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The Message of the Epistles.

2 Thessalonians.

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THIS letter had apparently been called forth by information Paul had obtained that the Thessalonians were either misconstruing an earlier letter they had received from him, or had received a forged document purporting to have come from him and stating that the day of the Lord had arrived. 'We entreat you, not readily to become unsettled in mind or troubled, either by any spiritual revelation or by any word or letter alleged to come through us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here' (2 Th 2^o). But he begins by praising them for their patience amid persecution. He asserts that in the justice of God their persecutors will be punished, while *they* will receive respite when Jesus comes to judge the disobedient and to be glorified in His saints. The second chapter, however, contains the main message of the letter, a strange little apocalypse to the effect that the day of the Lord cannot come until first a great Apostasy takes place, and an appearing of some one whom the Apostle calls the Man of Lawlessness. This apparently is to take place in the Temple at Jerusalem, where this son of perdition is to set himself up in the place of God. This lawlessness is already at work, but in secret, for there is a restraining force—an individual apparently—who is preventing it from being disclosed. By and by this individual will be removed and then will take place the manifestation of the lawless one, to be followed by swift retribution at the hands of the coming Christ. This lawless one, who is a kind of Antichrist, will be accompanied by all sorts of deceiving signs and wonders which will lead astray the careless. But they will be judged along with him.

Then Paul concludes with thanksgiving and exhortation to stand firm and to 'hold fast to the teachings which you have received from us, whether by word of mouth or by letter'—thereby admitting that he had sent a previous letter. He invites their prayers for him 'that the Lord's word may spread rapidly and be extolled,' but he manifests his anxiety about the Thessalonians by returning to prayer for them. In particular he counsels them to stand aloof from every brother whose life is disorderly and who refuses to work. He adduces his own example, as one who laboured constantly among them so as not to be a burden on any one.

He therefore commands the disorderly ones to work, and not to act the idle busybody. He ends the letter with the words: 'I, Paul, add a greeting with my own hand, which is the credential in every letter of mine. This is my handwriting. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.'

The genuineness of this letter has been denied. The main arguments against the Pauline authorship are, that the apocalyptic passage refers to events later than the life of Paul, that it is inconsistent with his teaching in 1 Th., that it characterizes the community to which it is written differently from 1 Th., and that it differs in tone. A glance at these arguments may be permitted.

It is alleged that in 1 Th. Paul describes the Parousia as imminent, whereas in 2 Th. he seems to argue that those who say it is at hand are wrong. And the reason he gives for this is in some respects the most curious feature of all Paul's letters—the Apocalypse of the Man of Lawlessness. But Paul does not deny that the Parousia is to come, in the second letter. And it is not against those who say that the Parousia is 'at hand' he argues, but against those who say it 'has come' (ἔσθηκει). That is a minor point, however. The chief controversy is concerning the contents of the Apocalypse in the second letter. The Man of Lawlessness is held by some to refer to Nero, or at any rate to the legend that arose after the death of Nero that he was Antichrist and that he would rise from the dead and lead armies of the East against Rome. In fact, it is said that the whole Antichrist legend originated in this way. And since this Apocalypse of 2 Th. clearly refers to Antichrist, it could not have been written till after the death of Nero. Bousset has, however, demonstrated that the legend of Antichrist is much older than the time of Paul. It was a Jewish belief that as there had been strife in heaven before the Creation, so there would be at the end of time. Some human defier of God would arise, who would have a dæmonic counterpart. Thus there is no difficulty in ascribing this letter to Paul so far as the beliefs in it are concerned.

The argument that the tone of the two letters is different while the language is the same may next

be considered. It is said that the sympathy and friendliness of the first letter have disappeared. The second is colder, more official. Further, the first letter seems to have been written to a purely Gentile community; the second is entirely Jewish in colouring. There is, as Wrede suggested, an Old Testament atmosphere about it more than about any New Testament book, except 'the Apocalypse.'

But Harnack has put forward, in reply, the idea that alongside the Gentile community of Christians there was a smaller Jewish community, and the second letter was written to them. He points out that Paul ends the first letter by adjuring the recipients to see that it was read by all the Christians in the place; as if there were two congregations, or, at any rate, some division among the Christians. And he suggests that immediately after the first letter was dispatched the second was sent to the Jewish section. Probably the true reading in 2 Th 2¹³ is, 'God chose you as a first-fruit (*ἀπαρχήν*),' not, 'God chose you from the beginning (*ἀπ' ἀρχῆς*),' as the Received Text has it. The Jewish Christians were the first-fruits in that city. He could not have made a remark of that sort to the whole body of Thessalonican Christians. If, therefore, this letter was sent to the Jewish section, this would account for its more marked Jewish outlook. The change in tone from the first letter is not apparent beyond a sharpening of Paul's authority. The atmosphere is really the same in both.

The most serious objection to the authenticity of this letter is its apparent inconsistency with the first. At first sight it looks as if it had been written to correct or contradict the first, and to deny its genuineness. For it says (2²): 'you must not let your minds get unsettled . . . by any letter purporting to come from me to the effect that the day of the Lord is at hand.' We have already lessened the force of this by pointing out that the correct translation is, not 'at hand,' but 'already here.' It seems more likely that the arrival of Paul's first letter had set some enemy off writing a forgery to confuse the minds of the Christians; for at the end of the second (3¹⁷) he writes an attestation in his own hand.

Various interpretations have been offered of the Mystery of Lawlessness, down even to the Scarlet Woman and the Pope. The only ones that need concern us here are those which spring out of the circumstances of the time in which Paul found himself. Some have suggested Gnosticism, some Emperor worship, some the impious design of Caligula to desecrate the holy place in Jerusalem by setting up his statue there. But on the whole the most likely theory is that it was Jewish hostility to the Christians, which the Empire has meantime restrained. Since the restrainer seems to be a definite individual, it has sometimes been suggested that it was James, the brother of the Lord, esteemed by all Jerusalem, who was holding Judaism in check from falling on the Christian Church.

But in any case, the view that the second letter is spurious is beset with more difficulties than it solves. It is not usual for spurious letters to be addressed to a definite church. Nor can the Apocalypse be held to be an interpolation, for it was for this section that the letter was written. Remove it, and no reason can be given for the existence of the letter at all. And there is no real inconsistency with the first letter. They are simply the variations of the same man's mind at different times. Nor are the ideas in the Apocalypse so very unusual. Somewhat similar ideas were held by Jesus Himself; at least the thought that the Parousia was at hand, but that other events would take place before it.

It is evident from what Paul says in 2 Th 2² that some false report had come to Thessalonica, purporting to have emanated from Paul himself. This is further corroborated by the closing verses of the letter, from which it appears that Paul suspected a forged letter had reached them. For he reminds them that, though he generally had an amanuensis in the writing of his letters, yet he always closed them with a line or two in his own handwriting. There must have been something distinctive about Paul's hand. 'See in what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand,' he writes to the Galatians. It may be a hint of short-sightedness. In any case he is determined the Thessalonicans shall be under no misapprehension as to who is writing to them when they receive a letter claiming to be from him.