I have a mantra for Corinthian studies: ‘Chronology, Chronology, Chronology’. Thankfully establishing chronology for Paul and the Corinthians is possible. He arrived in Corinth in AD 50 and departed in AD 57. Stretched between 50-57 are the following: between 50-51 Paul founded the church in Corinth; in 54 from Ephesus he wrote the ‘previous' letter to Corinth (lost); in early 55 from Ephesus he wrote a second letter, our First Corinthians; later in 55 he made his second or ‘painful' visit to Corinth; in 56 from Ephesus he wrote a 3rd letter (‘tearful' letter, also lost); later in 56 from Macedonia, Berea? He wrote his 4th letter, our Second Corinthians; in late 56 or early 57 Paul made his third and final visit to Corinth, stayed for 3 month (where he wrote Romans); in 57 Paul left Corinth for Jerusalem with the Collection.

Not everyone will agree with every date or every detail, for example, that Second Corinthians was one letter; many think it was later assembled from various fragments. This will not materially affect my argument. That argument, based on a sense of chronology, is that Paul’s relationships with this group of people was not static but was inevitably changing. Those relationships appear to have been stable during Paul’s first visit (50-51) when he established the church and survived the synagogue’s appeal to the Proconsul Gallio. Then there is the question of the size of the congregation: did it remain the same, diminish or grow?

Between 52-54 when Paul came to Ephesus things became complicated, in at least two ways. First, for some of that time, perhaps most of it, the church was under the influence of other leaders. First there was the gifted Alexandrian Jew, Apollos, an anēr logios, ‘a man of words', a rhetorician (Acts 18:24), who powerfully refuted the Jews of Corinth. Compared to Apollos Paul appeared rather mundane and ungifted. Paul’s relationship with the Corinthians was probably further destabilised by the visit of the better-accredited Cephas, accompanied by his wife.

Secondly, Paul’s ‘previous’ letter (lost) was directed to the church’s present failure to deal with internal moral issues – fornication, idolatry, drunkenness, and fraud. It is unlikely that such problems would have arisen when Paul was with them two years earlier, when, in any case the congregation’s numbers were probably smaller. In other words, in comparison with the stability of first two years the next two were less stable, due to the absence of Paul and the presence of less effective leaders. By the time Paul
wrote First Corinthians in early 55 the negative trajectory had continued. This is evident in the tone and content of the letter. Amongst the issues Paul had to address were four in particular.

First was the now widespread belief that the role of preaching was to produce ‘wisdom’ and that the worth of such preaching was judged by the quality of its rhetoric. Paul refers derisively to the ‘wisdom from speech’ (σοφία λόγου – 1 Cor. 1:17). Public speaking was at a premium in a Graeco-Roman city like Corinth, for political advancement, for entertainment and in public speaking competitions. The charismatic Apollos’s presence raised the profile of public speaking amongst the saints in Corinth.

The second was a growing sense of negativity towards Paul by the minority ‘haves’ within the congregation but also towards the majority ‘have nots’. As a Roman city Corinth was a deeply stratified society with few wealthy and influential elites and many the opposite, whether poor free people or slaves. Once more, it is likely that when Paul was with them as their founder when numbers were fewer, when the converts owed their all to Paul, it didn’t matter too much that he worked as a humble tentmaker. Those were ‘heady’ days when the Spirit had come with a rush. In Paul’s absence, however, there was most likely a relapse to Corinth’s traditional social stratification within the church. Paul’s lowliness as viewed in retrospect and in his absence may have been seen even more negatively by the presence of the brilliant Apollos who, I assume, was paid by the wealthy Corinthians and by the presence of Mr plus Mrs Cephas who we know were paid. The uncaring attitudes of the few elite members toward the many ‘nobodies’ was also seen in the cavalier attitude of the ‘man of knowledge’ eating in the presence of the god in the idol-temple. But it was most obvious at the Meal of the Lord when the few ‘haves’ ate and drank to excess, whilst the many ‘have nots’ went without. Again, there is an argument that the litigants Paul condemns in chapter 6 were the wealthier members who by dint of wealth and social influence must necessarily prevail against the poorer adversaries in the courts. It is possible that the stratification also extended to the church meetings. Paul’s ideal was that members of ‘the body’ were interdependent and united, regardless of their charismata. But this ideal was shattered by the claims to superiority of the tongues-speaking Πνευματικοι. Of course, it could be that the tongues-speakers were poorer members flexing their muscles in the assembly. But on balance, I suspect that the financially powerful members dominated the meetings from every viewpoint, including the showy exercise of their charismata in the assembly. Is there a theme here in these observations about stratification? At one level Paul is unhappy that the ‘haves’ marginalised and suppressed the ‘have nots’. Such behaviour was abhorrent to the Master Paul served, the ‘friend’ of the sinners, the lost and the poor. But this high-mindedness seems to have crept into the Corinthian church during Paul’s two-year absence. At another level, the ‘haves’ are actually rebelling against Paul himself. Behind ‘each saying, “I am of Apollos”’ or ‘I am of Cephas”’ there was a widespread sentiment, ‘ABP – “Anyone but Paul”’. If this is correct, as I believe it is, then the key part of First Corinthians
is chapter 4:8-12 where he says, ‘Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings!’ He goes on to portray himself as a struggling gladiator in an arena with the wealthy Corinthians, sitting in the best seats watching the humiliated apostle in his struggles. These he spells out as hunger, thirst, being poorly dressed, homeless, working with his own hands – all social and economic things that marked Paul out as a ‘have not’. In a word, it was Corinthian snobbery, but more serious even than that, their serious questioning, even rejection of Paul’s authority in the Corinthians assembly. Paul must tell them that his written words carry the authority of the Lord above their prophesying and tongues speaking. (14:37). From 1 Corinthians it seems that Paul was having to fight for very his apostolic authority and dignity. By early 55 the church in Corinth is close to rejecting its founding father.

A third serious matter was the doubt of some about the future resurrection at the End of history. The amount of space Paul devotes to this is a measure of its importance. We are left to speculate who these doubters were. Perhaps the poorer, less well-educated members may have been glad for the apocalyptic eschatology of the general resurrection when the poor would become rich and the weak strong. One’s station in life would have affected one’s attitude to eschatology. The poor had a lot to gain and the rich a lot to lose. In any case the rich – and therefore educated – may have been better attuned to Greek ideas about the survival of the soul in line with the theology of the Greek poets who specifically said, ‘There is no resurrection’. There were other issues, notably the failure of some of the Corinthians to disengage from the temple culture including from the city brothels. My guess is that this was a problem for the poorer male members of the house churches. We can exclude those Jews and God-fearers who were part of the church. These were not Jewish foibles.

I have not yet mentioned the fourth, and in my understanding, the biggest issue reflected in 1 Corinthians, apart from the elite Corinthians’ superior attitude to Paul and the ‘have nots’. That very large issue is matter of the Incestuous Man (5:1). I am persuaded by the argument that he was a powerful member of the church and that this, above all, was the reason the Corinthians failed to suspend him. Thus First Corinthians exposes serious issues within this congregation, the heightened evaluation of rhetoric, the intensification of social stratification discriminating against the ‘have nots’ including Paul, the denial of resurrection and the weightiest of all, the church’s failure to discipline the Incestuous Man. Nonetheless, despite these substantial issues Paul and Sosthenes wrote in a measured way, confident that Paul could visit them in the next year or so with these issues dealt with and behind them. True, Timothy was coming to monitor their compliance with the items in the letter. And Stephanas was there as a stout supporter of Paul, a bulwark within the church. Paul is pretty hot under the collar in chapter 4 (the gladiator passage), in chapter 6 (about litigation) and in chapter 11 (about the Lord’s Supper) and very strong about the notorious sinner in chapter 5. But his chapter 15 is measured and the final chapter pretty calm. He
expected to be able to come to them and be farewelled in dignity and, most importantly, with their contributions to the Collection for Jerusalem completed and intact. So all was good? Right? Wrong! When Timothy came, apparently, all was not good. In particular the church had failed to deal with the chief offender at least that is my reconstruction of the matter. His report to Paul in Ephesus was so negative that Paul had to make an unscheduled visit to Corinth. This, his second visit, he describes as 'painful'. It was 'painful' because of an incident described in 2 Corinthians 7 that involves someone who 'did an act of wrong' and another who 'suffered an act of wrong'. Almost certainly Paul was the 'wronged' party. But who was the one who 'did the wrong' to Paul?

Let me give two reasons for thinking the wrongdoer was the Incestuous Man. First, Paul’s reason for the second, emergency visit most logically flows out of something serious in First Corinthians that Timothy reported negatively about back to Paul. There is a congruity between 1 Corinthians, Timothy’s visit and Paul’s unscheduled visit, the 'painful' visit. Recall that a man having his father’s wife was outrageous even amongst unbelievers. To leave this crisis unresolved would hopelessly compromise the church in Corinth.

Secondly, 1 and 2 Corinthians each point to a single notorious individual, unnamed of course. The unnamed individual in 1 Corinthians is the Incestuous Man and the unnamed individual in 2 Corinthians is the man who wronged Paul. I believe the notorious unnamed man in 1 Corinthians and the notorious unnamed man in 2 Corinthians are one and the same – the Incestuous Man. Nothing new here; this is a widely held view. Reference to ‘a majority’ who have found against the wrongdoer (2 Cor. 2) implies a minority who support him in spite of the church’s eventual judgment against him and his subsequent repentance. What 'wrong' did he do against Paul?

We can only guess. But Paul’s many references in 2 Corinthians defending his financial probity lend weight to the suggestion that the wrongdoer accused Paul of financial impropriety, perhaps connected with an intended misuse of or even misappropriation of the Collection. It was, indeed, a 'painful' visit. So here is Paul back in Ephesus after humiliation in Corinth when the church members sat on the fence, failing to support their founder. When in Corinth during that second visit he had intimated a change of plans whereby he would come back directly to them, go to Macedonia and then return to them before being sent by them to Judea with the Collection (2 Cor. 1:15-16). Back in Ephesus, however, Paul fatefuly decided to write a letter instead of making this Corinth-Macedonia-Corinth visit, a letter Titus (not Timothy) would deliver, a letter demanding action against the wrongdoer, a letter that was in effect an ultimatum to the Corinthians to comply with Paul’s apostolic authority. This ‘tearful’ letter brought mixed results. It did succeed in forcing the Corinthians to support him in disciplining the wrongdoer, though there seems to have been ongoing rumblings and grumbling about this. But many were decidedly unimpressed by Paul’s failure to return as promised, calling him a lightweight, a ‘flip flop’ man, someone who says ‘yes’, ‘no’, ‘yes’ (2 Cor. 1). One sarcastic critic or group of critics said, ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily
presence is weak and his speech of no account’ (2 Cor. 10). This is specific commentary on Paul himself and his recent behaviour. A person or persons are saying, ‘When he came he was “weak”, overwhelmed by just one of our members. Only by a cowardly letter written back in Ephesus and brought by someone else is he “strong”’. This is damning commentary, a symptom of the depth to which Paul had fallen in the eyes of some within the church in Corinth: weak when present, only strong when absent by letter; a coward here, a bully there. In Ephesus Paul was overtaken by events later in 56. The riot of the silversmiths brought him face to face with death forcing him to flee north to Troas to rendezvous with Titus, anxious to hear the response of the Corinthians to the ‘tearful’ letter. No Titus. He crossed to Neapolis in Macedonia. Again, no Titus. More anxiety, as the days shortened and winter drew closer ending the sailing season. Eventually Titus arrived from Corinth and brought mostly bad news. True, the Corinthians at last acted against the wrongdoer who had repented, though his supporters remained unhappy. The bad news – the very bad news – was that some charismatic Jewish preachers had arrived and had been warmly welcomed by many in the church, especially I think, by the Jewish members. Paul with Titus and – it seems – Timothy set out from Neapolis visiting the Macedonian churches along the Via Egnatia – Philippi and Thessalonica – and been greatly encouraged by their desire to contribute voluntarily to the Collection. Eventually (it seems), they came to Berea where Paul, with his colleagues, set about writing a letter that Titus and two prominent Macedonian leaders will take to Corinth (2 Cor 8). Paul will follow soon after, in company with Timothy and one delegate from Berea and two from Thessalonica (Acts 20; Rom. 16).

Paul has two main objectives in writing Second Corinthians: (a) to secure the Corinthians’ commitment to complete the Collection, and (b) to deflect the Corinthians from those ‘who peddle the word’, whom he calls ‘false-apostles’ and ‘super-apostles’. His method is interesting.

First, by explanation and argument he seeks to ‘reconcile’ the Corinthians to him; and to reconcile the Corinthians to God; and to reconcile the Corinthians one another in a reunited church – a three-way reconciliation. In the process he seeks to ‘build them up’ in Christian maturity so that they will see for themselves the truth of the new covenant and the falsity and pretentiousness of the ‘super-apostles’. Equally, as ‘built up’ by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit they will fulfil Paul’s objective in voluntarily completing the Collection, that is, at their initiative, by grace. Paul sent the letter by these three supporters – Titus and the two eminent Macedonians – and then he came himself with four supporters, Timothy and two delegates from Thessalonica and one from Berea. In short, in 57 when Paul came finally to Corinth he was surrounded by supporters from Macedonia and with Titus and Timothy at his side, it was a far cry from the lonely figure who came a year earlier to Corinth at the second visit where he was humiliated by the church that failed to support him against the wrongdoer. Furthermore, he was securely located in the house of Gaius, in whose house the whole church met. With the help of Tertius – sponsored
by Gaius of Phobe – he wrote his great Romans letter during this 3 months sojourn in the Achaean capital. Perhaps he field tested his Romans letter in the Corinthian church? Meanwhile the members of church completed the Collection and Paul went on his way to Judea happier with the Corinthians than he had been for some time; reconciliation at last.

So much for our chronological review. How does a linear and chronology approach matter for Corinthian studies? Let me briefly give five examples. First, it is helpful in reading each letter in its chronological context. We benefit from reading 1 Corinthians against the background of 50-51 when Paul was present in Corinth and against the background of 52-54 when Paul was absent, but when Apollos and Cephas were present. As well, we are able to reflect on known events in wider Corinth during the years of Paul’s absence, for example, the effects of the famine, the inauguration of the imperial cult honouring Claudius in 54 and the death of Claudius Caesar later in October 54.

Bruce Winter has helpfully raised these ‘background’ questions in After Paul left Corinth: The influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change, William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2001. Similarly, our studies in 2 Corinthians would benefit from a careful study of 1 Corinthians and the events that happened between 1 Corinthians and when Paul and Timothy wrote 2 Corinthians. Timothy’s visit to Corinth; Timothy’s report to Paul in Ephesus; Paul’s second or ‘painful’ visit to Corinth; Paul’s dispatch of Titus with the ‘tearful’ letter; and Paul’s re-engagement with Timothy and with the Macedonian congregations in Macedonia.

It is quite remarkable that after 2000 years we are able to piece together these things to the degree we can. I think I know more about Paul and the Corinthians AD 55-57 than I do about my own life over a three year period forty years ago! Rather than get up too close to the texts of these letters, whether in part or in whole, there is something to be said for standing back and looking at First Corinthians from a wide angle and for looking at Second Corinthians from an even wider angle. Chronology, chronology, chronology is a big help.

Secondly, a linear approach prompts a number so questions that might not otherwise be raised, for example, the question of the numbers of members in the church. Would we be correct to assume that the numbers were constant throughout the seven-year period? Probably not. During Paul’s initial visit we know of the leading members – Crispus, Gaius and Stephanas and of Priscilla and Aquila and of Paul, Silvanus and Timothy. If we assume a household of a dozen or so for the leading members it would mean that the church in Corinth had 50-70 members when Paul took his leave in 51. Would we be correct to assume this remained the number of Corinthian believers in the house churches? Probably not. The opening lines of both epistles some years later imply growth in numbers of saints in the wider province so it would follow that the church numbers within the city had grown also. The number of
factions and viewpoints reflected within 1 Corinthians suggest a church membership well over a hundred members, perhaps approaching 200. This is a guess, of course, but not unreasonable. My point is that a chronological, linear approach at least raises the question.

Thirdly, should we assume that a senior Corinthian like Erastus was a member from the beginning? He is not mentioned until Paul’s last weeks in the city, in AD 57 (Rom. 16:23). Clearly Erastus the city oikonomos is a leading political figure in Corinth, though whether he is the Erastus the aedile who laid the pavement near the theatre ‘at his own expense’ remains a matter of debate. Had Erastus been a member of the church from the beginning we might have expected Paul to refer to him by name in First Corinthians, along with Crispus, Gaius and Stephanas. But his membership of the church in earlier years, with its inferences about the demographic nature of the church, should not be assumed.

Fourthly, speaking of Stephanas raises another chronology-based question. Clearly Paul is making much of Stephanas in First Corinthians (16:15-18). Mentioning Stephanas third in chapter 1 after Crispus and Gaius might seem an afterthought but actually may have been deliberate, to raise his profile above Crispus and Gaius. Certainly, Paul singles him out in chapter 16 for the Corinthians to ‘be subject to’, giving some reasons for this. But I am puzzled why at this stage, three years after Paul left Corinth, does he need to nominate Stephanas as his man in Corinth? Why does he have to give reasons about Stephanas five years after the foundation of the church? Had other leaders eclipsed Stephanas in the meantime? Had Stephanas been somewhere else? I don’t know the answer to the question why at this late stage Paul inflates Stephanas, but the question doesn’t seem to come up in the commentaries. Chronology asks questions like this. The commentators do, indeed, make much of the Stephanas passage but none that I have consulted addresses the question why must Paul buttress Stephanas’s leadership 5 years after the foundation of the church.

Fifthly, there is an argument that the issues in the letter are better addressed initially exegetically and within the chronological stream of relationships between Paul and the Corinthians. One example is that text I referred to – 2 Cor. 10:10: ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech of no account’. The two elements – letters and speech – naturally inspire scholarly interest in letter writing in antiquity and speech-rhetoric in antiquity, especially in the case of the latter where Paul downplays himself as idiotēs tō logō [Greek ἴδιοτῆς τῷ λόγῳ] ‘a layman in speech’ a few sentences later.

Discussion of Paul as a letter writer and a rhetorician is a fruitful field of research, but is it the place to start in understanding 2 Cor. 10:10? Rather than scurrying off immediately to Quintilian and Cicero and other ancient authorities might it not be better to begin with the actual context of the letter chronologically, and only then pursue the other research? Titus is the source...
of this verdict on Paul from some person or persons in Corinth during his most recent visit that he has then reported to his friend in Macedonia. The sharp criticism of Paul in 2 Cor. 10:10 is based on three specific area of failure. His first perceived failure was to secure the support of the church in disciplining the wrongdoer during his second visit. The second was his failure to return directly to Corinth as he had intimated and the third was the writing instead of a 'weighty and strong letter' which he dispatched by someone else. As we say today, it was 'not a good look'! This brutal criticism was in direct response to Paul's own actions, or lack of them. Further reflection would need to be based on research into contemporary letter writing and speech-rhetoric but I think the place to start is chronology. My point is that something is lost by not analysing 2 Cor. 10:10 and 11:5 first within the flow of the letter and within the flow of recent events, Paul's failure to deal with the wrongdoer, his failure to come back as promised and his dispatch of junior associate with a harsh letter.

To conclude, nothing is lost and much gained by commencing Corinthian studies with a wide-angle chronological understanding of the seven year saga. This, I suggest is methodologically a better place to start than with socio-political analysis of 'background' data. Of course, this is not an either/or but a both/and approach. But much depends where one starts. Thankfully, the Acts passages that 'bookend' Paul's relationships with the Corinthians (Acts 18 and 20 plus Romans 16) and the four letters and one visit in between provide a good basis for such a chronological approach, and one of the best examples for understanding a set of social relationships in the Graeco-Roman world of the first century.