

The Man of Lawlessness as the Final Antichrist

by Raymond C. Faircloth

At the time of the Protestant Reformation the Historicist interpretation of “*the Man of Lawlessness*” was applied to Roman Catholicism in reaction to that system. This meant that “*the Man of Lawlessness*” was interpreted as the succession of popes. Later-formed religious groups, still using the Historicist scheme, broadened the interpretation to include all the clergy of Christendom as ones who apostatized since the second century. This means that “he” is interpreted as a composite or body of people. In this scheme the temple in which he sits is said to be the body of believers. However, there is no reason given in the Scriptures to change the plain language in the texts to mean anything other than **a single most evil individual** appearing on the world scene just prior to the return of Christ. Just as God, Messiah and Satan are identified by thousands of singular personal pronouns so too is the ‘Man of Lawlessness’ identified as “he”—a singular particular male. Furthermore, just as the Scriptures give numerous names, titles and descriptions to God, to Messiah and to Satan, so too, *the Man of Lawlessness* is given the title of *the Antichrist* as well as many others. As a parallel, God reveals Messiah Jesus as His individual future visible representative and so too Satan finally reveals his individual future visible representative. The term antichrist means false Christ [messiah] and therefore one who opposes Christ.

Christians Knew About an Individual Antichrist

Christians of the 1st century knew fully from the Hebrew Scriptures the many descriptions of ‘Satan’s end-time man’ as for examples: “**The Prince of Tyre**” of Ezek. 28:2-10, the “**little horn**” of Daniel 7, and “**the ruler who is to come**” of Daniel 9:26 and “**the king who honours the god of fortresses**” of Daniel 11. With reference to Daniel 11 *The New American Commentary VOL. 18* on Daniel says:

Daniel previously had described this person (chaps. 7 and 9) and expected the reader to recognize him without an introduction. He is none other than the “little horn” of Dan. 7 and “the ruler who will come” of Dan. 9:26. He is known in the New Testament as “the man of lawlessness” (2Thess. 2:3-12), the “antichrist” (1John 2:18), and the “beast” (Rev. 11-20). Interpreting this passage to foretell Antichrist has been a widely accepted view since ancient times (e.g., Chrysostom, Jerome, Theodoret), and Young rightly calls this “the traditional interpretation in the Christian Church.” Almost sixteen hundred years ago Jerome declared: “those of our persuasion believe all these things are spoken prophetically of the Antichrist who is to arise in the end time.” Today the majority of both amillennial and premillennial scholars interpret this king to be Antichrist. p.306.

So it did not all need repeating in the Christian Scriptures. The terms *Man of Lawlessness* and *Antichrist* sufficed for Christians to be able to bring the full picture of this man back to mind:

- ❖ “...you heard that **antichrist** is coming, even now **many antichrists** have appeared...This is **the antichrist**, the one who denies the Father and the Son” (*1 John 2:18, 22*).
- ❖ “...those who do not acknowledge Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and **the antichrist**”
(*2 John 7*).

Yet, according to John’s words in his first letter: “...**the spirit of antichrist**...is already in the world” (*1 John 4:3*). Yet the fact that John describes ‘*many antichrists*’ and ‘*the spirit of antichrist*’ as already existing in his day in no way detracts from **the antichrist** as *the final* antichrist because John refers to this single person with the words “*you heard that antichrist is coming*...This is **the antichrist**, the one who denies the Father and the Son” (*1 John 2:18*). Because this man finally magnifies himself above all including God himself he can be seen as “*the one who denies the Father and the Son*.” Neither does John’s description of ‘*many antichrists*’ and ‘*the spirit of antichrist*’ as already existing detract from the wealth of biblical material concerning the single evil end-time oppressor of God’s people as one who is used by Satan (*2 Thessalonians 2:3, 4, 8, 9*).

The Cornerstone Text

2 Thessalonians 2:3-9

- ❖ “For that day [*the day of the Lord*] will not come, unless **the rebellion** comes first, and **the man** of lawlessness is revealed, the **son** of destruction, who opposes and exalts **himself** against every so-called god or object of worship, so that **he** takes **his** seat in **the temple** (Greek ‘naos’) of God, proclaiming **himself** to be God.

“Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And you know *what* is restraining *him now* so that *he* may be revealed in *his* time. For the *mystery of lawlessness* is already at work. Only *he* who now restrains *it* will do so until he is out of the way.

“And then the lawless *one* will be revealed whom the Lord Jesus will **kill with the breath of his mouth** and bring to nothing *by the appearance of His coming (parousia)*.

“The coming (*parousia*) of the lawless *one* is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and be saved” (ESV).

NOTE: Also rendered “**the rebellion**” in NRSV, NIV and NLT. It is rendered ‘Final rebellion’ in the REB and ‘Great Revolt’ in the NJB. These are all better than ‘apostasy.’ According to Bauer’s Greek-English lexicon the Greek word *apostasía* which is used in 2 Thessalonians 2 means: “defiance of established authority, **rebellion, abandonment**, breach of faith.” The word was also used in secular Greek of a political revolt and in the LXX in Joshua 22:22 of rebellion against God. E.g. Acts 21:21 ESV: “You teach all Jews...to forsake (*apostasía*) Moses.” *NAB gives ‘abandon’*

So the Final Rebellion will be a total abandonment, not of any particular religion, but of the true God because “*the Man of Lawlessness*” installs himself in God’s place.

“The Man of Lawlessness” Does Not Refer to the Clergy of Christendom

As can be seen from the above definitions the clergy of Christendom do not fit this picture of rebellion and total abandonment of God. The teaching that “*the Man of Lawlessness*” represents the clergy as ones who apostatized falls down because what is spoken of here is **the** Rebellion against all divine order and therefore meaning the well known final Rebellion that was coming **just before the return of Christ**. The clergy are not guilty of ‘opposing every so-called god or object of worship,’ nor of ‘proclaiming themselves to be God;’ but rather they direct attention to the worship of the trinity or in the Catholic case also to Mary. With reference to the term ‘antichrist,’ the clergy do not actively oppose Christ but, through Greek philosophy and tradition have misunderstood him and so follow “another Jesus.”

NOTE: It is incorrect to say that because “*the Man of Lawlessness*” and Judas Iscariot are the only ones to be called “**the son** of destruction” this must mean that “*the Man of Lawlessness*” has all of the qualities of Judas, including his being a betrayer, and therefore had earlier been a true Christian having now apostatized. The commonality of the two is the fact that both are individuals who will either have **the same final fate, namely destruction** or as the NLT translates 2 Thessalonians 2:3 to be “**the one who brings destruction**.” To illustrate: the similar phrase “a son of the prophets” focuses on that one’s work as a prophet and not on any other details concerning his characteristics.

The Temple Of God on 2Thessalonians Is Not Figurative of the True Church

The picture that Paul’s early Jewish readers would have had was of the **literal** temple in Jerusalem as having been desecrated by Antiochus IV in 168/7 B.C.E and the recording, in the two books of Maccabees, of this and the events leading to the rededication of the altar and the temple and resulting in the annual Jewish festival of Hanukkah. It is not possible to make the **figurative** description: “you are a temple of God” referring to the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 3:16 to mean the temple that “*the Man of Lawlessness*” sits in. In fact, it is impossible for the “*the Man of Lawlessness*” as he is described in 2 Thessalonians, to sit among and dominate the body of believers because Jesus had said: “A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers” (*John 10:5*).

True Christians would very easily recognize the false voice of such “a stranger”, *one “who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.”* So Christians would never follow such a person or have him regularly sitting among them. Further proof that the 2 Thessalonians temple is not figurative for the Church, is the fact that, in the few places that Paul uses the Greek word *naos* (temple) to mean something other than the ‘holy place’ in Jerusalem, he always explained that particular metaphorical meaning. Secondly it is “**the** temple” in contrast to Paul’s metaphorical usage of “**a** temple” elsewhere in 1 Cor. 3:19; 2 Cor. 6:16 and Eph. 2:19-21. So wherever Paul uses “**a** temple” it is metaphorical or analogous of the body of believers, but his usage of “**the** temple” is always a reference to the literal temple in Jerusalem. This even includes 1 Corinthians 3:17 where the two occasions of the words “**the** temple” both refer to Jerusalem and the phrase “*for the temple of God* [at Jerusalem]

is holy, and that is what you are [i.e. holy].” So Christians are only “a temple of God” as analogous to “the temple” at Jerusalem because it is holy; they do not replace it. Otherwise Paul’s argument would not make sense. The misapplication of the 2 Thessalonians temple as being *the church* did not appear until the third century with Origen’s allegorical method.

A FUTURE TEMPLE

The temple of God that both Jesus and Paul spoke of did not turn out to be the temple that was standing until 70 A.D. The events of the “end of the age” are in close proximity to a future destruction of the temple. How can this be understood when it appears that Jesus spoke of the temple that existed in his time? It was the Jewish way of understanding that two different structures on the same site are viewed as one particular temple. This was the view 500 years before Jesus’ time when Haggai asks:

❖ “Who is left among you who saw **this house** in its **former glory**? How do you see it now? (*Haggai 2:3*).

“The Man of Lawlessness” Has Not Yet Arrived

- The context of the passage is eschatological. Verse 1 says “...with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to him...” Hence all the details of the passage must refer to the time of the end when Jesus returns.
- “*The Man of Lawlessness*” is identical with the one spoken of by the early Church as ‘antichrist’ and regarded as an individual **to appear in the days immediately before the return of Christ**.
- “Then that lawless one will be **revealed** 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*). So ‘*the Man of Lawlessness*’ appears only in conjunction with Messiah’s appearing at which time Jesus brings him to his end.
- If the Rebellion and the revealing of “*the Man of Lawlessness*” referred to in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 had occurred in the second century and onward it would be meaningless as an event for Christians to watch out for as occurring before the “*coming of our Lord Jesus Christ*” and “*the coming of the Day of the Lord*.”
- “But the coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of **counterfeit miracles**, signs and wonders” (*2 Thess. 2:9 NIV*).
- The clergy are not and never have been capable of actual miracles in spite of displays by charlatans. The Bible’s description is of miracles on such a scale that vast numbers of Christians will be duped and all in one particular period of time.

The Mystery of Lawlessness

Lawlessness and rebellion against God has existed throughout human history yet it reaches its final and most virulent form when embodied in ‘*the Man of Lawlessness*’ who appears only in conjunction with Messiah’s appearing. There should be no confusion between “*the mystery of lawlessness*” revealed only to believers which “*is already at work*” in the apostles’ days and “*the Man of Lawlessness*” who is yet to appear. This shows a similar pattern to the “*mystery of the kingdom*” (Mark 4:11) as existing in the apostles’ days and the actual Kingdom yet to exist on earth. This *mystery of lawlessness* = The “*many antichrists have come*” in Paul’s and John’s day and who have “*the spirit of the antichrist*” (1 John 4:3). These antichrists are also *the “many false prophets”* who “*will arise*” mentioned by Jesus’ in Matthew 24. Yet the ultimate antichrist is shown in the words “*you have heard that antichrist is coming*.” (1 John 2:18). He is therefore in the future. So “*the Man of Lawlessness*” himself does not appear or get revealed until his **parousia** which must occur immediately prior to the **parousia** of Christ because Christ slays him. Hence “*the Man of Lawlessness*” cannot be anyone revealed in the early centuries but only “*that he may be revealed in his time*” which must coincide with Messiah’s **parousia**.

The Restrainer

This passage is very ambiguous and can be interpreted according to a slightly different rendering to that which is found in our standard translations. This rendering is according to a thorough analysis of the relevant Greek words which often have numerous meanings in English and a thorough exegesis of the entire second chapter in 2 Thessalonians:

❖ “And you now know **what** [*the rebellion and the revealing of the man of lawlessness*] **hinders** him [*Christ*], so that in his time he [*Christ*], will be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only **he**

- ❖ [*the man of lawlessness*] who now holds back does so until he **arrives in our midst**. Then the lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of his mouth, and destroy by the splendour of his coming” (2 Thess. 2:6-8).

Of prime concern to Paul’s readers was “*the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ*” rather than the revealing of “*the man of lawlessness*.” Hence, Paul may have been telling them about what was causing the delay in Christ’s return, namely, **the rebellion and the revealing of the man of lawlessness** yet to appear. However, if one follows the standard rendering, the “*what is restraining him now*” and “*he who now restrains it*” in Paul’s day show that someone is using a something (*evidently known to the recipients of the letter*) to do the restraining of full blown lawlessness embodied in “*the Man of Lawlessness*.” This person does not necessarily need to be a human or a body of humans acting as restrainer. Although few commentators would venture dogmatism in identifying this restrainer it is possible that it is someone from the heavenly realm. Because “*the Man of Lawlessness*” comes with **supernatural power** the restrainer too must have such power to be able to restrain him. Therefore the restrainer cannot be a human civil authority. Two suggestions that have been proposed are: 1) that it could be Michael the archangel or 2) that it could be God himself so that it is **God’s decree** that is the ‘*what*’ in the “*what is restraining*” according to Culver in *Daniel and the Latter Days*, p. 67.

Identical Details in the Prophetical Books

Because the Scriptures display a pattern of progressive revelation of God’s purpose throughout, small details concerning the 2 Thessalonians 2:3-9 teaching can be discerned through much of the Hebrew Scriptures. This is especially true of the book of Daniel to which Jesus specifically points when he says: “When you see the **abomination of desolation** spoken of by the prophet Daniel...” (Matt. 24:15).

COMPARISON OF DETAILS

- ❖ “For that day (*the day of the Lord*) will not come, unless **the rebellion** comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who **opposes** and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he *takes his seat in the temple of God*, proclaiming himself to be God ... And then the lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord Jesus will **kill with the breath of his mouth** and bring to nothing *by the appearance of His coming (parousia)* ... The coming (*parousia*) of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and **false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception** for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and be saved” (2 Thess. 2:3-9 ESV).
- ❖ “He [*the 11th king—the little horn of verses 8 and 24*] shall *speak words against the Most High*, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High, and shall think to change the times and the law; and they shall be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time” (Dan. 7:25).
- ❖ “And at the latter end of their kingdom... a **king of bold countenance**... He will cause deceit to succeed... will magnify himself... will destroy many, **He will even oppose the Prince of princes (the Messiah)**” (Dan. 8:23-27).
- ❖ “And the king [**the contemptible/despicable person**—verse 21] shall do as he wills. He shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god, and shall *speak astonishing things against the God of gods*. He shall prosper until the indignation is accomplished...” (Dan. 11:36).
- ❖ “There was given to him [**the beast**] a mouth *speaking arrogant words* and blasphemies, and authority to act for 42 months was given to him” (Rev. 13:5 NASB).

The Assyrian

- ❖ “Assyria, the rod of My anger... I send it against a godless nation ... the *arrogant heart* of the King of Assyria and the pomp of **his** haughtiness ... ‘O my people who dwell in Zion, do not fear the Assyrian who strikes you with the rod...’” (Isa. 10:5, 12, 24 NASB).

The historical attack (Isa. 36:20) by Sennacherib King of ancient Assyria in c 701 B.C came from Lachish to the south-west of Jerusalem. Yet this future Assyrian approaches Jerusalem **from the north** (Isa. 10:28-32). However, Sennacherib evidently acts as a type of the Antichrist.

- ❖ “...and he [*the shoot from Jesse*] shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and **with the breath of his lips he shall kill** the wicked. (‘slay the evil one’ LXX)” (Isa. 11:4b).

This is the cross reference to 2 Thessalonians 2:8. So Paul is quoting this in the context of ‘*the Man of Lawlessness*’ thereby connecting the subject matter with the Assyrian of Isaiah 10:5-24:

- ❖ “...on a day of great slaughter, ... to shake *the* nations with *the* sieve of worthlessness ...³⁰ And Yahweh will cause the majesty of his voice to be heard, and he will cause the descent of his arm to be seen, in furious anger and a flame of devouring fire, *with* a cloudburst and a rainstorm and stones of hail ... Indeed, Assyria will be shattered by the voice of Yahweh; he strikes with the rod.³² And every stroke of *the* staff of foundation that Yahweh lays will be on it with timbrels and lyres, and he will fight against it with battles of brandishing.³³ For Topheth has been prepared from yesterday; indeed, it is made ready for the king. He makes its pile of wood deep and wide; he makes fire and wood *abundant*. The breath of Yahweh burns in it like a stream of sulfur” (*Isa. 30:25ffLEB*).

Compare Revelation 19:20 concerning those thrown into the fire which burns with brimstone.

- ❖ “...so Yahweh of hosts will come down to fight upon Mount Zion and upon its hill ...⁶ Turn back to *the one against* whom the sons of Israel **have made deep rebellion**.⁷ For on that day, each one will reject his idols of silver and his idols of gold which your hands have made *in sin* for you ...⁸ And Assyria (Lit. the Assyrian) shall fall by a **sword not of a man...**” (*Isa. 31:4-8 LEB*). Compare Daniel 8:25.
- ❖ “(*Messiah verse 2*) will **deliver us from the Assyrian** when **he** attacks our land” (*Micah. 5:5, 6*).

This one is, as the earlier descriptions, the enemy of God’s people who is killed by Messiah at the end-time.

- ❖ “...and gather them [*Israel*] from Assyria; and I will bring them into the land of Gilead and Lebanon ... and they will pass through the sea of distress...And the pride of **Assyria will be brought down...**”
(*Zech. 10:10, 11*).

This prophecy was given 100 years after the ancient Assyrian empire had fallen. Hence, we must look to its having a future fulfilment:

- ❖ “He will stretch out His hand against **the north** and **destroy Assyria**, and he will make Nineveh a desolation...” (*Zeph. 2:13*).

Assyria is therefore evidently “the king of the north” as described in Daniel 11. The entire book of Zephaniah gives a context of the end-time. So this evil Assyrian gets destroyed at that time.

The King of Babylon, Daystar son of the dawn—

- ❖ “...take up this taunt against the king of Babylon, and say, how the oppressor has ceased ... But you said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will *sit on the mount of assembly* in the recesses of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.” (*Isa. 14:4, 13, 14 NASB*).

The King of the North (Seleucid, Syrian)

- ❖ “The despicable person...**he shall act deceitfully** ... Forces from him shall appear and *profane the temple* ... The king who honours a god of fortresses” (*Dan. 11:21-45*).

The next words of 12:1 “**And at that time**” put the context of the King of the North’s destruction in the same time frame as the Great Tribulation, the rescuing of Daniel’s people and the resurrection, all of which occur at the return of Messiah who will then slay the “*lawless one*” (2 Thess. 2:8). This fits the time scale for the antichrist event described in the rest of the Scriptures.

Additional Descriptions of the Antichrist in the Christian Scriptures

- “The desolating abomination standing where **he** ought not” (Mark 13:14 NAB, REB).
- The Rider of the white horse (Rev. 6) or possibly each rider of the four horses according to both Lang and Pink.
- The Beast from the abyss (Rev. 11:7). Also with 7 heads and 10 diadems which gets a fatal head wound (Rev. 13). This beast seems also to encompass Antichrist’s empire.
- The eighth king (Rev.17:11).

Types of the Antichrist

Nimrod, Chedorlaomer, the Pharaoh of the Exodus (the Assyrian Isa. 52:4), Goliath, Sennacharib, Haman, Herod, Judas Iscariot, Antiochus Epiphanes (in 1 and 2 Maccabees.)

Reasons Why the Antichrist Is a Single Individual

- The grammatical natural reading of “the man” and “the antichrist” must concern only a single individual. If the reference were to a system then the term ‘antichristian’ would have been used rather than “the antichrist,” because Christ is an individual.

NOTE: to say that “the man of Lawlessness” really means “the men of lawlessness” because, by way of comparison, the singular term “the man of God” in 2 Timothy 3:17, although said to each individual “man of God,” really applies to all men of God is to take terms from two very different contexts. Although what is said concerning the application of “the man of God” is perfectly correct, nevertheless, it can never be applied to “the man of Lawlessness” because of the latter’s eschatological context.

- Just as God is identified by singular personal pronouns so too, in each of the above many descriptions, “the man of Lawlessness” is identified as a single individual by singular personal pronouns. This is the grammatical natural reading.
- Each of the above descriptions and types show that antichrist is a single individual existing in one period of time, but not a succession of individuals nor a system or organization, e.g. referring to the King of the North. Daniel 11:45 says:

“And **he** shall plant the tabernacles of **his** palace...yet **he** shall come to **his** end, and none shall help **him**.”

- In John 17:12 Judas Iscariot (*a single individual*) is called “*the son of destruction*.” In First Thessalonians 2:3 the “*man of lawlessness*” is also called “*the son of destruction*” thereby indicating that he is also an individual.
 - Christ is a single individual, and so, logically is the final “antichrist (that) is coming” in the future (1 John 2:19). The ‘*many antichrists*’ mentioned are simply those who display:
 - ❖ “...every spirit that does not confess Jesus...the spirit of antichrist” (1 John 4:3).
 - ❖ “...the one who denies the Father and the Son” (1 John 2:22).
 - ❖ “...not acknowledging Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh” (2 John 7).
 - The arrival of: ‘*the man of lawlessness*’ is an indicator of the approach of the “*coming of our Lord Jesus*.” (2 Thess. 2). It is illogical for this to be a continuing indicator throughout the centuries as with the idea that ‘the man of lawlessness’ is a succession of individuals. It would never then be an actual indicator of when the Lord Jesus would come.
 - “Then **that** lawless **one** will be revealed whom the Lord will slay...and bring to an end *by the appearance of His coming*” (2 Thess. 2:8).
- This describes a single event involving a lawless one. Jesus does not slay a succession of individuals (*popes*) throughout the many centuries.
- The **parousia** of ‘*the man of lawlessness*’ is contrasted with the **parousia** of *Christ* (verse 9). Both are individuals whose advents occur in the same period of time. The parousia of Christ is yet future. Therefore, no part of the parousia of the ‘man of lawlessness’ can be in the past.

Antichrist Was Understood to Be a Single Individual for at Least the First Six Centuries

All Christian writers for the first 6 centuries (*who wrote on the subject*) believed the antichrist to be a single individual. According to Irenaeus in A.D. 185:

when this antichrist shall have devastated all things in this world, he will reign **for three years and six months**, and sit in the temple *in Jerusalem*; and then the Lord will come from heaven in the clouds, in the glory of the Father, sending **this man** and those who follow him into the lake of fire; but bringing in for the righteous the times of the kingdom.

‘The Teaching of the Apostles’ in the early 2nd century:

and then shall appear the world-deceiver *as Son of God*, **who** shall do signs and wonders, and the earth shall be delivered into **his** hands, and **he** shall do lawless deeds such as have never yet been done since the beginning of the world.

Cyril Bishop of Jerusalem in the 4th century:

But after these, the Antichrist is the 11th... at first **he** assumes a character of gentleness (as if a wise and understanding **person**), pretending both to moderation and philanthropy deceiving, both by lying miracles and prodigies which come from **his** magical deceptions, the Jews, *as if he were the expected Messiah*.

Gregory of Tours at the end of the 6th century:

Antichrist will assume circumcision, asserting **himself to be the Christ**. **He** will then place a statue to be worshipped in the temple at Jerusalem.

The Change to an Antichrist System

In the middle of the 12th century **the** Cathari introduced the historicist approach to interpreting prophecy. The Saracens were seen as being the antichrist.

1180. **Peter Waldo** identifies the antichrist with the *Papacy*.

c.1350. **The Waldenses** publish a treatise to prove that *the system of Popery* was the antichrist.

1519. **Martin Luther** identifies antichrist with the *Papacy*.