THE SECOND LETTER OF PAUL TO THE THESSALONIANS

Second Thessalonians appears to be a letter by Paul (2:1; 3:7) to a Gentile congregation in the Greek city of Thessalonica. Some scholars suggest that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians to correct misunderstandings in the first letter (2:2); they note that 2 Thessalonians references an earlier work (2:15; 3:17) and observe that the two letters contain parallels in language, structure, and subjects addressed, especially eschatology. The reference to the “temple of God” in 2.4 could then be seen as indicating a date prior to 70 CE, when the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed. However, most contemporary scholars doubt that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians; they note the contrast between the imminence and unpredictability of the end in (the undisputed) 1 Thessalonians (see the drawn-out scenario offered in 2 Thessalonians, the harsher tone of 2 Thessalonians(3:4–12); cf. 1 Thess 1–3), and its insistence on Pauline authorship (2 Thess 3:17). Appeals to Paul’s authority (3:4–5) and the demand for faithfulness to earlier tradition (2:15–3:6) to squelch end-time fervor also fit a post-Pauline setting.

If Pauline, the letter was probably written shortly after 1 Thessalonians, in the early 50s. If written in Paul’s name—pseudepigraphy was commonly practiced in Jewish, pagan, and Christian circles—a late first-century date seems likely.

Although the historical context is murky, the problems are clear: persecution, disagreements about the end-times, and refusal to work. The author, alternately consoling and reproving, exhorts the congregation to accept his interpretations and avoid false teachings (2:3;10–3:6). Against those preaching an imminent end, the author notes a series of steps, including a painful period of increasing wickedness (2:3–12). Against those “living in idleness,” perhaps believing the end has arrived or is very close, the mandate is to work (3:11).

The dualistic language divides insiders from outsiders (including followers of Jesus whose views differ from the author’s). The author criticizes those without faith or understanding (3:14) and welcomes God’s destruction of opponents (1:8–9). The counterpart to this denunciation is insistence that God protects believers.

Most traditional commentators focused on identifying the “lawless one” or “man of lawlessness” (2:3–9) who “exalts himself above every so-called god” and who “may be revealed” but is now restrained. Reformation-era polemics denounced both Luther and the pope as the “lawless one.” Some early church fathers said the reclaimer was the Roman Empire, which, by maintaining social order, prevented his arrival (Tertullian, Apology 32; I. Chryst., Hom. 2 Thess. 4). Some readers found evidence in 2.4 (“every so-called god”) for a second god, in addition to the God worshipped by Christians (Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. 3.6.5).

Second Thessalonians became a resource for church leaders because its portrait of a confident, even authoritarian Paul offered a model of a strong bishop (Caesarius of Arles, Sermon 252). Its demand for fidelity to tradition buttressed later opponents of views deemed novel or heretical.

The letter says nothing about Jews or Judaism, and it quotes no biblical verses. However, it does appropriate Jewish theological concepts. Parallel to Jewish ideas of God’s election of Israel (e.g., Deut 7:6), 2 Thessalonians insists on believers’ chosenness (1:11; 2:13–14). Though they suffer now, God will soon send relief (1:7). It employs biblical images of sacrifice (2:13) and angels (1:7). It also draws from scenarios about divine deliverance for oppressed Jews (e.g., Dan 7–12; 1–2 En.; 4 Ezra [2 Esd]; 2 Bar), including enigmatic human and supernatural antagonists such as “the lawless one” (2:3), “Satan” (2:9), and one who “exalts himself” (2:4).

Adam Gregerman
1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, 
To the church of the Thessalonians in God Our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

3 We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.

4 Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.

5 This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering.

6 For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you,

7 and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 8 These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,

9 when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marveled at on that day among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

10 To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill his power every good resolve and work of faith,

11 so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

2 As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, 

2.2 not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here.

3 Let no one deceive you in any way for the day will not come unless the present course of lawlessness continues and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction.

4 He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God. 5 The man of lawlessness and the restrainer (2 Thess 2:3–4)

6 The description of the “lawless one” draws on Jewish apocalyptic literature (Ps. Sol. 17:1; IQM 3:23; 3 Sdb. Or 3:63–74) and is modeled on foreign oppressors such as the Seleucid emperor Antiochus IV (second century BCE) and the Roman general Pompey (first century BCE) (Dan 11:24–45; Ps Sol. 2:1; 17:1; Josephus, Ant. 14.7.2). Both violated the sanctity of the Jerusalem Temple by entering sacred areas closed to Gentiles. Antiochus, who thought himself divine (his nickname was Epiphanes, “[God] Manifest”), also defiled the building by offering idolatrous worship there (Dan 11.31; 1 Macc. 1:46). In 40 CE, the emperor Caligula attempted to place his image in the Temple (Philos, Leg. Gal. 186; Josephus, Ant. 18.261). The offensive nature of the lawless one’s “taking” his seat in the temple of God” evokes this history along with the deep Jewish attachment to Jerusalem and the Temple. The letter’s author may have an actual person in mind, perhaps a false teacher or a Roman emperor claiming divine status; the author also may have drawn upon a tradition of an unspecified opponent of God and God’s people (who will ultimately be destroyed). If this letter were written after 70, the author may envision a third Jewish temple, which many Jews and some Christians expected (2 Bar. 12.4; Barnabas 16.3–4; Justin, Dial. 80–81); this hope was later enshrined in Jewish liturgy (Amidah Blessing 14: “May you [God] rebuild it [Jerusalem] speedily in our days”). Despite their origins in different texts, the figures of the antichrist (1 Jn 2.18, 22; 2 Jn 1.7) and the lawless one were eventually linked in eschatological scenarios (e.g., J. Chrys., Hom. 2 Thess. 4, referring to emperor Nero).

8 Greeting and Thanksgiving. The conventional salutation and thanksgiving parallel, or copy, 1 Thess. 1:1. Silvanus, sometimes regarded as the Silas of Acts 15:22–40; 17.3. Timothy, Paul’s co-worker and emissary (Acts 16:1–3 and elsewhere; 1 Cor. 16:10–11; Phil. 2:23–24; 3:4). Luke 1:1–17 is often used for one another, believers’ solidarity, dividing them from outsiders (Jn 13:34; Phil. 1:9). Qumran scrolls (1QS 5:1–20) and some rabbinic texts (B. Pesah. 49b) encourage tight bonds among the learned and separation from the unlearned.

1:4–10 God’s righteous judgment. 4 Among the churches the suggestion of a Pauline congregation (1:7; Rom 16.4, 16; 2 Cor. 8:1; 1 Thess. 1:7,9). Steadfastness and faith emphasize not the content of faith but devotion (see Job 2:10–11; also see B. Ber. 61b on commitment to God and Torah despite Roman persecution). Persecutions … afflictions, state persecution of Jesus’ followers was sporadic until the empire-wide Decian persecution in 250. Whether the Thessalonians faced state persecution, local ostracism, economic hardship, etc., or whether the reference is conventional or drawing upon 1 Thess. 2:14–16 cannot be determined. 5 This is evidence, this ambiguous phrase might refer to steadfastness and faith. Their afflictions may be seen as blessings for sinners, or perhaps God’s testing of the righteous who will be rewarded in the “kingdom of God.” Similar ideas appear in biblical (Prov 3:12) and rabbinic (B. Ber. 5a; “sufferings of [divine] love”) sources. 6 Repay with affliction when the faithful will be rewarded and their persecutors punished. Notions of external destruction emerge in late Second Temple texts (Dan 12:4; Macc. 10:15; 1QS 1:5–10:15; 10:17, 12:1–13:7; also 2 Macc. 6:12–15; Ps. Sol. 13:9–10; 2 Bar. 13:3–10; cf. Gen. Rab. 33:1). 7 The Lord Jesus is revealed as the agent of justice (Rom 2:6). Similar expectations of a divine redeemer who punishes Israel’s oppressors appear in 1 En. 68:49–49:4; 4 Ezra 3:15; 7:28; 13:32. Matthew, see Zech 14:5; Ps. 78:49; 1 En. 54:6; 61:10; 1QI 130:1–10. 8: Flaming fire, Isa 66:15; Dan 7:10–11. 9: Some Jewish texts forecast God’s destruction of oppressors (Jud. 21:21–22; 1QS 10:20; 4Q511:4; CD 5:1–19; 2 Bar. 54:14–22; Mek. Shitara 6). Who do not know God … who do not obey the gospel, perhaps two groups of opponents: unevangelized pagans (Jer 10:25; Gal. 4:8; 1 Thess. 4:5) and Jews who know, but do not obey Christian teaching (Rom 10:16–21). 9: Eternal destruction, belief in eternal (sometimes post-mortem) persecution began to appear in late biblical (Isa 26:19; Dan 12:2) and then Second Temple and rabbinic texts (Ps. Sol. 3:16; 1 En. 53:2; b. Shabb. 152b). 10: Saints, community members who believe. 1:11–12: Prayer. 11: Worthy of his call, election language (Deut 7:6; 26:17; Isa 41:9; Rom 9:6–7; 11:23; Eph 1:8; Jud. 2:9; 15:30–31; 1 Pet. 2:9; Gal. 2:13). The author recalls the believers’ chosenness in order to demand good works and faith. Jewish texts link election with demands for Torah-observance (Isa 44:22; Ps. Sol. 105:45; Ps. Sol. 9:11; Jud. 2:17–22; M. Avot 3:17 on the demand that Israel, God’s beloved, not forsake the Torah). 12: Name, possibly referring to Isa 66:5(LXX) (“so that the name of the Lord may be glorified”), with “Lord” referring to Jesus rather than to God.
And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false, so that all who have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned. But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, beloved of the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, whom we love and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.

Finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us, so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere, just as it is among you, and that we may be rescued from wicked and evil people; for not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will go on doing the things that we command. May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we did not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter; have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed. Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers. Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you.

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you.

a Gk from every brother who is
b Other ancient authorities lack Jesus
b Other ancient authorities read consume
c Gk brothers
d Gk a brother
e Other ancient authorities add Amen

"consumes," perhaps recalling the messianic prophecy of Isa 11:4 (see translators note b — the same verb is translated "consume" in Lk 9:54; Gal 5:15) and not by the sword (see Rev 19:15; 21; cf. Isa 11:4; Rev 19:17-21; Pss. Sol. 17:24; 1 En. 52:2; 4 Extra [2 Esd 13:10]). 9: Satan, though subordinate to God, deceives believers (Job 1:6-2:1; 1 Chr 21:1). Less cosmically powerful than in early Christian texts, Satan in rabbinic texts tempts the pious to sin (b. Qidd. 81a) and even deceives God (e.g., into testing Job; b. B. Bat. 16a). 10: Truth, referring here to "traditions" they were taught. Saved recalls the rewards in 1:5,7,9 of deliverance from persecution and entering into the divine presence. 11: Powerful delusion, perhaps recalling the false prophets God sent to deceive the evil king Ahaz (2 Kings 22:22-23).

2:13-17: Second thanksgiving. As with the Salutation and Thanksgiving, the conventional conclusion parallels 1 Thess 2:13. 13: First fruits, if this reading is correct (see translation notes), believers are likened to a temple offering (Jer 2:3; see Rom 8:23; 1 Cor 15:20). Sanctification, "making holy" or being set apart by the Spirit as a worthy offering. 14: Obtain the glory, believers will share in the glorified body of the resurrected Christ. 15: Hold fast to the traditions, see Deut 31:2-33; 1 Thess 2:11-13; Josephus, Ap. Ap. 2:22; m. Avot 3:13. Either by word of mouth or by our letter, indicating reliance on both oral and written traditions.

3:1-5: Prayer and encouragement. 1: Spread rapidly and be glorified, successful preaching leads to glorification of God and perhaps conversion (Mt 16:5; Acts 13:48; Rom 15:19); many Jews likewise hoped Gentiles would recognize the God of Israel as the one true god, but attitudes toward proselytism varied and there were few serious efforts to convert Gentiles to Judaism (see Ezek 38:23-39:27; Zech 8:18; b. Shab. 31a). 2: Evil one may be Satan (2:3); see the "Our Father" prayer in Mt 6:13. 3: Direct your hearts, hinting at God's control over these believers' faith; Ps 10:7; 1 Chr 29:18. Regardless of one's knowledge of Torah, what is important is that "one directs one's heart to heaven," often with divine aid (m. Men. 13:11; b. Ber. 56a-56b).

3:6-13: Denunciations of idleness. 6: Command, stern language demonstrating the seriousness of the threat. 7: Imitate, see 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Phil 3:17; b. Ber. 62a, on imitating the actions of the rabbis in all areas of life. 8: Toil and labor, Prov 10:4; 1 Thess 2:9; 5:12-16; Did. 12:4-5; m. Avot 2:2 praises combining Torah study and labor, and rabbinic sources exalt both manual labor (Av 28:23a) and commend fathers who teach their sons a craft (m. Qidd. 4:14; t. Qidd. 1:11; b. Qidd. 29a; see also m. B. M. 3:3; b. Qidd. 33a). Idleness may have been unseemly in the eyes of non-Christian neighbors, though some pagans disdained labor, at least by the learned. First Thess 4:12 requires that believers not depend on others. 9: Right, see 1 Cor 9:4-5. 11: Living in idleness, perhaps because they believed the end had arrived (see 1 Thess 4:11). 3:14-15: Having the disobedience. Have nothing to do with them, perhaps ejecting them from communal meals (3:10; Mt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:2; 2 Jn 1:10; 1QS 6-8). Enemies are former church members or those in disagreement with the letter's details. Similarly, Rabbi Eliezer was shunned by his colleagues after a legal dispute (b. B. Mez. 59b).