

Sunday

BACK TO SCHOOL

Bible-study: 2019/11/03 (St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, McMinnville) – 2 Thessalonians: Wk. 1 – 1:1-4,11-12

2 Thessalonians will be the final epistle we look at this year before taking a break: The Lectionary allocates three Sundays to it. Then, on the 24th [of November, 2019], there is a random passage from *Colossians*; and, in Advent, for the Christmas season, and until Lent, really, we're to be "bombarded" with a smattering of all kinds of things from many directions. For which a sensible strategy is needed – one I've not yet devised: *yes*, one could just "go with the flow." But my reluctance to "jump around" from one document suddenly to the next, week after week, where there aren't any obvious teaching-"blocs," is that to do so would be like looking at single pieces of a jigsaw, by themselves, and not having the whole puzzle. – I question the worthwhile-ness of doing such here.

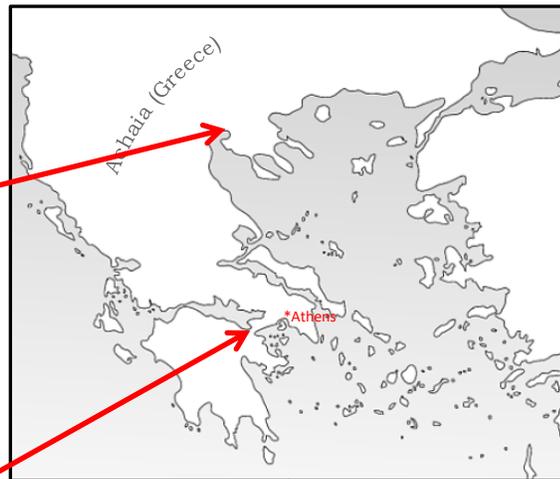
From Easter onwards, however, there is *real* potential to "dig deep:" six weeks of *1 Peter*, *fourteen*(!) of *Romans*, and so on. Alternatively, from Trinity Sunday (in 2020), we could explore earliest history, in one long arc, more-or-less continuously, from *Genesis* and *Exodus*. And even take in some *Deuteronomy*, *Joshua* and *Judges*. As ever there would be some "leaps" in the narrative, but we could easily compensate for some of those. So, let me know your thoughts over the next couple of months as to how you think we should proceed in the New Year.

[Ask for a volunteer to read the passage.]

So, I mentioned this last week: *2 Timothy* may be the *very* last thing Paul had a hand in before he was executed. *However*, his letters to the church in Thessaloniki – the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia (now north-eastern Greece), belong to the earliest batch of his work. That is if he wrote them, of course.

1 Thessalonians, which is mostly allocated to Year "A" (by our "lectioneers"), is 'universally accepted as indisputably Pauline'.¹

It was probably written from Corinth,² and not long after the Apostle had been



¹ See: Anderson, Garwood (2016), *Paul's New Perspective: Charting a Soteriological Journey*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 7, n.11.

² Picirilli, Robert E. (1990), 'Commentary on the Books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians', in Picirilli, Robert E.; Outlaw, W. Stanley & Ellis, Daryl (Eds.), *Randall House Bible Commentary: 1 Thessalonians through Philemon*, Nashville, T. N.: Randall House Publications, pp. 3-156, 5.

in the other city for ‘an evangelistic campaign’,³ establishing its church; which, being in its ‘very earliest stage’, was left ‘in the most rudimentary condition.’⁴ (“When, precisely?” You ask. Well, as Charles Wannamaker explains: ‘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.’⁵) And most approach the letters under the belief that they were written in ‘close succession’.⁶

(I should add that there are “voices” who believe the pair, chronologically speaking, are presented in the Bible *backwards*: T. W. Manson, for example, argues that *2 Thessalonians* was written *first*, from Athens; and that it finds itself placed later only because the epistles in the New Testament were, generally speaking, assembled in *size order*, largest to smallest.⁷ *But*, his position is paid little attention, for, if nothing else, there are a good number of references in *2 Thessalonians* to a previous letter, (which preceded it): in chapter two at verses two and fifteen, and in chapter three, verse seventeen.)

Some scholars do have doubts, though, about the authorship of *2 Thessalonians*, one-third of the contents of which, despite being a relatively short letter – approximately a thousand words in the NRSV translation, overlap with *1 Thessalonians*, and it strikes a few commentators as odd that the Apostle would be this repetitive.⁸

Secondly, some perceive what appears like a contradiction in the eschatology between the two.⁹ (Remember, “eschatology” is the big word used by theologians that refers to “The Last Things,” or “The End.”) We would discuss this issue in more length next week when it actually occurs in our readings, but there won’t be Sunday School – I’m to be in attendance at a conference in Birmingham, Alabama, all week. So, briefly, the point of tension concerns these words in *1 Thessalonians*:

[T]he day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman...’[\[5:1-3\]](#)

Yet, in *2 Thessalonians* we find this:

‘As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to

³ Morris, Leon (2009), *1 and 2 Thessalonians (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Volume 13)*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 23.

⁴ Andrews, H. T. (1920), ‘1 and II Thessalonians’, in Peake, Arthur S.; Grieve, A. J. & Stryker, Melancthon Woolsey (Eds.), *A Commentary on the Bible*, New York, N. Y.: Thomas Nelson & Sons, pp. 876-880, 876.

⁵ Wannamaker, Charles A. (1990), *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; Carlisle, U. K.: The Paternoster Press, 37.

⁶ Barclay, John M. G. (2016), *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 202.

⁷ See: ‘St. Paul in Greece: The Letters to the Thessalonians’ (1952), *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Volume 35, pp. 428-447.

⁸ See: Powell, Mark Allan (2009), *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Baker Academic (Baker Publishing Group), 387-396.

⁹ Initially, according to the books I read: Schmidt, J. E. C. (1801), ‘Vermutungen über die beiden Briefe an die Thessalonicher’, *Bibliothek für Kritik und Exegese des Neuen Testaments*, pp. 385-386. And a number of other authors since.

Him, we beg you...not to be...alarmed, ...for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. [i.e., the “Antichrist”] ...[whose] coming [will become] apparent in the working of Satan, [by], signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception...’[2:1-11]

Do you see the contentious difference? It *seems* that Paul initially describes the Eschaton as happening all at once: *bang!* Like an explosion. As soon as you’ve heard it, it is over; finished. And you either didn’t make it or you’re one of the lucky ones. The author of *2 Thessalonians*, on the other hand, depicts it as a process – a “process” – like that in *Revelation*, to some degree, which will be somewhat noticeable and apparent to onlookers: ‘events that will allow believers to know when Jesus is about to return.’¹⁰ How, then, to explain these different claims? Is it one or the other? Can it be both?

Furthermore, in addition to the salutation we see this morning where a ‘Paul’ claims to be the writer of *2 Thessalonians*, he says as much again in chapter three, verse seventeen, laying stress on this as if it were a matter of dispute: I quote – ‘I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.’ And some scholars suggest that this ‘overt “claim to authenticity”...is exactly the kind of thing that a forger would do in order to pass a letter off as being by Paul.’¹¹ – As in, “I think the lady doth protest too much.”

‘Furthermore, such a [strenuous] claim to authenticity would be anachronistic’, it is put forward, ‘for a letter actually written by Paul early in his ministry because we have no reason to believe that anyone was forging letters by Paul at that point. The forgeries came later, when the controversial missionary had come to be more highly respected within the church and his letters had been accorded some degree of authority.’¹²

Reassuringly, as Mark Powell observes, ‘none of the arguments given above are totally convincing’.¹³ Firstly, it is perfectly possible that Paul would have repeated much of the content from one letter in a follow-up, especially if the recipients were a *growing* church, which they likely were! And if new members were joining every day, even a brief space of time between the first letter being read aloud and the second arriving would have meant that many never received the original teaching. And to them, *2 Thessalonians* is *1 Thessalonians*.

Also, John Hurd adds the following: ‘The proposal that similarity shows inauthenticity involves the notion that text can be *too* similar as the result of copying, and it depends on the assumption that the author in question would not repeat himself to any considerable extent. But this last assumption requires defense. Which of us in writing Christmas “thank you” notes has not repeated himself, at times even word by word. Thus the term “wooden imitation” or even “plagiarism” would aptly apply to our genuine output. Of course, the author of *2 Thessalonians* is not writing Christmas notes, but then neither us be being accused of major plagiarism... In fact, a number of the commonly listed

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

similarities between the Thessalonian letters relate to letter style. Therefore the argument from similarity should be viewed with considerable caution... If two types of argument [i.e., argument from difference [and] argument from similarity] are not carefully distinguished, then a “heads I win; tails you lose” situation is inevitable. Features which are similar in the two documents are taken as evidence of borrowing; features which are different, as evidence of non-genuineness. Everything about the text can be explained with this type of hybrid method, and a method which explains everything is not subject to falsification.’¹⁴

This is to say, we don’t need to let the sceptics “have their cake *and* eat it.” They can’t have it every which way they want. And isn’t the best explanation for prevailing similarity common source? Of course it is: Clearly, Paul felt the need to reiterate some themes. And that’s it. That’s the “conspiracy.” (Yawn.) As Leon Morris observes: ‘It is strange to reject an epistle that contains nothing un-Pauline and bears all the marks of a Pauline writing, simply because another Pauline writing is markedly similar.’¹⁵ ‘The vocabulary, style and basic thoughts].’¹⁶

But what about the supposedly inconsistent eschatology? If Paul had taught the Thessalonian Christians that the Final Judgment would surprise humanity, how can the same man say later that it would “creep” in by stages through the intervention of Satan’s emissary, the “Lawless One”? Only an *entirely* different preacher – an impostor – could have relayed this idea, yes? No. There are a number of different explanations that preserve the Saint’s involvement in both letters. Most importantly, as John Anthony Dunne reminds us, as far as apocalypticism is concerned in the Scriptures, such passages are ‘notoriously difficult to interpret.’¹⁷ And any comparison depends on certainty about meaning. It is significant, therefore, that George Milligan, an expert in the original Greek text of the section under discussion, concludes: ‘the unexplained words and veiled phrases are of such a nature as to make it very questionable whether, with the resources at our disposal, any full and adequate interpretation of them is any longer possible.’¹⁸

One possibility is that, prosaically, it might be Paul just changed his mind; that he was convinced of one thing and came to think something else; but this is a very unhelpful solution, and one that I won’t indulge. After all, I don’t think his comments conflict. There is an easy synthesis to be made where by “The Lawless One” causes mischief on the earth, which is unmistakably satanic and thus concerns a recognizably concluding period of history when the “Dragon” is released to do harm as John the Evangelist predicts in his Apocalypse [see: Rev. 20:7-9], but the *actual* time and place of Christ’s appearing to arrest him and his destruction remains elusive. Does that make sense? Let me put it like this: I *know* my wife’s birthday is in July, but I

¹⁴ As quoted in McLean, Bradley H. (1996), *The Cursed Christ: Mediterranean Expulsion Rituals and Pauline Soteriology*, Sheffield, U. K.: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd., 158.

¹⁵ Morris (2009), 27.

¹⁶ *Supra*.

¹⁷ ‘Eschatological Emphases in 1 Thessalonians and Galatians: Distinct Argumentative Strategies Related to External Conflict and Audience Response’ (2018), *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies*, Volume 3, No. 2, pp. -248, 232..

¹⁸ Milligan, George (1905), ‘The Eschatology of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12’, *The Expositor*, Volume 12, No. 2, pp. 99-118, 193.

sometimes forget that it is on the 25th. (I get confused with Poppy's, which is the 10th.)

Wannamaker agrees. *2 Thessalonians* may describe occurrences that precede Jesus' return that are neglected in *1*, but this hardly amounts to a 'timetable'. Indeed, '[The Apostle] speaks of the rebellion and the manifestation of the Lawless One as *one* complex event' – one complex event 'immediately followed' by the very end.¹⁹ Additionally, Wannamaker makes the case as to why Paul would offer these "new" details: '[they] served as a proof that the day of the Lord...had not yet occurred', which some at Thessalonica seem to have thought had already happened. Why would they think this? As the Pharisees (and later the Rabbis) taught, God's Kingdom would begin with resurrection of the body, and this Christ accomplished in Jerusalem. There was a rumor circulating, therefore, that anybody still alive had "missed the boat," and anybody who had recently died must have had too. Paul's point, then, is to highlight the fact that though the Kingdom was truly "breaking in" – "at hand"[Mt. 3:2, E. S. V.] – it wasn't fully in force because the Lawless One hadn't "made his move," but was still reigning "[2 Cor. 4:4]."²⁰

Finally, it must be added that [t]he letter was unanimously accepted as an authentic composition of Paul in the early church (from the mid-first century on). It is intrinsically unlikely that all Christians would have been so easily hoodwinked by a letter claiming to be from the first part of Paul's ministry if it had in fact been produced some decades after his death. Church officials were on the lookout for pseudepigraphical writings and in fact rejected dozens of works for which authorship was doubtful; however, no one ever questioned the authenticity of *2 Thessalonians*.²¹

Powell concludes his deliberations about the authorship of *2 Thessalonians*, saying: 'The bottom line is that scholars remain undecided on this issue.' But I say it would be a mistake for us to be too concerned about their indecision: for, as the Reverend Kirsopp Lake argued already in 1910, 'to accept or reject *2 Thessalonians* [has become] one of the many subjects in which critical fashion rather than logical conviction was the decisive factor.'²² In other words, to put it bluntly, just because somebody (usually with a PhD) says that there's a problem, doesn't mean that there is *in fact*, a problem. After all, as Kate Woodthorpe admits in *Survive and Thrive in Academia*, academics 'face...sometimes overwhelming pressures to raise research funds, to publish in peer-review journals...to establish a track-record', and that means finding 'something to say.'²³ A niche. And then defending it come what may. ← Don't underestimate this reality as a factor shaping the direction of theology at the university and in the literature.

¹⁹ Wannamaker (1990), 18. See also footnote 2.

²⁰ *Supra*.

²¹ Powell (2009), 390.

²² '2 *Thessalonians* and Professor Harnack' (December 1910), *The Expository Times*, Volume 22, No. 3, pp. 131-133, 131.

²³ (2018), Abingdon: Routledge (Taylor & Francis Group), 109.