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*Interpretive Ambiguities and Scholarly
Proclivities in Pauline Studies:
A Treatment of Three Texts from
1 Thessalonians 4 as a Test Case*

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ABSTRACT

Interpretive impasses are part and parcel of Pauline studies. This essay examines scholarly stalemates resulting from learned readings of Paul's instructions to the Thessalonians regarding sexual purity, work and grief in 1 Thess. 4.4, 11 and 13 respectively. Furthermore, this article observes the exegetical moves that interpreters make in treating these texts. The fact that specialists of 1 Thessalonians draw decidedly different conclusions as to the meaning of Paul's instructions to his converts regarding marrying, laboring and mourning highlights the importance of the following issues in Pauline interpretation: (1) authorial intent; (2) cultural and contextual influences upon both the author and the audience; and (3) textual parallels. I conclude this paper by playing my own interpretive hand on the verses under discussion.

Keywords: 1 Thessalonians, Paul, sexuality, work.

Introduction

In the last two chapters of 1 Thessalonians, ostensibly Paul's earliest extant epistle (Collins 1993), the apostle instructs his beloved, if beleaguered, converts on a range of ethical, eschatological and ecclesial issues (Still 1999a; see also Malherbe 1987). Near the outset of his exhortations Paul addresses three topics upon which this paper will focus, namely, sexual purity (4.3-8, esp. 4.4), work (4.11c) and grief (4.13). In what follows we will consider

how various Pauline scholars have construed these seemingly polyvalent passages. As we proceed, we will also observe how an interpreter's reading of Paul's instruction to the Thessalonians on marrying, laboring and mourning shapes his or her understanding of the apostle's subsequent epistolary remarks on these specific subjects. By way of conclusion I will identify a number of the more pressing interpretive issues in Pauline studies that emanate from this essay and will indicate how I am presently inclined to view the texts under examination.

On Sexual Sanctification: Acquiring a Wife or Controlling One's Body?

1 Thessalonians 4 commences with Paul entreating his converts to continue to conduct themselves in light of the instructions that they had received from the missionaries (vv. 1-2). The apostle then turns in v. 3 to admonish the assembly to abstain from *porneia*. Positively, Paul is concerned that the congregation, in contradistinction to the Gentiles who do not know God (v. 5), be characterized by *hagiasmos* (4.3, 4, 7). By living holy lives, Paul contends, the Thessalonian Christians will be doing, not disregarding, God's will and calling for their lives and will be embracing, not extinguishing, the Holy Spirit's presence in their lives (4.3, 7-8; cf. 5.19). Failure to live in a manner consonant with previous Pauline instruction will leave believers vulnerable to the Lord who punishes wrongdoing (4.7).

While the meaning of 4.3-8 is clear enough on a general level, the devil (and the difficulty!) is in the details. In particular, interpreters have been confounded by and conflicted over 4.4 (see esp. McGehee 1989; Elgvin 1997; and Smith 2001a). It is typically agreed that Paul is enjoining the assembly to steer clear of sexual sin (4.3) and to differentiate themselves from patterns of moral behavior that typify Gentile outsiders (4.5). But how does Paul envision the Thessalonians doing this? Two major interpretive views have arisen in response to this question. While some scholars are convinced that 4.4 is best read 'that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor' (RSV), others are equally convinced that this text is better rendered 'that each of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor' (NRSV).

How have such divergent understandings of this verse arisen? As those who are familiar with this *crux interpretum* know, this long-standing exegetical conundrum revolves around Paul's use of the noun *skeuos* on the one hand and the infinitive *ktasthai* on the other. There is no question that Paul employs *skeuos*, which literally means 'vessel' or 'object', metaphorically; the query is, for what does *skeuos* stand? Regarding the present, middle/deponent infinitive *ktasthai*, the debate centers upon whether *ptaomai* can

carry a durative (or linear) force in the present tense as it does in the perfect and pluperfect tenses.

Broadly put, scholars who view *skeuos* as a metaphoric reference to wife tend to understand *ktasthai* ingressively (i.e. 'to acquire' or 'to obtain'), whereas those who think the noun refers to one's body are inclined to read the infinitive linearly (i.e. 'to possess' or 'to keep'). (For exceptions to this generalization, see Smith 2001a: 82-83.) In an effort to buttress their respective positions, exegetes appeal to various Pauline, Petrine, Old Testament, rabbinic, Qumran and Graeco-Roman parallels (see Smith 2001a). On either side of the interpretive divide, it is claimed that one's preferred reading, when supported by probative parallels, makes better sense of 4.4 and is more congruent with Paul's instruction elsewhere, especially 1 Corinthians 7.

In a thorough and erudite essay on 1 Thess. 4.4 published in 2001, Smith expresses the hope that his work might move Pauline specialists closer to a consensus on this seemingly impervious verse (Smith 2001a). All the while, Malherbe was preparing to quash Smith's optimism by moving in the other interpretive direction. Despite the fact that Malherbe did not have access to Smith's work when writing his learned commentary on the Thessalonian letters, it is doubtful that the article would have changed his mind (2000: 226-29). Whereas Smith argues with verve and precision that 4.4 is best read 'that each one of you know how to control your own member in a holy and honorable way' (Smith 2001a: 105), Malherbe maintains with the acumen characteristic of his work that the verse is best translated 'that each one of you learn how to acquire his own wife in holiness and honor' (see Malherbe 2000: 226, where he concurs with Yarbrough 1985: 69, and Burke 2003: 185-93). Even as the church fathers were of at least two minds over this puzzling passage, so also are their exegetical heirs (see Gorday 2000: 79-81).

On Working: General Pauline Instruction or Specific Thessalonian Admonition?

Having admonished the Thessalonians to continue to eschew *porneia* and to embrace *hagiasmos* in 4.3-8, Paul turns (*peri de*) in 4.9-12 to reinforce his converts' commitment to and practice of *philadelphia*. At the outset of this section the apostle assures the assembly that they did not need anyone to write to them regarding 'brotherly love' (cf. 5.1). Paul's confidence in the community regarding *philadelphia* stems from his conviction that the congregation had been 'God-taught' (*theodidaktos*) to love one another

(4.9; on *theodidaktos* see further Witmer 2006: 239-50). Additionally, Paul applauds the church for extending *agapē* beyond the confines of their own fellowship to other believers in Macedonia (4.10a; cf. 1.6-10). While clearly pleased with the Thessalonians' progress in the gospel in general and in *agapē* in particular, Paul does not want the congregation to rest on its spiritual laurels; rather, he wants them to do even more than before (*perisseuein mallon*, 4.10b; cf. 4.1). The general exhortation of 4.10b is given concrete expression in 4.11. In this verse the apostle reminds his converts of previous instructions that he and his coworker(s) had given them, namely, 'to make it [their] ambition to live quietly, to mind [their] own affairs, and to work with [their own] hands'. By following this counsel, group members would be able to live in a proper manner towards outsiders and would be dependent on no one (4.12).

To be sure, there is much of interest and import in these verses. For our present purposes, however, I want to explore how scholars have understood Paul's instruction to his converts 'to work with [their own] hands'. In his succinct, yet substantive, study *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry*, Hock posits that the mention of manual labor in 4.11 was not precipitated by any congregational concern. Instead, Hock suggests, this admonition is indicative of Paul's missionary teaching and 'is to be understood as simply a [behavioral] reminder' (1980: 43). Additionally, Hock maintains that Paul's directive regarding work is best read against the backdrop of Graeco-Roman moral philosophy as opposed to 'a Jewish regard for the value of toil, or as arising from ecclesiological problems due to eschatology' (1980: 47). In Hock's estimation, idleness was not especially a problem among the Thessalonians. Furthermore, he sees no necessary correlation between the apostle's exhortation to work on the one hand and the eschatological instruction surrounding this admonition on the other (1980: 43; see also Nicholl 2004: 103-104). The relative disconnect that Hock perceives between 'idleness' and eschatology is heightened by two additional factors: (1) He does not expound upon 1 Thess. 5.14a where Paul admonishes the assembly to warn the *ataktos* (*nouōeteite tous ataktous*); and (2) he regards 2 Thessalonians to be extraneous due to its debated authenticity (1980: 43).

Not a few interpreters would call into question Hock's contention that 1 Thess. 4.11-12 in general and Paul's exhortation for his converts 'to work with [their] hands' in particular is best explained as part of Paul's stock missionary paraenesis that he offered to new converts as a matter of catechetical course. For example, while de Vos in his 1999 monograph *Church and Community Conflicts* evinces an awareness of the ancient Graeco-Roman philosophical discussion regarding work and the related

socio-economic issues, he does not regard 4.11-12 as simply a rehearsal of paraenetic materials, nor is he willing to differentiate too sharply between the congregation's socio-cultural deportment and the apostle's eschatological instruction (1999: 160-70; esp. 165). De Vos not only views 4.11-12 as verses that 'seem to address the Thessalonians' situation most specifically' (1999: 161), but he also maintains that even though these verses do not contain eschatological language per se, the eschatological tenor of the texts immediately following, not to mention the 'enormous emphasis on eschatology and the parousia in 1 Thessalonians' overall, render Hock's reading untenable (1999: 165; see also Roetzel 1990: 324-31).

The contextual specificity of 4.11-12 is further emphasized by those interpreters who appeal to Paul's instructions regarding the *ataktoi* in 5.14a and, secondarily, 2 Thess. 3.6-16. Jewett, who also regards Paul's admonition in 5.22 'to abstain from every form of evil' to be relevant to this discussion (cf. 5.15), contends that when taken together these verses (esp. 4.11-12 and 5.22) 'suggest that the behavior of this group [i.e. the *ataktoi* of 5.14a, who are also in view in 4.11-12; cf. 2 Thess. 3.6-15] threatened the reputation of the congregation by violating widely accepted social practices' (Jewett 1986: 104-105; see also Weima 1996: 98-119). Far from being a general reinforcement of Pauline paraenesis, these verses were occasioned, according to Barclay, by some of the Thessalonians having abandoned their occupations to engage in aggressive, even provocative, evangelization (Barclay 1993: 512-30; esp. 520-25). Undoubtedly, there is a considerable interpretive chasm between the readings of 4.11-12 that we have canvassed.

On Mourning: Absolute Prohibition or Relative Comparison?

The final exegetical nettle that we will attempt to unravel in this article is 4.13b. In 4.13a Paul broaches a new topic about which he does not want the Thessalonians to be ignorant, namely, the destiny of those Thessalonian Christians who have died and are now sleeping. After raising the issue, Paul proceeds in 4.13b to offer the fellowship a reason for his subsequent instruction regarding the Christian dead: Paul does not want the assembly to be grieved or pained over the death of fellow believers like the rest of hopeless humanity was over the deaths of their beloved.

It may surprise some readers to learn that there is yet another pressing interpretive question arising from 4.13 beyond why the Thessalonians were ignorant regarding the destiny of the Christian dead and were consequently grieved, why Paul describes those deceased believers as sleeping, how it

is they fell asleep, and why Paul maintains that those outside the assembly have no hope in the grim face of death (see Marshall 1983: 118-22; Still 1999b: 196-99). It has become somewhat customary for commentators to interpret 4.13 as Paul's attempt to mitigate the church's mourning by means of contrasting Christian and non-Christian grief. For example, Gaventa asserts, 'Paul does not discourage grief with pious nonsense to the effect that Christians should not grieve because they know their loved one will be with God. Instead he recognizes the reality of grief, but distinguishes between the Christian's grief from that of others who do not know the hope of the Lord's return' (1998: 67; see also Richard 1995: 225, 234; Green 2002: 218; Nicholl 2004: 23-26).

Although the view articulated by Gaventa is indicative of how the majority of the letter's interpreters have understood 4.13b, such an understanding has recently been called into question by both Malherbe and Barclay (see also Hoffmann 1966: 210-12). In his aforementioned commentary, Malherbe, who stands in a renowned, if unacknowledged, interpretive line with such scholars as Milligan (n.d.: 56), Frame (1912: 167), Whiteley (1969: 68) and Lightfoot (1995: 63), not to mention such church fathers as Augustine, Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa (see Gorday 2000: 84-86), maintains that in 4.13b Paul intends to prohibit the Thessalonians believers from grieving altogether (Malherbe 2000: 264). Similarly, though more thoroughly and less tentatively, Barclay, in a fascinating piece that appears in a collection of essays on 1 Thessalonians published in 2003, posits that Paul, in keeping with the dualistic orientation of the letter in general and 4.13-5.11 in particular, issues to his converts an absolute prohibition against grieving (2003: 131-53; esp. 138-44). What is more, Barclay is convinced that the position Paul espouses here is congruous with the statements the apostle makes regarding grief elsewhere in his epistles, with the possible exception of Phil. 2.27 (2003: 140-41 n. 22).

Although Barclay makes a strong case for his reading of 1 Thess. 4.13, I am inclined to see some considerable tension remaining in Paul's (presumed) recommendation to the Thessalonians and his own statements regarding grief, not the least of which being Phil. 2.27. Granting for the sake of argument Barclay's reading of 4.13, one wonders if Paul could modify this extreme position set forth in 1 Thessalonians and the dualistic orientation that undergirds it as his ministry wore on. In response to Barclay's reading, however, I would suggest that the following interpretive questions remain: (1) Is it significant that the second person plural present subjunctive *lupēsthe* appears in the passive voice in 4.13b?; and (2) Would Paul have in fact issued a blanket prohibition against and

thereby a total repression of an inward sorrow that his congregants could not necessarily control?

Conclusion

It seems fitting to transition to the conclusion of this paper leaving these posed questions unanswered, given that the intent of this piece is to examine existing interpretations of disputed passages in 1 Thessalonians 4 as opposed to offering new readings of these texts or reinforcing existing ones. By engaging in this academic exercise, we have raised some perennial interpretive issues in Pauline studies to which we now turn as we conclude.

To begin, strikingly divergent readings of the same verses remind us that interpretive ambiguities exist and scholarly disagreements persist in the academic study of Paul (see Collins 1984: 299-325; and Bassler 1995: 53-66). Moreover, when interpreters reach an exegetical impasse, no amount of industry and ingenuity can cloak the fact that they are looking through an interpretive glass dimly and are peering imperviously, if eagerly, over others' shoulders in an attempt to read their mail (1 Cor. 13.12; Hays 1996: 1). Before yielding to deconstructionist despair (or delight!), however, we are reminded that there are textual constraints. (Biblical scholars have encountered deconstructionism largely through the work of Derrida [e.g. 1978; see also Detweiler 1982].) Historical, lexical and grammatical work still matters (so, too, e.g. Meeks 2005: 164-66), even if we reach an interpretive stalemate instead of an exegetical checkmate. For example, as we have observed, one's reading of 4.4 is predicated upon how one construes *skeuos* and *ktasthai* (e.g. McGehee [1989: 83-85] criticizes Yarbrough [1985] for anachronistically reading contemporary cultural conventions regarding marriage into 4.4; see also Elgvin 1997: 614). In addition, we saw that there is some question as to how the present passive subjunctive *lupēsthe* in 4.13b is best taken. (There is also a closely related, ongoing conversation regarding the interpretation of the comparative clause *kathōs kai* in 4.13b. See further, Nicholl 2004: 23-25.)

Interpreters of Paul's letters should also acknowledge that despite their best efforts to be objective in handling texts and sifting evidence, they will naturally and inevitably bring presuppositions and predilections to their scholarly work. For instance, would it make any substantive difference to Hock's understanding of 4.11c if he were to regard 2 Thessalonians, not to mention Colossians (note, e.g., 3.17, 23) and Ephesians (esp. 4.28), as authentically Pauline (see further Still 2006)? Furthermore, against which

socio-historical backdrop is Paul best read? Although Engberg-Pederson and contributors to his edited volume entitled *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide* illustrate the possibility of moving beyond a rigid dichotomy between Judaism and Hellenism in Pauline studies (Engberg-Pederson 2001), in practice most interpreters of Paul tend to gravitate in one direction or the other. Whereas Hock and Malherbe are wont to compare Paul's ethical instructions to the Thessalonians to Graeco-Roman moral philosophers (see also Sampley 2003), interpreters such as Roetzel, Carras, Collins, Rosner and Weima tend to iterate the Jewish orientation and coloration of the Pauline paraenesis in 1 Thessalonians 4 (see esp. Weima 1996: 103; see also Collins 1984: 326-35; Carras 1990: 306-15; and Rosner 1995: 351-60).

Indeed, this raises the point that parallels both inside and outside of Paul can be problematic (Bassler 1995: 56). For illustrative purposes, let us consider two textual parallels commonly adduced for understanding 4.4. In an attempt to determine the meaning of the metaphor *skeuos*, scholars frequently appeal to 4Q416 2 ii.21 (4QInstruction^b): 'Do not treat with dishonor the vessel of your bosom' ('l tql klh [h]yqkh). While some interpreters do so to support the translation 'wife' (see Strugnell 1996: 538-40), others cite this sapiential text from Qumran's Cave Four to buttress the rendering 'body', or more specifically, 'member' or 'sexual organ' (see Elgvin 1997; and Smith 2001b: 499-504). This passage could well be a 'critical parallel'; however, it seems ill-advised to appeal to a passage fraught with 'textual and contextual uncertainties' as 'the solution to the *crux* of 1 Thess. 4.4' (so Smith 2001b: 501, 504). Closer to hand, while some interpreters have marshaled 1 Cor. 7.2 ('But because of *porneia* each man should have his own wife, and each woman should have her own husband') to support their contention that *skeuos ktasthai* in 1 Thess. 4.4 means 'to acquire a wife' (see esp. Collins 1984: 325-35; also Yarbrough 1985: 69, 96-97; and Malherbe 2000: 228), others have asserted that the similarities between the passages are not as significant as some have imagined (McGehee 1989: 83-86, 88; Carras 1990: 308-309; Bassler 1995: 57-58; and Elgvin 1997: 612). In fact, Bruce asserts that 'It is impermissible to adduce 1 Cor. 7.2 as a parallel [to 1 Thess. 4.4], for there fornication is avoided by each man's having his own wife and each woman's having her own husband; the relationship is mutual and neither is the [*skeuos*] of the other, both being persons in their own right' (Bruce 1982: 83).

This raises a final interpretive issue that Beker once described as contingency and coherence in Paul's letters and thought (1980). Should the apostle's interpreters rightfully expect and reasonably detect a basic con-

gruity in Paul's thought? (For those who would likely answer 'yes', see e.g. Barrett 1994: 56; Hengel and Schwemer 1997: 302; and Hooker 2003: 69-70; for those who would likely respond with 'no', see e.g. Räisänen 1983: 264-69 and Sanders 1996: 112-29.) Or, does the occasional nature of Paul's writing and the contextual particularities of Paul's theologizing preclude synthetic moves and generalizing remarks (see Johnson 1997)? What light, if any, does Paul's remarks on a given topic in one letter shed on his comments on the same subject in another letter? Pauline scholars have both suggested and contested, for example, that Paul held to a variety of views on such matters as the Law (e.g. the contrasting views of Thielman 1994 and Räisänen 1983) and eschatology (Still 2004) during the course of his apostolic ministry. Is it, or is it not, reasonable and appropriate to think that the apostle would articulate a range of perspectives over the sweep of his epistles on intensely practical issues like marriage, moiling and mourning?

Given this paper's purpose, I need not, and ought not, offer a protracted interpretation of the opaque passages from 1 Thessalonians 4 under discussion. That being said, it seems academically responsible to at least tip my interpretive hand as I conclude. Regarding 4.4, I view the rendering 'to control one's own body (or perhaps vessel)' as more probable. I think that this reading is lexically, grammatically and contextually supportable and is more in synch with Paul's extended instruction on matters pertaining to marriage and celibacy in 1 Corinthians 7.

Concerning Paul's counsel to his converts 'to work with [their own] hands', I understand this admonition to have been occasioned by particular congregational exigencies (see also Agrell 1976: 101-103). Even if Paul included instruction on work by principle and example when with his converts, this does not sufficiently explain the presence of his paraenesis here. When it is taken into account that in his surviving letters Paul only explicitly expresses his concern that believers be engaged in work in 1 (and 2) Thessalonians, then the situational reading of 4.11-12 is not only acceptable, it is preferable.

Finally, while I do not part company with Barclay or Malherbe lightly, I find myself disinclined to think that Paul would place an absolute prohibition on an emotional reaction that was more than less beyond his audience's control. (It seems to me that the passive voice of the verb *lupein* should be given full weight.) Furthermore, it strikes me as both hypocritical of and irresponsible for the apostle to set forth counsel for his converts that he himself did not follow as a matter of (theological) principle (see esp. Phil. 2.27).

So then, at the outset of the paraenetic section of 1 Thessalonians, an intensely personal, pastoral missive, Paul calls his beloved Thessalonian brothers and sisters to remain sexually pure among their neighbors, to continue working alongside outsiders, and to cease to mourn as unbelievers regarding the deaths of their Christian loved ones. As it happens, the instructions Paul offers on these topics in 1 Thessalonians 4 do not, to the best of my knowledge, conflict with comments the apostle makes on these topics elsewhere in his extant letter corpus, however narrowly or broadly one may choose to define this collection (see Trobisch 1989; 1994).

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