

7. The Thessalonian Letters

a. An Overview

The authenticity of 1 Thessalonians has never been questioned seriously. It was quoted early in the second century and was ascribed to Paul by the Muratorian Canon (ca. AD 190). Paul wrote I and II Thessalonians from Corinth: his stay there can be dated by inscriptions and references in Acts to AD 50-51. It was probably written late in AD 50 or early 51.

Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians in response to Timothy's report on the church in Thessalonica (Acts 18:5). Paul had been forced to leave Thessalonica rather suddenly and was concerned for the young congregation there. He sent Timothy for a first-hand look. (Paul himself had been banned from the city because of riots there: Acts 17:9.) Paul wrote to encourage the believers in their faith and to address some ethical and doctrinal questions brought back to him by Timothy.

Questions have been raised about the authenticity of II Thessalonians and about the relation between it and 1 Thessalonians. Its style is said to be more formal than that of 1 Thessalonians and some scholars say that the two epistles conflict in their eschatology (note history of redemption following). The formalism of II Thessalonians, however, is limited to two expressions in 1:3 ("we ought" and "rightly so") and can be discounted because it does not characterize the epistle as a whole. Another argument against Pauline authorship is the unique language of 2:1-12 which is unparalleled in any other of Paul's epistles. Apocalyptic style was common in the first century and so this objection is generally admitted to lack force today.

The question about the relation between the two epistles is more serious, however. (It is important to note that Paul's epistles are arranged in order of length and that the designations "first" and "second" merely reflect that order. They do not in themselves imply relative Chronology.) I Thessalonians has a Gentile atmosphere--they had turned "from idols" (1:9); whereas II Thessalonians uses Old Testament phraseology and imagery in describing the Second Coming. Persecutions seem to be present in II Thessalonians but past in the first letter; internal strife in the Thessalonian church is new to Paul in II Thessalonians but familiar to all in I Thessalonians; I Thessalonians 5:1 would make more sense to the readers if the Thessalonians already had II Thessalonians 2:1-12. Some scholars, for these and other reasons, think that II Thessalonians was the first letter from Paul.