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Echoes of Jesus' Cross in Second Corinthians 12:7–10

Abstract:

One of the thorniest exegetical questions in Pauline literature involves the apostle's story of a thorn in the flesh. Interpreters have often attempted to fathom the meaning of the passage by gleaning insights from historical backdrops. However, in doing so, they have overlooked clues that lie much closer at hand, namely, Jesus' Passion tradition. Therefore, in this article, I attempt to show that Paul crafted the story of his thorn in light of Jesus' Passion. Based on analyses of linguistics, intertextuality, and literary context, I explore three significant echoes of Jesus' cross in 2 Cor 12:7-10: thorn in the flesh, threefold prayer, and antithesis of power and weakness.

Keywords: Thorn in the Flesh, Second Corinthians, weakness, suffering, boasting, intertextuality



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Introduction

Since Richard B. Hays' groundbreaking work, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, in which he applied a narrative reading to a Pauline letter and aptly demonstrated a narrative substructure of Galatians, scholars have begun to investigate narrative elements in Pauline letters (Hays 1983).¹ In the study of 2 Corinthians, one also observes reflections of Jesus' crucifixion in his discourse, as reflected in Paul's proclamation in 2 Cor 4:10: πάντοτε τὴν νέκρωσιν τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἐν τῷ σώματι περιφέροντες, ἵνα καὶ ἡ ζωὴ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἐν τῷ σώματι ἡμῶν φανερωθῇ (cf. 1 Cor 1:23). In Paul's understanding, a fusion of Christ's crucifixion and his own identity has taken place. Thus, throughout 2 Corinthians, the crucified Christ continues to echo. Moreover, as Paul's apostolic self-defense culminates in 2 Cor 12:7–10,² a corresponding intensification of the echo effect fittingly accompanies this climactic passage. Regarding the echoes of Jesus' cross in the apex of Paul's defense, Jerry W. McCant and Kar Yong Lim investigated several correlative experiences. McCant observes a number of parallels between their experiences as follows:

(1) Jesus faces σταυρός, an instrument of death. Paul faces a σκόλοψ, possibly an instrument of death (2 Cor 12.7). (2) Three times Jesus prays "Let this cup pass" (Mk 14.35 f.). Three times Paul prays for removal of the thorn (2 Cor [12.] 8). (3) Jesus prays "Not my will but thine..." (Lk 22.42). Paul receives an oracle, "For you my grace is sufficient" (2 Cor 12.9). (4) Jesus is crucified (Mk 15.24). Paul receives "no healing" (2 Cor 12.9). (5) Jesus was rejected by "his own" (John 1. 11). Paul's 'own' church rejected him (2 Cor 10.14; 12.7–10). (6) Jesus was raised from the dead "by the power of God" (Mk 16.1). Paul will live with Christ "by the power of God" (2 Cor 13.4). (7) Jesus was rejected as Messiah. Paul was rejected as Apostle. (8) Jesus was a Suffering Servant Messiah. Paul is a Suffering Servant Apostle. (McCant 1988: 571)

Lim likewise observes the resembling experiences, especially paying a close attention to the theme of weakness between Paul and Jesus and concludes, "Paul's boasting of his weakness is ... a theological interpretation of weakness that is grounded in the story of Jesus, the Messiah crucified in weakness but now reigning by the power of God (2 Cor. 13:4)."³

However, McCant does not develop his argument beyond the list of the correlations, and Lim does not adequately investigate other elements that reflect Jesus' Passion narrative in 2 Cor 12:7–10. Therefore, in this article,

intending to advance the discussions of McCant and Lim, I will attempt to demonstrate the ways in which Jesus' Passion and crucifixion echo and even shape Paul's argument in 2 Cor 12:7–10. I make such a case on the basis of the word study of σκόλωψ in ancient Greek literature, analyses of intertextual connections between 2 Cor 12:7–10 and the Passion tradition, and considerations of the literary context of 2 Corinthians.⁴ Accordingly, I will demonstrate three significant echoes of Jesus' Passion and crucifixion in 2 Cor 12:7–10: the thorn in the flesh, threefold prayer, and antithesis of power and weakness.⁵

Thorn in the Flesh

Paul's "thorn in the flesh (σκόλωψ τῆ σαρκί)" ranks among the most enigmatic expressions in the NT. Mysteries invite speculation, and NT scholars have risen to the challenge with innumerable theories regarding the composition of this particular thorn.⁶ However, scholars do acknowledge the lack of consensus on this question, and some even express an antagonistic attitude.⁷ When it comes to the composition of the thorn, a counsel of despair may be in order. We may never know if Paul's metaphorical thorn referred to spiritual or psychological anxiety, persecutions, oppositions, or some forms of physical ailment. However, the theological significance of the thorn may not be out of reach. But in order to grasp it, we need to entertain a possibility of echoes of the Jesus tradition with both linguistic and theological dimensions. Therefore, in the following section, I will argue that Paul's use of σκόλωψ, the description of the purpose of the thorn in the flesh, and his suffering for identity must have evoked Jesus' Passion in the minds of his readers.

To begin with, a close lexical affinity between σκόλωψ (2 Cor 12:7), ἄκανθα (Matt 27:29; John 19:2), and ἀκάνθινος (Mark 15:17; John 19:5) in light of ancient Greek literature suggests that Paul's employment of σκόλωψ reflects Jesus' crown of thorns (Mark 15:17; Matt 27:29; John 19:2, 5). BDAG defines σκόλωψ to be "a (pointed) stake," "thorn," or "splinter."⁸ Yet, since the word is a hapax legomenon in the NT, scholars have investigated various backgrounds of the word to identify what σκόλωψ refers to.⁹ However, interpreters have not considered the theological significance of σκόλωψ in relation to Jesus' crown of thorns in the Passion tradition (Mark 15:17; Matt 27:29; John 19:2, 5). Some scholars refrain from examining harmony and continuity between Paul's theology and Jesus' teaching and ministry due to the history of scholarship called the "Jesus

and Paul” debate.¹⁰ Moreover, at first glance, the texts seem to be unrelated since Paul employs σκόλοψ (2 Cor 12:7), whereas the evangelists prefer ἀκάνθινος (Mark 15:17; John 19:5) and ἄκανθα (Matt 27:29; John 19:2) to portray Jesus’ “thorns.” Nevertheless, an investigation of the use of σκόλοψ, ἀκάνθινος, and ἄκανθα in the ancient writings from the fourth century BCE to the fourth century CE in various corpora, including the LXX, the OT Pseudepigrapha, the Church Fathers, the Hellenistic poetry, oneiromancy, medical documents, and magical papyri, shows a close lexical relationship of these terms, which at times approaches synonymy.

First, Ezekiel 28:24 evinces this semantic overlap quite undeniably. Scholars routinely limit their interest to four passages in the LXX (Num 33:55; Ezek 28:24; Hos 2:6; Sir 43:19) when they conduct a word study of σκόλοψ. However, in doing so, they overlook a very close connection between σκόλοψ and ἄκανθα in Ezek 28:24. In Ezek 28:20–26, Ezekiel declares God’s judgment against Sidon (28:20–23), and God’s vindication leads into two consequences: the removal of Israel’s enemy (28:24) and the restoration of the house of Israel (28:25–26). In this literary context, σκόλοψ and ἄκανθα are synonymously employed as metaphors to portray Israel’s enemy who had shamed them: καὶ οὐκ ἔσονται οὐκέτι τῷ οἴκῳ τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ σκόλοψ πικρίας καὶ ἄκανθα ὀδύνης ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν περικύκλω αὐτῶν τῶν ἀτιμασάντων αὐτούς. Hence, no clear distinction of meaning can be made between σκόλοψ and ἄκανθα in this context.¹¹

Second, a work from the OT Pseudepigrapha, Sibylline Oracles, also exhibits a close association of these words. Dating from the second century BCE to the eighth century CE, this collection of oracles provides helpful background for NT studies. In this work, σκόλοψ and ἄκανθα appear together in Sib. Or. frag. 1:23–25.¹² Since the fragment is closely related to Sib. Or. 3:1–45, it is dated to the second century BCE (Collins 1983: 1:361, 467). The fragment 1:1–35 insists on allegiance to one God, manifesting a stark contrast between mortal men and the sovereign and almighty God. The author of the fragment begins with an introduction, identifying the issues of the people who exalt themselves and do not pledge allegiance to God (1:1–6). Then, the author goes on to describe one, sovereign, and almighty God (1:7–14) and to exhort people to worship God (1:15–25) and to stop roaming in darkness (1:26–31). The author concludes the fragment, declaring once again the existence of one sovereign God who is the Lord (1:32–35). In this literary context σκόλοψ and ἄκανθα are employed in 1:23–25 to describe the ways in which the people went astray: τύφῳ καὶ μανίῃ

δὲ βαδίζετε καὶ τρίβον ὀρθὴν εὐθεΐαν προλιπόντες ἀπήλθετε καὶ δι' ἄκανθῶν καὶ σκολόπων ἐπλανᾶσθε. People abandoned the right path and wandered through brier and thorn.¹³ Thus, σκόλωψ and ἄκανθα reflect a close lexical affinity in this context.¹⁴

Third, the Church Fathers also understand the similar semantic meaning between σκόλωψ and ἄκανθα. John Chrysostom (349–407 CE) employs σκόλωψ and ἄκανθα in an equivalent meaning in his work *Ascetam facetious utilitarian non debere* (PG48.1055). In a context pertaining to the exhortation of modesty and humbleness, Chrysostom employs σκόλωψ and ἄκανθα as metaphors to indicate the means which cause people to go astray: Ὁ γὰρ μὴ μετὰ φόβου καὶ πολλῆς ἐπιμελείας τὴν ἄσκησιν τῆς ἀρετῆς ἐργαζόμενος, πολλὰς ὑφίσταται τὰς εἰς τὸ κακὸν ἐκτροπὰς, καὶ ὡσπερ ἐξ εὐθείας καὶ βασιλικῆς ὁδοῦ πλανώμενος εἰς τὰς δι' ἄκανθῶν καὶ σκολόπων πλαγίας καὶ ἀνοδίας.¹⁵ The close proximity and the analogous semantic meaning of these words suggest at the very least a strong affinity.

Fourth, Callimachus (305–240 BCE), Greek poet and scholar who worked at the Alexandrian library, uses σκόλωψ and ἄκανθα as synonyms in his work, *Epigrams* (3), which was later incorporated into *Anthologia Graeca/Greek Anthology*, (7.320).¹⁶ In this short epigram, a man named Τίμων, a misanthrope, gives a florid description of the tomb in which he lives, saying that it is surrounded by σκόλωψ and ἄκανθα: Ὅξεϊται πάντη περὶ τὸν τάφον εἰσὶν ἄκανθαὶ καὶ σκόλοπες· βλάπτει τοὺς πόδας, ἣν προσίης· Τίμων μισάνθρωπος ἐνοικέω. In this context, the writer employs σκόλωψ and ἄκανθα near synonymously to describe objects which inflict pain to the feet upon approach.

Fifth, Oppian (second century CE), a Greco-Roman poet, employs σκόλωψ and ἄκανθα synonymously in his work, *Haliutica* (5.329). This five-volume work describes sea-creatures and the ways to catch them (Jones 1722).¹⁷ In 5.329 Oppian synonymously employs σκόλωψ and ἄκανθα to describe a physical characteristic of the sea-monster: ὁ δ' ὀξύπρωρον ἄκανθαν θηεῖται σμερδνοῖσιν ἀνισταμένην σκολόπεσιν (cf. 4.599).

Sixth, Artemidorus (mid-second to early-third century CE), a diviner, utilizes σκόλωψ and ἄκανθα in his work, *Oneirocritica* (3.33; 4.57). This five-volume work treats various interpretations of ancient Greek dreams (Harris-McCoy 2012). Books 1–2 provide an encyclopedic collection of interpretations of dreams that relates to the human life-cycle, including climate, body-parts, and life-events such as birth and death (Harris-McCoy 2012: 19). Book 3 is organized as a miscellany (Harris-McCoy 2012: 22–

24). Books 4–5 contain instructions for interpretations (Harris-McCoy 2012: 24–25). In 3.33 Artemidorus provides an interpretation concerning ἄκανθα and σκόλοψ. According to his understanding, ἄκανθα and σκόλοψ are listed together to signify pains, impediments, worries, grief, love affairs, and injustice: Ἄκανθαι καὶ σκόλοπες ὀδύνας σημαίνουν διὰ τὸ ὄξυν καὶ ἐμποδισμοὺς διὰ τὸ καθεκτικὸν καὶ φροντίδας καὶ λύπας διὰ τὸ τραχὺ, πολλοῖς δὲ καὶ ἔρωτας καὶ ἀδικίας ὑπὸ ἀνθρώπων πονηρῶν. Yet, in a narrow sense, especially with regard to love affairs and injustices, ἄκανθα signifies injustice committed by women, and σκόλοψ signifies injustice committed by men: καὶ αἱ μὲν ἄκανθαι ὑπὸ γυναικῶν τὰς ἀδικίας οἱ δὲ σκόλοπες ὑπ’ ἀνδρῶν προσημαίνουσι. However, in a general sense, Artemidorus treats ἄκανθα and σκόλοψ as near-synonyms.¹⁸ Also, in 4.57 Artemidorus lists ἄκανθα, σκόλοψ, παλιούρος, and βᾶτος together to explain usefulness of these plants: ἄκανθαι δὲ καὶ σκόλοπες καὶ παλιούροι καὶ βᾶτοι πρὸς μὲν ἀσφάλειαν ἐπιτήδεια πάντα διὰ τὸ φραγμοὶ γίνεσθαι καὶ ἔρκη χωρίων, πρὸς δὲ τὰς ἐκπλοκάς οὐ πάνυ τι ἐπιτήδεια διὰ τὸ καθεκτικόν. They help one build fencing of his or her property as walls. Thus, these terms share a very close semantic meaning.

Seventh, Oribasius (320–400 CE), a Greek medical writer and the physician of the Roman emperor Julian (331/332–363 CE), also employs σκόλοψ and ἄκανθα as near-synonyms in *Synopsis ad Eustathium* (7.17; *Libri ad Eunapium* 3.32).¹⁹ In this section, Oribasius explains remedy for the injuries from pointed objects and employs σκόλοψ and ἄκανθα to describe types of those injuries: Ἀκίδας καὶ καλάμους καὶ ἄκανθας, ἔτι δὲ καὶ σκόλοπας ἐπισπῶνται ἀναγαλλίδες αἱ δύο, ἀριστολογία, ἀμμωνιακὸν σὺν μέλιτι, ὑοσκυάμου καρπὸς λείος.²⁰

Finally, ἀκάνθινος and σκόλοψ show a close lexical relationship in their use in the Greek Magical Papyri, the collection of magical spells, formulae, hymns, and rituals, dating from the 100s BCE to the 400s CE (PGM IIIVI. 151–152).²¹ The passage is located in the context of love magic in XXXVI. 134–160 in which a man is to cast a spell on the woman with whom he wishes to sleep, by invoking Isis, Osiris, and daimons so that the magic brings her sleeplessness, hunger, and thirst until she sleeps with him. In this context ἀκάνθινος and σκόλοψ are synonymously employed to describe sufferings upon her: ἐὰν δὲ θέλη κοιμᾶσθαι, ὑποστρώσατε αὐτῇ σιττύβας ἀκάνθινας, ἐπὶ δὲ τῶν κοτράφων σκόλοπας, ἵνα μοι ἐπινεύσῃ ἐπὶ ἑταιρωτικῇ φιλίᾳ.²² Thus, these two words are indistinguishable in their meaning.

Having examined the use of σκόλοψ, ἄκανθα, and ἀκάνθινος in ancient Greek writings from the fourth century BCE to the fourth century CE in various genres and corpora, the most plausible conclusion can be deduced that σκόλοψ and ἄκανθα (as well as ἀκάνθινος) have a close lexical relationship, which at times function as near-synonyms. If so, it is quite plausible that Paul's description of the thorn in the flesh in 2 Cor 12:7 must have signaled the image of Jesus' crown of thorns in the minds of his readers.

Furthermore, Paul's description of the purpose of the thorn in the flesh reinforces the echoes of Jesus' Passion and crucifixion: Both Paul's thorn in the flesh and Jesus' crown of thorns humiliate the recipients. In 2 Cor 12:7 the expression, σκόλοψ τῆ σαρκί (with an appositional phrase, ἄγγελος Σατανᾶ), is surrounded by three ἵνα purpose clauses: ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι; ἵνα με κολαφίζῃ; and ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι. All those clauses (the first and the third clauses are verbatim) express humiliation as the purpose of the thorn in the flesh in two different ways: one in a negative sentence and the other in an affirmative sentence. Namely, the purpose of the thorn in the flesh/the messenger of Satan was to torment Paul. Likewise, Jesus' Passion story repeatedly describes humiliation inflicted upon him. While a thorn in the flesh was given to Paul in order to beat (κολαφίζω) him, Jewish religious leaders beat (κολαφίζω) Jesus with their fists while accusing him of blasphemy (Matt 26:67; Mark 14:65).²³ Also, after putting a crown of thorns on Jesus' head, the soldiers beat (τύπτω) his head with a reed (Matt 27:30; Mark 15:19).²⁴ Moreover, Jesus' crown of thorns together with the purple robe and a reed became instruments of insult and humiliation in the hands of the soldiers as they mocked Jesus for his royal pretensions.²⁵

In addition, both Jesus and Paul suffer for their identity. On the one hand, Jesus' torment was due to the accusation of blasphemy for his answer to a question regarding his identity (Mark 14:61–2; Matt 26:63–4). The high priest interrogated Jesus, asking if he was Christ, and Jesus admitted that he was the One. Thus, they accused him of blasphemy and tormented him (Mark 14:61–2; Matt 26:63–4). In other words, Jesus was accused and tormented on the basis of his identity. On the other hand, Paul's discussion in 2 Cor 12:7–10 reaches its apex regarding the legitimacy of his apostleship. Paul emphasizes his identity as a servant of Christ at the beginning of his speech proper (2 Cor 11:23), and his defense culminates in 12:7–10. Paul must defend his identity against criticisms from his opponents for the sake of the Gospel and the church. In fact, Paul declares in 12:9

that his thorn/weakness has become his identity because his weakness becomes the locus where the power of Christ is manifested. Thus, one can again observe another point of contact between Jesus and Paul: Both were accused and suffered for their identities: Jesus as the Christ and Paul as a servant of Christ. Therefore, a close semantic affinity between σκόλοψ (2 Cor 12:7), ἄκανθα (Matt 27:29; John 19:2), and ἀκάνθινος (Mark 15:17; John 19:5) in light of the ancient literature, similar humiliating experiences inflicted upon Jesus and Paul by their “thorn,” and their suffering for identity reveal the striking echoes of Jesus’ Passion narrative in 2 Cor 12:7–10.

Threefold Prayer

Regarding 2 Cor 12:8, Paul’s threefold plea continues to echo Jesus’ Passion tradition, namely, the prayer in Gethsemane (Matt 26:36–46; Mark 14:32–42; Luke 22:39–46). Some scholars construe the number τρίς to be numerical; others interpret it symbolically. Some argue the Jewish background for the practice of threefold prayer; others insist on the Hellenistic influence,²⁶ which has led some scholars to deny Paul’s awareness of Jesus’ threefold petition.²⁷ However, while these traditions may have served as backdrops of the threefold prayer, an analysis of the intertextual connections and literary context of the letter show that Paul’s prayer remarkably resembles Jesus’ plea in Gethsemane not only in its form but also its content and outcome.

First, one striking echo of Jesus’ Passion in Paul’s prayer pertains to his plea to remove his suffering. Paul implored the Lord to remove the thorn (2 Cor 12:7), and Jesus prayed to God to let the cup pass by him (Matt 26:39; Mark 14:36). While the exact identification of Paul’s thorn/the messenger of Satan may be out of reach, 2 Cor 12:7 at least indicates that the thorn inflicted some sorts of suffering upon him. Likewise, the Passion narrative clarifies that the term, cup (ποτήριον) serves as a metaphor which refers to Jesus’ suffering and crucifixion.²⁸ Thus, both Paul and Jesus are burdened with suffering; thus, they petitioned to remove it.

Second, Paul’s direct address to Christ in his plea in 2 Cor 12:8 shows his portrayal of suffering in connection with Jesus. In 2 Cor 12:8, he made a threefold plea to the Lord, Jesus: ὑπὲρ τούτου τρίς τὸν κύριον παρεκάλεσα ἵνα ἀποστή ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ. While the text does not specify who the κύριος is, the immediate literary context clarifies that the Lord refers to Christ (12:9). The significance of this direct address to Christ lies in the fact that Paul directly prays to Christ instead of God the Father only in

12:9 (Windisch 1924: 388).²⁹ Alfred Plummer suggests that Paul's use of παρακαλέω is influenced by the gospel narratives (Plummer 1915: 253–354). In fact, when the word παρακαλέω appears in the gospel narratives, 17 times out of 25 times the term is employed to address Christ, especially for pleas for healing (e.g., Matt 8:5; Mark 5:23; Luke 8:41). If so, Paul seems to make his address intentionally to Christ as the One who can heal his suffering from the thorn.

Third, Paul's use of παρακαλέω in light of the literary context of 2 Corinthians strongly suggests that his portrayal of suffering is grounded in that of Jesus. While Paul employs παρακαλέω in a sense of petition in 2 Cor 12:8,³⁰ he also employs the same word in the letter, expressing a sense of encouragement (1:4, 6; 2:7; 7:6, 7, 13; 13.11). In fact, God's encouragement is one of the prominent themes that characterize Paul's discourse in the letter. Paul declares that God encourages the afflicted (1:3–4) and such encouragement is only available on the basis of Christ's suffering (1:5). So, Paul may have wanted to call upon (παρακαλέω) Christ in 12:8, knowing that his encouragement is mediated through Christ (διὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ in 1:5). So, instead of praying to God through Christ, Paul directly implores (παρακαλέω) Christ who is the healer and whose suffering is the source and reason of God's encouragement (1:4–5). In other words, Jesus' suffering profoundly echoes in Paul's understanding: Jesus not only restores him from his suffering but also encourages him because he first suffered for Paul (1:5; cf. 13:3–4). Therefore, Paul's use of παρακαλέω presents another plausible evidence that his prayer reflects Jesus' suffering.

Fourth, the reception and acceptance of Paul's plea remarkably echo those of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane (2 Cor 12:9; Matt 26:39; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42). Both Paul and Jesus received the answer from the one to which the entreaty was made: Paul from Christ; Jesus from God. Both Paul and Jesus' pleas were answered but not in the way they had wished. In spite of his plea for removal, Paul's thorn in the flesh remained with him (2 Cor 12:9). Likewise, despite his prayer for the removal of the cup of suffering, Jesus was betrayed, tormented, and crucified (Matt 26:47–27:56; Mark 14:43–15:41; Luke 22:43–23:49). However, both Paul and Jesus accepted the answers they received. Paul actually embraced his weakness, proclaiming, διὸ εὐδοκῶ ἐν ἀσθενείαις, ἐν ὑβρεσίν, ἐν ἀνάγκαις, ἐν διωγμοῖς καὶ στενοχωρίαις, ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ· ὅταν γὰρ ἀσθενῶ, τότε δυνατὸς εἰμι (12:10). Certainly, it was not Paul's desire to continue to suffer from his thorn, but he accepts his thorn as a final answer from Jesus and resolves to continuously

face his thorn and suffer, knowing that the grace of Jesus is sufficient and his weakness becomes the locus of the divine power.³¹ Similarly, Jesus accepted the cup of suffering to be the will of God just as he had prayed for God's will to be done but not for his own will (Matt 26:39, 42, 44; Mark 14:36, 39; Luke 22:42). Jesus submitted himself and accepted the answer: He was betrayed, tormented, and crucified (Matt 26:47–27:56; Mark 14:43–15:41; Luke 22:43–23:49). Therefore, we can reasonably conclude that echoes of the crucified Christ exist behind Paul's threefold plea regarding his petition to remove his suffering, his direct prayer to Jesus as the healer and the source of encouragement, and his reception and acceptance of the answer.

Power and Weakness

Finally, in 12:9–10, the crucified Christ continues to echo in connection to the theme of power and weakness, especially when considering the literary context of 2 Cor 13:4. Paul depicts his experience based on the experience of Christ crucified.

In 12:9–10, Paul repeatedly highlights the paradoxical truth: power through weakness. In Jesus' answer to Paul in 12:9a *χάρις* and *δύναμις* are contrasted with *ἀσθένεια*. In 12:9b, *ἡ δύναμις τοῦ Χριστοῦ* is contrasted with Paul's *ἀσθένεια*. In 12:10, Paul's contentedness with various sufferings once again manifests the paradoxical principle of power and weakness in his life: *ὅταν γὰρ ἀσθενῶ, τότε δυνατός εἰμι*. Thus, a fusion of Paul's weakness and Christ's power has taken place; the antithesis of power and weakness has become the essential reality in his life.

Likewise, after articulating the reality of power and weakness in his life in 12:9–10, Paul illuminates this seeming paradox by referring to Christ's weakness and power in 13:4a. Just as power and weakness characterize Paul's life and ministry, he describes Christ's crucifixion and resurrection in light of power and weakness: *καὶ γὰρ ἐσταυρώθη ἐξ ἀσθενείας, ἀλλὰ ζῆν ἐκ δυνάμεως θεοῦ*. Moreover, in 13:4b, he further explains the union with Jesus,³² insisting, *καὶ γὰρ ἡμεῖς ἀσθενοῦμεν ἐν αὐτῷ, ἀλλὰ ζήσομεν σὺν αὐτῷ ἐκ δυνάμεως θεοῦ εἰς ὑμᾶς*. Paul's use of two prepositional phrases, *ἐν αὐτῷ* and *σὺν αὐτῷ*, strengthens his identification with Christ. Murray J. Harris correctly explains, "As a result of being in Christ (*ἐν αὐτῷ*), Paul shared in the weakness of his crucified Master. As a result of his fellowship with Christ (*σὺν αὐτῷ*), he shared in the power of his risen Lord (vv. 3b, 4a), a power imparted by God (*θεοῦ*)" (Harris: 2005: 917). Now, the antithesis of power and weakness between Christ and Paul becomes even more explicit.

As Lim notes, “Paul never divorces the experiences of God’s power from the experience of the cross as the centre of the divine power,” (Lim 2009: 193). Paul depicts his experience of weakness and power based on the experience of Jesus’ death and resurrection (Savage 1996).

Conclusion

In this study, I have attempted to demonstrate the echoes of Jesus’ Passion narrative in Paul’s story of the thorn in the flesh in 2 Cor 12:7–10 by investigating three remarkable affinities. First, based on the analysis of σκόλοψ, ἄκανθα, and ἀκάνθινος in the ancient writings from the fourth century BCE to the fourth century CE in various genres and corpora, I concluded that these terms share a close semantic relationship, which at times function as near-synonyms. Thus, I argued that Paul’s use of σκόλοψ in 2 Cor 12:7 must have brought the image of Jesus’ crown of thorns to the minds of his readers. Also, I have demonstrated that the affinities between Paul and Jesus regarding the purpose of their “thorns” and their experience of suffering for their own identity (i.e., Jesus as Christ and Paul as a minister of Christ) reinforce the picture in their minds. Second, I have argued that Paul’s threefold petition in 2 Cor 12:8 strikingly echoes Jesus’ Passion narrative. Both Paul and Jesus petitioned to remove their suffering. Paul addresses Jesus instead of God in his prayer. Paul’s employment of παρακαλέω in light of the literary context of 2 Corinthians reflects Jesus’ suffering. Both Paul and Jesus accepted the outcome of their prayer. Third, I have demonstrated a fusion of Christ’s crucifixion and Paul’s own identity in the antithesis of power and weakness in 2 Cor 12:9–10 and 13:4. Paul describes his life as a union with Jesus in his weakness and power.

In 2 Cor 10:1–12:13, the underpinning accusation against Paul pertains to his status as a servant of Christ; his rivals do not think that he belongs to Christ (10:7) and that he is not a servant of Christ (11:23). Therefore, Paul not only insists on his status as a servant of Christ (11:23) but also invites the Corinthians to see Christ incarnated in him and his ministry. If he intended to depict the crucified Christ in the apex of his defense in 2 Cor 12:7–10, these echoes of Jesus would well serve this purpose. Various implications arise from these results, but space does not allow for their exploration. For example, if Paul’s thorn in the flesh is to be understood in light of Jesus’ Passion and crucifixion, then the theological significance of Jesus’ echoes may shed a light on the understanding of the enigmatic expression, “σκόλοψ τῆ σαρκί” (2 Cor 12:7). The expression may encompass

multivalent dimensions, including suffering, persecution, physical pain, opposition, spiritual anguish, etc. Thus, further investigation along these lines seems promising. Moreover, my study may present additional evidence to the plausibility of Paul's familiarity with the Jesus tradition in the Jesus and Paul debate.

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End Notes

¹ See other works of narrative criticism on Pauline epistles, Norman R. Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); Corneliu Constantineanu, *The Social Significance of Reconciliation in Paul's Theology: Narrative Readings in Romans*, LNTS 421 (London: T&T Clark, 2010); cf. Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

² Many recognize Paul's defense reaches its climax in 12:7–10. For instance, see Fredrick J. Long, *Ancient Rhetoric and Paul's Apology. The Compositional Unity of 2 Corinthians*, SNTSMS 131 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004: 217).

³ See also Kar Yong Lim, "The Sufferings of Christ Are Abundant in Us" (2 Corinthians 1.5): A Narrative-Dynamics Investigation of Paul's Sufferings in 2 Corinthians, LNTS 399 (London: T&T Clark, 2009: 195).

⁴ With a number of the growing interpreters who maintain the integrity of the letter, the present study regards the compositional unity of Second Corinthians. Examples of works espousing the unity of the letter includes, Albert Klöpffer, *Kommentar über das zweite Sendschreiben des Apostel Paulus an die Gemeinde Zu Korinth* (Berlin: Reimer, 1874); Adolf Hilgenfeld, *Historisch-Kritische Einleitung in Das Neue Testament* (Leipzig: Fues, 1875); Heinrich J. Holtzmann, "Das gegenseitige Verhältniss der beiden Korintherbriefe," *ZWT* 22 (1879) 455–92; C. F. Georg Heinrici, *Das zweite Sendschreiben Des Apostel Paulus an die Korinthier* (Berlin: Wilhelm Hertz, 1887); James Denney, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, *The Expositor's Bible* (New York: Armstrong and Son, 1894); J. H. Bernard, "The Second Epistle to the Corinthians," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, 7 vols. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903) 3:1–119; Philipp Bachmann, *Der zweite Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, ed. Theodor Zahn, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* 8 (Leipzig: Deichert,

1909); Allan Menzies, *The Second Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians: Introduction, Text, English Translation and Notes* (London: Macmillan, 1912); Adolf von Schlatter, *Paulus, der Bote Jesu: Eine Deutung seiner Briefe an die Korinther* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1934); Ernest Bernard Allo, ed., *Saint Paul: Seconde Épître Aux Corinthiens* (Paris: Gabalda, 1937); Hans Lietzmann, *An die Korinther I-II*, HNT 9 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1949); R. V. G. Tasker, *Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958); Philip E. Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962); W.H. Bates, "The Integrity of II Corinthians," *NTS* 12 (1965) 56–69; Niels Hyl Dahl, "Die Frage nach der literarischen Einheit des Zweiten Korintherbriefes," *ZNW* 64 (1973) 289–306; Frances M. Young and David F. Ford, *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); Frederick W. Danker, *II Corinthians*, ACNT (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989); Ben Witherington III., *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997); Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); James M. Scott, *2 Corinthians*, NIBCNT (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998); Jan Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, SP 8 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999); David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, NAC 29 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999); Jerry W. McCant, *2 Corinthians*, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999); Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians* (The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); Long, *Ancient Rhetoric and Paul's Apology*; Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); Craig S. Keener, *1–2 Corinthians*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015); Christopher D. Land, *The Integrity of 2 Corinthians and Paul's Aggravating Absence* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015). On partition theories and literary issues, see a summary of origin and development of partition theories and the discussion of the literary unity of the letter in Hans Dieter Betz, *2 Corinthians 8 and 9: A Commentary on Two Administrative Letters of the Apostle Paul*, ed. George W. MacRae, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985: 2–36); Margaret E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of the Corinthians*, ICC, 2 vols. (London: T&T Clark, 1994: 1:3–49); Harris, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 8–51.

⁵ For identification of allusions and echoes, see Michael Thompson, *Clothed with Christ. The Example and Teaching of Jesus in Romans 12.1-15.13*, JSNTSup 59 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991: 28–37).

⁶ For a summary of the proposals, see Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians*, AB 32A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984: 547–50); Thrall, *Second Epistle of the Corinthians*, 2: 809–818; Harris, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*: 858–59. OF ASBURY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

⁷ E.g., Hughes, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*: 442; Garland, *2 Corinthians*: 521.

⁸ “σκόλωψ.” BDAG: 930.

⁹ David M. Park proposes three possible definitions, which succinctly provide an overview of scholarly views on the issue: cross, stake, and thorn. First, the Greek classical and apostolic sources employed ἀνασκολοπιζῶ, the verb from σκόλωψ, in relation to acts of impalement and crucifixion. Thus, σκόλωψ “signifies a cross, more particularly the cross of Jesus.” Second, since classical writers employ the term in military contexts, particularly in the contexts of defense and torture, σκόλωψ refers to stake. Third, based on the attestation of σκόλωψ in the LXX, classical literature, and the church fathers’ writings (as well as the definition of lexicographers), σκόλωψ can also mean “thorn” (“Paul’s Σκόλωψ τῆ Σαρκί: Thorn or Stake? (2 Cor. Xii 7),” *NovT* 22 [1980]: 179–183). Many commentators particularly favor this third definition due in large part to the usage found in the LXX (Num 33:55; Ezek 28:24; Hos 2:6; Sir 43:19). Park also concludes the third definition to be the more plausible meaning than other definitions in 2 Cor 12:7. See the list of scholars supporting this definition in Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1915: 349). Also, Hughes, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*: 447; Garland, *2 Corinthians*: 519.

¹⁰ On the history of the scholarship, see John M. G. Barclay, “Jesus and Paul,” *DPL* (1993): 492–503.

¹¹ Theodoret of Cyrus (393–458/466 CE) employs σκόλωψ and ἄκανθα by quoting Ezek 28:24 in his commentary on Ezekiel (1000.80): Καὶ οὐκ ἔσονται ἔτι τῷ οἴκῳ τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ σκόλωψ πικρίας, καὶ ἄκανθα ὀδύνης, ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν περικύκλω αὐτῶν, τῶν ἀπιασάντων αὐτοὺς, καὶ γινώσκονται ὅτι ἐγὼ εἰμι Ἀδωναὶ Κύριος. The TLG text of Theodoret’s quotation from Ezek 28:24 and the LXX’s Ezek 28:24 are slightly different (e.g., addition of Ἀδωναὶ in Theodoret’s text). However, σκόλωψ and ἄκανθα are employed in the same meaning and syntax.

¹² This collection of oracles consists of fourteen books and eight fragments. See introduction and translation in John J. Collins, “Sibylline Oracles,” *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983–1985), 1:317–472.

¹³ Collins translates σκόλωψ as “stake” (*ibid.*, 470). However, “thorn” seems more appropriate translation of the word when regarding the context of wandering in a path.

¹⁴ More specifically, thorn seems to function as a metonymy for briar in this context. Clement of Alexandria (150–215 CE) also quotes Sib. Or. frag. 1:23–25 in his apologetic work, *Protrepticus/Exhortation to the Greeks* (2.27.4): τύφῳ καὶ μανίῃ δὲ βαδιζετε καὶ τρίβον ὀρθὴν εὐθεῖαν προλιπόντες ἀπίλθετε τὴν δι’ ἄκανθῶν καὶ σκολόπων. The context of the second chapter involves Clement’s attack on Greek cults and gods: He condemns Greek divination (2.11.1–2) and Greek mysteries (2.12.1–22.7) and develops discussions pertaining to Greek atheism (2.23.1–25.2), the heavenly origin of fallen man (2.25.3–4), and the seven ways of idolatry (2.26.1–7), and he moves to exhort the Greeks to run back to heaven (2.27.1–5). In this

exhortation, Clement quotes Sib. Or. frag. 1:23–25 in which σκόλωψ and ἄκανθα are synonymously employed. Likewise, Theophilus of Antioch (second century CE) makes use of σκόλωψ and ἄκανθα in his apologetic work, *Ad Autolyicum/To Autolyucus* (2.36) by quoting Sib. Ora. frag. 1:1–35, although Clement and Theophilus' works are independent from one another (Nicole Zeegers-Vander Vorst, *Les citations des poètes grecs chez les apologistes chrétiens du IIIe siècle* [Recueil de travaux d'histoire et de philologie 4:47; Louvain: The Presses universitaires de Louvain, 1972] 141). In this work, Theophilus aims to convince his pagan friend, Autolyucus, of Christianity and to demonstrate the falsehood of paganism (See the life and work of Theophilus in Rick Rogers, *Theophilus of Antioch. The Life and Thought of a Second-Century Bishop* [Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000]). He quotes the entire section of Sibylline Oracles fragment one.

¹⁵ See also, Ruth Webb, "Mime and the Dangers of Laughter in Late Antiquity," in *Greek Laughter and Tears: Antiquity and After*, ed. Margaret Alexiou and Douglas L. Cairns, Edinburgh Leventis Studies 8 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017: 219–231 at 222).

¹⁶ For introduction of Callimachus and his works, see John Ferguson, "The Epigrams of Callimachus," *Greece & Rome* 17 (1970: 64–80); Benjamin Acosta-Hughes, Luigi Lehnus, and Susan Stephens, eds., *Brill's Companion to Callimachus* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Benjamin Acosta-Hughes and Susan Stephens, *Callimachus in Context: From Plato to the Augustan Poets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Richard Rawles, *Callimachus, Ancients in Action* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

¹⁷ See John Jones, *Oppian's Halieuticks of the Nature of Fishes and Fishing of the Ancients* (Oxford: The Theater, 1722); also see Ephraim Lytle, "The Strange Love of the Fish and the Goat. Regional Contexts and Rough Cilician Religion in Oppian's Halieutica 4.308-73," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 141 (2011): 333–86.

¹⁸ See the translation of 3.33 in *ibid.*, 277.

¹⁹ On Oribasius' career, see Barry Baldwin, "The Career of Oribasius," *Acta Classica* 18 (1975): 85–97.

²⁰ For French translation of Oribasius' works, see Oribasius, *Oeuvres d'Oribase*, 6 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1851–1876).

²¹ For introduction and English translation, Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

²² Also see another magical-medical work in the fourth century CE called *Cyranides* that consists of four books. In this collection of the book, particularly book 4 that is classified as bestiary, ἄκανθινος and σκόλωψ are employed together to describe creatures (4.28, 62).

²³ The word *κολαφίζω* is attested only 5 times in the NT (Matt 26:67; Mark 14:65; 1 Cor 4:11; 2 Cor 12:7; 1 Pet 2:20).

²⁴ The Greek words, *κολαφίζω* and *τύπτω*, are two different words, but they have a similar semantic domain. See L&N s.v. 19.1 and 19.7.

²⁵ Some scholars argue that the thorns may have emanated outward from the head to represent royal diadems, while others postulate that they may have turned inward to torment Jesus by adding physical distress to the emotional distress and humiliation. E.g., Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, WBC 33B (Dallas: Word, 1995), 830–831; Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 675; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1183–84; Luz Ulrich, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary on Matthew 21–28*, ed. Helmut Koester, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2005: 513–15).

²⁶ In Judaism threefold prayer is regarded in relation to Aaronic blessings (Num 6:24–26), Elijah’s threefold breathing upon the widow’s son with the prayer that he might be restored to life (3 Kgdms 17:21), and the Jewish custom of praying three times a day (Thrall, *Second Epistle of the Corinthians*, 2:818–9). Also, in the biblical tradition (Exod 32:10–14; 2 Kings 20:1–6; 2 Sam 15:25–30), threefold prayer pertains to the idea that one might be able to change God’s mind although the result is not guaranteed (Keener, *Gospel of Matthew*, 639). Likewise, threefold prayers are found in Hellenistic culture. They are often associated with Hellenistic healing (Thrall, *Second Epistle of the Corinthians*, 2:819).

²⁷ E.g., Tasker, *Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*: 178; Harris, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*: 861. See also scholars who recognize the echo of Christ’ prayer in 2 Cor 12:8, Plummer, *Second Epistle*: 353; Windisch, *Der zweite Korintherbrief*: 389; Garland, *2 Corinthians*: 522; Martin, *2 Corinthians*: 612; cf. Harris, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*: 861.

²⁸ Ulrich Luz explains cup as “a metaphor that since the time of the prophets usually means God’s judgment. Its meaning is not hard and fast, however, and it can also refer to a person’s ‘fate’ or in a narrower sense to death. After [Matt] 20:18–19 the readers have almost certainly understood the cup in the last sense” (*Matthew 8–20*, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001]: 543).

²⁹ See also Jean Héring, *The Second Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians* (London: Epworth, 1967: 93).

³⁰ The Greek verb, *παρακαλέω*, is usually employed in relation to “asking for help” but in 2 Cor 12:8 it is used in relation to “calling upon God in a time of need.” See “*Παρακαλέω, Παράκλησις*,” TDNT 5:794; “*παρακαλέω*,” BDAG: 764–65.

³¹ Paul in fact employs the perfect tense when he says, *καὶ εἰρηκέν μοι* in Cor 12:9, to indicate that his answer was permanently valid. The usage here is resultative perfect; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*

Beyond the Basics. An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996: 574–76).

³² The inferential conjunction γάρ indicates Paul substantiating his claim (13:4a) in 13:4b.

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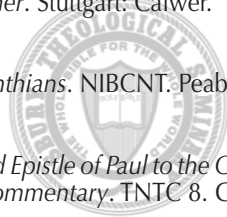
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