

“1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, and the Olivet Discourse”

Gary S. Shogren, www.openoureyeslord.com

How can we sketch out the outline of Christian eschatology from the years AD 40-50s and earlier? The Thessalonian epistles provide the clearest, datable data. The Thessalonians learned their eschatology from Paul; the apostle added to or further developed their understanding by the two epistles; and it is likely that Timothy refined their eschatology during his stays in Thessalonica.

How would Paul’s presentation compare with that of his contemporaries? Another very early set of eschatological teaching might have been circulating in the “Little Apocalypse”. This is typically defined as an oral or written tradition that was later incorporated into Mark’s gospel as chapter 13; and later into Matthew and Luke.

Based on the primitiveness of the two known epistles and one (hypothetical) “apocalypse”, one might surmise that the eschatology of 1-2 Thessalonians has as its nearest relative in the gospel tradition the hypothesized Little Apocalypse. In that case, the epistles should bear a strong resemblance to Mark 13. Beasley-Murray in his famous monograph pursued that hypothesis. If there is a Markan tradition that parallels 1 and 2 Thessalonians, then he cited it as the source or a contemporary parallel of Paul’s teaching. Nevertheless, there is an inherent flaw in Beasley-Murray’s approach, namely, that he favored Markan parallels reasons that have little to do with precise comparisons between the texts. At times he disregards the parallels that are found in Matthew or Luke, even in cases where they are equally good or better than the Markan ones.¹

A better method is to concentrate on the texts themselves, not on the theory of Mark 13’s origin. The result: when one compares the two epistles with *all three synoptic apocalypses*, Mark does not provide the closest parallels to Paul. Nor does it contain parallels to all the eschatology of 1-2 Thess; neither does the Lukan version. Only Matthew’s gospel (1) provides parallels for all of Paul’s eschatological teaching in the two epistles, and (2) uses technical vocabulary in the same way that Paul does. From textual considerations, indications are that Paul might have known and taught something resembling Matthew or special Matthean tradition.² The gospel material that Paul knew was later shortened by Mark; or was received by Mark in another version entirely.

¹ George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Future: An Examination of the Criticism of the Eschatological Discourse, Mark 13, with Special Reference to the Little Apocalypse Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1954), 226-30. His observations should be compared with the detailed study by Béda Rigaux, *Les épîtres aux Thessaloniens* (EBib; Paris: Gabalda, 1956), 98-101.

² For one supporter for this Matthean view, see pp. 37-38 of J. B. Orchard, “Thessalonians and the Synoptic Gospels,” *Bib* 19 (1938): 19-42. According to Orchard, the Matthean elements that turn up in the Thessalonian epistles include Jesus’ lament that they had killed the prophets (Matt 23:37); the trumpet call (Matt 24:31); the use of “meeting” in 1 Thess 4:17 (ἀπάντησις; Matt 25:6); the thief in the night (Matt 24:42, although see the parallel in

Let us follow along in Matthew (the ESV text) and the epistles. There we will find parallels to what the Thessalonian disciples knew from the apostles' initial visit:

In 1 Thessalonians –

- Matt 10:17-18 (paralleled in Mark, not in Luke) – “Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles.” When Paul interpreted the actions of the Judean leaders against Christians in 1 Thess 2:15-16, he could have seen them as a fulfillment of this prophecy of Jesus.
- Matt 24:8 (paralleled in Mark, not in Luke) – certain signs are the “beginning of birth pangs” (ἀρχὴ ὠδίνων); this metaphor is somewhat differently directed in 1 Thess 5:3, but the term is the same, “birth pangs” (ἡ ὠδίν).
- Matt 24:12 (not found in Mark or Luke) – “the love of many will grow cold” as a sign of the end. It is not certain that Paul was thinking of the Matthean tradition. Nevertheless, in both epistles, he seems preoccupied with fervent Christian love, and that concern may have been fueled by Jesus' teaching. See: 1 Thess 3:12 – “And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you”; see also 1 Thess 4:9-10; 5:8; 5:13; 5:26; 2 Thess 1:3.
- Matt 24:13 (paralleled in Mark and in Luke) – “the one who endures to the end will be saved.” The theme of endurance is a constant in these epistles, notably 1 Thess 3:5.
- Matt 24:31 (paralleled in Mark, not in Luke) – “And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” The motif of gathering appears in the apocalypse (Matt 24:40-41), the parable of the tares (Matt 13:36-43) and the parable of the dragnet (Matt 13:47-50). Cp. 1 Thess 3:13, 4:16-17.
- Matt 24:33 (paralleled in Mark, worded differently in Luke) – “So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates.” See 1 Thess 4:17, where “meeting” (ἀπάντησις/*apantēsis*) may denote going forth to formally welcome a king as he approaches a city.
- Matt 24:36 (paralleled in Mark, not in Luke) – “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son [as in the critical text], but the Father

Luke 12:39); drunkenness as a metaphor (Matt 24:49). See also G. Henry Waterman, “The Sources of Paul's Teaching on the 2nd Coming of Christ in 1 and 2 Thessalonians,” *JETS* 15/2 (1972): 105-13. He identifies no fewer than 24 points of contact between the epistles and the synoptic apocalypse, and also points to the Matthean version as the closest parallel.

only.” Compare with 1 Thess 5:2 – “you know perfectly well that the Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.”

- Matt 24:42 (paralleled in Mark, not in Luke) – “Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” Compare with 1 Thess 5:6-7, “let us not let ourselves fall asleep.”
- Matt 24:43 (paralleled in Luke, not in Mark) – “If the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into” (NRSV). See 1 Thess 5:4 – “But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness, so that the day would surprise you like a thief.”
- Matt 24:49 (paralleled in Luke, not in Mark) – “drunkenness” is a symbol of being wicked and unprepared. Cp. 1 Thess 5:6-8 – “those who get drunk do so at night... let exercise self-control”
- One might add Matt 24:14 (no parallel in Mark or in Luke), that the gospel will be preached to all nations. Cp. 1 Thess 1:8 – from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth.

In 2 Thessalonians –

- Matt 24:6 – (paralleled in Mark, not in Luke) the disciples should not be “alarmed”; 2 Thess 2:2, the Thessalonians should not be “alarmed” (both texts use $\theta\rho\acute{o}\epsilon\omega$).
- Matt 24:4-5, 11 (paralleled in Mark and in Luke) – The signs of the end include deception; false prophets. 2 Thess 2:2, “spirit” (better “Spirit”) almost certainly refers to false prophecy. Deception of the world takes place in 2 Thess 2:9-12.
- Matt 24:10 (no parallel in Mark or in Luke) – many will “fall away”; 2 Thess 2:3 – the “Apostasy”.
- Matt 24:15 (paralleled in Mark, Luke is different) – “when you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place.” The antichrist figure is known to the Thessalonians, 2 Thess 2:3-12. Paul taught them about him during his time there: 2 Thess 2:5 – “Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you?”
- Matt 24:30 (paralleled in Mark and in Luke) – the Son of man comes “with power and great glory”; see 2 Thess 1:7-10.
- Matt 24:31 (paralleled in Mark, not in Luke) – Gathering of the saints; see under 1 Thess 4:16-17 above, cp. 2 Thess 2:1 – “our gathering together to him”.

And in both epistles –

- Matt 24:9-12 (paralleled in Mark and in Luke) – The Christians will suffer tribulations (1 Thess 2:14; 3:3; 3:7; 2 Thess 1:4-8).

This analysis has elements of subjectivity, but it does give a broad indication of how Paul's letters compare with the Synoptics. With respect to points that might have a parallel to the synoptic eschatology:

All 19 are found in Matthew

12 are found in all three, Matthew, Mark and Luke

2 are found in Matthew and Luke, not in Mark

10 are found in Matthew and Mark, not in Luke

And key to our understanding of Beasley-Murray's interpretation (above): there are five elements that are found in Matthew and in the Thessalonian epistles are *not* found in Mark (these are 1. Matt 24:12 – “the love of many will grow cold”; 2. Matt 24:10 – many will “fall away”; 3. Matt 24:14 – the gospel will be preached to all nations; 4. Matt 24:43 – “If the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming”; 5. Mat 24:49 – people in the world are “drunk”). If Paul's eschatological terms resembled those of any gospel, it is Matthew, not Mark, and certainly not Luke.³

These parallels may indicate that the Thessalonian disciples were taught an eschatology that resembled that found in Matthew. But what about (b) above, that is, special eschatological terminology that Paul shares with Matthew, but not with the other gospels? Paul and Matthew coincide in the use of a semi-technical word group. Paul uses “meeting” (ἀπάντησις), which may be paraphrased as “welcome” the Lord; see our commentary on 1 Thess 4:17. Matthew also uses “meeting” (*apantēsis*/ἀπάντησις) in Matt 25:6. He uses a cognate for “meeting” (ὑπάντησις) in

³ There are three other Matthean passages that may have influenced 1 Thessalonians. First, Matt 13:20-21 (also paralleled in Mark and Luke) – “The seed is sown on rocky ground; these are people who receive the word with joy, but fall away because of persecution.” There is a striking resemblance to 1 Thess 1:6 – “in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit.” Second, there is a teaching unique to Matthew (10:23) that seems to have influenced Paul's missionary method: “When they persecute you in one town [Philippi?], flee to the next [Thessalonica? Berea? Athens?].” Matt 22:6 – Parable of the Wedding Feast, the invitees “abuse” (from ὑβρίζω) the messengers sent to bring them in. Only Matthew's version of the parable contains that verb, and Paul uses it in 1 Thess 2:2 to describe the abuse they received in Philippi. Third, in another Matthean passage there is language that is unparalleled in Mark and Luke, from the Parable of the Wedding Feast: Matt 22:6 – “those who were called (from καλέω) were not worthy (from ἄξιος) of the “kingdom of heaven” (22:2). The parallel in Luke 14:16-24 is quite different and may even be a different parable. This Matthean passage is very like 1 Thess 2:12 – “that you walk *worthy* of the God who *called* you into his *kingdom*”.

Matt 25:1. Both nouns have cognate verbs that appear in the NT; the verbs too never refer to the second coming. So then, only Matthew’s version of the Olivet Discourse (twice, in the Parable of the Ten Virgins) and Paul (once, 1 Thess 4:17) use this word group to refer to the church going forth to meet Christ at his coming; *and neither Mark or Luke or the other NT writers use it eschatologically*. It is plausible that Paul was acquainted with a Greek version of the Matthean or pre-Matthean Olivet Discourse and borrowed “meeting” specifically from that tradition.

There is one point that is absent from the Olivet traditions of all three synoptic gospels. As it happens, it is the one point that Paul introduces as new information in 1 Thessalonians: the resurrection of the saints. Yes, Jesus spoke elsewhere about the resurrection, for example in his argument with the Sadducees in Matt 23:23-33. But within the eschatological discourse as such, it is absent. Even if the Thessalonians had committed it to memory, they would not have heard an explicit word concerning the fate of dead Christians. For them, the pronouncement that “the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt 24:13; see also Matt 10:22) might sound unnervingly close to “salvation will come to those who manage not to die before Christ returns.”

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul provides the missing datum. The key to understanding the Olivet discourse from a *post-Easter* perspective is: “since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died” (1 Thess 4:14). Here is a comparison of the Matthean Olivet Discourse (ESV) and Paul’s teaching in the two Thessalonian letters:

Matt 24:30-31	1 Thess 4:16-17	2 Thess 1:6-7
the sign of the Son of Man	the Lord himself	when the Lord Jesus
will appear in heaven	will descend from heaven	is revealed from heaven
and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory		when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire
and he will send out his angels	with the archangel’s call; also “with all the holy angels” in 3:13	with his mighty angels
with a loud trumpet call	with the sound of God’s trumpet	

	<i>New information:</i> AND THE DEAD IN CHRIST WILL RISE FIRST	
and [the angels] will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other; the “virgins” go out to meet the bridegroom (25:1, 6)	then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever	

Thus, Paul gives them material that is new; not newly-minted, but new to the Thessalonians.

A very different reading of 1 Thess 4 is that Paul was overtaken by events; he then had to manufacture new doctrine in order for his system to continue to make sense. C. L. Mearns, for example, argued that the earliest church believed that Jesus was already acting as judge, and that believers were already resurrected through their baptism into Christ. That is to say, their eschatology was not future, but “realized”: is saw the fulfillment of all things in Christ’s exaltation. Then, within two decades, Paul’s “new apocalyptic programme was the product of his creative response to several pressures. First, there was the desire to include growing numbers of deceased first-generation believers within the scope of the Christian hope (cf. 1 Thess. 4.13).”⁴

Mearns’ revisionist exegesis rests on insubstantial evidence and fails to explain (1) the fact that many Christians must have died before AD 50, as Paul and Silas would know; Paul had been a witness of the first Christian martyrdom (Acts 8:1); James had been killed (Acts 12:1-2); and Paul himself had brought about the death penalty on others (Acts 9:1); (2) how Paul could have single-handedly steered the entire early church to abandon “realized eschatology” and to follow this new direction. Why is it that every other NT teaches futurist eschatology? Mearns’ interpretation is implausible.

Our analysis of these texts raises another point about the second coming and the gathering of the church. Many Christians look to 1 Thess 4 and ask whether this reunion with Christ is to take place before or after the great tribulation. In fact, when readers ask this of text, they are asking

⁴ P. 20, C. L. Mearns, “Early Eschatological Development in Paul: the Evidence of 1 Corinthians,” *JSNT* 22 (1984): 19-35. Mearns’ interpretation runs counter to a popular theory from the early 20th century, that Paul’s viewpoint evolved from Jewish-apocalyptic to Hellenistic-mystical one. For further development, see Ben F. Meyer, “Did Paul’s View of the Resurrection Undergo Development?” *TS* 47 (1986): 363-87.

the wrong question: Paul does not answer it; apparently, it does not even occur to him to address it.⁵

But the parallels provide a strong indication of what his answer would be: Matt 24:30-31 is extraordinarily similar to the language of 1 Thess 4:16-17 and 2 Thess 1:7-8. That is, when Paul describes the resurrection and the “rapture” of the saints, he speaks in terms that a reader of Matthew would have understood: the *parousia* and the going forth of the church to “welcome” the Lord is correlated with the coming of the Son of Man and the gathering of the saints...*after* the tribulation. It seems all but certain that that the resurrection and rapture of the church in 1 Thess 4 takes place after the tribulation, as aspects of Christ’s *parousia*.⁶

⁵ So notes D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles: a Call to Readiness* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), 203-06, although he promotes the pre-tribulational viewpoint.

⁶ The reader should consult the useful volume: Richard R. Reiter, editor, *Three Views on the Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-tribulation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996).