AN EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-5:11

by

A. Average Student

Presented to Dr. Dennis Smith
NT 500
Introduction to the New Testament

Phillips Theological Seminary
September 29, 2009
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Many scholars consider 1 Thessalonians to be Paul's earliest letter. He wrote it to a church he must have founded, since prior to his arrival they had worshipped “idols” (1 Thess 1:9). He probably stayed there a few months and then had traveled on. A bit later he had sent Timothy back to check on them (1 Thess 3:1-2). After he got a good report back from Timothy (3:6) he wrote this letter in response.

The makeup of the church and the nature of Paul's original message are indicated in 1:9-10:

For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead -- Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Since the members of the Christian community in Thessalonica “turned to God from idols,” as Paul says here, we can conclude that they were mostly Gentiles. Although the message Paul first preached to them is not entirely known to us, its basic features are outlined here. He preached about the one "living and true God" of the Jewish tradition, most likely in specific contrast to the traditional gods of the Greeks (the “idols”), and about Jesus as God’s son who had been raised from the dead. Most important, he placed an emphasis on the second coming of Jesus to “rescue


us from the wrath that is coming.” Clearly when Paul moved on from Thessalonica, he left them, as he says here, “wait[ing] for his Son from heaven.” This helps explain how the issue in our text arose.

How might a Gentile congregation have understand the concept of "[the coming of] his Son from heaven”? After all, the second coming idea is not a part of pagan religious belief, but rather is based on a Jewish concept of the afterlife. Some of the pagan religions did have a belief in the afterlife, but not in this form. Karl Donfried, for example, refers to the competing views of the afterlife in two pagan cults that were highly active in Thessalonica, namely the cult of Sarapis and the cult of the Cabiri. The questions raised to Paul in 4:13-5:11 reflect the incompleteness of their understanding, and Paul could be addressing this particular issue for the first time. As Abraham Malherbe says of this text: “The Jewish apocalyptic idea of the eschatological resurrection was present in pre-Pauline Christianity, as was the notion of the Parousia, but they were brought together for the first time in 1 Thess 4:13-18.”

**Literary Context**

The text for this paper, 1 Thess 4:13-5:11, is a teaching section on "the coming of the Lord.” It may be further subdivided into the issue of "hope for the dead," addressed to their concern for what will happen to believers who have already died when the second coming does occur (4:13-18), and the question "when will the day of the Lord come?” (5:1-11).

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4 Donfried, "Thessalonians," 1140-41.


