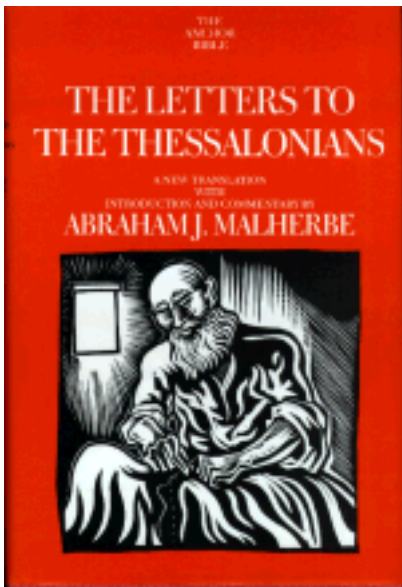


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Malherbe, Abraham J.

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

Anchor Bible 32B

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The origins of Abraham Malherbe's Anchor Bible commentary, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, might be said to go back more than thirty years to an influential article that he wrote entitled " 'Gentle as a Nurse': The Cynic Background to 1 Thessalonians 2," which appeared in *Novum Testamentum* in 1970. This essay appears to have been his first published work on 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and in it he began to explore the influence of the moral philosophers of Greco-Roman culture on Paul's thought as found in 1 Thessalonians and elsewhere. In doing this, he was reviving a tradition of scholarship that had emerged around the turn of the twentieth century but had largely fallen out of fashion until he began to resuscitate interest in it. This became a theme of much of Malherbe's subsequent scholarship and resulted in a collection of texts in his *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook* (1986), a small monograph entitled *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (1987), and a collection of technical essays entitled *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (1989). Subsequently he published several more works looking at the impact of the moral philosophers on Paul and early Christianity, the most important of these being his essay "Hellenistic Moralists and the New Testament" which appeared in *ARNW* 2.26.3 in 1992.

Another aspect of Malherbe's scholarship, which has played a role in his commentary, is his interest in the letter-writing tradition of antiquity. He produced two source books, *The*

Cynic Epistles (1977) and perhaps more importantly *Ancient Epistolary Theorists* (1977, 1988), that sought “to locate the place of letter writing in rhetorical theory and in the educational curriculum” in Greco-Roman culture (1). Thus, in many ways Malherbe’s Anchor Bible commentary on Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians represents the culmination of meticulous and detailed scholarship over a long and distinguished academic career.

In this review essay my primary focus will be on his work on 2 Thessalonians, as other reviewers have dealt in detail with the introductory matters and commentary on 1 Thessalonians. Because of the range of issues treated in the commentary, I will raise two major issues from the introduction and then look at several examples where Malherbe’s exegesis and historical reconstruction interact with one another. Before I do this, however, I want to raise a comparative point regarding Malherbe’s treatment of 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

One of the most striking features of the commentary is the imbalance in his handling of the two letters. In the case of the commentary on 1 Thessalonians Malherbe averages 2.8 pages per verse, while with 2 Thessalonians he averages only 1.75 pages per verse. I have examined five English-language commentaries (Best, Bruce, Marshall, Richard, and Wanamaker) as well as one French (Rigaux) and one German (von Dobschütz). None of the seven comes remotely close to the imbalance (the next nearest is less than .75 pages difference per verse), and in fact in the case of four of them the imbalance favors 2 Thessalonians. The same phenomenon is present in relation to the introductions to the letters, where the introduction to 1 Thessalonians is 57 percent longer than the one for 2 Thessalonians. The extent of the difference in the treatment of the two letters, particularly with respect to the commentary, is puzzling. Is 2 Thessalonians less interesting or less complex or simply easier to understand? Alternatively, could it be that Malherbe is actually less interested in 2 Thessalonians because he does not find as many connections to such things as the psychagogic tradition, moral philosophers, and the letter-writing tradition of Greco-Roman culture? Of the nearly one thousand references to non-Christian Greek and Latin literature in the book, fewer than thirty relate to 2 Thessalonians. Whatever the reasons are for these imbalances, 2 Thessalonians appears, by comparison, to have received short shrift from Malherbe.

The introduction to a commentary in theory represents the conclusions to which a commentator has come after critical analysis or exegesis of the text and its interpretation. For this reason, from the reader’s perspective, it provides a summary of many of the positions that are taken in the commentary. In the case of 2 Thessalonians no introductory question is more important than the question of authorship, since over the past three or four decades the weight of academic opinion has turned against the authenticity of

2 Thessalonians. Malherbe has chosen to develop his introduction to 2 Thessalonians by first marshaling the evidence for the Pauline authorship and then examining the case against it. Malherbe, who unreservedly supports the view that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians, recognizes that increasingly scholars view it as pseudonymous, but he claims that “[t]he majority of scholars still hold to the genuineness of 2 Thess” (364). I am not as confident about this as he is. Nevertheless, following on the work of others, such as Jewett (*The Thessalonians Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety*) and myself (*The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*), Malherbe shows that the evidence put forward in support of the pseudonymity of 2 Thessalonians is arbitrary, often based on special pleading, and even when taken cumulatively does not provide sufficient support to prove compelling (364–70). Malherbe’s rejection of the case for pseudonymity allows him to assume the Pauline authorship of the letter with all of its consequences for his interpretation of 2 Thessalonians.

Once the authorship question is decided in favor of Paul, the second key question that needs to be dealt with is the issue of the sequence of the letters, since this has a major impact on our understanding of the circumstances of the recipients and the occasion of writing. Malherbe, like most scholars who hold that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians, maintains that Paul wrote the two letters in their canonical order. He then assumes this in his discussion of the occasion and purpose of the letter, and only afterwards does he eventually discuss the problem of the alternative sequence of the letters. Logically this is incorrect, since it constitutes an a priori conclusion. (The same type of a priori reasoning is present in his treatment of the authorship.) He should have first established the chronological relationship between 1 and 2 Thessalonians and then dealt with the occasion of writing and the circumstances of the recipients. The way in which Malherbe has proceeded suggests strongly that he did not give serious consideration to the possibility that 2 Thessalonians preceded 1 Thessalonians with all of the implications this would have for the historical reconstruction of Paul’s interaction with the church in Thessalonica.

When he considers the case for the priority of 2 Thessalonians, Malherbe finds that most of the evidence is either inconclusive or involves forced reasoning (361–62). He acknowledges my challenge that those wishing to maintain the canonical sequence as the historical sequence should provide a positive case for it (362). In doing so he turns to Jewett’s threefold argument for the priority of 1 Thessalonians (363) but takes the position that, as the arguments are exegetical in character, he will deal with them in the actual exegesis of 2 Thessalonians. I will return to some of this evidence in another connection later. But Malherbe goes on to say that the evidence for the priority of 1 Thessalonians is much more powerful than the evidence for the possible primacy of

2 Thessalonians, which is based only on scattered references in the letter that can be used “to reconstruct the history of Paul’s relationship with the Thess” (363–64). Oddly enough, it is not altogether clear what Malherbe thinks constitutes much stronger evidence. He seems to suggest that the autobiographical section in 1 Thess 1:3–3:10, which sets out Paul’s relationship with the Thessalonians in a detailed and chronological manner, from his initial preaching to them until the point at which he wrote 1 Thessalonians, proffers powerful evidence for the priority of 1 Thessalonians. In itself this hardly seems persuasive, since the evidence to which he points contains a discussion of Timothy’s visit to the Thessalonians when Paul became overly anxious about how his recent converts were coping in a difficult situation (1 Thess 3:1–5). Virtually everyone who maintains the priority of 2 Thessalonians claims that Timothy took the letter on this visit, so the very evidence that Malherbe claims strongly supports the priority of 1 Thessalonians contains a reference to the possible situation that provoked 2 Thessalonians and to the means of its delivery, namely, the visit of Timothy at Paul’s behest.

Malherbe sees both letters as pastoral letters that have strong paraenetic features, including elements of exhortation and consolation. Like other scholars, he identifies three major issues addressed by 2 Thessalonians, which are linked with matters discussed in 1 Thessalonians: persecution, serious misunderstandings regarding eschatology, and the problem of disorderliness on the part of some. The first of these concerns, the issue of persecution (1:3–12), Malherbe believes to be the principal reason for the letter being written (351). In this he differs from many, particularly those who hold that 2 Thessalonians is pseudonymous and who believe that the correction of eschatological error (2:1–12) is the main reason for the letter. Careful analysis of his cross-referenced discussions of the theme of persecution reveals a certain degree of imprecision in his presentation. In the introduction to 2 Thessalonians Malherbe states that the recipients “were being persecuted as they had been when he [Paul] wrote the first letter (see 1 Thess 2:14)” (351). When we turn back to his comments on 1 Thess 2:14, we discover that he explicitly denies that Paul referred to persecution in this verse, with Malherbe preferring to think in terms of some form of social ostracism and possibly harassment (172–73). Furthermore, the aorist verb (ἐπόθετε) in 2:14 indicates that the experience of suffering was in the past at the time 1 Thessalonians was written. When we turn to the notes on 2 Thess 1:4 further problems emerge. Malherbe refers back to the sending of Timothy in 1 Thess 3:1–5 and says that he was sent “to stabilize the Thessalonians’ faith lest they be unsettled (*sainesthai*) by tribulations (1 Thess 3:2 [he surely means 3:2–3]) and now they were experiencing tribulations, as he had predicted that they would (1 Thess 3:4)” (390). The problem is twofold. According to Malherbe, 1 Thess 3:3 does not refer to the tribulations of the Thessalonians but to those of Paul (193), and though it is less clear he

appears to maintain that 3:4 is principally about Paul, not the Thessalonians, given that he explicitly relates the whole of 3:3, including the phrase about being appointed to tribulation, to Paul (194). While it would take too long to demonstrate this, Malherbe's understanding of θλίψις as inner psychological distress in 1 Thess 1:6–7 (128–29) and 3:3–4 (193) is misguided because he misinterprets the context of those two passages. In any case, as 2 Thess 1:4 and 6–7 reveal, Paul understood θλίψις as external oppression that was synonymous with persecution (διωγμός). Malherbe surely should have fed this back into his interpretation of the term θλίψις in 1 Thessalonians, given that Paul wrote the letters within a few months of each other according to Malherbe, but he has not done so.

Malherbe, like others who favor the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians, has to acknowledge that some form of external social pressure was brought to bear on Paul's converts in Thessalonica before 1 Thessalonians was written, as 1 Thess 2:14 reveals. But because of 2 Thess 1:3–10 they have to conclude that the Christian community in Thessalonica was subject to intermittent persecution when a far more natural explanation would be that 2 Thessalonians preceded 1 Thessalonians and that therefore there was only one period of intense social opposition for the Thessalonians, with 1 Thessalonians indicating that the storm had been weathered.

A second major issue in 2 Thessalonians, according to Malherbe, concerns the problem of an erroneous eschatological understanding (2:1–12). A principal problem is to explain how the error had arisen regarding the day of the Lord if the community already had 1 Thessalonians in their possession. In discussing what Paul may have meant in 2 Thess 2:2, a verse in which he refers to a letter that may have been thought by the Thessalonians to have come from him, Malherbe introduces an elaborate historical reconstruction on the thinnest of evidence (352–56). The problem for Malherbe would seem to be how to make 2 Thess 2:2b a possible reference to 1 Thessalonians when 1 Thess 4:13–5:11 seems so clearly not to leave room for the Thessalonian Christians to believe that the day of the Lord had come. His ingenious solution is to construct a scenario in which 1 Thessalonians was misinterpreted when read to what he construes as the secondary audience implied in 1 Thess 5:27, or even glossed or amended with an erroneous interpretation regarding the day of the Lord when copied for various secondary audiences (355, 429–30). According to Malherbe, there does not appear to have been any intention to deceive the secondary recipients (430), but they were confused, nevertheless, by the misinterpretation of 1 Thessalonians. Malherbe later says that 2 Thess 3:17, which refers to Paul's authenticating signature, should be understood as authenticating the original version of 1 Thessalonians as opposed to copies made of the letter for the use of the community to whom the letter was addressed (463). Why Malherbe thinks that "authorized" copiers of the letter would not have copied the signature when they were

copying the rest of the letter is not explained. Nor is it explained how this is any more likely a solution than the possibility that Paul contemplated the possibility of forged letters coming from other sources, a view that Malherbe acknowledges as possible in relation to 2 Thess 2:2 but then rejects for lack of evidence from the sixth decade of the first century, even though clear evidence does exist for this from a somewhat later period (356). Given this rejection based on a lack of evidence, it is ironic that he maintains that 2 Thess 2:2 contains a reference to 1 Thessalonians based on a complex scenario for which there is no evidence at all. That Paul contemplated forged letters, as 2 Thess 2:2 most naturally suggests, more credibly accounts for 3:17 than the hypothetical reconstruction of Malherbe.

Having taken this position with respect to 2 Thess 2:2, Malherbe goes on to say that 2 Thess 2:15, which refers to the traditions taught by Paul in his letter to which the recipients are to hold fast, refers to the teachings in the original autographed version of 1 Thessalonians rather than the glossed copy of the letter that he hypothesizes existed or an orally interpreted version of 1 Thessalonians (440). How the recipients of 2 Thessalonians were to distinguish between following the traditions taught in Paul's original version of 1 Thessalonians and following misunderstandings caused by a glossed copy or even oral interpretations of the original remains unexplained, particularly if Paul realized what was happening, as Malherbe implies in his discussion of 2 Thess 2:2. Thus if Malherbe were correct about his interpretation of 2 Thess 2:2, then 2:15 could just as easily be taken as supporting the tradition of a glossed version of the letter as the original version. Only those with the original and the glossed version and the ability to read could have possibly known to what Paul intended them to hold fast. Thus this proposal by Malherbe seems to pose more questions than it solves with respect to the relation between 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians.

In spite of my criticisms of certain aspects of Malherbe's treatment of 2 Thessalonians from the perspective of a fellow commentator on the Thessalonian correspondence, there is much to praise in this commentary. It is an extremely well-written and thorough commentary that does an excellent job of canvassing the secondary literature on 1 and 2 Thessalonians. It also offers an unrivaled amount of valuable parallel material from Greco-Roman literature that contributes substantially to our understanding of the two letters and of Paul as a pastor and letter writer. Although it is not technically a Greek-text commentary, Malherbe has created an invaluable tool for the scholar and student of New Testament Greek through his generous transliteration of Greek in support of his interpretation of the text. For those who hold to traditional views regarding such issues as the Pauline authorship of both letters, the canonical sequence, and the historical reliability of Acts, this commentary will prove an invaluable resource. For those maintaining less

traditional views, there is much that will prove challenging for them, even if they ultimately remain unconvinced by some of Malherbe's arguments.