

The Second Letter to the Thessalonians

Re-read as Pseudepigraph¹

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to suggest a socio-historical frame of reference within which 2 Thessalonians may have communicated meaningfully with its intended readers. The question of the historical background of 2 Thessalonians is discussed within the context of the question of the letter's authorship. First, the article focuses on the traditional view that Paul was the author and that the delayed parousia was the issue he addressed. Second, the article aims to argue an alternative view: 2 Thessalonians is reread as a pseudepigraph and it is an open question whether the delayed parousia was really the problem the author addressed.

1. INTRODUCTION

Describing the social context of an ancient writing is an historical undertaking. However, every historical investigation is limited to a greater or lesser degree by lack of information. Consequently the historian has to be content with judgements based on degrees of probability. In a sense what is involved is the substantiation of hypotheses by combining information into coherent and acceptable patterns. Therefore, the credibility of historical description also relates to the ability to explain data in terms of the proposed coherent and acceptable patterns so that existing problems of interpretation crystallise more clearly and may possibly be regarded by some scholars as having been solved.

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The purpose of this study is to suggest a new socio-historical frame of reference within which 2 Thessalonians may have communicated meaningfully with its intended readers. Perhaps this will help to lift this New Testament document from its impasse. According to Krodel,² the exegesis of 2 Thessalonians is a hard nut to crack especially on account of the problem of its authorship and a number of other elements which must be seen in the context of the question of authorship. As will be shown, scholars have achieved a large measure of unanimity in regard to the authorship problem.

Besides authorship, the second most common problem in interpreting the letter, according to Townsend,³ is the question of the historical background of 2 Thessalonians. It may probably be stated without contradiction that the description of the nature of the context within which 2 Thessalonians was intended to communicate, and especially the concepts peculiar to this letter, constitutes this letter's major single unsolved exegetical problem inviting elucidation and possible solution.

Traditionally the letter was regarded as sharing the Pauline authorship and historical provenance of 1 Thessalonians. Apart from the structural and verbal correspondence between the letters (see especially 2 Th 3:6-12; but also *inter alia* 2 Th 2:2, 15; 3:14), the eschatology (and in particular the parousia) and the aspect of "idleness" (cf 1 Th 4:11-12; 5:14 with 2 Th 3:6-13) have been regarded as strong points of thematic similarity. Commonly, the problem of believers in Thessalonica abandoning their daily work, becoming busybodies (μηδὲν ἐργαζομένους ἀλλὰ περιεργαζομένους) and over-enthusiastic and adopting a disorderly lifestyle (περιπατοῦντας ἐν ὑμῖν ἀτάκτως, 2 Th 3:6-15) is interpreted against an eschatological backdrop.⁴ The expectation of the imminent parousia has been regarded as the reason for the excessive enthusiasm. The delayed parousia, then, was the cause of confusion. As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, Lütgert wrote of the *traditional eschatology*, with specific reference to

² G Krodel, "2 Thessalonians," in G Krodel (ed), *Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thess., The Pastoral Epistles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 73-96: 74

³ J T Townsend, "II Thessalonians 2:3-12," in P J Achtemeier (ed), *SBL Seminar Papers* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1980), 233-247:233.

⁴ E Von Dobschütz, *The Thessalonicher-Briefe*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1909; reprint 1974), 174-183; E Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: Black, 1972), 176-178; F F Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Waco: Word Books, 1982), 90-91, 204-209.

1 and 2 Thessalonians.⁵ But it was precisely because of this traditional view that the interpretation of 2 Thessalonians presented serious problems. It has become increasingly clear that the eschatology of this letter simply cannot be reconciled with that of 1 Thessalonians. This has rendered the traditional explanation of the “idleness” in terms of “over-enthusiasm” extremely problematical. Thus Schmithals aligned himself to the view of Lütgert that 1 Thessalonians represents an early Jewish-Christian gnosticism, while 2 Thessalonians is a post-Pauline adaptation of it.⁶ However, except in the modified form encountered in the work of Willi Marxsen, this view has not achieved general exegetical recognition.

Especially difficult to correlate with the presumed historical background of 1 Thessalonians are: the perspective of 2 Thessalonians in regard to the time and circumstances of the second coming (παρουσία, 2 Th 1:3-12), the role of the figure of the *lawless one / the son of perdition* (ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας / ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας) – the one who proclaims himself to be God in the temple (2 Th 2:3-4) and the person/institution that *restrains* this figure (τὸ κατέχον / ὁ κατέχων) (2 Th 2:6-7) until such time as the parousia comes. And what complicates the problem still further is that it emerges from *inter alia* 2 Thessalonians 2:6 that the nature of the context within which 2 Thessalonians initially communicated was not always so unknown!

2. THE TRADITIONAL VIEW: PAUL AS THE AUTHOR AND THE DELAYED PAROUSIA AS THE PROBLEM

Many influential commentaries, introductions and monographs dealing with 2 Thessalonians assume the position that the letter was written by Paul himself a few months after he wrote the first letter to the Thessalonians.⁷ Thus regarded, 1 and 2 Thessalonians are placed and dated in Corinth in 50/51 CE. If the narrative in Acts is

⁵ W Lütgert, *Die Volkommenen im Philipperbrief und die Enthusiasten in Thessalonich* (Gütersloh: Bertelsman, 1909), 72.

⁶ W Schmithals, *Paul and the Gnostics* (New York: Abingdon, 1972), 159-160; cf W Lütgert, *Philipperbrief*, 547-654.

⁷ Von Dobschütz (supra, n 3); M Dibelius, *An die Thessalonicher I. An die Philipper II* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1925); W G Kümmel, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1967); M H Bolkestein, *De brieven aan de Thessalonicenzen* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1970); Best (supra, n 3); I H Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); R Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

followed in this regard, Paul founded the church in the company of Silas – also called Silvanus (cf 1 Th 1:1) – and Timothy when he visited the city of Thessalonica during the course of his second missionary journey (Ac 17:1-2; 1 Th 2:2).

Thessalonica, which in the time of Paul was already more than three centuries old, was a large seaport, strategically situated on the Roman highway from the Adriatic to the Black Sea. It was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. The city still exists as the modern day Salonica. From Thessalonica Paul visited successively Berea, Athens and Corinth. According to the traditional view, it was during his eighteen-month stay in Corinth (Ac 18:11) that Paul wrote his two letters to the Thessalonians.

With regard to the aim and purpose of the letters to the Thessalonians, the traditional theory is that 1 Thessalonians was written to answer the church's questions about the fate of loved ones who had died and the time of the second coming. According to this view, the motive for the writing of 2 Thessalonians was to correct a misconception regarding the parousia which, despite the first letter, still confused the church in Thessalonica.

A typical application of this point of view is the work of Larondelle.⁸ According to him, Paul had a practical problem in mind in 2 Thessalonians. He wished to combat a heresy. What this heresy amounted to was that the Day of the Lord was thought to have already arrived, or, at any rate, it was so imminent that it might arrive at any moment (2 Th 2:2). This heresy might be the result of a misunderstanding based on Paul's first letter(s) to the Thessalonians (cf the historical-critical problems and a solution such as that proposed by Schmithals), and especially the comment that occurs in 1 Thessalonians 4:17: "then (ἔπειτα) we who are alive, who are left (οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι), shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (ἀπάντησιν τοῦ κυρίου εἰς ἄερα). Larondelle says that this misunderstanding regarding the imminence of the second coming was foreseen by Jesus himself (cf Mt 24:23-24).⁹ In Thessalonica members of the church abandoned their daily work, became busybodies and over-enthusiastic, and began to live disorderly lives. Paul wished to set right these misconceptions by reminding the church of his oral instruction (see 2 Th 2:2-

⁸ H K Larondelle, "Paul's Prophetic Outline in 2 Thessalonians 2," *AUSS* 21 (1983), 61-69.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

9) that the rebellion and the *lawless one/the son of perdition* (ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας / ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας) first (ὁ πρῶτον) had to be revealed in the temple of God (εἰς τὸν ναὸν Θεοῦ, along with his satanic power and pretended signs and wonders (οὗ ἐστὶν ἡ παρουσία κατ' ἐνέργειαν τοῦ σατανᾶ ἐν πασῇ δυνάμει καὶ σημείοις καὶ τέρασι ψεύδους) (2 Th 2:9), and that *only then* (καὶ τότε) the Lord Jesus (ὁ Κύριος Ἰησοῦς) would destroy the lawless one with the breath of his mouth at the epiphany of his parousia (τῇ ἐπιφανείᾳ τῆς παρουσίας) (2 Th 2:8). In the meanwhile “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work” (τὸ γὰρ μυστήριον ἤδη ἐνεργεῖται τῆς ἀνομίας,) 2 Th 2:6-7 but is restrained by *something* (τὸ κατέχον, 2 Th 2:6) or *someone* (ὁ κατέχων, 2 Th 2:7).

According to Larondelle, Paul considered it essential that his readers should understand the sequence of events in order to correct the faulty conception leading to their mistaken hope and moral disorder.¹⁰ Larondelle therefore points out the connection between the teaching of Jesus and that of Paul in this regard.¹¹ In Mark 13:14 Jesus refers to the future *desecrating sacrilege* (τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως ἐσθηκοτα) which, according to Larondelle, must be understood as grammatically masculine); and in Matthew 24:15 Jesus says that this sacrilege will stand in the temple, the *holy place* (ἕστος ἐν τόπῳ ἁγίῳ). This “figure” and its activity is regarded by many as referring to the desecration of the temple by the same apocalyptic opponent called the *ἀντίχριστος* in 1 John 2:18. Larondelle is of the opinion that Paul’s comments in 2 Thessalonians 2 should be seen as merely a brief summary of more extensive teaching.¹² This is why Paul reminds the church of his previous oral instruction (2 Th 2:5, 15). He derives his description of the “antichrist” from a conflation of three Old Testament “revelations” with regard to the “anti-messiah:”¹³ the historical appearance and desecrating action of the “anti-messiah” in Daniel 7:25; 8:10-13; 11:36-37; the demonic nature of the self-exaltation and self-apotheosis of the kings of Tyre and Babylon in Ezekiel 28:2,

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 62.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid; cf R Bratcher, *Luke-Acts and the Jews* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), 55.

6, 9; Isaiah 14:13-14; the final destruction of “the wicked” on the strength of the epiphany of the royal messiah in Isaiah 11:4.

In Daniel 7:6 reference is made to *first* the (third) beast (with four heads and four wings), to which dominion is given, and *then* (Dn 7:7) there is the (fourth) beast (with ten horns and a little horn that came up amongst them) which is destructive. Larondelle thinks Paul uses this passage analogistically when he refers in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7 to that which restrains “the mystery of lawlessness [which] is already at work:” “the restrainer, who hinders the development of the antichrist.”¹⁴ According to Larondelle, Paul saw the “lawful government” of the Roman emperors as that which restrained the emergence of the dominion of the intolerant “antichrist.” There may be a connection between such a conception on the part of Paul and the references in Acts 18:12-16 and 22:22-29 (cf also Rm 13:4) that he was protected by the Roman authorities against the anger of the Jewish mob. There are also a number of references in the Patristics to the view that the civil authority of the Roman empire, headed by the emperor, was the τὸ κατέχον / ὁ κατέχων referred to in 2 Thessalonians¹⁵ Thus regarded, the ultimate revelation of “the mystery of lawlessness,” already at work in the time of Paul (ἤδη ἐνεργεῖται, 2 Th 2:7), would only take place after the Roman empire had disappeared from the scene.¹⁶

In Ezekiel 28:2, 12, 14, 15 reference is made to the king of Tyre who blasphemously exalts himself. Initially the king enjoyed the status of an anointed cherub of Yahweh in primal splendour and purity. In Isaiah 14:12-14 a similar delusion of self-apotheosis is attributed to the king of Babylon. These references must be understood in the context of the oracles against Tyre and Babylon.

As in Daniel 8 and 11:36, the contemporary enemy of God and his people is localised as being in the temple. This is precisely what we find in the “prophetic discourse” of Jesus recorded in Matthew 24:15, as well as in 2 Thessalonians 2:4. There are exegetes who base themselves on Isaiah 14:13-14 and 66:1 and contend that the term

¹⁴ Larondelle, 64.

¹⁵ J T Forestell, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (Englewood Cliffs, N J: Prentice Hall, 1968), 234.

¹⁶ Larondelle, 65.

“temple” in 2 Thessalonians 2:4 does not so much refer to the physical building in Jerusalem, but rather relates symbolically to God’s throne in heaven. Larondelle thinks that the “lawless one” wanted to take God’s place and that what it amounts to is that he demanded to be worshipped instead of God.¹⁷ According to Larondelle it is not necessary to decide between an earthly or a heavenly temple. What is at issue is not the distinction as such between the qualifications “earthly” and “heavenly,” but rather whether or not God is worshipped in truth.¹⁸ Structurally and thematically the reference in Daniel 8:9-13 and 11:31-45 to the “Awful Horror” relates to a king or a kingdom that attacks the holy ones of God by forcibly entering the holy land, the city and the temple, destroying the sacred temple cult and trampling God’s worshippers under foot. But worse is to come. The “destroyer” will set up a false representation of a cultic system of worship to usurp God’s place. What it means, in effect, is a blasphemous abomination, for the only road to salvation for humankind is within the framework of God’s holy covenant with humankind (cf Dn 8:11-13; 11:31; 12:11). This “rebellion” (“conscious sin” עֲשֵׂה) of the anti-messiah is described in Daniel 8:11 as a struggle against the “Prince of the host,” and in Daniel 8:25 as against the “Prince of princes,” his sanctuary (Dn 8:13) and his reconciling cult (cf the reference to the expression “continual burnt offering” in Dn 8:11).

Generally the references in Daniel 11:31-39 are historically linked to the actions of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 168 BCE. According to 1 Maccabees 1:57 he had a pagan altar set up in the place of the altar of burnt offering and presumably had a statue of Olympian Zeus erected on it. We know that the Roman emperor Caligula (= Gaius) issued an order in 40 CE that a statue of himself was to be erected in the temple in Jerusalem, but that he was murdered before his order could be carried out. According to Larondelle,¹⁹ Jesus’ words in the “prophetic discourse” of Matthew 24:15 and Mark 13:14 attest to an application of the “desolating sacrilege” of Daniel to the Roman army who set up their standards, which were objects of worship, in the temple court. However, the references in the Synoptic Gospels should be seen as only partial “fulfillments.” They point further, beyond 70 CE, to the greater, universal, eschatological “Awful Horror” in

¹⁷ Larondelle, 66; also G E Ladd, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 67.

¹⁸ Larondelle, 68.

¹⁹ Larondelle, 67.

the “temple of God” (figuratively understood), to which Paul draws attention in 2 Thessalonians.

Proceeding from the standpoint that 2 Thessalonians was written by Paul in order to answer the problems in the Thessalonian church arising from the misunderstanding regarding the second coming occasioned by his first letter, Mearns makes far more of the action of the Roman emperor Caligula in 40 CE.²⁰ Mearns agrees with A Moore that in 2 Thessalonians Paul is not interested in the chronological sequence of events attending the parousia, but in the circumstances that are necessary before the parousia will occur.²¹ The revelation of the “lawless one” points to the action of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in Daniel, but also to the later parallel figures known to us from the apocalyptic literature. Thus, while the usurpation of God’s place in the temple was prefigured by the action of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 168 BCE, it was also exemplified by Pompey’s entering the Holy of Holies in 63 BCE and, most recently, at the time of writing of 2 Thessalonians, by the Roman emperor Caligula in 40 CE.

According to Mearns,²² then, we have in 2 Thessalonians the same tradition as that encountered in the Markan eschatological discourse. Paul’s reference may therefore be seen as a qualification of a very early authentic tradition regarding the “sudden appearance of the thief in the night.” Attention is drawn to a “program of signs” to be seen as the events which will reportedly precede the “Day of the Lord.” In Mark 13 one of these events is alluded to in the reference to “the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be.” These events are symbolic of the cumulative forces of evil in the end-time. They are events which, according to Paul, must first happen, and therefore the Thessalonians must not become over-enthusiastic with regard to an imminent expectation of the Day of the Lord. According to Mearns, one must interpret 2 Thessalonians as representing the second of three phases in the apocalyptic development within Pauline thinking. In 2 Thessalonians it relates to the events surrounding Caligula in 40 CE.

²⁰ C L Mearns, “Early Eschatological Development in Paul: The Evidence of I and II Thessalonians,” *NTS* 27 (1981), 137-157.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 153; cf A L Moore, *The Parousia in the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 175-177.

²² *Ibid.*, 153.

Like Larondelle, Mearns interprets 2 Thessalonians 2:5 as referring to Paul's oral instruction.²³ According to him Caligula had, as a result of his provocative intentions, stirred apocalyptic expectations even before this instruction was given. At this stage Paul did not link Caligula's actions with the second coming of Jesus. Neither should the τὸ κατέχον of 2 Thessalonians 2:6 be understood as referring to Paul's mission to the gentiles, as Cullmann claimed.²⁴ (In this view ὁ κατέχων refers to Paul himself and τὸ κατέχον to his missionary task.) The problem here is that Paul says that "he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way" (ἐκ μέσου γένηται), but Paul believed that he would still be alive when the parousia happened. For Giblin the τὸ κατέχον refers to a pseudo-charismatic force of pagan origin.²⁵ He bases this view on the contention that κατεχόμενος is a standard term for one who, in the context of Dionysiac ecstasy, is possessed by the deity. Best (1972:299) raises six objections to this, in one of which he is supported by Mearns, namely that this reduces the "restrainer" to a local false prophet at Thessalonica whose disappearance would relate merely to a local eschatological situation and have no universal significance with regard to the sequence of final events.

In common with Larondelle, and basing himself on Tertullian and other Patristic commentators, Mearns believes that the "restrainer" relates to Paul's somewhat ambivalent attitude towards the Roman authorities.²⁶ From the perspective of the Roman empire, the "preserver of law and order," it is possible the government could be the "restrainer," particularly with regard to the reign of Claudius (41-54 CE). The expression "he who restrains" may be a play on the name *Claudius*, who as *claudens* is the one who closes.

²³ Ibid, 155.

²⁴ O Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (London: S C M, 1971), 164-166.

²⁵ C H Giblin, *The Threat to Faith: An Exegetical and Theological Re-examination of II Thessalonians* (Rome: Pontifical Institute, 1967), 167-169.

²⁶ Mearns (supra, n 19), 155.

Mearns finds the objection adduced by Best against this viewpoint unconvincing.²⁷ Best's contention is that the tone of 2 Thessalonians 2 is inconsistent with the identification of anything or anybody in it with historical events, forces or characters. Nowhere in other apocalyptic literature do we encounter the idea of Rome as a restraining force. Rather Revelation 17 indicates that Rome should be seen as the enemy of the people of God. Mearns answers this criticism by saying that hostility to Rome from the side of Christians dated from the Neronian persecution.²⁸ Therefore the "mystery of lawlessness" must be seen as referring to the Roman empire on account of the ambivalent attitude that, besides being the preserver of order, it carried within itself the inherent possibility of being a persecutor and a tyrant. It was precisely such an eruption of evil under Caligula that brought about a great crisis. This, we might say, was fortunately averted by the assassination of Caligula. For a while this evil was dormant but, in terms of Paul's expectation in 2 Thessalonians, it would reappear with the removal of the "restrainer" (= Claudius). Precisely what was expected happened during the reign of Claudius' successor, Nero (54-68 CE). According to Mearns, Paul, awaiting his imperial trial in Rome, probably lived to see the fulfilment of his prophetic prevision. He presumably died a martyr's death in the Neronian persecutions.²⁹

Christians did not regard the Old Testament's dramatic prophecies of divine epiphanies as fulfilled during the lifetime of Jesus. Neither did they do so at the time when the resurrection faith was taking root. It was in the early fifties, with Paul in the vanguard, that Christians, supported by traditions derived from Jewish apocalyptic, began to search for passages on the surface of the Old Testament to legitimise their hope of fulfilment at the time of the Lord's parousia.

An important development in the traditional debate on the nature of the "idleness" associated with the eschatological problems of 1 and 2 Thessalonians was signalled by

²⁷ Best (*supra*, n 3), 296.

²⁸ Mearns, 155.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 156.

the contributions of R Russell and B W Winter.³⁰ According to Russell, it is an exegetical error to interpret historical phenomena from the perspective of purely theological structures.³¹ He refers to Bengt Holmberg's social-scientific study of the aspect of "conflict" in the Pauline letters, in which Holmberg notes the importance for interpretation of the interaction between "the world of ideas" and "social structures."³² *Redaktionsgeschichte*, with its emphasis on a writing's *Sitz im Leben*, already pointed in this direction. With regard to the Corpus Paulinum, the works of *inter alia* Theissen and Hock are well-known for their socio-historical descriptions of early Christianity.³³

Specifically with reference to 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Hock interprets the aspect of "idleness" as a paraenetic topos of common occurrence in Hellenistic literature.³⁴ Dio Chrisostomos provides the example of the moral philosopher warning the "idler" to exercise a suitable profession, and in Lucian we have a moral philosopher's advice as to a suitable occupation for a free man who has just finished gymnasium. Bradley, on the other hand, contends that we have to do here with paraenesis in general, without necessary reference to any prevailing problem.³⁵ For Malherbe, the paraenetic topos operative in 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12 is that of "love" and "quietism."³⁶ Against the background of Greek Epicurean philosophy, Paul seeks to prevent the Thessalonians from manifesting the same kind of social attitude as the Epicureans, which consists in withdrawing from public life, living off others, being indifferent to social progress and seeking happiness only within the limits of the Epicurean community. A very general view with regard to

³⁰ R Russell, "The Idle in 2 Thess 3:6-12: An Eschatological Problem," *NTS* 34 (1988), 105-119; B W Winter, "If a Man Does not Wish to Work ...: A Cultural and Historical Setting for 2 Thessalonians 3:6-16," *TynB* 40 (1989), 303-315.

³¹ Russell, 105.

³² B Holmberg, *Paul and Power: The Structure of Authority in the Primitive Church as Reflected in the Pauline Epistles* (Lund: Gleerup, 1978), 205.

³³ G Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1982); R Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

³⁴ Hock, 42-47.

³⁵ D Bradley, "The Topoi as a Form in the Pauline Paraenesis," *JBL* 72 (1953), 238-246.

³⁶ A Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*. Philadelphia: Fortress, (1983), 24-27; also *idem*. "'Gentle as A Nurse': The Cynic Background to 1 Thess ii," *NT* 12 (1970), 203-217; and "Exhortation in First Thessalonians," *NT* 25 (1983), 238-256.

the interpretation of the social background of the reference to "idleness" in 1 and 2 Thessalonians is that it may be explained in the context of the Greek and Roman disdain for manual labour.³⁷ Kaye also suggested that the "disorderliness" in Thessalonica definitely related to social problems, but he did not expand on this point of view.³⁸

According to Russell, Paul's paraenesis in 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, and particularly 1 Thessalonians 5:1, with regard to "idleness," serves as a basis for a detailed elaboration in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13: the purpose of the call to mutual love, living in quietness, going about one's own business and working with one's hands is that "outsiders might approve the believers' social responsibility."³⁹ Instead of translating the word ἄτακτος, which occurs in the New Testament only in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 7, 11, as "idler" ("to be idle," "to live in idleness"), Russell, with an appeal to Philo, Josephus and the papyri, would render it "to be disorderly": "ἀνόμως means 'without law and order'" (Jos Ap. 2.151). According to Russell,⁴⁰ the ἄτακτοι in the Thessalonian church were a group who were not merely lazy,⁴¹ or unemployed (ἀργός in 1 Tm 5:13; Tt 1:12; Mt 20:3, 6), but who would not work (οὐ θέλει ἐργάζεσθαι, 2 Th 3:10) and would not accept the order within the church but also outside it in the wider community. Consequently, they impoverished themselves. Church members with the means who had grown weary of doing good (2 Th 3:13; cf 2 Th 3:7-8) must have been burdened with the responsibility of caring for the "disorderly." In Russell's view, however, the reason for this "disorderly" lifestyle must be sought not in over-enthusiasm with regard to the expectation of the Lord's imminent parousia (2 Th 2:3) or concern about the fate of those who had already died when the parousia came (1 Th 4:13-18) and about when it would happen (1 Th. 5:1-11) – "whatever encouraged this

³⁷ See, *inter alia*, W Bienert, *Die Arbeit nach der Lehre der Bibel: Eine Grundlegung evangelischer Socioethik*. Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1954), 213; Marshall (*supra*, n 6), 223.

³⁸ B N Kaye, "Eschatology and Ethics in 1 and 2 Thess.," *NT 17* (1975), 147-157: 157.

³⁹ Russell (*supra*, n 29), 105.

⁴⁰ Russell, 108.

⁴¹ Contra W Trilling, *Der zweite Brief an die Thessalonicher* (Zürich: Benziger, 1980), 144.

behaviour preceded these eschatological problems because disorderly behaviour existed from the beginning."⁴²

The main thrust of Paul's exhortation to the "disorderly" is "to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living" (μετὰ ἡσυχίας ἐργαζόμενοι τὸν ἑαυτῶν ἄρτον ἐσθίωσιν, 2 Th 3:12). In Russell's view, the purpose of this demand was that believers, on the one hand, should not offend against the pagan conception of civic order (cf the expression περιπατήτε εὐσχημόνως πρὸς τοὺς ἕξω in 1 Th. 4:12), and, on the other, should be independent in respect of material goods. The word used here, ἡσυχάζω to "live quietly") stands in a certain tradition of Greek philosophy. In this context it may refer to the "rest" a philosopher seeks when he withdraws from public life in order to devote himself to study (Plato *Resp.* 6.496D; Cass *Dio* 60.27).

So, the "quietism" to which Paul called the "disorderly" did not involve idleness, but work (1 Th 4:1; 2 Th 3:11). Apart from the fact that there was a disdain for manual labour among the Greeks and Romans, the Graeco-Roman aristocracy also held the view that the life of an artisan, for example, was dependent on the care of others and therefore could not be free and self-sufficient.⁴³ And yet there were members of the aristocracy who were on occasion compelled by exile or other financial need to abandon the life of a philosopher or a politician and perform manual labour. For this reason most aristocrats attached some sort of value especially to farm work.⁴⁴ This is not to deny that manual labour was regarded as slave labour. In the Pauline churches, however, there were not many from the aristocracy; most members worked with their hands.

It would therefore seem that the problem of "disorderliness" in Thessalonica relates to the situation of relatively poor people in a Hellenistic city. In the average Hellenistic city, people had limited means, and this would also have applied to a seaport

⁴² Russell, 108.

⁴³ Russell, 112.

⁴⁴ See C Mosse, *The Ancient World of Work* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), 25-30; M Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), 35-61; Hock (supra, n 32), 42-49; Malherbe (supra, n 35), 24-26.

like Thessalonica. "Idleness" was therefore a common occurrence.⁴⁵ Russell holds that in the case of Thessalonica, for example, one should think in terms of artisans who worked hard but were still dependent on the Roman "bread and circuses" ceremonies at which corn and oil were occasionally doled out.⁴⁶ In the cities such people often organised themselves into "coalitions" in order to win social advantage and respect on the strength of their numbers or, at least, to be able to claim "burial insurance."⁴⁷ A relationship could also develop between a "client" and a "patron." In the reciprocity of this relationship the patron would provide protection, care, money and food in exchange for the honour given him by the client.⁴⁸

In the ranks of the early Christians in the Pauline churches there were then the urban poor, some of whom may have been unemployed and others of whom may have found themselves in a sort of patron-client relationship. Once they were drawn into the circle of the Christian community, these believers would most probably have seemed to outsiders like "disorderly beggars," parasitising on the charity of the Christian church without any sense of reciprocal action towards their new benefactors. In this regard, Russell refers to a maxim of Seneca condemning such an ungrateful response: "He who does not repay a benefit sins" (Seneca *Ben* 1.1.13).⁴⁹ This is strongly reminiscent of 2 Thessalonians 3:10: "If anyone will not work, let him not eat." Over against Marxsen,⁵⁰ who is of the opinion that the reference to work in 2 Thessalonians should be seen as a vestige of the "Pauline tradition" to which the author harks back, Russell argues that we

⁴⁵ Cf M Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World, II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), 1126-1127.

⁴⁶ Russell (*supra*, n 29), 112.

⁴⁷ Cf also R MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 57-87.

⁴⁸ Cf also Hock (*supra*, n 32), 53-55; S Mott, "The Power of Giving and Receiving: Reciprocity in Hellenistic Benevolence," in G F Hawthorne (ed), *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation: Studies in Honor of Merrill C Tenney* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 60-72; S K Stowers, "Social status, Public Speaking and Private Teaching: The Circumstances of Paul's Preaching Activity," *NT* 26 (1984), 59-82: 71.

⁴⁹ Russell (*supra*, n 29), 113.

⁵⁰ W Marxsen, *Der zweite Thessalonicherbrief* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1982), 98-101.

are dealing here not with a literary tradition, but with aspects of the social context of the early Christians. His description of the situation is summarised as follows:⁵¹

If Pauline churches are composed primarily of believers from a lower social position (the poor, slaves, artisans, freedmen) with a minority from higher social levels in positions of leadership, then the idleness is more likely expressed by believers who are manual labourers from a lower social class. Paul urges these idle poor, caught up as beneficiaries of Christian love, to work, being self-sufficient and constructive in their relationship with others.

In his contribution, Winter ties in directly with the work of Russell and builds especially on the possible patron-client relationship which, according to him, too, was at the root of the problems in the social context of the Thessalonian church.⁵² In discussing this social interaction, Winter makes much use of the concept of *providentia*, to which a patron was obligated in respect of the needy. He links this historically to the year 51 CE, to which Tacitus (*An* 12.43) referred as a “terrible year” on account of earthquakes, the shortage of corn and the resultant famine.⁵³ In this regard, Tacitus referred to the suffering of “the poor” in consequence of the miseries that occurred in this year. He says that some people at that time saw it all as a “supernatural portent.” According to Winter, Thessalonica did not escape these disasters. Against this background, Winter differs from Russell by postulating that the patrons in the case of the Thessalonians must be seen not as benefactors within the church. The essence of the problem is precisely the fact that the believers who had left their past behind and become members of a new community sometimes broke off their relationship with their previous benefactors and sometimes did not. Both courses of action led to “disorderly” consequences.

Winter points out that the essence of the patron-client relationship consisted in the convention of “give and take.”⁵⁴ A benefaction by a patron created a chain of obligations: “The beneficiary had an obligation to respond to the gift with gratitude; his

⁵¹ Russell, 113.

⁵² Winter (*supra*, n 29).

⁵³ Cf Winter, 309.

⁵⁴ Winter, 306.

expression of gratitude then placed the original benefactor under the obligation to do something further.”⁵⁵ One of the obligations that clients had to fulfil towards a patron was to attend the ceremony of “morning greeting” (*salutatio*) at the home of the patron, in exchange for which they received their “day’s bread.” Part of the compulsory loyalty a client had to show towards a patron was the promotion of the benefactor’s interests in the πολιτεία.

There are sufficient indications in the New Testament to support the conclusion that some of these patrons became Christians.⁵⁶ These wealthy people would, however, retain their obligations to their pagan clients. Equally, the converse was true: clients who became Christians would be under obligation to remain loyal to their pagan patrons. In 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14 Paul admonishes his readers to shun anyone “living in idleness.” This probably amounted to not admitting such a person to the communal meal.⁵⁷ Whether food was received from a pagan or a believing patron, “idleness,” as Russell shows, entailed “disorderly” conduct. But, going beyond Russell, it is clearly not just a question of the relationships of church members among themselves. According to Winter, it may be understood as a reference to the activity that was expected of a client in promoting the interests of his patron in the πολιτεία.⁵⁸

Winter contends that Paul did not want to see his converts responsible for an uproar in Thessalonica, especially in the light of the fact that, despite the good offices of Jason (Ac 17:8), he himself had to leave the city in such a hurry. However, the avoidance of civil unrest was not the most important of Paul’s concerns. “His concerns are far wider because of the ongoing commitment of Christians to benefactions.”⁵⁹ According to Winter, Paul urges the members of the Thessalonian church to be self-sufficient, no longer dependent on their previous pagan patrons. People who still live off outsiders

⁵⁵ Mott (*supra*, n 47), 63.

⁵⁶ Cf Winter (*supra*, n 29), 306-307

⁵⁷ Cf also Russell, 115; Best (*supra*, n 3), 336; G Forkman, *The Limits of the Religious Community* (Lund: Gleerup, 1972), 135.

⁵⁸ Winter, 313.

⁵⁹ Winter, 314.

must not be admitted to the meals in house churches, so that as a result of their isolation they will become “ashamed” (2 Th 3:14). But Paul does expect of the believing patrons that they will care for those who have become Christians and turned their backs on the pagan world (cf 1 Th 1:9), but who are still dependent on the benefactions of those who have the means to help. At the same time, this ensures the maintenance of civic order. But those who are cared for in this way must know that the situation has changed. While it was not a disgrace in the life outside the church to be “idle” and dependent on a benefactor, believers are expected to follow Paul’s personal example, to be self-supporting and not to live off others. He who does not work cannot simply assume that a believing “benefactor” will take care of him.⁶⁰ “Give and take” is the essence of any reciprocity, also that of the Christian community.

2.1 Summary

There has therefore been an interesting development in the traditional view that the immediate cause for the writing of 2 Thessalonians was the confusion prevalent among the Thessalonian believers in spite of Paul’s first letter to them. The political and economic situation has been the focus of increasingly serious attention in the search for the solution to the exegetical problems in the letter. At first only the Roman government came into consideration as it was associated with both the τὸ κατέχων / ὁ κατέχων and the / ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας / ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας. Later, cultural-anthropological insights into the Mediterranean system of “give and take” in patron-client relationships were applied to help to elucidate the problem of “civic disorder,” to which there is reference in 2 Thessalonians. To date, however, this social-scientific approach has not been brought to bear either on the problem of the identity of the “lawless” figure/institution and of the institution/figure that restrains him or on the imminent eschatological expectation which is also a feature of 2 Thessalonians. A meaningful linkage between, on the one hand, the conduct of the “disorderly” and this enigmatic figure and, on the other hand, the Lord’s parousia will greatly advance the credibility of the insights in the fragments of investigation referred to.

⁶⁰ Winter, 315.

Furthermore the problem of the authorship of 2 Thessalonians is not something that can be left out of account in an investigation into the social context of the writing. If Paul was not himself responsible for the writing of 2 Thessalonians, this affects a number of current assumptions with regard to date, addresses, place and immediate purpose. In other words, the traditional account of the historical background of 2 Thessalonians is sharply challenged by exegetes who deny the Pauline authorship of the letter.

3. AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW: 2 THESSALONIANS IS A PSEUDEPIGRAPH, AND IT IS OPEN TO QUESTION WHETHER THE DELAYED PAROUSIA IS REALLY THE PROBLEM

Since the provocative contribution of William Wrede in 1903, the hypothesis that 2 Thessalonians might be pseudepigraphical has challenged conventional exegetical wisdom. By the early eighties the hypothesis had acquired the character of "scientific certainty," for example, Wolfgang Trilling.⁶¹ Giblin describes his own altered perspective as follows: "Unmindful of Wrede's earlier warnings, I tried in part to develop what was in 1964-66 the prevailing view that Paul himself dictated 2 Thessalonians. That effort failed, but I think that I had begun to read the text aright. I now consider the letter a pseudepigraph."⁶²

⁶¹ W Trilling, "Literarische Paulusimitation im 2. Thessalonicherbrief," in K Kertelge, (ed), *Paulus in den neutestamentlichen Spätschriften: Zur Paulusrezeption im Neuen Testament* (Freiburg: Herder, 1981), 146-156.

⁶² C H Giblin, "2 Thess 2 Re-read as Pseudepigraphical: A Revised Reaffirmation of *The Threat to Faith*," in R F Collins (ed), *The Thessalonian Correspondence* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990), 457-169: 460; also idem, *The Second Letter to the Thessalonians* (Englewood Cliffs, N J: Prentice Hall, 1990), 2-9.

Nowadays there is a striking, almost complete, unanimity between scholars on this score.⁶³ Krodel discusses in detail four reasons why the Pauline authenticity of 2 Thessalonians is unacceptable.⁶⁴ He points to phenomena in the letter such as the non-Pauline eschatology, repetitions and both structural and verbal dependence on 1 Thessalonians, the change in the image of God and, in connection with this, the author's onomatology relating to Jesus, the absence of the Pauline cross and resurrection kerygma, the dearth of pneumatology, the way in which the concept of apostolicity is used, and finally the nature of the reference to the word "letter" (δὲ ἐπιστολῆς) in 2 Thessalonians 2:2. According to Krodel, the author of 2 Thessalonians conducted a subtle polemic against a pseudonymous Pauline writing and another Pauline group. Both the writer and his opponent were therefore "Paulinists" who laid claim to Pauline authority and practised the literary technique of pseudonymity. Krodel believes that 2 Thessalonians was written at a time when and at a place where the Pauline letters were available only in the form of copies.⁶⁵

In 2 Thessalonians tensions are indeed present that arose only in a post-Pauline community. There was apparently a group that held the view that the eschaton was a present reality. Jewish apocalyptic provided the concepts for this specific interpretation of history and for this particular articulation of the Christian's experience of suffering (2

⁶³ R F Collins, *Thessalonian Correspondence*, Introduction, xi-xv, and pp 426-440, "'The Gospel of Our Lord Jesus' (2 Thes 1, 8): A Symbolical Shift of Paradigm"; H Braun, "Zur nachpaulinischen Herkunft des Zweiten Thessalonicherbriefes," *ZNW* 44 (1952/53), 131-145; W Trilling, *Untersuchungen zum 2. Thessalonicherbrief*. Leipzig: St Benno-Verlag, 1972), and idem, supra n. 40 and n 60; G Friedrich, *Der zweite Brief an die Thessalonicher*, in J Becker, et al, *Die Briefe an die Galater, Epheser, Philipper, Kolosser und Philemon*, 252-276. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), 252-276; G Krodel, "2 Thessalonians," in G Krodel (ed), *Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thess. The Pastoral Epistles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 73-96; J A Bailey, "Who Wrote II Thessalonians?" *NTS* 25 (1978/1979), 131-145; Marxsen, *Zweiter Thessalonicherbrief* (supra, n 49); F Laub, "Paulinische Autorität in nachpaulinischer Zeit (2 Thes)," in Collins, *Correspondence* (1990), 403-417, and idem, *Erster und zweiter Thessalonicherbrief* (Würzburg: Echter, 1965, ²1988); G S Holland, *The Tradition That You Received from Us: 2 Thessalonians in the Pauline Tradition* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1988), and idem, "'A Letter Supposedly from Us': A Contribution to the Discussion about the Authorship of 2 Thessalonians," in Collins, *Correspondence* (1990), 394-402; A G Van Aarde, "The Struggle Against Heresy in the Thessalonian Correspondence and the Origin of the Apostolic Tradition," in Collins, *Correspondence* (1990), 418-425; H. Koester, "From Paul's Eschatology to the Apocalyptic Schemata of 2 Thess.," in Collins, *Correspondence* (1990), 441-458: 455; L Hartman, "The Eschatology of 2 Thess as Included in a Communication," in Collins, *Correspondence* (1990), 470-485; D D Schmidt, "The Syntactical Style of 2 Thess: How Pauline is It?" in Collins, *Correspondence* (1990), 383-393: 388.

⁶⁴ Krodel (supra, n 1).

⁶⁵ Krodel, 86.

Th 1:4-10). According to Krodel, the fate of Jerusalem in 70 CE was seen by this group as the dawning of God's final judgement. If the wrath of God had already descended on the Jews and Christians were already beginning to experience the birth pangs of the new age (cf 2 Th 1:4-10), it could be concluded that the Day of the Lord had already dawned (cf 2 Th 2:2c). Against this background, Krodel holds that the letter was intended to provide guidance to Christians who were alleged to have become disoriented (σαλευθῆναι... ἀπὸ τοῦ νοῦς and over-enthusiastic (θρεῖσθαι, 2 Th 2:2a). The reference to "idleness" should, in Krodel's view, be understood in the context of eschatological fervour.⁶⁶

In spite of its emphasis on the aspect of "Paulinism" in the interpretation of 2 Thessalonians, a view such as Krodel's has clearly not succeeded in postulating an hypothesis that provides a coherent pattern for the elucidation of the problems associated with the social context of the letter. This also applies to more recent works. For the sake of greater clarity regarding the nature of many of these problems, some aspects will be touched upon.

It is striking that although exegetes have begun to accept the pseudepigraphical character of 2 Thessalonians, the investigation of similarities and differences between 1 and 2 Thessalonians has remained the central problem in their research. Because Paul's (first) letter to the Thessalonians functions as the most important source in relation to 2 Thessalonians, it is unlikely that we will see a speedy shift of perspective in the study of aspects of 2 Thessalonians such as the social context in terms of which the letter is to be understood. This is evident in the way that a number of recent works focus on the phenomena mentioned above, which were identified by Krodel.

It is true that, as far as eschatology is concerned, the emphasis is no longer on trying to fit 2 Thessalonians into the debate on Paul's developing ideas on apocalyptic⁶⁷ or the use of gnostic concepts,⁶⁸ but the problem is still discussed in terms of correspondences with 1 Thessalonians.

⁶⁶ Krodel, 87.

⁶⁷ Mearns, "Development" (supra, n 19).

⁶⁸ Schmithals, "Gnostics" (supra, n 5); Marxsen, *Zweite Thessalonicherbrief* (supra, n 49); et al.

In an important contribution, Hartman (1990:470-485) presents a *situation of persecution* as the background to the writing of 2 Thessalonians.⁶⁹ For him the eschatology of 2 Thessalonians is of interest as an expression of a communication event. He points out that chapters 1 and 2 cannot be separated from each other. The communication takes place from the perspective of a "Paulinist school" and is directed to a wider group of churches. The main concern of the letter is that its readers should see persecutions as part of the eschatological end. This pattern also occurs in other New Testament writings. However, the author of 2 Thessalonians modifies the traditional view that looks forward to an end to present afflictions. Rather, he seeks to encourage his readers by preparing them for continued struggle and continued hope. As regards the eschatological content of the letter, the *παρουσία*-imagery is Pauline and it corresponds with 1 Thessalonians. However, in Hartman's view there are no precedents for the coupling of the "lawless one" with the *παρουσία*.

What is important for our purposes is Hartman's question whether it was not perhaps the theme of "lawlessness" in the Synoptic Gospels that provided the author of 2 Thessalonians with a textual source for this concept. Hartman points out that the effect this figure had on the readers of the letter was that they were better able to comprehend the delay in the *παρουσία* and the function of present evil and decline. The *ὁ κατέχων* helps to identify the tribulations being endured as eschatological. In this way the author sought to scale down eschatological expectations while still keeping them alive. According to Hartman, 2 Thessalonians must not be read from a perspective of eschatological fervor being calmed. "The main problem is the harassment of the Christian minorities, a problem of which we also know from other NT texts (cf the situation in the line between Nero to Domitian)." The way in which God is presented in the letter is also to be understood against the background of this situation. God is always on the side of the readers and always opposed to their opponents. He is the cause of everything referred to in the letter. Although the unbelieving persecutors refuse to believe the gospel and although their delusion is connected with the "lawless one," it is God who permits and controls it.

Koester discusses a possible function of the *apocalyptic timetable* in 2 Thessalonians against the background of archaeological evidence relating to ancient

⁶⁹ Hartman, "Eschatology" (supra, n 62), 470-485.

Thessalonica and the “political” connotation the word *παρουσία* may have had in Thessalonica.⁷⁰ Although 1 and 2 Thessalonians make use of traditional apocalyptic material, this does not, in Koester’s judgement, provide a warrant for deductions from the letters that the convictions of the Thessalonian believers were influenced in any way by their pagan past⁷¹ or by millenarian sentiments,⁷² which allegedly related in some way or other to the Kabiros cult or the emperor cult or that of Dionysus, as Evans and Jewett opined.⁷³ Koester asserts that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to use archaeological findings relating to ancient Thessalonica of biblical times to help to interpret the letters to the Thessalonians. He points out that the archaeological pickings have been meager indeed. There have been monuments, such as the Arch of Galerius and the Rotunda. The Roman Forum and the Palace of Galerius have also been extensively excavated. It was a cause of excitement when a temple of Isis as well as many inscriptions and some sculpture relating to the Egyptian cult were discovered during the construction of a road some seventy years ago. But this provided no information that helps us to interpret the letters to the Thessalonians. Furthermore, Koester is sceptical that it will ever be possible to write a complete history of the religions practised in Thessalonica. It is true that Hendrix accumulated enough data for a description of the cult of the so-called “Roman benefactors” of the late Republican and early Imperial periods.⁷⁴ But for the following two hundred years of the Imperial period there are hardly any finds. For the interpretation of the Thessalonian letters it is this period, Koester says, that could be important. The only exception during this period is the time of Galerius, for which we can point to some substantial data. However, there is no archaeological evidence relating to religions such as Judaism that were practised in Thessalonica. Neither is it possible to reconstruct the history of the Jews in Thessalonica over a time span of half a millennium with the help of the fifth-century Samaritan inscription found in Thessalonica and the reference to

⁷⁰ Koester, “Eschatology” (supra, n 62), 441-458.

⁷¹ For example, Hendrix, “Thessalonians” (supra, n 62); also K Donfried, “The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence,” *NTS* 31 (1985), 336-356.

⁷² C A Wanmaker, “Apocalypticism at Thessalonica,” *Neotestamentica* 21 (1987), 1-10.

⁷³ R M Evans, *Eschatology and Ethics: A Study of Thessalonica and Paul’s Letters to the Thessalonians* (Princeton: McMahan, 1968); R Jewett, *Correspondence* (supra, n 6).

⁷⁴ Hendrix, “Thessalonians Honor Romans.” ThD Dissertation. (Cambridge, M A: Harvard University, 1984).

Jason (who, according to Ac 17:5-7, accommodated Paul and Silas at the time of the Jewish unrest but who was not mentioned by Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians).

According to Koester, the frame of reference of Paul's religious thought and that of his readers must be determined by an analysis of the traditions and motives which appear in 1 and 2 Thessalonians and the way they are interpreted there. Accordingly, he pays particular attention to the term *παρουσία*.⁷⁵

The term *παρουσία* occurs four times in 1 Thessalonians (2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23) and twice in 2 Thessalonians (2:1, 8). Apart from this, Paul uses it only once, namely in 1 Cor 15:23. In 1 Thessalonians, however, it is not used in contexts containing so-called pre-Pauline material. 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 may serve as an example. Koester regards the use of the term as typically Pauline. He is also of the opinion that it is a *political term* used as an analogy for the second coming. The coming of the Lord is likened to the arrival of a king or emperor, for which the church must prepare itself. Koester views the problem in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, relating to those who have died, in the light of the political meaning that not only the word *παρουσία* but also the word *ἀπάντησις* (1 Th 4:17) can have, and not in terms of the supposed issue regarding the delayed *parousia*. In his opinion Paul does not deal with the latter question at all in his letters. The words referred to are terms used by Paul to describe the coming of the Lord as the occasion when the whole church – those who are still alive as well as those who have died and have been resurrected – go out to meet the Lord like a civic deputation that goes out to meet the emperor when he visits the city. The important point is that those who have died will rise before the meeting. A visual image of this event, Koester says, can be derived from the archaeological evidence of the cemeteries of ancient Greek cities which everywhere were situated, often for kilometers, along the main roads. So those who had died might also be said to have a share in the meeting with the *κύριος* at his *παρουσία*.

Koester believes that underlying this use of the words *ἀπάντησις* and *παρουσία* one must assume a traditional apocalyptic timetable in terms of which events will occur in a particular chronological sequence. In this regard, he highlights a significant difference between 1 and 2 Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians the distinction between the future and the present is of no consequence. Paul portrays the church as an

⁷⁵ Koester, "Eschatology" (supra, n 62).

eschatological utopian alternative to the *Imperium Romanum*. In this way he builds up an eschatological community existing in the present in terms of faith, love and hope – a community that has even crossed the boundary from life to death. This is what is meant by saying that in 1 Thessalonians the distinction between future and present is of no consequence. In 2 Thessalonians the distinction is reinforced by the introduction of intermediate phases leading from the present to the future παρουσία. In Koester's view, then, references to ὁ κατέχων / τό κατέχον and the "antichrist" are not to be interpreted in terms of the Roman empire at all but as representative of different phases of the apocalyptic timetable.

3.1 Summary:

In our overview of relevant aspects in works in which the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians is not questioned we have already seen that the delay in the Lord's parousia cannot simply be regarded as the only cause of social problems in the church. This tendency is also evident among exegetes who assume 2 Thessalonians to be a "Paulinist" letter. Although Krodell continued to link the problems associated with "disorderly" conduct with supposed over-enthusiasm as a result of the imminent expectation of the parousia, his emphasis on the variant eschatology and portrayal of God in 2 Thessalonians has provided a basis for the conviction that we are here dealing with Paulinism. Hartman linked the changed portrayal of God to the situation of persecution. This point of view is as important as his suggestion that the reference to "lawlessness" in 2 Thessalonians might well be looked at from the perspective of what we know about this phenomenon on the basis of the Synoptic Gospels (and Ac). Like Hartman, Koester does not wish to minimise the importance of the function of the eschatological timetable in 2 Thessalonians. But what is at issue is not apocalyptic as such or developments in eschatological convictions but the importance of an intermediate phase in the handling of heresy concerning the parousia. Yet Koester is unconvincing when he contends that this point of view disposes of the opinion of Tertullian and the early Patristic fathers that the Roman empire is relevant in this regard. The very fact that 2 Thessalonians is still approached in terms of its similarities with and differences from 1 Thessalonians has led us not only to the phenomenon of Paulinism, but also to a possible social context which

may serve to correlate the different problems of interpretation and perhaps offer a solution.

The role of the temple, the relationship between the temple authorities and the Roman administration, the tendency to “civic disorder” among the Christians, their persecution by those who usurped God’s place in the temple, the fact that the persecutors are restrained and the problem as to whether or not the Day of the Lord was realised – these are all problems alluded to in 2 Thessalonians which may be seen in a coherent context. If 2 Thessalonians is read as a Paulinist writing (like the Paulinism of Ac; see, for example, Bradley 1987:107-132) against the background of an anti-Sadducean polemic (just as in the case of the Paulinism of Ac), this will at least help to elucidate the coherence of the problems to which we have referred.

4. A NEW SUGGESTION: 2 THESSALONIANS MAY BE READ AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF AN ANTI-SADDUCEAN POLEMIC

As in the case of certain other New Testament letters, known as Deutero-Pauline letters (1 and 2 Tim, Titus, Col and Eph), the author of 2 Thessalonians and his readers were clearly acquainted with some of the authentic Pauline letters and communicated with each other within the frame of reference provided by these letters. What happened is that justice was not always done to Paul’s own ideas. This phenomenon of the “wrong use” of Paul’s letters is known as *Paulinism*.

Teachers of heresy often appealed to spurious or forged letters of Paul. Güttermann uses 2 Thessalonians 2:2 and 3:17 as an example in this regard.⁷⁶ He says that there are exegetes who have remarked, even as far back as 1850, that many of Paul’s opponents were in truth *überzogene Pauliner*, just as in the case of the *später Marcion*. For this reason Paul may rightly be described as a “tragic figure”: “ständig missverstanden, falsch gehört und gelesen” This is the upshot of 2 Peter 3:15-16. The author of this document seems to imply that the opaqueness of Paul’s arguments (probably in regard to eschatology) made heresy possible. People could therefore easily be misled in

⁷⁶ E. Güttermann, “Paulus und der *désir* nach dem Eschaton,” *Linguistica Biblica* 58 (1986), 7-14: 9.

their use of Paul's letters. In a sense, the author of 2 Peter (and we may add: also that of 2 Th) wished to rescue his "beloved brother" Paul and find his "theology" acceptable. In fact, according to Güttermann, Paul's "theology" in no way determined the "theology" of 2 Peter.⁷⁷

If 2 Thessalonians is a product of Paulinism, how are the points of contact between the first letter to the Thessalonians and the second letter to be explained? The author of 2 Thessalonians depended heavily on 1 Thessalonians as a source and linked Paul's name to his letter in pseudepigraphic fashion (cf 2 Th 3:16-18). The other Pauline letters are not therefore the frame of reference within which the discourse of 2 Thessalonians must be interpreted.

A first remark that must be made on this score is that there were two reasons in particular why 1 Thessalonians served as a starting point for 2 Thessalonians, namely the taking up of the themes of the "second coming" and "apostolicity." A second remark is that 2 Thessalonians should not be seen as being in a continuum with the Pauline tradition, but rather as a writing that breathes the same spirit as that in 2 Peter, which, for its part, is also a result of Paulinism (cf 2 Peter 3:14-16). Especially in the light of the two themes mentioned above, 1 Thessalonians probably served the writer of the second letter as an ideal point of departure. This is because, strictly speaking, 2 Thessalonians has one dominant theme, namely affliction as a sign of the righteous judgment of God (cf 2 Th 1:5 – ἔνδειγμα τῆς δικαίας κρίσεως τοῦ θεοῦ, εἰς τὸ καταξιοθῆναι ὑμᾶς τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ ὑπὲρ ἧς καὶ πάσχετε).⁷⁸ This theme is very closely connected, on the one hand, with the false teachers' denial of the parousia and a final judgment, and, on the other, with the confused notion among the believers themselves that the Day of the Lord had already come. 1 Thessalonians is a brief Pauline letter, and this facilitated its use, and it is also the letter of Paul which deals most extensively with the theme of the second coming. In 1 Thessalonians Paul makes use of his own example, following the analogy of Jesus as the Κύριος, to spur the readers to responsible behavior and work in

⁷⁷ Güttermann, 10; or of 2 Thess: see W Trilling, *Untersuchungen zum 2. Thessalonicherbrief* (Leipzig: St Benno-Verlag, 1972), 140; E Käsemann, "Eine Apologie der urchristliche Eschatologie," in *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen*, vol 1, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, ³1964), 135-157: 138-140, 143-144.

⁷⁸ See J M Bassler, "The Enigmatic Sign: 2 Thess 1:5," *CBQ* 46 (1984), 496-510.

the light of the second coming. This appeal provides the author of 2 Thessalonians with a starting point for the rebuttal of error.

In this regard there is an important difference between the authentically Pauline, on the one hand, and the pseudo-Pauline (such as the Pastoral Letters) as well as the Paulinist writings (such as 2 Pet and 2 Th), on the other. Whereas Paul bases the authority of his personal example on Jesus, the Κύριος, the figure of the apostle functions as *Lehrautorität* in the Pastoral Letters, for example.⁷⁹ The Pauline figure has thus acquired a kerygmatic character.⁸⁰ In the Pastoral Letters it is especially the suffering of the apostle that is presented as exemplary (1 Tm 1:15-17; 2 Tm 3:10-11) and is used as an inducement to avoid (1 Tm 4:7; 6:11,20; 2 Tm 2:16, 23) and to combat heresy (1 Tm 1:3; 2 Tm 2:25; Tt 1:10-11). In 2 Thessalonians we also find the application of what Trilling termed *literarische Paulusimitation* as a rhetorical technique to combat heresy.⁸¹ Just as in the Pastoral Letters, the theme of the apostle's suffering plays an important role in 2 Thessalonians in the combating of heresy. The presence of this theme in 1 Thessalonians was probably as important a reason as the reference to the second coming for this Pauline writing serving as the starting point for the author of 2 Thessalonians.

Indeed it emerges from a critical reading of 1 Thessalonians that affliction and persecution are important themes of this letter.⁸² The following remarks will bear this out. The position of the church members as believers is compared three times with that of their unbelieving compatriots (1 Th 4:5, 13; 5:5). The opposition between believing and unbelieving Thessalonians is compared with what believers in Judea experienced at the hands of the Jews (1 Th 2:14), which was indeed also Paul's experience (1 Th 2:2), as well as that of Jesus (1 Th 2:15). There are two certainties for the believer: to suffer (1 Th. 3:3), but also to be delivered from God's punishment (1 Th 5:9). In fact, herein lies the surest confirmation of the Pauline authenticity of the first letter to the Thessalonians: the analogy of the suffering of Jesus, in the first place, and that of the apostle, in the second, provides a basis for Paul's soteriology: life is born out of suffering

⁷⁹ N Brox, *Die Pastoralbriefe* (Regensburg: Pustet, 41969), 68-69.

⁸⁰ Van Aarde, "Struggle" (supra, n 62), 425.

⁸¹ Trilling, "Paulusimitation" (supra, n 60); cf also Van Aarde, "Struggle" (supra, n 62).

⁸² Van Aarde, "Struggle" (supra, n 62), 419-420.

(cf 1 Cor 4:10-14; 2 Cor 4:16-18; Rm 5:3-5; Gl 6:17; Phl 3:10). This example motif serves to encourage both the church and Paul to persevere in faith, love and hope (1 Th 1:3; 3:6, 13). Conversely, the fact that in view of the end-time the Thessalonians' perseverance in the face of affliction is the basis of Paul's perseverance – because they stand firm in the Lord, Paul can really live again (1 Th 3:8).

Although the question of the second coming may therefore have been an important motive for the writing of 1 Thessalonians, it need not be regarded as the central or most important concern of the letter. Thessalonica was a young church in a predominantly pagan world and with antagonistic Jews in the immediate vicinity. The church had already endured persecution and could expect more. The letter served to strengthen and encourage church members. Paul himself was a good example to them. He wanted to urge them to live a good life for the sake of mutual encouragement, but also to win the respect of the pagan community. He wished to keep a path open so that he could go and supply what they still lacked in respect of a life characterised by the obedience of faith. In 2 Thessalonians (as in the Pastoral Letters and 2 Peter) the figure of Paul becomes a *Lehrautorität* in order to combat the heresy with regard to the delayed parousia. Meade has this comment on 2 Peter:

In 2 Peter, the great issue is one of authority (2:10), or more precisely, authoritative tradition and interpretation (1:20-21).... Since the author reveals a knowledge of Paul's writings (3:15-16), it may well be that his concept of authoritative tradition is influenced by Paulinism, and that his "reminder" (1:12-15; 3:1-2) is intended, like the Pastorals, to be a mediation of the apostolic presence in Peter's absence.⁸³

In so saying, Meade allows the function of the use of the concept of "apostolic tradition" in 2 Peter to be absorbed, so to speak, into what he calls "a mediation of the apostolic presence in [the apostle's] absence." Clearly, however, far more can be said about the background to the heresy which is at issue in 2 Peter (and 2 Th) than that it is

⁸³ C L Meade, *Pseudonymity and Canon: An Investigation into the Relationship of Authorship and Authority in Jewish and Early Christian Tradition* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1986), 190.

merely a matter of the so-called "apostolic parousia" and the presence of the authoritative apostolic word despite the absence of the apostle.

An observation on the comparability of 2 Thessalonians and 2 Peter which has decisively influenced the direction that the debate on the social context of 2 Thessalonians has taken is that made by Wolfgang Trilling (see also Käsemann 1964: 138-141, 141-145):

Ohne die Unterschiede zwischen II [2 Thessalonians] und 2 Petr, vor allem den *Unterschied des Milieus* (2 Petr ist hellenistisch, II alttestamentlich-judisch bestimmt) zu übersehen, zeigen sich auffällige Parallelen im Glaubensbegriff, in der Bewertung der apostolische Paradosis und kirchliche Lehre, in der Ausgestaltung und Interpretation der Eschatologie, vor allem in der Schwächung des Gegenwartsbezuges und der Verlagerung in die Zukunft – mit den entsprechenden Konsequenzen für das christliche Leben jetzt und für die *starke Betonung des Gerichtes in der Zukunft*.⁸⁴

(my italics)

Having concluded that the answer to the problem of the authorship of 2 Thessalonians is to be found in the concept of "Paulinism," we now intend to use this perspective in order to propose that the main concern of the letter may be understood against the background of an anti-Sadducean polemic. This will explain the "Old Testament-Jewish" character of "the strong emphasis on the future judgment" compared with the "hellenistic" character of the same theme in 2 Peter. It may also provide an acceptable background for the references to the enigmatic figures/institutions of the "lawless one," the one who "restrains" him/it before the coming of the parousia, the "disorderly" and the "busybodies" (2 Th 3:11), as well as the pronouncement: "If anyone will not work, let him not eat" (2 Th 3:10). These insights and this proposal follow from concurrence with the research of Güttgemanns (1986) on Paulinism, that of Neyrey on

⁸⁴ W Trilling, *Untersuchungen zum 2. Thessalonicherbrief* (Leipzig: St Benno Verlag, 1972), 140.

the Graeco-Roman background of 2 Peter,⁸⁵ and that of Russell and Winter on the possible social-scientific frame of reference of 2 Thessalonians.

The erroneous teaching combated in 2 Thessalonians with the help of Paulinism in fact does not relate to over-enthusiasm produced by the imminent expectation of the Lord's parousia, but rather to the handling of affliction in the light of the delay of the parousia. These matters can be understood in the socio-historical context of the false teaching that suffering is the sign that there will be no divine retribution and that there is, in any case, no after-life. 2 Peter also makes reference to this heresy. In his investigation into the possible Hellenistic-Roman (and possibly anti-Sadducean) context of 2 Peter, Neyrey (1980:407-431) pointed to interesting parallels between the disputation against Epicurean influence in Plutarch (*De Sera Numinis Vindicata*; cf also Almqvist 1946) and the description of Sadducean views with regard to (*inter alia*) the denial of retribution in the after-life and of the concept of a "final judgment" as such in Josephus (*BJ* 2.164-165; *Ant.* 13.297; 18.16).⁸⁶ Isenberg too notes first-century rabbinical texts that can be read as anti-Sadducean polemics.⁸⁷ Bassler builds on Wichmann's study on late-Judaic *Leidens-theologie* and interprets 2 Thessalonians 1:5 in the light of rabbinical debate on the connection between affliction and the righteous judgment of God.⁸⁸ One may therefore confidently assert that an investigation of anti-Sadducean features of 2 Thessalonians would seem to be fully justified. The presence of anti-Sadducean polemics in Acts does not necessarily mean that the book must be dated in the time before the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. The same applies to 2 Thessalonians.

⁸⁵ J H Neyrey, "The Form and Background of the Polemic in 2 Peter," *JBL* 99 (1980), 407-431; also Bassler (*supra*, n 77), 508, who also saw the connection between the work of Neyrey and 2 Thess.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 407-431; cf G F Moore, "Fate and Free Will in the Jewish Philosophies According to Josephus," *HTR* 22 (1929), 371-389; G Baumbach, "Das Sadduzäerverständnis bei Josephus Flavius und im Neuen Testament," *Kairos* 13 (1971), 17-37.

⁸⁷ S Isenberg, "An Anti-Sadducee Polemic in the Palestinian Targum," *HTR* 63 (1970), 433-444.

⁸⁸ Bassler, "Enigmatic Sign" (*supra*, n 77), 501; cf W Wichmann, *Die Leidens-theologie: Eine Form der Leidensdeutung im Spätjudentum* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1930).

5. THE SECOND LETTER TO THE THESSALONIANS REREAD

As in the case of 2 Peter, the delay of the parousia and suffering as a result of persecution were used by the false teachers of 2 Thessalonians to deny the righteous judgment of God. On the strength of certain reports in Acts and other elements in the Synoptic Gospels, we can assume that the opponents of the earliest Jesus movement included Sadducees. In Acts too "Paulinist traditions" are used to combat false teaching on the part of the Sadducees with regard to the after-life and to legitimate the ultimate vindication of Christian believers.

If 2 Thessalonians is read as an anti-Sadducean polemic, I believe that the coherent pattern of exegetical problems which we have identified on the basis of existing research more clearly takes shape. The "lawless figure who takes his seat in the temple, proclaiming himself to be God" may be seen to symbolise the Sadducean temple authorities. The Roman administration can indeed be seen as the "restrainer" of this "destroyer." In addition, it makes sense that it was vastly embarrassing that as clients some Christians were still dependent on aristocratic benefactors who were not believers. With an appeal to the example of Paul they are commanded to become self-supporting.

In social-scientific perspective, many studies of the first-century Palestinian situation indicate that it was the Sadducean aristocracy, in particular, who fulfilled the role of patrons, using the temple as a centre for the redistribution of financial means to the people. Christians are urged to care for one another within the limits of their new community and so to put the principle of reciprocity into effect. Patrons who have become Christians must not grow weary in well-doing. But anyone who will not work must remember that in this new community he cannot live off others. Those who are disobedient in this matter must be shamed by isolation and not being admitted to the communal meals.

Persecution which entails suffering for the faithful must not make it possible for their persecutors to confuse them with false teaching. Neither must believers become confused by thinking that the Day of the Lord has already come. The day of judgment will come with the Lord's parousia. They know the analogy. The parousia is the arrival of the conqueror in which they will participate, just as the soldier, dead or alive, will have a part in the parousia of the general or emperor. God will judge with righteousness and

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put an end to suffering. Present affliction is no reason to doubt the righteous judgment of God. On the contrary, suffering is the sign/proof (ἔνδειγμα) of God's righteous judgment. For the present, the persecutors are the cause of affliction; in the future they will themselves endure it. Eternal destruction will be the punishment of those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord, who is the giver of grace, will be with them all. They can accept this on the authority of Paul. However, they must not allow themselves to be misled by letters or traditions falsely attributed to Paul. This letter they may indeed trust (and it is not all that difficult to understand).