 Cor. 7.12),' in *Essays on Paul* (London: SPCK, 1982) 108–17; Margaret Thrall, *II Corinthians 1–7*, vol. 1, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 61–69; L.L. Welborn, *An End to Enmity: Paul and the "Wrongoer" of Second Corinthians*, BZNW 185 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 23–211.

¹⁷Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 5th ed. (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1929), 241. In German: the 'erschütternder langgezogener Seufzer.'

¹⁸Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 1–8; 268–303; Thomas Stegman, *The Character of Jesus: The Linchpin to Paul's Argument in 2 Corinthians*, AnBib 158 (Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2005), 304; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, BNTC (London: A&C Black, 1973), 243; Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians*, vol. 32A, AB (Garden City: Doubleday, 1995), 42, 44; Jan Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, SP 8 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 1; Sze-Kar Wan, *Power in Weakness* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 15.

¹⁹E.g., Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 202, 239; Stegman, *Character*, 304.

²⁰Rudolf Karl Bultmann, *Second Letter to the Corinthians*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 19. To be fair, Bultmann makes this statement after a brief discussion of the material's purpose. The statement is still significant because Bultmann aligns with the apologetic view yet does not offer a developed discussion on his rationale even as he notes the paradigm's difficulties (p. 18).

crisis' in which 'his Apostolic authority had been opposed.'²¹ More recently, Schmeller states – without critical discussion – that the focus of 2 Corinthians is the 'correct assessment' of Paul's ministry.²²

The confidence in the apologetic reading of 2 Corinthians becomes more surprising given Paul's tender attention to his fractured relationship with Corinth (e.g., 2 Cor 2:1-7; 7:5-16). He expresses his love for the community (2 Cor 2:4) and his regret at the thought of the community being pained (2 Cor 7:8). Although it appears plausible that the Corinthians are in need of more than a verbal drubbing – the pain stemming from Paul's previous visit affected 'every one [πᾶς]' of the Corinthians (2 Cor 2:5) – most interpreters assume that this emotive struggle is identical to the 'godly grief [κατὰ θεὸν λύπη]' (2 Cor 7:5-16).²³ This emotion endured 'only for a while [εἰ καὶ πρὸς ὥραν]' (2 Cor 7:7) and resulted in 'repentance [μετάνοια]' (2 Cor 7:9), thus suggesting that the community's pain quickly ceased. Consequently, the Corinthians are not typically portrayed as a humbled or hurting party; rather, they are rebellious converts who believe they have become 'strong' enough (2 Cor 13:9) to distinguish themselves from their apostle. They accuse Paul of insincerity (2 Cor 1:15-22), a refusal of support (2 Cor 11:7-15), and poor appearance and speech (2 Cor 10:10). Such accusations serve as a key ground of support for the prevailing paradigm.²⁴

A decision to follow the above reading of the Corinthian conflict creates the need to identify and characterize the anonymous opponents who embolden this troubled community. In fact, a whole sub-field of literature on this topic has appeared with key contributions from Georgi, Sumney, and

²¹Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1915), xiv.

²²Thomas Schmeller, *Der Zweite Brief an Die Korinther*, vol. 1, KEK 2/8 (Zürich: Patmos-Verlag, 2010), 17.

²³See, e.g., A.E. Harvey, *Renewal Through Suffering: A Study of 2 Corinthians*, SNTW (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 43–44, and George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 376; Thrall, *Corinthians*, I:490. For further discussion, see 2.1.

²⁴See, e.g., Betz, *Sokratische*, 44–69; Calvin J. Roetzel, 'The Language of War (2 Cor. 10:1-6) and the Language of Weakness (2 Cor. 11.21b-13:10)', *Biblical Interpretation* 17 (2009): 77–99 [78–81]; Lars Aejmelaeus, *Schwachheit als Waffe: Die Argumentation des Paulus im Tränenbrief* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 11–46; Paul Duff, *Moses in Corinth: The Apologetic Context of 2 Corinthians 3* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 1–17.

Welborn.²⁵ The opponents are typically read as either law-touting Judaizers, super-spiritual teachers, or Gnostic philosophers, but a clear consensus has not yet emerged.²⁶ Nonetheless, these mysterious individuals are a focus for discussion regarding the tone changes and literary breaks found throughout 2 Corinthians.²⁷ My analysis of these issues occurs later,²⁸ but a common response to the literary integrity problem is Bornkamm's proposal that the canonical letter is a series of separate documents (later joined by an editor) that originate from different phases in the conflict: 2 Corinthians 2:14–6:13; 7:2–4 (an early, subtle apology); 10:1–13:14 (the harsh, painful letter); 1:1–2:13; 7:5–16 (a later, reconciliatory letter).²⁹ A determining characteristic of each letter relates to Paul's engagement with the opponents – in the subtle apology, for instance, Paul 'speaks with clear superiority,' whereas he appears in the painful letter in 'an almost hopeless position.'³⁰ Alongside of these arguments is an increasing number of unity theories, led by Vegge, Witherington, and Long, who believe that 2 Corinthians is rhetorically coherent even if it contains some disparate sections.³¹ This conclusion, however, is reached in the confines of an apologetic reading: Paul's rhetoric is formulated to 'persuade.'³²

All of the above must be understood with respect to the summit of the material in 2 Corinthians, which is – as noted previously – Paul's experience of strength in weakness. The existence of any 'summit' in 2 Corinthians is notable not least because the material is typically understood to be totally

²⁵Georgi, *Opponents*, 1–10; Sumney, *Opponents*, 1–18; Welborn, *Wrongdoer*, 1–52.

²⁶See the excellent overview of the various options in Sumney, *Opponents*, 15–42. I provide further discussion on these options in 5.1.2.

²⁷Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005), 51, suggests that there is a connection between the purpose of 2 Corinthians and how one understands the integrity problem—if Paul is defending himself, then how the canonical letter is partitioned will be based upon the nature of the conflict and its participants.

²⁸See 2.4.2. For the time being, I do not assume a particular position on the issue.

²⁹Günther Bornkamm, 'History of the Origin of the So-Called Second Letter to the Corinthians,' *NTS* 8, no. 3 (1962): 258–64 [258–61]. See the excellent summary of partition theories in Thrall, *Corinthians*, I:3–48.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 260.

³¹Ivar Vegge, *2 Corinthians – a Letter about Reconciliation: A Psychagogical, Epistolographical, and Rhetorical Analysis*, WUNT 239 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 389. Witherington, *Corinth*, 69–77; Long, *Rhetoric*, 1–16. See 2.4.4 for further discussion.

³²Witherington, *Corinthians*, 145.

disparate, as suggested by the prevalence of partition theories. Yet interpreters continue to return to the meta-theme of strength in weakness, which occurs in various forms that coalesce upon Paul's experience of divine power in weakness.³³ The theme is not limited to a particular partition, and it incorporates several of the apostle's climactic statements from across the material: the possession of the 'treasure in jars of clay' (2 Cor 4:7); his description of 'receiving the sentence of death' only to be saved by 'the God who raises the dead' (2 Cor 1:8-11); and the assertion 'when I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Cor 12:10). However, interpreters typically place a chasm between these experiences and the attitude of the Corinthians. Not only do the community's beliefs and values contradict Paul's argument – they indulge in boasting (2 Cor 11:21b), demand references (2 Cor 3:1), obsess about honour (2 Cor 10:12) – the apostle never seems to explicitly relate his experiences to the community's.³⁴ God's power is not meant to comfort the Corinthians; rather, it confronts them with the authority of Paul's apostolic call. Despite the seemingly formative nature of strength in weakness for Paul, some interpreters describe this experience as a paradox without qualifying what they mean by this term.³⁵ Still others – such as Heckel and Hotze – conclude that Paul's experience of strength in weakness is an *equivocation*.³⁶ One might say that its significance lies merely in its ironic take on the will to power: Paul is the superior apostle, even if he is weak. Consequently, the strength in weakness paradox is resoundingly 'offensive'.³⁷ The Corinthians must embrace Paul's superiority, willing themselves to reconciliation, or else reap the consequences of apostasy (e.g., 2 Cor 13:5).³⁸

³³E.g., Savage, *Weakness*, 187–90, and Harvey, *Renewal*, 104. See 2.4.1 for a thorough justification of reading the paradox beyond the occurrence of *δύω*- and *ἄσθεν*- words.

³⁴Brian Dodd, *Paul's Paradigmatic "I": Personal Example as Literary Strategy*, JSNTS 177 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 30; Hafemann, *Corinthians*, 466; Thrall, *Corinthians*, II:831; Fitzgerald, *Cracks*, 206.

³⁵See, e.g., Savage, *Weakness*, 16; Guthrie, *Corinthians*, 249; Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 268–303.

³⁶Ulrich Heckel, *Kraft in Schwachheit: Untersuchungen zu 2. Kor 10–13*, WUNT 56 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 115; Hotze, *Paradoxien*, 218–19.

³⁷Savage, *Power*, 99.

³⁸So David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, NAC 29 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 545: The Corinthians must 'conduct a spiritual audit on themselves to see how they check out as Christians.' Also see Schmeller, *Korinther*, I:365–66, and Harris, *Corinthians*, 924.

In summary, it is evident that the interpretation of 2 Corinthians involves a variety of interconnected issues – the community’s pain, the opponents, the history of composition, and the strength in weakness paradox – all of which presently contribute to the sense that Paul is delivering a defense or an exposition of his ministry. This paradigm is too widespread for a focused study to truly endanger it, and it is so entrenched that it is difficult to envision how a larger study could unravel it. However, as I demonstrate in the following sub-section, the confident and rapid assertions of the field have rendered it vulnerable to the charge of offering a selective reading of the material.³⁹ This is most evident in textual anomalies found across 2 Corinthians.

1.2 ANOMALIES IN THE PARADIGM

An immediate point of resistance to the prevailing paradigm comes at the beginning of 2 Corinthians: Paul does not refer to the opponents nor to the Corinthians’ pride. Instead, the Corinthians are portrayed as those who ‘patiently endure [ἐν ὑπομονῇ]’ the ‘same sufferings [αὐτῶν παθημάτων]’ as Paul (2 Cor 1:6b). Far from the combative apostle, Paul states that he suffers for the Corinthians’ ‘comfort and salvation [παρακλήσεως καὶ σωτηρίας]’ (2 Cor 1:6a). This proclamation becomes even more confusing for the prevailing paradigm if one accepts that, like the rest of Paul’s corpus, the thanksgiving is programmatic for the material generally.⁴⁰ Of course, many interpreters conclude that 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 is the beginning of a conciliatory letter that was written at the end of the conflict between Paul and Corinth (i.e., 2 Cor 1:1–2:4; 7:5-16).⁴¹ A key theme of this document, however, is said to be the resolution of the Corinthians’ pain – so why does Paul write as though the community is suffering?

³⁹While the *origin* of the prevailing paradigm is an important issue, I am far more concerned with its present *existence*. If I had to identify its starting point in critical scholarship, I would suggest Betz’s *Sokratische*, esp. 44–69. But it clearly has its roots in prior scholarship (cf., e.g., Plummer, *Corinthians*, xiv).

⁴⁰E.g., Rom 1:1-5; Gal 1:1; P.T. O’Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul*, NovT-Sup 49 (Leiden: Brill), 1–10.

⁴¹For more on this explanation, see 2.4.4.

Related to this issue are two studies by Welborn concerning the pain created by Paul's previous visit and letter (2 Cor 2:1-7; 7:5-16). The first considers Paul's argument in light of the ancient 'pathetic proofs,' where a rhetor attempts to 'implant conviction' with respect to the emotions.⁴² Welborn concludes that Paul's series of self-portrayals, in which he experiences a shift in his emotions (2 Cor 1:8-11; 7:5-16), are meant to communicate to the Corinthians that they can experience this same transformation in Christ.⁴³ Welborn elsewhere contextualizes Paul's discussion of the Corinthians' pain with the methods of ancient psychagogy, suggesting that the apostle creates an 'emotional therapy' for the Corinthians.⁴⁴ He argues that rather than pushing the community to overcome their pain, the apostle points to Christ's suffering and passion, which sanctifies a certain form of pain (2 Cor 7:10) and allows it to have a constructive role within the community (2 Cor 7:11).⁴⁵ The combined effect of Welborn's studies is the emergence of a new dimension to Paul's response – his comforting of the community's pain. This raises many questions about the interpretation of 2 Corinthians: might Paul's argument about strength in weakness be more related to the issue of pain and less about his apostolic credentials? How can one be certain that the community's pain is ongoing (cf. 2 Cor 7:8)? Could Paul's comforting agenda be expanded beyond 2 Corinthians 1:1–2:13; 7:5-16? While Welborn intentionally limits the scope of his arguments, his conclusions are still more than enough to raise questions about the broader interpretation of 2 Corinthians even if he does not choose to pursue them. In this way, the paradigm arguably exerts its influence: those studies which raise serious questions about the paradigm's veracity are left to operate within its bounds.

There are only a couple of voices that have openly questioned the modern reading of 2 Corinthians. Paul often turns autobiographical in

⁴²Laurence L. Welborn, 'Paul's Appeal to the Emotions in 2 Corinthians 1.1–2.13; 7.5–16,' *JSNNT* 82 (June 2001): 31–60 [34].

⁴³*Ibid.*, 58–59.

⁴⁴L.L. Welborn, 'Paul and Pain: Paul's Emotional Therapy in 2 Corinthians 1.1–2.13; 7.5–16 in the Context of Ancient Psychagogic Literature,' *NTS* 57, no. 4 (October 2011): 547–70 [547–48]. Also see Welborn, *Enmity*, 43–52.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 569–71.

delivering his strength in weakness argument, and generally, such discourses have been viewed as apologetic tools.⁴⁶ But through the work of Ellington and Stegman, Paul's strength in weakness discourses are re-envisioned as hortatory passages.⁴⁷ The most direct assault to date on the current paradigm is found in Ellington's article on Paul's use of first-person pronouns in 2 Corinthians 10–13, where it is argued that Paul's experience of strength in weakness is instructive for the Corinthians through their participation in Christ (e.g., 2 Cor 13:5).⁴⁸ The difficulty, however, with the approach of Ellington and Stegman is that they do not analyze Paul's strength in weakness argument with a focus on its tangible benefits for the Corinthians. Most importantly, they do not propose an alternative situation which explains why the Corinthians are weak and need to learn from Paul's experience in the first place. Thus, it is easier for interpreters to continue viewing these discourses as merely self-referential and apologetic.

Perhaps the most significant anomaly is that Paul himself draws the present paradigm into question in 2 Corinthians 12:19: 'Have you been supposing all along that we have been defending ourselves [ὁμῖν ἀπολογούμεθα] to you? It is . . . all for your upbuilding [ὕμῶν οἰκοδομῆς], beloved.' To be fair, there is a level of irony here: Paul certainly defends his ministry in 2 Corinthians.⁴⁹ Yet, as many commentators suggest, this verse ends with the clarification that Paul's defense serves the broader goal of deepening the Corinthians' commitment to Christ.⁵⁰ This concession from Paul is not, however, developed further in the literature, and it is generally overlooked by modern interpreters – if Paul says he is not simply defending his ministry, why is the material so often characterized

⁴⁶See the excellent literature review in George Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography: Toward a New Understanding*, SBLDS 73 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 75–83.

⁴⁷Dustin Watson Ellington, "'Imitate Me": Participation in Christ and Paul's Vocational Model for the Church in 1–2 Corinthians' (Ph.D. thesis, Duke University, 2004), 144–256; Thomas Stegman, *The Character of Jesus: The Linchpin to Paul's Argument in 2 Corinthians*, AnBib 158 (Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2005), 304–76.

⁴⁸Dustin Ellington, 'Not Applicable to Believers? The Aims and Basis of Paul's 'I' in 2 Corinthians 10–13,' *JBL* 131, no. 2 (2012): 325–40 [339–40].

⁴⁹E.g., 2 Cor 3:1–3; 10:7; 11:7–11.

⁵⁰Mark Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Nottingham: Apollos, 2014), 466–68; Guthrie, *Corinthians*, 616–18; Harris, *Corinthians*, 894–96.

in this way?⁵¹ Paul's remark points to the possibility that, enveloping his defense, there is an agenda that has yet to be defined and explored.

Finally, in the latter stages of 2 Corinthians, Paul becomes more explicit in his engagement with the Corinthian community: "Test yourselves [ἐαυτοὺς πειράζετε]. Or do you not understand this about yourselves: that Jesus Christ is in you [Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν] – unless you fail to meet the test!" (2 Cor 13:5). This is arguably not the kind of conclusion that one would expect for a thoroughgoing *apologia*, whether it is the end of a unified letter or the harsh letter of 2 Corinthians 10–13. There is also the variety of inherently transformative terms and phrases that Paul employs throughout the material – his climactic interest in grace (2 Cor 12:9), the focus on inner renewal (2 Cor 1:8-9; 4:16), and Paul's calls for reciprocity (2 Cor 5:15; 6:11-13; 12:15; 13:8-9). The placement of the latter is especially interesting given that it often comes immediately after a strength in weakness discourse (e.g., 2 Cor 6:11-13; 12:15). As mentioned above, this is typically explained by Paul's defense: if the Corinthians become convinced of Paul's superiority, they will choose to reciprocate his love for them.⁵² But is it possible that Paul's strength in weakness discourses reveal Christ's redemption of human weakness – for a community which appears to have Jesus 'in them' – and thus help the Corinthians to reconcile with their apostle?

The questions produced by these textual anomalies serve as a series of bad omens for the prevailing paradigm of 2 Corinthians. While this paradigm offers legitimate insights, including the community's significant objections to Paul and the apostle's need to vindicate himself, it appears at risk of deeming these largely circumstantial issues to be the centre of gravity in 2 Corinthians. The observations above suggest that the Corinthians may have a more inward, emotive problem (of which their rebellion against Paul is simply a symptom) and Paul's response, girded with a series of self-referential defenses, climaxes in the theological task of describing the implications of the 'Christ . . . in you' (2 Cor 13:5). It

⁵¹E.g., Savage, *Weakness*, 11, 187–90; Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 202; Hafemann, *Corinthians*, 487; Witherington, *Corinthians*, 333.

⁵²See esp. 4.5.1 for further discussion.

seems advisable, if not necessary, that some solutions be sought for this emerging dilemma. Of course, possessing a plethora of questions is not new in the study of this genuinely difficult material. More than a century ago, Plummer was comparing the interpretation of 1 Corinthians with that of 2 Corinthians by likening it to ‘the passage from the somewhat intricate paths of a carefully laid-out park to the obscurity of a pathless forest. . . . The forest is not only obscure, it is thick with roots which trip one up.’⁵³ Here Plummer is referring largely to questions created by the literary integrity problem in 2 Corinthians. One could argue, however, that the dominant apologetic reading strains the material and only furthers the degree of interpretive difficulty. The field, then, has moved into a subtle crisis in which the ‘awareness of anomaly’ is significant, but not dominant.⁵⁴ The work of Ellington, Stegman, and Welborn has brought the field to an early staging ground, where it could move in a new direction, but it is one that has yet to be fully defined, let alone proven. In order to determine whether the prospect of a paradigm shift is real – where a study reaches conclusions that are ‘sufficiently unprecedented’ so as to ‘leave all sorts of problems’ for researchers – one needs to consider the work completed on the strength in weakness paradox.⁵⁵ If there are problems with the prevailing interpretations of 2 Corinthians, it is likeliest to be present within the theological substance of Paul’s response to the community.

1.3 READINGS OF STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS IN 2 CORINTHIANS

Although any study of 2 Corinthians must acknowledge the strength in weakness theme, the following survey is focused upon those works that are devoted to this theme (listed in chronological order). My summaries and appraisals remain very brief to allow for deeper engagement in the exegetical chapters of this book.

⁵³Plummer, *Corinthians*, xiii.

⁵⁴Kuhn, *Revolutions*, 66.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 10.

1.3.1 David Alan Black (1984)

David Alan Black represents the first comprehensive study of Paul's ἄσθεν- language. He argues that Paul generally uses these terms in 'non-literal' ways (i.e., not referring to physical weakness), especially as a 'sign' not only of 'humanity but of his apostleship.'⁵⁶ In 2 Corinthians, Paul views his weaknesses as 'a means to the realization of God's strength.'⁵⁷ Black summarizes Paul's use of ἄσθεν- terms with three headings: 'Weakness as a sign of humanity,' 'Weakness as a showplace of God's might,' and 'Weakness in the Church.'⁵⁸ For my purposes, it is notable that Black interprets weakness language in 2 Corinthians 10–13 as a crucial part of 'the apostle's arguments against his Corinthian opponents.'⁵⁹

Black's survey is certainly helpful for gaining insight on Paul's use of a particular word group and, in this sense, it is a valuable reference work. Yet his decision to focus only on those passages which include an ἄσθεν- word seems limiting when crucial metaphors, such as the 'treasure in jars of clay' (2 Cor 4:7), may be relevant to the strength in weakness paradox.⁶⁰ Perhaps the greatest issue, however, is the vague analytical work. For instance, in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, how is God's strength 'realized' in weakness – is it realized in one's knowledge, behaviour, or both? How is this apparent contradiction even possible? Black provides thorough exegesis, but he is not explicit about its theological significance.

1.3.2 Anthony Harvey (1996)

A.E. Harvey's thesis offers perspective on the lived reality behind 2 Corinthians: he argues that Paul's autobiographical discourses on suffering were shaped by the near-death experience in Asia (2 Cor 1:8-11). Here Paul was saved from death and consequently changed his views about suffering.⁶¹

⁵⁶David Alan Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness* (New York: Peter Lang, 1984), 170.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 171.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 228–53.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 235.

⁶⁰The need to expand the breadth of analysis is implicitly recognized by Savage, *Power*, 164–86, and Kar Yong Lim, "The Sufferings of Christ Are Abundant in Us": A Narrative Dynamics Investigation of Paul's Sufferings in 2 Corinthians, *LNTS* 399 (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2009), 40–157. See 2.4.1 for further discussion.

⁶¹Harvey, *Renewal*, 21–27.

Prior to this experience, such as in 1 Corinthians, Harvey contends that Paul viewed suffering as a terrible reality (e.g., 1 Cor 15:30-32). But in 2 Corinthians, it becomes an experience that brings ‘the sufferer closer to Christ.’⁶² This provides a clear solution for the origin of Paul’s distinctive strength in weakness language and distinguishes the apostle’s view of suffering as one that is ‘without precedent in any Jewish or pagan sources known to us, and is hard to parallel in . . . any other major religion.’⁶³

Although Harvey’s thesis can be challenged on multiple points – even in 2 Corinthians, Paul appears fearful of certain forms of suffering (e.g., 2 Cor 2:4; 7:10) – it does provide a helpful counterpoint to rhetorical studies which suggest that the strength in weakness paradox was utilized purely for persuasion.⁶⁴ The irony is that Harvey envisions a deeply personal dimension to Paul’s argument – the volume is titled *Renewal Through Suffering* – yet he does not develop the sense in which Paul experiences this *renewal*. Harvey seems more interested in the significance of 2 Corinthians for the history of religions and, ultimately, he believes Paul’s change of heart on suffering is apologetic: it defeats Corinthian claims about his ministry.⁶⁵

1.3.3 Timothy Savage (1996)

Perhaps the most widely read volume in the field, Timothy B. Savage begins by highlighting the importance of 2 Corinthians for what it means to be ‘a minister of Christ.’⁶⁶ He pursues this interest through a broad contextualization of the strength in weakness theme. He surveys Greco-Roman attitudes on status, self-display, eloquence, and boasting.⁶⁷ This leads to the conclusion that Paul’s converts were highly influenced by their surroundings, thus suggesting that the conflict in 2 Corinthians is caused by two opposing ‘worldviews.’⁶⁸ Savage then explores Paul’s

⁶²Ibid., 129.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴See nn31–32 above.

⁶⁵Ibid., 35–46.

⁶⁶Savage, *Power*, 1.

⁶⁷Ibid., 19–102.

⁶⁸Ibid., 185.

sufferings in 2 Corinthians 1–4, arguing that the apostle overturns the cultural consensus on every issue mentioned above. In this sense, Paul’s ministry is a countercultural engagement in which weakness represents ‘the power of God’ in its ‘mightiest expression.’⁶⁹

The singular achievement of Savage’s work is a historically and culturally nuanced reading of Paul’s strength in weakness argument. Nonetheless, Savage does not truly advance our understanding of the argument’s *theological* dimensions. His interest in Paul’s ministry also brings the prevailing research paradigm into sharp focus: what becomes significant about Paul is his countercultural polemics, which represent a unique worldview. Although Savage repeatedly describes Paul as a minister of Christ, one could say that this minister only *discusses* his ministry with the Corinthians and never truly *ministers*. This leads back to one of the questions posed earlier in this chapter: is there some sense in which Paul’s argument benefits the community beyond simply convincing them of his superiority?

1.3.4 Raymond Pickett (1997)

Utilizing the sociology of knowledge, Raymond Pickett’s work represents an early breakthrough in modern 2 Corinthians studies. Pickett suggests that interpreters move beyond the *ideas* represented by the cross of Jesus to ‘the social norms and values which it supports.’⁷⁰ He begins in 1 Corinthians before proceeding to 2 Corinthians and argues that Paul uses Jesus’s death to encourage the Corinthians to adopt an attitude of love and service.⁷¹ This leads to Pickett’s conclusion that the Corinthian conflict is ‘fundamentally related to a quandary centred around values.’⁷²

Pickett’s study is helpful because, perhaps for the first time in the modern era, one finds a detailed reading of texts in 2 Corinthians where Paul’s strength in weakness discourses are significant for *the life of the community*. However, Pickett’s conclusions should not be exaggerated: he

⁶⁹Ibid., 189.

⁷⁰Raymond Pickett, *The Cross in Corinth: The Social Significance of the Death of Jesus*, LNTS 143 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 31.

⁷¹Ibid., 126–208.

⁷²Ibid., 183.

situates his reading within the framework of an apology, perhaps because his study is limited to two texts (i.e., 2 Cor 4:7–5:19; 10–13) and lacks sufficient evidence to make a greater claim.⁷³ Although his work does not sufficiently consider how the social realities of the cross relate to Paul's theology, it still raises important questions: could a similar reading be provided elsewhere in 2 Corinthians? If there is a social dimension to Paul's argument, how might this change the way interpreters analyze the material generally? Pickett ruminates on the latter, stating, "There is a sense in which criticisms against [Paul], his reply to these criticisms and his anxiety about the Corinthians' conduct are all interrelated."⁷⁴ Despite this tantalizing suggestion, Pickett does not provide any clear statement on how these agendas might work together.

1.3.5 Michael Gorman (2001)

Michael J. Gorman's contribution represents further movement in Pickett's direction, albeit without the aid of a particular social method. He considers Paul's 'theology of the cross' in each of his letters, arguing that the apostle presents a 'narrative spirituality of the cross' in which readers become more like Jesus in their suffering – the achievement of 'cruciformity.'⁷⁵ In 2 Corinthians, Paul's apology presents a number of virtues exhibited at the cross, such as love and hope, which the Corinthians are to recognize in Paul, who models Christ, and thus adopt these behaviours and attitudes through their own participation with Christ (e.g., 2 Cor 5:15; 12:15).⁷⁶

Much like Pickett, Gorman implies that 2 Corinthians is more than an apology. Yet he remains inconsistent in his analysis, continuing to refer to the material as Paul's defense.⁷⁷ Although Gorman is laudable for his attempt to describe the significance of Jesus's cross with his term

⁷³Ibid., 162.

⁷⁴Ibid., 161.

⁷⁵Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 1–8.

⁷⁶Ibid., 349–67.

⁷⁷Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2017), 287, 291.

‘cruciformity’ – igniting no shortage of interest amongst interpreters⁷⁸ – this term focuses upon the cross rather than the resurrection. This contradicts what appears to be the Pauline case for experiences of strength in weakness: Jesus was crucified in weakness, but he *lives* by the power of God (2 Cor 13:5). Gorman’s oversight leaves his argument open to the charge of theological sadism.⁷⁹ Finally, his insistence that the strength in weakness discourses help individuals in their suffering raises a question from the previous section: is there a specific *context* of suffering to which Paul is responding in 2 Corinthians?

1.3.6. Kar Yong Lim (2009)

The penultimate entry in English-language studies of strength in weakness is Kar Yong Lim’s, which, like Stegman and Ellington, focuses on the question of participation in 2 Corinthians. A difference, however, is that Lim explicitly engages the question of suffering. He adopts a ‘narrative dynamics’ approach in which the ‘story of Jesus’ unites Paul’s suffering discourses and gives them meaning.⁸⁰ In particular, Paul’s suffering aids the ‘apostolic mission’ by acting as ‘a proclamation of the gospel of the crucified Messiah.’⁸¹ This leads Lim to conclude that 2 Corinthians is ‘primarily parenaetic in nature’ in the sense that it presents a cross-focused ministry that the Corinthians must accept in order to truly embrace their crucified Messiah.⁸²

Lim rightly follows in the footsteps of several interpreters by seeing a hortatory function for Paul’s suffering discourses. His approach is also distinctive as it helpfully demonstrates that the text itself – without need of a particular social methodology – holds a special interest in the life of

⁷⁸Not only has Gorman’s textbook on Paul gone to a second edition (cited above), his book entitled *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul’s Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009) has occasioned no less than fifteen published reviews.

⁷⁹Gorman recently recognized some problems in his articulation of ‘cruciformity,’ and he offers a revised articulation in *Participating in Christ: Explorations in Paul’s Theology and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 53–76. However, he is clear that this is not a *retraction* of his previous work and, as such, my concern with his *Cruciformity* book remains the same.

⁸⁰Lim, *Sufferings*, 36.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 197.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 198–99.

the Corinthian community. However, by constantly describing the data as a series of ‘suffering’ discourses, he glosses over their *paradoxical* nature and thus does not fully investigate their theological significance. Instead, he relates these suffering discourses to Paul’s mission, but in doing so, he keeps the prevailing paradigm intact. Paul’s experience of strength in weakness is still largely about his ministry, even if it is indirectly about the Corinthians.

1.3.7 Lisa Bowens (2017)

The most recent full-length publication that focuses on Paul’s strength in weakness comes from Lisa M. Bowens, who offers a detailed reading of 2 Corinthians 12:1-10. She focuses on establishing a fresh background for Paul’s ascent to paradise – a spiritual war concerning the knowledge of God (2 Cor 10:3-6).⁸³ She suggests that it is largely the messenger of Satan (2 Cor 12:7), rather than Paul’s opponents, who occasions Paul’s account of the ascent to paradise.⁸⁴ The apostle’s memory of the strength in weakness paradox reassures him that God brings ‘victory in the cosmic conflict and ultimately wins over all opposition, both human and suprahuman.’⁸⁵

Bowens’s study has many merits and, within the sub-field above, her argument is the most focused. She echoes previous interpreters when she concludes that Paul’s experiences of strength in weakness are an *example* to the Corinthians.⁸⁶ While the guiding metaphor of her study – a cosmic battle – may appear to favor the existing research paradigm, it helpfully de-centers the role of the opponents and places a focus on shared experiences between Paul and the Corinthians. However, the parameters of Bowens’s study prevent her from developing a wider reading of 2 Corinthians, especially regarding the details of the paradox and its benefit to the community. In this sense, the fresh direction outlined by Pickett and developed by Gorman and Lim – that Paul’s discourses are paradigmatic – continues apace, yet it is undeveloped across the material, especially concerning the underlying situation and Paul’s purpose in proclaiming a paradox of strength in weakness.

⁸³Lisa M. Bowens, *An Apostle in Battle: Paul and Spiritual Warfare in 2 Corinthians 12.1-10* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 46–83.

⁸⁴Ibid., 158–59.

⁸⁵Ibid., 221.

⁸⁶Ibid., 216.

1.3.8. *Changing Focus: Parallel Developments in Continental Scholarship*

Alongside the above developments in Anglophone scholarship lies a small body of Continental works that make substantial improvements to our theological understanding of the strength in weakness paradox.⁸⁷ The only English-language work that truly interacts with this body of literature is by Gerald G. O'Collins, who helpfully summarizes the different viewpoints.⁸⁸ According to O'Collins, the 'revelatory' view is concerned with the manifestation of a 'previously hidden power' through the transmission of knowledge.⁸⁹ This means that weakness possesses a 'hermeneutical function' – it reveals power from God that is otherwise unseen.⁹⁰ For instance, the Corinthians chastise Paul for his outward weaknesses (e.g., 2 Cor 10:10), but for the apostle, these inadequacies only draw attention to his possession of Christ's strength, which is found in the heart through faith (e.g., 2 Cor 5:12). The 'ontological' view differs by concerning itself with the 'order of reality,' in which power increases or even initially becomes available 'in the face of "weakness"'.⁹¹ In a sense, then, weakness is a 'pre-requisite' to experiences of God's power.⁹² This suggests that the thrust of the paradox is humility: Paul is humble, and thus receives God's strength (e.g., 2 Cor 12:9b), whereas his opponents' pride prevents it from taking root (e.g., 2 Cor 10:12). A third view is advocated by O'Collins in which the views above are combined: 'under circumstances of "weakness" something happens . . . and others become aware of this new development.'⁹³ Using O'Collins' helpful typology, one can then turn to the major Continental works, many of them in German, to better understand them and classify them.

⁸⁷To be clear, I am using *Continental* to refer to the institutions where these works were completed and their shared interest in the revelatory/ontological distinction.

⁸⁸Gerald G. O'Collins, 'Power Made Perfect in Weakness, 2 Cor. 12:9–10,' *CBQ* 33, no. 4 (October 1971): 528–37.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 528.

⁹⁰Seifrid, *Corinthians*, 454.

⁹¹O'Collins, 'Power,' 528.

⁹²*Ibid.*

⁹³*Ibid.*

1.3.9 Erhardt Güttemanns (1966)

A classic project is offered by Erhardt Güttemanns, who held that the opponents were Gnostic agitators who doubt Paul's legitimacy due to his lack of ecstatic experiences.⁹⁴ Consequently, Paul defends his 'apostolic existence' in 2 Corinthians.⁹⁵ Güttemanns frequently uses the term 'epiphany' to describe the strength in weakness paradox, suggesting that strength *appears* to Paul in the midst of his weaknesses.⁹⁶ This leads Güttemanns to conclude that Paul's boasting in weakness is a language event which represents, not so much a changed lifestyle, but an influx of knowledge that counters the Corinthians' obsession with *gnosis*.⁹⁷

The connection between one's characterization of the conflict in Corinth and how one reads the paradox is more evident in Güttemanns' work than any other work in the field. Although this is also its greatest hurdle: while Güttemanns seems correct to emphasize the issue of knowledge, particularly in light of the opponents' claims (e.g., 2 Cor 10:10), the Gnostic hypothesis has largely been disproven.⁹⁸ Can the revelatory view stand unchanged if our understanding of the Corinthian conflict changes? Equally important is Güttemanns' hesitancy to read the paradox as a *transformative* event for Paul's life. He suggests that boasting is a language event, but this overlooks the wider context of the Fool's Speech, in which Paul draws attention to his experience of power and the way it changes him in tangible ways, including during shipwrecks, hunger, and imprisonment (e.g., 2 Cor 11:22-33).

⁹⁴Erhardt Güttemanns, *Der leidende Apostel und sein Herr* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 155–56.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 165.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 170.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*

⁹⁸See, e.g., Judith L. Kovacs, 'The Archons, the Spirit, and the Death of Christ: Do We Need the Hypothesis of Gnostic Opponents to Explain 1 Cor. 2.6–16?', in *Apocalyptic and the New Testament: Essays in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, ed. Joel Marcus and Marion L. Soards, JSNTSup (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 217–36, and T. E. Klutz, 'Re-Reading 1 Corinthians after Rethinking "Gnosticism,"' *JSNT* 26, no. 2 (2003): 193–216.

1.3.10 Ulrich Heckel (1993)

In another important work, and perhaps the most influential German-language study, Ulrich Heckel begins with a selective survey of Pauline anthropology in order to frame Paul's strength in weakness discourses in 2 Corinthians 10–13.⁹⁹ Like Gütgemanns, he generally takes the revelatory view and even declares that the ontological view resists divine grace by making the reception of power dependent upon human ability and circumstance.¹⁰⁰ Heckel draws attention to the sense in which divine power repeatedly transcends normative evaluations of human worth and competence (e.g., Phil 4:13; 1 Cor 1:25).¹⁰¹ This suggests that the strength in weakness paradox is a 'polar' and one must ultimately 'dissolve' the paradox: Paul is simply referring to his experience from two different perspectives – that of the human and the divine.¹⁰² In this sense, with knowledge of the divine sphere, Paul understands himself to be simultaneously 'strong' and 'weak' (e.g., 2 Cor 12:10). But Heckel concedes that there are cases where weakness is necessary for receiving God's power; namely, individuals must repent and confess their sin before they can receive grace (e.g., 2 Cor 13:4b; 12:9b).¹⁰³ In this sense, Heckel is ultimately a mixed interpreter, offering elements of both the revelatory and ontological frameworks.

Heckel is right to highlight the transcendent character of God's power. But the proposal of polar opposition between the divine and the human separates these spheres of existence when Paul seems to emphasize the aid provided by God *in the midst of* his weakness (cf. 2 Cor 12:9). Even more troubling is the result of Heckel's conceptual framework: the paradox of strength in weakness is dissolved. Could a different model be proposed that better accounts for the intricate relationship between strength and weakness and avoids essentially erasing Paul's paradox *as paradox*? Another area of difficulty is Heckel's disdain for the ontological view, which is followed by his concession that one sometimes admits

⁹⁹Heckel, *Kraft*, 235–88.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 104–5.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 235–88.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 115–16; 121.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, 106.

weakness to receive God's strength. Heckel renders the revelatory and ontological views co-existent, but it is somewhat unclear how these dimensions of the paradox truly complement one another. Furthermore, Heckel often leaves one wondering what a paradoxical experience achieves anthropologically beyond the imparting of heavenly knowledge that enables Paul to defend himself.

1.3.11 Gerhard Hotze (1997)

In a wider study on Pauline paradox, Gerhard Hotze insists that the Lord's power is too transcendent to 'express concretely,' so it is received by faith in the 'inner person.'¹⁰⁴ This leads Hotze to argue that the concrete attitudes referred to in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, such as boasting and contentment, are concessive and purely meant to prevent the paradox from becoming incomprehensible.¹⁰⁵ His view of the paradox is, like Heckel's, concerned with the knowledge needed to understand two tiers of existence: the human and the divine.¹⁰⁶ He maintains that this is the only way to comprehend the paradox.¹⁰⁷

With respect to 2 Corinthians, Hotze's work is largely derivative of Heckel's. However, Hotze presents a stronger dichotomy between the human and the divine, going so far as to suggest that this transcendent paradox cannot be grasped by human actions. This is difficult to accept given that Paul's theology often works inside out, moving from an inward renewal to changed attitudes and behaviours (e.g., Rom 12:1-2). Is there more of a connection between knowledge and behaviour than Hotze envisions? And how would this work paradoxically? Might Hotze's earthly/heavenly dichotomy be misleading?

1.3.12 Victor Nicdao (1997)

Appearing shortly after Hotze's work, Victor S. Nicdao's project represents the only comprehensive engagement of these German-language studies in the English language. His research is focused on the 'relationship'

¹⁰⁴Hotze, *Paradoxien*, 219–20.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 225.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

between strength and weakness, which leads to a survey of sources that includes the German interpreters above.¹⁰⁸ He offers the general conclusion that both the revelatory and ontological views are necessary and they should be judged as complementary rather than opposed.¹⁰⁹ Despite the unique nature of Nicdao's study, he is very brief with his critical analysis and provides little advance in knowledge other than to bring some scholarship into the English language and to summarize the history of research in a comprehensive way. Nicdao's thesis is a valuable reference work, but like Black above, it is limited in its critical utility.

1.3.13 Jan Lambrecht (2001)

Finally, Jan Lambrecht begins with the premise that 'a paradox should not be understood literally.'¹¹⁰ He then argues that because strength in weakness is a component of Paul's everyday life (i.e., 2 Cor 12:7), it involves the coming of real power as opposed to its mere appearance (e.g., 2 Cor 4:16; 6:1-10).¹¹¹ In this sense, Lambrecht represents the ontological view, which is re-inforced in 2 Corinthians 13:4, where he suggests that Paul presents himself as weak in order to receive strength – much like the timeline of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection.¹¹²

Lambrecht rightly draws attention to the Christological basis of the paradox. However, it is difficult to follow his argument when he does not justify his premise that a paradox cannot be understood literally. The paradox may be cumbersome to describe, and thereby one could question its usefulness, but Lambrecht seems to have embraced this perspective far too quickly and offers a reading of strength in weakness that depends heavily on 2 Corinthians 13:4-5 rather than 2 Corinthians 12:9-10. Furthermore, the emphasis on prevenient human weakness creates the

¹⁰⁸Victor S. Nicdao, 'Power in Times of Weakness According to 2 Corinthians 12, 1–10: An Exegetical Investigation of the Relationship between Δύναμις and Ἀσθένεια' (Ph.D. Thesis, KU Leuven, 1997), 683–786.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 853–54.

¹¹⁰Jan Lambrecht, 'Paulus Vermag Alles Door de Kracht van God. Zwakheid En Sterkte,' *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 55, no. 4 (2001): 273–85 [274]. The original reads: 'aen paradox mag men niet letterlijk verstaan.'

¹¹¹Ibid., 281–82.

¹¹²Ibid., 284.

possibility of a new kind of competitiveness in Corinth – instead of a race to the top, it becomes a race to the bottom! Is the ontological view sufficiently sensitive to the situation in Corinth, where Paul says that the community is experiencing pain?

1.3.14 Trends in the Study of Paul's Strength in Weakness Paradox

Following the above survey, it appears that several trends noted in the study of 2 Corinthians generally remain true for analyses devoted to Paul's strength in weakness. A variety of studies do not engage seriously with the paradox and remain totally within the prevailing paradigm. This is brought to a climax in Savage's work, where the Pauline ministry is of only hypothetical relevance to the Corinthians given Paul's self-referential exposition and what is effectively the secondary benefit of delivering a rebuke to the community. The tide begins to turn with the contributions of Pickett, Gorman, and Lim, who tend in the direction of Ellington and Stegman, when each re-thinks some of the material and envisions an exhortative function for Paul's suffering discourses. The irony is that they do not seriously engage the logic or theological significance of the paradox. These contributions also struggle – like those earlier – to remain consistent. Despite having relevant findings, they fail to question the apologetic paradigm. Most importantly, *none* re-visit the setting preceding 2 Corinthians to consider whether the paradigm has led to a selective reading of the evidence. This is even more surprising given that Paul repeatedly discusses the community's pain (2 Cor 2:1-7; 7:5-16). As mentioned above, this is the immediate context of much, or all, of the material,¹¹³ yet even as Gorman and Lim insist that Paul is instructing the community on suffering, they do not comment on the Corinthians' specific experience of suffering (e.g., 2 Cor 1:6-7; 2:1-7). This creates a gap in our understanding of the Corinthian situation and how it relates to Paul's experience of strength in weakness.

Continental scholarship on strength in weakness has a different tendency: it offers a more sustained engagement with the theological

¹¹³See esp. 2.1-2 for consideration of this claim with reference to partition theories.

significance of the paradox, yet this is almost to the exclusion of broader concerns within 2 Corinthians. Their studies of paradox argue for very specific functions related to the attainment of knowledge (the revelatory view) or the necessity of humility (the ontological view). But they do not usually follow Anglophone scholarship in questioning the apologetic paradigm and, even worse, both Hotze and Lambrecht choose – on first principle – to ignore the paradoxical nature of Paul’s argument. This is perhaps the greatest sign of trouble in the field since the very object of study has become a haunted spectre, from which interpreters must flee! It is worth noting that all of the scholars above, especially Hotze and Savage, adhere to the apologetic reading of 2 Corinthians, where the opponents are emphasized and Paul’s response is a defense.¹¹⁴

These observations lead to the initial diagnosis that there is linguistic fragmentation in studies of strength in weakness: Anglophone scholarship usually focuses upon the broader significance of the paradox while Continental studies, most of which are in German, are interested in its theological details. These emphases are complementary, and it is altogether surprising that these two bodies of literature have never cross-pollinated. A better understanding of the paradox could improve one’s overall perspective on 2 Corinthians, and the larger questions of the material could likewise sharpen one’s view on the nature and significance of the paradox. Alongside this is the even deeper problem that, in the modern era, there has yet to be a serious reading of the strength in weakness paradox that begins with the setting of 2 Corinthians and, during the course of the argument, relates its findings to issues concerning the apologetic paradigm. It is in this context that Plummer’s confusion makes a great deal of sense: ‘Over and over again the Apostle seems to be alluding to something which his readers can understand; but we are not always certain that there is any allusion, and we can rarely be certain what the allusion is.’¹¹⁵ More than a missed allusion, the field of 2 Corinthians studies finds itself in a position where the theological

¹¹⁴E.g., Gütgemanns, *Herr*, 155–56; Heckel, *Kraft*, 2; Hotze, *Paradoxien*, 252–54, 178; Lambrecht, ‘Sterkte,’ 276–78.

¹¹⁵Plummer, *Corinthians*, xiii.

core of Paul's response lies unscrutinized vis-à-vis the apostle's larger purpose. One can only conclude that the field lies in crisis. The literature contains only constrained answers to the question: how does Paul build up the Corinthians using his strength in weakness argument (cf. 2 Cor 12:19)? He may defend himself, even identify heavenly knowledge, but the possibility that Paul aids the Corinthians in their weakness is left unconsidered. This study consequently offers a fresh reading of strength in weakness, especially in relation to the Corinthian context of pain (e.g., 2 Cor 2:1-7; 7:5-16).

1.4 RESEARCH APPROACH, OUTLINE, AND AIMS

Given the nature of the analysis above – especially its interest in how Paul's argument about strength in weakness speaks into the life of the community – one might say that I am concerned with the *kerygmatic significance* of 2 Corinthians.¹¹⁶ Like most interpreters, I maintain that the conflict between Paul and his opponents is of special importance. My point of departure lies in my insistence that this conflict places the whole community in the spotlight. Building upon the work of Ellington and Stegman, I consider whether Paul, though he speaks so often of himself, is presenting his experience of strength in weakness as a paradigm for how the Corinthians can be transformed in their experience of pain. This proposal is not unlike Rancière's concept of 'subjectivization,' which insists that communication is an 'in-between dialect' created for a particular discussion.¹¹⁷ Even if a speaker interacts indirectly with an audience, the latter is able – by virtue of their access to the discussion – to render a 'translation' and ponder its personal applicability.¹¹⁸ In practical terms, this means that it would be inadvisable, even pre-judging the material, to begin reading 2 Corinthians with the assumption that Paul's

¹¹⁶The *kerygma* is, of course, the 'proclamation' or 'message' about Jesus Christ (e.g., 1 Cor 2:4; 15:14). Similarly, my arguments intersect, at times, with the concerns of 'Paul as pastor' literature, but I am not motivated or influenced by a vocational agenda. My concerns are exegetical and theological, cf. Michael P. Knowles, *We Preach Not Ourselves: Paul on Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008); James W. Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry According to Paul: A Biblical Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006); Rosner et al., *Paul as Pastor*, 55–70.

¹¹⁷Jacques Rancière, 'Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization,' *October* 61 (1992): 58–64 [58].

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*

autobiographical discourses are largely about his ministry or that there is a special faction in Corinth which receives the majority of Paul's attention. The material is, in its present form, addressed generally to 'the church of God that is at Corinth' (2 Cor 1:1). So this study will focus on the broad implications of Paul's remarks for the Corinthians. It bears repeating that 'every Pauline letter arose, at least in part, from pastoral needs.'¹¹⁹ Whether or not the needs of the Corinthians went beyond a defense of the apostleship is an open question, but this study nonetheless insists that the material be viewed with the whole community as its subject.

The consequence of my focus is that certain issues lie beyond the scope of this study. This includes questions about the opponents' identity which, although they will be addressed later,¹²⁰ must be examined more with a view to determining the opponents' *influence* on the Paul-Corinth relationship than their precise *identity*. Issues of rhetoric that focus more on abstract guidelines for communication than the personal relationship with Corinth will not be rehearsed.¹²¹ Also lying beyond this study is the conversation on Paul's use of the plural pronoun, which has not altered the conclusion that Paul is the chief author of 2 Corinthians.¹²² The goal here is to develop a clear focus on understanding how the Corinthians are transformed by hearing of Paul's experiences; that is, what Rancière calls 'the formation of a one that is not a self but is the relation of a self to an other.'¹²³

Since my exegesis is focused on Paul's strength in weakness argument, including his understanding of 'paradox' and the implications that this holds for the Corinthians, I occasionally utilize the insights of a theological tradition. For instance, in Chapter Five, I use Susannah Ticciati's explanation of Augustine's 'agency rules' to illuminate the manner in which Paul envisions God's power competing with human power and, at other times, transcending human power and thus transforming it. When I do this, I am not claiming an Augustinian reading of the Pauline text,

¹¹⁹Harris, *Corinthians*, 1.

¹²⁰See 5.1.2.

¹²¹See nn31–32 above.

¹²²See the excellent overview in Thrall, *Corinthians*, 1:105–7.

¹²³Rancière, 'Subjectivization,' 60.

nor am I privileging theology over exegesis. I am only recognizing that, when reading Pauline texts – not least 2 Corinthians – one’s articulation of a text’s meaning can be aided by theology, especially if, upon analyzing the text, one finds conceptual resonances with a theological tradition or construct that is itself influenced by Paul’s theology.

This study will begin to qualify the relationship between Paul and Corinth by considering the nature of the situation being addressed in 2 Corinthians, especially the pain (λύπη) created by Paul’s previous visit and letter (2 Cor 2:1-7; 7:5-16). I start here because, as noted above, this is a widely overlooked dimension of the Corinthian conflict which forms a promising line of enquiry for considering the relevance of Paul’s strength in weakness argument to the community. I will engage in a semantic survey of λυπ- words in sources roughly contemporary with Paul, including Philo, Josephus, and Plutarch. The semantic potential of λυπ- words will then be considered in light of Paul’s use of these terms in 2 Corinthians 2:1-7; 7:5-16 in order to determine which meanings are most applicable. All of this is in service of a broader question: *are interpreters correct to assume that the Corinthians’ pain in 2 Corinthians 2:1-7 is identical with the godly grief of 2 Corinthians 7:5-16 and has thus quickly faded?* I argue that this assumption is unjustified given that the community appears to be experiencing despair, heartbreak, and bitterness in distinction from the ‘godly grief’, and these pains arise repeatedly in the material constituting 2 Corinthians. The implications of this conclusion will first be considered with respect to community characterizations. The Corinthians are typically portrayed as strong rebels, but is there now a sense in which they are weak, wounded believers? Since the nature of the Corinthian conflict affects how literary partitions are organized, the implications for the integrity debate will be considered as well. Finally, this chapter will address Paul’s ἄσθεν- language, which is the backbone of the strength in weakness paradox in 2 Corinthians 10–13. I will consider the potential for semantic and theological connections between this word group and the Corinthians’ pains.

The main body of research is an exegetical analysis of selected passages in 2 Corinthians. Each text was chosen because it employs the basic

language and theology that forms the strength in weakness paradox – God’s power arrives amidst Paul’s weakness. The main texts are evenly distributed across the material (2 Cor 1:3-11; 4:7-15; 6:3-13; 7:5-16; 12:1-21), thus providing a representative sample of the strength in weakness argument. The analysis of the paradox begins in 2 Corinthians 1:3-11, where I consider the nature of the programmatic thanksgiving (2 Cor 1:3-7), its connection with Paul’s affliction in Asia (2 Cor 1:8-11), and Paul’s intent for 2 Corinthians. Moving to 2 Corinthians 4:7-15, I consider the nature of the ‘treasure in jars of clay’ metaphor, particularly its logical structure and whether it is appropriate to describe the paradox as a contrast between divine power and human weakness. In the following chapter, I explore the suffering catalogue of 2 Corinthians 6:3-10. A special focus will be the connection between these autobiographical verses and the command that the Corinthians ‘widen’ their ‘hearts’ to Paul (2 Cor 6:13). Is there some sense in which the paradox enables the Corinthians to reconcile with the apostle? My argument culminates in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 where, upon incorporating the insights of German scholarship, I offer fresh perspective on the theological function of the strength in weakness paradox. The guiding question here concerns the relationship between divine and human agency – in what sense, if any, does the paradox initiate personal transformation in the life of Paul and the Corinthians? My analysis concludes with 2 Corinthians 12:11-21 and 2 Corinthians 13:1-5, where I suggest that the paradox’s effects are not fully understood until one analyzes these passages. I conclude by considering how the results of my study should influence one’s view of 2 Corinthians as a whole.

Above all, I argue that Paul is not focused on defending himself in 2 Corinthians (though he does this from time to time); rather, he writes to the Corinthians in the midst of their pains to build them up with his strength in weakness discourses. His argument is so deeply pastoral, and so evidently kerygmatic, that it is insufficient to classify it merely as a defense or an exposition of the apostleship. Paul’s experience of strength in weakness is a paradigm in which the community learns how Christ helps them in *their weakness*, enacting a series of transformative trajectories (i.e.,



μεταμορφώω [2 Cor 3:18]) that modifies their emotions and behaviour, not least their ability to reconcile with Paul. In other words, the strength in weakness paradox possesses a broadly transformative function which incorporates aspects of the ontological and revelatory views. Rather than follow the field by concluding that divine power *displaces* human weakness in the paradox, I argue that Christ's power redeems weakness without abolishing it, and together, these two realities paradoxically *increase* human potential for living like Christ in relational conflict. In this sense, rather than denigrating the literary and theological dimensions of paradox, I conclude that the concept of paradox is useful for Paul when writing to a community that believes weakness is solely and completely antithetical to strength.

J. Christiaan Beker once said that Paul's letters are 'a word on target, in the midst of human, contingent specificity.'¹²⁴ This project re-considers the nature of that specificity in Corinth, and in doing so, offers the chance to learn anew how Paul articulates his gospel as a 'word on target' for the Corinthians. It is expected that the study will make original contributions to our understanding of the situation preceding 2 Corinthians, especially the character of the Corinthians' pain; the literary integrity problem; the connection between pain (λύπη) and strength in weakness; the logical structure of the strength in weakness paradox; the theological significance of the paradox and its connection to communal behaviours; as well as the broader purpose of 2 Corinthians. It may even challenge the prevailing apologetic paradigm, which is not a glass ceiling to be shattered and destroyed; instead, it is a barrier that needs to be cut open and re-oriented to produce a view of the atmosphere that lies above. Paul defends himself in 2 Corinthians, but as I will demonstrate, he does so less than many suppose and with the overlooked goal of fortifying his ministry so that he can usher the community into a higher atmosphere that gives them more than a new relationship with their apostle. In this thin space, where – one might say – heaven and earth collide, one learns what happens when the Corinthians come face-to-face with a paradox that descends in the God-man, Jesus Christ (2 Cor 13:4).

¹²⁴Johan Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 24.

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