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## DISCERNMENT IN 1 THESSALONIANS

### ABSTRACT

This article analyses Paul's use of *δοκιμάζειν* in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 within the context of verbs for discernment (*δοκιμάζειν*, *πειράζειν*, *διακρίνειν* and their cognates). It discusses Paul's use of these verbs against the background of discernment in the Septuaginta. Paul's own understanding of discernment is then further investigated in terms of his socio-religious background and other New Testament books. It shows how he links discernment with a concrete situation and how discernment enables the human heart to realise its full potential by purifying it from all obstacles. It then discusses how the present tense of the imperative *δοκιμάζετε* in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 points towards the ongoing nature of discerning God's will and, finally, how Paul's eschatological context in 1 Thessalonians implies that discernment also has a future dimension.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Discernment is fundamental in the spiritual search for the divine will in every concrete situation (Therrien 1978:3). Paul uses the verb *δοκιμάζειν* mostly as "interpreting" (*ἐπιγινώσκειν*) and "testing" (*πειράζειν*; 2 Cor 6:9; 1 Cor 3:13) oneself (1 Cor 11:28; 2 Cor 13:5; Gal 6:4) and others (Rom 2:18; Phil 1:10; 1 Thes 5:21; also 1 Tim 3:10). The result of this testing is either recognition and approval of the practical decisions one has taken (Rom 14:22; 1 Thes 2:4; of Paul being entrusted with the Gospel) or repudiation and rejection (of Jesus by his enemies; Lk 20:17; of Jesus by human beings; 1 Pt 2:4; cf. Dubay 1997:102-103). What matters in the process of testing is that God's gifts of perceiving differences, of discernment, of profound perception and insight into what is to be discerned, together with the ability to interpret what has been discerned, are used correctly. Both *δοκιμάζειν* and *πειράζειν* are concerned with testing. However, while *πειράζειν* stresses a more negative temptation to do evil (see 1 Cor 10:13; 1 Thes 3:5), *δοκιμάζειν* focuses on a positive result that brings about recognition or approval of the true core of what is tested (Haarbeck 1986:809). Truth and falsity are disentangled by the process of discernment so as to preserve what is true.

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*δοκιμάζειν* is testing for the preservation of what is genuine and true. This testing takes place in this life, for God reveals God-self as the tester of hearts (1 Thes 2:4). Although Therrien (1973), Pieri (2002) and Munzinger (2007) locate discernment in concrete situations, Paul also understands discernment from an eschatological perspective when he declares that people will be tested in the final judgement (1 Cor 3:13; see also Jam 1:12). Consequently, the whole of Christian life is subject to God's scrutiny. All depends on being "approved in Christ" (*δόκιμος ἐν Χριστῷ*; Rom 16:10). This requires a serious effort to know God's will, which is regarded as gift of the Spirit (Rom 12:2; cf. Fee 1993:346).

## 2. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

An analysis of discernment in the teachings of Paul and in 1 Thessalonians requires one to take into account verbs other than the frequently used *δοκιμάζειν* and its cognates *δόκιμος* and *ἀδόκιμος*.<sup>1</sup> The traditional investigation of lexically related lemmas for discernment can lead to partial results. A more synchronic approach to the terms is needed. For example, on the basis of an etymological argument, Therrien (1973:10) identifies the meaning of *δοκιμάζειν* as the testing process or trial after which someone or something can be accepted and approved as *δόκιμος*.<sup>2</sup> Such an etymological approach does not do justice to the full scope of the terms and is linguistically inaccurate. While *δοκιμάζειν* is linguistically linked to *δόκιμος* and both may belong to the same semantic domains (to learn, to think), they do not always refer to discernment (see, e.g., Rom 14:18).

Other examples can also be mentioned. The quality of the believers' or apostle's work that is discerned by God (see 1 Cor 3:13) is not on the same level as the discernment carried out by the apostles of their own work (2 Cor 9:13; Gal 6:4), even if both are the result of discernment. This also questions the inclusion of those instances of the verb *δοκιμάζειν* that speak of God who tests people (1 Cor 3:13; 1 Thes 2:4). This divine testing shares only a common word-form with believers' discernment. There is no contextual evidence that these two aspects are related. It is also untenable to apply a similar logic to other verbs and to link, for example, *δοκιμάζειν* with *πειράζειν*. For instance, Therrien would surely not explain Paul's exhortation

1 Of the twenty-two occurrences of the verb in the New Testament, seventeen are found in the Pauline corpus: Rom 1:28; 2:18; 12:2; 14:22; 1 Cor 3:13; 11:28; 16:3; 2 Cor 8:8,22; 13:5; Gal 6:4; Eph 5:10; Phil 1:10; 1 Thes 2:4; 5:21; 1 Tim 3:10 (see also Lk 12:56; 14:19; 1 Pt 1:7; 1 Jn 4:1). Cf. Morgenthaler 1958:89.

2 "Accepter ou être accepté après épreuve."

to the Corinthians to *test* themselves<sup>3</sup> in the same way as Satan *tempts* someone.<sup>4</sup> It is also hard to conceive that he would see a parallel with those who tested God and were destroyed by serpents.<sup>5</sup>

Paul uses the verb *δοκιμάζειν* with the following nuances:

- Testing of the believers and their “work” (Rom 14:22; 1 Cor 11:28; 2 Cor 13:5; Gal 6:4).
- Testing “all things” (1 Thes 5:21).
- Discovering “the things that are important or pleasing to God” (Rom 2:18; 12:2; Phil 1:10; cf. also Eph 5:10).
- Gentiles do not see fit to acknowledge God (Rom 1:28).

These nuances further call into question a myopic focus on ethical discernment or discernment reserved solely for everyday behaviour. In the last instance, for example, Paul remarks that the Gentiles *οὐκ ἐδοκίμασαν τὸν θεόν* by praising him and thanking him, an attitude that not only comes from ethical conduct, but also implies wilful assent to God. Such a focus does not do justice to Paul’s understanding of discernment.

At this point, it must be noted that *δοκιμάζειν* is partially synonymous with other Greek verbs that also refer to discernment. In 1 Corinthians 11:31, for example, *διακρίνειν* is used as an equivalent for *δοκιμάζειν*. In 1 Thessalonians 5:21, it could be interchanged with *ἀνακρίνειν*, which is used in a similar manner in 1 Corinthians 2:15, where Paul also claims that all things can be evaluated. Yet not all occurrences of *δοκιμάζειν* are used with the same meaning. Some of the occurrences emphasise the *process* of examination (1 Cor 11:28; 2 Cor 13:5; Gal 6:4; 1 Thes 5:21); others stress the *result* of the examination (Rom 1:28; 14:22), and others combine both aspects (Rom 2:18; 12:2; Phil 1:10).

All terms for discernment, therefore, should be taken into account to understand its meaning. Though only *δοκιμάζειν* is used in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 (also 2:4), this article discusses its wider thematic link with other verbs for discernment in the Old Testament, through the Greek version of the Septuaginta (LXX), as well as Paul’s use of the thematically linked verbs *δοκιμάζειν*, *δια/ἀνα-κρίνειν*, *πειράζειν* and their cognates.

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3 Cf. 2 Cor 13:5, where *πειράζειν* is used synonymously with *δοκιμάζειν*.

4 Cf. *πειράζειν* in 1 Cor 7:5; see also Mt 4:1.

5 Cf. the use of *πειράζειν* in 1 Cor 10:9.

### 3. THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE LXX TO THE PAULINE δοκιμάζειν

Munzinger (2007:xiii) argues that for Paul “spiritual discernment ... was dependent on a liberated perception of reality and mature self-understanding”. He adds that “discernment [is] the nerve centre of Pauline thinking” and functions as a “translation of the Christ-event into the particulars of everyday life” (Munzinger 2007:18). To understand this central place of discernment for Paul, it is necessary to emphasise that Paul, a citizen of two worlds, is first of all a son of Israel, with its proper religious and cultural legacy and baggage, and finds in the LXX translation a special source of inspiration and a reliable instrument of reference for his use of discernment.

In the LXX, the verb δοκιμάζειν occurs thirty-seven times, ἀποδοκιμάζειν ten times and δόκιμος three times. The dialectical couple δοκιμάζειν – ἀποδοκιμάζειν, typical of numerous moral and religious texts, indicates in a more peculiar and specific manner the bearing and contents of the dynamic act of δοκιμάζειν. The verb δοκιμάζειν translates five different verbs in Hebrew: *bāḥan*, *bāḥar*, *ḥāqar*, *yāqar*, and *šārap* (Muraoka 2010:32). It mostly translates the verb *bāḥan* that, strictly speaking, means “to examine, to try, to put to the test” (Clines 1995:136). In thirty occurrences, *bāḥan* is, in turn, translated twice as διακρίνειν,<sup>6</sup> five times as ἐτάζειν<sup>7</sup> (ἐξετάζειν<sup>8</sup>) and

6 Job 12:11; 23:10, with the meaning of “to separate, distinguish, discern, examine”. According to Büschel (1965:922), the verb (δια)-κρίνειν is related to the Latin (*dis*)-cernere, where *cernere* means “to sunder”, and *dis-* adds the nuance of thoroughness or completeness of action or separation: “away”, as is also the case with the Greek *δια-* (cf. Luraghi 2003:168). In the basic sense, then, the verb means “part” or “sift”, with the most common meaning of “decide”, “judge”, “assess”. Except for the more general sense, it also means “believe”, “resolve”. Although the word is most commonly found in legal terminology, it does not belong there – either exclusively or by derivation. Büschel (1965:946-947) shows that διακρίνειν is originally a stronger form of the simple “to sunder”, “to separate”. It does not occur in the New Testament in its original spatial sense, but only in its figurative meaning, such as “to make a distinction between persons” (Acts 15:9; 1 Cor 4:7). In the latter meaning, “to distinguish between persons” gives the further nuance of “to judge between two” (see 1 Cor 6:5) and “to assess” (1 Cor 11:31). The noun διάκρισις in the New Testament usually means “differentiation”. 1 Cor 12:10 thus refers to the differentiation of the prophets, and Heb 5:14 of good and evil (cf. Büschel 1965:949).

7 1 Chr 29:17; Ps 7(8):9; 138(139):23, with the meaning of “to verify, research, examine, control”. The verb is not used in the New Testament.

8 Ps 10(11):5,6, with the meaning of “to look for intensely, examine in depth, try a metal, admit after examination”.

fourteen times as δοκιμάζειν.<sup>9</sup> Its primary and phenomenological meaning, as can be verified in the texts, is that of defining the physical-chemical process of demonstrating the authenticity of a coin. In a more metaphorical dimension, it comes to mean the examination and testing of persons (“the kidneys and the heart”; Dubay 1997:102-103) in order to get to know them in depth.<sup>10</sup>

Although *bāhan* is indeed the standard Hebrew equivalent of δοκιμάζειν, the entire semantic field of the verbs *bāhan*, *hāqar*, *šārap*, *nāssāh* (only in Piel), and even by *bāhar* and *yāqar*, forms the background of the verb δοκιμάζειν. Schunack (1978-1980:826) demonstrates that δοκιμάζειν “äussert (sich) als kritisches Unterscheiden (Prüfen) wie als praktisches Bewähren” “is expressed as critical discernment (examination) and in practical testing”. It is about a “kritisch-praktisches Verstehen” (critical-practical understanding; cf. Waaijman 2002:508-510). In this instance, the practical aspect needs to be emphasised, for it indicates the overlap between *bāhan* and *nāssāh*.<sup>11</sup> *Nāssāh*, as a practical way of testing and trying out, underlines a dimension of δοκιμάζειν.<sup>12</sup>

In summary, by using the Greek LXX version of the original Hebrew of the Old Testament, Paul focuses on a revealing nuance of the semantic and existential dimension of δοκιμάζειν, namely the specific characteristics of examining, trying, searching, testing above all through a purificatory process,<sup>13</sup> to arrive at a profound knowledge of the reality of persons and things in order to discern what is best, and thus to come to an authentic truth. Discerning (δοκιμάζειν) is the testing, therefore, of someone’s heart not only so that the person knows clearly, but also to realise someone’s full potential through purification from all that shackles and mortifies it (Therrien 1978:19).

Paul has his own understanding of δοκιμάζειν when compared with his socio-religious Greek and Hebrew culture, and with the rest of the New

9 The specific occurrences are Job 34:3; Ps 16(17):3; 25 (26):2; 65(66):10; 80(81):7; 94(95):9; Jer 6:27; 9:7; 11:20; 12:3; 17:10; 20:12; Zec 13:9 (twice).

10 Cf. Ps 25(26):2: “Try me (*bāhan* = δοκιμάζειν), O God, and put me to the test (*nāssāh* = πειράζειν), test with fire (*šārap* = πειρῶν) my kidneys and my heart (*kilyōtai we libbi*)”.

11 Tsevat 1975:69-71; Jenni 1997:207-209; Gerleman 1997:742; Helfmeyer 1998:443-446.

12 I am indebted to Kees Waaijman for pointing out this nuance to me during one of our discussions at the conference on discernment.

13 Paul derives the concept of purification through the test of fire directly from the religious and moral legacy of the Old Testament. The Greek culture does not reflect this dimension in its understanding of δοκιμάζειν (cf. Therrien 1978:3, 15, 19, 26).

Testament. For him, δοκιμάζειν consists essentially of discerning the will of God in a specific situation (cf. Therrien 1978:3).

#### 4. Δοκιμάζειν IN PAUL'S TEACHINGS

In the Pauline corpus, one can determine the pedagogical emphasis on discernment when Paul speaks of the ability to discern the will of God in "that which is good" (Rom 12:2b; Eph 5:17); "what pleases him" (Rom 12:2b; Eph 5:10); "that which is the best" (Phil 1:10); "but test everything; hold fast to what is good, but abstain from every form of evil" (1 Thes 5:21-22), until one succeeds in testing and trying their interior dispositions (cf. Gal 6:4; 1 Cor 11:28; 2 Cor 13:5). The following section will outline this in more depth by analysing 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 in order to determine Paul's life as educator and formator in discernment.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, Paul traces the rapport and relationship between the leaders of the community (the προϊσταμένοι) and the community itself. This is followed (vv. 14-15) by recommendations concerning the weak (τοὺς ὀλιγοψύχους, τῶν ἀσθενῶν). In verses 16-18, Paul commands the Thessalonian community to practise three fundamental qualities of Christian life, namely joy, prayer and thanksgiving, that are founded on the will of God in Christ Jesus. These verses form the introduction to the pericope (vv. 19-22), in which Paul gives them exhortations on their attitude towards the gifts of the Spirit ("Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets (v. 21), but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil (v. 22)").

This short section appears towards the end of Paul's first writing, and indeed of the first writing in the New Testament, where he addresses the Thessalonian community with a series of different exhortations (5:12-22) in order to edify them. The letter was written shortly after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Only some twenty years would have passed, if Jesus died in the year 33, and this letter was written in 50-51 AD. Thus, Paul, with the Lord Jesus only very recently raised from the dead, communicates to the Thessalonians, among the most important things, the need to discern the will of God as a service and as a gift profoundly imbued with love.

The series of imperatives that form part of this section (vv. 19-22) is the earliest record in the New Testament of the basically charismatic nature of the communities of the Early Church. These imperatives are more case-specific than the preceding exhortations in verses 15-18 (Fee 2009:216). As with the three preceding imperatives (vv. 16-18), the five imperatives in verses 19-22 are meant to be read together with the adversative particle δέ linking the two sets. In verses 19-20, the negative imperatives are parallel,

where the second member specifies the first. The second positive set, in contrast to the first, specifies what the Thessalonians are to do: the first rule (v. 21a) is general and the other two specify the first:

- <sup>19</sup> τὸ πνεῦμα μὴ σβέννυτε,  
<sup>20</sup> προφητείας μὴ ἐξουθενεῖτε,  
<sup>21</sup> πάντα δὲ δοκιμάζετε,  
 τὸ καλὸν κατέχετε,  
<sup>22</sup> ἀπὸ παντὸς εἴδους πονηροῦ ἀπέχεσθε.

#### 4.1 The fundamental role of the Spirit

The fundamental role of the Spirit is expressed in this passage by the remark, “Do not quench the Spirit (τὸ πνεῦμα μὴ σβέννυτε)”. The term and theme of the Spirit clearly plays a pre-eminent role within Scripture. Πνεῦμα, in its various forms and meanings, is used a hundred and twenty times in the authentic letters of Paul.<sup>14</sup> Five of these references are found in 1 Thessalonians, of which four refer to the Holy Spirit.

The theme varies from descriptions of the Spirit’s role in preaching (1:5, 6), to the Spirit’s presence as source of a holy life in 1 Thessalonians 4:8, to a difficult pronouncement on the three anthropological terms of πνεῦμα, ψυχή and σῶμα (5:23). In 1 Thessalonians 5:22, the action of the Holy Spirit, that is not to be snuffed out, is linked to the Spirit’s ability to reveal itself to believers in general, or through charisms in particular (Fee 2009:216). This is regarded as an inspiration in view and in function of the common good.<sup>15</sup> In 1 Thessalonians 4:3, Paul introduced the notion of God’s will (the anarthrous θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ) and the discussion of the

14 It is used a hundred and forty-six times in the thirteen letters.

15 Munzinger (2007:188) provided a helpful study on the interaction of the agency of the Spirit with existing cognitive processes which result in “transformed” decision-making. He regards the concept of the “renewed mind” (Rom 12:2 speaks of τῇ ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοῦς), which is equated with the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16: νοῦν Χριστοῦ) or “the mindset of the Spirit” (Rom 8:27: τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος), however, too individualistically and overlooks the communal aspects of the agency of the Spirit in decision-making (Munzinger 2007:35). 1 Cor 2:9-3:4, for instance, is concerned with corporate epistemological issues. Munzinger’s (2007:185-186) brief (one paragraph) defence of his individualistic approach fails to convince. He also does not fully address the difference between the “renewed mind” in Rom 12:2 and the “mind of Christ” in 1 Corinthians 2:16. Specifically, the agency of the Spirit is not made evident in Rom 12:2. In addition, Munzinger’s reference (2007:147 n. 32) to Rom 8 to support his argument for the presence of the Spirit is simply asserted without

call to holiness that leads to a statement that such holiness is related to being faithful to God who bestows the Spirit (4:8). In 5:18b, a restatement of the concept of God's will leads to a paraenetic injunction to welcome the activity of the Spirit, of which discernment (*πάντα δοκιμάζετε*) is a first, positive manifestation (Richard 1995:279).

The first negative command (*μὴ σβέννυτε*; a Pauline *hapax legomenon*<sup>16</sup>) emphasises the fire-like imagery of the Spirit. The emphasis is on the Spirit itself (note the definite *τὸ πνεῦμα*), or its activity, its inspiration, and not on the persons who possess it (Iovino 1992:278). The community is exhorted not to quench the Spirit's fire of inspiration, especially in its manifestation in prophecy, or in more metaphorical terms, not to suppress its activity. There are various sources of prophetic inspiration, since there are both the Holy Spirit and other kinds of spirits, and so the utterances must be tested and discerned, as Paul will exhort the Thessalonians in verse 21. Paul already discussed this function in 1:5-6 (Lang 1971:167-168).

The second negative imperative, *μὴ ἐξουθενεῖτε*, speaks specifically about one aspect of the Spirit's activity within the Christian community, namely, the work of prophecy (*προφητεία*) or its concrete manifestation in prophetic utterances. In the light of the parallelism in the two verses, one could say that the Spirit and prophecy are parallel with each other, showing themselves positively in discernment (v. 21a), holding fast to what is good (v. 21b) and keeping away from evil (v. 22).

## 4.2 Prophecy in discernment

The role of prophecy in discernment is expressed in the phrase "Do not despise the words of prophets (*προφητείας μὴ ἐξουθενεῖτε*)". The term *προφητεία* (referring to the person of the *προφήτης*) reflects a plurality of meanings in the Pauline literature. It ranges from the charism (1 Cor 12:10; 13:2) to the directives given by a prophet (1 Tim 1:18; 4:14). One element is, however, clear: in the list of the extraordinary and charismatic gifts of 1 Corinthians 14:1, 3, 5, prophecy is listed in the first place, while, with reference to the building of the mystical body of Christ, it comes immediately after apostleship,<sup>17</sup> together with the charism of teaching and of discernment of the spirits.<sup>18</sup> In 1 Thessalonians 5:22, there is a similar evaluation by Paul of the gift of discernment as a manifestation of the Spirit. The prophetic

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any motivation. Thus, the "renewed mind" of Rom 12:2 and the "mind of Christ" in 1 Cor 2:16 may not be addressing the same cognitive processes.

16 In the remainder of the New Testament, the verb *σβέννυειν* occurs only in Mt 12:20; 25:8; Mk 9:48; Eph 6:16; Heb 11:34.

17 Cf. 1 Cor 12:28; Eph 2:20; 3:5; 4:11-12.

18 Cf. 1 Cor 12:10; 14:29; Rom 12:5-9.



charism clearly consists of the announcing of God's will concerning an individual or a whole community. This holds also for the two verbs "to extinguish" and "to consider as nothing". If prophecy is indeed considered a manifestation of the Spirit, then "disdaining it" is considered to specify the reference to "extinguishing". The Thessalonians are not exhorted to "not reject" the work of the prophets, but to "not despise" (ἐξουθενεῖν) their work. The verb implies "to despise, to disdain; a rejection with contempt" (Bauer 2000:277). Prophecy cannot simply be accepted merely because it is a spiritual phenomenon and involves inspiration from some higher power. Pagans, Jews and Christians believed that prophecy could reveal hidden truths about the past, present and future (Witherington 2006:169). One had to have criteria to discern what was from God. The idea seems to point to some concrete problem within the community, but in view of the προφητεία in verse 20, Paul most probably had the charismata, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, in mind (cf. Richard 1995:272; Malherbe 2000:330-331). In view of the context and the verb σβεννύειν itself, it is more likely that Paul is referring to prophecy as a particular gift, and not to a general charisma (see Ellingworth & Nida 1976:123; Wanamaker 1990:125).

### 4.3 Discernment and its resulting actions

The resulting actions of discernment are expressed in the phrase "But test everything; hold fast to what is good (πάντα δὲ δοκιμάζετε, τὸ καλὸν κατέχετε)". The initial adversative particle (δέ) in 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22 clearly demonstrates the turn in Paul's thought: in contrast to the negative verbs σβεννύειν and ἐξουθενεῖν, Paul employs the positive δοκιμάζειν, a frequently used verb, both in the classical Greek as well as in the LXX (Grundmann 1964:256). In verse 21, the verb δοκιμάζειν is used for the first time in the Pauline corpus in its active sense. In the light of its link with the verb κατέχομαι, it should be translated with the meaning of "put to the test" (which also represents the scholarly consensus about this translation).

In 1 Thessalonians 5:21 (cf. also 2:4; Iovino 1992:279), Paul, who uses the verb δοκιμάζειν most of all New Testament authors (Morgenthaler 1958:89), adds the meaning of "approve, judge positively, find worthy" (see Bauer 2000:202) to its basic meaning of "to try, test, taste, examine". The spirit of "testing", of discernment is exercised in all aspects of Christian life, but first of all in relation to God's will. Romans 12:2 shows Paul's intention: "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove (εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν) what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect". At the same time, the Christian is exhorted: "All must test (δοκιμαζέτω) their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbour's work, will become a cause for pride" (Gal 6:4). By this double testing, the Christian would be

able to discern what is good and what is bad (Phil 1:9-10). In this manner, “good and evil” (τὸ καλὸν and τὸ πονερόν) is the outcome of the judgement of the believing conscience enlightened by the Spirit of God who reveals the secrets of every heart and moves the believers to acknowledge the unique God (cf. 1 Cor 14:25; see Iovino 1992:279). Consequently, the believers should hold on to the good that results from the evaluation (Ellingworth & Nida 1976:124; Wanamaker 1990:203).

Opinions differ regarding the meaning of πάντα as the object of δοκιμάζειν.<sup>19</sup> The present tense of the imperative δοκιμάζετε (as different from the aorist imperative) implies an ongoing action (Blass & Debrunner 1961:172; Wallace 1996:485-486). This ongoing action implies that discernment is about the here and the now, as Therrien correctly indicated. Paul wishes to locate discernment of the will of God in the *hic et nunc* of every personal and communal experience.<sup>20</sup>

The phrase “hold fast to what is good”, containing the substantiated adjective καλόν, is partially in line with Greek thought, where this term has a clearly ethical and aesthetic character. However, it is also different, since Paul qualifies the beautiful as a moral goodness that is in conformity with the will of God and that speaks of a service rendered out of disinterested charity. This concept has its origin in the moral and religious legacy of the LXX that translates the adjective ἰδὲ both with καλός and with ἀγαθός. Τὸ καλόν in Paul is synonymous with τὸ ἀγαθόν (see Rom 7:18; 12:9), and τὸ πονερόν to τὸ κακόν of verse 15. In this way, καλός has a more religious character. What is beautiful is what is in accordance with the will of God as it is expressed in the Law. In verse 21b, Paul is, therefore, exhorting the Thessalonians to discern everything from a religious and moral perspective. Holding to what is good is the consequence of testing and discerning made in the Spirit. Paul is, therefore, also implying that discernment asks for a decision to be made according to the conclusions drawn in the testing.

The verb κατέχειν is used seventeen times in the New Testament, of which ten times in Paul.<sup>21</sup> The meaning in Paul is “to hold, preserve, guard, possess” a teaching, as in 1 Corinthians 11:2, or in a negative sense “suppress the truth by injustice”, as in Romans 1:18. Paul often exhorts

19 Πάντα is to be interpreted as neuter plural (“everything”) rather than accusative masculine singular (“every person”). Cf. Bruce (1982:125).

20 Therrien (1978:3), “... consistait essentiellement dans le discernement de la volonté de Dieu dans le concret d’une situation déterminée”.

21 Cf. Moulton & Geden (1978:540). Jn 5:4 is held to be a gloss of secondary character. Cf. Metzger (1971:209); Omanson (2006:174).

Christians to keep away from (*ἀπέχεσθε*)<sup>22</sup> evil (v. 22). At the end of this paraenetic section, he qualifies “evil” in a more radical manner: *ἀπὸ παντὸς εἴδους*<sup>23</sup> *πονηροῦ*, “from every sort of evil”. The meaning in these instances is the basic etymological one, namely “vision, manifestation” (Kittel 1964:373-375; Malherbe 2000:334).<sup>24</sup> The early second century *Didachè* (3.1) expands this text into *φεῦγε ἀπὸ παντὸς πονηροῦ καὶ ἀπὸ παντὸς ὁμοίου αὐτοῦ* (Ehrman 2003), identifying *εἶδος* with *ὁμοιος*, likeness. The construction of *πᾶς* plus noun plus adjective occurs only in Paul; besides 1 Thessalonians 5:22, it occurs elsewhere in Ephesians 1:3 (*ἐν πάσῃ εὐλογίᾳ πνευματικῇ*) and 4:29 (*πᾶς λόγος σαπρὸς*; Fee 2009:223). The opposite, *ἀπὸ παντὸς ἔργου πονηροῦ*, occurs in 2 Timothy 4:18. Usage and context suggest that the adjective is to be understood as a substantive (“evil, harm”), with the anarthrous *πονηροῦ* even more telling (cf. Fee 2009:223; Malherbe 2000:334). Thus, Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to keep away from evil in all its manifestations, and thus from every kind of evil.

In summary, then, this passage lists recommendations and exhortations about the present situation of the Thessalonian community. With them Paul gives a clear, precise and universally valid teaching concerning discernment. This will enable one to seek and find the will of God in everyday life. This happens by keeping and holding fast to all that is good (*τὸ καλὸν κατέχετε*) and rejecting any kind of evil (*ἀπὸ παντὸς εἴδους πονηροῦ ἀπέχεσθε*). Only those who participate in and incarnate such a formative journey allow the Spirit to renew their inner being in order to really know the will of God in their personal and communal life.

## 5. THE *παρουσία* IN 1 THESSALONIANS

In view of the emphasis of scholars such as Therrien, Pieri and Munzinger on discernment in 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22, and particularly on the present imperative verb *δοκιμάζετε*, it is necessary to discuss the importance of the *παρουσία* theme in the same letter in order to understand discernment. Judgement is the final divine testing of what has taken place during the lifetime of people, as Paul stated in 1 Thessalonians 2:4 (*δεδοκιμάσμεθα* in the perfect, and *δοκιμάζοντι τὰς καρδίας ἡμῶν*). Given Paul's Jewish background, it is not surprising that this notion of testing is also found in the Old Testament: Jeremiah 11:20 speaks of judgement; Psalm 17:3 announces

22 The opposite of *κατέχειν*, *ἀπέχειν*, is used for evil, not in the sense of getting out of its way, but categorically to refuse to do it. Cf. Ellingworth & Nida (1976:124); also Marshall (2000:159). For the discussion on 4:3, cf. Morris (1991:179).

23 The neuter noun *εἶδος* is rarely used in the New Testament. It appears in Lk 3:22; 9:29; Jn 5:37; 2 Cor 5:7 and 1 Thes 5:22. Cf. Moulton & Geden (1978:270).

24 Not so Bruce (1982:126), relying on classical use.

the innocence of the Psalmist after being tested by God, and Psalm 26:2 is a plea to God to test the Psalmist. As a result of the future judgement and the present testing by God, believers strive for conduct that is in line with God's will (Grundmann 1964:257).

The future judgement theme and perspective are linked in 1 Thessalonians with the *parousia*. The word *παρουσία* has been interpreted as meaning a "presence" (from the basic meaning of the verb *παρεῖναι*). It is then said that the phrase in this passage does not refer to a descent of the risen and glorified Lord, but rather to the revelation of his actual presence. This presence had been realised "with a removal of the barrier between earth and heaven, like the raising of a curtain" (cf. Beale 2003:138-140). However, 1 Thessalonians 4:16 speaks of the glorified Jesus descending from heaven (*καταβήσεται ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ*). Although Paul's use of the term in his Christological arguments assumes Christ's pre-existence, the phrase remains oriented to the future. It should also be borne in mind that everywhere else in the New Testament the term *παρουσία* is used in the eschatological sense of the coming or arrival of the Lord or of the Son of Man (Mt 24:27-39; Jam 5:7; 2 Pt 1:16; 3:4; 1 Jn 2:28). The lemma *παρουσία* is always used with the genitive, without any technical significance, to mean both presence and future coming, and refers to specific human individuals (1 Cor 16:17; 2 Cor 7:6-7; Phil 1:26),<sup>25</sup> to the anti-Christ (2 Thes 2:9) and to Christ (1 Cor 15:23; 1 Thes 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thes 2:1, 8). The expectation in 1 Thessalonians is both present and future. Being under God's scrutinising eye, believers are involved in a twofold testing (denoted by the verb *δοκιμάζειν*): they must simultaneously learn the will of God by testing (1 Thes 5:21) and test themselves. Even in 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 (also Rom 8:19, 23), there is no interest in the interim period. Paul yearns to be "with Christ" (Phil 1:23), but still expects the *παρουσία* (Phil 3:20-21; 4:5; Oepke 1967:868).

Thus, with most scholars, it should be accepted that Paul's eschatological context in 1 Thessalonians implies that *παρουσία* means "coming" or "arrival", with a sense of movement (Best 1979:349-354). Testing and discernment have their origin in the present situation of the community. It implies the patient perseverance of faith in Christ until the day of judgement (Grundmann 1964:259). The good conduct which God seeks in the eschatological judgement and the *parousia* is to be found only in those who believe in Christ and whose faith is manifested in their present life. This Pauline characteristic of discernment in view of the *parousia* is, therefore, in line with other non-Pauline texts,<sup>26</sup> in which the term is used in

25 2 Cor 10:10 and Phil 2:12 refer to the *παρουσία* in a non-eschatological context.

26 See Mt 24:27-39; Jam 5:7; 2 Pt 1:16; 3:4; 1 Jn 2:28.

an eschatological sense of the coming or arrival of the Lord or the Son of Man (see Oepke 1967:870).

In 1 Thessalonians, the horizon of spiritual discernment of the will of God is the *hic et nunc* of every personal and communal experience. However, the eschatological aim of humanity cannot be neglected. Believers are to test and prove what the will of God is in their present life. They will know the divine will by testing and discernment. Testing and discerning keep the believers' actions from meaningless living to do God's will. This is done with an eye on the eschatological judgement.

## 6. CONCLUSION

A semantic field of the Hebrew verbs *bāḥan*, *hāqar*, *šārap*, *nāssāh*, and even *bāḥar* and *yāqar* forms the background of the verb δοκιμάζειν. Contextual analysis reveals that δοκιμάζειν also reflects testing and trying out on a practical level. By using the Greek LXX, Paul elaborates on the existential dimension of δοκιμάζειν, that is, he develops the practical, specific and relative characteristics of a process of examining, trying, searching and testing. This happens through a process of purification in order to arrive at an authentic truth concerning an object or person.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22, Paul advises and exhorts the Thessalonian community about their behaviour in the present and about the contingent situation of the community. Paul requires his community to test and discern the will of God for the concrete existence of people by keeping and adhering to all that is good and rejecting any kind of evil.

The contingent nature of discernment and its relevance in the here and now of the present is further qualified by the eschatological orientation of 1 Thessalonians, and especially by the παρουσία τοῦ κυρίου mentioned throughout the letter. After testing and discernment (πάντα δοκιμάζετε), the resulting action of adhering to what is good (τὸ καλὸν κατέχετε) implies taking the message to heart, believing it and acting upon it because and in view of the coming of the Lord in judgement. Paul's use of the term *discernment* in his Christological arguments is extended beyond the present to the future, since παρουσία also means "coming" or "arrival", with a sense of movement.

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