

Introduction

In 1 Thess. 1:9b-10 (“you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming”¹), Paul makes three main statements. The first concerns the actions of the Thessalonians, the second regards the action of God, and the third involves the activity of Jesus.

In the first statement—concerning the Thessalonians’ actions—there are three subsidiary statements. First, the Thessalonians have turned to God from idols. Second, they have turned in order to serve the living and true God. And third, they are waiting for the Son from the heavens. The second of Paul’s main statements involves the activity of God—that he has raised his son from the dead. This is the crucial statement of the three, for from it all the other actions follow—it is what we would call the precipitatory action. What seems to be clear is that the actions of the Thessalonians are all part of their response to the news that Jesus has been raised from the dead. The third main statement concerns the actions of Jesus, which I suggest is Paul’s affirmation and encouragement to the Thessalonians that since they have made their response to the news concerning God’s actions, Jesus himself is now acting in their favor—“who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.”

The second of Paul’s main statements I have outlined here is the critical one in this study. For it is this proclamation of resurrection to which the Thessalonians have responded and in light of which they are making significant changes in their lives. What seems to be clear is that Paul’s gospel fundamentally concerns the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. As I shall demonstrate below, the city of Thessalonica was thoroughly under the influence of Roman imperial authority, and it seems likely Paul will have proclaimed a gospel in Thessalonica that will have had a clear resonance with that reality. So, what of Thessalonica—what was its dominating culture?

IMPERIAL THESSALONICA

In 316 bce, “the dazzlingly successful new city of Thessalonike, formed by amalgamating a number of small settlement on the Thermaic gulf,”² was

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the New Testament are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

founded by Cassander, son of Antipater, who had been delegated responsibility for Macedonia by Alexander the Great. It was named for Cassander's wife, Thessalonike.

Roman influence over Thessalonica stretches back to at least 197 bce. The Romans had declared war on Macedon, claiming that they were seeking to free the Greeks. The ensuing battle resulted in defeat for Philip V at the Battle of Cynoscephalae in 197 bce. Philip entered into a peace treaty with Rome, and a period of uncertainty followed. Philip was followed by his son, Perseus, who, having defied Roman interests for the nine years of his reign, was decisively defeated by Rome in 168 bce.

Twenty years later, in 148 bce, an independence movement led by Andriskos was crushed by the Roman legions, and the entire surviving Macedonian aristocracy was exiled to Italy. Macedonia now belonged to the past, even as a protectorate. Despite this, Thessalonica did not by any means flounder, but rather in 146 bce, the Senate upgraded the city from regional capital to provincial capital of Macedonia—making it the first Roman province in the east. Macedonia was thus incorporated into the Roman Empire, and a governor and an army were installed at Thessalonike.³ Touratsoglou comments that the city thereby began to enjoy certain commercial and civic privileges accorded to provincial governors.⁴

After turning down an invitation from Julius Caesar to be part of what became the Triumvirate for fear that it might damage the Republic,⁵ Cicero was exiled from Rome and spent six months in Thessalonica⁶ as a preeminent orator and opponent of Julius's imperial plans, although Everitt suggests that Cicero considered Thessalonica "boring."⁷

During the civil wars of the first century bce, Pompey based himself in Thessalonica along with many Roman senators and established under his command no less than nine legions.⁸ "The city effectively became a 'second Rome' with the consecration of a site for the authoritative convening of the

2. R. M. Errington, *A History of Macedonia*, trans. C. Errington (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 133.

3. I. Touratsoglou, *Macedonia: History, Monuments, Museums* (Athens: Ekdotike Athenon S.A., 1995), 32.

4. H. L. Hendrix, "Thessalonica," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:523–27 (524).

5. E. Rawson, *Cicero* (London: Penguin, 1975), 106.

6. A. Everitt, *Cicero: The Life and Times of Rome's Greatest Politician* (New York: Random House, 2003), 144–47.

7. *Ibid.*, 147.

8. M. V. Sakellariou, ed., *Macedonia: 4000 Years of Greek History and Civilization* (Athens: Ekdotike Athenon, 1988), 194.

Senate.”⁹ Loyalties were in flux for a time after Pompey’s defeat by Caesar. Initially, the city supported Brutus and Cassius—although at some point they withdrew their support¹⁰—and after the battle of Philippi gave lavish honors to the victors, Octavian and Antony. Hendrix reports that the city was so attached to Antony that they inaugurated a new era in his honor.¹¹ Of course, this was to prove seriously problematic with Octavian’s defeat of Antony at Actium.

“The Macedonians were quick to honour Augustus by inaugurating an ‘Augustan era’ starting on 2 September 31 ce, the day of the victory at Aktion.”¹² Coins from the period bear the head of Julius Caesar on one side and Octavian on the other, with the inscription ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΕΩΝ.¹³ Inscriptions in the city from this period also make clear the establishment of a “priest and agonothete of Augustus” and also a “priest of Rome and the Roman benefactors.”¹⁴

Hendrix notes that “one of the few objects recovered at the city which can be dated with certainty to the period of Paul’s visit”¹⁵ is an almost complete statue of Augustus. This significantly confirms that Thessalonica was thoroughly in the grip of Roman imperial authority, and as Touratsoglou suggests, such free cities, while preserving their ancient institutions of government, “now proclaimed the glory of new gods and earthly lords.”¹⁶

IMPERIAL GOSPEL

Our focus is very specifically upon 1 Thess. 1:9b–10 and the description we read there of the transformation that has taken place in the lives of the Thessalonians as a result of hearing the gospel Paul announced in their city. Furthermore, as I have suggested, it surely follows that Paul’s visit to Thessalonica and the gospel proclamation he made there will have had a certain relevance and resonance with the imperialized culture of the city. In addition, it is significant and also abundantly clear from the epistle that Paul regarded the message he delivered during his visit to the Thessalonians as “gospel.” So 1 Thess. 1:5, “our message of the gospel [εὐαγγέλιον] came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.” And then, “We had courage

9. Hendrix, “Thessalonica,” 524.

10. *Ibid.*, 524.

11. *Ibid.*, 524.

12. Sakellariou, *Macedonia*, 196.

13. J. R. Harrison, “Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessalonica,” *JSNT* 25, no. 1 (2002): 71–96 (82).

14. C. Edson, “Macedonia,” *HSCP* 51 (1940): 125–36 (130).

15. Hendrix, “Thessalonica,” 524.

16. Touratsoglou, *Macedonia*, 33.

in our God to declare to you the gospel of God [εὐαγγέλιον] in spite of great opposition” (2:2); and “We are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God [εὐαγγέλιον] but also our own selves” (2:8); and Paul’s words about Timothy, “our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel [εὐαγγελίῳ] of Christ” (3:2).

Stanton cautions that while we cannot be certain of the precise origin of the word group εὐαγγέλιον, “it is clear that they [the early Christians] developed in rivalry with the prominent use in the propaganda and ideology of the imperial cult of this word group and a clutch of associated themes.”¹⁷ We have the example of the well-known Priene Calendar Inscription in honor of Caesar Augustus: “The birthday of our god signalled the beginning of good news for the world because of him” (ἦρξεν δὲ τῷ κόσμῳ τῶν δι’ αὐτὸν εὐαγγελί[ων ἢ γενέθλιος] τοῦ θεοῦ).¹⁸ And as Stanton points out, “Augustus . . . came as saviour and benefactor, bringing benefits for all. He has brought peace and will continue to do so. He was himself ‘the good news.’”¹⁹ Philo also reports, “So it was with Gaius. He who had been recently regarded as saviour and benefactor, who would pour new streams of blessings on Asia and Europe, giving happiness indestructible to each,”²⁰ but he then likens Gaius to Hermes²¹—the messenger of the gods—suggesting that he was himself the one who brought good news—εὐαγγελίζεθαι.²² And then Philo suggests that Gaius was the content of that good news (εὐαγγελιουμένη).²³ Thus it is clear that any suggestion that Paul has announced a “gospel” in Thessalonica must be taken seriously as an anti-imperial proclamation.

METHODOLOGY

Throughout this study, my concern is to examine how 1 Thess. 1:9b–10 sits within the sociopolitical context of Thessalonica, acknowledging that there should be no split between a sociopolitical and a theological approach. Both approaches overlap and inform each other. In addition, my concern is to examine the text with three distinct emphases. First, I shall consider the tradition history of the terms and motifs found here. Within this study, there will be

17. G. N. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11.

18. The Greek text is taken from W. Dittenberger, ed., *Oriens Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae: Supplementum Sylloges Inscriptionum Graecarum* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1905), 2:55.

19. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 32.

20. Philo, *The Embassy to Gaius* 22 (trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker LCL).

21. This link is noted in the entry for εὐαγγελιστής in LSJ 705.

22. Philo, *The Embassy to Gaius* 99.

23. *Ibid.*, 231.

examples of how terms and motifs have been used and understood within the Greco-Roman imperial sociopolitical context, but also examples from within the Jewish context. Hopefully, this approach will give a balanced and rounded understanding to the way Paul might have used the terms and in particular how they might have been heard by the audience. Therefore, in the first instance—examining how the terms have been used by Paul in order to communicate his message clearly—we will be seeking to enter in some way into the mind of Paul. That is, we will examine the ways in which the various terms and motifs used in Jewish literature will have formed something of Paul’s own cultural and experiential background. So, by a thorough examination of Hebrew Bible, LXX, and pseudepigraphical literature, as well as, on occasion, other contemporary literature that *may* have influenced Paul, we will seek to understand something of Paul’s thinking and approach.

Thus the second emphasis is that of reader-response—precisely how the words might have been understood by the original first-century audience. It is here that, by examining the response of the Thessalonians to the message of Paul, we can seek to enter, as it were, into their minds and begin to discern how the Thessalonians themselves might have heard that message. Hence, I shall take the information from the section above on Thessalonica and clearly set all that Paul says in 1 Thess. 1:9b-10 into that specific sociopolitical context; and I shall also take the section on gospel and seek to identify from the outset the possibility that Paul’s proclamation may have been understood as an announcement in the manner of the imperial gospel, but an alternative gospel. Thus I will seek to show that some of Paul’s terms and motifs appear to have had a particular resonance within the culture in which the Thessalonians lived. So, for example, the section on idols would best be understood, as far as possible, from within the narrative of Thessalonica and its culture. And then we may discern both how they might have heard the message Paul brought to them and the significance of their response. Furthermore, it is worth noting that in, for example, my examination of “waiting for the Son,” I draw on literature such as Plutarch, Pliny, and Josephus, who wrote either at the same as Paul or in the years following his correspondence with the Thessalonians. I thus argue that their terms and motifs reflect what most likely was generally available to and familiar to the Thessalonians within their own culture and provide useful insight into the way the Thessalonians would most likely have heard Paul’s message concerning the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

A third factor is that, in addition to seeking to enter into the minds of Paul and the Thessalonians in order to understand the way in which they utilize and comprehend certain terms and motifs, I of course acknowledge both my own

and other scholars' unique perspective as twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars looking back through history, seeking to elucidate the possible sense of particular words and phrases through the use of resources and texts available to us today. There may well be occasions when the culture and perspective of the twentieth and twenty-first century will influence and perhaps even cloud understanding of both Paul and the Thessalonians.

This book is quite specifically concerned with and focused upon the meaning and impact of resurrection as we read it in 1 Thess. 1:9b-10. For, as Fee makes clear, "This is the earliest known reference in Christian literature to the resurrection of Christ, the single most crucial event in early—and all—Christian faith."²⁴ Thus I will not endeavor to explore and analyze every single reference to resurrection in the Pauline literature, but only to draw in those texts that have a bearing upon my precise study of 1 Thess. 1:9b-10.

CHAPTER PLAN

As I have indicated above, the precipitatory statement at the heart of 1 Thess. 1:9b-10 is the claim that God has raised Jesus from the dead. Everything else in the verses follows from this. As we shall see, the claim of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is not only an unusual but also an extraordinary claim to make, as resurrection was almost completely unknown within the ancient world. Yet it is apparently on the basis of this gospel assertion that the Thessalonians turned their lives to God, to serve him and to wait for his Son. In this book, therefore, I take up an evaluation of resurrection as Paul's central gospel announcement in Thessalonica and consider its resonance and relevance within the Roman imperial world. An examination of resurrection within both the Greco-Roman world and classical literature will form the background for this evaluation before we consider the idea of resurrection in the Hebrew Bible, LXX, and Pseudepigrapha²⁵ in order to elucidate the inspiration for Paul's bold and radical

24. G. D. Fee, *The First and Second letters to the Thessalonians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 48.

25. In this book, I accept that Paul was aware of a broad spectrum of Scripture—both in Hebrew and in Greek. As Hays makes clear, Paul's "citations characteristically follow the Septuagint" (R. B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the letters of Paul* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, xi]). I also naturally understand that Paul, a loyal follower of Pharisaism (Acts 23:6) and devoted to the keeping of the Torah—as Acts 22:3 also makes clear, "brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God"—would thus have been well versed in the Hebrew Scriptures also. I accept also that in Paul's day the text of the Greek and Hebrew Bibles would have been relatively fluid (C. D. Stanley, *Paul and the Language of Scripture: Citation Technique in the Pauline Epistles and Contemporary Literature* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], 5).

proclamation. Ultimately, in chapter 1, I am seeking to understand Paul's specific intention in his gospel announcement and asking about how it will have been heard and received in Thessalonica. My assertion is that, for Paul, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead fundamentally usurps imperial claims to ultimate power. The gospel announcement that Jesus has been raised is a declaration that imperial power has been irretrievably subverted, thus giving impetus to the decisions made by the Thessalonians to live their lives for God.

However, if my thesis is correct, then of course there should be a discernible thread running through 1 Thess. 1:9b-10 that will confirm this. Therefore, following the initial chapter, on the announcement of resurrection within the Greco-Roman world and its impact and significance, we will then examine the other words and phrases within 1 Thess. 1:9b-10. We will be looking specifically to see whether there is evidence that Paul is not simply announcing the resurrection of Jesus from the dead but that his description of the transformation evidenced in the lives of the Thessalonians follows this anti-imperial theme.

Thus we turn in chapter 2 to Paul's first statement of the actions of the Thessalonians in response to the announcement of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead: "You turned to God from idols." There are two clear points for examination here. First, the use of ἐπιστρέφω as a descriptor of the Thessalonians' turning to God. This is a striking word for the simple reason that it is relatively rare in Paul. We might have expected Paul to use other words such as μετάνοια or πιστεύω instead of ἐπιστρέφω, so it is necessary therefore to examine the possible reasons why Paul chose this specific word to communicate to the Thessalonians what they have done. I will thus make the necessary examination of Paul's other uses of ἐπιστρέφω in order to see if there might be a common theme linking them and therefore the use of ἐπιστρέφω. It will then be appropriate to consider the alternatives mentioned above—μετάνοια and πιστεύω. Might it have been possible to use them instead? What is it about ἐπιστρέφω that communicates something specific about the Thessalonians' conversion to Christ? There are many examples of the use of ἐπιστρέφω in Scripture, but as we examine them what we will necessarily be particularly looking for is evidence that there might be an accepted understanding of this word that relates to and describes and affirms what I have asserted: that the Thessalonians' conversion is inspired by a gospel that is itself anti-imperial.

The second point regarding the Thessalonians' response to the gospel is that their turning to God was "from idols," and I consider this in chapter 3. Set within my overall thesis that the gospel Paul proclaimed is fundamentally

anti-imperial, and thus the description of the conversion of the respondents is therefore also anti-imperial, I am interested here to see if Paul's mention of idols also has an anti-imperial edge to it. It is abundantly clear that idols were everywhere in Thessalonica. And not only so, but the evidence clearly suggests that idols were intrinsically religious, political, and social all at the same time. In other words, it may not be possible to delineate between the focus of the worship being offered to the idols. If at one glance it appears that worship has a religious edge, a second glance will confirm that the political and/or social can and must be drawn into the perspective. My examination of the idols in Thessalonica will give a brief introduction to the worship of gods in the city, but in this chapter, I seek primarily to demonstrate that imperial culture and the rule of the emperors was embedded within the city such that any turning from idols to God would inevitably necessitate, in some sense, a turning from the imperial ruler and the imperially dominated prevailing culture.

The second main statement Paul makes concerning the actions of the Thessalonians is: “to serve a living and true God.” The first aspect here (examined in chapter 4)—that they have chosen to serve as slaves of God (δουλεύειν θεῷ)—is striking in that it communicates to us a voluntary giving up of one's autonomy in order to serve, without rights and without freedom, someone else. Why might they do this—what are the advantages of doing so; what are they trying to communicate through such a radical response to Paul's gospel? What we will do here first is to examine slavery in the Greek and the Roman context. This will help us work through the possible understanding that the Thessalonians might have had in terms of their deliberately choosing to give up their freedom to be slaves of God. But second, we will also need to examine the notion of slavery as it occurs in the Scriptures that Paul would have been familiar with. For while there may be something in the Greek and Roman traditions of slavery that will help us understand what is being described here, it appears clear that the idea of choosing specifically to be a slave *of God* is limited in antiquity but well-known within Scripture. Central to my exploration here is of course the question of how the decision to be a slave of God cuts across and perhaps even subverts traditional ideas and culture—particularly the imperial ideas and culture common to Thessalonica.

The second aspect of this second main statement concerning the actions of the Thessalonians, which forms the content of chapter 5, describes for us the God to whom they have turned: he is “living and true” (ζῶντι καὶ ἀληθινῷ). Once again, we are faced with a rare phrase. Indeed, this description of God is not found anywhere else in the Old or New Testaments, neither in the LXX nor in the Pseudepigrapha. So, once again we must ask if there is something in

particular that Paul is seeking to communicate through this unique description of God—aware of course that God is elsewhere described either as “living” or as “true” but never as “living *and* true”? Naturally, Paul may simply be drawing together two epithets and coincidentally placing them together, but this chapter will nevertheless consider the significance of choosing to describe God in this way. How do these descriptions of God sound when juxtaposed with the claims of the empire and in particular the imperial rulers? In what way might they begin to sound a distinctive and subversive tone? What becomes clear is that the depiction of God as “living” links into the idea of the relationship that God has with those who trust and follow him, and that “true” contains within it ideas connected with God’s faithfulness to his covenant.

Paul’s final main statement in 1 Thess. 1:9b-10 is that the Thessalonians are waiting for the son from the heavens. The two aspects of this statement—“waiting” and “for the son”—both provide strong supports for my thesis that Paul’s description of the Thessalonians’ actions is tied in with the proclamation of a fundamentally anti-imperial gospel.

First, I note that the use of ἀναμένειν to define the waiting activity of the believers is a hapax legomenon, although there are a few examples in the LXX and Pseudepigrapha, which I will investigate in chapter 6. In addition, I shall look at the way in which ἀναμένειν is employed by classical writers. However, what is most surprising and enlightening is the use of ἀναμένειν in the first century ce by Josephus, who uses it to speak of waiting for the imperial rulers. Paul’s choice of ἀναμένειν, rather than a more common word such as ἀπεκδέχομαι—which Paul uses regularly elsewhere—thus has a contemporary use that has a deep and profound resonance within imperial culture.

Second is the consideration—in chapter 7—of the title “son” for Jesus, the one whom God raised from the dead. It is apparent that the emperors laid claim to the title “son of god” and that each successive emperor was declared divine postmortem. However, there are two particular aspects of this claim to “sonship of the divine” that I will examine with regard to both the emperors and also then to Jesus. First, the claim to sonship of the divine appears to hold within it a certain right to rule. It may then of course be that the emperors necessarily needed to claim this relationship to the divine in order to legitimize their rule. But then we need to examine this with reference to Jesus and ask what Paul’s agenda might be if he is seeking to follow a similar track. Further, I will explore the suggestion that there is a specific role within the remit of the ruler as son of god which is to reconcile disparate peoples. Both of these aspects can be applied to Jesus, and my concern is to explore the extent to which they might be within Paul’s thinking as he depicts Jesus as the son of God in 1 Thess. 1:10.

And obviously, I shall consider how the application of such an epithet to Jesus in an imperial culture might then be understood.

In the final chapter, I take up the last phrase of 1 Thess. 1:9b-10: “Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming,” and explore its three key elements. First, I shall examine Paul’s use of the epithet-free “Jesus.” Is there significance in this stripped-back “Jesus,” and if so what might it mean in the context of the believers’ response to Paul’s gospel? Second, it is necessary to ask questions about what Paul intends to be understood by the assertion that Jesus is the one who “rescues” the believers. I shall do this through an examination of his use of *ρύομαι* elsewhere in his letters. Is there a common thread? Are there clues that might help to unpack its use in this earliest letter? Further, I will consider what is meant by *τῆς ὀργῆς τῆς ἐρχομένης*. The final challenge here will be to put all this together and set out a rather different perspective on “Jesus who rescues us from the wrath that is coming” than is normally expressed by scholars.

In each of the chapters I have very briefly outlined above, I examine the basis of the thesis, that in 1 Thess. 1:9b-10, Paul, having proclaimed a gospel of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, is in fact announcing an alternative gospel that not only counters the imperial ideas of gospel but also subverts and usurps the Roman Empire itself. Each subsequent chapter extends the breadth of the thesis by examining how the actions of the Thessalonians in response to this anti-imperial gospel contribute to our understanding of the implications and consequences of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. What did it mean in the lives of those in Thessalonica who heard Paul’s message and chose to respond positively to it?