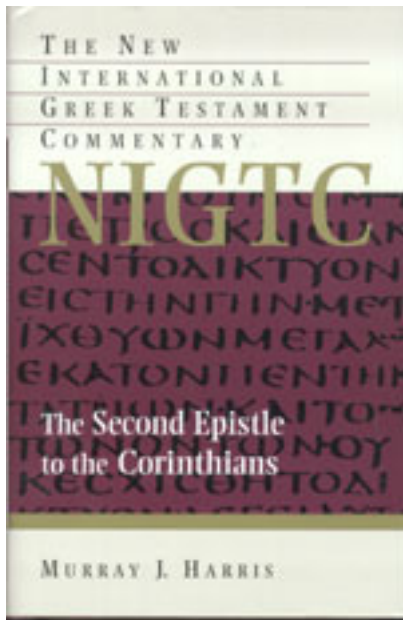


RBL 01/2007



**Harris, Murray J.**

***The Second Epistle to the Corinthians***

The New International Greek Testament Commentary

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/PaterNoster, 2005. Pp. cxxviii + 989. Hardcover. \$75.00. ISBN 0802823933.

H. H. Drake Williams III  
Tyndale Theological Seminary  
Badhoevedorp, The Netherlands

The New International Greek Testament Commentary series was initiated to cater particularly to the needs of students of the Greek text. Volumes in this series also aim to provide a theological understanding of the text, following a historical-critical-linguistic exegesis. While volumes in this series do collect the results of modern scholarship and make these findings accessible, they are less technical than full-scale critical commentaries.

Within these parameters, Murray Harris, Professor Emeritus of New Testament Exegesis and Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, provides a substantial commentary on 2 Corinthians. Much of his commentary focuses on the close attention to the Greek text, providing lengthy discussions on issues of grammar, syntax, and textual detail. Instead of bypassing past grammatical or syntactical questions and getting to issues of history or theology, Harris takes time to analyze in detail competing exegetical options.

This leads him, for example, to analyze a text such as 2 Cor 5:1 and to spend a great amount of space analyzing the grammar and syntax before discussing competing theological options. Harris translates the verse in the following manner, "For we know

that if our earthly tent-house is destroyed, we have a building from God, a permanent heavenly house not built by human hands.” The question that has the greatest theological value in 2 Cor 5:1 is what the Christian believer has in possession. Harris, rightly, isolates the five options for the possession of the building as follows: Is it a present possession of the spiritual body in heaven? Is it a present possession of the spiritual body on earth, in embryonic form? Could it be a future acquisition of the spiritual body at death, in reality? Is it a future acquisition of the spiritual body at death as an ideal possession actualized at the parousia? Or is it a future acquisition of the spiritual body at the parousia? (375–80).

Before arriving at his conclusion, however, he spends nearly seven full pages discussing the grammar and syntax of the verse (369–75). This discussion involves comments on the following: understanding of the conditional clause (*ean* rather than *ei*); justification for the translation of “earthly tent-house” (from *hē epigeios hēmōn oikia tou skēnous*); contextual analysis of the meaning of building (from *oikodomē* in parallel with 2 Cor 4:16 and *oikian*); grammatical analysis of two prepositional phrases, “from God” (from *ek theou* belonging with *oikodomē* rather than *echomen*) and “in heaven” (as qualitative rather than locative); and the meaning of *echomen* as a present active indicative verb. Following this lengthy grammatical analysis, Harris concludes that Christians can expect to acquire a spiritual body at death as an idealized possession actualized at the parousia. Most other commentators do not spend the same amount of space on these grammatical issues before drawing theological conclusions. This, however, is Harris’s custom, namely, to analyze as much grammar and syntax from the Greek text as possible before moving on to theological issues.

The same detailed attention to the written text can be seen in the way that Harris considers textual criticism. His commentary pays a great amount of attention to these issues found within the Nestle-Aland<sup>27</sup> Greek text. His translation of 2 Corinthians contains many notes referring to manuscripts that favor or challenge his own translation. Some of these comments are quite extensive, such as his discussion of the textual variants in 2 Cor 1:10 and 7:8 (151–52, 532–33). Sometimes his comments on textual notes on a particular section in 2 Corinthians fill two pages (see 2 Cor 12:1–10 [828–30]). While I did not check to see if Harris commented on every textual reference, it appears that nearly all, if not all, have at least some comment.

Two passages upon which Harris spends a greater amount of attention are 2 Cor 1:8–11 and 5:1–10. In his exegesis of 1:8–11 he argues that the *thlipsis*, or “affliction,” that led to Paul’s despairing of life was a severe physical illness rather than a “fighting with beasts in Ephesus,” opposition at Ephesus, imprisonment in Asia, or the Demetrius riot. He also identifies this affliction as the *skolops*, or “thorn in the flesh,” of 2 Cor 12:7, in agreement with a viewpoint promoted by W. M. Alexander in 1904. According to Harris, the three

times that Paul prayed for relief from the thorn in the flesh in 2 Cor 12:8 were once in Cilicia in A.D. 43, once in Perga in A.D. 47, and once in Troas in A.D. 56 (see 172). This great affliction forced Paul to lessen his self-reliance and to surrender his expectation, but not his hope, of being alive at the parousia. From this experience Paul then formulated his words of the significance of physical death of the believer in 2 Cor 5:1–10. While it will remain to be seen whether Harris’s viewpoint on Paul’s affliction will gain widespread support, his reasoning has credibility. It also fits well within the picture of Paul that is found in 2 Corinthians, where his suffering is on display as a prominent feature in his apostolic ministry.

Harris provides insight on many individual passages within 2 Corinthians, and he also makes a few contributions to the overall understanding of the book. He promotes a new idea for Paul’s opponents. He suggests that Paul faced two groups that banded together to counter him: “proto-Gnostics” who were present in Corinth throughout Paul’s ministry and “Palestinian Judaizers” who crept into the church before 2 Corinthians as Paul’s opposition (67–86). Both groups found common ground in their opposition to Paul. The idea is a plausible one, but Harris leaves unanswered how such an alliance would have formed.

He also supports a unified rather than fragmented view of the epistle. After surveying and evaluating integrity issues for over forty pages (8–50), he supports the traditional view that 2 Corinthians is to be considered a unity. Following four arguments, two of which appeal directly to the Greek text, he argues for a unity of the letter, stating that “though sent as a single letter, 2 Corinthians was composed in stages, not a single setting” (51). His argument on this matter is substantive. His stance has shifted slightly from his commentary on 2 Corinthians in the Expositor’s Bible Commentary in 1976, where he concluded that Paul wrote the epistle entirely at one time.

A further uniqueness of Harris’s commentary is his presentation of the relationships between Paul, Timothy, and Titus with the Corinthian church. These relationships provide significant background to the entirety of the Corinthian correspondence and are oftentimes difficult for students to follow. Harris has helpfully placed this information on four pages in a helpful column format (102–5). The table sets the many events in relation to biblical references and dates. Underneath the table are footnotes where abbreviated defenses for Harris’s reconstruction can be found. By providing this data in table format, readers can see the commentators’ position at a glance rather than needing to find that position by reading through many pages.

Some may find Harris’s attention to some historical issues more frustrating. For example, he spends much less space surveying the multiple viewpoints for Paul’s thorn in the flesh

than others do. Commentaries by Thrall and Plummer spend nine pages on the matter, while Hughes takes six pages and Martin four. Harris, however, is content to summarize their discussions in one page and to refer the reader to the arguments of other commentators. He is content to state his belief that the thorn is some kind of physical ailment, but he does not go into an exhaustive discussion summarizing all of the options.

Some who are looking for a commentary that is in touch with the concerns of church attendees will find this commentary too technical. While the themes and the theology of 2 Corinthians are displayed in accessible and warm-hearted ways, pastors whose Greek is not fresh may find this commentary too detailed. Also, there are fewer connections with modern readers of the text than some commentaries make. Those who are looking for a detailed examination of the Greek text will find this volume satisfying. It should be a standard reference work for those who value preaching or teaching from the Greek text as well as those who want to teach from 2 Corinthians, one of the most intimate of Paul's letters.