

SECOND EPISTLE OF PAUL TO THE THESSALONICANS

Approximate date: 51-52 C.E. (maximum of six months after 1 Thessalonians)
Time period: season of severe misunderstanding about the end-times
Author: the Apostle Paul
Location of author: Corinth
Target audience and their location: Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Thessalonica

The Apostle Paul claims to be the author of 2 Thessalonians, along with Silvanus and Timothy as co-senders (1:1). Genuine Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians tends to not be questioned by conservative examiners, but is often questioned by many liberals. The text of this letter was well-known to some of the main leaders and documents of the emerging Christianity of the Second Century, including: the *Didache* (ch. 2; 2 Thessalonians 3:11), Polycarp (*Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians* 11; 2 Thessalonians 3:15), Ignatius, Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho* 110; 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12), Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 3.7.2; 2 Thessalonians 2:8).¹ “No responsible early church authority ever questioned Paul’s authorship of 2 Thessalonians” (Carson and Moo).² Guthrie actually concludes, “The external evidence is, if anything, rather stronger [for 2 Thessalonians] than for 1 Thessalonians.”³

Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians is often challenged on the basis of its structure, and the fact that the letter is more formal and rigid in its language than 1 Thessalonians.⁴ Doubts about the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians can stem from the difficulty of thinking that a second letter would be posted to the Thessalonians, so soon after a first letter.⁵ “[T]hose who reject the letter’s authenticity do so mainly because it seems so pointless as a

sequel to 1 Thessalonians” (*IDBSup*).⁶ It is thought that 1 Thessalonians depicts an imminent return of the Messiah, and that 2 Thessalonians depicts a return that must be preceded by some definite events.⁷ Some liberals think that 2 Thessalonians “may have been written by someone among [Paul’s] co-workers or disciples who employed the authority of Paul to address a situation in which Christians were undergoing intense persecution” (*EDB*),⁸ and that this was likely a second generation piece after the death of the Apostle.

A majority of conservative interpreters hold to genuine Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians, and feel that 2 Thessalonians clarifies many of the statements made in 1 Thessalonians.⁹ Tenney notes that none of the arguments against Pauline authorship are valid, “for the two letters deal with two different aspects of the same general subject, and bear so many resemblances to each other that they are clearly related” (*NIDB*).¹⁰

In academic evaluation of 1&2 Thessalonians together, there is some discussion which proposes that 2 Thessalonians was actually written before 1 Thessalonians. This conclusion is often drawn from a comparison of theological themes that seem to be relatively new in 2 Thessalonians, and may be understood more firmly in 1 Thessalonians.¹¹ Such a view naturally would have to hold that 1&2 Thessalonians together were genuinely Pauline.

Most conservatives still tend to hold that 2 Thessalonians was written after 1 Thessalonians, and that this letter was composed not long after the first letter. It could have been written a number of months after 1 Thessalonians, although it could have

⁶ J.C. Hurd, “Thessalonians, Second Letter to the,” in *IDBSup*, 901.

⁷ Beare, “Thessalonians, First Letter to the,” in *IDB*, 4:626.

⁸ Gaventa, “Thessalonians, Second,” in *EDB*, 1300; cf. Krentz, “Thessalonians, First and Second Epistles to the,” in *ABD*, 6:522.

⁹ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 592-599.

¹⁰ Merrill C. Tenney, “Thessalonians, Letters to the,” in *NIDB*, 1009.

¹¹ Hurd, “Thessalonians, Second Letter to the,” in *IDBSup*, 901; Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 599-602; J.W. Simpson, Jr., “Thessalonians, Letters to the,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 937; Carson and Moo, pp 543-544.

¹ Merrill C. Tenney, “Thessalonians, Second Epistle to the,” in *ISBE*, 4:835.

² Carson and Moo, 536.

³ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 593.

⁴ Edgar M. Krentz, “Thessalonians, First and Second Epistles to the,” in *ABD*, 6:520-521; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “Thessalonians, Second,” in *EDB*, 1299.

⁵ F.W. Beare, “Thessalonians, First Letter to the,” in *IDB*, 4:625.

been written a number of weeks after it, as agitators had entered in among the Thessalonian Believers and were promoting an imminently forthcoming return of Yeshua.¹² 2 Thessalonians was probably written from Corinth, and was written to clarify misunderstandings from the first letter that had arisen after Paul heard a report about what had been taking place.¹³ 2 Thessalonians could have been written to answer the claims of an unauthorized letter, which said the return of Yeshua was at hand (2:2), or at least was anticipatory of unauthorized letters being forged in the name of Paul.

Like 1 Thessalonians, no one in the scholastic community has ever proposed a Hebrew or Aramaic origin for the text of 2 Thessalonians. A Greek composition of 2 Thessalonians is definite given its audience.

The theology of 2 Thessalonians is largely focused around eschatology.¹⁴ The letter adds additional dimensions to the eschatology of 1 Thessalonians, specifying that certain events must precede the return of Yeshua (2:1-3), and it introduces the figure of “the man of sin” (2:3-9),¹⁵ the antimessiah or antichrist. The text takes on a distinctly more Jewish character than 1 Thessalonians, including references to “the day of the Lord” (2:2), which the largely non-Jewish readership would not have been as familiar with as the Jewish readership.

Paul specifies many of the general end-time claims of 1 Thessalonians. He encourages the Believers in Thessalonica (1:4-10), corrects misunderstandings relating to the Second Coming (2:1-12), and is forced to exhort many of the Thessalonians to work (2:13-3:15). There was a strong belief that the return of Yeshua and the end of the world were at hand, and people were not working (3:10-12), providing sustenance for their families and/or giving the community of Believers a slothful reputation. As Gundry observes, “The fanaticism arose out of a belief in the immediacy of Jesus’ return...Paul therefore writes this second epistle to the Thessalonians to quiet the fanaticism by correcting the eschatology that gave rise to it.”¹⁶ Much discussion abounds from 2 Thessalonians on the figure of the antimessiah/antichrist, the issue of the restrainer (2:6-7), and the prophesied apostasy (2:3).¹⁷ Even though there are debates among

Christian pre-millennialists, there is also a wide amount of agreement. 1&2 Thessalonians together, though, do not tend to garner as much attention as does Yeshua’s Olivet Discourse, the Book of Revelation, or the Book of Daniel.

2 Thessalonians offers no huge theological challenges for the Messianic community today. It is interesting, though, that Paul does communicate how in his day, “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work” (2:7, NASU),¹⁸ indicating that in the mid-First Century many in the community of faith were already distancing themselves from God’s Instruction in the Torah. However, the bulk of Paul’s teaching in 2 Thessalonians relates to the return of Yeshua, and responds to the arguments of so-called end-time immanency. If anything, there is more in 2 Thessalonians to add to what is seen in 1 Thessalonians regarding the infamous pre- versus post-tribulation rapture debate. 2 Thessalonians also further addresses the need for Believers not to be too overanxious about the end-times, a problem much of the contemporary Messianic movement does suffer from. There is certainly room for improvement in our collective Messianic engagement level with the Epistle of 2 Thessalonians.

Consult the commentary **1&2 Thessalonians for the Practical Messianic** by J.K. McKee for a more detailed examination of 2 Thessalonians.

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¹² Tenney, “Thessalonians, Second Epistle to the,” in *ISBE*, 5:835-836.

¹³ Beare, “Thessalonians, First Letter to the,” in *IDB*, 4:626-627.

¹⁴ Carson and Moo, pp 549-550.

¹⁵ Tenney, “Thessalonians, Second Epistle to the,” in *ISBE*, 4:834-835.

¹⁶ Gundry, in *A Survey of the New Testament*, 356.

¹⁷ There is debate among interpreters how exactly to approach the term *apostasia* (ἀποστασία). The NASU renders it literally as “apostasy,” other versions like RSV/NRSV/ESV and NIV/TNIV render it as “rebellion.” Pre-tribulationists have been known to approach *apostasia* as not a massive departure of people away from faith in the Lord, but instead as a departure of Believers into Heaven.

Consult the article “**The Great Apostasy**” by J.K. McKee, appearing in his book *When Will the Messiah Return?*, for a further discussion.

¹⁸ Grk. *to gar mustērion edē energeitai tēs anomias* (τὸ γὰρ μυστήριον ἤδη ἐνεργεῖται τῆς ἀνομίας); “For already this separating from Torah is at work secretly” (CJB).

1

Salutation

¹ Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, to the assembly of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Yeshua the Messiah:

² Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Yeshua the Messiah.

The Judgment at Messiah's Coming

³ We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is fitting, because your faith is growing exceedingly, and the love of each one of you all toward one another abounds;

⁴ therefore, we ourselves boast of you in the assemblies of God for your perseverance and faith in all your persecutions and in the tribulations which you endure.

⁵ *This is* evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the Kingdom of God, for which you also suffer—

⁶ since it is a just thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you,

⁷ and to *give* relief to you who are troubled with us, at the revelation of the Lord Yeshua from Heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire,

⁸ inflicting vengeance to those who do not know God^a, and to those who do not obey the good news of our Lord Yeshua.

⁹ These will pay the penalty: eternal ruin away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might^b,

¹⁰ when He comes to be glorified in His holy ones, and to be marveled at in all those who have believed (because our testimony to you was believed), on that day.

¹¹ To this end also we pray for you always that our God may count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire of goodness and work of faith with power;

¹² so that the name of our Lord Yeshua may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Yeshua the Messiah.

2

The Man of Lawlessness

¹ Now we beseech you, brothers and sisters, with regard to the coming of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah, and our gathering together to Him,

² that you not be quickly shaken in your mind, nor be disturbed, either by a spirit, or by a word, or by a letter as from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

^a The CJB has bolded "in a fiery flame. Then he will punish those who don't know God" for 1:7-8, noting a possible allusion to Isaiah 66:15; Jeremiah 10:25; Psalm 79:6:

"For—look!—ADONAI will come in fire, and his chariots will be like the whirlwind, to render his anger furiously, his rebuke with blazing fire" (Isaiah 66:15, CJB).

"Pour out your anger on the nations that do not acknowledge you, also on the families that do not call on your name. For they have consumed Ya'akov—consumed him and finished him off, and laid waste to his home" (Jeremiah 10:25, CJB).

"Pour out your wrath on the nations that don't know you, on the kingdoms that don't call out your name" (Psalm 79:6, CJB).

^b The CJB has bolded "far away from the face of the Lord and the glory of his might" for 1:9, noting a possible allusion to Isaiah 2:10, 19, 21:

"Come into the rock, hide in the dust to escape the terror of ADONAI and the glory of his majesty...People will enter cracks in the rocks and holes in the ground to escape the terror of ADONAI and his glorious majesty, when he sets out to convulse the earth...Then they will enter the cracks in the rocks and the crevices in the cliffs to escape the terror of ADONAI and his glorious majesty, when he sets out to convulse the earth" (Isaiah 2:10, 19, 21, CJB).

³ Let no one deceive you in any way, for *it will not come* unless the apostasy^a comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition,

⁴ who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, setting himself up as God^b.

⁵ Do you not remember that when I was still with you, I was telling you these things?

⁶ And you know what restrains him now, so that he may be revealed in his own season.

⁷ For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains *will do so* until he is taken out of the way.

⁸ And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will remove with the breath of His mouth^c, and render powerless by the appearance of His coming;

⁹ *that is*, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and lying wonders,

¹⁰ and with all deceit of unrighteousness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved.

¹¹ And for this reason God sends them a strong delusion, that they should believe a lie;

¹² in order that they all might be judged who did not believe the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Chosen for Salvation

¹³ But we ought to give thanks to God always for you, brothers and sisters beloved of the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning for salvation in sanctification of the Spirit and belief in the truth.

¹⁴ And for this He called you through our good news, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah.

¹⁵ So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word *of mouth* or by a letter of ours.

¹⁶ Now may our Lord Yeshua the Messiah Himself and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace,

¹⁷ comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

3

Pray for Us

¹ Finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified, just as *it did* also with you;

² and that we may be delivered from perverse and evil people; for not all have faith.

³ But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil *one*.

⁴ And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will do the things which we charge.

⁵ And may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the perseverance of Messiah.

^a Grk. noun *apostasia* (ἀποστασία); “defiance of established system or authority, rebellion, abandonment, breach of faith” (BDAG, 120).

^b The CJB has bolded “everything...god...he will put himself above...of God...God” noting a possible allusion to Ezekiel 28:2: “Human being, tell the prince of Tzor that *Adonai ELOHIM* says: ‘Because you are so proud and have said, ‘I am a god; I sit on the throne of God, surrounded by the sea’; yet you are a man, not God, even though you think that you think like God” (CJB).

^c The CJB has bolded “will slay with the breath of his mouth” noting a possible allusion to Isaiah 11:4; Job 4:9:

“but he will judge the impoverished justly; he will decide fairly for the humble of the land. He will strike the land with a rod from his mouth and slay the wicked with a breath from his lips” (Isaiah 11:4, CJB).

“At a breath from God, they perish; at a blast from his anger, they are consumed” (Job 4:9, CJB).

Warning against Idleness

⁶ Now we charge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah, that you keep away from every brother or sister who walks disorderly, and not according to the tradition which you received from us.

⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; for we did not behave in an undisciplined manner among you,

⁸ nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but in labor and travail, *we were* working night and day, that we might not burden any of you;

⁹ not because we do not have the right, but in order to make ourselves an example to you, so that you would imitate us.

¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we gave you this order: if anyone will not work, neither let him eat.

¹¹ For we hear that some among you behave disorderly, doing no work at all, but are busybodies.

¹² Now those persons we order and exhort in the Lord Yeshua the Messiah, to work in quietness and eat their own bread.

¹³ But you, brothers and sisters, do not grow weary in doing good.

¹⁴ And if anyone does not obey our word through this letter, take note of that person, that you have no association with him, so that he may be shamed.

¹⁵ And *yet* do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother or sister.

Benediction

¹⁶ Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with you all!

¹⁷ The greeting of me, Paul, with my own hand, which is the sign in every letter; this is how I write.

¹⁸ The grace of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah be with you all.