

The Purposes Behind Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians

Thessalonica was a key city in Paul's missionary strategy. Its location on the Egnatian Way (1), its fine harbour, and its role as capital (2) and chief seaport of Macedonia (3) made it an ideal place to plant a church. According to Acts 17:2 Paul remained in the city at least three weeks, but the fact that the church at Philippi (three days journey away by road)(4) sent him aid at least twice (Phil. 4:16), together with Paul's statement that he worked night and day to support himself, both suggest a much longer stay.(5)

Eventually the jealousy of the Jews forced Paul to leave for Berea (Acts 17:5, 10) and then on to Athens (Acts 17:15). When Timothy rejoined him there Paul sent him back to Thessalonica in order to strengthen the believers (1 Thess. 3:1-2) and to reassure himself that the persecution had not forced them to recant (3:1). According to Kümmel the general view is that Paul wrote his first letter to them from Corinth (Acts 18:1), where Timothy reported to him what he had found out during his visit (1 Thess. 3:6).(6)

Paul's first purpose is to commend the believers for their endurance in spite of severe persecution (1:2-6).(7) He contrasts himself and his ministry with those of Hellenistic philosophers whose aims and interests were often selfish (2:3-6) (8) by reminding the Thessalonians of how he had suffered previously in Philippi (2:2). Unlike the philosophers he had not tried to take advantage of them. It is possible that some were suggesting that he had run away (9) like a coward, but Paul firmly refutes that by reminding them how he had lived whilst among them (2:10-12) (10) and expresses his concern for them (2:17-19). He further contrasts his teaching with that of mere human philosophy by commending them for accepting his words as the Word of God, "as it actually is" (v.13).

1 Thess. 2:13-16 is probably the most difficult passage in the whole epistle to understand. The main problem arises from an apparent contradiction between Paul's attitude to his fellow Jews here and in Romans chapters 9 - 11. Okeke argues that Paul was in a bad mood at the time and later changed his mind before writing Romans.(11) William Hendriksen rejects this view out of hand.(12) A number of explanations have been put forward as to what event "the wrath of God has come upon them fully at last" (v.16) refers to. In the Nineteenth Century scholars argued that it referred to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and the passage was used to try and prove that the whole letter (or at least chapter 2:13-16) was written after that date by a writer using Paul's name.(13) Jamieson, Fausset & Brown attempted to connect the passage with an event at the Passover in Jerusalem in AD 48 when about 30 000 (according to some) were slain in what was "a foretaste of the whole vengeance that speedily followed."(14) One is left wondering whether an event occurring 22 years later can be regarded as 'following speedily'. Others claim that Paul used the 'Prophetic aorist' - a parallel to the Hebrew prophetic perfect - but Okeke(15) and Thomas(16) both reject this, pointing out that the grammatical structure does not support the use of a Semitism

here.

The view taken by Hendriksen,(17) Ellicott,(18) and Thomas(19) is that Paul was referring to the arrival of the wrath on the Jews in a “potential or positional sense”. The picture that Paul is attempting to give is of the Lord as judge, having passed the sentence of condemnation against the unbelieving Jews, the sentence soon to be carried out in actuality. In view of Paul’s expectation of the Lord’s speedy return this seems to be the most consistent with the rest of the letter.

Karl P. Donfried in his extensive article on the Cults of Thessalonica(20) supplies much valuable background material on the religions of the city. These included the cults of Isis, Dionysus, Zeus, Ascepus, Aphrodite, Demeter, but most importantly that of Cabirus, who was the cities chief deity.(21) Paul mentions that the believers (who were mainly Greeks apparently) “turned to God from idols” (1:9), but the cult of Cabirus is significant in its connection with fertility. This great sexual emphasis in the culture in part explains Paul’s references to personal “holiness (2:10-12) and warnings against fornication (4:3). He contrasts holy living with the “passionate lust of the heathen” (4:4).(22) Paul’s only other references to sexual immorality are found in 1 Corinthians and in a catalogue of works of the flesh in Gal. 5:19. Like Thessalonica, the city of Corinth was dominated by a sexual cult (Aphrodite).

1 Thess. 4:13-18 is most frequently cited a proof-text for the rapture of the church, however this is not its true purpose. Rather Paul is assuring the believers that their brothers and sisters who have already died as a result of the persecution in the city(23) will not be left in some intermediate state when the Lord returns. He tells them that he has the Lord’s own word that they will proceed those still alive. A.T. Robertson and others point out that 4:12 is intended to discourage any from giving up their jobs in anticipation of the Second Advent.(24) Instead they are to continue to live their lives, without causing a disturbance.

Acts 17:7 records that Paul’s teaching led to the charge that he was “defying Caesar’s decrees.” Donfried connects this statement with the oath of allegiance to the Emperor. Paul’s teaching concerning ‘a different Kingdom’ (2:12); the *Parousia* (a term that referred also to the arrival of Caesar on a state visit) and the title *kurios* for Jesus Christ (which was also claimed by Caesar) explain this conflict.(25) Paul attacks the *Pax et Securitas*(26) (5:3) - the watchwords of the *Pax Romana* - condemning the existing world system which was indifferent to the Coming of the Lord in order to show the believers where their security lay.

Paul concludes in the style of a “parenetic” writer - that is giving moral exhortation in traditional Greek style. In a narrower sense as here this takes the form of three elements: memory, model and maxims. “Moral instruction was thought to be best accomplished by the initiation of an example”(27) (cf. 2:10-12). The model depended on memory, supported and expanded by maxims, which were often arranged antithetically as in 1 Thess. 5:21-22. Specific moral instructions begin in 4:1, but the elements of memory and model appear in the first three chapters.(28) So Paul writes to a Greek church in a style in which they can understand and then put into practice.

References

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(28) Johnson, 262.
