The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text

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THE EPISTLES TO THE
THESSALONIANS

A Commentary on the
Greek Text

by
CHARLES A. WANAMAKER
is her main stylistic criterion employed to isolate interpolated material. She contends that material containing antithetical parallelism of a noneschatological sort reflects the later stratum and repeatedly makes reference to this in her analysis of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. But this entails a very questionable assumption. Because one finds antithetical parallelism in later material, this hardly proves that it was not characteristic of Paul. Malherbe (Moral Exhortation, 136-138) has shown that antithetical presentations were typical of pænetic material and the setting out of ethical examples in Greco-Roman moral exhortation. Paul, versed in both the rhetorical tradition and the moral philosophy of the Greco-Roman world, almost certainly appropriated the antithetical style for himself from this source. To use its presence as a criterion for isolating later tradition, as Munro does, is to decide on a priori grounds that antithetical material is post-Pauline. Thus Munro’s argument turns out to be circular. In effect, she does not prove her thesis; she assumes that it is correct and then interprets 1 and 2 Thessalonians in light of it. For this reason her whole thesis is completely undermined at a methodological level.

From the above discussion it is clear that the only serious case for interpolation into the text of the Thessalonian correspondence turns out to be the one for 1 Thes. 2:13-16. But even this one falls short of carrying conviction when the arguments are considered carefully. Therefore, until more convincing arguments are offered, we may assume the essential literary integrity of both 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

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Although this runs contrary to prevailing scholarly opinion, I am convinced that one of the principal stumbling blocks to a solution regarding the relationship of 2 Thessalonians to 1 Thessalonians lies in the assumption of the priority of 1 Thessalonians. If it can be shown that a strong case exists for the priority of 2 Thessalonians, many of the problems associated with the relationship between the two letters can be resolved.

The question of the date and setting of 1 and 2 Thessalonians is complex and hinges on the wider problem of the general chronology of Paul’s life, which itself is a much debated issue, as the works of Jewett (Chronology) and Lüdemann (Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles) reveal. It is beyond the scope of this commentary to enter into this debate. Suffice it to say that at this stage I am not convinced by Lüdemann’s fairly radical reworking of Pauline chronology, and therefore I adopt a more traditional understanding of Pauline chronology, fully recognizing that it too has problems, especially where Paul’s letters and Acts appear to be at variance with one another.

Within the traditional framework most scholars, for example, Kümmel (Introduction, 257-260), Best (7-13), Koester (Introduction II, 112f.), and
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Marshall (20-23), maintain that 1 Thessalonians was written from Corinth a few months after the founding of the church at Thessalonica.\(^7\) 1 Thes. 3:1-6 indicates that Paul sent Timothy from Athens to Thessalonica (this visit of Paul to Athens is usually identified with the one mentioned in Acts 17:16-34), and most scholars believe that by the time Timothy returned to Paul, the apostle had moved on to Corinth, from which the letter was written shortly after Timothy’s arrival. Most scholars assume that 2 Thessalonians was written after 1 Thessalonians, and because of the similarity in themes it is usually held that the time between the two letters was short. 2 Thessalonians, it is thought, was intended to resolve an aberration in the Thessalonians’ eschatological understanding that had arisen in the wake of 1 Thessalonians and to call a halt to the idleness and unruly behavior of some of the church’s members. This latter trouble was already present at the time 1 Thessalonians was written and had persisted, perhaps becoming worse.

The traditional view has not gone unquestioned. There is no a priori reason why the canonical order should necessarily be the historical order. As Bruce (xli) notes, the canonical sequence of the Pauline letters was generally determined on the basis of length rather than any critical considerations about historical sequence. A number of scholars over the years, for example, West (“Order of 1 and 2 Thessalonians,” 66-74), Weiss (Earliest Christianity, 286-291), Manson (“St. Paul in Greece,” 428-447), Gregson (“Solution,” 76-80), Buck and Taylor (Saint Paul, 140-145), and Thurston (“Relationship,” 52-56) have challenged the priority of 1 Thessalonians.

Manson (438-446) has made the best case for the priority of 2 Thessalonians. He argues that 2 Thessalonians was written while Paul was in Athens and that Timothy delivered it to the Thessalonians at the time of the visit mentioned in 1 Thes. 3:1-6. 1 Thessalonians was then written from Corinth when Timothy returned to Paul after having delivered 2 Thessalonians. Following the lead of Weiss, Manson gives five principal reasons for the priority of 2 Thessalonians over 1 Thessalonians: (1) The persecution that seems to be happening in the present according to 2 Thes. 1:4-7 appears to be a thing of the past in 1 Thessalonians (cf. 1 Thes. 2:14). (2) The problem regarding disorder emerging in the church appears to be a new development in 2 Thes. 3:11-15, while it is treated as though it were a known problem in 1 Thes. 4:10-12. (3) The closing in 2 Thes. 3:17, in which mention is made that Paul’s signature is the mark of all his genuine letters, is pointless unless 2 Thessalonians is the first letter. (4) The remark in 1 Thes. 5:1 that the readers have no need for instruction regarding the time of the end seems particularly

\(^7\) Jewett (Thessalonian Correspondence, 49-60) holds a similar view though he comes at the problem from a different perspective than the traditional one. He, unlike those mentioned in the text, accepts John Knox’s critical principle that no information from Acts can be used in reckoning chronology if it is in conflict with data from Paul’s letters.
appropriate if they had already read 2 Thes. 2:1-12. (5) The expression "now
concerning," which occurs in 1 Thes. 4:9, 13 and 5:1, appears to be a common
formula to introduce answers to questions raised earlier by the intended
recipients (cf. 1 Cor. 7:1). In each case Manson shows that the subject
introduced in 1 Thessalonians arises from a question raised by the Thessalonians
regarding an earlier discussion of the subject in 2 Thessalonians. Thus
1 Thes. 4:9-13, which deals with orderly behavior, arises from the earlier
discussion of the issue in 2 Thes. 3:6-15; the question concerning the fate of
those who die before the parousia, which lies behind 1 Thes. 4:13, appears to
be a response to anxieties created by 2 Thes. 2:1-12, which deferred the
parousia to an indefinite future; and the question apparently addressed in
1 Thes. 5:1 regarding the time of the parousia seems also to arise from 2 Thes.
2:1-12, where Paul indicates that the day of the Lord is still in the future (cf.
Thurston, "Relationship," 54-55).
therefore, no point in trying to argue for a reversal of the canonical sequence.
On the other hand, if the case for the priority of 1 Thessalonians cannot be
made in a convincing fashion, then the case for the precedence of 2 Thes­salonians must be taken seriously.

When we turn to the arguments of those favoring the priority of 1 Thessalonians it is striking how little evidence they have actually adduced
for their position. For the most part scholars like Kümmel (Introduction, 264),
Best (45), and Marshall (25f.) have been content with offering a refutation of
the arguments in favor of the reverse sequence of the letters while providing
several cursory reasons for their own position. The only scholar of whom I
am aware who has seriously argued for the priority of 1 Thessalonians is
Jewett (Thessalonian Correspondence, 26-30), who incorporates most of the
evidence presented by others who defend the canonical sequence.

Jewett develops three lines of evidence. First, he looks at the three
possible references in 2 Thessalonians to a previous letter of Paul (2:2, 15;
and 3:17), pointing out that no such references exist in 1 Thessalonians
(Thessalonian Correspondence, 27f.). In the case of 2 Thes. 2:2 he argues that
Paul’s reference to a letter “as from us” purporting to prove that the day of
the Lord had come can only be explained in one of two ways: either the letter
alluded to was a forgery or it was an authentic Pauline letter prior to 2 Thes­salonians that was being misused by some people in the community. Jewett
rejects the possibility of a forgery because we have no other evidence for its
existence. This leaves him with the conclusion that it must refer to an authentic
Pauline letter, with 1 Thessalonians as our only available candidate.

But we need not assume that a forgery actually existed. Paul may have
merely thought that one did or simply considered the possibility. Alterna­tively, he may have included the reference for rhetorical affect, that is, he may
have simply been listing possible sources of confusion without seriously
believing that a forged letter actually did lead to the problem at Thessalonica
regarding the parousia (cf. Best, 279). Furthermore, 1 Thes. 4:13–5:11 pre­cludes the possibility of the misinterpretation suggested in 2 Thes. 2:2 by
identifying the day of the Lord with the parousia of Christ, the resurrection of
dead believers, and the ascension of both living and dead Christians. Best
(279), who accepts the priority of 1 Thessalonians, is undoubtedly correct
when he maintains that if Paul had thought that 1 Thessalonians was being
misunderstood he would have responded by redefining his views as he does,
for example, in 1 Cor. 5:9-13. For this reason it is almost certain that 2 Thes.
2:2 does not refer to 1 Thessalonians.

In 2 Thes. 2:15 Paul writes, “Hold fast to the traditions that you were
taught (ἐπαγγέλλω), whether through word of mouth or through our letter.”
Jewett believes that this is a clear reference to 1 Thessalonians since the aorist
passive verb ἐπαγγέλλω implies that the letter referred to was in existence
when 2 Thessalonians was written, and the only extant candidate is 1 Thes-
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This is the single strongest piece of evidence in favor of the priority of 1 Thessalonians, but it is far more ambiguous than Jewett acknowledges.

First, even if ἓδοκέοιτε is to be taken with “through our letter,” which is not altogether certain, it does not necessarily prove the priority of 1 Thessalonians. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that Paul had written another letter to the Thessalonians prior to either our 2 Thessalonians or our 1 Thessalonians.

Second, ἓδοκέοιτε (“you were taught”) is amenable to at least two other interpretations than the one given by Jewett. (a) The verb may function as an epistolary aorist in relation to the expression “through our letter” since the teaching in question precedes the verb in the letter. (b) BAGD (s.v., 2c) suggests that the verb may have the sense of a perfect passive. If this is correct then it would represent a natural way of including both the apostle’s original oral teaching and the immediately antecedent instruction within the letter.

Third, the singular form of “letter” (εὐαγγέλιον) would appear to exclude the possibility that another letter already existed, since Paul undoubtedly intended his readers to hold fast to his teaching regarding the parousia in the immediately preceding verses (cf. Lindemann, “Abfassungszweck,” 37). If the Thessalonians possessed a previous letter from Paul we would expect the plural “letters” in order to include the teaching in both letters.

Fourth, the reference to “our letter” is certainly more vague than we might have expected had Paul intended a reference to 1 Thessalonians. On every other occasion when Paul alludes to an earlier letter he does so in a way that identifies the letter either by its content or its result (cf. 1 Cor. 5:9; 2 Cor. 2:3f.; 7:8). This point takes on added weight if we interpret 2 Thes. 2:2 as implying that Paul considered the possibility that a forged letter existed. The vague allusion in 2:15 to a previous letter could actually be used to support the authority of a forged document.

According to Jewett, the third reference to a previous letter is found in 2 Thes. 3:17, where Paul indicates that his own handwriting authenticates all of his letters. This, Jewett contends, presupposes that the Thessalonians had access to at least one other letter from Paul. A different interpretation of 3:17 is preferable. In light of 2:2, which implies that a forgery may have existed, it is more probable that Paul wished to give his readers a way of testing any letter that might claim to be from him. In any case, if the readers already had a letter of Paul, it is strange that there is no direct mention of it in 3:17, since clearly the verse would have the intention of authenticating a previous letter, if such a letter existed.

The second line of evidence adduced by Jewett (Thessalonian Correspondence, 28f.) to prove the priority of 1 Thessalonians concerns the “rhetorical implications of the references” to persecution. Jewett begins by denying that we can determine anything about the chronology of the letters from the way in which persecution is dealt with in the two letters. Instead he argues
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that the rhetoric of the letters indicates that the canonical sequence is also the correct historical sequence. This conclusion is based on the presence in 1 Thessalonians of “an elaborate explanation of the apocalyptic significance of persecution,” which suggests that the readers had not yet accepted such an understanding of persecution. On the other hand, 2 Thessalonians merely serves to strengthen the readers’ already existing “sectarian, apocalyptic outlook that understands persecution as a sign of belonging to the new age rather than the old.” This implies that they had accepted the doctrine by the time 2 Thessalonians was written. Rhetorical logic requires that the elaboration of the doctrine of eschatological persecution precedes its acceptance, and therefore 1 Thessalonians is prior to 2 Thessalonians.

This second argument for the priority of 1 Thessalonians is unconvincing for several reasons. First, the objective evidence of the text, which Jewett dismisses, weighs heavily against his position. When 2 Thessalonians was written the community was undergoing persecution, as the present tense verbs of 2 Thes. 1:4-6 show, but there is no indication either that this was a new outbreak of persecution or an old problem that had reemerged. By way of contrast, when 1 Thessalonians was written the persecutions were a thing of the past, as the aorist tense of 1 Thes. 2:14 demonstrates. Best (42), however, contends that 1 Thes. 3:3 implies that the persecution of the Thessalonians was continuing at the time 1 Thessalonians was written and that therefore nothing can be made of the present tenses in 2 Thes. 1:4-6. This represents a serious misunderstanding of 1 Thes. 3:3. The verse refers to what Paul thought was happening at Thessalonica when he sent Timothy back there, not to what he believed was happening at the time 1 Thessalonians was written. This has important implications. Like most of those who maintain the priority of 2 Thessalonians, I would argue that 2 Thessalonians was delivered by Timothy during the visit mentioned in 1 Thes. 3:1-5. This means that a clear correlation can be made between the contents of 2 Thessalonians regarding the presence of persecution and the situation that Paul thought prevailed at Thessalonica when Timothy was sent there (see the discussion of this below, pp. 57-60).

Jewett’s second line of evidence for the canonical sequence is doubtful for another reason. 1 Thes. 3:3f. demonstrates that Paul had taught the Thessalonians the “apocalyptic significance” of persecutions at the time of their conversion. For this reason it would have been perfectly natural for Paul to assume that his converts understood the eschatological significance of persecution when 2 Thessalonians was written, if it was written prior to 1 Thessalonians. Whether they did or not is another matter, of course. From what has been said above it is fair to say that the “rhetorical implications of the references” to persecution put forward by Jewett do not necessitate the priority of 1 Thessalonians. In fact they may favor 2 Thessalonians as the first letter on the grounds that it was only after Timothy’s visit (when, according
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to my view, 2 Thessalonians was delivered) that Paul realized that the Thessalonians had not fully understood the implications of their persecution.

Jewett’s third argument for the priority of 1 Thessalonians, like his second, is based on a consideration of rhetoric. He maintains (Thessalonian Correspondence, 29f.) that in epistolary rhetoric it is normal to refer back to the preceding stages of a relationship and that allusions to previous contact should customarily be understood as referring to the last contact between the parties unless there is evidence to the contrary. This is because it is considered “unnatural in an epistolary situation to refer to distant phases of a relationship without taking into account the intervening phases that alter the relationship or add critical new information.” On the basis of his examination of the Thessalonian correspondence, Jewett claims that a striking fact emerges. All references to Paul’s direct contact with the community in 1 Thessalonians concern the founding mission (cf. 1 Thes. 1:5, 9f.; 2:17) and especially Paul’s conduct at that time (2:1-12). 1 Thes. 3:1-10 also mentions Paul’s most recent contact, which was by means of his personal representative Timothy, whom he had sent to learn how the church was faring and whose return precipitated the writing of 1 Thessalonians. What is missing, Jewett argues, especially in 1 Thes. 2:1-12, where we might expect it, is a reference to an intervening letter, if such a letter existed. On the other hand, the only allusion in 2 Thessalonians to the founding mission, according to Jewett, occurs in 2:15, a passage that in his view mentions a previous letter. This is, he argues, exactly what we should expect from the point of view of epistolary rhetoric, since the initial stage of the relationship is referred to along with an allusion to the most recent stage, namely, Paul’s first letter to the community.

But on careful inspection Jewett’s third argument is vulnerable at several key points. To begin with, as was shown earlier, 2 Thes. 2:15 is equivocal evidence for the existence of another letter. Furthermore, 2:15 is not the only mention of the founding mission in the letter. In 3:6-10 Paul invokes his and his coworkers’ behavior at the time of their founding mission as an example of how the Christians at Thessalonica should conduct themselves. Paul concludes the same passage by reminding his readers of the command that he gave when he was with them that no one should eat who was unwilling to work. The apostle does this, however, without any reference to 1 Thessalonians, which deals with the same general theme in 2:1-12 and more specifically in 4:10-12 where a command is given that is strikingly similar to the one mentioned in 2 Thes. 3:10. On the basis of Jewett’s own premises this constitutes a powerful argument for the priority of 2 Thessalonians, because we would expect Paul to mention the intervening correspondence precisely at this point—if 1 Thessalonians existed at the time. That he does not mention it indicates that it did not exist, according to Jewett’s understanding of what we should expect in epistolary references to the relationship between writer and addressees. In fact Manson (“St. Paul in Greece,” 442) may be correct in
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maintaining that 1 Thes. 4:10-12 is an allusion to the injunction in 2 Thes. 3:12.

It is true, as Jewett says, that there is no direct reference to 2 Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians. But two factors suggest that 1 Thes. 3:1-5 presupposes the existence of 2 Thessalonians. First, Funk ("Apostolic Parousia") has demonstrated that Paul’s letters were a form of apostolic parousia, that is, that Paul’s authority was communicated over distance and time by means of his letters. White (Light, 216) points out that it was a common practice in Paul’s day to send a letter with a trusted representative who was authorized to interpret and elaborate the contents of the letter being delivered. For this reason it is not altogether surprising that Paul should mention sending Timothy, rather than the letter that Timothy carried with him, if Timothy did take a letter with him.

Second, careful examination of 2 Thessalonians corresponds remarkably with Paul’s statement in 1 Thes. 3:1-5 regarding Timothy’s mission to Thessalonica on Paul’s behalf. To begin with, 2 Thes. 1:4-6 indicates that the readers were undergoing oppression from people outside the community at the time the letter was written, but 1 Thes. 2:14 makes it clear that by the time 1 Thessalonians was written the persecution was a thing of the past. Since nothing in 2 Thessalonians remotely suggests that the persecution represented a renewed outbreak after the period of tranquility implied by 1 Thes. 2:14 or an intensification after the writing of 1 Thessalonians, as Marshall (26) proposes, 2 Thessalonians would seem to reflect the earlier situation that prevailed at the time Timothy returned to Thessalonica (cf. Weiss, Earliest Christianity, 289f.; Manson, “St. Paul in Greece,” 438-441).

Similarly, Paul’s concern in 2 Thessalonians for strengthening the faith of his converts and encouraging them reflects one of the reasons for Timothy’s return visit. In fact Paul employs the same terms, ἀρνέσθαι and παρακαλέσθαι, in his wish-prayer for his readers in 2 Thes. 2:17 as he employs in 1 Thes. 3:2 to describe his intention in sending Timothy back. Since the wish-prayer functions as a summary of the main theme of 2 Thessalonians, its correspondence with the purpose of Timothy’s visit is particularly striking.

Furthermore, von Dobschütz (264) has noted that the infinitive σκέπασθαι ("to be shaken") in 2 Thes. 2:2 accords with σκέπασθαι ("to be shaken") in 1 Thes. 3:3. 2 Thes. 2:1-2 indicates that one of Paul’s primary purposes in writing was to keep his converts from being disturbed by claims that the day of the Lord had come. Whatever the problem was, it arose in the context of their persecution (see Best, 277; Marshall, 186). 1 Thes. 3:3 explicitly states that Timothy was sent to prevent the Thessalonians from being disturbed by their experience of persecution. Thus both 2 Thessalonians and Timothy’s visit had the same purpose, which suggests rather strongly that Timothy took 2 Thessalonians with him when he returned to Thessalonica.

From this examination of Jewett’s arguments we can draw two signifi-
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Thematic and Epistolary Approaches to 1 and 2 Thessalonians

In most commentaries on the Thessalonian correspondence the writers attempt to analyze the letters thematically in order to set out their structures in outline form. This approach has an inherent weakness. It tends to fragment the letters into sequences of themes without sufficient attention to the unity of their argumentation and the rationale for their overall structure. It also ignores the literary reasons for the inclusion of individual themes and their relationship to one another. Jewett (Thessalonian Correspondence, 68) further criticizes the thematic approach for lending itself to uncontrolled “theological biases” on the part of commentators who allow favorite doctrines to dominate their thematic analysis.

A different approach from thematic analysis has been to examine Paul’s letters in terms of their epistolary forms (see, e.g., White, Form and Function; Doty, Letters; O’Brien, Introductory Thanksgivings). Scholars practicing epistolary analysis have isolated components of Paul’s letters such as prescripts, introductory thanksgivings, main bodies, apostolic parousia segments,