

The Nature of Yeshua in the Pauline Epistles and Hebrews

than any formal creedal statement could be.”¹⁶ Certainly while later Christian leaders would come along and formulate different creeds about the Divine nature of the Messiah, albeit doctrinally correct, the claims of the text of an authentic Apostolic letter bear far more authority and significance to us as Bible readers. Witherington asserts how “The language previously applied to the *yom Yahweh* [יהוה יום] and the theophanies of Yahweh in general are now being applied to Jesus.”¹⁷ Fee similarly concludes, “Paul applies directly to Christ language from the Septuagint, where the Lord (*Kurios*) is a substitute for the name of Yahweh. Thus, with the language at the coming of our Lord, Jesus, with all his holy ones, Paul’s intertextual appropriation of Zechariah 14:5 seems certain.”¹⁸

1 Thessalonians 4:14-18

“The Return of Yeshua and Resurrection of the Dead”

“For if we believe that Yeshua died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Yeshua. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Messiah will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

The statements made by the Apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:14-18, were definitely intended to give the Thessalonians—who were confused about the doctrine of resurrection and the Second Coming—some significant hope for those among them who had died.¹⁹ Many of the Thessalonian Believers, having been reared in Greco-Roman paganism, did not have a firm comprehension on the future realities of the resurrection of the dead. The return of the Lord, and with it the recognition that the departed among them would be restored to biological life, was to bring them great comfort for the future. While 1 Thessalonians 4:14-18 has more to say about the resurrection and future eschatological realities than anything else, Yeshua being the causal agent of the resurrection, and some significant assertions about the nature of Yeshua, are witnessed in this passage.

The first part of 1 Thessalonians 4:14 testifies to the key truth, “For if we believe that Yeshua died and rose again...” (TLV). There are some disagreements, however, about what the second part of 1 Thessalonians 4:14 communicates. The source text says *kai ho Theos tous koimēthentas dia tou Iēsou axei sun autō* (καὶ ὁ θεὸς τοὺς κοιμηθέντας διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἄξει σὺν αὐτῷ). There is disagreement about the emphasis of the clause *dia tou Iēsou*, and the verb it is to be associated with.²⁰ One view makes Yeshua the agent of the Believers’ sleeping (*tous koimēthentas*), and the other makes Yeshua the agent of the Believers’ resurrection (*dia tou Iēsou axei sun autō*).

¹⁶ Bruce, *1&2 Thessalonians*, 74.

¹⁷ Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 104.

¹⁸ Fee, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 134.

Note how there is discussion involving what Paul actually means by saying that Yeshua returns with *tōn hagiōn autou* (τῶν ἁγίων αὐτοῦ). There are three main options available as to who those who will return with Yeshua to Planet Earth are: (1) “saints” meaning Believers, (2) “holy ones” (NIV) meaning God’s angels, or (3) saints/holy ones meaning a mixed assembly of both Believers and God’s angels. This does bear some importance on discussions about the intermediate state between death and the resurrection.

¹⁹ This entry has been adapted from the author’s commentary *1&2 Thessalonians for the Practical Messianic*.

²⁰ Cf. Bruce, *1&2 Thessalonians*, pp 97-98; Wanamaker, pp 169-170; Green, *Thessalonians*, 221; Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 133; Fee, *First and Second Thessalonians*, pp 169-173.

The majority view might be that *dia tou Iēsou* (διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ) pertains to the action of the deceased Believers, sleeping in Yeshua. The NASU rendering of 1 Thessalonians 4:14 reflects this: “those who have fallen asleep in Yeshua.” The advantage of taking *dia tou Iēsou* as meaning that Yeshua is the agent of the Believers’ sleeping, is how, as G. Green puts it, it would be “a way of saying that these believers died...in union with him. In death, believers are not separated from Jesus. This phrase then becomes an implicit affirmation that those who die as Christians do not cease to exist between the time of their death and the resurrection.”²¹

While this suggestion is surely inviting, there are a few more advantages in taking *dia tou Iēsou* as meaning that Yeshua is the agent of the Believers’ resurrection. The RSV rendering of 1 Thessalonians 4:14 says, “through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.” While this view should definitely be taken as Yeshua, the Son of God, being the One who resurrects the dead as part of the Father’s plan, neither the verbs *anistēmi* (ἀνίστημι), which has just been used in the opening of 1 Thessalonians 4:14 to describe the raising of Yeshua Himself, nor the verb *egeirō* (ἐγείρω) or “awaken,” appears here. Instead, what is seen is the verb *agō* (ἄγω), meaning “to direct the movement of an object from one position to another,” and here likely relates to “lead, bring, lead off, lead away” (BDAG).²² Supporting the second view proposed for 1 Thessalonians 4:14, Fee notes, “Jesus is at once both the one who accompanies the dead who are to be raised and [is] the agent of their being raised.”²³

As it concerns the Believers who have died, Morris concludes, “It is best to understand the words to mean that Jesus will bring the faithful departed with Him when He comes back.”²⁴ It is fully within the realm of lexical possibilities, even if it is a bit wooden, to render the second half of 1 Thessalonians 4:14 with: “through Yeshua, God will lead with Him those who are sleeping.” Yeshua will be the agent of the deceased Believers resurrection, and they will be led or brought (*agō*) with Him, obviously from Heaven, to be resurrected at the Second Coming. This is fully concurrent with how, previously, Paul has spoken of “the coming of our Lord Yeshua with all His saints” (1 Thessalonians 3:13).

When witnessing Yeshua the Messiah as the causal agent of the future resurrection in 1 Thessalonians 4:14—“For if we believe that Yeshua died and rose again, even so, through Yeshua, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep” (PME)—it is fair to conclude that Yeshua the Messiah bears a special significance in the cosmic order. Yeshua being the means by which the resurrection of the dead will be enacted, would seem most out of place if He were only a created agent of the Father. Given the tenor of 1 Samuel 2:6, “The LORD kills and makes alive; He brings down to Sheol and raises up,” Yeshua being integrated into the Divine Identity would fit much better with Him being the Father’s means of seeing the dead resurrected.

While some of the details of the timing of “the coming of the Lord” (*tēn parousian tou Kurion, τὴν παρουσίαν τοῦ κυρίου*) are surely present between pre- and post-tribulational readers of 1 Thessalonians 4:15, what cannot be in dispute is how Yeshua’s own teaching about His return and the resurrection (cf. Matthew 24:29-31) is predicated on resurrection passages and inferences of the Tanach (Old Testament). The ancient Thessalonians, being confused over whether or not their deceased loved ones would be able to participate in the return of the Messiah, should not have been confused when Paul told them, “the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the

²¹ Green, *Thessalonians*, 221.

²² BDAG, 16.

²³ Fee, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 170.

²⁴ Morris, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 140.

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dead in Messiah will rise first” (1 Thessalonians 4:16). While this would have surely brought great relief to those Thessalonians who had not quite known what was going to happen to their departed loved ones, probing the significance of what is stated in 1 Thessalonians 4:16, is quite key.

The concept of God Himself descending from Heaven to the Earth is something that is witnessed within the Tanach Scriptures. This surely happened at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:16). In Micah 1:3 we see, “For behold, the LORD is coming forth from His place. He will come down and tread on the high places of the earth.” Also not to be overlooked, in view of the further description given about the righteous meeting the Lord in the clouds, is how in Daniel 7:13 we read, “I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him.” What should not be ignored is that given the Tanach passages that speak of the arrival of the Lord to the Earth, to vindicate His people and judge sinners—is how Yeshua the Son is the One who will perform these actions. See details,

“[T]his well known Yahweh praise has now been appropriated to refer to Christ..The implied high Christology assumed by this language should not be overlooked, where the Septuagint’s *kyrios* = Yahweh is now *kyrios* = the risen Jesus.”²⁵

This has already been seen previously in 1 Thessalonians 3:13, given the intertextuality of Zechariah 14:5, and so when the return of the Messiah is detailed in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, we should not be surprised to see more Tanach passages where the Lord Yeshua accomplishes the actions of Adonai (YHWH) in the Tanach. But, the Son is no mere agent of the Father; He is the Son of Man of whom it is said, “And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and *men of every* language might serve [worshiped, NIV] Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed” (Daniel 7:14). We see, after all, that the Lord Himself, *autos ho Kurios* (αὐτὸς ὁ κύριος), descends from Heaven to Earth. The only way that one can account for this is affirming a plural Godhead, composed of *at least* the Father and Son.

²⁵ Fee, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 174.