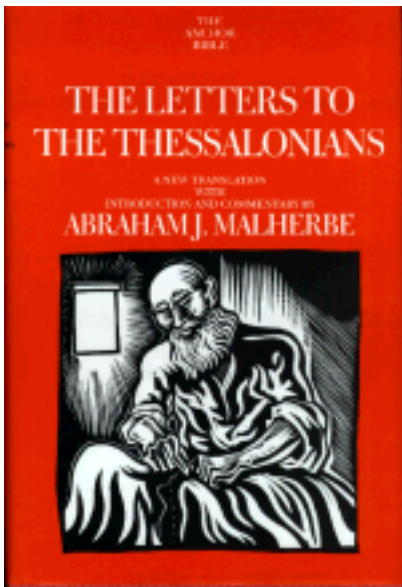


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Malherbe, Abraham J.

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

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Let me say it at once. Anyone working on the Thessalonian letters will start with this commentary in the foreseeable future. It is clearly written, learned in the best sense of the term, comprehensive in its coverage of the modern literature on these letters, and takes a position on every issue with the arguments supporting it laid out clearly. It is a model for anyone writing a commentary to emulate.

Malherbe says in his preface that

Paul's two letters to the Thessalonians, the earliest extant Christian writings, have fascinated me because they open windows onto newly founded Christian communities as no other documents do. They reveal the challenges recent converts faced and how Paul, aware of their problems, acted pastorally in writing to them. . . . I hope that this commentary will contribute to a greater awareness that Paul was as much concerned with the moral, emotional, and spiritual nurture of his converts as he was with their theological development. (xi)

Thus one expects an interest in the life of the Thessalonians, as Malherbe's essay, "Exhortation in First Thessalonians,"¹ would lead one to expect. Indeed, Malherbe

¹ Abraham J. Malherbe, "Exhortation in First Thessalonians," *NovT* 25 (1983): 238–56.

interprets the form of the letter as moral exhortation, its tone pastoral, its sources Paul's knowledge of the situation in the Thessalonian church, his language the (modified) language of popular philosophic moral exhortation.

This review will restrict comments to what Malherbe does with 1 Thessalonians. After his own translation of the letter (3–6), Malherbe's general introduction (13) states that though 1 Thessalonians is Paul's earliest letter, it is a letter of a "seasoned preacher," a "mature thinker," and does not reflect his initial missionary preaching. It is also not a "rudimentary theology that would develop as Paul encountered new circumstances" in later letters. While we may well examine the letter for clues to earlier traditions, "We shall understand 1 Thessalonians better, and appreciate it more, if we examine it as a witness to the way a Christian community came into existence in a Greek metropolis and was nurtured by its founder." One should expect no less from Malherbe, after reading his 1987 work *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care*.² (Malherbe's bibliography on p. 39 gives a long list of his relevant publications.)³

Given Malherbe's stress on social analysis, we expect major attention to what can be known of the history, culture, and religion of Macedonia in general and Thessalonica in particular. Here one is disappointed. Malherbe discusses Thessalonica in about one page, stating that it is a "free city," which gave it a good deal of self-government. He mentions the politarchs without referring to the inscription from the Vardar Gate now in the British Museum. His extensive bibliography (19–52) is not window dressing but is actually the working bibliography for the commentary; one appreciates the massive preparatory work that went into the writing of the commentary. But the bibliography contains few, if any, references to the modern literature on Macedonia, such as René Genouvès, ed., *Macedonia from Philip II to the Roman Conquest*,⁴ *Errington's History of Macedonia*,⁵

² Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

³ The most relevant to 1 and 2 Thessalonians are "'Gentle as a Nurse': The Cynic Background to 1 Thess. 2," *NovT* 12 (1970): 203–17; "Paul: Hellenistic Philosopher or Christian Pastor?" *ATR* 68 (1986): 3–13; *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); "Did the Thessalonians Write to Paul?" in *The Conversation Continues: Studies in Paul and John in Honor of J. Luis Martyn* (ed. R. Fortna and B. Gaventa; Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 246–57; "Pastoral Care in the Thessalonian Church," *NTS* 136 (1990): 375–91; "God's Family in Thessalonica," in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks* (ed. L. M. White and O. L. Yarbrough; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995); and "Anti-Epicurean Rhetoric in 1 Thessalonians," in *Text und Geschichte: Facetten theologischens Arbeits aus dem Freundes- und Schülerkreis: Dieter Lührmann zum 60. Geburtstag* (ed. S. Maser and E. Schlarb; Marburger theologische Studien 50; Marburg: Elwert, 1999), 136–42. See also Malherbe's *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook* (LEC 4; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) and *Ancient Epistolary Theorists* (SBLSPS 12; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

⁴ René Genouvès, ed., *Macedonia from Philip II to the Roman Conquest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

the volume *Macedonia: 4000 Years of Greek History and Civilization*, edited by Sakellariou,⁶ or the more general description of *The Greek City from Alexander to Justinian* by A. H. M. Jones.⁷ He does list the Harvard dissertation of H. Hendrix⁸ and the article Hendrix contributed to the Koester Festschrift,⁹ but not his *ABD* article “Thessalonica.”¹⁰ I also found no references in the entire commentary to works of art excavated at Thessalonica, such as the heroic statue of Augustus dated in the time of Caligula or Claudius (i.e., precisely in the period Paul was in Thessalonica). Malherbe mentions the Serapeum excavated early in the twentieth century but nowhere refers to the Augusteum mentioned by D. Pandermalis.¹¹ Malherbe has mined extensively in literary and epigraphic sources, less in the realia of Roman Thessalonica.

The introduction to 1 Thessalonians (55–92) is a meticulous reconstruction of the founding of the church at Thessalonica, the occasion and purpose of the letter, and its form, linguistic character, and epistolary style. He stresses again and again that the letter is parenetic, pastoral from beginning to end. Malherbe’s introduction will appear quite conservative to many readers in its historical decisions. He accepts both letters as authentic, argues for the integrity of 1 Thessalonians (thus rejecting the view that 2:13 [14]–16 is a later interpolation), accepts much of Acts 17:1–9, 13–14 as historically valid (though not uncritically), accepts the presence of Jews as witnessed in Acts on the basis of 2:13–16 and 2 Thessalonians, and holds that the Thessalonian believers belong to the artisan class (55–67). The church was small, not more than a few dozen people (63). There was no disunity in the group, which had little structure. Yet they were able to pick up the nuances of popular philosophy (65). (Malherbe assumes the validity of the term “popular philosophy” without showing what it implies, which may give a false impression. Does *popular* here simply mean an alternative to highly intellectual philosophic speculation, such as done by Plato and Aristotle, or does it mean something that is widely popular and so available to the masses? This widely used terminology is ambiguous and deserved elucidation—an unusual view, I know.)

Malherbe carefully discusses the predominant use of first-person plural verb forms and the forty-three occurrences of ἡμεῖς in 1 Thessalonians to conclude that it is a literary or

⁵ R. Malcolm Errington, *A History of Macedonia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

⁶ M. B. Sakellariou, *Macedonia: 4000 Years of Greek History and Civilization* (Greek Lands in History; Athens: Ekdotike Athenon, 1983).

⁷ A. H. M. Jones, *The Greek City from Alexander to Justinian* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940).

⁸ H. L. Hendrix, “Thessalonians Honor Romans” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1984).

⁹ H. L. Hendrix, “Archaeology and Eschatology at Thessalonica,” in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* (ed. B. A. Pearson; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 107–28.

¹⁰ H. L. Hendrix, “Thessalonica,” *ABD* 6 :523–27.

¹¹ In Sakellariou, *Macedonia*, 212.

authorial plural, a mark of parenesis, as parallels with Seneca's *Epistulae morales* show (87–89). Paul's usage often "specifies what he shares with his readers," giving a warm tone to the letter.

What I missed in this introduction was any discussion of the theological content of the letter, for example, an account of the role of Jesus in Paul's thought. Paul stresses two aspects of Jesus in 1 Thessalonians, his resurrection (1:10; 4:14) and his parousia as Lord (2:19; 3:13; 4:16; 5:23). But his death, while mentioned (1:10; 2:15; 4:14; 5:10, the last most likely in a creedal tag), plays no role in Paul's thought here. Does Jesus serve as a model for the Thessalonians (1:6)? A similar reticence about the Spirit, mentioned in 1:5; 4:8; 5:19, is present. Paul does not relate the Spirit to the future expectations anywhere in this letter. Malherbe might well say that Paul's choice of topics is determined by his parenetic, pastoral purpose, but does not. What in Thessalonian experience leads to this reticence?

God is more prominent than either Jesus or the Spirit but does not receive a synthetic, detailed presentation in the introduction. Malherbe might respond that the parenetic, pastoral character of the letter causes this; God is clearly the motivator in Paul's parenesis (see 2:4, 10, 12, 13, 15; 4:1, 7–8, 9). God is the active one in the resurrection of Jesus in the past (1:10) and of Christians in the future (4:14). Malherbe mentions in his Notes on 2:1–12 that God is mentioned nine times in 2:1–12 (137) but does not mention that Christ is mentioned only once in this paragraph. This leads me to question his interpretation of the phrase "gospel of God" in 2:2; he takes the genitive as either possessive or source. But given what Paul says in 1:9, I think this is an unusual Pauline use of *gospel* as proclamation about the gracious, living, authentic God, whom the Thessalonians now serve (1:9), who raised Jesus from the dead (1:10; cf. 2:13). Further on in the letter God is the determinative force in Paul's parenesis, the judge of human actions (see 4:1–8, θεοδίδακτοι in 4:9), the one who will raise the Thessalonian dead (4:14), and the one who destines the Thessalonians for the possession of rescue through Jesus (5:9). Malherbe certainly calls attention to much of this detail in the commentary but nowhere puts it into a comprehensive whole.

As Malherbe notes early on,

Nothing in this account of Paul's founding of the church represents the concerns his gospel frequently raised for Jews. The characteristic Pauline antitheses of law and gospel, faith and works, flesh and spirit, for example, are absent. Paul does not quote from the OT in the letter, and there are only a few places in the letter where he may allude to the OT (2:4, 16; 4:5, 6, 8; 5:8, 22), which suggests that he has in mind readers not nurtured on the Jewish Scriptures. Furthermore, on the

assumption that Paul adopted a style of writing appropriate to the circumstances and background of his readers, the Hellenistic hortatory character of the letter confirms their Greek, and not Jewish, background (see pages 81–86). (56)

That insight can be expanded. Paul never refers to any figure of the Old Testament, Adam, Abraham, David, or the prophets. He does not refer to the temple, Jerusalem, or the Torah. He does not use sacrificial language about the death of Jesus. The one possible reference to Jesus' death as sacrifice (5:10) appears to be a traditional formula that Paul does not interpret or expand. Malherbe mentions in his comments on 5:10 that "The formulation is prominent in Paul's reflection on the saving work of Christ (e.g., Rom 4:25;

2 Cor 5:14, 15, 21; Gal 3:12), but there is no such extended reflection here. Elsewhere in the letter, Christ's death is merely mentioned (2:15; the consequences of his death are not explicitly drawn in 4:14)." Such textual facts strongly support Malherbe's concentration on the Hellenistic parenetic tradition. His interpretation of Paul's language and thought is persuasive.

The commentary itself follows the pattern laid down for all Anchor Bible volumes. Each section of the commentary begins with a brief introduction followed by Malherbe's translation. The "Notes" that follow give detailed interpretation of the text phrase by phrase. Finally the section titled "Comment" is an essay pulling together the details into a coherent whole. The commentary on seven pages of Greek text fills pages 95–346, a generous allocation of space. Malherbe says on page 96 that "It will emerge in this commentary that Paul made extensive use of the conventions of discourse used by philosophers who aimed at the moral and intellectual reformation of their listeners." As noted above, I find this persuasive, a great contribution to Pauline studies and a challenge to interpreters of other Pauline letters to do such locally oriented interpretation.

The commentary raises a few issues for me. One is a hermeneutical issue. Should a commentator comment on the sources for Paul's language, as Malherbe does in his interpretation of 4:13–18, where he cites numerous passages from the Old Testament to illuminate Paul's use of language in 4:16–18 (see 274–76). But, given the noncitation of the Old Testament and the lack of any specific reference to Old Testament persons or institutions, should one not also ask what the Thessalonians might have understood by the language? Malherbe notes that the phrases "with a command, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God" (4:16) are "three military sounds." But he does not ask if the Thessalonians know of archangels or if they will associate the Old Testament passages he cites with the "trumpet of God." Would the Thessalonians, for whom "The imperial cult and its priests appear to have played a significant role in the

city” (15), have associated the “Lord” and these three with the ceremonial that accompanied the arrival of a ruler? Malherbe recognizes this in relation to ἀπάντησις in 4:17 (without citing Glare’s 1996 *Supplement* to LSJ, 40). The Thessalonians might well have given a more coherent reading of 4:13–18 than Malherbe’s, which uses Old Testament, early Jewish, and Greco-Roman materials to interpret different sections of the text. That is, I wish he had given as coherent a reading of 4:13–18 as he did of 2:1–12.

Malherbe is not inclined to identify early Christian traditions in 1 Thessalonians. Thus he does not find a scheme of early Christian preaching or an early Christian confessional tradition in 1:9–10 (118). He is dubious about the attempt to find an early word of the Lord in 4:15–17 and to isolate a late stage in the pre-Pauline tradition. He says, “Reconstructions like this, leaving one breathless with their precision, are of greater significance for their contribution to our knowledge of the development of early Christology and eschatology than for the exegesis of 1 Thessalonians” (269–70). In fact, any tradition behind the text is “irrecoverable.” He is more sympathetic to the attempt in 5:10.

Malherbe interprets the sequence of commands in 5:16–22, which a friend of mine called “shotgun parenthesis,” as a passage “On the Evaluation of Prophecy” (327–36). He divides the eight imperatives into two groups, the first three and the last five forming separate units. This leads him to stress the last five as a passage about the Spirit. Malherbe does not consider the possibility that this eight-imperative sequence is a description of early Christian worship, perhaps the oldest in the New Testament. Let me add, however, that these concerns about some specifics do not detract from the high value of the commentary. And the sections labeled “Commentary” provide integrated interpretations of each section. While academicians will find the “Notes” fascinating and informative about details, pastors will find these “Comments” instructive and highly useful in preparation for proclamation and education.

The “Index of Commentators and Modern Authors” (465–70), the “Index of Biblical and Other Ancient References” (471–96), and the “Index of Major Subjects” (497–508) provide useful guides for one locating specific details. The index of “Non-Christian Greek and Latin Literature” (489–96, three columns to the page) shows the depth of use of that literature. I wish that Malherbe had included bibliographical data for the editions of the rabbinic, patristic, and classical authors he cites to guide readers to the best critical texts (and good translations?). He does list F. Wehrli’s *Schule des Aristoteles*,¹² but not

¹² Fritz Wehrli, *Die Schule Aristoteles: Texte und Kommentare* (10 vols. and 2 supplements; 2nd ed.; Basel: Schwabe, 1967–78).

Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta, thus not giving Hans von Arnim the credit due him.¹³ Similarly, Malherbe refers to Epicurus (e.g., 247, citing Epicurus Vatican Fragment 29), yet Epicurus does not appear in the index, and neither Hermann Usener's *Epicurea*¹⁴ nor P. von der Muehl's Teubner edition of Epicurus, which includes the *Gnomologium Vaticanum Epicureum*, appears in the bibliography.¹⁵ One could easily multiply such items. (In Malherbe's defense, the publisher may have limited the size of the commentary, as has happened in a number of volumes. But in a commentary so rich in citations of and allusions to the literature of Greco-Roman antiquity many a reader will be left helpless before the riches in the commentary.)

In spite of the critical comments above, one finally must conclude that anyone studying 1 Thessalonians must begin with Malherbe's commentary. The publishers have printed a well-edited, complex text with hundreds of references. I noticed no typographical errors. Malherbe pays attention to every word in the text, sums up a century of scholarship on the letter, passes it under critical review, provides careful argumentation for his conclusions, and so invites the reader into critical reaction to his work. This is a signal achievement. While it may not be, like Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, a "possession forever," scholars will still be citing it a century from now.

¹³ Hans von Arnim, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* (4 vols.; Leipzig: Teubner 1903–24).

¹⁴ Hermann Usener, ed., *Epicurea* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1887).

¹⁵ Peter von der Muehl, *Epicuri epistulae tres et ratae sententiae a Laertio Diogene servatae* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1922).