

**It is very easy for today's Messianic people to overlook the content of the Pauline Epistles, due to their complexities about issues pertaining to the Torah, Second Temple Judaism, and the inclusion of the nations in God's plan of salvation. Among all of the Pauline letters, though, 1&2 Thessalonians get almost totally ignored by contemporary Messianic readers. Yet, 1&2 Thessalonians were some of the earliest of Paul's letters written, depicting some of the early conflicts which the Body of Messiah experienced, as the good news was being proclaimed in the Mediterranean world. 1&2 Thessalonians are quoted in bits and pieces for their teachings on the end-times, the Second Coming, and they are surely employed in debates over a pre- or post-tribulational gathering of the holy ones/saints. 1&2 Thessalonians include much more to be examined for certain, as the First Century Believers were caught in the middle of often being rejected by the Jewish Synagogue, and they were treated with great suspicion and hostility by Greeks and Romans.**

**What are some of the important spiritual and theological issues to be explored in 1&2 Thessalonians, which can no longer go overlooked for today's Messianic Believers? Was the Apostle Paul anti-Semitic in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15? What kind of a religious and/or political clash was occurring between the early Messianic movement, and the Roman establishment's veneration of Caesar? How has 1&2 Thessalonians been interpreted among many contemporary evangelical Protestants accurately, and not so accurately, as it concerns the return of the Messiah? What about the importance of the doctrine of the resurrection, especially for the early non-Jewish Believers, who were still likely struggling with issues from their pagan upbringing? What were some of the challenges which the widely non-Jewish Believers of Thessalonica faced, as they turned to the Messiah of Israel for salvation, and had to decisively be removed from any of the social or religious spheres in which they had once lived?**

**What important lessons are there for contemporary Messianic Believers to learn from 1&2 Thessalonians? How much have we left these two letters outside of our purview of Bible reading? What key insights and admonitions need to be incorporated into our spirituality, given some of the issues and difficulties we currently face—presumably as we live in some of the final decades before the actual return of Yeshua (Jesus) to Planet Earth? Messianic Apologetics editor J.K. McKee elaborates on these, and various other key subjects, in the commentary *1&2 Thessalonians for the Practical Messianic*.**

**Also included in this commentary is an exposition on Acts 17:1-15: Paul's visit to Thessalonica.**



# 1&2 THESSALONIANS

## FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC



# 1&2 THESSALONIANS FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

J.K. MCKEE

**MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS**  
[messianicapologetics.net](http://messianicapologetics.net)

# 1&2 THESSALONIANS

## FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

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# ABBREVIATIONS AND SPECIAL TERMS

The following is a list of abbreviations for reference works and special terms which are used in publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as TWOT for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

ABD: *Anchor Bible Dictionary*  
AMG: *Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament*  
ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)  
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament  
Ara: Aramaic  
ASV: American Standard Version (1901)  
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)  
b. Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*)  
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.  
BDAG: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)  
BDB: *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*  
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.  
CGEDNT: *Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Barclay M. Newman)  
CGL: *Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (2021)  
CHALOT: *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Holladay)  
CJB: *Complete Jewish Bible* (1998)  
CJSB: *Complete Jewish Study Bible* (2016)  
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition  
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls  
ECB: *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*  
EDB: *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*  
EJ: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*  
ESV: English Standard Version (2001)  
Ger: German  
GNT: Greek New Testament  
Grk: Greek  
HALOT: *Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koehler and Baumgartner)  
HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)  
Heb: Hebrew  
HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible  
IDB: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*

IDBSup: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement*  
ISBE: *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*  
IVPBBC: *IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)*  
Jastrow: *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (Marcus Jastrow)  
JBK: *New Jerusalem Bible-Koren* (2000)  
JETS: *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*  
KJV: King James Version  
Lattimore: *The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore* (1996)  
LITV: *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* by Jay P. Green (1986)  
LES: *Lexham English Septuagint* (2019)  
LS: *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott)  
LSJM: *Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott-Jones-McKenzie)  
LXE: *Septuagint with Apocrypha* by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)  
LXX: Septuagint  
m. Mishnah  
MARV: Messianic Apologetics Revised Version \*  
MT: Masoretic Text  
NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)  
NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)  
NBCR: *New Bible Commentary: Revised*  
NEB: *New English Bible* (1970)  
Nelson: *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*  
NETS: *New English Translation of the Septuagint* (2007)  
NIB: *New Interpreter's Bible*  
NIDB: *New International Dictionary of the Bible*  
NIV: *New International Version* (1984)  
NJB: *New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic* (1985)

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\* This is a modified and adapted edition of the public domain World Messianic Bible (WMB).

NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)  
NKJV: New King James Version (1982)  
NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)  
NLT: New Living Translation (1996)  
NT: New Testament  
OT: Old Testament  
REB: Revised English Bible (1989)  
RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)  
t. Tosefta  
Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament  
Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*  
TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*

TLV: Messianic Jewish Family Bible—Tree of Life Version (2014)  
TNIV: Today's New International Version (2005)  
TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*  
UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition  
v(s). verse(s)  
Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*  
Vul: Latin Vulgate  
YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)  
WMB: World Messianic Bible (2020)



# INTRODUCTION

For many Bible readers, or even just readers of the Pauline Epistles, encountering the letters of 1&2 Thessalonians is a bit of a conundrum.<sup>1</sup> When reading through much larger letters like Romans or 1&2 Corinthians, or a letter with a great deal of emotion and urgency like Galatians, or a letter with great majesty like Ephesians—there are some people who see 1&2 Thessalonians and just wonder, “*Huh?*” At the very most, too many Bible readers’ experience with encountering 1&2 Thessalonians is in single verse quotations here and there. They know about things like, “the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout...” (1 Thessalonians 4:16, NASU), “...who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God...” (2 Thessalonians 2:4, NASU), or “the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders” (2 Thessalonians 2:9, NASU). But how much do they know about things like, “For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—and yet Satan hindered us” (1 Thessalonians 2:18, NASU), or “Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone” (1 Thessalonians 3:1, NASU)? While the end-times or eschatology are undeniably a major feature of these two letters, understanding some of the issues, of the early Messianic movement in reaching out into the Mediterranean world, is also a major feature which all Bible readers need to know about.

Depending on how one dates the Epistle to the Galatians, the Epistle of 1 Thessalonians is often regarded as “the oldest extant piece of Christian literature” (Collins, *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*).<sup>2</sup> Many expositors on the Apostolic Scriptures date Galatians as the earliest of the Pauline letters composed, before the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council. But even if Galatians was the first Pauline letter written, then given the chronology of the Book of Acts and Paul’s visit to Thessalonica in Acts 17:1-9, the letter of 1 Thessalonians could still easily be the second oldest piece of Messianic literature, to then be quickly followed by 2 Thessalonians. The need, for reviewing 1&2 Thessalonians, makes these letters very important for us to understand and

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that in spite of the common reference to 1&2 Thessalonians as “the Book of 1 or 2 Thessalonians,” I am going to purposefully refer to these texts as either the First/Second Epistle(s) to the Thessalonians or Paul’s first/second letter(s) to the Thessalonians, and not use this reference. By failing to forget that these texts were letters written to a specific audience in a specific setting, we can make the common error of thinking that these were texts written *directly to us*. Our goal as responsible interpreters is to try to reconstruct what these letters meant to *their original audience first*, before applying their messages in a modern-day setting.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond F. Collins, “The First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians,” in Walter J. Harrelson, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, NRSV (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 2115.

contemplate some of the thoughts and viewpoints of the early Believers, and the challenges they faced. While there are various themes encountered in 1&2 Thessalonians viewed as being a bit general by many laypersons, Robert K. Jewett astutely informs us how,

“In the last decade or so [1990s into the 2000s] these two small letters have become some of the most hotly debated documents in the NT...[T]hey reflect the earliest accessible stage of Paul’s pastoral and missionary endeavors and provide our earliest glimpse into a nascent Pauline congregation” (ECB).<sup>3</sup>

A further summary on the importance of 1&2 Thessalonians is offered by J.W. Simpson, Jr., who says,

“Despite their brevity and their relative lack of significantly developed theological themes compared to the other letters in the Pauline corpus, the two letters to the Thessalonian Christians have become the object of much recent scholarly examination, particularly in the areas of rhetorical criticism,...sociological analysis...and the early development of Pauline theology” (*Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*).<sup>4</sup>

While Bible readers in general wonder about what role the letters of 1&2 Thessalonians play within the New Testament, it might be said that a certain number of Messianic Bible readers might even forget about 1&2 Thessalonians even being present within the Apostolic Scriptures. Yet, all can be easily reminded of the significant prophetic aspects of 1&2 Thessalonians, and what these letters teach Messiah followers about the future resurrection of the dead, the Second Coming, the rise of the antimesiah/antichrist, and sure judgment upon evil. A particular “bonus” to all of this, is that an examination, of the text of 1&2 Thessalonians on the whole, invites readers into a charged atmosphere in First Century Thessalonica, the capital of Macedonia, where the early Believers were at growing odds with their pagan neighbors and the local Jewish synagogue. One group thought the Messiah followers a nuisance as they proclaimed a King and Lord other than Caesar, and another group thought that they would incur Rome’s anger upon them as a minority group within the Empire.

Much is present in 1&2 Thessalonians which will surely enrich your understanding of Paul’s First Century ministry, and how the good news of Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ) can be particularly subversive to those in positions of political or religious power.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert K. Jewett, “1 and 2 Thessalonians,” in James D.G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson, eds., *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1413.

<sup>4</sup> J.W. Simpson, Jr., “Thessalonians, Letters to the,” in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 932.

## PAUL AND HIS RELATIONSHIP TO THE THESSALONICANS

The Apostle Paul visited the city of Thessalonica during his Second Missionary Journey (Acts 15:40-18:23). Paul began his early ministry in Thessalonica at the local synagogue (Acts 17:1-9), after he had to leave Philippi (Acts 16:6-40). There was a Jewish presence in the city, but later the group of new Messiah followers became predominantly non-Jewish (Acts 17:4; cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:9).<sup>5</sup> The leaders of the local synagogue became rather hostile to Paul, and brought charges against him before the city leaders of Thessalonica, on the trumped up accusation of him and his company being Messianic agitators (Acts 17:6-7). This likely had something to do with how the Emperor Claudius had once expelled all of the Jews from Rome, “Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus” (Suetonius *Life of Claudius* 25.2).<sup>6</sup> This was none other than a problem caused in Rome, by the proclamation of the Christ or the Messiah having arrived, and it stirred up a significant amount of trouble in the Roman Jewish community.

With the Jews having been forced to leave the city of Rome, this definitely played a role in how Paul and his gospel proclamation were received in Thessalonica. Ben Witherington III notes, “There was no reason Jews in Thessalonike might not feel the wrath of the emperor as well if they were caught disturbing the Pax Romana.”<sup>7</sup> If Paul was caught to be an insurrectionist against the Roman Empire, there would have been consequences for the Thessalonican Jewish community.

Paul had stayed in Thessalonica just long enough, to see a growing fellowship of Messiah followers emerge. The core of the Thessalonican assembly was made up of God-fearers (Acts 17:4), who had likely been associated with the local Jewish synagogue for some time. Various expositors, like Leon Morris and Donald Guthrie, think that these people were truly attracted to the One God of Israel, but they were not too interested in a narrow-minded ethnic exclusivity, present in much of Judaism.<sup>8</sup> What was the jealousy which arose against Paul from the Thessalonican Jews (Acts 17:5)? Was it caused by the message he proclaimed, as it was a rather inclusive message for all who would turn to Yeshua for salvation? Or, was it just that Paul was a better teacher of the Scriptures than they (Acts 17:2)? While there were surely a variety of social and spiritual factors at work in Thessalonica—and jealousy in general is a bane on all human beings of all generations—ultimately it might have just been the nature of Paul’s preaching which worried the Thessalonican Jews. Witherington observes,

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), pp 585-586; Simpson, “Thessalonians, Letters to the,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 934.

<sup>6</sup> Suetonius: *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves (London: Penguin Books, 1957), 202.

<sup>7</sup> Ben Witherington III, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 9.

<sup>8</sup> Leon Morris, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 18; Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 585.

“Jews were already in a somewhat precarious or even marginalized position after various proclamations and actions of Claudius since A.D. 41. They could hardly afford to lose what local support they had among local Gentiles, especially among the social elite, whether men or women.”<sup>9</sup>

The difficult part of Paul’s message declared in Thessalonica, as inclusive as it may have been for people looking to Yeshua for redemption—was tied to the accusation, “They are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king, *Yeshua*” (Acts 17:7, TLV).

The record of Paul’s visit to Thessalonica in Acts 17:1-9 is brief. Even though Paul and Silas stayed in Thessalonica for three Sabbaths (Acts 17:2), or the equivalent of around two weeks, it is likely that they were in Thessalonica a bit longer, with it being thought by some that it was as long as two to four months.<sup>10</sup> Even though the impression one gets from the Acts 17:1-9 record is the visit was more than two weeks, but perhaps less than two months—a month<sup>11</sup> to six weeks or so—was the time Paul spent in the city. A stay for Paul in Thessalonica of longer than two weeks would be necessary, to account for how the Philippian Believers, whom he had just left, sent an offering to him twice (Philippians 4:16).

There must have been a point when Paul stopped attending synagogue functions, he sought new Believers from among the local pagan Thessalonians, and then he was forced to leave the city. Paul had to leave the city in order to protect his Thessalonian friends who had received Yeshua, who had paid bond for him (Acts 17:9), given the charges of him being an instigator against Caesar. Morris raises the important factor

“It is clear from the Epistles that, while Paul had given a good deal of teaching, there was much he had not been able to say.”<sup>12</sup>

Having left Thessalonica, the Apostle Paul traveled on to Berea, where he was received far more favorably by the local Jewish synagogue, as they were told about the Messiah of Israel. As is commonly quoted at many Bible studies, “they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11, NASU), as those in the Berean synagogue examined the Tanach (OT) Scriptures to carefully check Paul’s teachings and gospel proclamation. While Paul experienced ministry success in Berea (Acts 17:12), the Jewish leaders from Thessalonica actually followed him and stirred up trouble (Acts 17:13). This forced Paul to move on to Athens (Acts 17:14-15). Paul’s ministry

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<sup>9</sup> Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 39.

<sup>10</sup> D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 533.

<sup>11</sup> Morris, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

work in Athens (Acts 17:16-34) was relatively fruitless, and from there he moved on to Corinth (Acts 18:1-17), where he spent a year-and-a-half.<sup>13</sup>

Looking at what is said in the account of Paul's visit to Thessalonica and Berea (Acts 17:1-15), and the surrounding events, F.F. Bruce concludes that

"The outline of events, gathered from 1 Thessalonians, agrees so well with the fuller record of Acts 16:6-18:5 that the record, though it is substantially later than 1 Thessalonians, may confidently be accepted as providing a historical framework within which the data of 1 Thessalonians can be read with greater understanding."<sup>14</sup>

To this, also needs to be factored the thoughts of I. Howard Marshall on Paul visiting Thessalonica again. Even though the Thessalonians would be told, "Satan hindered us" (1 Thessalonians 2:18, NASU) from visiting, the possibility could be present that Paul did visit the Thessalonians in person again:

"We hear nothing more of Thessalonica directly from Acts. After Paul's lengthy stays in Corinth and Ephesus, however, he departed for Macedonia, and after encouraging the disciples there, he went on south to Greece (Ac. 20:1f.). After three months there, presumably in Corinth, he returned north to Macedonia and sailed from Philippi to Troas, and so made his way to Jerusalem for his last visit (Ac. 20:3-6). It can be taken for granted that on both of these journeys through Macedonia he would have visited Thessalonica. This is confirmed by the fact that a number of Christians accompanied Paul from various churches to Jerusalem, and two names of Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus, are listed, along with the representative from Berea [Acts 20:4]..."<sup>15</sup>

While visiting Thessalonica again remains within a window of possibilities to have taken place later in the Book of Acts, what was more important was the need—after having to leave the city of Thessalonica—for Paul to have remained in contact with the new Believers. Morris makes the point, especially in view of the synagogue leaders in Thessalonica opposing Paul, of how they must have

"urged that he had no real love for his converts...and that he had never been motivated by any genuine concern for them, but only by the desire for personal profit. At that period there were many wandering preachers, both of philosophy and religion. They made a living by imposing on the credulity of those whom they could persuade to listen to them. It was

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. F.F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary: 1&2 Thessalonians*, Vol 45 (Waco TX: Word Books, 1982), pp xxii-xxvi for a further summary of the Acts 17:1-9 account, and its relationship to the background of 1&2 Thessalonians.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi.

<sup>15</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *New Century Bible Commentary: 1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 3.