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Transcending Epistolary Communication: Prayer in First Thessalonians

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Abstract

Prayer is one of the basic elements of religious life and is widespread in most religions. It is the human act, verbal and non-verbal, of communicating with a transcendent being (in the broadest sense). In comparison to its communicative function, the written form of prayer is secondary. This study differentiates between prayer as act, prayer as text and prayer as subject, understood as any reference to or statement made about prayer. In First Thessalonians, as in contemporary letters, prayer as subject can be found in a variety of ways. An especially remarkable feature is the prayer texts and acts of prayer (although these are not numerous and mostly short), which imply a change of addressee within the communicative situation of the letter. Against the background of ancient letters and epistolary conventions of the time, this article examines the characteristics and the specific function of prayer (as text, act and subject) in First Thessalonians. It argues that the Christian message shapes and multiplies the references to prayer, also integrating short texts and acts of prayer which transcend the epistolary communication, deepening not only the relationship between Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy and the Thessalonians but also their relationship to God and in God.

Keywords: Paul; Pauline letters; 1 Thessalonians; prayer; ancient letters; epistolography

1. Introduction

It may seem strange that a letter should contain prayers, since this in some way implies a change of the addressee in the act of communication.¹ In fact, there are many references to prayer and even short acts of prayer in First Thessalonians, as in the other Pauline letters. This has led scholars to characterise Paul's language in his letters as prayerful or

¹ On the basis of the common meaning of the term, prayer can be understood as the human act, verbal and non-verbal, of communicating with a transcendent being (in the broadest sense); cf. S.D. Gill, 'Art. Prayer (1987)', *EncRel(E)*² 11 (2005) 7367–72, at 7367; K.-H. Ostmeyer, *Kommunikation mit Gott und Christus: Sprache und Theologie des Gebetes im Neuen Testament* (WUNT 197; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 32–3. Since prayer is primarily an act of communication, written forms are secondary by nature. Nevertheless, in the Pauline letters, we are confronted with written forms of prayer. According to Gill, 'Art. Prayer', following T. Zahavy, 'A New Approach to Early Jewish Prayer', *History of Judaism, the Next Ten Years* (ed. B.M. Bokser; BJS 21; Chico: Scholars Press, 1980) 45–60, one can distinguish between prayer as text, prayer as act and prayer as subject. For the latter form, Gill suggests the term 'metaprayer', by which he understands any statement made about prayer. However, since this term primarily recalls theoretical reflections on prayer, it may be more appropriate to refer to these statements as 'references to prayer'.

saturated by prayer.² If, however, we look (for example) at a documentary papyrus letter from a certain Herm... to his lord and patron Serapion (CPR 5.19, 75–199 CE), we find that Paul is not unique in this respect: the letter to Serapion seems even more prayerful than the Pauline letters, since it consists almost exclusively of references to prayer, expressed through epistolary conventions, which – with the exception of the final greetings – are mostly personalised.³ At the beginning of the body of the letter, there is a health-wish for Serapion (lines 3–8). Another health-wish for him and his whole household is situated at the end of the body of the letter (lines 14–19). It is combined with a report of the letter writer's prayers and of the obeisance he makes for his patron before the gods; this is presented as a response to Serapion's continuous remembering him by means of a letter (lines 8–17). This in turn matches, at least indirectly, the motif of remembrance. Finally, there is an exchange of greetings surpassing the usual horizon: no less than all the gods, both male and female, are greeting the addressee (lines 19–22). Although the letter to Serapion is thus almost completely saturated by prayer, there are no genuine acts or texts of prayer besides the various references, whose communicative function consists in deepening the relationship between the letter writer and his addressee.

As I would like to show in the present article, which considers First Thessalonians against the background of contemporary ancient epistolography and its conventions, prayer in this Pauline letter figures as text, act and subject. In examining these three communicative and performative dimensions of prayer, the article goes beyond previous research, which mainly concentrated on certain formal or thematic aspects of prayer in the Pauline letters in general or in First Thessalonians in particular.⁴

After an overview of prayer as text, act and subject in First Thessalonians, the study successively focuses on each passage of prayer in the letter. It investigates the characteristic elements and the specific functions of prayer both by means of a comparison with Greco-Roman and Early Jewish letters and by taking into account contemporary epistolary conventions. A final section will draw some conclusions about the role of prayer in Paul's letter.

2. Prayer in First Thessalonians

Apart from references to prayer, there are also some short acts and texts of prayer in First Thessalonians, as in some letters from a Jewish context (cf. e.g. 2 Macc 1.2–5 LXX) but only rarely in letters from a pagan context (cf. P. Sarap. 89.13–15, 90–133 CE; CPJ 2.437.1–4, 116–17 CE). As in other ancient letters, they cluster particularly around the opening and closing of the letter. But unlike in the letter to Serapion or in P. Phil. 34 (1–99 CE), which consist almost exclusively of references to prayer, prayer does not feature in one lengthy section

² According to R.N. Longenecker, 'Prayer in the Pauline Letters', *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament* (ed. R.N. Longenecker; MNTS; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 203–27, the Pauline letters do not contain proper prayers but are characterised by prayerful language.

³ For a translation of the letter and a brief analysis of the writer's skilful individualisation of epistolary conventions as sketched subsequently see P. Arzt-Grabner, 'Paul's Letter Thanksgiving', *Paul and the Ancient Letter Form* (ed. S.E. Porter and S.A. Adams; Pauline Studies 6; Leiden: Brill, 2010) 129–58, at 140–1.

⁴ R. Jewett, 'The Form and Function of the Homiletic Benedictions', *Anglican Theological Review* 51 (1969) 18–34; G.P. Wiles, *Paul's Intercessory Prayers: The Significance of the Intercessory Prayer Passages in the Letters of St Paul* (MSSNTS 24; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974); P.T. O'Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul* (NovTSup 49; Leiden: Brill, 1977); R.F. Collins, 'Paul at Prayer', *Studies on the First Letter to the Thessalonians* (BETL 66; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1984) 356–64; J.C. Hurd, '1 Thessalonians 3:11–13: The Pivotal Importance of Prayer in the Structure of Paul's Letters', *ARC* 33 (2005) 257–80; C. Breytenbach, 'Der Danksagungsbericht des Paulus über den Gottesglauben der Thessalonicher (1 Thess 1:2–10)', *Grace, Reconciliation, Concord: The Death of Christ in Graeco-Roman Metaphors* (NovTSup 135; Leiden: Brill, 2010) 149–69; R.S. Schellenberg, "'Making My Prayer with Joy": Epistolary Prayer as Emotional Practice in Philippians and 1 Thessalonians', *NovT* 64 (2021) 79–98.

of the second part of the body of the letter (1 Thess 4.1–5.15). It is only towards the end of the second part that prayer once again plays a central role, not only as subject but also as act and as text. Furthermore, it is not only Paul, Silvanus and Timothy who are praying and reporting their own prayers; they also refer to the Thessalonians praying. The following table shows the relevant passages in First Thessalonians:

Table 1. *Prayer as Text, Act and Subject in 1 Thess*

Paul, Silvanus and Timothy Praying	<i>Thessalonians praying</i>
Prayer as act and text (1.1)	
Prayer as subject (1.2–3)	<i>Prayer as subject? (2.9)</i>
Prayer as subject (2.13)	<i>Prayer as subject? (3.6)</i>
Prayer as subject (3.9–10)	
Prayer as act and text (3.11–13)	
	<i>Prayer as subject (5.16–22)</i>
Prayer as act and text (5.23)	
Prayer as (implicit) subject (5.24)	<i>Prayer as subject (5.25)</i>
Prayer as act and text (5.28)	

2.1 Prayer as Text and Act in the Opening Greeting (1.1)

As is common in ancient Greek letters, Paul and his companions open their letter with the *superscriptio* in the nominative form, followed by the *adscriptio* in the dative form.⁵ But the *salutatio* differs from the usual Greek formula. Paul, Silvanus and Timothy use, not the stereotype *χαίρειν* in the infinitive, but a syntactically independent two-noun greeting, probably influenced by Hellenistic Jewish letter writing, where the greeting *שלום/שלום* is sometimes rendered unidiomatically as *ειρήνη*.⁶ Like the peace wish *ειρήνη ὑμῖν πληθυνθείη ἐν παντί καιρῷ* (Dan 4.37c LXX) that serves as *salutatio* in a letter from Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel, the greeting is addressed directly to the recipients.

⁵ Paul, who is named first, figures as the main sender and author of the letter, with Silvanus and Timothy as co-workers and co-senders. It seems most likely that the Thessalonians understood the first-person plural, which is used throughout the letter (except for 2.18; 3.5; 5.27), as a genuine plural. It is difficult to decide whether Silvanus and Timothy are also co-authors; while S. Byrskog, 'Co-Senders, Co-Authors and Paul's Use of the First Person Plural', *ZNW* 87 (1996) 230–50, at 236–8; N. Eubank, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019) 32–3; S. Schreiber, *Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher* (ÖTBK 13/1; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2014) 51–4, and other scholars assume this hypothesis, U. Mell, *Das Evangelium in einem rhetorischen Brief: Ein Kommentar zum 1. Thessalonicherbrief* (WMANT 166; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023) 116–17; C.A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 2006) 67–8, and other scholars reject it.

⁶ For the observation on Hellenistic Jewish letter writing, cf. L. Doering, *Ancient Jewish Letters and the Beginnings of Christian Epistolography* (WUNT 298; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012) 507.

In Aramaic epistolography, there are examples of greetings consisting of two or more nouns.⁷ In an oral context, there are also blessings wishing ἔλεος καὶ εἰρήνη (Gal 6.16 and Tob 7.11(12) LXX in the Codex Sinaiticus) or χάρις καὶ ἔλεος (Wis 3.9; 4.15 LXX),⁸ and in the Greek version of the Ethiopian Enoch, there is a combination of χάρις and εἰρήνη alongside joy and the inheritance of the earth (cf. 1 En. 5.7).⁹ The *salutatio* of the Epistle of Baruch at the end of the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch, dated to about 70–130 CE, contains a two-noun greeting quite similar to that of First Thessalonians. In the first half of the letter opening, it is introduced as an originally oral greeting (2 Bar. 78.2), imitating an old epistolary formula (cf. 2 Chr 36.23 LXX).¹⁰ The Greek version from which the Syriac version was translated is not preserved, but it probably read ἔλεος καὶ εἰρήνη, not χάρις καὶ εἰρήνη.¹¹

In view of these examples, it seems likely that the Pauline opening greeting derives from an oral Jewish blessing or greeting, perhaps also used in epistolary contexts, which Paul adapted by introducing χάρις.¹² Scholars disagree about whether the noun was supposed to evoke the Greek *salutatio* χαίρειν.¹³ In any case, it is one of Paul's key terms.¹⁴

In later letters, Paul also defines the source of grace and peace: χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (Rom 1.7; 1 Cor 1.3; 2 Cor 1.2; Gal 1.3; Phil 1.2; Phlm 3).¹⁵ It is possible that he is doing something similar here. While most scholars consider ἐν θεῷ πατρὶ καὶ κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ to be a descriptive phrase for the ἐκκλησία of

⁷ Cf. J.A. Fitzmyer, 'Aramaic Epistolography', *Studies in Ancient Letter Writing* (ed. J. L. White; Semeia 22; Chico: Scholars Press, 1982) 25–57, at 34–5, who characterises those epistolary greetings as secular or less pious in comparison with explicit benedictions or wish-prayers, since fuller versions of those greetings show that they would be completed by 'I send to you; or 'may there be'.

⁸ Cf. e.g. Doering, *Letters*, 413; I. Taatz, *Frühjüdische Briefe: Die paulinischen Briefe im Rahmen der offiziellen religiösen Briefe des Frühjudentums* (NTOA/StUNT 16; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991) 67. Cf. also I. H. Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 49, who discusses whether 'mercy and peace' as a Jewish formula might be influenced by the Aaronic blessing (Num 6.24–6).

⁹ This seems to be the only example of the combination of χάρις and εἰρήνη before Paul; cf. T.J. Bauer, *Paulus und die kaiserzeitliche Epistolographie: Kontextualisierung und Analyse der Briefe an Philemon und an die Galater* (WUNT 276; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011) 80–1, albeit not in an epistolary context and attested only by the Greek version of the Codex Panopolitanus, while the Ethiopic version has *fešhā* ('joy'); cf. G.W.E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch*, Chapters 1–36; 81–108 (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 159–62. Cf. also Doering, *Letters*, 413; F. Schnider and W. Stenger, *Studien zum neutestamentlichen Briefformular* (NTTS 11; Leiden: Brill, 1987) 26.

¹⁰ Cf. Bauer, *Paulus*, 80. The Letter is introduced by a messenger formula as in Jer 36.1 LXX (cf. 2 Bar. 78.1), but unlike in the letter opening in Jer 36.4 LXX, the content of the letter is not characterised as a divine word (cf. 2 Bar. 78.2); cf. H.-J. Klauck, *Ancient Letters and the New Testament: A Guide to Context and Exegesis* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006) 276; M. Karrer, *Die Johannesoffenbarung als Brief* (FRLANT 140; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986) 49–50.

¹¹ The lexeme ܫܠܡܐ itself has both meanings, but in the letter openings of the Syriac versions of the New Testament, it is reserved for ἔλεος, whereas χάρις is rendered as ܫܠܡܐܝܢ; cf. Doering, *Letters*, 410–12; Taatz, *Briefe*, 67. The Codex Ambrosianus further adds ܠܚܝܢܐܝܢ ('be to you') to the *salutatio*; cf. P. S. Alexander, 'Epistolary Literature', *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Sectarian Writings, Philo, Josephus* (ed. M. E. Stone; CRINT 2; Assen: Van Gorcum/Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 579–96, at 593; J. Lieu, "'Grace to You and Peace': The Apostolic Greeting", *BJRL* 68 (1985) 161–78, at 168 n. 29.

¹² Cf. Bauer, *Paulus*, 80; similarly, Lieu, 'Grace', 169–70, who suggests an adaptation of a Semitic formula.

¹³ Positive: e.g. S.A. Adams, 'Paul's Letter Opening and Greek Epistolography: A Matter of Relationship', *Paul and the Ancient Letter Form* (ed. S.E. Porter and S.A. Adams; Pauline Studies 6; Leiden: Brill, 2010) 33–55, at 47; Bauer, *Paulus*, 80; Klauck, *Letters*, 30; 360–1; negative: Doering, *Letters*, 409; Mell, *1 Thess*, 121; Schnider and Stenger, *Studien*, 25 and elsewhere; W.G. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014) 29 points to linguistic similarities but remains undecided.

¹⁴ On Paul's use of χάρις instead of ἔλεος see C. Breytenbach, "'Charis" and "Eleos" in Paul's Letter to the Romans', *Grace, Reconciliation, Concord: The Death of Christ in Graeco-Roman Metaphors* (NovTSup 135; Leiden: Brill, 2010) 207–38, at 234–7.

¹⁵ Cf. Doering, *Letters*, 407. In Galatians, the greeting is further expanded (cf. Gal 1.3–5).

the Thessalonians,¹⁶ some scholars suggest that it might be related to χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη, being thus a preliminary stage of Paul's later greeting formula.¹⁷ In both cases, the prepositional phrase widens the communicative situation: not only are Paul, Silvanus, Timothy and the Thessalonians present as communicative partners, but God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ also become present.¹⁸ Together with the following *salutatio*, the prepositional phrase reassures the addressees of their relation to God and Christ, which they share with the apostles.¹⁹

The letter opening thus makes it clear that the apostles are acting simultaneously as senders of the letter and as mere mediators who convey a divine blessing.²⁰ Unlike the *salutatio* in ancient Greek letters, with which the Thessalonians were familiar, Paul's opening greeting thus evokes an atmosphere of prayer from the very beginning of the letter.²¹

2.2 Prayer as Subject: The First Report of Thanksgiving (1.2–3)

After the opening greeting, Paul and his companions insert a report of their prayers for the Thessalonians, characterised especially as thanksgiving to God and combined with a motif of remembrance and of ceaseless prayer.²² Scholars debate whether the thanksgiving report is still part of the letter opening, whether it serves as a transition to the body of the letter or whether it forms its beginning. In ancient Hellenistic epistolography, a prayer report, the motif of remembrance, and a *formula valetudinis* concerning the health of the addressees or their general well-being could follow or be combined with the *salutatio* at the letter opening, but a thanksgiving report naming specific reasons for the thanksgiving was already part of the body of the letter, while there was no form like an 'introductory

¹⁶ Cf. e.g. F.F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (WBC 45; Waco: Word Books, 1982) 7; Doering, *Letters*, 407 n. 159.

¹⁷ Cf. B. Bosenius, 'Ein alter Interpunktionsvorschlag zu 1 Thess 1,1 neu beleuchtet: ἐν θεῷ πατρὶ καὶ κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη', *ZNW* 109 (2018) 138–47, following an interpretation of the Ambrosiaster and Theodore of Mopsuestia in the fourth and fifth centuries, and of Johann Benjamin Koppe in the nineteenth century. It is considered, at least as a possibility, by Schnider and Stenger, *Studien*, 20.

¹⁸ Cf. C. Hoegen-Rohls, *Zwischen Augenblickskorrespondenz und Ewigkeitstexten: Eine Einführung in die paulinische Epistolographie* (BThSt 135; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Theologie, 2013) 92–117; C. Hoegen-Rohls, 'Form und Funktion, Realia und Idee des Paulusbriefes', *Paulus: Leben – Umwelt – Werk – Briefe* (ed. O. Wischmeyer and E.-M. Becker; UTB 2767; Stuttgart: Narr Francke Attempto, 2021³) 247–78, at 274–6, who accordingly characterises the Pauline letters as kerygmatic letters.

¹⁹ For this function of the prepositional phrase see J. Bickmann, *Kommunikation gegen den Tod: Studien zur paulinischen Briefpragmatik am Beispiel des Ersten Thessalonicherbriefes* (FzB 86; Würzburg: Echter, 1998) 150. For the *salutatio* cf. Ostmeier, *Kommunikation*, 60.

²⁰ Cf. U. Heckel, *Der Segen im Neuen Testament: Begriff, Formeln, Gesten. Mit einem praktisch-theologischen Ausblick* (WUNT 150; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002) 266–98 and P. Arzt-Grabner, *Letters and Letter Writing* (Papyri and the New Testament 2; Paderborn: Brill/Schöningh, 2023) 83, who additionally observes that Paul's role is thus emphasised. But although the apostle only transmits the benediction, while God is the source of the salvific goods, it would stretch the point to identify God as the actual addressor, as supposed by K. Berger, 'Apostelbrief und apostolische Rede: Zum Formular frühchristlicher Briefe', *ZNW* 65 (1974) 190–231, at 202. His interpretation is rejected by Doering, *Letters*, 409–10; C. Gerber, *Paulus und seine „Kinder“: Studien zur Beziehungsmetaphorik der paulinischen Briefe* (BZNW 136; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), 55 n. 33; Karrer, *Johannesoffenbarung*, 70–1; Schnider and Stenger, *Studien*, 28–9 and others.

²¹ Cf. e.g. Mell, *1 Thess*, 122–3 and Wanamaker, *1–2 Thess*, 71, who states that 'Paul's "grace and peace" [...] constitute a formulaic prayer for the addressees of his letters.'

²² J. Lambrecht, 'Paul and Epistolary Thanksgiving', *ETL* 88 (2012) 167–71, at 169 identifies a temporary difference. He argues that making remembrance is concerned with the past, thanksgiving with the present and praying with the future. E. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians* (ed. D.J. Harrington; SP 11; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995) 46 and others understand μνησθῆναι as mentioning, not as making remembrance. M. Wolter, 'Das Proömium des Römerbriefes und das hellenistische Freundschaftsethos', *Paul's Graeco-Roman Context* (ed. C. Breytenbach; BETL 277; Leuven/Paris/Bristol: Peeters, 2015) 253–71, at 254 emphasises the aspect of commemoration, since this does not necessarily suppose that the sender and the addressee have met before.

thanksgiving'.²³ Since the thanksgiving report in 1.2–3 is also related to specific reasons, which are further unfolded in 1.4–10, foreshadowing at the same time the main themes of the whole letter,²⁴ it seems likely that the thanksgiving report in First Thessalonians opens the body of the letter.

While in contemporary letters the thanksgiving could be directed to gods (cf. e.g. P. Oxy. 77.5113.4–6, 200–99 CE), but also to the addressees or to others responsible for the good news that caused joy (cf. e.g. P. Bad. 2.34.2–8, 1–99? CE; O. Krok. 2.246.3–4, 117–30 CE),²⁵ in 1 Thess 1.2, the thanksgiving – characterised explicitly as the content of prayer – is addressed to God. This suggests that, for Paul and his companions, 'to give thanks is to pray'.²⁶ The reason for their thanksgiving, as well as the content of their prayers, is the spiritual well-being of the Thessalonians, replacing in this way the *formula valetudinis* that is frequent in Hellenistic letters and is either focused on the health of the addressees or extended to their general well-being.²⁷ At the same time, the function of the thanksgiving and of the prayer report in First Thessalonians is similar to that of the *formula valetudinis* in Hellenistic letters: to show the interest and compassion of the senders concerning the situation of their addressees,²⁸ thereby fulfilling a philofronetic aim.²⁹

The prayer report in First Thessalonians is further combined with a motif of remembrance. In ancient letters, making remembrance is often, but not necessarily related 'to a prayer or is performed before the gods'³⁰ (cf. e.g. BGU 2.632.2–6, 100–199 CE; 1 Macc 12.11 LXX). It has thus a similar function to the προσκύνημα phrase, which appears in private letters from the first century CE onwards as a stylisation or extension of the prayer report. This act of supplication or obeisance before a god was originally performed in a temple on behalf of someone, while some letters also indicate a merely formulaic use of the phrase. As it is absent in all Pauline as well as in later Christian letters, the προσκύνημα was obviously considered to be a pagan act of worship.³¹ Instead of προσκύνημα ποιέω/ποιέομαι, Paul uses a similar expression which is equally frequent in ancient letters: μνείαν ποιέομαι. At the beginning of the Pauline letters, it always signifies the remembrance in prayer, so '[I]ike private letter writers, Paul reports a religious act: He has performed prayers and remembrances before God for the entire Christ group of Thessalonike'.³²

In a π-alliteration, Paul and his companions further emphasise the unceasing nature of their prayers, in which they include all the members of the Thessalonian community.³³

²³ Cf. Arzt-Grabner, *Letters*, 123–4; cf. also P. Arzt, 'The "Epistolary Introductory Thanksgiving" in the Papyri and in Paul', *NovT* 36 (1994) 29–46; Arzt-Grabner, *Letters*.

²⁴ Cf. A.J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AYB 32B; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) 107. The function of providing a forecast is highlighted by D.W. Pao, 'Gospel within the Constraints of an Epistolary Form: Pauline Introductory Thanksgivings and Paul's Theology of Thanksgiving', *Paul and the Ancient Letter Form* (ed. S.E. Porter and S.A. Adams; Pauline Studies 6; Leiden: Brill, 2010) 101–27, at 104 as is recognised by most scholars.

²⁵ Cf. Arzt-Grabner, *Letters*, 126; in those cases, however, it is not a report, but an act of thanksgiving.

²⁶ Lambrecht, 'Paul', 169.

²⁷ Cf. Arzt-Grabner, *Letters*, 112; Malherbe, *1–2 Thess*, 107; Wolter, 'Proömium', 265.

²⁸ Cf. H. Koskenniemi, *Studien zur Idee und Phraseologie des griechischen Briefes bis 400 n. Chr.* (AASF 102/2; Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia Akateeminen Kirjakauppa/Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1956) 138.

²⁹ Cf. Malherbe, *1–2 Thess*, 107; Mell, *1 Thess*, 125.

³⁰ Arzt-Grabner, *Letters*, 113.

³¹ Cf. Koskenniemi, *Studien*, 142–3. The Christian origin of certain letters that contain a προσκύνημα phrase is therefore questioned; cf. Arzt-Grabner, *Letters*, 111.

³² Arzt-Grabner, *Letters*, 115.

³³ On the π-alliteration, used by Paul as a stylistic feature at the beginning of several letters (1 Cor 1.4; 2 Cor 1.3–7; Phil 1.3–5) see Malherbe, *1–2 Thess*, 106.

‘Paul subtly paints a picture of himself as a model who is constantly rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks.’³⁴

According to Peter Thomas O’Brien, the ‘introductory thanksgivings’ have an epistolary, a pastoral and apostolic, a didactic and a paraenetic function.³⁵ Similarly, according to Jeffrey A. D. Weima, the thanksgiving passages at the beginning of Paul’s letters have a threefold function: pastoral, exhortative and foreshadowing.³⁶ Rhetorically, they serve as a *captatio benevolentiae*.³⁷

2.3 Prayer as Subject? The Thessalonians Remembering the Work of Paul and His Companions (2.9)

In the following passage, the missionaries remind the addressees of their work among them, and in particular of their credibility. Five times they refer to the Thessalonians’ knowledge (1 Thess 1.5; 2.1, 2, 5, 11: οἴδατε),³⁸ but in 2.9 the expression varies,³⁹ creating a correspondence with 1.3: ‘As the missionaries remembered the Thessalonians’ “work of faith and labor of love” (1:3), so they expected that the Thessalonians would remember how they too had labored while they were with them.’⁴⁰ This correspondence makes it likely that a thankful remembrance in prayer may be implied.

Their behaviour shows that the Thessalonians really became imitators of the apostles: not only did they receive the Word amid difficulties, following therein the example of the missionaries and of the Lord (1.6), but they also accepted the message and applied it to their own lives.⁴¹ The praise implies a subtle paraenesis,⁴² since it encourages the recipients to persist in their conduct. The mutual remembrance further deepens the relationship between the apostles and their addressees. If a remembrance in prayer is implied, this goes beyond a merely philofronetic goal: it also deepens their shared relationship with God.

2.4 Prayer as Subject: The Second Report of the Apostles’ Thanksgiving (2.13)

The reciprocity between the apostles and the Thessalonians is further strengthened by the second thanksgiving report. It is closely linked not only to the thanksgiving report in 1.2–3,⁴³ but also to the reference to the remembrance of the Thessalonians. The transitional phrase καὶ διὰ τοῦτο connects it with the preceding reference to the apostles’ announcement of the Word among them, which the Thessalonians remember, and points to its reception by the Thessalonians, for which Paul and his companions thank God.⁴⁴ This reciprocity can also explain the following phrase καὶ ἡμεῖς εὐχαριστοῦμεν: if the remembrance of the Thessalonians mentioned in 2.9 implies a thanksgiving for the proclamation of the Word by the apostles, then the apostles, on their part, may well thank God for its

³⁴ Malherbe, *1–2 Thess*, 106.

³⁵ Cf. O’Brien, *Thanksgivings*, 261–3.

³⁶ Cf. J.A.D. Weima, *Paul the Ancient Letter Writer: An Introduction to Epistolary Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016) 56–60.

³⁷ Cf. Wolter, ‘Proömium’, 257.

³⁸ In two other instances, they call on God, and once also on the Thessalonians, as witnesses (2.5, 10).

³⁹ Wanamaker, *1–2 Thess*, 102 supposes that the expression changes for stylistic reasons.

⁴⁰ Bruce, *1–2 Thess*, 34; cf. also Malherbe, *1–2 Thess*, 148. The expression is not completely identical, since in 1.3, it is a genitive compound and in 2.9 an accusative compound. The motif of ceaselessness, which in 1.2–3 is related to the missionaries’ prayer, is also present in 2.9, although referring there to the missionaries’ toil night and day.

⁴¹ On the existential dimension of accepting the message in one’s own life see R. Hoppe, *Der erste Thessalonikerbrief: Kommentar* (Freiburg i. Br./Basel/Wien: Herder, 2016) 110.

⁴² Cf. Wanamaker, *1–2 Thess*, 80 concerning the function of the praise in 1.6.

⁴³ Cf. B.R. Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Int; Louisville: John Knox, 1998) 34.

⁴⁴ Cf. G.D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 85–7.

reception by the Thessalonians.⁴⁵ The second thanksgiving report hence emphasises the correspondence between the apostles and their addressees and indicates that the reference to the Thessalonians' remembrance may well imply a thankful remembrance in prayer.

While the explanation following the first thanksgiving report already pointed to the reception of the Word in distress, the reason given in the second report focuses on a different aspect, thus amplifying the first one.⁴⁶ Here, it is the reception of the proclamation as Word of God and not only as human speech. Thus, the thanksgiving highlights especially the interaction between the apostles, the Thessalonians and God, who is named three times in the verse. The fact that the thanksgiving is directed to him shows that he has the decisive part, while the reason given for thanksgiving likewise sheds light on the role of the apostles and of the Thessalonians: God is the one acting in the Thessalonians and indirectly through Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, from whom they heard his word which they accepted, recognising its divine character. As in the first thanksgiving report, the thanksgiving of Paul and his companions to God is described as unceasing. This implies not only an instantaneous prayer, but a constant communication with God which is embedded in their relationship with him.⁴⁷ The Thessalonians are included in this relationship. The thanksgiving report thus exceeds the common epistolary philophroneis, while it likewise has an epistolary, didactical and paraenetical function.⁴⁸

2.5 Prayer as Subject? The Thessalonians' Good Remembrance of the Apostles (3.6)

On Timothy's return from Thessalonica, Paul and Silvanus are comforted by the good news about the Thessalonians' faith and love and by being told that they always keep them in good remembrance, longing to see them (3.6). Again, one may ask if a remembrance in prayer is implied. Two aspects may support this assumption.

On the one hand, there is again a correspondence between the Thessalonians and the missionaries: both explicit, in the reference to the mutual longing to see each other, and implicit, in the fact that, through their constant act of remembrance, the Thessalonians are following the example of the apostles (cf. 1.2–3). As in 2.9, this correspondence indicates that they do not merely continue to think kindly of Paul and his companions,⁴⁹ but also thankfully remember them in prayer.

On the other hand, it seems conceivable that on his return, Timothy brought not only an oral message, but also a letter. Although such a letter is not mentioned explicitly, the density of epistolary clichés could be a hint.⁵⁰ This would make it even more likely that the motif of remembrance may imply a prayer report.

Accordingly, as in 2.6, it is possible that the mention of the Thessalonians remembering the apostles implies their prayer for them. Even though this is not absolutely certain, the frequent connection of the motif of remembrance with a report of prayer in Pauline letters in particular, as well as in ancient letters in general, makes it fairly probable that this is implied.

⁴⁵ Hence, one may well assume that *καί* belongs to *ἡμεῖς*, as the word order suggests. It is uncertain whether an oral report by Timothy or a letter from Timothy is implied, cf. e.g. Bruce, *1-2 Thess*, 44. For Marshall, *1-2 Thess*, 76–7 this explanation is not convincing, since there is no indication of such an oral or written message. He supposes that *καί* is related to *διὰ τοῦτο*, while others such as Malherbe, *1-2 Thess*, 165 think it emphasises the verb *εὐχαριστοῦμεν*.

⁴⁶ Cf. Bruce, *1-2 Thess*, 44.

⁴⁷ Hence, other than Richard, *1-2 Thess*, 112 supposes, not only 'a state of mind', but a constant relationship to God is intended here.

⁴⁸ Cf. Malherbe, *1-2 Thess*, 164.

⁴⁹ Cf. e.g. Marshall, *1-2 Thess*, 94–5.

⁵⁰ Cf. Arzt-Grabner, *Letters*, 115.

2.6 Prayer as Text, Act, and Subject: The Prayer Report and the Wish-Prayer at the End of the First Part (3.9–13)

At the transition from the first to the second part of the letter, just as in its opening, prayer plays a central role as text, act and subject. Simultaneously, the passage provides insights into the prayer of Paul and his companions, which is characterised by the expressions of thanksgiving, joy and supplication.⁵¹

For the third time, the senders mention their thankfulness to God. This leads to a report of their prayer and flows into an epistolary act of prayer.⁵² This time, however, they do not report their thanksgiving as they had done earlier on (cf. 1.2–3; 2.13). They express it in the form of a rhetorical question, indicating that they are more grateful to God than they can say.⁵³ The theme of thanksgiving towards God thus frames the entire first part of the letter, leading to a certain climax.

While the content of the thanksgiving is similar in all three cases, revolving around the Thessalonians, each one emphasises a different aspect. In 3.9–10, the reason for the renewed thankfulness towards God is the joy that the missionaries are experiencing because of them. This contrasts with their previous distress and affliction regarding the Thessalonians' faith (cf. 3.7). It is significant that the experience of joy is embedded in a context of prayer, forming a kind of non-verbal communication with God, as the expression *ἐμπροσθεν τοῦ θεοῦ* suggests.⁵⁴ It seems that this non-verbal form of prayer conveys more than what a verbal form of prayer rendering thanks to God could express. At the same time, it leads to a concrete prayer of supplication (3.10).

The apostles report their petitionary prayer, which consists of a twofold request and is described as permanent and superabundant.⁵⁵ While the expression *νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας* stresses the enduring quality of the prayer (cf. 1.2–3; 2.13),⁵⁶ its intensity is conveyed by the adverb *ὑπερεκπερισσοῦ*: 'The missionaries' prayer then is both continuous in time and limitless in intensity.'⁵⁷ With the double petition, to see the addressees again and to complete what is needed in their faith (3.10),⁵⁸ their report combines two motifs frequent in ancient letters: the longing for a reunion and the 'intention to satisfy or supply the want (*apoplērōun to endēon*) caused by one's physical separation from one's readers'.⁵⁹ However, it goes beyond the conventional scope of philophroneis by focusing on the Thessalonians' faith and thus being explicitly orientated towards an apostolic objective. Since Paul cannot yet realise his desire to visit the Thessalonians, he and his co-senders are going to teach them through the letter, using it as a substitute for their presence.⁶⁰ The prayer report 'serves as a reminder to the Thessalonians of their need for further spiritual growth and prepares them for the remaining part of the letter.'⁶¹ This preparation has a double dimension: the philophroneis elements deepening the relationship between the apostles and their

⁵¹ Cf. Wanamaker, *1-2 Thess*, 137–8.

⁵² Similarly, Bruce, *1-2 Thess*, 69.

⁵³ Cf. Marshall, *1-2 Thess*, 97.

⁵⁴ Cf. Richard, *1-2 Thess*, 163–4; Wanamaker, *1-2 Thess*, 137–8.

⁵⁵ Cf. Wanamaker, *1-2 Thess*, 138.

⁵⁶ Cf. Richard, *1-2 Thess*, 164; Wanamaker, *1-2 Thess*, 138; unlike Bruce, *1-2 Thess*, 68; P. T. O'Brien, 'Thanksgiving within the Structure of Pauline Theology', *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce* (ed. D. A. Hagner and M. J. Harris; Exeter: Paternoster, 1980) 50–66, at 56, who think that the expression only refers to acts of remembrance within certain regular moments of prayer.

⁵⁷ Richard, *1-2 Thess*, 164; cf. also Marshall, *1-2 Thess*, 98; Wanamaker, *1-2 Thess*, 138.

⁵⁸ Cf. also Malherbe, *1-2 Thess*, 204.

⁵⁹ Malherbe, *1-2 Thess*, 205.

⁶⁰ Cf. Malherbe, *1-2 Thess*, 205; Wanamaker, *1-2 Thess*, 139.

⁶¹ Marshall, *1-2 Thess*, 99; cf. further Malherbe, *1-2 Thess*, 205; Wanamaker, *1-2 Thess*, 138–9.

addressees provide the basis that allows the Thessalonians to receive and accept the following instructions,⁶² which in turn are anticipated thematically. Thus, the prayer report fulfils a philophroneic, a didactic, and a structuring epistolary function.

The following verses expand on the topic, while changing from the report to an act of prayer.⁶³ This change marks a shift in the letter, since Paul, Silvanus and Timothy will no longer give a report of their prayer; instead, they will either pray⁶⁴ or exhort the Thessalonians to do so. As in Hellenistic Jewish letters (c.f. e.g. 2 Macc 1.2–5 LXX) and in the rare cases of acts of prayer in other Hellenistic letters (P. Sarap. 89.13–15: ἀλλὰ θεοὶ φώζοιεν ἡ[μ]ᾶς ἀπροσκόπο[υ]ς), the epistolary prayer is expressed by naming the one who is to act in the third person and formulating the wish in the optative mood, which designates a strong, fulfillable wish.⁶⁵ It has a performative function, while God, being the grammatical subject, represents the actual agent.⁶⁶

The wish-prayer continues the topics mentioned in the previous prayer report. It is directly related to the missionary activity of Paul and his companions. The first petition pertains to the recurrently expressed desire to see the Thessalonians again (3.11; cf. 2.17–18; 3.10). While in other Pauline letters, plans for a visit are likewise found in the context of prayer (cf. esp. Rom 1.10–15; 15.22–32; Phlm 22), it is only here that the apostles formulate their plan as a wish-prayer, underlining thereby the prominent role of this desire in the present letter.⁶⁷ Although it may seem as if they were praying for their own purposes, in the context of the previous prayer report, their petition clearly has an apostolic aim. Furthermore, the invocation of God the Father and the Lord Jesus (1 Thess 3.11) represents a marked difference from prayers concerning travel and travel plans in other Greco-Roman and Early Jewish letters.

The following petition, in 3.12–13, for the spiritual well-being of the Thessalonians is exclusively addressed to the Lord, while the context suggests that ὁ κύριος again refers to Jesus.⁶⁸ Hence, already the earliest of the Pauline letters shows that prayers are directed towards Jesus.⁶⁹ With regard to the textual-pragmatic dimension, the petition for an overflowing in mutual love serves, in the light of its eschatological perspective, as a stimulus to appropriate behaviour. In the same way as the previous prayer report, the wish-prayer thus combines a pastoral and paraenetic function with a preparation for the subsequent section of the letter, in which the apostles will address these topics in greater detail.⁷⁰ In terms of rhetoric, therefore, Jewett, Wanamaker and others identify 3.11–13 as a *transitus*, summarising the *narratio* and introducing the *probatio*.⁷¹ In epistolary terms, the prayer has

⁶² Cf. Malherbe, *1–2 Thess*, 206 The philophroneic character is also highlighted by Fee, *1–2 Thess*, 127–8.

⁶³ Cf. also Marshall, *1–2 Thess*, 99; L. Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 110.

⁶⁴ Cf. J. Lambrecht, 'Thanksgiving in 1 Thessalonians 1–3', *Pauline Studies: Collected Essays* (BETL 115; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1994) 319–41, at 329.

⁶⁵ Cf. Gaventa, *1–2 Thess*, 45; Heckel, *Segen*, 267; Richard, *1–2 Thess*, 165. Like promises and assurances by God, the wish has an encouraging character; but unlike those forms of divine speech, it is a form of petitionary prayer on the part of the human speaker for his addressees; cf. the instructive differentiation offered by Heckel, *Segen*, 263–5.

⁶⁶ Cf. Heckel, *Segen*, 270–1; E. D. Schmidt, *Heilig ins Eschaton: Heiligung und Heiligkeit als eschatologische Konzeption im 1. Thessalonicherbrief* (BZNW 167; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010) 355; 360.

⁶⁷ Cf. Gaventa, *1–2 Thess*, 46.

⁶⁸ Cf. Bruce, *1–2 Thess*, 74; Fee, *1–2 Thess*, 131; Wanamaker, *1–2 Thess*, 142.

⁶⁹ Cf. also Wanamaker, *1–2 Thess*, 141; further H. Löhr, 'Formen und Traditionen des Gebets bei Paulus', *Das Gebet im Neuen Testament: Vierte europäische orthodox-westliche Exegetenkonferenz in Sâmbăta de Sus, 4.–8. August 2007* (ed. H. Klein, V. Mihoc, K.-W. Niebuhr and C. Karakolis; WUNT 249; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009) 115–32, at 129–30, who only cautiously assumes that prayers are directed towards Jesus.

⁷⁰ Cf. Malherbe, *1–2 Thess*, 211; 215.

⁷¹ Cf. R. Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety* (FF; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 77–8; Wanamaker, *1–2 Thess*, 140.

a central role for the structure of the letter, since it brings together the major topics of the letter, repeating those of the first part and anticipating those of the second part.⁷²

2.7 Prayer as Subject in the Exhortations to the Thessalonians (5.16–22)

In the first part of the letter, Paul and his co-senders reported several times on their prayers and even included an act of prayer for their addressees (1.2–3; 2.13; 3.9–13). Where the apostles mentioned the Thessalonians' remembrance of themselves, this may only possibly have referred to prayer (2.9; 3.6), but now, towards the end of the second part of the letter, they explicitly exhort the Thessalonians to pray, combining joy and thanksgiving with their prayers (5.16–18) just like the apostles themselves.⁷³ The ensuing exhortations concern the activity of the Spirit and the role of prophecy (5.19–22), and thus also a form of communication with God.

In comparison to the first sub-sections of exhortations, which deal with aspects of the communal life (5.12–15), from 5.16 onwards there is a shift to the requirements and facets of religious life.⁷⁴ Together with the content, the grammatical structure changes: in 5.16–22, an adverbial modification or an object precedes the imperative in each command.

The sequence of imperatives in 5.16–18 highlights the permanence of joy, the ceaselessness of prayer and the ubiquity of thanksgiving. The focus lies on the adverbial constructions at the beginning of each instruction and thus on the attitude,⁷⁵ which can be characterised as comprehensive in terms of time and circumstances. It is the same attitude that distinguished the apostles' prayer,⁷⁶ in both general and specific forms, such as making remembrance and thanksgiving. The insistence on continuity indicates that the commands seek to induce a constant orientation towards God.⁷⁷ This also makes it likely that the exhortations not only apply to communal worship, as many scholars suppose,⁷⁸ but that they comprise both communal and individual prayer.⁷⁹ As in 3.9–10, joy (5.16) is combined with prayer and thanksgiving, thereby indicating that it may constitute a form of non-verbal prayer. At any rate, it characterises Christian prayer.⁸⁰ With προσεύχομαι, the following command (5.17) uses the general term for prayer. Since it is followed by the exhortation to give thanks, some scholars assume that it signifies intercession, as in 5.25.⁸¹ The initial ἐν παντί in the request for thanksgiving (5.18) 'could be adverbial, but probably means "in everything," "in every circumstance"'.⁸² The final addition τοῦτο γὰρ θέλημα θεοῦ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ εἰς ὑμᾶς (5.18), 'which marks the only break in the strophic structure',⁸³ emphasises the importance of joy, prayer and gratitude as basic Christian attitudes by grounding them in God's will in Christ.⁸⁴ Thus, 'praise, intercession, and thanksgiving were not optional for the Christian'.⁸⁵

⁷² Cf. Fee, *1–2 Thess*, 125; Malherbe, *1–2 Thess*, 211.

⁷³ Cf. Fee, *1–2 Thess*, 215; Gaventa, *1–2 Thess*, 84.

⁷⁴ Cf. Wanamaker, *1–2 Thess*, 190; 199.

⁷⁵ Cf. Richard, *1–2 Thess*, 271; 278. In contrast, Malherbe, *1–2 Thess*, 238 thinks that the change of word order between the imperative and its mostly adverbial modification is probably due to stylistic reasons.

⁷⁶ Cf. Malherbe, *1–2 Thess*, 329.

⁷⁷ Cf. K.-H. Ostmeier, 'Das immerwährende Gebet bei Paulus', *ThBeitr* 33 (2002) 274–89, at 282.

⁷⁸ Cf. e.g. Mell, *1 Thess*, 375.

⁷⁹ Cf. Fee, *1–2 Thess*, 215; Schreiber, *1 Thess*, 309; Wanamaker, *1–2 Thess*, 200.

⁸⁰ Cf. Malherbe, *1–2 Thess*, 329.

⁸¹ Cf. Richard, *1–2 Thess*, 278; Wanamaker, *1–2 Thess*, 200.

⁸² Malherbe, *1–2 Thess*, 328.

⁸³ Malherbe, *1–2 Thess*, 328.

⁸⁴ Cf. Richard, *1–2 Thess*, 278; J. A. D. Weima, *1–2 Thessalonians* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014) 403.

⁸⁵ Wanamaker, *1–2 Thess*, 201.

It is more difficult to decide whether the exhortations concerning the activity of the Spirit and prophecy (5.19–22) likewise refer to prayer as subject, since First Thessalonians does not provide extended information in this regard.⁸⁶ This makes it hard to identify the specific situation in the Thessalonians' community that prompts these instructions.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, while the transition to this last sequence of imperatives seems abrupt, the role of the Spirit links them to the previous exhortations, as joy and prayer are grounded in the activity of the Spirit (cf. Rom 8.26–7; 14.17; Gal 5.22; 1 Thess 1.6): they are 'both the result and the evidence of the Spirit's presence'.⁸⁸ A comparison with 1 Cor 12–14 also suggests that this last set of exhortations concerns congregational worship.⁸⁹ This means that they are at least situated in a context of prayer.

2.8 Prayer as Text, Act, and (Implicit) Subject: The Second Wish-Prayer (5.23–4)

The exhortations are followed by a wish-prayer (1 Thess 5.23). As in 3.11, it opens with the words αὐτὸς δὲ ὁ θεός, further qualified as ὁ θεὸς τῆς εἰρήνης (cf. Rom 15.33; 16.20; Phil 4.9), forming thus an *inclusio* together with the grace and peace wish in the opening greeting (cf. 1 Thess 1.1).⁹⁰ As at the beginning of the letter (cf. 1.2–3), the concern for the addressees' well-being in a comprehensive sense replaces the health-wish that is common in ancient letters. Once more, the apostles adapt an epistolary convention in a manner that serves their purposes.⁹¹ Instead of expressing their wish by reporting about their prayer, as is done in some ancient Hellenistic letters, they convey it in the form of a performative petitionary wish-prayer.⁹²

Together with 3.11–13, this second wish-prayer forms an *inclusio* around the *parænesis* in 4.1–5.22. Both are closely connected with each other and with the respective context: while 3.11–13 links the first part of the letter with the second one, functioning as a transition, 5.23 has a concluding function by repeating the themes of sanctification (cf. 3.13; 4.3, 4, 7) and *parousia* (cf. 2.19; 3.13; 4.13–5.11).⁹³ If God sanctifies the Thessalonians, then it is he who enables them to follow the admonitions of the apostles.⁹⁴

The performative character of the wish-prayer is emphasised and reinforced by the following verse (5.24), which expresses the certainty that the faithful God, who calls the Thessalonians, will act in accordance with the requests made by the missionaries. The verse functions as a complement to their petition, which implicitly forms the object of the

⁸⁶ Fee, *1–2 Thess*, 216; Gaventa, *1–2 Thess*, 84 point out the abruptness of the two negative imperatives in 5.19–20, for which there is no preparation within the letter.

⁸⁷ Cf. e.g. Weima, *1–2 Thess*, 403–4. The similarities to the *parænetical* instructions in other Pauline letters induce Mell, *1 Thess*, 374 and others to argue that they are not based on a specific situation or concrete deficiencies in Thessalonica.

⁸⁸ Fee, *1–2 Thess*, 214.

⁸⁹ Cf. Gaventa, *1–2 Thess*, 85.

⁹⁰ Several scholars, such as J. A. D. Weima, *Neglected Endings: The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings* (JSNTS 101; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 174–5 would read 5.23–8 as the closing of the letter. Bruce, *1–2 Thess*; Fee, *1–2 Thess*; Gaventa, *1–2 Thess* and others identify 5.25–8 as closing of the letter. In the light of ancient documentary letters, Arzt-Grabner, *Letters*, 163–4 reduces it even further to 5.26–8, beginning with the secondary greetings.

⁹¹ Cf. also Malherbe, *1–2 Thess*, 342–3.

⁹² Cf. Arzt-Grabner, *Letters*, 171, who nonetheless doubts that the addressees would recognise in 5.23–4 a correspondence to the formulaic final prayer report.

⁹³ Cf. Malherbe, *1–2 Thess*, 211; Wanamaker, *1–2 Thess*, 205–7.

⁹⁴ Cf. Gaventa, *1–2 Thess*, 85.

subordinate clause.⁹⁵ It thus constitutes a statement about prayer, which Sam D. Gill calls a ‘metaprayer’.⁹⁶

2.9 Prayer as Subject: The Exhortation to Pray for the Apostles (5.25)

Immediately afterwards, in 5.25, there follows another exhortation to pray, this time as a request for prayer on behalf of the apostles. In several manuscripts, there is a *καί*, ‘pray also for us’, which creates a connection either to the general exhortation to pray in 5.17 or to the previous petition of Paul and his companions for their addressees in 5.23.⁹⁷ Despite the semantic relation to 5.17, the immediate context suggests that the request calls the Thessalonians to reciprocate the prayer of the missionaries.⁹⁸ Reciprocity in prayer is further evident in the overall structure of the letter, which the missionaries open by reporting about their thanksgiving for the Thessalonians in prayer (1.2).⁹⁹ Thus, the request of Paul and his companions creates ‘a bond of mutual intercession’.¹⁰⁰ In addition to its textual-pragmatic function, the request for prayer has an epistolary function: in a compositional sense, by forming an *inclusio* around the body of the letter, together with the previous exhortations and the prayer reports at the beginning, and in a communicative sense, by deepening the relationship. Thus, as in Hellenistic letters, the request for the Thessalonians’ prayer has a philophroneic function, with Paul ‘[a]sking them to pray for him and his companions is a way of expressing mutual indebtedness between friends’.¹⁰¹ At the same time, the mutual prayer transcends the reciprocity in the relation between the missionaries and their addressees, since it is rooted in the relationship with God.¹⁰²

2.10 Prayer as Text and Act in the Final Greeting (5.28)

In 5.28, another grace benediction, similar to the opening greeting (1.1) albeit now with a christological character, closes the letter. It replaces the standard *ἔρωσο* or *ἔρωσθε*, common in Hellenistic letters, although the final greeting, too, could be individualised, as various examples attest.¹⁰³ The final greeting in First Thessalonians may thus have been ‘perceived as unique, but not strange, and conveyed to the addressees that the relationship with them was of special and personal significance to the letter sender’.¹⁰⁴

Through the greetings at its beginning and end, the letter is surrounded by prayer. Moreover, because of the performative character of the benedictions, the addressees, too, are surrounded by prayer in a certain sense. At the same time, the communicative situation is widened by naming the Lord Jesus Christ as the source of grace. The Thessalonians are

⁹⁵ Malherbe, *1-2 Thess*, 339 emphasises that the affirmation becomes more pronounced through the fact that there is no object associated with the verb.

⁹⁶ Cf. Gill, ‘Art. Prayer’, 7370.

⁹⁷ Cf. e.g. Malherbe, *1-2 Thess*, 340, who sees the latter option as more plausible. In view of the textual evidence, it is hard to decide whether the *καί* is original or not, since \mathfrak{P}^{30} B D* 33 1739 2464 and other manuscripts contain it, while it is absent in \aleph A D¹ F G Ψ and others; cf. B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2000²) 565, who remains undecided, but notes a literal reference to 5.17.

⁹⁸ Cf. e.g. Bruce, *1-2 Thess*, 134; Wanamaker, *1-2 Thess*, 207; Weima, *1-2 Thess*, 425. According to Fee, *1-2 Thess*, 232, the reciprocity in prayer was so obvious that the *καί* was added by early scribes. In comparison, Schreiber, *1 Thess*, 321 supposes that the idea that Paul might have requested prayers for his sanctification and preservation might have caused some of the scribes to omit the *καί*.

⁹⁹ Cf. Richard, *1-2 Thess*, 286.

¹⁰⁰ Wanamaker, *1-2 Thess*, 207.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Fee, *1-2 Thess*, 232.

¹⁰² Cf. Schreiber, *1 Thess*, 325.

¹⁰³ Cf. Arzt-Grabner, *Letters*, 171–6, who provides various examples from documentary letters.

¹⁰⁴ Arzt-Grabner, *Letters*, 175.

thus included in the relationship with God in Christ, out of which and in which the apostles are living.

3. Conclusions

As has been demonstrated, Paul and his companions use existing epistolary formulas and conventions, modifying them in the light of their message. They give them a personal touch, not only by adapting them to their specific situation, like the writer to Serapion or other skilful writers, but primarily by letting the Christian message shape the references to prayer and indeed multiplying them, including also short acts of prayer and prayer texts. In particular, prayer as act and text, but also as subject, has an enclosing, foreshadowing, transitional and concluding function.

With respect to the communicative dimension, the letter is characterised by the mutual thanksgiving, remembrance, prayer and intercession. There is thus an imitation, a reciprocity and a correspondence in prayer. As the references to their own prayer and the calls to unceasing prayer show, the missionaries see prayer as a basic existential attitude, a constant turning towards God – not only God the Father but also the Lord Jesus Christ. They are filled with the certainty, which they also share with the addressees, that God is going to answer their prayers.

The prayers of Paul and his companions are directly linked to their missionary task. Their reports of their intercession and thanksgiving serve as a stimulus for their addressees to grow and overflow in mutual love. With their prayer, the Thessalonians are to respond and imitate the missionaries, deepening their relationship with them and their relationship with God. In the same way, the performative character of the prayers opens up the communicative situation between Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, on the one hand, and the Thessalonians as addressees, on the other, since they are equally related to God, and in God to each other. In sum, Paul and his companions live from, and in, the relationship to God in Christ, and their addressees, too, are included in this relationship.

Acknowledgements. The article is based on my paper ‘Paul on Prayer: The Communicative and Performative Function of Prayer in the First Letter to the Thessalonians’, presented at the SBL Annual Meeting 2023 in San Antonio, Texas, in the section ‘Prayer in Antiquity’ (Andrew R. Krause; Angela Kim Harkins) with Laura Lieber, Duke University, in the chair. An earlier stage of the paper was presented to members and students of the *École Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jérusalem*, where I began my research. I am grateful for their helpful and encouraging feedback, and especially for the postdoctoral fellowship granted to me by the *École Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jérusalem* in the academic year 2023/24, although I was compelled to interrupt my stay in view of the situation after 7th October 2023.

Competing interests. The author declares none.