

11. The Thessalonian Correspondence

Murray J. Smith

The two Thessalonian letters are among the earliest in the Pauline corpus, and provide a unique window on the apostolic proclamation in its earliest form. Together, they reveal a great deal about how earliest Christianity, with its roots in the Scriptures of Israel and the historic ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, first made its way in the Greco-Roman world. Despite being among the shortest of Paul's letters, 1 and 2 Thessalonians nevertheless provide us with a strikingly clear presentation of the gospel, a remarkably developed theological vision, and arguably the most extended reflection on the Christian hope to be found in any of the letters of Paul. For those who accept these letters as the "word of God" (cf. 1 Thess 2:13), their significance for Christian theology and service in a largely post-Christian culture is not hard to see. In what follows we offer, first, an account of the apostolic gospel mission in Thessaloniki and a description of the Christian community to which it gave rise, and second, an analysis of the letters themselves.¹

1. The Apostolic Mission and the Christian Community in Thessaloniki

1.1. The Arrival of the Gospel in Thessaloniki

The gospel came to Thessaloniki in A.D. 49, when Paul, Silas, and Timothy arrived in the city.² The mission there formed part of a broader work in Macedonia and Achaia (modern Greece), to which Paul had been called in a vision (Acts 16:9-10). Having been mistreated and imprisoned in the Roman colony of Philippi (Acts 16:19-24; cf. 1 Thess 2:2), the three missionaries travelled 148 km west-south-west along the *Via Egnatia*, through Amphipolis and Apollonia, to Thessaloniki.³ Consistent with Paul's mission strategy of

¹ For a review of recent research, see S. A. Adams, "Evaluating 1 Thessalonians: An Outline of Holistic Approaches to 1 Thessalonians in the Last 25 Years," *CBR* 8.1 (2009): 51-70.

² Silas had accompanied Paul from the beginning of his "second missionary journey" in Antioch (Acts 15:40). Timothy had joined the two missionaries in Lystra (Acts 16:1-4).

³ For the road, and distances, see C. J. Hemer and C. H. Gempf, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1989), 115.

establishing a base for the gospel in the major centers, the apostolic trio did not stop until they reached the Macedonian capital.

1.2. The City of Thessaloniki before the Arrival of the Gospel

When the missionaries came to Thessaloniki, they encountered a cosmopolitan city with a proud Macedonian heritage, deep Roman connections, and a significant Jewish community.⁴ The city's proud Macedonian heritage dates to 315 B.C. when Cassander, king of Macedonia, founded it on the site of ancient Therme, and named it after his wife, the daughter of Philip II, and half-sister of Alexander III ("the Great").⁵ Situated at the head of the gulf of Therme, and boasting the best harbor in the Aegean, the city flourished throughout the Hellenistic period.⁶

As early as the first half of the second century B.C., however, Thessaloniki came under the influence of Rome. In 167 B.C., the Romans annexed Macedonia and made Thessaloniki the leading city in the second of four districts. In 148 B.C., they made Thessaloniki the capital of the newly united province of Macedonia.⁷ In 42 B.C. Mark Antony granted Thessaloniki the status of "free city" (*civitas libera*), in thanks for the city's support for Antony and Octavian at the battle of Philippi.⁸ Throughout this period, the location of the city on the *Via Egnatia*, which connected Rome with the cities of the East, further ensured its prosperity.

Indeed, the status of a Roman "free city" brought considerable benefits. It meant that Thessaloniki enjoyed imperial benefaction, while also retaining significant autonomy. In particular, the city (unlike Philippi and other Roman colonies) was free from military occupation, and did not have to integrate a large number of Roman veterans, or adjust to the imposition of Roman law (the *Ius Italicum*).⁹ At the same time, it had the right to mint local and imperial coins, and received some tax concessions.¹⁰ Significantly, local elites and local institutions, including the traditional body of five or six "city authorities" (the *πολιτάρχαι* of Acts 17:6, 8), remained in place.¹¹ This

⁴ For details of the Thessalonian population, see D. W. J. Gill, "Macedonia," in D. W. J. Gill and C. Gempf, eds., *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting, Volume 2: Graeco-Roman Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 406-8.

⁵ Strabo, *Geogr.* VIII frgs. 21, 24.

⁶ Cf. W. Elliger, *Paulus in Griechenland: Philippi, Thessaloniki, Athen, Korinth* (Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 92/93; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1978), 78.

⁷ The administration of the province underwent several modifications during the Roman period. For the details, see D. Pandermalis and F. Papazoglou, "Macedonia under the Romans," in M. B. Sakellariou, ed., *Macedonia: 4000 Years of Greek History and Civilization* (Athens: Ekdotike Athenon S.A., 1983), 192-221; Gill, "Macedonia," 400-406.

⁸ Pliny, *Nat.* 4.36.

⁹ Gill, "Macedonia," 405-6.

¹⁰ J. A. O. Larsen, "Roman Greece," in T. Frank, ed., *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome IV* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1938), 449.

¹¹ The term *πολιτάρχαι* (sg. *πολιτάρχης*) appears at Acts 17:6, 8, but nowhere else in Acts or the surviving Greek literature. The term is, however, well known from Greek inscriptions and documentary papyri, where it refers to the ruling authorities of several Macedonia cities. Luke's

combination of Roman benefaction and local autonomy ensured that even after Macedonia was ravaged during the Roman civil wars (44–31 B.C.), Thessaloniki emerged relatively unscathed to enjoy a period of peace and prosperity during the Julio-Claudian era (27 B.C.–A.D. 68).¹²

Within this Roman free city with a proud Macedonian heritage, Paul found a significant Jewish population. The origins of the Jewish community in Thessaloniki are unknown, but the epigraphic evidence indicates that Jews were already in Greece-Macedonia in the third century B.C.¹³ By the mid-first century A.D., Philo, citing a letter from Agrippa to the emperor Caligula, could list Thessaly, Boeotia, Macedonia, Aetolia, Attica, Argos, Corinth, and the Peloponnese as regions with a Jewish population.¹⁴ Certainly, the account in Acts 17:1-9 indicates that by Paul's day Thessaloniki, like the other major cities of the eastern Mediterranean, was home to a strong Jewish community.

1.3. The Gospel in the Synagogue

The apostolic mission in Thessaloniki is narrated by the tantalisingly brief account in Acts 17:1-9, which indicates that Paul, consistent with his custom, took the gospel to the Jewish synagogue upon his arrival in the city. The apostle “reasoned” there “from the Scriptures” on three consecutive Sabbaths “explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead,” and so concluding that “this Jesus, who I am proclaiming to you, is the Messiah” (Acts 17:1-3). Some Jews, Acts continues, “were persuaded” to believe, and these “were joined” to the apostle and his companions (Acts 17:4). Most likely, these Jewish believers included Jason, who came to host the missionaries (Acts 17:5-7; cf. Rom. 16:21),¹⁵ and Aristarchus (Acts 19:29; 20:4; 27:2; cf. Col 4:10-11; Phlm 24).¹⁶ In addition, Acts 17:4 mentions that a “large number of God-fearing Greeks” and “quite a few prominent women” became believers. These God-fearing Greeks were Gentiles who worshipped the God of Israel, associated with the Jewish synagogue, and to some extent observed the Mosaic law, but who had not undergone the rite of circumcision.¹⁷ The prominent women were most probably either God-fearing

use of the term in this context and nowhere else is testimony to his meticulous concern for historical accuracy. For details see G. H. R. Horsley, “The Politarchs,” in Gill and Gempf, *The Book of Acts*, 2:419-31.

¹² Larsen, “Roman Greece,” 465.

¹³ For sources and discussion see I. Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting, Volume 5: Diaspora Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 154.

¹⁴ Philo, *Legatio* 281.

¹⁵ Cf. F. M. Gillman, “Jason of Thessalonica,” in Raymond F. Collins and Norbert Baumert, eds., *The Thessalonian Correspondence* (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1990), 39-49.

¹⁶ B. W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 46-47 suggests that this Aristarchus is also to be identified with the Aristarchus found in a list of Macedonian politarchs.

¹⁷ Acts employs forms of φοβέω (10:2; 13:16, 26) and σέβω (13:43, 50; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:7) as semi-technical descriptions for such people. For discussion, see S. McKnight, “Proselytism and Godfearers,” in C. A. Evans and S. E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 835-47.

wives of some of the principal citizens of the city, or women who were leading citizens in their own right.¹⁸ Either way, the Acts account records that Paul's gospel won at least some adherents in Thessaloniki from among those Jews and Gentiles who knew something of the Jewish Scriptures, and who worshipped the God of Israel.

1.4. The Gospel on the Streets

At some point, however, it seems that Paul and his companions took the gospel "to the streets."¹⁹ The account in Acts provides no indication of a mission outside the synagogue, but the Thessalonian letters give the strong impression of a successful mission to the Gentiles of the city and are quite clearly addressed to people who had "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess 1:9).²⁰

Indeed, four additional observations suggest not only that Paul and his companions conducted a successful mission outside the synagogue, but also that this mission lasted some time.²¹ First, we must allow time for the fact that when the apostolic trio came to Berea, Athens, and Corinth, they found that the report of the conversion of the Thessalonians had preceded them (1 Thess 1:8). Second, the apostolic trio engaged in "tentmaking" work (1 Thess 2:9; 2 Thess 3:7-9; cf. Acts 18:2-3), which also seems to require a longer stay in the city. Third, at Phil 4:16 Paul speaks of how the Philippians sent him aid "more than once" while he was in Thessaloniki and, given the distances involved (about 148 km each way), it seems unlikely that this could have occurred within the space of "three sabbath days" (two weeks). Finally, at 1 Thess 2:7-8, 11-12, 17, 19-20 the apostolic trio speak of the great affection that exists between themselves and the Thessalonians, which also implies a stay longer than two weeks. Taken together, this evidence suggests that, even though the gospel "ran" among the Thessalonians (2 Thess 3:1), the apostolic proclamation to the Jews, which lasted "three Sabbath days," took place in the context of gospel work in the city lasting several weeks, or even months.²²

¹⁸ For discussion see C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, Volume 2* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), 812.

¹⁹ R. F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 37-42 shows that Paul's workshop was almost certainly a primary site for his evangelistic activity among Gentiles. The homes of key individuals (such as Jason) most likely also provided a site from which Paul could preach and teach (see S. K. Stowers, "Social Status, Public Speaking, and Private Teaching: The Circumstances of Paul's Preaching Activity," *NovT* 26 [1984]: 65-68).

²⁰ It is probably significant, for example, that despite a range of intertextual echoes of the LXX, the letters nowhere explicitly cite the Scriptures of Israel.

²¹ Cf. the case for a longer stay, first made by J. B. Lightfoot, *Biblical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1893), 259.

²² In order to reconcile the account in Acts with the evidence of the letters, we must posit a time lapse either between Acts 17:4 and 5 or, perhaps more likely, between Acts 17:1 and 2. Cf. B. Witherington III, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 36-39 who argues that the ministry among the Gentiles of the city preceded, and was then contemporaneous with, the mission to the synagogue recorded in Acts 17.

1.5. The Gospel, the Church, and the Religio-political Culture of Thessaloniki

The earliest Christian community in Thessaloniki, then, seems to have comprised a majority of Gentiles (including some former God-fearers) and some Jews. Whatever the precise ethno-religious mix, the apostolic gospel provided an identity-shaping reference point for the whole church: it distinguished the nascent Christian community from both its Gentile environment and its Jewish roots.

On the one hand, for those of Gentile background, the gospel called for a significant re-orientation of life. The God revealed in Jesus Christ was utterly unlike the plethora of gods worshipped in the traditional Greco-Roman cults, the mystery religions, and the newly minted imperial cult, which filled the city. The archaeological evidence clearly demonstrates that Thessaloniki had devotees of the traditional cults of the region (especially that of the Cabiri), of the numerous gods and demi-gods imported from Greece (Zeus, Herakles, the Dioskouri, Apollo, Aphrodite, Dionysus, and Asclepius), and of the “mystery” cults of Serapis, Isis, and Mithras which came from Egypt and Persia.²³ Indeed, the numismatic evidence indicates that the cults of Cabirus and Dionysus were sponsored by the city authorities.²⁴ In this context, Paul reminds the Thessalonians that they had “turned to God from idols” when they embraced the gospel (1 Thess 1:9), and that this radical re-orientation of life had ethical implications: “each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the Gentiles who do not know God” (1 Thess 4:4-5).²⁵ In contrast to the moral licence and cultic syncretism often associated with Greco-Roman religion, the God revealed in the gospel called for purity of life and exclusive devotion to one Lord, Jesus Christ.

This exclusive devotion to the Lord Jesus was particularly counter-cultural in the context of Roman rule. Roman benefaction had brought “peace and security” to Thessaloniki (cf. 1 Thess 5:2), and at least as early as the beginning of the first century B.C., the Thessalonian city authorities had added the cult of the “goddess Roma and the Benefactor Romans” to the range of other divinities worshipped in the city.²⁶ In the years following the establishment of Thessaloniki as a Roman free city (42 B.C.), the Thessalonians embraced the imperial cult, and gave it pre-eminence. The

²³ See especially C. Edson, “Cults of Thessalonica,” *HTR* 41 (1948): 153-204 and Karl P. Donfried, “The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence,” *NTS* 31.3 (1985): 336-56.

²⁴ H. L. Hendrix, “Thessalonica,” *ABD* 6:525.

²⁵ Donfried, “Cults,” 337 suggests that Paul here deliberately critiques the cult of Dionysus, the god of wine and joy, which was often associated with phallic symbolism, when he calls to the Thessalonians to find joy and life in Christ while controlling their “member” (σκεῦος, 1 Thess 4:4).

²⁶ H. Hendrix, “Thessalonians Honor Romans” (Th.D. Diss., Harvard University, 1984), 22 notes that the earliest extant inscription for this cult of “Roman benefactors” (Ῥωμαῖοι εὐεργέται) dates to 95 B.C.

epigraphic evidence demonstrates that they built a temple to “Imperator Caesar Augustus, son of god,” provided a priest and “games superintendent” (ἀγωνοθέτης) for the cult of Augustus, and hosted annual games in his honor.²⁷ Significantly, they installed statues of the emperor,²⁸ and minted coins presenting Augustus as a “son of god.”²⁹ As in other parts of the empire, the founding of imperial cults like this served to connect the social order of the city with the Roman imperial order and—through the Roman *princeps* (later emperor)—with the divinely established cosmic order.³⁰ Imperial cults thus gave divine sanction to the status quo, and it is no wonder that any challenge to the authority of the Roman emperor was treated with suspicion, and even violence. The apostolic gospel, which called for exclusive devotion to God’s “Son,” the “Lord Jesus Christ,” thus sharply distinguished the newborn church from its Gentile environment.

On the other hand, for those who had come to faith in Christ from Judaism, the gospel revealed that the God of Israel’s Scriptures had now acted in a new and decisive way through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 17:3). The gospel thus stood in deep continuity with Judaism, and Jews who accepted Christ did not encounter the same kind of radical re-orientation of life faced by their Gentile neighbors. Nevertheless, since the gospel relativized those aspects of the Jewish law which gave Jewish life its distinctive character (Sabbath, circumcision, food laws), it always had the potential to destabilize the Jewish community (cf. Acts 18:13). Indeed, this new development within deep continuity meant that the apostolic mission stood in direct competition with the mission of the synagogue, and was therefore opposed (cf. 1 Thess 2:16). The apostolic gospel thus sharply

²⁷ C. Edson, ed., *Inscriptiones graecae Epiri, Macedoniae, Thraciae, Scythiae, Pars II Inscriptiones Macedoniae, Fasciculus I Inscriptiones Thessalonicae et viciniae* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972) = *IT* 31, 32, 132, 133. Hendrix, “Thessalonians,” 106-9, 312 notes that the significance of the new cult is evident in the fact that “every extant instance in which the ‘priest and *agonothete* of the Emperor’ is mentioned, he is listed first in what appears to be a strict observance of protocol”.

²⁸ Archaeological Museum, Thessaloniki, Catalogue Number 1065. Images and discussion in Hendrix, “Thessalonians,” 45-54; cf. H. L. Hendrix, “Archaeology and Eschatology at Thessalonica,” in B. A. Pearson et al., eds., *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 116-18.

²⁹ Two series of coins are particularly significant: (1) the first series (*British Museum Catalogue* [= *BMC*] 115 nos. 16, 58-59, 61) quite possibly dates from as early as 29–28 B.C. and bears, on the obverse, the laureate head of Julius Caesar and the inscription ΘΕΟΣ (“god”) and, on the reverse, the head of Augustus with the title ΣΕΒΑΤΟΥ (“of Augustus”) or the name of the city ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΩΝ (“of Thessaloniki”). Since Augustus was Julius Caesar’s adoptive son, the coin clearly presents him as a “son of god,” an epithet widely used of him during the principate. (2) The second series (H. Gaebler, *Die Antiken Münzen von Makedonia und Paionia* [Ger. orig. 1906], 2:125 no. 44) bears on the obverse the head of Augustus with the legend ΚΑΙΣΑΡ ΣΕΒΑΣΤΟΣ (“Caesar Augustus”), and on the reverse the prow of a ship with the city’s name ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΩΝ (“of Thessaloniki”). On this standard issue coin the place given to Augustus had previously belonged to Zeus. The coin may well, therefore, point to the divinization of Augustus. Images and discussion in Hendrix, “Thessalonians,” 170-73, 179.

³⁰ For this understanding of the imperial cults, see S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 239-48.

distinguished the Thessalonian church not only from its Gentile environment, but also from its Jewish roots.

1.6. Opposition to the Gospel

It is no surprise, then, that opposition to the gospel in Thessaloniki first developed among the Jewish community, but quickly spread further afield to the Gentile inhabitants of the city (cf. 1 Thess 2:14). According to Acts 17:5, some unbelieving Jews, “jealous” of the missionaries’ success, and no doubt “zealous” for the law (Acts 17:5: ζηλώσαντες; cf. Acts 5:17; 13:45: ζήλος), gathered some men from the city marketplace and started a riot. This mob set out in search for Paul and Silas, and rushed to Jason’s house where (presumably) the missionaries were staying and the first believers were known to meet (cf. Acts 17:7). Unable to find Paul and Silas, the mob forcibly dragged Jason and some of the other believers before the “city authorities” (the πολιτάρχης), and brought charges against them.³¹

The charges against Jason and the other believers were extremely serious: they had received Paul and Silas, who were “turning the world upside down” by acting “against the decrees of Caesar” in saying that “there is another king, Jesus” (Acts 17:6-7). Most likely, the Thessalonian Jews invoked here not merely the Roman law of treason (*maiestas*), but certain more specific “decrees of Caesar” (δογμάτων Καίσαρος). The Julio-Claudian emperors had, indeed, repeatedly forbidden astrologers and other magicians from all forms of prophecy, and especially prophecy related to the death of a ruler, or the coming of a new one.³² Moreover, it is quite likely that the city authorities of Thessaloniki, together with the body of citizens (the δῆμος) had taken an oath of personal loyalty to the Roman emperor, by which they had bound themselves to “attack and pursue with arms and the sword by land and by sea” whomsoever was found to be an enemy of Caesar.³³ In this context, it is easy

³¹ The vehemence of the Jewish opposition at this time may be further explained as a response to the actions of the emperor Claudius, which had placed Jews across the empire in a precarious position. In A.D. 41 Claudius banned meetings of Jews in Rome (Cassius Dio, *Hist.* 60.6.6). In the same year, he wrote to the Jews of Alexandria granting them freedom to worship, but warning them against welcoming those Jews who “stir up trouble throughout the whole world” (P.Lond. 1912). In A.D. 49 he expelled the Jews from Rome (Acts 18.2; Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.4; Orosius, *Hist. c. pag.* 7.6.15-16). Following these actions, the Jews of Thessaloniki no doubt feared the loss of their historic right to practice their ancestral religion (see Josephus, *A.J.* 14.211-16; 16.166; *C. Ap.* 2.37; Philo, *Legat.* 315-16; cf. Acts 16:21). In this context, it is easy to see why they distanced themselves from Paul and his companions.

³² Cassius Dio, *Hist.*, 56.25.5-6; 57.15.8. See E. A. Judge, “The Decrees of Caesar at Thessalonica,” *RTR* 30 (1971): 1-7; repr. in E. A. Judge and J. R. Harrison, eds., *The First Christians in the Roman World: Augustan and New Testament Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 2008), 456-62.

³³ The language here is drawn from an oath of personal loyalty, binding of Roman citizens and non-Romans alike, from Paphlagonia (*Orientalis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae [OGIS]* 532: 6 March 3 B.C.). For discussion, see Judge, “Decrees,” 5-7. J. R. Harrison, “Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki,” *JSNT* 25.1 (2002): 79-80 demonstrates that there is widespread evidence for similar oaths being taken across the empire in the Julio-Claudian period. Although

to see how the apostolic proclamation in Thessaloniki, which included a pronounced eschatological element, and announced the enthronement and coming reign of the “Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess 2:1, 8), could be understood as counter-imperial. Paul and his companions announced nothing less than “another King” (Acts 17:7) and so proclaimed the crucified Jesus as a rival to the Roman emperor Claudius! On this basis, then, the Jews of Thessaloniki sought to blacken Paul and Silas, and those who had received them, with the brush of political subversion.

1.7. After the Missionaries Left Thessaloniki: Persecution for the Gospel

This potentially explosive situation was only defused by the hasty departure of Paul and his companions from the city. The city authorities took monetary payment from “Jason and the rest” (Acts 17:9) to guarantee that they would keep the peace. Then, probably as a condition of the bail, “the brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas (and Timothy?) away by night to Berea” (Acts 17:9-10). Although the gospel was well received in Berea (Acts 17:11-12), the Jews of Thessaloniki vehemently pursued Paul and his companions there (Acts 17:13), forcing Paul to move on to Athens alone (Acts 17:14).

This premature departure was so traumatic that the missionary trio compare it to being “orphaned” (1 Thess 2:17). The trauma was exacerbated for the Thessalonians by the continuation of their persecution following the departure of the missionaries (2 Thess 1:4; cf. 1 Thess 2:14-16; 3:3-4). Indeed, it is possible that the persecution was so extreme that it led to the deaths of some in the church. This, at least, would help to explain why the death of some members had become such an issue so soon after the missionaries had left (1 Thess 4:13).³⁴

Be that as it may, the missionary trio were clearly concerned for the suffering community in Thessaloniki. They had, to be sure, left behind some kind of rudimentary leadership structure (1 Thess 5:12), but they were all too aware that the apostolic mission in the Macedonian city had been cut short. In this context, the apostle and his companions sought continued personal contact with the young church. Paul himself made several attempts to return to Thessaloniki, but was unable to do so, being hindered by “Satan” (1 Thess 2:18).³⁵ Bereft of other options, therefore, and increasingly concerned about the state of the Thessalonian church, Paul sent Timothy back to the city from

we do not have direct evidence for Thessaloniki, such an oath was most likely part and parcel of the city’s obligation as a “free city” of the empire.

³⁴ This was suggested by F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (2nd ed.; London: Tyndale Press, 1952), 327-28; cf. Donfried, “Cults,” 349-50.

³⁵ The best explanation of this verse remains that of W. M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen, Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1895), 231 who suggested that the Thessalonian city authorities continued to oppose the presence in their city of one who had caused such a disturbance, and that Paul interpreted this ban as satanic opposition to the gospel.

Athens (Acts 17:15; 1 Thess 3:1-5),³⁶ while Silas was despatched to some other Macedonian destination (perhaps Berea or Philippi?).³⁷ This personal ministry through Timothy was, of course, supplemented by the ministry of the letters, and it is to them that we must now turn.

2. The Letters

2.1. The Authors

The Thessalonian letters were written by Paul, Silas, and Timothy.³⁸ Despite the tendency of modern scholarship to focus exclusively on Paul, the attribution of authorship to the three missionaries (1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1), and the consistent use of the first person plural throughout both letters, should be given due weight. The ministry of letter writing, like that of the initial gospel proclamation in Thessaloniki, was collegial. It was together that these three missionaries had planted the church, and so together that they wrote to comfort and establish it in the faith.

At the same time, there should be no doubt that Paul was the leading author. Silas and Timothy were clearly subordinate to Paul in some ways (e.g. Acts 17:15; 1 Thess 3:1-6), and the emphatic greeting at 2 Thess 3:17, together with the occasional lapses into the first person singular throughout 1 Thessalonians (2:18; 3:5; 5:27) indicate that Paul was the one who actually dictated the letters. Just as he seems to have been the dominant evangelist and teacher during the mission in Thessaloniki (Acts 17:2), so he seems to have taken the lead role in writing to the church.

2.2. The Dates and Places of Writing

It is most commonly argued that both Thessalonian letters were written from Corinth some time between late A.D. 49/early 50, when Paul arrived in that city, and early A.D. 52, when he left.³⁹ On this view, the trio wrote 1

³⁶ Presumably, Timothy's presence was deemed less threatening than Paul's by the city authorities. Timothy's Greek patrilineage (Acts 16:1) and relatively junior status may have been factors here.

³⁷ It is difficult to be certain about Silas' movements. For this reconstruction, see J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on Epistles of St Paul from unpublished commentaries* (2d ed.; London: Macmillan, 1904), 40; cf. T. W. Manson, "St. Paul in Greece: The Letters to the Thessalonians," *BJRL* 35 (1952-53): 435-36, 446-47.

³⁸ At least since J. E. C. Schmidt, *Vermutungen über die beiden Briefe an die Thessalonicher*, *Bibliothek für Kritik und Exegese des Neuen Testaments und ältesten Christengeschichte* (Hadamar: Gelehrtenbuchhandlung, 1801) and W. Wrede, *Die Echtheit des zweiten Thessalonicherbriefs* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1903) the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians has often been questioned. For a summary of the major arguments, and a convincing defense of the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians, see C. A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 17-28.

³⁹ Paul's ministry in Corinth may be securely dated by a comparison of Acts 18:11-17 and the Delphic letter of Claudius which relates to Lucius Junius Gallio. See E. M. Smallwood, *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Gaius, Claudius, and Nero* (Cambridge: Cambridge

Thessalonians when Timothy returned from Thessaloniki with good news about the state of the church there (1 Thess 3:6; Acts 18:5), and wrote 2 Thessalonians shortly thereafter, when the missionaries became aware of renewed persecution, continued eschatological confusion, and a deterioration in the moral stance of some church members.⁴⁰

It is perhaps more likely that 2 Thessalonians was written first.⁴¹ The canonical order of the letters is, at any rate, no argument against this possibility, since it reflects only their relative length.⁴² On this view, the missionary trio wrote 2 Thessalonians in anxiety and haste from Athens in late A.D. 49,⁴³ and sent it with Timothy on his first urgent return visit to Thessaloniki (1 Thess 3:1-5). 1 Thessalonians was then written from Corinth a short time later, probably in the early months of A.D. 50, after the missionary trio were reunited there (Acts 18:5), and in response to the good news Timothy brought back from the north (1 Thess 3:6).

In favor of this view, six considerations are noteworthy:

1. It seems quite probable that Paul and Silas would have sent a letter with Timothy from Athens expressing their own concern for the church.⁴⁴ In this connection, it is striking that the apostolic trio describe Timothy's mission (1 Thess 3:2) and the purpose of 2 Thessalonians (2 Thess 2:17) in identical terms, using a combination of the verbs "strengthen"

University Press, 1967), 105, no. 376; J. H. Oliver, "The Epistle of Claudius Which Mentions the Proconsul Junius Gallio," *Hesperia* 40 (1971): 239-40. For discussion, see Bruce, *Paul*, 253-55.

⁴⁰ Among the more recent commentaries, this view is adopted, with minor variations, by E. Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: Adams & Charles Black, 1972), 42-45; F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Word, 1982), xxxiv-v; I. H. Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (London: Morgan and Scott, 1983), 20-23; A. J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 361-64; G. L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 52-53; Witherington, *Thessalonians*, 10, 31, 183; G. D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 5.

⁴¹ This view remains a minority position. It may be traced back at least as far as H. Grotius, *Annotations in Novum Testamentum I* (Amsterdam, 1641), 1032-42; H. Grotius, *Annotationes in Novum Testamentum II* (Amsterdam, 1646), 651. It has more recently been advocated by: J. C. West, "The Order of 1 and 2 Thessalonians," *JTS* 15 (1913): 66-74; J. Weiss, *Earliest Christianity: A History of the Period A.D. 30-150* (trans. Frederick C. Grant; 2 vols.; New York: Harper, 1959 [orig. 1937]), 286-91; Manson, "St Paul in Greece," 428-47; R. Gregson, "A Solution to the Problem of the Thessalonian Epistles," *EvQ* 38 (1966): 76-80; C. Buck and G. Taylor, *Saint Paul: A Study of the Development of His Thought* (New York: Scribner's, 1969), 150-62; R. W. Thurston, "The Relationship between the Thessalonian Epistles," *ExpT* 85 (1973-1974): 52-56; Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 37-45.

⁴² Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, xli.

⁴³ J. Calvin, *1, 2 Thessalonians* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999 [orig. 1550]), in his discussion of "the argument" of 2 Thessalonians, notes "a very generally received opinion among the Latins, that it was written from Athens."

⁴⁴ Cf. Manson, "St Paul in Greece," 436; cf. J. L. White, *Light from Ancient Letters: Foundations and Facets* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 216 who notes that it was common practice in the first century to send a letter with a trusted representative authorized to interpret and elaborate on the letter's contents.

- (στηρίζαι) and “encourage” (παρακαλέσαι), which occurs nowhere else in the Pauline corpus.⁴⁵
2. The contrast between the urgent tone of 2 Thessalonians and the more irenic tone of 1 Thessalonians is well explained if 2 Thessalonians was written in haste and anxiety from Athens on the basis of limited information, while 1 Thessalonians was written some time later from Corinth, following the good report from Timothy (1 Thess 3:6), and when the apostolic trio had time and space to compose a more considered and polished letter.
 3. The persecution of the Thessalonians is clearly a present and pressing reality in 2 Thess 1:4-7, but in 1 Thessalonians 1–3 it is, if not a thing of the past, at least a less pressing concern. If 1 Thessalonians was written first, we are forced to posit a renewal of persecution to account for 2 Thessalonians. While possible, this reconstruction lacks clear evidence. The only unambiguous evidence of persecution relates to the time of the apostolic mission and its immediate aftermath (Acts 17:5-9; 1 Thess 2:14-16).⁴⁶
 4. 2 Thess 3:6-15 provides an extended discussion on the problem of idleness, while 1 Thessalonians includes only brief references to the same issue (1 Thess 4:10-12; 5:14). The problem of idleness was addressed by the apostolic trio already during the initial mission (2 Thess 3:10), but there is no indication that they gave any instruction regarding how to discipline recalcitrant members. The command to “warn the idle” at 1 Thess 5:14 is somewhat cryptic on its own (warn them of what? admonish them how?) but makes good sense if the recipients have already read/heard the more detailed instructions about how to deal with recalcitrant members in 2 Thess 3:6-15.
 5. The expression “now concerning” (περὶ δέ οἱ περὶ τῶν) seems to have been something of a standard device for Paul when responding to oral or written questions (cf. 1 Cor 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12).⁴⁷ At 1 Thess 4:9, 13, and 5:1 this expression seems to refer to questions asked by the Thessalonians, and these questions can be related to issues discussed in 2 Thessalonians (1 Thess 4:9-12 with 2 Thess 3:6-15; 1 Thess 4:13-18 and 1 Thess 5:1-10 with 2 Thess 2:1-10).⁴⁸ It is certainly possible that the missionaries here simply refer to standing topics left over from their ministry in Thessaloniki, especially since both eschatology and idleness had been addressed during the original mission (2 Thess 2:5; 3:10).⁴⁹

⁴⁵ So Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 44. Contra Green, *Thessalonians*, 66.

⁴⁶ A renewal of persecution is widely posited. See R. Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 24-25; C. R. Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica: Situating 1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 183-98; Witherington, *Thessalonians*, 15, 29-36. It is telling, however, that no evidence for such persecution can be adduced, beyond 2 Thess 1:4-7 itself, which merely begs the question.

⁴⁷ E. J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), 259.

⁴⁸ Cf. Manson, “St Paul in Greece,” 445-46 and (following him) Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 39.

⁴⁹ So Witherington, *Thessalonians*, 15.

Alternatively, it is also possible that the missionary trio received such questions via a messenger or letter sent from Thessaloniki, although we have no firm evidence for this.⁵⁰ What we do know is that Timothy was sent to the church from Athens (1 Thess 3:1-5). It is eminently plausible, therefore, that having delivered the first letter to the Thessalonian congregation (2 Thessalonians), Timothy returned to Paul in Corinth with further questions relating to that letter, which the missionaries then addressed in 1 Thessalonians.

6. The abrupt change to the first person singular at 1 Thess 5:27 is unusual in the Pauline corpus in that the “I” is not clearly identified (cf. 1 Cor 16:21; Gal 6:11; Col 4:18; Phlm 19). In the light of the emphatic greeting at 2 Thess 3:17, however, it seems plausible to suggest that 1 Thess 5:27 was written in Paul’s own hand,⁵¹ and was intended as the “sign” of authenticity referred to in the earlier letter.⁵²

These considerations carry varying weight, and yet provide a strong cumulative case.

The two main arguments against the view that 2 Thessalonians was written first appeal to indications of sequence in the letters themselves. First, proponents of the traditional view point to 2 Thess 2:15, which seems to refer to a previous letter, most likely (it is said) 1 Thessalonians.⁵³ The mention of “our letter” (singular) in this verse could, however, refer to 2 Thessalonians itself.⁵⁴ Second, proponents of the traditional view note that 1 Thessalonians does not refer to any previous correspondence, which seems strange given its extended review of the relationship between the missionaries and the church in 1 Thessalonians 1–3.⁵⁵ The references to Timothy’s visit (1 Thess 3:1-5),

⁵⁰ A. J. Malherbe, “Did the Thessalonians Write to Paul?” in R. T. Fortuna and B. R. Gaventa, eds., *The Conversation Continues: Studies in Paul and John in Honor of J. Louis Martyn* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 246-57 considers it likely the Thessalonians wrote to Paul.

⁵¹ In the absence of the autograph of 1 Thessalonians, it is impossible to be certain that 1 Thess 5:27 was written in Paul’s own hand. Given, however, that this was Paul’s customary practice, it seems reasonable to assume that it was. cf. A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (trans. L. R. M. Strachan; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978 [orig. 1927]), 170-71 for an example of a first-century letter with a change in handwriting (but not a signature) as a mark of authenticity at the close.

⁵² Manson, “St Paul in Greece,” 442-43 argued that 2 Thess 3:17 itself indicates an initial letter. On its own, however, 2 Thess 3:17 may be simply explained as a response to the (real or imaginary) forged letter referred to at 2 Thess 2:2.

⁵³ Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*, 27-28 also points to 2 Thess 2:2 and 3:17 as references back to 1 Thessalonians, but these are unlikely (cf. Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 40-41; Green, *Thessalonians*, 68, n. 8).

⁵⁴ Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 41 suggests that the governing verb ἐδιδάχθητε (“you were taught”) may be taken either as an epistolary aorist, or as having the sense of a perfect passive, either of which allows for a reference to the present letter. Given, however, that the aorist tense-form by itself does not encode past time (eg. C. R. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative: Soundings in the Greek of the New Testament* [New York: Peter Lang, 2008], 88-91), it is more likely that ἐδιδάχθητε simply refers to the apostolic teaching considered as a whole, whether given by word of mouth or through (the present?) letter.

⁵⁵ Cf. esp. Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*, 29-30.

however, may well assume a letter sent with him, especially given the Greco-Roman and early Christian preference for a “living voice” over written communication.⁵⁶ At any rate, this argument can work both ways: when 2 Thessalonians discusses issues also addressed in 1 Thessalonians these refer not to a previous letter (as one would expect on this logic if 1 Thessalonians was already in existence), but to the initial oral instruction (cf. 2 Thess 2:5; 3:10).⁵⁷ In the end, therefore, it seems more likely that 2 Thessalonians was written first, even if the evidence does not allow certainty.

2.3. The Form and Purposes of the Letters

Whatever the order of their composition, the purposes of the Thessalonian letters come into sharp focus when their form and content are related to the concrete historical situations in which they were written. 1 Thess 5:27 makes it clear that these letters were intended to be read aloud to the congregation gathered in Thessaloniki and to meet the needs of the church there. It should be no surprise, then, that the form of the letters may be usefully compared with both Greco-Roman epistolary conventions and ancient rhetorical techniques.⁵⁸ The letters, indeed, integrate the conventions of ancient letter writing with those of ancient rhetoric to achieve their purposes, even as their distinctive Christian message breathes fresh life into both forms.⁵⁹ In what follows, then, we examine the form and purpose of each letter in turn.

(a) 2 Thessalonians

2 Thessalonians adopts the approach of deliberative rhetoric.⁶⁰ This form of rhetoric seeks to persuade an audience to embrace a particular course of action in the future. The letter thus opens with an epistolary prescript (1:1-2) and

⁵⁶ Galen, *De comp. med. sec. loc.* 6; Quintillian, *Inst.* 2.2.8; Pliny, *Ep.* 2.3; Seneca, *Ep.* 6.5; Papias in Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.4. Cf. L. Alexander, “The Living Voice: Scepticism towards the Written Word in Early Christian and in Graeco-Roman Texts,” in D. J. A. Clines, S. E. Fowl, and S. E. Porter, eds., *The Bible in Three Dimensions* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 221-47.

⁵⁷ Cf. Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 43-44.

⁵⁸ For an introduction to ancient epistolary conventions as they relate to the NT, see D. E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 158-225; H.-J. Klauck, *Ancient Letters and the New Testament: A Guide to Content and Exegesis* (Waco: Baylor, 2006). For an introduction to rhetorical criticism of the New Testament letters, see G. A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism, Studies in Religion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); C. J. Classen, *Rhetorical Criticism of the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

⁵⁹ For this perspective, see especially C. Wanamaker, “Epistolary Analysis: Is a Synthesis Possible?,” in Karl P. Donfried and Johannes Beutler, eds., *The Thessalonians Debate: Methodological Discord or Methodological Synthesis?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 255-86; R. F. Collins, “‘I Command That This Letter Be Read’: Writing as a Manner of Speaking,” in Donfried and Beutler, *The Thessalonians Debate*, 319.

⁶⁰ The following analysis of the rhetorical form of the letters relies primarily on the discussions in Aristotle, *Rhetorica* 1.4-10; 3.14-19 and Cicero, *De inventione rhetorica* 1.19; *Partitiones oratoriae* 27.

exordium (1:3-12), which introduces the main theme of the letter as the future advent of the Lord in judgment, and indicates steadfast faith as the appropriate response to present persecution. The letter then introduces the primary problem in the *partitio* (2:1-2), namely, the false claim that the “Day of the Lord” has already come, which is then answered in the *probatio* or proof (2:3-12), which emphasizes the future advent of the Lord. A transitional prayer of thanksgiving (the *transitus*: 2:13-17) then leads to a twofold *exhortatio* (or exhortation) to prayer (3:1-5) and to faithful work (3:6-15). The *peroratio* contains the final wish prayer (3:16), before an epistolary greeting and blessing close the letter (3:17-18).⁶¹

This form was particularly well suited to the historical situation outlined above. The apostolic trio wrote from Athens (or perhaps Corinth), painfully aware of the persecution being faced by the church in Thessaloniki (2 Thess 1:4, 6-7), and having heard some disturbing reports about the situation there (2 Thess 2:1-2; 3:11), but lacking concrete information about the church they had left in such haste. In this context, Paul and his companions wrote 2 Thessalonians with a strong focus on the future: they wrote to “strengthen” and “encourage” (2 Thess 2:17) the Thessalonians to continue to “stand firm” (2 Thess 2:15) in their new faith and to continue to “walk worthy of their calling” (2 Thess 1:11-12), even despite intense persecution (2 Thess 1:4-5), in the knowledge that the coming of the Lord would bring comfort to them, and righteous condemnation to their enemies (2 Thess 1:3-12; 2:13–3:5). For this reason, it was a matter of great concern that some in the church had begun to claim that “the Day of the Lord has come,” for in so doing they were undermining the hope provided by the gospel (2 Thess 2:2). No less serious was the continuation, and perhaps exacerbation, of a problem that had already surfaced while the missionaries were in Thessaloniki, namely, the refusal of some church members to work for their bread (2 Thess 3:10-11).

This analysis of the letter’s form (future-focused deliberative rhetoric) and historical context leads to the conclusion that the apostolic trio wrote with a three-fold purpose. They wrote to persuade the Thessalonians: first, to continue standing firm amidst persecution (2 Thess 2:15-17); second, to reject mistaken beliefs regarding the “Day of the Lord” (2 Thess 2:1-12); and third, to discipline idle members of the community—to get them back to work so they could provide for themselves rather than being dependent on others (2 Thess 3:6-15). For each of these future-focussed goals, the form of deliberative rhetoric was an apt choice.

⁶¹ Cf. similar outlines, each with its own distinctive emphases, in Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*, 61-88; F. W. Hughes, *Early Christian Rhetoric and 2 Thessalonians* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 68-73; Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 51; Witherington, *Thessalonians*, 31.

(b) 1 Thessalonians

1 Thessalonians, by contrast, is shaped by the conventions of epideictic or demonstrative rhetoric. This rhetorical form seeks, either through praise or blame, to encourage an appropriate response to the present situation.⁶² Thus, in keeping with the conventions of epideictic rhetoric, after a brief epistolary prescript (1:1), 1 Thessalonians begins with an *exordium* or prologue that introduces the major themes of the letter in terms of active faith and love, and steadfast hope (1:2-3). The authors then tell the story of the apostolic gospel in Thessaloniki in the extended *narratio* (1:4–3:10). This element was a standard feature of epideictic rhetoric, but not required in deliberative rhetoric, which may go some way to explaining its inclusion here rather than in 2 Thessalonians.⁶³ Here it serves to emphasize the missionaries' commitment to the Thessalonians (1 Thess 2:17–3:5), and their exemplary behavior while among them (1 Thess 1:5; 2:1-12). This leads to a *transitus* (3:9-13), a transitional prayer of thanksgiving, which further highlights the themes of faith and love, but tellingly implies that somehow hope is lacking (see further below). The *probatio* or proof (4:1–5:22) then presents the main concerns of the letter in calling the Thessalonians to faithful holy living (4:1-8), brotherly love (4:9-12), and especially hope—even in the face of opposition and death—because of the coming “Day of the Lord” (4:13–5:11). The *exhortatio* then exhorts the Thessalonians to continue in the distinctive way of Christ (5:12-22), the *peroratio* expresses a final wish prayer, which again underscores the hope of the gospel (5:23-24), and the final epistolary greetings and charges close out the letter (5:25-28).⁶⁴

This rhetorical form was well suited to the situation outlined above, in which the apostolic trio wrote to the church in Thessaloniki for a second time, now from Corinth, having finally received much-desired information about the health of the church, and celebrating the good report from Timothy (1 Thess 3:1-8). It seems that either the situation in Thessaloniki was not as serious as the missionaries had initially feared, or (perhaps more likely) that the initially intense persecution had died down, while Timothy's visit, and the letter he bore (2 Thessalonians), had gone at least some way towards addressing the internal problems being faced by the church. 1 Thessalonians is, accordingly, full of praise for the Thessalonians, and repeatedly affirms them in their current beliefs and behaviors (1:2-3, 6-10; 2:13-14, 19-20; 3:6-9; 4:1-2, 9-10; 5:11). The apostolic trio do not try to persuade the Thessalonians

⁶² Aristotle, *Rhet.* 3.12.5-6 suggests this rhetorical form was particularly well suited to written compositions.

⁶³ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 24.

⁶⁴ Cf. the similar outlines, each with its own distinctive emphases, offered by Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*, 71-78; F. W. Hughes, “The Rhetoric of 1 Thessalonians,” in Raymond F. Collins, ed., *The Thessalonian Correspondence* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990) 97, 109-16; Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 49; Karl P. Donfried and I. H. Marshall, *The Theology of the Shorter Pauline Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 4; S. Walton, “What Has Aristotle to Do with Paul? Rhetorical Criticism and 1 Thessalonians,” *TynB* 46 (1995): 234-38, 249-50; Witherington, *Thessalonians*, 21-29.

to change their beliefs or practices, but encourage them to continue in the way of faith, love, and hope as they wait for the Lord to come. At the same time, the letter starkly contrasts the Thessalonian believers with Satan, “the Jews,” and their own “fellow countrymen” (1 Thess 2:14-18), on whom it heaps blame as those who oppose the gospel and who are destined for wrath (1 Thess 2:16; cf. 1:10; 5:3, 9).

These observations on the rhetorical form of the letter and the concrete historical situation in which it was written together suggest that its primary purpose was to encourage the Thessalonian believers to continue in faith and love and, especially, to bolster their hope in the God of the gospel as they look forward to the coming of the Lord. Indeed, this concern to bolster the hope of the church is evident not only in the prominence given to eschatological teaching throughout the letter (1 Thess 1:10; 2:19-20; 3:13; 4:13-5:10; 5:23), but also in three elements of the rhetorical strategy employed by Paul and his companions.

First, the missionaries strategically deploy the triadic formula of faith, love, and hope at the beginning and end of 1 Thessalonians (1 Thess 1:3; 5:8), but tellingly omit “hope” when they record Timothy’s report about the church (1 Thess 3:6). The strong implication is that hope was lacking, and it was this that the missionaries longed to supply (1 Thess 3:10).⁶⁵ Second, the missionaries place emphasis throughout the first part of the letter on all that the Thessalonians “already know” (1 Thess 1:5; 2:1, 5, 9, 10, 11; 3:3-4 [2x]; 4:2, 9). This creates a clear contrast with their concern that the Thessalonians not remain ignorant about the fate of those who have died, or grieve as those who have “no hope” (1 Thess 4:13).⁶⁶ This contrast, then, strongly suggests that at least a key part of what was “lacking” in the Thessalonians’ faith was the hope of the resurrection of the dead at the return of the Lord (1 Thess 4:13-18; cf. 5:9-10).⁶⁷ Third, as will be demonstrated shortly, the missionaries repeatedly present the return of the Lord in strongly polemical (i.e. counter-imperial) terms. This in turn suggests that the foundational social reality that stood behind the Thessalonian’s lack of hope was the opposition to the gospel of the Roman-backed city authorities who had ejected the apostolic trio from the city, separated them from the church, and given tacit approval to the ongoing persecution. In all of this, the missionaries’ choice of epideictic or demonstrative rhetoric was well suited to the purpose of the letter: by it they sought to confirm the Thessalonians in their newfound faith in Christ, to encourage them to continue as a distinctive community living in the way of

⁶⁵ So Donfried, “Cults,” 347-48. Cf. the lack of “hope” at 2 Thess 1:3.

⁶⁶ Cf. Donfried, “Cults,” 348 who notes further that the discursive prominence of the short paragraph at 1 Thess 4:13-18 is enhanced by the return, at 1 Thess 5:1, to matters about which the Thessalonians “have no need to have anything written” to them.

⁶⁷ It was not that the missionaries had neglected to teach the Thessalonians about the hope of the gospel in general. On the contrary, it is clear that the eschatological coming of Christ formed a central part of the initial gospel proclamation (2 Thess 2:5; 1 Thess 1:9-10). Rather, the missionaries had not had the chance to draw out all of the implications of this hope, especially as it relates to those who die before the Lord’s return.

love, and especially to comfort them with the hope of the gospel even in the face of opposition and death.

2.4. The Christocentric Theological Worldview of the Letter

In order to achieve these purposes the apostolic trio provided the Thessalonians with a profoundly christocentric theological worldview. To be sure, the Thessalonian letters are no systematic theology textbook: the theological worldview they present is deeply embedded in the pastoral and polemical realities of the Thessalonian situation. Nevertheless, given that these are among our earliest extant letters from the apostle Paul, and therefore among the earliest Christian documents of any kind, it is striking that the theological worldview presented in them is so well-developed, including many of the major themes and emphases so characteristic of Paul's later letters. In what follows, we briefly outline the teaching of the Thessalonian letters on the gospel, the God of the gospel, the hope of the gospel, and gospel living.

(a) The Gospel

At the center of the theological worldview presented in these letters is “the gospel” (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον: 2 Thess 1:8; 2:14; 1 Thess 1:5; 2:2, 4, 8, 9; 3:2). Like so much of Paul's theological language, this terminology is rooted in the Scriptures of Israel, and speaks directly into the Greco-Roman world of his day.⁶⁸ In speaking of their message as “the gospel,” the apostolic trio simultaneously evoke the biblical tradition about the “good news” of the coming kingdom of YHWH, the God of Israel,⁶⁹ and challenge the “good news” claims of the early Roman empire to have brought salvation and peace to the known world.⁷⁰

The report in 1 Thess 1:9-10 indicates that the gospel Paul and his companions announced in Thessaloniki contained at least three key

⁶⁸ On the origins of the use of the term εὐαγγέλιον in antiquity, see G. Friedrich, “εὐαγγελίζομαι, εὐαγγέλιον, προεθαγγελίζομαι, εὐαγγελιστής,” in G. Kittell, ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:707-37; cf. D. Dormeyer and H. Frankemölle, “Evangelium als literarischer Gattung und als theologischer Begriff,” *ANRW* 2.25.2: 1543-1704; J. P. Dickson, “Gospel as News: εὐαγγελε- from Aristophanes to the Apostle Paul,” *NTS* 51 (2005): 212-30.

⁶⁹ At several points in the LXX, the cognate verbs εὐαγγελίζομαι and εὐαγγελίζω refer to the announcement of God's victory over his enemies, or to the proclamation of the coming kingdom of YHWH. See Ps 39:10 (Eng. 40:9); 67:12 (= Eng. 68:11); 95:2 (= Eng. 96:2); Isa 40:9; 52:7 (cf. Nah 2:1 = Eng. 1:15); 61:1.

⁷⁰ For example, the Calendar Decree of the Asian League from Priene (9 B.C.), in the Roman province of Asia, announces that “the birthday of the god (Augustus) was the beginning for the world of the glad tidings (εὐαγγέλια) that have come to men through him.” For the full text, see *OGIS* 2:458. A convenient translation is provided by V. Ehrenberg and A. H. M. Jones, eds., *Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Augustus and Tiberius* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1976) §98b. For further examples, see Deissmann, *Light*, 366-67; Ehrenberg and Jones, *Documents*, nos. 14, 38, 41, 98, 99.

components:⁷¹ the apostolic trio proclaimed the “living and true God” of Israel over against all idols (cf. Acts 14:15-17; 17:22-29); they declared that this God had acted decisively through the death and resurrection of his “Son,” the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Thess 1:8; 1 Thess 3:2; 5:10); and, especially, they announced the good news that because Jesus died “for us” (cf. 1 Thess 5:10), he is also the one through whom God will bring eschatological salvation from the “wrath to come” (cf. 1 Thess 5:9; Acts 17:30-31).⁷² This gospel, the apostolic trio affirm, had its origins in God (1 Thess 2:2, 8, 9; cf. 1 Thess 2:13) but was entrusted to Paul and his companions (1 Thess 2:4) so that they can speak of it as “our gospel” (2 Thess 2:14; 1 Thess 1:5). The significance of the gospel can be gauged from the fact that it was the means by which God, who had chosen the Thessalonians for himself, called them to salvation (2 Thess 2:14).

(b) The God of the Gospel: God our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit

The gospel that Paul and his companions proclaimed in Thessaloniki also opens up a vision of the one true God, who is at work in the lives of his people as Father, Son, and Spirit. The missionaries clearly embrace the fierce monotheism of the Hebrew Scriptures; they no less clearly include the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit within the identity of God.⁷³ It is remarkable, then, that these very earliest of Christian documents contain all the essential building blocks for what would later become the characteristic Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

1. God our Father. To begin with, the “God” (θεός, 53x) of whom the missionaries regularly speak is, without question, the one “living and true God” of Israel, the great Creator and ruler of all (1 Thess 1:9 with Jer 10:10). Consistent with Paul’s usage across the extant letters, however, θεός in the Thessalonian correspondence refers particularly to the “Father” (πατήρ: 2 Thess 1:1, 2; 2:16; 1 Thess 1:1, 3; 3:11, 13). This striking designation for God has its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures,⁷⁴ and more specifically in Jewish messianism,⁷⁵ but owes its major impetus to the teaching of Jesus, and to the early Christian recognition of him as the Son of God *par excellence*. The Thessalonians were no doubt familiar with the Greco-Roman habit of invoking Zeus, the gods of the mystery religions, and even the Roman

⁷¹ Most likely, the report at 1 Thess 1:9-10 reflects the apostolic proclamation to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 14:14-18; 17:22-31). The preaching in the synagogue, briefly summarized at Acts 17:2-3, most probably followed the contours of the paradigmatic synagogue sermon from Pisidian Antioch reported in Acts 13:16-41.

⁷² For similar conclusions see Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 9-10.

⁷³ For the language of “inclusion in the divine identity,” see especially R. J. Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998).

⁷⁴ Exod 4:22; Deut 14:1; 32:6; Isa 1:2-4; 63:16; 64:8; Jer 3:19, 22; 4:22; 31:9, 20; Hos 11:1.

⁷⁵ See God’s promise to David in 2 Sam 7:14; cf. Ps 2:7

emperor, as “father.”⁷⁶ For Paul and his companions, however, there is only one true God and Father, who is first and foremost the Father of his Son, Jesus (1 Thess 1:10a; cf. Rom 15:6; 2 Cor 1:3; Eph 1:3; Col 1:3), and the one who raised Jesus from the dead (1 Thess 1:10b).⁷⁷

Moreover, this God, the Father, loves his people (2 Thess 3:5; 1 Thess 1:4). He chose them for himself (2 Thess 2:13; 1 Thess 1:4) and destined them for salvation (1 Thess 5:9). He now calls them into his kingdom (1 Thess 2:12; cf. 2 Thess 1:5), and actively works in their lives (2 Thess 1:1, 4, 11; 1 Thess 1:1; 2:4, 12, 14; 4:1, 3, 7, 8; 5:18, 23). Ultimately, this God is also the righteous judge and defender of his people (2 Thess 1:5-6). He is displeased with those who do not know him and oppose his gospel (1 Thess 2:15; 2 Thess 1:8; cf. 1 Thess 4:5), and is already at work to harden his enemies for the judgment of the final day (2 Thess 1:6-8; 2:11-12), when he will vindicate his people by raising them from the dead (1 Thess 4:14).

2. God’s Son: the Lord Jesus Christ. The Thessalonian letters also present a striking picture of God’s Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The missionaries presuppose the full humanity and historical career of Jesus (1 Thess 1:10; 2:15; 4:14) and, in characteristic Pauline fashion, invest these with soteriological significance (1 Thess 5:10). At the same time, however, without any hint that the monotheism just noted is being diminished or abrogated, the Lord Jesus Christ is consistently included in the identity of the one true God.

Jesus’ identity as Son and Lord is particularly significant here. The first of these titles (“Son” = ὁ υἱός) is rooted in the biblical understanding of Israel (Exod 4:22-23; Hos 11:1; Ps 80:15), and then especially of Israel’s King, the Davidic Messiah, as the “Son of God” (2 Sam 7:13-14; Ps 2:7). In appropriating this tradition, Paul elsewhere teaches that Jesus, by virtue of his resurrection from the dead, has now been enthroned as the “Son of God in power” (Rom 1:3-4; cf. 1 Cor 15:23-28; Col 1:12-15). Here, similarly, the designation of Jesus as Son enables Paul and his companions to combine Davidic messianism with the Danielic vision of the “son of man coming on the clouds” (Dan 7:13-14; cf. 1 Thess 4:17), to declare that Jesus, the resurrected Son, is now in heaven with the Father, from where he will come to bring eschatological deliverance to his people (1 Thess 1:10). In this way, the title “Son of God” takes on new significance, and begins to express something of Jesus’ participation not only in the authoritative divine rule, but also in the very identity of God himself.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ In his widely published *Res Gestae* (35.1) Augustus presents the award of the title *pater patriae* (“Father of the Fatherland”) to him on 5 February 2 B.C. as the crowning moment of his career. For further evidence and discussion of Greco-Roman usage, see Schrenk, “πατήρ,” *TDNT* 5:945-1014.

⁷⁷ For this most characteristic Pauline description of God, see 1 Cor 6:14; 2 Cor 4:4; Gal 1:1; Rom 4:24; 6:4; 8:11 (2x); 10:9; Col 2:12; Eph 1:20; cf. 1 Pet 1:21.

⁷⁸ Cf. Fee, *Thessalonians*, 48-49.

The second title applied to Jesus, “Lord” (ὁ κύριος), is particularly prominent in the Thessalonian correspondence (46x). It further develops the apostolic presentation of Jesus as one who is included within the identity of God. Indeed, the application of this title to Jesus is particularly striking given the usage of the LXX, where the Greek κύριος regularly translates the divine name (יהוה). In this context, it is significant that throughout the letters, God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ share in a range of divine attributes and activities: the church exists “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1); grace and peace come from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thess 1:2, 12; 3:16; 1 Thess 5:23); divine glory and faithfulness belong both to God and the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thess 1:9-10; 2:14; 1 Thess 2:12, and 2 Thess 3:3; 1 Thess 5:24); God’s will finds expression “in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess 5:18); and, perhaps most striking of all, prayers are directed to both God the Father and the Lord Jesus (2 Thess 2:16-17; 3:3-5, 16; 1 Thess 3:11-13; 5:28). Similarly, the Thessalonian letters take a number of phrases which in the LXX regular apply to the LORD God, and effortlessly transpose them into references to the Lord Jesus. The missionary trio thus speak of the “name of the Lord” (2 Thess 1:12; 3:6), the “word of the Lord” (2 Thess 3:1; 1 Thess 1:8; 4:15), the “day of the Lord” (2 Thess 2:2; 1 Thess 5:2), and “the hope of our Lord” (1 Thess 1:3), in each case taking OT phrases pregnant with monotheistic significance and applying them to the Lord Jesus. Most significant of all, the Thessalonian letters also include a number of more extended, and seemingly deliberate, intertextual echoes, in which LXX texts that explicitly speak of the LORD God are now applied to the Lord Jesus. The most important of these relate to the “coming of the Lord” and are discussed below under “the hope of the gospel.”

Paul’s reasoning elsewhere reveals that this recognition of Jesus’ inclusion in the identity of God was grounded in his resurrection from the dead, and facilitated by some remarkable christocentric exegesis of key LXX passages, especially Ps 110:1 (cf. 1 Cor 15:25; Rom 8:34; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1), Deut 6:4 (cf. 1 Cor 8:4-6), Isa 45:22-23 (cf. Phil 2:9-11), and Isa 28:16/Joel 2:32 (LXX Joel 3:5; cf. Rom 10:9-13). It is difficult to be certain how much of this understanding Paul had in place by the time the missionary trio first wrote to the church in Thessaloniki. Given, however, the presuppositional way in which Paul and his companions speak of Jesus as the Lord, and predicate of him a range of prerogatives that, from an OT perspective, belong to “the LORD” alone, it is highly likely that this exalted Christology predates not only the letters, but also the mission in Thessaloniki itself.

3. The Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is much less prominent in the Thessalonian letters—πνεῦμα occurs 5x in unambiguous reference to the Holy Spirit—than either God the Father (θεός, 54x; πατήρ, 8x) or the Lord Jesus Christ (κύριος, 46x; Ἰησοῦς, 29x; Χριστός, 20x in various combinations).⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Cf. G. D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 40 who identifies six references to the Spirit: 1 Thess 1:5, 6; 4:8; 5:19; 2 Thess 2:2, 13.

Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit is closely associated with the work of the God the Father and the Lord Jesus, and he is clearly included with them in the identity of the one true God.

Indeed, already in these early letters, the contours of Paul's more fully developed doctrine of the Spirit may be clearly seen. The Thessalonians' conversion is attributed to God's work by his Spirit: the gospel came to them "not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess 1:5) so that they "received the word," despite persecution, "with the joy of the Holy Spirit" (1 Thess 1:6). Likewise, the ongoing work of God in the Thessalonian community is attributed to the Spirit: God chose them to be saved "through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth" (2 Thess 2:13); to disregard apostolic instruction regarding sexual immorality is to disregard "God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you" (1 Thess 4:8); and the church is commanded to "not quench the Spirit" (1 Thess 5:19).

The Thessalonian letters do not, of course, present a fully-developed Nicene doctrine of the Trinity. Nevertheless, the extent to which these two very brief and very early Christian letters present the one true and living God of Israel in proto-trinitarian terms should not be missed. The God who is at work through the gospel to save his people is a tri-une God. His actions as Father, Son, and Spirit provide the only hope for salvation in the face of sin, suffering, and death (see esp. 2 Thess 3:13-15; 1 Thess 1:2-10).

(c) The Hope of the Gospel: The Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ

The eschatology of the Thessalonian letters has excited as much interest—and created as much confusion—in the scholarly literature as it seems to have done among the Thessalonian believers.⁸⁰ Whatever else we might say about the striking eschatological vision presented in these letters, there is no doubt that its focal point is the personal coming and presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus, the apostolic trio announce, will "come" (ἔρχομαι: 2 Thess 1:10), "descend" from heaven (καταβαίνω: 1 Thess 4:16), and stage a "kingly arrival" (παρουσία: 2 Thess 2:1, 8; 1 Thess 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23).⁸¹ This will be his "revelation" (ἀποκάλυψις: 2 Thess 1:7), or "manifestation" (ἐπιφάνεια: 2 Thess 2:8) on the "day of the Lord" (ἡ ἡμέρα τοῦ κυρίου: 2

⁸⁰ See especially now P. G. R. de Villiers, "In the Presence of God: The Eschatology of 1 Thessalonians," in Jan G. van der Watt, ed., *Eschatology of the New Testament and Some Related Documents* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 2011), 302-32; de Villiers, "The Glorious Presence of the Lord: The Eschatology of 2 Thessalonians," in Watt, *Eschatology*, 333-61; D. Luckensmeyer, *The Eschatology of First Thessalonians* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009).

⁸¹ The Thessalonian correspondence provides the first extant evidence of Christian use of the term παρουσία for Jesus' future advent, which may imply that the term (but not necessarily the concept) was coined by Paul (cf. R. H. Gundry, "The Hellenization of Dominical Tradition and Christianization of Jewish tradition in the Eschatology of 1-2 Thessalonians," *NTS* 33 [1987]: 162-69). Outside 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Paul employs the term παρουσία in this way only at 1 Cor 15:23.

Thess 1:10; 2:2; 1 Thess 5:2, 4, 5, 8). The Thessalonians, therefore, may be described as those who “turned to God . . . to wait for his Son from heaven” (ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν: 1 Thess 1:9-10). In these terms the two short letters furnish no less than seventeen unambiguous references to Jesus’ final advent (cf. also 1 Thess 1:3; 2 Thess 2:14). The eschatological horizon of the Thessalonian letters is thus filled with the future or second coming of Jesus.⁸²

This emphasis on Jesus’ final advent has often been explained as a rush of “initial imminent eschatological fervor” later abandoned by the apostle Paul.⁸³ The evidence of the later letters, however, demonstrates that Paul never lost sight of Jesus’ final advent.⁸⁴ The prominence of Jesus’ future return in the Thessalonian letters, and the specific form it takes, is best explained, therefore, not by theories of radical development in Paul’s theology, but by the dynamic interaction between the missionaries’ Scripturally-rooted and Christ-centered theology, and the polemical and pastoral contexts of the letters. In what follows we explore this dynamic interaction via five observations regarding the apostolic teaching on Jesus’ final advent in the Thessalonian letters.

First, the apostolic expectation that the Lord Jesus will “come” is rooted in the “coming of God” tradition of Israel’s Scriptures.⁸⁵ This tradition simultaneously looks back to the great theophany at Sinai (Exod 19:7-20), and forward to the great and final “coming” of God to judge his enemies and vindicate his people (e.g. Ps 96:13; 98:9; Isa 40:1-11; 52:7-10; 66:12-16; Mic 1:3-4; Zech 14:1-9; Mal 3:1-5). It is closely associated with the prophetic expectation of the coming “day of the LORD” (יום יהוה),⁸⁶ and is further developed in the later Jewish literature.⁸⁷ The whole complex is, indeed,

⁸² The explicit language of a “second coming” as distinct from a “first coming” does not appear in Christian sources until Justin Martyr in the second century (*I Apol.* 52.3; *Dial.* 14.8; 32.3; 36.1; 40.4; 45.4; 49.2, 7; 52.1, 4; 53.1; 54.1; 69.7; 110.2, 5; 111.1; 121.3). The closest New Testament analogue is found at Heb 9:28: Christ “will appear a second time” (ἐκ δευτέρου). Nevertheless, the idea that Christ will come again is ubiquitous in the Pauline letters, as it is elsewhere in the NT.

⁸³ Most recently, P. Foster, “The Eschatology of the Thessalonian Correspondence: An Exercise in Pastoral Pedagogy and Constructive Theology,” *JSPL* 1.1 (2011): 57; cf. C. L. Mearns, “Early Eschatological Development in Paul: The Evidence of I and II Thessalonians,” *NTS* 27 (1981): 157.

⁸⁴ Clear references to the future advent of Jesus in the later Pauline letters include 1 Cor 1:7; 4:5; 11:26; 15:23; 16:22; Phil 3:20; Col 3:4; 1 Tim 6:14; 2 Tim 4:1, 8; Tit 2:13. References to “the day” of the Lord/Christ are probably also significant here. See Rom 2:16; 1 Cor 1:8; 5:5; 2 Cor 1:14; Phil 1:6, 10; 2:16; 2 Tim 4:8. cf. J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 313.

⁸⁵ On this theme, see esp. T. F. Glasson, “Theophany and Parousia,” *NTS* 34 (1988): 259-70; E. Adams, “The Coming of God Tradition and its Influence on New Testament Parousia Texts,” in C. Hempel and J. M. Lieu, eds., *Biblical Traditions in Transmission: Essays in Honour of Michael A. Knibb* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 1-19.

⁸⁶ See esp. Isa 13:6, 9; 58:13; Jer 46:10; Ezek 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14; Amos 5:18, 20; Obad 15; Zeph 1:7, 8, 14; Mal 4:5. The two traditions are directly related at Zech 14:1-5 and Mal 3:1-2; cf. also *T. Mos.* 10.3-10.

⁸⁷ Cf. 2 *Bar.* 48.39; *L.A.B.* 19.12-13; *I En.* 1.2-9; 25.3; 90.15-17; 91.7; 100.4; 102.1-3; 2 *En.* 32.1; *Jub.* 1.27-28; *Liv. Pro.* 13; *T. Abr.* 13.4; *T. Mos.* 10.3-10; *T. Levi* 8.11; *T. Jud.* 22.2; *Sir* 16:18-19.

nothing more than an outworking of the central covenant promise: “I will be your God and you will be my people, and I will dwell among you” (e.g. Exod 6:7; 29:45-46; Lev 26:12). In a world where the sovereign rule of the LORD God of Israel is contested and opposed, the prophets proclaim that God will again come down to establish his kingdom, judge his enemies, and vindicate his people.

The Thessalonian correspondence, however, takes this tradition in an unprecedented direction by declaring, without explanation or apology, that the “coming of the LORD” God is to be embodied in the future advent of the risen Lord Jesus. Thus, at 2 Thess 1:6-10, the apostolic trio employ OT texts that speak of the coming of the LORD God to announce the future advent of the Lord Jesus: he will be revealed from heaven “in blazing fire” (2 Thess 1:8; cf. Isa 66:15) with “his mighty angels” (2 Thess 1:7; cf. Zech 14:5); he will come “to be glorified in his saints” (2 Thess 1:10; cf. Ps 88:8 LXX [= Eng. 89:7]; Isa 49:3; so also 2 Thess 1:12 with Isa 66:5) and “marveled at among all who have believed” (2 Thess 1.10; cf. Ps 67.36 LXX [= Eng. 68:35]); he will “repay” those who “do not obey” the gospel (2 Thess 1:6, 8; cf. Isa 66:4, 6, 15), and these will suffer punishment “from the presence of the Lord (Jesus) and from the glory of his might” (2 Thess 1:9; cf. Isa 2:10, 19, 21). The great and final “day of the LORD” (2 Thess 1:10; 2:2; 1 Thess 5:2, 4, 5, 8) is therefore now centered on the “coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess 2:1).

The same phenomenon is evident in 1 Thessalonians. At 1 Thess 3:13 Zechariah’s vision of the “coming of the LORD my God and all the holy ones with him” (Zech 14:5) is seen to reach its fulfilment in the “coming of the Lord *Jesus* with all *his* holy ones.” Likewise, at 1 Thess 4:16-17, the promise that “the Lord himself will descend” (καταβήσεται) recalls the LORD’s “descent” on Mount Sinai (Exod 19:11, 18, 20; 34:5 LXX: καταβαίω),⁸⁸ when he came in “clouds” (1 Thess 4:17; Exod 19:9, 16), and with the sound of a “trumpet” (1 Thess 4:16; Exod 19:16, 19) to “meet” his people (1 Thess 4:17; Exod 19:17). Indeed, the apostolic proclamation here also evokes both the prophetic expectation that the LORD will “come down” again, just as he did at Sinai, to bring judgment and salvation (Mic 1:3; Isa 64:1-3) and the Danielic theophany in which the “Ancient of Days . . . comes” in judgment to vindicate the “son of man” who “comes” to him on the “clouds” (1 Thess 4:17; Dan 7:13-14, 18, 22, 27). In all of this, the apostolic trio never merely repeat the Scriptural data, but—as we will see—pass it through the filter of Jesus’ own eschatological teaching, and rework it around Jesus himself, to show how all the hopes of Israel will reach their climax when *he* comes again.

⁸⁸ The verb καταβαίω became the standard LXX translation of the Hebrew ירד in later allusions to the Sinai theophany (2 Sam 22:10; Ps 18:9; Neh 9:13; Ps 144:5; Mic 1:3). It is significant, therefore, that 1 Thess 4.16 is the only instance in the NT where the same verb is applied to the future “coming” of Christ. Since the word was not commonly used to speak of Christ’s future advent, the choice of it here most likely reflects a deliberate allusion to the “descent” of the Lord at Sinai.

Second, this remarkable application of the “coming of God” tradition to Jesus is not arbitrary, but is grounded in Jesus’ historic achievement as Israel’s Messiah. For Paul and his companions, Jesus’ future *παρουσία* as Lord is nothing more than the ultimate manifestation of his *messianic* victory, won at the resurrection.⁸⁹ There was in Second Temple Judaism no expectation that the Davidic Messiah, the son of God, should come *once* and then, after an interval, come *again* a second time. It was scarcely even imaginable that, having been crucified, the Messiah should come again “in glory” and “from heaven.”⁹⁰ The apostolic trio, however, emphasize that the one who is to come is none other than the historical person Jesus, who was killed in Judea, and rose again (1 Thess 2:15-19; cf. 2 Thess 1:7; 2:1, 8; 1 Thess 1:10; 3:13; 5:23). It was Jesus’ resurrection that made all the difference. Interpreted through the lens of Ps 110:1 and Dan 7:13-14, Jesus’ resurrection allowed him who was crucified to be recognized as the enthroned Messiah, the Lord seated at the LORD’s right hand, and thus the “Son” who will descend “from heaven” (1 Thess 1:10, ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν; cf. 2 Thess 1:7; 1 Thess 4:16, ἀπ’ οὐρανοῦ) in “glory” (2 Thess 1:9, τῆς δόξης τῆς ισχύος αὐτοῦ). Once this was recognized, all the prophesies of a glorious messianic advent could be applied to Jesus’ future coming. Accordingly, at 2 Thess 2:8 the apostolic trio proclaim that Jesus is the messianic “stump of Jesse” who at his future coming will destroy his enemies “with the breath of his mouth” (2 Thess 2:8; cf. Isa 11:4 with Ps 33:6 and Isa 30:27-28). Jesus’ resurrection thus provides the crucial basis for the apostolic conviction that the crucified Messiah will come again as Lord.

This connection between Jesus’ messianic identity and future *παρουσία* has, however, often been missed. Indeed, it is often asserted that the *only* Jewish background for early Christian “second coming” expectation is to be found in the “coming of God” and “day of the LORD” traditions.⁹¹ What this reading misses, however, is that the application of the “coming of God” tradition to Jesus is grounded in the prior recognition that, through his resurrection, Jesus has been exalted to heaven to reign as Messiah at the Father’s right hand (cf. 1 Cor 15:25; Rom 1:4; 8:34; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1 with Ps

⁸⁹ Cf. P. Ware, “The Coming of the Lord: Eschatology and 1 Thessalonians,” *ResQ* 22 (1979): 111-12; Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 87.

⁹⁰ Cf. J. A. T. Robinson, *Jesus and His Coming: The Emergence of a Doctrine* (2nd ed.; London: SCM, 1979), 142; B. Witherington III, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World: A Comparative Study of New Testament Eschatology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), 178.

⁹¹ T. F. Glasson, *The Second Advent: The Origin of the New Testament Doctrine* (3rd rev. ed.; London: Epworth, 1963), 176: “Jesus comes not because He is the Christ, but because He is Lord”; cf. Glasson, “Theophany and Parousia,” 267: “He comes with angels to judge not because he is Messiah but because he is Lord”; R. J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Waco: Word, 1983), 97: “much early Christian thinking about the parousia did not derive from applying OT messianic texts to Jesus but from the direct use of OT texts about the coming of God”; N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (London: SPCK, 2007), 142: “Paul and the other writers regularly refer to ‘the Day of the Lord,’ and now of course they mean it in the Christian sense: ‘the Lord’ here is Jesus himself. In this sense, and in this sense only, there is a solid Jewish background for the Christian doctrine of the ‘second coming’ of Jesus.”

110:1). Jesus' future coming as Lord is certain only because he has already been enthroned, by his resurrection, as Christ.

Third, the apostolic teaching regarding Jesus' final advent in the Thessalonian letters is not only rooted in the Scriptures and centered on Jesus' resurrection as Messiah, it is also clearly shaped by Jesus' own eschatological teaching. This is evident in both letters. In 2 Thessalonians, the coming of the "lawless one" to "deceive" through "signs and wonders" (2 Thess 2:9), while rooted in the Scriptural warning from Deut 13:1-3, has also been shaped by Jesus' teaching about the rise of "false messiahs and false prophets" who will come with "signs and wonders" before the end (Matt 24:24/Mark 13:22). In 1 Thessalonians, likewise, the declaration that the Lord will descend from heaven, call his people with the voice of an archangel and a trumpet, and gather them to himself on the clouds (1 Thess 4:16-17) most likely echoes not only Exodus 19 and Daniel 7, but also Jesus' application of the latter prophecy to himself in the saying about the "son of man" sending out his angels to gather the elect (Matt 24:30-31/Mark 13:26-27).⁹² Similarly, the sudden arrival of the "day of the Lord . . . like a thief in the night . . . as labor pains on a pregnant woman" (1 Thess 5:2-4) draws not only on Jeremiah 6,⁹³ but probably also on Jesus' parable about the "thief" (Luke 12:39-40/Matt 24:43-44; cf. 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 3:3; 16:15), his eschatological sayings about "birth pains" (Matt 24:8/Mark 13:8), and his warnings about "sudden . . . destruction" from which there is no escape (Luke 17:26-27/Matt 24:37-39; Luke 21:34-36). Finally, the exhortation to be "awake and sober" as people who "belong to the day" (1 Thess 5:4-8) echoes Jesus' teaching in two parables closely related to the parable of the thief, namely those of the watchmen (Luke 12:36-38/Matt 24:42/Mark 13:34-7) and the steward (Luke 12:41-48/Matt 24:45-51).⁹⁴ In all of these instances the apostolic trio do not simply quote the Jesus tradition verbatim, but interpret both Israel's Scriptures and the "word of the Lord" (1 Thess 4:15) through the lens of the gospel (1 Thess 4:14), in order to apply them to the pastoral situation in Thessaloniki.⁹⁵

⁹² C. M. Tuckett, "Synoptic Tradition in 1 Thessalonians?" in R. F. Collins, ed., *The Thessalonian Correspondence* (Leuven: Peeters, 1990), 177-80 questions this connection on the basis that Matt 24:30-31/Mark 13:26-27 do not mention resurrection, which is "the key point of Paul's argument". In response, S. Kim, "The Jesus Tradition in 1 Thess 4:13-5.11," *NTS* 48 (2002): 234-35 plausibly suggests that Paul most likely considered the gathering of the elect to presuppose the resurrection of the dead, especially given the prominence of resurrection in the Danielic tradition on which Jesus' saying depends (Dan 12:1-3; cf. also John 5:27-29 which similarly connects the son of man's "voice" with "resurrection"). Cf. Witherington, *Thessalonians*, 133-37 who suggests that Paul here "combines a saying of Jesus with his own reflections on Dan 7:13-14 and 12:2-3" (135).

⁹³ G. K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), 142 notes Jer 6:14: "saying 'peace, peace' when there is no peace" (cf. Jer 8:1; Ezek 13:10); Jer 6:24: "pain like that of a woman in labor;" 6:26: "suddenly the destroyer will come upon us;" and 6:4-5: "Let us attack at night."

⁹⁴ Cf. D. Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 308-12.

⁹⁵ The "word of the Lord" at 1 Thess 4:15 has been variously interpreted as: (1) A pre-Easter *verbum Jesu*; (2) a post-Easter prophetic revelation; (3) the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection. For a review of the literature, see M. W. Pahl, *Discerning the "Word of the Lord": The "Word of the Lord" in 1 Thessalonians 4:15* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2009), 6-34. All

Fourth, while the expectation of Christ's return in the Thessalonian letters is rooted in Israel's Scriptures, centered on the historic achievement of Messiah Jesus in his resurrection, and shaped by Jesus' own teaching, it is also cast in language designed to radically subvert Roman imperial claims.⁹⁶ At 1 Thess 1:9-10 Paul and his companions report how the Thessalonians had "turned to God . . . to wait for his Son from heaven." In doing so, they pit Jesus against Augustus, the deified "son" of the divine Julius Caesar,⁹⁷ who was in the first century widely believed, by virtue of his *apotheosis*, to be ruling the world from the heavens in the presence of his father.⁹⁸ The apostolic trio speak further of the "hope of salvation . . . through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 5:8-9; cf. 1 Thess 1:3) and so directly challenge the claims of the Roman emperor to provide "hope" as the "savior" of the known world.⁹⁹ Similarly, at 1 Thess 2:12 the missionaries speak of God calling the Thessalonians into his kingdom, and thus implicitly contrast the kingdom of God with the Roman empire. At 1 Thess 5:2-3, moreover, they evoke the Augustan slogan "peace and security" (εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια; Lat. *pax et securitas*) to show that the "day of the Lord" will bring sudden destruction on those who trust in the false peace and security provided by Rome.¹⁰⁰ Further,

things considered, it seems best to understand "the word of the Lord" here as a reference to Jesus' own teaching, interpreted in the light of both Scripture and the gospel message. For this understanding see Witherington, *Thessalonians*, 135.

⁹⁶ On this theme, see especially Harrison, "Imperial Gospel," 82-93; cf. N. T. Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," in Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000), 160-83.

⁹⁷ For Augustus as, "son of god" see: *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae (ILS)* 107, 113; *Corpus inscriptionum Latinarum (CIL)* XI 0367; *Supplementum epigraphicum Graecum (SEG)* XI 922-23; P.Ryl. 601; *Papiri Greci e Latini, Pubblicazioni della Società italiana (PSI)* 1150; P.Tebt. 382; P.Oslo 26; *Sammelbuch griechischen Urkunden aus Ägypten (SB)* 8824; 8897. Discussion in T. H. Kim, "The Anarthrous *υἱός θεοῦ* in Mark 15:39 and the Roman Imperial Cult," *Biblica* 79.2 (1998): 225-36.

⁹⁸ For the heavenly rule of Augustus, see: Seneca, *Apol.* 8; *Oct.* 477-91, 504-33; *Clem.* 1.10.3-1.11.4; Manilius, *Astron.* 1.7-10, 384-86, 800-803, 915-16, 925-26; 4.551-52, 932-35, and *Insc. lat. sel.* 137. For discussion see Harrison, "Imperial Gospel," 93-95. It is significant, however, that there is no suggestion in the Roman imperial propaganda that Augustus would ever "return" from the heavens to rule again on the earth.

⁹⁹ For the widespread application of "salvation" language to the Julio-Claudians from Augustus onwards, see W. Foerster and G. Fohrer, "σῶζω, σωτηρία, σωτήρ σωτήριος," *TDNT* 7:965-1024; J. Schneider and C. Brown, "Redemption," *NIDNTT* 3:205-21. For "hope", the sestertius minted by Claudius in A.D. 41 is particularly significant, in that it mentions "the hope of Augustus" (*Spes Augusti*). Discussion in M. E. Clark, "Images and Concepts of Hope in the Imperial Cult," in H. K. Richards, ed., *Society of Biblical Literature 1982 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1982), 39-43.

¹⁰⁰ The terms "peace" (Gk. εἰρήνη; Lat. *pax*) and "security" (Gk. ἀσφάλεια; Lat. *securitas*) were an important part of Roman imperial propaganda, and regularly appear (separately) on imperial coins (C. H. V. Sutherland and R. A. G. Carson, *The Roman Imperial Coinage* [rev. ed.; London: Spinks & Son, 1984] [= RIC], 1.26, 38, 252, 253, 476) 38, 252, 253, 476) and monuments, esp. the "Altar of Peace" (*Ara Pacis*) 9 B.C., as well as in literary descriptions of the Julio-Claudian age (Ovid, *Ex Ponto* 2.5.18: "peace of Augustus;" Philo, *Legat.* 147: Augustus is "the guardian of the peace;" Martial, *Epigrams* 7.80.1; Tacitus, *Ann.* 12.29: "Roman peace;" Augustus, *Res Gestae* 12.2: "Augustan peace"). Significantly, the terms appear together as a

at 2 Thess 2:8 they speak of the “appearance” (ἐπιφάνεια) of Christ at his “coming” (παρουσία) using terms that were often applied to Roman rulers in the first century.¹⁰¹

Most striking of all, however, is the passage at 1 Thess 4:13-17 where Paul and his companions present the future advent of Jesus in what amounts to nothing less than a frontal assault on Roman imperial propaganda. To begin with, they speak of Jesus as “the Lord” (ὁ κύριος), and thus not only include him within the identity of the one true God of Israel, but also set him in direct competition with the Roman *princeps* (later emperor) who, from the time of Augustus onwards, could be honored (at least in the Mediterranean East) as the supreme Lord (κύριος) of the known world.¹⁰² In addition, they speak of Jesus’ “arrival” (παρουσία), using a term which not only described the “coming” of God in some Jewish texts,¹⁰³ but more prominently referred in the Greco-Roman world to the arrival of an emperor or other high-ranking dignitary in a city.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, they describe the “meeting” (ἀπάντησις) of the Lord and his people using a term which—especially in association with παρουσία¹⁰⁵—could refer to the welcome extended by the citizens of a town to a visiting emperor or dignitary.¹⁰⁶

description of the blessing of Roman rule in a number of important inscriptions and texts: *SEG* XLVI 1565; *CIL* 14, 2898-2899; *ILS* 3787-3788; *OGIS* 613; Josephus, *A.J.* 14.247-248; Velleius Paterculus, *Hist.* 2.98.2; 2.103.3-5; Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.12; 3.53; 4.74; Plutarch, *Ant.* 40.4. See J. A. D. Weima, “‘Peace and Security’ (1 Thess 5:3), Prophetic Warning or Political Propaganda?” *NTS* 58.3 (2012): 331-59.

¹⁰¹ For παρουσία, see below. For ἐπιφάνεια: (1) *I.Eph.* II.251 has Julius Caesar as “god manifest” (θεὸν ἐπιφανῆ); (2) likewise Ernst Kalinka et al., eds., *Tituli Asiae Minoris* (Vienna: Hoelder, Pichler, Tempsky, 1901–) (= TAM), ii.760c and P.Oxy. 7 (1910), 1021.2 both have Claudius as “god manifest” (θεὸν ἐπιφανῆ). See S. R. F. Price, “Gods and Emperors: The Greek Language of the Roman Imperial Cult,” *JHS* 104 (1984): 86; G. H. R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (vol. 4; Sydney: Macquarie University Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, 1987), §52.

¹⁰² (1) Augustus: P.Oxy. 1143; (2) Tiberius and Livia: *OGIS* 606; Caligula: Aurelius Victor, *Caes.* 3; (3) Claudius: P.Oxy. 37; (4) Nero: P.Oxy. 246; *SIG*² 376, 814; Deissmann ostraca 22, 23, 24, 25, 36a, 37, 39, 76 (in P. M. Meyer and A. Deissmann, *Griechische texte aus Ägypten, herausgegeben und erklärt* [Berlin: Weidmann, 1916]); Acts 25.26. Cf. discussion in Deissmann, *Light*, 351-57.

¹⁰³ *T. Jud.* 22.2; Josephus, *A.J.* 3.80; 9.55; 2 *Bar.* 55:6; cf. 2 *Pet* 3:12 and 2 *En.* 32:1 which speaks of God’s “second coming” after his first visitation at creation (2 *En.* 58:1).

¹⁰⁴ For Hellenistic usage, see *BDAG* 2b, 780-81; cf. discussion in Deissmann, *Light*, 368-73. Examples of Roman imperial παρουσία language include: (1) Germanicus: *SB* I.3924, 34; (2) Nero: Latin adventus (= παρουσία) coins: *RIC* 95-97, 130-36, 371, 386-88, 429, 489-92, 564-65; cf. *SIG*³ 814; (3) Titus: Josephus, *B.J.* 7.100; (4) Hadrian: Latin adventus coins: *RIC* 224-27, 315-20, 374, 740-42, 793-94, 872-907; cf. *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 25 (1901): 275.

¹⁰⁵ The two terms (ἀπάντησις and παρουσία) appear together, for example, in Josephus’ description of the entry of Alexander III (“the Great”) to Jerusalem (*A.J.* 11.327-28).

¹⁰⁶ E.g. Cicero, *Att.* 8.16.2; 16.11.6; Josephus, *B.J.* 7.100. For this reading, see esp. E. Peterson, “Die Einholung des Kyrios,” *ZST* 7 (1930): 682-702 (cf. already Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Thessalonians* 8 [NPNF 13:356]). Peterson’s reading was challenged by J. Dupont, *SUN KRISTWI: L’union avec le Christ suivant saint Paul* (Bruges: Nauwelaerts, 1952), 66-73 who argued that Sinai theophany imagery provides a sufficient explanation for the language. For a comprehensive review of the ensuing debate, see Luckensmeyer, *The Eschatology of First*

In all of this, the apostolic trio directly challenge the realized eschatology of the Roman imperial gospel which served to legitimate the status quo.¹⁰⁷ Rome proclaimed Augustus (and his heirs) as “Lord,” “Savior,” and “son of god.” The *παρουσία* of the Roman ruler and his representatives was celebrated in the provinces with great pomp and ceremony, for it was he who had brought “salvation,” “peace,” “security,” and “hope” to the world.¹⁰⁸ Paul and his companions, by contrast, proclaim the present rule of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus, and announce the hope of his future *παρουσία*, when he will descend from heaven (1 Thess 4:16), execute wrath on the enemies of his people (2 Thess 1:5-10; 2 Thess 5:8; 1 Thess 1:10; 5:9), and bring lasting peace, salvation, and life in his presence to all who belong to him (1 Thess 2:19; 3:13; 4:17; 5:9-10, 23). In doing so, the apostolic trio not only redraw the monotheistic claims of Israel’s Scriptures around Jesus they also bring them to bear, with striking polemical force, in the Greco-Roman world. Jesus, rather than Caesar, is the one true Lord of all.¹⁰⁹

Fifth and finally, the significance of all of this for a fledgling Christian community subject to persecution should not be missed. It is, indeed, no accident that of Paul’s seven uses of *παρουσία* (“arrival,” “presence”) for the future advent of Jesus, six occur in these letters to the Thessalonian churches (2 Thess 2:1, 8; 1 Thess 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; cf. 1 Cor 15:23), where persecution by the Roman-sponsored city authorities had caused such trouble. The apostolic trio comfort the Thessalonians by declaring that Jesus’ eschatological *παρουσία* will have opposite results for his people and their enemies. The wicked will receive “eternal destruction” from the presence of the Lord (2 Thess 1:8-9; cf. Isa 2:10, 19, 21),¹¹⁰ but believers will enjoy that presence (2 Thess 1:10; 2:1; 1 Thess 4:17; cf. 1 Thess 2:19; 3:13; 4:17). The

Thessalonians, 260-68. In the end, there is no need to decide between Sinai/theophany imagery and Hellenistic *ἀπάντησις* patterns. Like so much of Paul’s language in the Thessalonian correspondence, his description of the final advent in 1 Thess 4:13-18 is best understood as rooted in the Scriptures of Israel, and speaking (polemically) into the Greco-Roman world of the first century.

¹⁰⁷ J. R. Harrison, “Paul, Eschatology and the Augustan Age of Grace,” *TynB* 50.1 (1999): 83-90; Harrison, “Imperial Gospel,” 88-95.

¹⁰⁸ A prime example is provided by the Priene inscription (*OGIS* 2.458) which celebrates the “glad tidings” (*εὐαγγέλια*) of Augustus, who by his “appearance” (*ἐπιφάνεια*) as “savior” (*σωτήρ*) has brought “peace” (*εἰρήνη*) and “hope” (*ἐλπίς*). See also further examples in Harrison, “Imperial Gospel,” 89-93.

¹⁰⁹ On the integration of Scripture, gospel, and counter-imperial polemics in Paul’s letters, see esp. Wright, “Gospel and Empire,” 182-83.

¹¹⁰ Most English translations render the *ἀπό* in 2 Thess 1:9 with the sense of separation. The wicked will suffer eternal destruction, “shut out from” (NIV), “separated from” (NRSV), “away from” (ESV) the presence of the Lord. Against this reading, however, it should be noted that in Isaiah 2, which manifestly provides the language here (Isa 2:10, 19, 21), the presence of the LORD is the source of the destruction coming on the wicked. For this reason, the preposition *ἀπό* at 2 Thess 1:9 should be rendered with a simple “from” to indicate that the “eternal destruction” of the wicked “comes from” the presence of the LORD. See C. L. Quarles, “The APO of 2 Thess 1:9 and the Nature of Eternal Punishment,” *WTJ* 59 (1997): 201-11.

wicked will suffer “wrath” (1 Thess 2:16),¹¹¹ but believers will be rescued from it (1 Thess 1:10; 5:9).

In particular, not even death will ultimately be able to separate the Lord’s people from his glorious presence. At 1 Thess 4:13-18 the apostolic trio explain that when the Lord Jesus descends, the dead will be raised so that all of Christ’s people together will be “caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air,” and thus be “always . . . with the Lord” (1 Thess 4:6-17).¹¹² The connection made here between the “coming of the Lord” and the final resurrection has deep roots in Israel’s Scriptures (cf. Isa 25:7-9; 26:19-21). Nevertheless, this passage is the first Christian text to connect the resurrection of God’s people with the final advent of the Lord *Jesus* (cf. 1 Cor 15:23; Phil 3:20-21). Indeed, the real innovation here is the apostolic presentation of Jesus’ resurrection as the prototype for the resurrection of his people: just as God raised Jesus from the dead so, through Jesus, God will also raise those who have died (1 Thess 4:14; cf. 1 Thess 5:10).¹¹³ The purpose of all of this, it must be stressed, is to comfort the Thessalonians in their grief at the loss of some of the members of their community. Far from missing out on the life of the age to come, “those who have fallen asleep” will be raised first (1 Thess 4:16).¹¹⁴ The Thessalonians, therefore, need not “grieve as others do who have no hope” (1 Thess 4:13). Instead they should “encourage one another” with the hope of the gospel (1 Thess 4:18; 5:11).

It should be clear, then, that there is no need to explain away the remarkable emphasis on Jesus final advent in these letters as a rush of “initial eschatological fervor” later abandoned by Paul. The prominence of Jesus’

¹¹¹ This fate will be shared by the “man of lawlessness” (2 Thess 2:8), whose identity is much debated. Given the evidence surveyed above, it is difficult to discount a reference to the Roman authority, through whom Paul sees Satan at work (2 Thess 2:9; cf. 1 Thess 2:18; 3:5), even if the Roman authority is only a prototype of the figure ultimately described here. For a helpful review of the options and insightful discussion, see esp. Green, *Thessalonians*, 300-325.

¹¹² The final destination of the Lord and his people is not made explicit in this text. Luckensmeyer, *The Eschatology of First Thessalonians*, 266 is correct to note that Paul’s concern was to provide a “solution to the concrete problem of grief” rather than a fully developed eschatology. Nevertheless, contra J. Plevnik, “1 Thessalonians 4.17: The Bringing in of the Lord or the Bringing in of the Faithful?” *Biblica* 80.4 (1999): 537-46, three considerations strongly suggest that Lord’s people are called to meet the Lord “in the air” in order to escort him back to the (re-)new(ed) earth: (1) Paul elsewhere emphasizes the terrestrial nature of the gospel hope when he speaks of the coming of Lord “from heaven” (1 Cor 15:20-28; Phil 3:20-21), the resurrection of “the body” (1 Cor 15:35-58), and the liberation of the entire created order (Rom 8:18-25); (2) the consistent biblical promise is that LORD will come to dwell with his people in a renewed heavens and earth (e.g. Exod 29:45-46; Lev 26:12; Isa 40:1-11; 52:1-10; 66:15; Ezek 43:1-5; 48:35; Zech 14:5; Rev 21:1-5); (3) the parallels with Hellenistic παρουσία and ἀπάντησις traditions suggest that an escort back to earth is envisaged (see above).

¹¹³ Most English translations take διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ (“through Jesus”) as modifying the substantive participle τοὺς κοιμηθέντας (“the ones who have fallen asleep”) and thus translate the phrase “God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him” (NIV 2011). The translation cited above (ESV) is, however, to be preferred. The phrase διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ (“through Jesus”) modifies the verb ἄξει (“will bring”) and thus makes Jesus the agent through whom God will bring the dead. Cf. Fee, *Thessalonians*, 172; contra Witherington, *Thessalonians*, 133.

¹¹⁴ Contrast 2 Esd 13:24 which states that those who are alive at the end are more blessed than those who die before it arrives.

final advent in 1 and 2 Thessalonians is best explained by the dynamic interaction between, on the one hand, the apostle's Scripturally-rooted and Christ-centered theology, shaped by the teaching of Jesus himself and, on the other hand, the Thessalonian situation, to which this teaching was applied with pastoral sensitivity and polemical daring. These factors together provide ample explanation for both the prominence of the *παρουσία* in the Thessalonian letters, and the striking terms in which it is expounded.¹¹⁵

2.5. The Gospel Call to Live the Christian Life: The City within a City

Finally, and more briefly, the Thessalonian letters show how the gospel of hope calls the Thessalonians to live as an alternative society, a city within a city, demonstrating to the onlooking world the good news of the kingdom of God. The members of the fledgling messianic community at Thessaloniki were evidently still coming to grips with the significance of their new faith and its implications for their lives (1 Thess 1:9-10; 4:1-12). The apostolic trio, therefore, root their eschatological teaching in the Scriptures of Israel and the words of Jesus in order to deconstruct the Greco-Roman value system so prevalent in Thessaloniki, and to replace it with one grounded in the Creator God of Israel, and centered on the gospel of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.¹¹⁶

Within this new framework, Paul and his companions provide a brief, but remarkably full, account of the distinctive Christian life in community. They call the Thessalonians to faithfulness in marriage (1 Thess 4:1-8) and to brotherly love (1 Thess 4:9-10), as they work with their hands so as to “walk properly before outsiders and not be dependent on anyone” (1 Thess 4:11-12). They show, further how the gospel enables them to grieve with hope (1 Thess 4:13; 5:8) as they walk in faith and love confident in their salvation (1 Thess 5:6-10).¹¹⁷ Finally, the apostolic trio provide an inspiring vision of Christian life and mission in community, as they exhort the Thessalonians to honor their leaders (1 Thess 5:12), to live at peace (1 Thess 5:13), to “admonish the idle” while also patiently “helping the weak” (1 Thess 5:14), to persist in “doing good . . . to one another and to everyone” (1 Thess 5:15) as they lead joy-filled, prayerful, thankful lives, overflowing with love by the power of the Spirit (1 Thess 5:16-22; cf. 3:11-13).¹¹⁸ Indeed, one of the primary purposes of the pronounced eschatological emphasis we have explored above is to call the Thessalonians to a holy and blameless life in anticipation of the blessing they will receive at the coming of the Lord (1 Thess 3:11-13; 5:23-24).

¹¹⁵ Cf. the similar assessment in R. F. Collins, “From *παρουσία* to *ἐπιφάνεια*: The Transformation of a Pauline Motif,” in C. W. Skinner and K. R. Iverson, eds., *Unity and Diversity in the Gospels and Paul: Essays in Honor of Frank J. Matera* (Early Christianity and Its Literature 7; Atlanta: SBL, 2012), 299.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Witherington, *Thessalonians*, 140.

¹¹⁷ Indeed, the familiar Pauline triad of faith, hope, and love appears in these letters for the first time (1 Thess 1:3; 5:8; cf. 1 Cor 13:13; Col 1:4-5) as a characteristic description of the Christian life.

¹¹⁸ On the Spirit here see Fee, *Empowering Presence*, 55-62.

The primary issue, however, on which the apostolic trio provide instruction is that of idleness. It appears that some in the Christian community in Thessaloniki were refusing to work for their bread (2 Thess 3:6-15; 1 Thess 4:11-12; 5:14). It has often been assumed that the source of this problem was a kind of over-realized eschatology: the belief that the “day of the Lord” was imminent, or had already arrived, had led some to abandon all work.¹¹⁹ It is significant, however, that the apostolic trio never explicitly connect their instruction on the issue of idleness with their eschatological teaching. It seems just as likely, therefore, that the problem of idleness at Thessaloniki was unrelated to the eschatological confusion in the church.¹²⁰ Indeed, a strong case can be made that the primary target of the apostolic instruction is the patronage system which dominated ancient Mediterranean cultures.¹²¹ In this system it was common for wealthy patrons to maintain a retinue of clients in return for political support.¹²² Where this system continued within the church it could easily breed factionalism and division. Where Thessalonian believers remained the clients of unbelieving patrons, they could easily find their faith in Christ compromised by their prior obligations. The apostolic trio therefore call the Thessalonians to imitate their own practice: just as they worked to support themselves, so they expect the church to build a community upon principles of self-sufficiency and equity (2 Thess 3:7-10). Rather than spending their time as “busybodies” (2 Thess 3:11), engaged in political intrigue promoting the interests of their patrons by effusive praise in the public arena, the apostolic trio urge the Christians to “aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands . . . so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one” (1 Thess 4:11-12). Indeed, Paul and his companions seek to imbue the Thessalonians with a vision of the church as a benefactor to the city, doing good in Jesus name, and overflowing in generosity towards those outside the community (2 Thess 3:13; 1 Thess 5:15).¹²³ The apostolic teaching on the idleness issue was, therefore, designed to call the Thessalonians out of the web of destructive reciprocal obligations involved in the Greco-Roman patron-client system, and to the kind of self-sufficiency that would allow the church to do good in the world.

¹¹⁹ For an extended presentation of this widely assumed position, see especially Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*, 159-78.

¹²⁰ Cf. Witherington, *Thessalonians*, 32-33

¹²¹ See especially Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City*, 41-60.

¹²² See, for example, Juvenal, *Satires* I.V which provides a satirical window on patron-client relationships in the Roman world.

¹²³ Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City*, 30-35, 58 demonstrates that the language of “doing good” at 2 Thess 3:13 (καλοποιούντες) and 1 Thess 5:15 (τὸ ἀγαθὸν διώκετε) would be readily recognized as “benefaction language” in the Greco-Roman world.

3. Conclusion

1 and 2 Thessalonians are among the earliest, and therefore most significant, documents for mapping the history and beliefs of the early church, especially Paul. They document the earliest Christian conviction that Jesus of Nazareth is the one in whom all the hopes and expectations of Israel reach their fulfilment. They record the way in which this very Jewish message first addressed the polytheistic cultures of the Greco-Roman world. They reveal much about the pastoral heart and collegial practice that shaped Paul's apostolic ministry. And they provide, for the first time, a brief but remarkably comprehensive vision of Christian life in community as a life of faith, hope, and love (1 Thess 1:3; 5:8).

More than all of this, however, as some of the oldest Christian texts in existence, these two letters preserve the heart of the Christian gospel in its earliest form. Together, 1 and 2 Thessalonians reveal that within twenty years of Jesus' crucifixion in Jerusalem, the apostolic trio could announce in distant Thessaloniki that Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, "died for us" (1 Thess 5:10), that he was "raised from the dead" so that "we might live together with him" (1 Thess 1:10; 5:10), that he is now ruling in heaven as the Son of the Father (1 Thess 1:10), and that he will come again in glory as Lord to judge the living and the dead (2 Thess 1:6-10; 1 Thess 4:13-17). These letters, moreover, present this gospel as the means by which the Creator, the one living and true God of Israel (1 Thess 1:9), is at work in his world, by his Holy Spirit (1 Thess 1:5-6; 4:8), to bring salvation (2 Thess 2:13; 1 Thess 5:8-9) to those from all the nations who trust in his Son (1 Thess 2:16). Stated in this way, it is abundantly clear that all of the major threads of Paul's theology, and of the orthodox Christian faith that later wove them together, are already laid out here in these very early letters to the church in Thessaloniki.

Recommended Reading

- Best, E. *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*. London: Adams & Charles Black, 1972.
- Bruce, F. F. *1 and 2 Thessalonians*. Waco: Word, 1982.
- Donfried, Karl P. "The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence." *New Testament Studies* 31.3 (1985): 336-56.
- Donfried, Karl P., and J. Beutler, eds. *The Thessalonians Debate: Methodological Discord or Methodological Synthesis?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.
- Fee, G. D. *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.
- Gundry, R. H. "The Hellenization of Dominical Tradition and Christianization of Jewish tradition in the Eschatology of 1-2 Thessalonians." *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987): 161-78.
- Harrison, J. R. *Paul and the Imperial Authorities at Thessalonica and Rome: A Study in the Conflict of Ideology*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2.273. Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 2011.
- Jewett, R. *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986.

- Judge, E. A. "The Decrees of Caesar at Thessalonica." *Reformed Theological Review* 30 (1971): 1-7.
- Kim, S., "The Jesus Tradition in 1 Thess 4:13–5:11." *New Testament Studies* 48 (2002): 225-42.
- Luckensmeyer, D. *The Eschatology of First Thessalonians*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009.
- Malherbe, A. J. *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Bible 32B. New York: Doubleday, 2000.
- Nicholl, C. R. *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica: Situating 1 and 2 Thessalonians*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- De Villiers, P. G. R. "In the Presence of God: The Eschatology of 1 Thessalonians." Pages 302-32 in *Eschatology of the New Testament and Some Related Documents*. Edited by Jan G. van der Watt. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2.315. Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 2011.
- De Villiers, P. G. R. "The Glorious Presence of the Lord: The Eschatology of 2 Thessalonians." Pages 333-61 in *Eschatology of the New Testament and Some Related Documents*. Edited by Jan G. van der Watt. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2.315. Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 2011.
- Wanamaker, C. A., *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.
- Witherington, B., III. *1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.