

# THE GENETIC HISTORY OF I AND II CORINTHIANS. STUDIES CONSTRUCTIVE AND CRITICAL.

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Dr. Alfred Plummer, in his Commentary on II Corinthians, comes out strongly for the unity of I Corinthians, but for the composite nature of II Corinthians. "Proposals to treat the Epistle (I Corinthians) which has come down to us in the familiar form as a conglomeration of several letters, or of portions of several letters, are not worthy of consideration. The same cannot be said of the Second Epistle. There is considerable probability that it is composite." Pg. xii. There is manifested in the Commentary many reasons for inferring that Dr. Plummer did consider the structure of II Corinthians adequately; and there is just as much evidence that he did not do so in the case of I Corinthians. So his judgment in this latter case is worth only what any well-trained intellect would carry in matters wherein it had not only not considered, but where it had prejudged that the problems were not worthy of consideration. It seems to me that the composite nature of I Corinthians is as much, if not more, in evidence to the critical reader, as that of II Corinthians; and certainly the question is worthy of serious consideration by those who hold to the composite nature of II Corinthians; for the two Epistles are akin both as to their genetic history and subsequent service in the churches.

That both the First and Second Epistles are composite the American Revisers seem to have recognized; and they have indicated the several sections in the compositions by breaks in thier text indicative of breaks in the context. The structure of both Epistles is broken by them as follows: I Cor. 1:10-4:21; 5-6; 7; 8-11:1; 11:2-34; 12-14; 15; 16:1-9, and II Cor. 1:3-7:16; 8-9; 10-13, making eleven components in the two Epistles. There are many

facts which go to show that several of these components are in turn composite, and the analysis should be extended yet further; but of this we will treat below, accepting for the time being the breaks of the American Revisers. It becomes us to account for the breaks thus indicated in the text of the two Epistles by some rational and consistent theory which shall be adequate to explain all the facts involved; and in that behalf the following has been suggested in the *Review and Expositor* for Oct. 1911. After having founded and started the new Gentile church at Corinth during his ministry there in 50-51, and after his journey to the East in 52, while engaged in establishing the church at Ephesus, and those in Asia, in 53-55, Paul corresponded with the church at Corinth, directing its life from time to time through his letters and by messengers with notes of instructions (as he did also from Macedonia in 56); and then when he came to visit Corinth in the winter of 56-7 these letters were gathered and compiled and epistolized into the present Epistles, according as Sosthenes or Timothy was his associate in that work, to function henceforth as Scripture to be read in the churches and by the public. Hence the genesis of the Epistles is to be found in two distinct processes, the one an effort to direct the life of the church at Corinth, in its endeavor to attain unto the Messianic in Jesus, through occasional letters addressed to the concrete situations as they developed from time to time; and the other a literary effort to invent for the culture of the Messianic life, and out of its past experiences, a peculiarly Christian Scripture competent to function canonically beside the Old Testament. This theory is suggested to account for the broken structure of the Epistles, and their present complex and composite nature. I confess that the more I consider this theory, the more worthy of consideration it appears to be; and one must regret that so competent a scholar as Dr. Plummer should have pronounced on it without due consideration.

That the Apostle, at a single sitting, with benignity aforethought, perpetrated these Epistles on the public of all coming time, over the shoulders of the church at Corinth, in what may be termed a single act of literary effort, is a theory too patently in the face of all the facts involved to receive much credence; and it is entirely incongruous with the literary customs of the times in such matters, and the genesis of canonical books generally. If each of these Epistles was written at a single sitting, to meet each a single and separate situation in the church at Corinth, either would convict that church of having more scandals and schisms and heresies and follies at one and the same time than any other church ever experienced in long periods of its history; and the states of soul manifested by the author would be so numerous and inconsistent and distressing as to almost indict his sanity. Hence the theory that either Epistle was composed at what may be called a single sitting, or as a single writing in a single setting, is in the face of both the literary and historical phenomena involved; and, after reflection, we are surprised that we ever thought such could have been the genesis of either of them. But if each came into being part by part, as situation followed situation in the developing life of the church and the ministry of the Apostle to call them forth, coalescing and taking on more and more literary functionings in the life of the church, not immediately intended in their original purposes, these scandals and schisms and heresies and follies are distributed over several years as they develop in the life-processes of the church and the responses of the Apostle's mind thereto. For this theory may be claimed both the analogy of history and the facts, literary and historical, implied in the writings themselves; and it is much better to derive the genetic history of a writing from the facts in that writing itself, than to arbitrarily impose on it some theory which we may invent to meet the demands of our own modern minds.

If these components, as above set forth according to the breaks in the text of the American Revisers, were originally separate letters in a correspondence extending over the year 53-56 while the Apostle was engaged in his ministries in Ephesus and Macedonia, may we not hope to so arrange them in their original chronological order as to restore that correspondence as it displayed the progressing life of the church under the directing hand of the Apostle the while? I think that is entirely possible, if we can get a starting-point for that work. By comparing the perspectives of these several letters, and noting their relations to each other as representing different stages of the growing situation, and arranging them accordingly, this may be done with more or less confidence, according to the sufficiency of the evidence at hand. A starting point for such work may be found in I Cor. 5:9, "I wrote unto you in my epistle," implying that hitherto he had already written them one letter; and hence the letter in which this language is used must have been the second in the series, and the one referred to in it was the first. Now if II Cor. 6:14-7:1 be compared with this reference carefully and critically, I am sure the reader will see that it meets every demand of the reference here; and so it is in all probability the letter referred to, or an excerpt from that letter; and, being a "boulder" passage where it is, it could not have been originally a part of II Cor. 1:3-7:16. So we may say that II Cor. 6:14-7:1, or the letter from which it was extracted, was the first in the correspondence; and I Cor. 5-6 was the second. Taking the situation implied in the perspectives of these two passages as our starting-point; and noting how the perspectives of the others stand related to it as different stages of a developing situation, the following would seem to have been the chronological order in which they were originally composed and dispatched to Corinth by the Apostle. (1) II Cor. 6:14-7:1; (2) I Cor. 5-6; (3) 7; (4) 8:1-11:1; (5) 11:2-34; (6) 12-14; (7) 15; (8) 16:1-9; (9) 1:10-4:21; (10)

II Cor. 10-13; (11) 1:3-6:13, 7:2-16; (12)8-9. An exposition of the perspective of a writing is so intricate and calls for such critical acuteness and detailed research that we cannot now give the grounds for the above arrangement; but the reader will find his efforts to confirm this arrangement according to perspectives exceedingly interesting and fruitful study. We can here only give the results of our own study with the hope that it may prove at least suggestive of the real facts in the situation. It is worth while to notice in the above enumeration of the letters in their supposed chronological order, that (1) and (2) and (3) deal with a situation of sexual disorder and abnormal views of marriage incident thereto, and (4) and (5) deal with a situation arising from idolatrous feasts and foods and disorders in the church arising therefrom; and both of these are but in line with Paul's special charge to effect in the Gentile churches "the necessary things" decreed in the council at Jerusalem three years before, Acts 15:28-29, 16:4. May we from this infer that the Apostle is seeking in these letters to meet that obligation put on him by the Jerusalem council, and in that behalf wrote the earlier letters to the new church? Suppose we date these letters as having been written during the year 53. It is also worth noticing in comparing the perspectives of the letters as arranged that there is a decided break between (5) and (6) in the relations and attitude of the author and readers, indicating just such a readjustment of mutual relations as would issue from a visit to Corinth as is proposed in 11:34; and we may therefore infer that the Apostle did carry out the purpose therein expressed early in 54, and set matters right in the church by such a visit. In the year 54 we must date the letters (6) and (7), both of which seem to have been predicated on observations he had made at first hand on his recent visit. Letter (8) was written before Pentecost in 55, and after he had taken up the work of collecting aid for the poor in Jerusalem. I am much inclined to

make chapter 9 a separate letter, for it does not fit well into 8-10 with which the American Revisers give it; and in that event it would come in as the opening one of those dealing with the assaults on his apostolic rights and prerogatives, which are further treated in (9), (10) and (11). This assault seems to have been engendered by the coming of some emissary to Corinth early in 55; and the drive on the Apostle was at its height by the summer or autumn of that year. Hence the letters dealing with it may be dated in that year, (9) and (10) being from Ephesus, and (11) from Macedonia. These letters, especially if chapter 9 be one of them, show this contention in its rise and fall, chapter 9 and 1:10-4:21 dealing with it in its growing stage, and II Cor. 10:13 and 1:3-7:16 with its complete passing away through the visit of Titus with the "sorrowful letter," II 10-13; and the letter in II 1:3-7:16 is written as "the gratulatory letter" to clear away the debris, and put the parties back into cordial relations again. There can be no better place for studying the development of life in letters than in this contention as thus exposed in the perspectives of these four letters. The letter, or letters, (12) was written from Macedonia in the summer of 56, when the collection was being pressed there and in Corinth and the Achaian churches.

What did the church do with these letters after they had been read and the matters adjusted accordingly? Did they file them away for safe-keeping, and future references? Or did they have them read in the meetings of the church for further edification in the Messianic way of life? That they were capable of being so used, after the situation to which they were immediately aimed had passed away, is clear; and they must have felt the need of some such apostolic help in grasping the Messianic life, some peculiarly Christian Scriptures to supplement the Old Testament Messianically interpreted. Did they give this place and functioning to these letters from the Apostle in view of his apostleship to them? Could they

have filed away the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians, giving it no heed and functioning in their efforts to cultivate the Messianic way? Or could they have done so with the fifteenth? I think not. So the Apostle found them already using his letters in church worship, along with the Old Testament, when he arrived in Corinth in the winter of 57. But, if these letters were already being given the dignity and functioning of literature, may they not already have been adjusted to that sphere of use, several of the smaller ones, for instance, being compiled and epistolized into a larger document for this end? Thus 5-6 may have been originally two letters compiled and conflated for this end; also in 8-11:1 we may have what was originally three small letters, subsequently epistolized for reading in the church before the Apostle came. This is entirely possible, and in the latter case I think probable.

On arriving at Corinth in the winter of 57, and seeing this situation and use of his letters, the Apostle decided to compile his correspondence into books to be read in the church and by the public generally; so he epistolized them as we now have them for that end, and dedicated them to the church, who would be witnesses to their genuineness. A book-scribe, who could write a book-hand was employed, and the letters were copied from the papyrus on to book-parchment under the Apostle's dictation; and the manuscripts authenticated by the Apostle writing the last sentences in his own handwriting as opposed to that of the scribe, I Cor. 16:21-24. At this time and as a part of this process he composed the dedications in I. 1:1-3 and II. 1:1-2, and the preface in I. 1:4-9; and the conclusions in I. 16:10-20 would have been taken from the closing paragraphs of the several letters, which except in these particulars must have duplicated each other. The letters, having already become part of the cherished life-assets of the church, would be preserved as fully as possible in their very wording in the epistolization; though

here and there the Apostle doubtless felt it necessary to interpolate passages, such as I Cor. 9:15-18, 15:29-34, etc. Notice the vast horizon of readers in the dedications, especially in that to the First Epistle; and it is evident that they are not salutations to letters, for a definite and fixed group of readers, but the dedication of a book to the Christian public.

We cannot, of course, hope that this hypothesis of the genesis of these Epistles shall prove true in every detail and particular, and we are conscious that it is not as yet well threshed out in its details; but there is promise in it of leading us to recover the genetic history of these Epistles at least in outline, with which to displace our present entire ignorance in that matter.