

“Paul’s Reliance on Scripture in 1 Thessalonians”

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Although Paul uses what we recognize as biblical language and some phrases that seem to echo the Bible in 1 Thessalonians, nowhere does he quote scripture as he does elsewhere. This essay seeks to understand how the scattered echoes and allusions to scripture in 1 Thessalonians inform the shape of Paul’s apocalyptic theology, whether or not those echoes and allusions would have been recognized by his Thessalonian listeners.

It is instructive to compare the letter to the Romans, which in the Nestle-Aland 27 text is full of italicized words and sentences indicating quotations from or allusions to the Bible, with 1 Thessalonians, which is set entirely in Roman type. The marginal references to biblical allusions in the latter are relatively few, numbering only 24 on seven pages of text, roughly 3 to a page, compared with 288 on the 32 pages of Romans, about 9 per page.¹ Although Professor Nestle and his descendents can locate a word or two here and there from the LXX that show up also in Paul’s letter to Thessalonica, they can find no quotations. Neither can I. Krenz thinks that 1 Thess 2:14-16, Paul’s indictment of those who “killed...the prophets” in 2:15, is the “only reference to the OT in the Letter,” although he offers no specifics.²

¹ “Of the approximately one hundred explicit citations of the OT in the Pauline corpus, almost all appear in the *Hauptbriefe*. In fact, among the uncontested letters of Paul, not only are the explicit citations confined to the *Hauptbriefe*, but fully half are found in Romans alone” (James M. Scott, “Paul’s Use of Deuteronomistic Tradition,” *JBL* 112/4 [1993] 645).

² Edgar N. Krenz in *HarperCollins Study Bible*, ed. Wayne A. Meeks, et al. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993) 2221. Presumably, Krenz has in mind 1 Kings 18:13 and 19:10, 14; Neh 9:26; or 4 Esd 1:32. It is telling that Nestle does not point to the same passages. Identifying Bible verses in 1 Thessalonians is a remarkably creative enterprise.

In view of the pagan past of the Thessalonian Christians,³ it is scarcely surprising that the apostle does not quote the Jewish Bible to them. He nevertheless presumes his listeners share with him some fundamental notions that we recognize as biblical.⁴ In order to understand this letter, one must have a rudimentary grasp of at least whom Paul refers to as Θεός,⁵ whom Paul designates Χριστός and κύριος,⁶ who God's πνεῦμα is,⁷ the necessary connection between ethics and religion, particularly the notion of the “will of God,”⁸ and of what the judgment of God will consist.⁹ Finally, Paul refers in this letter to the apostolic preaching that established the church as “the word of the Lord” (e.g., 1:8; 4:15), a phrase that commonly describes divine revelations and prophetic speech.¹⁰

I. General biblical language and ideas in 1 Thessalonians

Whether they have learned it directly from the Bible¹¹ or not, the Thessalonians apparently understand something of what it says to Paul and other first-century Jews like him.

³ 1 Thess 1:9 precludes their having been synagogue hangers-on of any sort, *pace* Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 58-62.

⁴ Paul also presumes his listeners' familiarity with other essentials of his Christian proclamation—that Jesus died, God raised him from the dead, and he will come again at the last day to rescue us from “the impending wrath” (1:10).

⁵ 1 Thess 1:1, 3, 4, 8, 9; 2:2, 4, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14; 3:2, 9, 11, 13, 14; 3:2, 9, 13; 4:3, 5, 8, 9, 14, 16; 5:9, 18, 23.

⁶ Χριστός: 1 Thess 1:1, 3; 2:7, 14; 3:2; 4:16; 5:9, 18, 23, 28; κύριος: 1 Thess 1:3, 6, 8; 2:15, 19; 3:11, 12, 13; 4:2, 6, 15, 16, 17; 5:2, 9, 23, 27, 28.

⁷ 1 Thess 1:5, 6; 4:8.

⁸ 1 Thess 4:3; 5:18.

⁹ 1 Thess 1:10; 2:16; 4:6; 5:2.

¹⁰ Gen 15:1; Exod 9:20; Num 3:16; Isa 1:10; Jer 1:2; Ezek 1:3; etc.

¹¹ I assume a rather broad “canon” here, in view of Paul's wide-ranging use of texts from both Tanak and other Second Temple literature.

This letter is rife with what Ciampa describes as “scriptural language and ideas.”¹² Even if they do not know the Decalogue—and Paul does not refer to it in 1 Thessalonians—they certainly know the equivalent of the first commandment. They have “turned to God from idols” and they “serve the living and true God” (1:9). To “turn to God from idols” echoes¹³ numerous biblical exhortations to turn to Israel’s God and away from all others.¹⁴ The epithet “living God” is ubiquitous in scripture,¹⁵ as is “true God,”¹⁶ and the two are adjacent at Jer 10:10: “the LORD is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King.” There is no particular reason, however, to think the Thessalonians know that Paul quotes his (their?) holy book when he describes God that way. There is not even any compelling reason to think the apostle himself consciously alludes to scripture when he speaks of God that way. It is simply one of the ways Jews refer to God.

Depending on how long Paul stayed in Thessalonica when he founded the church and how long the congregation has existed when Paul writes—estimates range from a few weeks to a few months—there may have been a measure of time for him to teach them from the Bible. We simply have no way of knowing. Surely Stanley is correct to say it is “historically implausible”

¹² Roy E. Ciampa, “Scriptural Language and Ideas,” in *As It Is Written: Studying Paul’s Use of Scripture*; SS50 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008) 41-57.

¹³ Despite Stanley E. Porter’s carefully nuanced distinction between an “echo” and an “allusion” (“Allusions and Echoes,” in *As It Is Written: Studying Paul’s Use of Scripture*; SS50 [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008] 29-40), I am afraid I use the two interchangeably here. The difference does not finally seem to be sufficient to distinguish among the few texts Paul seems to invoke in 1 Thessalonians.

¹⁴ Lev 19:4; Deut 11:28; 30:10; Ps 85:8; Isa 45:22; Ezek 6:9; 14:6; 18:30; 33:11; Jon 3:8; Mic 7:17; 4 Esd 15:20.

¹⁵ Deut 5:26; Josh 3:10; 1 Sam 17:26, 36; 19:16; Pss 42:2; 84:3; Isa 37:4, 17; Jer 10:10; 23:36; Dan 6:20, 26; Hos 1:10; Esth 6:13, 16 Bel 1:5, 25 (and, by contrast, 1:6, 24), 3 Macc 6:28; 4 Macc 5:24.

¹⁶ 2 Chron 15:3; Jer 10:10; Wisd 12:27; 3 Macc 6:18.

that the Thessalonians know very much about scripture, though, when they hear Paul's letter.¹⁷ Malherbe's observation about 1 Thess 4:5 can be multiplied many times: "The epithet that Gentiles do not know God comes from the OT (Job 18:21; Ps 78[79]:6; Jer 10:25), but Paul does not appear to have any particular OT passage in mind."¹⁸ The fact that the Thessalonians are loved and called by God¹⁹ is part and parcel of Israel's identity as the covenant people. A Jew need not point specifically to the story of Abraham's election or a particular text about God's love for Israel to know that God loves and calls. The realm of God into which the Thessalonians are called (1 Thess 2:12) is similarly one of the ways Christian Jews commonly describe God's sovereignty, although Elliott's reminder is well taken that "empire" is also a category that evokes powerful images from the everyday lives of people living in a Roman city like Thessalonica.²⁰

What "Christ" means to Paul is of course beyond the scope of this discussion, although the word derives from the Bible's descriptions of anointing as setting someone apart for divine purpose. The multivalent character of the act of anointing, and therefore of the concept "Messiah," is very likely beyond the reach of former pagans.²¹ This means there is every reason to think the non-Jews in Paul's audience may have understood his designation of Jesus as

¹⁷ Christopher D. Stanley, "Paul's 'Use' of Scripture: Why the Audience Matters," in *As It Is Written: Studying Paul's Use of Scripture*; SS50 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008) 125-155. 133.

¹⁸ *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 230.

¹⁹ 1 Thess 1:4; 2:13; 5:24.

²⁰ Neil Elliott, "'Blasphemed among the Nations': Pursuing an Anti-Imperial 'Intertextuality' I Romans," in *As It Is Written: Studying Paul's Use of Scripture*; SS50 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008) 213-233.

²¹ Ciampa, "Scriptural Language and Ideas," 51-52.

Χριστός without any particular knowledge of the Bible. They probably think it is simply one of Jesus' names.²²

The Spirit of God is another category that runs throughout Israel's scriptures,²³ although non-Jews too are well aware of spirits and spiritual beings.²⁴ Stoics, in particular, speak of the universal, cosmic character of πνεῦμα that holds the universe together, and that conviction is frequently reflected in Jewish discussions of the Spirit.²⁵ Although when Paul speaks of God's πνεῦμα (4:8) or simply of τὸ πνεῦμα (5:19) he very likely thinks of God's creative (Gen 1:2) and electing Spirit (1 Sam 16:13) that inspires prophecy (1 Sam 10:6) and recreates Israel (Ezek 37:5), the Thessalonians do not need to know those stories to understand what he means when he says God has given them πνεῦμα αὐτοῦ (1 Thess 4:8) or urges them not to quench it (5:19). That believers too have a πνεῦμα (5:23) that can be sanctified by being made whole and blameless would be understandable to the Thessalonians with or without their knowledge of the Bible.

God's wrath (1 Thess 1:10), God's vengeance on wrong-doers (4:6), and the "day of the Lord" (5:2) are also concepts that betray biblical origins.²⁶ The ideas are rooted in Israel's—and Judaism's—conviction that God requires just behavior from the people of God. This intimate connection of religion with ethics is distinctive of first-century Jews and therefore of Christians

²² James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 197.

²³ Gen 1:2; 41:38; Num 24:2; 1 Sam 10:10; 11:16; and so on.

²⁴ Hermann Kleinknecht, "πνεῦμα, κτλ" in *TDNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 6.331-359.

²⁵ Jon R. Levison, *The Spirit in First-Century Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1997) 133-137.

²⁶ E.g., Exod 4:14; 32:10-11; Num 11:1, 10, etc.; 1 Sam 24:12; Hos 12:3, etc.; Obad 15; Amos 5:18-20; Joel 1:15; Zeph 1:14-18.

like Paul.²⁷ Again, though, there is little indication in 1 Thessalonians that Paul refers to scripture specifically to make his point. He simply reminds them of what he has previously told them about right living (4:1). His ethics, though, are notably not of his creation, but rather come directly from God: they are literally “God-taught” virtues (4:9).

II. Proposed allusions

Most of Nestle-Aland’s marginal references in 1 Thessalonians do little more than point to isolated vocabulary in Paul’s letter that also appears in earlier texts. Some proposals are not particularly convincing. The phrase τὴν ἐλπίδα τῆς ὑπομονῆς, for example, does indeed occur in both 1 Thess 1:3 and 4 Macc 17:4. There is no indication, though, either that Paul invokes the image of the enduring patience of the martyrs’ mother specifically or that he presumes the Thessalonians know that story. There are sufficient stories of patient suffering and martyrdom among Jews and Christians (e.g., 1 Thess 2:13-16; 3:3b-4) that if Paul regularly pointed to 3 Maccabees he might have been more explicit in this letter. There is, of course, no way to know. It seems more likely that the triad of virtues for which he gives thanks, “faithful work and loving labor and hopeful endurance in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3), which reappears at 5:8 in the same order, and in a different order at 1 Cor 13:13, is part of his original preaching. That preaching is of course itself shaped by Israel’s scripture, a matter to which we shall return.

Another suggested biblical allusion in the letter is even less persuasive. At 1 Thess 5:3, Paul says, “When they say, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!” Nestle

²⁷ See Wayne A. Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians*; LEC (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 91-96; and *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

points to Jer 6:14 and the false prophets who cry, “‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.” Paul, though, manifestly quotes—and mocks—not those seventh-century prophets but contemporary Roman imperial propaganda.²⁸ Although the apostle himself may well have heard an ironic echo of Jeremiah’s indictment in the empire’s repeated promise of “peace and security”—I certainly do—he does not draw the parallel in 1 Thess 5:3.

The image of a thief in the night to describe the suddenness of the *parousia* in 1 Thess 5:2 is sometimes read as an allusion to Job 24:13-14: “The murderer rises at dusk to kill the poor and needy, and in the night is like a thief.” The phrase may just as well echo the dominical saying in Matt 24:43-44, though, since the context is much more similar (“But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour”). In view of how remarkably seldom Paul quotes Jesus, even this is merely a guess.

A few other passages in the letter seem somewhat more clearly to reflect biblical texts, although none of them is a direct quotation. Three merit attention.

(1) Paul claims in 1 Thess 2:14-16 that Judean resistance to Christian preaching serves a divine purpose: to “fill up the full measure of their sins” (*ἀναπληρῶσαι αὐτῶν τὰς ἀμαρτίας*). Verbal similarities suggest an echo of the assurance from God to Abram in Gen 15:16 that “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete” (*ἀναπεπλήρωνται αἱ ἀμαρτίαι*). Second Maccabees makes similar use of the Genesis story: “For in the case of the other nations the Lord waits

²⁸ See Abraham Smith, “Unmasking the Powers: Toward a Postcolonial Analysis of 1 Thessalonians,” 47-66 in Richard Horsley, ed., *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (New York: Continuum, 2004) 63; Holland Lee Hendrix, “Archaeology and Eschatology at Thessalonica,” 107-118 in Birger A. Pearson, ed., *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 114.

patiently to punish them until they have reached the full measure of their sins” (ἐκπλήρωσιν ἁμαρτιῶν, 6:14). A still later text, the *Testament of Levi*, apparently also has the Genesis episode in view when it marks God’s vengeance on Shechem, son of Hamor, for his rape of Dinah and subsequent multiple sins:²⁹ “the wrath of the Lord came upon them to the uttermost” (6:11).³⁰ It is interesting that three unrelated Jewish authors use the same language, apparently drawn from the same text in Genesis 15, to make a similar point about divine judgment that waits until wickedness builds to a particular level of offense. Significantly, all three authors substitute their own enemies for the Amorites in the original Genesis context: Paul says God’s wrath falls on the Judeans who “killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out” (1 Thess 2:15); 2 Maccabees says God punishes Gentiles, but “does not deal in this way with us [i.e., Israel], in order that he may not take vengeance on us afterward when our sins have reached their height” (6:13b-14); the *Testament of Levi* substitutes the story of Shechem from Genesis 33 for God’s

²⁹ That is, his being circumcised, his intention to rape Sarah and Rebecca as he had Dinah, his persecution of Abram “when he was a stranger,” and so on

³⁰ Jeffrey S. Lamp lists five possibilities for the similarities: (1) Paul quotes *TLevi* 6:11; (2) *TLevi* quotes 1 Thess 2:16; (3) 1 Thess 2:14-16 is an interpolation; (4) *TLevi* 6:11 is an interpolation, (5) Paul and *TLevi* independently quote a common source (“Is Paul Anti-Jewish? *Testament of Levi* 6 in the Interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16” CBQ 65 [2003] 408-427, citing Tjitze Baarda, “The Shechem Episode in the Testament of Levi: A Comparison with Other Traditions,” in *Sacred History and Sacred Texts in Early Judaism: A Symposium in Honour of A. S. van der Woude* [ed. J. N. Bremmer and F. García Martínez; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992] 11-73, esp. 63). Such an assumption of complex literary relationships seems unnecessary when a common tradition—perhaps oral?—offers an equally plausible theory.

In a different vein entirely, Scott argues that a much more general use of biblical theology, specifically what Scott calls the “Deuteronomic View of Israel’s History,” informs the apostle’s thought in 1 Thess 2:14-16 (“Paul’s Use of Deuteronomic Tradition,” 649; cf. Donald A. Hagner, “Paul’s Quarrel with Judaism,” in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity: Issues of Polemic and Faith*; ed. Craig A. Evans and Donald A. Hagner [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993] 128-150, 133-134). If that is the case, a narrative of Israel’s sin and God’s judgment, rooted in scripture but not explicitly citing it, informs Paul’s expectation of judgment on those who oppose his mission. He makes a similar point in Rom 9:14-18—that Pharaoh’s oppression of Israel demonstrates God’s power by highlighting God’s freedom to harden and to have mercy—with an interpretation of Exod 9:16.

promise of judgment on the Amorites (6:1-11). These three may rise to the level of Porter's definition of an allusion, since each one seems to "bring an external person, place, or literary work into [a] contemporary text."³¹

(2) A similar case occurs at 1 Thess 5:8, where Paul says urges his listeners to "put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation." This is one of the clearest allusions to scripture in the letter, invoking the picture in Isa 59:17 of God who "put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in fury as in a mantle" in preparation for the nation's redemption from exile.³² What is curious here is the way Paul uses the image not to talk about God's being armed against enemies but about Christians' protecting themselves from the dangers of wickedness by donning God's armor. The same image occurs in three more texts: the Wisdom of Solomon, Ephesians, and the Babylonian Talmud.

The Lord will take his zeal as his whole armor, and will arm all creation to repel his enemies; he will put on righteousness as a breastplate, and wear impartial justice as a helmet; he will take holiness as an invincible shield, and sharpen stern wrath for a sword, and creation will join with him to fight against his frenzied foes (Wisd 5:17-20).

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph 6:13-17).

Raba said: The following was told me by the suckling who perverted the way of his mother, in the name of R. Eleazar. What is the meaning of the verse, *And he put on righteousness as a coat of mail*? It tells us that just as in a coat of mail every small scale joins with the others to form one piece of armour, so every little sum given to charity combines with the rest to form a large sum. R. Hanina said: The same lesson may be

³¹ "Allusions and Echoes," 40.

³² Paul quotes from Isaiah 59 also in Romans. Rom 3:15-17 cites Isa 59:7-8, somewhat selectively, as part of the catena of verses that attest the sinfulness of the entire world.

learnt from here: And all our righteousness is as a polluted garment. Just as in a garment every thread unites with the rest to form a whole garment, so every farthing given to charity unites with the rest to form a large sum” (*Baba Bathra* 9b).³³

All four of these discussions take place in contexts of moral exhortation rather than descriptions of God’s saving power. Although there is no particular reason to think that the writer of Ephesians knows 1 Thessalonians, even if Eph 6:131-7 were influenced by 1 Thess 5:8, Wisdom and the Babylonian Talmud would still offer two other unrelated uses of the picture of divine armor in Isaiah to exhort proper moral life. This suggests the existence of some kind of Jewish paranetic tradition that interprets Isa 59:17 as hortatory. Richard suggests the tradition grows up in apocalyptic contexts, “precisely because life itself and particularly the end-time struggle were seen as a contest between the spheres of light and darkness or good and evil”³⁴ and thus require more than mere human vigilance or moral fortitude, but God’s own protection and power.

(3) A final allusion to scripture may be in Paul’s portrayal of the Day of the Lord, with destruction that arrives on non-believers as suddenly as a pregnant mother’s labor pains (1 Thess 5:3). The image of childbirth as a metaphor for the wrenching pain of redemption is ubiquitous in both Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature (1 En 62:4; 4 Ez 4:40-42; 16:35-39; Sib Or 5.514; 1 QH 3.7-10; Gal 4:19; Matt 24:8; Mark 13:8; Rev 12:2), and its roots are in the Hebrew Bible. Psalm 48 contains a description of God’s staring down God’s competitors and their fleeing in terror:

Within [Zion’s] citadels God
has shown himself a sure defense.
Then the kings assembled,
they came on together.

³³ Trans., Israel W. Slotki (Soncino, 1935).

³⁴ Earl J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*; Sacra Pagina 11 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1995) 255.

As soon as they saw it, they were astounded;
they were in panic, they took to flight;
trembling took hold of them there,
pains as of a woman in labor [ὠδῖνες ὡς τικτούσης],
as when an east wind shatters the ships of Tarshish (vv. 3-7; LXX 47:7).

Isaiah may be the first to compare the advent of the Day of the Lord specifically to the onset of childbirth:

Wail, for the day of the LORD is near;
it will come like destruction from the Almighty!
Therefore all hands will be feeble,
and every human heart will melt,
and they will be dismayed.
Pangs and agony will seize them;
they will be in anguish like a woman in labor [ὠδῖνες...ὡς γυναικὸς τικτούσης].
They will look aghast at one another;
their faces will be aflame (13:6-8).

Jeremiah, though, uses the simile the most frequently (seven times), linking the terror that precedes imminent destruction expressly with the consequences of idolatry:

And you, O desolate one, what do you mean that you dress in crimson, that you deck yourself with ornaments of gold, that you enlarge your eyes with paint? In vain you beautify yourself. Your lovers despise you; they seek your life. For I heard a cry as of a woman in labor [ὡς ὠδινούσης], anguish as of one bringing forth her first child, the cry of daughter Zion gasping for breath, stretching out her hands, “Woe is me! I am fainting before killers!” (4:30-31).

“We have heard news of them, our hands fall helpless; anguish has taken hold of us, pain as of a woman in labor [ὠδῖνες ὡς τικτούσης](6:24).

What will you say when they set as head over you those whom you have trained to be your allies? Will not pangs take hold of you, like those of a woman in labor [ὠδῖνες...καθὼς γυναῖκα τίκτουσαν]? (13:21).³⁵

³⁵ Cf. also “O inhabitant of Lebanon, nested among the cedars, how you will groan when pangs come upon you, pain as of a woman in labor!” (22:23); “Thus says the LORD: We have heard a cry of panic, of terror, and no peace. Ask now, and see, can a man bear a child? Why then do I see every man with his hands on his loins like a woman in labor? Why has every face turned pale?” (30:5-6); “For thus says the LORD: Look, he shall swoop down like an eagle, and spread his wings against Moab; the towns shall be taken and the strongholds seized. The hearts of the warriors of Moab, on that day, shall be like the heart of a woman in labor” (48:40-41); “Damascus has become feeble, she turned to flee, and panic seized her; anguish and sorrows

Unlike the echoes of Gen 15:16 at 1 Thess 2:14-16 and Isa 59:17 at 1 Thess 5:8, the phrase ὥσπερ ἡ ὥδιν τῆ ἐν γαστρὶ ἐχούση in 1 Thess 5:3 does not betray any verbal associations with the prophetic texts that employ the image, with the notable exception of the noun ὥδιν or the cognate verb ὥδίνω. The echo here is not of a single text but of a significant theme in Jeremiah, where the image of labor pains serves repeatedly to describe the fear that comes suddenly on people when they see the threat of destruction looming on the national horizon. For Paul, what will come suddenly and terribly is the destruction that will sweep away all who have idolatrously trusted in the Empire’s “peace and security” rather than turning to God and God’s Messiah.

III. The shape of Paul’s gospel

For the most part, it seems the echoes or allusions that scholars have detected in 1 Thessalonians of the language of Israel’s Bible are faint at best. Even the clearest allusions do not require that those who hear Paul’s letter know scripture themselves. Because these passages reminiscent of the Old Testament seem also to be used by other Jews in similar ways, in roughly contemporary contexts, we see Paul in 1 Thessalonians engaged in some conventional Jewish exegesis that helps him interpret his apocalyptic message with a church founded by that message. Gen 15:16 helps him affirm God’s justice in the face of opposition to the gospel. Isa 59:17 assists his moral exhortation by assuring Christians that their struggle against evil is not theirs alone. Jeremiah’s metaphor of labor pains to describe sudden fear and destruction gives him a picture of

have taken hold of her, as of a woman in labor” (49:24); “The king of Babylon heard news of them, and his hands fell helpless; anguish seized him, pain like that of a woman in labor” (50:43).

the judgment that will fall on outsiders when the Day of the Lord brings redemption to God's elect.

It is not particularly surprising that when we catch Paul in this letter relying on biblical texts, however subtly, we find him in the company of others who inhabit his apocalyptically shaped world. He is, after all, fundamentally an interpreter—in Beker's words, an apocalyptic interpreter of the Christ event.

We can say then that the hermeneutical interaction between the coherent center of the gospel and its contingency—that is, the manner in which the one gospel of “Christ crucified and risen” in its apocalyptic setting achieves incarnational depth and relevance in every particularity and variety of the human situation—constitutes Paul's particular contribution to theology.³⁶

The same is true of his interpretation of scripture, whether overtly, as in the *Hauptbriefe*, or less visibly, as in 1 Thessalonians.

First Thessalonians is commonly described as Paul's quintessentially apocalyptic letter, in large measure because of one section of it: 4:13-5:11. In point of fact, however, discussion of the end times comprises a comparatively smaller portion of the letter than conventional wisdom assumes. Paul's assurance that the Lord will not abandon Christians who have died and his exhortations concerning the Day of the Lord occupy a single page of the letter's seven-and-one-half pages in the Nestle text. Although anxiety about the destinies of believers who have died is very real, as is the church's anticipation of the trumpet's blast, eschatology is scarcely the primary matter that occupies Paul's attention in the letter, and it should not be uncritically equated with his apocalyptic proclamation.

Although the apocalypse that shapes Paul's message certainly contains news that “the appointed time has grown short” (1 Cor 7:29), it is primarily the revelation of Jesus Christ (Rom

³⁶ J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 35.

16:25; Gal 1:12; 2:2) and of his cross (2 Cor 12:1-10). It discloses the invasion of God's *καὶνὴ κτίσις* (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15) and the consequences of that invasion for the present life of the church that is molded after the model of Jesus' death and resurrection.³⁷

It is helpful to consider his use of the word *παρουσία*, that most conventionally apocalyptic of words, in this letter, because it points as much to the present reality of the church's life in response to Paul's preaching as it does the assurance of Jesus' future appearing. Outside the New Testament, *παρουσία* commonly denotes the appearance or visit of a ruler among subjects and is sometimes used in the New Testament to describe the coming of the risen Lord in glory.³⁸ Paul is the least consistent New Testament writer. Of 24 occurrences of the word, eleven are Paul's; of those, only five refer to the eschatological appearing of Christ. Only in 1 Thessalonians does he use the word to speak exclusively of the Lord's appearing, and the only place outside this letter that he mentions Jesus' *parousia* is 1 Cor 15:23: "Christ the first fruits [of resurrection], then at his appearing those who belong to Christ." More frequently, he uses *παρεῖναι* and *παρουσία* to describe his own presence among his churches (1 Cor 5:3; 2 Cor 10:2, 11; 11:9; 13:2, 10; Gal 4:13).³⁹ This makes 1 Thessalonians appear to be more focused on the eschaton than perhaps it ought.

Each reference to Jesus' *parousia* in 1 Thessalonians (1:9-10; 2:19; 3:12-13; 4:15; 5:23) stands at a critical turning point in the letter's structure. The first three mark transitions within the thanksgiving—Paul's gratitude for the Thessalonians' faithfulness to the gospel (1:2-8) and for their faithfulness to the apostolic mission team (2:1-18), and his prayer for their continued

³⁷ I am indebted to J. Louis Martyn's remarkably perceptive understanding of this in his treatment of Galatians ("The Apocalyptic Gospel in Galatians," *Int* 54 [2000] 252-253).

³⁸ Albrecht Oepke, "παρουσία, κτλ" *TDNT* (1967) 5.858-871.

³⁹ See R. W. Funk, "The Apostolic *Parousia*: Form and Significance," in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox*, ed. W. R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule, R. R. Niebuhr (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) 249-268.

faithfulness (3:1-10)—and the fifth initiates the letter’s concluding benediction (5:23-28). Only the fourth mention of *parousia*, at 4:15, occurs in a discussion of the end times. The recurrence of this image of the Lord’s appearing serves as something like the letter’s heartbeat, the steady rhythm that moves it from beginning to end. The apostle sounds a persistent note of reminder throughout 1 Thessalonians that the crucified and risen Christ is both the source of the church’s faithfulness and the guarantor of that faithfulness. Jesus’ *parousia* carries at once the reality of God’s election and the promise of redemption. Jesus is “the one who rescues us from the impending wrath” (1:10), the one who will gather his church to himself at the last trumpet (4:16; cf. 1 Cor 15:52). He is also, however, the one through whom the Thessalonians bring their faithful work, loving labor, and hopeful endurance into the very presence of God (1:3), the one who makes the faithful church a crown of boasting for the apostles (2:19), the one who pours into believers’ hearts his own love such that their love becomes known beyond their own fellowship (1:8; 3:12; 4:10), and the one who sanctifies the church and assures its holiness so that it may stand in the presence of the holy God (3:13; 5:23). This assurance of Jesus’ *parousia* that suffuses 1 Thessalonians stems from an emphatically apocalyptic conviction that is by no means limited to eschatology.⁴⁰

The central concern of 1 Thessalonians is not simply the church’s proper understanding of God’s eschatological timetable but the formative function of Christian proclamation. Far more pervasive in 1 Thessalonians than discussion of the end times is this concern for preaching and its effects. Paul variously calls his proclamation the word, the word of the Lord, or the word of

⁴⁰ This is *in nuce* the case I make in “Preaching in 1 Thessalonians,” *Journal for Preachers* 28.3 (2005) 20-26.

God (1:6, 8; 2:13 [bis] 4:15, 18),⁴¹ the gospel (1:5; 2:2, 8, 9; 3:2, 6), exhortation or comfort (2:3; cf. 2:12; 3:2; 4:1, 10; 5:11), command (4:2, 11), and prophecy (5:20). It is instructive to consider the verbs he uses when he talks about preaching. He customarily uses verbs of speaking and hearing with εὐαγγέλιον, and he does so in 1 Thess 2:2, 9. Elsewhere in the letter, though, the gospel is more than the specific words he speaks or his listeners hear. God entrusts the gospel to Paul and his coworkers (2:4) and they in turn hand it over to the Thessalonians (2:8). Nowhere is there such a clear picture of the preacher as intermediary between God and the church. The only use of the verb εὐαγγελίζομαι in 1 Thessalonians describes not Paul's proclamation but what happens when Timothy reports to him that the Thessalonians have stood firm in the faith despite opposition and suffering (3:6). The safety and well-being of the church are themselves gospel to the apostle, since "we now live since you stand firm in the Lord" (3:8). Paul thanks God that the gospel "happened" to the Thessalonians "in power and in the Holy Spirit and with complete conviction" rather than in word alone (1:5).⁴² The Thessalonians receive the word (1:6; 2:13) and it "sounds forth" from them (1:8). Paul says the word of the gospel did not occur among the

⁴¹ Compare also the contrast between God's word and human words in 1 Thess 2:5, 13; 4:8.

⁴² First Thessalonians has a large concentration of forms of the verb γίνομαι, in addition to describing what happens to the word of proclamation. The other instances of γίνομαι rehearse the relationship between the mission team and the Thessalonians who "became" the church in that city. "You became imitators of us and of the Lord" (1:6); "you became a model to all believers" (1:7); "our entrance to you has not become empty" (2:1); "we became infants among you, as a nurse might care tenderly for her own children" (2:7); "you became dear to us" (2:8); "we became holy, just, and blameless to you" (2:10); "you became imitators of the church of God in Judea" (2:14); "I sent [Timothy] so that I might know your faith, lest the tempter tempt you and our labor come up empty" (3:5). These reminders of what "happened" in the formation of the Thessalonian church are clustered in the first three chapters, the thanksgiving period, which points to the importance throughout the letter of the pastoral relationship between the Pauline mission team and the Thessalonian Christians. Paul Schubert's classic study demonstrated that the issues raised in a letter's thanksgiving telegraph at the outset the primary concerns of the letter (*The Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgiving* [BZNW 20; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1939]).

Thessalonians as a word of flattery or as a disguise for greed (2:5) but in purity and authenticity from those to whom God entrusted it (2:4). The Thessalonians received this word with joy (1:5) and in great tribulation (1:6). The apostles delivered to the church not only the gospel but also their own lives (2:8). The word of the gospel thus is never entirely circumscribed by the words uttered by human preachers because it comes from “the God who gives you his Holy Spirit” (4:8). The word Paul preaches, then, comes to him as the prophets discerned their words of the Lord. It is disclosed as a revelation from God.

This largeness and otherness of the word of proclamation and its power to save determine the several specific consequences of preaching as Paul speaks of it in 1 Thessalonians. Those who hear the word preach it to others (1:8; 4:18). The church encounters resistance and struggle from those who refuse its message; indeed suffering is to be expected and embraced rather than avoided because that confirms rather than disconfirms the truth of gospel (2:14-16 3:3-4, 7). The word of the cross, as Paul calls it in 1 Cor 1:18, inevitably subjects those who preach it and those who believe to the same destiny their Lord experienced. “We told you ahead of time,” he says, “that we were about to be beset by tribulation, and so it has happened and so you know” (1 Thess 3:4). The gospel further reorients the priorities of the Christian community it creates: it is not the living but the dead whom the Lord of glory summons first to himself (4:16-17), the church is called to care with its ministry not for the strong and the hearty of faith but for the weak, the fainthearted, and idlers (5:14). The apostolic mission team itself is shaped by the cruciform message it proclaims.

Paul rehearses the church’s relationship with the apostles in chapter 2, highlighting the cruciform character of the church’s life:

Although we might have been able to throw our weight around as apostles of Christ, we became instead infants⁴³ in your midst, as a wet nurse might care tenderly for her own children. So because we long for you, we are pleased to hand over to you not only the gospel of God but even our own lives, because you have become beloved to us. For you remember, brothers and sisters, our labor and toil, how we worked night and day so that we might not weigh any of you down when we preached to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, as is God, how we came to you believers in a holy and just and blameless way, as you know, how with each one of you we were as a father with his own children as we exhorted you and pled with you and testified to you that you might walk in a way that is worthy of the God who calls you into his own glorious realm.... But when we were orphaned from you, brothers and sisters, for a brief season—and only physically, not emotionally—we longed all the more eagerly to see you in person (2:7-12, 17; my translation).

Paul refers to himself and his colleagues in a single brief paragraph as the infant child, the nursing mother, the brother, the father, and the orphan of the church they have established in Thessalonica. Each of the kinship metaphors alone—with the exceptions of infant and orphan—occurs commonly in the first century. Philosophers frequently hold up wet nurses as the epitome of instructors who take account of their listeners' frailties, teachers often assume paternal responsibility for their students, and several religious communities use sibling language to refer to themselves. No one but Paul, though, claims both the role of the infant and the nursing mother at the same time. The apostolic mission takes on the astonishing weakness of a newborn and the precarious vulnerability of an orphan, the tender love of a nursing mother and the guiding authority of a father, and the peer relationship of a sibling—all of them in the same paragraph—because that mission is cruciform in character, shaped by the love and vulnerability of the cross of Christ. This is what Paul elsewhere describes as power made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9) and wisdom revealed in foolishness (1 Cor 1:21). Although the gospel that God has entrusted to

⁴³ Beverly Roberts Gaventa's text-critical argument in support of *νήπιοι* in 2:7 ("apostles as Babes and Nurses in 1 Thessalonians 2:7," 193-207 in John T. Carroll, Charles H. Cosgrove, and E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds., *Faith and History: Essays in Honor of Paul W. Meyer* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990] and *First and Second Thessalonians*, 26-27) is stronger than Malherbe's case for *ἡπιοι* ("'Gentle as a Nurse': The Cynic Background to 1 Thess 2," *NovT* [1970] 203-217 and *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 145-148).

the apostles gives them power to “throw [their] weight around” (1 Thess 2:7) that gospel instead shapes their ministry according to the model of Christ crucified.

The cruciform character of Christian life shapes Paul’s moral exhortation as well. He urges each of his listeners to “know how to acquire his or her own vessel in holiness and honor” (4:4), that is, to create celibate partnerships like those in view in 1 Corinthians 7: “so then, the one who marries his own virgin does well; and the one who does not marry will do better” (7:38).⁴⁴ To love and honor one’s vessel of holiness requires that one respect his or her vow and neither transgress its boundaries nor defraud one’s partner by seeking to set the vow aside (1 Thess 4:6). The radically apocalyptic character of such unconventional households—families that effectively replace the households from which believers have come—also lays on the church the obligation to live quietly among its neighbors, mind its own business, and engage in productive work so as to avoid being dependent on outsiders (4:12). Paul describes life together as the church repeatedly in this letter as the granting of precedence to the least among them: the dead will meet the Lord in the air ahead of the living (4:16-17); the disorderly, the discouraged, and the weak are to be the chief concern of the community’s patrons (5:14); they are always to “pursue the good for each other and for all” (5:15). The apostle’s letter is to be read to “*all* the brothers and sisters,” not only to the congregation’s leaders (5:27).

IV. Summary

⁴⁴ This is the case I make in “A Modest Proposal in Context,” in *The Impartial God: Essays in Honor of Jouette M. Bassler*, ed. Robert Foster (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007) 232-245, furthering the argument of Jouette M. Bassler, “Σκευός: A Modest Proposal for Illuminating Paul’s Use of Metaphor in 1 Thessalonians 4:4,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*; ed. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1995) 53-66.

By way of summary, I want to reflect briefly on two of the questions posed to me when I was asked to engage in this study, with thanks for the invitation and appreciation for the task.

Where do we find references to Scripture in 1 Thessalonians? By what criteria can such unmarked references be identified? The criteria proposed by earlier studies for discerning the presence of biblical allusions are somewhat less helpful for the reader of 1 Thessalonians than for readers of other Pauline letters. When he quotes nothing from scripture and even some of the language he uses that reminds *us* of the Bible may in fact have come from elsewhere, it does not particularly matter whether or not the apostle has access to an earlier text or his listeners would recognize it. The reminder is valuable, however, that the Bible is the air Paul breathes, the water he swims in, his native language. Sometimes individual words or phrases can in fact signal that he relies on the Bible for much of his vocabulary.

Does Paul seem to be engaging with the broader context of the OT verses to which he refers, or does he use them in a way that bears little relation to their original context? If we were to define context as broadly as possible—that is, including Paul’s entire canon rather than the literary contexts of discrete texts—then the answer to this question can be affirmative. What is customarily labeled atomistic in Paul’s exegesis (“Does God care for oxen?” in 1 Cor 9:9) assumes a modern respect for literature rather than an apocalyptic conviction that God speaks to him, and to the church, in an unprecedentedly direct manner because of the revelation of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit. The whole story of God’s creative and redemptive work, particularly the death and resurrection of Christ, interprets for him even the smallest phrase from scripture.