Murphy-O’Connor, Jerome

Keys to Second Corinthians: Revisiting the Major Issues


vanThanh Nguyen, S.V.D.
Catholic Theological Union
Chicago, Illinois

Second Corinthians is an extraordinary letter with a wide variety of issues. To really understand and interpret this complex epistle, one must find the right key to unlock its mysteries. There is really no better scholar to accomplish this task than Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, who is widely recognized as a leading authority in the Corinthian correspondence (known to us as 1 and 2 Corinthians) and author of numerous books on Pauline research. Keys to Second Corinthians is a collection of twelve articles written from 1986 to 1993 that appeared in different journals and edited books. These twelve previously published academic articles are now brought together in one volume to revisit the major issues and address the many complex aspects of interpreting Second Corinthians. At the end of each article, a postscript is appended to examine the reception history and to bring the discussion up to date with the latest research on the issue.

Its Context”; (9) “Philo and 2 Cor 6:14–7:1”; (10) “Pneumatikoi in 2 Corinthians”; (11) “The Date of 2 Corinthians 10–13”; and (12) “Another Jesus (2 Cor 11:4).” While each of the articles makes an important contribution to Pauline scholarship, not all of them carry the same weight of influence and reception. Certainly not all of them possess the keys to interpreting 2 Corinthians. In my observation, I see three major issues that are accentuated throughout this anthology, which might function as significant keys to truly unlock this complex text.

The first major issue addresses the historical backgrounds of 2 Corinthians, namely, authorship (ch. 1), composition (ch. 2), and date (ch. 11). Unless these issues are resolved, interpreting any ancient text, especially a biblical text, will be tenuous. The opening chapter appropriately focuses on the issue of co-authorship. Murphy-O’Connor convincingly argues and demonstrates with historical as well as contemporary evidence that the presence of co-senders in the address of a Pauline epistle was not a meaningless detail. Rather, these co-senders make a significant contribution to the composition of Pauline letters. Consequently, the numerous references to the “we” and “I” in 2 Corinthians indicate a genuine collaborative effort by Paul and Timothy. Concerning the composition of 2 Cor 1–9, the author rejects the customary claim that 2 Cor 2:14–7:4 forms a separate letter. Murphy-O’Connor argues against the partition hypothesis (ch. 2) by showing that there is no logical or emotional break between 2 Cor 2:13 and 2:14. The resonances of the term “Macedonia” in 2:13 caused Paul momentarily to change his line of thinking to focus on another topic, but he returns to it again in 7:5. The thesis of chapter 11 is much more significant than just about the “dating” of 2 Cor 10–13. This chapter argues against the hypothesis that claims 2 Cor 10–13 as the missing Severe Letter, which is alluded to in 2 Cor 2:4, and that 2 Cor 10–13 was written before 2 Cor 1–9. Murphy-O’Connor systematically argues against this unconvincing theory of partition and dating. He shows that 2 Corinthians is a combination of Paul’s fourth (2 Cor 1–9) and fifth (2 Cor 10–13) letters to the community. As Paul’s last letter in the Corinthian correspondence, 2 Cor 10–13 was written in anger from Illyricum in preparation for his third visit to Corinth.

The second major issue deals with the identity and alliance of Paul’s opponents (chs. 5 and 10). In examining the unusual modes of expression and the polemic/apologetic passages found in 2 Cor 2:14–4:6 (found in ch. 5 of the book), Murphy-O’Connor identifies two groups of opponents: one made up of local Corinthians and the other by outsiders. The Corinthian opponents, known as pneumatikoi (spirit-people), were the free-thinking Hellenistic pseudo-philosophic believers, and the outsiders, namely, the Judaizers, were the law-observant Jewish Christians. These two groups struck an unusual alliance to discredit and destroy Paul. Murphy-O’Connor previously thought that the Judaizers were of Palestinian origins but has now changed his mind (in the postscript) that they were more
probably “emissaries of Antioch, whose duty was to bring its daughters into line with the new Judaizing ethos of the mother church” (83). The article “Pneumatikoi in 2 Corinthians” (ch. 10) examines the presence of the Spirit-people in various passages in 2 Corinthians to determine the nature of the opposition. Murphy-O’Connor points out that Paul encountered serious opposition from the Spirit-people throughout his ministry at Corinth, which is reflected in both 1 and 2 Corinthians. When Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, however, he was in opposition to another group of Judaizing intruders, who seemed to have infiltrated and formed an alliance with the local Corinthians after having read 1 Corinthians.

The third and final major issue deals with the basic context (ch. 8) and influence (ch. 9) of 2 Corinthians, namely, Philonic ideas and teachings. Murphy-O’Connor admits that he had accepted too quickly the Essene influence on Paul. Qumran influence was unlikely to have penetrated Jewish life in Palestine itself, let alone the Diaspora. According to Murphy-O’Connor, therefore, Paul used Philonic language and ideas to criticize and reorient the thought of the pneumatikoi.

In general, the three major issues summarized above are reiterated throughout the book and therefore function as keys to unravel the complexity of interpreting 2 Corinthians. Since the purpose of the book is to “revisit” the major issues of 2 Corinthians, the postscripts after each article reassess each hypothesis and enter into honest dialogue and conversation with other scholars in the field. This section is most interesting and insightful. It entertains different perspectives and provides up-to-date scholarship. Sometimes Murphy-O’Connor gives a history of the reception of an article, which can be very intriguing. For example, he honestly acknowledges that the article (in ch. 4) entitled “The New Covenant in the Letters of Paul and the Essene Documents” has made no impact whatsoever in the biblical world. He describes this article as a victim like many other “Festschrift articles once published disappear into a black hole whose gravity pull is so strong that they never again emerge” (60). It seems that he not only attempts to revisit some issues but to resurrect some dead ones. The results of reviving some of these key issues, nevertheless, remain to be seen.

This book is not for everyone or for the faint of heart. It is written for serious scholars who specialize in Pauline research. To appreciate the work of this scholarship, one must be well versed in multiple languages, for example, Greek, German, and French. Pauline scholars, however, will no doubt go away feeling intrigued and challenged by the skillful argumentation and provocative reconstruction of Paul’s most eloquent and contested epistle.