

## The “Antichrist”

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A brief summary of Chapter 10 in the book entitled,  
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by Jonathan Menn

“The original meaning of the Greek prefix *anti* is ‘instead of’ or ‘in place of.’ On this basis *antichristos* means a substitute Christ or a rival Christ. Since, however, the antichrist as depicted in the New Testament is also the sworn adversary of Christ, we may combine both ideas: the antichrist is both a *rival* Christ and an *opponent* of Christ.”<sup>1</sup> Contrary to much popular opinion, the term “antichrist” is not found in the book of Revelation but appears only in 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7. Nevertheless, “when the title does occur for the first time, the matter is not discussed as a novelty.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, John says that “*you heard that antichrist is coming*” (1 John 2:18).

### Person versus personification

“A survey of the historic teachings about the antichrist brings two main lines of thought to the fore: (1) that the antichrist is a power or movement; and (2) that the antichrist is a human person at the end of history.”<sup>3</sup> Both views arose early in church history.<sup>4</sup> Although all the Bible’s passages must be synthesized to form a good understanding of “Antichrist,” the primary NT passage that suggests an end-time individual is the “*man of lawlessness*” of 2 Thessalonians 2. The primary NT passages that suggest a power or entity that transcends the individual are the descriptions of the “beasts” in Revelation.<sup>5</sup>

### Antichrist as a person

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<sup>1</sup> Hoekema, *Bible and Future*, 157; see also McGinn, *Anti-Christ*, 4 (Antichrist is both a persecutor of Christianity and the church and a perverter of Christianity and the church).

<sup>2</sup> Ford, *Abomination of Desolation*, 162.

<sup>3</sup> Berkouwer, *Return of Christ*, 261; see also Johnson, *Triumph*, 190n.12.

<sup>4</sup> See Johnson, “Revelation,” 521-22, 529; McGinn, *Anti-Christ*, 78. The most comprehensive historical survey of views concerning Antichrist is Bernard McGinn, *Anti-Christ: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Schnabel suggests that the two lines of thought are compatible: Antichrist can be both a system and a leader of that system. See Schnabel, *40 Questions*, 176.

Grant Osborne is typical of those who take the “Antichrist as person” view: “While the beast sums up the beasts of Daniel, he is also the fulfillment of the ‘little horn’ of Daniel, Antiochus Epiphanes. . . . The description of the two beasts in [Revelation] 13 fits an individual rather than an empire, and the rest of the NT expects a person, from Mark 13:14 (‘he is standing’) to 2 Thess. 2 (‘the man of lawlessness’) to the ‘many antichrists’ of 1-2 John, who are individual false teachers, as proleptic of the final Antichrist (1 John 2:18).”<sup>6</sup> The majority of those who see Antichrist as a person view him as a human agent influenced or possessed by the devil; a minority view him as the devil incarnate.<sup>7</sup>

### **Antichrist as a personification**

Personification is a form of metaphor in which a non-human (God, an animal, an object, an idea, or other abstract notion) is described as if it were human or had its own personhood. For example, wisdom is personified as a woman in Prov 1:20; “Mammon” (i.e., wealth) is personified as a god in Matt 6:24 and Luke 16:13; Death and Hades are personified in Rev 20:14. “That Paul speaks of the antichrist [in 2 Thess 2:3-10] in ‘personal’ terms does not decide the issue; for this was also John’s mode of presentation [in 1-2 John], yet John clearly spoke of an antichrist [indeed, of ‘the antichrist’] already present.”<sup>8</sup> Given the apparently trans-historical, trans-individual, and ultimately theological descriptions, the “beasts” or “Antichrist” may, in fact, be *personifications* of evil and anti-Christian social-political-religious systems and institutions. As such, Antichrist may be manifested in different ways at different times and places throughout history, including (but not limited to) a final manifestation shortly before Christ returns.

### **John’s descriptions of Antichrist in 1 John and 2 John**

The issue of person versus personification is reflected in John’s ambiguous use of the term “antichrist.” In 1 John 2:18 (“*you heard that antichrist is coming*”), *antichristos* appears to be a person who will come in the future; however, that is not entirely clear since no definite article (“the”) is used before the word “antichrist.”<sup>9</sup> John’s other descriptions make clear that “Antichrist” is not limited either to one person or to some future manifestation. In 2:18 John states, “*Even now many antichrists have appeared.*” John then says, “*They went out from us, but they were not really of us*” (2:19). Thus, “Antichrist” is equated with all false teachers and was actually present in John’s day.

John is the only biblical writer to actually use the term “antichrist,” and his

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<sup>6</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 495.

<sup>7</sup> McGinn, *Anti-Christ*, 2, 49, 282n.4.

<sup>8</sup> Berkouwer, *Return of Christ*, 270.

<sup>9</sup> Joel McDurmon also points out that “John does not say that antichrist ‘is coming in the future,’ he simply reminds his listeners that ‘antichrist comes.’ The verb here is in the present tense, not a participle and not future.” McDurmon, *Jesus v. Jerusalem*, 184-85.

descriptions of Antichrist in 1 and 2 John are considerably different from most popular contemporary conceptions of Antichrist. John never speaks of “*the* Antichrist” as an evil end-time individual at all. Gary DeMar summarizes, “Antichrist is simply any belief system [or those who espouse it] that disputes the fundamental teachings of Christianity, beginning with the person of Christ. These antichrists are ‘religious’ figures. The antichrist, contrary to much present-day speculation, is not a political figure, no matter how *anti-* (against) Christ he may be.”<sup>10</sup> This should be borne in mind when considering the identity and nature of any purported “Antichrist.” Most popular depictions of “Antichrist,” however, draw heavily, if not exclusively, from Paul’s description of the “*man of lawlessness*” in 2 Thessalonians 2 and the “beasts” of Revelation, rather than from John’s actual descriptions of “antichrist(s).”

## **Antichrist seen in parallels between Daniel, 2 Thessalonians 2, and Revelation**

### **The prophecies of Daniel**

The prophecies in Daniel are based in history but thematically appear to extend to the end of the age. Daniel uses apocalyptic imagery in referring to “beasts,” a “little horn,” and a “despicable person.” The “beasts” of Dan 7:1-7, 15-23 are kings or, more specifically, kingdoms. The “*little horn*” of Dan 7:7-8, 20-25; 8:9-26 and the “*despicable person*” of Dan 11:21-37 appear to refer to Antiochus Epiphanes (c. 215-164 BC), ruler of the Seleucid Empire, whose defiling of the Jerusalem temple and attempt to outlaw the practice of Judaism led to the Maccabean Revolt beginning in 167 BC.<sup>11</sup> That Daniel’s vision extends beyond Antiochus is indicated in Daniel 8, in which Gabriel tells Daniel that the vision pertains to “*the time of the end*” (8:17), “*the appointed time of the end*” (8:19), and “*many days in the future*” (8:26). Similarly, Dan 11:35 refers to the “*end time*” and “*the appointed time,*” and Dan 11:40 refers to “*the end time.*”

### **Reapplication of Daniel’s prophecies in 2 Thessalonians 2 and Revelation**

Just as Jesus in the Olivet Discourse applied Daniel’s “*abomination of desolation*” references to the events of AD 70, so Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2 and John in Revelation apply Daniel’s themes and imagery to Antichrist. In the literature of late inter-testamental Judaism there appear to have been two types of eschatological “Anti-Messiah” figures: a political-military tyrant from outside the

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<sup>10</sup> DeMar, *Last Days*, 269.

<sup>11</sup> Adeyemo, “Daniel,” 1004, 1009; Beasley-Murray, “Interpretation of Daniel 7,” 44-45, 53; Payne, *Encyclopedia*, 371-72, 377-78; McGinn, *Anti-Christ*, 14; Scofield, *New Scofield*, 908n.4, 910n.1, 3. Adeyemo, Payne, and Scofield do not believe that Antiochus is in view in Daniel 7, although they agree that he is in view in Daniel 8 and 11. They contend that strictly an end-time Antichrist figure is in view in Daniel 7. Whether or not Antiochus is in view in Daniel 7, the customary reapplication of prophetic themes, language, and imagery to similar events beyond the original historical referent would allow for a wider application than simply to Antiochus.

community who oppresses the people and a false teacher from inside the community who deceives the people. The two are combined in the “*man of lawlessness*” (2 Thess 2:3-12) but are separated in the two “beasts” of Revelation 13.<sup>12</sup>

### **The “Man of Lawlessness” (2 Thess 2:3-12)**

In 2 Thess 2:4 Paul’s description of the “*man of lawlessness*” is drawn from Dan 11:36, which generally is seen as a depiction of Antiochus Epiphanes, and from such passages as Dan 8:9-14; 9:26-27; 11:31, 45; 12:11, which also usually are taken to refer to Antiochus and his depredations.<sup>13</sup> Paul also saw an ongoing connection between the first century and the end-time: “*In his time he [the ‘man of lawlessness’] will be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work*” (2 Thess 2:6-7). Beale comments, “Though this fiend has not yet come so visibly as he will at the final end of history, he is *nevertheless* ‘already at work’ in the covenant community through his deceivers, the false teachers.”<sup>14</sup>

Vos observes that according to 2 Thess 2:3-12, Antichrist’s activity “lies fundamentally in the sphere of religious and moral seduction. He proceeds, not by applying violence, but through estranging and leading astray his followers from the truth of the Gospel. Of political organization and activity . . . nothing is said by the Apostle in so many words.”<sup>15</sup> Paul’s description of the “*man of lawlessness*” thus echoes John’s description of “Antichrist” in 1-2 John.

Early in its history, the church saw Paul’s “*man of lawlessness*” as coming from within the church, not outside of it. Beale comments, “The earliest source in line with the understanding that the ‘man of lawlessness’ will deceptively infiltrate the church as the ‘temple of God’ is the *Epistle of Barnabas* 4 (mid-nineties AD), which appeals to the Dan. 7 prophecy of the end-time tyrant and associates him with ‘the works of lawlessness’ and ‘the age of lawlessness’, and equates the church with the temple (see also *Barnabas* 6 and 16 for the church as the temple).”<sup>16</sup>

### **The “Beasts” (Revelation 13)**

#### *Sources of the beast imagery*

The description of the “beast” of Rev 13:1-7 is primarily drawn from Daniel 7. The “*beast coming up out of the sea*” is from Dan 7:2-3. The “*ten horns*” are based on Dan 7:7, 20, 24. Rev 13:1-2 turns Daniel’s lion, bear, leopard, and “dreadful and terrifying” beast, which in Daniel represented four successive world empires, into

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<sup>12</sup> See Osborne, *Revelation*, 494; Schnabel, *40 Questions*, 153.

<sup>13</sup> See Weima, “1-2 Thessalonians,” 887. As Schnabel states, Antiochus “became the ‘prototype’ for the supreme opponent of God on earth.” Schnabel, *40 Questions*, 155.

<sup>14</sup> Beale, *Temple*, 287.

<sup>15</sup> Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 122-23.

<sup>16</sup> Beale, *Temple*, 284n.41.

one. However, in Revelation the image of the beast also draws from Daniel's descriptions of the "little horn" and Antiochus. Thus, Alan Johnson notes that, according to Rev 13:2, "this beast had 'on each head a blasphemous name.' This prominent feature is repeated in 17:3 (cf. 13:5-6). Arrogance and blasphemy also characterize the 'little horn' of Daniel's fourth beast (7:8, 11, 20, 25) and the willful king of Daniel 11:36. John alludes to the vision of Daniel but completely transforms it."<sup>17</sup> Both Daniel's little horn (Dan 7:21) and Revelation's beast (Rev 13:7) wage war against the saints and overcome them.

The Bible always applies beast imagery to empires, forces, and entities that transcend the individual. In addition to the "beasts" of Daniel 7, the OT contains several other references to "beasts" as epitomizing evil empires.<sup>18</sup> Hence, Sam Storms concludes that the "beast" of Revelation 13 "is primarily corporate in nature, rather than personal."<sup>19</sup> Several aspects of the "beast" reflect the first-century Roman context in which John wrote. Nevertheless, its meaning and relevance point beyond the situation that Christians faced in that time and place. John's combining Daniel's four beasts into one suggests that the beast transcends any one historical empire.<sup>20</sup>

### *The beasts as parodies of Christ*

Like the "*man of lawlessness*" of 2 Thess 2:3-12, the most important aspect of the beast of Revelation is not political or economic but is theological. Rev 13:5-6; 17:3 stress the beast's arrogance and blasphemies. That the beast is truly "Antichrist"—the great theological counterpart to Christ and all that Christ represents—is seen in the many parallels between Christ and the beast. Both Christ and the beast: (1) Have swords;<sup>21</sup> (2) Have horns;<sup>22</sup> (3) Are slain, with the same Greek word (*sphagizō*) used to describe their deaths;<sup>23</sup> (4) Rise to new life, with the same Greek word in 2:8 and 13:14 (*ezēsen*) used to say that they "*came to life*";<sup>24</sup> (5) Are given authority;<sup>25</sup> (6) Wear many diadems;<sup>26</sup> (7) Have a throne;<sup>27</sup> (8) Have authority over "every tribe, tongue, people, and nation";<sup>28</sup> (9) Have followers who have their names written on their foreheads;<sup>29</sup> and (10) Receive universal worship.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Johnson, "Revelation," 525.

<sup>18</sup> Ps 74:13-14; 87:4; 89:10; Isa 27:1; 30:7; 51:9; Jer 51:34; Ezek 29:3; 32:2-3.

<sup>19</sup> Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 478.

<sup>20</sup> Resseguie, *Revelation of John*, 182, 191.

<sup>21</sup> Compare Rev 1:16; 2:12, 16; 19:15, 21 and 13:10.

<sup>22</sup> Compare Rev 5:6 and 13:1, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Compare Rev 5:6 and 13:3, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Compare Rev 2:8, 5:6, 9; 13:8 and 13:3, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Compare Rev 2:27; 5:1-9 and 13:2, 14.

<sup>26</sup> Compare Rev 13:1 and 19:12.

<sup>27</sup> Compare Rev 13:2 and 3:21.

<sup>28</sup> Compare Rev 5:9; 7:9 and 13:7.

<sup>29</sup> Compare Rev 13:16-17 and 14:1.

<sup>30</sup> Compare Rev 5:8-14 and 13:4, 8.

The second beast “is also a parody of the messianic Lamb of [Rev] 5:6 and has an ironic relation with that Lamb. It, too, is a lamb with horns [Rev 13:11].” The second beast has primarily a religious role and later is called “*the false prophet*” (Rev 16:13; 19:20; 20:10). This beast parallels the “*man of lawlessness*” with respect to satanic influence (Rev 13:11; 2 Thess 2:9), signs (Rev 13:13-15; 2 Thess 2:9), deception (Rev 13:14; 2 Thess 2:10), and worship (Rev 13:12, 15; 2 Thess 2:4).

*The number of the beast: 666 (Rev 13:18)*

If the words “Caesar Nero” are transliterated into Hebrew, they have the numerical value of 666.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, some scholars believe that John identifies Nero as the beast.<sup>32</sup> However appealing the Nero idea is to some, gematria (a mystical method of interpreting Scripture by substituting numbers for letters in certain words or names) ultimately fails as a method of identifying Antichrist. First, to attempt a literal calculation of some individual’s name is contrary to the symbolic way in which numbers are used in Revelation and other apocalyptic literature. Second, there are many names, both ancient and modern, that come to 666 when subjected to gematria.<sup>33</sup> Even the word “beast,” when transliterated into Hebrew, comes to 666.<sup>34</sup> The real problem is the use of gematria itself. Its use is akin to magic or the occult. Further, the Greek phrase “*number of a man*” does not have a definite article (i.e., the word “the”) before “man.” Consequently, it “can be translated generically as ‘a number of man’ (i.e., a number of humanity), or nongenerically, referring to an individual, ‘a number of a person’ (i.e., a specific individual).”<sup>35</sup>

Beale discusses the significance of the contrast between the use of “six” and “seven” throughout Revelation: “The number seven refers to completeness and is repeated throughout the book. But 666 appears only here. This suggests that the triple sixes are intended as a contrast with the divine sevens throughout the book and signify incompleteness and imperfection. . . . The triple repetition of sixes connotes the intensification of incompleteness and failure that is summed up in the beast more than anywhere else among fallen humanity.”<sup>36</sup> Or, as Resseguie puts it, 666 is the epitome of “humanity’s bestial traits.”<sup>37</sup> In the second century Irenaeus arrived at a similar conclusion. He held that 666 signifies “a summing up of the whole of that apostasy which has taken place during six thousand years.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Resseguie, *Revelation of John*, 189.

<sup>32</sup> See Chilton, *Paradise*, 180-81; DeMar, *Last Days*, 260-61. Schnabel, however, observes that John could not have been identifying Nero as the “final” Antichrist since Nero died in AD 68, whereas John wrote Revelation several years after that. Schnabel, *40 Questions*, 190.

<sup>33</sup> See Beale, *Revelation*, 720-21; DeMar, *Last Days*, 231-38.

<sup>34</sup> Resseguie, *Revelation of John*, 191.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>36</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 721-22.

<sup>37</sup> Resseguie, *Revelation of John*, 190.

<sup>38</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.28.2.

## Concluding comments regarding Antichrist

The history of Christianity, almost from its beginning, has been littered with attempts to identify Antichrist. Behind the specific and sometimes fanciful identifications of Antichrist, however, lies an element of truth. That is, just as Christ's rule extends throughout this entire age, so the evil activities of the devil and his servants extend throughout the same time. John's imagery and the parallels he makes between Christ and the beast force us to deal with the questions: What is my first or ultimate priority? What is most important to me: Christ or the world, its institutions, and all that it has to offer? That issue is driven home by the fact that the dragon, the beast from the sea, and the beast from the land constitute a trinity competing with the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit: "As the Son receives authority from the Father ([Rev] 2:27; 3:21), so the sea beast receives authority from the dragon, and as the Spirit glorifies the Son (John 16:14), so the second beast does with respect to the first beast (Rev. 13:12-15)."<sup>39</sup>

Paul's discussion of the "*man of lawlessness*" reveals that ultimately God is in charge of what is happening. He is working out his purposes through the "*lawless one*" whom "*the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming*" (2 Thess 2:8). God is the one who sends "*a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, in order that they may all be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness*" (2 Thess 2:11-12). Similarly, with the "beasts" of Revelation God is in ultimate control: He is sovereign over Satan and his minions;<sup>40</sup> the authority granted the forces of evil is only temporary (see Rev 12:6, 12; 13:5); and the beast, the false prophet, the dragon, and their followers are permitted to arise and prosper for a season, only to be eternally destroyed by Christ.<sup>41</sup>

Consequently, we may not understand why God acts as he does, but we can have confidence that even the worst evils human beings and Satan can devise are subject to God's orchestration and are part of his overall plan: "*For God has put it in their hearts to execute His purpose by having a common purpose, and by giving their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled*" (Rev 17:17).

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<sup>39</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 729; see also Torrance, *Apocalypse Today*, 113.

<sup>40</sup> See Rev 6:1-3, 5, 7, 9, 12; 9:1-2; 11:2-3; 13:5, 7; 20:1-3, 7.

<sup>41</sup> See Rev 14:18-20; 17:8; 18:1-2, 21; 19:11-21; 20:9-10, 14-15.

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