

Antichrist

As eventually defined in Christian tradition, the antichrist is a mythical-historical figure controlled by Satan who opposes Christ and usurps his place among humankind. He deceives humanity with false teaching and signs and wonders (*see* Signs) in order to obtain allegiance that only Christ deserves. He opposes Christ and persecutes Christians who maintain their proper allegiance to Christ alone. At his return Christ will defeat the antichrist and his followers, thus establishing his divine authority without challenge. Christ's victory over the antichrist is central to the final battle of the cosmic struggle between God and Satan linked with the forces of evil.

1. Historical and Theological Origins
2. Antichrist in the New Testament
3. Antichrist in the Early Church

1. Historical and Theological Origins.

The early Christian conception of the antichrist is multifaceted, and its origins are obscure. The concept is rooted in the apocalyptic and messianic traditions of late Second Temple Judaism (third century B.C. to A.D. 70) and Christian interpretation of the OT in light of these traditions. In turn, these traditions are often rooted in the mythology of the ancient Near East and in Persian dualism. Jewish apocalyptic adapted the ancient Near Eastern combat myth of a great primeval battle at creation between a powerful god and a chaos monster or dragon (*see* Beasts, Dragon). It also adapted the Persian dualism that taught that the world is engaged in a fierce battle between the powers of good and evil. In Jewish thought, battles between the wicked and the faithful, good and evil angels, and the dragon of chaos and the Creator God are all parts of this struggle. The present age is controlled by evil but will be followed by a new age controlled by good.

Typically Jewish apocalyptic molded this mythology and dualism into prophecy that explained the struggles of the righteous in this world in terms of the contemporary struggle of God and the righteous against adversaries who are agents of the powers of evil. These adversaries include oppressive foreign rulers who persecute the righteous, as well as false teachers and prophets who deceive them. The end of the struggle is the victorious coming of the Messiah to defeat the adversaries and establish the kingdom of God (Dan 11:36; Ezek 28:2; *2 Apoc. Bar.* 36–40; *T. Mos.* 8; *see* Kingdom of God). The most powerful adversary emerging within Jewish apocalyptic was Satan, or Beliar (or Belial). Satan has roots in the dragon of chaos that opposed God in creation mythology. In the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, Beliar, a demonic figure from the tribe of Dan, entices Israel to turn from worshiping God to live in error. A messiah of the tribe of Levi binds him and casts him into everlasting fire (*T. Dan.* 5:10–11; *T. Levi* 18:12; *T. Judah* 25:3).

Actual historical events often shaped the adaptation of mythology and dualism by Jewish apocalyptic. The rule of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes of Syria (175–

164 B.C.) did the most to sharpen the depiction of tyrannical opposition to God focused in an individual. He desecrated the Jerusalem temple by dedicating the altar to Zeus and sacrificing a pig on it; this act was called the “abomination of desolation.” In the book of Daniel the Greek empire is portrayed as a beast with ten horns and a little horn (Antiochus) speaking arrogantly and waging war against the righteous, only to be destroyed by the Ancient of Days, who gives his kingdom to a “son of man” (Dan 7; cf. 8:5–25; 9:26–27; 11:21–45). *Testament of Moses* 6–10 (first century A.D.) combines traits of Antiochus Epiphanes and Herod the Great to form an anti-God figure of the last day whose influence, along with the devil, is destroyed by God.

In A.D. 68 Emperor Nero committed suicide by stabbing himself in the throat with a sword. There were rumors that he did not die but had escaped to Rome’s enemy, the Parthian Empire. Others thought that he had died and been resurrected. The myth is called *Nero redivivus*. Either scenario depicted him as planning to invade the Roman Empire (see Roman Empire). In one scheme he was to attack Jerusalem only to be stopped by the Messiah (*Sib. Or.* 5:93–110), and in another he was Beliar incarnate (*Sib. Or.* 3:63–74).

[p. 51]

2. Antichrist in the New Testament.

The word *antichrist* (*antichristos*) appears only in the Johannine epistles (1 Jn 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 Jn 7), although the concept occurs elsewhere. In the NT and early Christian sources the antichrist appears in apocalyptic contexts expressing the hope that God will intervene in history to destroy God’s enemies and the enemies of God’s people and usher in a new era under God’s undisputed command. Within this dualism, the antichrist is the enemy and evil substitute for Christ. As God, angels and the righteous have evil counterparts in Satan, demons and the wicked respectively, so Christ has his counterpart in the antichrist.

It is anachronistic to speak of an antichrist before the early Christians identified Jesus as the Messiah and modified Jewish traditions accordingly. The antichrist tradition results from the converging of separate streams of Jewish tradition within early Christian eschatology. It has two forms, based on the Jewish traditions used. One is a nonpolitical, deceptive religious figure from within the community. It may be rooted in the Jewish tradition of the prophet like Moses and a false prophet who opposes the true prophet and misleads the righteous with signs and wonders (Deut 18:18–22). The second form is a tyrannical ruler from outside the community who oppresses the faithful in the end times. It may be rooted in the Jewish tradition of end-time tyrants. Both traditions are reflected in the prefix *anti-* (Greek *anti*, not Latin *anti*), which means “acting in place of” as well as “opposed to.” These Jewish traditions themselves are hard to trace, as is the path of their convergence into the antichrist tradition, a convergence from which the NT picture of the antichrist emerges unfocused.

These traditions of the false prophet and end-time tyrant were used by NT and early Christian writers as the situations they addressed dictated. The end-time tyrant tradition was used in light of the anti-Jewish and Christian activities of the emperors

Caligula and Nero, as well as Rome's destruction of Jerusalem, which was reminiscent of the actions of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (2 Thess; Rev). The false prophet tradition was used when the church was threatened by false teaching (Mk 13 and par.; 2 Thess; 1-3 Jn).

2.1. *The Synoptic Apocalypse.* The Synoptic Apocalypse (Mk 13 par. Mt 24 and Lk 21) contains Jesus' prophecy of the appearance in the last days of such false prophets and false Christs, who will perform signs and wonders, deceive the faithful and lead many astray (Mk 13:6 par. Mt 24:5 and Lk 21:8; Mk 13:21–22 par. Mt 24:23–24). These false prophets and false Christs are closely associated with the concept of the antichrist but are not equivalent. They do not demand worship, nor are they the cause of the suffering of those days; they only accompany the appearance of the desolating sacrilege mentioned (perhaps Zealot activity in the temple during the war of A.D. 66–73).

2.2. *2 Thessalonians.* Paul gives us the earliest Christian prophecy of the antichrist in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12, written about A.D. 52 (see *DPL*, Man of Lawlessness). Paul asserts that in the last days a great rebellion against God will be led by a man of lawlessness. He will usurp the place of God, placing himself in the temple of God and demanding to be worshiped. He will perform all kinds of signs and wonders under the power and plan of Satan. Paul combines the false prophet and the end-time tyrant traditions in a single figure, perhaps in part because of the contemporary actions of Emperor Caligula, who wanted to be worshiped as a god and demanded that his statue be set up in the temple at Jerusalem (A.D. 40).

2.3. *Johannine Epistles.* In the Johannine epistles the antichrist is portrayed as a spirit (1 Jn 4:3) or collective force for evil in the last days (1 Jn 2:18). The antichrist is plural, representing all those who held erroneous views of the person of Christ and were already manifest in the church at the time of the writing (1 Jn 2:22; 4:3; 2 Jn 7). In this case the antichrists are docetists who did not confess that Jesus the man was the divine Christ come in the flesh. This portrayal of the antichrist as a collective of deceptive false teachers (see *Adversaries*) already present in the Johannine community relies on the false prophet tradition. This portrayal is an expression of Johannine realized eschatology, in which the age to come is already present (see *John, Letters of*).

2.4. *Revelation.* The most developed treatment of the antichrist is found in the book of Revelation, written at the end of the reign of Emperor Domitian, who was persecuting Christians (A.D. 96). John uses the emperor to symbolize the Roman imperial system as evil and empowered by Satan, in part because the [p. 52] emperor demanded worship as God and persecuted Christians who refused to do so. John combines the traditions of the false prophet and the end-time tyrant, specifically *Nero redivivus* traditions, with the chaos dragon of ancient Near Eastern mythology.

John portrays the evil Roman Empire using the images of two beasts. The first beast, from the sea, is modeled on Daniel's fourth beast (Dan 7:7–8, 23–27). It has ten horns and seven heads, with one of the heads having a fatal wound that has been healed (Rev 11:7; 13:1–10; 16:12–16; 17; 19:20–21). This beast is given power by the dragon (Satan; Rev 12:3, 9), blasphemes God and demands that people worship it. As the symbolism of Revelation 17 makes clear, the first beast is the antichrist and

symbolizes the Roman Empire; its heads are various emperors who demanded worship, with the healed head representing Nero—all empowered by Satan. Nero became a focus for the antichrist because he was the first official persecutor of God's people, the church, and was rumored to have been resurrected from the dead like Christ.

The second beast has two horns like a lamb and speaks like the dragon. It performs miracles and compels the worship of the first beast under threat of death (13:11–18; 16:13; 19:20–21). This beast represents the emperor cult, whose priests enforced the worship of the emperor throughout the Roman Empire. In the consummation of all things Christ throws both beasts into the lake of fire as part of the eradication of evil from creation (19:20–21).

3. **Antichrist in the Early Church.**

The antichrist tradition was popular among the early Christians, and both false prophet and end-time tyrant traditions continued. One Christian source from the end of the first century is the “Testament of Hezekiah” (3:13–4:22 of the *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah*). It blends the false Christ, Beliar and end-time tyrant traditions into a mature concept of antichrist. Here the antichrist is Beliar (Satan) incarnate in *Nero redivivus*. He presents himself as Christ, performs miracles and sets up his image in every city for people to worship. At the Second Coming, Christ throws Beliar and his followers into Gehenna.

In the *Epistle of Barnabas* 4.1-5 (late first century A.D.) the beast of the fourth kingdom of Daniel 7:7–8 is the Roman Empire of the author's time. The beast is part of the wickedness and lawlessness of the last days and is probably to be identified as the antichrist. *Didache* 16 (second century A.D.) predicts that in the last days there will arise false prophets as well as the Deceiver, who will claim to be a Son of God, perform miracles and persecute the righteous.

Quoting 1 John 4:2–3 and 2 John 7, Polycarp (early second century A.D.) agrees with the Johannine epistles that the antichrist is the spirit of heresy. Everyone who denies the actual Incarnation is an antichrist (docetism), and everyone who denies the resurrection and judgment is the firstborn of Satan (Pol. *Phil.* 7.1). In deciphering the number of the antichrist, 666, Irenaeus (second century A.D.) identifies the antichrist with *Lateinos*, the Roman Empire, or *Teitan*, the ancient name of royal dignity belonging to a tyrant (*Haer.* 5.25, 30). Hippolytus (third century) wrote that the antichrist would arise from a revived Roman Empire to become the accepted Messiah of the Jews who persecutes the church, combining political tyrant with false prophet or messiah traditions (Hippolytus *Dem. Chr.*).

Although the NT and the early church identified contemporary heresies or political persons and systems as the antichrist, for both the antichrist in his fullness remains a future eschatological reality. His appearance is part of the final conflagration in which the forces of evil make their greatest and final effort to deceive the people of God, divert their allegiance and defeat the powers of good only to be completely and ultimately defeated.

See also Beasts, Dragon, Sea, Conflict Motif; Emperor, Emperor Cult; Eschatology; John, Letters of; Prophecy, Prophets, False Prophets; Revelation, Book of; Satan, Devil.

BIBLIOGRAPHY. W. Bousset, *The Antichrist Legend*, London: Hutchinson, 1896); F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (WBC; Waco, TX: Word, 1982); D. Ford, *The Abomination of Desolation in Biblical Eschatology* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1979); J. Ernst, *Die eschatologischen Gegenspieler in den Schriften des Neuen Testaments* (Regensburg, Germany: Friedrich Pustet, 1967); R. Fuller, *Naming the Antichrist: The History of an American Obsession* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); C. H. Giblin, *The Threat to Faith: An Exegetical and Theological Reexamination of 2 Thessalonians 2* (AnBib 31; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967); G. C. Jenks, [p. 53] *The Origins and Early Development of the Antichrist Myth* (BZNW 59; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991); H.-J. Klauck, "Der Antichrist und das johanneische Schisma: Zu 1 Joh 2, 18–19" in *Christus bezeugen: Festschrift für Wolfgang Trilling zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. K. Kertlege et al. (ETS 59; Leipzig: St. Benno, 1989) 237–48; L. J. Lietaert Peerbolte, *The Antecedents of Antichrist: A Tradition-Historical Study of the Earliest Christian Views on Eschatological Opponents* (SJSJ 49; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996); V. Maag, "The Antichrist as a Symbol of Evil" in *Evil*, ed. Curatorium of the C. G. Jung Institute (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967) 57–82; B. McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994); B. Rigaux, *L'antéchrist et l'opposition au royaume messianique dans l'ancien et le Nouveau Testament* (Gembloux: J. Duculot, 1932); R. Schippers, *Mythologie en Eschatologie in 2 Thessalonicenzen 2, 1–17* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1961); H. Schlier, "Vom Antichrist: Zum 13. Kapitel der Offenbarung Johannes" in his *Die Zeit der Kirche* (Freiburg: Herder, 1956) 16–29; L. Sirard, "La parousie de l'antéchrist: 2 Thess 2, 3–9" in *Studiorum Paulinorum Congressus II 1961* (AnBib 17–18; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963) 2:89–100; G. Strecker, "Der Antichrist: Zum religionsgeschichtlichen Hintergrund von 1 Joh 2, 18.22; 4, 3 und 2 Joh 7" in *Text and Testimony: Essays on New Testament and Apocryphal Literature in Honour of A. J. J. Klijn*, ed. T. Baarda et al. (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij: J. H. Kok, 1988) 247–54.

D. F. Watson