



Thessalonians 1 & 2

Introduction

Among the collection of epistles attributed to Paul the two letters to the Thessalonians stand out for their concern with eschatological hope. That hope, especially in 1 Thessalonians is embedded in a very personal address to a community that Paul had founded and for which he cared very deeply. The eschatological scenarios in the two letters, however, differ in significant details, a fact which has raised questions about the authenticity of the second letter. The letters are of particular interest because 1 Thessalonians is probably the earliest written document of the fledgling Christian movement that survives. It shows Paul at the height of his missionary activity to the Gentiles, but prior to the composition of his major epistles.

Paul's Relationship with Thessalonica

Thessalonica was founded by the Macedonian king Cassander in 316/15 BCE. It was strategically situated for commercial purposes. The major Roman highway, the Egnatian way, which ran east to west across northern Greece, passed through the city, which also possessed an excellent port.

The Book of Acts reports that Paul and his companion Silas came to Thessalonica on his "second missionary journey," that phase of his work as an apostle that took him beyond Asia Minor to Greece. He first stopped at Philippi (Acts 16 and 1 Thessalonians 2:2). Then, according to Acts 17:1–9 Paul preached in the Jewish synagogue of Thessalonica, persuading some members as well as many of the "devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women" (Acts 17:4). As in Philippi, his message generated controversy. According to Acts, Jews who objected to the message attacked the house of one Jason who had hosted Paul and Silas, claiming that they "have been turning the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). The heart of their complaint was political. The apostles were "acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor" and proclaiming "another king named Jesus" (Acts 17:7). In reading the Thessalonian correspondence, it will be useful to keep this charge in mind and to test the ways in which the gospel that Paul preached could be construed as a challenge to the contemporary social and political order.

According to Acts, Paul left Thessalonica and continued to Beroea, also in northern Greece, where Jewish critics from Thessalonica continued to oppose his mission. Paul eventually went on to Athens (Acts 17:10–15) before concluding his "second missionary journey." Luke's

chronology sets this activity after the “apostolic council” (Acts 15), which Paul also mentions in Galatians 2:1–10 as having taken place “14 years later,” presumably after his first visit to Jerusalem, which took place three years later than his conversion or call experience (Galatians 1:10–18).

These chronological data are not precise and there are various options for combining them, but a one widely accepted version places the death of Jesus in 30 CE, Paul’s “Damascus Road” experience within a year or two, his first visit to Jerusalem in the mid 30’s and the “apostolic council” in approximately 48 CE. If Luke’s dating of Paul’s missionary activity in Thessalonica is correct, Paul would have been there around 49 CE and would have written 1 Thessalonians sometime later. How much time there was between the mission to the city and the writing of the letter is not clear. There was enough time at least for some members of the community to die (1 Thessalonians 4:13), but probably not more than a year or so. Paul indicates that he had attempted to keep in touch with the community from Athens through his associate Timothy (3:2).

As Acts indicates, Paul’s journey took him to Athens and then to Corinth, where he encountered the proconsul Gallio (Acts 18:12–17), an event that can be dated to 51–52 CE. Before that happened, Timothy and Paul’s other companion Silas, had rejoined him in Corinth (Acts 18:5). 1 Thessalonians was probably written after their arrival, but before Paul’s encounter with Gallio.

The Structure of 1 Thessalonians

Like most of Paul’s letters, 1 Thessalonians begins with a greeting naming Paul and his co-authors, Silvanus and Timothy (1:1). A standard “thanksgiving” section follows in which Paul offers a prayer of gratitude and highlights some themes treated in the rest of the letter (1:2–10). The heart of the letter treats Paul’s relationship to the Thessalonian community, one based on the experience he had with them (2:1–16), his hope for another visit (2:17–20), and his efforts to stay in touch through Timothy (3:1–13). As in all his letters Paul, the apostle and pastor, takes time to exhort his congregation to live a life worthy of their calling (4:1–12; 5:12–22). Framed by the warm exhortation, Paul addresses a concern, perhaps reported to him by Timothy, about the fate of members of the community who have died (4:13–18), and more generally about what his community should think about their eschatological hopes (5:1–11). The conclusion of the letter follows a common pattern, with a benediction (5:23–24), a request for prayer (5:25), greetings (5:26), and a final good wish (5:28).

2 Thessalonians

The much briefer epistle insists, perhaps too strongly, that it is an authentic letter of Paul, with the signature written in his own hand (3:17). Stylistically the letter resembles 1 Thessalonians and does not show the kind of variation in vocabulary or phrasing found in letters such as Colossians, Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). The stylistic

qualities of those letters have led many scholars to doubt their authenticity. 2 Thessalonians does not have such a distinctive style.

2 Thessalonians does lack the tone of personal intimacy that characterized 1 Thessalonians and is almost exclusively focused on questions of eschatology, sketching a scenario of the end time that differs from that of 1 Thessalonians. The difference in tone and the difference in eschatology have led many to question the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians.

The arguments have not persuaded all scholars. It is possible that Paul himself, perhaps relying on one of his associates, soon after writing his first letter, wrote to supplement or modify the way in which he treated eschatological hope in 1 Thessalonians. If so, he may have been attempting to correct an erroneous opinion that in view of the coming end of the world one need not work (3:6–14).

Yet the differences are significant, and, on balance, it is more likely that the 2 Thessalonians was written by a disciple of Paul, imitating his style and offering a different scenario of end time events. If so, the letter could have been composed any time before Paul's letters were assembled into a collection, probably sometime in the last decades of the first century, after Paul's death. The circumstances of the composition of 2 Thessalonians remain a matter of conjecture. It may be that the traumatic events of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE as a result of the Jewish revolt against Rome shaped a new version of eschatological speculation.

Structure of 2 Thessalonians

The framework of the letter is simple with an address (1:1-2) followed by a brief thanksgiving (1:3–4). The heart of the letter is a little apocalypse describing eschatological judgment (1:5–12), a mysterious process of opposition to Christ by a “lawless one” (2:1–12), and a reassurance to the congregation that they are God's chosen ones (2:13–17). The author then asks for prayer (3:1–5), warns against idleness (3:6–14), and concludes with a benediction (3:16), the personal signature (3:17), and the final good wish (3:18).