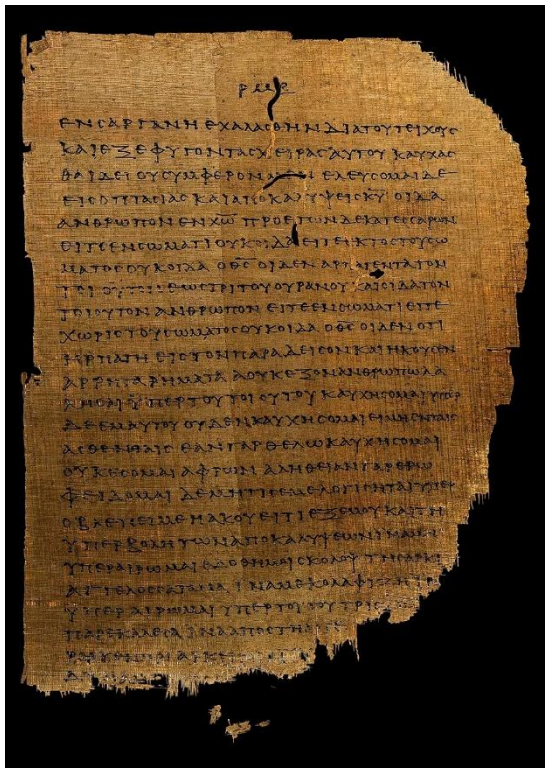
Unpacking Paul's New Testament Letters

Was 2 Corinthians originally more than one letter?

Lauren K. McCormick November 11, 2026

Seven New Testament letters are undisputed works of the apostle Paul (Romans; 1 Corinthians; 2 Corinthians; Galatians; Philippians; 1 Thessalonians; Philemon). Some scholars think a few others may also be attributable to Paul (Colossians; 2 Thessalonians; Ephesians), while the remaining letters are typically believed to have been written by someone other than Paul (1 Tomothy; 2 Timothy; Titus). Complicating matters further, even for those letters securely attributed to Paul, some scholars believe they were composite works rather than single writings.



Ancient papyrus containing a portion of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. *Credit: Wikimedia Commons, public domain.*

This is exactly the topic biblical scholar Brent Nongbri takes up in his Fall 2026 *Biblical Archaeology Review* article "Cobbling Together 2 Corinthians." Is 2 Corinthians really one continuous letter from Paul, or is it a compilation of multiple letters that were subsequently edited together?

In his article, Nongbri explains "partition theory" and how scholars study ancient composite letters, including those found in the New Testament. As there was no organized postal service in antiquity, letters were sent, received, and collected/collated at disparate times, which often caused written correspondence to be received and read out of order. Nongbri writes:

Outside of official Roman administration, the delivery of letters was something of a hit-and-miss activity. You would find someone who was going to the city where you wanted to send your letter, and you would give them your folded or rolled-up letter with the addressee's name written on the outside and hope for the best. Bad weather, shipwrecks, forgetfulness, or any number of factors might prevent a letter from being delivered in a timely way (or at all!).

Second Corinthians is the New Testament epistle most often considered to be a combination of two or more separate writings. The letter is characterized by abrupt shifts in tone or topic, awkward seams from one section to the next, and passages that seem to assume different contexts and settings—all hallmarks of a text that has been pieced together from different writings.

Admittedly, all ancient copies of 2 Corinthians that have been preserved present Paul's text as one continuous letter, though the earliest probably dates to no earlier than 150 years after Paul wrote—that is, to a time when Paul's writings had already been consolidated into a single letter. Consequently, the evidence that 2 Corinthians represents multiple missives is found within the text itself.

The shift in tone between 2 Corinthians 9 and 10 is the strongest piece of evidence: In chapters 1–9, Paul celebrates Corinthian repentance and expresses confidence in the community in Corinth (2 Corinthians 7:4). Chapters 10–13 switch to a sharp, sarcastic tone, abruptly defending Paul's status as an apostle and chastising the same Corinthian community for grave religious failings. The lack of transition in tone and subject matter from chapters 9–10 is considered a "literary seam."

Nongbri therefore asks: "Did things like this actually happen in antiquity? Did people combine separate letters? Could they be jumbled out of chronological order?"

“Upon receiving a letter,” Nongbri writes, “recipients would read the letter and then either throw it away or save it. When saving letters, people sometimes archived them by pasting them to other letters from the same person, forming collected rolls of received letters. There is actually a Greek term for this kind of collection, a *tomos synkollesimos*, literally a ‘pasted roll.’” Letters in pasted rolls were sometimes attached in the order they were *received* rather than when they were written and sent.

Several historical parallels exist for how Paul’s letters may have been combined into single texts. Epistles attributed to the fourth-century Egyptian monk Pachomius have survived in a Latin translation that includes 11 letters. Over the last century, very early manuscripts of these letters have been discovered in Egypt, and they divide the letters differently. In other words, the order of the letters attributed to Pachomius changed somewhere in the process of transmission, perhaps similar to Paul’s letters.

To read more about how partition theory may help explain the composite nature of some of Paul’s letters, read “Cobbling Together 2 Corinthians” by Brent Nongbri in the Fall 2026 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*.

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