

Second Thessalonians

Did Paul write 2 Thessalonians? It is widely accepted that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians, but 2 Thessalonians is more controversial. The writing style is very close, which is a good indication that the same author wrote both books. But that isn't the only factor that experts must consider. And similarity in style isn't as straightforward a factor as one might assume. For obvious reasons, any forger worth his salt will do everything he can to imitate the known style of the author he is imitating. So, then it's a matter of sorting out how closely they align in style and vocabulary. For many scholars, the similarity in style between the two Thessalonians epistles is good enough to conclude that Paul wrote both.

But for other scholars, there is a problem. Some of what the author says in the second epistle seems not to correspond with what he says in the first. The main reason (or one of them) for writing the second letter is to address the issue of the timing of the coming of the Kingdom of God. It goes back to the words Jesus spoke on that subject as recorded in the gospel of Mark. In Mark 1:15, 9:1, and 13:30, Jesus made it very clear that the Kingdom of God was imminent. Jesus said that it would happen before some of the people in his listening audience died. However, as more and more of those people died over the years and the Kingdom still had not arrived, believers naturally began to question their eschatological beliefs. It became ever more clear that what they had expected, and what Jesus had promised, did not happen. That forced Christian leaders like Paul to keep finessing the official line on God's timing. They couldn't just say: "Oops, Jesus was wrong. Never mind. Forget everything we've told you about Christianity. It just didn't work out like we thought it would. Oh well." They had to keep coming up with plausible explanations about why Jesus had been so wrong.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul tries to assuage their fear and anxiety by assuring them that those who had already died had not lost their place in line. They weren't being cheated. When the Kingdom did finally come, those souls would be resurrected, and they would be the first group ushered into the Kingdom. Only then would Jesus usher in the second

group – those still alive when the Kingdom comes. It wasn't known exactly when that would happen, Paul said, but when the time came, it would be a sudden, dramatic event. Therefore, the Thessalonian believers needed to be constantly prepared and alert, because the coming of the Kingdom would sneak up on them. (See 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11).

That, apparently, did not solve the problem, however. It seems that some of the believers there got the idea that the Kingdom had already come, and they seemed convinced that that teaching had come from Paul and his aids. The author of 2 Thessalonians tells them not to believe that false teaching, no matter how they happened to have heard about it. He goes on to explain that certain events must take place before the Kingdom will come. He briefly describes those events, and reminds them that he had told them all about it when they were still together. (See 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2).

And that is why some scholars believe that Paul did not write both epistles. If Paul had in fact told them about the events that would precede the coming of the Kingdom, how could he have also told them that it would be a sudden, dramatic event that would take them by surprise, and that nobody could predict when it would happen? Those two messages are incompatible. Paul said one thing or the other, but he did not say both, obviously. It's plausible that, between the writing of the two letters, Paul had changed his mind, or that new information had come to light. But, that doesn't solve the dilemma, because he says that he had told them about the events preceding the coming during their time together (before the first epistle was written).

For that reason, 2 Thessalonians appears to be a forgery. Another indication, although admittedly less compelling, is 2 Thessalonians 3:17: (NRSV)

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.

Well, maybe not. Paul does not typically close that way. In other words, the author is saying "This is really Paul writing, and you can tell it is really Paul writing, because I write just like Paul". He does end 1 Corinthians (16:21) with:

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. That sounds like Paul. In 2 Thessalonians 3:17, the author doth protest too much.

Interestingly, the second primary purpose of this second epistle is to address a problem that apparently developed sometime after the first letter was written. It seems some Thessalonians had become slackers. Paul (or his impersonator) needed to scold them and remind them to get off their asses and earn their dinner. Anyone who wouldn't work wouldn't be fed, and slackers were to be ostracized. However, they weren't to be treated as enemies. More like ugly redheaded cousins. Or something. (See 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15).