The Temple and the Thorn: 2 Corinthians 12 and Paul's Heavenly Ecclesiology

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Jewish and Christian beliefs and Pauline descriptions of heavenly and ecclesiological realities provide support for a possible explanation for Paul's supernatural experience in 2 Cor 12. In this experience, Paul enters the heavenly model for the earthly temple and witnesses God and Christ enthroned and glorified in the heavenly equivalent of the holy of holies. But Paul's ecclesiology, featuring as it does the temple nature of the church and the church's union with Christ, suggests that he would have seen the church enthroned as well (Eph 2:6). Tendencies in NT visions also lend support to this interpretation. Various factors, when combined with Paul's commitment to the growth of the church as the earthly manifestation of the heavenly temple, suggest a possible link between the unspecified thorn in the flesh and Paul's cruciform, missional suffering.

Key Words: temple, heaven, vision, cruciformity, thorn, eschatology, revelations, church, ecclesiology, 2 Cor 12

Paul's “thorn in the flesh” has been the object of much speculation. On the other hand, commentators sometimes avoid speculating about the possible content of the visionary event (hereafter referred to as “the Event”) that led to the thorn in the flesh. Harvey is not atypical: “We cannot of course know what Paul experienced.” Garland posits that this mystical experience “cannot be adequately communicated to others” and thus has “no value for the church”; he follows Talbert in ascribing a private, emotional, ambiguous “devotional” benefit to this Event, akin to the private benefit one might get from speaking in tongues. Goulder finds that the

visionary, whom he believes to be not Paul himself but a colleague of Paul also derided by the super-apostles or elitist Corinthian believers (perhaps Timothy; cf. 1 Cor 4:14–17), “saw nothing,” which fact contributes in part to Paul’s “unenthusiastic account” of the Event.  

4 Baird notes, “In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul is ‘commissioned’ to silence.” He precedes this quotation by noting a few of the things visible in heaven but does not develop these thoughts with respect to Paul and in fact surmises that this revelation actually revealed nothing: “2 Corinthians 12, therefore, describes a revelatory experience through which nothing is communicated.”  

5 Murray Harris is even reluctant to apply a basic Pauline belief such as Christ’s presence in heaven to his interpretation of this passage.  

But Paul does not share this interpretation of the vision. He claims he could share facts about the vision (12:6) and links it to other content-laden revelations (12:7). There are of course difficulties in interpreting such an opaque Event and the unspecified thorn. While reticence to engage in speculation is understandable, it should not preclude reasonable hypotheses and investigation, even if these require going beyond what Paul wrote. In this article, I mine a variety of Pauline and early Jewish and Christian teachings on heavenly realities in order to propose a reasonable interpretation of the Event and thorn in 2 Cor 12:1–10.  

6 Concluding theological observations on the significance of these interpretations will be registered.  

ASSUMPTIONS  

Given the brevity of this paper and its multifaceted subject matter, many relevant questions cannot be explored, and many assumptions cannot be fully defended. The latter should at least be stated. In the first instance, with almost all interpreters save Goulder, I take it that Paul speaks autobiographically throughout ch. 12.  

2 Corinthians is taken whole; at a minimum, with Andrew Lincoln, there is “a continuity in life setting” between  


8. My argument still works from Goulder’s perspective, although in my opinion 12:7 seems to require taking the previous event as part of Paul’s catalog of revelations.
ch. 1–9 and 10–13. More controversially, the Prison Epistles and Acts are treated as data useful for the investigation of Pauline thought generally and 2 Cor 12 specifically, debates about authorship notwithstanding.

These assumptions could perhaps be labeled canonical. But the present approach is not entirely ahistorical, because parallels can be found in early Jewish, ANE, and contemporaneous Christian traditions. ANE and pan-Mediterranean evidence is also of value; Robbins notes that these verses “exhibit many presuppositions in the Mediterranean world about the nature of a person in relation to the heavens.” However, space restrictions in this article require a narrower focus, which I engage in the hopes that biblical and early Jewish and Christian perspectives, arguably more influential for Paul, will clarify his view of “the nature of a person in relation to the heavens.”

**Pauline Chronology and the Significance of the Revelation**

A date 14 years before Paul’s letter would place Paul’s Event and the thorn alongside other revelations of this sort at the beginning of his ministry. The fact that Paul offers a date suggests that the Event is particularly important, not least (and perhaps not merely) for the suffering to which it led. Segal sees it as foundational for Paul’s life as a Christian, but this is too much. What might be more plausible is that this Event was spectacular, significant, and in some respects formative or foundational for Paul’s ministry. This significance would explain why the Event (and others like...


10. As canonical approach proponent Robert Wall observes, “If one of the roles that Acts performs within the NT is to introduce the letters of the NT, we presume that the narrative of Acts will yield clues to the deeper logic of the Pauline letters” (“Israel and the Gentle Mission in Acts and Paul: A Canonical Approach,” in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* [ed. I. H. Marshall and D. Peterson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 440).

11. See, for instance, the Qumran covenaners’ conception of their community as the “holy of holies” (IQS 8.4–8.10).


15. C. R. A. Morray-Jones (“Paradise Revisited [2 Cor 12:1–12]. The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul’s Apostolate, Part 2: Paul’s Heavenly Ascent and Its Significance,” *HTR* 86...
it, 12:7) threatened to inflate Paul in inappropriate ways, a threat that required divine intervention in the form of the imposition of suffering.\textsuperscript{16} A visionary experience(s) without ongoing implications seems unlikely to require a tempering experience capable of producing ongoing (apparently interminable) suffering and humbling. Surely, Paul is referring to a “most striking” Event of great significance.\textsuperscript{17}

This observation paves the way for handling a major objection. Wouldn’t Paul’s observation that what he heard in third heaven were “unutterable utterances”\textsuperscript{18} render any attempt to explore what Paul experienced null and void? As I noted above, one sometimes encounters the conclusion that the Event is rather opaque. But, whereas what was said in the heavens is unclear, the fact that what was said was or is unutterable does not mean that Paul would not have known or remembered what he saw. Paul insists in 12:6 that he could speak truthfully about the Event. He only does not do so because it would constitute the sort of boasting capable of redirecting the Corinthians from what they had seen in his ministry. As noted above, this fact is sometimes overlooked in the literature, which contributes to the lack of consideration of the content of the Event.

\textbf{What Did Paul See in Heaven?}

\textbf{Paradise, the Temple, and the Third Heaven}

What would Paul expect to encounter in the heavens? How would Paul have known he was in the third heaven and in paradise? One cannot answer these questions solely by reading Corinthians. As noted above, a pan-exegetical or biblical theological approach, rather than strict exegesis, is required. While conclusions will thus be more speculative than one might like, the quest for answers is not hopelessly speculative, for two aspects of Paul’s context provide data for addressing these questions. First, Jewish and Christian understandings of heaven can be brought to bear. Second, on the assumption that the revelation of heaven in this Event affected Paul in a profound way, one could assess the teaching on heaven in Pauline texts. These two domains overlap, because the NT’s Pauline material is unlikely to constitute a total departure from concepts found among Paul’s Jewish and Christian predecessors and contemporaries.

\textit{Paradise as Temple}

Paul includes a powerful hint of what he would have experienced by mentioning “paradise” in 12:4. From before the NT era, paradise was regularly

\textsuperscript{[1993]: 268} goes so far as to suggest that the vision is indeed formative for Paul’s apostleship and equates it with the vision in the temple of Acts 22:17–22.

\textsuperscript{16.} Craig S. Keener, \textit{1 and 2 Corinthians} (New Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 238.


\textsuperscript{18.} Goulder’s translation, “Visions and Revelations,” 308.
associated with the paradise of primordial Eden, with the temple, and with the heavenly location of YHWH and the righteous in the present. By entering Paradise, Paul entered the heavenly Eden. The paradisical place of God’s royal presence on earth in Eden and the temple mirrors God’s heavenly paradise from which he reigns; earthly places of God’s dwelling are places where heaven and earth overlap.

Heavenly and Earthly Overlap

In early Judaism and Christianity, the paradises of Eden and other earthly sanctuaries were believed to be patterned after heavenly realities. In a theme explicated in Heb 8:1–6 and revisited in 9:11–12, 23–25, the author notes that earthly holy places (the tabernacle is named, the temple is surely implied) were modeled on the heavenly throne room. For Jews and Christians, a heavenly-earthly overlap clarified several concepts, not least of which was the way in which God and Christ reigned from heaven (Ps 11:4; Matt 28:18–20; Rev 4–5; 7:15; 20:11; 21:5; 22:1–3; Eph 1:21–22), but also reigned among God’s people in his temple and among his people in Israel and the church (Pss 2, 24, 68, 110; Isa 6; Matt 28:18–20; Eph 3:17, 4:8–10; Col 3:15).

Expansion and the Church as Temple

The overlap of heaven and earth is perhaps best explained in terms of invasion or expansion. God’s presence is not static in Eden and the temple. Rather, the function of the temple and its precursors is that God’s presence, reign, glory, and holiness should expand on earth. This theme is most readily associated with the work of Greg Beale, who has recently described in detail the relationship between this mission of expansion and the missions of the “postcursors” of the temple, the Messiah and the church. In order to


22. On God’s earthly and heavenly reign, see especially Pennington, Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew (NovTSup 126; Leiden: Brill, 2007).
determine the bearing of this line of thought on Paul’s view of heaven and the church, some investigation of Paul’s teaching on the Temple is in order.

Paul sees in the establishment and expansion of God’s holiness and presence as the “Christified” temple the believers who are united to Christ as his Body (Ephesians, esp. 2:19–22; 3:16–17, 19; 1 Cor 3:10–23; 6:12–20; 2 Cor 6:14–7:1).24 Paul’s robust biblical-theological doctrine of the Holy Spirit and union with Christ-as-temple reconciles these statements and provides the basis for the heavenly-earthly correlation.25

The “height, length, depth and width” of Eph 3:18 echoes passages such as Exod 37–38, Ezek 40, and Rev 21, where the place of God’s presence is measured. Accordingly, Paul calls the church the “fullness” of God in the next verse. “[T]he concept of the church as God’s dwelling place is also reflected in Paul’s use of terms associated with the concept of ‘filling.’” In Eph 3:19, “Paul alludes to the image of the tabernacle and temple being filled with God’s glory.” Believers, like the temple, are “filled by the Spirit” (Eph 5:18).26 Moreover, “the church . . . Christ’s body . . . is the fullness of him who fills all in all” (1:23) and Christ himself “fill[s] all things” (4:10). Therefore, the church is in some respects God’s vehicle for the universalization of his presence and glory on earth: “Through [the church] God will fulfill his promise in Habakkuk 2:14, ‘For the earth will be filled/With the knowledge of the glory of the Lord,/As the waters cover the sea.’”27

“The underlying idea was that the temple was a microcosm of the macrocosm, so that the building gave visual expression to the belief in Yahweh’s dominion over the world.”28 In the same way, Christ’s presence in the world with his people is extended as the nations submit to his rule, receive the Spirit, and take the name of the Triune God in baptism, submitting to the appointed King (Matt 28:18–20). This is at least part of the way God’s kingdom comes, God’s will is done, and God’s name is hallowed, on earth as in heaven (Matt 6). The heavenly reality that was given visual expression in the OT is given actualization in the OT and NT as God’s subjects multiply, God’s kingdom expands, and his Spirit fills humans so that they participate (albeit imperfectly) in resurrection life. Just as the earthly temple was constructed to represent the heavenly temple and its

23. I owe this term to Bruce Waltke.
24. Beale, “Eden, the Temple, and the Church’s Mission,” 30. Of course, a number of commentators do not find Ephesians and Colossians to be Pauline. Yet even for these scholars, interpreting “the Pauline tradition” is a chief role for the author of Ephesians, and for Colossians, “Paul’s teachings may be counted as one of the most important factors in the author’s background”; so Andrew Lincoln and A. J. M. Wedderburn, The Theology of the Later Pauline Epistles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 83 and 13, respectively.
27. Beale, The Temple and the Church’s Mission, 401.
realities, the earthly church is likewise being constructed so as to represent heavenly realities more faithfully. Beale summarizes the narrative flow: “The essence of the Temple, the glorious presence of God, sheds its OT architectural cocoon by emerging in Christ, then dwelling in his people, and finally dwelling throughout the whole earth.” Alexander is even closer to the present point when he notes that the Christian church is “not just the successor to the temple but the embodiment of that dwelling not made with hands which existed eternally in heaven”; a “temple ‘not made with hands’ was language for the Christian church.”

Paul clearly expects this heavenly identity to manifest itself among the Corinthians and Ephesians in their behavior. Expansion comes from evangelism and growth in spiritual maturity (Eph 4), as Peterson notes: “the heavenly locus of this community is obvious” in Ephesians, 1 Peter, and 1 and 2 Corinthians. This heavenly identity becomes “part of a developing argument about the sanctity of the church and its calling to be faithful to Christ in a hostile and unbelieving world.”

Threefold Scheme for Holy Places and Paul’s Third Heaven

Scholars generally agree that the third heaven is not a destination distinct from paradise. What is almost never considered is that the common triadic sanctuary arrangements on earth (the Garden-Eden-outermost uninhabited land trio is reflected in Sinai, the tabernacle, and the Jerusalem temple) might be related to the three-heaven scheme reflected in 2 Corinthians. An association between three holy spaces and the concept of the third heaven cannot be worked out in detail here. But the association is attractive given the way in which earthly sanctuaries are believed to be constructed after the “heavenly pattern” (Heb 8:5, 9:23), and given that 1 Enoch depicts the heavenly temple as having a similar tripartite pattern.

The three-heaven scheme (perhaps based on a literal reading of OT passages such as 1 Kgs 8:27; Neh 9:6; 2 Chr 2:6, 6:18; Pss 68:33, 148:4; “the heavens and the heavens of the heavens”; cf. Mid. Ps. 114:2; T. Levi 18:10, 2 En. 8:1–8 [B], with some connection between the two concepts in 2 En. 31:1–2 [A]) can be found in T. Levi 2:7–10, 3:1–4; Apoc. Mos. 37:5 and 40:2;
3 Bar. 4:8 also associates paradise with the third heaven. Three, five, seven, and ten heavenly levels are all found in Jewish literature, but the third is perhaps widespread at this early date. While the purpose of multiple “levels” is not always transparent, it is clear in the triadic scheme that distinctions in levels of holiness, exaltation, and (for those admitted) intimacy are being depicted. Paul has been granted entrance to the heavenly Edenic paradise, the most holy place. An experience in the innermost throne room is surely consonant with the description “surpassing greatness” (2 Cor 12:7).

The Cultic, Cosmic, Corporate Christ

On the basis of the preceding sections, one can begin to deduce a reasonably Pauline answer to the question, “What did Paul see in heaven?” Paul entered the throne room of heaven’s Temple and saw God and Christ reigning. In heaven, God and Christ are not alone. Who would Paul have seen in the throne room according to his letters? Paul would have seen Christ, who shares Yhwh’s identity, sharing the reign with the Father. The heavenly man reigning in the heavenly paradise-Temple represented the new humanity, against the old Adam who had failed in his reign in the earthly paradise-Temple.

But according to Paul, Christ does not reign alone. The lodestar of Pauline theology is his doctrine of union with Christ. The rule of Adam was to be shared by those who shared his status as God’s son (Luke 3:38) and God’s image. The rule of the Second Adam is likewise shared by those who share his status as God’s Son and God’s Image. Believers, Paul knows,
are “raised up with [Christ] and seated with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6; 3:1). Christ is now present in heaven, reigning in a specific place, the right hand of God (Eph 1:20–21; cf. 2 Cor 5:8; 1 Thes 4:17; Phil 1:23, “with Christ” after his death). The same resurrection power that was at work in the resurrection, ascension, and enthronement of Christ brings believers themselves into that resurrection life and heavenly (soon to be earthly) reign (Eph 1:19–22, 2:6).\footnote{41}

So Paul did not just see God and his Son enthroned in glory in paradise. He saw the church. Who exactly constituted this church is less clear. A sort of “heavenly ecclesiology” is known both in Judaism and Christianity, although the doctrine of union with Christ develops beliefs such as these in significant ways.\footnote{42} Perhaps Paul saw the OT saints,\footnote{43} or Stephen, who was martyred at his feet, or perhaps members of the churches, or himself, not in a looking glass darkly, not in an earthen vessel, but clearly and gloriously. Another way to explore the matter is to say that in God’s paradise Paul also would have seen something of new creation (itself foreshadowed by Eden, the tabernacle, the temple), and the firstfruits of new creation (1 Cor 15:20–23). This concept is for Paul already a present ecclesiological reality for believers on the basis of union with the resurrected, new creation Christ (Gal 6:14–15, 2 Cor 5:17).\footnote{44} In Paul’s mind, the church is now the (as-yet imperfect) earthly, in-Christ manifestation of heavenly reality in every respect, filling the role the temple before her once filled, but doing so in a more magnificent and universal fashion.

**Pauline Revelations and Heavenly Ecclesiology**

More support for heavenly ecclesiology is found in other Pauline and NT revelatory experiences. Paul claims he could share the content of the Event. He ties it to other revelations he has had, citing “exceedingly great

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41. There is admittedly an already/not-yet relationship to be explored here; cf. 1 Cor 4:8–9; ch 15; 2 Cor 5:1–10; Rom 8:17, 23, 34–38.

42. Among many other passages, see Heb 10:19–22, 12:22–24; Isa 51:3, 58:11, 60:13; Ps 1:1–3; Dan 7; Matt 5:8, 19:28–30; Luke 23:40–43; Acts 7:54–56; 4 Ezra, and 3 Bar. 10:5, “the place where the souls of the righteous come when they assemble”; 1QS 8:5–9, 9:3–6; the emphasis on “kingdom of priests” and divine sonship (Exod 4:22, 23; 19:6; cf. 1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6, 5:10) for Israel’s own heavenly identity. On the idea that this sort of thought extends back to Adam and forward through biblical tradition, see Steven Bryan (“The Eschatological Temple in John 14,” *BRR* 15 [2005]: 187–98), who argues that “heavenly rooms” are in fact part and parcel of the heavenly temple; Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis, “God’s Image, His Cosmic Temple and the High Priest: Towards an Historical and Theological Account of the Incarnation,” in *Heaven on Earth: The Temple in Biblical Theology*, 81–99; and Wilder, “Illumination and Investiture.”

43. This line of investigation may clarify Peter’s desire to construct a tabernacle when he sees Moses and Elijah and the glory of Christ (Matt 17:1–5) while on the mountain, a traditional place of epiphany and holy presence not least because of its closeness to the heavens.

revelations” (2 Cor 12:6–7). It is surely relevant that these other revelations contain ecclesiological (or missiological) content. The “mystery” of Paul’s Gospel—revealed to him through supernatural visions or revelations—is concentrated on the inclusion of the Gentiles (Acts 9:15–17 [about Paul and not to him, but see Acts 22:10, 15]; 16:8–9; 18:8–10; 22:17–21; 26:13–20; Gal 1:12, 15–17; Eph 3:1–7; 5:32; Col 1:24–27). More broadly, with the exception of the birth and death narratives in the Gospels, visions and revelations in the NT always have ecclesiological content. Peter’s vision in Acts 10–11 is dominated by this concern. The lengthy vision(s) of John in the Apocalypse opens and closes with Christ with his church in the present and in eternity (chs. 1–3, 21–22), with the church never far from view throughout. The church is also dominant in the revelations in the early Shepherd of Hermas.

As a result, the heavenly nature of the church became dominant in the early church’s self-conception. The “most important of all” characteristics of the ecclesia was its conception as “in the first instance, not simply as an earthly but as a heavenly and transcendental entity.” “The ecclesia is in heaven, created before the world, the Eve of the heavenly Adam, the Bride of Christ, and in a certain sense Christ himself. These Pauline ideas were never lost sight of. In Hermas, in Papias, in Second Clement, in Clement of Alexandria, etc., they recur.”

But in contemporary Christianity, it would perhaps be difficult to speak of the heavenly nature of the church as a major point of emphasis, although one can find this emphasis in the rare postmillennialist and in certain Orthodox, hierarchical Roman Catholic, and some Charismatic and Pentecostal circles. While confidence, security, exuberance, and action can spring from this self-conception, perils—pride, boasting, a certain smug self-satisfaction—can also easily accompany the apprehension of this reality. If this study is an accurate reading of 2 Cor 12, Paul simply chooses not to rehearse the full weight of his revelation to a congregation much more in need of a focus on Paul’s humility and suffering than the glory that they all share in Christ (1 Cor 4:8–17, 11:1, and so on).


47. Harnack, The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries (trans. J. Moffat; vol. 1; London: Williams & Norgate, 1908), 408 and n. 2. One may extrapolate from Richard Hays, Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel’s Scriptures (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 26, that Paul’s doctrine of heaven mirrors his use of Scripture, which is “uncontestably ‘ecclesiocentric.’”
As a result, Paul’s Event and its correlates mentioned in 2 Cor 12:7 have a tempering corollary that might especially commend itself to those who already celebrate the heavenly reign of the saints. To that aspect of 2 Corinthians we now turn.

Thorn in the Flesh and Cruciformity

As mentioned previously, scholarly literature offers a vast menu of identifications of Paul’s “thorn,” and here I have time and space on my plate for but one item from the buffet. But one possible solution in particular commends itself, not least because of its connection with the Event’s ecclesiological significance. The thorn in the flesh can be taken as a reference to one of Paul’s most dominant teachings (according to 1 Cor 4:15–17 and many similar passages, if not scholarship on Paul): his cruciform manner of life and ministry, in imitation of Jesus and for the benefit of the church, to be imitated by others.48

The relevance of this point for the Corinthians letters and the context of 2 Cor 12 is abundantly clear. Paul’s divinely given remedy for fighting self-elevation is thus the same remedy Paul applies to the misguided Corinthians, if the universal principle of “it takes one to know one” is applied. Thus, 2 Cor 10–13, and a large part of the Corinthian correspondence, are concentrated on Paul’s spiritual résumé of missional suffering after the pattern of Jesus (1 Cor 4:8–17, 10:32–11:1; 2 Cor 1:3–11; 2:14–17; 4:7–12; 6:3–10; 8:9; 11:23–33; 12:9–10; 13:4–9).49

Various vocabulary and conceptual connections between 2 Cor 12 and the rest of Paul’s teaching on this topic can be highlighted. In 1 Cor 10–11:1 and Acts 20:32–35, Paul refuses to accept payment so that he can model a cruciform pattern for others so that they might imitate him. Immediately after the mention of the thorn, he segues into the same topic (12:11–19). And Paul’s cruciform fatherhood here (12:14–15) recalls the same motif in 1 Cor 4:15–17. “What is seen in me” (12:6) recalls the Pauline emphasis on a sacrificial life as a visible pattern (found in 1 Cor 4:15–17; 10:32–11:1; Phil 3:17; 4:9; 2 Thess 3:7–9; Acts 20:18–19, 32–35). “What is heard” (12:6) recalls 1 Cor 4:8–17, what Paul “taught [his cross-shaped “ways in Christ”] everywhere in every church.” “Weakness” (12:9) caused by the thorn is seen repeatedly in Paul’s cruciform ministry (1 Cor 4:10; 2 Cor 11:29–30; 13:4, 9; but cf. Gal 4:13). The “catalog of suffering” of 12:9–10 to which Paul links the thorn is of course part and parcel of the broader cruciform pattern (1 Cor 4:8–17, 10:32–11:1; 2 Cor 1:3–11; 2:14–17; 4:7–12; 6:3–10; 8:9; 11:23–33; 12:14–15; 13:4–9). The “flesh” (12:7) as the locus of Paul’s suffering recalls

49. Pace Gooder (Only the Third Heaven?), who sees Paul stopping short of the highest heaven and argues that the context of 2 Cor 10–13 creates problems for those who see Paul advancing to the highest, holiest place, not least because of Paul’s emphasis on humility.
Col 1:24, where Paul’s flesh is where what was lacking in Christ’s affliction receives its filling.

In sum, Paul is teaching in 2 Cor 12 that great revelation and insight into heavenly realities cannot excuse the Corinthians from the sacrificial way of life Paul requires. Indeed, for Paul, their “father” (1 Cor 4:15–17, 2 Cor 12:14–15), insights such as these lead straight to his own suffering and the suffering of those who would imitate him as he imitated Jesus.50

Once the association with the imitation of Jesus becomes clear, the whisper of a possible association with Jesus’ own three pleas for release from his cruciform mission becomes a veritable scream of agony: Paul himself thrice cries out to be liberated from his cross-shaped burden.51 The ecclesiological bent to the Event and other revelations, noted above, supports this association, for in a number of those same passages Paul is said to suffer for the sake of the church (Acts 9:16–17; 26:30–31; Eph 3:1, 13; Col 1:24–2:3; cf. Phil 2:17, 29–30).

As with other aspects of this article, there is a degree of speculation at work; the connections are more educated guesses of the biblical theological variety than precise exegetical observations. Although it cannot be proven, associating the Event and the thorn with Paul’s mission and cruciformity fits what we know of Paul’s life, particularly his other revelations and their connection to his ministry and his suffering, and especially the wide variety of references to his Jesus-imitating, cruciform lifestyle broadly and locally in 2 Cor 10–13.52

Conclusion and Significance for Ministry

Paul’s context, his revelations, and his temple theology clarify the vision of 2 Cor 12:1–10 and its significance for Christian ministry in important ways. First, Paul’s historical context illustrates the belief in a relationship between the heavenly temple and YHWH’s earthly sanctuaries. Second, Paul’s letters treat the church as God’s present temple, performing the expansive and representational function in God’s world intended for God’s sanctuaries in Eden and Israel’s temples. Accordingly, Paul emphasizes the believers’ presence in the heavenly realm through union with Christ, just as many in his historical context saw links between God’s heavenly and earthly sanctuaries. At present, heavenly reality is “unseen” (2 Cor 4:17), yet it would be revealed in future; indeed, it was being unfolded already, if dimly, in

50. Beale recognizes this theme in the near context of the Event and thorn in one sentence in The Temple, 398: “[The] divine presence is seen clearly in, among other things, the midst of suffering for the faith and not compromising (e.g., 2 Cor 4:7–18; 12:9–10).”

51. The Corinthian temple of YHWH is tied to the third heaven, where believers now reign; just as Christ pleaded three times not to die for that temple, so Paul pleaded three times to have his cruciform thorn removed; Paul is about to visit the Corinthian “temple” a third time, with each visit requiring the modeling of cruciformity.

52. It is possible that Paul saw a closer functional link between his “generic” suffering (assuming this adequately describes Gal 4:13) and his missional suffering.
the community-in-Christ at Corinth. Third, Paul’s supernatural Event in 12:1–5 is presented in 12:7 as in line with his other revelations, which (as with other revelations/visions in the NT) were heavily ecclesiological. Finally, Paul’s thorn is in some respects aligned with his cruciform suffering (12:9–10).

Pastors and leaders no doubt would ask how to balance a heavenly-ecclesiological emphasis such as this so as not to fall into patterns of boasting and glorification. In the first instance, Paul does not play all his cards on every occasion, so as not to play into the hands of the boasters. This is surely why Paul does not remind them of the glorious ecclesiology revealed to him in the Event. Rather, Paul’s divinely-provided solution to personal and corporate boasting and self-glorification is an abiding commitment to cruciform imitation of Jesus in all areas of Christian life and ministry, including details such as what one makes and how one makes it, which Paul addresses in the next paragraph. If the supernatural thorn is “the death of Jesus we always carry around in our body” (2 Cor 4:10), a requirement not removed when Paul prayed for it to be removed (perhaps after the first few rounds of persecution left “the mark of Jesus on [his] body,” Gal 6:17), then leading others into cruciform mission by example becomes the pastoral silver bullet, so to speak, capable of undermining premature glorification and boasting.

Beale ends his text with the charge: “[O]ur task as the covenant community, the church is to be God’s temple, so filled with his glorious presence that we expand and fill the earth with that presence until God finally accomplishes the goal completely at the end of time!” These truths are beautiful, but they are costly. Jesus’s disciples who beheld his tabernacling glory (John 1:14, 11:40) and would share that glory and heavenly dwelling with him as they are vitally united to him (17:22, 24, John being the only NT author to come close to Paul’s emphasis on union) are the same disciples called to share in his cross-shaped sufferings (13:13–17, 31–35; 15:4–13).

Paul had seen the highest heaven opened. This paper explores the possibility that, for Paul, the heavens held not just paradise and the God of Israel enthroned but the enthroned Messiah and his enthroned church.

53. To the Ephesians Paul strongly emphasizes heavenly identity, and missional suffering more minimally (Eph 3:1, 13). The order is reversed in Corinthians, with cruciformity playing a greater role (see especially 1 Cor 2:2). These respective emphases of these letters display Paul’s pastoral sensitivity particularly in light of his personal experience in each location (if Acts 20:17–35 is a helpful guide) and should not be taken as signs that different authors are at work, pace Lincoln, Theology of the Later Pauline Epistles, 128–29.

54. Paul does not frequently appeal to anything close to “worm theology” to combat boasting and glorification.


2 Corinthians 12 and other NT passages suggest that the earthly result of exposure to such a glorious ecclesiology was not a life of boasting and indulgence but a life of the “thorn”: Christ-imitating sacrifice for the sake of the church and its mission, so that the earthly version of the heavenly temple might grow to maturity and expand to fill the earth.  

57. After composing this article, I read the useful lively study by Nicholas Perrin, the recently released *Jesus the Temple* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010). Perrin's emphasis on Jesus as the link between Paul’s temple theology and other counter-temple movements does not rule out a vision of the heavenly temple. In fact, his thesis adds more fuel to the fire of expectation that one would see a church-temple in heaven. Perrin repeatedly highlights the correlation between the trampling or destruction of the temple (and the construction of the eschatological temple) with tribulation or woes (p. 19 and n. 4; scattered throughout pp. 51–60, 70, 78, 187–89, and elsewhere). This makes a link between heavenly temple-ecclesia and thorn-as-cruciform-suffering all the more intriguing: “The final temple may have been a unilateral act of God, but this would not occur without a good measure of human suffering along the way” (p. 188).