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# Exegesis

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*Our primary aim in this regular series is to exegete specific biblical texts which are relevant but also differently understood by evangelicals. We are not advocating any one interpretation but contributors are free to provide their own responsible exegesis in the hope that readers will be stimulated to undertake an even more careful examination of the particular verse or passage themselves.*

*The Rev. Alan Gibson, in Issue 14, gave us a helpful exegesis of 1 Corinthians 11:19 relating to Christian unity under the title, 'Why Differences in the Church are Inevitable'; in the present study, Professor Leahy concentrates on the difficult problem of the identity of the man of sin. He does so by way of an exegesis of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 and against the background of various interpretations of this passage.*

*At a time when Christianity is not only under attack from world religions and the religion of worldliness but also from a spurious version of itself which is becoming more and more associated with the figure of a single, earthly leader, we should look again at this important passage.*

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## Exegesis: 2 The Man of Sin

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### *Fred Leahy*

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In this letter, Paul indicates two events which will precede the second coming of Christ: a general apostasy and the revelation of the 'man of sin' or 'lawlessness'. In the final and most exhaustive sense of the term, and it is a complex idea, 'the day of the Lord' had not yet come, nor would it come until there had been 'the falling away' and the revelation of the man of sin, the son of perdition.

Note that the Apostle speaks about "**the** apostasy", "**the** falling away", "**the** rebellion", for the word has that association of revolt. There has always been apostasy. There is a sense, however, in which the New Testament sees apostasy as an eschatological phenomenon: it is heightened and intensified in the last hour. Consequently, the Apostle speaks of **the** apostasy. This apostasy will occur in the Christian Church; Calvin reminds us, "None can be termed apostates, but such as have previously made a profession of Christ and the gospel" (comment on v.3).

Paul then associates the revelation of the man of sin with the apostasy; he emerges in connection with **the** rebellion as its leader. This is not to say that the rebellion and the revelation of the lawless one are simultaneous but the Apostle sees them as closely connected. It is significant that while the apostasy is said to 'come', the man of lawlessness is said to be 'revealed' (v.3).

It is what Dr. George Milligan describes as “the mocking counterpart of the *apokalupsis* of the Lord Jesus Himself” (cf. 1:17). In verse 9, Paul speaks of the man of sin’s ‘coming’, (*parousia*) and again we have the idea of a mocking counterpart.

We may say, then, that in the last days there will be an intensification of evil and a great departure from the truth, reaching its climax in the appearance of the man of lawlessness. Most commentators agree that this figure described by Paul is to be identified with the antichrist mentioned by John. Most of the Church Fathers, including Augustine, held that view and this position has never been seriously challenged. In the man of lawlessness therefore we find all the marks of antichristianity and consequently we may proceed on the assumption that the New Testament teaching on antichristianity does help us to understand more fully the teaching of this passage. This is particularly true of our Lord’s statements concerning false Christs and false prophets, and the Apostle John’s use of the term ‘antichrist’. In a more detailed examination of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, we can notice the salient features of the man of lawlessness and his activities.

### **His Titles (v.3)**

(a) **‘Man of Sin’ or ‘Lawlessness’**: the latter is probably the better reading, although there is support for the former reading. There is no essential difference, because, as we read in 1 John 3:4, “sin is lawlessness”. Quite literally this title reads, “the man of the sin” or “the lawlessness”. The lawlessness in view is not lawlessness in general, but a special and unprecedented lawlessness which characterises the rebellion of which the man of lawlessness is head. Not only is the man of lawlessness wicked in himself, but he encourages others to follow a course of lawlessness, a way which is contrary to the Word and the truth of God. The expression ‘lawless one’ (v.8) means, as Lenski puts it, “the height of opposition to the gospel”. Consequently we read of “the deception of wickedness for those who perish because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved”; belief of what is false, not believing the truth, taking pleasure in wickedness constitutes “the lawlessness” described in this passage.

(b) **‘the Son of Perdition’**, lit. ‘the perdition’. Perdition or destruction, marks him from the outset and there is only **one** such perdition; it is unique. Christ called Judas “the son of perdition” (Jn. 17:12) and he was apostate in a unique sense. His apparent devotion masked a disloyal heart and he was a type of the antichrist or lawless one. The type and the antitype are characterized by doom. Leon Morris writes, “The Man of Lawlessness will certainly be lost”.<sup>1</sup> The expression ‘son of’ has a Hebraic twist. See, e.g. 2 Sam. 12:5, A.V. marg., i.e. he must certainly die; Matthew 23:15, “a son of hell”, indicates that perdition is certain. So it is with this arrogant figure described by Paul.

Paul’s thinking in this passage is considerably influenced by the predictions of antichrist in the book of Daniel but Paul’s discussion is distinct and independent. However the basic concepts are derived from Daniel and this is true of

these titles. See, e.g. Daniel 7:25-6 which describe the certain destruction of this lawless one.

### **His Character (v.4)**

Our Lord warned against ‘pseudoprophets’ in sheep’s clothing (Mt. 7:15) and these false prophets would deceive many (Mt. 24:11). There will also be pseudochrists, showing great signs and wonders, “so as to mislead, if possible even the elect” (Mt. 24:24).

The Apostle John warned against the pseudoprophets (1 Jn. 4:1; cf. Acts 20:29,31). Our Lord alone foretold the appearance of false Christs and initially they arose without the Christian community (e.g. John 5:43). We cannot restrict our Lord’s prediction of false Christs to Jewish pretenders, for He was instructing His own disciples. As Patrick Fairbairn affirms, “He wished them to regard the immediate future as but the beginning of a remoter end — a beginning that should in substance be often repeating itself, though the particular form might undergo many alterations”.<sup>2</sup> Fairbairn goes on to argue that when men assume to be, or do what by exclusive right belongs to Christ, “they then become, if not in name, at least in reality, false Christs.”

How should we view the terms ‘antichrists’ and ‘antichrist’? The prefix ‘anti’ can denote open opposition or a supplanting by usurpation which is a much more subtle form of hostility. Etymologically, an antichrist may be an open opponent of Christ or cunning usurper of Christ’s Name and prerogatives (cf. the term ‘antipope’ in history).

John was conscious of antichristianity as such and speaks of “the spirit of the antichrist” (1 Jn. 4:3) and the activity of “many antichrists” (1 Jn. 2:18). He asks, “Who is **the liar**”, the liar by pre-eminence “but the one that denies that Jesus is the Christ”. This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son (1 Jn. 2:22). Now such denial of the truth by itself could not be regarded as a supplanting of Christ by a blasphemous usurpation of His office, and yet it does indicate a peculiar manner of denying the truth, a manner wholly different from that of atheism or heathenism. It is a manner common to all forms of antichristianity, namely that of denying the truth not from an openly antagonistic position, but under the guise of Christianity and with an apparently friendly attitude. The antichrists of John’s day had not always been such. 1 John 2:18 may be rendered, “Many have become antichrists ...” They were not so originally, but by a gradual, downward progress they became such. John adds: “They went out from us, but they were not (really) of us ...” For a time they belonged to the Christian community, but showed by their apostasy that they were no part of its true life. Therefore John gives a theological test to be used in view, probably, of the Gnostic heresy.

The Gnostics professed to honour the name of Jesus, yet denied that He was a personal incarnation of the Eternal Word. Like the old serpent, such teachers were deceivers and antichrists. Without renouncing the name of Christ, they forsook the simplicity of the Faith and turned His truth into a lie. Without openly or formally supplanting Christ we see here, in Fairbairn’s words, “a cer-

tain use of Christ's name, with a spirit and design entirely opposed to Christ's cause".<sup>3</sup>

The opposer *ho antikeimenos* of 2 Thessalonians 2:4 sets himself against God and arrogates the highest prerogatives, yet such self-deification is in fact rather than in form, for it is described as "the mystery of lawlessness", it is associated with signs and false wonders and with all deception of wickedness then to those who are beguiled by it God sends "a deluding influence so that they believe what is false", or "the lie".

The 'temple of God' is said to be the theatre of the opposer's wicked presumptions and with reference to the Christian Church, the apostle knows of no temple but that Church itself. This conclusion agrees with Paul's general use of *naos*, a word applied to the Holy Place in the temple of Jerusalem (Mt. 23:35; Lk. 1:9; 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19). The *naos* or sanctuary of God is His Church, His dwelling.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:4 we see that the lawless one takes his seat in the *naos*, the sanctuary, a word not to be confused with *heiron* which refers to the entire Temple complex with its various buildings and courts. The Antichrist's opposition to God is seen in his coming as a usurper into the *naos*, the Church, there "showing himself off that he is a God". It is significant that Judas, the son of perdition, is the type of antichrist, for Judas betrayed the Master with a kiss.

Berkouwer remarks, "The New Testament picture of Antichrist shows clear traces of a pseudo-religiosity. Furthermore, the **anti** forewarns us that the **contra** is complete in the sphere of false imitation and sham. The opponent not only opposes but assumes the allure of a new and a **contra**-salvation. Thus the **contra** of sin wraps itself in the vesture of the apostles and toga of the Messiah himself. This is the method of the devil's appeal. His invitation is accompanied by signs and wonders and by marvellous and astounding powers. His deception reaches its goal in the attitude of bewilderment and amazement on the part of the man who is 'bewitched' (Rev. 13:3 cf. v.12). Sin discloses its true essence by hiding its **deepest intents**." We have, then, in antichristianity what Berkouwer terms "the ultimate heresy".<sup>4</sup> Antichrist is one who masquerades as Christ. Calvin says: "Paul sets Antichrist in the very sanctuary of God. He is not an enemy from the outside, but from the household of faith, and opposes Christ under the very name of Christ."

Assuming that John's 'Antichrist', and Paul's man of lawlessness are identical, Westcott says the word 'antichrist', "means far more than simply 'an adversary of Christ'. As far as the form is concerned it may describe 'one who takes the place of Christ' ... or 'one who under the same character opposes Christ. It seems most consonant to the context to hold that *antichristos* here describes one who, assuming the guise of Christ, opposes Christ. In this sense it embodies an important truth: That hostility is really formidable in which the adversary preserves the semblance of the characteristic excellence which he opposes ... The Antichrist assails Christ by proposing to do or to preserve what He did while he denies Him."<sup>5</sup> No enemy is so dangerous as a false friend.

## His Rise to Power (vv. 5-7)

One of our main difficulties in interpreting this passage is that it is a supplement to the Apostle's oral teaching; in addition the style is rather disjointed for he is excited and writes with considerable feeling. It is clear that the Apostle and his readers knew what he had said in Thessalonica (vv. 5,6), so our problem is "to fill in the gaps and to catch his allusions" (Leon Morris).

There have been a number of conjectures as to what is meant by the restraining power which in Paul's day hindered the full emergence of the lawless one. These include the Roman empire, the Jewish State (Warfield), the Holy Spirit (Dispensationalists, cf. Scofield Reference Bible), the preaching of the Gospel (Cullmann), law and order, etc.

In verse 6 the restraining agency is impersonal: "You know **what** restrains him now." In verse 7 it is personal: "**He who** now restrains will do so until **he** is taken out of the way." Professor F.F. Bruce favours the view that Paul had the Roman empire in mind.

The Apostle emphasises the historical connection between the present activity of the "mystery of this lawlessness" and the eventual revelation of the lawless one; "the mystery of lawlessness is already a mystery at work". Biblically, a mystery is a secret which man can never fathom by his own unaided reason: it can only be known by revelation. This 'mystery of lawlessness' has been described by Fairbairn as "a complex and subtle operation of the worst principles and designs, as might be carried on under the fairest and most hypocritical pretences ..."<sup>6</sup> Lenski remarks, "It is not merely dormant, but is already operative (*energetai*) although as yet unseen. It is like a viper in its shell that will presently crawl out and then be blasted."

Thus we find a tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet'. Paul rejected the 'already' of the Thessalonians: the day of the Lord had not fully come. He replaced it with another and sinister 'already'. "The mystery of lawlessness is **already** at work," and so the actuality of Christ's kingdom and the actuality of Satan's blasphemous mimicry and counterfeit stand in irreconcilable antithesis and conflict. God is the Lord of history; and in God's time and God's way that which **holds back** the appearance of the lawless one will be removed and the one who apes God will be revealed.

In the meantime "the mystery of this lawlessness" is compelled to work under cover until, within the sovereign purpose of God, it is permitted to develop a personal head as described in verses 3 and 4. What will eventually emerge on the scene of time, the ultimate expression of antichristianity, will stand in historical continuity with and represent the final disclosure of that which was veiled in mystery yet constantly at work when Paul wrote.

John Calvin comments that Satan was "carrying on secretly and clandestinely what he would do openly in his own time. He was therefore at that time secretly laying the foundations on which he would afterwards rear the edifice, as actually took place. And this tends to confirm more fully that it is not an in-

dividual that is represented under the term Antichrist, but one kingdom, which extends itself through many ages.’

### **His Reign (vv. 9-12)**

Antichrist’s *‘parousia’* is ‘in accord with the activity of Satan’. The norm of Antichrist’s conduct is Satanic: lying, deception and error. Lenski remarks: “We see it in the deception of Eve and in the story of the fall. The climax appears in the Antichrist, beyond whom the lie and the destruction cannot go.” Paul in no way underestimates the Antichrist or his evil mission. He will come with ‘all power and signs and false wonders with all the deception of wickedness’. Such limited power as Satan has is at the disposal of Antichrist for his false signs and wonders. Here we see the destructive power of Satan active in **the lie** — a sham reality, a sham truth and worst of all, men accepting the lie as the truth. The wonders associated with Antichrist’s mission are real enough, but they are “false” in the sense that they are wrought in a spirit of falsehood and in the interests of falsehood.

A ‘sign’ points beyond itself and signifies a certain reality. But a sign associated with **the lie** of Satan pretends to signify something as being real and true which in fact is neither. Such a sign can only deceive and destroy. It belongs to “the deception of wickedness” (v.10), “the deceit of unrighteousness” which accords with Satan’s working. The Antichrist will come to lure men to their destruction and will use every weapon of Satan to deceive “those who perish”.

It is of paramount importance that we recognize the deceptive, lying role played by Antichrist. He does not appear as an enemy of truth, but with diabolical cunning succeeds in making men believe that **the lie is the truth**. As Calvin says: Satan ... “puts on Christ’s mask, while he, nevertheless, at the same time chooses armour, with which he may directly oppose Christ.”

Antichrist cannot injure the elect of God. He finds his subjects among “those who perish”. A false Christ cannot deceive the elect, on the other hand, the Antichrist’s subjects “did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved”. This truth is “the truth as it is in Jesus”, the saving truth of the Gospel which centres in Christ and cannot be separated from Him. Their whole bent is away from the truth of God which alone can give them salvation.

For this reason “God will send them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, and took pleasure in wickedness.” Here we have guilt and penalty side by side. God is not passive and inactive while Antichrist works but sends righteous retribution upon the sinner. It is not some abstract, moral law that confronts us here, but a moral God Who upholds His righteousness and maintains His kingdom against Satan’s challenge and attempted usurpation.

The reign of Antichrist, then, is an implementation of Satan’s sway in the hearts and lives of those who love not the truth, but it is a peculiar implementation of it. It is a blasphemous mimicry of the reign of Christ and a diabolically clever counterfeit of Christianity, an activity taking place not within the ranks of paganism or scepticism, but within the professed Church of God!

## His Overthrow (v.8)

We are not to think that there is a simple contest between God and Satan; there is more to it than that for God uses the very machinations of Satan to serve His own sovereign purpose. This happened supremely at the crucifixion of our Lord and the Bible affords many examples of this principle. God uses men's sins in a way which works out their punishment and this is clearly taught in verses 11 and 12. It is equally true of the very appearance of the man of lawlessness on the scene of time. Christ's revelation (1:7) is active and is made by Himself; that of the Antichrist is passive (2:3,6,8) and is made by God. Antichrist's revelation is an exposure and it sets the scene for his final doom: "whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end, or abolish, by the appearance, or 'outshining' (*epiphany*) of His coming or presence (*parousia*)."

The expression 'breath of His mouth' may well be a quotation from Isaiah 11:4. Two things are stated about the overthrow of Antichrist: 1. the Lord will slay him, remove, destroy; 2. the Lord will abolish the Antichrist by the *epiphany*, the outshining of His *parousia* or presence. The lawless one is revealed in God's time and will find himself swept away by the breath of the Lord's mouth and completely undone by the Lord's *parousia*.

It seems best to take the expression 'breath of His mouth' as referring to the Word of Christ. As Lenski remarks, "The Word is poison to Antichrist." Some commentators regard the expression as merely indicating the ease with which Christ will overthrow Antichrist but it is doubtful if that interpretation does justice to the statement. The Antichrist, says Calvin, "will be reduced to nothing by the word of the Lord". He adds: "This victory of the word, therefore, will show itself in this world, for the spirit of His mouth simply means the word, as it does in Isaiah 11:4, to which Paul seems to allude."

When the Apostle speaks of Christ **abolishing** (A.V. 'destroy') the Antichrist, he uses one of his favourite words, *katargein*. It occurs 25 times in the Pauline corpus and only twice elsewhere in the New Testament, and in the A.V., it has 17 different renderings in the 27 places of its occurrence. It means 'to put out of commission' or, as we might say, 'knock out of gear'. The splendour and majesty of the Lord will overwhelm the lawless one.

## His Identity

We must now consider whether or not the term '**man** of lawlessness' indicates the future emergence of a single, personal antichrist. Many hold that it does. Dr. A.A. Hoekema writes, "The description given in this chapter cannot refer to anything but a definite person. He is called **the** man of lawlessness, **the** son of perdition (v.3), **the one who** opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship (v.4)." Hoekema refers to the personal pronouns used in this passage in support of his view. He concludes that "the Scriptures do seem to teach, particularly in 2 Thessalonians 2, that there will be a final climactic antichrist whom Christ Himself will destroy at His Second Coming".<sup>7</sup> Similar opinions have been expressed by theologians and commentators, especially since the end of the 19th century, including such

names as Trench, Vos, Norris, Hendriksen, etc.

However, the case is not quite so simple as has been claimed. Berkouwer warns "That Paul speaks of the antichrist here in 'personal' terms does not decide the issue ... This is too facile a way to deal with the elements of Old Testament apocalyptic present here." He seriously questions the futuristic view of a personal antichrist at the end of history. "This", he says, "has frequently been supposed, partly on the grounds of 2 Thessalonians 2 ... partly because the personal aspect lends itself to being taken more seriously than 'antichristian powers'. Obviously this latter is erroneous reasoning, if only because 'person' and 'powers' are not all that easy to separate."<sup>8</sup> Charles Hodge argues in support of the view that Antichrist is an institution under a personal head. He maintains that it is "according to the analogy of prophecy to speak of nations, institutions or kingdoms, as individuals and he further maintains that "the work assigned to Antichrist in prophecy, extends over far too long a period to be accomplished by one man."<sup>9</sup> Calvin sees the man of lawlessness as "the vicar of Satan" who "would hold supreme power in the Church, and would preside there in the place of God. Now he describes that reign of abomination under the name of a single person, because it is only one reign though one succeeds another."

It is easier to believe in the future appearance of a single and final personal antichrist, if we hold that Antichrist is essentially atheistic or agnostic. Many believe that Antichrist will be an infidel and the very embodiment of evil, e.g. Trench, various dispensationalists and some Roman Catholic expositors. J.N. Darby, founder of the Brethren movement, was once a member of the High Church party in the Anglican Church. It was then that he was influenced by the views of the Jesuits Ribera and Lacunza, who endeavoured to divert attention from the Papacy, hitherto regarded by most Protestants as the Antichrist, by teaching that there would be a future, infidel Antichrist. Thus an originally Jesuit view of Antichrist was unthinkingly accepted and widely propagated by modern dispensationalists. The concept of a single, infidel Antichrist is untenable if we concede that the figure described in 2 Thessalonians 2 is essentially ecclesiastical nor does it agree with the New Testament description of antichristianity as such and loses sight of the historical connection which the Apostle establishes between the 'mystery of lawlessness' already at work in his day and the revelation of this same mystery in the appearance of the man of lawlessness.

Charles Hodge remarks, "If Antichrist is to be a single person, concentrating in himself all worldly power as a universal monarch, to appear shortly before the end of the world, as is assumed by so many expounders of prophecy, it is hard to see how he was to be the product of the leaven already working in the times of the Apostles."<sup>10</sup> We may add that it is equally hard to reconcile such a view of Antichrist with Antichrist's type, Judas, who was ostensibly a devoted follower of Christ. If Paul is describing the infidel Antichrist of Ribera, Darby and many more, then verses 6 and 7 of this chapter present us with the greatest difficulty, for, as Hodge reminds us, the causes which would bring such a person to power were not in operation in Paul's day.



We may now ask if there is any system or power in history which corresponds to the description of Antichrist given by Paul. In his discussion of this subject Hodge writes that the Papacy is the Antichrist and thus “the passage is perfectly intelligible”. He continues, “This portrait suits the Papacy so exactly, that Protestants at least have rarely doubted that it is the Antichrist which the Apostle intended to describe.”<sup>11</sup>

The role of the Papacy in the context of the present ecumenical apostasy is too great to be easily set aside. All the old arguments against the Papacy stand and it is sad that so many Reformed theologians are so ill-informed in their consideration of Roman Catholicism. A Lutheran, Professor J.T. Mueller, has written, “If modern Protestant theologians fail to recognize that the Pope at Rome is the Antichrist, it is because they themselves do not understand what an abomination it is to reject God’s Word as the only source and standard of faith and to anathematize the doctrine of justification by faith. Since the Papacy destroys the central article of the Christian Faith, its outward adherence to the Apostles’ Creed is only one of the many lies by which it deceives the unwary. To these lies belong also the many ‘good works’ of which it boasts. Luther rightly says (St.L., XVIII, 1530): ‘The Papacy is a kingdom which destroys both faith and the Gospel.’”<sup>12</sup>

Today we have fresh arguments in support of the old Protestant view of the Papacy. In the context of the ecumenical movement, Rome has assumed a position of subtle influence and leadership — wooing and coaxing unfaithful church leaders into closer fellowship with herself and at the same time weaving a clever and all-embracing net of religious synthesis.

There may well be a further development of antichristianity as apostasy grows and deepens but it seems likely that the Papacy will remain the focal point of the new and tyrannical amalgam of pseudo-Christianity. It will be a “tyranny”, to use the words of Calvin, “such as does not wipe out either the name of Christ or of the church, but rather misuses a semblance of Christ and lurks under the name of the church as under a mask.” The pretended vicar of Christ will remain in reality, until the day of his final overthrow, the vicar of Satan.

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