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978-0-521-07307-3 - From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica: Situating 1 and 2 Thessalonians

Colin R. Nicholl

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FROM HOPE TO DESPAIR IN THESSALONICA

This ground-breaking analysis cuts to the heart of the critical debate surrounding the two Thessalonian Epistles. Colin R. Nicholl examines the situations giving rise to each letter with a view to determining how the two relate historically. His book presents an original and compelling hypothesis, arguing that reflected in the letters are two stages of a single crisis plaguing a recently formed Greek church, which spiralled from hope into despair on account of confusion about 'the end'. In addition to making a fresh case for the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians and resolving one of the most difficult problems in the Bible, the identity of 'the restrainer', this monograph is the most up-to-date and comprehensive analysis of the Thessalonian Epistles available today. It is an indispensable resource for scholars and pastors interested in the Thessalonian correspondence.

DR COLIN R. NICHOLL is Assistant Professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts. His writings have been published in a number of scholarly, religious and secular publications.

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SOCIETY FOR NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES

MONOGRAPH SERIES

General Editor: Richard Bauckham

126

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521831420

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First published 2004

Reprinted 2005

This digitally printed version 2008

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Nicholl, Colin R.

From hope to despair in Thessalonica: situating 1 and 2 Thessalonians / Colin R. Nicholl.

p. cm. – (Society for New Testament Studies monograph series; 126)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 83142 3

1. Bible. N.T. Thessalonians – Criticism, interpretation, etc. I. Title. II. Monograph series (Society for New Testament Studies); 126.

BS2725.52.N53 2004

227'.8106 – dc21 2004051554

ISBN 978-0-521-83142-0 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-07307-3 paperback

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PREFACE

The title of this monograph encapsulates well not only its contents, but also a significant aspect of my experience in writing it. For, three years into my research, in March 1999, I travelled to Thessalonica and *environs* with my wife, Sirscha, to see the various sites of archaeological significance. On the evening of 16 March, we left Thessalonica for Philippi in our rental car. By the time we had reached Asprovalta, outside Thessalonica, the rain was coming down in torrents. As I was driving around a bend in the road, I saw a car stationary in the road in front of me and braked, only to skid into the other side of the road, as though on black ice. In spite of my efforts to manoeuvre the car into the ditch, we careered head-on into an oncoming lorry.

In the crash my wife sustained a terrible head wound and three fractures in her left arm, and I fractures in my sternum, ribs and right leg (tibia and fibula). Astonishingly an ambulance happened to be passing by with two empty beds. My wife was taken to the Hippokratia hospital and I to Saint Paul's hospital in Thessalonica. For sixteen hours I lay in pain and despair, wondering whether my wife would survive and, if she did, whether she would have her mental faculties. During that time, the gentleman in the bed opposite me died and I heard his wife's scream of despair as she heard the news. But I thank God that the life and mind of my spouse were preserved and that she was soon transported to be with me in Saint Paul's.

After five difficult days in Thessalonica (documented in *The Spectator*, 2 February 2002), we were airlifted to Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge for surgery. Sirscha had metal plates inserted into her left forearm and I had a unilateral external fixator ('the mutilator') affixed to my tibia. Unfortunately, after four months with 'the mutilator' and two months in a cast, on the day when I was expecting to begin walking again, I was informed that my tibia had not united and that I required major surgery to rectify the problem. The feeling of abandonment by God at that time was very real. Needless to say, the palpable despair I experienced in Thessalonica (and Cambridge) has given me a greater

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empathy for what I believe was the predicament of the addressees of 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

In the wake of my experiences, I should thank certain key people, who gave me and my wife hope in the midst of our despair. I would like to thank Costas and the other ambulanceman who helped save my wife's life; the surgeons of Hippokratia Hospital who operated on my wife, and certain, regrettably anonymous, staff at Saint Paul's who showed kindness to my wife and me; Alison Haralimpidis, the representative of the British Consulate in Thessalonica, a very wonderful lady, who went far beyond the call of duty, making our stay in Thessalonica bearable and shorter than it otherwise would have been; Paul Stephenson, the US Consul General and his team, who also worked diligently on our behalf; and, most of all, missionaries Brian and Elizabeth Richards and their two children, who, upon receiving an e-mail about our predicament, left Skopje, Macedonia, and drove five hours to Thessalonica to serve us in a Christ-like manner for four days.

In addition, I am grateful to the members of Eden Chapel and some friends at Tyndale House, who for two months took turns to deliver home-cooked meals for my wife and me; and to the hundreds, even thousands, who prayed for us in Cambridge, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Germany, the USA, Canada and across the world.

My research has benefited greatly from access to the resources of the university libraries of Tübingen, Uppsala and Cambridge, as well as of the libraries of Corpus Christi College, the Faculties of Oriental Studies and of Classics, and Tyndale House. Friends particularly helpful to me include Wesley Olmstead, Steve Bryan, David Baer and John Hartmann.

A member of Corpus Christi College, I always appreciated the college's friendliness and warmth, particularly as expressed by the gracious Graduate Secretary, Margaret Cathie. The Student Awards Agency for Scotland are to be thanked for the three-year major Scottish Studentship which made this study possible, and for funding my 'study trip' to Greece. In addition, I wish to express my gratitude to Corpus Christi College and the Managers of the Bethune-Baker and Hort Memorial Funds (the Faculty of Divinity, Cambridge) for generous research grants.

Profound thanks are due to my supervisor, Professor M. D. Hooker, who never failed to offer incisive and rigorous criticism and valuable advice. At the same time, I must express my appreciation for the kindness, patience and sympathy she displayed in the face of my medical problems and those of my father, and for her sense of humour throughout the process. I feel honoured to have had her as my supervisor. I am grateful also to Dr. M. M. B. Thompson, who supervised me for one term when Professor Hooker was on sabbatical.

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Thanks are also due to my doctoral examiners, Professor I. Howard Marshall and Revd John Sweet, for their constructive criticism of my work and their encouragement to publish my research. I am indebted to Professor Richard Bauckham for accepting this book as a part of the SNTS Monograph Series. In addition, I have been grateful to faculty, staff and students at the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Divinity, where I lectured for two years, and at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, where I am now privileged to serve as an Assistant Professor, for helping to create congenial and stimulating academic environments in which theological research can truly thrive.

I am inestimably indebted to my parents, who first endued me with an appreciation for the Bible, and who sacrificed so much for me throughout my theological education, but especially in 1999, when, for a total of three months, they left everything to help my wife and me in the aftermath of the accident. They were consistently encouraging and supportive, as were my wife's parents, who also flew to Cambridge to assist my wife and me when we were so needy.

I dedicate this book to my wife, the most gracious, loving and patient person I have ever met. To see her with her head split open in the ambulance and then to lie in a hospital bed in Thessalonica thinking that she might be dead or brain-damaged were without doubt the worst moments of my life. But to hear that she had survived was undoubtedly the most joyful moment of my life. I cannot imagine life without her; she is my soul mate, whom I love to the very depths of my being. She has given so much of herself for me and for this book. I count it a privilege to be her husband.

Finally, I wish to thank God my Father and the Lord Jesus Christ for providing me with the opportunity and the means to study at Cambridge, for sustaining me throughout, for flashes of what seemed like inspiration and insight, and, most of all, for hearing the desperate cries of my wife and me for salvation on a road just outside Thessalonica.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Unless specifically noted below, abbreviations follow the SNTS Monograph Series style and the *SBL Handbook of Style*.

1 Clem.	1 Clement
1 Esdr.	1 Esdras
2 Bar.	2 Baruch
ABS	Anvil Biblical Studies
ACNT	<i>Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament</i>
ACS	Ancient Culture and Society
Aeschylus, <i>Pr.</i>	<i>Prometheus Vincitus</i>
AGRL	Aspects of Greek and Roman Life
Apoc. Abr.	Apocalypse of Abraham
Apuleius, <i>Apol.</i>	<i>Apologia</i>
ARGU	Arbeiten zur Religion und Geschichte des Urchristentums
Aristotle, <i>Rhet.</i>	<i>Rhetorica</i>
Asc. Isa.	Ascension of Isaiah
ATLAP	<i>American Theological Library Association: Proceedings</i>
BAFCS	The Book of Acts in its First-Century Setting
Barn.	Epistle of Barnabas
BCBC	Believers Church Bible Commentary
BECGNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the Greek New Testament
BFCT	Beiträge zur Förderung christlicher Theologie
BLG	Biblical Languages: Greek
BPAA	Bibliotheca Pontificii Athenaei Antoniani
BS	The Biblical Seminar
BST	Bible Speaks Today
BTCL	Biblical and Theological Classics Library

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BU	Biblische Untersuchungen
CB	Century Bible
CBSC	Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges
CC	Calvin's Commentaries
CCC	Christ and Culture Collection
CEB	Commentaires Evangéliques de la Bible
CECNT	Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
CFTL	Clark's Foreign Theological Library
Cicero, <i>Rep.</i>	<i>De Republica</i>
COQG	Christian Origins and Question of God
CPNIVC	College Press NIV Commentary
CRS	Classical Resources Series
CUF	Collection des universités de France
Cyril of Jerusalem, <i>Cat.</i>	<i>Catechetical Lectures</i>
DBM	<i>Deltio Biblikon Meleton</i>
Did.	Didache
Diog. L.	Diogenes Laertius
EBC	<i>Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>
EBib	Etudes bibliques
Epictetus, <i>Diss.</i>	<i>Dissertationes</i>
Eusebius, <i>Hist. Eccl.</i>	<i>Historia Ecclesiastica</i>
FCCGRW	First-Century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World
<i>Gen. R.</i>	<i>Genesis Rabbah</i>
GLH	Greek Lands in History
GNS	Good News Studies
Gos. Thom.	Gospel of Thomas
Gr. Apoc. Ezra	Greek Apocalypse of Ezra
GTA	Göttinger theologische Arbeiten
GTJ	<i>Grace Theological Journal</i>
GTW	Grundriß der theologischen Wissenschaften
Herm. <i>Sim.</i>	Hermas, <i>Similitudes</i>
HFT	Helps for Translators
HNieT	Het Nieuwe Testament
HSL	Herald Scriptural Library
HSP	Halley Stewart Publications
HT	Harper Torchbooks
HTKNTSup	Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament Supplement-Bände
Irenaeus, <i>Adv. Haer.</i>	<i>Adversus Haereses</i>

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JBS	Jerusalem Biblical Studies
Jerome, <i>Epist.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
JHC	<i>Journal of Higher Criticism</i>
JL	The Jowett lectures
Josephus, <i>Ant.</i>	<i>Antiquitates Judaicae</i>
<i>Bell.</i>	<i>De Bello Judaico</i>
JPentT	<i>Journal of Pentecostal Theology</i>
JProfT	<i>Jahrbücher für protestantische Theologie</i>
Jub.	Jubilees
KNT	Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
KVHS	Korte verklaring der Heilige Schrift
LaB	Old Latin text as found in Lat169 and Lat170 and as published by D. De Bruyne, 'Les Anciennes Versions latines du Cantique des Cantiques', <i>Revue Bénédictine</i> 38 (1926): 97–122
LaH	Jerome's Hexaplaric Emendation of the Old Latin as reconstructed by A. Vaccari, <i>Cantici Canticorum: Vetus Latina Translatio a S. Hieronymo ad Graecum Textum Hexaplarem Emendata</i>
LCBI	Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation
McNTS	McMaster New Testament Studies
Malalas, <i>Chron.</i>	<i>Chronographia</i>
MC	Macmillan Commentaries
MSB	Monographien und Studienbücher
MTL	Marshall's Theological Library
MTS	Marburger theologische Studien
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NClarB	New Clarendon Bible
NGS	New Gospel Studies
NHMS	Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
NK	Natur och kultur
NLT	New Living Translation
NTM	New Testament Message
NTR	New Testament Readings
NTT	New Testament Theology
OBS	Oxford Bible Series
Obs.	Julius Obsequens
OCT	Outstanding Christian Thinkers

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Origen, <i>In Mat.</i>	<i>Commentary on Matthew</i>
OTM	Oxford Theological Monographs
PCPSSup	Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society Supplementary Volumes
<i>Pes.</i>	<i>Peṣahim</i>
P. Flor.	D. Comparetto and G. Vitelli, <i>Papiri greco-egizii: Papiri fiorentini</i>
P. Hib.	B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt, eds., <i>The Hibeh Papyri: Part I</i>
Philo, <i>Leg. All.</i>	<i>Legum Allegoriae</i>
<i>Leg. Gai.</i>	<i>Legatio ad Gaium</i>
<i>Mig. Abr.</i>	<i>De Migratione Abrahami</i>
<i>Mut.</i>	<i>De Mutatione Nominum</i>
<i>Plant.</i>	<i>De Plantatione</i>
<i>Praem. Poen.</i>	<i>De Praemiis et Poenis</i>
<i>Quaest. in Gen.</i>	<i>Quaestiones in Genesin</i>
<i>Sac.</i>	<i>De Sacrificiis Abelis et Caini</i>
<i>Spec. Leg.</i>	<i>De Specialibus Legibus</i>
Pliny, <i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
P. Lond.	F. G. Kenyon and H. I. Bell, <i>Greek Papyri in the British Museum</i>
Plutarch, <i>Public.</i>	<i>Publicola</i>
Pol. <i>Phil.</i>	Polycarp, <i>The Epistle to the Philippians</i>
Polybius, <i>Hist.</i>	<i>Histories</i>
P. Oxy.	The Oxyrhynchus Papyri
Ps.-Philo, <i>Ant.</i>	Pseudo-Philo, <i>Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum</i>
Ps. Sol.	Psalms of Solomon
PTA	Papyrologische Texte und Abhandlungen
REL	<i>Revue Ecclésiastique de Liège</i>
SBG	Studies in Biblical Greek
SBibS	Sources for Biblical Study
SCBO	Scriptorum Classicorum Bibliotheca Oxoniensis
Sch. Eur. <i>Hec.</i>	W. Dindorf, ed., <i>Scholia Graeca in Euripidis Tragoedias ex Codicibus Aucta et Emendata</i> . 4 vols. Oxford: Academico, 1863
SEJC	Studies in Early Judaism and Christianity
SENT	Schlatters Erläuterungen zum Neuen Testament
SFAC	South Florida Academic Commentary Series

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SHCT	Studies in the History of Christian Thought
Sib. Or.	Sibylline Oracles
SJSJ	Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism
SM	Studia Moralia
SMBCB	Supplements to Mnemosyne, Bibliotheca Classica Batava
SNTG	Die Schriften des Neuen Testaments neu übersetzt und für die Gegenwart erklärt
SNTW	Studies of the New Testament and its World
Sophocles, <i>Ant.</i>	<i>Antigone</i>
SVTG	Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum
Tacitus, <i>Ann.</i>	<i>Annales</i>
TC	Theological Collections
TC	R. F. Collins, ed., <i>Thessalonian Correspondence</i> . BETL. Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1990
TED	Translations of Early Documents
TEH	Theologische Existenz heute
<i>Tetrast. Iamb.</i>	<i>Tetrasticha Iambica</i>
TG	<i>Theologisches Geschenk</i>
T. Jud.	Testament of Judah
TSJTSA	Texts and Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America
TTFL	Theological Translation Fund Library
TWAT	<i>Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament</i>
TZT	<i>Tübinger Zeitschrift für Theologie</i>
UBS	United Bible Societies
VB	Verklaring van een Bijbelgedeelte
<i>WestJ</i>	<i>Wesleyan Theological Journal</i>
Wis.	Wisdom of Solomon
WS	<i>Weidenauer Studien</i>
WSB	Wuppertaler Studienbibel
Xenophon, <i>An.</i>	<i>Anabasis</i>
<i>Hell.</i>	<i>Hellenica</i>