THE THESSALONIAN CORRESPONDENCE

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In 1 Thes 5,1-5 Paul deals with the question about the date of the Lord's coming. In Paul's view the Day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly and as suddenly as a thief in the night. That is to say, the Day of the Lord cannot be predicted. As a consequence, Paul feels urged to conclude his discussion of the topic with an exhortation to continuous vigilance and sobriety (5,6): “So then, let us not sleep like the rest, but let us keep awake and be sober”. The exhortation to sobriety is repeated in v. 8: “Let us keep sober, armed with faith and love and with the hope of salvation”. The final element of this exhortation, that is, the exhortation to entertain hope of salvation, is founded on an argument which Paul puts forward in vv. 9-10: “For God did not choose us to suffer his anger, but to possess salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us in order that we might live...”. What Paul argues is that it is reasonable for Christians to have hope of salvation since God has destined them, not for the terrors of judgment, but for the attainment of salvation. This salvation has been brought about “through our Lord Jesus Christ” (end of v. 9), and that, as Paul says in v. 10, through the fact that “Christ died for us”.

Here we find, for the first time in Paul's correspondence, the formulaic phrase “Christ died for” with an adjunct indicating the person(s) for whom he died.

In Paul's authentic letters this so-called “dying formula” (in German, Sterbensformel) occurs eight times, though in slightly varying forms. One can consider Rom 5,8, Χριστός υπέρ ημῶν άπέθανεν, as the basic form of the formula. Parts of the formula, or allusions to it, occur another seven or eight times in Paul. Variants of the same formula turn up in six passages in 1 Pe, Heb and Jn.

The purpose of this note is to reconsider the question of the setting in which the Christian dying formula originated. Before entering into the problems connected with the provenance and origin of the formula, however, we want to make some observations concerning the particular form of the formula in 1 Thes 5,10. The Greek witnesses to the text of this verse are divided in their choice of the preposition preceding ημῶν. Some witnesses read περί ημῶν (01* B 33), others read υπέρ ημῶν. N-A now gives υπέρ in the main text and περί as a variant in the critical apparatus. In all the previous editions of N-A the opposite was the case.

1 All instances will be listed in the Appendix to this contribution.
Περί should probably be regarded as the original reading, for at least two reasons. First, in all other Pauline occurrences of the formula we find the preposition ὑπέρ. It is more likely that an early reading περί has been adapted to Paul's normal usage than that an original, perfectly acceptable ὑπέρ has been changed into an unusual περί that does not harmonize with the form the formula has at other places. Secondly, in Hellenistic Greek ὑπέρ loses ground in favor of περί. ὑπέρ becomes less and less frequent and περί takes its place. As a result of this development ὑπέρ is of a higher literary level than περί. Περί becomes the ordinary preposition, whereas ὑπέρ becomes the more distinguished, the more literary, the more formal word. Since scribes were more or less lettered persons, it is more plausible that they changed pedestrian idiom into nicer expressions than the other way around. In the transmission of Greek texts, περί is much more liable to correction into ὑπέρ than ὑπέρ into περί. It is extremely probable, therefore, that in 1 Thes 5,10 Paul himself wrote περί. The same applies to 1 Cor 1,13.

In recent scholarly literature several aspects of the dying formula have been studied. I am referring here to the investigations by, among others, K. Wengst, S.K. Williams, M. Hengel, and M. de Jonge.

I cannot here summarize all the questions discussed by these authors. Instead, I shall first of all mention four points about which a certain degree of consensus has been reached. Subsequently, I shall go into one particular issue on which opinions still differ greatly, namely, the question: which was the setting of the early Christian community in which the dying formula originated and originally functioned.

We need not discuss the following four points at great length:

1. The formula describes Jesus' death both as atoning and as vicarious or substitutionary. That it characterizes Jesus' death as atoning is clear from, for example, Rom 5,6-11. Here Paul argues that it is owing to the fact that Christ died for us that we were pronounced free from guilt and reconciled to God. That the formula describes Jesus' death as vicarious appears from 2 Cor 5,14-15 where Paul says that Christ died as one for all, so that all have died (cf. John 11,50).


3 Klaus WENGST, Christiologische Formeln und Lieder des Urchristentums (SNT, 7), Gutersloh, Gerd Mohn, 1972

4. S.K WILLIAMS, Jesus' Death as Saving Event The Background and Origin of a Concept (HDR, 2), Missoula, Scholars, 1975


(2) There can be no doubt that the phrase “Christ died for us” is of pre-Pauline origin. This appears from, for example, 1 Cor 15,3 where Paul quotes a variant of the dying formula explicitly as a tradition which he himself had received.

(3) The history of the Greek phrase ἀποθνήσκω υπέρ or περί can be traced without difficulty. Pre-Pauline Greek-speaking Jewish Christians adopted it from Hellenistic Jewish Greek. In Hellenistic Jewish Greek “to die for” was standard terminology for the death of martyrs who died for the Law or for the national community. Their death was said to expiate the sins of the nation and to bring about reconciliation between God and his people. In this sense the phrase occurs, for instance, in 2 Mac 8,21 ἐτοίμους υπέρ τῶν νόμων καὶ τῆς πατρίδος ἀποθνήσκειν. In its turn, Hellenistic Jewish Greek owed the phrase ἀποθνήσκω υπέρ to pagan Greek, in which the expression was used to denote the death of heroes who died for the freedom of their city or fatherland, or, more generally, on behalf of other people. To quote one example out of many, in Euripides’ Alcestis, where the central issue is the substitutionary death of Alcestis for her husband Admetus, the father of Admetus says to his son, for whom he refuses to die: “Don’t you die for your father and I’ll not die for you”: μη ονησχ’ υπέρ τοῦ δ’άνδρός, ούδ’έγώ προ σοῦ (690; cf. 282 where Alcestis says to Admetus: ἡνήσκω ... υπέρ σέθεν).

(4) Originally, the phrase ἀπέθανεν υπέρ does not go back to Is 52-53, for in this specific form it does not occur in those chapters on the suffering servant, but it does occur, both in Hellenistic Jewish Greek and in Paul (e.g., Rom 5,7), without any connection with Is 53. Moreover, in the NT the dying formula is not connected with Is 53 until in a relatively late stage of the tradition, namely, in 1 Pe 2,21-25.

Now let us turn to the question in which situation of the life of the early Christian communities did the dying formula originate? Which activity of the community formed the context in which the dying formula took shape?

Authoritative New Testament scholars, among them Jeremias⁷, Lohse⁸, Riesenfeld⁹, and Hengel¹⁰, have pointed to the celebration of the eucharist as the most plausible milieu in which the idea of Jesus’ vicarious death or even the dying formula itself emerged. They regarded the eucharistic words as transmitted by Mark (“This is my blood of the covenant, shed for many”) or by Paul (“This is my body, which is for

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¹⁰ Martin Hengel, Atonement, pp. 71-73.
you”) as belonging to the most primitive stage of the Christian tradition, or even as authentic words of Jesus. These interpretative sayings spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper would have shown the earliest Christians how to understand Jesus’ death properly. In response to these eucharistic words, the Aramaic speaking community would already have expressed its understanding of Jesus’ death as vicarious and expiatory in a phrase which the Greek speaking communities in their turn would have rendered as “Christ died for us”.

Now it is true that in the common eucharistic tradition underlying Paul, Mark and John, Jesus’ body or blood were spoken of as “given for many”, or “for you”. Yet, however old the “for many” or “for you” element may be, there is reason to suppose that it is secondary, seeing that the eucharistic prayers of Did 9-10 make no mention whatsoever of the bread as Jesus’ body given “for others” or of the wine as Jesus’ blood shed “for others”.

In my opinion the testimony of the Didache should be given much weight. First, the eucharistic prayers transmitted in this writing give the impression of being very primitive, both in that they show a close affinity with corresponding Jewish thanksgivings pronounced at meals and in that they preserve traces of a belief in a realized eschatology. Secondly, it is difficult to explain why a reference to Christ’s body or blood being given for the members of the community would have been omitted if it had originally been part of the eucharistic liturgy.

Consequently, the background of the dying formula has not to be sought in the eucharist, but conversely, the eucharistic formulas “for many”, “for you”, and “for the life of the world” should be regarded as secondary interpretations of the meaning of the eucharist, based on an existing understanding of Jesus’ death as vicarious and expiatory. The eucharistic formulas in question are probably based on the so-called “surrender formula”, running “He gave himself up for us”.

The hypothesis according to which the dying formula originated in a eucharistic context is also open to another objection. In none of the New Testament passages in which the dying formula occurs does one find any reference or allusion to the sacrament of the eucharist. If the formula came into being in connection with the eucharist, it is strange that there is no trace of this original link with the eucharist left in the NT passages in which the formula actually occurs. Consequently, the theory according to which the dying formula originated in the context of the earliest Christian celebration of the eucharist has to be dismissed.

Another suggestion concerning the social context in which the dying formula came into being has been put forward by Klaus Wengst.

11. Martin Hengel, Atonement, p. 73.
12. This formula figures in varying forms in Gal. 1,4; 2,20, Eph 5,2,25, Mk 10,45, Mt 20,28, 1 Tim 2,6, Tit 2,14, Rom 4,25; 8,32 and in the Freer Logion (Mk 16,14).
According to Wengst, the dying formula shows signs of having originated in the sphere of the church’s religious instruction. He bases his suggestion on the observation that the υπέρ element, plus the genitive, points to a certain degree of deliberate reflection. In Wengst’s view this reflection has to be located in the catechesis of early, Greek-speaking, Jewish-Christian communities.

It has to be admitted that in the υπέρ element, plus the genitive, the dying formula has something extra in comparison with, for example, the so-called resurrection formula “God has raised Jesus from the dead” (1 Thes 1,10; Gal 1,1; etc.)\(^\text{14}\). However, the mere occurrence of the preposition υπέρ seems to me too weak an indication to bear the burden of Wengst’s conclusion that the genesis of the dying formula must be located in the catechesis of the earliest church.

A renewed attempt to determine the situation in which the formula “Christ died for us” arose should start from a close examination of the function of the formula in the eight passages in Paul in which it occurs. An examination of the function of each particular instance of the formula in its literary context yields a strikingly consistent picture. It can be demonstrated that in all cases the formula serves as foundation of the claim that God’s salvation has become reality or has at least been inaugurated.

1 Thes 5,10 is a good example. In v. 8 Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to the hopeful expectation of their salvation. In v. 9 he bases this exhortation on the affirmation that God has already destined them to the attainment of salvation. In order to back up this latter assertion, Paul uses the formula “Christ died for us”. In this way the dying formula serves as foundation of the contention that for those who put their trust in Christ, salvation has already been brought about by God, although its full realization is still outstanding. If the life of Christians can be said to be characterized by the tension between the “already” and the “not yet”, the dying formula is used to ground the “already”.

This can also be seen in Rom 5,6 and 8. Here too the phrase “Christ died for us” is the foundation of the claim that we have been justified and reconciled to God. The same is true for Rom 14,15, “Do not, by your eating, bring disaster to a man for whom Christ died”! Obviously, the man in question has been saved and that is God’s work, τὸ ἐφεύρετο τοῦ θεοῦ (v. 20). This work has been made possible, however, through Jesus’ expiatory death and must not be ruined by one’s fellow Christians. Here too Jesus’ dying for the person is mentioned as the ground of his salvation.

In 2 Cor 5,14-15 the function of the dying formula is the same. The new life of Christians who have ceased to live for themselves and now live for Christ (v. 15) is, according to this passage, the effect of Christ’s

\(^{14}\) See on this formula M. DE JONGE, Christology, pp. 34, 37-38.
dying for them. In other words, the phrase “Christ died for them” functions as the foundation of the description of the Christians’ life as something new. “The old order has gone, a new order has already begun” (2 Cor 5,17) and this new order has its foundation in Christ’s death for others.

From what precedes it may be concluded that the dying formula appears in contexts in which the author wishes to highlight the new state of life to which Christians have been transferred. We see that whenever this newness of the Christians’ life is founded on Christ’s vicarious death, that is, on the dying formula, the author intends either to encourage his readers to rest assured of their eventual salvation (Rom 5,6.8), or to exhort them to a conduct in accordance with their new life (most other instances).

Where, then, in the life of the earliest church do we have to locate this encouragement and this paraenesis? By far the most obvious option is that activity which in 1 Thes is so often referred to as παρακαλεῖν and παράκλησις (1 Thes 2,3; 3,2; 4,1.10.18; 5,11.14). These terms refer to the preaching in the form of an address containing teaching, admonition, encouragement, and exhortation. The Epistle to the Hebrews (13,22) characterizes itself as such an exhortation: λόγος τῆς παρακλήσεως. According to Acts 13,14, the officials of the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch expected Paul to deliver a λόγος παρακλήσεως, an exhortatory address, following the reading of the Law and the Prophets.

In my view, then, the origin of the dying formula can best be located in the exhortatory homily of the earliest, Greek-speaking, Christian community, which may well have been that of Jerusalem in the early thirties of the first century A.D. Whether or not the formula has ever had any equivalent in Aramaic or Hebrew, cannot be ascertained. The evidence does not permit us to go back further than the earliest Greek-speaking, Jewish Christian congregation. The language the members of this congregation spoke was, of course, the Hellenistic Jewish Greek of their Jewish parents, brothers, and sisters. In this Hellenistic Jewish Greek, the expression “to die for” occurred as martyrdom terminology. Early Greek-speaking, Jewish Christians applied this expression to Jesus and so created the “dying formula”. Needless to say that this association of the phrase “to die for” with the death of Jesus presupposes the interpretation of Jesus’ death as atoning and vicarious. For that was the meaning of the expression already in Hellenistic Jewish Greek before it was adopted to characterize the death of Jesus. But how the interpretation of Jesus’ death as the atoning and substitutionary death of a Jewish martyr originated is another question.
Appendix

The Dying Formulas in the New Testament

1 Thes 5,10 Χριστοῦ τοῦ ἀποθανόντος περὶ ἡμῶν
1 Cor 15,3 Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν
2 Cor 5,14 εἰς ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀπέθανεν
2 Cor 5,15 ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀπέθανεν
ibidem τῷ ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν ἀποθανόντι
Rom 5,6 Χριστὸς ... ὑπὲρ ἁσβεθῶν ἀπέθανεν
Rom 5,8 Χριστὸς ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἀπέθανεν
Rom 14,15 ὑπὲρ οὗ Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν

Rom 14,9 Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν ... ἵνα ζώντων κυριεύσῃ
1 Cor 1,13 μὴ Παύλος ἐσταυρώθη περὶ ἡμῶν;
1 Cor 5,7 v.l. τὸ πάσχα ἡμῶν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἐτύθη, Χριστὸς
1 Cor 8,11 δι’ ὅν Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν
2 Cor 5,21 God has made Christ to be sin ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν
Gal 2,21 Χριστὸς ... ἀπέθανεν for our justification
Gal 3,13 Χριστὸς became accursed ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν

Cf. Rom 5,7 ὑπὲρ δικαίου τις ἀποθανεῖται, ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἁγαθοῦ ... ἀποθανεῖν.
Rom 9,3 ἤχομεν ἀνάθεμα εἶναι ... ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου
Phil 1,29 ὡμίν ἐχαρίσθη τὸ ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ ... πάσχειν

1 Pe 2,21 Χριστὸς ἐσπαθήθη ὑπὲρ ὑμᾶς
1 Pe 3,18 Χριστὸς ... περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν ἐσπαθήθη (v.l. ἀπέθανεν), δίκαιος ὑπὲρ ἀδίκων.
Heb 2,9 (Ἰησοῦς) ὑπὲρ παντὸς γεύσηται θανάτου.
Jn 11,50 ἵνα εἰς ἀνθρώπον ἀποθανεῖν ὑπὲρ τοῦ λαοῦ
Jn 11,51 ἔμελλεν Ἰησοῦς ἀποθανεῖται ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἔθνους
Jn 18,14 συμφέρει ἐνα ἀνθρώπον ἀποθανεῖν ὑπὲρ τοῦ λαοῦ.

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