

The ἄπιστοι of 2 Cor 6:14: Beyond the Impasse

David I. Starling (Morling College)

Abstract

Amongst defenders of the Pauline authorship of 2 Cor 6:14-7:1, an impasse exists between those who read the ἄπιστοι of v. 14 as a reference to the Gentile pagans of the city and those who read it as a reference to the “false apostles” of chs. 10–13. In this article I suggest a possible resolution of that impasse, based on a re-examination of the content and function of holiness concepts within 2 Corinthians. The ἄπιστοι in view are indeed the Gentile pagans of Corinth, but the principal issue over which Paul is urging the Corinthians to separate from them is the pagan σοφία σαρκική that has distorted their assessments of Paul and his opponents.

Key words: 2 Corinthians, interpolation, integrity, holiness, unbelievers, separation

In 2 Cor 6:14-7:1, sandwiched between the appeals of 6:11-13 and 7:2-4 (which, in turn, ride on the back of Paul’s defence of his ministry in the preceding chapters) readers of 2 Corinthians are confronted by a paragraph which at first reading appears startlingly different in its language, tone and theme.

Within the space of six tightly-structured, rhetorically forceful verses, readers are urged not to be “mismatched with unbelievers” (6:14), barraged with rhetorical questions about the impossibility of fellowship between “righteousness and lawlessness ... light and darkness ... Christ [and] Beliar ... a believer [and] an

unbeliever ... the temple of God [and] idols” (6:14b-16a), reminded of a catena of scripture citations about their identity as the temple of God and the call to separate from uncleanness (6:16b-18), and summoned – in the light of these scriptural texts – to join the writer in “cleans[ing] ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of the Lord” (7:1).

Interpolation theories

For some readers of 2 Corinthians, the phenomena of 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 seem so foreign to what one might expect from Paul, and the paragraph’s relationship to the immediately preceding and following context so inexplicable, that the passage is viewed as an alien intrusion of non-Pauline material, inserted into the letter by another hand.

One frequently cited proposal regarding the provenance of the paragraph is that of Joseph Fitzmyer, who argued in an article first published in 1961¹ that 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 was a non-Pauline interpolation, originating in Essene circles and reworked by

¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “Qumrân and the Interpolated Paragraph in 2 Cor 6:14-7:1,” *CBQ* 23 (1961) 271-280. Similar arguments can be found in N.A. Dahl, “A Fragment and Its Context: 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1” in *Studies in Paul: Theology for the Early Christian Mission* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977) 62-69; Joachim Gnilka, “2 Cor 6:14-7:1 in the Light of the Qumran Texts and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs,” in *Paul and Qumran: Studies in New Testament Exegesis* (ed. J. Murphy-O'Connor; London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968) 48-68.

a Christian redactor before being introduced into its present context in 2 Corinthians.

Fitzmyer cites five features of the paragraph as providing evidence of its Essene origins:² (a) the “triple dualism” of uprightness and iniquity, light and darkness, Christ and Beliar; (b) “the opposition to idols”; (c) “the concept of the temple of God” (applied to the members of the community); (d) “the separation from impurity”; and (e) “the concatenation of Old Testament texts.” Whilst granting that some of these features can also be found in undisputedly Pauline contexts (and that some are the common stock of Judaism and scarcely unique to Qumran) and without asserting that any one of them was impossible for Paul to have been responsible for, Fitzmyer argues that the cumulative weight of all five features (together with “the interrupted sequence of the surrounding context, the self-contained unit and the strange vocabulary”) make it most likely that the paragraph’s origins were Essene rather than Pauline.³

In an article published a little over a decade later, Hans Dieter Betz went a step further and argued that the paragraph was not just non-Pauline but anti-Pauline.⁴

² Fitzmyer, “Qumrân and the Interpolated Paragraph,” 273.

³ Fitzmyer, “Qumrân and the Interpolated Paragraph,” 279–280. In an article published in the same year, Pierre Benoit was a little less cautious in his evaluation, describing the paragraph as “a meteor fallen from the heaven of Qumran into an epistle of Paul” (P. Benoit, “Qumran et le Nouveau Testament,” *NTS* 7 (1961) 279; my translation).

⁴ Hans Dieter Betz, “2 Cor 6:14–7:1: An Anti-Pauline Fragment?” *JBL* 92 (1973) 88–108.

Central to Betz's argument is the way in which the Scripture citations function in the paragraph. The fact that the identity of the community addressed in v. 16 as "the temple of God" is grounded in the covenant formula of Lev 26:11-12 is a sign for Betz that the writers of 2 Cor 6:14-7:1 "radically identify" what Paul radically separates in Galatians: the promise of God and the observance of Torah.⁵ The Isa 52:11 citation in v. 17 functions, according to Betz, as a call to a "cultic-ritual separation from the 'unclean,'" which the members of the Christian community must achieve for themselves (a call that Betz sees as standing in stark contrast with Paul's view, in which the church is already holy).⁶

The total effect, Betz argues, is to convey a theology that he sums up thus: "The Christian people are under Christ's protection, as long as they stand firmly in the Sinai covenant. The purpose of the Christian life is to achieve the state of holiness and thus to become acceptable to God in the final judgment. This is done through purification from all defilement brought about by Beliar and his forces. Because of this goal, any contact with people outside of the covenant must be eliminated."⁷ According to Betz's reading of the paragraph and his understanding of Paul's

⁵ Betz, "2 Cor 6:14-7:1: An Anti-Pauline Fragment?" 103.

⁶ Betz, "2 Cor 6:14-7:1: An Anti-Pauline Fragment?" 96.

⁷ Betz, "2 Cor 6:14-7:1: An Anti-Pauline Fragment?" 108.

argument in Galatians, “Paul must have been the very embodiment of everything that the Christians speaking in 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 warned against.”⁸

An argument similar to Betz’s is mounted by Christoph Heil, who focuses on the language of “separation,” which is elsewhere used in Paul in a negative sense as “a technical term for the fencing-off of Jews from Gentiles”⁹ (e.g. Gal 2:12) and has a positive sense only when God is the subject and the reference is to Paul being “separated” by God for the work to which he has been called (e.g. Gal 1:15; Rom 1:1). Given this background, Heil argues, it is inconceivable that Paul would have been responsible for the way in which the Isa 52:11 citation is employed in v. 17.¹⁰

Interpolation theories such as these have met with a number of convincing counter-arguments, however. The argument for non-Pauline authorship based on the vocabulary used within the paragraph has been dismantled by Gordon Fee,¹¹ who works his way systematically through the paragraph’s *hapax legomena* (ἑτεροζυγεῖν, μετοχή, συμφώνησις, Βελιάρ, συγκατάθεσις, ἔμπεριπατέω, εἰσδέχομαι, παντοκράτωρ, μολυσμός) pointing out that at least two (ἔμπεριπατέω, εἰσδέχομαι and arguably παντοκράτωρ, if it is drawn from 2 Sam 7:8) belong to the LXX citations and can readily explained on that account, and three others (μετοχή,

⁸ Betz, “2 Cor 6:14–7:1: An Anti-Pauline Fragment?” 108.

⁹ Christoph Heil, “Die Sprache der Absonderung in 2 Kor 6,17 und bei Paulus,” in *The Corinthian Correspondence* (ed. Reimund Bieringer; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1996), 717–729, 723; my translation.

¹⁰ Heil, “Die Sprache der Absonderung”, 724.

¹¹ Gordon D. Fee, “II Corinthians VI.14–VII.1 and Food Offered to Idols,” *NTS* 23 (1977) 533–538.

συμφώνησις, μολυσμός) have close cognates that are used in other, undisputed, Pauline contexts within the Corinthian correspondence. Fee and others have also pointed out Paul's propensity to use *hapax legomena* in the more rhetorically heightened sections of his letters (as here, for example, in the series of synonyms that are required by the string of rhetorical questions in vv. 14-16),¹² and have pointed out a series of characteristic Paulinisms within the paragraph (e.g. Μὴ γίνεσθε...,¹³ ἔχοντες with an object qualified by a pronoun,¹⁴ ἐπιτελέω,¹⁵ λέγει κύριος as a citation formula,¹⁶ rhetorical questions – an idiom that has more in common with the Hellenistic-Jewish wisdom literature than with the Qumran texts¹⁷ – and composite Scripture-citations).¹⁸

¹² E.g. Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1985) 192; Margaret E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994) 34-35; Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 340.

¹³ Rom 12:16; 1 Cor 7:23; 10:7; 14:20.

¹⁴ 2 Cor 3:12; 4:1, 13.

¹⁵ Rom 15:28; 2 Cor 8:6, 11; Gal 3:3; Phil 1:6.

¹⁶ Rom 12:19; 14:11; 1 Cor 14:21.

¹⁷ E.g. 2 Cor 2:21-22; 1 Cor 4:7; 7:16; 9:7. An example of a close parallel from the Hellenistic-Jewish wisdom literature is the string of rhetorical questions in Sir 13:2, 17-18, cited in James M. Scott, *Adoption as Sons of God: An Exegetical Investigation into the Background of Υιοθεσία in the Pauline Corpus* (WUNT; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992) 190.

¹⁸ E.g. Rom 3:10-18; 9:25-26, 33; 11:8, 26-27, 34-35; 1 Cor 15:54-55.

The argument for interpolation on the grounds of the alleged theological incompatibility of the paragraph with Paul's undisputed writings has, equally, been shown to be based on an exaggerated and selective reading of both the paragraph and Paul's undisputed writings;¹⁹ it is hardly beyond the bounds of possibility that the Paul who wrote such warnings and injunctions as 1 Cor 5:11-13, 6:9-11 and 10:14-22 and 2 Cor 11:13-15 could have written the warnings and injunctions of 2 Cor 6:14-7:1.²⁰ Similarly, arguments based on the hermeneutical perspective and method of the paragraph have been rebutted by a string of studies comparing the way in which Scripture is read within 2 Cor 6:16-18 with the way it is read within the rest of the letter and elsewhere in Paul's writings.²¹

In addition to such counter-arguments to the theories of non-Pauline authorship, there are a number of problems with the theory that the passage (whether Pauline

¹⁹ E.g. Thrall, *2 Corinthians*, 30-31; Barnett, *2 Corinthians*, 340; Gerhard Sass, "Noch einmal, 2Kor 6,14-7,1: Literarkritische Waffen gegen einen 'unpaulinischen' Paulus?" *ZNW* 84 (1993) 36-64.

²⁰ Cf. Michael Newton, *The Concept of Purity at Qumran and in the Letters of Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 110-114.

²¹ E.g. 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," *NTS* 35 (1989) 550-581; William J. Webb, *Returning Home: New Covenant and Second Exodus as the Context for 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1* (JSOT; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993); James M. Scott, "The Use of Scripture in 2 Cor 6:16c-18 and Paul's Restoration Theology," *JSNT* 56 (1994) 73-99; Scott J. Hafemann, "Paul's Use of the Old Testament in 2 Corinthians," *Int* 52 (1998) 246-257; David I. Starling, *Not My People: Gentiles as Exiles in Pauline Hermeneutics* (BZNW; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011) 85-87, 96-106.

or non-Pauline) has been clumsily interpolated into its immediate context in 2 Cor 6:11-7:4, interrupting the flow of ideas from 6:13 to 7:2.

Whilst the heavy overlap of imagery and sentiment between 6:11-13 and 7:2-3 is frequently cited as an argument in favour of interpolation theories, it can equally – perhaps even more – serve as an argument against interpolation: if Paul has digressed in the intervening verses, then such repetition of imagery and sentiment serves a valid resumptive function, but if he has not, then (in the absence of any obvious rhetorical heightening or development) it is redundant.²² This problem with the interpolation theories is intensified by Paul’s use of προείρηκα in 7:3, which hardly serves any function if there has been no intervening digression.²³

Further to the problem of the overlaps between 6:11-13 and 7:2-3, the other even more basic problem with interpolation theories is that they succeed only in replacing the difficult question of why Paul might have included the paragraph at this point in the letter with the even more difficult question of why an interpolater

²² Cf. Fee, “II Corinthians VI.14–VII.1 and Food Offered to Idols,” 161; Scott, “Use of Scripture in 2 Cor 6:16c-18,” 95.

²³ As is pointed out by (among others) Frank J. Matera, *II Corinthians: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster, 2003) 159.

may have inserted it, without any clues from the history of the transmission of the text to suggest where or by whom the interpolation might have taken place.²⁴

But if interpolation theories based on the vocabulary, theology and hermeneutics of the paragraph or on the literary seams at 6:13-14 and 7:1-2 are unconvincing, we are still left with the problem of how the content and rhetorical function of 6:14-7:1 relate to the larger context of the letter (or, less ambitiously, if one or more of the other partition theories of the composition-history of 2 Corinthians is accepted, the somewhat more circumscribed context of chs. 1-7 or 2:14-7:4).

Who are the ἄπιστοι?

Advocates for the Pauline authorship of 2 Cor 6:14-7:1 and its integrity within the letter fall into two main schools of thought concerning the question of how the call to separation in 6:14-7:1 relates to the larger argument of the letter, reflecting their different views as to the identity of the ἄπιστοι referred to in v. 14.

²⁴ As Webb (*Returning Home*, 163) and Furnish (Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians* [AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1984] 380) both note, proponents of interpolation theories tend to respond to the question of why the paragraph was inserted here with such comments as “not clear” (Gnilka, “2 Cor 6:14 - 7:1,” 67), “remains unsolved” (Fitzmyer, “Qumrân and the Interpolated Paragraph,” 280), “for reasons unknown” (Betz, “2 Cor 6:14-7:1: An Anti-Pauline Fragment?” 108) and “impossible to say” (Dieter Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986] 12). For a more recent and somewhat speculative attempt to answer these questions, see Stephen J. Hultgren, “2 Cor 6.14-7.1 and Rev 21.3-8: Evidence for the Ephesian Redaction of 2 Corinthians,” *NTS* 49 (2003) 39-56.

According to one theory that has become increasingly widely held in recent decades,²⁵ the ἄπιστοι are Paul’s opponents within the Corinthian church, the ψευδαπόστολοι of chs. 10–13, rhetorically depicted by Paul as unbelievers and idolaters. Some support for this identification can be found in the similarities between the dichotomies of 6:14–16 (Christ v. Belial, light v. darkness, righteousness v. lawlessness) and the language of “Christ,” “Satan,” “light” and “righteousness” in 11:13–15, and in the way that Paul’s use of ἄπιστοι in 4:4 appears to include as its primary referent not pagan idolaters but Jewish opponents of Paul’s gospel (though probably not, at least in its primary reference, the Jewish-Christian ψευδαπόστολοι of chs. 10–13).

²⁵ Cf. J.F. Collange, *Enigmes de la Deuxième Épître de Paul aux Corinthiens: Étude exégétique de 2 Cor. 2:14-7:4* (SNTSMS; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972) 305–306; D. Rensberger, “2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 - A Fresh Examination,” *SBT* 8 (1978) 25–49; J. Murphy-O’Connor, “Relating 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 to Its Context,” *NTS* 33 (1987) 272–273; David A. DeSilva, “Recasting the Moment of Decision: 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 in Its Literary Context,” *AUSS* 31 (1993) 3–16; Franz Zeilinger, “Die Echtheit von 2 Cor 6:14-7:1,” *JBL* 112 (1993) 71–80; James M. Scott, *2 Corinthians* (NIBCNT; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998) 152–153; Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000). Beale’s view (“Old Testament Background of Reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5-7,” 573) also has strong affinities with this approach but is not identical in its implied understanding of the referent of the ἄπιστοι. Christian Wolff (*Der Zweite Brief Des Paulus an die Korinther* [THKNT; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1989] 146–150), argues that the passage is best understood as a non-Pauline baptismal paraenesis, redacted and inserted into its present context by Paul, and interprets ἄπιστοι (in its new context within 2 Corinthians, as distinct from its putative original context) as referring to Paul’s opponents.

The strongest argument for this identification of the ἄπιστοι, however, is in the way in which it explains the relationship between 6:14–7:1 and the immediately surrounding context. On this view, Rensberger claims, “the contextual problem is at once resolved. Paul pleads for the Corinthians to open their hearts as his is open; not to be mismatched with ‘unbelievers’ (his opponents), but to make room for him (2 Cor 6:11–7:2).”²⁶ William Webb, arguing against this reading, concedes: “One must grant that movement from lack of affection for Paul (6:11–13; 7:2–3) to the problem of competing affection for opponent apostles (6:14–7:1) flows nicely.”²⁷

According to the reading of the passage that Webb himself supports (along with a host of others including Plummer, Fee, Barnett, Harris, Thrall, Martin and Witherington)²⁸ the ἄπιστοι in v. 14 are not Paul’s Jewish-Christian opponents

²⁶ Rensberger, “2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1,” 31. Scott argues similarly: “2 Cor. 6:14–7:1 exhorts the Corinthians to put into practice the implications of their New Covenant situation for their sanctification. In this way the Corinthians, who are in Paul’s ‘heart’ (7:3; cf. 3:2), open their Spirit-filled ‘hearts’ to the apostle and remain an ἐπιστολὴ Χριστοῦ written by the Spirit of the ‘living God’ (3:3; cf. 6:17b), and their New Covenant lifestyle remains a reason for ‘boasting’ (7:4) for the apostle, and apology for the legitimacy of Paul’s apostolate. Seen in this light, 6:14–7:1 does not interrupt the argument of the passage and provides closure for the whole apology” (Scott, “Use of Scripture in 2 Cor 6:16c–18,” 96).

²⁷ William J. Webb, “Unequally Yoked Together with Unbelievers: Part 1,” *BSac* 149 (1992) 33.

²⁸ Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1915) 206; Fee, “II Corinthians VI.14–VII.1 and Food Offered to Idols”; Barnett, *2 Corinthians*, 341–343; Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the*

within the church in Corinth but the pagan idolaters of the surrounding Corinthian culture.²⁹ Reasons offered for this identification of the ἄπιστοι include the purity connotations of 6:14, 17 and 7:1,³⁰ the allusions to pagan worship in 6:16-18 and the

Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 499-501; Thrall, *2 Corinthians*, 472-473; Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 196-197; Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 402-406. Thomas Schmeller's proposal that 2 Cor 6:14-7:1 is a Pauline composition or insertion (intentionally similar to the language and concepts of the Jerusalem church as an expression of Paul's fellowship with Jerusalem Christianity) originally located as a transition between chs. 8-9 and chs. 10-13, is a complicated variation on this theme. According to Schmeller ("Der ursprüngliche Kontext von 2 Kor 6.14-7.1: Zur Frage der Einheitlichkeit des 2. Korintherbriefes," *NTS* 52 [2006] 219-238, 230-231 and *Der Zweite Brief an die Korinther* [EKK; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Patmos, 2010] 373-374, 378-382) the exclusive reference of ἄπιστοι, as the text stands, is to the Corinthians' pagan neighbours, but in the putative original arrangement of the letter, the polemic of chs. 10-13, following immediately after these verses, would have made it clear to the Corinthians that Paul's opponents in Corinth were also included among the "unbelievers" from whom they would need to separate if they were to be in true fellowship with Paul.

²⁹ Proponents of this view differ over whether the separation that Paul has in view is narrowly focused on the issue of participation in the cultic feasts of the pagan temples (e.g. Fee, "II Corinthians VI.14-VII.1 and Food Offered to Idols," 158-160) or has a somewhat broader application in view, given the language of "lawlessness," "darkness," "Beliar" and "unbelievers" in vv. 14-15 (e.g. Harris, *Second Corinthians*, 501). Barnett speaks in terms of separation from "the cultic life of the city," that involved "both idolatry and temple prostitution" (Barnett, *2 Corinthians*, 345-347).

³⁰ Cf. the discussion of the relationship between the term ἑτεροζυγοῦντες that Paul uses in 2 Cor 6:14 and its background in the laws against mixtures in Lev 19:19 and Deut 22:9-10 in Newton, *Concept*

absence of ἄπιστοι language from chs. 10–13, where Paul is writing explicitly and at length about the ψευδαπόστολοι.³¹

Whilst this second (majority, traditional) reading of the identity of the ἄπιστοι is on stronger ground in how it accounts for the *contents* of 6:14–7:1, and has convincing connections with the somewhat more nuanced discussion of cultic and ethical purity-related issues in 1 Cor 5–6 and 8–10 and the lingering anxieties that Paul expresses in 2 Cor 12:21, it struggles to explain how a call to cultic and/or ethical separation from the surrounding paganism fits within the closer surrounding context of 2 Cor 1–7.³²

Witherington offers a typical example of how proponents of this reading attempt to answer that question, arguing that the appeal for disentanglement from cultic alliances with paganism is a necessary corollary of the call to reconciliation with

of Purity, 111–112, and the examination of the influence of Scripture (including the Mosaic law) on Paul's instructions regarding the purity of the community in Brian S. Rosner, *Paul, Scripture and Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5–7* (Leiden: Brill, 1994) 73–80.

³¹ Cf. Margaret E. Thrall, “The Problem of II Cor. VI.14–VII.1 in Some Recent Discussion,” *NTS* 24 (1977) 143; Webb, “Unequally Yoked: Part 1,” 36–37.

³² Webb comments: “While the false-apostles view smooths out the contextual transition and resolves a tension in Pauline theology, it struggles severely with the relevance of much of the material within the passage. Though contextually problematic, the non-Christians/pagans view integrates the material in 6:14–7:1 with ease” (Webb, “Unequally Yoked: Part 1,” 44).

Paul in 6:1-2.³³ Barnett similarly suggests that “withdrawal from the Gentile cults will be [the Corinthians’] way of responding to [Paul’s] call to them, demonstrating that they are truly an apostolic church.”³⁴

Whilst such arguments have an obvious element of truth to them, they still struggle to explain why it is disentanglement from *pagan* alliances that suddenly comes into view at 6:14,³⁵ when there has scarcely been a hint in the preceding chapters that cultic commensality or sexual immorality has been the problem driving Paul’s anguished pleas that the Corinthians reconcile with him.³⁶

The idea of holiness

One possible way to move beyond this apparent impasse between content-driven arguments in favour of reading ἄπιστοι as pagan idolaters and context-driven arguments in favour of reading ἄπιστοι as a reference to the ψευδαπόστολοι of chs. 10–13 is to re-examine the content and function of the idea of holiness in

³³ Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 402–406.

³⁴ Barnett, *2 Corinthians*, 341.

³⁵ Allo comments: “Dans le contexte, il n’est question de paganisme ni avant ni après” (Ernest Bernard Allo, *Saint Paul: Seconde Épître aux Corinthiens* [EBib; Paris: Gabalda, 1937] 189).

³⁶ The only (possible) reference in chs. 1–7 to the purity issues of idolatry and/or immorality is the account in ch. 2 of the person who has been disciplined as a consequence of Paul’s earlier, “severe letter,” but there is no suggestion in ch. 2 that this is still an unresolved issue between Paul and the Corinthians and it is far from certain that his case is to be identified with the one in view in 1 Cor 5.

Second Corinthians.³⁷ If it is holiness-related concepts that dominate the rhetoric of 6:14–7:1, from the “mismatching” (ἑτεροζυγεῖν) imagery of 6:14 (with its background in the purity laws of Lev 19:19 and Deut 22:9–11) through to the language of “making holiness perfect” (ἐπιτελοῦντες ἁγιοσύνην) at the end of 7:1, then any enquiry into how the paragraph might relate to its surrounding context ought to pay attention to the way in which this theme functions in the rest of the letter.

Apart from the reference in the opening verses to “the saints throughout Achaia” (1:1),³⁸ the first appearance of holiness language within the body of the letter is (depending on text-critical decisions that will be discussed in the following paragraphs) to be found in the boast that Paul makes in 1:12 that “we have behaved in the world with holiness [ἐν ἁγιότητι] and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God – and all the more toward you.”³⁹

The translation of verse 12 provided above rests on a text-critical decision that ἁγιότητι (“holiness”) rather than ἀπλότητι (NRSV “frankness,” following the reading preferred in UBS1–4) is more likely to have been the original word used by

³⁷ Cf. the brief comments in Dahl, “A Fragment and Its Context,” 69; DeSilva, “Recasting the Moment of Decision,” 15.

³⁸ Given the language of Paul’s greeting in 1 Cor 1:2, it is unlikely that Paul is using ἅγιοι as a technical term for Jewish believers, or distinguishing between οἱ ἅγιοι and ἡ ἐκκλησία.

³⁹ My translation here departs from the NRSV to replace “frankness” with “holiness,” reflecting my preference for ἁγιότητι over ἀπλότητι as the original reading.

Paul. Given that this is a reading that flies in the face of the confident decision of the UBS4 editors in favour of ἀπλότητι,⁴⁰ it will need a more than cursory justification.

Whilst the apparatus of UBS4 characterises its reading of ἀπλότητι as “almost certain,” the textual commentary that accompanies that edition of the Greek NT retains the more circumspect comments of the commentary’s earlier edition, acknowledging that “it is difficult to decide between ἀγιότητι and ἀπλότητι, either of which could easily be confused with the other,” but arguing tentatively in favour of the latter.⁴¹ The arguments offered in favour of ἀπλότητι are threefold: “(a) the context seems to require a word meaning ‘simplicity’ rather than ‘holiness’; (b) the word ἀπλότης occurs a number of times in 2 Cor (8.2; 9.11, 13; 11.3); and (c) the word ἀγιότης is never used elsewhere by Paul.”

The first of these arguments is somewhat overstated – whilst the context is certainly one in which ἀπλότητι makes very good sense, and fits with a little more obvious

⁴⁰ So confident, in fact, that they give the reading a “B” rating (“almost certain”) in the apparatus; compare the “D” rating (“a very high degree of doubt”) given to the same reading in UBS1–3.

⁴¹ Bruce Manning Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament (Fourth Revised Edition)* (2nd ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994) 507. The comments on this verse in the second edition of Metzger’s *Textual Commentary* are identical to the comments in the first edition, even down to the lists of manuscripts cited (which differ somewhat in UBS4 from the lists cited in UBS3; the list of witnesses cited in the NA27 apparatus is slightly different again, but the net effect does not tilt the weight of evidence appreciable in either direction).

neatness than ἀγιότητι, it can hardly be said to “require” a word with that meaning.⁴² Moreover, as commentators including Margaret Thrall and Murray Harris have pointed out, all three arguments are two-edged swords; by showing how smoothly and easily ἀπλότητι fits into the context, they simultaneously have the effect of strengthening the case for ἀγιότητι to be regarded as the more difficult reading, and therefore the one more susceptible to correction by a later copyist.⁴³ The likelihood of scribal correction from ἀγιότητι to ἀπλότητι would have been compounded by the relative unfamiliarity of the word ἀγιότης among post-apostolic Christian writers and readers, and the contrasting familiarity of ἀπλότης.⁴⁴

⁴² See also the argument of Margaret E. Thrall, “2 Corinthians 1:12: ΑΓΙΟΤΗΤΙ or ΑΠΛΟΤΗΤΙ,” in *Studies in New Testament Language and Text* (ed. J.K. Elliott; Leiden: Brill, 1976) 369-370. Thrall marshalls evidence from Rom 2:27, 2 Cor 12:1, Phil 1:15, Rom 1:18, 1 Cor 4:21, 1 Cor 2:4, 11:27, Gal 5:24, Phil 1:11 and 1 Thess 4:4 in support of her claim that Pauline usage frequently links two nouns through dependence on the same preposition even though their meanings are somewhat loosely related rather than strictly (or even roughly) synonymous.

⁴³ Cf. Thrall, “2 Corinthians 1:12,” 370; Thrall, *2 Corinthians*, 133; Harris, *Second Corinthians*, 183; Wolff, *2. Korinther*, 29.

⁴⁴ Cf. Thrall, “2 Corinthians 1:12,” 367-368, who notes the total absence of the word ἀγιότης in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers and Apologists, and the frequent usage of ἀπλότης in the post-apostolic and patristic writings.

When these considerations are weighed together with the early, diverse and reliable manuscript support for ἀγιότητι (P⁴⁶ ⚭* A B C Ψ K a),⁴⁵ there are good reasons for preferring ἀγιότητι over ἀπλότητι as the likely original.⁴⁶

If that is the case, then the first instance of holiness language within the body of 2 Corinthians is one that occurs in a particularly prominent point in the disposition of the letter, and one that is programmatic for the apology and polemic that follow.⁴⁷ The kind of “holiness” Paul has in mind (along with the “sincerity” that he places in tandem with it) is somehow related to the criticisms against which he intends to defend himself, and its content is unpacked in terms of a contrast between “fleshly wisdom” (σοφία σαρκική) and “the grace of God”⁴⁸ which becomes the focus of both his defence of his own conduct and his critique of his opponents’.

⁴⁵ Harris (*Second Corinthians*, 183) notes the representation of proto-Alexandrian (P⁴⁶ ⚭* B 1739), later Alexandrian (A C Ψ a), Western (it^r) and Byzantine (K) textual families among the MSS that read ἀγιότητι.

⁴⁶ Thrall’s conclusion (“2 Corinthians 1:12,” 372) is that “the more solid arguments seem to favour ἀγιότητι, despite the fact that a case can be made for the alternative.”

⁴⁷ Regardless of whether (as I would argue) the letter-body of 2 Corinthians commences with the disclosure formula of 1:8 or (as many others argue) the letter-body begins at verse 12, the “boast” Paul makes in that verse is clearly of great rhetorical significance, planting a flag in the ground to mark the point at which Paul intends to engage his critics in combat.

⁴⁸ A concept associated in 12:9 with Christ’s cruciform power-in-weakness.

The connection between the holiness and sincerity Paul claims and the contrast he draws between “fleshly wisdom” and “the grace of God” is not hard to find: the holiness and sincerity of Paul’s conduct, he asserts, are “the holiness and sincerity *of God*,” and therefore radically inconsistent with the σοφία σαρκική that is learned from and dependent on the powers of a world that is at war with him (cf. 4:2-4; 10:1-5).⁴⁹ The fact that this distinction of mind and conduct can be characterised as a matter of “holiness” – or, at least, closely connected with the language of holiness and purity – is confirmed in 6:6-7 (“by purity [ἐν ἀγνότητι], knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit [ἐν πνεύματι ἀγίῳ], genuine love, truthful speech and the power of God”) and again in 11:2-3, when Paul expresses his anxiety that the Corinthians’ thoughts will be “led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ [ἀπὸ τῆς ἀπλότητος καὶ τῆς ἀγνότητος τῆς εἰς τὸν Χριστόν]” by the serpentine craftiness (πανουργία, v. 3) of the false apostles.

The pointed disavowal of “fleshly wisdom” which is the essence of the “holiness” Paul lays claim to in 1:12 becomes a motif that pervades chs. 1-7,⁵⁰ partly through direct references to thinking and behaviour that is κατὰ σάρκα (1:17; 5:16) and

⁴⁹ There is no need, therefore, to vault across (as Thrall does, in “2 Corinthians 1:12,” 370-371) to 12:16-18 and the accusations of financial impropriety on Paul’s part in order to find a reason why Paul may have had recourse to the language of ἀγιότης in 1:12.

⁵⁰ And is resumed in chs. 10-13 (cf. 10:2-4; 11:18).

partly through a series of οὐκ ... ἀλλά and μὴ ... ἀλλά contrasts that accomplish a similar function (e.g. 3:1-3;⁵¹ 4:5, 18; 5:12).

Regardless of whether (as the majority of commentators suggest)⁵² Paul's apology for his sufferings and his defence of his integrity are treated separately by Paul in 2:14-7:4 and 1:12-2:13 respectively or (as I would argue)⁵³ they function as closely

⁵¹ The second half of the contrast commenced in 3:1b is supplied by the emphatically asyndetonic v. 2, and hammered home in the οὐκ ... ἀλλά contrasts of v. 3.

⁵² E.g. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, xxxv-xxxvi; Thrall, *2 Corinthians*, xiii; Harris, *Second Corinthians*, ix-x.

⁵³ The striking lack of detail in the report that follows the disclosure formula of 1:8 (Οὐ γὰρ θέλομεν ὑμᾶς ἀγνοεῖν, ἀδελφοί...) suggests a scenario in which the news of Paul's affliction in Asia is already known to the Corinthians, and the accusation has been made that Paul has tried to keep this shameful story from them. Read against that backdrop, the double negative of the disclosure formula function not merely as a circumlocution for something like Γνωρίζω γὰρ ὑμῖν, but also as a pointed disavowal of any attempt on Paul's part to hide the story of his sufferings from the church in Corinth. If that is the case, then the transition from 1:8-11 to 1:12-14 can be read as a smooth and obvious one (note the γὰρ in v. 12 that is obscured by the 'now' or 'indeed' with which it is translated in the NIV and NRSV), reflecting the close connection elsewhere in chs. 1-7 between Paul's apology for his sufferings and his defence of the transparency of his dealings with the Corinthians. Far from wanting to hide his shameful sufferings from the Corinthians (v. 8), Paul is eager for the Corinthians to know about them so that they can stand alongside him in prayer and thanksgiving (v. 11), for (γὰρ) his boast is that he relates to all people, and supremely the Corinthians, "with holiness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God" (v. 12).

inter-connected issues, introduced by Paul together in 1:8, Paul’s repudiation and critique of “fleshly wisdom” is integral to the way in which he deals with both. On both scores, too, Paul not only rebuts the accusation that he himself is acting κατὰ σάρκα (cf. 2 Cor 10:2) but also pointedly implies that his critics are, and offers repeated, sharp contrasts between speech and ministry κατὰ σάρκα and speech and ministry ἐν Χριστῷ.

Whilst in his letters to other churches (and at times within the Corinthian correspondence) Paul was entirely capable of taking aim at Jewish thinking that was in his view κατὰ σάρκα, in his interaction with the Corinthian church the primary target of his polemic against the flesh and its wisdom was the boasting and judging of Greco-Roman pagan culture.

This pattern is set in 1 Cor 1–4, in Paul’s response to the ἔριδες within the Corinthian congregation and the sophistic “wisdom” and boasting that Paul sees as underlying them,⁵⁴ and it is equally the case in 2 Cor 10–13, where Bruce Winter observes that “Paul’s evaluation of his sophistic opponents with their σαρκικὴ

⁵⁴ See especially Bruce W. Winter, *Philo and Paul among the Sophists* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 141–202. Also Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 4–15; David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 3–9.

σοφία (noted already in 2 Cor 1:12) is clearly in keeping with his critique of the sophistic tradition in 1 Corinthians 1–4 and 9.”⁵⁵

Paul’s critique in 1 Cor 1–4 and 2 Cor 10–13 of the sophistic thinking that has been imbibed by the Corinthians is not of course a “purity” issue in the same way as the issues of sexual conduct and cultic commensality that he addresses in 1 Cor 5–6 and 8–10; the problem with the sophists is not that they are *pagan* (in the narrowly cultic-religious sense of the word) but that they are *fleshly*. Hence it is not at all surprising that those who read ἄπιστοι in 2 Cor 6:14 as a reference to pagan idolaters tend to see the call to separation in 6:14–7:1 as a reprise of the instructions on sexual purity and separation from the pagan cult in those chapters of Paul’s earlier letters, despite the absence of any indication in 2 Cor 1:1–6:13 that these concerns are at the front of Paul’s mind as he writes.

⁵⁵ Winter, *Philo and Paul*, 237. It is also worth noting the strong connections of language and theme between 1 Cor 1–4 and 2 Cor 1–7: for example the close parallels between 2 Cor 1:12 and 1 Cor 2:5 and the similarities between the “triumphal procession” image in 2 Cor 2:14–17 and the depiction of the apostles as “last of all ... sentenced to death ... a spectacle to the world” in 1 Cor 4:8–13 (cf. Scott J. Hafemann, *Suffering and Ministry in the Spirit: Paul’s Defense of His Ministry in II Corinthians 2:14–3:3* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990] 52–59). Further support for this reading of 2 Cor 1–7 can be found in the argument of Geurt van Kooten that Paul’s use of Exod 34 in 2 Cor 3 is motivated by his anti-Sophistic polemic (Geurt Hendrik van Kooten, *Paul’s Anthropology in Context: The Image of God, Assimilation to God and Tripartite Man in Ancient Judaism, Ancient Philosophy and Early Christianity* [WUNT; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008] 313–339).

But this distinction between cultic syncretism and the broader cultural syncretism that Paul sees manifested in the Corinthians' imitation of the mind and manners of the sophists is not for Paul the vast gulf that it might appear to be for us. There is a significant overlap and interconnection in 1-2 Corinthians between Paul's critiques of the various moral, cultic and intellectual syncretisms that he sees in the Corinthian church;⁵⁶ at times in his critique of the sophistic σαρκικὴ σοφία in 1 Cor 1-4 and 2 Cor 10-13 Paul appears to deliberately depict the Corinthian flirtation with sophistic thinking using language that is shockingly religious (e.g. 1 Cor 1:10-17)⁵⁷ or sexual (e.g. 2 Cor 11:2-3) in its connotations.

⁵⁶ Cf. the discussion of Paul's interaction with the interconnected elements of the Greco-Roman "cultural symbol system" in Raymond Pickett, *The Cross in Corinth: The Social Significance of the Death of Jesus* (JSNTSup; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 32: "The fact that [Paul] repeatedly contrasts the Corinthians' identity as believers with pagan identity and often draws sharp boundaries between the church and the world betrays a suspicion that certain Greco-Roman ideals and values continued to have a stronghold in the Corinthian congregation. These Greco-Roman ideals and values formed a part of a cultural symbol system that was at odds with ideals and values inferred from gospel symbols."

⁵⁷ Cf. the argument in Winter, *Philo and Paul*, 185-187, where Winter shows the correspondences between Paul's depiction of the Corinthian devotion to their teachers and the language used for confessions of belonging to Aphrodite, Apollo and Dionysos in surviving Corinthian inscriptions. Winter concludes (pp. 186-187): "By transferring their affirmation of loyalty from the sophistic to the pagan religious sphere Paul delivered a stunning rebuke, for they would never have imagined that their party slogans amounted to this... A sophistic understanding of the Corinthian Christians'

Beyond the impasse

All this suggests a possible resolution of the impasse between a content-driven reading of the ἄπιστοι in 6:14 as pagan idolaters and a context-driven reading of the ἄπιστοι as Jewish-Christian false apostles. If it is the sophistic adulation of rhetorical polish and outward appearance, along with the more general Graeco-Roman contempt for all things weak and servile,⁵⁸ that is causing the Corinthians to side with the ψευδαπόστολοι against the weak and suffering apostle Paul, then – in keeping with his polemic against fleshly wisdom throughout 2 Cor 1–7 and the rhetorical strategy employed in 1 Cor 1:10–17 and 2 Cor 11:2–3 – it is not at all implausible that Paul would characterise this alliance with the pagan mind and mores in language that includes the cultic and purity terminology that we find within 2 Cor 6:14–7:1.

The “holiness” Paul speaks of in 7:1 is a broad, comprehensive concept, involving cleanness from “every defilement of body and of spirit” – it is not an exclusively metaphorical or spiritual purity that he has in mind. But its principal application in the immediate context of the paragraph is to the need for the Corinthians to

exclusive relationship to individual teachers amounted to idolatry even though those they adhered to were Christian teachers.”

⁵⁸ See for example Timothy B. Savage, *Power through Weakness: Paul's Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 19–34.

separate from the pagan σοφία σαρκική that has attached them to the false apostles and alienated them from Paul.

On this reading of 6:14-7:1 Paul is still addressing the attacks of his Jewish-Christian opponents, as he has been throughout 2 Cor 1-7, but as he reaches the rhetorically heightened climax of his appeal, his warning to the Corinthians is that in embracing the ministry of these ψευδαπόστολοι and concurring with their negative evaluation of Paul's ministry they are becoming "mismatched" with the pagans in their adulation of fleshly wisdom and rhetoric and their competitive quest for status.⁵⁹

The ἄπιστοι in view within the paragraph are indeed the idol-worshipping pagans of Corinth. The ψευδαπόστολοι are not themselves the "unbelievers" Paul is referring to in v. 14, any more than they are the "Beliar" (v. 15) or the "idols" (v. 16) to which Paul refers in the following verses. To this extent the traditional view is correct.

⁵⁹ Cf. the somewhat similar suggestion in Beale, "Old Testament Background of Reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5-7," 573: "The precise manner in which they are to separate from the world is by not evaluating Paul's apostleship according to the unbelieving standards of the world, as the preceding context indicates. Paul probably did not consider the 'unbelieving world' which he refers to in 6:14-15 to be that which lay only outside the confines of the church, but viewed it as a force within the church (2 Cor 13:5) against whose influence believers need to be on guard."

But the principal issue over which Paul is here urging the Corinthians to separate from the ἄπιστοι to whom he refers within these verses is not the cultic or sexual entanglements he addresses elsewhere but the “fleshly” thinking that has distorted their assessments of Paul and the ψευδαπόστολοι. The ψευδαπόστολοι, whilst not themselves the ones whom Paul is describing in these verses as “unbelievers” (or “Beliar” or “idols”) are guilty in Paul’s eyes of exactly the kind of illicit and unclean fellowship that he is condemning in vv. 14–16, and their influence is fostering rather than combating the Corinthians’ captivity to the pagan mindset of the surrounding culture.⁶⁰

If this reading is followed, then we are able to retain the best elements of both sides of the argument over the identity of the ἄπιστοι in 2 Cor 6:14 – the paragraph fits neatly at the rhetorical climax of Paul’s *apologia* and appeal for reconciliation in chs. 1–7, and the language that he employs carries a meaning that is consistent with his usage in the rest of 2 Corinthians and elsewhere in his letters. Perhaps, at last, the impasse can be resolved.

⁶⁰ Hence Paul’s need – according to the account that he gives in 12:19–21 – to combat the influence of the ψευδαπόστολοι in order to build up the Corinthians, among whom he fears the long catalogue of fleshly vices listed in vv. 20–21 have been festering unchecked under the false apostles’ influence.