

How it Ends: Brief Remarks on Reading 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

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Abstract

This short essay reflects theologically upon aspects of the enigmatic passage 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 and contends that while certainly directed at assuaging the eschatological anxieties of the Christian congregation to whom it is addressed, this passage is not, as is often suggested, uninterested in eschatological doctrine as such. Rather, I argued that it is precisely the apocalyptic vision of the victorious and eloquent epiphany of the Lord that funds the peace and hope to which Christians are called in the midst of tumultuous times, and that this orientation is decisive for both faith and theology.

Keywords

Paul, Eschatology, Apocalyptic, Thessalonian correspondence, *katechon*, hope

Like many others, I have long admired Joseph Mangina's theological commentary on the book of *Revelation* and its demonstration that there are important theological insights to be won from patient wrestling with even the most difficult of apocalyptic texts in the library of Scripture.¹ In this short essay, I want to consider another apocalyptic passage from the New Testament which, for all its

1. Joseph Mangina, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010).

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brevity, is no less enigmatic and unsettling. The text in question is 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. Not only is there “nothing like 2 Thess 12:1-12 anywhere else in Paul’s writings or in the NT,”² but commenters regularly preface their efforts to come to grips with this text by invoking Augustine who, commenting upon this passage in Book 20 of his *City of God*, writes with candor: “I admit that the meaning of this completely escapes me.”³ My own ambitions here must, accordingly, be *very* modest.

I originally imagined engaging recent philosophical readings of Paul in a conversation concerning the vexed matter of the theo-political significance of this passage in debates downstream from Carl Schmitt. But a funny thing happened on the way to the *katechon*, that mysterious reality named in 2 Thessalonians 2:5-7 which in one way or another forestalls the eschaton. While there are serious puzzles to be pondered in this quarter—not least what is to be made theologically of the idea of there being a providentially endorsed political “power that prevents the long-overdue apocalyptic end of times from already happening now”⁴—in the event my attention was drawn to something else, something different.

For pressing pedagogical and pastoral reasons, the preponderance of this passage treats of the perilous path of things *en route* to the eschaton. The epistle is clearly pitched into the exigencies of the local Christian congregation in Thessalonica where eschatological enthusiasm has, for whatever reason, erupted in ways distracting, disruptive, as well as deluded. Addressing a community “shaken out of its wits” (v.2) the letter as a whole, and this passage, in particular, looks to “forestall the consequences of this unleashed anxiety and to counter it.”⁵ The tale told of the unfolding of the eschatological end-time serves, in the first instance, simply to certify that now *is not that time*, and so to pour so much cold water upon the fires of apocalyptic fervor. Much recent scholarship has been keen—and for good reason—to emphasize that aimed as it is to calm and comfort the congregation in just this way, this passage is simply “not dogmatic in character,”⁶ because Paul seems to be “more concerned with the pastoral problem of correcting the Thessalonians’

2. Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 427.

3. *De civitate Dei* 20:19; Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. H. Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1984), 933.

4. The formulation is Schmitt’s own, cited in Julia Hell, “*Katechon*: Carl Schmitt’s Imperial Theology and the Ruins of the Future,” *The Germanic Review* 84:4, 2009, 283.

5. So, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998), 110. The translation follows Gaventa and Bruce.

6. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 427–428.

outlook than he is with describing the coming of the Antichrist or even the coming of the Lord.”⁷

But I wonder about the final part of this claim. I wonder, as a contemporary theological reader, whether Paul really is basically unconcerned here with “even the coming of the Lord.” It seems to me, rather, that the climax of Paul’s pastoral intervention is precisely a doctrinal one: namely, a forthright teaching at verse 8 concerning the *fact* and *quality* of the *adventus* of Christ that halts the march of the “mystery of lawlessness” and so ends the unfolding of the *futurum* as simply a wicked “boot stamping on a human face—forever,” to borrow from Orwell.⁸ I want to suggest that in this, we confront Paul as an unusual sort of apocalypticist, one who, as Christopher Rowlands observes, “does not come across as an interpreter of apocalyptic or prophetic oracles with a divinely given wisdom so much as a figure whose authority in this phase of his life owes everything to an apocalyptic conviction.”⁹ The “urgent anguish of his vocation” on display in the “overburdened nature of the expression”¹⁰ of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 derives not only from his direct pastoral concern to dampen down eschatological anxiety but also and most sharply from the positive pressure of just that actual apocalyptic conviction.

If this reading holds, then we can read 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 in close connection with 1 Corinthians 15:24-26—“Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death”—though their historical relation to each other can be variously construed. Should 2 Thessalonians be a post-Pauline pseudonymous offering originating between 80 and 120 CE from “somewhere in the broad range of the Pauline Aegean

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7. Charles H. Giblin, *The Threat to Faith: An Exegetical and Theological Re-Examination of 2 Thessalonians 2* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967), 41. An extraordinary exception to this reticent tendency among contemporary commentary is Douglas Farrow, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020), which offers an intense and elaborate gloss on the historical and theological significance of Paul’s apocalyptic *doctrine* here; see 198–261.
 8. George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1977 [1949]), 256: “If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever.
 9. Christopher Rowlands, “Paul as an Apocaliptist” in Benjamin E. Reynolds and Loren T. Stuckenbruck (ed.), *The Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition and the Shaping of New Testament Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 133.
 10. Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2004), 77.

mission,”¹¹ then 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 represents an expansive and rather theatrical gloss on the *very* concise eschatological story of divine victory offered in the Corinthian passage. If, however, something like the position recently advanced by Douglas Campbell is correct—and Paul authored both of the Thessalonian letters during the first years of the 40s CE and 1 Corinthians in 51 CE—then the immensely compressed eschatological remarks of 1 Corinthians 15:24-26 contain within them, as it were, the more elaborate apocalyptic drama sketched in 2 Thessalonians.¹² Either way, the focal concern in both passages is the victorious consummation of the saving work of Christ, which will finally bring to an end everything inimical to the reign of God and the flourishing of God’s beloved creatures. In both passages, we also note how this focal eschatological concern presses with power upon—and so interferes with—the present.

Paul’s announcement of the substance of his eschatological hope here is as consequential as it is concise: “And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming” (v. 8). As the distinctive designation suggests, the eschatological opponent—the “lawless one” (τῆς ἀνομίας)—stands and operates in hostility toward God’s gracious instruction, counsel, and command. Whatever its particulars, its essential *enmity* is decisive. The Hebraic synonymous parallelism by which the action of the Lord Jesus is set forth is striking. The poetics of redemption demand that when compelled to throw inadequate words at the eschatological horizon, Paul speaks of the militant advent of Christ to save us, at one and the same time, both a “word event” and an “appearance.” The first image evokes the creative power of the breath of God (Genesis 2:7 and Psalms 33:6) but is more closely drawn from Isaiah 11:4, which envisages a salutary moment in which “with righteousness God shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.”¹³ Here as ever the breath of the Lord carries a *verbum efficax*, a word of judgment that “makes it so,” a final,

11. M. Eugene Boring, *I & II Thessalonians: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2015), 223. Boring reviews the debate concerning authorship concisely at 209–223.

12. Douglas Campbell, *Framing Paul: An Epistolary Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 31–32. The case is also made independently by Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 110–114.

13. For discussion see F.F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, revised edition (Waco, TX: Word Books, 2015), 172–173 and Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 424, 434. Other parallels, including Rev. 19:15 and 4 Ezra 13:10, are noted by Maarten J. J. Menken, *2 Thessalonians* (London: Routledge, 1994), 113–115.

sovereign, world-bestowing word which effortlessly enacts its own content. In this image, the extended agonism of the apocalyptic drama evaporates in an image of the Lord's almost breezy dissolution of the works of lawlessness and their hitherto powerful perpetrators. "One little word shall fell him"—indeed. Paul here gestures at the eschatological power of divine *truth* to effect the final redemption of lives ensnared and depleted within circumstances of difficult divine silence, ambiguous religious cant, and satanic dissembling. But not only the *final* redemption. Calvin remarks with discernment that precisely because Paul espies this ultimate victory of the Word he can and must also testify "that *in the meantime* Christ will scatter the darkness in which the Antichrist will reign by the rays which He will emit before His coming, just as the sun, before becoming visible to us, chases away the darkness of the night with its bright light."¹⁴

Calvin's comment leads us on, as it already exploits the passage's second image in order better to understand the first. That second and parallel image shifts from the poetics of divine word and speech to those of light and appearance. We are told of how the manifestation of lawless enmity is to be annulled by τῆ ἐπιφανεΐα τῆς παρουσίας αὐτοῦ, i.e., by the epiphany of his Parousia. This phrase with its redoubled talk of appearing is an *hapax legomena*, and a curious one at that. I am drawn to Giblin's memorable rendering of the phrase as "the *éclat* of his own *parousia*," for by that borrowed French term he evokes an act at once theatrical and irrepressible, a *dénouement* whose forceful radiance almost displaces entirely everything that has come before.¹⁵ Here we are in the semantic terrain of light and darkness; here we are in the dogmatic terrain of the identity of the One who is "Light from Light," as the creed tells it, whose second advent just is the tabernacling of uncreated divine glory in the midst of the people. As Paul styles it here, *this* epiphany is the eschatological dawning of the day of the Lord which by its nature must drive away and bring to naught the despair, the demagoguery, and the demons that flourish in the night.¹⁶

Taken together, Paul's striking phrases point to the eruption of Christ out from his patient hiddenness and into "exercising the latent power and range

14. John Calvin, in D.W. Torrance and T.F. Torrance (ed.), *Romans and Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 405, emphasis added.

15. Charles Homer Giblin, "The Second Letter to the Thessalonians" in R.E. Brown, J.A. Fitzmeyer, and R.E. Murphy (ed.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990), 874. The term *éclat* has behind it the Old French verb *esclater* meaning "to burst forth" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, c.v.).

16. For wide-ranging discussion of the theological significance of this trope, see the essays collected in part two of *Light from Light: Scientists and Theologians in Dialogue*, ed. Gerald O'Collins and Mary Ann Meyers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

and significance of His presence and therefore putting into effect what was done in Him for all human beings and for the whole created order” as Barth once described the resurrection itself.¹⁷

Indeed, Barth’s proposal in the *Church Dogmatics* that Christ’s *parousia* be understood as a single threefold event encompassing resurrection, present revelation by the Spirit, and future final coming—and which just as such displays recurrent dramatic patterns—is suggestive here.¹⁸ For it is striking how the future eschatological drama limned in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-13 tracks with the dynamic conspiracy of enmity, deception, calculation, and prudence which plays itself out in the narration of the Lord’s passion, that simultaneous outworking and revelation of both the “mystery of lawlessness already at work” (v. 7) and the altogether greater mystery “of the gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ” (Romans 16:25). For all their differences, Paul’s account of the apocalyptic drama of “the coming of our Lord and our assembling to meet him” (2 Thessalonians 2:1) seems to be a dynamic reiteration of Christ’s cross and resurrection: namely, a drama marked by an intensifying, active opposition to God’s ways and purposes which comes to a crescendo and is met, disclosed, and finally overcome simply by the eloquent appearing and epiphanic word of the Lord Jesus. In light of its controlling images, we might also do well to understand this eschatological revelation to which Paul gestures in verse 8 as a final performance of the divine name. This epiphanic word and eloquent appearing of the Lord Jesus is, for faith, God’s hope for the answer to the question “Am I only a God far away and not also a God near at hand?” (Jeremiah 23:23); it is the salutary fulfillment of the promise that “I will be there howsoever I will be there” (Exodus 3:14) in the form of an event which proves at the same time to be the ultimate justification of God before and over his enemies precisely for *their sake*: the eschaton.

I would like to suggest that, if Paul is our teacher, it is crucial to our theological vocation that we resist cultivating the practice of Christian dogmatics “as theology in and of the *katechon*”¹⁹—i.e., doing theology merely in service (however obliquely) to the holding actions of the present powers that be—and instead labor to keep our theological thinking and speaking indexed

17. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1, ed. and trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 292. Translation altered.

18. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1, 292–296.

19. Mike Grimshaw, “Introduction” to Jacob Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), xxiv.

firmly to the eschatological *parousia* of Christ. Whether we construe the beguiling *katechon* as the restrainer—an “ordering power” providentially deployed though “not without guilt ... to protect the world from disintegration,”²⁰—or as the first “non-climatic manifestation of the Anti-God, a pseudo-prophetic threat” that even now looks to “seize” and “possess control” over things,²¹ our theological attention can and must be drawn past it and tethered instead to the promise of the *reigning* of the Lord.

Such a theology would, of necessity, be apocalyptic, “embodying,” as Mangina himself puts it, “a realism of a higher order,” because committed to displaying how the scriptures serve to testify “to *God’s* action on behalf of his world, as the revelation of *Jesus Christ*, and as an instrument of the *Holy Spirit* in opening our minds and hearts to the things that God has done and is doing in our midst.”²² But if this is so, then we must demur from the view that what finds us in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 is “not informational language at all” but merely florid *paraenesis* and *pastoralia*.²³ For there can be no true and effective practical instruction which does not arise from a discernment of the determinative—and disclosive—*doing* of God. Paul here expresses minimal concern for the eschatological *diary*, it is true; but he demonstrates maximal concern for eschatological *dynamics*. And in this theology must follow. For, as Christopher Morse writes, “what grace does, according to the dynamics of this reality description, is overtake us with what our true place actually and amazingly is.”²⁴ Proper theological concentration upon the direction, pattern, and power of this divine overtaking funds our “good hope” (v. 16) as we endeavor to “love the truth” (v. 10) more fully and “delight in righteousness” (v. 12) more fittingly. This kind of apocalyptic realism is enjoined upon

20. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Clifford J. Green (ed.), trans. Richard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglas W. Stott; *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, volume 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 131.

21. Charles Homer Giblin, “The Second Letter to the Thessalonians,” 873–875. Cf. Karl P. Donfried and I. Howard Marshall, *The Theology of the Shorter Pauline Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 94.

22. Joseph Mangina, *Revelation*, 27, 29.

23. M. Eugene Boring, *I & II Thessalonians*, 280: “The unreflective, confessional-language dualism of this paragraph ... is not informational language at all, but the language of *paraenesis*, addressed to insiders—not to inform them about particular apocalyptic events, but to encourage them to live in a particular way.”

24. Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*. 2nd edition (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 239.

us by evangelical faith and, rightly displacing fascination with both “clock and calendar” eschatology and the powerful holding patterns of this present age, it allows us to “keep our wits about us” (v.2) in the midst of the tumult. Indeed, as Calvin avers, for us “the preaching of this doctrine” itself is a servant and anticipation of “Christ’s coming to us,” *in the meantime*.²⁵

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25. John Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 405.