



Leven in verwachting van de komst van Christus.: eEen onderzoek naar de uitleg en het gebruik van Paulus' teksten over de (weder)komst van Christus in 1 Tessalonicenzen in preken

R.H. Nieuwenhuis

SYNOPSIS

LIVING IN THE EXPECTATION OF THE COMING OF CHRIST RESEARCH INTO THE EXPLANATION AND USE OF PAUL'S TEXTS ON THE (SECOND) COMING OF CHRIST IN 1 THESSALONIANS IN SERMONS

INTRODUCTION

This essay looks at the question of how sermons on the apocalyptic texts in 1 Thessalonians are preached. For this purpose I studied seventeen sermons by clergymen from different denominations in protestant churches. I researched how they deal with these texts and what meaning they give to them for their congregations.

The first chapter starts, first of all, with a description of the background to the First Epistle to the Thessalonians. I will then go on to give an explanation of the texts concerned. These texts are 1 Thessalonians 1:8-10, 2:17-20, 3:11-13, 4:13-18 and 5:1-11.

In the second chapter I outline the background to apocalypticism as set out by Paul in 1 Thessalonians. I will discuss what apocalypticism is and what its characteristics are. Since Paul's basis is to be found in the movement surrounding Jesus, apocalypticism and the movement surrounding Jesus is also discussed in this chapter. It is about awaiting the Kingdom of God and the Son of Man. Thereafter, I will show how apocalypticism emerges from Paul in the themes 'already and not yet', 'flesh and spirit', and 'in Christ'. Then, I will discuss the question of how Paul sees the coming of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians, in which the *Parousia*, being in the presence of the Lord, ethics and the pastoral care of Paul play a role.

In the third chapter I will outline the theology of 1 Thessalonians. First of all, this chapter looks at Paul's preaching about God. After this, I will discuss the meaning of Christ in this epistle, which will cover the discussion of Christological titles, the resurrection of Christ, Christ's death for us and awaiting Christ. Later on in this chapter I will discuss the proclamation to the Thessalonians. The conclusion is that the theology of 1 Thessalonians can be characterised as a theology of hope.

In the fourth chapter, I will analyse the sermons I researched. I will do this on the basis of the following research questions:

1. How do these sermons discuss the future and how is this future linked to the passage in the Bible?
2. What role does apocalypticism play in the sermons?
3. In what way does the context of the text relate to the lives we live today?
4. How do the sermons give comfort, and warnings, admonitions?

Question 1 addresses eschatology and history and also concerns eschatology and life after death. The second question is about the difference between apocalypticism and eschatology and about how apocalypticism features in the sermons. Question 3 is about a comparison with the situation in Thessalonica, how the sermons preach about death and how the passages in the Bible are dealt with. And the last question is about solace and admonition. In this chapter, I will analyse how these themes are discussed in the sermons and which common threads and differences emerge.

In the fifth chapter, I will evaluate the research. Firstly, I will discuss the use of the exegesis in the sermons, trying to reveal patterns in the exegesis. These patterns relate

to the context and central concepts like gratitude, sanctification, hope, the coming of Christ, light and darkness, day and night. I will compare this exegesis with the results of my research. Then, I will go on to discuss the use of apocalypticism in the sermons and I will make a distinction between the apocalyptic passages in the Bible being ignored in the sermons and their being used as a prediction. After this, I will discuss its meaning, as used in the sermons, for today's listeners. I will make a distinction between the apocalyptic passage in the Bible as a comfort, as a warning and as a source of inspiration. Thereafter, I will discuss the proclamation of the apocalyptic passages in the Bible. I will make a distinction between the apocalyptic passages in the Bible as a sign of hope, as a basis for ethics and as a reference to God's victory. Finally, this chapter will discuss the homiletic use of the passages in the Bible. I will compare this with the discussion of it in the relevant homiletic literature. First of all, I will look into the relationship between the text and the sermons and in doing so I will make a distinction between the following themes: history and current affairs, the sermon as a dialogue between the text and listener, and the sermon as a proclamation-on-the-basis-of-the-passage-in-the-Bible of the acts of God. Following this, I will look at the theological understanding of apocalyptic texts. In doing so, I will distinguish the following themes: the language of apocalyptic texts, apocalyptic texts in relation to the world and apocalyptic texts in relation to humanity. Finally, I will make some recommendations in this chapter for delivering sermons on apocalyptic texts. These recommendations focus on sermons on apocalyptic texts in order to understand society, to come to self-understanding and as the proclamation of a God who makes everything anew.

EXPLANATION OF THE FIRST EPISTLE TOT THE THESSALONIANS

In this chapter I will explain the relevant texts relating to the *Parousia*.

The background to the epistle

In the days of Paul, Thessalonica was an important place that had developed into a big cosmopolitan port city. It had a mixed population which included Jews, as it is stated in Acts 17:1 that there was a synagogue there. On his second missionary journey, Paul and Silas established a church there. According to Acts 17, Paul and Silas appeared in the synagogue on three Sabbath days. A number of Jews joined them as did a multitude of Greeks, a group of God-fearers. As a result of threats by the Jews, Paul and Silas had to leave the city prematurely; they had probably resided there for several months.

Many scholars think that the epistle was written in 50 AD. Others come to an earlier date. This is due to differences of opinion on the date of the Apostolic Council and Paul's residence in Corinth. A combination of information from the epistles and the Acts of the Apostles make the date of 48/49 AD for the Apostolic Council and the date of 50 AD for Paul's journey to Greece seem likely. Paul and his followers' visit to Thessalonica must have taken place in that year and this means that the epistle must have been written in that year as well.

The epistle was written after Timothy's visit to the church in Thessalonica. Paul had sent him there to size up the situation after they had left in haste. Timothy's positive reports caused Paul and his followers to send a letter to express their gratitude and to give some admonitions. This must be seen against the background of the *Parousia*. The

epistle is characterised by the extensive attention given to the *Parousia*. There are two parts to the epistle. After the opening in 1:1, a personal part follows in 1:2-3:13 which deals with the apostle's good relationship with the church. This is meant to express his thanks to God for the development of the church and for what it has done and to strengthen their bonds. The second part in 4:1-5:22 contains admonitory teachings and aims to give a definitive answer to the questions on the *Parousia* that had arisen. The word *Parousia* occupies an important position in the epistle. It is about the coming of the Lord. In 1 Thessalonians, the word *Parousia* indicates the Kingship of Christ who makes his presence as King known to his followers. What this entails, must be clarified in the explanation of the texts concerned.

Working translation

In this paragraph, I will provide a working translation in Dutch of the texts concerned.

Explanation of the texts

1 Thessalonians 1:8-10

In this passage the apostle expresses his thanks for the church in Thessalonica and he particularly mentions their works of faith, their labour of love and the perseverance of their hope. This already puts forward the idea of the trinity of faith, hope and love but in another order. The church is an example to the whole of Macedonia and Greece. This is divided into three parts: a. How they received Paul and his followers, b. How they turned to God from idols to serve the living God, and c. How they waited for the Son of God from heaven, whom he had raised from the dead, Jesus who delivered us from the wrath to come.

Re a: What is said of the Thessalonians, and for which the apostle expresses thanks, is that God has worked on them in a great way and has produced great changes through the proclamation of the gospel.

Re b: Their conversion is a radical break from the other gods to the God of Israel, who has nothing in common with the idols. From that time forward, the believers serve the living God and show this through faith, love and hope.

Re c: They await the Son of God from heaven: this is the apocalyptic expectation of the Son of Man. Since this is typically a Jewish expression, Paul uses Son of God, which is more commonly known to the Greeks. It is the expectation of the risen one who will deliver them from the wrath to come. The Risen Lord delivers believers from the judgment to come.

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

In this passage Paul points out how he altruistically brought the gospel. He thanks the Thessalonians for accepting his proclamation of the gospel. They became followers of the communities of Jesus-followers in Judea that had been oppressed by their fellow-countrymen as well. Here Paul judges his fellow-Jews who rejected Jesus harshly, which is why the wrath of God came upon them. This text seems to be anti-Semitic and has often been interpreted as such. Some scholars like Baarda¹ and Tomson² do not see this as anti-Semitism. In this, Paul is true to the Jewish tradition of persecuting prophets.

¹ T. Baarda, 'Maar de toorn is over hen gekomen...', in T. Baarda, Hans Jansen, S.J. Noorda, J.S. Vos (red.), *Paulus en de andere Joden*, Delft 1984, p 15-74.

² P.J. Tomson, *Als dit uit de hemel is...*, Hilversum 1979, p 148.

This also fits in with the language used in certain circles of the Pharisees and in the documents from the community of Qumran. Paul wants to encourage the Thessalonians by comparing their situation with the oppression the communities in Judea had to suffer.

The apostle expresses his longing to see the church again. The reason for this is that the community of Thessalonica is Paul's hope, joy or crown when facing our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming. This is the first time he uses the word *parousia*. This is the coming of Jesus from heaven. And at this coming, the community is Paul's hope or joy or crown. These terms relate to the manner in which the community gives shape to serving the living God. The apostle expects the community to be blameless in holiness. This is important to the apostle as this is the way he presents the community before the Lord at his coming. It shows that his work was not in vain.

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

In chapter 3, Paul recalls his anxiety for the community he had to leave behind so abruptly. This is why he had sent Timothy to see what had become of the community and to encourage it. Timothy returns with positive reports and this makes the apostle grateful. It strengthens his longing to visit the community in order to supplement what was still lacking in their faith. So there is still something wrong in the community and that is why the apostle prays that the Lord will strengthen their hearts, so that they will be blameless in holiness at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. There is a critical notion in this. As the Lord is coming, they have to behave blamelessly.

Paul speaks about the coming of the Lord with all his saints. There is a difference of opinion about who those saints are. On the one hand, there is the opinion that it is the angels who are referred to here. References are made to Zechariah 14:5, which speaks of the revelation of the Lord on the Mount of Olives of the coming of the Lord with all his saints. Zechariah refers to the angels. On the other hand, there is the opinion that these saints are all the deceased believers. Jewish apocalyptic literature refers to the righteous who come with the Messiah. Whenever Paul refers to the saints he means the believers. In my opinion, the interpretation that believers are meant when saints are mentioned, is the most plausible one.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

In chapter 4, Paul starts the second part of the letter in which he discusses the more specific questions of the community and its situation. In 4:1-12, he starts with an extensive admonition. Here he emphasises the sanctification of the community. Although he does not appear to find it necessary to speak about brotherly love, he still does. This is metaphorical for the mutual love of the members of the community. Despite all the praise, he still finds it necessary to give this admonition. This may still be missing from their faith.

In verses 13-18, the apostle discusses the *parousia* extensively and he explains the expectation believers may have in that regard. A commotion had probably arisen because of the death of members of the community before the *parousia* and the question was raised as to what would happen to them at the *parousia*. Harnisch is of the opinion that 4:13 shows that gnosticism was an underlying influence on the community.³ Gnostic reasoning holds that the resurrection has already taken place, that is, in those who are 'enlightened'. Those who do not belong to this 'enlightened' elite are dead and there is

³ W. Harnisch, *Eschatologische Existenz: ein exegetischer Beitrag zum Sachanliegen von 1 Thessalonicher 4:13-5:11*, p. 23ff

no hope for them. This would have created unease in the community. This opinion is not very plausible. Paul uses a word that means sleep and which can also be used metaphorically to mean dead. Against the background of the apocalyptic proclamation of the *parousia*, it is understandable that questions arose as to what would happen when community members died. Paul's proclamation had led to a *Nah-Erwartung* - an imminent expectation - that had been shaken when community members died.

In verse 14, the apostle responds to the problems that had arisen. The basis of the hope for the dead is the death and resurrection of Jesus. This resurrection guarantees the faithful who have died that they will not remain separated from Jesus but that they will be with him again. The apostle elaborates on this and he does so by a saying of the Lord. It is not clear where this saying originates from; it is not part of the gospels. It is possibly a spoken word of Jesus that had been passed on. It may also be the word of the risen Jesus, as spoken by a prophet. There is no certainty as to the origins of this saying.

What the saying of the Lord amounts to is that we, who are alive and remain unto the *parousia*, will not precede the dead. Here, Paul indicates that he expects the *parousia* during his lifetime. Since this has not yet come about, many have sought a way out by explaining this 'we' in such a way that Paul did not include himself in it, but that 'we' and 'us' is used in a general sense or that 'we' has optional scope: in so far as we may live to see this. Although Paul lives and works from the nearness of the Lord in a chronological sense, at the same time he knows that communication about times and dates is not possible. The *Nah-Erwartung* is not relevant for Paul. The only thing he is concerned about is making it clear that when the *parousia* occurs the living will not precede the dead.

In the next verses Paul gives an elaborate description of the *parousia*. We find all kinds of representations and motifs from apocalypticism such as the voice of the archangel, the trumpet or the descent from Heaven. However, Paul is less elaborate than most apocalyptic Scriptures. He only gives brief descriptions. He only wants to point out that the dead will not stay behind the living. The background to the *parousia* is the reception afforded to a Hellenistic ruler: the most eminent citizens of the city would go to meet him and give him a festive welcome. This is how the still living and the risen dead believers will meet the Lord in the air. The *parousia* means that there will no longer be a separation between the Lord and the faithful. They will always be with the Lord. The faithful will ever live and act together with the Lord. This is about the eschatological connection of the faithful with the Lord, a connection that is as all-embracing in life as it is in suffering and in eternity.

1 Thessalonians 5

In 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 the apostle examines the question of when the *parousia* will occur, but he does not answer this question. Believers do, however, have to take the *parousia* into account. He does not use the word *parousia* here but he speaks of the *day of the Lord*. This term indicates Judgment Day. Paul interprets this term christologically: the day Christ appears. He makes it clear that nothing can be said about the times and dates of this day. The day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night and believers always have to take this into account. This is why the apostle encourages the believers to be vigilant, to follow a life of faith, love and hope. The believers are children of the light who do not belong to the night or darkness. The contrast of light and dark can also be found in the texts of Qumran, in which the members of the sect are the sons of light and outsiders belong to the darkness. The expression is part of Jewish apocalyptic language and Paul uses it as such as well.

In verses 9-10 Paul reaches a kind of conclusion: 'For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, in order that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him.' The death of Christ is the basis for the hope that believers may cherish. The background to this can possibly be found in a pre-Pauline summary or a baptismal formula.⁴ The expression 'Christ who died for us' might also be based on the admonitory proclamation of the earliest, Greek-speaking, Christian community as well.⁵ At the end of this part Paul returns to his conclusion that we shall always be with the Lord.

The end of chapter 5, verses 12-28, contains general admonitions for the community. It ends with the prayer that God will sanctify church members at the *parousia* of our Lord Jesus Christ.

BACKGROUND

Introduction

In this part I will outline the background to Paul's speeches on the *parousia* in 1 Thessalonians. In the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD apocalyptic expectations prevailed in Israel and within the entire Jewish community. Some scholars even call Paul an apocalyptic.⁶ In any case, he does use apocalyptic terminology. Apocalypticism has to be seen as a background to Paul.

What is apocalypticism?

There has been a lot of discussion about the definition of apocalypticism. Collins phrases the definition, which was determined by a group of scientists - mainly American - in 1979, as:

Apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.⁷

Later, the same group of scientists suggested adding the following phrases to the definition in regard to the function of the genre:

An apocalypse is intended to interpret the present earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future and to influence both the understanding and the behaviour of the audience by means of divine authority.⁸

The definition referred to above is generally accepted.

⁴ See M.H. Bolkestein, *De brieven aan de Tessalonicenzen*, Nijkerk 1970, p 139.

⁵ See H.J. de Jonge, 'The original setting of the *Xristov a)peqanen u(per* formula', in R.F. Collins, *The Thessalonian Correspondence*, Leuven 1990, p. 230 and 234.

⁶ See for instance B.J. Lietaert Peerbolte, *Paulus en de rest. Van farizeeër tot profeet van Jezus*, Zoetermeer 2010, p. 97.

⁷ J.J. Collins, 'Towards the Morphology of a Genre', *Semeia* 14 (1979), p. 9.

⁸ J.W. van Henten and O. Mellink, *Visioenen aangaande het einde*, Zoetermeer 1998, p. 13.

Characteristics of apocalypticism

The main characteristics of apocalypticism are the following:

- It is a revelation of hidden knowledge which at first is meant for insiders only. The form of the revelation differs from book to book. It can be visions, dreams, the hearing of voices, journeys to Heaven.
- The language of apocalyptic scriptures is mystical and has, in general, an essentially symbolic nature.
- The author hides behind a pseudonym. Most apocalyptic books are written in the name of an authoritative figure from antiquity such as Daniel, Enoch, Ezra or Baruch for example.
- There is often a propensity to dualism. It is about this world and the next; the contrast between light and darkness, between good and evil.
- The periodisation of history plays an important role. Overviews of history are offered from early times up to the eschaton. An example of this is the 10-week prophesy in 1 Enoch.
- A lot of attention is paid to the world of angels and demons; all world events are determined by spiritual forces, either good or bad.
- Most of the time apocalypticism is not only about the people of Israel, but about the entire creation. This literature has a tendency to be universalistic.
- Some elements are called apocalyptic: the teachings on resurrection, the final judgment, Heaven and Hell, the Messiah, but these also occur beyond apocalyptic literature.

Apocalyptic literature

The most important apocalyptic literature appears between 200 BC and 100 AD. After this period apocalyptic scriptures did appear in Jewish circles but they do not have the same importance as the works from the period mentioned above.

Some of the most important apocalyptic scriptures of this time are:

- a. Daniel, 2nd century BC.
- b. 1 Enoch; a collection of a number of books, most of which date from the 2nd century BC.
- c. The Book of Jubilees, 2nd century BC.
- d. The Sibylline Oracles, from 150 BC to the 2nd century AD.⁹
- e. Parts of the Testaments of the 12 Patriarchs, the last part of the 2nd century BC.
- f. Psalms of Solomon, ca. 48 BC.
- g. 2 Enoch, 1st century AD.
- h. 4 Ezra, ca. 80 AD.
- i. 2 Baruch or the Apocalypse of Baruch, ca. 90 AD.
- j. The Ascension of Moses, 1st century AD.

Furthermore, texts of an apocalyptic nature have also been found in the documents of Qumran. The works are not entirely apocalyptic but several scrolls contain parts that have apocalyptic characteristics.¹⁰

Apocalypticism played an important role amongst the early Christians as well. In the gospels we find apocalyptic orations (Mark 13, Matthew 24-25, Luke 21). In addition,

⁹ According to Collins the Sibylline Oracles should not be considered to be part of the apocalyptic literature.

¹⁰ Cf. J.W. van Henten and O. Mellink, *opp. cit.*, p 15.

awaiting the coming of the Son of Man plays an important part in the gospels and an important apocalyptic theme emerges in them as well. A complete apocalypse has even been included in the New Testament: John's Book of Revelation, end of the 1st century AD.

Background to apocalypticism

There are big differences of opinion as to the background to apocalypticism. Some are of the opinion that apocalypticism emerges from prophesy. Others see wisdom as a background, as well as prophesy. Some see foreign influences, especially from Persia, in apocalypticism. In every study, prophesy appears to be the basis of apocalypticism. Although there are differences between them, continuous development can still be perceived. Still, it is too one-sided to view prophesy as the only background. Besides prophesy there are other influences like those of Wisdom Literature and even a Persian influence from those in exile. Jewish apocalypticism exists in a broad context. The development of apocalypticism mainly resulted from the crisis in Jewish society. The people lived under foreign rule and were oppressed, this all was so far removed from God's promises in the Torah and the Prophets that there had to be a revival out of the downfall. The apocalyptic scriptures were meant to offer comfort to the pious in their difficult circumstances.

Apocalypticism and the movement surrounding Jesus

The apocalyptic expectations in Paul's world are also to be found in the movement surrounding Jesus. After all, Paul was based in this movement. A number of themes show the apocalyptic nature of the way in which Jesus acts. This is shown in the central idea of his proclamation: the Kingdom of God is near. The background to this is the apocalyptic division of history into two periods: the times of evil governed by Satan and the time in which God rules. The second reference to the apocalyptic nature of how Jesus acts is found in the coming of the Son of Man. In the gospels we also find what is called the Little Apocalypse. Jesus' oration on the last things in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21 has a pre-eminently apocalyptic nature. Thus, Paul was not only influenced by Jewish apocalypticism but also by the apocalyptic background of the movement surrounding Jesus, to which he had connected himself.

Paul as an apocalyptic

In Paul's world rapid changes occurred because of the development of large empires. This time of unrest was a good bedrock for apocalypticism. Paul sets out the elements of an apocalyptic eschatology, for instance the day of wrath, the present evil aeon, the end of the centuries. Paul's life and work were governed by his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. He can only represent this new experience in the apocalyptic framework with which he is familiar. Soards summarises Paul's apocalyptic perspective as follows: 'Paul, the apostle articulates an apocalyptic perspective that has modified in the light of the Christ-event'.¹¹

In Jewish apocalyptic scriptures the present evil aeon and the coming one are separated. What is all-important for Paul is that, in Christ, the new aeon has already

dawned in the old one. This is the 'already' and the 'not yet' of the new creation. On the one hand people are subjected to evil powers that seduce them into sin and idolatry, on the other hand the faithful have subjected themselves to God who will bring them to a life of righteousness and of service to him. The breakthrough for Paul was to be found in the cross and the resurrection of Christ.

In Paul's epistles the tension between 'already' and 'not yet' emerges in the contrast between 'flesh' and 'spirit'. 'Flesh' is human existence governed by sin. 'Spirit' is the dominating power of the new aeon. On the one hand believers live in the 'flesh' governed by the power of this aeon, but they live in the 'spirit' as well which means that the power of the new aeon can govern them.

One of Paul's special expressions is 'in Christ'. Since this hardly occurs outside Paul's epistles, Paul probably created it as well. There are two sides to the expression. One is what God does in Christ: the salvation and redemption that he has brought about through the works of Christ. On the other hand the expression indicates the new situation in which believers live: their connection to Christ is all-important to them. People are in Adam or in Christ. Adam and Christ are corporate figures who represent the old aeon of death and the new aeon of life. To be in Christ, then, means to belong to the new creation. Here again, Paul uses apocalyptic categories to outline his proclamation.

How does Paul see the coming of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians?

Paul uses the word *Parousia*, *parousi/a* for the coming of the Lord, but it is only in 1 Thessalonians that he uses this word in this context. Paul imagines the coming of the Lord as that of a ruler who enters a city, which is part of his realm, with great ostentation. He connects the *Parousia* with the resurrection of Christ. This resurrection is the beginning of the dawn of the new aeon, the *Parousia* is the completion of this new aeon. In principle, the new aeon has already begun because the powers of the old one have been disarmed. But the victory has not yet fully emerged and that will only happen at the *Parousia*. This is where the expression, which is characteristic of Paul's apocalypticism, of 'already' and 'not yet' emerges. The new aeon is not only just part of the future but has already become part of the present.

What started at the resurrection will be completed at the *Parousia* of the Lord. According to 1 Thessalonians 1:10 this means being delivered of the wrath to come. Awaiting the Son of God from Heaven, from God's mystery, focuses us on the meaning of his resurrection: to be delivered from the wrath to come.

The *Parousia* also means the revelation of what is still a mystery. What the resurrection of Christ accomplished will be manifest at the *Parousia*. Following a crucified Lord still seems foolish now, but then the wisdom of it will become clear.

What the *Parousia* will ultimately bring about is the faithful always being with the Lord, the living as well as the dead. By bringing this up the apostle discusses the issue that concerned the Thessalonians. What would happen to the church members who had already died before the *Parousia*? Paul's proclamation had led to a *Nah-Erwartung* that had been shaken by the death of the members of the church. The apostle responded to this issue by stating that the dead, as well as the living, will witness the *Parousia*. On the basis of Jesus' death and resurrection they will be with him. By stating this, the connection with Christ is expressed. To be with Christ means to live in glory in the new aeon. Believers do not have to worry about their dead. Their connection with Christ will not end.

In his epistle, Paul also admonishes the life of the Thessalonians. The question is to what extent his ethical guidelines are determined by his expectation of the coming of the Lord. Paul emphasises the holiness of the church. First of all, this is a cultic term. Holy means that something or someone belongs to God. In 1 Thessalonians holy means belonging to God and living life appropriately. Best calls holiness and love in 1 Thessalonians umbrella words for the entirety of Christian behaviour.¹² In my opinion this is a good characterisation of the concept of holy in this epistle. For the church, sanctification must lead to decent behaviour. These are the requirements that the apostle gives through Jesus Christ. Paul's instructions are determined by the new aeon that started in Christ and in that sense are given by Christ. Paul encourages the Thessalonians to be blameless in holiness before God our Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints (1 Thessalonians 3:13). Awaiting the *Parousia* means that the faithful must concentrate on being holy before God. The call for vigilance has an ethical notion as well. In the light of Christ they belong to the new aeon and this not only implies a life in faith and hope but also in love. The expectation of the *Parousia* determines the ethics.

The awaiting of the *Parousia* is also related to Paul's pastoral care. He wants to strengthen and hearten the church. He does this mainly by referring the believers to the coming of the Lord. In their questions regarding the dead they can console each other, since they have the certainty that after the *Parousia* they will ever be with the Lord. In 1 Thessalonians 5: 24 Paul encourages the church by referring to the expectation that they will be preserved without blemish at the *Parousia* because God, who calls for it, is also faithful.

THE THEOLOGY OF 1 THESSALONIANS

In this chapter, I look at theological notions in the 1st epistle to the Thessalonians; to speak of the theology of 1 Thessalonians is a step too far, since the epistle is too limited for this. It is, therefore, about the theological notions that might provide a picture of the meaning of this epistle.

The first thing that will be addressed is how Paul speaks about God. The Thessalonians had turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9). This is the God of Israel. The apostle also calls God the Father. Although this term was already known from the Jewish tradition, what is special in Paul is that God is the Father of Jesus Christ. What is central in Paul's thoughts about God is that the God of Israel raised his Son from the dead. God is life and gives life. The God of Israel is creating a new beginning and the raising of Jesus is the dawn of that new beginning. Believers are to await this risen Son from Heaven and this idea can provide comfort to those who have lost their loved ones.

The meaning of Christ is of great importance to the theological notions of 1 Thessalonians. In this epistle he is called Lord, most of the time. Paul adopted this title from Jesus' first followers. This title is important to Paul as it refers to the dominion of Christ, plus it also has a connection with the *Parousia*. The coming of the Lord indicates the dawn of his Kingdom.

Christ is called the Son of God just once in this epistle. The Thessalonians are awaiting the Son of God from Heaven whom he (God) has raised from the dead. The use of this title sounds eschatological. The Son of God is the Saviour who is to come.

The great significance of Christ is that he is the risen one. He is the basis of the hope that believers may have. Resurrection is, as Beker says, the language of the end time.¹³ The new aeon dawns with the resurrection. It is the beginning of the salvation and the transformational acts of God.

The epistle speaks of Christ's death for us just once (1 Thessalonians 5:9). The death of Christ will deliver us from the wrath of God. Christ's death for us can be compared to the death of the Jewish martyrs in 2 and 4 Maccabees. Their self-sacrifice leads to a reconciliation between God and the people of Israel. Through Christ's death for them, believers have a basis for their hopes. They know, because of this, that God has not appointed them to his wrath (1 Thessalonians 5:9). The formula is a foundation for the statement that, for those who put their trust in Christ, salvation is brought about by God. Christ's death for us is meant to encourage believers to persevere in times of difficulty and threats.

Awaiting Christ is one of the most important theological notions of 1 Thessalonians. The apostle repeatedly refers to how that should define the lives of the believers. They await the Son of God from Heaven who will deliver them from the wrath to come (1 Thessalonians 1:10). With his proclamation of the coming of the Lord, in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Paul wants to console believers who have been saddened by the death of fellow believers before the dawn of the coming. The apostle uses apocalyptic language for this. Just like the resurrection, the *Parousia* is the language of the end time. In the resurrection and the *Parousia* events are represented by images that are conceivable to humans, ones which cannot be explained within the framework of human history. It is an expectation of acts of God that go beyond any powers of imagination. Here, the apostle proclaims that in the coming of Jesus Christ, God is not leaving people to their fate, not even if they have died. There is tension in this expectation between the 'already' and the 'not yet'. Through the resurrection of Christ, believers are already involved in the new life. However, they still have to endure suffering and death. The idea of awaiting Christ is to give them the courage to persevere and not be tied to old worldly patterns. A life in expectation makes believers receptive to what is beyond them.

In the proclamation to the Thessalonians there are two theological notions: admonitions and comfort. The apostle finishes some important parts of his epistle with: admonish/comfort one another with these words (1 Thessalonians 4:18 and 5:11). Eschatology plays an important role in both notions.

The apostle calls believers to a way of life that is consistent with serving the living and true God and the coming of his Son from Heaven. The way they live their lives must be defined by that expectation of the coming of the Lord. The concept of sanctification is central to this. The apostle prays for their sanctification so that they are holy at the coming of the Lord. This means a life of vigilance, which is a life of faith, love and hope. This is not just a matter of commandment. Believers may expect that God the Father of Jesus Christ works in them when they open themselves up to him.

The apostle also wants to comfort believers in this epistle. They are in difficult circumstances, subject to oppression and persecution. Believers are dying, possibly as victims of oppression. He comforts them by referring to the coming of Christ who will bring salvation. They can look forward to the completion of God's victory.

The theology of 1 Thessalonians can be characterised as a theology of hope. This hope was raised by what the God of Israel did in and through Jesus Christ. By raising Jesus Christ he commenced their salvation and believers can look forward to the completion of that salvation. It is this hope that will help believers, through all their difficulties and struggles, to continue to live in faith and love.

ANALYSIS OF THE SERMONS

In this chapter I analyse the sermons on the passages of 1 Thessalonians. I did this using the following themes: the future, apocalypticism, the context of the passage in the Bible linked to life today, comfort and admonitions. I chose these themes because they clearly show how the sermons deal with these passages in the Bible.

There are two approaches to the future in the sermons. The first assumes the actual coming of Christ at the end of history. This does not mean that the sermons actually give any details about this because the expectation of the coming of the Lord is partly represented by visual language. The second approach implies that there is no, or hardly any, intervention from God at the end of history. In addition, the future comes up in the sermons as life after death. This happens mainly in the sermons that were delivered on the last Sunday of the church year, when the community remembers its dead. The sermons pay most attention to the judgment. There are two approaches to this judgment. The first one sees this as a real event, the second one denies its reality. Both approaches are designed to make the listeners aware of their responsibility and they also want to encourage them by giving them hope and faith.

I researched apocalypticism on the basis of the following apocalyptic motifs: justification, universalism, dualism and nearness. I chose these because they play a central role in apocalypticism.

In the sermons justification is mainly about the final judgment. It is not meant to frighten listeners but to give them comfort. God wants to save them from the judgment. Justification is about God's unwavering promise of salvation and the renewal of his creation.

Universalism is about an expectation for the entire creation. We find two approaches to this motif in the sermons. On the one hand, the apocalyptic texts are seen as predictions and the future will come about according to the scenario outlined in the passages of the Bible. At the same time, these sermons also point out that the focus in apocalyptic texts is on the end time and they are, therefore, beyond our history and reality. On the other hand, apocalyptic texts are only seen as visual language and they bear no relation to real expectations. When using this approach, the sermons point out that apocalyptic language is part of an obsolete world view and, because of this, must be interpreted other than as an expectation of a whole new world.

There are two ways in which dualism comes to the fore in the sermons. On the one hand, there is the contrast between light and darkness. On the other hand, there is the contrast between this aeon and the one to come, this world and the world to come. As regards the first contrast the sermons refer to the light that appeared in Jesus Christ which dispels all darkness. At the same time the sermons appeal to the listeners to live in that light and not to be defined by the dark, which can occur in different ways. We also find dualism in the contrast between this aeon and the one to come where the sermons speak of the expectation of the new world. The 'already' and the 'not yet' also play a role in this dualism. On the one hand, as children of the light, believers can already live in

that light and experience part of this new world, on the other hand, a great deal is still lacking in their lives, since they have to deal with shortcomings, suffering and death.

The nearness of the coming of Christ plays an important role in 1 Thessalonians. The *Parousia* is at hand. The problem is that, in the meantime, two thousand years have passed and the *Parousia* has not yet come about. In the sermons we find two approaches to this issue. On the one hand, sermons emphasise that Paul was not mistaken in his preachings about the nearness of the coming of the Lord and on the other hand, the nearness of the *Parousia* is put into perspective and re-interpreted. However, only a few of the sermons actually refer to the tension that occurs as a consequence of the delay to the *Parousia*. This leads to the conclusion that nowadays, churches do not perceive the delay to the *Parousia* as a problem.

Apocalyptic scriptures await the ultimate salvation from God and with that they give voice to the central idea of their faith in God. The sermons also discuss God. Dingemans says: 'The actual question in regard to sermons, is how – in the context of all the listeners' questions – God can be discussed in a time in which God is anything but obvious.'¹⁴ Within the framework of apocalypticism, God in the sermons is the God who acts in the past, the present and the future. In the sermons his past acts are his creation and his revelation in Jesus Christ. The acts of God in the present are represented in the sermons by the God who gives strength. The acts of God in the future relate to his acts of salvation, which believers can look forward to with anticipation. Reference to God as Creator is made here as well. As he is the creator he can even create new life in death. In speaking about the acts of God in the present and in the future we find two approaches in the sermons. Firstly, the sermons are about the real expectation of God's intervention in history. In the second approach his acts in history are denied. In those sermons God is nothing more than a name that gives meaning to what is relevant to people or God is only mentioned in connection with other concepts such as the Kingdom of God or God's beneficence. In speaking about God, the sermons want to inspire openness before God and with that give listeners hope for the future.

As the sermons are based on the passages of 1 Thessalonians, the circumstances in Thessalonica at that time play an important role. Those circumstances in the first century after Christ are different from those of listeners to the sermons in the 21st century after Christ. The sermons discuss the situation in Thessalonica, as it appears in the epistle, in two different ways. In the first place, the sermons are based on the idea that the problems of the Thessalonians are the same as those of believers nowadays. They equate the circumstances of the community of Thessalonica with those of churches today. In the second approach, the situation in Thessalonica is not, or hardly, mentioned and the problem of the Thessalonians is immediately translated into a question for now.

The Thessalonians' biggest problem was the question of the fate of those who had already died before the *Parousia*. It is mainly the sermons that were delivered on the last Sunday of the church year, when the community remembers its dead, that discuss this problem; the question regarding the dead is addressed. In the sermons we can see four approaches. The first approach refers to the resurrection of the dead at the end of times, which is expected as a real event. The second approach does not answer the question about the fate of the dead, because the Bible represents several versions of life after death and none of them can be seen as the only right one. The third approach discusses the judgment of God that people can expect after their death. These sermons intend to warn the listeners and urge them to keep awaiting the Lord. The fourth approach does

not focus so much on the fate of the deceased, but on the circumstances of those who are connected to them. These sermons intend to bring comfort and solace.

In 1 Thessalonians comfort and admonitions play an important role. The sermons are consistent with this epistle to the Thessalonians and they almost all focus on offering comfort and admonitions. Comfort is expressed in circumstances of grief. This mainly happens in sermons remembering the dead. In addition, comfort is directed at crises in the lives of the listeners. These may be crises in society as well as crises in their personal lives. In 1 Thessalonians comfort is defined by the expectation of the coming of Christ. On the one hand, we find an approach in the sermons that is consistent with 1 Thessalonians by also defining comfort by the expectation of the coming of Christ. On the other hand, comfort is not relevant to this expectation.

In the admonitions in the sermons we find, on the one hand, warnings about God's judgment and on the other hand the admonitions focus on how life should be lived. This is a call for a life of sanctity. There is a focus on personal life as well as on responsibility for society. In part the admonitions in the sermons are determined by the expectation of the coming of the Lord, but in part this expectation does not play a role in the admonitions.

When we draw conclusions about how apocalypticism is dealt with in the sermons, we can see four approaches. In the first approach, the apocalyptic world view is perplexing to the listeners. The problems relating to the proclamation of apocalyptic texts are recognised by all church branches. In the second approach the sermons do not, or hardly, discuss the strangeness of the apocalyptic texts. They assume the reliability of these texts and the reality of the expectations mentioned in them. This approach is seen in churches that have a more conservative interpretation of the Scriptures. In the third approach, nothing is said about apocalypticism and it is entirely, or almost entirely, ignored. The fourth approach does use apocalypticism but places a different interpretation on it. The perplexing nature of apocalypticism is, with some exceptions, discussed in the sermons, however. In churches with a more conservative interpretation of the Scriptures, the apocalyptic elements are taken literally to a certain extent; in pluralistic PKN churches, the Protestant church in the Netherlands, and in liberal churches they are ignored or re-interpreted.

When we look at the way sermons deal with these passages in the Bible we can conclude that the circumstances in which the sermons were delivered determine how they deal with the biblical passages. This is clear in the sermons that were delivered when the dead were remembered. Mourning and questions about death determine the approach to the passage in the Bible. The sermons choose the parts of the text that the clergymen can use in their proclamation on the particular occasion and hope plays an important role in this.

The issue the sermons do not, or hardly ever, discuss is how near the *Parousia* is. The reason for this is that, since the epistle to the Thessalonians was written, two thousand years have passed and the *Parousia* has still not come about. This makes it difficult to keep emphasising the nearness of the *Parousia*. The expectation does, however, still remain part of the sermons, but without any details. It is about impressing on the listeners the idea of being open to God's future, whatever that may be.

EVALUATION OF THE RESEARCH

The use of exegesis in the sermons

In this paragraph I evaluate the use of the exegesis in the sermons I researched. I compared this to a number of commentaries and the results of my research.

I found patterns in the exegesis that occur in a number of the sermons. These include the historical context of 1 Thessalonians and the specifically Jewish context. In addition, there are a number of central concepts in this epistle which the sermons elaborate; these concepts are: gratitude, sanctification, hope, the coming of Christ, light and darkness, day and night. The context and the specifically Jewish context will be discussed in a separate section, the central concepts will be explained as part of all the sermons with the meaning they have for listeners of those sermons.

There are differences in these patterns. The historical context of the epistle was mentioned in most of the sermons, the specifically Jewish context in only three of them. This means that most of the sermons do not pay any attention to the specifically Jewish context.

In the exegesis of the central concepts, a remarkable difference can be found between the sermons. With the exception of the concept of gratitude, all the specified central concepts have an eschatological and an apocalyptic meaning. A number of the sermons explain these concepts in an eschatological and apocalyptic sense, other sermons do not. The conclusion has to be drawn from this that, in the exegesis, the sermons do actually differ from apocalypticism.

The use of apocalypticism in the sermons

In this paragraph I evaluate what the sermons said with respect to apocalypticism. In addition, I discuss the homiletic use of apocalyptic texts. Finally, I will consider where the specific challenges lie in delivering a sermon on an apocalyptic text.

Evaluation of apocalypticism

For this paragraph I evaluated what the sermons said with respect to apocalypticism. Firstly I evaluated how the sermons used the apocalyptic passages in the Bible. I saw three ways of using these texts. The first is to ignore the texts. A number of sermons, delivered by the same clergyman, ignore these texts even though there is certainly reason to pay attention to them. I ascertained that the reason for this is the strangeness of these texts which contain representations from a different world and a different time. In collecting the sermons on these texts, I also noted that not many sermons were delivered on these apocalyptic texts from 1 Thessalonians, because several clergymen notified me that they did not have any sermons on them. Without doubt, this was due to the strangeness of the texts as well. Secondly, I ascertained that these apocalyptic passages in the Bible were used in the sermons as a prediction. A number of sermons see these texts as a description of what believers may expect. I noted that these sermons use the apocalyptic passages in the Bible in a more eschatological way than an apocalyptic one. In the apocalyptic texts it is all about the end of history and this does not provide a scenario for the future. The apocalyptic texts do provide expectations for the future but do so using such images that no specific expectation can be garnered from them. In the third place, I ascertained that these apocalyptic passages in the Bible were used as a symbol in the sermons. They are a symbol of what listeners to the sermons

might experience in their lives, such as shocking experiences. This can be consistent with apocalypticism, which seeks to explain present earthly circumstances from the point of view of the supernatural world. However, apocalypticism seeks to explain earthly circumstances from the point of view of the future as well. This concerns the expectation of the end time which has a transcendental nature. The expectation of the end time is the expectation of the future as well. This means that the apocalyptic passages in the Bible are more than simply symbolic. Again, the 'already' and the 'not yet' of the new aeon have to be taken into account.¹⁵

After this, I evaluated the meaning of the apocalyptic passage in the Bible as used in the sermons for today's listeners. A large number of sermons give this text the meaning of comfort. This applies particularly in situations of mourning and grief. The comfort is that believers may have hope. This is consistent with the intention of 1 Thessalonians. The apostle wants to comfort believers in their difficult circumstances. The verb *parakale/w* ('comfort') plays an important role in the epistle. Other sermons show that the apocalyptic passage in the Bible is a warning to today's listeners. They warn the listeners about the coming judgment and point out that they will be lost if they do not accept Christ. Some sermons only say that you have to provide justification before the Lord. In apocalypticism there certainly is the matter of judgment, but that is not meant as a warning. The apocalyptic scriptures seek to comfort those faithful believers who keep themselves to the Torah by showing them that the ungodly and the pagans who oppress them will perish. In 1 Thessalonians too, the apocalyptic passage in the Bible is more of a comfort than a warning. A number of sermons give meaning to the apocalyptic passage in the Bible as a source of inspiration for today's listeners. This is not about the specific content of the passages in the Bible but how they can inspire the listeners about new possibilities in their lives. They give new insights and point out new roads. This applies especially to the listeners whose lives are, in one way or another, in a rut. In doing this they give the apocalyptic passage in the Bible a new meaning. The question is: is this consistent with the original meaning? Apocalypticism points to an event of the end time that is both cosmic-universal and definitive. It is about a transcendental reality. In his epistle to the Thessalonians Paul shows that this transcendental reality has meaning for the situation believers are in. The apocalyptic passages in the Bible point to unexpected possibilities that are beyond our comprehension. As such they can give rise to new possibilities.

After this, I evaluated what the proclamation of the apocalyptic passage in the Bible is as used in the sermons for today's listeners. A large number of sermons preach that, based on the apocalyptic passages in the Bible, listeners may have hope. They may look forward to a new future. It is the hope of a new time and a new world. The listeners may look forward to ever being with the Lord. In this way, the sermons are consistent with the theme of the epistle; hope plays a central role in 1 Thessalonians. In times of oppression and in circumstances of death and destruction believers may have hope in the future. The theology of 1 Thessalonians can be characterised as a theology of hope.¹⁶ In a number of the sermons the proclamation of the apocalyptic passages in the Bible contains instructions for the behaviour of the listeners. These texts are exhortations to listeners to live a life consistent with the will of God, with the concept of sanctification playing a role here. These sermons are, in this way, consistent with what Paul says in his epistle to the Thessalonians. The apostle emphasises the sanctification of the believers.

15 See chapter 'The Theology of 1 Thessalonians' § 3.4

16 See chapter 'The Theology of 1 Thessalonians' § 4.2.

The basic principle of his guidelines is the expectation of the *Parousia*: as the believers are looking forward to the *Parousia*, they already have to give shape to the new aeon that came in Christ and is waiting to be finalised. Based on the apocalyptic passages in the Bible other sermons preach God's definitive victory over the powers of death and destruction. They proclaim God's lasting love and a new world in which there is peace and righteousness. This proclamation is consistent with Paul's expectations. His speeches on the *Parousia* in 1 Thessalonians are a proclamation of God's definitive victory. Whereas the sermons emphasise the new earth that God will create, 1 Thessalonians does not mention this at all. There, God's victory means that believers will always be with the Lord. The apostle does not specify what this includes.

This research shows that the use of apocalypticism in sermons can be quite different. On the one hand, it is ignored because it is of no use in these times and on the other hand, it is seen as a real expectation or as a symbol. Most of the sermons are consistent with the texts of the epistle to the Thessalonians. Sometimes, the sermons emphasise themes that play no, or hardly any, role in the epistle. The research has shown that the sermons give new meanings to the apocalyptic passages in the Bible as well.

The homiletic use of the passage in the Bible

In this paragraph I will discuss the homiletic use of the passage in the Bible and of the apocalyptic text in particular. For this purpose, I researched the homiletic literature and focused on the question as to what meaning the passage in the Bible and in particular the apocalyptic text can have for today's listeners and this society. I compared this to the sermons involved in the research.

It must be concluded that the homiletic literature pays very little attention to apocalyptic passages in the Bible. Only Bohren has a paragraph on apocalyptic sermons in his homiletics.¹⁷ What does have to be mentioned is that Jacobsen's research relates entirely to apocalyptic preaching.¹⁸

For this paragraph I researched, first of all, the relationships between the passage in the Bible and the sermons, and in particular the apocalyptic passage in the Bible found in 1 Thessalonians. In doing this, I made a distinction between the following three themes: 1. History and current affairs, 2. The sermon as a dialogue between the text and the listener, 3. The sermon as a proclamation-on-the-basis-of-the-passage-in-the-Bible of the acts of God.

The theme history and current affairs relates to this question: how can a historical text have meaning in today's life? This is a question that also concerns 1 Thessalonians, a letter that was written in approximately 50 AD to an actual community and which discusses the questions and circumstances of this community.

A number of homilists see the connection between then and now in a continuing interpretation of the text. For instance, Paul uses apocalyptic language in 1 Thessalonians and interprets this with an eye to the situation of the church of Thessalonica. According to Buttrick, this is not about content but about structure.¹⁹ In the homiletic analysis the question that must be answered is what is the movement of the text and what is the author trying to bring about in his listeners or readers? Long uses the image of the witness. The preacher has to bear witness to what he or she has heard in the Biblical texts. The preacher listens to a voice, hoping to meet God through

17 R. Bohren, *Predigtlehre*, München 1971, pp. 266-279.

18 See D. Jacobsen, *As Seeing the Invisible: The Cosmic Scope of Apocalyptic Preaching*, Nashville 1997

19 D. Buttrick, *Homiletic, Moves and Structures*, Philadelphia 1987, pp 264-269.

the text.²⁰ In doing so, the words in the Bible must be interpreted as products of their time. In the opinion of these homilists the meaning for today's listeners of texts from the past has to be found in the question as to what the author wanted to bring about in his readers. The preacher has to interpret the text so that he or she can bring about the same, in his or her listeners, as the author had intended to bring about in his readers. He or she can work in a similar way in the listeners to the sermons as Christ worked in the believers of Thessalonica. In this way the preacher is, to quote Long, a witness of Christ²¹ and he or she lets the listeners know what he or she heard.

For the most part, the sermons I researched acknowledge the discrepancy between the apocalyptic passages in the Bible and today's world. They differ, though, in how they deal with this. Some sermons downplay the differences by recognising the strangeness of the texts and they put forward the expectations of the passage in the Bible as real events. They do not discuss the world view, in our western world, as changed by natural sciences. Other sermons translate the circumstances of that time, along the lines of Buttrick and Long, to today's circumstances. They accentuate the continuing interpretation of the apocalyptic passage in the Bible and discuss what the text said then and what it says today in different circumstances. By bearing witness to what they heard in the text, they seek to establish a link between history and current affairs.

A number of homilists see the relationship between the passage in the Bible and the sermon as a dialogue between text and listener. The clergyman then is, to quote Dingemans, a listener among the listeners.²² During the sermon a conversation takes place between the passage in the Bible and the listener, a conversation which is about sharing experiences of life and faith. The experiences that form the basis of the passage in the Bible can provide listeners with experiences that put their circumstances in a completely different light. Hirschler states that the experiences of the first disciples and the first community with Jesus Christ can provide a key which may cast a new light on people's circumstances today.²³

Although the homilists, who see the relationship between the passage in the Bible and the sermon as a dialogue between text and listener, do not necessarily speak about apocalyptic texts, these texts can be approached from the perspective of that dialogue as well. All clergymen want the listeners of their sermons to understand the text and therefore, take their circumstances into account. However, there are great differences between the sermons as far as the dialogue between text and listener is concerned. Some give strong emphasis to the text as the Word of God which has to be accepted. In that case, there is no conversation between text and listener. A number of the sermons were delivered on the last Sunday of the church year when the community remembers its dead. These discuss death and the loss of loved ones. The Thessalonians' experiences in the epistle are related to the experiences of the listeners. Other sermons emphatically engage in a dialogue with the passage in the Bible and look for the experience of faith that is the basis of the text. For example, the unexpectedness of the *Parousia* can cast light on the crises of today. They show that the dialogue between text and listener provides opportunities which make the text understandable to today's listeners.

As for the relationship between the passage in the Bible and the sermons, the proclamation of what God does plays an important role. The passage in the Bible and the sermons are about what God does. The passage in the Bible is a reminder of the word of

²⁰ Th. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, Louisville 1989, p 44.

²¹ Long, *op. cit.*, p 47.

²² See Dingemans, *op. cit.*, p 14.

²³ See H. Hirschler, *Biblich Predigen*, Hannover 1988, p. 139.

God. In 1 Thessalonians 4:15 the apostle speaks to the community of Thessalonica using a saying of the Lord: For this we say unto you by a saying of the Lord: 'For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord' (Του̃το γα̃ρ υ9μι=ν λε/γομεν ε0ν λο/gw| kuri/ou). This word is God's promise, as Bohren says.²⁴ It is the proclamation of the God who makes everything anew. From this, the clergyman can apply God's promise to today's social circumstances and show what God is doing in the present on the basis of what the text says. This is not about the pattern of promise and fulfilment. Each time, the promise offers new, surprising prospects and it is not dependent on historical circumstances and ideas, as Moltmann says.²⁵ This word of promise does not mean standing by and waiting for God to act, but it implies that listeners should focus on this promise and thus set out for God's future.

In most of the sermons I researched, the proclamation of what God does plays an important role. The sermons differ in their elaboration of this. In a number of sermons what God does is: he speaks. He addresses people. Other sermons emphasise that God gives strength in people's lives which helps them to continue or to lead the life that God asks of them. Many sermons refer to the promises of God that, partly, concern the coming of Christ at the end of time. In doing this, several sermons remember the resurrection of Christ. As God raised Christ from the dead, how he will make everything new can be proclaimed. Something may be expected, on the basis of what God does. The sermons differ on what is expected of God. A number of them expect the literal fulfilment of the promises; others see the promise as a source of inspiration for everyday life. When remembering the dead, God's promise is mainly about life after death.

After this, I looked, for this paragraph, at the theological understanding of apocalyptic texts. The research concerns the question as to which theological concepts from apocalyptic texts play a role in the proclamation. In doing this, I made a distinction between the following three themes: 1. The language of apocalyptic texts. 2. Apocalyptic texts in relation to the world. 3. Apocalyptic texts in relation to humans.

The language of apocalyptic texts has a theological meaning. Apocalyptic language uses metaphors and speaks in images. It refers to a transcendental reality. The question is: how should this language be understood? Jacobsen discusses the cosmic scope of apocalyptic language; this is the cosmic symbol of a social world that projects itself onto a heavenly world. This language shows that established social worlds are not fixed forever.²⁶ Grözinger, too, states that the metaphor is based on human reality but that it goes beyond this at the same time. In doing so, it casts a new light on this reality.²⁷ Apocalyptic language criticises this world and looks forward to a new world.

Most of the sermons I researched do recognise the visual nature of apocalyptic language but they differ as far as the significance of the metaphors is concerned. Some state that the images do say what will happen in the future but the exact information is missing. Others see apocalyptic language only as visual language dealing in symbols. The opinion that apocalyptic language is used to criticise the existing world hardly emerges in the sermons I researched. The sermons do not, or hardly, discuss the purpose of the metaphors in apocalyptic language. It is either a reality or an image. The theology of apocalyptic language only emerges to a limited extent.

²⁴ Bohren, *op. cit.*, p 253.

²⁵ J. Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung*, München 1966, p 93.

²⁶ Jacobsen, *op. cit.*, pp 5-6

²⁷ A. Grözinger, *Homiletik*, Güterloh 2008, p 225

The apocalyptic texts can also be used to interpret the world. In this context, Jacobsen refers to the 'cosmic scope' of apocalyptic texts.²⁸ This is about the belief that God the Creator is also God the Redeemer and therefore, that creation and redemption are connected. It is about the creation and the redemption of the world. This is about the resurrection of Christ, upon which the expectation about the future of creation is based. The expectation of a new world is central in apocalyptic texts. The apocalyptic texts make it clear that the world with its injustice, misery and death does not have to stay that way. This is how the apocalyptic texts can be used to interpret the world.

The sermons I researched do not pay much attention to the world and world conditions. Although there is every reason to interpret the world in an apocalyptic way after the attacks of 11 September 2001, this hardly happens in the sermons. When fears about what apocalyptic texts can cause are discussed, this is mainly of a personal nature such as fear of judgment or fear in general. Hope plays an important role in the sermons but it is mainly connected to life after death. Only a few sermons pay attention to the world and they are about the new world where Christ will reign and about God's salvation of his creation which leads to the normalisation of relationships between people. In general, the cosmic meaning of apocalyptic texts is neglected in the sermons. As Jacobsen states,²⁹ the theological interpretation of what happens in society occurs only to a limited extent in the sermons. That several sermons were delivered when remembering the dead, could be the reason that hope is not focused so much on the world but on the personal situation of the listeners, who are grief-stricken and have major questions about death.

Jacobsen refers to theological anthropology which also plays a role, in addition to the theological treatment of apocalyptic texts in terms of the creation.³⁰ The cosmic dimension of apocalyptic texts determines the anthropology. They place people in the context of their judgments on and their expectations for the world. The eschatological judgment is all-important in this. Man is held captive by the power of evil and sin. He wholly depends on redemption.

In anthropology, the resurrection of Christ also plays an important role. In 1 Thessalonians, this is connected to the resurrection of believers at the *Parousia*. This is about being the new human, an idea which took shape in the resurrection of Christ. Believers share in the resurrection of Christ by living a new life. Jacobsen is of the opinion that a theology with an apocalyptic nature is a prototype of Christian practical or contextual theology.³¹ In this way, sermons about apocalyptic texts can be a means of self-understanding.

Of the sermons I researched, only a few refer to the subjection of man to the power of sin. Man is called a sinner in general, and they do so in the context of redemption. These sermons point to the consequences that listeners should connect to that redemption. Other sermons look at being human from the eschatological reality but they immediately point out the consequences for how life should be lived. The sermons emphasise the spiritual and ethical aspects of being human.

²⁸ Jacobsen, *op. cit.*, p. 5

²⁹ See Jacobsen, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

³⁰ See Jacobsen, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

³¹ Jacobsen, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

Recommendations for preaching about apocalyptic texts

In this paragraph, I discuss the possibilities for delivering sermons on apocalyptic texts. In the first place, this is about the problems that arise when preaching on these texts, thereafter, it is about the meaning these texts can have for the present and finally I make some recommendations for delivering sermons on these texts.

The problems with delivering sermons on apocalyptic texts lie in the language and the world view of these texts. They are not consistent with the language and the world view of most listeners in our western world. This raises questions about how realistic these texts are and sermons have to take this into account. Apocalyptic texts refer to the transcendental in metaphoric language. People's experiences are hidden behind this. Sermons can be delivered on these texts, if they look for these experiences and connect them to the listeners' experiences.

After this, there is the problem of the futuristic nature of apocalyptic texts. In the New Testament apocalyptic texts it is a matter of awaiting the *Parousia* in the short term. The problem is that this event has not happened and that two thousand years have now passed. How then, can sermons on these texts be delivered? The texts concern the transcendental and relate to something which is beyond time. The *Parousia* classifies time as eschatological time, time in which decisions have to be made. Sermons on these texts can call upon listeners to make a decisive choice and encourage them to persevere in difficult circumstances.

Where the meaning of apocalyptic texts for the proclamation is concerned, I distinguish two themes. First of all, the apocalyptic texts as a criticism of today's society. After this, apocalyptic texts as a proclamation of hope.

Apocalyptic texts proclaim the dawn of God's dominion and with this the judgment of the powers that keep this world in their grasp. These texts seek to make readers aware of their circumstances. They show where things are going wrong and they point to the new world of God's dominion. Sermons on these texts can call on listeners to release themselves from entrenched situations and to go the way of faith, love and hope.

In referring to the end of time apocalyptic texts proclaim hope. This hope is nourished by the resurrection of Christ. As a result of this, believers may have hope in a new future. These texts point to what God does and raise hopes in this way. Sermons on these texts can discuss the hope that listeners may cherish. This can help them find their way when they have to deal with setbacks and encourage them to continue in faith.

Finally, I have some recommendations for delivering sermons on apocalyptic texts. In doing this, I will make a distinction between the following three themes: First of all, sermons on apocalyptic texts in order to understand society. Next, sermons on apocalyptic texts in order to come to self-understanding. And finally sermons on apocalyptic texts as the proclamation of a God who makes everything new.

Apocalyptic texts interpret the world because they proclaim a new world which will replace the old one which is governed by the powers of evil. Sermons on these texts can also interpret circumstances in society. They can make it clear to the listeners that they do not have to be led by fear of all the evil in the world or be dispirited. They can show the way to the new world in which God rules and where his love and justice, as visible in Jesus Christ, takes shape.

Sermons on apocalyptic texts can also bring listeners to self-understanding. They can help listeners to understand whether and how they are held captive by the power of sin and injustice. They can proclaim salvation and show the way beyond the grasp of sin and injustice. In this context, the resurrection of Christ plays an important role, as this breaks through all of those powers of evil. The listeners can emulate Christ. This can

help them as humans, to follow Christ's example. They can learn to see themselves as people who die in life and are forever connected to Christ. In order to learn to understand the self, the 'already' and the 'not yet' have to be taken into account. On the one hand, people are still subjected to the powers of evil and death, on the other hand they are already connected to the new life by this connection with Christ.

Apocalyptic texts proclaim the Name. This is the four letter Name JHWH, I Am Who I Am. It is the Name that does something in the world and in people. These texts proclaim a God who makes everything new. Preaching, on the basis of these texts, about a God who makes everything new, is about actual circumstances of the listeners. They can help listeners gain new insights into their circumstances and to find a new way. The proclamation of a God who makes everything new can point listeners towards a new future and help them to dedicate themselves to this. When God makes everything new, this is also about the future of the dead. Sermons on apocalyptic texts can offer listeners hope that there is a future for the dead as well. They proclaim that the living and the dead will ever be with the Lord.

Despite the strangeness of apocalyptic texts they can still have meaning in today's life. They proclaim a breakthrough that will overturn everything. In this way they can help us understand today's world in a new way and to give insight into a new future. This is why it is useful to preach about these texts, so that they can bring new dynamics into the lives of listeners. They can help them understand the times in which they live, to give insight into new possibilities and to offer hope in chaos and despair. Sermons on these texts can help believers have faith in a God who makes everything new.