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Sancification and the Gift of the Holy Spirit

A Semiotic Study of 1 Thess 4:1–8

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Abstract

This an exegetical study of 1 Thess 4:1-8 that presents the work of sanctification that God initiates and maintains in Christians when each individual welcomes the gift of the Holy Spirit and cooperates with God by learning to master and possess his bodily impulses and passions. A diachronic analysis is followed by a synchronic one and in the end, the findings of both approaches are summarized as a conclusion.

Keywords: Sanctification, Impurity, Sexual Conduct, Holy Spirit, Will of God.

Introduction

This study intends to explore the nature of *sanctification* and its relationship with the gift of the Holy Spirit in the first part of Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonians (1 Thess 4:3-8). The first section consists of a commentary mainly based on historical-critical research that serves as a frame and preparation for the semiotic analysis presented in the second part. The main lexemes of the pericope will be understood especially in the context of the same letter and in the Corpus Paulinum, considering their Old Testament background. The Diachronic and Synchronic methods complement each other to arrive at a conclusion that points out the main findings of this study, which can be applied to Christians and the Church today in a much broader context than that addressed by Paul to the Thessalonians of the first century.

The Context

Paul, together with Silas and Timothy, reached Thessalonica on his second missionary journey and could preach there only three successive Sabbaths in the synagogue (Acts 17:1-2). In a short period, the missionaries could establish a community composed of many Greeks and some Jews (Acts 17:4). This success provoked the resentment of other Jews who stirred the local people and the city councilors against Paul and his companions. As a result of this, "the brothers" managed to get Paul out of the city and send him to Beroea and from there to Athens (Acts 17:10-15), from where he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica (1 Thess 3:1-2). Paul finally reached Corinth, from where this letter, arguably the first document of the New Testament, was written around 50 B.C. Paul writes to his newly found community after Timothy returns from Thessalonica and gives him an account of the situation he encountered there (1 Thess 3:2, 6).

The first letter Paul ever wrote to a particular community was motivated by that report of Timothy and by the fact that he believed he left that people too soon, like "orphans" (1 Thess 2:17), assailed by persecutions (cf. 1 Thess 3:3), and afraid that "the tempter had tempted you and that our labor had been in vain" (3:5).

The first three chapters are a kind of introduction where Paul commends the Thessalonians for their faith (3:7-9) and expresses his love for them (3:12) and

his desire to return and “see you face to face and restore (καταρτίσαι¹) whatever is lacking in your faith” (3:10). In this introduction, Jesus Christ is presented as the Son of God “whom He raised from the dead” and “who delivers (ρύόμενον²) us from the wrath to come” (1:10) and is coming “with all His saints” (3:13).

The second section consists mainly of a paraenetic message. It is an exhortation based on the authority of Christ (4:1), which mainly deals with the issues of holiness – sexual conduct (4:3–8), brotherly love (4:9–12), and eschatology (4:13–5:11). Finally, he closes the letter with some instructions for community life (5:12–22).

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| Address and thanksgiving | 1:1–10 |
| A. The missionaries’ labor and persecution | 2:1–3:13 |
| B. Paraenetic section | 4:1–5:11 |
| Introduction | 4:1–2 |
| 1 On sexual conduct | 4:3–8 |
| 2 On brotherly love | 4:9–12 |
| 3 On eschatology | 4:13–5:11 |
| Final instructions and greetings | 5:12–22 |

1. A Preliminary Commentary

We begin this study considering the two introductory verses to the paraenetic or exhortative section:

4:1–2 “Finally, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live (walk) and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus”.

“λοιπὸν οὖν” (for the rest, therefore) introduces the whole parenetic section of the letter: “we ask you and we urge you in the Lord Jesus” (4:1). The verb παρακαλέω (to urge) is often used in letters to stress the fact that what is taught

¹ This form is the infinitive aorist active of the verb καταρτίζω: to restore, to put in order.

² ρύόμενον is the verb participle present middle accusative masculine singular of ρύομαι: to save, to rescue, to deliver.

comes from a higher authority³. In verse 2, the apostle points out the “instructions” and example the missionaries had given them “through the Lord Jesus Christ” (cf. 2:10–12). Paul doesn’t want to leave any doubt that what he teaches bears the authority of Jesus Christ as he had done before (cf. 3:13).

Paul’s main concern is that the Thessalonians follow the teaching they have received from the missionaries about how they “ought to live (walk) and please God”. Although he reckons that they are doing so: “just as you actually do walk”, he considers that they still have to grow in this regard. Therefore, he urges them “to walk even more” (4:1). This is a follow-up of what he had told them at the beginning of his letter when he thanked God for their “work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3). The verb περιπατέω (to walk) appears three times in the same verse and conveys the figurative meaning of the Hebrew verb *הלך* of the Old Testament, as referred to the believers’ conduct and faithfulness towards God in their day-to-day life⁴:

Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; Walk before Me, and be blameless (Gen 17:1)⁵.

The concept of “walking [before the Lord]” is paired with that of “pleasing God”. The missionaries are a clear example of how to please God. The very motive that brings them to preach the Gospel is “not to please mortals, but to please God” (2:4), and for this reason, they had to suffer shame and great opposition (cf. 2:2). “To please God” is also related to the way they cared for and nourished the community (cf. 2:7–8), and with the labor and toil they had to face: “We worked night and day so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God” (2:9). Pleasing God supposes a dynamic process of growth.

4:3 “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication.”

From this verse to verse 8 we notice a short literary unit where the words “God”, “holy” and “sanctification” are significantly dominant.⁶ Like in the Old

³ Cf. Raymond F. Collins, *The Power of Images in Paul* (Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical Press, 2008), 22.

⁴ Cf. Collins, *The Power of Images in Paul*, 21–22.

⁵ This verb is one of the most frequently used in the OT (1556 times), many times with this figurative meaning as, for instance, in Deut 26:17; 28:9; 1 Kgs 2:4; 3:13; 6:12; 8:23; 2 Kgs 10:31; 21:22; Ps 1:1; 26:3,11; 32:8, etc.

⁶ Cf. Collins, *The Power of Images in Paul*, 22.

Testament, God, the Holy One of Israel is who sanctifies (Isa 41:14; 43:3; Lev 20:8; 21:8; 22:32). There is a direct causal connection between the working of God (through the Holy Spirit) in believers and their “sanctification”. As Paul puts it at the beginning of this letter (1:5), through his Spirit, God transforms the believer into a witness of God’s word and of living according to “God’s will”. The focus of this paraenetic section is “sanctification”, which in v. 3 is related to sexual morality. Paul puts it very bluntly, not leaving leeway for any compromise: The Thessalonians need to undergo a thorough change in their moral life. Sanctification is God’s work in them, but this divine action needs to be matched with the new believers’ responsibility: they should refrain from their previous sexual misconduct.

In the letter, ἀγιωσύνη (holiness) (3:13; 4:4, 7) is the state of being holy. On the other hand, “ὁ ἁγιασμὸς ὑμῶν” (your sanctification), indicates the process of being made holy. The will of God, then, is that they undergo the process of “sanctification” (4:3)⁷. Paul uses the same noun in Rom 6:19 and 1 Cor 1:30, where it also bears the causative meaning of the transformation process God works in those who were foolish and weak to make them wise and strong with the wisdom and strength of God.

In the previous chapter, Paul had already shown what the outcome of this process of sanctification would be:

May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints. (3:12–13)

God’s transforming action –“sanctification”– not only allows the believer to know God’s will but also to do it (cf. Rom 12:2; Eph 5:17; 6:6; Col 1:9–10; 4:12). One of the very important notes that differentiated the people of the Covenant from the rest of the peoples was their sexual ethos (see Leviticus 18 and 20):

Reminding the Thessalonians of the reality of their sanctification, their being co-opted into God’s people accomplished through the gift of God’s Holy Spirit to them, Paul tells them that holiness entails avoidance of, sexual immorality (πορνεία) in all its forms.⁸

⁷ Cf. Eduard Verhoef, “1 Thessalonians 4: 1-8: The Thessalonians Should Live a Holy Life,” *HTS Theological Studies/Theological Studies* 63, no. 1 (2007): 347–63, 349.

⁸ Cf. Collins, *The Power of Images in Paul*, 23.

The Thessalonians face two contrasting options: either to compromise with the mores of their neighbors or to accept God's work of transformation/recreation and renewal to conform with His will (θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ) and so please Him.

Paul's instruction about sexual ethics related to holiness might well be a response to Timothy's report and his evaluation of the community's socio-cultural environment. Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, which by Paul's time was the largest and wealthiest city in Macedonia, a busy commercial port on the north Aegean Sea, where the Greco-Roman sexual mores were the norm; Married life was mainly meant for status and family ties, while sex out of marriage was tolerated, particularly for men:

We keep mistresses for our enjoyment, concubines to serve our person each day, but we have wives for the bearing of legitimate offspring and to be faithful guardians of the household. (*Against Neaera: Demosthenes* 59.122)⁹

The newly converted Thessalonians need to make a big change in their lifestyle leaving behind their former vices in a city where sexual excesses were also associated with numerous pagan cults like that of Aphrodite and Dionysius¹⁰.

The Greeks who converted to the Gospel in Thessalonica found stern opposition and even persecution from their fellow gentile Greeks (cf. 1 Thess 1:13; 4:4–5; 5:5–6; 2 Thess 1:4–8). They might have resented the newly converted Christians' abrupt separation and shunning of their regular religious and civic activities as a consequence of their conversion¹¹.

Another strong motive behind the hostility of the fellow Greeks towards the converts may well have been the political affiliation of the Thessalonians towards Rome, which Paul addresses in a subtle and crafty way by criticizing the “*Pax Romana*” propaganda:

When they say, ‘There is peace and security, then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! (1 Thess 5:3)

⁹ Gerald W. Peterman, ‘Marriage and Sexual Fidelity in the Papyri. Plutarch and Paul’, *Tyndale Bulletin* 50 (1999): 163–72, 163–64.

¹⁰ Cf. Karl P. Donfried, ‘The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence’, *New Testament Studies* 31, no. 3 (1985): 336–56, 337.

¹¹ Cf. John MG Barclay, ‘Conflict in Thessalonica’, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (1993): 512–30, 512–13.

The seemingly secure might of the Roman Empire and those who rely on it will “fall victim of the sudden wrath of God.”¹² Following up on this insight, J. R. Harrison reads the eschatological imagery of 1 Thess 4:13—5:11 in an anti-imperial, counter-cultural framework; Paul’s words represent a “radical subversion of Roman eschatological imagery and terminology”¹³.

Considering this situation, and the radical change from pagan sexual mores to a Christian one the Thessalonians need to undertake, Paul doesn’t leave any doubt in this matter: Holiness and sexual immorality can’t coexist as he also told the Colossians:

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication/πορνεία, impurity/ἀκαθαρσία, passion/πάθος, evil desire/ἐπιθυμίαν κακήν, and greed (which is idolatry). (Col 3:5)

4:4-5 “That each one of you knows how to control/κτᾶσθαι your own body/vessel in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion (πάθει ἐπιθυμίας), like the Gentiles who do not know God”.

Though Paul’s understanding of the human person is holistic, the body is perceived as an instrument (vessel) where human conduct is manifested, and as such, it must be holy (Rom 12:1-2). Paul’s anthropology can be understood as a “holistic dualism”,¹⁴ where body and soul form a unified person (cf. 1 Thess 5:23). Paul’s eschatology reveals this view:

Our Lord Jesus Christ... , who died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him. (1 Thess 5:9–10)

For we know that if our earthly dwelling, a tent, should be destroyed, we have a building from God, a dwelling not made with hands, eternal in heaven. (2 Cor 5:1)

Paul explains to the Thessalonians that the deceased believers are still alive

¹² Holland Lee Hendrix, Birger A. Pearson, and Helmut Köster, “Archaeology and Eschatology at Thessalonica,” in: *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991), 107–18, 118.

¹³ James R. Harrison, “Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 25, no. 1 (2002): 71–96, 92.

¹⁴ The Old Testament does not establish an ontological distinction between body and soul. In Hebrew anthropology, the human personality consists of a unity of life in which the soul (immaterial) and the body (material) constitute a personal unit of a single being, unlike the Greek dualism that saw man as two dialectically separated parts. Cf. Cooper, John W. *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000, 46.

but not in their physical bodies. The soul is not an immortal entity as such. Paul only says that the persons are “asleep” waiting for the resurrection and fullness of life with Jesus. The text of Romans further develops that notion. An eternal and incorruptible body will replace our “earthly dwelling”:

For Paul, the true man is the whole man. The true man is not the inner man alone, for although the body is outward, it is not unessential. The body is to be sanctified and will be resurrected.¹⁵

The words used here to describe sexual misconduct are the same used in Col 3:5. In both texts the difference between the converts and the Gentiles is stressed, assuring the community of their new identity as opposed to that of their neighbors, whose sexual conduct was often driven by passionate lust (πάθει ἐπιθυμίας), that is, unrestrained and inappropriately expressed lust¹⁶. Such change in their lifestyle entailed a challenge for each individual: “each of you” and brought about tensions in their relationship with their fellow Greeks.

A keyword here is σκεῦος (vessel) which is used as a metaphor to signify an object that needs to be “controlled, acquired or possessed” (verb: κτάομαι). This verb appears in Sir 36:29 paired with “a wife” as a direct object “ὁ κτόμενος γυναῖκα...” The same happens in the Septuagint version of Ruth 4:10. This led some commentators, like Collins, to apply this translation to 1 Thess 4:4 replacing “vessel” with “wife”: acquiring a wife “for himself/τὸ ἑαυτοῦ”. According to this scholar, this verse would reflect Paul’s advice to the Corinthians (1 Cor 3:37), encouraging the Thessalonians to marry, and thus satisfy their sexual drives and avoid sexual immorality¹⁷ T. Elgvin, based on an enigmatic Qumranic text (4Q416 2 II.21), which he translates as “Furthermore, do not dishonor the vessel of your bosom (or: your lawful vessel),” maintains that in 1 Thess 4:4 this term is used as “a euphemism for the male organ”¹⁸. That position is not very sound since it

¹⁵ Gundry, Robert H. *Soma in biblical theology: With emphasis on Pauline anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁶ Robert W. Yarbrough, ‘Sexual Gratification in 1 Thess 4:1–8’, *Trinity Journal* 20, no. 2 (1999): 215–32, 226.

¹⁷ Cf. Collins, *The Power of Images in Paul*, 25. Among other reasons to support his opinion, he argues that in 1 Pt 3:7, the author uses the same metaphor (σκεῦος) to represent the “woman” as the weaker sex in the context of marriage. Cf. *Ib.*, 24. Anyway, σκεῦος in 1 Pt is applied to both husband and wife, the latter being the weaker σκεῦος. Therefore this text can’t be taken as a parallel to 1 Thess 4:4. Cf. James Everett Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, vol. 39 (C. Scribner’s Sons, 1912), 149.

¹⁸ Torleif Elgvin, “‘To Master His Own Vessel’. 1 Thess 4:4 in Light of New Qumran Evidence’, *New Testament Studies* 43, no. 4 (1997): 604–19, 618.

is based on a blurred document: What for him is a כ (kaf), is most probably a ב (bet). Therefore, instead of “כלי הוקכה = vessel of your bosom”, “בלי היקכה = your prescribed portion” should be read, which makes more sense in the context of the whole Qumranic text¹⁹. Yarbrough, following Donfried²⁰, still considers that the translation of σκεῦος in 1 Thess 4:4 is justified based on the archaeological discoveries of Phallic representations of the cult of Cabrius that “were highly visible in Paul’s time”²¹.

In the context of Paul’s teaching, the most reasonable meaning of “vessel” is the human body and as an extension, the human person²². As to the verb κτάομαι, in this context, it can convey the meaning of “to gain possession of”, “to master” or “to control”. Therefore, the apostle means to urge Christians to master their own sexual drives with respect towards others as well as one’s own bodies. Indeed, the noun σκεῦος means “vessel or implement of any kind”²³. Besides 1 Thess 4:4, Paul uses this noun in Rom 9:21, 22, 23 and in 2 Cor 4:7. In all cases it can be translated as “vessels”, pointing to those made by a potter. He teaches that we bear the treasure/θησαυρός (of the Gospel) “in vessels of clay” (2 Cor 4:7), meaning “in our bodies/in our selves” (cf. 2 Tim 1:14). These texts speak of the relationship between the potter and the clay, that is, the Creator and His creature, which has a rich Old Testament background (cf. Gen 2:7; Jer 18:1,6,11 Isa 29:16; 45:9; 64:8). This understanding of “vessel” makes more sense considering also the parallelism of 1 Thess 4:3–8 with Paul’s teaching on sexual morality in 1 Cor 6:12–20.

For the Greeks body and soul are metaphysically antipathetic to each other, and the body could be understood as , the “vessel of the soul” but only as its prison, a reality inferior to the soul, from which the soul needs to be liberated²⁴. Paul, for whom body, spirit, and soul are a type of parallelism intended to emphasize the

¹⁹ Menahem Kister, ‘A Qumranic Parallel to 1Thess 4: 4? Reading and Interpretation of 4Q416 2 II 21’, *Dead Sea Discoveries* 10, no. 3 (2003): 365–70, 366. This author translates the text as follows: “Do not satiate yourself with food when there is no clothing, do not drink wine when there is no food, do not seek pleasures when you lack food, do not live lavishly with the little you have when you are poor, lest you be unmindful of your very life, and **do not be disgraced by (living) not according to your prescribed portion.**”

²⁰ Cf. Donfried, “The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence,” 337–41.

²¹ Yarbrough, “Sexual Gratification in 1 Thessalonians 4,” 221.

²² Paul’s anthropology is the one present in the Old Testament, a holistic one, not a dualistic one as that of the Hellenistic world. For him, soul, body, spirit, and flesh “designate the whole human person under one or other aspect.” Collins, *The Power of Images in Paul*, 24.

²³ H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon with a Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 1607.

²⁴ Cf. Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 208.

whole person, each Christian must know how to dominate the inclinations of the flesh, not allowing himself to be enslaved by them, like the pagans “who do not know God” (Cf. Jer 10:25)²⁵. In 2 Cor 5:17 the apostle of the Gentiles stresses the new reality and identity of Christians: “So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.”

In 1 Cor 6:18–19, Paul tells the Corinthians to shun fornication/*πορνεία* because it is a sin against the body itself: “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?”. Here the body is related to the Holy Spirit as “a temple”, a dwelling place that is made holy by His presence. In Rom 5:5, Paul preaches that through the gift of the Holy Spirit, “the love of God has been poured into our hearts”. Figuratively, the Holy Spirit appears as a liquid poured into a container (our hearts). That same relationship between the human body and the Holy Spirit is found in 1 Thess 4:8, where the process of sanctification is God’s work in the Christian who makes himself available by “possessing or controlling” his passions and lust. This could also be taken as a process of appropriation or of “acquiring” one’s own body/self as the place where the gift of the Spirit is to be welcomed. The designation of the body/self as a location indicates the relevance of a unique and personal relationship between God and each believer.

4:6 “...that no one trespass or exploit a brother or sister in this matter(*πρᾶγμα*), because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.”

The verbs *ὑπερβαίνω* (to transgress by going beyond proper limits in behavior, trespass) and *πλεονεκτέω* (to take advantage of, exploit, outwit, defraud, cheat) don’t bear any sexual connotation (cf. Ps 17:30; Job 14:15; 24:2; 38:11; 2 Cor 2:11; 7:2; 12:17–18). Both words bear the implication of exceeding the measure and order given by the creator to human beings²⁶ underscoring the relevance of that Creator-creature relationship.

In Rom 9:21 the potter is related to the clay to imply the relationship between Creator and creature (cf. Isa 41:25; Jer 18:6). Here in 1 Thess 4:6 Paul connects

²⁵ Cf. Karl Staab and Norbert Brox, *Cartas a Los Tesalonicenses: Cartas de La Cautividad: Cartas Pastorales* (Edición Herder, 1974), 46.

²⁶ Cf. Günter Haufe, *Der Erste Brief Des Paulus an Die Thessalonicher* (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1999), 71.

the idea of trespassing God's creation order with the matter (πρᾶγμα) of sexual immorality (πορνεία), where vessel ("σκεῦος") and clay ("πηλός") are similar nouns. The keyword here is "avenger"²⁷; which points to the forbidden action, a transgression of God's created order: "Sanctification means first of all not doing such an action". This way, Paul connects the issue of trespassing on God's order of creation with that of sexual morality.

The text that is in the background is the song of Moses (Deut 32:1–43), where God rebukes those members of his people who "neglected the Rock who begot you, and forgot the God who gave you birth" (Deut 32:18) and swears: "Vengeance is mine!" (Deut 32:35). Trespassing against and exploiting one's brother in this context bears the meaning of committing adultery with his wife, which would affect the community as a whole and,²⁸ even more serious, would be an act of defying the Creator Himself; His will is that we be "sanctified": "Be holy, for I, Yahweh your God, am holy" (Lev 19:2), which is paraphrased in v. 7.

Paul considers the Thessalonians as the people of God (1:1, 4, 9–10; 3:13; 5:5, 23–24). Consequently, the life they are to live as God's people is to be holy, which distinguishes them from idolaters; in Judaism, the liaison between idolatry and immorality was commonplace: "For the making of idols was the beginning of fornication and the invention of them was the corruption of life" (Wis 14:12). In this context, sex and eros are an integral part of God's creation but should be exercised within the Creator's parameters, in contraposition to the pagan way²⁹:

For Paul religion entailed not just orthopraxy but also a doxological orthodoxy, all permeated with a warm sense of personal devotion; it is doubtful whether this same quality of religion can be easily documented from rabbinic sources³⁰.

Trespassing against one's brother results in going beyond the measure established by God and breaching one's friendship with Him, who calls us to be holy, to enter into a personal love relationship with Him. Expressions like "each one of you" (v.4), "no one" (v. 6), and "whoever" (v. 8), stress the importance of this personal relationship with the Lord and the implication this relationship has particularly in the sexual and married life of Christians and by extension in all aspects

²⁷ Cf. "God's wrath" in 1 Thess 5:9.

²⁸ Cf. Collins, *The Power of Images in Paul*, 26.

²⁹ Cf. Yarbrough, "Sexual Gratification in 1 Thess 4," 228.

³⁰ Yarbrough, "Sexual Gratification in 1 Thess 4," 230.

of their life.

4:7 “For God did not call us to impurity but to holiness”.

Prophet Ezekiel foretells a purification “from all your impurities” and “from all your idols”, placing “impurities” and “idols” at the same level (cf. Ezek 36:25,29)³¹. It is also significant that this text also mentions the gift of the Spirit: “I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you” (Ezek 36:26).

The word ἀκαθαρσία (impurity) appears also at the beginning of the letter where Paul tells the Thessalonians that their exhortation or encouragement does not come from ἀκαθαρσία, nor error or deceit (1 Thess 2:3); Here this word is not directly related to sexual immorality but bears a broader sense. Both in 2 Cor 12:21 and Gal 5:19, ἀκαθαρσία is associated with πορνεία (fornication) and ἀσέλγεια (licentiousness, sensuality). These texts reflect the same teaching of Paul in 1 Thess 4:3-8.

Speaking of the Greeks in Rom 1:24, Paul says that because they fell into idolatry, God abandoned them to ἀκαθαρσία (impurity) that is “in the concupiscence of their hearts/ἐν ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις τῶν καρδιῶν αὐτῶν”. Impurity is a state of the soul that leads people to dishonor (ἀτιμάζω) their bodies. Idolatry is also connected with “sexual impurity” and “lustful passion” in Col 3:5.

An important text that sheds more light on this verse is Rom 6:19:

For just as you once presented your members as servants to impurity and to greater and greater lawlessness, so now present your members as servants to righteousness for sanctification.³²

The “state of impurity” leads εἰς τὴν ἀνομίαν (to lawlessness). The opposite process is that of righteousness leading εἰς ἁγιασμόν (to sanctification) –the same term used in 1 Thess 4:3.

4:8 “Therefore whoever rejects this, rejects not human authority but God, who

³¹ The Septuagint uses the word ἀκαθαρσία for “impurity” seven times in Lev 7:20; 15:3,24; 20:21,25; 22:3 [only 6 examples here] because it appears twice in Lv 15:3. meaning ritual impurity. In the quoted text of the prophet Ezekiel, the noun appears in the plural, expanding the meaning to other areas of behavior.

³² This is our literal translation of this verse.

also gives his Holy Spirit to you.”

The use of the particle *τοιγαροῦν*, (therefore, so that) with a consecutive sense, which in the NT only occurs here and in Heb 12:1, leads the whole dynamic and logical argumentation of this pericope to its climax in this final verse.

Once again, Paul turns to divine authority to leave no doubt about the urgency and necessity of his teaching; anyone who rejects this instruction is not rejecting him or his fellow missionaries, but God Himself. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, who are the means of God’s communication to his people (cf. Exod 16:8; 1 Sam 8:7; Isa 7:13), Paul and his companions have the mission of proclaiming to the Thessalonians “not the word of man, but the word of God” (1 Thess 2:13). Furthermore, this also reflects the common spirit of the Christian mission that has its origin in Jesus’ sending off of his disciples (cf. 10:16; Mt 10:40)³³.

“God, who indeed gives the Holy Spirit to you”, closes the inclusio begun in v. 3 where God’s will is said to be †“your sanctification”. On one hand, the intensive “τὸν και/who indeed” stresses the fact that the giver of the Holy Spirit is God, and on the other hand, the final bracket of the inclusio completes the idea that the process of sanctification is done by the Holy Spirit (cf. Ezek 36:27; 37:14). The participle *διδόντα* in the present tense, in the context of this parenetic section, shows God’s continuous action of giving the Spirit for their sanctification. This can be strengthened by the present tense of the participle used in 1 Thess 5:24: “πιστὸς ὁ καλῶν ὑμᾶς/Faithful is the one who calls you” (also in 1 Thess 2:12), and He is calling them “not to impurity but to holiness” as stated in the previous verse.

2. A Semiotic Analysis

2.1. Introduction

The precedent analysis is mainly diachronic. At this point, we move into a synchronic semiotic study of the pericope. The first approach to the text serves as a

³³ Cf. Müller, *Der erste und zweite Brief an die Thessalonicher*, 175-176. This author correctly notices: “This is not yet about an apology for Paul’s apostolate, but rather generally about the authority held by mediators of salvation and prophets according to the Old Testament understanding. In the background is the Old Testament Jewish understanding of revelation in its communication through people for people (cf. 2:13)”. Müller, 176.

preparation for the present one and gives it consistency. It also gives a framework and clarification of terms and values to be considered in this semiotic study. The two approaches complement each other to render a comprehensive understanding of the text.

Semiotics is the study of the meaning that results from the analysis of signs as integral parts of a system. The term semiotics originates from the Greek word *σημα, σημεῖον*, which refers to everything that constitutes a sign, a signal or mark. From this word derives the nominal form *σημειωτικός* (observer of signs) as well as *σημαντικός* (the significant)³⁴, from which semantics, an auxiliary science of semiotics that studies the constitution of the meaning of words and phrases, takes its name³⁵.

The logical principle that is at the base of this science is that of differences: “There is no meaning except through and in difference³⁶.” From this principle, semiotic or structural analysis seeks to discover the effects of meaning in texts, conceived as a fabric whose elements constitute a structured system of relationships: “The content of a text is articulated on the basis of differences between various elements.” of significance (big/small; high/low; sick/cured...) and it is these differences that draw the relative value of the elements³⁷.”

Another key postulate of this methodology is the principle of immanence, which assumes that the elements of a text acquire their meaning and are significant only in the interrelationships of the same in that text. Therefore, semiotics pays special attention to the synchronic aspect of the text, that is, to the relationships, oppositions and differences of linguistic signs within the same text.

It is therefore about discovering a metalanguage that is present in the structures that make up the so-called generative path of meaning in a given text.

³⁴ P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la Langue Grecque*, Vol. III (Paris, Éditions Klincksieck, 1968), 998.

³⁵ Cf. W. Egger, *Lecturas del Nuevo Testamento. Metodología Lingüística Histórico-Crítica*, (Verbo Divino, 1990), 114–117.

³⁶ “Il n’y a de sens que par et dans la différence”. Grupe D’Entervernes, *Analyse Sémiotique des Textes. Introduction. Théorie-Pratique*, Lyon, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1977, 8.

³⁷ J.-C. Giroud and L. Panier, “Semiótica Una práctica de lectura y de análisis de los textos bíblicos,” (Verbo Divino, 1991), 47.

2.2 The Manifest Structure

As stated above, semiotics is particularly interested in the immanent structure, which is not obvious and can only be revealed through a systematic process of structural analysis. This process must start with the analysis of the manifest structures, which are the literary units that organize the plot of the story and that can be visualized with simpler criteria by identifying markers and keywords or phrases. Therefore, to perceive the manifest structure of this passage we begin by recalling the inclusio mentioned above. In the middle of this concentric or chiasmic structure, Paul describes the “how” or the way this sanctification is to take place. And this way, points out a necessity expressed both positively and negatively:

| | |
|--|----|
| God’s will → Your Sanctification (4:3a) | A |
| No-fornication/πορνείας (4:3b) | B |
| a) Affirmative: “Control your own body/vessel in holiness and honor” σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι ἐν ἁγιασμῷ καὶ τιμῇ (4:4) | C |
| b) Negative: “Not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles” μὴ ἐν πάθει ἐπιθυμίας καθάπερ καὶ τὰ ἔθνη (4:5) (Not to trespass or wrong one’s brother) (God as avenger) (4:6) | |
| No-impurity/ἁκαθαρσία (4:7a) | B’ |
| God’s call to holiness (4:7b) (Rejection of God’s will) (4:8a) God’s gift (to us) → Holy Spirit (4:8b) | A’ |

At the base of semiotics is the affirmation that regardless of their language or culture, human beings grasp the meaning according to a binary logic of opposition: When we grasp the relationship between these two terms, we build from them the meaning of our perception:

Following this principle, we notice that the words “in holiness and honor/ ἐν ἁγιασμῷ καὶ τιμῇ” (4:4) of section C-a), are opposed to “lustful passion/πάθει ἐπιθυμίας” (4:5) of C-b).

B and B' are similar but not the same. There is a difference in the terms that is significant to the construction of the text: from the particular "fornication", there is an opening to the broader concept of "impurity". God's will in "A" pairs with "God's call to holiness" in "A" and "sanctification" with "Holy Spirit".

There are two parentheses inside the pericope which might reflect the particular matters concerning the Thessalonian Christian community, reported by Timothy that Paul wants to address: some cases (or maybe just a single case) of adultery within the community and some resistance, at least of some members, to accepting the missionaries' teachings as a whole.

The structure of the pericope tells us that its main aspect is that of sanctification, understood as the work of God through His Holy Spirit so that persons please God by doing His will. The religious and theological language used to comment on marriage dismiss any claim to see it as a mere antidote to fornication.

2.3 Surface Level Analysis

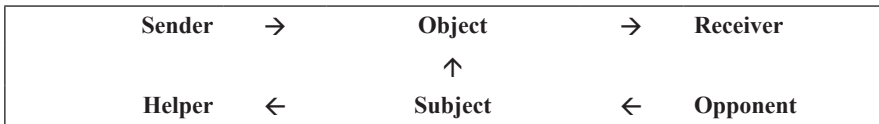
2.3.1 The Narrative Component

Considering the manifestation (manifest structures), we can glimpse the opposition between "holiness/sanctification" and "impurity/sexual immorality".

Starting from the basic principle of semiotics according to which meaning arises from difference, the narrative component seeks to describe the differences found in the succession of the text. In every text, there is a succession of states, which are statements of the type "to be" or "to have" and of transformations or statements of the type "to do" that suppose a passage from an initial state of a subject to a final state. The narrative analysis then seeks to discover the states and transformations of a text and rigorously present the differences that arise in their succession.

In the dynamics of the *actantial model*, subjects can be in a state of union (\cap) or disunion (\cup) with certain objects. In a given text, the behavior of the actants changes, causing the aforementioned transformations: a subject can give, lose, acquire, take away, obtain, yield, etc. a certain object thus changing to a state of union or disunion concerning such object. It is the sender that determines which

receiver receives which object; This initiates a program of action, developed by the subject. This action can achieve its goal, sometimes with the aid of the helper; but it can also be impeded or frustrated if the opponent prevails. The *actantial model*, designed by A. J. Greimas can be represented as follows³⁸:



The basic narrative statement in this description is the one that corresponds to the transformation of an initial state into a final state. This transformation is indicated by abstract formulas like the following:

$$\text{Sender (A) } \mathbf{P} \text{ (Subject } \cup \text{ Object) } \rightarrow \text{ (Subject } \cap \text{ Object)}$$

Here “A” represents the action; the double arrow, the statement of action. The different actantial roles are located in this dynamics according to their behavior in the text. A key concept in the analysis of the narrative component is that of the narrative program (NP). An NP is an abstract formula to represent an action, that is, “the succession of states and changes that are chained from a Subject-Object relationship and its transformation.”³⁹

NP “Sanctification”

For this is the will of God, **your sanctification**: that you abstain from fornication. (4:3).

Whoever rejects this, rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his **Holy Spirit** to you. (4:8)

God → The Thessalonians \cup Holy Spirit → The Thessalonians \cap Holy Spirit

³⁸ Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Sémantique structurale. Recherche de méthode*, vol. 2, Langue et Langage (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1966), 180.

³⁹ Groupe d’Entrevernes and Juan Mateos, *Análisis Semiótico de Los Textos: Introducción, Teoría, Práctica* (Cristiandad, 1982), 27.

Sender: God

Subject: The Thessalonians

Object: Holy Spirit

Helpers: the proclamation of the Gospel (cf. 2:13; 3:2); the missionaries' example (cf. 2:9-12) and prayer (1:2).

Opponents: the fellow Greeks' environment; their instinctual drives; the tempter (3:5) or Satan (2:18); the Thessalonians' need to grow in faith (cf. 3:10).

All the elements or “actants” in this scheme are present in the letter.⁴⁰ The subject is the Thessalonians, both as a community and as individuals.

The “sanctifying” Object here is the Holy Spirit, whom the Father gives to the Thessalonians. They count on the Gospel or the Word of which the missionaries had the authority to preach and their example and love.

The sender of the Holy Spirit is God, who calls the Thessalonians (the receivers) “into his own kingdom and glory” (2:12). All the positive and negative influences of these actants were discussed in the previous section and makes sense in this *actantial* scheme. On the opponents' side, Paul's desire to personally strengthen the Thessalonians' faith is evident in the letter, due to the short time he was able to spend with them. His concern is shown by sending Timothy to them.

One of these actants, *the tempter* is the *sender* of the anti-sanctification NP that can also be inferred in Paul's letter⁴¹:

For this reason, when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor should be in vain. (1 Thess 3:5)

⁴⁰ Another key postulate of this methodology is the principle of immanence, which supposes that the elements of a text acquire their meaning and are significant only in the game of interrelationships of the same in that text. Semiotics focuses on the synchronic aspect of the text, in contrast to other disciplines that consider the diachronic aspect, that is, the transformations of the language throughout its evolution, as is the case of philology, etymology, and the history of language.

⁴¹ This follows the principle of paradigmatic organization or principle of opposition, according to which every element in NP projects an opposite symmetrical element. Due to the controversial character of each narrative transformation, each NP explicitly or implicitly raises an anti-NP: what in an NP is a loss, in its anti-NP constitutes an acquisition, and vice versa, each union, on the one hand, constitutes disunity for the other. Each agent subject (AS) supposes an anti-subject or opponent that becomes the AS of the anti-NP.

Here we can enunciate a conditional transformation where, according to Paul, *the tempter* has the capacity of inducing the new believers to abandon their faith and the Christian community. It can be expressed as follows:

NP “Apostasy”⁴²

I was afraid that somehow **the tempter** had **tempted** you and that our labor had been in vain. (3:5)

“Whoever **rejects** this, **rejects** not human authority but God, who also gives his **Holy Spirit** to you” (4:8).

The tempter (Satan) → Thessalonians \cap Holy Spirit → Thessalonians \cup Holy Spirit

Sender: Satan

Subject: the Thessalonians

Object: the Holy Spirit

Helpers: the fellow Greeks’ environment; their instinctual drives; the tempter or Satan; the Thessalonians’ need to grow in faith.

Opponents: the proclamation of the Gospel; the missionaries’ example and prayer.

This NP appears before the paraenetic section that is addressed to the community as a whole. Sometimes in the exhortation part, Paul changes the subject to address each individual of the community (cf. 4:4, 6, 8).

The dynamics of God’s action who sanctifies by giving his Holy Spirit is the opposite of the satanic action that tends to spoil the work of the missionaries. The helpers of the previous NP become the opponents in this anti-sanctification NP, and the same switch happens with the opponents that here become helpers.

The coldness of the *actantial* formula requires mentioning the factor of human freedom that can welcome or reject God’s gift of the Spirit. Upon this factor hinges all the pericope that is logically constructed, as it can be visualized in the manifest structure (see section 4.1), to culminate in that exhortation: God’s call to holiness (4:7), for which He gives his Holy Spirit. Each one must freely accept God’s gratuitous gift: his sanctifying Spirit (4:8). Once the persons freely “welcome” the Spirit, God guides, increases their love, purifies, and strengthens them (cf. 3:11–13)⁴³.

⁴² This term does not exist in the text but expresses Paul’s fear of having labored in vain (2:1; 3:5).

⁴³ Satan can only tempt but doesn’t have the power to counteract God’s work in persons.

The *inclusio* not only separates the first part of the paraenetic section (vv. 3–8) from the second (vv. 9–12) but, most importantly, indicates the prevailing aspect of this pericope, namely: “*sanctification*”.

NP “Self-Possession”

That each one of you knows how to control your own body in holiness and honor. (4:4).

Each of you → Vessel \cup Holiness/Honor → Vessel \cap Holiness/Honor

Sender: Each of the members of the Thessalonian community
Subject: Each person’s body and, by extension, each person’s self
Object: The state of Holiness and Honor
Helpers: The missionaries’ example; the authority of Jesus Christ; The work of the Holy Spirit.
Opponents: The Thessalonians former style of life; The environment; The fellow Greeks; The tempter.

The urge of Paul lies in the fact that the Thessalonians are no longer Gentiles and therefore they must conform their moral life as members of God’s People. Paul’s call is now addressed to every individual, whose body –which here means the whole person, or the self, is called to have these qualities of holiness and honor, which were not theirs when they were pagans and didn’t know God.

The apostle urges them to make a firm decision to control or to own (possess) their bodies. This decision pertains to each individual and supposes a process that goes along with God’s work of sanctification. The free will and the effort of each individual come to the fore here: Christians must exercise responsibility in the process of Sanctification initiated and operated by God.

NP “Impurity”

...not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God. For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. (4:5,7)

Each of you → Vessel \cup Lustful passion → Vessel \cap Lustful passion

Sender: Each of the members of the Thessalonian community
Subject: Each person’s body and, by extension, each person’s self
Object: The state of Lustful passion
Helpers: The Thessalonians former style of life; The environment; The fellow Greeks; The tempter.
Opponents: The missionaries’ example; the authority of Jesus Christ; The work of the Holy Spirit.

This NP is the anti-NP of the previous one and shows the conditional outcome for people who reject God by rejecting Paul’s teaching on sexual morality and do not control their selfish desires.

After Timothy’s report Paul notices a change at least in some of his addressees. After having initially received the Gospel “not only in word but also in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction” (1:5), they became imitators (μιμηταί) of the missionaries and Christ Himself (1:6). Paul’s exhortation shows that this was not the general impression by the time Timothy visited them because they had taken Paul’s word as a mere human authority, and not God’s (4:8).

The Syntagmatic Organization of the Pericope⁴⁴

The flow of meaning is organized as follows in the text. Other narrative programs are secondary and are not indicated here:



There is a succession of actions. God takes the initiative by giving the Holy Spirit, and then the persons either welcome or reject the Holy Spirit. If the person

⁴⁴ A *syntagma* is an orderly combination of interacting signifiers which forms a meaningful whole in a text. According to the semiotic principle of syntagmatic organization, the text is composed as a chain of narrative programs or action statements that follow each other in a logical order until the conclusion is reached.

accepts God and God’s gift, the process of sanctification continues to unfold. This NP unfolds at the beginning of the letter. With the conversion of the Thessalonians, and the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1:5), this sanctification process began in their new community (cf. 1:9). The pericope studied here begins with Paul’s exhortation to control or own their selves so that God’s work in them could be fulfilled, that is their sanctification. He urges them not to give way to lustful passion and to take his teaching in this regard as coming from God. The outcome of impurity as a state of life is the loss of their faith or apostasy (cf. 3:5)⁴⁵.

The narrative component could be summarized as follows:

| | | |
|---------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| Sender | God (Thru. The Holy Spirit) | The Tempter (Satan) |
| Subject | ↓ The Thessalonians <i>Welcome (of the Spirit) ←→ Rejection (of the Spirit)</i> | ↓ The Thessalonians |
| Narrative Programs | Sanctification Self-Possession | Apostasy Impurity |

From this narrative component analysis, we can infer the following oppositions:

- Work of the Holy Spirit vs. Influence of the tempter
- Sanctification vs. Fornication
- Welcome vs. rejection (of God and His gift: the Holy Spirit)
- Holiness and Honor vs. Lustful passion

2.3.2 The Descriptive component

The descriptive analysis seeks to study the content units called figures that are organized and interrelated in the text. The narrative component constitutes the flow of the action in the text while the descriptive component is what gives color to the action through the recognition of these elements of meaning, the figures, that embody the *actantial roles* and their functions, and it does so by considering three axes: the actors (actorization), the times (temporization) and the spaces (spatialization).

⁴⁵ In eschatological terms it is called “a state of destruction/ ὄλεθρος” (1 Thess 5:3).

2.3.2.1 The Actors

The two senders of emitters of the presented Narrative Programs enact their influence on the subjects in different ways: God acts through love and by the gift of his Spirit to sanctify the Thessalonians. Satan tempts them to drive them away from God by transgressing God's established order and measure, particularly in the area of sexual mores and brotherly love.

The main character present in the pericope is "God" (4 times: vv. 3, 5, 7 and 8); Once He is called "the Lord" (v. 6). Jesus Christ appears in the introduction (v. 1) and the Holy Spirit at the very end in v. 8. Other characters are the Thessalonians both as a community ("your" and "you") and as individuals ("each of you" in v. 4, "no one" in v. 6, and "whoever" in v. 8); the gentiles (v. 5); Paul together with the missionaries ("we" in v. 1), who are the ones conveying to them what God's will is; and finally, there is an "us" that includes Paul, the missionaries and also the Thessalonians in v. 7: "For God did not call us to impurity but to holiness."

Going a step further in the analysis, we note that certain figurative sets can be grouped according to certain resemblances in what is called a descriptive theme. The descriptive theme constitutes the virtual aspect, while the figurative set is the realized aspect, that is, the meaning of the figures in the context of a given discourse.

| Descriptive themes (Virtual aspect) | Figurative sets (Realized aspect) | Figures |
|---|---|--|
| Welcoming God (Sanctification) | Holiness and Honor | The missionaries' example People of God Brotherhood God as creator Holy Spirit God's authority Pleasing God |
| | Purity | Control/possess one's "vessel" Respect Knowledge of God |
| Rejecting God (Temptation) | Lustful passion | Fornication Transgression/ ὑπερβαίνω Men's authority God as avenger |
| | Impurity | To exploit, to defraud/πλεονεκτέω The gentiles Ignorance of God |

This picture shows that the work of the Spirit is realized or carried out in the two figurative sets of *holiness* and *purity*. *The tempter's* work is opposed to that of the Spirit, and is actualized in the figurative sets of *transgression* and *impurity*. The figurative sets show how the realization of the descriptive themes would eventually end up. At the same time, we can see the opposition of the respective descriptive themes and figurative sets:

- Welcoming vs Rejecting (God)
- Holiness and Honor vs. Lustful Passion
- Purity vs. Impurity
- God's authority vs. Men's authority
- Pleasing God vs. God as an avenger
- Respecting vs. Defrauding (brothers)
- Knowledge of God vs. Ignorance of God

Transgression in the context of the letter points to an act of trespassing God's

moral order and limits by *defrauding* or *exploiting* one's brother. It has a vertical creator-creature dimension as well as a concomitant horizontal brother-brother dimension.

2.3.2.2 Spatialization⁴⁶

As it was already mentioned, in a figurative way, the Holy Spirit is given by God to persons as a precious liquid is poured into a *vessel* (a container, a carrier, or bearer) that symbolizes a person's body and, by extension, the person herself. The sanctifying work of the Spirit who enters into the welcoming person is the actualization of God's will. The vessel's function is to contain the liquid and if needed to pour it out in an appropriate manner so that it doesn't get spilled and wasted. The container limits the permanence of the liquid in the space designed by the potter for it to be contained.

God is the giver of a gift (the Holy Spirit), which the person can welcome or reject. If the person receives it, it comes inside him, and works inside him, making him holy. This gift is "*God's love*" that from His transcendence, from outside of us, "has been poured into our hearts" (Rom 5:5). It is a transcendent God that communicates with His creature and empowers him/her from within.

Another special note is Paul's distance from the community. Paul probably wrote this letter when he was in Corinth.

The binaries that can be found in this analysis are the following:

- Creator vs. creature
- Creatureliness vs. Self-sufficiency
- Self-control vs. Transgression

2.2.2.3 Temporalization⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Spatialization is easy to detect when we deal with a narrative text where the characters move from one place to another, go up or down, or adopt different postures. On the other hand, in a parenetic text, it is necessary to resort to figurative movements, inferred from abstract messages.

⁴⁷ In the axis of temporalization we find figures that manifest progress or changes over time. The chronology of events is used to discover and analyze the different factors that influence the development of the scene or "paint" or qualify Paul's exhortation.

There is a work begun by the missionaries who preach the Gospel, and then a direct action of God, who gives the Holy Spirit, which is a continuous action: a progressive and gradual work of sanctification. The Spirit is constantly available and being given to the believers and as the Word of God preached to them is “*at work*” in the believers (2:13).

There is a missionary work that took place for about two months. There is a point in time when the persons were converted to the Gospel and incorporated into a new community. For Paul, Christians are chosen by God and sanctified at the precise time of their conversion (1 Thess 1:4–5; 2 Thess 2:13–14). From then on, the Thessalonians who made up that community came to form part of the “People of God.” Then Paul was forced to leave. After a short time, he sends Timothy to Thessalonica, and soon after he returns to him with a report about the community situation. The opposition that is evident here is the following:

- People of God vs. Pagans

The following table integrates the figurative sets with the narrative programs synthesized in the two descriptive themes:

| | | | | |
|---------------------------|---|-----------------|---|----------|
| Descriptive themes | Welcoming the Holy Spirit (Sanctification) | | Rejecting the Holy Spirit (Temptation) | |
| Narrative Programs | Sanctification | Self-possession | Impurity | Apostasy |
| Figurative Sets | Holiness and Honor Purity | | Lustful passion Impurity ⁴⁸ | |

The processes of Sanctification and Self-possession or control grow hand in hand. When God’s sanctifying gift is welcomed, the process of sanctification develops together with the person’s commitment and effort to possess or control his own “vessel”, albeit amid struggle and difficulties. The opposite descriptive theme supposes an overt rejection of God by not accepting the totality of the apostle’s instructions, which come from God Himself. The result of welcoming the Spirit is

⁴⁸ A narrative program and a figurative set have the same name (“Impurity”) [what is the “same name”?]. However, the latter is broader in meaning than the first, which is more specific as it is connected directly with sexual immorality.

the growth in holiness, honor, and purity.

In this parenthesis, the negative part is meant to draw attention to the positive one that is required and urged upon. The Holy Spirit is the agent of sanctification given by God to each Christian. Rejection of that gift makes the person more vulnerable to being led astray under the influence of “the tempter”.

2.4 Deep Level Analysis

2.4.1 Logical-Semantic Organization

The integration of the narrative and descriptive components shows the interrelation between actants, figures, figurative sets, themes, and descriptive roles. This analysis makes it possible to identify isotopies or lines of meaning that cross the text⁴⁹.

The narrative and descriptive elements are articulated according to the semiological isotopies on a fundamental and final opposition that constitutes the basis on which the entire discourse is structured⁵⁰. This fundamental opposition,

Does not belong to the geometry of the discourse, that is, to its plot, but constitutes its operational and relational ‘mentality’. The binomial must synthesize all the relationships and oppositions found in the analysis.⁵¹

The following table combines the surface level with the deep level of our study:

⁴⁹ The term isotopy comes from physics (ισο equal; τόπος place). The uniformity of the text is given by the repetition or redundancy of the semes that connect the sememes in a story. The semes are basic units of meaning analogously to what atoms represent in the field of physics.

⁵⁰ The semiological isotopies, which summarize the redundancy of nuclear semes in the figures, reveal the internal structure of the text. Figurative sets are formed according to this type of isotopy.

⁵¹ René Krüger, *Dios o El Mamón: Análisis Semiótico Del Proyecto Económico y Relacional Del Evangelio de Lucas* (Lumen, 2009), 47.


| Surface Level Analysis Components | | Binomials | Fundamental opposition |
|--|--|---|------------------------------------|
| The Narrative Component | | Work of the Holy Spirit vs. Influence of the tempter Sanctification vs. Fornication Welcome vs. Rejection (of God) | Sanctification vs. Impurity |
| The Descriptive Component | <i>Actantial Roles</i> Holiness and Honor vs. Lustful Passion Purity vs. Impurity God's authority vs. Men's authority Pleasing God vs. God as an avenger Respecting vs. Defrauding (brothers) Knowledge vs. Ignorance (of God) | | |
| | Spatialization | Creator vs. creature Creatureliness vs. Self-sufficiency Self-control vs. Transgression | |
| | Temporalization | People of God vs. Pagans | |

We consider that the fundamental binomial on which the dynamism and all the tension of the pericope are articulated is constituted by two factors: Sanctification vs. Impurity. It is in the mechanism of the opposition of these two elements whence the profound meaning of the pericope arises. This can be proven by comparing this

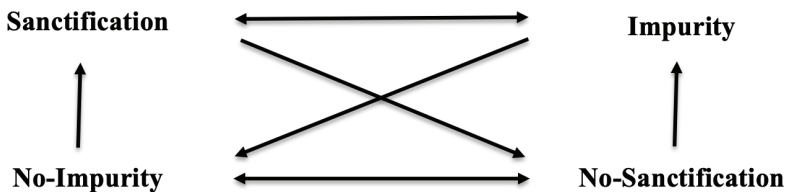
fundamental opposition, also called *semantic isotopy*⁵², to each of the binomials and noticing that it functions as a sort of common denominator.

2.4.2 The Semiotic Square

The text that we analyze constitutes a micro-universe of meaning. The logical-semantic organization tries to be a representation of that universe. The mechanism that articulates and organizes the logical relationships of the meaning of the text is shown graphically in the semiotic square based on the *semantic isotopy* that shows the opposition of two basic values. Three types of relationships are combined in this square, represented by the corresponding arrows and their directions:

- Opposition relationships: \leftrightarrow
- Contradiction relationships: 
- Presupposition relationships: \uparrow

The fundamental binomial is then articulated in the semiotic square as follows:



The interweaving of the text in its lines of meaning is reflected in this logical scheme. The main value “*Sanctification*” represents God’s work through the Holy Spirit. The opposite of “*Sanctification*” is “*Impurity*”, which in the text shows the state of the soul of a person. Paul warns the Thessalonians that “*Impurity*” can lead them to be gradually estranged from God to the point of becoming “like the pagans who know no God” (v. 7); This would be a turning back to their previous

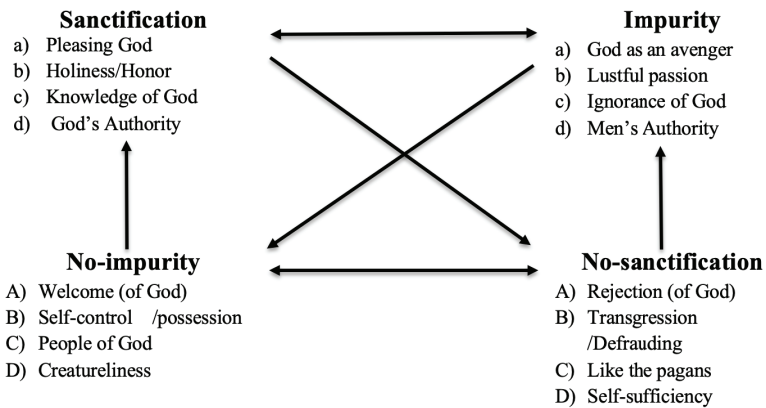
⁵² A *semantic isotopy*, is the narrower and most common type of isotopy and supposes the recurrence of semes. A *seme* is a unit of meaning; it is like an atom of meaning (indivisible).

state before their conversion: “you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God” (1 Thess 1:9).

God offers His sanctifying Spirit to persons through the mediation of the Church (missionaries). The progressive work of God in persons is opposed to persons in a deteriorating state of impurity. The second movement hinges on the free choice of persons who don’t allow God to act in them –in the text appears as “re-jecting God”.

“*Sanctification*” presupposes “*No-Impurity*”, that is, being in a state of openness to God’s work, that is, a welcome to God’s Holy Spirit.

The semiotic square allows us to classify the binomials found in the surface level analysis according to the fundamental binomial (*semantic isotopy*) as follows:



God’s work of sanctification presupposes each person’s welcome to His Holy Spirit:

There is a direct causal connection between the working of the Spirit of God in believers and their “sanctification”. God, through his Spirit, transforms the believer into a witness of the Word of God and of living according to God’s will (cf. 1:5: “in power and in the Holy Spirit”).⁵³

“*No-Impurity*” represents a personal attitude of availability towards God, which in turn allows God to make persons holy and pure. The gift of the Holy Spirit comprises two concomitant effects: it is an act of recreation and also a renewal

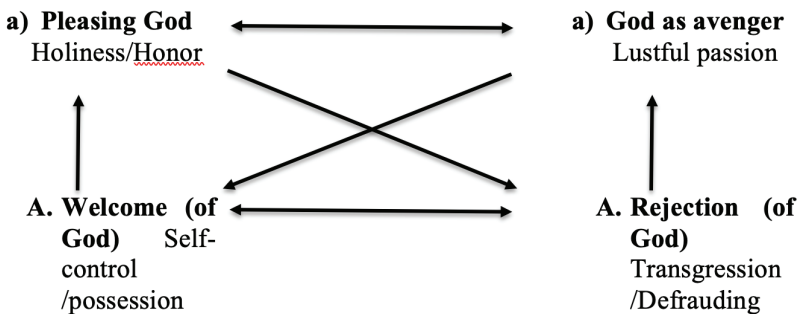
⁵³ Müller, *Der Erste Und Zweite Brief an Die Thessalonicher*, 176.

of the Covenant. This is indicated by the values of “Creatureliness” and “People of God”. God’s recreation and inclusion of persons into the People of God occur when persons freely and actively welcome His Holy Spirit. What is God’s action through the Holy Spirit, has to be actively welcomed by the Christian’s attitude of controlling and possessing his own self.

This state of No-Impurity leads to God’s work of sanctification, which in the text is what pleases God, that is, God’s will. In a state of holiness, the Christian lives under the authority of God in full trust and obedience. The corollary of being God’s people, who are gifted with God’s Holy Spirit, is entering into an intimate relationship with God: knowing God who reveals Himself. When a man responds to God’s call to holiness, God’s grace is superabundant (Rom 5:20).

The opposite dynamics flow on the other side of the semiotic square. The rejection of God, which manifests itself in the transgressions and abuses of one’s brothers, and in an attitude of self-sufficiency (like the pagans), results in a life of impurity, characterized by a severed relationship with God and a state of a total loss of control of one’s passions.

The different values are organized in the semiotic square in a way that can lead to concentric squares of meaning, for example:



Rejecting God as the One who calls us into His holiness, alienates Christians from their creator and redeemer. They close themselves to His Holy Spirit who sanctifies them and helps them in their conversion process and in their inner struggle to own govern their emotions, feelings, and impulses. Thus, persons choose to be self-sufficient and self-centered by not allowing God to interfere with their life affairs. Being estranged from God people don’t experience –don’t know– God in their lives and act according to their own will (impure intentions (2:3) – men’s

words (2:13) – men’s authority (4:2)). Paul talks about the people who are “not pleasing God” as those who “killed Jesus and the prophets”, drove Paul out of Thessalonica, “are hostile to all” (2:15), and hinder him “from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved” (2:16).

In the antipodes of “honor and holiness,” the text presents “lustful passion”, which in this semiotic square could be also projected and understood beyond sexual immorality with a broader sense as the expression “the spirit of fornication” had for the desert fathers to represent all the “appetites of the flesh”.⁵⁴ When these acts of hostility and abuse are carried out, particularly within the Christian community, God turns Himself into an avenger of the perpetrators’ victims.

Conclusion

The main points considered in the diachronic analysis are strengthened and deepened by the findings of the semiotic study. The following aspects were tackled by both approaches:

- a) (4:3) The consideration of the process of sanctification initiated by God on the believer through His gift of the Spirit. A process that requires the free assent and cooperation of each person.
- b) (4:4-5) Through this transformation the Thessalonians now belong to the People of Covenant, leaving behind their former lifestyle and sexual behavior. The opposite process is that in which “the tempter” instigates believers, leading them to impurity and to give in to their selfish and lustful desires.
- c) (4:6) This way they follow their own designs (man’s authority) and not that of God, transgressing against God’s created order, which includes exploiting or abusing their own bodies/persons and those of their brothers and sisters.
- d) (4:7-8) God calls them to holiness and not to impurity. This opposition is clearly expressed in the semiotic square and analyzed deeply throughout both in the narrative and descriptive analysis.

In the face of a state of impurity that threatens to gradually alienate persons from themselves, from others, and from God, the Lord gives his Holy Spirit to

⁵⁴ Cf. John Cassian, *The Conferences of John Cassian* (Aeterna Press, 1894), 33.

sanctify those who belong to Him and are part of his covenantal People. This process of sanctification is presented in four main areas of relationship:

1. God – Christian/Christian community: God takes the initiative to send the missionaries who preach the Gospel to the Pagans and invite them to “serve the living and true God” (1:9). God is the creator who, like a potter, lovingly shaped his creatures with a cavity to hold and bear the Holy Spirit, who is God’s precious gift. Thus, God turns them into a people of His Own and temples of his divine presence. Their Christian identity presupposes their determination to live in honor and holiness refraining from any impurity and idolatry.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is a continuous and progressive salvific and purifying action of God in persons and in Christian communities.

2. The Christian within oneself: This entails a personal struggle to overcome the concupiscence of the flesh. The rich metaphor of the “vessel” that needs to be controlled, possessed, or acquired, represents the inner process of self-possession each person has to face and carry out as a response to God’s gift of the Holy Spirit. God’s free act of love has to be met with a concomitant action of conversion and obedience to God’s will. Under the sanctifying motion of the Holy Spirit, the Christian should make himself available to God’s will continually and gradually in a deeper way to collaborate with that gift and so please God. Human responsibility and freedom are integral factors of human growth. The freer the person becomes; the more will he/she be able to respond to God’s call to holiness. Here we see the relevance of human maturity and growth as a foundation where God’s Spirit works.

The process of human healing-conversion is motivated and initiated by God’s gift of the Spirit and is supposed to go along with God’s work through the same Sanctifying Spirit. There is no place for schizophrenic Christians; Sanctification leads to wholeness and psycho-spiritual integration.

3. Christian/Christian community – World/Pagan society: To become imitators of Christ and of Paul, is a call to patience and fortitude in bearing with all difficulties, persecutions, and hostilities that Christians’ new iden-

tity and mission entail. They live in the world without compromising with social and political pressures and conveniences to water down the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In a society impregnated with relativism, the believer and the Church are called to remain faithful to the truth of the Gospel.

Another important element in this regard is the determination to work hard to nourish and build up Christian communities, especially amidst the pagan world.

4.Christian – Christian/Christian community: They are called to mutual respect and love. Trespassing God’s moral order by defrauding or abusing one’s brothers or sisters offends the creator who can turn into “an avenger” of the abused ones. This area is more developed in the following verses of this parenetic section (4:9–12).

This study allows us to have a deeper understanding of “*sanctification*” as a double process where God takes the initiative and sustains his work as the Christian and Christian communities freely respond by opening their whole being to God’s Spirit; This active “*welcome to the Spirit*” entails a commitment to personal and spiritual maturity in a Christian community and the total availability to carry on the Church’s mission even amidst difficulties, hostility, and persecution in imitation of Christ and of his missionaries.

Thy will be done! Thy kingdom come! (Mt 6:10)