

2 Thessalonians in Post-Pauline Context

Glenn S Holland

Allegheny College

SBL/EGL (31 March 2013)

2 Thessalonians may be understood as the earliest surviving commentary on one of Paul's letters, since it reshapes 1 Thessalonians so as to present a more overtly apocalyptic vision of Paul's message. As such, 2 Thessalonians reflects the attempt by one of the followers of Paul to provide a definitive interpretation of the Apostle's legacy, in competition with his other followers, in the years after his death. I will offer a review and re-evaluation of the conclusions in my 1988 study,¹ in the light of a quarter-century of further consideration and the continuing conversation about Alpha Christianity and its re-evaluation of the earliest years of the Jesus movement.

Introduction

Some years ago – more than I care to think about – I published *The Tradition that You Received from Us: 2 Thessalonians in the Pauline Tradition*. This was a reworked version of my doctoral dissertation, written under the guidance of Hans Dieter Betz at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. It should not surprise those familiar with Betz's work that a primary component of the book was a rhetorical analysis of 2 Thessalonians, undertaken in part in comparison to 1 Thessalonians, to address the second letter's authenticity. My conclusion was that 2 Thessalonians represents deliberative rhetoric, intended to persuade its audience to remain faithful to "the tradition that you received from us" (3:6).

But the most notable feature of 2 Thessalonians is generally agreed to be its reworking of the apocalyptic expectations inspired by 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11. 2 Thessalonians offers a detailed but enigmatic apocalyptic scenario intended to reassure the audience that it is not true "that the day of the Lord is already here." This scenario foresees "the rebellion" and the revelation of "the lawless one," "the son of destruction," which will in turn lead to the return of Jesus (2:3, 2:8). In these events, Satan will use "every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved" (2:10). This apocalyptic scenario, like most, is intended to reinforce a particular form of behavior in the present, one consistent with a received tradition of proper actions.

My purpose here, however, is to attempt to situate 2 Thessalonians within the varied reactions to the loss of the first generation of Jesus believers in the late first century. With this goal in mind, I will briefly describe some of the characteristics of 2 Thessalonians that have led me to identify it as an early deutero-Pauline letter.

¹Holland **Tradition**.

I will then consider the letter's apocalyptic scenarios, and compare them to others produced at about the same time. Finally, I will suggest a setting within the Pauline tradition, and among other works struggling to make sense of the Jesus faith in the wake of the death of the first generation of believers, and the delay of the parousia.

2 Thessalonians as a Deutero-Pauline Letter

The basic problem of the relationship of 2 Thessalonians to 1 Thessalonians, and so also to the Pauline corpus, parallels the Synoptic Problem: the same, but different. As is the case with the Synoptic Gospels, there are striking similarities between the two letters, including wording, structure, and content, while there are also striking differences between the two letters in these same categories. In regard to language, the vocabulary of the letters is very similar (even identical) in places, but in other places, notably in the eschatological sections, where we might expect the most agreement, the vocabulary is very different. Further, what appears in 1 Thessalonians as performative language is in its parallels in 2 Thessalonians instead couched in descriptive language. Thus "We always give thanks to God for all of you (1 Thess 17:2a) finds its parallel in "We must always give thanks to God for you . . . as is right" (2 Thess 1:3).

2 Thessalonians uses πίστις in the sense of "faithfulness," steadfastness especially under persecution, mirroring God's own faithfulness (3:2b-3a). The "eccentric" dual thanksgivings of 1 Thessalonians is paralleled in 2 Thessalonians, but given the considerably shorter length of the second letter, this is more an indication of different authorship than the opposite. 2 Thessalonians also includes an "authenticating" signature which was not only invisible to its audience, but does not reflect Paul's practice in his own letters. And though 1 and 2 Thessalonians deal with eschatology, their focus and their approach to the apocalyptic end are markedly different.

These characteristics of 1 and 2 Thessalonians in comparison with each other, along with others not worth recording here, lead to the conclusion that 2 Thessalonians is not a product of Paul, but a deutero-Pauline letter reflecting on 1 Thessalonians. Ostensibly, 2 Thessalonians was written to prevent anxiety caused by the promulgation of the idea that "the day of the Lord is already here." (2:2c). But its purpose is more specifically to direct the audience to understand what Paul has written in a particular way: as Bultmann noted, it is a commentary on 1 Thessalonians. As such, it is part of a broader attempt of the second generation of Jesus followers to reshape the Jesus movement in the face of changing conditions. Those were in part the result of a number of specific events: (a) the persecution of Jesus' followers in Rome under Nero, in 64 CE, and (b) the Jewish War with Rome, the siege and capture of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and the suspension of perpetual sacrifice, in 70 CE.

But changes also arose in part within the evolving Jesus movement itself: (a) the loss of first-hand (and even second-hand) witness to the events of Jesus' ministry, and so also the "completion" of available information about Jesus, (b) the loss of the initial "natural" leaders of the movement, those who had been associated with Jesus or with early leaders such as Paul, and (c) the delay of the expected return of Jesus as apocalyptic lord at the eschatological end, despite the passing of the first generation of his followers.

Indeed, reinterpretation and re-presentation of apocalyptic expectations within the Jesus communities is arguably one of the oldest forms of adjustment to the evolving situation of the Jesus movement: (a) 1 Thessalonians itself offers Paul the opportunity to reinterpret his own earlier preaching about the return of Jesus, (b) those who see different layers of tradition within the so-called Q tradition often identify these on the basis of an evolving apocalyptic viewpoint there, and (c) 2 Thessalonians therefore provides one among several examples from the second generation of a continuing tradition of apocalyptic reinterpretation and re-presentation, in this case one formed with the intention of reaffirming a specific understanding of the Pauline tradition.

The Apocalyptic Vision of 2 Thessalonians

The apocalyptic tenor of 2 Thess becomes evident in the thanksgiving (1:5-10), which extols “the righteous judgment of God” in apocalyptic terms. This judgment is seen in the coming affliction of those who afflict the audience “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from Heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:7b-8). The “flaming fire” is the tool of divine vengeance, inflicting “the punishment of eternal destruction,” since fire was believed to consume and end existence. The flaming fire also serves to separate the wicked from “the presence of the Lord and the glory of his might,” which is what the chosen experience, “because our testimony to you was believed” (1:9-10). Note that this coming affliction is aimed not only at those who have afflicted the audience, but also “those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In other words, these are people who worship God (they are distinct from “those who do not know God”), and therefore Jews and/or followers of Jesus. But since Jews would presumably be included among those who “afflict” the audience, it seems more likely that the group “who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” refers to “disobedient” members of the Jesus communities. (I leave aside for now the question of what it means to “obey” the gospel).

The real locus of apocalyptic reinterpretation in 2 Thessalonians, however, appears in the second chapter with a full-blown apocalyptic scenario. It is introduced with a reference to 1 Thess 4:13-5:11, “As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together unto him . . .” (2:1a), indicating that the audience is those who “obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The apocalyptic scenario is presented to reassure the audience that it is not true “that the day of the Lord is already here” (2:2b), as some apparently believe. The author discredits this message, whether communicated “by spirit or by word of letter, as though from us,” suggesting misunderstanding of 1 Thessalonians. On the other hand, the author seems at pains to deny any attribution of the false message to Paul in any way, invoking his own interpretation of Paul. This is followed in 2:3a by a warning, “Let no one deceive you in any way.”

The apocalyptic scenario in 2 Thessalonians 2 goes through three stages: (a) first is “the rebellion” (ἡ ἀποστασία), identified in 2:6-7 with “the restrainer” (τὸ κατέκον) in 2:6-7 and the “mystery of lawlessness” (τὸ μυστήριον). Second is the coming of the “man of lawlessness” (ὁ ἄνομος), now restrained, “who will take his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God” (2:4).

Third, and described only in relation to the “man of lawlessness” who is also “the son of destruction,” is the return of the Lord Jesus, described in two different ways to suit the perspectives of the two opposing groups to be affected:

- On the one (left) hand, Jesus will destroy the man of lawlessness “with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming” (2:8), presumably the same “flame of fire” leading to “eternal destruction.”
- On the other (right) hand, as described in 1:10, he will gather those chosen for salvation, made holy by the Spirit and through belief in the truth (2:13).

The intention is to make the audience aware of their own position in the unfolding apocalyptic scenario: They are in its first stage (ἡ ἀποστασία), the working of Satan, who uses power, signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing . . . (2:10). The author emphasizes deception (2:10b-12): “. . . because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason, God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false, so that all who have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned.” The message is clear: Not only is the day of the Lord yet to arrive, but the chief danger in the present is being deceived by Satan, against whom the only defense is belief in and love for the truth, and “obeying the gospel” – whatever that means.

We find a similar message in the “Synoptic Apocalypse” as it appears in the versions of Mark 13 and Matthew 24. In both, the Synoptic Apocalypse presents a three-stage apocalyptic scenario, presented as a teaching of Jesus, with the audience placed within the scenario’s chronology. I will take Mark as the primary example:

- The first stage, the usual events of history, called “the beginning of the birth pangs” (Mk 13:6-13), sees Messianic pretenders appearing in the name of Jesus and saying “I am he!” – “and they will lead many astray” (Mk 13:6b).
- The second stage, the affliction, begins when the “desolating sacrilege” is “set up where it ought not to be” (Mk 13:14); its unparalleled suffering would spare no one, but the Lord will cut it short for the sake of the elect (Mk 13:20); during this stage false Messiahs and false prophets deceive many people.
- “But in those days, after that suffering,” the final stage is signaled by signs in the sky – sun, moon, and stars – and the parousia of the Son of Man with his angels, who gather the elect from the ends of the earth (Mk 13:24-27).

In Matthew 24 the divisions are similar; here, the final stage follows “immediately after the suffering of those days” (Mt 24:29). Notable in the Synoptic Apocalypse and 2 Thess 2 are warnings against deception (2 Thess 2:3, Mk 13:5, 13:21-23, Mt 24:4, 24:11, 24:23-26), and against false Messiahs and false prophets (Mk 13:6b, 13:21-22, Mt 24:5, 24:11, 24:23-24, 24:26, compare 2 Thess 2:9-10). Deception is punishment for the wicked (2 Thess 2:10-12, Mk 13:6b, 13:22b, Mt 24:5b, 24:10-12, 24:24), though the endurance of the chosen will result in their ultimate salvation (Mk 13:13b, 13:20b, 13:27; Mt 24:13, 24:22, 24:31). There are also exhortations not to become troubled (2 Thess 2:2, Mk 13:7, Mt 24:6), and reminders that the audience has been prepared for these events by hearing the apocalyptic scenario itself (2 Thess 2:5, Mk 13:23, Mt 24:25). In each case, there is a deliberate attempt to guide the audience to understand its place within the unfolding scenario, and not to allow themselves to be misled by “deceivers” to believe that the end is coming sooner than, in fact, it will: “But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Mk 13:13, Mt 24:13).

2 Thessalonians in the Developing Jesus Movement

It is a commonplace that apocalyptic literature is less about the future and more about the appropriate response in the present. In the case of 2 Thessalonians, the apocalyptic scenarios of 1:5-10 and 2:1-12 convey a series of messages: steadfastness in suffering, the day of the Lord will not come until it is preceded by specific events, the present is in the first stage of the apocalyptic scenario, which sees many deceptions, and one may avoid deception and ruin only by attending to the author's teaching, presented as that of Paul: by "doing the things we command" (3:4) and avoiding "believers who are living in idleness and not according to the traditions that you received from us" (3:6, 3:14).

This tradition is a body of teachings that are traced to Paul, who in turn has passed on what he received (τὴν παράδοσιν). It should be understood primarily as a code of behavior conveyed also through "Paul's" example, notably in regard to working for one's food (2:9-13; compare the genuine Pauline 1 Thess 4:11). As elsewhere in the Hellenistic world, to know the truth is to behave in a morally correct way: knowledge is the wellspring of action, so that delusion leads to sin, while knowing the truth leads to virtuous acts.

Ostensibly, the apocalyptic scenario serves a conservative purpose: to reinforce what the audience already knows and believes, and to dissuade them from anything that seems to deviate from what they have already been taught. In fact, the content of this "previous teaching" is being revised. In 2 Thessalonians as in the deutero-Pauline literature generally, new information is not offered as such, as it was in Paul's letters (1 Cor 12:1b οὐ θέλω ὑμᾶς ἀγνοεῖν, 1 Thess 4:13a Οὐ θέλομεν δὲ ὑμᾶς ἀγνοεῖν) but instead, the tradition is said to be known to the audience already.

Where might we situate 2 Thessalonians in the variety of early Jesus communities? First, we have a concern for the apocalyptic future expressed in terms similar to those in the Synoptic Apocalypse of Mark 13 and Matthew 24. Second, there is a tendency to "close the book" on doctrinal and moral teaching, and to represent that "teaching" as "traditions" whose content is inviolable. What these two tendencies together do is to annex Synoptic tradition to Pauline tradition, before "closing the book" on both. This heals a previous breach between the two traditions, and gives a new and richer meaning to "the tradition that you received from us."

Comment

E Bruce Brooks

The consolidation Glenn here points to may also apply to the genuine Paulines. Is there not reason to suspect that some passages in the Pauline corpus which are closest to the Gospels (eg Mt 23:31f ~ 1 Thess 2:15f; see Walker **Interpolations** 218) are the work of Paul's posthumous editors, reconfiguring him for future Christian generations not as the Apostle merely to the Gentiles, but rather as the universal Apostle?

Works Cited

- Glenn S Holland. *The Tradition that You Received from Us*. Mohr 1988
 William O Walker Jr. *Interpolations in the Pauline Letters*. Sheffield 2001