

Yale Bible Study

1 and 2 Thessalonians

2 Thessalonian 2: Resistance and Delay

In the first chapter Paul presented a scenario of eschatological events that was different in many ways from what appeared in 1 Thessalonians. The earlier letter had a positive and encouraging tone, offering consolation to those whose friends and relatives had died. The letter assured them that they would be together again to greet Christ on his return. The scenario sketched in this letter emphasizes the judgment that would take place at the time of Christ's coming. Although the scenario differed from that of 1 Thessalonians, the initial picture of eschatological judgment sketched here is familiar from other early Christian depictions of what would happen at the end of the age. The eschatological discourse of chapter 2 moves into less familiar territory, although it too has abundant parallels in the tradition of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic thought. It depicts a period of strife between "our Lord Jesus Christ" and a mysterious individual who resists his coming. Although the passage does not use the term, it served as a basis for Christian speculation on "the Antichrist."

The Lawless One (2:1–12)

The reference to "being gathered together with him" (v 1) alludes to the kind of scenario that Paul describes in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. It is similar as well to what appears in Jesus' eschatological discourse in Matthew 24:31, 38–42. The subsequent reference to the source of deception, a "spirit," a "word," or a "letter as if by us" (v 3) lists possible sources of false teaching, an inspired prophecy, a rational argument, or a Pauline letter.

The latter phrase may be an explicit reference to, and an attempt to discredit, 1 Thessalonians, although this letter will later endorse Paul's teaching "by letter" (2:15).

The second verse focuses on the precise problem with expectation of the eschatological "gathering," the belief that "the day of the Lord is already here." Anyone who read the eschatological passage in 1 Thessalonians and its reference to "we who are alive, who are left," (1 Thessalonians 4:17) could easily have drawn the inference that the second coming of Christ was going to happen in the lifetime of the first generation of believers. Paul, of course, had warned the Thessalonians that it was impossible to predict when Christ's return would occur (1 Thessalonians 5:1–2), but that warning did not prevent his followers from hoping that the event would happen sooner rather than later.

There are, in fact, numerous other passages in the New Testament that give evidence of a belief in Christ's imminent return. In Mark 9:1, for example, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power." The epilogue to the Fourth Gospel (John 21) seems to address a similar hope that the first generation of disciples, or at least the "beloved disciple," would be alive to welcome Jesus back to earth (John 21:20–23). The author of John 21 had to correct that expectation, by treating a purported saying of Jesus, perhaps something like Mark 9:1, as a hypothetical question, not a promise. The Book of Revelation plays in intriguing ways with eschatological hopes, how the "not yet" is somehow here "already," but it too has passages that point to Christ's imminent return (Revelation 10:7; 12:10–12; 22:12). Paul himself in 1 Corinthians refers to the "impending crisis" (7:26), and expresses his convictions that "the appointed time has grown short" (7:29) and that "the present form of this world is passing away" (7:31).

Belief that the events of the “end time,” including the second coming or “parousia” of Christ, were imminent was thus common enough among Christians of the first century but that belief became more problematic as time wore on.

One way of dealing with what has been described as the “delay of the parousia” was to reinterpret eschatological hopes. Examples of such reinterpretation are in evidence in such texts as 2 Timothy 2:18, which condemns two teachers, Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have declared that “the resurrection has already taken place,” but their teaching does not seem to be the problem addressed in 2 Thessalonians. The problem seems to be the expectation that the parousia is imminent.

Other early Christians refocused eschatological hope. The eschatological discourse found in Mark 13 could be used in support of the belief in the imminent second coming mentioned in Mark 9:1. The third evangelist uses Mark 13 as the basis for his version of Jesus’ eschatological teaching in Luke 21. Writing after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, he extends the eschatological timetable by saying that the destruction of the city is simply the start of the “times of the Gentiles” (Luke 21:20–24). The coming of the Son of Man would take place at a later, indefinite date (Luke 21:25–28).

The scenario of 2 Thessalonians also suggests that something must happen and someone must appear before Christ’s parousia. It names the event as “the rebellion” and the coming one as “the lawless one,” who is “destined for destruction” (v 3). Both terms are rather vague and could refer to any number of things. The first, *apostasia* (literally, “apostasy”) can be translated with political overtones, as in the NRSV’s “rebellion.” It would then refer to a period of political and military turmoil, of “wars and rumors of wars” such as those predicted in Jesus’ eschatological discourse (Matthew 24: 6; Mark

13:7; Luke 21:9). The term will come to have a special sense in Christian circles for those who deviate from accepted teaching and discipline. The related verb appears in 1 Timothy 4:1, referring to those who “renounce the faith.” Similar references to such doctrinal apostasy as a hallmark of the end time appear at 2 Timothy 3:1–5; Jude 18–19.

The figure of the “lawless one” who is “destined for destruction” may be a “false Messiah,” predicted as a feature of the end time in the various versions of the eschatological discourse (Matthew 24:23; Mark 13:21; Luke 21:8). The first epistle of John explicitly mentions as a feature of the “last hour” an “antichrist” (1 John 2:18), and suggests that this figure is linked with “apostasy” (v 19). The scenario thus involves some kind of division in the community prompted by a figure with a new or different message from that of the Johannine elder.

The following description of the “lawless one” (v 4) has echoes of various figures who opposed the God of Israel. One is the “Day Star, son of Dawn” of Isaiah 14:12–20, who said, “I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of the assembly.” Another is the Prince of Tyre of Ezekiel 28:1–10. A third is Antiochus Epiphanes, the Greek king of the Seleucid empire, who defiled the Temple in 167 BCE, leading to the Maccabean revolt. His actions inspired the language “desolating sacrilege” of Matthew 24:15 and Mark 13:14. The Book of Daniel describes Antiochus in clearly unflattering terms (Daniel 7:23–25; 8:23–25; 11:20–28).

The audacity of the figure of the “lawless one,” who takes a place in God’s Temple, “declaring himself to be God” (v 4) could be inspired by these Biblical figures, or by contemporary Roman emperors, usually “divinized” after their death, but often objects of cultic reverence in Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire. The visions of the Book of Revelation certainly connect demonic opposition to God with that political

power and such an anti-Roman attitude may undergird the prediction of the “lawless one” here.

Biblical villains of cosmic dimensions and eschatological projections of opposition to God are woven together into the figure of the “lawless one.” But, the letter further lengthens the eschatological timetable, and makes him a hidden reality, subject to a mysterious “restraining” force (v 6). This vague entity is probably inspired by stories of angelic struggles between forces of good and evil, such as those found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Scroll of the Rule (1QS), for example, depicts the struggle between the Spirit of Darkness and the Spirit of Light. A similar tale in Revelation 12:7–17, drawing on ancient myths of divine combat, tells of the struggle of the archangel Michael with the Devil and the expulsion of the latter from heaven. Whatever its inspiration, the “restraining” force remains mysterious and is not easily identified with any contemporary reality. That mysterious quality further lengthens the eschatological timetable.

While mystery shrouds the eschatological future, it offers a way of reading the present and contemporary application is the focus of the remainder of the reflection on the “lawless one.” That “coming” figure already has an impact on the world, where the effects of “Satan” are to be felt (v 9). Paul understood that an inimical spiritual force was at work in opposition to his mission (1 Corinthians 7:5; 2 Corinthians 2:11; 11:14; 12:7; 1 Thessalonians 2:18), and, in some way, could punish sinners (1 Corinthians 5:5). He, or one of his disciples, can also name this personal force “Beliar” (2 Corinthians 6:15), who stands in opposition to Christ. The current passage envisions a similar figure. Satan is responsible for the “wicked deception” of those who “refused to love the truth” (v 10). The reading of eschatological characters as symbols of contemporary church divisions,

noted as features of 1 John and the pastoral epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), appears once more.

Although the author has pointed to the baleful work of Satan who leads some astray, he now ultimately attributes the process to God, who sends people a “powerful delusion” which leads to false belief (v 11). The formulation here might be taken to support a strong notion of predestination, and the language echoes the reference to divine “destination” of 1 Thessalonians 5:9. But the pattern of divine action is very similar to what Paul describes in Romans 1:18–25. A human decision to refuse the gift of faith prompts God’s action in leaving people to their desire. Like many religious thinkers of the first century, our author holds in tension two principles that philosophers and theologians have long struggled to reconcile: divine sovereignty and human responsibility. In any case our author has a harsh word for those who have not believed and taken pleasure in unrighteousness: they “will be condemned” (v 12).

Another Thanksgiving (2:13–15)

The somewhat harsh tone of the reflection on eschatology in which 2 Thessalonians has been engaged since 1:5 now reverts to a more positive, pastoral mode. The Thessalonians ought to give thanks because God has “chosen” them, as Paul had said at 1 Thessalonians 1:4. They are the “first fruits,” an image that Paul uses for the gifts of the spirit (Romans 8:23), or of the resurrected Christ (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23), but also of those who have come to believe (Romans 11:16). The Thessalonians are presented as an offering to God, but the result of that offering is their “salvation,” which happens through “sanctification” and “belief in the truth.” These are certainly terms that Paul uses

to characterize Christian life. “Sanctification” is a term defining what is appropriate for presentation to God in the Temple cult. Paul uses it, for instance in Romans 6:19–22, to refer to the result of living in the righteousness that comes as a gift from God accepted in faith. While “faith” in Romans can certainly have a propositional content (Romans 10:8–13), it is more a stance of fidelity, imitating the fidelity of Jesus. While Paul was hardly bound to a wooden use of his language, the formulation here sounds as if it is an adaptation of Pauline vocabulary with a slightly different meaning from Paul’s characteristic usage.

Our author holds on to the core hope of Paul’s eschatology, the attaining of “the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.” With that hope in mind, he urges his addressees to “stand firm” (v 15) and hold fast to what he has taught. Here 2 Thessalonians seems to endorse Paul’s earlier correspondence by referring to “our letter.”

The chapter ends with a prayer for comfort and strength (vv 16–17).

Suggestions for Further Reading:

Hanna Roose, “‘A Letter as By Us’: Intentional Ambiguity in 2 Thessalonians 2.2,”

Journal for the Study of the New Testament 29 (2006) 107–24.

Andy Johnson, “Paul’s ‘anti-Christology’ in 2 Thessalonians 2:3–12 in canonical context,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 8 (2014) 125–43.

Questions for Discussion:

1. The author of 2 Thessalonians seems to be engaged in a reinterpretation of early Christian hope and expectation. If this is so, what are the implications for your understanding of what Scripture does?
2. Do the images for eschatological conflict used in 2 Thessalonians play any role in your own thinking about Christian hope? Do you see any correlation between them and what other passages of the New Testament say on the topic?
3. The framing of eschatological hope in this letter seems to pay special attention to issues of community coherence. In the process those who disagree seem to be demonized as agents of an inimical spiritual power. Does the letter reflect a tendency in all situations of disagreement that we should be aware of? Are there ways in which Christians should frame their disagreements with others?
4. Does the language of “sanctification,” used for what happens within the life of the community, resonate with contemporary Christians? What does it suggest to you? And what are its practical implications?