

## 1-2 THESSALONIANS

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WISDOM COMMENTARY

Volume 52

# 1 Thessalonians

Florence M. Gillman

Mary Ann Beavis

*Volume Editor*

# 2 Thessalonians

Mary Ann Beavis and HyeRan Kim-Cragg

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# Abbreviations

The English text of quotations from the Bible is that of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise indicated.

1 QPHab	<i>Pesher Habakkuk</i>
AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation
BJRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
ECL	Early Christianity and Its Literature
FCB	Feminist Companion to the Bible
Hermeneia	Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HTS	Harvard Theological Studies
IBC	Interpretation Bible Commentary
IFT	Introductions in Feminist Theology
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>

<i>J ECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
<i>JFSR</i>	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i>
<i>JSNTSup</i>	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
<i>JSOTSup</i>	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
<i>KJV</i>	King James Version
<i>LIMC</i>	<i>Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae</i>
<i>LS</i>	<i>Louvain Studies</i>
<i>LSJ</i>	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> (Liddell, Scott, and Jones)
<i>LXX</i>	Septuagint
<i>NAB</i>	New American Bible
<i>NABRE</i>	New American Bible Revised Edition
<i>NICNT</i>	New International Commentary on the New Testament
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NRSV</i>	New Revised Standard Version
<i>NT</i>	New Testament
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>OBT</i>	Overtures to Biblical Theology
<i>PRSt</i>	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
<i>PsychoanalQ</i>	<i>Psychoanalytic Quarterly</i>
<i>RelEd</i>	<i>Religious Education</i>
<i>SBL</i>	Society of Biblical Literature
<i>SemeiaSt</i>	Semeia Studies
<i>SP</i>	Sacra Pagina
<i>SR</i>	<i>Studies in Religion</i>
<i>SymS</i>	Symposium Series
<i>TNIV</i>	Today's New International Version
<i>WUNT</i>	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZECNT</i>	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series: New Testament



## *Contributors*

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John Gillman received his PhD in religious studies, specializing in the Pauline letters, from the University of Louvain (KUL) in Belgium. For many years he has taught at San Diego State University. He is also a dually certified (ACPE and NACC) supervisor of Clinical Pastoral Education, who has directed CPE programs in community settings for the underserved, at major medical centers, and for a national hospice provider.

Maria Pascuzzi received her licentiate in Sacred Scripture (SSL) from the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, and her doctorate in biblical theology (STD) from the Gregorian University, Rome. Her teaching, research, and publishing have focused on the letters of Saint Paul. She is currently a visiting scholar at Saint Joseph's College, New York City, where she is working on commentaries for 1 and 2 Corinthians.

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## Foreword

# *“Come Eat of My Bread . . . and Walk in the Ways of Wisdom”*

*Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza  
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Jewish feminist writer Asphodel Long has likened the Bible to a magnificent garden of brilliant plants, some flowering, some fruiting, some in seed, some in bud, shaded by trees of age old, luxurious growth. Yet in the very soil which gives it life the poison has been inserted. . . . This poison is that of misogyny, the hatred of women, half the human race.<sup>1</sup>

To see Scripture as such a beautiful garden containing poisonous ivy requires that one identify and name this poison and place on all biblical texts the label “Caution! Could be dangerous to your health and survival!” As critical feminist interpretation for well-being this Wisdom Commentary seeks to elaborate the beauty and fecundity of this

1. Asphodel Long, *In a Chariot Drawn by Lions: The Search for the Female in the Deity* (London: Women’s Press, 1992), 195.

Scripture-garden and at the same time points to the harm it can do when one submits to its world of vision. Thus, feminist biblical interpretation engages two seemingly contradictory insights: The Bible is written in kyriocentric (i.e., lord/master/father/husband-elite male) language, originated in the patri-kyriarchal cultures of antiquity, and has functioned to inculcate misogynist mind-sets and oppressive values. At the same time it also asserts that the Bible as Sacred Scripture has functioned to inspire and authorize wo/men<sup>2</sup> in our struggles against dehumanizing oppression. The hermeneutical lens of wisdom/Wisdom empowers the commentary writers to do so.

In biblical as well as in contemporary religious discourse the word *wisdom* has a double meaning: It can either refer to the quality of life and of people and/or it can refer to a figuration of the Divine. Wisdom in both senses of the word is not a prerogative of the biblical traditions but is found in the imagination and writings of all known religions. Wisdom is transcultural, international, and interreligious. Wisdom is practical knowledge gained through experience and daily living as well as through the study of creation and human nature. Both word meanings, that of capability (wisdom) and that of female personification (Wisdom), are crucial for this Wisdom Commentary series that seeks to enable biblical readers to become critical subjects of interpretation.

Wisdom is a state of the human mind and spirit characterized by deep understanding and profound insight. It is elaborated as a quality possessed by the sages but also treasured as folk wisdom and wit. Wisdom is the power of discernment, deeper understanding, and creativity; it is the ability to move and to dance, to make the connections, to savor life, and to learn from experience. Wisdom is intelligence shaped by experience and sharpened by critical analysis. It is the ability to make sound choices and incisive decisions. Its root meaning comes to the fore in its Latin form *sapientia*, which is derived from the verb *sapere*, to taste and to savor something. Hence, this series of commentaries invites readers to taste, to evaluate, and to imagine. In the figure of *Chokmah-Sophia-Sapientia-Wisdom*, ancient Jewish Scriptures seek to hold together belief in the “one” G\*d<sup>3</sup> of Israel with both masculine and feminine language and metaphors of the Divine.

2. I use wo/man, s/he, fe/male and not the grammatical standard “man” as inclusive terms and make this visible by adding /.

3. I use the \* asterisk in order to alert readers to a problem to explore and think about.

In distinction to traditional Scripture reading, which is often individualistic and privatized, the practice and space of Wisdom commentary is public. Wisdom's spiraling presence (*Shekhinah*) is global, embracing all creation. Her voice is a public, radical democratic voice rather than a "feminine," privatized one. To become one of Her justice-seeking friends, one needs to imagine the work of this feminist commentary series as the spiraling circle dance of wisdom/Wisdom,<sup>4</sup> as a Spirit/spiritual intellectual movement in the open space of wisdom/Wisdom who calls readers to critically analyze, debate, and reimagine biblical texts and their commentaries as wisdom/Wisdom texts inspired by visions of justice and well-being for everyone and everything. Wisdom-Sophia-imagination engenders a different understanding of Jesus and the movement around him. It understands him as the child and prophet of Divine Wisdom and as Wisdom herself instead of imagining him as ruling King and Lord who has only subalterns but not friends. To approach the N\*T<sup>5</sup> and the whole Bible as Wisdom's invitation of cosmic dimensions means to acknowledge its multivalence and its openness to change. As bread—not stone.

In short, this commentary series is inspired by the feminist vision of the open cosmic house of Divine Wisdom-Sophia as it is found in biblical Wisdom literatures, which include the N\*T:

Wisdom has built Her house  
 She has set up Her seven pillars . . .  
 She has mixed Her wine,  
 She also has set Her table.  
 She has sent out Her wo/men ministers  
 to call from the highest places in the town . . .  
 "Come eat of my bread  
 and drink of the wine I have mixed.  
 Leave immaturity, and live,  
 And walk in the way of Wisdom." (Prov 9:1-3, 5-6)

4. I have elaborated such a Wisdom dance in terms of biblical hermeneutics in my book *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001). Its seven steps are a hermeneutics of experience, of domination, of suspicion, of evaluation, of remembering or historical reconstruction, of imagination, and of transformation. However, such Wisdom strategies of meaning making are not restricted to the Bible. Rather, I have used them in workshops in Brazil and Ecuador to explore the workings of power, Condonblé, Christology, imagining a the\*logical wo/men's center, or engaging the national icon of Mary.

5. See the discussion about nomenclature of the two testaments in the introduction, page xxxi.



## Editor's Introduction to Wisdom Commentary

### *“She Is a Breath of the Power of God” (Wis 7:25)*

*Barbara E. Reid, OP*

*General Editor*

Wisdom Commentary is the first series to offer detailed feminist interpretation of every book of the Bible. The fruit of collaborative work by an ecumenical and interreligious team of scholars, the volumes provide serious, scholarly engagement with the whole biblical text, not only those texts that explicitly mention women. The series is intended for clergy, teachers, ministers, and all serious students of the Bible. Designed to be both accessible and informed by the various approaches of biblical scholarship, it pays particular attention to the world in front of the text, that is, how the text is heard and appropriated. At the same time, this series aims to be faithful to the ancient text and its earliest audiences; thus the volumes also explicate the worlds behind the text and within it. While issues of gender are primary in this project, the volumes also address the intersecting issues of power, authority, ethnicity, race, class, and religious belief and practice. The fifty-eight volumes include the books regarded as canonical by Jews (i.e., the Tanakh); Protestants (the “Hebrew Bible” and the New Testament); and Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern Orthodox Communion

(i.e., Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach/Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, including the Letter of Jeremiah, the additions to Esther, and Susanna and Bel and the Dragon in Daniel).

## A Symphony of Diverse Voices

Included in the Wisdom Commentary series are voices from scholars of many different religious traditions, of diverse ages, differing sexual identities, and varying cultural, racial, ethnic, and social contexts. Some have been pioneers in feminist biblical interpretation; others are newer contributors from a younger generation. A further distinctive feature of this series is that each volume incorporates voices other than that of the lead author(s). These voices appear alongside the commentary of the lead author(s), in the grayscale inserts. At times, a contributor may offer an alternative interpretation or a critique of the position taken by the lead author(s). At other times, she or he may offer a complementary interpretation from a different cultural context or subject position. Occasionally, portions of previously published material bring in other views. The diverse voices are not intended to be contestants in a debate or a cacophony of discordant notes. The multiple voices reflect that there is no single definitive feminist interpretation of a text. In addition, they show the importance of subject position in the process of interpretation. In this regard, the Wisdom Commentary series takes inspiration from the Talmud and from *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss; New York: Women of Reform Judaism, Federation of Temple Sisterhood, 2008), in which many voices, even conflicting ones, are included and not harmonized.

Contributors include biblical scholars, theologians, and readers of Scripture from outside the scholarly and religious guilds. At times, their comments pertain to a particular text. In some instances they address a theme or topic that arises from the text.

Another feature that highlights the collaborative nature of feminist biblical interpretation is that a number of the volumes have two lead authors who have worked in tandem from the inception of the project and whose voices interweave throughout the commentary.

## Woman Wisdom

The title, Wisdom Commentary, reflects both the importance to feminists of the figure of Woman Wisdom in the Scriptures and the distinct



wisdom that feminist women and men bring to the interpretive process. In the Scriptures, Woman Wisdom appears as “a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty” (Wis 7:25), who was present and active in fashioning all that exists (Prov 8:22-31; Wis 8:6). She is a spirit who pervades and penetrates all things (Wis 7:22-23), and she provides guidance and nourishment at her all-inclusive table (Prov 9:1-5). In both postexilic biblical and nonbiblical Jewish sources, Woman Wisdom is often equated with Torah, e.g., Sir 24:23-34; Bar 3:9-4:4; 38:2; 46:4-5; 2 Bar 48:33, 36; 4 Ezra 5:9-10; 13:55; 14:40; 1 Enoch 42.

The New Testament frequently portrays Jesus as Wisdom incarnate. He invites his followers, “take my yoke upon you and learn from me” (Matt 11:29), just as Ben Sira advises, “put your neck under her [Wisdom’s] yoke and let your souls receive instruction” (Sir 51:26). Just as Wisdom experiences rejection (Prov 1:23-25; Sir 15:7-8; Wis 10:3; Bar 3:12), so too does Jesus (Mark 8:31; John 1:10-11). Only some accept his invitation to his all-inclusive banquet (Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24; compare Prov 1:20-21; 9:3-5). Yet, “wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” (Matt 11:19, speaking of Jesus and John the Baptist; in the Lucan parallel at 7:35 they are called “wisdom’s children”). There are numerous parallels between what is said of Wisdom and of the *Logos* in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1-18). These are only a few of many examples. This female embodiment of divine presence and power is an apt image to guide the work of this series.

## **Feminism**

There are many different understandings of the term “feminism.” The various meanings, aims, and methods have developed exponentially in recent decades. Feminism is a perspective and a movement that springs from a recognition of inequities toward women, and it advocates for changes in whatever structures prevent full human flourishing. Three waves of feminism in the United States are commonly recognized. The first, arising in the mid-nineteenth century and lasting into the early twentieth, was sparked by women’s efforts to be involved in the public sphere and to win the right to vote. In the 1960s and 1970s, the second wave focused on civil rights and equality for women. With the third wave, from the 1980s forward, came global feminism and the emphasis on the contextual nature of interpretation. Now a fourth wave may be emerging, with a stronger emphasis on the intersectionality of women’s concerns with those of other marginalized groups and the increased use

of the internet as a platform for discussion and activism.<sup>1</sup> As feminism has matured, it has recognized that inequities based on gender are interwoven with power imbalances based on race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity, physical ability, and a host of other social markers.

## Feminist Women and Men

Men who choose to identify with and partner with feminist women in the work of deconstructing systems of domination and building structures of equality are rightly regarded as feminists. Some men readily identify with experiences of women who are discriminated against on the basis of sex/gender, having themselves had comparable experiences; others who may not have faced direct discrimination or stereotyping recognize that inequity and problematic characterization still occur, and they seek correction. This series is pleased to include feminist men both as lead authors and as contributing voices.

## Feminist Biblical Interpretation

Women interpreting the Bible from the lenses of their own experience is nothing new. Throughout the ages women have recounted the biblical stories, teaching them to their children and others, all the while interpreting them afresh for their time and circumstances.<sup>2</sup> Following is a very brief sketch of select foremothers who laid the groundwork for contemporary feminist biblical interpretation.

One of the earliest known Christian women who challenged patriarchal interpretations of Scripture was a consecrated virgin named Helie, who lived in the second century CE. When she refused to marry, her

1. See Martha Rampton, "Four Waves of Feminism" (October 25, 2015), at <http://www.pacificu.edu/about-us/news-events/four-waves-feminism>; and Ealasaid Munro, "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?," <https://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus/feminism-fourth-wave>.

2. For fuller treatments of this history, see chap. 7, "One Thousand Years of Feminist Bible Criticism," in Gerda Lerner, *Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 138–66; Susanne Scholz, "From the 'Woman's Bible' to the 'Women's Bible,' The History of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible," in *Introducing the Women's Hebrew Bible*, IFT 13 (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 12–32; Marion Ann Taylor and Agnes Choi, eds., *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters: A Historical and Biographical Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

parents brought her before a judge, who quoted to her Paul's admonition, "It is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Cor 7:9). In response, Helie first acknowledges that this is what Scripture says, but then she retorts, "but not for everyone, that is, not for holy virgins."<sup>3</sup> She is one of the first to question the notion that a text has one meaning that is applicable in all situations.

A Jewish woman who also lived in the second century CE, Beruriah, is said to have had "profound knowledge of biblical exegesis and outstanding intelligence."<sup>4</sup> One story preserved in the Talmud (b. Berakot 10a) tells of how she challenged her husband, Rabbi Meir, when he prayed for the destruction of a sinner. Proffering an alternate interpretation, she argued that Psalm 104:35 advocated praying for the destruction of sin, not the sinner.

In medieval times the first written commentaries on Scripture from a critical feminist point of view emerge. While others may have been produced and passed on orally, they are for the most part lost to us now. Among the earliest preserved feminist writings are those of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), German writer, mystic, and abbess of a Benedictine monastery. She reinterpreted the Genesis narratives in a way that presented women and men as complementary and interdependent. She frequently wrote about feminine aspects of the Divine.<sup>5</sup> Along with other women mystics of the time, such as Julian of Norwich (1342–ca. 1416), she spoke authoritatively from her personal experiences of God's revelation in prayer.

In this era, women were also among the scribes who copied biblical manuscripts. Notable among them is Paula Dei Mansi of Verona, from a distinguished family of Jewish scribes. In 1288, she translated from Hebrew into Italian a collection of Bible commentaries written by her father and added her own explanations.<sup>6</sup>

Another pioneer, Christine de Pizan (1365–ca. 1430), was a French court writer and prolific poet. She used allegory and common sense to

3. Madrid, Escorial MS, a II 9, f. 90 v., as cited in Lerner, *Feminist Consciousness*, 140.

4. See Judith R. Baskin, "Women and Post-Biblical Commentary," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: Women of Reform Judaism, Federation of Temple Sisterhood, 2008), xlix–lv, at lii.

5. Hildegard of Bingen, *De Operatione Dei*, 1.4.100; PL 197:885bc, as cited in Lerner, *Feminist Consciousness*, 142–43. See also Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

6. Emily Taitz, Sondra Henry, Cheryl Tallan, eds., *JPS Guide to Jewish Women 600 B.C.E.–1900 C.E.* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2003), 110–11.

subvert misogynist readings of Scripture and celebrated the accomplishments of female biblical figures to argue for women's active roles in building society.<sup>7</sup>

By the seventeenth century, there were women who asserted that the biblical text needs to be understood and interpreted in its historical context. For example, Rachel Speght (1597–ca. 1630), a Calvinist English poet, elaborates on the historical situation in first-century Corinth that prompted Paul to say, "It is well for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Cor 7:1). Her aim was to show that the biblical texts should not be applied in a literal fashion to all times and circumstances. Similarly, Margaret Fell (1614–1702), one of the founders of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, addressed the Pauline prohibitions against women speaking in church by insisting that they do not have universal validity. Rather, they need to be understood in their historical context, as addressed to a local church in particular time-bound circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

Along with analyzing the historical context of the biblical writings, women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries began to attend to misogynistic interpretations based on faulty translations. One of the first to do so was British feminist Mary Astell (1666–1731).<sup>9</sup> In the United States, the Grimké sisters, Sarah (1792–1873) and Angelina (1805–1879), Quaker women from a slaveholding family in South Carolina, learned biblical Greek and Hebrew so that they could interpret the Bible for themselves. They were prompted to do so after men sought to silence them from speaking out against slavery and for women's rights by claiming that the Bible (e.g., 1 Cor 14:34) prevented women from speaking in public.<sup>10</sup> Another prominent abolitionist, Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797–1883), a former slave, quoted the Bible liberally in her speeches<sup>11</sup> and in so doing challenged cultural assumptions and biblical interpretations that undergird gender inequities.

7. See further Taylor and Choi, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, 127–32.

8. Her major work, *Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed by the Scriptures*, published in London in 1667, gave a systematic feminist reading of all biblical texts pertaining to women.

9. Mary Astell, *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (New York: Source Book Press, 1970, reprint of the 1730 edition; earliest edition of this work is 1700), 103–4.

10. See further, Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838).

11. See, for example, her most famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman?," delivered in 1851 at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Akron, OH; <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp>.

Another monumental work that emerged in nineteenth-century England was that of Jewish theologian Grace Aguilar (1816–1847), *The Women of Israel*,<sup>12</sup> published in 1845. Aguilar's approach was to make connections between the biblical women and contemporary Jewish women's concerns. She aimed to counter the widespread notion that women were degraded in Jewish law and that only in Christianity were women's dignity and value upheld. Her intent was to help Jewish women find strength and encouragement by seeing the evidence of God's compassionate love in the history of every woman in the Bible. While not a full commentary on the Bible, Aguilar's work stands out for its comprehensive treatment of every female biblical character, including even the most obscure references.<sup>13</sup>

The first person to produce a full-blown feminist commentary on the Bible was Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902). A leading proponent in the United States for women's right to vote, she found that whenever women tried to make inroads into politics, education, or the work world, the Bible was quoted against them. Along with a team of like-minded women, she produced her own commentary on every text of the Bible that concerned women. Her pioneering two-volume project, *The Woman's Bible*, published in 1895 and 1898, urges women to recognize that texts that degrade women come from the men who wrote the texts, not from God, and to use their common sense to rethink what has been presented to them as sacred.

Nearly a century later, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Sharon Ringe and Carol Newsom (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), appeared. This one-volume commentary features North American feminist scholarship on each book of the Protestant canon. Like Cady Stanton's commentary, it does not contain comments on every section of the biblical text but only on those passages deemed relevant to women. It was revised and expanded in 1998 to include the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical books, and the contributors to this new volume reflect the global face of contemporary feminist scholarship. The revisions made in the third edition, which appeared in 2012, represent the profound advances in feminist biblical scholarship and include newer voices. In both the second and third editions, *The* has been dropped from the title.

12. The full title is *The Women of Israel or Characters and Sketches from the Holy Scriptures and Jewish History Illustrative of the Past History, Present Duty, and Future Destiny of the Hebrew Females, as Based on the Word of God*.

13. See further, Eskenazi and Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, xxxviii; Taylor and Choi, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, 31–37.

Also appearing at the centennial of Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* were two volumes edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza with the assistance of Shelly Matthews. The first, *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), charts a comprehensive approach to feminist interpretation from ecumenical, interreligious, and multicultural perspectives. The second volume, published in 1994, provides critical feminist commentary on each book of the New Testament as well as on three books of Jewish Pseudepigrapha and eleven other early Christian writings.

In Europe, similar endeavors have been undertaken, such as the one-volume *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung*, edited by Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), featuring German feminist biblical interpretation of each book of the Bible, along with apocryphal books, and several extrabiblical writings. This work, now in its third edition, has recently been translated into English.<sup>14</sup> A multivolume project, *The Bible and Women: An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History*, edited by Irmtraud Fischer, Adriana Valerio, Mercedes Navarro Puerto, and Christiana de Groot, is currently in production. This project presents a history of the reception of the Bible as embedded in Western cultural history and focuses particularly on gender-relevant biblical themes, biblical female characters, and women recipients of the Bible. The volumes are published in English, Spanish, Italian, and German.<sup>15</sup>

Another groundbreaking work is the collection *The Feminist Companion to the Bible Series*, edited by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993–2015), which comprises twenty volumes of commentaries on the Old Testament. The parallel series, *Feminist Companion*

14. *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, trans. Lisa E. Dahill, Everett R. Kalin, Nancy Lukens, Linda M. Maloney, Barbara Rumscheidt, Martin Rumscheidt, and Tina Steiner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012). Another notable collection is the three volumes edited by Susanne Scholz, *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect*, *Recent Research in Biblical Studies* 7, 8, 9 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013, 2014, 2016).

15. The first volume, on the Torah, appeared in Spanish in 2009, in German and Italian in 2010, and in English in 2011 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature). Four more volumes are now available: *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (2014); *The Writings and Later Wisdom Books*, ed. Christl M. Maier and Nuria Calduch-Benages (2014); *Gospels: Narrative and History*, ed. Mercedes Navarro Puerto and Marinella Perroni (2015); and *The High Middle Ages*, ed. Kari Elisabeth Børresen and Adriana Valerio (2015). For further information, see <http://www.bibleandwomen.org>.

to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings, edited by Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff and Maria Mayo Robbins (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001–2009), contains thirteen volumes with one more planned. These two series are not full commentaries on the biblical books but comprise collected essays on discrete biblical texts.

Works by individual feminist biblical scholars in all parts of the world abound, and they are now too numerous to list in this introduction. Feminist biblical interpretation has reached a level of maturity that now makes possible a commentary series on every book of the Bible. In recent decades, women have had greater access to formal theological education, have been able to learn critical analytical tools, have put their own interpretations into writing, and have developed new methods of biblical interpretation. Until recent decades the work of feminist biblical interpreters was largely unknown, both to other women and to their brothers in the synagogue, church, and academy. Feminists now have taken their place in the professional world of biblical scholars, where they build on the work of their foremothers and connect with one another across the globe in ways not previously possible. In a few short decades, feminist biblical criticism has become an integral part of the academy.

## **Methodologies**

Feminist biblical scholars use a variety of methods and often employ a number of them together.<sup>16</sup> In the *Wisdom Commentary* series, the authors will explain their understanding of feminism and the feminist reading strategies used in their commentary. Each volume treats the biblical text in blocks of material, not an analysis verse by verse. The entire text is considered, not only those passages that feature female characters or that speak specifically about women. When women are not apparent in the narrative, feminist lenses are used to analyze the dynamics in the text between male characters, the models of power, binary ways of thinking, and dynamics of imperialism. Attention is given to how the whole text functions and how it was and is heard, both in its original context and today. Issues of particular concern to women—e.g., poverty, food, health, the environment, water—come to the fore.

16. See the seventeen essays in Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, eds., *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2005), which show the complementarity of various approaches.

One of the approaches used by early feminists and still popular today is to lift up the overlooked and forgotten stories of women in the Bible. Studies of women in each of the Testaments have been done, and there are also studies on women in particular biblical books.<sup>17</sup> Feminists recognize that the examples of biblical characters can be both empowering and problematic. The point of the feminist enterprise is not to serve as an apologetic for women; it is rather, in part, to recover women's history and literary roles in all their complexity and to learn from that recovery.

Retrieving the submerged history of biblical women is a crucial step for constructing the story of the past so as to lead to liberative possibilities for the present and future. There are, however, some pitfalls to this approach. Sometimes depictions of biblical women have been naïve and romantic. Some commentators exalt the virtues of both biblical and contemporary women and paint women as superior to men. Such reverse discrimination inhibits movement toward equality for all. In addition, some feminists challenge the idea that one can "pluck positive images out of an admittedly androcentric text, separating literary characterizations from the androcentric interests they were created to serve."<sup>18</sup> Still other feminists find these images to have enormous value.

One other danger with seeking the submerged history of women is the tendency for Christian feminists to paint Jesus and even Paul as liberators of women in a way that demonizes Judaism.<sup>19</sup> Wisdom Commentary aims

17. See, e.g., Alice Bach, ed., *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 2002); Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer, *Women in Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000); Irene Nowell, *Women in the Old Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997); Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001); Bonnie Thurston, *Women in the New Testament* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

18. Cheryl Exum, "Second Thoughts about Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1.8–2.10," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, FCB 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 75–97, at 76.

19. See Judith Plaskow, "Anti-Judaism in Feminist Christian Interpretation," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), vol. 1, 117–29; Amy-Jill Levine, "The New Testament and Anti-Judaism," in *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 87–117.



to enhance understanding of Jesus as well as Paul as Jews of their day and to forge solidarity among Jewish and Christian feminists.

Feminist scholars who use historical-critical methods analyze the world behind the text; they seek to understand the historical context from which the text emerged and the circumstances of the communities to whom it was addressed. In bringing feminist lenses to this approach, the aim is not to impose modern expectations on ancient cultures but to unmask the ways that ideologically problematic mind-sets that produced the ancient texts are still promulgated through the text. Feminist biblical scholars aim not only to deconstruct but also to reclaim and reconstruct biblical history as women's history, in which women were central and active agents in creating religious heritage.<sup>20</sup> A further step is to construct meaning for contemporary women and men in a liberative movement toward transformation of social, political, economic, and religious structures.<sup>21</sup> In recent years, some feminists have embraced new historicism, which accents the creative role of the interpreter in any construction of history and exposes the power struggles to which the text witnesses.<sup>22</sup>

Literary critics analyze the world of the text: its form, language patterns, and rhetorical function.<sup>23</sup> They do not attempt to separate layers of tradition and redaction but focus on the text holistically, as it is in its present

20. See, for example, Phyllis A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1984); Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo, eds., *Women and Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

21. See, e.g., Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), whose aim is to engage in biblical interpretation not only for intellectual enlightenment but, even more important, for personal and communal transformation. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (*Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001]) envisions the work of feminist biblical interpretation as a dance of Wisdom that consists of seven steps that interweave in spiral movements toward liberation, the final one being transformative action for change.

22. See Gina Hens Piazza, *The New Historicism*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship, Old Testament Series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

23. Phyllis Trible was among the first to employ this method with texts from Genesis and Ruth in her groundbreaking book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978). Another pioneer in feminist literary criticism is Mieke Bal (*Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987]). For surveys of recent developments in literary methods, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Janice Capel Anderson and

form. They examine how meaning is created in the interaction between the text and its reader in multiple contexts. Within the arena of literary approaches are reader-oriented approaches, narrative, rhetorical, structuralist, post-structuralist, deconstructive, ideological, autobiographical, and performance criticism.<sup>24</sup> Narrative critics study the interrelation among author, text, and audience through investigation of settings, both spatial and temporal; characters; plot; and narrative techniques (e.g., irony, parody, intertextual allusions). Reader-response critics attend to the impact that the text has on the reader or hearer. They recognize that when a text is detrimental toward women there is the choice either to affirm the text or to read against the grain toward a liberative end. Rhetorical criticism analyzes the style of argumentation and attends to how the author is attempting to shape the thinking or actions of the hearer. Structuralist critics analyze the complex patterns of binary oppositions in the text to derive its meaning.<sup>25</sup> Post-structuralist approaches challenge the notion that there are fixed meanings to any biblical text or that there is one universal truth. They engage in close readings of the text and often engage in intertextual analysis.<sup>26</sup> Within this approach is deconstructionist criticism, which views the text as a site of conflict, with competing narratives. The interpreter aims to expose the fault lines and overturn and reconfigure binaries by elevating the underling of a pair and foregrounding it.<sup>27</sup> Feminists also use other postmodern approaches, such as ideological and autobiographical criticism. The former analyzes the system

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Stephen D. Moore, eds., *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

24. See, e.g., J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993); Edgar V. McKnight and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994).

25. See, e.g., David Jobling, *The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Three Structural Analyses in the Old Testament*, JSOTSup 7 (Sheffield: Sheffield University, 1978).

26. See, e.g., Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); *The Bible in Theory: Critical and Postcritical Essays* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010); Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

27. David Penchansky, "Deconstruction," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Steven McKenzie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 196–205. See, for example, Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993); David Rutledge, *Reading Marginally: Feminism, Deconstruction and the Bible*, BibInt 21 (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

of ideas that underlies the power and values concealed in the text as well as that of the interpreter.<sup>28</sup> The latter involves deliberate self-disclosure while reading the text as a critical exegete.<sup>29</sup> Performance criticism attends to how the text was passed on orally, usually in communal settings, and to the verbal and nonverbal interactions between the performer and the audience.<sup>30</sup>

From the beginning, feminists have understood that interpreting the Bible is an act of power. In recent decades, feminist biblical scholars have developed hermeneutical theories of the ethics and politics of biblical interpretation to challenge the claims to value neutrality of most academic biblical scholarship. Feminist biblical scholars have also turned their attention to how some biblical writings were shaped by the power of empire and how this still shapes readers' self-understandings today. They have developed hermeneutical approaches that reveal, critique, and evaluate the interactions depicted in the text against the context of empire, and they consider implications for contemporary contexts.<sup>31</sup> Feminists also analyze the dynamics of colonization and the mentalities of colonized peoples in the exercise of biblical interpretation. As Kwok Pui-lan explains, "A post-colonial feminist interpretation of the Bible needs to investigate the deployment of gender in the narration of identity, the negotiation of power differentials between the colonizers and the colonized, and the reinforcement of patriarchal control over spheres where these elites could exercise control."<sup>32</sup> Methods and models from sociology and cultural anthropology

28. See Tina Pippin, ed., *Ideological Criticism of Biblical Texts: Semeia 59* (1992); Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 2007).

29. See, e.g., Ingrid Rose Kitzberger, ed., *Autobiographical Biblical Interpretation: Between Text and Self* (Leiden: Deo, 2002); P. J. W. Schutte, "When They, We, and the Passive Become I—Introducing Autobiographical Biblical Criticism," *HTS Theologisches Studien / Theological Studies* vol. 61 (2005): 401–16.

30. See, e.g., Holly Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones, eds., *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009).

31. E.g., Gale Yee, ed., *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Warren Carter, *The Gospel of Matthew in Its Roman Imperial Context* (London: T & T Clark, 2005); *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); Judith E. McKinlay, *Reframing Her: Biblical Women in Postcolonial Focus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2004).

32. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 9. See also, Musa W. Dube, ed., *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000); Cristl M. Maier and

are used by feminists to investigate women's everyday lives, their experiences of marriage, childrearing, labor, money, illness, etc.<sup>33</sup>

As feminists have examined the construction of gender from varying cultural perspectives, they have become ever more cognizant that the way gender roles are defined within differing cultures varies radically. As Mary Ann Tolbert observes, "Attempts to isolate some universal role that cross-culturally defines 'woman' have run into contradictory evidence at every turn."<sup>34</sup> Some women have coined new terms to highlight the particularities of their socio-cultural context. Many African American feminists, for example, call themselves *womanists* to draw attention to the double oppression of racism and sexism they experience.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, many US Hispanic feminists speak of themselves as *mujeristas* (*mujer* is Spanish for "woman").<sup>36</sup> Others prefer to be called "Latina feminists."<sup>37</sup> Both groups emphasize that the context for their theologizing is *mestizaje* and *mulatez* (racial and cultural mixture), done *en conjunto* (in community), with *lo cotidiano* (everyday lived experience) of Hispanic women as starting points for theological reflection and the encounter with the divine. Intercultural analysis has become an indispensable tool for working toward justice for women at the global level.<sup>38</sup>

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Carolyn J. Sharp, *Prophecy and Power: Jeremiah in Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

33. See, for example, Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Luise Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995); Susan Niditch, "My Brother Esau Is a Hairy Man": *Hair and Identity in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

34. Mary Ann Tolbert, "Social, Sociological, and Anthropological Methods," in *Searching the Scriptures*, 1:255–71, at 265.

35. Alice Walker coined the term (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967, 1983]). See also Katie G. Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 30–40; Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: Lura Media, 1988); Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

36. Ada María Isasi-Díaz (*Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-first Century* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996]) is credited with coining the term.

37. E.g., María Pilar Aquino, Daisy L. Machado, and Jeanette Rodríguez, eds., *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

38. See, e.g., María Pilar Aquino and María José Rosado-Nunes, eds., *Feminist Intercultural Theology: Latina Explorations for a Just World*, *Studies in Latino/a Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007).

Some feminists are among those who have developed lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) interpretation. This approach focuses on issues of sexual identity and uses various reading strategies. Some point out the ways in which categories that emerged in recent centuries are applied anachronistically to biblical texts to make modern-day judgments. Others show how the Bible is silent on contemporary issues about sexual identity. Still others examine same-sex relationships in the Bible by figures such as Ruth and Naomi or David and Jonathan. In recent years, queer theory has emerged; it emphasizes the blurriness of boundaries not just of sexual identity but also of gender roles. Queer critics often focus on texts in which figures transgress what is traditionally considered proper gender behavior.<sup>39</sup>

Feminists also recognize that the struggle for women's equality and dignity is intimately connected with the struggle for respect for Earth and for the whole of the cosmos. Ecofeminists interpret Scripture in ways that highlight the link between human domination of nature and male subjugation of women. They show how anthropocentric ways of interpreting the Bible have overlooked or dismissed Earth and Earth community. They invite readers to identify not only with human characters in the biblical narrative but also with other Earth creatures and domains of nature, especially those that are the object of injustice. Some use creative imagination to retrieve the interests of Earth implicit in the narrative and enable Earth to speak.<sup>40</sup>

## Biblical Authority

By the late nineteenth century, some feminists, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, began to question openly whether the Bible could continue to be regarded as authoritative for women. They viewed the Bible itself as the source of women's oppression, and some rejected its sacred origin

39. See, e.g., Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Women Partners in the New Testament," *JFSR* 6 (1990): 65–86; Deirdre J. Good, "Reading Strategies for Biblical Passages on Same-Sex Relations," *Theology and Sexuality* 7 (1997): 70–82; Deryn Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Feminist Hermeneutics* (London: SCM Press, 2011); Teresa Hornsby and Ken Stone, eds., *Bible Trouble: Queer Readings at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011).

40. E.g., Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger, *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, *SymS* 46 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008); Mary Judith Ress, *Ecofeminism in Latin America, Women from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

and saving claims. Some decided that the Bible and the religious traditions that enshrine it are too thoroughly saturated with androcentrism and patriarchy to be redeemable.<sup>41</sup>

In the Wisdom Commentary series, questions such as these may be raised, but the aim of this series is not to lead readers to reject the authority of the biblical text. Rather, the aim is to promote better understanding of the contexts from which the text arose and of the rhetorical effects it has on women and men in contemporary contexts. Such understanding can lead to a deepening of faith, with the Bible serving as an aid to bring flourishing of life.

### Language for God

Because of the ways in which the term “God” has been used to symbolize the divine in predominantly male, patriarchal, and monarchical modes, feminists have designed new ways of speaking of the divine. Some have called attention to the inadequacy of the term *God* by trying to visually destabilize our ways of thinking and speaking of the divine. Rosemary Radford Ruether proposed *God/ess*, as an unpronounceable term pointing to the unnameable understanding of the divine that transcends patriarchal limitations.<sup>42</sup> Some have followed traditional Jewish practice, writing *G-d*. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has adopted *G\*d*.<sup>43</sup> Others draw on the biblical tradition to mine female and non-gender-specific metaphors and symbols.<sup>44</sup> In Wisdom Commentary, there is not one standard way of expressing the divine; each author will use her or his preferred ways. The one exception is that when the tetragrammaton, YHWH, the name revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14, is used, it will be without vowels, respecting the Jewish custom of avoiding pronouncing the divine name out of reverence.

41. E.g., Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: A Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973).

42. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

43. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet; Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 191 n. 3.

44. E.g., Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992). See further, Elizabeth A. Johnson, “God,” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 128–30.

## Nomenclature for the Two Testaments

In recent decades, some biblical scholars have begun to call the two Testaments of the Bible by names other than the traditional nomenclature: Old and New Testament. Some regard "Old" as derogatory, implying that it is no longer relevant or that it has been superseded. Consequently, terms like Hebrew Bible, First Testament, and Jewish Scriptures and, correspondingly, Christian Scriptures or Second Testament have come into use. There are a number of difficulties with these designations. The term "Hebrew Bible" does not take into account that parts of the Old Testament are written not in Hebrew but in Aramaic.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, for Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Eastern Orthodox believers, the Old Testament includes books written in Greek—the Deuterocanonical books, considered Apocrypha by Protestants. The term "Jewish Scriptures" is inadequate because these books are also sacred to Christians. Conversely, "Christian Scriptures" is not an accurate designation for the New Testament, since the Old Testament is also part of the Christian Scriptures. Using "First and Second Testament" also has difficulties, in that it can imply a hierarchy and a value judgment.<sup>46</sup> Jews generally use the term Tanakh, an acronym for Torah (Pentateuch), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings).

In Wisdom Commentary, if authors choose to use a designation other than Tanakh, Old Testament, and New Testament, they will explain how they mean the term.

## Translation

Modern feminist scholars recognize the complexities connected with biblical translation, as they have delved into questions about philosophy of language, how meanings are produced, and how they are culturally situated. Today it is evident that simply translating into gender-neutral formulations cannot address all the challenges presented by androcentric texts. Efforts at feminist translation must also deal with issues around authority and canonicity.<sup>47</sup>

45. Gen 31:47; Jer 10:11; Ezra 4:7–6:18; 7:12–26; Dan 2:4–7:28.

46. See Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, 193–99.

47. Elizabeth Castelli, "Les Belles Infidèles/Fidelity or Feminism? The Meanings of Feminist Biblical Translation," in *Searching the Scriptures*, 1:189–204, at 190.

Because of these complexities, the editors of Wisdom Commentary series have chosen to use an existing translation, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), which is provided for easy reference at the top of each page of commentary. The NRSV was produced by a team of ecumenical and interreligious scholars, is a fairly literal translation, and uses inclusive language for human beings. Brief discussions about problematic translations appear in the inserts labeled “Translation Matters.” When more detailed discussions are available, these will be indicated in footnotes. In the commentary, wherever Hebrew or Greek words are used, English translation is provided. In cases where a wordplay is involved, transliteration is provided to enable understanding.

## **Art and Poetry**

Artistic expression in poetry, music, sculpture, painting, and various other modes is very important to feminist interpretation. Where possible, art and poetry are included in the print volumes of the series. In a number of instances, these are original works created for this project. Regrettably, copyright and production costs prohibit the inclusion of color photographs and other artistic work. It is our hope that the web version will allow a greater collection of such resources.

## **Glossary**

Because there are a number of excellent readily available resources that provide definitions and concise explanations of terms used in feminist theological and biblical studies, this series will not include a glossary. We refer you to works such as *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, edited by Letty M. Russell with J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), and volume 1 of *Searching the Scriptures*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza with the assistance of Shelly Matthews (New York: Crossroad, 1992). Individual authors in the Wisdom Commentary series will define the way they are using terms that may be unfamiliar.

## **Bibliography**

Because bibliographies are quickly outdated and because the space is limited, only a list of Works Cited is included in the print volumes. A comprehensive bibliography for each volume is posted on a dedicated website and is updated regularly. The link for this volume can be found at [wisdomcommentary.org](http://wisdomcommentary.org).



## **A Concluding Word**

In just a few short decades, feminist biblical studies has grown exponentially, both in the methods that have been developed and in the number of scholars who have embraced it. We realize that this series is limited and will soon need to be revised and updated. It is our hope that *Wisdom Commentary*, by making the best of current feminist biblical scholarship available in an accessible format to ministers, preachers, teachers, scholars, and students, will aid all readers in their advancement toward God's vision of dignity, equality, and justice for all.



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# *1 Thessalonians*



## *Acknowledgments*

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Florence Morgan Gillman  
2016



## **Author's Introduction to 1 Thessalonians**

### *Context and Musing about Women and Thessalonica*

When Paul composed 1 Thessalonians ca. 50 CE, he had been preaching about the resurrection of Jesus for more than a decade. Paul's intellectual formation as a Pharisee (Phil 3:5) had prepared him to explain in depth the profound traditions of Judaism. Building on that theological bedrock, Paul's approach to Christian evangelization in the middle years of the first century CE would have been as a mature teacher who had come to understand his Jewish monotheism through the interpretive lens of the resurrected Jesus. His message must have been carefully crafted as he spoke to the Thessalonians during his short time with them, at most a few months, in the year 49 CE. By then Paul's approach in announcing the gospel news that had so jolted his own life would have been delivered to new listeners skillfully focused on what he deemed essential. Further, by 49 CE Paul was no longer a novice at adapting his message for a wide spectrum of people with cultural, geographic, ethnic, and religious differences. And, by mid-century, not only Paul's converts but also his co-workers included both Jewish and Gentile women and men. Just some months before the Thessalonian visit Paul had participated in the pivotal debate in Jerusalem about the question of mandating circumcision for Gentile converts (Gal 2:1-10; Acts 15), an event that affirmed Paul's missionary strategy to the Gentiles.

While 1 Thessalonians may not be the first letter Paul wrote to the early churches, it is the earliest extant Christian document.<sup>1</sup> It presents us with the first known written communication about the kerygma. But we should caution ourselves not to think we are hearing Christianity's very first formulation of its message. First Thessalonians is not the nascent voice of the preaching about Jesus that our historically demanding minds so wish we had; its wording reflects many years of Paul's thought<sup>2</sup> and evangelizing, following his life-changing event on the road to Damascus (Gal 1:15-16; Acts 9:3-9; 22:6-11). One therefore approaches this letter recognizing that we are reading the experienced Paul who had carefully formulated in preaching, and probably in writing,<sup>3</sup> for both Jewish and Gentile listeners, what he considered essential in his presentation of the gospel. As the oldest known document of the early Christians, 1 Thessalonians draws a reader closer than any other NT sources to the rippling effects emanating from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus into the early Christian mission. To hear the voice of Paul in 1 Thessalonians in the year 50, over a decade after he himself had become a follower of Jesus, is to also learn about the status of the Christian movement as it was first being adopted and lived in the vibrant Greco-Roman city of Thessalonica.

Before turning to details about that city and its inhabitants, this introduction will cover some preliminary considerations. First, I will describe

1. This commentary proceeds on the widely held view that none of Paul's other authentic letters were written before 1 Thessalonians. Further, it considers 2 Thessalonians to be post-Pauline (see the commentary in this volume by Mary Ann Beavis and HyeRan Kim-Cragg). The term "Christian(s)" is anachronistically used throughout my text merely for convenience as one among numerous synonyms to refer to the members of Paul's churches; it is unlikely the Thessalonian believers would have used that designation for themselves (see Acts 11:26).

2. The weight of current scholarship generally expresses no compelling doubts about the integrity of this letter, although 1 Thess 2:14-16 has been assessed by some to be an interpolation. This commentary assumes the letter's integrity. On 2:14-16, see below, pp. 53–56.

3. See, in contrast, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 17, who considers 1 Thessalonians to be Paul's very first letter to a Christian group so that "we must keep the experimental character of the letter in the foreground as we read and interpret it." In contrast, I think Paul could have written earlier letters (which regrettably were not preserved). I therefore read 1 Thessalonians as reflective of well-honed Pauline teaching as of the point he wrote it, albeit containing comments formulated to dialogue specifically with the Thessalonian believers. On Paul's experience as a letter writer, see my comment below on 5:27, p. 94.



my feminist approach (1). Then, turning to Thessalonica, some information will be reviewed about the city and the famous Via Egnatia (2). That is followed by two stories about women: one is a tale of a Macedonian princess, which may have been told to Paul (3.a), and the other is a story about a Roman woman whose poignant life trajectory is often chronicled by feminists today (3.b). The story of the latter woman's links to Thessalonica is included here especially for "us," the feminist researchers for whom her life is informative and fascinating. The recounting of those narratives and the historical summaries they are threaded into will take us chronologically through the Macedonian period of Thessalonica and into the Roman era of Paul; that section ends with reference to the Roman civil wars and the Macedonian politarchs (3.c). Finally, to round out information about the background of 1 Thessalonians, I sketch the context of the letter within Paul's journeys and the structure of the letter (4).

## 1. A Feminist Commentary on 1 Thessalonians

The existence of many comprehensive commentaries on 1 Thessalonians<sup>4</sup> argues against writing another. The Wisdom Commentary series within which this volume is included, however, has recognized the usefulness of a feminist treatment of the whole letter to add to those (usually briefer) feminist studies of 1 Thessalonians already published.<sup>5</sup> The aim of this study is therefore to dialogue with primarily those aspects of the

4. See, e.g., Earl J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, SP 11 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995); Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians*, IBC (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1998); Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009); Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000); Gary Steven Shogren, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012); Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *1–2 Thessalonians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).

5. See, e.g., Pheme Perkins, "1 Thessalonians," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 349–50; Lone Fatum, "1 Thessalonians," in *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 2, *A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 250–62; Jutta Bickman, "1 Thessalonians: Opposing Death by Building Community," in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, ed. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 810–20; Monya A. Stubbs, "1 Thessalonians," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 588–91.

text that touch upon the broad range of feminist concerns; as such, the material included here is intended to be complementary to, rather than repetitive of, the various commentaries already published.

Yet an obvious question arises: What is there to be discussed in 1 Thessalonians from the perspective of feminist interests since this epistle says almost nothing about women and, furthermore, is one which some think Paul wrote to an exclusively male congregation?<sup>6</sup> This “disinterested in females” surface impression of the letter prompted Lone Fatum to observe that “involving oneself as a feminist theologian in the interpretation of 1 Thessalonians is like forcing one’s way into male company, uninvited and perhaps unwanted.”<sup>7</sup> She forcefully defended the position that the letter is addressed only to men.<sup>8</sup> In concert with many feminist and other interpreters, however, I do not share Fatum’s sense of exclusion, except regarding 1 Thess 4:3-8.<sup>9</sup> While the letter is undoubtedly androcentric, commenting on it from the perspective of the broad range of feminist interests, such as issues of gender, family concerns, power, social status, and imperialism, opens up many avenues of dialogue to consider regarding the women of the earliest church in Thessalonica.

In thinking of those women, it must be recalled that Paul’s letters reflect that, throughout his travels, he lived and worked on “Main Street” and, as far as the evidence points, his churches generally met in the houses of his converts. Paul comes across in his own writings neither as a hermit nor as an aloof teacher but rather as a man socially embedded in the living spaces and daily life of his female and male contacts, including both adults and children. This reality shines through in 1 Thessalonians wherein Paul draws on a wide choice of gender-related metaphors taken from family relationships as well as everyday experiences.<sup>10</sup> For

6. See below pp. 31–33.

7. Fatum, “1 Thessalonians,” 250.

8. Fatum comments: “We may conclude that although women were surely among the converts in Thessalonica, they were not among the brothers as members of the community. Because they were defined and qualified as women, they were not seen as Christians and their sociosexual presence among the brothers was virtually a nonpresence” (ibid., 262).

9. See below pp. 73–74.

10. On Paul’s use of metaphor as a rhetorical strategy, see esp. Trevor J. Burke, *Family Matters: A Socio-Historical Study of Kinship Metaphors in 1 Thessalonians*, JSNTSup 247 (London and New York: T & T Clark International, 2003); Jennifer Houston McNeel, *Paul as Infant and Nursing Mother: Metaphor, Rhetoric, and Identity in 1 Thessalonians 2:5-8*, ECL 12 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015).

example, he uses domestic comparisons involving birth pangs and women nursing infants.<sup>11</sup> As Carolyn Osiek and Margaret MacDonald have observed:

It is important to remember that house-churches were places of women giving birth. They were places of women's labor (including sometimes very difficult labor), delivery, deaths of infants and mothers in child-birth, nursing babies, and the precarious work of keeping a baby alive. . . . If the household *familia* included many slaves, labor and delivery could have been a frequent occurrence. On the basis of the frequency of births and the presence of children, house-church meetings must have been noisy and bustling places.<sup>12</sup>

In 1 Thessalonians Paul also refers to bad times in family households, especially happenings at night, such as when a thief breaks in or when drinkers are drunk.<sup>13</sup> Paul lived, and therefore wrote, as an ordinary, social person who interacted with people of all ages and both sexes.

My approach to feminist analysis, with reliance on the historical-critical method, is interested in the world of people behind the text of 1 Thessalonians, that is, the subject location underlying the biblical document. This includes learning primarily about the women, their experiences, and their concerns that have usually been overlooked, submerged, ignored, or even disvalued not only in ancient male writers' androcentric worldviews but also in later interpreters' explications of the text. This informs my broader aim, which is to contribute to a more detailed and gender-balanced narrative about Paul's texts and the history of early Christianity, and to enable contemporary readers to engage with those data. I will approach the text using a hermeneutics of suspicion, i.e., the supposition that the androcentric text conceals more than it reveals about women. This leads to attempts to search out how both the women and men in Paul's churches related to and were affected by his teaching and writing. I also raise questions about how Paul may have reacted to elements in the culture and lives of the believers with whom he interacted. This can be of great interest, and not merely historically, to those who read a text today, those who now "stand in front of the text." Certainly many feminist issues, for example, experiences of power relationships

11. For a major study concerning Paul's use of maternal imagery, see Gaventa, *Our Mother*.

12. Margaret Y. MacDonald, Carolyn Osiek, and Janet Tulloch, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 66–67.

13. See below pp. 84–86, on 5:2, 7.

between the sexes and among various socio-economic groups, are types of dynamics felt across the centuries. I recognize, of course, that, as I work with the text of 1 Thessalonians, the feminist points of discussion I pursue to an extent correlate with my own social location. To summarize that for the reader: I write as a middle-class, white American female, married and a mother, educated in both the United States and Europe (Leuven, Belgium), and as a professor of biblical studies.

The contributing voices who have joined with me in this commentary, Regina Boisclair, John Gillman, and Maria Pascuzzi, likewise write from their individual perspectives. Each has offered a brief comment on her or his social location as well.

Regina Boisclair: “I was born and raised in Massachusetts, traveled much of the world and never lost my Boston accent! My academic path followed the scenic route. While I am one of the few biblical scholars in Alaska, I also teach world religions, death and dying, ecumenics as well as biblical studies. My research interest in lectionaries unites what impacts worshiping assemblies as well as the academy of scholars.”

John Gillman: “A Hoosier at heart, I grew up in a small town in south-eastern Indiana, received my education in the United States and Europe, and have worked for many years in both academics and the pastoral care arena. Most recently I have served as a supervisor of Clinical Pastoral Education in a hospice setting, and before that in an urban-based CPE program whose mission was outreach to the marginalized. My ancestors are predominantly German. I am a white, middle-class male, married, and have one adult daughter.”

Maria Pascuzzi: “I write as a middle-class, white, bilingual American female. I grew up in Brooklyn, New York, enriched by the encounter with so many diverse peoples and ideas. I remain most at home in environments characterized by great diversity. I was educated in the United States, Europe (Rome, Italy), and the Middle East (Israel). I have taught biblical studies at the undergraduate and graduate level for over twenty-five years.”

## 2. The Road to Thessalonica

By the time Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy entered Thessalonica in ca. 49, the city was a significant crossroads and port within the Roman Empire. As their travels in the region can be reconstructed from 1 Thessalonians and are generally corroborated by Acts (17:1-9), it seems that the trio headed for the city mainly because the famous Roman highway, the Via Egnatia, led there; they may have had specific people (suggested

by their recent contacts in Philippi) to look up as well. The three travelers had only some months earlier sailed from Troas and disembarked in Macedonia; when they trekked inland, it appears they let the Egnatia plot their itinerary, much like a modern traveler might decide to drive a freeway and let the exits determine where to stop.



It is interesting to speculate about travel on that great highway, sections of which still exist. The mix of military, foreign, local, commercial, and adventuring characters on or near the road, including pilferers and panhandlers, must have been engaging, and at times dangerous, especially for strangers like Paul and his companions. They were colorful individuals themselves with a pressing message they wanted to proclaim, yet they seem to have been newcomers to Roman Macedonia. Even today on the various sections of the Egnatia that have survived and are gradually being developed into an international cross border hiking trail (with sections in Albania, Greece, and Turkey), interesting encounters abound.<sup>14</sup> One can only imagine the conversations Paul and his companions might have had and the situations in which they stayed. Their options included the infamous, colorful roadside inns,<sup>15</sup> as well as their own tents and the homes of locals like Lydia, who had given

14. For information on this route, see Louis Werner, "Via Egnatia: To Rome and Byzantium," *Aramco World* 66 (2015): 20–31.

15. One ancient source (dated 333 CE) that lists the stops along the Via Egnatia, e.g., *mansiones* (full-service-type inns) and *mutationes* (minimal facilities for travelers located at intervals between *mansiones*), is the travel account by the anonymous Bordeaux Pilgrim. That the writer was a female has been proposed by Laurie Douglass, "A New Look at the *Itinerarium Burdigalense*," *J ECS* 4 (1996): 313–33, who argues that the Pilgrim's writing reveals "an idiosyncratic interest in women" (325). For a

accommodation to the missionaries in Philippi just prior to their time in Thessalonica (Acts 16:15).<sup>16</sup> Once they arrived in Thessalonica, Jason was their host (Acts 17:7).<sup>17</sup>

### 3. Famous Women Entwined with Thessalonica's Greco-Roman History

Newcomers to Thessalonica like Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, if they had a penchant for learning history and especially if they were fascinated by being in the home region of Alexander the Great, were probably told captivating stories about his Argead dynasty as well as about the later Roman takeover of the area. If Alexander intrigued them, they would have learned not only tales about him and his generals but also lore about their female counterparts, the powerful Macedonian royal women. Explaining the name of the city to visitors would in itself have occasioned telling at least some details about the Argead princess it commemorated, Thessalonike. One might ask, however, if such narratives would have had an impact on Paul. While there is no way to assess that, if the stories were told with an androcentric emphasis, the Macedonian royal women may have been cast as dangerous manipulators. They were indeed dangerous, but they were also struggling to survive within a murderous environment. It is interesting to review Thessalonike's story as we set out to think about the era of Paul in her city.

#### *a. Thessalonike Was Used to Legitimate Male Power*

The city of Thessalonica, now modern Saloniki, has a feminine name that honors the princess Thessalonike. She was linked to three very powerful men: her father, Philip II; her half-brother, Alexander III (the

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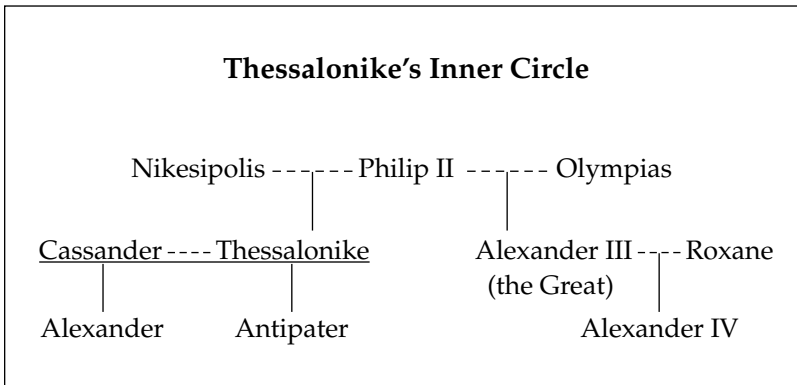
critical response, see Susan Weingarten, "Was the Pilgrim from Bordeaux a Woman? A Reply to Laurie Douglass," *J ECS* 7 (1999): 291–97.

16. On Lydia, see, e.g., Florence Morgan Gillman, *Women Who Knew Paul* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 29–38; Kate Cooper, *Band of Angels: The Forgotten World of Early Christian Women* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2013), 15–20; on the difficulty of assessing the historicity of Lydia, see Jason T. Lamoreaux, *Ritual, Women, and Philippi: Reimagining the Early Philippian Community*, *Matrix: The Bible in Mediterranean Context Series* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 105–6. He concludes the evidence in Acts is insufficient to make a determination.

17. See Florence Morgan Gillman, "Jason of Thessalonica (Acts 17,5-9)," in *The Thessalonian Correspondence*, BETL 87, ed. Raymond F. Collins (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1990), 39–49.

Great); and her husband, Cassander. The latter founded the city in 316 BCE and named it in her honor, although his obvious motive for doing so was to use her ancestry to legitimate his weak claim to rule. Thessalonike's story would have been kept alive for successive generations of Thessalonians and others in the wider region of Macedonia as a significant part of the history of the era of Alexander the Great and the Argead dynasty. Her life story, like that of many women in her circles, was one of a tumultuous existence lived within an ever-dangerous web of royal intrigues.<sup>18</sup>

Born about 352 BCE, Thessalonike was a daughter of Philip II and his Thessalian wife, Nikesipolis.<sup>19</sup> She was thus a half-sister of Alexander the Great, the son of Philip II by his wife Olympias. Because her birth occurred the day the Macedonians and the Thessalian league won a victory in Thessaly, the Battle of the Crocus Field, her father declared her name should be "victory [νίκη] in Thessaly." Thessalonike's mother died shortly after her birth, and Olympias took over her upbringing. The two, stepmother and stepdaughter, became very close throughout the ensuing decades until the death of Olympias resulted in Thessalonike being thrust literally into the arms of her stepmother's murderer.



Olympias had married the already polygamous Philip II in 357 BCE. She became the most dominant among his current and subsequent wives.

18. On Thessalonike's more immediate family within the dynasty, see esp. Olga Palagia, "The Grave Relief of Adea, Daughter of Cassander and Cynnana," in *Macedonian Legacies: Studies in Ancient Macedonian History and Culture in Honor of Eugene N. Borza*, ed. Timothy Howe and Jeanne Reames (Claremont, CA: Regina Press, 2008), 195–214.

19. Alternatively, her mother may also have been Philip's Thessalian wife Philina. See *ibid.*, 207.

Their son, Alexander III (the Great), was born in 356. Over time Olympias became estranged from Philip, but she retained her powerful status among his wives. She was living in her home region of Epirus at the time of Philip's murder in 336. Olympias then returned to Macedonia to support Alexander's claims to the throne. In the decade following, during his lengthy and extensive eastern expedition (334–323), she came to distrust and hence to intrigue against Alexander's regent, Antipater, who exercised that office during Alexander's absence and continued to do so following Alexander's sudden death in 323. So powerful was Antipater (grandfather of Thessalonike's son of the same name) that he even retained his authority during the successive joint rule of Alexander the Great's posthumously born son, Alexander IV, and Alexander's half-brother, Philip III Arrhidaeus.

Olympias was not successful in undermining Antipater. When he died in 319 she did, however, support his chosen successor, Polyperchon. But this thereby placed her in opposition to Antipater's son, Cassander, who was threatened by Polyperchon's power. In 317 Olympias murdered Alexander's half-brother Philip III Arrhidaeus and his wife Eurydice. That resulted in making her grandson, Alexander IV, the son of Alexander the Great and the Sogdian princess, Roxane, the sole king. Thessalonike, along with Olympias and other members of the royal family, had returned to Macedonia in 317. But in 316 Cassander successfully captured them as they held out in the fortress of Pydna. He then triggered the murder of Olympias by the avenging relatives of Philip III. With that loss of her allied stepmother, Thessalonike was taken by Cassander to become his wife. When Cassander gave his new wife's name to Thessalonica that same year he was relying on her bloodline to ensure his path to the throne.

The cycle of dynastic murders continued when Cassander in 309, to further strengthen his rule of Macedonia, and with Olympias no longer around as a protector, murdered Alexander IV and Roxane. From 305–297, in the absence of no living heir to the throne, Cassander finally called himself king, legitimizing his claim to the title because of his marriage to Thessalonike. Olga Palagia has noted that at their marriage in 316 Thessalonike and Cassander were middle-aged by ancient standards, and she observes that, since it would be inconceivable that two Macedonians of the highest nobility would have remained single until then, Thessalonike may have been a widow.<sup>20</sup> Cassander, like most of the Macedonian rulers of his era, appears to have been polygamous.

20. *Ibid.*, 207.



Thessalonike became the mother of two sons, Antipater and Alexander. When Cassander died of sickness in 297 his older son Philip, probably the son of another mother, ruled for a short time until his own death. Antipater was expected to succeed him. However, Thessalonike favored Alexander. Antipater, jealous of his mother's preference for his younger brother, ordered her death in 295.<sup>21</sup>

In the subsequent history of the city of Thessalonica, the location Cassander had chosen for the new city remained advantageous. It was slightly to the northwest of an existing small settlement, Therme, and had a deep harbor with a drop off some thirty to fifty feet close to the coast. Effectively Cassander enlarged what had been some twenty-six small towns; he also moved various local populations into the new city. From that time forward Thessalonica, regarded as having the best of the Aegean seaports, became a crossroads for routes going north into central Europe, west to the Adriatic, and east to Byzantium. Macedonian dominance, however, eventually gave way to the Romans.

First-century CE visitors to Thessalonica such as Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy no doubt knew some Roman history. But more detailed stories would have been told in the local lore. The general thrust of tales of the Macedonians, following the demise of the Argead dynasty and their successors, was about loss and conquest. The Romans, under Aemilius Paullus, defeated the Macedonians in 168 BCE and then divided the region into four republics. In 146 it became a full Roman province with Thessalonica retaining its Greek name as the capital. Under the Romans the status of the city escalated; it became a major administrative nerve center. Already a hub, the Romans increased that importance when, using existing trade routes, they constructed the Via Egnatia between 146 and 120 BCE. Leading both east and west from Thessalonica, and passing outside the west fortification walls of the city, the sturdy road extended some seven hundred miles from Dyrrachium on the Adriatic Sea east to Byzantium. Long before the time Paul and his companions traversed its eastern Macedonian stretches, the route had become a significant avenue of movement and communication.

### *b. Our Friend Tullia Ciceronis*

Along with lore about the days of the Argeads, no doubt vivid stories of the successive Roman period in Macedonia were also passed on to

21. On the current excavation of a magnificent royal tomb from this period, whose occupants are yet to be identified, see below p. 41.

newcomers. Maybe Paul and his companions were told that the famous Roman orator, Cicero, had lived briefly in Macedonia. Exiled in Greece from May 58 BCE until August 57 BCE, Cicero spent most of that time in Thessalonica. An aspect of Cicero's story, however, that is unlikely to have been included in local stories Paul heard concerns Cicero's daughter Tullia. But we contemporary scholars interested in her might find it illuminating. While the course of her fragile yet tenacious female existence is often cited today as an example of a Roman woman's life cycle, the impact of her father's Thessalonian period upon her life may be lesser-known data. That suggests a reason to recount it here. Tullia's story also offers the current reader an encounter with an identified Roman woman. An elite urbanite, she was probably analogous to some women of Thessalonica Paul may have encountered. Interestingly, Acts 17:12 reports that "not a few" of the Thessalonian women of "high standing" had become believers.

Tullia was the daughter of Cicero and his first wife, Terentia. The biographies of Terentia and particularly of Tullia are well known to those fascinated with women's lives in the Roman world.<sup>22</sup> Tullia, also called by the diminutive Tulliola, was probably born ca. 79 or 78 BCE.<sup>23</sup> Her adult life included a first marriage at the age of sixteen, widowhood, two more marriages, and two divorces, interspersed with two pregnancies. She died a month after the second birth at the age of thirty. To contextualize part of this scenario, however, with material usually not mentioned in sketches of Tullia, it is worth noting that Cicero's Thessalonian sojourn from 58 to 57 BCE had an enormous impact on her life as well as her mother's.<sup>24</sup>

Cicero had escaped his political enemies in Rome, primarily the tribune Clodius, by going to Thessalonica just before a formal decree of exile was passed. While there he suffered severe depression, with suicidal tendencies. He had refused to allow Terentia to accompany him, insisting she remain behind, although in great personal danger to herself. She was to manage his chaotic financial affairs and protect Tullia and her younger brother. The marriage of Cicero and Terentia might well have ended at

22. See esp. Susan Treggiari, *Terentia, Tullia and Publilia: The Women of Cicero's Family* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

23. Marjorie Lightman and Benjamin Lightman, *Biographical Dictionary of Ancient Greek and Roman Women: Notable Women from Sappho to Helena* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2000), 220–23; 230–32.

24. See Treggiari, *Terentia*, 56–70.

that point although it did not. Terentia *de facto* remained in charge of Cicero's finances and shouldered the responsibility for the financial security of Tullia and her brother. Although Tullia was already married to her first husband, Gaius Calpurnius Piso Frugi, her father was still making payments on her dowry. His self-exile, and the ensuing formal exile decree, which stated that all his property was to be confiscated, left his daughter in dire financial straits. Terentia managed to assist Tullia nevertheless, and both of them, with extraordinary fortitude, publically protested Cicero's exile. So dangerous was their situation that when Cicero's home on the Palatine was burned, Terentia took refuge with her half-sister, a Vestal Virgin.

The year 57 BCE brought many changes for Tullia and her mother. Tullia's first husband died. Then Cicero's decree of exile was lifted. Tullia traveled at great effort to meet him on his return. He had journeyed across the Via Egnatia from Thessalonica to Dyrrachium, then taken a ship to Brundisium, where she was waiting. Rather surprisingly, after his return, Cicero became dissatisfied with how Terentia had handled his financial affairs. He was "neither grateful nor even understanding of the difficulties with which she successfully coped."<sup>25</sup> His disenchantment eventually precipitated their divorce in 46, followed by his marriage to Publilia, whom he then also quickly divorced. Cicero's estrangement from Terentia did not, however, weaken his deep emotional attachment to Tullia. Her political influence on him remained significant as well. Cicero was close to Tullia until she died shortly after giving birth in 45.<sup>26</sup> Cicero's own death followed two years later. As for the intrepid Terentia, she too remained bonded to Tullia throughout their lives. And

25. Lightman and Lightman, *Biographical Dictionary*, 222.

26. There is a sentimental legend about a tomb found in Rome in the fifteenth century that was supposedly Tullia's. As the story goes, the body seemed to have been buried the day it was found and there was a glowing lamp inside, assumed to have been burning for fifteen centuries. Later the poet John Donne further romanticized this in the eleventh stanza of his Eclogue of December 26, 1613. In a section titled "The Good Night," an *epithalamium* (a poem written for a bride on the way to her marital bed) honoring the marriage of the Earl of Somerset and Frances Howard (see <http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/eclogue.php>; accessed June 11, 2015) Donne wrote:

Now, as in Tullia's tomb, one lamp burnt clear,  
 Unchanged for fifteen hundred year  
 May these love-lamps we here enshrine  
 In warmth, light, lasting, equal the divine.

Terentia, having moved on in spite of her husband's ingratitude for all she had done during his Thessalonian self-exile, amazingly for her era, lived to be 103.

The lives of Tullia and her mother Terentia offer a glimpse of both advantages and forms of stress—personal, political, and economic—with which upper-class Roman females might have to cope. There were certainly such women in the vibrant Roman administrative nerve center of Thessalonica, and Acts, as noted above, reports that Paul converted some of them as well as men of the same class. One wonders how Paul would have framed his message to people like Tullia and Terentia. What does seem evident is that if such women decided to join Paul they would not have lacked determination to exercise some control over their own lives. They might also be especially competent as persons who, used to dealing with officials on many levels, could serve as leaders within or negotiators on behalf of Paul's community. Furthermore, wealthy women who joined Paul's churches would have expected to act as his patrons, as they customarily did with groups they belonged to and usually hosted and supported.<sup>27</sup>

### *c. The Romans and the Politarchs*

As the Roman Empire's civil wars progressed throughout the 40s and 30s BCE, Thessalonica sometimes backed the losing side. The city nevertheless emerged following Octavian's triumph in 31 as a privileged "free city." This meant Thessalonica had the right to produce its own coins; it also was allowed some tax immunity and a degree of administrative and juridical freedom. With its prosperity ensured and its prime location, the population of the city is estimated to have grown to between 65,000 and 100,000 by Paul's era.

Thessalonica was allowed by the Romans to govern according to its local civic structures, which consisted of three levels. These were, from

27. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 181: "The rich convert to Christianity . . . probably understood herself/himself as entering a club, and expected to exercise the influence of the patron on this club. Without question the house church, as a voluntary organization, was structured according to this patron-client relationship." On female patrons, see esp. Katherine Bain, *Women's Socioeconomic Status and Religious Leadership in Asia Minor in the First Two Centuries C.E.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 97–135.

lowest to highest: a citizen assembly, a council, and the politarchs. The latter figures, essentially city officials, have drawn attention because they are referred to twice in Acts (17:6, 8).<sup>28</sup> As late as the early twentieth century, until the finding of inscriptional evidence verifying their presence in Thessalonica, Acts' use of the term "politarchs" had been seen as not historical.<sup>29</sup> It is now understood that the politarchs functioned "as a bridge between the Roman authorities and the local population"<sup>30</sup> and more recently it has been suggested that it is "highly probable that the politarchs had also some kind of judicial role. Some unpublished epigraphic material from the area seems to point in this direction."<sup>31</sup>

With this introductory material, a stage has been set for a feminist discussion of some aspects of 1 Thessalonians in the following five chapters. Before that, however, it is necessary to review the context in which Paul composed his document and set up a general outline of how he organized it.

#### 4. The Context of Paul's Letter

In 1 Thess 3:6, Paul explains to the Thessalonians that "Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us—just as we long to see you." Paul's decision to write to the group suggests that he and Silvanus, who was presumably with him, had been awaiting news about them. Paul's quick turnaround in replying implies that while the report was largely positive, pressing issues had also emerged in Timothy's update that Paul needed to address. Timothy may also have relayed a letter to Paul from the Thessalonians. Some have thought the main evidence for that would be Paul's use of the formulaic *περὶ δέ* ("concerning") in 4:9 and 5:1, which could suggest he was responding to something written. However, that suggestion

28. Concerning the political situation in Thessalonica with which the Christians were in conflict as reflected in Acts 17:1-9, see Christopher Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 91-137.

29. See Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 8-9.

30. Ekaterini G. Tsalamponi, "The Jews and the Agorai of Thessaloniki (Acts 17:5)," *The Bible and Interpretation* (2012): 5, <http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/tsa368022.shtml>.

31. *Ibid.*

cannot be conclusive since the phrase is more likely just a cliché used in letter writing to introduce a set of comments.<sup>32</sup>

Paul does not say where he was when he wrote 1 Thessalonians. He does indicate in 3:1-2 that, while he had been in Athens and when he could bear his separation from the Thessalonians no longer, “we [he and Silvanus] decided to be left alone . . . and [so] we sent Timothy . . . to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith.” Paul’s way of referring to Athens intimates that he and Silvanus were no longer there as he was writing, but he fails to mention his current location. Acts, however, may offer some insight. Regarding Paul’s time in Athens, the Lukan account states that Paul had been “deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16). Then Acts reports Paul’s Areopagus event and says that Paul moved on to Corinth, giving no indication that Silas (as Silvanus is called in Acts) was with him. Instead, that source notes that Silas later came from Macedonia to Corinth along with Timothy.

The combined data from 1 Thessalonians and Acts has caused scholars to conclude that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians from Corinth soon after receiving Timothy’s report. As for Silvanus, it seems likely that he had been with Paul and had not returned to Thessalonica with Timothy. And, since Paul’s sojourn in Corinth can be quite accurately dated to 49–51 CE,<sup>33</sup> we can conclude that these are the approximate dates for the reunion of Timothy with Paul and Silvanus; hence the letter’s composition would be toward the beginning of that time frame, thus about 50.

From this supposition about Paul’s location at Corinth and the dating of 50 CE for 1 Thessalonians, the broader context within his previous travels can be reconstructed. In 1 Thess 2:2, Paul points out that his preaching in Thessalonica came after the three missionaries had been “shamefully mistreated at Philippi.” This accords with the data in Acts, which situated Paul’s time in Thessalonica, then Athens and Corinth, during what has been conventionally called Paul’s second journey. While Acts must be relied on with caution, it says in Acts 15:40–16:10 that earlier on this journey Paul had left Antioch with Silas and visited Derbe and Lystra,

32. Margaret M. Mitchell, “Concerning Peri De in 1 Corinthians,” *NovT* 31 (1989): 229–56, at 253–54. See also Raymond F. Collins, *The Birth of the New Testament: The Origin and Development of the First Christian Generation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 115–16.

33. The dating is dependent on Paul’s appearance in Corinth before Gallio and the so-called Gallio inscription that enables the close estimation of Gallio’s period in that city; see Acts 18:12.

where he had asked Timothy to join them. The trio then passed through Phrygia and Galatia to Troas before sailing to Samothrace and passing through Neapolis. From there Paul and his companions reached Philippi (16:11-12). Following difficulties in Philippi, they then proceeded (apparently along the Via Egnatia, since the text says he passed through Amphipolis and Appollonia) to Thessalonica (17:1). The data from Acts parallels Paul's comments in 1 Thess 2:2 where he reports that he had gone from Philippi to Thessalonica after having been "shamefully mistreated at Philippi." And it also corresponds to Paul's indication that both Silvanus and Timothy had been with him in Thessalonica. Acts, however, tells a fuller story than Paul alludes to in 1 Thessalonians about his activities in both Philippi and Thessalonica, just as it does regarding his period in Corinth. Acts reports that while in Thessalonica Paul evangelized in the synagogue on three sabbaths. As a result, not only some Jews but also "a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women" had been persuaded to join Paul and Silas (Acts 17:4). Other Jews who had become jealous, joined by some ruffians from the marketplaces, formed a mob. The mob attacked the house of a man named Jason, with whom Paul and Silas had been staying, dragging Jason and some believers before city authorities, accusing them all of "acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus" (17:5-7). They were let go once Jason and others posted bail. "That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas off to Beroea" (17:10). In that small city, the two went to a synagogue where the Jews were "more receptive than those in Thessalonica" (17:11) so that many believed, "including not a few Greek women and men of high standing" (17:12). It was when the Jews of Thessalonica heard of Paul's preaching in Beroea and followed him there that the Beroean believers sent Paul off to the coast headed for Athens (presumably by ship). Interestingly, however, Silas and Timothy remained with the Beroeans, although Paul instructed them to "join him as soon as possible" (17:14-15).

As is obvious from this summary, the problem of correlating the data of 1 Thessalonians with that of Acts 17:1-15 is a thorny one. More recent scholarly solutions range from some few treating the Acts passage as generally accurate<sup>34</sup> to many other assessments expressing a degree of some or even extreme skepticism about Luke's report. In the end it seems

34. A recent contribution reflecting this approach is Murray J. Smith, "The Thessalonian Correspondence," in *All Things to All Cultures: Paul among Jews, Greeks, and Romans*, ed. Mark Harding and Alanna Nobbs (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

best, as will be done in this commentary, to weigh each point of comparison as the issues are raised.

With respect to structure, 1 Thessalonians has two major parts: a lengthy section of thanksgivings followed by exhortations. In chapters 1–3, Paul expresses gratitude for the believers' conversions and then reminisces about the time he and his companions spent with them followed by their painful separation. In chapters 4–5, Paul offers exhortation and instructions.

Following the format of letter writing of the period, 1 Thessalonians opens with a salutation that identifies the senders and recipients and includes a greeting (1:1). The salutation leads into the senders' expression of gratitude concerning the recipients. This is followed by three successive thanksgivings (1:2-10; 2:13-16; and 3:9-10),<sup>35</sup> an unusual feature in Paul's letters. The thanksgivings constitute a major part of the letter's first section, so much so that some conclude they are actually part of the body of the document. What follows then in 4:1–5:24 could be considered the "rest" of the body. The material in 4:1–5:22 may be divided into sections that are paraenetic (4:1-12 and 5:12-22) and eschatological (4:13–5:11).<sup>36</sup> Paul then rounds out his missive with a final prayer (5:23-24), some last recommendations (5:25-28), including a solemn order about reading the letter to all the believers (5:27), and a concluding salutation (5:28).

35. See Jan Lambrecht, "Thanksgivings in 1 Thessalonians 1–3," in *Thessalonian Correspondence*, ed. Raymond F. Collins, BETL 87 (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1990), 201: "Present, past and future, as well as the double focus of addressees and writer in their relation to God and Jesus Christ, appear to have been the structuring factors of Paul's thought in 1 Thes 1–3. Of course, over and against the first thanksgiving in 1,2-5, the thanksgiving of 2,13 is repetitive and, just as the first, rather static ('always, constantly'). The third of 3,9-10 refers to a more advanced point in history, a recent, peculiar event and Paul's joy at the return of Timothy."

36. Jan Lambrecht, "A Structural Analysis of 1 Thessalonians 4–5," in *Collected Studies on Pauline Literature and on the Book of Revelation*, ed. Jan Lambrecht, AnBib 147 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2001), 282–87.



# 1 Thessalonians 1

## *The Women and Men Who “Turned to God from Idols” (1:9)*

Paul’s greeting in 1 Thess 1:1 indicates that the letter is not only from him but also from Silvanus and Timothy. This signals Paul’s high regard for his two co-workers and the important roles they had in the evangelization of the Thessalonians. It is not evident (nor is it in the Acts portrayal of this same period) whether others, such as the wives of Silvanus and Timothy, were accompanying the trio. Nevertheless, since it would have been quite typical for the time to not mention women in such a group, Silvanus and Timothy, if married, may have had spouses with them. That Paul did not is confirmed by 1 Cor 9:5 where he states that he (along with Barnabas) had been exceptional in not exercising his right to be accompanied by a believing wife, at least up until the writing of 1 Corinthians (about 55–56 CE). In looking at this first extant letter of Paul and assessing his age as being in the early thirties or more when he wrote 1 Thessalonians in 50 CE, one might wonder about his own marital status prior to that point. While in his later writing (1 Cor 7:8) Paul indicates he then had no wife, it remains doubtful that he had not married earlier, particularly since as a deeply committed Pharisee he was dedicated to observance of the Law to the fullest.<sup>1</sup> This correlates with the judgment of numerous scholars that Paul was a widower.<sup>2</sup>

1. See especially Raymond F. Collins, *Accompanied by a Believing Wife: Ministry and Celibacy in the Earliest Christian Communities* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 125–32.

2. See *ibid.*, 132, n. 81.

## 1 Thess 1:1-10

<sup>1:1</sup>Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,  
To the church of the Thessalonians  
in God the Father and the Lord Jesus  
Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

<sup>2</sup>We always give thanks to God for  
all of you and mention you in our  
prayers, constantly <sup>3</sup>remembering be-

fore our God and Father your work of  
faith and labor of love and steadfast-  
ness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>4</sup>For we know, brothers and sisters  
beloved by God, that he has chosen  
you, <sup>5</sup>because our message of the gos-  
pel came to you not in word only, but  
also in power and in the Holy Spirit and  
with full conviction; just as you know

Paul's respect for Silvanus and Timothy is apparent throughout the letter,<sup>3</sup> notably in 1 Thess 2:7, where he describes them as being apostles along with himself.<sup>4</sup> Silvanus (Silas is a shortened Greek form) is generally held to be the Silas referred to in Acts. A leading member of the Jerusalem church, he was an early Jewish Christian (Acts 15:22), a prophet, a church emissary (15:32), and possibly a Roman citizen (16:37). Silas had begun to travel with Paul (15:40) following Paul's falling out with Barnabas. Paul's choice to be accompanied by Silas was "certainly astute, since it had the diplomatic advantage of placing the Pauline mission under the auspices of Jerusalem."<sup>5</sup> In naming Silvanus first in 1 Thess 1:1, Paul likely reflects that they had known and collaborated with each other much longer than had he and Timothy and perhaps that Silvanus was the older of these two co-workers.

When 1 Thessalonians was written, Timothy, who was later to become one of Paul's most often mentioned and dependable of co-workers, had been with Paul only for those months since Paul and Silas had preached first in Derbe and then in Lystra (Acts 16:2), Timothy's town. Timothy was the son of a Jewish mother, Eunice. She and her mother, Lois,<sup>6</sup> had become Christians, probably when Paul and Barnabas initially evangelized in their region. Their names are known from 2 Tim 1:5.

3. For a discussion on male bonding between Paul and his male co-workers, especially Timothy, see David J. A. Clines, "Paul, the Invisible Man," in *New Testament Masculinities*, ed. Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson, SemeiaSt 45 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 188–89.

4. See below, p. 42.

5. John Gillman, "Silas," *ABD* 6 (1992): 22–23.

6. See Florence Morgan Gillman, *Women Who Knew Paul* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 22–24.

what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. <sup>6</sup>And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, <sup>7</sup>so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. <sup>8</sup>For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every

place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. <sup>9</sup>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, <sup>10</sup>and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

According to Acts, Timothy was uncircumcised, a situation Paul determined he needed to rectify in order for Timothy to preach with him, that is, “because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew his father was a Greek” (16:3). Little can be speculated about Timothy’s Gentile father,<sup>7</sup> although it may be assumed Timothy would have grown up with the issues of a child raised in a family with one monotheistic (but rather nonobservant?) parent and one polytheistic parent.<sup>8</sup> While Paul may have envisioned that Timothy’s circumcision would increase his credibility with the Jews, he may also have discerned that Timothy’s life experience within a “mixed marriage” would have been advantageous as a missionary to Gentiles. This may have been a major factor in Timothy’s positive rapport with the Thessalonians to which the letter abundantly testifies.

The impact upon children raised like Timothy in mixed religious contexts could have had both positive and negative repercussions. While perhaps gaining insight into the religion of both parents and their

7. It is reasonable to posit that Timothy’s father (if alive) and his mother had remained together since, if they had divorced, the father would have retained *potestas* (control) over any children, precluding Timothy’s evangelization by his mother and grandmother. But the question can also be raised of whether Timothy’s father was aware of his wife’s Christian conversion. See Margaret Y. MacDonald, “Early Christian Women Married to Unbelievers,” *SR* 19 (1990): 229–56, at 227, who observes about women married to unbelievers: “The thought of losing a child to a pagan father and stepmother must have inspired some mothers to keep their religious affiliations carefully hidden from unbelieving husbands.”

8. On issues concerning children in families with only one believing Christian parent, see Cornelia B. Horn and John W. Martens, “Let the Little Children Come to Me”: *Childhood and Children in Early Christianity* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 101–6.

extended families, such children might have experienced bewilderment. Cornelia Horn and John Martens support the position that “children in the first centuries of the Christian movement perceived the new religion as socially dislocating.”<sup>9</sup> Their exposure to the conversion of their elders is likely to have been “confusing and disorienting for them as it disturbed familial and kinship structures.”<sup>10</sup> Whatever Timothy’s familial religious dynamics had been like, he must have been prepared to evangelize a wide spectrum of people. Paul’s dependence on him to act as emissary to the Thessalonian church when Paul himself could not (1 Thess 3:2) reflects the trust Paul had in Timothy as a minister.

As Paul expands the salutation in 1 Thess 1:1, he identifies the church (ἐκκλησία) of the Thessalonians as being “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul’s use of patriarchal language for God was typical for the Judaism of his time. The salutation also reflects his rootedness in his lifelong Jewish monotheism. Paul’s understanding of Jesus’ role within that religious context is clear throughout the letter. As Earl J. Richard has observed: “From the start Paul insists on the theological and Christological character of the community’s being called together, namely, the community’s monotheistic and loving relationship to the deity . . . and its commitment to God’s messianic agent.”<sup>11</sup> This salutation also has further suggestive overtones. In identifying Jesus with the titles “Lord” (κύριος) and “Christ” (χριστός), Paul employed a title for God’s anointed in Israel (χριστός), his designation of Jesus as a king, while “Lord” (κύριος) was an honorific used for an emperor. In view of this, Maria Pascuzzi has observed: “By applying the emperor’s public titles to Jesus, Paul suggests one of two things: Jesus and the emperor were equals or the emperor was neither Lord nor King, because Jesus was. Either way, this was dangerous if not outright treasonous.”<sup>12</sup> Using these titles for Jesus is the first of many indications in this letter, some of which will be commented upon in later chapters, that Paul’s perspective is critically anti-imperial.

A further point to be noted regarding Paul’s indication in the salutation that 1 Thessalonians is from himself, Silvanus, and Timothy is that while Paul uses the first-person plural frequently throughout the text,

9. *Ibid.*, 113.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Earl J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, SP 11 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 38.

12. Maria Pascuzzi, *Paul: Windows on His Thought and His World* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2014), 253.

### *God the Father*

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy name God once as “the Father” (1:1) and three times as “our God and Father” (1:3; 3:11, 13). With the addition of the first-person plural possessive pronoun, the co-authors include not only themselves but also the community of believers united under the same God. In the seven letters accepted as authentically Pauline, just over half of the instances where Paul uses “Father” as a designation for God (eleven out of twenty instances) with reference to the community of believers occur in the greeting (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2, 3; Gal 1:1, 3, 4; Phil 1:2; Phlm 1; 1 Thess 1:1, 3). Hence, we can understand this common feature as part of the formulaic nature of the greeting. Paul’s usage may be influenced by his understanding of God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, so named in two other letters (Rom 15:6; 2 Cor 1:3; 11:31), although not in 1 Thessalonians. This undoubtedly goes back to the Jesus tradition known to Paul, for twice he refers to believers, who, empowered by the Spirit, cry out “Abba! Father!” (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15; see also Mark 14:36), thus bearing witness that they are children of God (Rom 8:16).

How dominant is Paul’s use of patriarchal language in naming the Divine? Considering that

Paul uses “God” thirty-four times in 1 Thessalonians, the descriptor “Father” appears in 8.9% of the occurrences. This percentage decreases significantly in his three longest letters, Romans (1.8%), 1 Corinthians (2.8%), and 2 Corinthians (2.7%); it is the same in Philippians (8.9%) and increases in Galatians (12.1%). While it is difficult to draw hard conclusions, one wonders what factors may have influenced the notable reduction in patriarchal language in his lengthier letters, yet with an increase in Galatians, his most tendentious letter?

Regarding 1 Thessalonians, the reader is presented with a fuller picture of the Divine that transcends the limitations of patriarchal imagery. Entrusted with the “Gospel of God” (2:2, 8, 9), Paul places his courage in God (2:2), gives thanks to God (2:13; 3:9) and feels joyful before “our God” (3:9). In his closing exhortation he addresses the God of peace (5:23). In a most remarkable expression found only in this letter, Paul applies to all believers, both Jews and Gentiles, what had been originally reserved to Israel, namely, that they are “beloved by God” (ἡγαπημένοι ὑπὸ θεοῦ, 1:4). Paul perceives that God’s love is now extended to the church, whose fledgling members have been taught by God “to love one another” (4:9),

which they have already taken to heart as demonstrated by their love for all the faithful throughout Macedonia (4:10). So, God, called Father a few times in the letter, is the one who

has destined those called “not for wrath” (5:9) but to embrace the abundant love God extended to the renewed Israel.

*John Gillman*

his vacillation into the first-person singular (2:18; 3:5; and 5:27) suggests he himself was the actual author.<sup>13</sup> For simplicity’s sake I will generally refer to Paul as the writer of 1 Thessalonians, although realizing his authorship *de facto* may have included input from Silvanus and Timothy. We must also envision that Paul dictated what he composed to an amanuensis, a scribe, as was the widespread practice at the time. That person also may have had an impact on the formulation of the text.

In comparison with other Greco-Roman letters known from the same period, 1 Thessalonians is relatively long. Who might his scribe have been if Paul was located in Corinth? During Paul’s later period there, when he wrote the epistle to the Romans (ca. 56), the scribe who worked with Paul was Tertius, a male with a Roman name (Rom 16:22). He appears to have been a believer since he sent his own greetings to the letter’s recipients. In 50, however, when Paul composed 1 Thessalonians, what scribe might he have enlisted? While professional scribes were easy to retain, Paul is likely to have preferred one who was a believer, a person who understood his conceptual language.

During Paul’s first visit to Corinth, Acts 18:2 indicates that his closest contacts were Priscilla and Aquila, believers who had recently been forced out of Rome. A reasonable guess is that someone already in their circle of Christians, or even Aquila or Priscilla, was the scribe of 1 Thessalonians. Although Acts 18:3 describes the couple as tentmakers, making it unlikely either was literate, the thought that one of them was Paul’s scribe should not be too quickly dismissed.

From various Greco-Roman inscriptions and literary references it is known that particularly in urban areas there were female scribes, although it appears that far fewer women than men had such training. Interestingly, the extant inscriptional evidence for female scribes suggests

13. See Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 4.

that some were slaves or freedwomen who functioned in urban contexts as employees whose literacy was at the service of upper-class women.<sup>14</sup> Given her social status as both Gentile and possibly of a higher class than her artisan Jewish husband, or as having formerly been a slave in an upper-class family, Priscilla may have been literate.<sup>15</sup> She quite possibly was the scribe of 1 Thessalonians.<sup>16</sup> In later years, when Paul wrote Romans from Corinth and Tertius was his scribe,<sup>17</sup> Priscilla and Aquila were by then in Rome; they were the first he singled out in his greetings to the Roman believers. Notably, he commented that “all the churches of the Gentiles” (Rom 16:4) owed them gratitude. While it is known that subsequent to their period in Corinth they had gone on to evangelize in Ephesus and then Rome, what is the meaning of this gratitude owed by *all* the Gentile churches? While interpreters have asked what this expansive claim meant,<sup>18</sup> it could be that Priscilla and Aquila had themselves carried on written communication with many groups, which underscores the possibility of the literacy of at least one of them. In fact, a possible reference is found in 1:8-9 to suggest that correspondence between them and the wider regions of Macedonia and Achaia may have been going on already in 50 as Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians. There Paul indicates that he had become aware (by letters received in Corinth? from visitors?) of how the Thessalonians were widely known as exemplars to other believers. Who was spreading this word, and how?

As with all of Paul’s correspondence, the original papyrus of 1 Thessalonians is lost.<sup>19</sup> History is indebted for the letter’s preservation to early

14. Kim Haines-Eitzen, “‘Girls Trained in Beautiful Writing’: Female Scribes in Roman Antiquity and Early Christianity,” *J ECS* 6 (1998): 629–46, at 635–37. See also Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 44.

15. See Gillman, *Women*, 49–57.

16. Priscilla has likewise been considered literate and was suggested as the author of Hebrews by Adolf von Harnack, “The Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Lutheran Church Review* 19 (1900): 448–71; his theory was further developed by Ruth Hoppin, *Priscilla’s Letter: Finding the Author of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Fort Bragg, CA: Lost Coast Press, 2000).

17. Tertius’s name is Latin for “third,” a type of name often given to slaves. On his function as a scribe, see Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 978–80.

18. See the suggestions summarized by *ibid.*, 958.

19. For the manuscript history of 1 Thessalonians, see Raymond F. Collins, *The Birth of the New Testament: The Origin and Development of the First Christian Generation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 1–5.

copyists, most likely Christians who recognized an enduring value in Paul's writings.<sup>20</sup> Would that suggest these were unpaid copyists and therefore, even more than professional scribes needing to earn a living, likely to be females?

By addressing the greetings to the whole church (1 Thess 1:1), Paul ascertained that his communication was intended for all. He reiterates that as well at the close of the letter where he commands "by the Lord" that the letter be publically read (5:27), signaling his concern for the non-literate, probably the majority. In this earliest of his known epistles, one observes that Paul did not deal with the group via status or hierarchical distinctions; he did not write exclusively to their leaders on their behalf or as a channel to them. In his closing words too, while he certainly urges respect and esteem for the leaders who had "charge" of them (5:12), Paul does not suggest any members were more important than any others.

In 1 Thess 1:4 the translation of ἀδελφοί ("brothers and sisters"), the first of its frequent uses in this letter, has been closely scrutinized. It is the first instance of believers so referring to the members of their ecclesial group. Gordon Fee explains that "it reflects the imagery of the church as God's household, where Christ is the householder and all who are his are family related to one another as 'brothers and sisters.'"<sup>21</sup> Fee traces this metaphor for the believing community to Exod 2:11, where Moses visits his brothers and sees one being beaten by an Egyptian. He observes that early Christians would have additionally received a family-oriented

20. With respect to the characteristics of scribes in the later manuscript transmission of Christian documents, see Kim Haines-Eitzen, "Engendering Palimpsests: Reading the Textual Tradition of the Acts of Paul and Thecla," in *The Early Christian Book*, ed. William E. Klingshirn and Linda Safran (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 177–93, at 183: "The earliest Christian papyri contain clues as to their copyists. The use of such stylistic features as the *nomina sacra*, the appearance of harmonistic tendencies—such features suggest that during the second and third centuries, early scribes worked privately and individually to reproduce early Christian texts. While some of the scribes may have been professionals, many of them—in contrast to the scribes who copied Greco-Roman literature more generally—seem to have been nonprofessionals who had a vested interest in the texts they were copying. Herein lies the significance of exploring the identities of early Christian scribes. They were not mindless copyists, the ancient equivalent of photocopy machines. Rather, they often took the 'care' to change, to manipulate, and (to their minds) to correct the text they were copying to make it say what they thought it meant. It is no coincidence that in the earliest Christian texts we find the most fluidity and variety of readings."

21. Fee, *Letters*, 30.



sense for the body of believers from Jesus himself in his references to God's family as being constituted by those who do God's will (see, e.g., Mark 3:34).<sup>22</sup>

While this letter is for the whole Thessalonian church (1 Thess 5:27), we can wonder who was explicitly denoted by the masculine plural ἀδελφοί. It is widely understood inclusively by translators (as in the NRSV) and therefore rendered "brothers and sisters." Nevertheless, when read in light of what has been described as the "unrelenting androcentrism of the text,"<sup>23</sup> some have suggested the term is exclusively male. Indeed, due to the absence of women's names in the letter and the lack of advice concerning women themselves, there is a sense of female invisibility in 1 Thessalonians. This contrasts with the other six authentically Pauline letters, all of which make references to women. The issue is compounded by the admonitory passage in 4:3-8 that is probably addressed only to men.<sup>24</sup>

Richard Ascough, in the course of his work on Macedonian associations, cautiously adopts the position that, in 1 Thessalonians, ἀδελφοί denotes only males.<sup>25</sup> He holds that Paul elsewhere does use the term inclusively. Ascough's conclusion about 1 Thessalonians is based on his assessment that the social structure underlying the nascent Thessalonian church was that of a voluntary association of perhaps tentmakers or leather workers. He suggests that Paul had collectively persuaded an existing professional group "to switch their allegiance from their patron deity or deities 'to serve a living and true God.'"<sup>26</sup> Ascough asserts that "while it is true that the text does not indicate the turning of an entire group to the veneration of Jesus, neither does it indicate what is assumed by most: individual conversions."<sup>27</sup> He concludes that 1 Thessalonians is addressed only to males on the assumption that female artisans would not belong to a group in a trade normally carried on by men. Noting that

22. Ibid., 31.

23. Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, "'Gazing Upon the Invisible': Archaeology, Historiography, and the Elusive Wo/men of 1 Thessalonians," in *From Roman to Early Christian Thessalonikē: Studies in Religion and Archeology*, ed. Laura S. Nasrallah, Charalambos Bakirtzēs, and Steven J. Friesen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 73-108, at 75.

24. See below, p. 74.

25. Richard S. Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Associations: The Social Context of Philip-pians and 1 Thessalonians*, WUNT 161 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 186-90.

26. Ibid., 185.

27. Ibid., 186.

1 Thessalonians contains no indication of women in the church, nor does it contain advice for women or families, he thinks that Paul offers advice germane only to males. He also finds support for this position in the statement in 4:4 “that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor.” Ascough understands this reference, as have others, to being an admonition strictly to males to control their genitalia. That position can be held, however, without assuming that in all the rest of the letter Paul gave no thought in what he wrote to the women in the group. Furthermore, Ascough seems to mitigate against the strength of his own suggestion concerning the male-only interpretation of ἀδελφοί by noting that if the Thessalonian Christian group was male, then that church was atypical among Paul’s communities, as known, e.g., from Corinth, Philippi, and Rome.<sup>28</sup>

Regarding Ascough’s males-only interpretation, some additional concerns must be raised. First, would any one trade association have commanded Paul’s total and restricted attention in the city? Also, were his converts not immediate stepping stones to their family and friends?<sup>29</sup> Additionally, while Ascough’s work demonstrates the importance of Macedonian associations in the social context, and documents well the possibility that Paul did evangelize within such a structure, why consider only the associations of trades generally followed by men? Since the evangelization of the Thessalonians followed closely upon Paul’s period in Philippi, where Lydia the purple cloth seller had been a key member and apparently the leader of the Philippian church (Acts 16:14-15, 40), she may have supplied contacts for Paul to engage with in Thessalonica. Since Ascough’s presentation of inscriptional data itself includes a reference to an association of purple dyers in Thessalonica,<sup>30</sup> there is a likelihood that Paul connected with a group linked to the purple trade, e.g., dyers and sellers, a business known to have been carried on by women.

The supposition that ἀδελφοί in 1 Thessalonians is an exclusively male referent has been critiqued at length by Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre who argues that the invisibility of women in the text nevertheless offers no evidence that women were not members of the church. “While it is clear

28. *Ibid.*, 186–90.

29. See Lone Fatum, “1 Thessalonians,” in *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 2, *A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 250–62, who has taken the position that while women were certainly among the converts in Thessalonica, because according to patriarchal logic their lives were embedded in men’s, they are not addressed in themselves in 1 Thessalonians.

30. Ascough, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations*, 22.

that there were homosocial membership groups in the Greco-Roman world, there is no indication the Christ groups were among them."<sup>31</sup> Pointing to the tension often experienced between the androcentrism of many a written document when compared with the material reality of the archaeological record, she repeatedly underscores a basic principle of feminist historians: "*Wo/men were there.*"<sup>32</sup> In essence, affirming the presence of women in the group of Thessalonian believers is not a form of feminist wishful thinking. The issue of 1 Thessalonians being addressed to women as well as men is not resolved by simply concluding women were there, however. The problem remains that even interpreters who do acknowledge women's presence in the group often proceed to make them invisible by overlooking them in their commentaries.

As Paul's remarks move forward in chapter 1 he reveals an interesting aspect of his thought concerning imitation. Paul characterizes the Thessalonians as persons of faith, love, and hope (1 Thess 1:3) and further as "imitators of us and of the Lord" (1:6). They in turn, as imitators, then became exemplars for other believers in Macedonia and Achaia (1:7-8). One strand of feminist commentary views Paul here exercising a discourse of power which is effectively "a demand for the erasure of difference."<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Castelli's perception is that Paul's phrasing concerning imitation in 1:6 and 2:14 is a use of rhetoric "to rationalize and shore up a particular set of social relations or power relations within the early Christian movement."<sup>34</sup> Jeffrey Weima has responded to this by classifying Castelli's position as a misunderstanding of Paul's imitative or mimetic theme, one that "stems from reading too heavily the apostle's statement through the eyes of our contemporary cultural attitudes and concerns."<sup>35</sup> He states that current issues regarding patriarchalism and hierarchical relationships "can quickly create the conviction that any person urging others to imitate him is guilty of arrogance and an abuse of powers."<sup>36</sup>

31. Johnson-DeBaufre, "Gazing," 93.

32. *Ibid.*, 73, 92. Her italics.

33. See Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power*, Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 17.

34. *Ibid.*, 116.

35. Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 98.

36. *Ibid.*; see also Trevor J. Burke, *Family Matters: A Socio-Historical Study of Kinship Metaphors in 1 Thessalonians*, JSNTSup 247 (London and New York: T & T Clark International, 2003), 146, where his assessment is that Castelli fails to understand Paul as a servant of the Lord and that imitating Paul "is only to follow the example of 'the Lord' (1:6; cf. 1 Cor. 11.1)."

Joseph Marchal, while applauding Castelli's efforts to "explicate the power dynamics of such argumentation,"<sup>37</sup> nevertheless critiques her work for what he perceives as an overwhelming emphasis on the dominating or repressive effects of mimetic persuasion. In his view, because power is also productive and produces reactions that cannot be constrained by the exerciser, Paul's call to imitation might also have elicited a "whole series of effects that are multiple, diffuse and ambiguous,"<sup>38</sup> particularly by women. Marchal urges future Pauline scholarship on mimesis to "continue to investigate and formulate the full range of complicated roles women likely played in these [Pauline] communities."<sup>39</sup>

Paul links the imitation of the three missionaries and the Lord with the persecution the Thessalonians had been experiencing (1 Thess 1:6). The reasons for the persecution that Paul refers to numerous times in the letter remain uncertain. Many assume, persuasively so in my view, that the social problems that rejection of polytheistic practices would have occasioned for the believers underlie the persecution.<sup>40</sup> This receives confirmation in 1:9, where Paul indicates that the conversion of the Thessalonians had been a turning away from idols and toward God in order to serve "a living and true God." In this phrase one can hear what Paul must have set before the believers: hitherto they had honored dead and false gods.

While serving the living and true God, they were simultaneously awaiting with steadfast hope the return of Jesus and their rescue by him from the wrath to come (1 Thess 1:10). The rejection of idols by the Thessalonians suggests the group was predominantly Gentile. This contrasts with Acts 17:1-4, which indicates that some of Paul's converts in Thessalonica were members of the synagogue, although the Acts tradition does allow the assumption that those Jewish converts were a small number and probably lived under pressure from the synagogue to leave Paul's group (see Acts 17:5, 11).

The subject of the earliest Christians' disentanglement from the worship of their former deities is intriguing. In 1 Thess 1:9, Paul could be implying that their abandonment of idols was complete. That is hard to imagine, however, and one wonders how quickly Paul expected his

37. Joseph A. Marchal, *The Politics of Heaven: Women, Gender, and Empire in the Study of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 66.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*, 114.

40. See further on 2:14-16, p. 58.

Gentile converts to solidify such a radical break. It is more probable that Paul's statement that the Thessalonians had turned away from their idols is prescriptive and that the rejection was an ongoing process.

Turning from idols for this presumably small group of the very first Gentile Christian believers in their city must have been increasingly traumatic. On the difficulty of leaving behind the worship of their deities, Weima states in his recent commentary that "in a society where cultic activities were intimately connected with political, economic, and social interests, it is to be expected that there would be significant opposition to both Paul and his Thessalonian converts."<sup>41</sup> This observation refers to the resentment the believers would have felt from their non-Christian neighbors. They are presumed to have elicited anger and to have been perceived as arrogant and antisocial and as disloyal citizens, even to the point of becoming persecuted as Paul indicates throughout the letter, notably in 1 Thess 2:14-16. Another aspect of this distressing social situation would have been the inner difficulties in the thoughts and feelings of the believers as they left behind practices and beliefs they had hitherto taken seriously. Jennifer Houston McNeel has summarized the situation this way:

After Paul left town, the Thessalonian believers faced the challenges of living in a countercultural manner, specifically the social ostracism that would have resulted from their withdrawal from pagan rituals honoring the gods and the Roman emperor. Given the very group-oriented Mediterranean culture, pressure and persecution from neighbors, severed family ties, and the collapse of business relations had led to a crisis of identity for the Thessalonians.<sup>42</sup>

These aspects of conversion, that is, the personal difficulties for and within the new believer in leaving behind the past, are especially interesting when gender is factored into the considerations. For example, what might be said about how the rejection of idols may on some levels have been a different experience for each gender? Further, one can wonder what Paul's guidance was like as he led the Thessalonians' transition from polytheism to monotheism. How existentially did he understand what he was asking of them? For Paul himself, his own radical transition

41. Weima, *1–2 Thessalonians*, 22.

42. Jennifer Houston McNeel, *Paul as Infant and Nursing Mother: Metaphor, Rhetoric, and Identity in 1 Thessalonians 2:5-8*, ECL 12 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015), 123.

in belief had been wholly within his lifelong Jewish monotheism; he had moved from his rejection of Jesus as resurrected to his belief that indeed God had raised Jesus, and then of course to adopting the theological implications that came with what he understood the resurrection of Jesus revealed. But to what extent was the intra-monotheistic transition Paul experienced analogous to what his Gentile converts underwent in their radical move from polytheism to monotheism?

Before proceeding on the assumption that Paul's Thessalonian converts were casting aside a web of beliefs in idols and the attendant social practices, however, the consideration could be made that, prior to meeting Paul, they may have already been tending toward monotheism. For example, were the Thessalonians godfearers (converts gradually moving into Judaism) before Paul met them? Acts 17:4 suggests this possibility with its reference to "a great many of the devout Greeks," i.e., presumably godfearers who, having heard Paul and Silas, joined with them. Yet nothing Paul says in 1 Thessalonians suggests that any of the Thessalonian believers already knew much about either Judaism or the Jewish Scriptures.

Still another explanation one could advance is that the Thessalonian converts were disaffected from the pagan religious milieu around them, and therefore were eager for a message such as Paul's. If so, they might easily have become countercultural. Again, nothing in 1 Thessalonians validates any supposition that alienation had been their prior stance. Assuming, therefore, that the group to whom Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians was predominantly Gentile and new to disengaging from polytheistic practices, the task here is to read the text with that in mind, although allowing as well that the Acts 17:4 reference to some few godfearers in the congregation might have some validity.

To explain a rapid, total move from the worship of idols to Christian beliefs it could be surmised that the apocalypticism of Paul's message set forth expectations so imminent and urgent that the conversion the Thessalonians were led into *had* to be completed immediately. Probably they had no realization that their converted status would go on for years, even decades, since they expected the imminent return of the Lord. One could guess they had therefore not thought through the social implications of abandoning their idols for a long future ahead, nor of how they risked local ostracism to the point of persecution. If indeed they had entered into what they envisioned as a short waiting period for the Lord they were still, some months later as Paul wrote, apparently generally maintaining their distance from their cultic past. At the same time, some of Paul's comments, especially as I will note regarding 1 Thess 4:3-8,

suggest difficulties they may have continued to face in letting go of past involvements and practices. I will also make suggestions throughout the commentary of possible cultic related practices that may have drawn Christian women in particular into recidivism.

Paul states his own explanation of the Thessalonians' ability to reject their idols in 1 Thess 1:5, noting that the gospel had been communicated "not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." For Paul it was "power and . . . the Holy Spirit" that had enabled the believers to become imitators of the three preachers and also to resist the persecution that ensued (1:5-6).

The issue of the Thessalonians' rejection of idols must be pursued further. It is most likely that new converts, who it appears had not debated long over their conversions, would need to be repeatedly repropelytized regarding the former religious practices that had pervaded their social context. As time went on and the Parousia of Jesus (1 Thess 4:13-5:8) had not materialized, and as the social difficulties of their new identities took hold, is not a certain amount of relapse to have been expected?

One could consider as a plausible example whether women would not have had great difficulties remaining withdrawn from cultic ways that had been deeply woven into their female, and in that era fragile, existences, especially practices surrounding childbirth. To assess how hard it may have been for ancient women to give up their prior customs, however, it would help to know what those were. This raises the subject of the cults of Thessalonica, about which information mainly comes from archaeological evidence.

The idols Paul refers to in the city would have ranged across a wide spectrum of deities related to the Greek pantheon, as well as various Egyptian and Roman gods, Roman emperor worship, and the God of the Jews.<sup>43</sup> The paucity of evidence from the ancient city, however, hampers detailed analysis of the cults as well as the levels of popularity and dominance among them. That scarcity is due to the continuous location of the city on the same land occupied by the ancient city<sup>44</sup> and the resulting

43. See esp. the survey in Katerina Tzanavari, "The Worship of Gods and Heroes in Thessaloniki," in *Roman Thessaloniki*, ed. D. V. Grammenos (Thessaloniki: Thessaloniki Archaeological Museum, 2003), 177-262.

44. See Laura S. Nasrallah, "Empire and Apocalypse in Thessaloniki: Interpreting the Early Christian Rotunda," *J ECS* 13 (2005): 465-508, at 471, who suggests the engaging metaphor that "the cityscape of [modern] Thessaloniki is a palimpsest, where the ancient city underlies and at times emerges into modern Thessaloniki."

destruction of earlier buildings in order to build successive structures.<sup>45</sup> Another decisive factor in the view of Katerina Tzanavari was “the [later] popularity of Christianity, which while incorporating several elements of the earlier, so-called pagan religions, at the same time destroyed their sanctuaries.”<sup>46</sup> While the minimal extant material related to the cults of Thessalonica has been scrutinized,<sup>47</sup> it remains uncertain if that mirrors for us which were the major or only cults thriving.<sup>48</sup>

Regardless of which deities they may have been attracted to, the earliest women who converted to Christianity, given their tiny numbers and lack of a wide system of ecclesial support, may have found it very difficult to abandon cultic practices regarding childbirth. Can we put ourselves in their place? As a woman’s labor pangs set in and the possibility of difficulties and death confronted her,<sup>49</sup> would she have been able to resist traditional cultic customs? If practices involving amulets, possession of votive figurines, incantations, etc., had “helped” a birthing woman’s mother, aunts, sisters, and friends, and were being pressed upon her by them and her midwife during her labor, would it not have seemed risky to resist their accumulated “wisdom” and women’s standard practices?<sup>50</sup> Kathy Gaca summarizes what some of the traditions surrounding a birth would have been:

Eileithyia, Artemis and Hera facilitated pregnant women’s risky act of giving birth. At the liminal time of delivery, the midwife and other women assisting in a successful birth cried out a celebratory *ololygê*

45. Tzanavari, “The Worship of Gods,” 178.

46. *Ibid.*

47. See, e.g., Karl P. Donfried, *Paul, Thessalonica, and Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 21–47; Laura S. Nasrallah, Charalambos Bakirtzēs, and Steven J. Friesen, eds., *From Roman to Early Christian Thessalonikē: Studies in Religion and Archaeology*, HTS 64 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), xv.

48. There is some hope for additional new archaeological data due to the building of Thessalonica’s new subway (to be completed in 2018). As the largest excavation in its history, the underground construction of the six subway stations follows the route of the ancient Via Egnatia. In 2008 workers found more than one thousand graves. The study of information from the graves may be especially helpful regarding women because tomb inscriptions and contents are a major archaeological source for the lives of ancient women, especially the non-elite.

49. See below concerning 5:1–11, pp. 89–91.

50. On the authority accorded to midwives, see Margaret Y. MacDonald, Carolyn Osiek, and Janet Tulloch, *A Woman’s Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 55.



[ὄλολυγή, “ululation”]<sup>51</sup> to the goddesses. The critical period of labor, when the one pregnant woman became two viable human beings, or one, or none, was an especially heightened time of the goddesses’ perceived presence.<sup>52</sup>

Additionally, midwives dedicated to Lucina (an epithet for Juno), the Roman goddess of childbirth, were known to wrap ribbons around the womb of a mother in labor and to set a place at table to give thanks to Lucina.<sup>53</sup> Beryl Rawson, commenting on data from Roman Italy, has observed that regarding the various divinities and spirits associated with birth and newborns “the origin of much of the ritual and superstition is difficult to establish, but the general thrust seems to be propitiation of superhuman forces, protection of the infant at a time of great danger, and cleansing of pollution.”<sup>54</sup>

The transitioning from such “time-tested” practices must have been both daunting and gradual for the very earliest Thessalonian female Christians. It is logical to envision recidivism occurred. Would Paul have been surprised? For their later sisters and daughters it no doubt became easier as the group’s numbers increased, social support became more widespread and females grew up within the already believing community. Paul’s statement in 1 Thess 1:9 about turning from idols can be read both as hopefully prescriptive but also perhaps as reflecting his admiration for those of his Thessalonian converts who really had fully confirmed their leap into monotheism, including perhaps some courageous females who, as they gave birth, called on only the “living and true God” (1:9).

51. Ululation (from Latin *ululare*, “to howl”) involved loud, high-pitched trilling; it was a very emotional wailing, usually invoking a god, and was performed by women at both times of joy and times of sorrow. This form of wailing is still practiced in many cultures. On Paul and ululation, see below, pp. 79–80, regarding 4:13.

52. Kathy L. Gaca, “Early Christian Antipathy toward the Greek ‘Women Gods,’” in *Finding Persephone: Women’s Rituals in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Maryline G. Parca and Angeliki Tzanetou (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 280.

53. *Ibid.*, 285.

54. Beryl Rawson, *Children and Childhood in Roman Italy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 109.