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Peace, Security, and Labor Pains in 1 Thessalonians 5.3

Daniel M. Yencich

All of Paul's letters, to one degree or another, feel like they are expecting something. If there is a sense of unfinished business in Paul's writing it is because his story of salvation is incomplete: Christ came, died for our sins, and was raised from the dead, but the resurrection of Jesus is just the first fruits—a symbol, a signpost of the fullness of the kingdom to come. For Paul, it is on the future day of the Lord when the kingdom of God will come in its fullness and God will finally be all in all (1 Cor 15). Paul preaches from this liminal place between the *now* and the *not yet* of the kingdom: Paul proclaims this kingdom just as he awaits this kingdom. In the midst of his preaching, teaching, and letter-writing, the Apostle Paul is expecting something.

This sense of expectation is not divorced from reality for Paul. Expecting the advent of a new world does not induce Paul to simply check out of this one. Paul's apocalyptic worldview of expectation does not simply give him a lens through which to see the coming end. Rather, it affords Paul and his churches a uniquely Christ-centered way of living in this world while waiting for and expecting its transformation. Paul's apocalyptic outlook is an active expectation and thus not without its own unique set of politics and way of being in the world. In Paul's worldview, the present and coming kingdom of God has radical and concrete implications for the present world and its kingdoms. According to the Pauline teaching, Christ disarmed the powers by his death (Col 2.15) and will abolish all rulers and powers and place all enemies beneath his feet when his kingdom comes in its fullness (1 Cor 15.24). In light of the victory of Christ, the assurance of his coming kingdom, and the social context of living as Roman subjects in conquered territory, a key question animates Paul's ministry: How are we to live faithfully within the earthly kingdom of Rome as we expect the coming of the kingdom of God?

Throughout the history of its interpretation, 1 Thessalonians 4–5 has largely been understood as having *only* to do with the *not yet* of the kingdom. This is indeed understandable, since these chapters explicitly detail the future coming of the Lord and the resurrection of the dead. Yet woven into this eschatological expectation is a concretely this-worldly and political statement in verse 5.3: “When they say, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!” (NRSV).

In a cultural climate that values the separation of church and state and eschews talk of religion and politics at the dinner table, it is unsurprising that the politics of Paul's expectation in 5.3 have typically been missed. Yet, as a close reading of this verse shows, there is good reason to interpret it as a carefully crafted Messianic critique forecasting swift destruction for all who would place faith in the *peace* (*eirēnē*) and *security* (*asphaleia*) of Rome and its rulers. This destruction will come upon Rome, its rulers, and its manifold governing structures present at Thessalonica and in every territory conquered by Rome. God's justice will come upon the Roman Empire, just as labor pains (*ōdin*) befall a pregnant woman, and “there will be no escape!”

Although much of what follows will focus on those two words in 5.3—*peace* and *security*—the ultimate aim is to root 5.3 more firmly within the wider literary context of the letter and the social world in which 1 Thessalonians was composed and received. Following a sketch of the debate over whether 5.3 represents false prophecy or a Roman slogan, I will present the case for reading *eirēnē* and *asphaleia* as separate but

complementary qualities that Rome proclaimed of its imperial identity, power, and rule. From this follows the conclusion that 5.3 is part of Paul's salvation narrative in which God's kingdom eclipses and destroys the unjust kingdoms of the present age, of which Rome was chief in Paul's lifetime. Lastly, I will make suggestions for how Paul's unique apocalyptic politics can enliven and enable the ministry of the church today as we, too, await in active expectation the coming of the kingdom of God.

Prophetic Peace or a Roman Slogan?

Abraham J. Malherbe, a noted New Testament scholar with roots in the Stone-Campbell tradition, represents the majority view concerning the subjects of 1 Thessalonians 5.3—those who say there is peace and security. In his commentary, Malherbe argues that the subjects of 5.3 are false teachers proclaiming an inappropriate sense of peace and security to the Thessalonian church. *Eirēnē* and *asphaleia* are meant to echo the false prophets who cried out “Peace, peace!” when there was no peace (Jer 6.14).¹ Although this interpretation is plausible and recognizes Paul's indebtedness to the Old Testament, it falters upon closer inspection. First, while *eirēnē* is indeed the same word used for the Hebrew *shalom* (peace) in the Greek version of Jeremiah 6.14, *asphaleia* is not attested in the prophecy—nor is *asphaleia* ever rendered as the Greek equivalent for *shalom* elsewhere in the Septuagint.² Lacking a firm parallel, a connection between 1 Thessalonians 5.3 and Jeremiah 6.14 is difficult to sustain.

Second, Malherbe simply does not take seriously enough the political character of biblical prophetic and apocalyptic literature.³ While Malherbe does contend that Paul is forecasting judgment upon God's enemies, he leaves the identity and character of these enemies ambiguous by describing them simply as “the unjust, unholy, and proud.”⁴ Furthermore, Malherbe wishes to disconnect apocalypticism from concrete political circumstances, contending that “the *apocalyptic context* in which the ‘slogan’ is set” is reason enough for doubting a political reading of the verse.⁵ In other words, in Malherbe's reading, apocalyptic and prophetic literature cannot be political. Yet prophecy and apocalypticism do not—indeed *cannot*—negate a political reading. The Old Testaments prophets often proclaimed oracles against foreign nations and rulers who would be judged upon the day of the LORD.⁶ Indeed, Jeremiah 6 itself is broadly political in nature, inasmuch as its prophecy concerns the invasion of Israel by a conquering nation. Furthermore, apocalyptic literature in the Second Temple era often arose from political crises.⁷ As Lee Magness points out, biblical prophecies and “apocalypses should be read as texts written by and for real people, suffering real turmoil, in their very real lives.”⁸ While Malherbe is surely correct that Paul is writing in an apocalyptic key, he misses the mark by

1. Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 32B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 287; 292; 304. Cf. Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 180; F.F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, WBC 45 (Waco: Word Books, 1982), 110.

2. Helmut Koester, “Imperial Ideology and Paul's Eschatology in I Thessalonians,” in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1997), 161.

3. For a recent and well-researched exploration of the political aspects of early Jewish apocalypse, see Anthea Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

4. Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 290.

5. *Ibid.*, 304. Emphasis added.

6. See, for example, the prophetic day of the LORD oracles against Babylon (Isa 13.1–8, 19–22; Jer 50.1–51.58); Egypt (Jer 46); the Philistines (Jer 47); Moab (Jer 48); Ammon (Jer 49.1–22); Damascus (Jer 49.23–27); Kedar and Hazor (Jer 49.28–33); and Elam (Jer 49.34–39). For Paul, the *day of the Lord* refers explicitly to the Parousia of Christ. *Ibid.*, 291.

7. “Generally speaking, Judean apocalyptic literature was the product of and was addressed to certain crises that emerged from the imperial situation that prevailed in Judea under the Hellenistic and Roman empires.” Richard A. Horsley, “The Kingdom of God and the Renewal of Israel: Synoptic Gospels, Jesus Movements, and Apocalypticism,” *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism: The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 305. Cf. Daniel 1–7; *1 Enoch*.

8. Magness, “Apocalypse Now,” 21. Prophecy, likewise, should be read as responses to concrete situations rather than simply foretellings of a distant future.

depoliticizing the prophetic and apocalyptic character of 1 Thessalonians 5.3. By identifying the *they* in this verse as ambiguous false teachers or prophets without noting the political character of biblical prophecy and apocalyptic, Malherbe offers a reading that accounts only for the presence of *eirēnē* in 5.3, but not *asphaleia*, and disconnects Old Testament prophecy and Judean apocalyptic from the sociopolitical crises in which such prophecy often arose.

While Malherbe's reading represents the majority view, a small but vocal minority have raised important criticisms of this interpretation and marshalled evidence to support the conclusion that those who say there is peace and security are none other than Rome and its rulers. In an oft-cited essay, Helmut Koester identifies *peace and security* as an explicit slogan derived from imperial propaganda touting the *Pax Romana*.⁹ Jeffrey Weima extends the argument by taking into account Roman texts, inscriptions, and coinage to further lend credence to Koester's reading.¹⁰ Weima's article represents the most thoroughgoing exploration of ancient texts in an effort to identify a particular Roman slogan against which Paul is speaking in 1 Thessalonians 5.3. Culling from an impressive collection of texts from the late Republican period to the fourth century CE, Weima makes the argument that, behind 5.3, there is a Roman propaganda slogan (Peace and Security) and Paul is counting on his audience to recognize it as such.¹¹

Weima gathers some very relevant texts from Paul's historical context that speak quite plainly about the Roman ideologies of peace and security. First, Weima exposes the thoroughgoing propaganda of Roman peace—the famed *Pax Romana*—from the latter first century BCE onward. In a series of coins minted from 32–29 BCE, Weima shows how commonplace the peace of Caesar Augustus was.¹² The Roman peace was both the monetary and ideological currency with which Rome traded.¹³ Not limited only to coinage, rhetoric of the Roman *pax* can be found memorialized upon monuments and inscriptions and written in literary texts from the Republican period onward. At the *Ara Pacis* (“Altar of Peace”) we find a visual expression of the peace and prosperity brought to Rome by Augustus' military supremacy.¹⁴ Similarly, in an inscription dated to 9 CE, Augustus was lauded as the “Savior who has made war to cease and who will put everything in *peaceful* order.”¹⁵ Even after his reign, Augustus was credited with inaugurating a kingdom which established the peace of Rome for generations to come.¹⁶

Although notions of security did not enjoy the same ubiquity in Roman coinage, inscriptions, and texts in this period as did peace, Weima notes a few examples in which security (*asphaleia* in Greek, *securitas* in Latin) functions as an identifiable piece of Roman Republican and imperial ideology. As with the Roman peace, coins were likewise a convenient medium for the promotion of Roman security. During Caligula's time upon the throne (37–41 CE), he had coins minted with his face emblazoned upon the head and the goddess *Securitas* pictured on the tail.¹⁷ Similarly, Nero's reign (54–68 CE) saw the production of coins upon which “Security of Augustus [*securitas Augustae*]” was etched.¹⁸ Otho, during his two-month reign in 69 CE, had enough time on the throne to mint coins proclaiming “Security [*securitas*] for the Roman people.”¹⁹

There are a few texts from the late Republican and early imperial period in which *peace* and *security* appear, if not as part of an explicit slogan, at least in very close proximity. In 85 BCE, a statue to the Roman

9. Koester, “Imperial Ideology and Paul's Eschatology,” 161–2.

10. Jeffrey A. D. Weima, “‘Peace and Security’ (1 Thess 5.3): Prophetic Warning or Political Propaganda?,” *NTS* 58, no. 03 (2012): 331–59.

11. *Ibid.*, 332.

12. *Ibid.*, 333–341.

13. *Ibid.*, 334–6.

14. See the full-color image of the altar's eastern wall in *Ibid.*, 344.

15. *Ibid.*, 351. Italics in original. See also the many inscriptional and monumental examples throughout Weima's article.

16. See the various coins minted during the reigns of Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, and other emperors of the early Roman Empire, all of which bear witness to the ubiquity of the *Pax Romana* in imperial propaganda throughout the first century. *Ibid.*, 336–8.

17. *Ibid.*, 340.

18. *Ibid.*, 340–1.

19. *Ibid.*, 341.

general Pompey was erected, praising him as the one who “restores peace and security on land and sea.”²⁰ Intended for a wide audience and written in Greek, the *lingua franca* of the era, this inscription contains both *eirēnē* and *asphaleia* together as descriptions for the state of affairs brought on by Pompey’s victory and the ascendancy of Rome. During the age of Augustus, twin altars were erected at Praeneste (modern-day Palestrina in Italy), one in celebration of the *peace of Augustus* and the other in praise of *Augustan security*.²¹ In circa 20 CE, the Roman historian Velleius Paterculus describes the Roman general Lucius Piso as the one who brought “security to Asia and peace to Macedonia” on behalf of the then-emperor Tiberius (*History of Rome* 2.98.2)²² Velleius later recounts the adoption of Augustus Tiberius as heir of the throne and reports that “the assurance of security, order, peace, and tranquility” was felt by all people in response to Tiberius’s ascendancy (*Hist. Rom.* 2.103.3–5). Seneca, the Roman philosopher and contemporary of Paul, describes the ideal Roman ruler as one “under whom justice, peace, modesty, security, and dignity flourish” (*Clem.* 1.19.8; cf. *Epistle* 91.2). Writing at the close of the first century CE, Josephus, the Jewish historian and Roman sycophant, speaks of the “security” (*asphaleia*) and the “state of happiness and peace” (*eirēnē*) afforded to “all humankind” by the Roman Empire (*Antiquities* 14.247–248).

Two Words but No Slogan: Peace and Security in Roman Thessalonica

Although Weima has indeed gathered a sizable collection of evidence for reading *peace and security* as a Roman slogan, his argument has not gone without criticism. Indeed, Joel R. White is correct that none of Weima’s examples present *peace and security* as an explicit Roman slogan.²³ As we have seen, *peace* and *security* are found independently throughout a vast array of texts, coins, inscriptions. Yet, even when they appear together, there is no evidence that an actual slogan was being promoted. Because there is no evidence for an explicit slogan, White concludes, the interpretation of *they* in 5.3 as Rome and Roman rulers “is by no means a certain one.”²⁴ Although that interpretation is not certain, there are multiple reasons which commend it—even if there never was a Roman slogan proclaiming peace and security during Paul’s time.

Despite coming to opposing conclusions, both Weima and White agree on a very fundamental point: that is, both scholars make the assumption that the only way to read 5.3 with Rome in mind is to read *peace and security* as a slogan or doublet.²⁵ Because there is no evidence for an explicit slogan, White rejects Weima’s entire argument, concluding that “the jury is still out” on the subject and meaning of 5.3.²⁶ Yet the text of 1 Thessalonians 5.3, as it exists in Greek manuscript form, does not require the assumption of an explicit peace and security slogan. Greek New Testament manuscripts were written in a style of handwriting called *scriptio continua*, in which WORDSAREWRITTENLIKETHIS and punctuation is almost totally absent.²⁷ The text, such as it is, does not include any clear indication whether Paul is quoting *peace and security* as a discernible Roman slogan, or if he is quoting *peace* and *security* as discrete but complementary pieces of Roman political

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 345–6; For photographs of these altars see Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 307.

22. Quoted in Weima, “Peace and Security,” 354.

23. Joel R. White, “‘Peace and Security’ (1 Thessalonians 5.3): Is It Really a Roman Slogan?,” *NTS* 59, no. 3 (2013): 382–95.

24. Ibid., 395.

25. “[T]he quoted phrase ‘Peace and security’ stems from a different source, namely, a popular theme or slogan of the imperial Roman propaganda machine.” Weima, “Peace and Security,” 332. White, on the other hand, contends that “[i]n no single instance can it be conclusively demonstrated that that phrase ‘peace and security’ has the character of a slogan.” White, “‘Peace and Security’: Is It Really a Roman Slogan?,” 392.

26. White, “‘Peace and Security’: Is It Really a Roman Slogan?,” 395.

27. Readers interested in viewing free, full-color images of the earliest New Testament manuscripts, including 1 Thessalonians, should visit the website of the Center for the Study of the New Testament Manuscripts (CSNTM), CSNTM Homepage [cited 16 Jul 2014]. Online: <http://http://www.csntm.org/>.

ideology in the Republican and imperial eras.²⁸ The Greek text supports both readings, but the evidence of Roman coins, texts, and inscriptions discussed above, and the significant absence of *eirēnē kai asphaleia* as a discernible slogan, thus tips the scales towards reading 5.3 with Rome in mind—but *not as a quotation of a specific slogan or doublet*. Rather, I suggest we split the quotation in two and render the verse as “³But when they say, ‘Peace’ and ‘Security,’ destruction will come upon them swiftly—just as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman—and they will not escape!”

Not only is this reading allowed by the Greek text, but it also makes sense of the data in the most comprehensive way. Malherbe’s interpretation of *they* as false prophets only explains the presence of *peace* in 5.3, but not *security*. Furthermore, as we have seen, it suffers the weakness of divorcing the Jewish apocalyptic worldview from the concrete sociopolitical realities to which it responds. Weima’s reading of the verse as a quotation of a Roman slogan has much to commend it, not least the fairly exhaustive gathering of ancient evidence that supports it. Yet it, too, falters (along with White’s perspective) because it assumes that a Roman slogan must be proved in order to read 5.3 as a forecast of God’s judgment against the Roman Empire.

The view I have articulated here takes seriously Paul’s indebtedness to the Old Testament prophetic tradition, but does not divorce prophesy and apocalypticism from the social world and its political structures. Furthermore, like Weima, it contextualizes Paul’s thought within the social world of the Roman Empire, but it also cuts against Weima’s conclusion by affirming, with White, the absence of an explicit Roman slogan in our ancient sources. Against White, however, I suggest that the absence of a slogan as such does not fundamentally dismantle the interpretation that the *they* who are saying it is a time of peace and security in 5.3 is in fact Rome and its supporters. There does not have to be a discernible slogan behind 5.3, since both peace and security were vital parts of Roman Republican and imperial political ideology and demonstrably visible within the cultural context of Paul’s ministry. Paul, a Jew who likely saw Rome as the fourth kingdom in the prophecy of Daniel 7, was writing to a gathering of Jesus followers in Roman-occupied Thessalonica. When Paul mentions an ambiguous *they* who claim there is peace and security, it is likely that a Thessalonian audience well-acquainted with Rome and its cultural currency would catch the reference and place faith in the coming kingdom of God rather than the false peace and security of Rome.

1 Thessalonians 5.3 in Its Literary and Theological Context

Not only does reading 5.3 as a judgment against Rome make sense within the literary and cultural context of the Roman Empire, it also fits very well within the context of 1 Thessalonians and Paul’s ministry as a whole. Looking at 1 Thessalonians 4.13–18, it can be read, like 5.3, as an eschatological prophecy that has concrete implications regarding the fate of Rome and all the kingdoms of this world. At the Parousia, the *true* Lord, Jesus Christ—whom the false lord Caesar is simply aping—will come “with a cry of command” and gather the faithful *out of* the empire of Rome and *into* the kingdom of God (1 Thess 4.16–18).²⁹ Thus we can see that 1 Thessalonians 5.1–11 further echoes Paul’s apocalyptic register. Like the Jews at Qumran, Paul believed the faithful *children (or sons) of light* are opposed to the *children (or sons) of darkness* (1 Thess 5.4–5). At Qumran, the children of darkness are identified with the nations who invaded and oppressed Israel during the Second Temple period, of which Rome was the last (see *The War Scroll*, 1QM, 4QM).³⁰ Could Paul share their sentiments? Paul gives a final clue for who the subjects of “sudden destruction” might be when he encourages his audiences to put on the breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet of hope of salvation (5.8). The ubiquity of the Roman military throughout the empire presented Paul with a natural foil

28. White wishes to discount any texts which predate the Roman Principate, as if Roman political ideology before Augustus is irrelevant to Paul’s political context. *Pace* White, it is clear that peace and security were touted as features of Roman rule in both the Republican and Imperial eras and had been recognizable as such to Roman subjects for quite a while. See White, “‘Peace and Security’: Is It Really a Roman Slogan?,” 385, 386.

29. 1 Thessalonians 4.13–18 echoes and contradicts elements not only of the Roman Empire but also the imperial cult which supported it. See Ben Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 140.

30. George W.E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature Between the Bible and the Mishnah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 143.

with which to compare the armor of God. This imagery also adds to and rounds out the strong distinction Paul is trying to draw between the faithful and those who believe there is peace and security in placing their faith in the Empire.

That Paul would be antagonistic towards Rome in 1 Thessalonians 5 fits well with what we know from 1 Corinthians 15:24–28 about the overall shape of salvation for Paul, and what he believed to be the final fate of the powers and rulers of the present age on the day of the Lord. Luke’s account in Acts also corroborates Paul’s apocalyptic resistance towards Rome. Acts 17:6–7 reports that the uproar at Thessalonica arose against Paul because he was “turning the world upside down” by proclaiming that “there is another king [besides Caesar] named Jesus.” Read within the context of 1 Thessalonians, Paul’s ministry, his kingdom of God theology, and with the evidence from Roman coinage, inscriptions, and literary texts, it just makes good sense to read 5.3 as a prophecy of Rome’s final judgment.

Peace, Security, and the Church Today

Although Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5.3 points towards Rome, an empire long dead and dismantled, his prophetic posture and apocalyptic worldview are far from irrelevant for the church of today. Like the Thessalonian believers, Christians living and ministering throughout every nation across the globe need reminding, and sometimes chastening, that no earthly kingdom or country will last forever: every rule and every authority will pass away when the eternal kingdom arrives in its fullness. Here in America, whose population enjoys many good benefits of citizenship, the church can sometimes falter in its allegiances, derive too much of its identity from the nation that surrounds it, and place too much faith in hope, change or even the liberty that characterize the national identity. Paul, in looking forward to the kingdom of God, calls the church to hold that citizenship and those slogans loosely, and to be faithfully distinct from the long table of nations that, ultimately, will all pass away.

Such a political posture enables the church to be fluid in its ministry—to love and to serve beyond borders and, when necessary, against the decrees of rulers and authorities. This apocalyptic worldview animated Paul’s ministry among the nations, just as it enabled some of the early leaders of the Stone-Campbell Movement to hold loosely to their American citizenship, preach the kingdom of God, and focus on the pursuit of unity in Christ for the salvation of the world.³¹ The nations around us, each in their own way, proclaim peace and security, but Paul—and the God of whom he speaks—calls us to expect the true peace and final security of the kingdom of God. Destruction will swiftly befall these lesser kingdoms around us, as labor pains beset a woman, in the final moments before the birth of the eternal age to come. Now, as then, Paul calls the church to join him in this active expectation.

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31. See, for example, the exploration of the apocalyptic theologies of David Lipscomb and James Harding in John Mark Hicks and Bobby Valentine, *Kingdom Come: Embracing the Spiritual Legacy of David Lipscomb and James Harding* (Abilene: Leafwood, 2006).