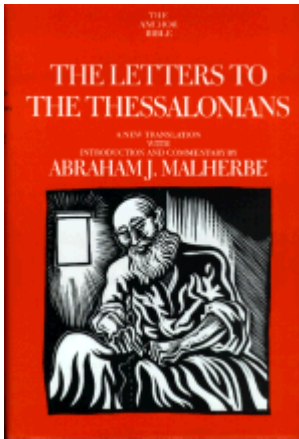


RBL 09/2004



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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Scholars who have benefited over many years from Malherbe's application of his extensive knowledge of Greco-Roman materials to elucidate New Testament texts will not be disappointed by his commentary on Paul's Thessalonian correspondence. This work not only includes references to a wide range of Greek and Latin pagan texts that may profitably be consulted to gain a better understanding of Paul's use of terminology and epistolary forms, and of his pastoral practice, but it also provides a paradigm for the judicious comparison of pagan material with New Testament passages.

The first indication of the way Malherbe situates Paul within the context of the thought and practice of ancient moral philosophers is already to be found in an article first published more than thirty years ago, entitled "'Gentle As a Nurse': The Cynic Background to 1 Thess. 2" (*NovT* 12 [1970]: 203–17). In the years to follow his approach has been demonstrated in a series of publications, including *Moral Exhortation, a Greco-Roman Sourcebook* (LEC 4; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986); *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); and "Hellenistic Moralists and the New Testament," *ANRW* 2.26.1:267–333. In these and subsequent publications (a recent bibliography of Malherbe may now be found in *Early Christianity and Classical Culture: Comparative Studies in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* [ed. John T. Fitzgerald, Thomas H. Olbricht, and L. Michael White; *NovTSup* 110; Leiden: Brill, 2003], 41–46) the following general assumptions and principles may be discerned that also underlie his use of Greco-Roman materials in this commentary. (1) Ancient epistolary theory provides a better framework for understanding the form of

Paul's letters than the ancient rhetorical handbooks (see esp. 96). (2) Comparative material should not be adduced merely on the basis of (superficial) verbal and phraseological correspondences but only after a detailed and in-depth analysis of the texts within their original contexts. (3) The most relevant corpus of nonbiblical material to be used in comparisons with Paul is the writings of the Greek and Roman moral philosophers. (4) These writings provide us with not only comparative material as regards terminology, motifs, concepts, and *topoi* but also, and especially, as regards pastoral and psychagogic practice.

Within the limited scope of this review it is not possible to do justice to the diverse and rich collection of Greek and Roman texts to which Malherbe refers the reader in the course of the commentary (of the twenty-six-page index of ancient references, about a third is devoted to non-Christian Greek and Latin sources). I shall therefore confine my discussion to a few examples illustrating his use of these texts.

While 2 Thessalonians should be considered a letter of the mixed type (cf. Pseudo-Libanius, *Epistolary Styles* 45; see p. 361), comparison with ancient letters (e.g., by Seneca, Cicero, Pliny), epistolary handbooks, and paraenetic texts (e.g., by Isocrates, Dio Chrysostom, Plutarch) clearly establishes 1 Thessalonians as a paraenetic letter. The paraenesis functions throughout the letter, however, and is not only confined to the last two chapters (81–86). The view of earlier scholars such as Dibelius and Bradley that paraenesis is limited to the hortatory sections and that there is no direct connection between paraenesis and the circumstances of the readers is therefore not borne out by the evidence (81–82, 222–23). The type of consolation found in 1 Thess 4:13–18 was considered part of the function of paraenetic letters according to the ancient handbooks (279–80). In addition to the literary form, comparison with ancient letters also shows that a considerable number of the phrases and expressions encountered, for example, in 1 Thess 2:17–18 and 3:6–10, are epistolary conventions (see 208). These include mention of one's desolation and earnest desire for contact in 1 Thess 2:17 (182–84); the constant remembrance of absent friends (1 Thess 3:6; see 201); thanks to God for a successful communication (1 Thess 3:9 [203–4]); reference to the author's praying day and night; and the invitation to the readers to express their need (1 Thess 3:10 [204–5]).

As far as the meaning of words and terminology used by Paul is concerned, Malherbe's references to comparative material are clearly based on a careful and systematic study of the available sources. Some of his more detailed discussions are those on kinship language (p. 110); *κενός* (135–36); error and deceit (139–40); *κτᾶσθαι* used of marriage (226, 227); *σκεῦος* (226–28); the phrase *πάθος ἐπιθυμίας* (229–30); *πλεονεκτεῖν* (231–33); and *θεοδίδακτος* (244–45).

A crucial feature of Malherbe's use of comparative material is, however, that he moves beyond the level of words and phrases to the vastly more important level of concepts, motifs, and topoi. The importance of topoi lies, *inter alia*, in the fact that they refer to moral and religious ideas shared within and determined by a culture: recognizing that Paul makes use of a particular topos from the Greco-Roman world not only helps us to understand the broader, underlying idea but also gives an indication of the measure of Paul's engagement with Greco-Roman culture. It is much more difficult to identify comparable sources on this level, because they cannot be found with simple, mechanical searches in indices or electronic databases: one has to study the nonbiblical texts themselves in detail. The present commentary has thus benefited from Malherbe's enormous erudition gained over many decades, in particular his comfortable familiarity with the Greco-Roman moral philosophers. Important concepts and topoi that are illuminated by Greco-Roman material include God as cosmic father (107); the essential connection between words and deeds (111); the veneration of cultic images (119–20); the anger of the gods (122); the confidence to speak (137); spiritual life as contest or struggle (138); avoidance of flattery (141–42); greed (142–43); friendship (147, 215, 257); living in cosmic harmony (152); pagan condemnation of Jews (170); sexual conduct and marriage (229–30); living quietly versus meddlesomeness (247–50, 453–54); seemly behavior (251–52); death and postmortem existence (271, 276, 278–83, 442); moral soberness and wakefulness (296–98, 305–6); peace and security (303–4); the tripartite division of human nature (338–39); and divine retribution (407, 433).

The most prominent use made of Greco-Roman material, running like a golden thread throughout the commentary, is to illustrate to what large extent Paul's pastoral care of the Thessalonians was indebted to the philosophical tradition of psychagogy. Psychagogy, a system of moral and spiritual guidance, had been widely used by philosophers in Greece and elsewhere from the fourth century B.C.E. in the training and development of their students. The system itself provided guidelines for the respective roles and responsibilities of both the student and the philosopher-guide. Although many of the basic principles were widely held, individual philosophers and philosophical communities practiced different styles of psychagogy. Paul himself also adapted psychagogic principles to make them applicable to a life focused on the Lord, instead of one centered on the self (see esp. 323–27). Much of Paul's pastoral practice can therefore only be understood within the context of psychagogy. This includes features such as the following: the teacher's intimate involvement with his students (113); the need to imitate the teacher (126); the emotional distress of new converts (128, 129); philosophic missionary work (135); the spiritual guide as nurse or father (146–47, 150–51); the need for individual instruction (151); consolation and anticipation of hardships (152, 198); self-description of the teacher (154–55); the teacher's students as his glory (185, 186); the

need to be reminded of the exemplary life of the teacher (207); commitment by the teacher (208); the aim of the philosophic life as following or pleasing God, which entails a metamorphosis of the mind (220); the role of moral instruction (240); the building-up of students (307); the importance of caring (313–14) and of admonition (314–15); supporting the morally weak (318–19); the problem of students retaliating against criticism (321–22); communal admonition of and withdrawal from a recalcitrant individual (459); and admonition in private (460). For scholars working on spiritual guidance in antiquity, the detailed discussion of Paul’s pastoral care as a form of psychagogy makes this commentary a valuable study of how one particular teacher applied the system in his own practice.

Malherbe’s focus on the Greco-Roman moral philosophers thus proves to be a very productive framework within which to explain salient features of Paul’s message and of his relationship to the Thessalonians. On the other hand, this focus also excludes other textual corpora that could have been brought into the discussion to fill out the history of religions context of Paul’s letters. A couple of examples will have to suffice. In 1 Thess 5:6–8 we find the topos of soberness and wakefulness, which is also common in the moral philosophers (296–98). These verses are framed by eschatological material (5:2–4, 9–10) and a reference to the dualistic division of humanity in “sons of light” and “sons of darkness” (5:5), which Malherbe compares with teachings from the Qumran community (294). The whole cluster of ideas is, however, also reminiscent of gnostic or Hermetic thought; compare the connection of the topos of wakefulness and sobriety with salvation and eschatology in *Corp. herm.* 1.27–30, which is combined with metaphors of light and darkness and preceded by a section on the dualistic division of humanity in which the deity’s presence and assistance play an important role (1.24–26). Again, in commenting on the phrase “good hope” (ἐλπίδα ἀγαθήν) in 2 Thess 2:16 Malherbe notes that this expression “does not appear elsewhere in the Bible” but “is frequently attested in secular Greek” (442). The expression is in fact often used to indicate the eschatological expectations of those initiated into mystery religions (cf. Plato, *Phaed.* 67B, “The journey which is now imposed on me [sc. Socrates before his execution] is begun with good hope [μετὰ ἀγαθῆς ἐλπίδος]”; Isocrates, *Paneg.* 28, “the ritual which gives those who participate in it sweeter hopes [ἡδίους τὰς ἐλπίδας] regarding both the end of life and all eternity”; Cicero, *Leg.* 2.36, “to die with a better hope [cum spe meliore moriendi]”; Plutarch, *Cons. Apoll.* 120C, “You ought to be of good hope [καλὰς ἐλπίδας ἔχειν] for your dear departed son”; Aelius Aristides, *Or.* 24, Jebb p. 297.18, “There was good hope [τῆς ἀγαθῆς ἐλπίδος]. . . , almost as if in an initiation”; *Or.* 19, Jebb p. 259.16, “to have sweeter hopes for the end [περὶ τῆς τελευτῆς ἡδίους ἔχειν τὰς ἐλπίδας]”). Within the context of 2 Thessalonians, and especially in view of the possible allusion to

1 Thess 4:13 (“that you do not grieve as the rest do who have no hope”), it thus seems worthwhile to consider the possible religious connotation of the phrase “good hope.”

In this commentary Malherbe has given us a superb example of the way Greco-Roman material can and should be used in the study of Paul’s letters. Both in the selection of comparative material and in the way this material is brought to bear on Pauline texts, the commentary provides a standard and a model to be emulated for many years to come.