

23 2 Timothy. Good News for Those Condemned to Death

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1. Paul Oppressed, Imprisoned, Impoverished. Just as 2 Peter comes to us as Peter's testament before his martyrdom in Rome under Nero (64-65 AD), so 2 Timothy is presented as Paul's testament prior to his martyrdom, also in Rome during the same period. 2 Timothy in its final form probably was written later by a younger colleague (80-85 AD) but may well contain historical memories and teachings from Paul himself that were adapted to a later context.

Facing winter without adequate clothing (4:13), an impoverished Paul had been unjustly imprisoned and then abandoned by all his friends and colleagues, with the exception of Luke (4:9-12, 16). Paul's situation portrayed here reflects the circumstances of oppression and

poverty of many who faced the death penalty, often innocent (imprisoned for debt or by religious bigots). Paul's entire missionary career had been one of persecution and continual oppression (3:10-13; see 1:8, 12, 16; 2:9; 4:5, 14, 17). Jesus' followers were to distance themselves decisively from all such oppressive tendencies ('adikía, acts totally opposed to the just character of the Liberator-God of the Exodus, 2 Tim. 2:19, citing Numbers 16:5) and seek to incarnate God's liberating justice and solidarity with the weak and poor (2:20-22).

2. God's Liberating Justice through Jesus. Although the Gospels themselves present no evidence of fulfillment, according to Luke Jesus had presented himself as the liberator of prisoners (Luke 4:18-19; see John the Baptist's cruel martyrdom and cf. Acts 4 and 12). The New Testament stresses the Christian responsibility of visiting prisoners, without assuming that a miraculous liberation would follow (Matthew 25:36, 39, 43-44; Hebrews 13:3). In 2 Timothy Paul faces realistically his imminent execution (4:6). Nevertheless, he still insists that Jesus--like Yahweh in the Exodus--is the liberator who had repeatedly liberated him in the past (3:11; 4:17) and who also, as just judge, would finally liberate him from all oppression and save him for God's just new order expected to descend soon from heaven (4:18; cf. 1:10). God would then reward the Apostle's faithfulness with a crown as a token of vindication and reward from the Exodus God of liberating justice (4:7-8; cf. Savior/Liberator and salvation in 1:9-10; 2:8-10).

Many who advocate the death penalty support their arguments by citing Genesis 9:6 (God to Noah): "Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in God's own image God made humankind." The Torah includes many such provisions in which crimes are punishable by death. However, we easily forget that in the diversity of biblical teachings other texts demonstrate how frequently the state tragically errs by seeking to punish a human being with the death penalty. In the Hebrew Bible, for example, we have the cases of Moses and Daniel and in the New Testament, Jesus, Stephen, James, Peter and Paul. See also

the case of the adulterous woman in John 8:1-11, where Jesus subversively sets aside the death penalty that the Mosaic Law had stipulated for adultery.

2. Judaism. According to 2 Timothy, even awaiting execution Paul does not concern himself with ecclesiastical structures to preserve the churches--not a word about hierarchies, popes, cardinals and bishops! Rather he gives us the classical affirmation of the inspiration of the Scriptures as an always valid authority following his death (3:14-17).¹ The letter encourages Timothy to study and interpret responsibly the Scriptures (2:15) and to communicate the Gospel to other “faithful people who will be able to teach others as well” (2:2). Today many reject any idea of inspired Scriptures, while others cite Paul to support a legalistic fundamentalism far from the reality that 2 Timothy seeks to affirm. Four aspects easily are overlooked:

1) 2 Timothy 3:14-17 does not refer to the New Testament but to the Hebrew Scriptures that Timothy had known from early childhood. Consequently, Christians may apply the text to the New Testament only by analogy (see 2 Peter 1:19-21; 3:15-16);

2) 2 Timothy interprets the Hebrew Scriptures as texts that testify to Jesus and indicate the way of forgiveness, health and liberation from oppression--all of which are indicated by the word “salvation”--not by works of the Law of Moses but by faith in Jesus as the Anointed One, whom God empowered to be the Savior, Healer and Liberator.

3) The Hebrew Scriptures offer neither “ethics” nor “morals” but “wisdom” for life’s journey, instruction in “liberating justice” (solidarity with the oppressed), and “good works” that empower the weak and the poor (cf. 4:17 --> Titus).

4) 2 Timothy’s strong teaching concerning the inspiration of the Hebrew Scriptures contradicts the anti-Judaic tendency common in church history of depreciating the Hebrew Bible as an “Old” Testament (--> 2 Corinthians). On the other hand, the insistence of the text that the Hebrew Scriptures themselves point toward an integral liberation through a commitment with

Jesus, God's Anointed One, supports the validity of the church's testimony concerning God's saving acts in the person of Jesus. Theologically we may affirm that the same liberating God of the Exodus (Yahweh) is revealed in Jesus' praxis and person. For that reason both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament attest to the same liberating God and seek to transform individuals and create viable communities that manifest God's liberating justice in their good works (Matthew 25:31-46).

3. Women and Sexual Minorities. Although 2 Timothy names 25 men and only four women, the prominence of the women is notable. This recognition reflects Timothy's personal experience, since he was first instructed in the Hebrew faith by his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois (1:5). With his Jewish mother, Timothy had followed the Jesus way since shortly before his first contact with Paul, who chose him as his companion (in Lystra, 49-50 AD). Acts 16:1-3 indicates that Timothy's father was a Gentile but not necessarily married with Timothy's mother. Paul sends greetings to Timothy from a woman companion in Rome, Claudia (2 Tim. 4:21). The Apostle also salutes Prisca (Priscilla) and Aquila for the last time (4:19), naming Prisca first, as was his custom (the only exception is --> 1 Cor. 16:19, written for a situation where women were overturning patriarchal traditions; see 1 Cor. 11:2-16; cf. the scribal gloss, 14:34-35). In a letter that stresses the positive importance of women, many find shocking the pejorative reference to "weak women" easily misled by false teachers (gynaokária, 3:6).

Timothy himself seems to have been somewhat timid (2 Tim. 1:7-8), insecure (1 Tim. 4:12), quite emotionally attached to Paul (2 Tim. 1:4), and of delicate health (1 Tim. 5:23), all perhaps consequences of continual emotional repression. Paul treats him as his own beloved child (2 Tim. 1:2), although Timothy must have been 35 to 40 years old, according to chronology presupposed in the letter (with Paul's imminent death in 65 AD some 15 years after Timothy's

call in Lystra). Timothy's timidity may have resulted from a sense of shame, a theme Paul repeatedly returns to in the letter (1:8, 12, 16; 2:15).

Of 29 persons named in 2 Timothy, six probably had been married: Prisca and Aquila are the only married couple named (4:19a), but probably Lois and Eunice, Timothy's grandmother and mother respectively, probably also had been married (1:5, possibly widows later). Reference is also made to Jesus' ancestor David (2:8, who had nine wives, two concubines + Abishag) and Onesiphorus's household (probably his widow and children, perhaps also with slaves), since he apparently had recently died (1:16-18; 4:19). If such was the situation, only here does the New Testament encourage prayer for someone deceased.

2 Timothy names 22 other men plus Claudia (a woman) as individuals. Six men are mentioned in pairs: four because they had abandoned either Paul (Phylegus and Hermogenes, 1:15) or the truth (Hymenaeus and Philetus, 2:17), plus Jannes and Jambres (3:8, Egyptian magicians who opposed Moses, according to a Jewish tradition). Also Demas had abandoned Paul (4:10) and Alexander the coppersmith, who had done him much harm (4:14-15). In more positive contexts, in addition to Timothy and Jesus (1:1-2), Paul names Crescens, Tychicus, Titus, and Carpus (4:10-13), plus Erastus and Trophimus (left sick in Miletus, 4:20); also Mark who was with Timothy in Ephesus (4:11). With Paul in Rome when he pens his last testament are four men (Luke, 4:11; Eubulus, Pudens, and Linus, 4:21) plus the woman Claudia (4:21; total, 23 individuals). --> Romans 16 presents a similar picture, naming only three married couples among 37 persons. Obviously sexual minorities were dominant in these contexts (a perspective suppressed in traditional commentaries (--> Titus, Philippians, Colossians).

With his martyrdom imminent, the Paul of 2 Timothy focuses especially on God's promise of life (1:1, 10), which includes not only the Greek concept of immortality (1:19), but also the Hebrew concept of bodily resurrection (2:8, 11-12; see Jerusalem Bible note 2:18). In

the face of his death, Paul shows himself fully confident of having fulfilled God's purpose in his life (4:7) and anticipates being rewarded in eternal life with the crown of a winning athlete (4:8). However, by the grace of God no one need be a "loser" and all may be winners (4:8b), even someone who was "the foremost of sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15).

Bibliography: 2 Timothy (See also above under Pastoral Letters)

- Aageson, James W., "2 Timothy and Its Theology"; Lewis R. Donelson, "Studying Paul: 2 Timothy as Remembrance"; Gordon D. Fee, "Towards a Theology of 2 Timothy from a Pauline Perspective." Seminar Papers, Society of Biblical Literature. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997, 692-749.
- Murphy-O'Conner, J. "2 Timothy Contrasted with 1 Timothy and Titus", Revue Biblique 98 (1991): 403-18.

See also SBL Seminar Papers on the pastoral letters, 1998.