

The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD

Episode 127–The Early Christian View of God in 2 Thessalonians

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Introduction

In our last episode, we examined the claims of two prominent scholars of early Christianity; the late Larry Hurtado and Richard Bauckham. Hurtado has argued in many of his publications that the early Christian devotion of Jesus, found in the NT, was binitarian in theology and practice. Richard Bauckham has argued in his books that Jesus was exalted and absorbed into the identity of God. However, when we carefully examined what is likely to be the earliest Christian document in the NT, 1 Thessalonians, neither of these reconstructions appeared to be what Paul taught. In fact, the Apostle Paul understood God along the lines of Jewish monotheism, where God is a single person. Jesus, the Jewish messiah, died, rose, and was exalted to God’s right hand.

In this week’s episode of the BUP, we will look at 2 Thessalonians to see how early Christians understood the God of Israel and the exalted messiah, Jesus. 2 Thessalonians was written to answer some confusion that arose from what Paul said in 1 Thessalonians. There is a sizable number of scholars, although in the minority in modern times, who argue that 2 Thessalonians is pseudonymous, that someone wrote it in Paul’s name or under Paul’s authority. Most scholars still favor Pauline authorship and I personally find the arguments for Paul writing 2

Thessalonians to be convincing. If Paul wrote it, then it couldn't have been too long after 1 Thessalonians, one or two years later at most. 2 Thessalonians was meant to correct some misunderstandings that the congregation in Thessalonica had. Were monotheism and Christology among the topics that Paul sought to correct?

Let's find out on this week's episode of the Biblical Unitarian Podcast!

1 – The Christian Portrayal of God in 2 Thessalonians

- Theos 18x in three chapters.
 - In 2:4, theos is used for a man that makes himself into god, so this would be a negative example.
- Every time the true God is qualified, it is qualified as the Father (1:1, 2; 2:16), never as God the Son or God the HS.
- God is considered the just judge, as he is the one who will repay those who afflict the believers in Thessalonica, and he will do so justly. (1:6)
- God is the object of prayer, specifically in that God would count the Thessalonians worthy of their calling and that God would fulfill every desire for goodness (1:11)
- God is the one who has chosen the believers from the beginning (1:13). He does this by the process of sanctification of the HS and faith in the truth.
- Nothing said of God that strikes me as diverging from Jewish unitary monotheism.
 - God is not described as triune or even in binitarian terms.
 - There is no hint that God is a plurality of persons.
 - In other words, Paul is portraying God consistently with the portrayal of God exhibited in the Hebrew Bible, where God is only one person, namely the heavenly Father.

2 – The Christian Portrayal of Jesus in 2 Thessalonians

Jesus 12x

Christ 10x

Lord 22x

Notables include:

- Our Lord Jesus (1:8, 12; 2:1, 14, 16; 3:6, 18)

- The Lord of peace himself. (3:16)

It is almost as if Lord has become a proper name for Jesus, much like Christ very quickly became a proper name. Furthermore, by being described as our Lord, this indicates that Lord is not another way of speaking about Yahweh, since our Yahweh is not a Hebrew phrase found anywhere in the Old Testament.

The saving gospel message is described variously in terms of Jesus:

- The gospel of our Lord Jesus in 1:8;
- The word of the Lord in 3:1

The Lord Jesus will return from heaven at the second coming. The persecutors, along with those who do not know God and who don't obey Jesus' gospel, will suffer destruction away from Jesus' presence. (1:9)

Of course, the second coming is consistently described in terms of Jesus, not God and not the Father:

- When he comes (1:10)
- The Parousia of our Lord Jesus Christ (2:1, 8)

Jesus has glory that is attainable, and this is framed as part of the hope to be achieved when Jesus returns:

- These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and away from the glory of His power (1:9)
- It was for this He [God] called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2:14)

The Christian faith is described as “in the Lord”--sphere of influence

- the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him (1:12)
- We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will continue to do what we command. (3:4)
- Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. (3:12)

So, when it comes to the depiction of Jesus, there is not really any evidence to suggest that he is a second member within a godhead that consists of more than one person. Nor is there any hint that Jesus has been so exalted that he is now absorbed into the identity of God. Jesus is a highly

exalted human being, of that there can be no doubt. How does this exalted man, anointed by God, function when working with the true God, the Father?

3 – God and Jesus Working Together in 2 Thessalonians

There is an ambiguous passage where Jesus could be called God or he might be distinguished from God: *the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and Lord Jesus Christ.* (1:12)

- This deals with the grace, which is attributed to both God and Jesus:
 - Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1:2)
 - Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, (2:16)
 - The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. (3:18)
- It seems that the consensus of modern commentators and specialists is that the lack of the definite article for the Lord Jesus Christ is not likely to be an intentional suggestion that the Lord Jesus Christ is our God. In fact, the modern critical commentaries note that Paul elsewhere in 2 Thessalonians does not use the article when referencing the Lord Jesus Christ when it is unambiguously clear that he is a distinct person from God. This is likely due to the title Lord had already become much like a proper name, like Christ had become a proper name for Jesus. In Greek, a definite article is not required for proper names, so it wouldn't be needed to distinguish the Lord Jesus from our God in 1:12, especially when the two are always distinguished persons in every other occurrence in 2 Thessalonians. Consider these examples:
 - Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1, no article before Lord)
 - Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:2, no article)

Jesus is involved in the process of divine judgment. God will repay those who afflict the Thessalonians and give relief when Jesus will be revealed from heaven on the day of judgment (1:6-7). The divine passive in the verb “revealed” suggests that it is God himself who will reveal Jesus on that apocalyptic day.

God repays the afflicted (1:7) by sending Jesus to do the slaying (2:8)

The Lord Jesus is able to be sought out in order that he may direct the hearts of believers into the love of God and into the steadfastness exhibited by Christ.

The church in Thessalonica is defined as being in God our Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1)

Both God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ send greetings (1:2)

In conclusion, we have observed that:

2 Thessalonians was written to correct some very important misunderstandings that arise from things said in 1 Thessalonians. The identity of God and the person of Jesus Christ were not among those topics that needed any clarification. First, we noted that the true God is depicted in 2 Thessalonians as the Father. As the true God, the Father acts as the divine judge and the one who elects his people. He is the recipient of prayer and the one who sanctifies the people of God with his Spirit.

Second, we noted that Jesus Christ is most frequently described as the risen Lord, which is indicative of how God has exalted Jesus in status. The gospel that Jesus preached is regarded as the message the Thessalonians should believe and preach. Jesus participates in the judgment of God in that God sends Jesus to execute evildoers. Jesus remains a representative of the people of God and his sphere of influence is embedded in much of Paul's theology, so that Paul's "in Christ" theology is even described in terms as being "in the Lord".

Lastly, we observed that God and Jesus are regularly spoken of as working together on many fronts. On the day of judgment, Jesus will be revealed by God. Paul is confident that his converts can come to exhibit the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ, indicating that both God and Jesus possess desirable ethical qualities that believers should adopt. The believing community is defined as the church in God as the Father and in Jesus Christ as the risen Lord. As per the usual case in Paul's letters, both God and Jesus send greetings. God and Jesus are consistently distinguished, and this is almost certain to be the intended case in the grammatically ambiguous passage that talks about the grace of our God and Lord Jesus Christ (1:12). If the consensus of modern scholars is correct that this passage indicates two persons, not one person who is both our God and the Lord Jesus Christ, then there is absolutely no evidence that God is anyone other than a single self--the Father. Furthermore, there is no indication that the theology of Jesus is anything other than the depiction of an exalted human being who now shares in God's activity. God is still one person and the highly exalted and promoted Jesus remains distinct from the only true God. 2nd Thessalonians, therefore, exhibits biblical unitarianism theology.

Join us next week as we look at Galatians to see how the risen Jesus is portrayed alongside the only true God of Jewish monotheism.

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