

1 & 2 Thessalonians

Through the Centuries



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Commentaries

Anthony C. Thiselton

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“I can think of no person better qualified to write a reception-history commentary than Anthony Thiselton, because he knows what reception history means and how it plays out in interpretation. This commentary is a treasure trove of exegetical and theological insights gleaned from the vast and interesting array of those who not only have interpreted these important letters to the Thessalonians but have responded in prose and poetry to their major themes and ideas.”

*Stanley E. Porter, President and Dean, and Professor of
New Testament, McMaster Divinity College,
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada*

“With an uncanny grasp of the ‘afterlife’ of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Anthony Thiselton demonstrates why it is crucial that we understand that we aren’t the first people to encounter these Pauline letters. For some it might have been enough simply to document centuries of encounter with these New Testament texts, but Thiselton takes us further, showing where the history of influence has been relatively stable and also where that history provokes our fresh reflection. Not surprisingly, with this foray into the emerging area of reception history, Anthony Thiselton has set a high bar for those who will follow.”

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“This superb commentary deals with some of the earliest Christian writing we possess. The reception history exemplified here considers not simply how different readers at different times interpreted these important texts but the whole manner in which they have shaped the history and direction of the church and its thinking. This sheds immense light not only on the suppositions that we naturally bring to the themes of these texts but how we should and should not interpret Paul. All this is undertaken not only with the scholarly depth that one would expect from one of our foremost Biblical and hermeneutical scholars of our time but also with profound insight into the theological issues at stake. Of interest equally to church historians, Biblical scholars, theologians and ministers alike, it is a key resource for all who would endeavour to understand how Paul has been read and should be read. Lucid in style, this volume is not only immensely scholarly, it is also an accessible and extremely enjoyable read!”

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1 & 2 Thessalonians Through the Centuries

Anthony C. Thiselton

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Series Editors' Preface

The Blackwell Bible Commentaries series, the first to be devoted primarily to the reception history of the Bible, is based on the premise that how people have interpreted, and been influenced by, a sacred text like the Bible is often as interesting and historically important as what it originally meant. The series emphasizes the influence of the Bible on literature, art, music, and film, its role in the evolution of religious beliefs and practices, and its impact on social and political developments. Drawing on work in a variety of disciplines, it is designed to provide a convenient and scholarly means of access to material until now hard to find, and a much-needed resource for all those interested in the influence of the Bible on western culture.

Until quite recently this whole dimension was for the most part neglected by biblical scholars. The goal of a commentary was primarily if not exclusively to get behind the centuries of accumulated Christian and Jewish tradition to one single meaning, normally identified with the author's original intention.

The most important and distinctive feature of the Blackwell Commentaries is that they will present readers with many different interpretations of each text, in such a way as to heighten their awareness of what a text, especially a sacred text, can mean and what it can do, what it has meant and what it has done, in the many contexts in which it operates.

The Blackwell Bible Commentaries will consider patristic, rabbinic (where relevant), and medieval exegesis as well as insights from various types of modern criticism, acquainting readers with a wide variety of interpretative techniques. As part of the history of interpretation, questions of source, date, authorship, and other historical-critical and archaeological issues will be discussed, but since these are covered extensively in existing commentaries, such references will be brief, serving to point readers in the direction of readily accessible literature where they can be followed up.

Original to this series is the consideration of the reception history of specific biblical books arranged in commentary format. The chapter-by-chapter arrangement ensures that the biblical text is always central to the discussion. Given the wide influence of the Bible and the richly varied appropriation of each biblical book, it is a difficult question which interpretations to include. While each volume will have its own distinctive point of view, the guiding principle for the series as a whole is that readers should be given a representative sampling of material from different ages, with emphasis on interpretations that have been especially influential or historically significant. Though commentators will have their preferences among the different interpretations, the material will be presented in such a way that readers can make up their own minds on the value, morality, and validity of particular interpretations.

The series encourages readers to consider how the biblical text has been interpreted down the ages and seeks to open their eyes to different uses of the Bible in contemporary culture. The aim is to write a series of scholarly commentaries that draw on all the insights of modern research to illustrate the rich interpretative potential of each biblical book.

John Sawyer
Christopher Rowland
Judith Kovacs
David M. Gunn

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Abbreviations

- ANF The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956–62 [1885–96].
- CCSL Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina
- FC Fathers of the Church
- LCC Library of Christian Classics, vols. 1–26, gen. eds. John Baillie, John T. McNeill, and Henry P. Van Dusen. London: SCM, 1953–69. Vols. 20 and 25 published Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960.

- NPNF1 A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 1st series, ed. Philip Schaff. 14 vols. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1886–9.
- NPNF2 A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 2nd series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. 14 vols. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- PG Patrologiae cursus completus: Series Graeca, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne. Paris: Garnier, 1857–66. (Popularly known as *Patrologia Graeca*.)
- PL Patrologiae cursus completus: Series Latina, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne. Paris: Garnier, 1844–65. (Popularly known as *Patrologia Latina*.)

Introduction

The Aims of Reception History

The aim of this commentary

The Preface to the series explains that reception history shows not only how people have interpreted a text (in this case 1 and 2 Thessalonians), but also how the text (Thessalonians) has influenced readers. The history of reception therefore examines interpretation of the two epistles in a number of historical periods or “through the centuries.” But it also shows how writers respond under the influence of the text. It becomes an interdisciplinary study, because the text is “received” not only by commentators and Christian theologians, but also by

those known for their literary work, including poetry, hymns, philosophy, music, and art. The writer who in effect founded reception history, Hans Robert Jauss, describes it as socially formative. It becomes a resource for cultural study. The Bible shapes ideas and practices, yet these ideas and practices shape how the Bible is interpreted, and its role in practical life.

The study thus provides multiple perspectives on the text. It is like being given a stereoscopic vision, or what Mikhail Bakhtin called a “polyphonic” vision of the text. Since modern biblical studies tends to concentrate only on the relatively recent conclusions of biblical criticism, this commentary, like others in the series, offers a distinctive resource for studying 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Even the vast commentary of 754 pages by Beda Rigaux, *Saint Paul: Les Épîtres aux Thessaloniens* (1956), concentrates on exegesis or interpretation, while it has virtually nothing on reception history, except passing references to interpreters of earlier years. This applies even more to more recent standard commentaries, for example, those by Ernest Best (1972), F. F. Bruce (1982), Abraham J. Malherbe (2000), and others. Even Ben Witherington (2006), who takes a new approach, restricts much of his attention to rhetorical criticism, as well as to modern interpretation. There is relatively little engagement with precritical interpretation.

The founder of reception history: Hans Robert Jauss

The main founder of reception history was Hans Robert Jauss (1921–97). In 1944 he began studies in Prague, and in 1948 at Heidelberg. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) had a special influence on his thought. He specialized in the romance literature of the Middle Ages. In 1966 Jauss shared in founding the University of Constance as a center of interdisciplinary research, which included a professorial research team of five. He gave his inaugural lecture on literary history in 1967, which largely founded the principles of reception history. It is available in his programmatic book, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982). Influences on this include: (1) Hans-Georg Gadamer, his teacher at Heidelberg, on the history of *effects* (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), or (as Luz suggests) the history of *influences*; (2) reader-response theory in Wolfgang Iser and others, who focus attention on the *active* role of readers in making the potential of a text actual (see Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 516–57); and (3) the theory of paradigm change, which suggests a switch between the dominant models that influence a discipline, but without fully discarding previous models. He also considers many other writers on literature, including Roman Ingarden, and Paul Ricoeur. (For a convenient summary, see Holub, *Reception Theory*, 1–52; Parris, *Reception Theory and Biblical Hermeneutics*; Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 316–25.)

The heart of Jauss's essay concerns the concept of "horizon of expectation." Many use the concept of "horizon" for interpretation in hermeneutics, as the boundary which limits what lies within the view of an interpreter. But it is crucial that "horizons" may *move and expand*, as the *interpreter* moves. This differs often from "presuppositions." The text becomes active when the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter engage with each other (see Thiselton, *Two Horizons*). But a text may not always "say" what a group of readers *expects*. Jauss speaks of "a change of horizons," for "at the historical moment of its appearance" a work or text "satisfies, surpasses, disappoints, or refutes the expectations of its first audience" (*Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 25). He observes: "The reconstruction of the horizon of expectations in the face of which a work was created and received in the past enables one ... to pose questions that the text gave an answer to, and thereby to discover how the contemporary reader could have viewed and understood the work" (28). From the viewpoint of this series of commentaries, the next sentence is critical: "It brings to view the ... difference between the former and current understanding of a work."

In 1 and 2 Thessalonians differences of horizon, situation, and perspective, give us a broader depth, or a new perspective on the text, which looks for continuity and discontinuity in historical readers. Jauss opposes "historical objectivism," or merely "causal" or value-neutral production of the work (*Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 20). He opposes positivism. Earlier texts predispose the reader to approach a text with a prior horizon of expectation, but this may become "corrected, altered, or even just reproduced" (23). Overall, there may be, through a historical period, a "historical unfolding of understanding," the discovery of a cumulative tradition (32). We wait to see whether or not "innovation, surprise, surpassing, rearrangement, alienation" (35) will disrupt tradition and continuity. In everyday life certain ways of reading become routinized, automatic, and familiar. The landscape becomes flattened. Art and *poēsis* (in the sense intended by Aristotle) seek to disrupt what is known as overfamiliarization. We see the familiar from a fresh angle, or in a new way. In modern painting this is often a standard move.

Finally, Jauss takes up "the Logic of Question and Answer" from Gadamer and Collingwood. For example, what *questions* we ask of the work or the text differs according to whether we are engaged in (1) a first reading, or (2) what Jauss calls "a retrospectively interpretative reading," or (3) a "historical reading that begins with ... reconstruction" (139). A poetic text will enable us initially to perceive something, but the process of exploring meaning may remain "still left open" (141). In this respect it is like interpreting a musical score. Jauss explores this further in his *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (1982).

Jauss and 1 and 2 Thessalonians

One of Jauss's key points concerns tension between the reception of a text in a given period of the history of reception and its widespread reception today. Where this tension is sharp, it may challenge the reader to rethink his or her expectations. Jauss often calls this *provocation*. Probably the most striking example of such tension can be seen in the apocalyptic flavor of 2 Thessalonians, and even more decisively in respective attitudes to Paul's language about the wrath of God, or about hell and punishment in 1 and 2 Thessalonians (see 1 Thess. 2:16; 4:15–16; 5:3, 9; 2 Thess. 1:5–9; 2:10–11). For example, on 1 Thess. 2: 15, Chrysostom asserts that the wrath of God is near, "predetermined and predicted" (*Homily 3*; NPNF1 13.334). On 1 Thess. 4:16 he declares: "Might one say, 'God is full of love,' hence this is only a threat? These things are indeed true ... These things will happen" (*Homily 8.357*). He compares the illusory skepticism of those to whom Noah preached, and cites the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. He concludes, "I say not these things to frighten you" (*Homily 8.359*) but as salutary medicine. In *Homily 2* on 2 Thessalonians 1 (NPNF1 13.382) he declares: "If we always think of hell, we shall not soon fall into it." He comments, "Dost thou fear the offensiveness of such words? Hast thou, if thou art silent, extinguished hell? ... Let it be continually spoken of, that thou mayest never fall into it. It is not possible that a soul anxious about hell should readily sin" (383).

Many more quotations to this effect come from Chrysostom, as feature below. But this is not confined to Chrysostom's era. Irenaeus comments, "In both Testaments there is the same righteousness of God [displayed], when God takes vengeance ... The fire is eternal, and the wrath of God shall be revealed from heaven." But, he adds, "They [Gnostics] keep silence with regard to his judgement" (see Matt. 26:24). Irenaeus especially has in mind the Gnostic contrast between an allegedly wrathful Creator God of the Old Testament, and an allegedly loving and mild God of the New Testament (*Against Heresies* 4.28.1–2; ANF 1.501). Tertullian writes that "Vengeance" and "everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord" are explicit predictions of Paul (vv. 8–9; *Against Marcion* 5.6; ANF 3.463). Origen alludes to the wrath of God in the golden calf narrative (Exod. 32:11; *On Prayer* 10.3); of God's judgment being "in the right" in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (Exod. 9:27; *On Prayer* 28.16); and of God's judgments as "unsearchable" in Rom. 11:33 (*On First Principles* 4.3.14). Basil the Great (c. 330–379) reminds his readers to keep before them "that day and that hour ... the tribunal where no excuses will prevail" (Letter 174; NPNF2 8.220).

This is not even confined to the patristic era. In the medieval era, we shall consider *Judgement II* (perhaps from Bede), *The Exeter Book*, Haimo, Thietland,