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Karl P. Donfried and I. Howard Marshall

Excerpt

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The theology of 1 Thessalonians

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Note on the biblical translations

Most of the translations of texts from 1 and 2 Thessalonians are from the RSV. In some cases the NRSV has been used, and some translations are the author's.

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CHAPTER 1

The setting of 1 Thessalonians

THE RHETORICAL STRUCTURE

It is a major contention of this analysis that an awareness of the social situation in Thessalonica and a consideration of the structure of the letter itself will greatly assist the task of understanding the theology of 1 Thessalonians. The structure of a letter can be analysed by employing the methodologies commonly referred to as form and rhetorical criticism, analytical tools that can help determine Paul's intentions in writing this letter. The former, i.e., form-critical epistolography, explains how parts of letters are constructed; the latter, i.e., Graeco-Roman rhetorical criticism, allows us to see more vividly why the letter is constructed the way it is as well as giving us further insight into the lived situation of the letter.¹ Nevertheless, we need to be careful not to impose existing form-critical and rhetorical categories on 1 Thessalonians, especially when we are alert to the fact that this letter is a first attempt in Christian letter writing.

Theology, structure and social situation are closely interwoven in 1 Thessalonians and other Pauline letters. Thus rhetorical criticism can, by using its analytical tools, alert us not only to distinct emphases in a given letter but also to certain dimensions in the rhetorical situation, which give suggestions about the larger social situation that might otherwise have been overlooked. To recognise, for example, which of the

¹ For a further discussion see Frank Witt Hughes, *Early Christian Rhetoric and 2 Thessalonians*, *JSNTSup* 30 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 19–50; and Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986).

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three types (*genera*) of rhetoric – deliberative, judicial or epideictic – a document is employing already gives important clues to its social situation as well as its intention. Although there may be overlap between these *genera*, the time reference for deliberative rhetoric is the future, the appropriate time for epideictic rhetoric is primarily the present, though often with reference to both the past and the future, and the temporal framework for judicial rhetoric is the past. To be precise in identifying the different types of rhetoric, it is critical to note the standard topics that are common to each. For epideictic rhetoric these are primarily praise (e.g., 1 Thess. 2:1–12) and blame (e.g., 1 Thess. 2:14–16) and in deliberative rhetoric these standard topics are advantage and honour, viz., that which is expedient and/or harmful to the intended recipients. Thus the identification of these and other ‘strategies of persuasion’ will allow us to gain ‘greater understanding of the author, the audience, and the author’s purpose in communicating with the audience’.²

Understanding 1 Thessalonians as an epideictic letter allows for some significant conclusions about both what Paul intended and what he did not intend to communicate. On the one hand, recognising 1 Thessalonians as belonging to the epideictic *genus* of rhetoric – i.e., one emphasising praise and, to a lesser degree, blame – allows us to see that the Thessalonian Christians have become the object of Paul’s praise. Hughes summarises the matter well:

The heaping on of praise is something that Paul does, primarily because it reinforces the good relationship between Paul and the Thessalonians that had existed for some time – though the relationship was seriously troubled by Paul’s non-presence in Thessaloniki during the congregation’s recent difficult time, characterized by the deaths of beloved people in the congregation. Paul’s persuasive response to that bereaved congregation is to praise their faithfulness and love, to explain in an affective manner the reasons for his non-presence in Thessaloniki (2:17–3:10), to confirm teaching that

² Frank Witt Hughes, ‘The Social Situations Implied by Rhetoric’ (an unpublished paper presented to the *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas* Seminar on New Testament Texts in their Cultural Environment, July 1991), 5.

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he had already made (the first two proofs: 4:1–8 and 4:9–12), and to add teaching that he had not done before (such as the material in 4:13–5:3), which is not claimed to be prior teaching but rather revelation through a ‘word of the Lord’ (4:15). The fact that Paul did all those things, tying them together quite skillfully by the triad of virtues in 1:3, the listing of the *propositiones* in the *partitio* (3:11–13), and their careful and subtle recapitulation in the *peroratio* (5:4–11), seems to indicate that Paul either learned rhetoric in school or had quite a gift for rhetoric, sensing the appropriateness of the rules to his letter even without formally learning them.³

On the other hand, since 1 Thess. 2:1–12 does not contain any explicit and sustained charges against Paul it can be determined that this letter cannot be categorised as belonging to the judicial *genus* of rhetoric. In judicial rhetoric such charges would have to be taken up and defended in the *probatio* (proof). While 1 Thess. 2:1–12 may possibly suggest that some doubts about Paul’s motivation had arisen among some in Thessalonica, certainly one cannot, as a result, conclude that Paul is arguing against opponents in this letter.

Although Graeco-Roman rhetorical theory does not focus significantly on letters, the actual practice of rhetoric did include letters. Therefore one can speak of a ‘rhetorical letter’ and, perhaps, add that in terms of epistolary genre 1 Thessalonians approximates, but is not identical with, ancient letters of consolation. In terms of rhetorical *genus* there is a clear connection with epideictic rhetoric. Not unimportant for this particular linkage is the fact that among the two most important categories of the epideictic *genus* of rhetoric is the funeral speech (*epitaphios*) and consolatory speech (*paramythetikos*). Paul’s intention in writing 1 Thessalonians is to console a Christian community suffering the effects of persecution and death, to encourage the discouraged.

What follows is an abridgement and slight modification of the rhetorical structure of 1 Thessalonians proposed by Frank Witt Hughes.⁴

³ Ibid., 13–14.

⁴ Frank Witt Hughes, ‘The Rhetoric of 1 Thessalonians’, in *The Thessalonian Correspondence*, ed. Raymond F. Collins, *BETL* 87 (Leuven: University Press, 1990), 94–116.

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- I *Exordium* (introduction) (1:1–10)
 - A epistolary prescript (1:1)
 - B thanksgiving prayer (1:2–10)
- II *Narratio* (narrative⁵) (2:1–3:10)
 - A introduction to *narratio* (address) (2:1)
 - B a description of Paul's first visit to the Thessalonians (2:1–16)
 - C Paul's desire for a second visit (2:17–3:10)
- III *Partitio* (Statement of propositions⁶) (stated as an intercessory prayer; 3:11–13)
 - A first petition (transition from *narratio*): the topic of Paul's desired journey to the Thessalonians (3:11)
 - B second petition: the topics of the three-part *probatio* introduced (3:12–13)
 - 1 first topic: 'increase in love' (3:12–13)
 - 2 second and third topics: 'being preserved at the Parousia' (3:13)
 - a second topic; 'to establish your hearts blameless in holiness'
 - b third topic: 'at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints'
- IV *Probatio* (proof) (4:1–5:3)
 - A first proof: 'how it is necessary to walk and to please God' (4:1–8)
 - B second proof: 'concerning brotherly love' (4:9–12)
 - C third proof: 'concerning those who have fallen asleep' (4:13–5:3)
- V *Peroratio* (epilogue) (5:4–11)
 - A transition from previous section (5:4)
 - B honorific description of Thessalonians (5:5)
 - C first consequence of description: wakefulness (5:6)
 - D reasons for consequence: association of sleeping and drunkenness with night (5:7)

⁵ Cicero in *De inventione* 1.27 defines the *narratio* in this way: 'The narrative is an exposition of events that have occurred or are supposed to have occurred.' Quintilian in *Institutio oratoria* 4.2.31 states that the *narratio* 'consists in the persuasive exposition of that which either has been done, or is supposed to have been done ...'

⁶ In the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 1.17 it is explained that this exposition or statement of propositions 'consists in setting forth briefly and completely, the points we intend to discuss'.

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E second consequence of argument: preparation for action (5:8–10)

F third consequence of argument: console one another (5:11)

VI Exhortation⁷ (5:12–22)

A introduction of exhortation (5:12)

B first exhortation: concerning church order (5:12)

C second exhortation: concerning church discipline (5:14–22)

VII Final prayers and greetings (epistolary conclusion) (5:23–8)

A intercessory prayer (5:23–4)

B a request for prayer (5:25)

C final greetings (5:26–7)

D final prayer (5:28)

The implications of these brief introductory remarks and of this rhetorical outline will be shown at several points as our study of the theology of 1 Thessalonians unfolds.

PLACE AND DATE OF WRITING

Place

Having been alerted to the rhetorical and epistolary classification of 1 Thessalonians, it is now appropriate to ask whether we have any knowledge as to the place of writing and Paul's own situation as he writes this letter.

To glean information about where and when 1 Thessalonians was written is not as uncomplicated as one might initially think. The clues found in 1 Thessalonians are few and do not always coincide with the information provided by Acts. Was this letter written in Athens, Corinth or elsewhere? According to Acts 17 Paul went to Athens from Beroea while Silas and Timothy remained in Beroea. The next reference to these Pauline co-workers is found in Acts 18:5, at which point Silas

⁷ The descriptors of Categories VI and VII are left in English because they are not a usual *pars orationis* of the Graeco-Roman rhetorical handbook tradition. See further Hughes, *Early Christian Rhetoric*, 63–4.

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and Timothy have arrived in Corinth from Macedonia. The point of tension between the Acts account and that found in 1 Thess. 3:1–3 is that Acts makes no reference to Timothy having been in Athens, which is the common way to understand the meaning of 1 Thess. 3:1–3: ‘Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind in Athens alone, and we sent Timothy.’

One’s perception of the accuracy of Acts plays an important role in relating these differing accounts. We hold that the theological framework in Acts is secondary but that there may well be some highly accurate kernels of information throughout Luke’s second volume. Since we reject a radically critical or fundamentalist reading of Acts, it should be clear that we are not involved in any special pleading for its accuracy which would necessitate a forced reconciliation of the two accounts. But the apparent tension between the two descriptions does raise the questions of how one is to interpret Paul’s assertions in 1 Thess. 3:1–3 and whether the accounts in 1 Thessalonians and Acts may be understood in a non-contradictory way.

The syntactical location of the phrase ‘in Athens’ is important for the understanding of Paul’s argument in 1 Thess. 3:1ff. The reference to Athens is hardly meant to indicate either the place where 1 Thessalonians was written nor the place where the decision was made about sending Timothy to Thessalonica. The older view that Paul was writing in a city other than Athens is essentially correct. Otherwise would he not have written ‘to be left *here* alone’ instead of ‘to be left in Athens alone’? Rather, Athens is the place where Paul ‘decided to stay on *alone*’. The motif ‘alone’ is critical to the argument: being left alone in a strange environment without his circle of co-workers was certainly a hardship for Paul. This is the crucial point that Paul makes. As a result we would conclude that, according to both sources, Timothy was never in Athens and that it is an error to read 1 Thess. 3:1 in such a way. Similarly, to suggest that this letter is being written from Athens assumes a strained reading of this same text. Paul is writing 1 Thessalonians in the presence of Silvanus and Timothy who have

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returned from Thessalonica, a fact suggested by the opening sender formula (1:1) and, according to Acts 18:1, 5, the most likely place for this gathering is in Corinth. In 1 Thess. 3:7, Paul describes his own situation, presumably in Corinth, as one marked by 'distress and affliction'. Timothy's return to Corinth and his reunion with Paul with the good news of the faith and love of the Thessalonian Christians has brought 'comfort' and 'joy' to the Apostle's otherwise fragile situation. This mutuality, a feature so apparent from the rhetorical character of 1 Thessalonians, is expressively attested to here in 1 Thess. 3:6–10. As he intends to comfort and bring consolation to them by composing this letter, so here they have conveyed their comfort and consolation to him through his co-worker Timothy.

Date

When did Paul write 1 Thessalonians? To answer this question requires some discussion of the issues involved in determining the parameters of Pauline chronology. With regard to methodology, we acknowledge, with most scholars today, that there are essentially only two sources for our knowledge of the Pauline period: the letters of the Apostle himself and the events recorded by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. Most New Testament scholars today give priority to the Pauline letters since Paul himself stands closest to the events he records. Further, it is increasingly recognised that Luke, in writing his second volume, reshapes many traditions to cohere with his overall theological purpose just as he does in the composition of the gospel of Luke. As a result, Acts becomes less useful as a source for exact chronological information since much of this information has been subjected to a larger theological programme. While Acts can still remain a valuable source of detailed and accurate information when separated from its programmatic framework it should never be given priority over the documents originating from Paul himself and should only be used when it does not contradict assertions made by the Apostle. Yet, however one views the data, *there can be no*

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absolutely definite chronology of the Pauline period: all attempts must be tentative and subject to correction and revision.

To answer our immediate question as to when 1 Thessalonians was written, we want to accentuate for our consideration just a few items among the broader chronological issues. In Gal. 1:21 the Apostle asserts: 'Then [*epeita*] I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia.' Based on the parallel use in 1 Cor. 15:6 and 7, *epeita* in Gal. 1:21 is likely to refer to the immediately preceding event in v. 18, i.e., Jerusalem. The critical question with regard to this verse in Galatians is not so much the referent of *epeita* in Gal. 1:21, but, rather, how one is to understand the reference to Syria and Cilicia and the length of time spent there. Syria includes Christian centres in Damascus, the place of Paul's conversion, and Antioch, an area where, by Paul's own description, he had worked (Gal. 2:11) and a city extensively referred to in Acts (11:19ff; 13:1, 14; 15:22ff; 18:22). In addition, Cilicia includes Tarsus, which, according to Acts 22:3, is Paul's native city. Is the intention of this reference to suggest that Paul spent some eleven to fourteen years *only* in Syria and Cilicia? Or, given the overall context of Paul's desire to distance himself from Jerusalem, does he merely wish to say that, 'then, after my fifteen-day stay in Jerusalem, I did not stay around that area but I began moving toward Syria and Cilicia' without in any way wishing to suggest that he worked only in that area? *How one interprets this reference to Syria and Cilicia will be crucial for the reconstruction of a chronology of the Pauline period.* For those scholars who understand the reference to Syria and Cilicia as not limiting Paul's activity to these regions, the Apostle may well have been involved in missionary work as far away as Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens and Corinth very early in his career. They would urge that the reference in Phil. 4:15 to 'the beginning of the gospel' refers literally to the beginning of Paul's independent missionary work in Philippi and that 1 Thess. 3:1ff refers to Paul's continuing work during this period in Thessalonica, Athens and Corinth. This interpretation allows for an 'uncrowding' of Paul's missionary work, for the maturing of his apostolic ministry and the development of his theology. Rather than an