

Authorship of 2 Thessalonians

Reasons for Doubting Pauline Authorship

Some scholars think it odd that Paul would repeat so much of what he said in 1 Thessalonians in a second letter written to the same people a few months later. Although 2 Thessalonians is a relatively short letter, about one-third of its contents overlap closely with what Paul just told the Thessalonians in the previous letter. Even the format of the two letters is similar. For example, 1 Thessalonians contains two thanksgivings (1:2; 2:13) and two benedictions (3:11–13; 5:23), a peculiarity that is not typical of Paul's style but that is repeated in 2 Thessalonians, which also has two thanksgivings (1:3; 2:13) and two benedictions (2:16–17; 3:16). Such duplicated irregularities give the impression that someone might have used 1 Thessalonians as a template to create “a typical Pauline letter” without realizing that these features were not actually characteristic of Paul's style.

Some scholars think that the advice given in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 actually contradicts what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:1–3. In the first letter, Paul indicates that the day of the Lord could come at any time and will come without warning. The “new teaching” in 2 Thessalonians claims that the day of the Lord cannot come until

other things happen, events that will allow believers to know when Jesus is about to return.

That the Thessalonians were previously alarmed when some members of their church died before the second coming (see 1 Thess. 4:13–18) seems hard to reconcile with the claim here that Paul believed that the end was not yet at hand and that he had taught this to the Thessalonians when he was with them (2 Thess. 2:5). At the very least, some scholars say, if Paul actually believed the teaching about the end times expressed in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12, he would have responded to the crisis dealt with in 1 Thessalonians differently: he would have told them, “Of course some people are going to die, because the end is not yet at hand!”

Some scholars think that 2 Thessalonians’ overt “claim to authenticity” actually counts against its acceptance as one of Paul’s genuine letters. The author alludes to the possibility that some forged letters from Paul might be circulating (2:2) and then goes out of his way to prove that this one is not a forgery: “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write” (3:17). Some scholars claim that this is exactly the kind of thing that a forger would do in order to pass off a letter as being by Paul. Furthermore, such a claim to authenticity would be anachronistic for a letter actually written by Paul early in his ministry, because we have no reason to believe that anyone was forging letters by Paul at that point. The forgeries came later, when the

controversial missionary had come to be more highly respected within the church and his letters had been accorded some degree of authority.

Reasons for Affirming Pauline Authorship

Above Arguments Are Not Totally Convincing

It is possible that Paul would have repeated much of the content from one letter in a follow-up letter (especially since he seems to think that the Thessalonians need to be reminded of things).

It is possible that his thinking on a subject as mysterious as the end times could have been inconsistent or paradoxical. We note, for example, that the author of Mark's Gospel has no trouble including material that maintains that the end is coming soon and will be unpredictable (13:30–37) alongside material that describes events that must happen first and that may be regarded as signs for knowing the moment is near (13:5–8, 10, 14, 21–29).

It is possible that Paul emphasized different aspects of his beliefs at different times, depending on which pastoral concern needed to be addressed. When comforting grief-stricken people who longed to be reunited with their loved ones, he stressed that the end was coming soon. When dealing with folks who worried that the time may have already come and that they had missed it, he indicated that other things must happen first.

It is possible that Paul in fact did have to worry about people using his name to promote their own ideas even when his status as an apostolic authority in the church was more limited and localized.

Pseudepigraphy in This Instance Is Highly Unlikely

The strong, explicit claim that 2 Thessalonians makes to authenticity (with words in Paul's own handwriting) rules out any consideration of it having been produced pseudepigraphically under honorable conditions (e.g., by disciples who wanted to continue their master's work and humbly give him credit for what he had inspired). In this case, if the letter is not by Paul then it must be regarded as a forgery, offered by someone guilty of perpetrating the very sort of fraud that 3:17 warns against. The pseudepigraphical author would have to be regarded as an unscrupulous hypocrite. It is unlikely that such a person would be motivated to produce a letter that evinces the high moral values of this composition.

The letter was unanimously accepted as an authentic composition of Paul in the early church (from the mid-first century on). It is intrinsically unlikely that all Christians would have been so easily hoodwinked by a letter claiming to be from the first part of Paul's ministry if it had in fact been produced some decades after his death. Church officials were on the lookout for pseudepigraphical writings and in fact rejected dozens of works for which authorship was doubtful; however, no one ever questioned the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians.

One of the letter's central claims is that the day of the Lord will not come until after the "lawless one" perpetrates some sort of abomination in the temple of God (2 Thess. 2:3–4). It seems unlikely that a pseudepigraphical author would have written this after 70, the year when the temple was destroyed; if the letter was written before 70, it might much more easily have been produced during Paul's lifetime, and thus by Paul himself.

Some Sample Views

One proposal is that 2 Thessalonians represents a claim to speak for "the real Paul" on the part of some strand of post-Pauline Christianity that is competing with other strands of Pauline Christianity that may be making similar claims.¹ Another proposal regards both letters as coming from Paul and explains their differences in terms of pastoral responses to diverse crises.² A mediating position holds that the letter was not written by Paul but that it was written to the Thessalonian church, probably by Timothy or one of Paul's other companions.³ A minority position holds that 2 Thessalonians might have been written (by Paul) prior to 1 Thessalonians.⁴

Conclusion

The bottom line is that scholars remain undecided on this issue. Many think it likely that Paul did not write this letter and that he would not even have approved of it, but many others think it more likely that

Paul did write it. Most interpreters will admit that the evidence is not completely compelling either way.

1. See Frank Witt Hughes, *Early Christian Rhetoric and 2 Thessalonians*, JSNTSup 30 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989).
2. See Charles H. Giblin, *The Threat to Faith: An Exegetical and Theological Re-Examination of 2 Thessalonians 2*, AnBib 31 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1967); Colin R. Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica: Situating 1 and 2 Thessalonians*, SNTSMS 126 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
3. See Karl P. Donfried, "The Theology of 2 Thessalonians," in *The Theology of the Shorter Pauline Letters*, NTT (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 84–87.
4. See Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 37–45.