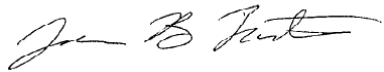


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Echoes of Isaiah 40-66 in 2 Corinthians

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Abstract

Echoes of Isaiah 40-66 in 2 Corinthians

By Jessica Foster

How does Paul read Scripture? This study contends that Paul is a competent, attentive reader of Scripture who defines his apostolic ministry by using its images and categories. Inspired by Richard Hays' *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, this study investigates intertextual echoes resounding from allusions to Isaiah 40-66 in 2 Corinthians. Some of the allusions include Paul and Christ as Suffering Servant, proclamation of reconciliation and new creation, and the ministry of *paraklesis* (consolation). These allusions are not coincidental, but develop the meaning of the text, and their full import can only be grasped with careful attention to their original context. Finally, in appreciating and imitating Paul as pastor-theologian, this study concludes with a reflection on the pastoral implications of Paul's usage of Isaiah within 2 Corinthians.

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Paul's Approach to Scripture

This study's approach to of Paul's use of Scripture is informed by Richard Hays' *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*. Hays complains about earlier scholarship which suggests that Paul is trying to explain a gospel that is separate from the Old Testament, but that Paul uses Old Testament "mythology" occasionally to explain his improved religion.¹ In this thinking, Scripture citations are essentially proof-texts, not theological sources that shape Paul's thinking in any serious way. As Hays explains, "A truly supersessionist Christian theology would steamroller the scriptural text, flatten it onto the pavement to 'prepare the way of the Lord [Jesus].' A nonsupersessionist theology will necessarily grapple in a more anguished and loving way with Scripture."² This analysis will avoid supercessionism and recognize Paul is no supercessionist, but is himself grappling with his Scripture as a Jewish servant of Christ.

Hays' position is this: "The vocabulary and cadences of Scripture... are heavily on Paul's mind, and the great stories of Israel continue to serve for him as a fund of symbols and metaphors that condition his perception of the world, of God's promised deliverance of his people, and of his own identity and calling. His faith, in short, is one whose articulation is inevitably intertextual in character."³ In reflecting on secular literary criticism on secular texts, Hays explains: "To identify allusions is only the beginning of the interpretive process... The critical task, then, would be to see what poetic effects and larger meanings are produced by the poet's devise of echoing predecessors."⁴ Yet biblical criticism often stops short of this, identifying allusions but not exploring how they contribute to the meaning of Paul's epistles. But

¹ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 7.

² Richard B. Hays, "A Response to Critiques of *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*" in *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 176.

³ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

because Paul's faith is "intertextual," because he is so steeped in his Scripture and it so shapes the way he understands his gospel and ministry, careful attention to scriptural allusions in Paul's epistles is needed. This study will show that Paul's usage of Isaiah is not limited to one quotation (2 Corinthians 6:2). Instead, Paul draws on key vocabulary and concepts from Isaiah to explain his ministry and invite the Corinthians to participate similarly in following Christ. Hays urges interpreters to listen carefully for the intertextual "echoes" created by Paul's allusions to the Old Testament. The Old Testament context of allusions, including theme, tone, purpose, etc. should echo in the reader's ear while reading Paul's letter and should exert influence on interpretations of Paul. This study will pay close attention to the echoes created by Paul's use of Isaiah in 2 Corinthians.

Identifying and Evaluating Allusions

An appreciation for Paul's substantive usage of Scripture does not mean, however, that any alleged allusion is a valid one. Hays proposes seven tests for evaluating possible allusions to the Old Testament.⁵ The first is availability—was the text available to the author? In the case of 2 Corinthians and Isaiah, this test is clearly passed; Paul clearly knows Isaiah and quotes from it explicitly in 2 Cor. 6:2. The second is the "volume" of the echo, a more complex criterion involving "repetition of words or syntactical patterns," but also "how distinctive or prominent is the precursor text within Scripture" and "how much rhetorical stress" Paul places.⁶ Most of the allusions that will be discussed in this project have at least moderate volume. Some of them repeat exact words, others a key word or image. Isaiah 40-66 is a prominent text within Scripture, the work of a major prophet, alluded to extensively throughout the New Testament. In some cases Paul places more rhetorical stress on these allusions than on others. However, the

⁵ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 29-31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

third criterion Hays identifies is recurrence—how often does Paul use this text? Thus, Isaianic allusions with a fainter volume, with less rhetorical stress, are still identified and explored in this project because they are part of a pattern throughout 2 Corinthians. As will be seen, there are many places in 2 Corinthians where Paul uses Isaiah, and he quotes from it in his other letters, too.

The fourth criterion is thematic coherence: “How well does the alleged echo fit into the line of argument that Paul is developing? Is its meaning effect consonant with other quotations in the same letter or elsewhere in the Pauline corpus? Do the images and ideas of the proposed precursor text illuminate Paul’s argument?”⁷ In other words, the alleged allusion must cohere with the thematic context in Paul’s writing, not undermine it or be completely unrelated to it. However, a legitimate allusion does generate meaning and enrich Paul’s meaning. It has effects on the meaning of the epistle, produces an “echo” in the textual symphony, or else it would not be present. So, Hays invites interpreters to consider how an allusion might “illuminate Paul’s argument,” and enrich our understanding of what Paul is saying. In this project, careful attention will be paid to how allusions fit the context of 2 Corinthians, to insure the alleged allusions are legitimate. Conversely, the ways allusions generate more meaning and participate in the intertextual symphony will also be interpreted.

The fifth criterion for Hays is historical plausibility—does the interpretation fit Paul in his historical context? Hays clarifies, “The value of the test is to make us wary of readings that turn Paul into (say) a Lutheran or a deconstructionist.”⁸ This project does not attempt to make Paul fit modern theological or philosophical categories and is grounded in close reading of 2 Corinthians, not other ideologies. The sixth test Hays identifies involves the history of

⁷ Ibid., 31.

⁸ Ibid.

interpretation—have other critics found these echoes, too? This project frequently draws on other interpreters, while paying deeper attention to the echoes generated by these allusions than many of these critics do. The last and most nebulous of Hays’ criteria is “satisfaction”: “With or without clear confirmation from the other criteria listed here, does the proposed reading make sense? Does it illuminate the surrounding discourse? Does it produce for a reader a satisfying account of the effect of the intertextual relation?”⁹ Hays confesses this test is “difficult” but “finally the most important.” Similar to but more comprehensive than the fourth criterion of thematic coherence, the satisfaction test seeks to determine whether the allusion—in terms of theme, argument, style, tone, etc., yield a “satisfactory,” reasonable and useful reading of Paul’s epistle. This project will frequently take these concerns into consideration, showing how these allusions do produce satisfying, productive readings of 2 Corinthians that improve understanding of the whole letter.

Paul’s Pastoral Hermeneutic

Hays further points out that Paul’s hermeneutic is “ecclesiocentric,” not “Christocentric.”¹⁰ In other words, unlike other, non-Pauline New Testament texts, the Old Testament is not used to prove Jesus’ status as Messiah, or to legitimize Jesus as Israel’s Savior. Instead, Paul uses the Old Testament ecclesialogically, to form and guide the church, to locate (in this instance) the Corinthians in the narrative of salvation which began in Israel’s Scriptures but continues in Paul’s own time, to located himself as their leader. Indeed, as Paul says after quoting Isaiah 49:8 in 2 Corinthians 6:2a, he adds, “See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!” Isaiah’s grand vision of new creation and of the Suffering Servant’s ministry has broken gloriously into the Corinthians’ “now.” Even as Paul uses Isaiah to explain

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 86.

his own ministry to the Corinthians, his purpose is to instruct and edify the Corinthian community. Because of this explicit quotation from Isaiah 49:8, Isaiah is an important hermeneutical key to 2 Corinthians.¹¹

Is This Method of Interpretation Historically Sound?

It is an open question how much of the Isaianic background of 2 Corinthians the Corinthian community would have understood. Christopher Stanley argues that Hays' method is illegitimate for historical reasons, that it "fails to consider the profound differences in the literary capabilities of ancient and modern readers."¹² Stanley finds it highly unlikely that the majority of the members of Paul's churches were literate or knowledgeable about the Old Testament, and therefore a responsible rhetorician like Paul would use Old Testament quotes or allusions in a substantial way, beyond what can be reasonably understood from the context in Paul's letters. However, Stanley himself concedes, "Paul's letters leave no doubt that his patterns of thought and expression were heavily molded by the Jewish Scriptures."¹³ Therefore, regardless of the interpretive capabilities of the Corinthians, it makes sense that Paul is engaging with his Scriptures in substantial, deep ways that may not be fully grasped by every Corinthian hearer. Again, as Stanley admits, "We may be asking too much of Paul if we expect him to speak in a way that even illiterate members of his churches could understand everything that he said."¹⁴

Furthermore, we cannot be as sure as Stanley is that Paul's audiences would be ignorant of the Old Testament beyond its basic shape and popular figures. We have no way of knowing what teaching Paul and other teachers offered Gentile communities about the Old Testament. But

¹¹ Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians (The New International Commentary on the New Testament)* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 46.

¹² Christopher Stanley: *Arguing with Scripture: The Rhetoric of Quotations in the Letters of Paul* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 47.

¹³ Stanley, 51.

¹⁴ Ibid.

since the Old Testament is Paul's sacred Scripture, it makes sense that Paul would teach from it and about it. Although this is a mostly Gentile Christian community, Paul directly quotes from Isaiah in 6:2. He also writes at length about Moses in 3:7-15, but gives little background information about him, apparently assuming they are familiar enough with these Scriptures to understand. Perhaps the Corinthians were fairly familiar with the Old Testament. Even if the Corinthians would not have heard every intertextual echo, 2 Corinthians is essentially "a thesis like compendium of Paul's self-conception as an apostle, as well as a classic presentation of his corresponding apologetic for the authority and validity of his apostolic ministry."¹⁵ The letter is both apologetic and confessional, an exposition of Paul's own apostolic identity. As a devout Jewish Christ-follower, this identity is clearly shaped by Scripture, of which Isaiah is a key part.

A Religious Way of Reading

Moreover, an obsession with what Paul's audience could understand or what the historical Paul might have intended is hermeneutically and theologically short-sighted. As Hays points out, "Texts can generate readings that transcend both the conscious intention of the author and all the hermeneutical structures that we promulgate. Poets and preachers know this secret; biblical critics have sought to suppress it for heuristic purposes."¹⁶ Even secular literary theory, with the exception of some kinds of historical and psychoanalytic criticism, does not focus on questions of authorial intent. It analyzes the text, not the writer's mind, and recognizes that meanings of text can be deeper and broader than what a writer thought about when composing a text (which is really inaccessible to critics and on some level to the writer him/herself).

¹⁵ Scott Hafemann, *Suffering and Ministry in the Spirit: Paul's Defense of His Ministry in 2 Corinthians 2:14-3:3* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1986), 2.

¹⁶ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 33.

Hays engages with critics who feel that his method is too theological, too confessional, “less an analysis of religion than a specimen of it.” He replies that if his work “stands in confessional continuity with its subject matter [and] carries forward Paul’s theological trajectory,” it is for him “cause to rejoice.”¹⁷ Thinking of Paul as deep and competent reader of Scripture, taking into account the canonical relationship between Old and New Testaments, and “enact[ing] a mode of sympathetic reading that may be possible only for interpreters who know the tradition and its struggles from the inside” are perhaps inevitably theological.¹⁸ Canonicity is Hays’ and my own final reply to objections to this approach.

Hays elaborates elsewhere, “To limit our interpretation of Paul’s scriptural echoes to what he intended by them is to impose a severe and arbitrary hermeneutical restriction. In the first place, what he intended is a matter of historical speculation; in the second place, his intertextual echoes are acts of figuration. Consequently, later readers will rightly grasp meanings of the figures that may have been veiled from Paul himself. Scripture generates through Paul new figurations.”¹⁹ If we believe, then, that Isaiah and 2 Corinthians are part of the canon of Scripture, the meaning of 2 Corinthians is bigger than what the historical Paul may or may not have meant in his writing. The Holy Spirit creates and speaks through these intertextual echoes. Hays asks: “Do we then overthrow the canon by this hermeneutic? On the contrary, we uphold the canon. Will the imaginative freedom of Paul’s example ultimately destroy Scripture’s authority if we dare to read the text as freely as he did? On the contrary, only when our interpreters and preachers read with an imaginative freedom analogous to Paul’s will Scripture’s

¹⁷ Richard B. Hays, “A Response to Critiques of *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*” in *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel’s Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 176.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 33.

voice be heard in the church.”²⁰ Reading with deep attention to these intertextual echoes does not negate Scripture, making Scripture so pliable it says whatever we want it to say. As already discussed, Hays’ seven criteria offer boundaries so that this kind of interpretation can be free, within reasonable limits. This kind of reading, far from playing fast and loose with Scripture, attempts, like Paul, to live in the world of Scripture, and is necessary for understanding Paul’s “intertextual” gospel. Hays thinks of this kind of interpretation of Paul’s letters as like Paul’s own way of reading Old Testament Scripture—a “free” reading that hears echoes and makes deeper, artful connections. This kind of reading uses close reading and exegetical skills, but is simultaneously theological, viewing both Testaments as Scripture. It certainly considers what the historical Paul may have thinking, but recognizes the Holy Spirit speaking in these intertextual echoes.

This analysis will seek to read 2 Corinthians and its use of Isaiah in a scholarly yet confessional way, and will reflect on pastoral implications for its findings. Even if it cannot be proven beyond any reasonable doubt that Paul planned every intertextual echo that will be discussed here, because I believe Isaiah and 2 Corinthians are Scripture, Isaiah can and should exert force on my reading of 2 Corinthians. Because of this canonical approach, this study will not attempt to determine the composition of 2 Corinthians (e.g., how many letters were edited together to form 2 Corinthians, where are the “seams” of these fragments, what order were they originally written in, etc.). While source criticism is a useful type of biblical criticism, this project will interpret 2 Corinthians as a literary unity, because that is its final form that we have in the canon of Scripture. Theories of composition, no matter how intriguing, are unprovable and are not themselves part of Scripture. And as will be explored, echoes of Isaiah resound

²⁰ Ibid, 189.

throughout 2 Corinthians, from beginning to end, suggesting the possibility this really was one letter. And even if it was not, it underscores my contention that Isaiah is an important background for 2 Corinthians, because it means Paul alluded to Isaiah in multiple letters.

2 Corinthians 5:14-6:10

This section will be examined first because it contains a clear, explicit quotation to Isaiah 49:8 in 2 Corinthians 6:2a, and because it contains a high volume of allusive material. This quotation, as Mark Gignilliat points out, is from a critical point in Isaiah's vision "in God's eschatological, redemptive drama... beginning to pressure the reader to recognize an individual who emerges as the one who embodies the vocation of Israel as a light to the nations."²¹ Gignilliat argues that by using this citation and, in 2 Corinthians' surrounding verses, language related to the vocation of the Isaianic Suffering Servant, Paul envisions Jesus as this Servant. He lists five key points of overlap between Isaiah and 2 Corinthians: the death of the one for all, a new creation established by the Servant, God's reconciliation of humanity to God, the Servant as agent of reconciliation, and the forgiveness of sins as a key component of this reconciliation.²²

Isaiah 49:8 is God's promise to the Suffering Servant, to help the Servant and bring salvation through the Servant's ministry. Isaiah goes on, from the perspective of God, to describe the nature of this ministry, "saying to the prisoners, 'Come out,' to those in darkness, 'Show yourselves'" (49:a). Furthermore, "Lo, these shall come from far away, and lo, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syrene" (49:12). The people far away are brought near through the Servant's ministry.

²¹ Mark S. Gignilliat, *Paul and Isaiah's Servants: Paul's Theological Reading of Isaiah 40-66 in 2 Corinthians 5:14-6:10* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 75.

²² *Ibid*, 92.

In 2 Corinthians 5:18-19, right before the direct quotation, Paul explains his “ministry of reconciliation—“in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself... and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.” The Servant’s ministry of bringing those far off near sounds similar to this ministry of reconciliation. Right after the direct quote, Paul insists, “We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry” (6:3). Nor does the Isaianic Servant—“And I will turn all my mountains into a road, and my highways shall be raised up” (49:11). In the Servant’s ministry God removes obstacles that may prevent the far-off from returning. Intriguingly, right after Paul’s description of avoiding obstacles, he calls himself and his coworkers “servants of God” (6:4), another note in the Isaianic symphony echoing across the letter.

Kar Yong Lim helpfully points out that 2 Cor. 6:1—“we urge you not to accept the grace of God in vain” (*kenos*)—“echoes the lament of the Servant” in Isaiah 49:4—“But I have labored in vain (*kenos*), I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward is with God.”²³ It may be objected that this connection is weak or absent. The Isaianic Servant is lamenting that his ministry has been in vain, but Paul is speaking to the Corinthians, asking them not to accept God’s grace in vain. However, the verbal parallels between Isaiah 49:4 and 2 Cor. 6:1, plus the close proximity to many other allusions to Isaiah (in particular the direct quote from Isaiah 49:8 in 2 Cor 6:2), suggest this indeed is an allusion. Moreover, although the exact situations of the two verses are not identical, the idea behind them is similar—a lament, a fear that people are not responding to God and to God’s servant’s ministry. Using Hays’ criteria, the volume and the thematic coherence here are strong.

²³ Kar Yong Lim, *The Sufferings of Christ Are Abundant In Us: A Narrative Dynamics Investigation of Paul’s Sufferings in 2 Corinthians* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 131.

The allusion is significant because it amplifies a note of Paul's self-confidence in this textual symphony. If the Corinthians do reject Paul and reject God, God will still be with Paul, as God is with the Servant. As previously discussed, it does not really matter whether the Corinthians can hear that note or not. Paul knows who he is: God's suffering servant, whom God will redeem and reward whether the Corinthians heed this exhortation or not. Gignillat points out that grammatically, the word "for" (*gar*) "operates causally"—6:2 is a consequence of 6:1.²⁴ This also fits the narrative arc of Isaiah 49. After the Servant laments—"But I have labored in vain..."—God promises to help the Servant in his ministry of bringing the far off, near—"In a time of favor I have answered you." Even though the Servant, and Paul, have experienced rejection, God still helps and saves.

Stanley argues against appealing to the context of Isaiah 49:8 in reading 2 Corinthians 6:2: "From Paul's interpretive comments in vv. 1-2 it seems clear that he meant for the Corinthians to the second person singular 'you' in the quotation as a reference to themselves: the time of God's salvation is present for them (individually and collectively) if only they will accept Paul's call for 'reconciliation.'"²⁵ The text may indeed be read intelligibly that way. However, 6:2 is much more intelligible, and fits more closely with its surrounding context in the letter, if the allusion to Isaiah is taken seriously, and the "you" read as a reference to Paul. If Stanley is right, and Paul means the "you" to be the Corinthians, why does Paul immediately thereafter launch into a defense of his ministry? "We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way..." (vv. 3-4). The sequence of Paul's argument makes the most sense if God is

²⁴ Gignillat, 57.

²⁵ Stanley, 103.

offering help and salvation to Paul, the “servant,” especially because Isaiah 49:8 is itself addressed to the Servant. Using Hays’ criteria, my reading is more “satisfactory,” more logically coherent, than Stanley’s. Stanley’s argument that Paul has wrenched this quotation from its context and that attempting to interpret it in context is unfruitful is unfounded.

Who Is The Servant?

Lim also highlights a parallel between the Servant’s suffering and Paul’s hardship catalog.²⁶ The Servant is “deeply despised, abhorred by the nations” (49:7). As will be further discussed, the Servant is said to suffer throughout Isaiah. 2 Corinthians 6:3 says, “As servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way, through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities...” (6:3-4). Paradoxically Paul’s status as a servant is established through his suffering. His suffering does not disqualify him from ministry but actually qualifies him as a servant of God like the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. As Gignillat explains, 2 Corinthians is Paul’s “defense of apostolic integrity,” and Scripture forms part of his “warrant” to support that defense.²⁷ Comparing his ministry to that of the ancient Suffering Servant is a powerful warrant indeed. It is an awesome moment: “The Apostle reminds them of the import of his own vocation: to him have been addressed the words which Yahweh had spoken to his servant.”²⁸

A careful reading of both Isaiah and 2 Corinthians complicates any simple interpretation of the identity of the Servant. Inspired by, and adding more examples to, the work of German scholar Otfried Hofius (the first scholar to interpret 2 Corinthians in light of Paul’s usage of Isaiah), Gignillat points out that Deutero-Isaiah and 2 Corinthians clearly portray an innocent

²⁶ Lim, 131.

²⁷ Gignilliat, 34.

²⁸ David M. Stanley, “The Theme of the Servant of Yahweh in Primitive Soteriology, and Its Transposition by St. Paul,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 16.4 (1954), 417.

person who suffers vicariously, in order to redeem.²⁹ He points to 2 Cor. 5:14-15, which twice says that Christ died *for* all (*hyper*), a preposition and sentiment repeatedly used in LXX Isaiah 53's description of the Servant who suffers vicariously, and to 2 Cor. 5:21, "For (*hyper*) our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin..." Likewise, the Suffering Servant "was wounded for (*hyper*) our transgressions, crushed for (*hyper*) our iniquities" (53:9). He is an "offering for (*hyper*) sin" (53:10). The Servant, like Christ, suffers on behalf of others. Again, in close proximity to other allusions to Isaiah and to the explicit quotation in 6:2, these parallels to Isaiah are clearly not coincidental.

A paranetical clarification at this point is important: Gignillat helpfully reminds readers that neither Isaiah nor Paul is articulating a precise atonement theology.³⁰ Neither explains how this redemptive suffering works; the mechanics are not outlined. Because atonement theology is beyond the purview of Isaiah's and Paul's literary purposes, this study will not attempt to articulate such a theology either.

Within this section of 2 Corinthians, Paul has used the Isaianic Suffering Servant in two different ways. The quotation in 6:2 from Isaiah 49:8, as previously discussed, suggests Paul thinks of himself as a suffering Servant. Yet the allusions to Isaiah 53 are used to point to Christ's death *for* all. Interpreters who believe Paul is using Isaiah in 2 Corinthians in substantial ways disagree about the identity of the Servant.

Gignillat insists that for Paul only Christ is the Servant, but he has to sidestep serious evidence to the contrary in his analysis of 2 Cor. 6:2 to maintain this position. Contextually it makes more sense to understand Paul as the Servant in that verse, that God has helped Paul preach on this day of salvation, that Paul has commended himself as a "servant" (6:3), that Paul,

²⁹ Gignillat, 95.

³⁰ Ibid, 83.

like the Servant, puts no obstacles in the way. Reading “you” in 6:2 (who is undoubtedly the Servant in the context of Isaiah 49:8) as Jesus makes little sense in the context of a discussion about the Corinthian response to Jesus’ ministry. Gignilliat tacitly concedes as much—“The referent of the second person pronoun [in 6:2] is not the central concern with which Paul is dealing,” he argues, unconvincingly in my judgment.³¹

Beale, however, in his analysis of Isaiah 49 as background for 2 Cor. 6:2 and 2 Cor. 5:14-21’s explanation of reconciliation, sees Paul as the principle referent. Beale explains, “It is this same idea of corporate representation which allows Paul in his own mind to understand how the very context of the Isaiah 49 Servant could apply to himself without distorting the way in which he thought it may have been intended originally. Furthermore, in that he was continuing the mission of Jesus, the Servant, he could easily apply the Servant prophecy to himself.”³² I agree, and extend this idea to see Paul’s use of Isaiah 53 to identify Jesus with the Servant and Isaiah 49 to identify himself with the Servant. There is no need to attempt to resolve complications in the text which Paul appears not to think of as contradictions.

What, then, is the significance of Paul’s dual usage of the Isaianic Suffering Servant, as both Christ and himself? As previously described, casting himself as the Suffering Servant provides a warrant for Paul’s suffering. The Corinthians then should not object to Paul’s apostolic legitimacy on the grounds that he is suffering a variety of hardships (6:4-8), because Paul suffers like all of God’s true servants suffer, from Christ to Isaiah’s suffering Servant. This is why Paul says “As servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through

³¹ Ibid., 59.

³² G.K. Beale, “The Old Testament Background of Reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5-7 and Its Bearing on the Literary Problem of 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1” *New Testament Studies* vol. 35 (1989), 564.

great endurance, in affliction, hardships, calamities” (6:4). Paul’s sufferings do not disqualify him but actually commend his ministry.

Furthermore, in identifying the Servant as both himself and Christ, Paul underscores his participation in Christ’s ministry, legitimizing Paul’s own apostolic service and emphasizing the depth and efficacy of Paul’s own suffering, which is like Christ’s cross. Lim points out another important parallel to Isaiah 53.³³ 2 Cor. 4:11 says, “For while we live, we are always being given up to death (*paradidomi*) for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal bodies.” Isaiah 53:12 says, “Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured himself out to death (*paradidomi* in the LXX), and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” Again, in a letter full of other parallels to Isaiah, and Isaiah 53 in particular, this word choice cannot be coincidental; the volume and recurrence here are strong enough to consider this a valid allusion. Paul is drawing a parallel between his suffering and that of Jesus. Paul’s suffering is redemptive like Christ’s; Paul is a suffering Servant like Christ. 2 Cor. 4:12 continues, “Death is at work in us, but life in you.” Paul’s suffering, like Christ’s, provides redemption to the Corinthian community. As Lim explains, “It is precisely because Jesus is a suffering Messiah that Paul can claim to be a suffering apostle... By being handed over to death, Paul participates in the pattern of Jesus giving himself in love for the sake of others.”³⁴ This pattern highlights Paul’s deep love for the Corinthians. He not only exhorts them but suffers for them. The suffering actually legitimizes the exhortation; because Paul loves the Corinthians

³³ Lim, 114.

³⁴ Ibid., 116.

enough to suffer for them like Christ did, the Corinthians should listen to Paul, just as, ostensibly, they want to listen to Jesus.

Why does Paul bother with using Isaiah here? Why does Paul not compare himself directly to Jesus' suffering and forget Isaiah's suffering servant? In other words, what is the effect of Paul's dual usage of the Suffering Servant, as both Christ and himself? It emphasizes the unity of Paul's ministry with Christ's, and the closeness Paul has to Christ in this suffering, even more strongly. Paul is not only like Christ, but shares a role that he assigns to Christ. Using the Servant in both ways in such close proximity in the same section of text underscores this even further. In addition, Paul's choice to describe Christ's suffering and his own suffering in the language of Isaiah highlights the extent to which Paul inhabits the world of Scripture. He views everything, from his own vocation, to "riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger" (6:5), to Christ, through the lens of Scripture. This fits with Paul's overall message. Paul is not trying to be innovative; he is truly a servant, merely imitating the great Servants before him.

An important caveat, previously introduced in the discussion of Hays' work, concerns Paul's ecclesiocentric, rather than Christocentric, hermeneutic. Paul's purpose in alluding to Isaiah here is not to prove that Jesus is the Messiah, or that Isaiah predicted Jesus' crucifixion. Indeed, Paul does not say, "The prophet Isaiah said..." regarding Jesus' suffering. For Paul and the Corinthians, Jesus' legitimacy as the Messiah is simply assumed. What is in doubt for the Corinthians is Paul's legitimacy as an apostle, which is why he needs to "commend" himself as a "servant" of God (6:3). As will be explored later, Paul's usage of Isaiah 53 makes it even clearer that suffering does not contradict, but actually upholds, the status of servant.

Again, it may be asked whether the primarily Gentile Corinthian community would have noticed these allusions to Isaiah 53. Do these alleged allusions comprise an effective warrant for

Paul's claim to apostolic legitimacy despite and because of his suffering? There are other places in the New Testament which directly link Jesus to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. For instance, Luke 22:3 has Jesus say at the last supper: "For I tell you, this Scripture must be fulfilled in me, 'And he was counted among the lawless'; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled," a clear allusion to Isaiah 53:12, "He poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for transgressors." In Acts 8:30-33, the Ethiopian eunuch reads Isaiah 53:7-8 and asks Phillip who it is about, and Phillip replies with "the good news about Jesus" (v. 35). Paul himself directly quotes from Isaiah 53:1, "Who has believed what we have heard?" in Romans 10:16: "But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, 'Lord, who believed our message?'" Isaiah 53:1 is also quoted in John 12:38, while Jesus is predicting his death to a disbelieving crowd. Although the gospels were written after 2 Corinthians, this array of allusions to Isaiah 53 suggests that it was common to apply this passage to Jesus; and Paul himself does so in Romans. So it is possible this language was so ubiquitous the Corinthians would have understood the allusions to Isaiah 53 in 2 Corinthians 5, and would have understood this warrant for Paul's ministry of suffering. But even if the Corinthians would not have understood this language, this letter is Paul's robust, passionate defense of his pastoral identity. Therefore, it is possible that this defense includes images and allusions that are important to Paul, but not entirely clear to the Corinthians. Moreover, as previously discussed, an analysis that takes seriously the text's status as Scripture can recognize this warrant for a ministry of suffering as authoritative and Holy Spirit-inspired regardless of whether the Corinthians recognized it.

Reconciliation, New Creation, and Judgment

Once Paul’s usage of Isaiah is grasped, parts of 2 Corinthians become easier to follow. As Beale points out, the linking of reconciliation and new creation in 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 has been discussed by commentators, but “none has been able to explain how reconciliation and new creation are conceptually related.”³⁵ On an initial reading, verse 18 feels like a non-sequitur. In 5:17 all those in Christ are a new creation, but in verses 18-20 this theme is apparently dropped to discuss reconciliation.

To work through this puzzle, Beale points out the very close wording in Greek between 2 Corinthians 5:17 and the LXX of Isaiah 43:18-19 and Isaiah 65:17, laying each verse so the parallels can be seen:

2 Cor. 5:17: ὥστε εἴ τις ἐν Χριστῷ, **καινὴ** κτίσις· τὰ **ἀρχαῖα** παρῆλθεν, **ἰδοὺ** γέγονεν καινά

Isaiah 43:18-19 (LXX) μὴ μνημονεύετε τὰ πρῶτα καὶ τὰ **ἀρχαῖα** μὴ συλλογίζεσθε. **ἰδοὺ** ποιῶ **καινὰ** ἃ νῦν ἀνατελεῖ καὶ γνώσεσθε αὐτά καὶ ποιήσω ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ ὁδὸν καὶ ἐν τῇ ἀνύδρῳ ποταμούς

Isaiah 65:17 (LXX): ἔσται γὰρ ὁ οὐρανὸς **καινός** καὶ ἡ γῆ **καινὴ** καὶ οὐ μὴ μνησθῶσιν τῶν προτέρων οὐδ’ οὐ μὴ ἐπέλθῃ αὐτῶν ἐπὶ τὴν καρδίαν

NRSV Isaiah 43:18-19: “Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

NRSV Isaiah 65:17 “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind”

Beale adds that the common words “old,” “new,” and “behold,” especially in the context of so many other allusions to Isaiah, establish a clear connection between 2 Cor. 5:17 and these other verses. To use Hays’ criteria, the “volume” here is quite audible. In Isaiah both verses

³⁵ Beale, 551.

occur in the context of God's bringing the exiles back home. In Isaiah 43, this is the "new thing" (v. 18) God is doing: "Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you" (43:5). The exiles, who were far off from God, are now being reconciled to God: "Yet you do not call upon me, O Jacob; but you have been weary of me, O Israel!" (v. 22); "But you have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities. I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins" (vv. 24b- 25). In Isaiah 43 the new thing God is creating *is* reconciliation, bringing the exiles home, drawing them back to God. Beal's connections between 2 Cor. 5:17 and Isaiah are helpful, as is his identification of reconciliation as a key theme in 2 Corinthians and Isaiah.

However, Beal does not appear to notice the note of judgment implied by the new creation of Isaiah 65. Isaiah 65 declares judgment on those who have rebelled against God: "But you who forsake the Lord, who forget my holy mountain, who set a table for Fortune and fill cups of mixed wine for Destiny, I will destine you to the sword, and all of you shall bow down to the slaughterer" (vv.11-12a). It also declares God's blessing upon a faithful remnant, "Therefore thus says the Lord God, my servants shall eat, but you shall be hungry" (v. 13a), a blessing described through new creation imagery: "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind" (v. 17). The new creation is a blessing to the faithful and an act of judgment against the unfaithful, who are slaughtered and therefore are not invited to participate in the new creation.

It is not correct, then, to interpret the new creation here as an image of universalistic salvation. This undercurrent of judgment implied by reading "new creation" in its context in Isaiah helps to properly interpret 2 Cor. 5:17-6:2. 5:17 declares, "So if anyone is in Christ, there

is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” The glory of this new creation is very real, for those who are “in Christ,” for those whom God is “not counting their trespasses against them” (v. 19). 5:20 reads, “So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” When the Isaianic background of new creation language is properly understood, the implication is that if the Corinthians do not choose to heed this appeal, they are not a part of the new creation. As previously discussed, Paul’s allusion to the Servant imagery of Isaiah 49 in 6:2 helps establish and assert his apostolic authority. Paul’s ministry should be trusted because he stands in the Servant tradition of Isaiah, in which Christ also stands. The note of judgment with the new creation imagery contributes to this theme. And without reading it in its context to Isaiah, a stronger note of judgment in the textual symphony (to borrow again from Hays’ imagery of echoes) will be missed. Heeding Paul’s appeal is the difference between being included in this new creation, or not. The gloriousness of the new creation and of the reconciliation, the forgiveness of sins, is very real, but it does not overshadow the veiled threat of judgment.

Another important feature of Isaiah’s “new creation” is its clear eschatological character. It is a transformation of the cosmos, and its miraculous attributes clarify that this is a vision of future glory: “No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress” (65:19); “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox” (65:25a). When this eschatological character is understood, reading Paul’s usage “new creation” highlights how remarkable this promise is. “So if anyone is in Christ, there *is* (emphasis mine) a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” Paul is proclaiming that in Christ, the future glory of the new creation in the eschaton has broken into the present, and not

just in a global sense, but in the lives of believers in Christ. As previously described, Paul links himself with the awesome good news: “So we are ambassadors for Christ, since Christ is making appeal through us” (5:20). To reject Paul and his appeal is to reject the opportunity to participate in the new creation breaking into the here and now, an absurdly terrible choice.

Therefore, it is also not correct to assume Paul has plucked verses from their Old Testament contexts for convenient proof-texting. Paul’s understanding of himself as an apostle is shaped by the composite picture of the Isaianic Servant’s ministry, and the contexts of the Isaianic allusions shed light upon and are congruent with the text of 2 Corinthians. It may be objected that the new creation, reconciliation, and eschatological imagery is unrelated to the figure of the Suffering Servant, that Isaiah 43 and 65 are not, strictly speaking, Servant Songs. However, newer scholarship on Isaiah has argued that interpreters have for too long wrongly interpreted the Servant Songs as somehow separate from the rest of Isaiah, that Deutero-Isaiah should be properly interpreted as a literary unity.³⁶ More importantly, it seems unlikely Paul would have interpreted the Servant Songs as somehow unrelated to the rest of these chapters of Isaiah, in close proximity to clear Servant imagery. Furthermore, given that 5:17, with semantic similarity to Isaiah 43:18-19 and Isaiah 65:17, is in close proximity to other Isaiah allusions previously discussed that are clearly related to the Servant’s ministry, it seems Paul is linking the proclamation of new creation and reconciliation of those far off with the Servant’s ministry. There are, then, multiple dynamic tensions at play in this intertextual symphony. There are equally strong notes of judgment and reconciliation, of apostolic authority and apostolic suffering, which does not delegitimize but ironically undergirds that authority. It is because Paul suffers as a Servant that he can dare exhort the Corinthians as the Servant, as Christ, to be

³⁶ Gignilliat, 70.

reconciled, to escape judgment and enter the new creation—“as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endure, in afflictions, hardships, and calamities” (6:4). And with an awareness of 2 Corinthians and Isaiah as Scripture, interpreters can appreciate this interplay of meaning even if it is possible Paul or the Corinthians did not.

Defining “Comfort”

Paraklesis, or “comfort,” as the NRSV often translates it, is a key word throughout both 2 Corinthians and Isaiah.³⁷ Indeed, it is used six times in 2 Cor. 1:3-11. It is difficult to articulate a precise English equivalent of this multivalent Greek word. *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* explains that in the LXX, it often means “comfort in any human grief” (778), but may also mean in a more general sense “encouragement” or “friendly exhortation.”³⁸ It is also used for God’s comfort given to an individual in a time of temptation and for “eschatological consolation or comfort.”³⁹ Moreover, notes *TDNT*, in books of the LXX which are not translations of Hebrew, *paraklesis* as comfort is never used. In the books of Maccabees the word is frequently used to mean “encouragement and exhortation rather than true comfort in distress.”⁴⁰ In the New Testament, *paraklesis* often refers to “exhortation on the basis of the gospel,” “for the wooing proclamation of salvation and apostolic preaching.”⁴¹

The Oxford English Dictionary explains that the English word “comfort” may mean “relief or support in mental distress or affliction; consolation, solace, soothing... sometimes expressing little more than the production of mental satisfaction.” The *TDNT* suggests that this is not quite what the LXX of Isaiah nor Paul mean by *paraklesis*. This consolation is not so much

³⁷ Lim, 33.

³⁸ Otto Schmitz, “Paraklesis,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 778.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 794.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 778.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 795.

emotional as it is eschatological, theological, and soteriological. This consolation may therefore not offer inner “soothing,” but exhortation to come to God. “Encouragement” may be a better translation, although *paraklesis* does not mean, as the English term may imply, a building up of a person’s self-confidence, but is related to God’s activity and God’s salvation. However, while *paraklesis* is not primarily an emotional concept, it does often convey the depth of divine love, a love which encourages and builds up and announces new possibilities to the suffering. As previously discussed, Paul’s comparison of himself to the Suffering Servant expresses the depth of his love for the Corinthians; he loves them enough to suffer for them. The depth of God’s love and of Paul’s love as conveyed through the term *paraklesis* will be discussed. With the complexities of *paraklesis* established, I will use “comfort,” “consolation,” and “encouragement” for *paraklesis* interchangeably, recognizing there is no one English word that captures this Greek term.

The Servant’s Ministry of Comfort

In light of previously discussed similarities in vocabulary, images, and themes between Second Isaiah and 2 Corinthians, Paul’s description of his ministry as one of consolation links him with the Suffering Servant’s ministry of consolation, a ministry of eschatological glory and reconciliation. Second Isaiah opens: “Comfort, O comfort (*paraklesis*) my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” (40:1-2). The Servant’s ministry is to comfort the people who were far off from God, to announce God has reconciled them back to himself. These verses’ position at Isaiah 40, this key turn within canonical Isaiah to prophecy of return from exile, highlights that this consolation will be an important theme for the

rest of Isaiah. By using the word “comfort” in a document filled with other allusions to Second Isaiah, it is highly likely Paul is thinking of the Servant’s ministry of reconciliation as he writes.

As previously discussed, 2 Corinthians 6:2 quotes directly from Isaiah 49:8—“In a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you.” A few verses later, this Servant song speaks of consolation—“Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones.” God brings comfort through the Servant’s ministry, a comfort of astonishing proportions. The preceding verses make clear that this comfort is an act of reconciliation for those who are far off. The second half of 49:8 reads, “I have kept you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritage.” The Servant Song continues, “He who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water he will guide them” and “Lo, these shall come from far away, and lo, these from the north and from the west and from the land of Syrene” (vv. 10, 12).

Another key place in Isaiah where comfort is linked to the Servant’s mission is the beginning of ch. 61: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord God has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort (*paraklesis*) all who mourn” (vv.1-2). Although these verses do not explicitly use the word “Servant,” it is clear they are referring to a special prophetic figure. Danker helpfully points out: “Since Paul is unfamiliar with the type of debate exhibited in modern discussion concerning the identity of Isaiah’s suffering servant and the specific parts of Isaiah that are to be allotted to presentation of the Servant, it is also probable

that he associated the possessor of the Spirit in Isaiah 61 with the Lord's Servant."⁴² Indeed, this figure provides for those who mourn "in Zion" (v. 3) and prophesies that "they" shall rebuild ruins (vv. 3-4). It is reasonable, therefore, to read these verses as part of the Servant's ministry, or at least to assume Paul would have read them that way. These words may sound like purely emotional comfort for those who are suffering in mourning. But there is clear theological content to this comfort; it gives the mourners "a mantle of praise" (v. 3) and enables them to "build up the ancient ruins" (v. 4). The comfort does not lead to sitting around feeling better. Instead the comforted are praising God and rising up to rebuild. Furthermore, this comfort has a reconciliatory dimension. The comforted are rebuilding "the devastations of many generations" (v. 4). And "because their shame was double, and dishonor proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion" (v. 7). Those punished and mourning in exile are now reconciled and forgiven through the divine comfort of the Servant's proclamation. This imagery of comfort also conveys deep divine love. The comfort brings with it extravagant grace, outrageous reversal of fortune. The far off, sinful exiles are not only forgiven, but comforted, possessing "favor" and their enemies avenged (v. 2), the mourners covered in ashes now shiny with oil, loud with praise, raised up to build again (vv. 3-4).

Although the Servant's ministry brings comfort, the Servant himself experiences profound suffering: "Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, 'Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you'" (Isaiah 49:7). And as previously discussed, Isaiah 51 portrays the Servant's terrible suffering on behalf of others. This is the same relationship of suffering to consolation as

⁴² Frederick W. Danker, *II Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1989), 41.

found in 2 Corinthians. Suffering does not disqualify Paul nor the Servant from ministry, but legitimizes and enables ministry.

This comfort is also eschatological, looking forward to future redemption: “I, I am he who comforts (*paraklesis*) you; why then are you afraid of a mere mortal who must die, a human being who fades like grass? ... You fear all day long because of the fury of the oppressor, who is bent on destruction. But where is the fury of the oppressor? The oppressed shall speedily be released; they shall not die and go down to the Pit, nor shall they lack bread” (53:12, 13b-14). The comfort comes from God and looks forward to a future time when oppression is ended and death is no more.

This can be seen also in Isaiah 66; verse 13 reads, “As a mother comforts her children, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.” Furthermore: “For the Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to pay back his anger in fury, and his rebuke in flames of fire. For by fire will the Lord execute judgment, and by his sword, on all flesh; and those slain by the Lord shall be many” (vv. 15-16). This is an eschatological comfort that will come when the enemies of God’s people are destroyed and God’s people live in “the new heavens and the new earth” (v. 22).

In summary, Isaiah’s usage of “consolation” has several dimensions. It is a key aspect of the Suffering Servant’s ministry. It announces reconciliation of those far off back to God. It conveys the deep, transforming love of God and commissions those comforted to new tasks of service to God. It is also eschatological; it is not fully realized until a future judgment and redemption of the earth.

Paul and the Ministry of Comfort

Paul begins 2 Corinthians by referencing his ministry of comfort: “Blessed be... the God of all consolation, who consoles us in our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ” (vv. 3-4). This relationship of suffering to consolation evokes the Suffering Servant’s ministry. As previously discussed, Paul clearly thinks of Christ as the Suffering Servant. And as Christ suffers for others, Christ consoles. Paul continues, “If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering” (v. 6). Barnett explains that Paul is couching his ministry “in antitriumphant and indeed explicitly suffering terms.”⁴³ And yet, it is this suffering that legitimizes his ministry. Paul is suffering like the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, like Christ. There is a deep love for the Corinthians implied here. Paul loves them enough to suffer terribly for them, to love them with Christ’s love. As previously discussed, Isaiah’s imagery of divine comfort suggests an extravagant outpouring of divine grace. The love of the “God of consolation” (v. 3) is flowing through Paul into the Corinthians.

As previously discussed, “consolation” in Isaiah has a reconciliatory dimension. It is the announcement of God’s desire to reconcile wayward Israel back to God’s self. Understanding the Isaianic framework underneath Paul’s ministry of consolation helpfully draws out a key purpose of the epistle—to reconcile the Corinthians to God and to Paul. It is important to avoid making too many claims about the conflicts and crises in the Corinthian community, or in any of the communities to which Paul writes, because there is no way of verifying them. As readers of the epistles we only have one end of the conversation. I concur with Hafemann, who complains

⁴³Barnett, 74.

about scholarship that functions on a kind of circular logic, reconstructing the situation of the Corinthian community and positing that as the letter's hermeneutical key. Hafemann proposes interpretation done the other way around—first read the text closely, and then make tentative claims about the community's situation.⁴⁴

However, a straightforward reading of 2 Corinthians indicates that there is conflict between Paul and the Corinthians. Just after this section about comfort, Paul says, rather defensively, “But I call on God as witness against me: It was to spare you that I did not come again to Corinth... So I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit” (1:23, 2:1). These verses need to be read in context, with the preceding verses about reconciliatory comfort. God brings consolation through the sufferings of Christ and of Paul. Therefore, Paul's decision not to come to Corinth, Paul's painful visit, and the resultant suffering which Paul (2:4) shares along with the Corinthians will lead to reconciliation. In his ministry of consolation, Paul is bringing the wayward Corinthians back to God and to himself. Moreover, this ministry of Paul's suffering for the Corinthians' consolation highlights his deep love for them. Because he loves them and aches for them, how can they continue to be angry about a painful visit and then a missed one? This theme reoccurs later: “Make room in your hearts for us, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one... I often boast about you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with consolation (*paraklesis*); I am overjoyed in all our affliction” (7:2a, 4). Paul is urging the Corinthians to return to him; he is filled up with the proclamation of God's encouragement and God's reconciliation. This consolation has come to him presumably through the “affliction,” since chapter 1 implies that consolation comes through suffering. Yet the affliction is not merely Paul's but “our[s].” The Corinthians are joining in the suffering.

⁴⁴ Hafemann, 3.

The conflict has obviously brought suffering to the Corinthians, too, and in 1:6, Paul declares that they will receive consolation if they suffer along with him. Like Israel in Isaiah, the Corinthians are not passive recipients of the ministry of comfort, although in 2 Corinthians, unlike Isaiah, the Corinthians will actually have to suffer. As previously discussed, Paul compares himself to Christ and to the Suffering Servant to offer a warrant for his apostolic authority. Paul has authority because he suffers. Therefore, Paul's inviting the Corinthians into the ministry of consolation and suffering may seem to delegitimize his own authority. However, the Corinthians' role of suffering is more limited. They "endure the same sufferings that we also are suffering" (v. 6), not new sufferings. Paul, through Christ, is the template, the authoritative model, for Corinthian suffering for the gospel.

This can be seen in 2:5-7: "But if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but to some extent—not to exaggerate it—to all of you. This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person; so now you should forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." Apparently there was an egregious offender in the Corinthian community, who has caused the Corinthians to suffer. Yet this suffering should effect forgiveness for the offender and lead the Corinthians to extend him consolation. By discussing this just after Paul's explanation of the ministry of consolation, and his discussion about the conflict between himself and the Corinthians, Paul is implicitly asking the Corinthians to follow his example. Just as Paul suffers for the Corinthians and consoles them, just as Paul has been accused by the Corinthians and still proclaims love for and reconciliatory consolation to them, so the Corinthians should follow that example—understanding their sufferings as endured for the sake of the offender, and forgiving and consoling him. The Corinthians' suffering and ministry of consolation is more limited than Paul's and intimately connected to his, underscoring that

Paul's ministry as the Suffering Servant is a special apostolic ministry (but is likewise derived from Christ's own ministry as the Suffering Servant).

As previously discussed, Isaiah's notion of consolation is eschatological. It often looks forward to and is fulfilled in the life to come. By discussing consolation as happening in the present, it may seem as though 2 Corinthians has a fully realized eschatology. However, the eschatological notes of consolation in Isaiah amplify that refrain in the symphony of 2 Corinthians. In Isaiah and in 2 Corinthians, consolation "is not only a present reality, but it is also a guarantee of the fullness of salvation in the future."⁴⁵ Lim points to v. 9 to support this argument. After outlining his ministry of consolation and suffering, Paul explains the "affliction" they experienced in Asia that left them "so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself" (v. 8), but "We felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead" (v. 9). Paul's terrible suffering leads to a comfort, but the fullness of this comfort will not be manifested until the final judgment.

Paul continues:

"This is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God—and all the more towards you. For we write nothing other than what you can read and also understand until the end—as you have already understood us in part—that on the day of the Lord Jesus we are your boast even as you are our boast" (1:12-14).

The ministry of consolation, clearly a significant component of Paul's "behavior" towards the Corinthians, will be part of his boast on the judgment day. The "end" in v. 13 has a clear double meaning; Paul wants the Corinthians to read the letter to completion, and understand his proclamation until the end of history. Paul understands his relationship to the Corinthians as eternal, the occasion of each other's divinely given glory on the judgment day.

⁴⁵ Lim, 33.

This relationship of mutual suffering and consolation is sacramental; it brings future heavenly glory into the present. The relationship between Paul and the Corinthians is a foretaste of the kingdom come. Moreover, the eschatological and reconciliatory character of this consolation highlights that even though there are some conflicts in their relationship at the present, God is working them out; Paul and the Corinthians are eternally inseparable. Collins points out that it is significant that Paul and the Corinthians *are* each other's boast (grammatically in the present tense in Greek); "Paul's use of the present assumes that they are already taking pride in one another."⁴⁶ This eschatological, reconciliatory consolation enables a future glory to be experienced now, in the relationship between Paul and his people.

Jars of Clay

Paul describes his pastoral identity through the image of the clay jar: "But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (4:7). Paul is the clay jar, fragile and ordinary, a container for the "extraordinary" power of God. This verse begins a longer description of the sufferings he has endured only through God's grace: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair..." (v. 8). Read merely in the context of 2 Corinthians, this image strongly underscores Paul's dependence on God. However, as Barnett points out, this may be read as an allusion to two passages in Isaiah.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, Barnett does not discuss what the literary effects of this allusion are, but I will explore them here. Taking seriously the notion that this image is borrowed from Isaiah, interpreters can hear subtler but very real echoes that enrich and enhance the basic meaning of the metaphor.

⁴⁶ Raymond Collins, *Second Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 41.

⁴⁷ Barnett, 230.

The first instance of pottery imagery in Isaiah occurs in the context of God's anointing of Cyrus (45:1). God then answers objections to this choice in a stunning reply worth quoting at length:

“Woe to you who strive with your Maker, earthen vessels with the potter! Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, ‘What are you making?’ or ‘Your work has no handles?’ ... Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker: Will you question me about my children, or command me concerning the work of my hands? I made the earth, and created humankind upon it; it was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host. I have aroused Cyrus in righteousness, and I will make all his paths straight; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward, says the Lord of hosts” (45:9, 11-13).

The function of the pottery imagery here is clear. A potter is sovereign over clay, far more knowledgeable than the clay, at a higher level of existence. The potter God's gracious choice to anoint Cyrus to bring the exiles home should therefore not be challenged. God is free to choose God's servants, even a seemingly unlikely Gentile ruler like Cyrus. This meaning of the Isaiah's clay imagery as highlighting God's sovereignty deepens our understanding of what 2 Corinthians 4 is doing. God is free to choose Paul, an unlikely, weak, afflicted vessel to bear God's power, and free to rebuke and bestow “woe” on those who oppose God's choice. Later in the letter Paul is more explicitly rebuking the Corinthians for their offense at his suffering and his more ordinary ministry than the “superapostles.” Yet this undertone of warning and of celebration of God's free power echo here in 2 Corinthians 4:7. Moreover, it is not the lone echo of this theme in chapter 4: “We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing” (vv. 2-3). To use Hays' criteria, there is thematic coherence. Paul is daring anyone to challenge him, so convinced is he that he is doing right in “the sight of God.” He goes on to link acceptance of “*our* gospel” with eternal salvation. To reject Paul, to

reject the vessel the potter has chosen, is to reject God. But this note of warning is amplified with a proper understanding of the Isaianic background of the pottery imagery.

It may be objected that God is also called a potter in Jeremiah 18 and Lamentations 4:2; why should it be assumed Paul is thinking of Isaiah here? But Isaiah is a more explicit and consistent background for 2 Corinthians than is Jeremiah or Lamentations. Furthermore, the context of Isaiah 45 is more harmonious with the textual symphony of 2 Corinthians than Jeremiah 18 or Lamentations 4; its thematic coherence is greater. In Jeremiah 18, God is comparing the wayward people to the clay vessel as an image of judgment: “Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings” (v. 11). Paul is surely not thinking of himself as a jar of clay in danger of destruction. In Lamentations 4 the people who were once glorious jewels are now, after divine judgment, become ordinary clay jars: “The sacred stones lie scattered at the head of every street. The precious children of Zion, worth their weight in fine gold—how they are reckoned as earthen pots, the work of a potter’s hands!” (vv. 1-2). Again, Paul is surely not saying that he has experienced a punishment like the exile. In determining and evaluating Old Testament allusions, it is important not only to look for verbal parallels or similar metaphors, but also the functions and themes of those metaphors.

Isaiah and the Unity of 2 Corinthians

Much ink has been spilled in source criticism of 2 Corinthians. Is this one letter, two, or more? This paper does not attempt to give a complete answer to this question, and any certain answer is impossible. However, another benefit of reading 2 Corinthians with the Isaianic background in mind is that it sheds some light on this question. As will be shown, 2 Corinthians contains allusions to Isaiah throughout the whole of the letter, not just in the middle. Again, this

does not settle the question of the composition of the letter. But the allusions throughout the book do provide evidence in favor of literary unity, and suggest Paul draws on Isaiah not just in a few select pages but throughout his writing. Even if the literary unity of Isaiah is rejected in favor of multiple letters edited together, Isaiah still seems to be an important influence on Paul's thought, important enough to show up in multiple letters.

Fundraising from the Corinthians

In chapters 8-9, Paul is talking to the Corinthians about his fundraising project for Christians in Jerusalem and soliciting their contributions. Paul clearly does not want to apply too much pressure: "I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others"—that is, the Macedonian church (8:8). Paul goes on to reflect theologically about generosity: "And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work" (9:8). As Furnish points out, here Paul alludes clearly to Isaiah 55:10-11.⁴⁸ 2 Cor. 9:10 reads, "He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of righteousness." Isaiah 55:10-11 says, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

In 2 Cor. 9:10, Paul is emphasizing the faithfulness and generosity of God. Because God is faithful to sustain the processes of nature and feed God's people physically, the Corinthians can trust God's provision and therefore give generously to Paul's project. Moreover, Furnish,

⁴⁸ Victor Paul Furnish, *2 Corinthians*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 442.

summarizes, “If the Corinthians will contribute generously to the collection, they will see how God can multiply their resources for yet more generous giving.”⁴⁹ This is a somewhat similar message to Isaiah’s. For Isaiah, God’s word is as dependable as seed growing and feeding people. Unfortunately, Furnish does not reflect further on the literary effects of the Isaianic allusion which he identifies.

Again, understanding the context of Isaiah helps understand the implications of 2 Cor. 9:10 in greater depth. Isaiah 55:10-11 is located in the context of a call to repentance: “Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” (vv. 6-7). Israel should repent, because of the sureness of God’s word. This allusion amplifies a note of judgment and urgency in Paul’s fundraising, a note that is not otherwise absent: “The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (9:6).

Yet the tone of Isaiah 55 is not wholly threatening. The “word” of v. 11 that is so faithful is a word of reconciliation and homecoming for those far off, a glorious end to exile: “For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands” (v. 12). This fits with the dominantly joyful tone of 2 Corinthians but adds a renewed emphasis on reconciliation. Indeed, it helps make sense of what comes after 2 Cor. 9:10: “You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us” (v. 11). Furthermore, the Christians in Jerusalem will “long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” (vv. 14-15). If the

⁴⁹ Furnish, 449.

Corinthians do listen to Paul and give, they will be drawn near to God, to Paul, and to the church in Jerusalem, and this is truly a cause for joy, for exclaiming in thanksgiving to God.

Although Isaiah 55:10-11 does not occur in the context of a servant song, the way Paul uses this allusion also illustrates his pastoral identity. In Isaiah 55:10-11, God declares that God's word will not return to God's mouth empty. God's word is as firm and faithful as the sower's seed. If Israel heeds the call to repentance previously discussed in vv. 6-9, God's word, God's promise of homecoming, will be fulfilled. Paul certainly sees himself as a proclaimer of God's word. And whether the Corinthians heed Paul and give to this project or not, God's word is strong. And if the Corinthians do repent, and do "seek the Lord while he may be found" (Isaiah 55:6), this joyous reconciliation is not only possible but certain, through God's sufficient word.

These themes of judgment and reconciliation, clarified and amplified by a deep understanding of the allusion to Isaiah, also makes sense of what follows after that, which otherwise seems like a non-sequitur, a fragment of another letter. Paul clearly rebukes the Corinthians in a powerful defense of his ministry: "I ask that when I am present I need not show boldness by daring to oppose those who think we are acting according to human standards" (10:2). Why is a fundraising appeal followed by such a robust self-defense? Giving to the fundraiser would mean the Corinthians are submitting to God's word and thus will receive this joyful reconciliation envisioned in Isaiah. But this is not the only form of repentance required; they also need to repent of their rebellion against Paul—"We are ready to punish every disobedience when your obedience is complete" (10:6). And if they do, the joyful reconciliation pictured in Isaiah will happen. Furthermore, Isaiah's emphasis on the powerful promise of God is a theme continued in 2 Corinthians 10. Quoting from Jeremiah 9:24, Paul retorts, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord," then continues, "For it is not those who commend themselves

that are approved, but those whom the Lord commends” (10:17-18). Paul defends himself not on his own merit but on God’s, the one whose word does not return empty, who gives seed and bread. 2 Cor. 9:10’s allusion to Isaiah 55:10-11, therefore, facilitates the transition from the fundraising appeal to a more general demand for the Corinthians to be reconciled, to listen to Paul.

This analysis may appear to read too much into a single allusion. However, the verbal similarities between 2 Cor. 9:10 and Isaiah 55:10-11 are too strong to be coincidental; the “volume,” to use Hays’ language, is quite audible. And as has already been discussed, interpreters should respect Paul as a competent reader of Scripture. Isaiah 55 does bring together a focus on repentance, the faithfulness of God, and God’s power to reconcile, themes that also belong to Paul in the fundraising appeal and the subsequent self-defense. If Paul were not thinking about the themes of Isaiah 55, why did he allude so clearly to it? Why not stop with quoting from Psalm 112:9, quoted in 2 Cor. 9:9? Using Hays’ criterion of “satisfaction,” understanding 2 Cor. 9:19 as an Isaianic allusion produces a more satisfying, logically coherent reading of the text than glossing over it does.

It may also be objected that this Isaiah allusion is not sufficient evidence for the literary unity of 2 Corinthians. That is true, and the aim of this project is to investigate Paul’s usage of Isaiah, not to determine the sources and composition of 2 Corinthians. But Paul’s usage of Isaiah here provides some evidence for literary unity. Even if chapter 9 and chapter 10 were not part of the same composition originally, they are part of the same document now. Therefore, it seems legitimate to interpret the document we have, instead of the documents we do not. This is especially true for the Christian interpreter, who recognizes 2 Corinthians in its present form (whatever its previous forms may be) as Scripture inspired by the Spirit.

Servant Status

The allusion to Isaiah within the context of fundraising is not the only Isaianic allusion to occur in the latter chapters of the letter. Three times throughout 2 Corinthians Paul explicitly refers to himself as a servant.⁵⁰ In 3:5-6, Paul writes: “Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers (servants) of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit, for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” This theme of suffering revealing the glory of God, through which God sustains God’s suffering servant, is evident. It may be objected that this is not a clear allusion to Isaiah, that “servant” is a common word not necessarily derived from Isaiah. However, it is clear from this second usage of “servant” as a title for Paul in 6:4 that we are meant to think of Isaiah: “But as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities.” This usage of “servant” occurs right after the direct quote from Isaiah in 6:2, taken from God’s word to the suffering servant. The grammar indicates that this must be read to say: We commend ourselves—that is, we prove that we are—servants of God.⁵¹ This is a subtle but important distinction that is not immediately obvious in the English translation. Paul is saying he commends himself to be a servant of God, not that he is commending himself in general, while being a servant of God. It is the great endurance, the affliction, the hardship, that commends and legitimates Paul as a servant, standing in the Suffering Servant tradition of Isaiah.

A third time Paul calls himself a servant, in 11:23: “Are they ministers (servants) of Christ? I am talking like a madman—I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death.” This suffering Servant identity is

⁵⁰ Danker, 180.

⁵¹ Ibid., 141.

not confined to the middle of the letter, but drawn upon throughout it. Here the focus is not extensive theological reflection but Paul's "recital of performance far beyond the call of duty."⁵² Yet it is important to note that these other two instances of "servant," especially the second in such close proximity to a direct quotation from Isaiah, establish that Paul is drawing on the Suffering Servant throughout the whole letter, and that this is a significant identity for Paul.

The Marriage Metaphor

As A.E. Harvey points, out, there is another instance of an Isaianic allusion occurring later in 2 Corinthians: "I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (11:2).⁵³ Unfortunately, Harvey does not reflect on the significance of the allusion, except to summarize: "Paul's concern for the Corinthian church is like that of God for his people... Paul thinks of the Corinthian church as 'betrothed' to Christ through his own agency, with all that this implies of exclusive commitment."⁵⁴ In other words, Harvey does not see the allusion as adding anything significant that cannot already be deduced from a straightforward reading of 2 Corinthians apart from the Isaianic allusion. This marriage image is a powerful one that, as Harvey rightly suggests, illustrates Paul's understanding of his ministry—to draw the Corinthians closer to Christ. Paul is not the husband, but the loving matchmaker and officiant. However, a clear understanding of the Isaiah allusions and substantive investigation of the literary effects created by them is needed.

As has already been mentioned, Isaiah 61 opens with an announcement of the prophet's ministry:

"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me." The prophet goes on to rejoice in God's blessings upon the people. Then the prophet says: "I will

⁵² Ibid., 110.

⁵³ A.E. Harvey, *Renewal Through Suffering: A Study of 2 Corinthians*. Studies of the New Testament and its World. (Edinburgh: T&T Publishing, 1996), 97.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom docks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with jewels” (61:10).

God anoints the prophet for ministry and God binds himself to the prophet, lavishing on the prophet salvation and beauty. The prophet is overcome with thanksgiving and praise for what God has done for him and for Israel.

Isaiah 62 continues with the prophet announcing God’s triumph and reconciling grace for the people: “You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married, for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” (vv. 4-5). It may be objected that it is improper to read the prophet, as a character, the same prophet of chapter 61, is speaking here. However, the repeated nuptial metaphor suggests at the very least a close connection between chapters 61 and 62, sufficiently close that we should read the prophet as continuing to speak. Moreover, certainly Paul would not have shared modern concerns about source criticism or even modern chapter and verse divisions, and so Paul as an interpreter of Isaiah would likely read Isaiah 62 and 61 together.

In Isaiah 62 the prophet, then, is making the announcement of marriage between God and the people. This notion of ministry makes clear that the prophet’s role, and Paul’s, is clearly subordinate to God’s role. It is Servant-like even though this is not a Servant song, servile in its humble, simple role. Yet this nuptial image of Isaiah 62 is juxtaposed with God’s marriage to the prophet in Isaiah 61. One important difference, however, is that the marriage of God and prophet has already happened, but in Isaiah 62 it is an image of soon, but not yet present glory—“For Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn” (62:1). Here a

subtler yet important note resounds in the symphony of 2 Corinthians. The prophet is already wedded to God, clothed in glory. Therefore, so, too, is Paul, even though the critics say, “ ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible’ ” (2 Cor. 10:10). And whether the Corinthians return to Paul and to God or not, God has already lovingly bound himself to Paul. The image also highlights the prophet’s, and Paul’s, dependence on God. God seeks his minister out, God weds him, God clothes the bride/minister in salvation.

It may be perhaps objected—why does Paul not explicitly call himself married to God, as the prophet of Isaiah does? The answer is that Paul does not need to. Here he is focused on boldly confronting the Corinthians’ failure to live as the future bride of Christ. He is commending himself through his weaknesses, not through an image of marriage to God. Yet as this study has shown again throughout this letter Paul is reading and using Isaiah, and Isaiah’s nuptial language is centered around both prophet and people. And even if the Corinthians are not expected to hear this resonance, it is reasonable to hear Paul as both the one announcing future marriage for God and people and one already wedded to God. And even if Paul was not thinking about himself in this way, taking 2 Corinthians seriously as Scripture means there are deeper meanings and echoes than what the historical Paul may have intended.

This nuptial imagery also highlight’s Israel amazing blessing offered by God. They “shall no more be termed Forsaken” (62:4). The marriage has not yet happened; it is not as though Israel and God are completely separate at this point. But the full reconciliation and the full reversal of forsakenness is anticipated, but not yet here. The wedding is an enormous reversal for fortune for far-off, “desolate” Israel. Hearing the glowing language of God’s delight for God’s future bride echo in our ears in reading 2 Corinthians 11:2 highlights the absurdity of the Corinthians’ choice. They are wandering away from a beautiful wedding to God. Yet

simultaneously it injects a note of hope. God is the one who marries the wayward, the forsaken, the desolate. The Corinthians need only accept their part in the marriage, and remain true to Paul and not the superapostles, because Paul is the only one who can preside over this marriage.

It may be objected that the Old Testament contains language in other places about God wedding God's people. However, in light of many other allusions to Isaiah that have already been discussed, it is more fruitful and plausible to read 2 Corinthians 11:2 in light of Isaiah, not Hosea, for instance. In addition, Isaiah 62 makes this wedding of God with God's people a future event, not a present reality. Therefore, it fits the nuptial image in 2 Corinthians better than Hosea, where the marriage is an already established fact. It may also be objected that Paul is more likely thinking of the nuptial language in Isaiah 54: "For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called" (v. 5). However, again in this passage the wedding of God and God's people is an already established fact, not an anticipated future event as it is in Isaiah 62 and in 2 Corinthians 11:2.

Significance of Isaianic Allusions

In a work as rich and complex as 2 Corinthians, it is difficult to summarize all of the impacts of these allusions. What are the benefits of analyzing these allusions as interpreters, and what are the benefits for Paul in employing them? However, in surveying them all patterns emerge. Significantly, Paul applies the suffering Servant motif to Christ and to himself. Although some interpreters have tried to argue for one of these against the other, I have argued that holding them together in dynamic tension is not only more consistent with the textual evidence, but also yields a more satisfying reading and resonates with the larger themes of 2 Corinthians. Christ is the suffering Servant who suffers for his people. So, too, is Paul. This highlights Paul's dependence on Christ, and this holy closeness to Christ, since both are participating in this

ancient, foretold ministry. As has already been discussed, Paul's choice to draw on the suffering Servant, rather than to simply say his suffering is like Christ's, underscores this closeness between Paul and Christ. Paul is not just like Christ, but sharing in the same role with Christ. Paul's self-identification with the suffering Servant also serves as a warrant for his ministry of weakness and suffering. Ancient Scripture indicates that true servants of God depend on God, and suffer for the benefit of others and the glory of God. Therefore, opposing the suffering ministry of Paul is tantamount to opposing God. Paul so thoroughly inhabits the world of Scripture that he cannot talk about his vocation without drawing on Scripture.

Another benefit of studying these allusions is that such analysis sheds light on what may otherwise be non-sequiturs or confusing statements. For example, hearing and taking seriously the quotation from Isaiah 49:8 in 2 Corinthians 6:2 clarifies that God is speaking to Paul, and equipping Paul, God's servant, to exhort the Corinthians. Otherwise, the function of 6:2, the identity of "I" and "you" in the verse, are puzzling and even out of place with the surrounding context of the letter. Likewise, 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 draws on language of new creation and reconciliation, concepts which seem unrelated until the literary context of Isaiah is understood.

Moreover, a deeper understanding of the contexts of these allusions to Isaiah enables interpreters to hear the fully symphony of meaning in 2 Corinthians. The literary context of Isaiah produces new layers of meaning, deeper echoes, when appealed to in 2 Corinthians. When Paul is taken seriously as a faithful, devout, and skilled reader of his Scripture, this strategy is not far-fetched but an important way of listening closely to Paul's writing and self-reflection. So, for example, a note of warning in the new creation language is sounded; God speaks of new creation in Isaiah as a judgment against the unfaithful. In this way notes of warning are sounded throughout the epistle to prepare readers for a final climax of exhortation at the end of the letter.

It also takes Scripture seriously as wondrously deep, yielding meanings beyond what it can be immediately proven Paul “meant.” It also appreciates Paul’s gospel and proclamation as thoroughly Scriptural.

Another important example is the motif of consolation (*paraklesis*) in 2 Corinthians, a multivalent concept in Isaiah. Overlooking the background of Isaiah in interpreting the motif of consolation in 2 Corinthians does not render the concept unintelligible. But there is strong textual evidence that it is linked to the Servant’s ministry in Isaiah and therefore should be read with the resonances of its use in Isaiah. Reading 2 Corinthians in this way clarifies that when Paul is speaking about consolation for the Corinthians, he is speaking of suffering on their behalf and with them. Consolation in Isaiah is also closely connected with the reconciliation of God’s wayward people back with God, through the ministry of the Servant. Therefore, as Paul speaks of consolation he is also implicitly urging the Corinthians to be reconciled to himself and to God. Furthermore, consolation in Isaiah has connotations of exhortation; it is not emotional comfort but theological and spiritual encouragement, which highlights that Paul is trying to teach the Corinthians more than take away their pain. Consolation in Isaiah is also an announcement of eschatological salvation, of future, glorious deliverance. With this understanding, Paul’s consolation is also an announcement of future glory and simultaneously an announcement the future glory has broken into the present in Christ and in Paul’s cruciform ministry.

In addition, studying the allusions to Isaiah offers additional evidence for the debate about whether 2 Corinthians is one letter or composed of multiple letters written at different times. While the especially strong allusions to Isaiah are concentrated in the middle of the letter, this analysis has found other allusions at the beginning and end of the letter. Therefore, there is some evidence that 2 Corinthians as a whole has common themes, allusions, and images

throughout the letter. And even if it is composed of multiple letters, it is clear Isaiah is an important influence on Paul's thought and identity on each occasion for writing.

Pastoral Implications

Finally, Paul's usage of Isaiah has interesting pastoral implications. Paul's understanding of himself and his ministry is deeply shaped by Scripture. He inhabits the world of Scripture and therefore speaks in its terms. This suggests that Christian pastors today should likewise shape their pastoral identities, teaching, and proclamation through close reading of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments. It also suggests that the pastoral response to conflict should not be immediate reaction but more reading of Scripture, and reading oneself, as pastor, into the story. Interestingly, Paul does not offer a resume of his qualifications and achievements, but defends himself by naming his sufferings and how his sufferings make him a suffering Servant like Christ. This suggests that the world of Scripture, not church growth techniques or corporate leadership strategies, should shape the ways pastors talk about their ministry with church members. Biblical categories like suffering Servant are Paul's metric for evaluating his ministry. This notion that suffering with and for people is actually what qualifies a person for ministry is still so paradoxical today that it requires Scriptural warrant— Isaiah, the gospels, 2 Corinthians.

Paul's adaptation of the suffering Servant as an identity for himself and for Christ, the jars of clay imagery, and the nuptial metaphor highlight that Paul is self-consciously dependent on God. He does not want to be unique or innovative; he wants to be like Christ, and thus empowered and redeemed by God. He does not want to rescue the Corinthians, but to marry them to their real love, Christ. Yet he is simultaneously strong in this dependence on God, strong enough to withstand the attacks of superapostles and the doubts of the Corinthians. He is the chosen Servant, the potter's clay jar, the bride decked in righteousness. His self-defense always

returns to the theme of God's work in him. This is what keeps the suffering from being codependency—it is commanded, sustained, and legitimized by God, not the people.

The Isaianic background of “consolation” also offers a robust model for pastoral care. It is linked to the willingness of the Servant and of Paul to suffer—persecution, opposition, stress, the pain of empathy with the suffering, “anxiety for the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28). A stern, aloof parson cannot offer Pauline nor Isaianic consolation. Consolation is also an announcement of reconciliation to God and to one another, a declaration of the end of exile, as in the case of the egregious offender whom the Corinthians should “forgive and console” (2:7). Pastoral care is theological, shaped by the gospel of reconciliation. It is not primarily about making people feel better, but encouraging them to know the hope and responsibility God's reconciling love has laid on them. It is not the sole responsibility of the pastor; the Corinthians too must console their wayward brother. Consolation is also eschatological, the announcement of future glory and of the breaking in of that glory now. Pastoral care leads people to hope in God, and in a better world God is making. This consoling hope is what sustains Paul in the throes of despair, trusting the God who “raises the dead” (2 Cor. 1:9).

In taking Paul seriously as a reader of Scripture and as a pastor, in taking the canonicity of both Testaments seriously, the fullness of the symphony of the epistles can begin to be heard. Scholarly exegesis is necessary to competently hear the echoes and their interplay. On that foundation pastoral-theological reflection can be built, in the effort to both listen to Scripture and to follow Paul as a servant of God.

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