C. A. Wanamaker: Apocalypticism at Thessalonica.

ABSTRACT
Rejecting contemporary theological treatments of Paul's apocalypticism as inadequate, this paper uses the emergence of apocalyptic Christianity at Thessalonica as a test case for examining the dialectic between social reality and ideas in the formation of one particular Pauline apocalyptic community. After setting out a paradigmatic structure from which to analyze apocalyptic Christianity at Thessalonica based on contemporary studies of millenarian movements and sociology of religion in general, the paper attempts to explain the origin of Christianity at Thessalonica as a millenarian movement. In doing this the dialectic between social reality and Paul's apocalyptic ideas comes into clearer focus.

0 PAUL AND APOCALYPTICISM
In recent years New Testament scholars have increasingly come to accept that Paul's theology has an apocalyptic character. That is, he espouses a belief in a divinely determined future, involving cosmic transformation with judgement and final salvation for the elect (cf. Baumgarten 1975; Sanders 1977; Beker 1980; Martyn 1985). But the study of Paul's apocalyptic thought has been hampered by unconscious historical idealism which presupposes "that all developments, conflicts and influences are at bottom developments of, and conflicts and influences between ideas" (Holmberg 1980:201; cf. Meeks 1979:4-5). Beker, for example, in his recent book *Paul the apostle* (1980:135-81) argues that "Paul's thought was anchored in an apocalyptic world view". He proceeds, however, to discuss Paul's apocalyptic theology without so much as a sideways glance at the social dimensions of Paul's apocalypticism. Beker's approach results in a completely inadequate and distorted understanding of the nature and significance of apocalypticism for Paul and his converts because it abstracts apocalyptic thought from the social realities out of which it emerged and ignores the social movement which espoused it as its ideology. If we are to avoid the "idealistic fallacy" as Holmberg (1980:202) calls it, we must take cognizance of the dialectic between social reality and ideas in the formation of Pauline Christianity.

In this paper I propose to begin an examination of the interaction between Paul's apocalypticism and the social reality and experience of one of the communities which he founded. By doing so I hope to focus attention on the social dimension of Paul's missionary activity. This I
am convinced will help us to see that the success of the Pauline mission was not based on the ultimate truth of what Paul proclaimed in a metaphysical sense. Rather he succeeded by first articulating what Wallace (1956:265-6) calls a new and more satisfying "mazeway", that is a new total understanding of an individual or group regarding society, culture, nature, ethics and, in the case of early Christianity, the divine, and then instituting what Berger (1973:53-4) calls a new "plausibility structure" which could legitimate and maintain the new symbolic system of beliefs and values.

I have chosen to examine the community at Thessalonica for two reasons. First the two letters addressed to it have the strongest apocalyptic orientation of any of the Pauline letters, and therefore afford us our best chance to see the interaction between Paul's apocalyptic thought and a particular social situation. (I have assumed in this paper that 2 Thessalonians is Pauline either in the sense that he was directly responsible for its composition, or that it was written by one of his protégés on his behalf [cf. Donfried 1985:352; Marshall 1983:28-45]). Second, the Thessalonian Christians as we meet them in the two epistles addressed to them seem to represent the Pauline community which shows the least experience with outside interference from non-Pauline Christianity. Thus in principle they are a purer example of Pauline Christianity than any of the other communities that we have access to through Paul's letters.

1 APOCALYPTICISM AND MILLENNARIANISM

Gager (1975:20-37) and others (e.g. Meeks 1983; 1983a:171-80) have shown that what New Testament scholars have commonly referred to as the apocalyptic character of early Christianity must be understood in terms of the phenomenon which Talmon (1962; 1966) and other social scientists call millenarianism. Gager (1975:21) bases this correlation on five factors which the literature on millenarian movements makes reference to: 1. imminent salvation, 2. the transformation of the present social order, 3. release of emotional energy, 4. brevity of the movement's existence, and 5. the central role of a messianic, prophetic, or charismatic leader. This typology, which he largely borrows from the work of Jarvie (1976), is descriptive rather than explanatory, but its applicability to early Christianity is unmistakable.

In this essay I will be operating with a more complicated explanatory paradigm which includes three components: 1. predisposing factors, 2. the role of the prophet, and 3. the new symbolic and social formation.

Millenarian movements do not just happen. What Talmon (1966:181-92) calls predisposing factors lead to the possibility and the attrac-
tiveness of the millenarian option. Chief among the predisposing factors is the experience of what Burridge (1969:13) calls “dissatisfaction with the current system”. As Meeks (1983a:172) observes, those who become involved in millenarian movements “are, of course, almost invariably people who are not competing successfully in the existing scheme of social transaction”. Their dissatisfaction may arise from a wide variety of economic, political, or social factors such as political oppression, economic hardship, social anomy, or low status. These create tensions for a society or a group within the society making them more receptive to the possibility of a radical transformation of society.

Mere dissatisfaction, however, is not sufficient to lead to a millenarian movement. An individual, normally referred to as a prophet, must appear and articulate a new set of beliefs and values for a frustrated group. Almost inevitably such prophets claim and are believed to have divine inspiration or revelation for their new “mazeway” which offers psychological and/or material benefits, that is redemption or salvation in a new and transformed society (cf. Burridge 1969:164). But the prophet or one of his followers must also provide the plausibility structure for the new symbolic world by creating a new society and social realities which will reinforce the plausibility of the new beliefs and values.

For its adherents the essence of a millenarian movement is that it remediates or compensates for the dissatisfaction engendered by their experience of the dominant society (cf. Sharot 1982:18). The new symbolic and social world which emerges from the activity of the prophet “reinforces the new relationships of power and the new ethos within the movement at the same time that it negates for group members the world view held by the dominant society” (Meeks 1983a:173; the emphasis is his).

In the paragraphs which follow I will examine the emergence of apocalyptic Christianity at Thessalonica. In the process the value of the explanatory capacity of millenarianism for understanding its emergence will become clear.

2 THE EMERGENCE OF AN APOCALYPTIC COMMUNITY AT THESSALONICA
In considering the foundation of the Christian movement in Thessalonica several questions require attention if we are to understand the socio-religious significance of what appears to have happened. Why did the Thessalonians who became Christians find Paul’s announcement of imminent salvation appealing? To put it differently: what predisposed them to reject the “mazeway” of which they were a part,
in favour of the new one which Paul presented to them? What was the nature of the new symbolic and social world which they accepted? What was its plausibility structure? The answer to these questions is not straightforward. As with the study of early Christianity in general, we do not have nearly as much evidence available to us as we would like, and therefore our answers to a large extent must be based on inferences from the texts of 1 and 2 Thessalonians in light of what is known about religion as a social phenomenon. While the limits of this paper preclude my offering fully worked out answers, I nevertheless hope to provide pointers for the answering of these questions. Let us begin with the conversion of the Thessalonians.

Conversion, Wilson (1982:119) has observed, constitutes “a resocialization to distinctive ideas and values.” One socially constructed and maintained world is rejected in favour of another one. This can occur when the plausibility structure of the social world in which one lives begins to crumble. Thus, as Berger (1973:58) observes, the possibility of conversion “increases with the degree of instability or discontinuity of the plausibility structure” of the existing social world. The maintenance function of the plausibility structure is severely undermined when individuals or a group within society experience dissatisfaction with the existing political, economic or social structures and their ability to meet material and/or psychological needs. As I have indicated above this is a primary predisposing factor in the emergence of millenarian movements.

While we do not have precise information about the pre-conversion social experience of the Thessalonians, it is possible to make a general inference of some importance. Paul mentions that they were converted in a situation of considerable external distress (ἐν θλίψει πολλή) but that they experienced the joy of the Holy Spirit (1 Th. 1:6). The letter does not indicate the exact nature of the tribulation, but 1 Thessalonians 2:14 specifies that they had suffered it at the hands of their own fellow countrymen. As Meeks (1983:691) remarks, “The very groups with whom formerly they shared ties of kinship and racial or local origins were now their enemies.” Meeks blames their rejection on the exclusivism of Christianity. While broadly this may be true, it is unlikely that it was merely a problem of the dissolution of kinship ties as Meeks conjectures since the urban environment of Thessalonica would not have been organized along kinship lines to any great extent. Donfried (1985:342-52), following a suggestion by Judge (1971), argues that the problem was a political one and stemmed from civic concern regarding a threat to the imperial cult in Thessalonica. The Christians worshipped another king, Jesus, and this may well have been viewed as an act
of disloyalty to Caesar. This certainly fits with what Acts 17:5-9 says, and explains why the Thessalonians' fellow countrymen persecuted them since they threatened the political ideology of the dominant society, thereby questioning its existence (see Berger & Luckmann 1967: 122-46).

We may infer from this that the choice of those who became converts to Christianity and remained so in Thessalonica was not made lightly; their conversion was costly in real terms. They were rejected by the society of which they had been a part, and some have even suggested that the problem about death prior to the parousia in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 was engendered by the death of members of the community by persecution (Donfried 1985:350). Whatever may be the case with this suggestion, the Thessalonians who converted to Christianity must have been sufficiently dissatisfied with the existing social world of which they had been a part and their position in it must have been sufficiently weak or ambiguous to cause them to reject it even in the face of strong coercion from that society not to do so. In other words, their conversion in the face of external duress indicates a failure on the part of society to accommodate them and a predisposition to the radically new symbolic and social world which Paul offered them.

In reminding the Thessalonians of their conversion, Paul wrote, “You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and await his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who saves us from the coming wrath” (1 Th. 1:9-10). Although this passage is often said to be a traditional formulation which summarized the missionary preaching to the gentiles (e.g. Best 1977:85-7; Wengst 1972:30), the way in which Paul employs it suggests that he thought his readers would recognize their own conversion experience in it. If this is correct, it implies that at the very centre of their belief structure was an apocalyptic understanding of the imminent transformation of the world and their own final salvation through a heavenly redeemer. They were, in short, millenarians in their religious beliefs. Thus, even if Longenecker (1985:93) were correct in his study of the eschatology of 1 and 2 Thessalonians when he asserts that “Paul’s basic Christian conviction and the starting point for all his Christian theology was not apocalypticism but functional christology”, an apocalyptic expectation was at the heart of the faith of his converts in Thessalonica. Christology, then, was one of the supporting ideas in the construction of their apocalyptic world view (cf. Meeks 1983a:179-80).

What Biblical scholars and theologians normally call Paul’s theology, from a sociological perspective constitutes the complex belief patterns which formed his symbolic world or world view. To use
the terminology of Wallace (1956) it constitutes the new “mazeway” which Paul and other early Christian thinkers constructed. We do not have time to explore this world view, but the Thessalonian correspondence gives evidence of its basic structures. The living and true God (1 Th. 1:9) has destined his elect to salvation, through Jesus Christ who died for them, and the rest of humanity for wrath (1 Th. 1:10; 5:9). The present age is subject to the power and activity of Satan (1 Th. 2:18; 3:5; 2 Th. 2:9-10). The true believers in the gospel may expect to suffer tribulation in the present (1 Th. 3:4), but they will enjoy the kingdom of God at the parousia when their oppressors and all unbelievers will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction (2 Th. 1:5-10). In the meantime humanity is divided into the sons of light who know God and the truth about human existence and the sons of darkness (1 Th. 5:5). The sons of light who have the Spirit of God (1 Th. 4:8) must conform to the behaviour pattern which pleases God (1 Th. 4:1) in preparation for their imminent final salvation. The apocalyptic character of this world view is perfectly obvious from these broad features and fits into the pattern of beliefs which are typical of a millenarian movement.

Millenarianism is never individualistic in orientation. Rather millenarian beliefs create a new system of social relations through the inculcation of a new social identity to those who accept the beliefs. The new values and beliefs which the prophet imparts become the basis for the formation of a community or society which will collectively share in future salvation (cf. Wilson 1973:494). One of the most striking features about early Christianity in relation to its religious competitors was that its spread entailed the formation of new social communities. In these communities the social and racial distinctions of the dominant society were rejected, while the new beliefs and values of the movement were inculcated. Gager (1975:140) has highlighted the importance of this when he argues that the single most crucial aspect in the spread of Christianity in the ancient world was “the radical sense of community” which it possessed. As he notes, “Christian congregations provided a unique opportunity for masses of people to discover a sense of security and self-respect”. We may safely say that without the reinforcing of beliefs and values which Paul’s closely knit communities provided, his missionary activity would have failed just as the individualistic mystery religions and Greek philosophies did. Thus the social organization which we call the church performed a crucial function as part of the necessary plausibility structure in maintaining and legitimating the social reality of the apocalyptic world which Paul announced and to which the Thessalonians converted. As Berger (1973:55) has noted,
"The maxim *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* has general empirical applicability, provided one understands *salus* in a theologically rather unpalatable sense — to wit, as continuing plausibility. The reality of the Christian world depends upon the presence of social structures within which this reality is taken for granted and within which successive generations of individuals are socialized in such a way that this world will be real to them."

We must now look at the way in which the plausibility of Paul's apocalyptic world view was reinforced. We may assume that the Thessalonians like the Corinthians and the Galatians (cf. 1 Cor. 1:13; 12:13; Gl. 3:26-8) underwent baptism as a form of initiation. Baptism served to demarcate the boundary between two worlds. It did this both by ritualizing the separation from one's former social world which the ideology of the movement negated by describing it in such terms as existence in sinful flesh (Rm. 6:5-11) or enslavement to the *σεσκέπασμα* (Gl. 4:3) and by symbolizing the entrance into the new social reality of the apocalyptic faith through the myth of putting on Christ (Gl. 3:27; cf. Meeks 1983a:150-7; Berger & Luckmann 1967:132-3). What baptism ritualized and symbolized the ideology of the community inculcated. Language like "you turned from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Th. 1:9) and "you are sons of the light and the day; we are not of the night or of the darkness" reinforced the sense of separation and new identity, as did language about election (e.g. 1 Th. 1:4). Even persecution was given an interpretation which emphasized the boundary between the old and the new social experience of the Thessalonians by affirming the group's identity as the people of God who would be saved (1 Th. 2:13-17). It also was used by Paul to confirm the truth of their apocalyptic world view (1 Th. 3:3-5; 2 Th. 1:5-10). Finally, the ethic enjoined by Paul established community and supported the new sense of social identity which distinguished the Thessalonians from outsiders (1 Th. 4:1-12, note especially the term *τοὺς ἐξω* in v. 12).

One further detail requires mentioning before I conclude this sketch of the emergence of the apocalyptic community at Thessalonica. The birth of the Christian movement at Thessalonica occurred in response to the missionary activity of the apostle Paul. From the various letters of Paul we know that his self-understanding included an unshakeable belief that God had called him to be an apostle (Gl. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; Rm. 1:1) to the gentiles (Gl. 1:16; 2:7; Rm. 11:13). Paul describes his call as a revelatory experience (*ἀποκάλυψις* in which the identity of Jesus as God's Son was revealed to him (Gl. 1:15-17). In one of the most extensive autobiographical sections in any of his epistles (Gl. 1:11-2:10), he argues for his independence from Jerusalem and for the
divine origin of the gospel which he preached to the gentiles. In summary Paul appears to have viewed himself as a divinely appointed agent for converting the gentiles to the new value and belief system (the gospel) which had been revealed to him.

Among the Thessalonians who converted to the new movement, Paul created the impression that his message was a word from God, not from men (1 Th. 2:13), and therefore that he was a divine messenger. At an objective level this impression was probably created by the fact that his announcement of the imminent transformation of the existing order and the salvation of God's elect (cf. 1 Th. 1:10; 2:12) was accompanied by what were interpreted as ecstatic manifestations of divine power (1 Th. 1:5; cf. 2 Cor. 12:12; Gl. 3:2-5). At a different level, however, the belief that Paul was an agent or messenger of God was attached to his ability to communicate a coherent, new world of beliefs and values which, on the one hand, negated the old beliefs and values and overcame the limitations of the Thessalonians' existing social reality, and, on the other, possessed the necessary plausibility structure to maintain itself. This is precisely the role which any prophet must perform in a millenarian movement if his "revelation" is to transform the social world of his followers (cf. Burridge 1969:153-63). Thus what Paul calls his apostleship, we may call – from a sociological perspective – his role as the cult prophet in the millenarian movement which he established at Thessalonica.

3 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have not exhausted the possibilities for understanding the emergence of the apocalyptic community at Thessalonica as a millenarian social movement. Furthermore I have not even attempted to analyse what happened to it in the period after Paul left when the Thessalonian Christians experienced problems with the millenarian ideology which they had adopted, and its praxis. Nevertheless, I trust that this essay has at least made clear that Pauline Christianity can usefully be understood as a millenarian movement for the purpose of describing and explaining its development and character. I further hope that I have shown both the need to investigate early Christianity in terms of the historical dialectic which existed between theological reflection and social reality, and some of the potential of this approach which can complement traditional historical and theological investigation.
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