

An *In Situ* Appreciation of St Paul's Old Testament Corinth

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Abstract

Through *in situ* study participants become familiar with the geography and archaeology of the Middle East and develop an understanding of the milieu in which the Old and New Testaments were written. This includes an appreciation of some of the themes and events reflected in the Old Testament and of the spread of the Christian Movement. Through a study of the sites linked to St. Paul and the Jesus movement of the first century CE, such as Corinth, participants develop an understanding of the cultural and religious environment for reading the Bible and Paul's influence in the development of early Christianity. (The author joined a bible study tour to Greece, Patmos and Turkey led by the Rev Dr Michael Trainor of Flinders University in 2011)

Introduction

The archaeological site of Corinth was a significant cosmopolitan seaport and trading centre city in ancient Greece, and capital of the Roman province of Achaia in southern Greece.¹ Corinth was a thriving metropolis and one of the dominant commercial centres of the Mediterranean world as early as the eighth century BCE. Accordingly, the Corinthian site offers the opportunity for enriching an appreciation of the cultural and religious environment of the Bible, and the impact of the apostle Paul upon the expansion of early Christianity.²

This *in situ* paper will address questions relating to: (1) how is the geography of the Corinthian site presented, (2) what is the Archaeology of the Corinthian site, (3) how does Corinth connect to our biblical understanding, (4) how does Corinth illuminate our biblical tradition, (5) where is there a sense of Paul at the Corinthian site, and finally, (6) why is the Corinthian site focal to the Bible?

¹ Harry T. Frank, *An Archaeological Companion to the Bible* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1972), 301-310.

² *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments: New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition* (U.S.A.: Catholic Bible Press, 1989), (Acts 18:1, 19:1, 1Co 1:2, 2Co 1:1,2Co 1:23, 2Ti 4:20).

Moreover, it will be argued that the Corinthian archaeological site sets a stage for today. This is in the context of Paul's confronting the Corinthians about their sins and shortcomings in ancient Greece, calling all Christians, then and now, to avoid succumbing to the secular world by accepting its values and lifestyles. The archaeological presence of Corinth speaks to the hermeneutical metaphysical of today, reminding Christians to live Christ-centred, virtuous, loving lives that exemplify God. Thus, the archaeological events relevant to the Corinthian site assist in examining our lives and values, in the light of a complete commitment to Christ and the Christian creed.³

How is the Geography of the Corinthian Site Presented?

Corinth is an ancient city approximately fifty miles west of Athens, on a slender stretch of land (isthmus) adjoining the Peloponnese peninsula to the Greek mainland. To the west of the isthmus lies the Gulf of Corinth, to the east the Saronic Gulf. The isthmus was in ancient times traversed by hauling ships over the rocky ridge on sledges; however it is now traversed by a canal. In antiquity, the renowned city of Sparta was the foremost city of the peninsula. As a natural link between East and West, Corinth's prosperity was guaranteed by its location.⁴ With two seaports Corinth's position as a commercial and transportation hub was enhanced considerably. Correspondingly, the proximity of seaports and sailors to the city brought with it a reputation for loose and licentious living epitomised by the term "Corinthian Girl" for immoral women.⁵

What is the Archaeology of the Corinthian Site?

Archaeology refers to the systematic study of past human life and culture by the recovery and examination of the remaining material evidence. The archaeological ruins of ancient Corinth are ranged around the base of the rock of Acrocorinth, which forms a natural acropolis (citadel) for the city and is located a short distance from the modern city of Corinth.⁶ Most of the few remaining structures are Roman, rather than Greek, due to the city's flourishing period after the Romans sacked and rebuilt much of the original Greek city. Furthermore, over the centuries much of what remained of the city has been destroyed by periodic earthquakes. Nevertheless, noteworthy ruins remain on the Corinthian site of

³ Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth : The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), 7-21.

⁴ Sherman E. Johnson, *Paul the Apostle and His Cities*, Good News Studies (Wilmington, Del.: M. Glazier, 1987), 94-105.

⁵ Leslie J. Hoppe, *A Guide to the Lands of the Bible* (Collegeville, Min.: Liturgical Press, 1999), 311.

⁶ K. J. Dover, *The Greeks* (London: British Broadcasting, 1980), 18.

archaeological interest such as: (a) the temples of Aphrodite, Apollo and Octavia, (b) the Roman Forum with its Bema public platform and Peirene Fountain, together with (c) the Aesclepiion.

(a) The Aphrodite Temple ruins are situated on the monolithic Acrocorinth rock overseeing the ancient city of Corinth.⁷ The Temple of Aphrodite exemplified the ancient city's reputation for luxury and vice and hosted up to 1,000 sacred prostitutes. Also of interest on the Acrocorinth are the remnants of a stone minaret and ancient fortified walls.⁸

The Temple of Apollo is the most notable sixth century BCE ruin of ancient Corinth located on a hill overlooking the remains of the Roman Forum (marketplace). The Temple of Apollo is one of the oldest stone temples in Greece, yet with only seven of the original 38 Doric columns standing today. In the time of Paul (50's CE) the temple was functioning fully and continued functioning until it was devastated by earthquakes in later years.⁹ Notably, the near geographical relationship of the Forum to the Temple of Apollo had relevance to the problem of Christians eating food offered to idols.¹⁰

The Temple of Octavia has only part of the original foundation and a few pillars remaining today. It was dedicated to the sister of Emperor Augustus and represents the imperial cult of Rome, which was spread throughout the Greek empire.

(b) The Roman Forum was the market and civic centre of a city and in Corinth was situated below the Temple of Apollo. Located within the Roman Forum is a sacred spring, the Bema and the Peirene Fountain. The sacred spring is sited along the northern edge near the renowned Lechaion Road. In the fifth century BCE the spring was above ground though it was covered over in later years by building activities.

However, the Bema ruins are still discernible today. The Bema was the public platform where St. Paul pleaded his case when dragged in front of the Roman governor Gallio in 52 CE by the Corinthians. The Peirene Fountain was the main source of water for

⁷ J. Brian Tucker, "Urban Religion in Roman Corinth: Interdisciplinary Approaches," *Journal of Biblical Studies* 6/1 (June 2006): 38-54.

⁸ J. Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology*, 3rd rev. and expanded ed. (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 36, 58.

⁹ Sarah B. Pomeroy et al., *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social, and Cultural History* (Oxford, Eng. ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 79,127,174.

¹⁰ Peter D. Gooch, *Dangerous Foods: 1Corinthians 10:10 in Its Context* (Canada: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1993), 2-26, 47-52.

Corinth with substantial ruins still visible today. The fountain was a splendid structure that served as a meeting place for Corinthian citizens.

(c) Similarly, the Aesclepiion was inside the city wall, and was the sanctuary of the god of healing (4th century BCE). It was situated in a colonnaded courtyard, with a series of dining rooms in a second courtyard. Votive offerings of terra-cotta signifying afflicted human body parts (such as hands, legs, breasts, genitals,) were found upon excavation of the Aesclepiion, many of which are displayed in the nearby Corinth museum.¹¹

How Does Corinth Connect to our Biblical Understanding?

The Corinthian archaeological site connects significantly to our biblical understanding as it reveals through extensive excavation human antiquities of theological value.¹² The theological thrust of Paul's letters to the Corinthians was directed to problems of Christian life and faith that had arisen in Paul's newly established church at Corinth.¹³

Paul's primary concerns were numerous such as difficulties relating to divisions and immorality in the church, food offered to idols, matters of conscience, church order, questions about sex and marriage, gifts of the Holy Spirit, and Christ's resurrection¹⁴. With profound perception Paul showed how the gift of God's love addresses and answers these questions (Cor.13). Through Corinth and the Corinthian text biblical understanding is enhanced by Paul's message of 'Love', which Paul stresses is more important than faith or hope. Moreover, all the problems of the Church could be solved, notes Paul, if the members loved one another as Christians should (Ch.:13.4, 5, 6-8).

How Does Corinth Illuminate our Biblical Tradition?

Corinth connects significantly to biblical tradition in relation to customs, rituals and beliefs. Paul's relationship with Corinth revolved around themes related to problems of Christian conduct in the church, themes which have traditionally been inherent in most Christian communities. Thus, the question of progressive sanctification and continuing

¹¹ Hoppe, *A Guide to the Lands of the Bible*, 19-24.

¹² Eric H. Cline, *Biblical Archaeology : A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1-9.

¹³ Delbert Royce Burkett, *An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002),73-89.

¹⁴ Richard E. DeMaris, "Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29): Insights from Archaeology and Anthropology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114/4 (1995): 661-682.

development of a holy character, relevant to church tradition, threads through Corinth and the Corinthian text.¹⁵

Furthermore, Corinth remains through the customs, rituals and beliefs encountered there by Paul to still be relevant to the church today by way of inspiration and instruction. Christians in our time continue to be influenced by their cultural setting with many of the questions and problems that challenged the church at Corinth still prevailing. These are problems such as divisions, instability, immaturity, envy and jealousy, marital difficulties, and sexual immorality.¹⁶ Moreover, by addressing these problems, Paul's letters offer some of the most memorable and valued chapters in the New Testament such as 1Cor.13 on love and 1Cor.15 on the resurrection.¹⁷

Where is there a Sense of Paul at the Corinthian site?

There is a sense of Paul's presence and character at the Corinthian site due primarily to historic records and Paul's writings. These writings sketch his missionary journeys, exhortations and admonishment of the various Christian congregations. Moreover, through Corinth and Paul's discussions and doctrinal matters an exposé of the man himself is acquired illuminating Paul's inner character, problems and fears.¹⁸ Of all the forefathers of the Church, Paul is generally considered the most brilliant and multifaceted, the largest in outlook, and therefore the best endowed to carry Christianity to alien lands and peoples such as Corinth.¹⁹

Paul spent eighteen months in Corinth (Acts 18:11) due primarily to the centrality of Corinth in the Roman Empire. Hence, there is a sense of Paul's presence in Corinth through the numerous buildings and artefacts Paul lived and worked among.²⁰ The Isthmian Games were a highlight of Corinthian life and Paul's use of athletic metaphors in his first letter to the Corinthians (1Cor 9:24-27) infers his interest and perhaps attendance.²¹ Similarly, Paul's reference to dissensions within the Christian community (1Cor 12:12-26) may have been influenced by votive offerings left by those healed at Corinth's Aesclepiion.

¹⁵ George Arthur Buttrick Ed., *The Interpreters Bible* (New York: Abington Press, 1953), 3-13; 265-276.

¹⁶ Michael David Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Fully revised 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 267-268; 293-294.

¹⁷ Gaston Deluz, *A Companion to I Corinthians* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1963), 7-19.

¹⁸ *NRSV Bible*, 165-186.

¹⁹ Michael Grant, *Saint Paul* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), 3-27.

²⁰ C. M. Bowra, *Classical Greece*, Great Ages of Man (New York: Time., 1965), 168-169.

²¹ F. E. Peters, *The Harvest of Hellenism: a History of the near East from Alexander the Great to the Triumph of Christianity* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1972), 105.

Why is the Corinthian Site Important to the Bible?

The Corinthian site has archaeological biblical importance due to the letters Paul wrote to the Corinthians relating to theological and congregational problems he encountered and addressed. Why was this so? Possibly, because as a missionary, Paul could work more effectively in Corinth due to its proximity within the Roman Empire, its attraction for visitors for numerous reasons (commerce, healings, games) and its status as the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. Hence, much of Paul's work and theology was accomplished in Corinth, as reflected in his two biblical letters to the Corinthians.²²

What is more, the Corinthian site has biblical importance because it offers insights into the 'body of Christ' concept.²³ Paul was anxious to teach his infant church at Corinth an appropriate morality, and to unite them in a single community. Paul's use of the notion of 'body' permitted him to address both these goals (1Cor. 12:12). Paul's language confirms he was mindful of the real life situation of his audience, and drew on this to fortify his message. Paul not only contested certain inapt ideas about materiality but also had to confront the potential split within the community, proving through his corporeal analogy the futility of such discord (1Cor 6:13-20; 2Cor 4:10).

Conclusion

This *in situ* paper has addressed a number of questions pertaining to the archaeological site at Corinth. Appropriate answers have been offered to questions such as the geographical presentation of the Corinthian site, archaeological aspects of the site, and the connection of the site to our biblical understanding. Moreover, how the Corinthian site illuminates biblical tradition, a sense of Paul's presence, and the reasons for Corinth's relevance to biblical applications, has been addressed.

Archaeology's contribution to an appreciation of the Bible has been supported, specifically the Bible's relevance to Paul's relationship with the ancient city of Corinth. An orderly revision of past human life, culture and history by the recovery and examination of the residual material evidence has offered an opportunity to appreciate Paul as a living person. Subsequently, it can be seen through Paul's relationship with the city of Corinth how

²² Michael D. Coogan Ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 267-268; 293-294.

²³ Dennis Sleight, "The Theological, Anthropological and Moral Connection between the 'Body of the Believer' and the 'Body of Believers' in 1Corinthians," *Australian EJournal of Theology* Issue 4 (February 2005):1-4.

the two letters to the Corinthian church by Paul differ significantly in tone and focus relative to theological theory and practice.

Significantly, this Bible Study Tour *in situ* experience motions a link with the environment in which the elements of the Old and New Testaments were anchored and authored. Thus, the Corinthian archaeological site presents the opportunity to escalate empathy for Paul's theological bearing on the maturity of this fledgling Christian church and its practical manifestation for "loving one another as I have loved you."²⁴

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²⁴ *NRSV Bible*, John 15:12, 109.

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