ST. PAUL IN MACEDONIA:
2. THE THESSALONIAN CORRESPONDENCE

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THE study of St. Paul in Macedonia need not be confined to those periods during which he was actually present in that province. If his letters to various churches were substitutes for the spoken words which he would have addressed to them had he been present with them, then his letters to the churches of Thessalonica and Philippi are as much entitled to be considered under the heading "St. Paul in Macedonia" as his spoken words to those churches would be, if they had been preserved to us.

Two letters of Paul addressed "to the church of the Thessalonians" have come down to us in the New Testament collection. We commonly call them letters of Paul, but in fact each of them is superscribed in the names of "Paul, Silvanus and Timothy". Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy appear in Acts as Paul's companions during his first visit to Thessalonica. For a short time after leaving Thessalonica the three were separated, but according to Acts xviii. 5 they were reunited in Corinth. Corinth, then, would suggest itself as the place from which the letters to the church of Thessalonica were sent.

But if Paul, Silvanus and Timothy are named together as joint-authors of both letters, may not Silvanus and Timothy have played a responsible part in the composition of one or another of the letters? It has been felt that this consideration might help towards a solution of the problem of the relation between the two letters. F. C. Burkitt, for his part, thought that both letters were the work of Silvanus; Paul, he suggested, had them read over to him and added 1 Thessalonians ii. 18 and 2 Thessalonians iii. 17 in his own hand. This theory of authorship made it easier for Burkitt to maintain his belief that Galatians is the earliest of

1 A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, 12th December 1979.
Paul's extant letters; it explained the contrast which he felt between the maturity of Paul's thought in Galatians and the immaturity which he found in both the Thessalonian letters—especially in their eschatology.¹

But the evidence of each of the two Thessalonian letters points to Paul as its primary author. The author uses "we" in both letters when he speaks of himself and his companions comprehensively; but when he wishes to speak in his own name he leaves his readers in no doubt of his identity. "We wanted to come to you time and again", he says in 1 Thessalonians ii. 18, "even I Paul" (referring to his desire to return to Thessalonica as soon as possible after his enforced departure from the city). Again, at the end of 2 Thessalonians he draws attention to "the greeting of me Paul with my own hand, my token in every letter: so I write" (iii. 17).² Is it likely that these were two personal notes added by Paul to Silvanus's letters, as Burkitt thought? I find it difficult to think so. Silvanus and Timothy are named as Paul's associates, and one or the other of them may have served as his amanuensis, but Paul (it seems to me) is the effective author of both letters—so at least the readers are intended to believe.

That last caveat—"so at least the readers are intended to believe"—has regard to the fact that the genuineness of the letters has been questioned. This is particularly so with 2 Thessalonians; the genuineness of 1 Thessalonians has been generally accepted. F. C. Baur regarded himself as a pioneer.⁴

¹ F. C. Burkitt, Christian Beginnings (London, 1924), pp. 130 ff. Burkitt also followed Harnack's suggestion that 2 Thess. was sent to the Jewish section of the Thessalonian church (see p. 339 below).

² O. Roller thought that the purpose of the signature in 2 Thess. iii. 17 was to draw the readers' attention to the fact that the whole letter was written by Paul, the signature being therefore in the same hand (Das Formular der paulinischen Briefe [Stuttgart, 1933], pp. 187 ff.).

³ The first scholar to deny the authenticity of 2 Thess. appears to have been J. E. C. Schmidt in a succession of works: Philologisch-exegetische Clavis über das Neue Testament, i. 2 (Giessen, 1798); Bibliothek für Kritik und Exegese des Neuen Testaments (Hadamir, 1801), pp. 385 f.; Einleitung in das Neue Testament (Giessen, 1804), pp. 256 f.

⁴ He was anticipated by C. Schrader, Der Apostel Paulus, Teil 5 (Leipzig, 1836).
in doubting the authenticity of 1 Thessalonians which, he wrote in 1845, "has as yet excited no suspicions". The absence of anything in this epistle that criticism can easily lay hold of has been for most critics a powerful argument for its authenticity; Baur, however, saw in this "a criterion adverse to a Pauline origin".1 (The authentic Paul, it is implied, provides no lack of material for criticism to lay hold of—which is true enough in one sense.) In Baur's eyes, 1 Thessalonians was based on the narrative of Acts (and that implied for it a second-century date), and contains reminiscences of genuine Pauline letters, especially 1 and 2 Corinthians. Moreover, it presupposes the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 in saying of the Jews, "retribution has overtaken them for good and all" (1 Thess. ii. 16)—a remark which, together with its immediate context, continues to present an exegetical problem.

Whereas 1 Thessalonians reflects (at second hand) Paul's eschatological views, Baur found, 2 Thessalonians reproduces the eschatology of a very different school. It was composed under the influence of the Johannine Apocalypse: the "man of lawlessness" of 2 Thessalonians ii. 3 f. is modelled on the beast from the abyss of Revelation xiii. 1-9. The signature at the end of 2 Thessalonians is a mark of pseudonymity: in Paul's day there was no need to guarantee the authenticity of his letters; only with the circulation of pseudepigrapha did this become necessary.2

R. A. Lipsius, a disciple of Baur, was able to fit 1 Thessalonians into Baur's historical reconstruction of early Christianity by finding an anti-judaizing tendency in it; it was thus possible for him to accept its authenticity while remaining true to the tenets of the Tübingen school.3

In our own day A. Q. Morton's computerized analysis of its literary style has led him to the conclusion that 1 Thessalonians does not come from the author of the Roman, Corinthian and

2 F. C. Baur, "Die beiden Briefe an die Thessalonicher", Theologische Jahrbücher, xiv (1855), 141 ff., translated as Appendix III in the volume cited in the preceding note (pp. 314 ff.).
Galatian correspondence (and neither does 2 Thessalonians). This analysis does not take account of the contents of the document, and the stylistic deviations (which it is said to share with 2 Thessalonians, Philippians and Colossians) may be put down to the freedom which one of Paul’s colleagues was allowed as his secretary. (Timothy’s name is conjoined with Paul’s in the superscriptions of all these letters.)

We shall return to the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians; for the moment, we observe that of the two letters 1 Thessalonians is much more informative about the movements of Paul and his companions after their departure from Thessalonica.

II

Not many weeks had passed since Paul left Thessalonica, but in the interval he had sent Timothy back to visit the new Christians there and report on their wellbeing. Timothy brought back a report so generally encouraging that Paul dictated a letter there and then, expressing his joy and relief. If he had feared that the Thessalonian converts were disillusioned or discouraged by the turn of events attending and following his sudden departure from the city—which, in the eyes of less well-disposed people, might have seemed like leaving them in the lurch—he was assured that, on the contrary, they were enthusiastically propagating the new faith on their own initiative.

Even so, Paul felt it necessary to explain his hasty departure and his failure to return: if his converts did not blame him, some of their relatives and neighbours did; and it would be well if the converts had the necessary information to answer any criticisms. Besides, questions had been raised about his conduct

and that of his companions during their stay in Thessalonica: they were being charged with mercenary motives and worse. Happily, Paul was able in this regard to appeal to his converts’ own knowledge of the facts. He and his fellow-missionaries did not sponge on them, but earned their own living by manual work, so that the new believers might learn by example as well as by precept how Christians ought to live.

If the Thessalonian Christians found themselves enduring persecution because of their new faith and way of life, let them reflect that this was the common lot of Christians. In this respect they stood in the noble succession of the churches of Judaea. (Paul does not mention that at an earlier stage he himself had played a leading part in persecuting the churches of Judaea; but this is not the only problem presented by 1 Thessalonians ii. 13-16.)

It was because, after more than one frustrated attempt to revisit their city, he could not bear to remain without news of them that he sent Timothy to encourage them and bring him news of them, while he stayed on in Athens. Now Timothy had come back with the good news of their resolution and missionary zeal, and Paul was overjoyed.

But Timothy brought news not only of their faith and charity, but also of their insufficient grasp of Christian standards in sexual ethics. Sexual activity should be confined within the frontiers of marriage; a life consecrated to the service of God could give no place to fornication. And for a member of the church to be guilty of a sexual trespass within the family circle of a fellow-Christian would be an appalling denial of the brotherly love which ought to prevail among them, and which was actually manifesting itself among them in so many desirable ways. The earnestness with which Paul warns them against sexual laxity


2 This seems to be the force of 1 Thess. iv. 6a: I take ἐν τῷ πράγματι to mean "in the matter under discussion" (i.e. sexual relations).
suggests that he had learned that there was need of such a warning.

Another warning was called for because some of their number, perhaps from an over-enthusiastic expectation of the imminent advent of Christ, thought it unnecessary to go on working, and so were inevitably becoming a charge on others. This too was a denial of brotherly love, and it made a very unfortunate impression on non-Christians. Paul therefore urges on each of them the importance of earning an honest living.

The over-enthusiastic expectation of the imminent advent of Christ sprang partly from Paul’s teaching on the subject, which they had imperfectly digested (and in any case Paul had been deprived of the opportunity to teach them as much as he would have liked to do), and partly, perhaps, from a wider contemporary wave of eschatological excitement. It is plain that Paul had taught them something about the expected advent of Christ: when he reminds them of their conversion, he says that they “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, our deliverer from the coming wrath” (1 Thess. i. 9 f.).

The “coming wrath” is the outpouring of judgement which, it was believed, would mark the end of the current age. That believers in Christ would be delivered from it is affirmed again towards the end of the letter: “God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain deliverance through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. v. 9).

The Greek word for “advent” is *parousia*. Paul may have been the first Christian to use this word of the return of Christ: he is certainly the first Christian writer to do so. The word occurs repeatedly in this sense in the Thessalonian correspondence (cf. 1 Thess. ii. 19, iii. 13, iv. 15; 2 Thess. ii. 2, 8). This use is probably derived from its employment to denote the official visit of a ruler. In the Thessalonian letters Paul portrays the advent of Christ in terms reminiscent of Old Testament theophanies. If, in the Blessing of Moses, Yahweh came from Sinai “from the myriads of his holy ones” (Deut. xxxiii. 2); if,

1 These words would be a fitting summary of the experience of any pagans who were converted after listening to such preaching as that reported in Acts xiv. 15-17 (at Lystra) or xvii. 22-31 (at Athens).
in the expectation of one of the latest prophets of Israel, "Yahweh my God will come, and all the holy ones with him" (Zech. xiv. 5b), so Paul looks forward to "the parousia of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones" (1 Thess. iii. 13). But whereas the "holy ones" in Old Testament theophanies are angelic beings, in relation to the parousia of Christ they may well include his holy people, and that in no merely nominal sense. For Paul is not really interested in the apocalyptic scenery; he looks forward to the parousia especially as the time when the people of Christ will be "established in holiness" by him in the presence of God. More personally, Paul looks forward to it as the time when his apostolic service will be finally reviewed by the Lord who commissioned him on the Damascus road, and he says he will be content to have his service assessed by the quality of his converts (1 Thess. ii. 19).

That Paul had not had time to give his Thessalonian converts as much teaching on this subject as could have been wished is indicated by his response to some news which (presumably) Timothy had reported to him. In the relatively brief interval since Paul's departure some of them had apparently died. The others were anxious about the status of these departed friends at the coming parousia. Would they forfeit the joy of being associated with their returning Lord? Quite evidently, they had not been taught that the resurrection of the just would coincide with the parousia; this is what Paul now tells them by way of reassuring them. He appeals to the highest authority for this reassurance: "we tell you this by the word of the Lord." Whether he is referring to something said by Jesus in the course of his ministry or to something said by a Christian prophet in his name is uncertain. But what he says "by the word of the Lord" is that the first thing that will happen at the parousia is that "the dead in Christ will rise" (1 Thess. iv. 13-18).

It emerges quite plainly from Paul's way of expressing himself here that at this stage he himself expected to survive to the parousia. At a later stage in his career he expected rather to be among those who would be raised from the dead, but this shift of perspective—the so-called "delay of the parousia"—does not

1 Cf. 2 Cor. iv. 14, v. 1-10.
appear to have occasioned any change in his theology in general or in his eschatology in particular.

If, however, the parousia may be expected in the lifetime of most Christians then living, this is not stated positively; it is rather assumed. No more precise indication is given: as Jesus had spoken of the Son of Man as coming at a time when he was least expected, so, says Paul, "the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" (1 Thess. v. 2). It is on the ungodly, however, that the day will break with such surprising suddenness: believers will be prepared for it—not because they know when it will come but because to live the Christian life is to be permanently ready for the great day. Others may remain in the darkness and fall asleep; Christians live in the light and stay awake (1 Thess. v. 1-10). Indeed, something to the same effect is recorded among the sayings of Jesus: "if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the look-out and not allowed his house to be broken into" (Matt. xxiv. 43).

Despite the prevalent eschatological interest, in which Paul himself probably shared, he discourages unhealthy excitement and urges moral alertness and sobriety.

The practical exhortations which conclude 1 Thessalonians cover general principles of Christian ethics, but some of them reflect the part which prophesying played in the church. "Do not quench the Spirit", says Paul (i.e. by discouraging prophets from exercising their gift), "do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good; abstain from every form of evil" (1 Thess. v. 19-21). Prophesying is encouraged, but not everything that claims to be the product of prophetic inspiration is to be swallowed uncritically. It is what is said, not how it is said, that matters; and what is said must be weighed to make sure that it is consistent with what is already known to be true.

III

If only 1 Thessalonians had come down to us, the Thessalonian correspondence would have presented no great problem. Here and there we should have to consider the possibility of a later gloss or interpolation, and we should have to deal with
analysts who discern two distinct letters in this short document; but the letter could be accepted without serious question as one sent by Paul to his Thessalonian converts shortly after he was forced to leave their city, and from it we could fill in various details about the evangelization of Thessalonica and the fortunes of the church after Paul's departure.

Again, if only 2 Thessalonians had been preserved, there would be no great problem. From it we could not reconstruct the course of recent events to the extent that is possible with 1 Thessalonians, but we should gather that the church was in good heart, so that Paul was prompted to thank God for them as well as to give them further encouragement. The church needed further instruction about the coming day of the Lord, and those members who, because of eschatological excitement or some other reason, were idling and becoming a charge on their friends required straight and stern admonition.

It is the fact that both letters have come down to us that raises questions which demand an answer—questions, in particular, about their relation the one to the other.

In general, 2 Thessalonians covers very much the same ground as 1 Thessalonians, if more perfunctorily. Again we have thanksgiving to God for the Thessalonian Christians' faith and love, amid the persecutions which they are enduring. These persecutions, it is remarked, are a means of fitting them for the kingdom of God, while they are equally certain tokens of the doom of their persecutors when the Lord comes "to be glorified in his holy ones" (2 Thess. i. 10).2

There is a major eschatological section (2 Thess. ii. 1-12) to which we shall return: it is the one feature which distinguishes the second letter from the first. It is followed by further exhortations of a general kind, including a stern warning against idle-

1 The view that 1 Thess. consists of two letters (along with certain non-Pauline additions), editorially joined at iii. 5, was propounded by K. G. Eckart, "Der zweite echte Brief des Apostels Paulus an die Thessalonicher", Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche, lviii (1961), 30 ff.; it was rebutted by W. G. Kümmel, "Das literarische und geschichtliche Problem des ersten Thessalonicherbriefes", Neotestamentica et Patristica = O. Cullmann Festschrift (Leiden, 1962), pp. 213 ff. See p. 338, n. 2 below.

2 Here again the close association between "his holy ones" and "all who have believed" suggests that the holy ones are not exclusively angelic beings.
ness. Again the readers are reminded, as in 1 Thessalonians ii. 9-12, how the missionaries had set them an example in this respect. This example, coupled with teaching to the same effect—"If any one will not work, let him not eat" (2 Thess. iii. 10)—constituted part of the "traditions" to which the Thessalonians are urged to hold fast (2 Thess. ii. 15, iii. 6).

If both letters are authentic, they were evidently sent within a brief interval, one after the other. Why then should there be so much repetition and overlapping between them? And why, at the same time, should there be such a different eschatological outlook in the one as against the other?

One of the boldest answers to this double question has been given by Andreas Lindemann: 2 Thessalonians, he argues, was written as a deliberate replacement for 1 Thessalonians by someone who did not approve of the eschatological perspective of 1 Thessalonians. This person reproduced the substance of 1 Thessalonians in the matter of thanksgiving, encouragement and admonition, in a somewhat abridged and impersonal form, but he replaced the eschatological teaching of 1 Thessalonians, with its emphasis on the imminence of the parousia, with a new section (2 Thess. ii. 1-12) in which he emphasized that the parousia would be preceded by certain events—in particular, the rise of Antichrist (not that he calls him by this name)—and that not until Antichrist was entrenched in supreme power would Christ appear in his parousia and deal him his deathblow.

That we have to do with a deliberate replacement, Professor Lindemann maintains, is shown, first, by the writer's suggestion in 2 Thessalonians ii. 2 that any eschatological teaching ascribed to Paul which disagrees with that which is about to be given should be treated as a forgery and, second, by the explicit signature "Paul" at the end of the letter. The implication of 2 Thessalonians ii. 2 is that 1 Thessalonians is spurious (the truth, according to Lindemann, being the other way round);

1 If they were intended for different groups (see pp. 339 f. below), they might have been sent simultaneously.

and as for the signature in 2 Thessalonians iii. 17, is it not odd that this is the only letter in the Pauline corpus which is expressly subscribed "Paul"? If indeed Lindemann is right, then 2 Thessalonians is not an example of conventional deutero-Pauline pseudepigraphy (in which a faithful disciple of Paul tries to apply to a new situation the treatment which he believes Paul would have given it); the writer intentionally sets himself to substitute a composition of his own for an existing Pauline letter.

Willi Marxsen puts forward the view that 2 Thessalonians—not, in his judgement, a Pauline epistle—was written to counter a form of gnosticism.¹ The warning in 2 Thessalonians ii. 2 against supposing that "the day of the Lord has come" is compared with Paul's ironical reply in 1 Corinthians iv. 8-13 to those "men of the Spirit" in the church of Corinth whose conduct suggested that they had already entered the coming kingdom of glory: "I wish it were so", Paul remarks, "for then we should be reigning with you" instead of being treated as "the offscouring of all things". But if in both 1 Corinthians and 2 Thessalonians issue is being taken with what has been called an "over-realized eschatology", it was possible in apostolic days, as it is manifestly possible today, to hold such an outlook and yet have nothing to do with gnosticism. (In any case, the Thessalonians are more probably being warned against an over-emphasis on the imminence of the parousia than against an over-realized eschatology.)

A more elaborate statement of the "gnostic" interpretation of 2 Thessalonians (and, for that matter, of 1 Thessalonians too) has been made by Walter Schmithals.² But gnosticism can be read out of the Thessalonian correspondence only if it be first read into it.

IV

One or two scholars have undertaken to argue that 2 Thessalonians was sent not to the church of Thessalonica but to one of

the other Macedonian churches, about the same time as 1 Thessalonians was sent to Thessalonica; this would account for the common material in both.

Maurice Goguel, for example, suggested that 2 Thessalonians was originally intended for the church in Beroea, while Eduard Schweizer has thought of it as originally a letter to Philippi. A copy of it was made in Thessalonica and preserved there, and because it was cherished in the Thessalonian church the original greeting to Philippi was replaced by one borrowed from the beginning of 1 Thessalonians. It would in that case be the first letter to the Philippians, the second letter, written several years later, being our present Epistle to the Philippians. Polycarp, it is pointed out, in his letter to the Philippian church, knows of more than one letter sent to that church by Paul; he says, too, that Paul in his letters praises the Philippians to all the churches (an inference which could be made more readily from 2 Thessalonians i. 4 than from anything in our Philippians).

But if Paul wrote a letter to the Philippians at the same time as 1 Thessalonians, we might expect it to contain the same kind of warm personal references to the people addressed as we find in 1 Thessalonians.

Another attempt to solve the problem of the relation between the two letters is the suggestion that they were sent to distinct groups in the Thessalonian church.

Adolf Harnack thought that 2 Thessalonians was addressed more particularly to the Jewish-Christian membership of the church. But Paul is unlikely to have adopted this line in dealing with any of his churches: his desire was the complete integration of former Jews and former Gentiles in the new fellowship, and anything which would have encouraged the maintenance of a sense of separateness between the two groups would have been

3 Polycarp, *Ep. ad Phil.*, iii. 2, xi. 3.
resisted by him. In his letter to the Romans he does say at one point, "I am speaking to you who are Gentiles" (Rom. xi. 13), but he does so in a letter addressed to all the Christians in Rome, and he does so in order to promote a sense of unity between the two groups, warning Gentile Christians not to look down on their fellow-believers of Jewish birth.

Yet there was positive substance in Harnack's observation that a distinct group is addressed in 2 Thessalonians. This is recognized by E. E. Ellis, who argues that 2 Thessalonians was more probably directed to Paul's Thessalonian co-workers, the responsible leaders of the congregation.\(^1\) It is they who are in a position to deal authoritatively with idlers and with others who disregard the apostolic injunctions (2 Thess. iii. 6-15). In 1 Thessalonians the readers are urged to give recognition and esteem to their leaders (1 Thess. v. 12 ff.); this is followed by a one-sentence exhortation to the leaders to care for the others (1 Thess. v. 14). What is compressed into one sentence in 1 Thessalonians is expanded in 2 Thessalonians as a whole.

This approach to the problem, when more fully developed, may prove to be more satisfactory than any other.

One suggestion about the relation between the two letters must be treated with special respect in this place, because it was defended by T. W. Manson in a lecture delivered here in 1952.\(^2\) It is that 2 Thessalonians preceded 1 Thessalonians. The suggestion was first put forward, it appears, by the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius in 1641 (he, incidentally, dated 2 Thessalonians in A.D. 40, finding a reference in 2 Thess. ii. 4 to Caligula's attempt in that year to have his image set up in the temple at Jerusalem).\(^3\)


\(^3\) H. Grotius, *Annotationes in Novum Testamentum*, i (Amsterdam, 1641), 1032 ff.; ii (Paris, 1646), 651. On similar grounds a recent work has dated Paul's visit to Thessalonica not later than January, A.D. 41, and 2 Thess. not later than the autumn of A.D. 44 (C. H. Buck and G. Taylor, *St. Paul: A Study of the Development of his Thought* [New York, 1969], pp. 150 ff.).
There is nothing antecedently improbable in dating 2 Thessalonians before 1 Thessalonians.\(^1\) The order in which the Pauline letters are arranged in the New Testament is not chronological, but the descending order of length; it is because 1 Thessalonians is longer than 2 Thessalonians that it precedes it in the canon.\(^2\) The chronological sequence of the two letters must be established on internal evidence.

If 2 Thessalonians is the earlier of the two letters, this does not affect what has been said already about the occasion of 1 Thessalonians; we should simply assume that when Paul sent Timothy from Athens back to Thessalonica (1 Thess. iii. 2) he gave him a letter for the Thessalonian church—our 2 Thessalonians. Then, when Timothy returned with good news from Thessalonica, Paul sent 1 Thessalonians.

The main arguments for the priority of 2 Thessalonians are these: (a) At the beginning of 2 Thessalonians (i. 4 f.) the readers are said to be currently enduring persecution for their faith; in 1 Thessalonians (ii. 14) the persecution is referred to in the past tense. (b) The deplorable idleness of some members of the church has just come to the writers' attention in 2 Thessalonians (iii. 11 f.); in 1 Thessalonians (iv. 10-12, v. 14) it is mentioned as something well known to writers and readers. (c) The personal signature at the end of 2 Thessalonians, with its explanatory note, is pointless except in the first letter to a new addressee or addressees. (d) If the people addressed had already received the teaching in 2 Thessalonians ii. 1-12, then the statement in 1 Thessalonians v. 1 that they had no need of teaching about "times and seasons" would be very much to the point. (e) The two sections in 1 Thessalonians which begin with the phrase "Now concerning" (περὶ δὲ) take up topics already


\(^2\) The letters are arranged in two groups: letters to churches and letters to individuals. Within each of the two groups they are arranged in descending order of length, except that Ephesians is somewhat longer than Galatians, which precedes it.
touched upon (ex hypothesi) in 2 Thessalonians—brotherly love (1 Thess. iv. 9; cf. 2 Thess. iii. 6-15) and the times and seasons (1 Thess. v. 1; cf. 2 Thess. ii. 1-12).

These arguments are of varying cogency. On the other side, we should note that there is no explicit mention in 1 Thessalonians of a previous letter sent to the church by Paul, whereas in 2 Thessalonians ii. 15 there is what could well be a reference to an earlier letter: “Hold fast the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by a letter from us.”

V

In particular, the eschatological teaching of the two letters is easier to understand if 1 Thessalonians is the earlier. In 1 Thessalonians Paul speaks as if the parousia were to take place in his own lifetime and in that of most of his readers; it will come when least expected, “like a thief in the night”. This may well have led some of his readers to conclude that it was so imminent that there was no point in going on with the ordinary concerns of daily life. To correct this error he says in 2 Thessalonians ii. 1, “It is imminent indeed, but not so imminent as all that. Don’t be misled into thinking that the great day is already on us. It will come soon enough, but certain things must first take place—the climax of world rebellion against God and the appearance of the man who incarnates the spirit of rebellion and claims for himself the worship due to God. When he has reached the summit of his power, then the parousia of Christ will come and with its coming the great rebellion will collapse.”

If it be thought that this forecast of coming events cannot come from the same author as 1 Thessalonians, since the idea of certain well-defined events preceding the day of the Lord is inconsistent with the idea of its arrival like a thief in the night, let it be considered, first, that we find the same ambivalence in the eschatological teaching of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels.

1 C. E. Faw, “On the Writing of First Thessalonians”, JBL, lxxi (1952), 217 ff., argues that, as in 1 Cor., the sections in 1 Thess. beginning περὶ δὲ introduce Paul’s answers to questions which the Thessalonian church had put to him in a letter.
True, in the Synoptic Gospels we can have recourse to source analysis: it is in Q that the day of the Son of Man's revelation overtakes the world with the suddenness of Noah's flood or the rain of fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah (Luke xvii. 26-30), whereas in Mark's account of the Olivet discourse "wars and rumours of wars" will be rife, "but the end is not yet"; "the gospel must first be preached to all the nations", and not until people see "the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not" will the Son of Man come (Mark xiii. 7, 10, 14, 26). There may be inconsistency between these two perspectives, but Luke and Matthew do not appear to have noticed it: Luke incorporates both accounts separately in his Gospel—the Q material in Luke xvii. 22-37 and the Markan material in Luke xxi. 5-36—while Matthew interweaves the two in one composite discourse (Matt. xxiv. 1-51). And in the two separate strands it is noteworthy that Mark includes the urgent call to be on the alert, "for you do not know when the time will come" (Mark xiii. 32-37), while Q not only says that first the Son of Man "must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation" (Luke xvii. 25)—this could be regarded as Luke's insertion of a Markan motif—but suggests that when the spiritually alert recognize a situation ripe for judgement, they may expect the judgment to fall: "where the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together" (Luke xvii. 37; cf. Matt. xxiv. 28).¹

Let it be considered, again, that the eschatological teaching in 1 Thessalonians is mainly on a personal level: it is given in response to questions about the lot of believers who have died before the parousia. This is followed by a brief reference to the day of the Lord as it affects men and women in general: it will overtake the ungodly without warning, but believers, being children of light, will be awake and prepared for it.

In 2 Thessalonians believers are told further how they may be prepared for the great day: they will recognize the events which signal its approach. Personal eschatology belongs to the realm of individual piety and is unrelated to world happenings;

¹ If this is a proverbial saying, the birds were probably vultures originally; they have been changed to eagles with allusion to the legionary aquilae of the Roman army which besieged Jerusalem.
a cosmic perspective on the day of the Lord calls for some account to be taken of the current course of history. Paul’s consuming urge for the evangelization of the world did not blind him to the significance of world events; indeed, his missionary strategy would be the more effective if he paid some attention to them. He had been able thus far to exploit the peaceful conditions of the Roman world in the interests of his life-mission, but there were disquieting straws in the wind. There was mounting unrest in Judaea, and this unrest had repercussions elsewhere. It had something to do with his own unfortunate experience in Thessalonica, when he was branded as one of those who had “subverted the world”. News of the expulsion of Jews from Rome had recently reached him; we have considered the possibility that he learned something of it before he left Thessalonica, and he certainly heard all about it from Priscilla and Aquila on his arrival in Corinth. The troubles which had driven him out of one Macedonian city after another were fresh in his mind. Probably Gallio’s encouraging judgement at Corinth had not yet been given when Paul wrote to the Thessalonians. Roman law and order were still in control of affairs, but it was only too clear that the “hidden power of lawlessness” was already at work, and it would probably continue to do so until it erupted violently and swept all before it. When Paul tells his friends in 2 Thessalonians ii. 3 that the day of the Lord cannot arrive until the great rebellion has broken out, he is not postponing the day to the indefinite future; he is talking about a development which at the time seemed certain to be experienced by them in their lifetime. If they paid heed to what he said, they would be ready—well informed as well as morally alert.

It may be that Gallio’s judgement a few months later modified his perspective, but it was not radically changed. True, in his subsequent letters he does not express himself in the apocalyptic terms of the Thessalonian correspondence, but very much the same perspective may be seen in the maturity of his letter to the Romans. In a passage following closely on the very positive assessment of the powers that be in Romans xiii.1-7, he says, “Recognize this critical season: it is already high time for you to wake up from sleep, for our deliverance is nearer now than
when we first believed. The night is far advanced; the day is at hand. Let us then put off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light. Let our conduct be seemly, as befits the light of day . . . ” (Rom. xiii. 11-13).

VI

Interesting as literary criticism of this kind is, over-concentration on it may tempt us to overlook the fact that the literature in question deals with the extraordinarily difficult situation in which ordinary men and women found themselves—a situation in which (to use a bit of jargon) they were simultaneously being desocialized and re-socialized. There is no time at the end of this lecture to consider this aspect of the life of those Gentile Christians, but it is an aspect which deserves our attention.