Murphy-O’Connor, Jerome

*Keys to Second Corinthians: Revisiting the Major Issues*


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As in his *Keys to First Corinthians* published in 2009, this volume not only brings together a number of Murphy-O’Connor’s previously published essays but also provides a “Post Script” for each of them. The addenda—which, cumulatively, constitute close to one-third of the book—allow Murphy-O’Connor to supplement and clarify his original studies and, more particularly, to respond to works by others that have appeared in the meantime, especially those that take positions at variance with or specifically reject his proposals.

The earliest of the twelve essays republished here appeared in 1977 and the latest in 1993. They are now presented as chapters and arranged in a more or less logical sequence. The first two deal, broadly speaking, with the composition of 2 Corinthians: “Co-authorship in Second Corinthians” (1993), and “Paul and Macedonia: The Connection between 2 Corinthians 2:13 and 2:14” (1988). Chapters 3–9 take up issues related especially to 2 Cor 1–9, which Murphy-O’Connor judges to be the earlier of two letters that form the canonical letter: “A Ministry beyond the Letter (2 Cor 3:1–6)” (1987); “The New Covenant in the Letters of Paul and the Essene Documents” (1989); “*Pneumatikoi* and Judaizers in 2 Cor 2:14–4:6” (1986); “Faith and Resurrection in 2 Cor 4:13–14” (1988); “‘Being at Home in the Body and in Exile from the Lord’ (2 Cor 5:6b)” (1986); “Relating
2 Cor 6:14–7:1 to Its Context” (1987); and “Philo and 2 Cor 6:14–7:1” (1988). The essay that stands as chapter 10, “Pneumatikoi in 2 Corinthians” (1977), argues that the situations addressed in 1 and 2 Corinthians are closely connected, and the last two essays are devoted to the last four chapters of the canonical letter: “The Date of 2 Corinthians 10–13” (1991); and “Another Jesus (2 Cor 11:4)” (1990). A twelve-page bibliography contains all of the works mentioned, whether in the original articles or in the Post Scripts, and in addition to a subject index there are indexes of passages cited from, respectively, Philo and 2 Corinthians.

With one interesting exception, all of the positions Murphy-O’Connor staked out in the original publications are reaffirmed here. For example, he continues to believe that canonical 2 Corinthians is a composite of two letters, chapters 1–9 being the earlier and chapters 10–13 the later; that Timothy was not just a co-sender of these letters but an actual co-author of them; that 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 is authentically Pauline and an integral part of chapters 1–9; that Paul is still having to contend with the Corinthian pneumatikoi, whose views he had opposed in 1 Corinthians, as well as with Judaizers who have appeared on the scene in Corinth since then; and that the apostle’s concern in 2 Cor 1–9 is to turn the Corinthian pneumatikoi against the Judaizers by making the message of the latter “as unattractive as possible” to the former. Murphy-O’Connor both reiterates and reinforces his contention, for which he acknowledges his indebtedness to Richard Horsley, that the views of the pneumatikoi had been shaped by Philonic ideas mediated to them by Apollos. But while he previously believed that the Judaizing intruders had come from Jerusalem, he now suggests that it is “much more probable” they were from Antioch-on-the-Orontes.

Readers already familiar with Murphy-O’Connor’s extensive and widely respected publications on Paul’s life, letters, and thought will know what to expect in this volume. Consistently, he pays careful attention not just to the details of the Pauline texts but also to their situational settings and religious-historical contexts, and he is well-versed in the secondary literature pertinent to his inquiries. Characteristically, he seeks to support his views with solid evidence and sound reasoning, and he expects no less from others. He is boldly assertive in presenting his own conclusions and equally so when criticizing those who have arrived at different conclusions. Occasionally, however, he allows his imagination to come into play. Can he or anyone else really know what was “characteristic of Paul’s temperament” (8) or that “Paul was still a neophyte both as a leader and a writer” when he wrote to the Thessalonians but “much more experienced” when he wrote 1 Corinthians (11)? Further, even if one could agree that Sostenes collaborated with Paul in the actual composition of 1 Corinthians, what supports Murphy-O’Connor’s claims that because “he was one of those people who are briskly insightful in conversation but complicated and overly subtle in formulating a text,” Paul found that “working with [him] proved less satisfactory than anticipated,” and that after giving him
“two chances” the apostle “in irritation abandoned him” (11)? Again, what supports the view that Apollos’s teaching in Corinth “would have been much more complex and sophisticated than the preaching of Paul, and thus more susceptible to error” (139)?

Fortunately, such momentary flights of imagination as these do not usually serve as weight-bearing components of Murphy-O’Connor’s arguments and proposals. His conclusions must be taken seriously even when they are not fully convincing. The more speculative aspects of his arguments do not represent scholarly lapses as much as they reflect his keen interest in exploring options, taking account of every bit of evidence, leaving no loose ends, and demonstrating the plausibility of what he proposes.

In separate comments that he makes about the work of, respectively, Francis Watson and Jan Lambrecht, Murphy-O’Connor inadvertently reveals a couple of things about his own scholarly proclivities. Although disagreeing with Watson’s identification of 2 Cor 10–13 as the “severe letter” mentioned in 2 Cor 2:4, he expresses appreciation for the contributions that Watson has made to the discussion: “His critique has stimulated reflections which some may consider a little too imaginative. However, it is only by debating different possible historical reconstructions of Paul’s highly complex relationship with Corinth that it will eventually become possible to decide which is the more probable” (159, emphasis original). A similarly revealing comment occurs when Murphy-O’Connor contrasts his and Lambrecht’s readings of 2 Cor 4:7–15. “I instinctively look for either-or solutions, whereas he is content with both-and interpretations” (101, emphasis added). Indeed, there is nothing at all “both-and” about the scholarship on display in this book, and this is one of the reasons why the author’s proposals command attention even when they do not compel assent.

Post Script. It is disappointing that a book otherwise so elegantly produced is marred by so many typographical errors and misspellings. Without trying to look for any, this reviewer was assaulted by more than thirty.