

**A COMMENTARY ON  
ST. PAUL'S FIRST EPISTLE  
TO THE THESSALONIANS**

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A commentary on St. Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians by Alfred Plummer

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**ALFRED PLUMMER**

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*By the Rev.*  
*ALFRED PLUMMER, D.D.*

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ST. PAUL'S FIRST EPISTLE  
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THESSALONIANS

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## INTRODUCTION

### I. THESSALONICA

THE Epistles to the Thessalonians do not tell us a great deal about the city in which these most interesting converts of the Apostle of the Gentiles lived ; but what they tell us harmonizes very well with what we learn from other sources.

The passage of the Gospel from Asia to Europe is a momentous event in the history of the Apostolic Age ; and it took place when St. Paul, in obedience to what he believed to be a Divine command, ' set sail from Troas ' and came ' to Philippi, which is a city of Macedonia, the first of the district, a Roman colony ' (Acts xvi. 8-14). To us this means the spread of Christianity from one continent to another. But that is not the way in which it is regarded in the N.T., in which the word ' Europe ' does not occur, and in which ' Asia ' never means the continent of Asia. The Apostle of the Gentiles and his historian, St. Luke, seem rather to have regarded the event as a passage from Eastern to Western civilization, an advance from a world in which the best elements had centred in Judaism to a world in which the best elements were found in the art and thought of Greece, and in the political and military organization of Rome.

" Westward the course of empire takes its way " (*Bishop Berkeley*),

It was neither to Europe in general, nor to any particular city, that the Apostle was invited to come and render help, but to Macedonia ; and the Macedonians, although they were looked down upon by the pure Greeks, were morally more promising material for missionaries to work upon than

their more brilliant and attractive neighbours in Achaia. As Mommsen says :

“ While in Greece proper the moral and political energy of the people had decayed, there still existed in Northern Greece a goodly proportion of the old national vigour which had produced the warriors of Marathon. This sturdy vigour and unimpaired national spirit were turned to peculiarly good account by the Macedonians, as the most powerful and best organized of the states of northern Greece. The people still felt itself independent and free. In steadfast resistance to the public enemy under whatever name, in unshaken fidelity towards their native country and their hereditary government, and in persevering courage amidst the severest trials, no nation in ancient history bears so close a resemblance to the Roman people as the Macedonians ; and the almost miraculous regeneration of the state after the Gallic invasion redounds to the imperishable honour of its leaders and of the people whom they led ” (*History of Rome*, Bk. III. ch. viii. *sub init.*).

It is possible that the fact of the Apostle's beginning his new mission at Philippi was due simply to his having chosen as his means of transit to Macedonia a ship that was bound for Neapolis, which was the seaport of Philippi, from which it is about ten miles distant. Having landed there, he saw the advantages which Philippi possessed as a missionary centre. But it is more probable that he aimed at Philippi from the first, and that he chose his ship accordingly. Its advantages for the Apostle's purpose were threefold. It was a Roman colony, and its inhabitants, like St. Paul himself, had the rights and privileges of Roman citizens. It was on the Via Egnatia, the great high road between East and West, right across the North of the Hellenic peninsula, from Dyrhachium on the Adriatic to the mouth of the Hebrus. And it had, what was essential from the missionary's point of view, a settlement of Jews, to whom the Gospel must first be preached. The settlement was a small one, for it had no synagogue, but only ' a place of prayer ' (*προσευχή*), near the river Gangites ; but it sufficed. When



Paul and Silas, after the outrageous treatment which they received from the mob and the praetors of Philippi, decided to leave the place, they went rather more than 100 miles farther West to a city which had similar advantages.

As Professor von Dobschütz rightly observes: "Christianity, on account of the whole of its previous history and its origin, could not dispense with the synagogue as its starting-point" (*The Apostolic Age*, p. 47). Hence the comparative failure of the Apostle's preaching at Athens (Acts xvii. 32-34).

Thessalonica, like Philippi, was on the great Egnatian Road. It had a settlement of Jews large enough to have a synagogue, 'the desired synagogue' (*ἡ συναγωγή*), as St. Luke calls it (Acts xvii. 1). Although it was not a Roman colony, it was a free city, a privilege which was conferred upon it for having sided with Octavius and Antony in the second civil war. Coins exist which bear the inscription, 'Thessalonica the free.' Moreover it was a seaport, so that it was a travel and trade route between East and West both by land and by sea. It was doubtless because of its great advantages as a commercial centre that so many Jews had settled there, and have continued to settle there all through its history.

It is nothing more than a coincidence, but the coincidence is worth noting, that both these Macedonian towns, which became cities under Roman rule, seem to have owed their origin, or at any rate their original name, to their water-supply. The original name of Philippi was Crenides (*Κρηνίδες*), 'Wells' or 'Fountains': and the original name of Thessalonica was Therma (*Θέρμα*), 'Hotspring,' from the hot springs of salt water, which are still found in the neighbourhood. These primitive names might seem to anticipate the gracious fact that both towns were to become the places where 'wells of water, springing up unto eternal life' (John iv. 14), and 'fountains of waters of life' (Rev. vii. 17), would, for the first time in the Western world, be found. In later ages Thessalonica was successful in converting many members of the barbarous and pagan hordes which came

down upon it ; and it was so staunch in upholding traditional beliefs that it was known as " the Orthodox City."

It was about B.C. 315 that Cassander, son of Antipater, turned the small town of Therma into a large city by sweeping into it the inhabitants of other towns and villages and enriching it with fine buildings. He gave it the name of Thessalonica after the name of his wife, who was the daughter of Philip of Macedon and the half-sister of Alexander. At the time when Macedonia was divided into four parts, Thessalonica was the capital of the second. When these divisions were abolished, it became the metropolis of the whole. Along the whole extent of the Egnatian Road there was no city so important or so influential as Thessalonica. Gibbon (ch. xvii. note 21) says that " before the foundation of Constantinople Thessalonica is mentioned by Cedrenus (p. 283) as the intended capital " (Smith's Milman's *Gibbon*, II. p. 292). Wealthy Romans often resided there. Cicero, who chose it as a home during the time of his exile (*Pro Planc.* 41), says that its inhabitants were " in the lap of our Empire." Many of its inhabitants, nearly all of whom were heathen, were engaged in trade and were well-to-do, as probably were most of the Jews, whose synagogue had attracted a considerable number of proselytes. But no doubt the majority earned their living by manual labour, as did the Apostle and his colleagues during their stay (ii. 9). Hence we find that among the first converts were some Jews, many ' God-fearers ', and a considerable number of women from the upper classes (Acts xvii. 4). The ' God-fearers ' were not proselytes, but religious heathen, who attended the synagogue and admired the Jewish Law. Whether these women were Macedonians or Jewesses, or whether they were the wives of heathen, or of proselytes, or of Jews, it is impossible to determine. Lightfoot (*Philippians*, pp. 55-57) has shown that women in Macedonia probably had a better social position than elsewhere in the civilized world. " At Philippi, at Thessalonica, at Beroea, the women take an active part with the Apostle. . . . The active zeal of the women in this country is a remarkable

fact, without a parallel in the Apostle's history elsewhere." But a little later in his work at Thessalonica the large majority of converts were heathen (i. 9), who worked with their hands for a living (iv. 11; 2 Thess. iii. 10-12). Among the Jews were Aristarchus (Acts xx. 4; Col. iv. 10) and in all probability Jason (Acts xvii. 5, 6; cf. Rom. xvi. 21).

As a free city, Thessalonica had the privilege of electing its own magistrates, to whom St. Luke gives the title of 'Politarchs' (*πολιτάρχαι*, Acts xvii. 6, 8). This title for 'the rulers of the city' is found in no classical author, and the use of it was urged by Baur, Zeller, and others as a reason for questioning the accuracy of Luke's narrative. But the accuracy has been abundantly vindicated by the evidence of seventeen inscriptions, thirteen of which are attributed to Macedonia, five being from Thessalonica. The most famous of these five is now in the British Museum. It was taken from the Roman triumphal arch, now destroyed, which crossed the Via Egnatia near the Vardar gate. It contains these words: "The Politarchs being *Sosipater* son of Cleopatra and Lucius Pontius *Secundus*, Publius Flavius Sabinus, Demetrius son of Faustus, Demetrius of Nicopolis, Zoilus son of Parmenio also called Meniscus, *Gaius* Agillecius Politus." It is a curious coincidence that three of the names should be those of three of St. Paul's friends, Sopater of Beroea (Acts xx. 4), Secundus of Thessalonica (xx. 4), and Gaius of Macedonia (xix. 29). See Conybeare and Howson, ch. ix.; Cook (*Speaker's Commentary*), Knowling (*Expositor's Greek Testament*), and Rackham (*Oxford Commentaries*) on Acts xvii. 6; Lewin, *Fasti Sacri*, p. 294 § 1767; Tozer, *Highlands of Turkey*, I. pp. 143-145, II. p. 358; Zahn, *Introd. to N.T.*, I. p. 211; E. de Witt Burton, *American Journal of Theology*, July, 1898, pp. 598-632, where the whole of the seventeen inscriptions are collected. Sosipater (Rom. xvi. 21) is the same name as Sopater.

Like so many cities which are seaports, Thessalonica had an evil reputation for licentiousness, which was augmented by the wanton rites connected with the worship of the Cabiri (Lightfoot, *Biblical Essays*, p. 257). Cities