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# Comfort one another: reconstructing the rhetoric and audience of 1 Thessalonians

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cases, the Gospel of Matthew serves more as a source of examples for the larger hermeneutical argument of the book than as the book's specific focus.

The book is really about hermeneutics or the problem of understanding how a text like the Gospel of Matthew can be held to be meaningful beyond the circumstances of its original composition and, furthermore, how the meanings ascribed to the text by later generations are not simply arbitrary or to be considered strictly beside the point for an historically minded readership. Thus the first chapter of the book addresses the limits of the historical-critical method: essentially, the tendency of this approach to make the text a thing of the past. The second chapter then explains how the method of interpretation practised by Luz, which is attentive to the "history of [meaning] effects" or *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the text, makes possible "a new dimension of understanding". Lest one think, however, that Luz is simply opposed to the use of historical criticism in biblical interpretation, the fifth and final chapter of the book returns, after the two aforementioned case studies in Matthew 10 and 16, to "the question of truth" and "the value of the historical-critical method".

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## **Comfort One Another, Reconstructing the Rhetoric and Audience of 1 Thessalonians**

Abraham Smith

Louisville: Westminster Press, 1995

Abraham Smith's book represents a new direction in biblical studies. Drawing upon the tools of literary criticism, he closely observes the contours of language, pays attention to the rhetorical context of the period, and thinks hard about the relationship of the text of 1 Thessalonians to readers.

In the first chapter, he develops principles as viable tests for a valid interpretation, thereby charting a course for interpretation. These principles include not doing violence to a text by ignoring some or all of its parts, communicating an interpretation in an understandable fashion, and bringing new insights or direction to the interpretation.

His section on readers is helpful to anyone engaged in biblical interpretation. First, he demonstrates that all critical readers are "constrained to read as biased or interested readers" (17). Leaving behind the classical empiricist notion of a "passive receptive mind", Smith offers an "interactionist model". He demonstrates how each writer "recontextualizes" an ancient writer. Further, Smith asserts that the modern interpreter has this

task also. However, the main chapters of this book seek to set 1 Thessalonians into its rhetorical and social context.

The second chapter comprises a thorough introduction to Hellenistic rhetoric and an effort to understand the type of letter 1 Thessalonians most closely resembles. After a discussion of the various types of letters it has been compared with, the reader is offered examples from the Hellenistic world which parallel some of the passages from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians and signify a letter of consolation. Smith examines the rhetorical function of some of Paul's imagery, for example, the work imagery in 2:1-12 in which the diligent worker is contrasted with the flatterer. Smith argues that references to work in 1 Thessalonians do not necessarily reflect the reality of Paul's congregation. Rather, they are part of a construction of his congregation by Paul to help them to understand that prestige is associated with toil for the growth of other believers. Smith asserts that Paul's images were sometimes embellished and typological and should not be understood as historical reality. Rather, ancient audiences recognized in them the author's values and hopes for them.

The fourth chapter analyses a smaller section of the rhetoric of 1 Thessalonians. A key issue which Smith discusses sheds new light upon the social history of the audience of 1 Thessalonians. He understands the suffering of the Thessalonians to be the loss of the usual social networks. In choosing to become part of the early Christian movement, Gentiles set themselves up to lose whatever economic and social benefit they might have had from their patrons. Therefore, Paul responds to this situation by adopting the language of beneficence which included ancient notions of friendship, toil, and wisdom. Paul writes to the church consoling them with the thought that suffering is to be an expected part of life under the parousia. After all, Jesus and the Jerusalem church also suffered. By aligning the congregation with the suffering righteous, Paul assures them that they are living appropriately. These assurances remind the congregation of what they already know from their environs, namely, that suffering is a part of life and that the virtuous person does so steadfastly and calmly. By connecting the experiences of the church with the values of their society, Paul constructs a congregation which is more stable and mutually supportive in the midst of their hardships. In addition, Paul adopts the language of patron relationships by calling God their new patron (1:1b; 1:2). By this linkage, Paul assures the congregation of protection and of God's faithfulness "even if on the surface things go awry" (74).

Up to this point in the book, Smith demonstrates that Paul uses the language of the social environs of his readers. In his last chapter, Smith notes several ways which Paul's consolation letter is useful for the modern world. These include the creation of "an alternative community which resists paltry forms of security, the reinforcement of hermeneutic frameworks and vital supportive networks for those who face suffering, the construction of power as stability under pressure and not as the ability to wield force" (103). However, Smith rightly notes that the patriarchal nature of

Paul's language will not suffice in the modern world because "the consolatory genre, for all of its benefits, construes maturity in androcentric terms" (103). The ancient world understood grieving, weakness, and loss of self-control as attributes of women. Males who exhibited these characteristics were denigrated as immature. Women, then, in order to be faithful Christians had to read themselves into the text as males. An understanding of this sex role stereotyping is useful for the modern world as it understands that Paul's words still have power and as it seeks to live in a more egalitarian world.

This book is welcome at a time when pastors and laity seek to understand what is of edification for the church within the biblical tradition and what needs to be critiqued if the church is going to continue to be a dialogue partner which is taken seriously in society. While too difficult for study groups at church, it would be useful for seminarians and pastors. All too often we have studied Paul's letter in the context of Judaism and forgotten that the Greco-Roman world was the foreground in which the drama took place.

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### **Filling up the Measure; Polemical Hyperbole in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16**

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Carol J. Schlueter  
Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994  
219 pp. \$41.00 hardcover

In this revision of her doctoral thesis, Carol Schlueter reconsiders the long-standing puzzle of 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16. Finding inadequate earlier solutions to the discrepancy between this passage and Romans 9-11, she opts for neither harmonization nor pleas of inauthenticity. Rather, she considers these "abrasive statements" against the Jews as polemical hyperbole which castigates the opponent, embraces the reader, and polarizes the issue(s) at hand. With Montefiore *et al*, she understands the early Christian movement within the context of Judaism, and the passage within a lively internal debate; our discomfort should be further eased because Paul's most intense vituperation was "reserved for insiders", specifically, opposing Christians.

Here is a welcome addition to other recent treatments of the Pauline epistles, which marry historical concern to a close reading of text, through the vehicle of rhetorical criticism. Schlueter's presentation of hyperbolic