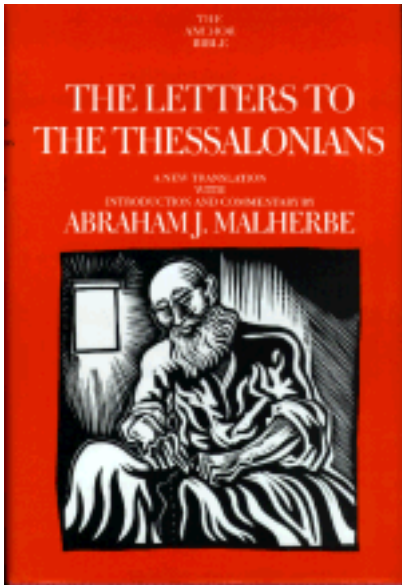


RBL 09/2004



Malherbe, Abraham J.

The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary

Anchor Bible 32B

New York: Doubleday, 2000. Pp. xx + 508. Cloth.
\$50.00. ISBN 0385184603.

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All those interested in Scripture will applaud the appearance of 1 and 2 Thessalonians in the prestigious Anchor Bible series, a series which has already begun to replace first editions of some NT commentaries. This major volume—the mature result after a long incubation period—is presented with utmost care as well as with prudent, balanced judgments. Malherbe is constrained, of course, to follow the rules of the series: new translation, notes and comment for each pericope; no footnotes; Greek given in translation. Malherbe, however, does not provide the usual special bibliography at the end of each pericope; there is only an extensive introduction (55–59 and 349–375).

What are the most striking characteristics of this new commentary? We mention five of them. Malherbe prefers and defends the opinion that 2 Thessalonians is written by Paul himself. Yet he qualifies the addressees. Since in Thessalonica there must have been more than one house church, the distinction between the primary and secondary audience of 2 Thessalonians, and *vice versa*. So the immediate addressees of each letter are not completely the same. “It was evidently Paul’s custom to write one letter to all the groups when there were a number of groups . . . It is therefore not incongruous at all that Paul wrote both letters to the entire church but focused on each of at least two groups as the

Lambrecht’s review originally appeared in *Bib* 83 (2002): 135–38. The editor would like to thank *Biblica* for permission to republish this review.

initial recipient of a letter” (353; cf. 463 for the hypothesis that the original first letter “had remained with the first recipients while a copy not bearing his signature was circulated among other Christians in the area”).

Secondly, as could be expected especially for 1 Thessalonians, Malherbe offers a wealth of parallel texts mostly taken from more or less contemporary Greek philosophers who aim at a moral reformation in their society. The author, however, keeps stressing that conventional expressions have been radically adapted and modified by Paul, and turned to pastoral use. The numerous illustrations given by Malherbe are convincing, indeed. Elsewhere he writes: “Paul uses the moral philosophical language of his day, but places it within a larger framework quite foreign to the philosophical tradition he uses” («Paul’s self-sufficiency (Philippians 4:11)», *Texts and Contexts. Biblical Texts in Their Textual and Situational Contexts* [FS. L. Hartman (eds. T. Fornberg and D. Hellholm) Oslo 1995] 823–824).

Thirdly, this commentary rejects a rhetorical approach for the structuring of the letters; see the brief negative judgment (96). 1 Thessalonians is a friendly, paraenetical, pastoral letter. The threefold thanksgiving which covers chapters 1–3 forms the basis for explicit paraenesis of chapters 4–5 and is itself to some extent paraenetical. Malherbe refuses to consider 2,1–12 as an apologetical text. In this passage Paul presents himself as an example: the remembrance of his attitude and labor calls for imitation (2,14–16 is authentic). The author repeatedly uses the term “psychagogy” to characterize Paul’s mode of exhorting and admonishing (see esp. 323–324). 2 Thessalonians is written to console the discouraged, correct a false doctrine and warn the idlers and disorderly (375).

Fourthly, it will certainly strike the reader of this commentary that according to Malherbe no expectation of a near end is present in these two writings of Paul. More than once the “restrained use” of apocalyptic material is underlined (e.g. 302, 400). In 1 Thess 4,12 and 5,1–11 Paul does not intend to motivate ethical behavior by means of a reference to the shortness of time. The problem which Paul faces in 1 Thess 4,13–18 is that some Christians are saddened by the thought that the deceased will come later at the parousia. Paul reassures them that those who are left until the coming will by no means have precedence over those who have fallen asleep. The problem in 5,1–11 is created by Christian prophets who by preaching a deferral of the parousia proclaim a false security. In 2 Thess 2 Paul most probably has to deal with a misunderstanding of that text from 1 Thessalonians (429): some Christians maintain that the Day of the Lord has already come (2:2).

A fifth characteristic, which follows naturally from other positions taken by the author, concerns the reconstructions. Paul could have been working about three months in

Thessalonica in the summer of 49 and must have announced the gospel in a quite detailed way. About four months after leaving the city, i.e. in the beginning of 50, he writes the first letter to the Thessalonians from Corinth. Then six months later the second letter is sent (as already mentioned, to a different primary audience in that city). It is possible, even probable, that on his return Timothy brought with him a letter from the Thessalonians to which 2 Thessalonians would have been the danger of discouragement of the isolated new converts in Thessalonica.

A first item of criticism is not meant so much for the author himself as for the series. Although the commentary is written in a polished, exemplary style, the texts not always reads easily. Since in order to avoid footnotes the author has to put references to other authors to grammar and biblical parallels, and also transliterated Greek words, within parentheses, the presentation often becomes heavy and less transparent. The reader's eye spontaneously looks for the closing parenthesis that may be found only two lines below. The train of thought is thus interrupted brusquely; at the end this can produce an irritating effect. A note: it is not always immediately evident to what or to which the position the author refers with his use of "so" (cf. 440 and 453).

It appears to me that Malherbe undervalues the eschatology of the Thessalonian correspondence, in particular Paul's expectation of the nearness of the parousia. In Malherbe's comment on 1 Thess 3,13 the awaiting of Christ's return is not even mentioned although the prayer speaks of "the coming (*parousia*) of our Lord Jesus with his all his saints." That expectation, I think, is present everywhere in both letters. Even when in 2 Thess 2 "Paul" sets in sequence the eschatological events (lawlessness and apostasy, restraint, parousia of the man of lawlessness, parousia of Christ), the expectation, I think, is in no way suspended, rather heightened. It is true that in Thess 5,1-11 it is not the parousia of Christ but the coming of the day of the Lord is that is mentioned explicitly. One may ask: what is the difference? We can hardly assume that for Christian ethical life there is no eschatological motivation, only a reference to the Christian identity: because we are Christians, we must live as Christians. It would seem that the imminence spoken of in 5,3 also applies to Christians: because they are "sons of day" the Day will not surprise them like a thief in the night (5,4-5). Paul most probably thought that the salvation through Christ and the Christians living with him for ever (v. 10) were not far off.

Malherbe is of the opinion that in 49 Paul must already have written letters. So the argument that in 1 Thess 1-3 Paul has not yet his own stereotyped thanksgiving period (with actual thanking, remembering of the past and praying for the future) and that the threefold thanksgiving of 1 Thessalonians still shows "the coming into existence," as it were, of Paul's way of introducing his letters, cannot meet his acceptance. Is this correct?

Furthermore, is the refusal to detect any nuance of self-defense in 2,1–12 appropriate? And, in the division of these three chapters, should not more attention be given to the alteration of what is said of the Thessalonians and what Paul has done or is doing? Finally, can the function of these chapters be reduced to being a basis for the explicit paraenesis of chapters 4–5?

Other, admittedly minor, remarks can be made. For instance, it is not explained why in 1 Thess 1,3 the kai/ between “God” and “Father” is not translated. In the same verse one may doubt that the expressions “the work of faith,” “the labor of love,” and “the endurance of hope” describe the strenuousness with which the Thessalonians “preached the word” (108). Malherbe claims that in 3,3a “the afflictions” refer to Paul’s own experiences (192; cf. 196 and 198), but this seems rather unlikely (notwithstanding 3,7). One could list more such points with which one disagrees, at great risk, however, of forgetting the much greater number of those with which one agrees.

Omissions in the bibliography are the commentary of R. Pesch and, perhaps more to one’s regret in connection to with the possible non-Pauline authorship 2 Thessalonians, R. F. Collins’ *Letter the Paul Did Not Write* (GNSt 28; Wilmington 1988). The “running titles” (134–164 and 165–177) are incorrect. Yet very few typographical errors have been detected (but see, e.g., 192 *hēmōn* instead of *humōn*, and 397 where, instead of *antapodounai*, the verb *paradidosthai* is written).

To what extent colleagues will be convinced by Malherbe’s often personal approach cannot but remain uncertain, for example regarding the second letter’s authenticity, but even more, it would seem, as to the distinction between the audiences. Yet everyone will admire the sound reasoning behind Malherbe’s positions. The author provides us with a steadily close reading since each clause carries its weight. Without a doubt, this well-informed, judicious commentary will soon be taken as a standard reference work. In conclusion, Malherbe’s commentary is an outstanding piece of work, highly to be praised and recommended.