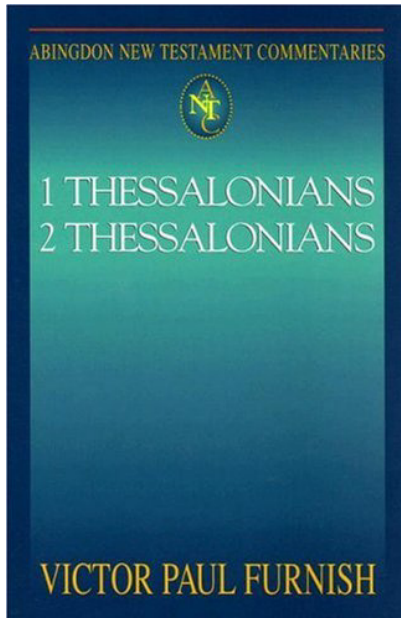


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Furnish, Victor Paul

1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians

Abingdon New Testament Commentaries

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In 2007 Victor Paul Furnish published a commentary on both epistles to the Thessalonians in the Abingdon New Testament Commentaries series. As this series is meant especially for theological students, the authors of these commentaries do not “engage in technical academic debate” (11). This intention is restrictive, of course, but it is at the same time the strength of these commentaries. The authors are to write a short and clear commentary on the New Testament writings. It is quite an achievement that the Furnish managed to write a lucid and rather complete commentary on both these epistles within 204 pages. Further, in spite of the rather limited number of pages, Furnish discusses several topics that are often lacking in commentaries. For example, in the introduction on 1 Thessalonians the question is considered whether the colleagues Timothy and Silvanus played some role in the writing of the letter. Rightly, in my view, Furnish states that they did not (24, 30–31). Another example Furnish gives of an often-missed topic is a paragraph about the cult of Cabirus (27) in a chapter about the city of Thessalonica.

It is probably due to the restrictions of this series that no English translation is given in the commentary. Sometimes a phrase is provided in the translation of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible; sometimes Furnish gives his own translation of a specific

text. His explanation of the text is generally very clear and helpful. I would like to make some remarks.

Furnish accurately notes that in these epistles the community is identified “with reference to its members,” a fact that most scholars ignore. Paul’s choice of words signifies that non-Thessalonians would have been excluded, although Paul will not have meant this. In the other Paulines the church is addressed “by referring to its location” (38).

With respect to the famous passage 1 Thess 2:13–16, it is argued that these verses belong to this epistles (25). Some authors consider these verses or part of them to be an interpolation, but in the view of Furnish and of many other interpreters their arguments “fall short of demonstrating the plausibility of any interpolation hypothesis” (65). It is painfully missed in the exegesis of these verses that nothing is said about the meaning of the first article in verse 15. Are only those Jews meant who killed the Lord Jesus, or did Paul make the general remark that the Jews killed Jesus? Although there is no room for an elaborate discussion about this problem in this commentary, it cannot be neglected, in my view. The general remark Paul made here should be assessed as a regrettable slip of the tongue, and I consider it important to admit this failure. However, in the concluding paragraph of this section it is said that Paul “is not issuing a general indictment of the Jews as a class. He is alleging particular ways in which *certain* Jews have opposed the purposes of God” (71, emphasis added). If these sentences are to be interpreted as a late explanation of verse 15, Furnish should have felt obliged to argue why Paul did not formulate this important restriction of the Jews as he did elsewhere (see, e.g., Rom 8:14; 9:6; Phil 3:15).

With respect to another well-known hot item, the interpretation of *skeuos* in 1 Thess 4:4, Furnish sums up the interpretations given by others. He thinks that *skeuos* points to “woman” (89). The problem with this interpretation is that consequently these phrases are said to men only and not to the whole community. In my view, *skeuos* points to the human body. Examples are well known of texts where the verb *ktasthai* has the meaning “to possess.” Furnish’s reference to 1 Cor 7:2 is not relevant because Paul used other words there. Paul warns the Thessalonians against fornication and impurity in this pericope. It is said time and again that they should live “in holiness.” Furnish suggests that the threefold use of the noun *hagiasmos* has to do with the cult of Cabirus, who “was revered in their city as ‘the holiest of all gods’” (92). But this honorable mention stems from a third-century inscription (see IG, X.2.I page 83) and therefore cannot be used to explain the use of *hagiasmos* in a first-century epistle. Paul wants the Thessalonians to live holy lives and to avoid impurity. It is not at all clear that Paul points to the cult of Cabirus with these words.

The commentary on 2 Thessalonians is preceded by an introduction, as was that on 1 Thessalonians. In this introduction the arguments pro and contra the authenticity of the letter are summed up. These arguments are well-known, and Furnish sums them up in a clear and lucid way (131–37). He concludes that these arguments do not “*require* the conclusion that 2 Thessalonians is deuterio-Pauline, but they strongly support this conclusion” (137).

In the commentary the text is considered carefully but rather briefly due to the nature of this series. With respect to 2 Thess 2:2, Furnish does not decide whether these words point to 1 Thessalonians “being cited in support of the false claim” that the day of the Lord is already here or to “a forged letter being represented as Paul’s own” (154). Regarding 2 Thess 2:6–7, Furnish sums up several interpretations of the word “to restrain.” What is meant by the “restraining force or figure” (155–57)? Furnish concludes: “Perhaps the writer has deliberately left much unclear.... By making it more difficult to identify any specific event as an eschatological sign he would be serving his primary aim” (157), that is, to warn his audience against the evil “that must occur before the Lord returns” (157).

In conclusion, this volume is in my view a valuable and affordable contribution for students and pastors in spite of the few topics I missed. The up-to-date explanation is very helpful for all who want to know a bit more about these two epistles and who do not have the opportunity to study them thoroughly themselves.