

2 Thessalonians

I. AUTHENTICITY¹

Because this epistle has been more widely disputed than its counterpart and because the question of its relationship will need discussion, the purpose and date of the epistle will be left until after these other problems have been settled. This epistle, in company with 1 Thessalonians, was strongly assailed by the Tübingen school, and the results of their criticism are still apparent in the reserve with which many modern scholars view it. Neil, for instance, claims that most scholars accept it only *faute de mieux*.

Many modern scholars are disinclined to regard this epistle as authentic, but there are still those who defend it.

The external evidence is, if anything, rather stronger than for 1 Thessalonians, for it was not only included in the Canon of Marcion and the Muratorian List and was mentioned by Irenaeus by name, but was apparently known to Ignatius, Justin and Polycarp.

Although this evidence enables us with considerable certainty to conclude that the earliest Christians considered this epistle a genuine work of Paul, yet internal evidence has been supposed by some to make the tradition improbable. There are four main grounds of objection.

a. Eschatology

A change of approach is alleged in the second epistle as compared with the first in respect of the parousia. Here it is less imminent, for certain events must first take place. Some of the earlier critics attempted to heighten the problem by supposing that the 'man of sin' was intended to be identified with Nero Redivivus, which meant that the epistle could not have been earlier than the last decade or two of the first century, *i.e.* too late for Pauline authorship. But there has been a change in the twentieth century towards the whole subject of eschatology. As Neil points out, time sequence does not arise in eschatological thought, and to attempt to date documents on such grounds must inevitably lead to a false trail. It must further be borne in mind that 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11 presupposes some knowledge of eschatological signs on the part of the readers, which suggests that Paul had given them some oral instruction in the matter. While the section about the 'man of sin' finds no parallel in 1 Thessalonians, there is no reason to deny that Paul could have written it. Earlier attempts to regard it as an independent apocalypse which was later attached to the epistle are not now favoured. The work of Bousset on the antichrist legend has shown that the background of it must be largely found in Jewish apocalyptic thought and that the man of sin is therefore the Pseudo-Messiah and not some historical person such as Nero as formerly proposed. Had the Nero Redivivus myth been in mind in this passage it would at once date it as post-Pauline. Because of the close similarities between this passage and Mark 13 it is reasonable to suppose that Paul was acquainted with Jesus' eschatological teaching. In that case no weighty objection can be lodged against the language here. A sufficient explanation of the different eschatological emphasis is the

¹Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Series taken from jacket.;, 4th rev. ed.;, The master reference collection Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996, c1990), 592.

need to answer a misunderstanding which had not arisen when 1 Thessalonians was written. The change is not in eschatology but in viewpoint due to changing circumstances.

b. Change of tone

It has been claimed that 2 Thessalonians is more formal and frigid than 1 Thessalonians, which is notable for its warm affection. Whereas in the first epistle Paul says 'we ... thank God' (1 Thes. 1:2), in the second he says 'we ought ... to thank God' (2 Thes. 1:3; 2:13), and even says 'we command you' (2 Thes. 3:6, 12). But such changes can hardly be taken too seriously since in any case Paul is having to deal with a different situation and probably wrote in a very different mood. He is warmer towards them in the first epistle because of the great encouragement news of them had brought him. But he must have been a little perplexed to say the least at the turn of events which prompted the writing of the second epistle. It is a fallacy to assume that any writer must always write in the same tone, since tone is very much a matter of mood which is in turn easily affected by prevailing circumstances.

c. Readers

In 1 Thessalonians, as we have seen, Gentiles are mainly in mind, but the second epistle is said to assume a greater knowledge of the Old Testament (*cf.* 1:6–10; 2:1–12). But there are no allusions in this epistle which Gentiles could not have appreciated. Acts demonstrates the strong Old Testament flavour of primitive Christian preaching, even among Gentiles. Nor can the apocalyptic element be considered unintelligible to Gentiles, since Mark's Gospel includes similar apocalyptic material and is generally reckoned to have been written for Gentiles.

d. Similarities

Why, it is asked, should Paul have written two epistles so close together? And why are there such frequent and close similarities in language? Would such a man as Paul have repeated himself in this manner? On the strength of such considerations some writers have therefore concluded that 2 Thessalonians was written by an imitator. Yet, as Neil has rightly pointed out, the assumption here is that it would be a psychological impossibility for a man to have written both epistles to the same people. But on what basis is psychological impossibility to be judged? If, as we have seen, the probabilities are that the changed situation demanded a similar yet different approach, the objection is nullified.

When the strong similarities are combined with the differences it is in fact more difficult to imagine a writer other than Paul himself. Certainly the similarities are not so striking as to make imitation even a probable solution. What agreements there are not lengthy, and similarity of wording often occurs in different settings in the two epistles. These similarities and differences are adequately accounted for by the practical demands of the church at the time.

e. Suggested explanations

Not one of these objections is seen to possess real substance, yet some scholars have considered them of sufficient weight to suggest alternatives to Pauline authorship and these may be listed as follows.

(i) *Pseudonymous authorship*. The theory that 2 Thessalonians is a forgery must be rejected, not only because of the inherent difficulties of the thesis already mentioned, but also for want of a sufficient motive. The writer, moreover, portrays too intimate an acquaintance with the Thessalonian situation (*cf.* 3:6–15).

(ii) *Co-authorship*. Since Timothy and Silvanus are linked with Paul in the introduction, it has been suggested that they wrote the second epistle and that Paul added his own autograph (3:17). But since Paul would not have signed anything that he did not assent to, this theory does nothing to remove the supposed difficulties over subject-matter. Further, Timothy and Silvanus are also mentioned in 1 Thessalonians, which led F. C. Burkitt to propose that Silvanus drafted both epistles and Paul added 1 Thessalonians 2:18 and 2 Thessalonians 3:17. But it is difficult to see what problems such a theory solves. It would seem to create more difficulties than Pauline authorship since it would then be necessary to find a reason for such unparalleled procedure on the part of Paul. On the other hand such procedure cannot be ruled out as impossible.

(iii) *The divided church theory*. A. Harnack suggested that 1 Thessalonians was sent to Gentiles and 2 Thessalonians to Jews. But the evidence for a divided church at Thessalonica is negligible. The greater use of the Old Testament in the second epistle has been dealt with above, where it was pointed out that this could equally well be designed for Gentile readers. But the most damaging criticism of this theory is that it is inconceivable that Paul the universalist would have fostered such a division by separate letters to the rival sections. Furthermore, in 1 Thessalonians 2:13–16 the Judean church is actually held up to the Gentiles as an example, which militates against a separate Jewish faction. In any case, since the letters have identical superscriptions, Paul must have taken a considerable risk that the letters might have gone to the wrong section of the church. Harnack's recourse is to suppose that some indication of its Jewish destination has dropped out of the second epistle, but this only demonstrates the weakness of the theory.

(iv) *The private-public theory*. In order to account for the more formal tone of 2 Thessalonians Dibelius suggested that this epistle was designed for public reading. But this is no solution, since in the first epistle (5:27) Paul commands that his letter should be read to all the brethren, which can only mean that it too was designed for public reading. Commenting on this view, Neil points out that it 'brings the circle round again after a century of speculation almost to the traditional view. It is so near indeed that it seems hardly worth making any distinction at all'.

INTRODUCTION TO 2 THESSALONIANS²

As noted in the Introduction to 1 Thessalonians, I have chosen to write a separate Introduction to the second letter so that it will be recognized as having its own “place in the sun” as a Pauline document, and not simply get absorbed in the Introduction to the first letter. However, in this case I will forego the material that is common to both letters and concentrate on the matters that are pertinent only to this letter on its own. Thus I will here deal with only the first and third matters from the previous Introduction: Authorship and Date, and Occasion for Writing.

I. AUTHORSHIP AND DATE

If one were to take this letter at face value, as a “second” letter from the apostolic trio to the believers in Thessalonica, then this section of the Introduction would be very brief indeed. And because the commentary is in fact written from that perspective—as the only way one can make good sense of it at all—it will be much briefer than some think is fair or reasonable. But the writing of a commentary on this letter in and of itself tends to push one toward authenticity regarding authorship, so that there has been only one significant commentary in English over the past century and a half that has tried to make sense of this letter as a forgery.

When one reads the literature by those who argue that Paul is not the author of this letter, one is struck by the “thinness” of the argumentation as such, especially since there is hardly a single argument that does not take some form of subjectivity on the part of its proponent(s). And at the end of the day, it becomes quite clear that had this letter not contained the material in 2:1–12, this view would not have arisen at all. Indeed, the most often-recurring argument against Pauline authorship is a very subjective one, that this letter lacks the “warmth” of the first one. But one may rightly wonder how this is an objective argument at all. And in any case, why should the letter not come across thus, given (a) that some misinformation regarding the day of the Lord has been attributed to Paul himself, and (b) that he has to deal with one situation (the disruptive-idle) for a second time and now at length!

I do not intend here to “reinvent” the wheel, as it were, regarding the arguments pro and con for Pauline authorship. This has been done several times, and I find especially salutary and useful the even-handed treatment of these matters in the commentary by Marshall (28–45) and the detailed “pro and con” handling of this question by Malherbe (349–74). But it is of some interest that those who argue most strongly against this letter as authentic have also seldom written a commentary on it, with the single exception in English of that by Richard noted above; and his attempt at trying to make sense of it as a forgery in itself would seem to push a reader back toward viewing the letter as authentic.

It is not my purpose here to go over all that ground yet again, and thus I advise the reader to consult the three commentaries just noted for the arguments pro and con. I have

²Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (, The New International Commentary on the New Testament Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 237.

chosen rather to introduce the present commentary only, and not to engage in further debate on this issue, except to note with approval the conclusion made by Marshall some years ago that “it is very doubtful whether a set of weak arguments adds up to one powerful one” (34). Since one can in fact make good sense of this letter as a follow-up to the first one, and since the internal data in the second letter basically push one in this direction, this will be the assumption of the present commentary.

In defense of going this route, however, I here offer a (very brief) sampling of items found in the second letter, in relationship to the same phenomena in the first letter, which would seem to push forgery beyond the bounds of ordinary historical probability. And what makes this sampling the more telling from my perspective is the “incidental” nature of these items, the kind of matters that would seem to require the “author” of the second letter to have gotten into the skin, as it were, of the author of the first letter, which of course would indeed be the case if it is authentic.

1. In both letters the thanksgiving evolves into a major item that Paul feels he needs to address, yet the two matters themselves are without an even remotely close relationship to one another (Paul’s past relationships with the Thessalonians; and the fact that their persecutors are headed for divine judgment). How, one wonders, could a forger have pulled this off, and have done so in such a radically different manner from the first one, the only Pauline letter he knew.

2. The use of the vocative *adelphoi* (“brother [and sisters]) is distributed about the same number of times throughout the two letters, and at an extremely higher rate of occurrence when contrasted to the rest of the corpus; furthermore, it occurs in both letters toward the front of the elongated “thanksgiving,” the length of which in both cases is yet another feature that does not happen elsewhere in the corpus.

3. In this same regard, these are the only two letters where on one occasion in each Paul elaborates on the vocative itself; in 1 Thessalonians 1:4 as “*adelphoi* loved by God,” and in 2 Thessalonians 2:13 as “*adelphoi* loved by the Lord.” A forger who knew well the first letter might have been able to do this, but could he have also done so by changing the second one so as to use the language of the Benjamin blessing in Deuteronomy 33:12?

4. One of the features of Paul’s later letters is his love of ὑπέρ (*hyper*) compounds, so much so that in the commentary on Philippians (221) I suggest “that Paul virtually holds the copyright” on them. Thus Paul’s thanksgiving (1:3) that the Thessalonians’ faith “is growing more and more” (*hyperauxanei*) has all the earmarks of an authenticity that would be difficult for one who does not know the rest of the corpus to imitate.

5. Another feature found in these two letters is Paul’s use of *pistis* (ordinarily, “faith”) to refer to someone’s “faithfulness.” This is an especially striking feature in the first letter (see on 3:1 and 5); it occurs again at the opening of this letter in 1:3 and 4. Thus, even though in its first instance (v. 3) one could argue that “your faith” is what is increasing, that is more difficult to do with its next appearance in verse 4, where Paul commends them (in this order!) for “your perseverance and faith(fulness).”

6. Although the *specific* phenomenon does not occur elsewhere, the unusual redundancy in 1:3 of (literally) “the love of each one of all of you for one another” is an especially Pauline feature.

7. It would seem only remotely possible, if at all, for a forger to capture Paul's noteworthy use of *kyrios* to refer exclusively to Christ and *theos* to refer to God, a feature that is maintained throughout the second letter. On the other hand, this consistency is easily explained as Pauline, since in his next preserved letter (1 Cor 8:6) Paul breaks up the familiar *Shema* so that the word *kyrios* ("Lord") refers exclusively to Christ the Son, while the word *theos* ("God") is used equally exclusively to refer to God the Father.

8. The arresting intertextual use in 3:2 of precise language from the Septuagint of Isaiah 25:4, where it differs considerably from the Hebrew, is a feature that is so thoroughly Pauline that one can scarcely imagine a forger having been able to do this, especially one who knew only the first letter.

9. Perhaps the most striking feature of all is the anarthrous use of "the Lord" in the phrase *en kyriō*, which is found in abundance throughout the corpus and occurs three times in the first letter (3:8; 4:1 [plus "Jesus"]; and 5:12), and occurs in the second letter twice (3:4 and 12 [plus "Jesus Christ"]). One would seem to need familiarity with the entire Pauline corpus to have been able to duplicate this phenomenon; but it makes perfectly good sense as stemming from Paul himself and thus reflecting a usage that was already in place and that will last a lifetime.

Finally, what is perhaps the most significant feature of all regarding this letter is the fact that its author has a thoroughgoing acquaintance with, and use of, language and terms from the first letter, but knew next to nothing, if anything at all, of the Paul of the later letters. As many have pointed out before, this phenomenon in itself calls the theory of pseudepigraphy into an extremely high level of suspicion, while at the same time it makes it nearly impossible that someone with knowledge of the whole corpus wrote it at a later time.

The ultimate question on this matter, of course, is "why?"; why would anyone care to write such a letter simply for the sake of "palming off" as Pauline the singular (even for Paul) eschatological material in 2:1–12—and one could surely posit no other meaningful reason for a forgery. And to let that material sit in the middle of the letter rather than at the end would seem to make almost no sense at all.

At the end of the day, therefore, one must make allowance for our otherwise rather limited knowledge of Paul—on the basis of a somewhat small "literary" output—and note that all such idiosyncratic moments as 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 (cf. esp. Romans 9–11) remind us how much we really do *not* know about Paul on the basis of this limited collection of letters—although, of course, they do tell us a great deal, and by and large show a considerable consistency in thought and content.

Given, therefore, the strong evidence in favor of viewing this letter as authentic, the question of *date* is related to the date suggested for the first letter—probably a few months later and thus probably sometime *circa* 50 CE.