Were Thessalonians “meddling in divine matters”?
A re-reading of 2 Thess 3:11

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Abstract: Paul plays on words when he states that some Thessalonians were not working (from ergazomai) but “meddling” (from periergazomai). The English versions and the secondary literature take the second verb to refer to “meddling in other people’s business.” While this “horizontal” interpretation has much to commend it, scholars have not given due attention to another attested application of the periergazomai word group, “prying or trespassing into divine matters.” Far from being rare, this “vertical” usage is found in pagan texts and particularly in literature of the Second Temple. This paper will explore these parallels in an attempt to better understand the life situation of Thessalonica. If the apostle is charging people with trespassing in the divine realm, that might shed light on why some Thessalonians had abandoned their gainful employment and felt that they deserved church support.

According to 2 Thess 3, some Christians were not working, but “meddling.” This ethical breakdown seemingly arose within a brief time: hadn’t Paul of late praised their industriousness in 1 Thess 1:3? In 1 Thess 4:11-12, he offered, not a rebuke, but merely a reminder that they should “aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.” Underlying the apostle’s instruction were the spiritual values of economic independence, orderliness and decorum before the “outsiders” (τοὺς ἐξω), that is, the greater population.¹

The apostles practiced what they preached, doing manual labor to support themselves and to provide a model of behavior. Paul and Silas had the right to ask for financial support; they chose to set aside that clause in their contract, in order to expedite the gospel (1 Cor 9), and to not be a “burden” (from βάρος) to the new disciples (1 Thess 2:7).

Moving through 1 Thess 1 to 2 Thess 3, we can read between the lines: by the time Timothy arrived in the city with 1 Thessalonians, some Christians had quit their “secular” work. He tells the church not to feed them, but it is not clear whether they were already doing so. What were the unemployed Thessalonians up to, and what was their rationale? Paul gives few hints, only that they do not work, but live in a disorderly fashion (the ἄτακτος word group).² The Contemporary English Version presumess far too much: “some of you just loaf around” (likewise, ESV – “walk in idleness”; GNB – “live lazy lives”; REB – “idling their time away”). In fact,
Paul never says that they their sin was sloth; nor that they depended on patronage, a view that has lately grown in popularity; nor that they laid down their tools because the Day of the Lord had arrived or was at hand.

In 2 Thess 3:11, Paul charges these people with “not working, but meddling”: he plays the *hapax* “meddling” (from περιεργάζοµαι) off of “working” (from ἐργάζοµαι; see 1 Cor 4:12; Eph 4:28). The HSCB translates ἐργάζοµαι as “not working at all,” similarly the NASB. But is that reading too much into the verb, as if it meant cessation of all fruitful activity? In fact Paul often uses ἐργάζοµαι with the application of “to engage in gainful employment”; that’s certainly its use elsewhere in the Thessalonian epistles (1 Thess 2:9, 4:11-12; 2 Thess 3:7-9). Using our modern idiom we might translate 3:10 as “they choose (from θέλω) not to undertake gainful employment.”

What about the second verb, περιεργάζοµαι? Almost all the versions and the secondary literature take it as a reference to meddling in other people’s business. This is the only meaning BDAG offers: “to be intrusively busy, be a busybody, meddler.” The Vulgate renders 3:11 along the same lines, with curiosus [from cūriōsus] agentes, “they pass their time inquisitively” (D-R) or “they engage in meddling.” That was also the view of Chrysostom: “a person who is not employed and yet is able to work, naturally they turn into a busybody” (my own paraphrase). The NJB sums up this consensus viewpoint: they are “doing no work themselves but interfering with other people’s.” Paul has already made the connection between quiet industry and Christian respectability in 1 Thess 4:11-12, where he also charged them to “mind their own affairs.” If that interpretation of περιεργάζοµαι is correct, then there are many parallels in pagan Greek, Jewish and Christian literature; for example:

Demosthenes, *In Aristogitonem* 15.5 - “in the case of these mischief-makers (τῶν περιεργάζοµένων τι), who annoy everyone alike and pretend to be superior to the rest, you should display such indifference”

*Testament of Gad* 6.5 – “In a dispute do not let an outsider hear your secrets...he may talk to you frequently but treacherously, or be much concerned with you (περιεργάζεταί σε), but for an evil end...”

In the 2nd century, Plutarch frequently uses the word group to mean meddling in the affairs of a another person, or meddling in governmental affairs or in military matters.

And most importantly, 1 Tim 5:13 would reinforce that interpretation: “[Single younger widows] learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house; and they are not merely idle (from ἀργός), but also gossips and busybodies (the cognate adjective περιέργοι, which is a feminine form), saying what they should not say.” (1 Tim 5:13 NRSV).9
To sum up the view that is the majority if not the universal opinion: the shape that περιεργάζοµαι took in Thessalonica was meddling in which one person annoys others by taking up their valuable time; it is a social or horizontal offense.\(^\text{10}\) The solution? These distracting people should get back to their own work, tend to their own affairs, stay off the dole, and stop interrupting people who are trying to live their own lives.

Nevertheless, this is not the only possible interpretation of 3:11; I will propose a different one, based on solid linguistic data and combined with a little conjecture. The possibility exists that περιεργάζοµαι in this context refers to a vertical or heavenward meddling, not directed against human beings but infringing on the matters of God or the heavens.

Let’s look at the data. The Bauer lexicon gives a single meaning, but other have other possibilities for περιεργάζοµαι, in Moulton-Milligan, in TLG, in the papyri. We begin with Liddell, Scott:

**LSJ περιεργάζοµαι**

1. *take more pains than enough about* a thing, *waste one’s labour on* it [Shogren – “fussiness”]
2. c. acc., *to be busy about*: meddle, interfere with; abs., *to be a busy-body*
3. bargain, haggle περὶ της τιµῆς
4. in good sense, *elaborate*
5. *investigate thoroughly; seek diligently*
6. παῦτα π. have this effect, of substances

First, a few observations on the LSJ article are in order:

- Of these uses, #3 and #6 have to do with specific contexts (#3 is price negotiation, #6 is scientific, for example, in Galen), whereas the others appear in a variety of contexts.
- I’m not sure what to make of #4, “to elaborate.” The definition from the OED is “to develop or present in further detail,” but the examples in the literature did not have a good sense, as concluded LSJ; a different definition might have been, “to express oneself in an extravagant, verbose fashion”
- There is however a use of the verb that definitely has a positive spin, as in pseudo-Demosthenes, *Oration* 13 “On organization” 7.7, where he says that people should “worry about the affairs of Greece (τῶν Ἑλληνικῶν περιεργάζεσθαι).”\(^\text{11}\)
- While LSJ lists the “absolute use” of the verb under #2, the absolute use shows up under other categories.
The various cognates: the noun περιεργία, the adjective περίεργος (twice in the NT) and the adverb held roughly the same meanings; that is, authors state that a person is doing the verb, and also apply the adjective or the noun to one and the same situation.

More importantly for our purposes, and surprising, LSJ does not list a separate category for the many references that have nothing to do with annoying other people, but which have to do with meddling in matters outside of one’s allotted place in the universe. Let’s examine a few of the most noteworthy examples, found in Greek, Jewish or Christian contexts:

**Periergazomai and cognates as “vertical meddling” – SAMPLE TEXTS:**

An inscription concerning Mēn, the god of Anatolia (AD 2-3 cent): “Whoever meddles [polupragmateo] or is a busybody [periergazomai] in divine matters, let him be counted guilty of sin before the sovereign Mēn.”

Theopompus, Testimonia, 4th century philosopher, quoted by Let. Aris. 314-15 (Charlesworth) – Moreover, [Demetrius to the king of Egypt] said that he had heard Theopompus declare that, just when he was about to quote in a misleading way some of the previously translated passages from the Law [of Moses], he had a mental upset for more than thirty days; at its abatement, he besought God to make clear to him the cause of this occurrence. “It was revealed to [Theopompus] in a dream that it was due to his meddlesome [participle of *periergazomai*] desire to disclose the things of God to common man…”

Plato, Apologia Socratis (Stephanus) – This is the well-known charge that “Socrates is a criminal and a busybody [periergazomai], investigating the things beneath the earth and in the heavens and making the weaker argument stronger and teaching others these same things.” – Note: Socrates and other philosophers were thought to be a nuisance to his fellow-citizens, but here the adverbial participle “investigating” attaches to *periergazomai*.

Sirach 3:22-24 (NRSV) – “Reflect upon what you have been commanded, for what is hidden is not your concern. Do not meddle [periergazomai plus dative] in matters that are beyond you, for more than you can understand has been shown you. For their conceit has led many astray, and wrong opinion has impaired their judgment.”

Testament of Issachar 5:1-2 (Charlesworth) – has both meddling with God’s affairs and human

Keep the Law of God, my children;
achieve integrity; live without malice,
not tinkering with [periergazomai] God’s commands or your neighbor’s affairs.¹⁴

Philo, *Names* 72, criticizes those who would trespass in God’s cosmic secrets: “On what account dost thou investigate the motions and periods of the stars? and why hast thou bounded up so high from the earth to the heavens? Is it merely that you may indulge your curiosity [periergazomai] with respect to those matters? And what advantage could accrue to you from all this curiosity [periergos]?” Same in *Migration* 187 – “Abandoning therefore your superfluous anxiety to investigate [periergia] the things of heaven, dwell, as I said just now within yourselves, forsaking the land of the Chaldeans, that is, opinion, and migrating to Charran the region of the outward sense, which is the corporeal abode of the mind.”


Acts 19:19 – “A number of those who practiced magic [periergia] collected their books and burned them publicly.”¹⁵

Shepherd of Hermas, *Parables* 9.2.6-7 - And the shepherd said to me, “Why are you debating with yourself and becoming perplexed, and troubling yourself? Do not attempt, as though you were intelligent, to understand things you cannot comprehend, but ask the Lord that you may receive the intelligence to understand them. You are not able to see things behind you, but you do see what is in front of you. Let what you cannot see alone, and do not trouble yourself [periergazomai] about it; but master those things that you do see, and do not concern yourself about the rest.”

Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.1.6 (ANF) – “…those who take part in the divine words, ought to guard against betaking themselves to this, as they would to the building of cities, to examine [the divine words] out of curiosity [periergia]; that they do not come to the task for the sake of receiving worldly things, having ascertained that they who are consecrated to Christ are given to communicate the necessaries of life. But let such be dismissed as hypocrites.”

Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.17 (ANF) – the philosophers took all their good ideas from the Old Testament, “and claimed these as their own teachings, disguising some points, treating others sophistically by their ingenuity [periergia], and discovering other things, for perchance they had “the spirit of perception.”
Hippolytus, *Refutation* 1.1.prologue (ANF) – he states that people who are deceived tend to pry into *periergia* any disclosure of false doctrine; also calls astrology “meddling” (6.55, 10.5).

Spurious Clementine Epistle concerning virginity 1.11 (ANF). He links the two key passages from 2 Thess 3 and 1 Tim 5 – “Such are the ways of all those who do not work, but go hunting for tales [periergazomai] and think to themselves that this is profitable and right. For such persons are like those idle and prating widows “who go wandering about [periergos] among houses” [1 Tim 5:13] with their prating, and hunt for idle tales, and carry them from house to house with much exaggeration, without fear of God. And besides all this, barefaced men as they are, under pretence of teaching, they set forth a variety of doctrines.”

Origen on 1 Corinthians, fragments (Kovacs, *1 Corinthians*, 148) – “But nonetheless, even if I [Paul] have a right to the things I need, in consideration of what builds up (1 Cor 8:1), I do not make full use of this right (1 Cor 9:18). I am careful not to put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ (1 Cor 9:12) or to give an excuse to those who are living in idleness and not doing any work but are also mere busybodies (2 Thess 3:11). Therefore, just as I do not make use of the right my teaching gives me, so also you who claim to be wise should not make use of your right but should take thought for the building up of your neighbors.”

Origen *Contra Celsum* 8.61.5, also 14 (ANF) – the simpleminded man “is curiously inquisitive about [from periergazomai] the names of demons, their powers and agency, the incantations, the herbs proper to them, and the stones with the inscriptions graven on them, corresponding symbolically or otherwise to their traditional shapes.”

Gregory Thaumaturgus, *De fide* 12 (3rd century; ANF) – With regard to the mystery of the incarnation, “let us not intermeddle with [periergazomai] the word of the Gospel by lifeless disputations, scattering about endless questionings and logomachies, and making a hard thing of the gentle and simple word of faith; but rather let us work the work of faith, let us love peace, let us exhibit concord, let us preserve unity, let us cultivate love, with which God is well pleased....” He goes on to use Acts 1:7 as an example of our ignorance: “it is not for us to know the times or the seasons which the Father hath put in His own power...”

Cyril of Alexandria, *Comm on John* 2.8 (5th century; Pusey) – “...we will glorify the Only-Begotten together with God the Father, not with any difference, but in equality of honour and glory, as God of God, and Light of Light, and Life of Life. And overmuch enquiry [periergazomai] into what is to be received as faith, is not without hazard:
nevertheless we must test the force of the As, lest our opponents be overwise in their own
conceits.”

Thus, “vertical” meddling was an accepted, if minor, use of the περιεργάζοµαι word group. The
evidence includes a handful of Classical and koinē Greek references; the use is more frequent in
Second Temple Jewish texts (especially Test XII Patriarchs; Epistle of Aristeas; Philo); the
Christian references resemble the use of the word group in Judaism.

The specific compass of meddling in the divine (using περιεργάζοµαι or a cognate) is typically:

1. Snooping around the Mysteries of the Cosmos: Socrates meddled in the secrets of the
universe, and his curiosity was considered irreverent. Similarly...

2. Dabbling in Magic and Astrology: Philo regards the study of astrology as a transgression
into forbidden knowledge; so does Hippolytus. Acts speaks of dabbling in the mysteries
of magic, as does Origen.17

3. Prying too deeply in the Scriptures or God’s truth: Theopompus meddled into the Hebrew
Scriptures in order to be a mediator of God’s truth to humanity. Sirach warns against the
arrogant who go beyond the plain sense of Scripture. T. Issachar warns against meddling
with or overcomplicating God’s commands. Josephus warns against over-curiosity in
God’s truth; so do Hermas, Clement of Alexandria and Gregory. A sub-set is
investigation which leads people astray into false doctrine: Hippolytus thinks that
meddling too much in God’s truth might yield false doctrine; so do Pseudo-Clement and
Cyril of Alexandria.

Now, in the black-and-white sci-fi movies of my childhood, a common trope is the mad scientist
who probes too far into the mysteries of the universe, unleashing powerful destructive forces.
Someone inevitably warns him: “There are some things in God’s creation which man was not
meant to know!”18 If dubbed into koinē, I imagine that περιεργάζοµαι would appear in the
dialogue of many such movies.

These ancient references open the possibility that these Thessalonians were trespassers in matters
that were beyond them. Far from being lazy may have been energetically pursuing their goal.
This distracted them from gainful employment because they were too much caught up in the
divine matters. The result is that they live “disorderly” (from ἄτακτος), out of synch with God’s
plan. The divine will for them had been manifested in the apostolic model, specifically the
Pauline version of it: they were apostles, yet they supported themselves by the labor of their
hands, even though they were also doing the Lord’s work; that is because all Christians should
support themselves, even if they fancy themselves “adept” in God’s ways. The apostolic team
was not “disorderly” (ἀτακτέω, 2 Thess 3:7); neither should the Thessalonians be (see 1 Thess 5:14).

If a “vertical” application of περιεργάζοµαι is to function in 2 Thess 3, we must then ask, what might these disciples have been doing that constituted trespassing on holy ground? I suggest three possibilities:

#1. Calculating the Lord’s return. Typical of those in any age who date the parousia is arcane reasoning, plus meddling in things that don’t concern them. In fact, Gregory Thaumaturgus used περιεργάζοµαι to speak of those who violate the dictum, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority” (Acts 1:7). One could imagine a Thessalonian who ignores the “No Trespassing” sign and concocts proofs that “the day of the Lord is already here” (2 Thess 2:2); he or she quits working, either because worldly occupation is no long valid, or in order to spread this new message.\(^{19}\) One difficulty with this view is that Paul makes no connection between unemployment in 3:11 and the end-time panic of 2:1-3; nor does he rebuke the unemployed for any counterfeit doctrine.

#2. Dabbling in some sort of mystical quest for truth, leading to otherworldliness.\(^{20}\) Here we might have a parallel in the Pastoral Epistles, for example 1 Tim 1:3-4 – “instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations.”\(^{21}\) And perhaps Col 2:8 – “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.” Walther Schmithals thinks the Thessalonians were dabbling in Gnostic mysteries, although here as elsewhere Schmithals is hyper-sensitive to whiffs of a system where it probably never made an appearance.\(^{22}\) The problem once again is, if these people were Gnostics, then why does Paul spend ten verses talking about their work ethic instead of telling them to stop being Gnostics?

#3. More generally, fervently proclaiming the gospel but crossing into forbidden ground by asking for financial support. They might have reasoned, had not Jesus taught that “the worker is worth his keep” (Matt 10:10; see further Gal 6:6; 1 Tim 5:17-18)? This fits more nicely within the correspondence. First of all, the best interpretation of 1 Thess 1:6 is that Thessalonians were noteworthy for being evangelistic throughout Macedonia. Second, Paul provided an example of hard work to these disciples, one that is appropriate for any believer. But thirdly, in the Thessalonian epistles, when Paul speaks of a work ethic, it is always in connection with the model he gave them as a person in ministry. This gives this third interpretation an edge over the other two. For while Paul does not rebuke them for eschatological calculations or for mystical doctrines, he does use himself as an example to prove this specific point: As apostles we worked for our own living, even while doing the Lord’s work; evangelists who go out from the churches we plant should follow our pattern.\(^{23}\) Some Thessalonians went from house to house or even
throughout Macedonia, asking for support and heedlessly causing harm with their inflated self-perception. As one writer states, his example “calls to order members of the community with a missionary activity similar to Paul’s.”

This “meddling evangelist” viewpoint has always had a few exponents – Malherbe, for example – but they always take περιεργάζοµαι horizontally, as interfering with other humans, not in divine matters. As Origen said, “Therefore, just as I do not make use of the right my teaching gives me, so also you who claim to be wise should not make use of your right but should take thought for the building up of your neighbors.”

I suggest that a vertical meaning of περιεργάζοµαι is possible in this passage and that Malherbe’s viewpoint might be developed beyond the conventional understanding of that verb.

So then, taking ἄτακτος to mean “disorderly,” ἐργάζοµαι to mean “gainful employment” and περιεργάζοµαι to mean trespassing God’s guidelines for Christian ministry, we might paraphrase 3:11-12 –

11 For we hear that some of you are living out of sync with the pattern [we taught and lived, both for Christians generally but especially for those who preach the gospel]: they do not keep busy with gainful employment; in fact they are presumptuous, crossing the God-ordained line into an area where they should not be intruding.

12 Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to quietly work at a paying job so that they can support themselves [even as they carry out their gospel ministry].

In 2 Chronicles, the chief priest Azariah warned King Uzziah against trespassing into the temple to burn incense. Uzziah’s action stemmed from his pride and impertinence, not piety. The priest’s rebuke in the 2 Chron 26:18 LXX was simple: Οὐ σοί – “it’s not for you” to barge into the sanctuary to do a work that should be done only by the correct order of appointed ministers. Perhaps Paul is saying to the Thessalonian super-evangelists, financial support is “not for you.”

We have suggested that these Thessalonians were deeply invested in the task of evangelism and teaching, but that they crossed the line and became interlopers when they averred themselves “worthy of their hire,” claiming for themselves an apostolic right that not even Paul and Silas chose to take advantage of. Paul’s analysis is, You’re doing a good work, you’re not heretics, but you do presume too much on God’s good graces; and so, as the saying goes, don’t quit your day jobs.

NOTES:

1 Neither in 1 Thess 4 nor in 2 Thess 3 does Paul explicitly state that unemployment and disorderliness affect the community, although that is assumed by most, including Ernest Best, A commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians (reprint; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 340.
The word group means “disorderly” rather than “lazy”; see BDAG; LSJ; LEH; MM; TDNT. Philo, On the creation 22, used the adjective to denote the cosmos as “without form” in Gen 1:2. Spicq is exactly right when he complains: “It would not be necessary to insist on the meaning of ataktos ‘not remaining in his/her/its place, out of order, undisciplined’ – if a certain number of exegetes did not suggest translating it ‘idle, lazy.’ But the usage of the verb, the adjective, and the adverb in the Koine, notably in the first century AD, confirms that the word covers any breach of obligation or convention, disorders of life in general; and the usage is decisive.” So Spicq, “ἀτακτέω, ἄτακτος, ἄτακτως,” TLNT, 1:223; esp. C. Spicq, “Les Thessaloniciens ‘inquiets’ étaient-ils des paresseux?” Studia Teologica 10 (1956): 1-13. Likewise Robert Jewett, The Thessalonian correspondence: Pauline rhetoric and millenarian piety (FF; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 105, who rejects “laziness” but reads too much into ἄτακτοι with his rendering “obstinate resisters of authority.” G. Delling in “ἄτακτος (ἀτάκτως), ἀτακτέω,” TDNT, 8:48 states: “Outside Christianity the verb, when applied to work, does not in the first instance lay emphasis on sloth but rather on an irresponsible attitude to the obligation to work.” Contra Best, 334, who argues that the root meaning of ἄτακτος is “loafer,” here and in 1 Thess 5:14.

Charles A. Wanamaker, The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A commentary on the Greek text (NIGNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 283-86.


μηδὲν ἐργαζόμενους ἀλλὰ περιεργαζόμενους. This is a use of figura etymologica, in which two words with the same root are used adjacently. (Pseudo) Demosthenes, Philippica 4.72 used a similar play on words; but it is too much to suggest that “not working but meddling” was a well-known Greek trope.


This is how Chrysostom took it in his homily: Second Thessalonians 5.2 (NPNF 1, 13: 394). Ambrosiaster, Commentaries on Galatians-Philemon, trans. and ed. by Gerald L. Bray (ACC; Downers Grove, IL: 2009), 118, says that the idle “go around quietly collecting stories and opinions, knowing who wants to hear what about whom, so that they will be freely invited to dinner.” Also the modern commentaries, such as Wanamaker, 286 – “people being busybodies involved in affairs that are not of their business.” See for example, Green, Rigaux, Witherington, Best, Malherbe, Fee, Beale.


See especially Plato, Republic 433a-c (Shorey) – “And again that to do one's own business and not to be a busybody (from πολυπραγµονέω, a synonym of περιεργάζοµαι) is justice, [433b] is a saying that we have heard from many and have often repeated ourselves.” “We have.” “This, then,” I said, “my friend, if taken in a certain sense appears to be justice, this principle of doing one's own business. Do you know whence I infer this?” “No, but
tell me,” he said. “I think that this is the remaining virtue in the state after our consideration of soberness, courage, and intelligence, a quality which made it possible for them all to grow up in the body politic and which when they have sprung up preserves them as long as it is present. And I hardly need to remind you that [433c] we said that justice would be the residue after we had found the other three.”

11 Pseudo-Demosthenes, Oration 13 “On organization” 7.7-8 – “For if you were content to let things slide and not worry about the state of Greece, it would be another matter. But, as it is, you claim to take the lead and to determine the rights of other states; yet neither in the past nor today have you furnished a sufficient force to superintend and secure this claim.” The positive sense of the word group in this text is precisely opposite Paul’s use of the terms: being silent (ἡσυχάζω in 1 Thess 4:11; ἡσυχια in 2 Thess 3:12) is passive, versus being concerned about or, almost, “proactive, busy about” (περιεργάζομαι).


14 The Charlesworth version is based on the Greek text καὶ ἐν ἀκακίᾳ πορεύσθε, µὴ περιεργαζόµενα ἐντολὰς Κυρίου, καὶ τοῦ πλησίον τὰς πράξεις. Some manuscripts omit ἐντολὰς Κυρίου, καὶ and so the R. H. Charles version chooses the shorter reading “Not playing the busybody with the business of your neighbor.” The author seems to be contrasting a “simple” hearkening to God’s law (another rendering of ἁπλότητα, rather than “integrity”), as opposed to “overcomplicating” it.

15 Here the neuter plural of the adjectival form, τὰ περίεργα, has the semi-technical sense of “magic.” See too a papyrus letter dated AD 198, a Roman edict in Egypt, which outlaws magic (περιεργία). From P.coll.youtie 1.30.

16 The full version is from the Syriac, but there are Greek fragments in which the author connects the verb periergazomai with the cognate adjective periergos.

17 D. H. Field, “περιεργάζοµαι,” in NIDNTT 1:266 - “The derived adj. is used similarly to mean either of an enquiring mind, curious (and hence magical; cf. Lat. curiosus).” For some reason he also states: “In the LXX periergazomai only appears in two alternative readings preserved in Origen’s Hexapla, where it means seek diligently (2 Sam. 11:3; Eccl. 7:30).” Perhaps Field is not counting Sirach as part of the Greek Scriptures: as we have noted the verb appears in an important reference in Sir 3:23.

18 So, famously, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, in which the doctor warns: “Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow.”

19 M. J. J. Menken, “Paradise regained or still lost?” 287, favors a version of this view, in which the proponents in a realized parousia annoy their fellow Christians with their doctrine. Others interpret the verse to mean that believers in an imminent end of the age were disturbing the church: G. G. Findlay, The epistles of Saint Paul the apostles to the Thessalonians (reprint of 1904 ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 210; William Neil, The Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians (MNTC; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1950), 194; D. Edmund Hiebert, The Thessalonian Epistles: A call to readiness (Chicago: Moody, 1971), 346.
20 So says C. L. Mearns, p. 23 of “Early eschatological development in Paul: The evidence of 1 Corinthians,” *JSNT* 22 (1984): 19-35: “we may presume that the giving up of regular work in the case of many Thessalonians probably stemmed from the enthusiastic motive of living in ‘heaven now’ and enjoying a proleptic paradise.”

21 Beyond that, there were false teachers, associated with Ephesus in the pastoral epistles (Titus 1:11; likewise 1 Tim 3:3, 8; 6:5; 2 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:7, 11; also 2 Pet 2:3). Paul does not use the verb περιεργάζοµαι word group in these texts, but he certainly could have – this sort of speculative mysticism was just the sort of activity that invited charges of περιεργάζοµαι in the literature of the Second Temple.

22 Walter Schmithals, *Paul & the Gnostics*, tr. John E. Steely (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1972), ch. 3 – “The historical situation of the Thessalonian epistles.” See too Jewett, 105. Schmithals, 198 says that the Thessalonians were supposedly otherworldly because their Gnostic theology encouraged it: “the disorderliness of their activity consists in the fact that in their missionary busyness they neglect their existence in this world.” Schmithals detects an elaborate theological structure behind what was more likely a simple matter of lifestyle.

23 So Chrysostom, *Second Thessalonians* 5.2 (NPNF 1, 13: 394) – “For if Paul, not being under a necessity, and having a right to be unemployed (from ἀργέω), and having undertaken so great a work, did nevertheless work, and not merely work, but ‘night and day,’ so that he was able even to assist others, – much more ought others to do this.” The same adjective turns up in Matt 22:3 – the landowner “saw others standing idle (from ἀγρός) in the marketplace.” They are not guilty of laziness: they have presented themselves for work, they are willing, but “no one has hired us.”

24 Schmithals, 198.

25 Todd D. Still, *Conflict at Thessalonica: a Pauline church and its neighbors* (JSNTSS 183; Sheffield: JSOT, 1999), 245-50. Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: the philosophic traditional of pastoral care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 100, points to a parallel in the Cynic philosophers, who “leave their jobs, sponge off people, contribute nothing to society, and meddle in other people’s business”; Jewett, 105. According to Christian texts from a few decades later, there was regularly trouble with parasitical teachers who looked to the church for goods or money. The *Didache* uses language similar to 2 Thess 3; it is better that they should work with their hands and not be “unemployed” (from ἀγρός, Did. 12.4). *Didache* mentions “apostles” who were condemned not for their doctrine but because of economic impropriety: “Let every apostle who comes to you be welcomed as if he were the Lord. But he is not to stay for more than one day, unless there is need, in which case he may stay another. But if he stays three days, he is a false prophet. And when the apostle leaves, he is to take nothing except bread until he finds his next night’s lodging. But if he asks for money, he is a false prophet” (Did. 11.4-6). If teachers come to a town and wish to receive money from the church, then they “trading on Christ” (Did. 12.5). Some have argued that this viewpoint here expressed would only be convincing if 2 Thessalonians were written significantly later than Paul – like the *Didache* in the late first or early second century, see the overview in I. Howard Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (NCB; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 219. But this is hardly necessary, given that at least as early as the 40s Paul demonstrated a fine sensibility of how financial mistrust could inhibit the work of the gospel. He knew of people who were wrongfully taking money from others (cf., e.g., 2 Cor 11:5-9).

26 Origen on 1 Corinthians, fragments (from Judith L. Kovacs, ed., *1 Corinthians interpreted by early Christian commentators*, Church’s Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2005), 148.