

INTRODUCTION

The pressures of persecution, apparent in 1 Thessalonians, have intensified in this letter. In its three brief chapters the reader perceives the vital importance for suffering believers of confident hope in the Lord's return. Likewise intensified is the problem of idleness. In the face of abuses of Christian generosity, 2 Thessalonians gives a sharp reminder of the individual Christian's duty to live as a responsible member of the community, hard-working and self-supporting.

Much of what was said about the circumstances and organization of 1 Thessalonians can also be affirmed of the second letter (see introduction to 1 Thessalonians above). But unlike 1 Thessalonians, this letter presents two major critical problems. Brief attention will be given to these below.

AUTHORSHIP

Unlike 1 Thessalonians, the second letter has widely been taken as a pseudepigraph, composed after Paul's death by one of his followers who used 1 Thessalonians as a model. Several lines of evidence have been cited to support the hypothesis that 2 Thessalonians is not an authentic letter of Paul.

One of these concerns the letter's eschatology. While 1 Thessalonians emphasized that the Lord's return was imminent, that is, that it could occur at any time (5:1-11), 2 Thessalonians appears to propose a series of preliminary signs which must occur before the Lord can return (2:1-12). If this is indeed the case, then, it is argued, that the tension between the two letters is such that Paul could not have written both.

More particularly, it is often argued that the less imminent expectation of 2 Thessalonians reflects a later period in the life of the church, when the vivid expectation that the Lord would return within the lifetime of the first generation of Christians had been disappointed. If so, then it is clearly a production of the generation after the apostle Paul.

Secondly, it is argued that the tone of 2 Thessalonians is considerably colder and more formal than 1 Thessalonians. As an example, “we ought to thank” in 2 Thess 1:3; 2:13 is regarded as less warm than “we thank” in 1 Thess 1:2. Likewise, the repeated use of “command” in 2 Thess 3:6, 12 is said to reflect a less intimate relationship between the writer and the readers. Such a shift in tone is thought to be unlikely if Paul had written both letters, especially if 1 Thessalonians was written first, but is entirely to be expected if the second letter was a pseudepigraph.

Thirdly, the background of the readers appears to be different. 1 Thess 1:9 appears to indicate a predominantly Gentile audience, but in 2 Thessalonians references to the final judgment (1:6-10) and the man of lawlessness (2:1-12) appear to assume knowledge that could be expected only of Jews. It is consequently argued that the second letter was not written for the same church, indicating that the addressee and so also the author named in the salutation are fictions.

Combined with these concerns is the literary style of 2 Thessalonians. In some respects it closely resembles 1 Thessalonians, following a similar outline (including a double thanksgiving: 1 Thess 1:2-10; 2:13-16; 2 Thess 1:3-12; 2:13-17) and discussing similar themes (eschatology, idleness). However, it has been argued that the sentence structure of 2 Thessalonians is significantly different from the undisputed letters of Paul. In particular, 2 Thess 2:3-12 is a more complex sentence than is found elsewhere in Paul’s letters, constructions with the genitive are more frequent, and subordinating conjunctions are more numerous.¹ Likewise it is argued that a

¹Daryl Schmidt, “The Syntactical Style of 2 Thessalonians: How Pauline Is

number of terms and concepts from Paul's authentic letters are used in a different sense in 2 Thessalonians.² The combination of similarity and dissimilarity is said to point to a post-Pauline imitator, who at some points incorporated elements of Paul's style and substance from 1 Thessalonians and at others reflected followed his own course.

The force of these arguments is considerable, and a large number of contemporary scholars have been persuaded by them to reject Pauline authorship of this letter. However, the idea that 2 Thessalonians is pseudepigraphical is itself problematic. It is first of all difficult to understand why someone would write 2 Thessalonians and ascribe it to Paul, since presumably it contained nothing so controversial as to demand the apostle's authority for its acceptance. Furthermore, if written by a later imitator, that person knew only 1 Thessalonians, since the major parallels are only with that letter. Such a situation would be surprising for a second-generation disciple of Paul. The reference to the temple in 2:4 gives no indication that the Jerusalem temple has been destroyed by the Romans, again surprising if the letter were written near the end of the first century when the fall of Jerusalem was well known. Furthermore, 3:6-15 give every appearance of having been written to a specific congregation in response to a particular problem. It would be most unusual for a letter to be written to specific church in the name of Paul after his death and not be detected as a pseudepigraph. And if all in the church recognized the fiction and accepted it as such, we must explain how the later church forgot the origins of the letter, since all external evidence affirms that Paul is the author (Marcion, c. A.D. 150, and the Muratorian Canon, c. A.D. 180, both ascribe it to Paul). These considerations make the hypothesis of pseudepigraphy less than likely.

It?" *The Thessalonian Correspondence* (Raymond F. Collins, ed., BETL 87, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990), pp. 383-393.

²For a summary of such arguments see Wanamaker, pp. 25-27.

In fact, each argument for pseudepigraphy can be explained on the hypothesis that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians himself. The eschatological tension in fact has less to do with a lessening of expectancy than is often allowed. Exegesis of 2:1-12 in the comments below will indicate that what Paul discusses here is probably not a series of preliminary signs but the present reality that evil and the Evil One appear to dominate and that such dominance is itself proof that the Lord has not yet returned. In this case, there is absolutely no tension between the eschatology of the first and second letters. However, even if this interpretation should be wrong, it is not impossible that Paul would express a different perspective on the Lord's coming in 2 Thessalonians and not view it as contradictory, just as he does in 1 Cor 15:1-58, which stresses the general resurrection, and 2 Cor 5:1-10, which stresses individual immortality.

Likewise, the change in tone between the two letters can be explained by the change in circumstances. In 1 Thessalonians part of Paul's concern was to reassure the readers of his affection for them despite his absence. That need having been met, the second letter — preoccupied with the persecution of the church, the problem about the Lord's return and the idleness of some members — reflects less of the personal warmth emphasized in the first. Furthermore, if Paul used a different amanuensis for each letter, or if Silas and Timothy had different roles in the composition of each letter, the tone and style could easily have changed.

The change from a Gentile to a Jewish background is more apparent than real. As noted in the introduction to 1 Thessalonians, that letter includes a number of phrases which assume knowledge of the Old Testament and Judaism. The Jewish orientation of the second letter is more explicit but hardly necessitates a different audience. This observation also obviates the need for other hypotheses, such as that Paul sent the two letters to two different factions of the church, one Gentile and the other Jewish, or that he sent the first letter to the church at large and the

second to the leaders of the church.³

The stylistic differences between 2 Thessalonians and the other letters of Paul are real, but they can be exaggerated. The complexity of sentences and concentration of subordinating conjunctions are in fact not two matters but one, since complex sentences require subordinating conjunctions. The sentence of 1:3-12 is exceptional, but it is approximated in Ephesians and Colossians.⁴ The authorship of those letters is also disputed, but to base an argument for one letter's inauthenticity on its similarity with another questioned letter is to build a supposition on another supposition. It would be fairer to admit that in a short letter like 2 Thessalonians, a few unusual expressions may create a false impression of stylistic variance. Furthermore, it is admitted by all that Paul's style changed with each letter. Only in Romans, for example, do we find the rhetorical question, "What shall we say then?" (3:5; 4:1; 6:1; 7:7; 8:31; 9:14, 30), and no one disputes the authenticity of Romans on that basis.⁵ Alleged differences in the use of key terms and presentation of concepts have likewise been exaggerated. Paul's usage elsewhere is often more flexible than some critics will allow. And 2 Thessalonians contains some Paulinisms which would have been difficult for an imitator to compose.⁶ The combination of similarities and differences between the two Thessalonians letters and between the second and the rest of the Pauline corpus is at least as consistent with the hypothesis that Paul wrote both under changing circumstances as it is with the hypothesis of a pseudepigrapher.

Thus, though the controversy over the authorship of this letter is likely to continue among scholars, the arguments

³The Letter is the hypothesis of E. Earle Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 19-21.

⁴Schmidt, "Syntactical Style," p. 385.

⁵For a series of such examples see Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*, p. 12.

⁶Marshall notes εἴπερ (*eiper*) in 1:6, ἀνεσις (*anesis*) in 1:7, and ὑπεραυξάνω (*hyperauxanō*) in 1:3 (p. 32).

against Paul's authorship are not sufficient to overturn the testimony of the letter itself and of the early church. By nature of the case, evidence to prove the authenticity of an ancient document always falls short of absolute proof. But those who have accepted 2 Thessalonians as a genuine letter of Paul can do so with integrity, knowing that the balance of evidence favors their conclusion.

ORDER AND CIRCUMSTANCES OF WRITING

The traditional assumption has always been that 2 Thessalonians was written not long after 1 Thessalonians, while Paul was still in Corinth. Paul had apparently received a report, perhaps from Timothy after the delivery of the first letter, of ongoing problems in the Thessalonian church. The persecution had not abated, misunderstandings about the Lord's return continued, and the willfully idle had not repented. Therefore, Paul composed a second letter to address the developing situation, probably only months after writing the first.

There have been several scholars who have questioned the traditional order, however, postulating that 2 Thessalonians was in fact written first. The traditional order of Paul's letters, these have argued, is based not on chronology but length, longer letters of Paul being placed before shorter ones in the canon. Therefore, internal considerations alone, the evidence of the letters themselves, must determine the order of writing.

The most recent and important advocate of the priority of 2 Thessalonians is Charles Wanamaker. His argument, which in the main follows a line marked out by others, may be summarized as follows. First, the persecution of 2 Thess 1:4-7 appears to be a matter of the past in 1 Thess 2:14. Secondly, the idlers of 2 Thess 3:6-15 appear to be a new problem, while 1 Thess 4:10-12 and 5:14 address it as something well known and already under control. Thirdly, the signature of 2 Thess

3:17 appears to be more fitting in Paul's first letter to the church. Fourth, the eschatological teaching of 1 Thess 4:13-5:11, especially in light of the remark in 5:1 that the readers had no need of such instruction because they had received it before, is more coherently explained if it is an elaboration on 2 Thess 2:1-12, especially if some implications of that passage had been misunderstood. On the other hand, if the church had already received 1 Thess 4:13-5:11, it is difficult to see how they would have concluded that the day of the Lord had already come (2 Thess 2:2), since the dead had not yet been raised and united with the living in the Lord's presence (1 Thess 4:17). Therefore, Wanamaker argues with earlier advocates of the hypothesis that 2 Thessalonians was written by Paul after he received a vague report about problems in the Thessalonian church and was delivered by Timothy in the visit described in 1 Thess 3:1-10.⁷

While Wanamaker has succeeded in showing how little evidence there actually is for the priority of 1 Thessalonians, the case for the priority of 2 Thessalonians is far from proved. External evidence must be weighed also: Marcion apparently referred to 1 Thessalonians as the first letter despite the fact that he did not arrange his canon by length.⁸ As far as internal matters are concerned, if 2 Thessalonians was the first letter, it is surprising that Paul makes no reference to it in 1 Thessalonians as a part of his passionate discussion of his prior work with the Thessalonian church (2:1-12) and his attempts to return to them since his departure (2:17-20). Wanamaker suggests that the mention of Timothy's visit may be a tacit reference to it, since Timothy can be assumed to have carried some letter from Paul on this visit.⁹ Still, one might expect a more specific mention of so substantial a letter as 2 Thessalonians had it been written first. On the other hand, the references to letters in 2 Thess 2:2, 15; 3:17 are at

⁷Wanamaker, pp. 37-45, 269 and *passim*.

⁸Guthrie, *Introduction*, p. 600.

⁹Wanamaker, p. 44.

least consistent with the idea that 1 Thessalonians had already been received, though they do not demand it.

If 1 Thessalonians is prior, as the slight balance of probability suggests, we can assume that the persecution of the church, which may have abated after Paul's departure, has heated up again, or at least that the church is in greater turmoil because of it. Likewise, we must assume that the church's misunderstanding of the Lord's return in 2:2 occurred despite the logical force of 1 Thess 4:13-18. Also, the idle who were warned briefly in 1 Thess 4:11-12 and 5:14 did not heed that warning. Such developments will surprise those who assume that human behavior is always reasonable and orderly, but those who have experienced the give and take of pastoral leadership will recognize that churches and Christians, like stocks, seldom move in a straight line. Against such a background Paul dictated his second letter, seeking to correct the church's course and reinforce its growth.

THEOLOGICAL VALUE

2 Thessalonians focuses primarily on three issues: persecution, the Lord's return, and the problem of idleness. Each has remarkable relevance for today's church.

Persecution is perhaps less a part of the experience of Christians in North America than in other parts of the world. Nevertheless, for many Christians it remains a real threat. More broadly, all believers experience the hostility of unbelievers at various points, and all can be subject to the hurt of their ridicule, even if they are relatively safe from physical violence. 2 Thessalonians provides the important reminder that God notices such suffering and promises to bring vindication for his people. The suffering of the church will one day end.

Likewise, the pervasive dominance of evil, obvious to every modern observer, will one day end as well. Whatever the precise nature of the "man of lawlessness" (2:3), Paul certainly focuses attention on his present activity (2:9-12). Christians

who wonder whether their faith is true when they see the opponents of Christianity with the upper hand have their answer in this letter. Evil will continue to run rampant in this age, but when Christ returns, he will utterly destroy every manifestation of it and the One who stands behind it. The goodness and faithfulness of God can be trusted to answer every aspect of injustice in this age.

Unemployment, underemployment and wide gaps in income are no less a social reality now than they were for Paul's readers. And so the need for Christian charity continues as it did in the first century. But the dangers inherent in such sharing are still real as well. Paul's reminders about the need for personal responsibility and self-support (3:6-12), coupled with the reminder to continue in good works of generosity (3:13) are messages to be heeded as today's church considers its role in addressing the pressing issues of poverty and the failures of the secular welfare state.

The observation that problems had intensified since Paul wrote his first letter contains a pertinent message in itself. Even in Paul's ministry, the life of the church was characterized by trouble as much as progress. Yet through such trouble the work and will of God are accomplished. Christians frustrated by the one-step-forward-two-steps-back trajectory of the church can take heart that in similar circumstances the great apostle still found much for which to give thanks and boast (1:3-4; 2:13-14). God's will, which will be fully realized only when Christ returns, is even now being worked out in the life of the church, even when outwardly it appears defeated.

OUTLINE

- I. GREETING – 1:1-2**
- II. OPENING THANKSGIVING,
ENCOURAGEMENT AND PRAYER – 1:3-12**
 - A. Thanksgiving for the Thessalonians’ Growth and
Endurance in Persecution – 1:3-4**
 - B. Encouragement in Light of God’s Judgment – 1:5-10**
 - C. The Content of Paul’s Prayer – 1:11-12**
- III. INSTRUCTION ON THE LORD’S RETURN –
2:1-12**
 - A. The Day of the Lord Not Yet Present – 2:1-2**
 - B. The Apostasy and the Man of Lawlessness – 2:3-12**
 - 1. The Apostasy and the Revelation of the Man of Lawlessness – 2:3
 - 2. A Description of the Man of Lawlessness – 2:4
 - 3. Reminder of Oral Instruction on the Subject – 2:5
 - 4. The One Who Restrains/Prevails – 2:6-10
 - 5. God’s Consequent Actions – 2:11-12
- IV. RENEWED THANKSGIVING,
ENCOURAGEMENT AND PRAYER – 2:13-17**
 - A. Thanksgiving for the Salvation of the Thessalonians
– 2:13-14**
 - B. Encouragement to Remain Faithful to the Traditions
Delivered by Paul – 2:15**
 - C. Prayer for the Lord’s Encouragement and Strength
– 2:16-17**

V. EXHORTATIONS – 3:1-16

A. General Exhortations – 3:1-5

B. Exhortations Regarding Church Discipline – 3:6-15

1. Exclusion of the Willfully Idle – 3:6-13

2. Exclusion of the Disobedient – 3:14-15

VI. CONCLUSION – 3:16-18