

Hellenistic Formal Receptions and Paul's Use of ΑΠΑΝΤΗΣΙΣ in 1 Thessalonians 4:17

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In 1930 Peterson published "Die Einholung des Kyrios," an article providing quotations from ancient papyri, inscriptions and literature in order to demonstrate that behind Paul's words in 1 Thess 4:17 stands the custom of the Hellenistic formal reception of a dignitary. This viewpoint, widely held among biblical scholars, states that Paul presupposed that his readers in Thessalonica would understand his description of the Parousia in light of such receptions. Thus the formal elements of these welcoming celebrations are unstated parts of the text because of Paul's use of the technical term ΑΠΑΝΤΗΣΙΣ.

The present study, which ironically began as an attempt to strengthen Peterson's case, reveals that ΑΠΑΝΤΗΣΙΣ was not a technical term and that all of the main elements of Hellenistic receptions are missing from 1 Thess 4:15-17. An analysis of the ancient descriptions of these receptions shows that most of their usual elements are actually the opposite of what we find in Paul's description of the Parousia. Instead of being a cipher for understanding what Paul meant, they function more as a foil—a loose pattern to play against when describing the coming of the heavenly king.

Key Words: Apantesis, 1 Thess 4:17, Hellenistic Receptions, Parousia, Second Coming

For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a *cry of command*, with the *archangel's call*, and with the *sound of the trumpet of God*. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (εἰς ἀπάντησιν τοῦ κυρίου εἰς ἄερα); and so we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thess 4:15-17).

Paul's description of the Parousia reverberates with megadecibel blasts of sound. Although many scholars today readily acknowledge multiple readings of texts,¹ one can hardly imagine any envisioning Paul's words as describing a secret rapture of Christians into the sky. Yet "myriads and myriads" of Christians in fact read the text in precisely this manner, as a casual reading of the multitude of works produced by prophecy enthusiasts so readily reveals.²

Over against this naive approach stands the widely held scholarly view that Paul had in mind the Hellenistic formal reception when he dictated 1 Thess 4:15-17. Nevertheless, it would be overly simplistic to assert that on the one side we have the passionately held, anachronistic nonsense of the uninformed and on the other side the assured facts of historical criticism. Increasingly, biblical scholars are articulating the decisive role played by their own presuppositions in exegesis. Instead of appealing to the long discredited myth of objectivity still prevalent in some circles,³ scholars are expressing their personal agendas that lead to particular understandings. Such honesty need not imply a sort of sociological determinism in which all readings are relativized and the biblical documents have no power to speak for themselves. It indicates a healthy avoidance of the hubris that the inscription over the entrance of the temple of Apollo at Delphi warned against: "Know Thyself" (know that you are but a mortal and not a deity).⁴

My own sociological setting, for example, included a Christian community that read 1 Thess 4:15-17 as describing the "Rapture of the Church" prior to the Great Tribulation. One of my fondest beliefs was that all *true* Christians would be spared the dreadful woes depicted in Revelation by being snatched up into heaven. Not until my

1. See, e.g., Jerome T. Walsh, "Methods and Meanings: Multiple Studies of 1 Kings 21," *JBL* 111 (1992) 193-211.

2. Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) was the best selling "nonfiction" book of the 1970s, selling 15 million copies that decade (Chapter 11 is entitled "The Ultimate Trip"). To date it has sold over 25 million copies (Ken Sidey, "For the Love of Zion," *Christianity Today* [March 9, 1992] 46). During the Persian Gulf Crisis, Zondervan's initial print order for John Walvoord's *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis: What the Bible Says about the Future of the Middle East and the End of Western Civilization* was one million copies (John Elson, "Apocalypse Now?" *Time* [Feb. 11, 1991] 88).

3. E.g., Jon D. Levenson explores historicism's fallacious claims to philosophical and theological neutrality that still infect historical-critical methodology (*The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993]). He argues against the historicist position which "requires that scholars' loyalties to particular religious communities remain privatized and not be brought out into the open where dialogue takes place" (p. 122).

4. Plato explores the meaning of the two delphic inscriptions, "Know thyself" and "Nothing in excess," in *Charm.* 164d-176d; see also *Phaedr.* 230a; *Phil.* 48c-49b.

undergraduate college experience did this whimsical notion collapse before me, a casualty of simple observation. A teacher at a summer camp I attended said with a wry smile that with the *blowing of trumpets and shouting of the archangel* in 1 Thess 4:16, there was enough noise to raise the dead. Stunned, I saw the passage as if for the first time, experiencing what Gadamer calls "being pulled up short by the text."⁵ So strongly did my beliefs dominate my perception that I was blind to obvious details.

Later, while doing my doctoral studies, the whole dispensational approach to such matters collapsed around me like the walls of Jericho when Joshua's men blew *their* trumpets and shouted. With the dust of its destruction settling on my head like some ancient Hebrew mourning ritual, I translated Erik Peterson's 1930 article "Die Einholung des Kyrios."⁶ His citations of material from ancient Greek papyri, inscriptions, and literature found fertile soil in my dusted condition. I was completely persuaded by his explanation that Paul's use of εἰς ἀπάντησιν in 1 Thess 4:17 presupposed a well known custom: the Hellenistic formal reception.

Recently, with the prophetic beliefs of my youth glimmering as fanciful dreams of a bygone era, a new threat to dogma raised its ten horns and seven heads out of the apocalyptic sea of chaos. While reviewing Peterson's assertions, I discovered to my horror that some of them are simply not persuasive. The potential demise of Peterson's widely accepted argument posed eschatological terror for me. For years I have taught students on the basis of his understanding. For years I have dispensed with the bothersome teaching about the Rapture of the Church by using his explanation. But what if Paul did not have in mind the formal reception of a king when he described the victorious return of Christ?

In retrospect I realize that my commitment to Peterson's view was based somewhat on my desire to distance myself from the childhood teachings that were now a source of embarrassment. My emotional commitment prevented me from even wanting to notice any problems with his reconstruction. What began as an effort to strengthen Peterson's argument became a disturbing exercise in scholarly honesty.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON ΑΠΑΝΤΗΣΙΣ IN 1 THESS. 4:17

A few scholars prior to Peterson understood the background for 1 Thess 4:17 to be the Hellenistic formal reception, but he provided

5. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2d ed.; New York: Crossroad, 1992) 268 (p. 237 in 1st ed.).

6. Erik Peterson, "Die Einholung des Kyrios," *ZST* 1 (1930) 682-702.

much more extensive justification for this view.⁷ He asserted that the meeting of the Lord in the air (εἰς ἀπάντησιν in 1 Thess 4:17) carried an obvious meaning to Paul's audience in Thessalonica that needed no explanation. Since for the modern reader this meaning is not apparent from the text, Paul must have presupposed a technical meaning for the word ἀπάντησις that was well known to his readers.⁸ Peterson then quotes a number of ancient Greek sources to demonstrate that the words συνατᾶν, ἀπαντᾶν, ὑπαντᾶν, ἀπάντησις, ὑπάντησις, and ὑπαπάντησις all were used to describe a formal meeting of an important individual who was coming to a city (e.g., an emperor or general, or in Christian times, a visiting bishop).

In anticipation of the coming, a formal resolution would be made to announce the event. On the day of the arrival, the city dignitaries would lead a large contingent of the local populace out of the city walls to conduct a formal reception and escort the esteemed individual back into the city. In this procession would be people representing various groups of citizens, such as priests dressed in their finest and carrying cult objects, soldiers in dress uniform, and teachers from the gymnasium with their students. The people typically wore garlands, and frequently the city was specially decorated and performed with burning incense. At the actual meeting the people shouted their welcome and praises to honor the arriving dignitary and often sang songs. Once inside the city, the arriving official would usually offer sacrifice on one or more altars and sometimes pronounce judgment on selected prisoners, liberating some and sentencing others to execution.⁹

According to Peterson, Paul's use of εἰς ἀπάντησιν in 1 Thess 4:17 presupposes this standard celebration. At the Parousia, Christians leave the gate of this world and rush to meet the Lord in the air, ceremoniously coming to meet their king. But in this case the city is enlarged to become the entire world, which is the same view as is presented in Phil 2:10-11, where everyone in heaven and on earth bows before Christ and confesses him as Lord. Angels, the resurrected dead, and transformed Christians all welcome the returning Lord with a shout of acclamation and escort him down to the earth. When he arrives on the earth, he will then pronounce judgment, rewarding the faithful believers and condemning those who have not believed.¹⁰ Thus, Peterson reads into Paul's words the entire

7. E.g., James E. Frame says that lying behind Paul's words is the "official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary" (*The Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* [ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912] 177).

8. "Die Einholung," 682-83.

9. *Ibid.*, 693-97.

10. *Ibid.*, 698-99.

conceptual framework of the Hellenistic reception as a way of understanding Paul's meaning.

A significant number of modern scholars adopt Peterson's view of 1 Thess 4:17.¹¹ W. Mundle states,

The ancient expression for the civic welcome of an important visitor or the triumphal entry of a new ruler into the capital city and thus to his reign is applied to Christ. . . . The same thoughts occur in the parable of the ten virgins. The virgins leave to meet the bridegroom (*eis apantesin tou nymphiou*), i.e., the Lord, to whom they wish to give a festive reception (Matt 25:1).¹²

I. H. Marshall also endorses this view, but with some hesitation:

. . . the Greek word used here probably carries an allusion to the way in which a visiting dignitary might be met on the way to a city by a representative group of citizens who would then escort him back to the city. We may compare how Paul was met by the Roman Christians some miles from the city (Ac. 28:15, where the same word is used). . . If this idea is the correct interpretation, then we may well take the further step of deducing that the Lord's people go to meet him in order to escort him back to the earth and that this is where they shall always be with the Lord. It is improbable that this permanent union takes place in the air or in heaven.¹³

F. F. Bruce provides further evidence from ancient sources:

When a dignitary paid an official visit (*παρουσία*) to a city in Hellenistic times, the action of the leading citizens in going out to meet him and escort him back on the final stage of his journey was called the *ἀπάντησις*. So Cicero, describing Julius Caesar's progress through Italy in 49 B.C., says, "Just imagine what *ἀπαντήσεις* he is receiving from the towns, what honors are paid to him!" (*Ad Att.* 8.16.2), and five years later he

11. Peterson wrote the article on *ἀπάντησις*, in *TDNT* 1.380-81: "According to 1 Th. 4:17, at the second coming of the Lord, there will be a rapture *εἰς ἀπάντησιν τοῦ κυρίου εἰς ἄερα*. The word *ἀπάντησις* (also *ὑπάντησις*, DG) is to be understood as a tech. term for a civic custom of antiquity whereby a public welcome was accorded by a city to important visitors. Similarly, when Christians leave the gates of the world, they will welcome Christ in the *ἀήρ*, acclaiming Him as *κύριος*."

12. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (ed. C. Brown; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 324-25. See also William Neil, *The Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians* (Moffatt Commentary; New York: Harper, 1950) 150; Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 146; Ernest Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Black's NT Commentaries; London: Adam & Charles Black, 1972) 199. Best argues against J. Dupont's thesis that OT passages like Exod 19:10-18, with their clouds, trumpets and descent of the Lord provide sufficient background for Paul's words (*ΣΥΝ ΧΡΙΣΤΩ*: *L' Union avec le Christ suivant Saint Paul* [Bruges, 1952] 64-73).

13. I. Howard Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 131.

says much the same about Caesar's adopted son Octavian: "The municipalities are showing the boy remarkable favor. . . . Wonderful ἀπαντήσεις and encouragement!" (*Ad Att.* 16.11.6).¹⁴

Yet Bruce cautions:

These analogies (especially in association with the term παρουσία suggest the possibility that the Lord is pictured here as escorted on the remainder of his journey to earth by his people—both those newly raised from the dead and those who have remained alive. But there is nothing in the word ἀπάντησις or in this context which demands this interpretation; it cannot be determined from what is said here whether the Lord (with his people) continues his journey to earth or returns to heaven.¹⁵

The caution by F. F. Bruce is well advised, even though a few passages at first appear to suggest that ἀπάντησις functioned as a technical term. In *Ad Att.* 8.16.2, quoted above by Bruce, Cicero inserts it into his Latin sentence: "Quas fieri censes ἀπαντήσεις ex oppidis, quos honores!" Yet Cicero has a habit of sprinkling Greek terms through his prose, and his insertion of ἀπάντησις here must be considered in light of this tendency, as well as the term's general use elsewhere.¹⁶

HELLENISTIC FORMAL RECEPTIONS AND ΑΠΑΝΤΗΣΙΣ

Ἀπάντησις finds widespread use in ancient texts, but the events described vary substantially author by author. One cannot responsibly claim that ἀπάντησις is a technical term on the basis of its percentage of use in passages describing formal receptions. Of its many occurrences in Diodorus Siculus' *Bibliotheca historica*, for example, most involve the meeting of soldiers in battle, and the same is true for the historical work of Polybius. Sometimes ἀπάντησις describes a formal greeting of a dignitary, but often it does not. And some descriptions of such receptions do not use ἀπάντησις or ὑπάντησις (or the verb forms of these words).

A computer search of the literature written during the several centuries surrounding Paul's era using the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (TLG) produced 91 pages of citations of passages that employ forms of ἀπάντησις, ἀπαντάω, ὑπάντησις, and ὑπαντάω.¹⁷ Yet only a minority of the uses of these terms describes formal receptions. For example, in the passages located, Philo Judaeus uses these words 27 times,

14. F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (WBC 45; Waco: Word, 1982) 102-3.

15. *Ibid.*, 103.

16. See, e.g., the list in H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (9th ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1940; suppl. added 1968) 178.

17. The forms απαντησ., απηνητησ., υπαντησ., and υπηνητησ. were used to generate the list. This left out some important descriptions like Josephus' (*J.W.* 7.68), but the search parameters were quite sufficient to locate a large number of texts.

but not once to describe the meeting of a dignitary. Similarly, Josephus employs them 92 times, but only ten times in descriptions of formal receptions. In the LXX the noun ὑπάντησις is used frequently in 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles and sporadically in other books, particularly 1-3 Maccabees. Often it designates the hostile meeting of armies, although it also describes virtually any kind of meeting.¹⁸

Word use alone, however, does not decide the issue of whether or not people of Paul's day considered ὑπάντησις to be a technical term for the Hellenistic formal reception. For example, Christians used παρουσία as a technical term for the second coming of Christ,¹⁹ although, as did others in their cultures, they also used it for lesser arrivals²⁰ or to mean "presence." Context obviously indicated the intended meaning, and Christians readily recognized when Parousia designated the second coming. But do we find similar recognition in early Christian explanations of 1 Thess 4:17 that ὑπάντησις was understood as a technical term for a formal reception?

Peterson finds such evidence in a late fourth century Easter sermon by John Chrysostom, which clearly connects Paul's description of the Parousia to formal receptions.

For as when a king ceremoniously entered a city, certain dignitaries and city rulers, and many others who were confident toward the sovereign, would go out of the city to meet him; but the guilty and the condemned criminals would be guarded within, awaiting the sentence which the king would deliver. In the same way, when the Lord comes, those who are confident toward him will meet him in the midst of the air, but the condemned, who are conscious of having committed many sins, will wait below for their judge.²¹

18. Examples include Abigail going to meet David to prevent the killing of Nabal and his family (1 Sam 25:32, 34), David's messengers going to meet the disgraced ambassadors who had half their beards and clothes cut off (2 Sam 10:5), Shimei coming to curse David as he left Jerusalem before Absalom (1 Kgs 2:8), the elderly David rising to meet his wife Bathsheba (1 Kgs 2:19), Elisha's servant Gehazi going to meet the Shunammite woman with the sick child (2 Kgs 4:26), Azariah the prophet going to meet king Asa with a word from the Lord (2 Chr 15:2), Tobit going out to meet his daughter-in-law (Tob 11:6), Jonathan going to battle against Antiochus (1 Macc 12:41), and disorderly women flocking into a city (3 Macc 1:19). For references see Edwin Hatch and Henry A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint and the Other Greek Versions of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; Austria: Akademische Druck—U. Verlagsanstalt, 1954) 1.117; 2.1406 for ὑπάντησις.

19. Matt 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Cor 15:23; 1 Thess 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess 2:1, 8; Jas 5:7, 8; 1 Pet 1:16; 3:4, 12; 1 John 2:28.

20. For the coming of a person: 1 Cor 16:16 (Stephen); 2 Cor 7:6, 7 (Titus); 10:10; Phil 1:26; 2:12 (Paul). For the coming of Satan: 2 Thess 2:9.

21. *On the Ascension, of Our Lord Jesus Christ*; my translation from the Greek text in *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae: Canon of Greek Authors and Works* (ed. L. Berkowitz and K. A. Squitieri; 3d ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) section 50.450.57.

In another sermon Chrysostom again describes 1 Thess 4:15-17 in light of the widespread custom of enthusiastic crowds greeting a king.

The Archangel therefore I think is he, who is set over those [angels] who are sent forth, and who shouts thus: "Make all men ready, for the judge is at hand." And what is "at the last trumpet"? Here he implies that there are many trumpets, and that at the last the Judge descends. . . . If He is about to descend, on what account shall we be caught up? For the sake of honor. For when a king drives into a city, those who are in honor go out to meet him; but the condemned await the judge within.²²

If such statements existed elsewhere in early Christian literature, Peterson's argument would be well established. But Chrysostom stands alone in giving this explanation. Other patristic authors use 1 Thess 4:13-18 to deal with such issues as the last judgment and the resurrection of the body, but not one interprets it in light of Hellenistic formal receptions.²³

True, exegesis by the Church Fathers is often rather fanciful, and caution is necessary when using their interpretations. But although Chrysostom's connection of 1 Thess 4:13-17 with a historical practice seems plausible, the fact that his late fourth-century exegesis is unique in making this connection is certainly reason for caution. Indeed, in all of the ancient texts located that overtly describe receptions of elites, only the passage from Chrysostom mentions trumpets, and Chrysostom is clearly relying on 1 Thess 4:14-17 for his description. Furthermore, only Chrysostom connects judgment of prisoners by the king with the Hellenistic formal reception. His focus on judgment is simply not reflected in other ancient descriptions of these meetings. His words depend not on customary reception agendas but on Paul's words. Apparently Chrysostom's exegesis reflects his own situation in Constantinople, not a tradition of interpreting ἀπάντησις in 1 Thess 4:17. To use his explanation of the Parousia in this passage as one's locus of interpretation is problematic at best.

Ironically, 1 Thess 4:14-17 does not specifically mention any of the elements normally associated with receiving dignitaries. It speaks of the archangel's call and the trumpet blast and the dead and living believers being caught up to meet the Lord in the air. These aspects do

22. *Homilies on Thessalonians*, Homily 8; trans. from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 13, Saint Chrysostom (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983 reprint).

23. A tedious search through the citations listed in the five volumes of *Biblia Patristica: Index des citations et allusions bibliques dans la littérature patristique* (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1975-1991) uncovered nothing that matched Chrysostom.

not correspond with descriptions of Hellenistic receptions, as the following examples demonstrate.

A papyrus fragment from a king's letter during the war of Ptolemaios Euergetes against Syria describes the main aspects of such meetings, although it does not employ a form of ἀπάντησις/ἀπαντάω or ὑπάντησις/ὑπαντάω.

. . . we reached Seleucia. The priests and the government officials and the other citizens and the leaders and the soldiers, wearing wreaths, came as a group to the harbor with very evident good will toward us, and we were escorted all the way into the city.²⁴

The wearing of wreaths and/or festive clothing was fairly common in these ceremonies, as an inscription for Attalos III of Pergamum also reveals.

And the publicly appointed priests, and the priestesses, and the chief magistrates, and the rulers, and the victorious athletes wearing wreaths won in the games, and the gymnasiarch with his young men (ἐφήβων) and youths (νέων), and the teacher (παιδονόμον) with his students (παίδων), and the citizens, and the [women, and all the virgins,] and the city dwellers [dressed in bright clothes and wearing festive wreaths] met (ἀπαντήσασιν) him (lines 33-39).²⁵

Herodian's description of Rome's celebration of the great victory of Maximus further illustrates the festive dress and also indicates that it was customary to bring cult objects and provide the dignitary with opportunities to sacrifice.

The Italian cities sent delegations of their prominent citizens dressed in white, wearing laurel wreaths and all bringing with them the statues of their local gods and any golden crowns that were among their dedications. They paid homage to Maximus and showered him with flowers. The army that had been besieging Aquileia came out, too, dressed for peace and carrying laurel branches. . . . For the first two days in Aquileia, Maximus did nothing except perform sacrifices.²⁶

24. *Papyrus Petrie* 2.45, col. 2, line 22—col. 3, line 2 (συναννησάντων is used, not a form of ἀπαντάω). My translation of text given by Peterson, "Die Einholung," 684.

25. My trans. of Peterson's quotation from Dittenberger, *Orientalis Graeci Inscr.* Nu. 332. There is a problem with the reconstruction of this inscription. All through the list of people attending the reception, the pattern is to give a definite article before the noun that designates the subgroup being listed. The problem arises at the end of the list: τὰς [γυναῖκας καὶ παρθένους πάν]τας καὶ. . . . The article τὰς indicates a missing feminine noun, but the masculine form πάντας does not match παρθένους, and the lack of an article prior to "virgins" represents a definite break in the pattern followed throughout. The original reading of the inscription is not apparent.

26. *Herodian*, vol. 2 (LCL; trans. C. R. Whittaker; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970) 8.7.2-3. Ἀπάντησις does not occur in this text. Peterson quotes a c. 225 C.E. papyrus fragment from *Papyrus Berol.* 2.362 (p. 7 B.G.U.) that mentions "workers

The offering of sacrifices by men such as Maximus was especially in response to some great triumph but not necessarily limited to such occasions.

Formal receptions were usually orchestrated by city officials and sometimes announced by decrees, as the following inscriptions indicate.

Res Gestae Divi Augusti.

By decree of council assembled: those holding the most important offices were sent as far as Campania to meet (ὑπαντήσοντες) me.

A decree from Cyzicus (c. 37 C.E.).

And all from Cyzicus, as an expression of their good will, meet (ὑπαντήσαντας) them with their rulers and garland bearers, and greet them . . . and that the overseer of youth (ἐφήβαρχον) bring his young men (ἐφήβους) and the teacher (παιδόνομον) his students (παῖδας) to the reception (ὑπάντησις).²⁷

A passage from Dio Cassius describing Nero's reception of Tiridates, whom he crowned king of Armenia, further illustrates official planning.

After this Nero took him up to Rome and set the diadem on his head. The entire city had been decorated with lights and garlands, and great crowds of people were to be seen everywhere, the Forum, however, being especially full. The centre was occupied by the civilians, arranged according to rank, clad in white and carrying laurel branches; everywhere else were the soldiers arrayed in shining armour.²⁸

Often a broad cross section of the populace participated in the greetings, and some descriptions, like the following papyrus, indicate that the receptions were loud and enthusiastic.

After this we proceeded to Antioch and found the preparation and the enthusiasm of the crowds to be so great that we were all amazed. For they met (ἀπήντησαν) us outside the city gate, chief officials and satraps, as well as the other civic leaders, and soldiers and priests and the various magistrates, together with all the youths from the gymnasium, and additionally a large crowd wearing garlands. They brought out all

taking in festal procession the statue of the god unto the meeting (ἀπάντησιν) of the ruler" (my trans.). When Christians conducted formal receptions for their leaders, they exchanged their symbols for cult objects. Marcus Diaconus, for example, says, "Those from the city . . . met (ὑπήντησαν) us, having the sign of the honorable cross and singing psalms" (*Vita Porphyrii* 58, p. 49, 8-9).

27. My translation of Peterson's citations from "Dittenberger, Sylloge, Nr. 798" ("Die Einholung," 685).

28. *Dio's Roman History*, vol. 8 (LCL; trans. E. Whittaker; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1925) 62.4.1-2. Ἀπάντησις is not used in this text.

the sacred artifacts for the procession to the meeting (ἀπάντησιν). Some extended the right hand in greeting, while others expressed their approval with applause and shouting.²⁹

Similarly, Eusebius' account of the triumphant return of Constantine to Rome after a great victory over Maxentius, in which he saved the city, gives a good indication of the potential volume of sound involved.

And here the whole body of the senate, and others of rank and distinction in the city . . . along with the whole Roman populace, . . . received him with acclamations and abounding joy; men, women, and children, with countless multitudes of servants, greeting him as a deliverer, preserver, and benefactor, with incessant shouts.³⁰

Cicero, speaking of Octavian, says that at Teanum "there was a marvelous crowd to meet him and cheers for him" (*Att.* 16.11.6).³¹ Ammianus Marcellinus, describing Julian's acclamation as he approached Antioch, explains that "as he neared the city, he was received with public prayers, as if he were some deity, and he wondered at the cries of the great throng, who shouted that a lucky star had risen over the east" (22.9.14).³²

29. *Papyrus Petrie* 3.44, Col. 3, lines 17-25. My translation of text from Peterson, p. 684.

30. *Life of Constantine* 1.39 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952). Dionysius of Halicarnassus reports that when Numa consented to become king and the Romans heard that he was approaching town, "They met (ὑπήντων) him upon the road with great applause, salutations and other honors conducted him into the city" (*Roman Antiquities* 2.60.2; trans. E. Cary, *The Roman Antiquities of Dionysius of Halicarnassus*, vol. 1 [LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937]). *Rom. Ant.* 9.58.8 tells of the Roman military leader Quintus being honored after defeating the Volscians and Aequians: "In consideration of his success the senate came out to meet him (ὑπάντησει), gave him a cordial welcome and honored him with a triumph" (trans. E. Cary, *The Roman Antiquities of Dionysius of Halicarnassus*, vol. 6 [LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1947]). Another passage says that after a military victory, "The senate went out to meet (ἀπήντησε) these consuls as they approached the city and decreed that they should both celebrate a triumph" (*Rom. Ant.* 10.21.8; see also 10.24.2).

31. *Cicero: Letters to Atticus*, vol. 2 (LCL; trans. E. O. Winstedt; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913).

32. *Ammianus Marcellinus*, vol. 2 (LCL; trans. J. C. Rolfe; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940). According to Livy, "[King] Attalus crossed to Piraeus to renew and confirm his alliance with the Athenians. The whole body of citizens, with their wives and children, poured out to meet him; the priests in their vestments and the very gods, so to speak, starting up from their thrones, welcomed him as he entered the city" (31.14.11-12; from *Livy*, vol. 9 [Books 31-34] [LCL; trans. E. T. Sage; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935]).

Josephus' description of the citizens of Rome receiving Vespasian as their new emperor also graphically recounts a wildly enthusiastic meeting. Amidst such feelings of universal goodwill, those of higher rank, impatient of awaiting him, hastened to a great distance from Rome to be the first to greet (ἀπάντων) him. Nor, indeed, could any of the rest endure the delay of meeting, but all poured forth in such crowds—for to all it seems simpler and easier to go than to remain—that the very city then for the first time experienced with satisfaction a paucity of inhabitants; for those who went outnumbered those who remained. But when he was reported to be approaching and those who had gone ahead were telling of the affability of his reception of each party, the whole remaining population, with wives and children, were by now waiting at the road-sides to receive him; and each group as he passed, in their delight at the spectacle and moved by the blandness of his appearance, gave vent to all manner of cries, hailing him as "benefactor," "savior," and "only worthy emperor of Rome." The whole city, moreover, was filled, like a temple, with garlands and incense. Having reached the palace, though with difficulty, owing to the multitude that thronged around him, he offered sacrifices of thanksgiving for his arrival to the household gods.³³

This text illustrates how people would sometimes go quite a distance out of town to meet the arriving dignitary and escort him back to their festively decorated city. Especially if the man had won some sort of great victory, he would offer sacrifices to deities, although such activities were not limited to triumphs.

Some passages indicate that people going out to meet a dignitary lined either side of the road. For example, in the following description of the celebration after a victory that Titus won over Jewish rebels, Josephus says,

The people of Antioch, on hearing that Titus was at hand, through joy could not bear to remain within their walls, but hastened to meet him (ἔσπευδον δ' ἐπὶ τὴν ὑπάντησιν) and advanced to a distance of over thirty furlongs, not only men, but a crowd of women and children also, streaming out from the city. And when they beheld him approaching, they lined the road on either side and greeted him with extended arms, and invoking all manner of blessings upon him returned in his train (*J.W.* 7.100-102).³⁴

Similarly Polybius, when describing the reception of King Attalus by the Athenians, says,

33. *The Jewish War, Books IV–VII*, vol. 3 (LCL; trans. H. St. J. Thackeray; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928) 7.68-72.

34. *Ibid.* *J.W.* 7.119 also contains a description of Romans coming out to meet Titus and welcome him back, which uses ὑπάντησεις.

As he entered the Dipylon, they drew up the priests and priestesses on either side of the road; after this they threw all the temples open and bringing victims up to all the altars begged him to perform sacrifice. Lastly they voted him such honours as they had never readily paid to any former benefactors.³⁵

Such offering of sacrifices was an important part of many receptions, even appearing somewhat surprisingly in Josephus' account of the arrival of Alexander the Great at Jerusalem. In *Ant.* 11.8.4 (§327) he explains that Jaddua the high priest had a dream in which he was instructed to "adorn the city, and open the gates; and that the rest appear in white garments, but that he and the priests should meet (ποιεῖσθαι τὴν ὑπάντησιν) the king in the habits proper to their order." In the following account, the Gentile monarch is actually asked to offer sacrifice on the altar of Yahweh.

And when he [Jaddua] understood that he [Alexander] was not far from the city, he went out in procession, with the priests and the multitude of the citizens. The procession (ὑπάντησιν) was venerable, and the manner of it different from that of other nations. . . . [and] Alexander, when he saw the multitude at a distance, in white garments, while the priests stood clothed with fine linen, and the high priest in purple and scarlet clothing, with his mitre on his head having the golden plate on which the name of God was engraved, he approached by himself, and adored that name, and first saluted the high priest. The Jews also did all together, with one voice, salute Alexander, and encompass him about . . . And he came into the city; and when he went up into the temple, he offered sacrifice to God, according to the high priest's direction.³⁶

As the examples listed reveal, most receptions were attended by a wide cross section of the local population. In some receptions, however, only certain segments of the populace attended. For example, Polybius recounts a meeting limited to soldiers.

[Apelles] hastened to the help of Leontius. On his arrival at Corinth Leontius, Ptolemaeus, and Megaleas, who were in command of the peltasts and the other crack corps, were at much pains to work up the soldiers to give him a fine reception. After entering the city in great

35. *Polybius: The Histories*, vol. 5 (LCL; trans. W. R. Paton; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926) 16.25.7-8. See also Plutarch, *Life of Pompey* 40.1-3 for a description of people lining both sides of a roadway (cf. 13.4 and 26.1).

36. *Ant.* 11.8.5 §§329, 331-332, 336; trans. W. Whiston, *The Works of Josephus* (reprinted; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987). Other formal meetings are recounted in *Ant.* 11.342; 12.138 (a meeting of Antiochus, as recounted by Polybius); 13.101 (the people of Askalon have a reception in an attempt to buy off Jonathan); 13.149 (Askalon gives a formal meeting to Demetrius, Antiochus' general); and 19.340 (Marcus, the ruler of Syria, is greeted by Herod Agrippa to show honor).

pomp owing to the number of officers and soldiers who had flocked to meet (τῶν ἀπαντησάντων) him, he proceeded without alighting to the royal quarters.³⁷

Basically, the nature of the Hellenistic reception dictated the way in which it was conducted. Some meetings were well planned and broadly attended. Others were spontaneous. All were enthusiastic (or at least reported to be).

A selection from Pliny vividly illustrates the diversity of ways in which kings entered cities during formal meetings, as well as the excitement such events could generate among the populace.

Now . . . think of the day when you entered your city, so long awaited and so much desired! The very method of your entry won delight and surprise, for your predecessors chose to be borne, or carried in, not satisfied even to be drawn by four white horses in a triumphal carriage, but lifted up on human shoulders in their overbearing pride. You towered above us only because of your splendid physique; your triumph did not rest on our humiliation, won as it was over imperial arrogance. Thus neither age, health nor sex held your subjects back from feasting their eyes on this unexpected sight: small children learned who you were, young people pointed you out, old men admired: even the sick disregarded their doctors' orders and dragged themselves out for a glimpse of you as if this could restore their health. . . . Roofs could be seen sagging under the crowds they bore, not a vacant inch of ground was visible except what gave a precarious and shaky foothold, streets were packed on both sides leaving only a narrow passage for you, on every side the excited populace, cheers and rejoicing everywhere. All felt the same joy at your coming.³⁸

One might well imagine that Paul anticipated similar enthusiasm at the Parousia, but did he envision the other dimensions illustrated in the above examples?

THE HELLENISTIC RECEPTION AND 1 THESS 4:15-17

The dominant scholarly understanding of the ἀπάντησις in 1 Thess 4:17, based on the work of Peterson, does not sufficiently account for

37. *Polybius: The Histories*, vol. 3 (LCL; trans. W. R. Paton; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923) *Histories* 5.26.8-9. Similarly, Diodorus 18.59.3 describes an enthusiastic military reception of a renegade who experienced a reversal of fortune. See *Diodorus of Sicily*, vol. 12 (LCL, trans. F. R. Walton; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947). Peterson gives an example from Book 33.28a that contains no formal meeting and no use of ἀπάντησις; according to the Loeb edition. The *TLG* search solved the problem: the passage is located in 33.28b.1. Altogether, the *TLG* search for ἀπάντησις/ὑπάντησις; words listed 74 uses in Diodorus Siculus.

38. *Pliny: Letters and Panegyricus*, vol. 2 (LCL; trans. B. Radice; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969) *Panegyricus* 22.1-5.

the differences between Paul's words and descriptions of receptions of dignitaries. All of the main elements of Hellenistic receptions found in ancient papyri, inscriptions and literature are missing from 1 Thess 4:15-17. Asserting that Paul assumed his readers would automatically fill in such details lacks cogency when we compare Paul's words with these accounts. If he truly assumed his audience would presuppose these details, then he deliberately reversed most of the usual elements. Claiming that ἀπάντησις was a technical term carrying with it a standard set of expectations is not convincing. Furthermore, even if one assumes that Paul understood ἀπάντησις in this way, the evidence demonstrates that he did not read such meaning wholesale into his description of the Parousia.

First, the coming is unexpected. Christians anticipate Christ's arrival but are unaware of when it will happen (1 Thess 5:1-4). Instead of the Christian leaders planning a great reception at a particular time when they will lead their citizens out to celebrate, they devote themselves to preparing people for an event whose time will take them by surprise. Participants in the ἀπάντησις do not prepare for the king's arrival by decorating the city, burning incense, and so forth. Their preparation is practicing good works to be worthy of inclusion in the event (5:5-11).

Second, participants do not put on special garments or wear laurel wreaths in preparation for the reception but are unexpectedly snatched out of earthly activities. Although Paul only implies it in 4:14-17, in the parallel passage in 1 Cor 15:51-54 he clearly states that Christians will be given resurrection bodies at that time.³⁹ This transformation greatly overshadows the wearing of festal clothing at normal receptions, although there are indications elsewhere that such festal garments were envisioned as part of heavenly dress. Revelation describes the saints as wearing white garments in the afterlife (Rev 3:4-5; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13; 19:14), and if Paul presupposes anything about white garments in 1 Thess 4:15-17, he presupposes that these are provided by God as a reward for faithfulness. Thus, the function of the clothing would differ from that of normal receptions.

Third, participants do not announce the coming king with their heralds. Instead of greetings and cheers from the crowd, Paul mentions a blast from a heavenly trumpet and the loud cry of the archangel, who summons believers to meet the Lord in the air (4:16). Trumpet blasts are not mentioned in the descriptions of receptions of dignitaries, with the exception of John Chrysostom's homily on Thessalonians; and this seems to be based on Paul's words, not knowledge

39. For a listing of the parallels with 1 Cor 15:51-52, see John Gillman, "Signals of Transformation in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18," *CBQ* 47 (1985) 275.

of first-century practice. In Jewish and Christian tradition, trumpet calls are said to announce divine judgment (Rev 8:2-9:21; 11:15-19; *Apoc. Mos.* 22; *Sib. Or.* 8.239), the resurrection of the dead (2 Esdr 6.23-24; *Sib. Or.* 4.173-74), and the gathering of the elect from the four corners of the earth (Matt 24:31; *Apoc. Abr.* 31:1-2).⁴⁰ So it is not unreasonable that Paul also would include a trumpet in his thinking about the Parousia, but this trumpet is blown by one of the heavenly entourage, not one of the welcoming crowd. Its function is to summon, not to greet, and the source of its inclusion here is that of Christian expectations of the Parousia, not Hellenistic receptions.

Fourth, no donations are encouraged nor taxes levied to purchase presents to honor the heavenly king.⁴¹ Instead, he brings rewards for his faithful servants. Paul says nothing of presenting Christ with a crown, but he does say earlier in 2:19 that the Thessalonian Christians will be his own crown (στέφανος) of boasting at the Lord's coming. Yet this is a symbol of accomplishment, like the reward received by an athlete, not a diadem presented to a king. Garlands are mentioned in some of the passages describing receptions, but these were part of the festal dress donned to greet the dignitary. Paul either does not make this association or modifies it to make another point.⁴²

Fifth, in 1 Thessalonians, wrathful judgment of the wicked is a major part of the Parousia (1:10; 5:3, 9; cf. 5:13, 23), and this dominant element is missing from the descriptions of Hellenistic receptions. Although many Patristic sources deal with judgment when commenting on 1 Thess 4:13-18, only Chrysostom connects this judgment with formal receptions. And, as discussed earlier, its presence in his commentary on 1 Thess 4:13-18 is not based on Greco-Roman convention but on Christian expectations of the Parousia. New Testament texts that speak of the Parousia often focus on divine judgment occurring as part of the event,⁴³ but that is far different

40. M. J. Harris, "σάλπιγξ" in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (3 vols.; ed. C. Brown; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 3.874.

41. Adolf Deismann, *Light from the Ancient East* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1908) 368-73, documents this custom, which sometimes burdened local citizens because of the considerable expense involved: "Cf. the complaint of the priests of Nis at Philae (Ptolemaic period) in Dittenberger, *Orientalis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae*, No. 139, ἀναγκάζουσι ἡμᾶς παρουσίας αὐτοῖς ποιῆσθαι" (p. 368, n. 4); and "An inscription of the 3rd cent. B.C. at Oblia [Dittenberger, *Sylloge*, No. 226] mentions a parousia of King Saitapharnes, the expenses of which were a source of grave anxiety to the city fathers, until a rich citizen, named Protogenes, paid the sum--900 pieces of gold, which were presented to the king" (p. 370).

42. A similar statement is made in 2 Tim 4:7-8, which speaks of a crown (στέφανος) of righteousness which the Lord will give to Paul on the day of judgment.

43. E.g., Matt 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-50; 24:36-44, 51; 25:1-46 (esp. 25:31-32); Rom 2:5, 16; 1 Cor 1:7-8; 4:5; 5:5.

from Peterson's assertion that arriving dignitaries sometimes pronounced judgment as part of the ceremonies.

Sixth, and finally, Paul makes no mention of the Hellenistic custom of a dignitary offering sacrifices on local altars after the reception. In Paul's thinking, of course, Jesus already offered himself as the definitive sacrifice, so this aspect of the formal reception would be abhorrent, a grim reminder of the paganism from which he sought to deliver people. He reminds his audience in 1 Thess 1:9 that they had turned from idols to serve the living and true God.

Peterson, therefore, was incorrect in reading the Hellenistic formal reception *into* 1 Thess 4:13-17. The text itself does not support his assertion that Paul's use of ἀπάντησις in 4:17 brings with it the entire baggage of the custom of greeting dignitaries. And if it did, we should admit that Paul deliberately reverses conventional expectations, which would actually fit what we know about his use of other conventions. Paul tends to modify existing language and cultural norms when communicating with his audience. His modification of the Hellenistic letter form, for example, is widely documented.⁴⁴ Not content merely to copy the standard approach, he creatively produces a letter form that deviates from the norm.

In 1 Thess 4:13-17, the custom of the Hellenistic formal reception is part of the cultural background for Paul's thinking. When he speaks of the coming of the heavenly king, he would probably have had in mind some aspects of the pomp associated with the great receptions he had witnessed or heard about. Yet the details come much more from Christian visions of the Parousia than from Greco-Roman models. Interpreting Paul's words in light of descriptions of Hellenistic receptions is helpful, but not as Peterson and others have envisioned. Such passages provide insight into the sociological background for 1 Thess 4:13-17, but for a reason the opposite of what Peterson believed. Instead of being a cipher for understanding what Paul meant through the supposed use of a technical term, they function more as a foil—a loose pattern to play against when describing the coming of the heavenly king.⁴⁵

44. For collections of material from ancient letters, see John L. White, *Light From Ancient Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986); and Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*. Comparisons with Pauline literature are documented in such works as William G. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973); and Paul Schubert, *Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgivings* (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1939).

45. The various descriptions of receptions reveal diversity in the way such meetings were conducted. There was no set form, only a somewhat broad understanding of what was appropriate when greeting a dignitary, which often included some fairly predictable elements. There was no textbook-type formula for a proper greeting.

In Paul's mind the coming of the Monarch from heaven will far exceed the glory of the most magnificent reception ever lavished on a Greek or Roman king. Yet the pomp will not be furnished by the loyal subjects but by the king himself. He will come at an unexpected time, summon his people with a heavenly trumpet and the call of an archangel, and snatch them into the sky where he will give to them their resurrection bodies, rewarding them for their faithfulness before he proceeds to earth to judge the wicked.

SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE AND SCHOLARLY HONESTY

My investigations into 1 Thess 4:13-17 took me through a series of unexpected transitions of thought but did not lead me full circle. The journey into this research forced me to confront my own deeply held biases. I still detest what I perceive to be the misguided teaching on the Rapture of the Church in some Christian circles because of the abuses it produces.⁴⁶ So I did not want to face the possibility that Peterson's interpretation was incorrect, since it was such an effective and easy means of dispensing with the fanciful notion of the Rapture.

The initial goal of my research was to provide English translations of the material presented by Peterson so that it would be readily available to Christians. In so doing I would provide a service to the Church, helping to steer Christians away from the escapist theology that leads some to view the world as destined to end in a nuclear holocaust, right after the elect are raptured off to heaven. A man with a mission, I sought to locate further texts describing Hellenistic formal receptions so that the case would be airtight and the information readily accessible. When I first began to see some problems with the theory, I did not want to face them.

Only after a period of about a year was I able to admit the possibility that Peterson's exegesis was eisegesis. With great hesitation I carefully examined the data, and honesty forced me to admit I had been wrong. In a way this was a triumph, for it illustrated again the power of the text to transform the view of the reader.

At this point, with only a small amount of residual resentment, I admit that the text of 1 Thess 4:13-17 leaves open the matter of whether or not the Christians are caught up in the air in order to escort the Lord back to earth. By comparing this passage with the other New Testament texts that speak of the Parousia it remains clear, at least to me, that the Parousia in Paul's mind included divine reward of the righteous and judgment of the wicked. But honesty

46. See my article "The Tragedy of Prophecy Enthusiasm," *The Covenant Quarterly* 51 (1993) 37-45.

forced me to defuse the most effective bomb in my historical arsenal that so readily destroys the fanciful notion of the Rapture. How much of our scholarship do we perform while looking over our shoulders at the beliefs of our youth that have become sources of embarrassment to us as scholars?