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The Wrath of the Deities and The Privileged Deceased: Narrating Death in the Associational Rupture at Thessalonica

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Abstract

After Paul, Silvanus and Timothy left Thessalonica, members of the fledgling Christ group in that city experienced death within their social network. Opinions differ as to whether the authors' comments in 1 Thess 4.13–18 are addressing puzzlement internal to the Christ group alone, or whether these recent deaths also played into the wider discourse of the city. In addressing this issue, I adopt the view, propounded especially by Richard Ascough, that the Thessalonian Christ group had its origins in a civic association. In contrast to Ascough, I propose that the association did not undergo a complete 'conversion' to a new deity; instead, it experienced a rupture in its membership, with some members splitting off to form a new assembly of Christ-devotion. This 'ruptured association' scenario offers a different explanation than Ascough's regarding the issue the authors of 1 Thess were addressing in 4.13–18. The argument draws upon comparanda from the database of Greco-Roman associations and offers an interpretation in closer alignment with the primary emphasis of the text.

Keywords: 1 Thessalonians; Greco-Roman associations; social conflict; death; deities; eschatology; Thessalonica

1. Introduction

Not long after Paul arrived in Thessalonica, a group of Thessalonians adopted Christ-devotion. In the words of the authors of 1 Thess, these people had 'turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming' (1 Thess 1.9–10). Not long after that, however, a few people within the network of Thessalonian Christ-followers seem to have died. This, at least, is the current scholarly consensus, based on what the authors wrote in 1 Thess 4.13–18. That passage, in fact, has been identified as revealing 'the primary exigency of 1 Thessalonians'.¹ When

¹ Colin R. Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica: Situating 1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 112. Cf. David Luckensmeyer and Bronwen Neil, 'Reading First Thessalonians as a Consolatory Letter in Light of Seneca and Ancient Handbooks on Letter-Writing', *NTS* 62.1 (2016) 31–48, at 35: 'The purpose of the letter is...to address the context of affliction, and especially instances of death.' This is a helpful corrective to seeing everything written beyond chapter 3 as 'almost tacked on as afterthoughts' (so Richard N. Longenecker, 'The Nature of Paul's Early Eschatology', *NTS* 31 (1985) 85–95, at 88).

Timothy returned from Thessalonica and gave Paul and Silvanus the news of what was happening in Thessalonica (3.6), all three wrote the letter known to us as 1 Thessalonians, whose primary purpose (together with other purposes) was to address a community in the aftermath of the recent death of a few Christ-followers.²

Scholars offer different evaluations regarding the extent to which ‘the primary exigency’ may have rippled out. Were the deaths of Christ-followers simply an internal quandary within the Thessalonian Christ assembly, or had those deaths become part of a wider conversation within the city? It is common to recognize the deaths of Christ-followers as having an ‘extramural’ component (despite their inevitable ‘intramural’ effects). This is especially true in studies since the late twentieth century, with a number of publications exploring the way Christ-devotion was embroiled in conflictual relationships with others in the city beyond their membership.³ Indicative of this interpretation are John Barclay’s comments from 1993:

It is certainly remarkable that, so soon after the introduction of Christianity, more than one death has occurred among the small band of believers. At the very least, it would be easy for non-Christians to mock their faith in a “savior” who had failed to save them from death. But we may also imagine nonbelievers finding the close temporal connection between conversion and death more than coincidental. Greek mythology had more than enough stories of gods who struck down impious individuals, and such events were rumored still to occur... [W]e should not underestimate the readiness to attribute “natural” events to the direct intervention of the gods. At a popular level, the anger of the gods was a reality never to be ignored.⁴

In this interpretation, the loss of life within the Christ assembly must have been strongly registered by those beyond the assembly.

Other scholars, however, reconstruct the situation differently, seeing those deaths as almost exclusively an intramural conundrum. Burton Mack argued that the issue behind 4.13–18 is the question, ‘do our dead still belong to us and we to them?’⁵ For Mack, the death of Christ-followers had few ramifications beyond the community and did not play into the hands of extramural ‘oppressors’.⁶ Along somewhat similar lines, Wayne Meeks interpreted the situation as problematic for the Thessalonian Christ-followers because recent deaths posed the question of whether ‘the power of death’ could ‘shatter the unique bonds of intimate new community’.⁷

² See Hajnalka Ravasz, *Aspekte der Seelsorge in den paulinischen Gemeinden: Eine exegetische Untersuchung anhand des 1. Thessalonicherbriefes* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), where ‘die paulinischen Krisenbewältigungsressourcen’ in 1 Thessalonians (174) is featured and, perhaps, overplayed.

³ See especially (in chronological order) John M. G. Barclay, ‘Conflict in Thessalonica’, *CBQ* 55 (1993) 512–30; Carol J. Schlueter, *Filling Up the Measure: Polemical Hyperbole in 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994); Karl P. Donfried, ‘The Imperial Cults of Thessalonica and Political Conflict in 1 Thessalonians’, in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (ed. Richard A. Horsley; Harrisburg: Trinity, 1997) 215–23; Craig S. de Vos, *Church and Community Conflicts: The Relationships of the Thessalonian, Corinthian and Philippian Churches with their Wider Civic Communities* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999); Todd D. Still, *Conflict at Thessalonica: A Pauline Church and its Neighbours* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); Mikael Tellbe, *Paul between Synagogue and State: Christians, Jews and Civic Authorities in 1 Thessalonians, Romans and Philippians* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001) 80–140; Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair*; Néstor O. Míguez, *The Practice of Hope: Ideology and Intention in 1 Thessalonians* (trans. Aquiles Martínez; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

⁴ Barclay, ‘Conflict in Thessalonica’, 515–16. So too Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair*, 74; Nijay Gupta, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019) 82.

⁵ Burton L. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), 110.

⁶ Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament?*, 109.

⁷ Wayne A. Meeks, ‘Social Functions of Apocalyptic Language in Pauline Christianity’, in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East* (ed. David Hellholm; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983) 687–705, at 693.

Richard Ascough has proposed much the same as Mack and Meeks. But Ascough's interpretation differs from theirs in arguing that the primary social context for understanding the emergence of the Thessalonian Christ assembly was the world of Greco-Roman associations. Ascough's interpretation of the situation is the dialogue partner for this essay. While I am dependent on his initial proposal regarding the associational context of the Thessalonian situation, I take the situation in a different direction – one that sees the recent death of Christ-followers to have played out extramurally within the associational context of first-century Thessalonica. In order to demonstrate the point, Ascough's broader interpretative approach needs to be appreciated.⁸

2. Framing the Associational Context

Drawing on a proposal first made by John Kloppenborg, Ascough argued that the Thessalonian Christ assembly had originally been an occupational association.⁹ As its members heard Paul preach the good news in their workshops (2.9), they decided to abandon their traditional associational deity/deities. Word of this notable conversion of an association spread far and wide through associational networks 'not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place' (1.8). But when death came to the assembly of Christ-followers, the shock caused them to wonder about whether those who had died continued to have membership within the Christ assembly. At the heart of the matter lay 'a concern over belonging in the community', with the Thessalonian Christ-followers 'wrestling with whether the dead members of the family are incorporated into the larger family of God and God's kingdom'.¹⁰

I follow Ascough's argument in one regard but not in another. I find it convincing that the origins of the Thessalonian Christ group are best explained in relation to the conversion of members of an association, as Ascough proposes. For instance, this interpretation makes good sense of Paul's claim that he preached the gospel while working night and day in what must have been a workshop connected to the local occupational association (2.9).¹¹ Moreover, when the authors of 1 Thessalonians speak about the report of the Thessalonians' conversion spreading far and wide in a short period of time (1.7-9), an associational context can explain that situation with ease. The alternative, which sees the Thessalonians as evangelistic missionaries throughout extensive regions of the Mediterranean basin, is extremely unlikely. The Thessalonian Christ-followers were

⁸ See especially Richard S. Ascough, 'The Thessalonian Christian Community as a Professional Voluntary Association', *JBL* 119 (2000) 311-28; Richard S. Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Associations: The Social Context of Philippians and 1 Thessalonians* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) 162-90; and Richard S. Ascough, 'Redescribing the Thessalonians' "Mission" in Light of Greco-Roman Associations', *NTS* 60 (2014) 61-82. For others adopting this view, and critical of it, see Bruce W. Longenecker, 'The Rupture of an Association: Social Conflict and Its Management in Paul's Thessalonian Christ Group', forthcoming, note 1.

⁹ The idea appeared initially in John S. Kloppenborg, 'Φιλαδέλφια, Θεοδιδακτος and the Dioscuri: Rhetorical Engagement in 1 Thess 4.9-12', *NTS* 39 (1993) 265-89.

¹⁰ Richard S. Ascough, 'A Question of Death: Paul's Community-Building Language in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18', in his *Early Christ Groups and Greco-Roman Associations: Organizational Models and Social Practices* (Eugene: Cascade Books 2021) 277-98, at 289 (originally published in *JBL* 123.3 (2004) 509-30). Ascough's interpretation does not necessarily exclude a scenario of social conflict, but that aspect is not articulated in his work, since he is so intent on articulating the internal effect of death within the single converted community.

¹¹ Ronald F. Hock, 'The Workshop as a Social Setting for Paul's Missionary Preaching', *CBQ* 41 (1979) 438-50. According to Anastassios Ch. Antonaras (*Arts, Crafts and Trades in Ancient and Byzantine Thessaloniki: Archaeological, Literary and Epigraphic Evidence* (Mainz: Verlag des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums, 2016)), some workshops functioning in the first-century CE are evident in the archaeological record of modern Thessaloniki, including workshops for ceramics (#15, vessels and moulds; #19, vessels; #41, lamps; #42 and #43, figurines), metalworking (#45), purple dyeworks (#77), and bone carving (#101).

notably vocal about their Christ-devotion within their civic context (1.8), but the news of their conversion must have been spread through the grapevine of interregional associational networks.¹² Ascough collected evidence for interregional networks of this kind, and Josiah Hall has expanded the database further.¹³ This context of translocal associational networks provides a context for understanding the widespread reportage of the Thessalonians' conversion.

On the other hand, instead of imagining the occupational association to have converted *en masse* (as Ascough proposes), it is far more likely that the original association underwent a rupture, with some members breaking off from that parent association (either of their own initiative or, more likely, through expulsion) to form a splinter assembly of Christ-followers. As I argue elsewhere, this revised version of Ascough's argument accounts for an otherwise neglected feature of the letter.¹⁴ I also note that adjustments were likely to have transpired within the newly formed group of Christ-followers, after breaking off from the parent association (which may well have been a guild of craftworkers, as Ascough proposes):

- The Christ assembly initiated changes in its cultic or 'religious' character. These adjustments included an increase in the frequency of assembly meetings (at least weekly instead of monthly) and the heightened worship of their new deity – which became its primary *raison d'être* in light of the expected return of its divine Lord.
- The Christ assembly experienced social 'persecution' owing to the transgressive story of its deity in relation to the Roman imperial order.¹⁵
- The Christ assembly lost its previous associational connection to influential civic patrons and to the civic hub of occupational opportunities – perhaps resulting in a subsequent decrease in the economic viability of its members (i.e., the 'severe ordeal of affliction' and 'extreme poverty' mentioned in 2 Cor 8.2).
- Other people beyond those who had been members of the parent organisation may have joined the new Christ assembly (including women).

¹² In 'The Rupture of an Association', I note three reasons why this is the case: economic (the Thessalonians did not have the financial resources for a widespread missional initiation), temporal (the timeframe does not allow for a widespread missional initiative), and numerical (the Thessalonians could not have populated a widespread missional initiative). Arguing that Thessalonian Christ-followers were ardent missionaries covering a vast area, Stefan Schreiber (*Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2014), 106–9) also argues that an associational reconstruction of the Thessalonians' conversion 'lässt sich am 1 Thess nicht überzeugend nachweisen' (56). I think both estimates are incorrect. The unlikely scenario that the Thessalonians were successful missionaries over a significant portion of geographical space is an important component in the relatively uncommon argument that 1 Thessalonians is pseudonymous from a later time, rather than a realistic document from Paul's day; see most recently Marlene Crüsemann, *Die pseudepigraphen Briefe an die Gemeinde in Thessaloniki: Studien zu ihrer Abfassung und zur jüdisch-christlichen Sozialgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2010) 137–41.

¹³ See Richard S. Ascough, 'Translocal Relationships Among Voluntary Associations and Early Christianity', *JES* 5 (1997) 223–41; Josiah D. Hall, 'Translocal Relationships among Associations and Christ Groups, Revisited', *ZNW* 113 (2022) 231–60. See also Sarah E. Rollens, 'Conflict and Honor in the Ancient Epistle: Or, How an Egyptian Funerary Association Illuminates Rivalry at Corinth', in *Greco-Roman Associations, Deities, and Early Christianity* (ed. Bruce W. Longenecker; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2022) 309–24.

¹⁴ In particular, the shift in the authors' exhortations in 5.15, which usually eludes comment from interpreters but makes perfect sense in this 'ruptured association' context. On this and the following points, see Longenecker, 'The Rupture of an Association'.

¹⁵ On this, see also Bruce W. Longenecker, 'Configuring Time in Roman Macedonia: Identity and Differentiation in Paul's Thessalonian Christ Group', in *Greco-Roman Associations, Deities, and Early Christianity* (ed. Bruce W. Longenecker; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2022) 289–308.

- The Christ assembly welcomed networked relationships with nearby Christ groups (e.g., 4.10).
- The Christ assembly elected new leaders (5.12–13).

In this ‘ruptured association’ scenario, the Thessalonian Christ assembly would have been deeply immersed in a reputational battle in which it was heavily in the interests of the leaders of the parent association to bring the Christ assembly into disrepute, showing it to be a transgressive associational offshoot that the parent association has disassociated from completely.

As I will argue, it is this revised scenario that best explains the context for understanding the authors’ comments in 4.13–18. Certainly, the authors of the letter seek to assure the Thessalonians that the deceased will be joined with the living when their Lord comes again (as in 4.17b especially), and here Ascough’s interpretation has a foothold. But the authors’ main emphasis lies elsewhere in this passage, unaccounted for in Ascough’s interpretation. In 4.13–18, the authors are interested primarily in emphasising the privileges of the deceased in the eschatological coming of Jesus Christ (as in 4.14b–17a). I propose that this emphasis is inversely proportionate to how the deceased were being depicted in the narrative articulated within the civic and associational networks by the parent association against the Christ assembly.

3. Penalizing Transgressors of Associational Identity

Change was a potential threat to the identity of associations. That an association might change its character at some point in the future was a destabilising prospect. If for no other reason, an association needed to assure potential benefactors that it would continue to publicly honour its benefactors without retraction in the future (see esp. *IDelos* 1520).¹⁶ It was essential to an association’s prospects to be able to demonstrate a determined fidelity to its original identity and to any commitments made in the course of its development. This is why one inscription notes that anyone wanting to enter a particular association as a new member ‘must first read the by-laws carefully before entering, so as not to find cause for complaint later’ (*CIL* 14.2112).

Inscriptions frequently reveal the seriousness of this need for constancy. An inscription from the second century BCE honours the benefactor of an association, noting that ‘the decree’ honouring him is to ‘have authority for all time’ so that no one within the association is ever permitted ‘to invalidate the honours granted to Dionysodoros’ (*IG* 12.1 155). Consequently, the inscription outlines the penalties to be meted out to anyone who compromises the association’s faithfulness to its commitments – that is, whom the association considers to be ‘unrighteous’. So, ‘the one who goes against what is written’, the one who proposes a change to the arrangement, will pay 100 drachmas to the association, and the proposed motion will be recognised as ‘invalid’, with the person proposing the change being ‘liable to the unalterable law’ of the association.¹⁷

¹⁶ In this essay, citations of epigraphical collections are standard. Beyond that, ‘GRA 1’ refers to John S. Kloppenborg and Richard S. Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary, volume I. Attica, Central Greece, Macedonia, Thrace* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2011); ‘GRA 2’ refers to Philip A. Harland, *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary, volume II. North Coast of the Black Sea, Asia Minor* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2014); ‘GRA 3’ refers to John S. Kloppenborg, *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary, volume III. Ptolemaic and Early Roman Egypt* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2020).

¹⁷ It is not wholly clear what the phrase ἐξέστω τῷ χρήζοντι τῶν [ἐ]ρανιστῶν ἀπογράψαι αὐτὸν τὸ ἐπιτίμιον refers to. It is translated as ‘It is permitted for a member of the club to propose the penalty’ in

Other associational data follow the same pattern. An inscription from the Egyptian Delta region (GRA 3, 169 = SB XXII 15460; dated to 5 BCE) pronounces that should anyone attempt to reverse the commitments of the association, a penalty of five hundred silver drachmas will be incurred. A damaged papyrus from the Egyptian Fayum region (GRA 3, 199 = *PLond* VII 2193; dated to 69-58 BCE) records the constitution of an association, including a list of transgressions that would not be tolerated (and would be met, presumably, by fines, although any listing of penalties has not survived). Beyond infractions such as being absent from the banquet, stealing the wife of another member, or resigning before the end of a financial year (without paying membership fees for the remaining months of that year), the transgressions of particular note include any attempt 'to depart from the brotherhood of the leader to join another brotherhood' or 'to establish factions' within the association. Another artefact, a four-panel inscription from the Aegean islands (IG 12.3 330 = *LSCG* 135; dated to 210-195 BCE), is a manifesto that lists extensive regulations of a household association (i.e., Epikteta's relatives). In order to ensure that the association does not deviate from its established identity, it lists transgressions that will be punishable, including any attempt to dissolve 'the prescribed sacrifices' or to 'create division' or to 'malign anything traditional'. The penalties include fines, the seizure of property, and expulsion from the association.

An inscription from Delos (*IDelos* 1520; about 150 BCE) reveals an association granting extensive honours to one of its benefactors and promising terrible outcomes to any member who might propose 'things that are forbidden' – that is, significant adjustments to the association's commitments. Other members were to be informants against such people, and those informants would be eligible for a portion of the hefty fine incurred by the transgressor (6000 drachmas) – a fine imposed also on the president under whose watch such things transpired.¹⁸ But besides the fine, the transgressor is also to be 'subject to a curse', which other members of the association are encouraged to initiate. Moreover, he is to be 'utterly destroyed' (or perish completely), together with his children (ἐξώλης εἶη [α]ὐτὸς καὶ τὰ τέ[κν]α αὐτοῦ). The cursing and destruction of the transgressor envisaged here (regardless of what that was thought to entail specifically) go beyond the realm of human agency.¹⁹ Suprahuman forces are expected to favour the association by exacting serious punishments against members who tamper with the association's charters of identity and commitments.

The involvement of suprahuman forces in this regard should not be surprising. Apart from the debate about the extent to which Greco-Roman associations can be said to have been 'religious' in general, data of this kind indicate one reason why associations might invoke deities as suprahuman patrons; if for no other reason, deities can be used to threaten punishment against potential transgressors of the association's established identity and commitments.²⁰ This pattern imitates the regulations often found within civic centres, such as a public inscription from Miletus that accuses those who transgress ancestral customs with 'impiety and injustice' (ἀσεβῆ καὶ ἄδικον; *LSAM* 53; late first century CE; from Miletus). Similarly, another public inscription identifies transgressors of civic regulations as 'impious' for the same reason (*LSAM* 28; first century CE; from Teos), while another allows the civic officials to be charged with impiety if they fail to properly perform their stated duties (*LSAM* 69; second century CE; from Stratonikeia).

Richard S. Ascoug, Philip A. Harland, and John S. Kloppenborg, *Associations in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012) 158.

¹⁸ On the need to appoint capable leaders who will carry on the traditions and are fully immersed in 'the power of our doctrines' (τὴν δύναμιν τῶν λό[γ]ω[ν] τῶν [ἡμ]ετέρων), see IG II² 1099.

¹⁹ The term ἐξώλης was frequently found in imprecatory curses.

²⁰ For a controversial argument regarding 'religious' dimensions of Greco-Roman associations, see Éric Rebillard, 'Retiring Religious Associations', in *Greco-Roman Associations, Deities, and Early Christianity* (ed. Bruce W. Longenecker; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2022) 203-24.

Associational inscriptions follow the same pattern of expectation. A household association in Halicarnassus concludes ‘May life be better under divine and human control [ὑπὸ θεῶν καὶ ἀνθρώπων] for those who preserve [τοῖς...διαφυλάσσουσιν] and observe these regulations’ (LSAM 72; third-century BCE). While this is not articulated as a threat, the unwanted consequences of doing the opposite would be obvious to all. An association of Sabbatists in Cilicia (southern Anatolia) engraved their corporate regulations during the reign of Augustus (LSAM 80 = GRA 2, 152). Those regulations include the prohibition against nullifying any part of the regulations without authority (ἄκυρον). ‘Let the one who does so be purified’ (τῷ δὲ ποιήσαντι ἔστω ἀγνεία), which seems to imply discipline. The point is reiterated later: ‘No one is permitted to erase, damage, or change the dedications’ that the association advertises in its public inscriptions. If anyone ‘sins against the deity Sabbatistes’ in this way ([ἀ]μαρτήι τὸ εἰς τὸν θεὸν τὸν Σαββασιστήν), that person is required to pay four fines of 100 drachmas each: one to the deity himself, one to the association, one to the city, and one to the ruler of the district. To seek to change the commitments of the association is to transgress against the deity of the association, with consequent ramifications to the association’s reputation within its civic environment. In this light, it makes perfect sense for copies of regulations (associational or civic) to be stored, as some were, in temples.²¹ As John Kloppenborg notes, ‘the gods themselves were personally invested’ in associational commitments, and consequently ‘the instructions given should...be followed closely and taken seriously’.²²

Nowhere is this conviction more clearly stated than in an inscription outlining the regulations of a Lydian household association (GRA 2, 117 = LSAM 20; late second or early first century BCE). The inscription explicitly attributes the associational regulations to the deities (i.e., specifically Zeus, but other deities are involved in ensuring they are observed). These regulations are said to have been established ‘in accordance with ancestral custom’.²³ The regulations foresee a scenario in which someone might ‘withdraw their goodwill towards this house’ or initiate plans contrary to its established customs; in such instances, the other members ‘are neither to look the other way nor remain silent’ but should ‘expose’ (ἐμφανιεῖν) the transgressor and ‘avenge’ (ἀμυνεῖσθ[αι]) the situation. Members are reminded that ‘the gods set up in it [the association] are great, and... they watch over these things and will not tolerate those who transgress the ordinances’ (τοὺς παραβαίνοντας τὰ παραγ[γέ]ματα οὐκ ἀνέ]ξονται). The association even approved a ritual whereby all members walk past and touch the stone on which ‘the instructions of the god have been written’ as a way of differentiating ‘those who obey these instructions’ and ‘those who do not obey’ – with no one wanting to be among the transgressors, out of fear for reprisals by the deity. A specific example is given, which reinforces the general principle applicable to all members:

If she [a female transgressor of the regulations] does any of these things from the time the ordinances have come on to this inscription, she will experience evil things, sent from the deities (κακὰς [ἀρὰς παρὰ τῶν] θεῶν ἔξει), for disregarding these ordinances. For the god does not desire these things to happen at all, nor does he wish it; instead, he wants obedience. The gods will be gracious to those who obey,

²¹ Examples from a single epigraphical collection make the point well, whether the inscriptions are from civic arenas (LSAM 3; LSAM 13; LSAM 15; LSAM 16; LSAM 28; LSAM 53; LSAM 69), temples (LSAM 51), or associations (LSAM 50). *CIL* 14.2112 even includes the instruction that ‘the by-laws’ of an association ‘should be inscribed on the inner side at the bottom of the four-columned porch of the temple of Antinoüs’.

²² Kloppenborg, *Greco-Roman Associations*, 188. See also James C. Hanges, ‘1 Corinthians 4:6 and the Possibility of Written Bylaws in the Corinthian Church’, *JBL* 117.2 (1998) 275–98, at 292.

²³ For other inscriptions prescribing that things be done ‘in accordance with ancestral custom’ (κατὰ τὰ πατέρα), see also GRA 1, 9 = *IG* II² 1261; GRA 3, 243 = *OGIS* 51; *OGIS* 50 = *RIG* 1018.

and always give them all good things, whatever gods give to men whom they love. But should any transgress, they [the gods] will hate [μισήσουσι] such people and inflict upon them great punishments ([με]γάλας αὐτοῖς τιμωρίας περιθήσου[σιν]).

The deities love and are gracious toward those who are faithful to the character of the association; by contrast, they hate transgressors of the associational identity and punish them severely, including inflicting evil curses upon them.²⁴

These examples demonstrate how associations took steps to ward off the diminution of their original identities, as established in their initial organizational charters, seeking also to maintain constancy in their commitments adopted along the way. They illustrate a conviction that must have been common across a vast swath of associations — that transgressing the charters of associational identity and commitment will result in penalties of one kind or another. In some instances, the penalties that are most severe are manufactured by the associational deities, who will inflict ‘great punishments’ on those who undermine associational identities and commitments. Whether we attribute the adjective ‘religious’ to associations of this kind, it would seem that the deities are invoked to serve the social function of preventing what could in some instances be deemed a hostile takeover of the association from within the associational membership itself.

4. Narrating Death

It is this context that best explains 1 Thess 4.13–18. Death had recently entered the network of Christ-followers in Thessalonica. The deceased may have previously been members of the parent association, or they may have joined only after the Christ assembly had formed.²⁵ Either way, these deaths were taken as a ‘godsend’ by the leaders of the parent association, who were especially invested in denouncing the newly established Christ assembly (not least, to bolster their own social reputation). In their narration, members of the Christ assembly had proven themselves to be impious transgressors – transgressors in the first instance of the identity and commitments of the parent association and its Rome-aligned deities, and therefore offenders of the good news of Roman peace and security.²⁶ As a consequence, the deities of the association were thought to have signalled their disapproval by orchestrating a curse upon the transgressive assembly, as indicated by death within the network of the Christ assembly. To borrow the language of the associational data listed above, the deities ‘set up in the association are great’, ‘watching over these things’, being ‘intolerant’ of transgressors who ‘withdraw their goodwill’ from it and seek to overturn ‘ancestral custom’; the associational deities will ensure that the impious ones will be ‘utterly destroyed’ together with their children. Meanwhile, the associational members of the parent association ‘are neither to look the other way nor remain silent’ but, instead, are ‘exposing’ the transgressors and ‘avenging the violations’ by the power of the deities of the association, in alignment with the deities of the Roman imperial order.²⁷

²⁴ Another way of offending an association was to ‘knock down’ or ‘vandalise’ its inscriptional monuments – a scenario foreseen in a grave monument from Thyatira, which guarantees potential offenders that ‘the deities will not be gracious to them or to their children, nor will the earth bear fruit for the offender’ (TAM 5.2 1148; undated).

²⁵ In the latter scenario, they may have joined the assembly precisely because they were already ill and in need of a deity of salvation.

²⁶ On the close interconnection between local deities and the Roman imperial order (without the need to postulate the Roman imperial cult as a key component in the connection), see D. Clint Burnett, ‘Imperial Divine Honors in Julio-Claudian Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence’, *JBL* 139.3 (2020) 567–89.

²⁷ In this regard, some in the parent association might have imagined that their efforts to curse the Christ assembly had been effectively carried out in the death of some Christ-followers. There is little reason to

This interpretation keeps the associational context in place (as Ascough proposed), but is more productive in explaining the emphases of the text of 1 Thessalonians – in particular, the authors’ emphasis on the distinct privileges that lie ahead for the deceased in the triumphal coming of Jesus Christ. In 4.13–18, the authors attempt to flip the script propagated by the parent association. Instead of the deceased being the evidence that the associational deities have cursed the errant Christ assembly, the authors display them as ones to be initially blessed in the eschatological triumph of Jesus Christ.²⁸ Just as God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead, so also, in the eschatological victory that lies ahead, God ‘through Jesus will bring with him [Jesus Christ] those who have died’ (4.14).²⁹ There is a proper sequence to the things that are yet to take place, as explained now by the authors of the letter.³⁰ Those who are now thought to bear the curse of the associational deities will, in fact, be the first to rise to celebrate the glorious coming of Jesus Christ; only then will Christ-followers who are alive be lifted to join the eschatological procession (4.15–17a). The deceased ones are not the trophies of the associational deities’ vengeance; instead, they are the privileged ones who are first in line to share in Christ’s glorious coming. With this renarration, the Thessalonian Christ-followers are to ‘encourage one another’ (4.18), since they now have a fuller narration that directly counters the narration of the parent association.³¹ The same deity who raised Jesus Christ from

think, however, that the deceased Christ-followers had been murdered by people in Thessalonica – contra, for instance, Rainer Riesner, *Paul’s Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 386–7; Karl P. Donfried, ‘The Imperial Cults of Thessalonica and Political Conflict in 1 Thessalonians’, in *Paul and Empire* (ed. Richard A. Horsley; Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997) 215–23, at 221–3; Gupta, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 62.

²⁸ René Kieffer (‘L’eschatologie en 1 Thessaloniens dans une perspective rhétorique’, in *The Thessalonian Correspondence* (ed. Raymond F. Collins; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990) 206–19, at 212) suggests that the Thessalonians Christ-followers feared that they might be next in line for death.

²⁹ The verb ἀνέστη in 4.14 assumes the agency of God in resurrecting Jesus Christ (not the self-raising of Jesus Christ), as in the ἠγείρεν of 1.10 and throughout the Pauline corpus.

³⁰ With regard to the question about the extent to which the authors had taught the Thessalonians about the future resurrection of Christ-followers when they were with them (or even whether they had thought much about it prior to the writing of 1 Thessalonians), this interpretation suggests only that the emphasis on the future benefits of deceased Christ-followers is fresh, resulting from a development contingent to the Thessalonian situation. It is not possible to adjudicate other features of 4.13–18 in this regard. On this issue in general, see especially Otto Merk, ‘1. Thessalonicher 4,13–18 im Lichte des gegenwärtigen Forschungsstandes’, in *Eschatologie und Schöpfung* (ed. Martin Evang, Helmut Merklein, and Michael Wolter; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997) 383–403; David Luckensmeyer, *The Eschatology of First Thessalonians* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009) 192–211 and beyond. The authors seem to attribute this new information about the future benefits of the deceased to a revelatory word from the exalted Lord; cf. ἐν λόγῳ κυρίου in 4.15 (especially in relation to 5.19–20). On this, see especially Sebastian Schneider, *Vollendung des Auferstehens. Eine exegetische Untersuchung von 1 Kor 15,51–52 und 1 Thess 4,13–18* (Würzburg: Echter, 2000) 234–40.

³¹ If Judeans in Thessalonica joined in the denunciation of the Thessalonian Christ-group (as some scholars think, based largely on Luke’s account in Acts 17.1–9), their version of the story would have differed from that of the parent association, but their story may also have depicted the deaths within Christ-groups as a sign of divine displeasure – simply with a different conception of the divine agent involved.

In 2.14–16, the letter’s authors have already laid the groundwork for invalidating any such version of the story, claiming the deity of the Judeans to be aligned with Jesus Christ and his followers. It is important to be clear about what the authors say in 2.14–16, however. Their primary point is that the Thessalonians have experienced the same things from their contemporaries as the Judean Christ assemblies experienced from ‘the Judeans who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets’ – that is, the Judean leaders (of various times), not the Judean ethnic group *in toto*. In the same way, the compatriots of the Thessalonians (and in particular certain civic leaders, by analogy with the Judean leaders of 2.14–15) have excluded the Christ-followers from their former place in society, displeasing God and hindering the proclamation to the gentiles. The shared experiences of Judean and Thessalonian Christ assemblies appear in 2.15b–16, not in 2.15a. See Abraham Smith, ‘“Unmasking the Powers”: Toward a Postcolonial Analysis of 1 Thessalonians’ in Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul*

the dead (and, in fact, the deity who is 'living and true' in implied contrast to the dead idols of the pagan world) will ensure that the deceased will receive a privileged place in the sequence of events when their resurrected Lord comes in eschatological triumph.³²

But there is more to the authors' discursive strategy than renarrating the story of the dead in 4.13–18. The authors also implicitly renarrate the story of the parent association itself. In 5.1–11, they assure the Christ assembly that those who rally around the slogan of 'peace and security' (not least the parent association, with its deities aligned with Roman imperial order) are subsumed in a world of darkness and assured destruction.³³ Just as a pregnant woman eventually undergoes labour pains, so too destruction will eventually come upon them, and there will be no escape for any of them, as divine 'wrath' is sure to ensnare them. In the meantime, the intense social conflict stoked against the Christ assembly by the parent association requires Christ-followers to put on protective armour: 'the breastplate of faith and love' and 'for a helmet, the sure hope of salvation' (5.8). There are no metaphorical swords or spears to be used aggressively against the parent association, just as the authors encourage the Thessalonian Christ-followers to live quiet lives among their contemporaries (4.11–12). But the authors are also certain that in due course, the Christ-followers will be participants in the eschatological victory of their deity while divine wrath falls on all others.

Both 4.13–18 and 5.1–11 play a role in inverting the parent association's narrative about the power and wrath of the associational deities.³⁴ This is underlined by the fact that the end of the second unit reiterates two aspects of the first – (1) the authors' claim that 'whether we are awake [i.e., alive] or asleep [i.e., dead], we will live with him' (5.10), and (2) their exhortation to 'encourage one another and build up each other' with these words (5.11; cf. 4.18).³⁵ Both sections, 4.13–18 and 5.1–11, belong to a narrative of divine triumph articulated in terms that are specifically suited to meet the concerns of the Thessalonian Christ group in relation to the associational conflict that dominates its social location and self-identity.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that the recent deaths of people in the network of Thessalonian Christ-followers invited diverging explanations within the associational context of ancient

and the Roman Imperial Order (New York: Trinity Press International, 2004) 4–66. (Also helpful from a different angle is Sarah E. Rollens, 'Inventing Tradition in Thessalonica: The Appropriation of the Past in 1 Thessalonians 2.14–16', *BTB* 46.3 (2016) 123–132.) The case for seeing 2.13–16 as a later insertion in the authors' original text (as, for instance, in Birger A. Pearson, '1 Thessalonians 2.13–16: A Deutero-Pauline Interpolation', *HTR* 64 (1971) 79–94) is unnecessary, as Smith especially demonstrates.

³² On the implied contrast in 1.9 between the living deity and the dead idols, see Regina Börschel, *Die Konstruktion einer christlichen Identität. Paulus und die Gemeinde von Thessalonich in ihrer hellenistisch-römischen Umwelt* (Berlin: Philo Verlag, 2001) 98.

³³ Despite occasional protests, the majority of scholars accept that 'peace and security' is the authors' phrase to denote the Roman imperial order. The classicist Karl Galinsky considers the phrase to be 'certainly...an Augustan motto' ('The Cult of the Roman Emperor: Uniter or Divider?' in *Rome and Religion: A Cross-Disciplinary Dialogue on the Imperial Cult* (ed., Jeffrey Brodd and Jonathan L. Reed; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2011) 1–21, at 12).

³⁴ It is standard to see 4.13–18 and 5.1–11 as two parts of a discursive unit. See, for instance, Eckart Reinmuth, 'Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher', in Nikolaus Walter, Eckart Reinmuth, and Peter Lampe, *Die Briefe an die Philipper, Thessalonicher und an Philemon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998) 105–56, at 142; Paul-Gerhard Müller, *Der Erste und Zweite Brief an die Thessalonicher* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2001) 181 (although Müller sees 4.1–5.11 as a three-panel discourse, 168–9).

³⁵ This reading of 5.10 has been challenged (see John Paul Heil, 'Those Now "Asleep" (not dead) Must be "Awakened" for the Day of the Lord in 1 Thess 5.9–10', *NTS* 46.3 (2000) 464–71), but it remains the current consensus nonetheless.

Thessalonica. The authors of 1 Thess narrated the story of the dead in Christ to counter the narration being propagated by leaders of the parent association. In 4.13–18 (and together with 5.1–11), the authors tell a story about the ultimate sovereignty of their deity, precisely because the parent association has taken the lead (perhaps with other sectors of Thessalonian society) in telling a story in which the recent deaths of transgressive Christ-followers prove the sovereignty of their associational deity/deities – deities fully embedded within the panoply of deities thought to oversee the Roman imperial order. The parent association imagined the deceased Christ-followers to be the ultimate embarrassment to and disqualification of the Christ assembly; the authors of the letter try to get ahead of that narrative by placing the deceased Christ-followers as key players in the story of their sovereign Lord.

This interpretation keeps in place the associational context that Ascough helpfully developed initially while also repositioning the death of Christ-followers within a more charged associational context than the one proposed by Ascough. In the process, those deaths can be seen to have signification not only internally within the Christ assembly but also with regard to the antagonistic extramural relations that the authors' talk of 'persecution' suggests (1.6; 2.14; 3.3–4). When the historical setting is recognised to be the rupture within rather than the conversion of an association, an interpretative option emerges that does better justice to the emphasis of 4.13–18. The issue addressed there is not so much about 'the social cohesion' of the living and the dead, nor about the disruption in 'a pattern of burial practices without offering anything in its place', as Ascough suggests.³⁶ Instead, that section addresses the urgent issue of how to respond to the mocking narrative spun by the parent association (in particular) regarding the credentials of the Christ assembly – a narrative in which the deceased were positioned front and centre. The authors of 1 Thess articulated a narrative that inverted the significance of the deceased in Christ, showing them to be privileged in the eschatological procession of their Lord – in direct contradistinction to the narrative so forcefully asserted by the leaders of the parent association.

Competing interest. The author declares none.

³⁶ Ascough, 'A Question of Death', 291.

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