

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

THE ANTICHRIST OF 2 THESSALONIANS.

I PROPOSE in this paper to review once more the problem of the above difficult passage, on the assumption of the genuineness of the Epistle. Granted that Paul wrote it, whom could he mean by the man of sin? It may in the end prove impossible to secure a satisfactory interpretation on the assumption that the Epistle is genuine; but we ought to exhaust every effort to save the threatened limb before we yield to those who favour violent measures.

Our key must be furnished by what we read in 1 Thessalonians ii. 14-16, and in several passages of the Acts, regarding the hostility of unconverted Jews towards the Pauline Gospel. Later, when a party of the Jewish Christians have become leaders in the same hostility, we hear less about the machinations of un-Christianized Jews. Paul, in 1 Thessalonians, draws an analogy between the persecutions endured by the Thessalonians and those endured by the primitive Christian community—the “churches of Judea.” In so speaking, he implies a wholly favourable view of the Jerusalem disciples. They are typical sufferers and typical Christians. Correspondingly, those who wrong them are the typical enemies of God, upon whom *the wrath is come to the uttermost*. If, then, Paul believed in Anti-Christ—the great leader of godlessness—he must inevitably place him, at this stage in his thoughts, among the Jews.¹ Outwardly, indeed, and nominally, the Jews continue to be God’s friends and worshippers. Inwardly, however, St. Paul conceives, they are God’s most determined enemies, and as such their case is hopeless. This may seem to us a bitter judgment; and perhaps it is. But, when we think of Jewish malignity towards St. Paul and towards his Lord

¹ Later stages may not have room for such a figure at all. That is one of the difficulties of the passage.

—a malignity which, as regards the disciple at any rate, eighteen centuries have done little to dilute—the judgment appears psychologically intelligible. What, then, is the future to bring? First and foremost, the Jews must unmask. They must appear in their true colours—not even seeming friends, but open enemies of God. This, then, is “the apostasy” (2 Thess. ii. 3) of which the Apostle had told his converts, and which they ought to keep in mind as the first great signal of the tragic drama of judgment.

The importance of “the apostasy,” however, is almost lost in what is to accompany it. For the movement is to find its personal head and embodiment in the man of sin. That great ungodly Jew is to be guilty of wickednesses which, unlikely as they may seem to be committed by a Jew, will yet, when they do occur, bear a character of outrage and horror in him beyond what they could have in any other. Thus they will mark unbelieving Judaism for what it is. They will show its hatred of God. Details are drawn chiefly from Old Testament passages, notably the picture of Antiochus Epiphanes in Daniel xi.,¹ but also Ezekiel’s denunciation of the King of Tyre (xxviii. 2). Caligula’s demand, that his statue should be placed in the temple at Jerusalem, has also probably influenced St. Paul. Transferred to a Jew, the claim of worship becomes even more hideous. Yet that is just what Paul expects. The more wicked, the more likely to be found in the programme of the “man of lawlessness.”

There is greater difficulty in divining what can be meant by the restraining force—neuter at verse 6, masculine at verse 7. What could that be which held back an ungodly Judaism from its full development? Might it be the presence of those suffering saints, the Christians of Jerusalem?

¹ Probably already interpreted, before St. Paul, as a picture of Antichrist.

“For the elect’s sake” (Matt. xxiv. 22; Mark xiii. 20),¹ God might restrain the full development of Jewish wickedness, while these were praying and labouring in the midst of Israel. In Paul’s mood of mind, however, he will expect matters to be pushed to an extreme. He may think that this malignant anti-Christian Judaism will drive out the Church. The Book of Acts traces the growing wickedness of the Jews upon similar lines. After Stephen’s death, all Christians leave Jerusalem “except the Apostles” (viii. 1); but, when Peter himself must flee (xii. 17), it is time for the systematic Gentile mission to begin (xiii. 1 and following chapters).² Or perhaps Paul may expect something beyond that. The Jews may kill out rather than drive out the Christian Church—making an end in the most tragic fashion. If none of these conjectures quite satisfies—if the context seems to demand something more definitely supernatural—we might meet the critic’s expectations without renouncing our historical construction. We might add to it. It may be accompanied by a supernatural reflex. Why should not the angel of Israel—“Michael your prince” (Dan. x. 21)—occupy his place, and avert the worst, while there are Christian Jews mixed with the destined followers of Anti-Christ? If the Jews drive out or kill out the Christians, they may at the same time be driving away their own angel guardian.

Or we might turn in quite another direction for the interpretation of the “restraint,” and think, with the general exegetical tradition, of the Roman empire and emperor. The Jews are the men of the law. Everything lawless is a horror to them, if we are to judge by what they

¹ The words are quoted as a parallel, not as an authority directly moulding Paul’s thought.

² Compare M. Baumgarten’s Commentary. If not the full and exhaustive Divine teleology which Baumgarten thinks it, the sequence of events he expounds is none the less St. Luke’s pragmatism as a historian.

say. But their deeds, time after time, in city after city, show them to be the patrons of lawless violence. Such check as they meet with is furnished by the great Pagan empire. *The mystery of lawlessness*—unrevealed in its full scope—*doth already work*: when God breaks the civilized heathen power, this last worst enemy of goodness, lawless anti-Christian Judaism, will burst forth in a final defiance of God and His Christ. If such was St. Paul's train of thought, he might well confine himself to vague hints, especially in writing. Even to contemplate the fall of the Empire, though with regret, must seem to the ruling authorities manifest treason.

When the obstacle (whatever it is) ceases to operate, all will be ready for the last scenes. The diabolical counterpart of Jesus will be manifested, with his hideous claims and frauds (*v.* 9); and those who would not have Christ (*v.* 10), their minds blinded by God's awful judgment (*v.* 11), will accept a master who, with all his adherents, is doomed to sudden and final destruction at the hands of the returning Christ (*v.* 8; *Isa.* xi. 4). These verses become much fuller of meaning when we cease to read them as an abstract dogmatic description of the doom of bad men, and take them as a programme for God's special enemies—unbelieving Israel. They would not receive Christ; they will receive Antichrist greedily. And they shall receive the reward of their choice that it deserves! ¹

If we look through the passage in the light of the above suggestions, it may seem to us that it contains strangely little which points with any certainty towards the Jews. But we must not do it injustice. We must take it as it presents itself; and it does not profess to be a teaching, but only a reminder. In his oral discourses—so we may fairly understand—Paul made everything plain. Now, he

¹ Are the Jews also aimed at in 2 Thess. i. 8?

has only to make allusions, in the cryptic phrases which apocalyptists love. He has told of the apostasy of Israel and of the rise of its diabolically wicked leader. The special point of importance at the moment is not who the Antichrist is, but *that there is to be an Antichrist* before the end of all things. When he forces himself to speak of Antichrist, St. Paul must needs do so in tones of emotion, in accents of horror. But that is incidental, inevitable. It is not done in order to teach the readers; they had been taught before. It is simply the right language for such thoughts; or it is relief to the speaker's mind.

It may be harder to conceive how St. Paul could advance from 2 Thessalonians ii. as now interpreted to Romans xi. But, in any case, he had to move from 1 Thessalonians ii. 16 to the same contrasted goal; it is unpardonable to strike out a passage, like that in 1 Thessalonians, which belongs to the well-attested text of an unquestionably Pauline epistle. And there are considerations which at any rate lessen the difficulty. For one thing, it lies in the nature of apocalyptic, whoever practises it, to revise its calculations under pressure from facts. Besides, the Paul of 1 and 2 Thessalonians is still, in thought, largely a Jew. He is overwhelmed with the horrible mystery of his nation's rejection of Jesus and persecution of Christian evangelists. His nation becomes to him an image of Antichrist. Heaven and earth are waiting till due judgment can be executed. He himself is rescuing before the Advent a few souls—Gentile souls; for to the Gentiles he has been sent—that he may lead them by the hand when he meets the returning Judge and Saviour: "These have I gained for Thee!" (1 Thess. ii. 19, 20). Such are the limits of Paul's horizon as yet. In the next few years his thoughts widen. Though he still—and always: Philippians iii. 20; iv. 5—expects the Advent within a very short time, he rejoices to realize

that the whole world is to have the message of the Gospel (Rom. i. 5), and, persuaded that God has "mercy upon all" (Rom. xi. 32), he recalls to mind that Israel was chosen of old, and allows himself to subordinate even Israel's sin to the thought of God's electing grace.¹ Some Christian scholars charge the later programme with "Jewish particularism" in thought; but we surely must admit that it breathes the Christian spirit more fully, or more deeply, than either 1 Thessalonians ii. or 2 Thessalonians ii. Ought we to add, that the supplanting of Jews by Judaizers as chief enemies of the Pauline Gospel may have helped to lessen the Apostle's sense of the wickedness of his unbelieving brethren? It could hardly fail, at any rate, to lessen his sense of the glory of the Christian Church at Jerusalem as the typical saints and sufferers. And that tends towards lightening the shadow which lies upon the unbelieving nation.

It is not probable that what is here suggested will be thought successful all through the passage. Perhaps it will not succeed at any point, at least as it stands. Criticism is a real and formidable ordeal. Yet something may be gained, if scholars are led to study the passage more carefully, treating it as genuinely Pauline. Had 2 Thessalonians ii. come from a *falsarius*, could he have afforded to confine himself to dark hints? Does not the very obscurity of the passage confirm the account it gives of itself, viz. that it is a later reference to previous clearer teachings communicated by word of mouth?

¹ It strikes one as strange that 1 Thess. should bid men "watch," and 2 Thess. add: "Oh, but the end cannot come till the man of lawlessness has been manifested." Still, this strangeness is inherent in the Second Epistle, whatever view we take of its date and authorship. It is, indeed, inherent in the eschatological and apocalyptic line of teaching, which, if on one side exciting men to a frenzy, yet marks out a programme, and theorizes learnedly upon "times and seasons."