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The Antichrist

by Roy Yates

Mr. Yates last gave us a contribution in a note on Colossians 1: 24 which appeared in April-June 1970. We welcome this study in the figure of Antichrist, particularly as portrayed in Revelation 13—a fitting sequel to David Brady's paper on the number of the Beast which appeared in our issue of October-December 1973. Mr. Yates explains that the terms "myth" and "mythological" in his paper are descriptive of the kind of language in which many of the leading ideas of the Apocalypse are expressed, not of the ideas themselves.

ALTHOUGH the actual name "Antichrist" is found in the New Testament only in the Johannine Epistles,¹ the idea is much more widespread, especially if we understand the force of the *anti* as indicating opposition as well as a false claim. Thus we include under the heading of Antichrist such passages as Dan. 7: 7f., 21f.; II Thess. 2, and Rev. 13, which deal with the opposition that the forces of evil offer Christ in the last days. There are strong associations here with the Jewish legend of an evil being who would appear in the last days, coupled with the idea that there was a "mystery of iniquity" already at work in the world.² This teaching was based on various Old Testament passages, especially the later chapters of Daniel where the references originally applied to Antiochus Epiphanes. Later on this was seen still to have a future reference and the Jews still looked for the appearance of a "Man of Sin" who would concentrate in himself the powers of evil and whose appearance would be a sign of the last time. In this cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil Jewish Apocalyptic taught that the world was under the limited and temporary sway of evil powers and that in the end God would reveal His Kingdom to make a final end of the kingdom of the adversary. It was also part of this ancient belief that before God's final victory was won evil would make one last desperate stand in the form of a supreme adversary who would be a kind of diabolical parody of God's Messiah. For the early Christians this adversary was to be an Antichrist, through whom evil would have its last long fling before abolition.

I John 2: 18. The concept of Antichrist is introduced into the Johannine Epistles as one that is already well known to the readers. Of course the significance of this depends on the dating of the doc-

¹ I Jn. 2: 18, 22; 4: 3; II Jn. 7.

² II Thess. 2: 7.

ument; it increases if it is dated earlier, and *vice versa*. In this verse the appearance of Antichrist is proof of the last hour. C. H. Dodd³ indicates that the author has rationalized the "myth"; it is no longer a monster from the deep claiming divine honours. There is no single Antichrist, but many—wherever doctrines are taught that subvert the essential truths of the gospel.⁴ We also note here a connection with false prophecy.⁵ Dodd further points out that on the whole the development of early Christian thought left the Antichrist "myth" behind, and that, apart from II Thess. 2, Paul has little or nothing to say about it.⁶ The author of the Johannine Epistles too has left behind the mythological form of language which figures so largely in the book of Revelation. For him the adversary is an idea and a doctrine, albeit an armed idea and a doctrine backed up by physical force, with power to poison men's minds and to pervert the truth. It is a lie; the empowered epitome of false belief. Dodd's interpretation of the "Antichrist" passages in the Johannine Epistles might well provide the key to the interpretation of the Antichrist passages in Revelation, as well as in the rest of the New Testament.

II Thessalonians 2: 3-10. This is a passage of notorious obscurity, but from the context it appears that some members of the Thessalonian church had misunderstood what Paul had said in his previous letter⁷ about the nearness of the Parousia, and they thought that the last days were upon them. Paul's concern was to allay the excitement and show that certain recognized signs would precede the Parousia, including a widespread apostasy and the appearance of the "Man of Sin". Since these had not yet materialized there was no reason to suppose that the Parousia was upon them. Nevertheless they were still to be on the alert because Paul could see a "mystery of iniquity" already at work, which was a sign that the personal incarnation of evil was not far distant. T. F. Glasson⁸ suggests that the attempt of the Emperor Caligula to set up his image in the Temple at Jerusalem in A.D. 40 may account for this conviction. The attempt did not succeed because Caligula died before his orders could be carried out. Thus he is not the Antichrist, but it could be argued that his attempt to violate the Temple showed that the spirit of Antichrist was abroad. In Jewish writings the "Man of Sin" was usually connected with the desecration of

³ *The Johannine Epistles* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1946), p. 49.

⁴ Cf. I Jn. 2: 22, where it is said that the 'liar', the 'antichrist' is the one who denies 'that Jesus is the Christ.' Also cf. 4: 3. Again II Jn. 7 is adamant on guarding the truth that Jesus Christ came 'in the flesh'.

⁵ Cf. Rev. 13: 11ff.

⁶ C. H. Dodd, *op. cit.* p. 50.

⁷ I Thess. 5: 1ff.

⁸ *The Second Advent* (London: Epworth, 3rd. edn., 1963), pp. 189-200.

the Temple, and especially with the actions of Antiochus Epiphanes. Thus in popular tradition it came to be believed that the Parousia was to be heralded by the last desperate fling of sin.

As part of these events the Thessalonians were to be on the look out for "the rebellion" and "the Man of Sin". "The rebellion" (v. 3) was a common feature of Jewish teaching about the end of the world. It was believed that there would be widespread apostasy from God before the Judgement. Here we see that this belief was taken over into Christian Apocalyptic.⁹

"The Man of Sin"¹⁰ presents an insoluble problem of interpretation. He is not Satan himself, but a unique man in whom Satan dwells and operates. So complete is the control of Satan over this instrument that the parallel between the incarnation of Christ and the indwelling of Satan in the *Anomos* is almost complete. Hence he is the Antichrist. He claims divine status and backs up his claim with signs and miracles. With the power he displays he induces men to follow him, albeit to their destruction. This power is seen to be active even now in the world as "the mystery of lawlessness", and it would be fully revealed if it were not for a restraining power which holds him in check. The Parousia of the Son of Man would only come when the restraining power had been taken away and the "Man of Sin" given free reign to exercise his perverting influence. In the figure of the "Man of Sin" we have Paul's conception of the Antichrist. The restraining power which holds him in check for a while has been variously interpreted as the Roman Empire, the Emperor, Satan as the figure in temporary control of the forces of evil, the preaching of the Gospel, and even Paul himself. There is no clue given in the passage, but it is assumed that the Thessalonians know what is being referred to: "you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time"(v. 7).

This chapter has bearing on Paul's doctrine of Satan. T. Ling comments, "Satanic power is seen to be of a kind which ultimately must manifest itself in a tyrannous human power that has totally dissociated itself from the demands of God."¹¹ In the end we see that Christ is victorious over sin and lawlessness incarnated in human beings. In this sense the "Man of Sin" can be seen as a symbol of mankind's revolt against God; of the accumulated evil of this present age which has assumed the form of a demonic power; and of the pride of man which seeks to usurp the authority of God.

⁹ Cf. Matt. 24: 10ff.

¹⁰ Or "Man of Lawlessness", also called the "Son of Perdition" (v. 3) and "the Lawless One," (v. 9).

¹¹ *The Significance of Satan* (London: S.P.C.K., 1961), p. 51.

W. Neil¹² thinks that this obscure passage finds most relevance as the symbolic expression of the cosmic battle between Christ and the Antichrist, God and Mammon, which rages now and will continue and intensify until the final judgement falls on the world and the power of evil is vanquished by the power of God. Even here in St. Paul, as in the Johannine Epistles, the Antichrist is seen in terms of a human agent, an actual terrestrial power. The question of a spiritual power operating this human puppet is another matter. At least there is fundamental agreement that Antichrist himself is a worldly power, whatever his driving force. The same is found to be true of Antichrist in the book of Revelation.

Revelation 13. It is in this chapter that the mythological portrayal of the Antichrist reaches its fullest development in the New Testament. Although the idea is expressed in the author's own unique way and imagery, there is much in common with the portrayal in the rest of the New Testament. It is seen that Antichrist is a human agent; that all the events described take place with the approval of God; that there is a close connection with false prophecy; and that his chief weapons are lies (false doctrines) and perverted power. The whole chapter reveals that evil assumes the form of a demonic parody of God, of Christ, and of divine revelation, with the intention of subverting the truth and corrupting men's minds—that so deluded they might become part of the avalanche of evil that brings them to their inevitable destruction. The working lie annihilates itself after evil's last big fling, by the process of self-destruction. In the end the great lie is seen to have no real substance, only appearance. It is seen to be a sham.

As the course of events in the last days unfolds before the eyes of the Seer, the restraining power is removed, and evil has free reign on the earth. The context of Ch. 13 is the revelation of Jesus Christ seen from the point of view of its conclusion in Christ. The seven trumpets sound and time is no more (Ch. 10). Chapters 11-20 are a prophecy which looks on the universe from the point of view of its end and future in Christ. From Chapter 12 we gather that Satan, in the form of a Dragon, is defeated by Michael and the heavenly hosts. He is cast down to the earth, which is his dominion for the time being, along with his minions, and where he reigns for 1,260 days—the whole eschatological epoch. The woman, who is the object of his raging, is kept safely; and so he turns to make war on her offspring—namely the saints. The nature of this new persecution inflicted on the saints is shown in a new vision in chapter 13. Thus the movement of hostility towards God, which

¹² M. Black and H. H. Rowley, *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (London: Nelson, 1962), on "Thessalonians", §872.

has its authorship and support in Satan, does not abate as history unfolds itself to its close, but rather grows. In the last days attention is focused on the Antichrist, the agent through whom Satan operates.

In this chapter we deal with a demonic triad of beings, with Satan, the Beast, and the False Prophet, who are meant to be a parody of the heavenly triad of revelation. They do not represent the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (this doctrine may not have reached such maturity by the time Revelation was written), rather they represent the triad of revelation—of Father, Son and Prophet.¹³ These three beings are set out as a hierarchy, their respective origins indicating their relationship to one another. Satan has his origin in the heavens, the Beast in the sea, and the Prophet on the earth. In describing the demonic hierarchy A. M. Farrer¹⁴ suggests that there are no real grades in it; it is a sham. The Antichrist and false prophet are equally men, and are related as Goebbels was to Hitler. In being a demon Satan has no real superiority over the other two, but his power is parasitical on the sin of men. In this sense Farrer thinks that Satan is the vast image of a working lie sprawled over half the heavens. There is a large amount of truth in this, but one wonders if the motivating power behind this vast accumulation of evil is not something more than the total aggregate of human sin seen *en masse*.

In the closing verses of Chapter 12 Satan stands on the sea shore. His attempt to attack the women has been thwarted, and so he turns his attention to her offspring, the saints. He looks into the water and creates his own reflection, and the Beast—the monster from the deep—emerges. The emergence of the Beast is meant to be a mystery.¹⁵ Satan has no mandate to release the powers of the sea, yet in the furtherance of his subversive plans, the forces of evil come forth, and even the forces of nature are twisted and the minds of men bent to serve his evil purposes for a season.

Vv. 1-4. Description of the First Beast. As indicated, the Beast has its origins in Satan, the Dragon, who is also the serpent who tempted Eve—the seed of the serpent making war on the woman's seed. The Beast is the reflection of Satan and has similar attributes.

¹³ The prophet was an important figure in the early Church, through whose utterances the divine word was believed to be imparted and revelation continued. "Prophet" occurs in the lists of ministries in I Cor. 12: 28 and Eph. 4: 11. Also, if the Didache is accepted as an early and authentic historical document of A.D. 100-200 we have clear evidence that the office of prophet continued until the sub-Apostolic era, although its authority had already fallen into disrepute.

¹⁴ *A Rebirth of Images* (London: Dacre, 1949), p. 286.

¹⁵ A. M. Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), p. 151.

He is pictured as rising from the sea; the "Great Deep" of ancient mythology; the primeval waters of chaos. He is to attempt to bring the earth back to that original chaos, thus destroying the order of creation. There are close connections here with the creation of the chaos monster, Leviathan. E. Langton¹⁶ goes as far as to suggest that the Beast is none other than the Dragon himself, the chaos monster emerging from his ancient abode and now equated with the more recent conception of the Devil and Satan. We agree that the Beast in every way is the very image of Satan, but they are not to be identified. The whole idea of this passage is that the figures are meant to parody God and Christ. Thus it is more likely that the Beast is meant to be the incarnation of Satan, rather than Satan himself. This is the same Beast who in 11: 7 was seen to rise from the abyss, thus signifying that he is a man rising from the dead. The details of his description are drawn from similar mythical beasts in apocalyptic literature. He is a composite figure. He looks like the Dragon, and is his very image. They both have seven heads symbolizing total world rule, and terrifying political power directed by perverse motives. The reference is not to the state as such, for in the New Testament the state is generally looked upon as being at least neutral; rather the reference is to degenerate political power which turns against God Himself. There are obvious references here to the Roman Empire in its capacity as persecutor of the Christians to make them conform to the standards of Emperor worship.

The Beast is given the throne of Satan. Although Satan has been ejected from heaven and lost his rights he still has power and a throne to confer. But the throne again is part of the working lie. Satan assumes God's place and invests the Beast as his anointed one, giving to him the position he once offered to Jesus: "To you will I give all this authority . . . If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours."¹⁷ The Beast is a parody of Christ. We have here a perverse travesty of the Father/Son relationship, down to the fact that the Dragon is worshipped for sending the Beast, his anointed one. One of the seven heads of the Beast has been smitten with a mortal wound, but the stroke of death has been healed. This is something that could pass for a resurrection because the Beast is a mortal man; which means much more than if a mere Dragon were healed of a mortal wound. Christ is seen as a Lamb standing as slaughtered, the symbol of saving power; while Antichrist is seen as a Beast slaughtered to death and healed,

¹⁶ *The Essentials of Demonology* (London: Epworth, 1949), p. 209.

¹⁷ Lk. 4: 6f.; cf. Matt. 4: 9.

the quintessence of demonic unreality. G. B. Caird¹⁸ suggests that the smitten head might represent *Nero redivivus*, and the worship offered in consequence to the Dragon and the Beast to be connected with the cult of Emperor worship which was strong in Asia Minor. The motive for such worship is the unassailable strength of the state demanding such allegiance. But in thus worshipping the physical might of the state's power the inhabitants of the earth are in fact worshipping Satan, who has control over his realm, the earth, for a time.

Vv. 5-10. The Operation of the First Beast, Antichrist. The Beast makes war upon the saints, the seed of the woman. To do this he is given Satan's supreme authority over the earth, although it is a limited authority extending only for a season, i.e. for forty-two months. Antichrist conducts his campaign using two main weapons; supreme power and lies. The Beast opens his mouth and utters blasphemy against God and against His dwelling place. The mouth is an essential mark of the Antichrist; his mighty speeches and eloquent words. But the greatness consists in blasphemy. There is never any substance behind the claims made by Satan or his agents. The name of God is blasphemed by falsely ascribing divine honours to Caesar. The system set up is a vast working lie by which men are deceived into worshipping the Beast and the Satanic power who sent him. The second weapon of the Beast's warfare against the Church is supreme power, political and spiritual. The object of his operation is to set up a false religion backed up by force and pain of death. All perverted political power is concentrated in the form of Antichrist, and the demonic is raised to its peak as everything that comprises the "world" unites with him against the seed of the woman. In this total warfare the defeat of the saints is spelled out in advance. Satan's temporary authority extends to the whole earth and all who are in it, including the saints. His victory appears to be complete and the saints are annihilated. But it is part of the Christian paradox that martyrdom for the saints marks victory rather than defeat. In their death they conquer because they are no longer within the sphere of Satan's operation. Satan's victory is limited, and when the forty-two months are over the vindication of the saints at the Parousia of the Son of Man will begin. The theme is that though there is trial now there will be ultimate victory later. This is so because Satan and the Antichrist, although their power seems to be complete, only operate

¹⁸ *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (London: A. and C. Black, 1966), pp. 164ff. Or the healing of this mortal wound might refer to Caligula's serious illness from which he recovered. It was also Caligula who ordered that his image be set up in the Temple at Jerusalem.

by divine permission. In v. 10 there is a call for faith and endurance to last out until the victory comes, as it surely will.

Vv. 11-12. *Description of the Second Beast.* This figure has been variously held to be the province of Asia Minor in its double aspect of civil and religious administration, or Emperor worship backed up by heathen priesthood, or the power of Imperial Rome in all its aspects. He receives the name of "false prophet", while the first Beast is false Christ. He has a corresponding secondary role, as indicated by his place of origin—the land. The Satanic triad is now complete; the demonic travesty of God, Messiah and prophet. The description of the subsidiary monster is brief. He looks like a lamb, having two horns, as compared with the seven of the first Beast, but he speaks like the Dragon. He is the false prophet appearing as a wolf in sheep's clothing, and acting as the spokesman of the Antichrist. By his utterances men are bewildered into regarding the corrupt Empire as a worthy object of worship. Thus indirectly worship is offered to Satan himself.

Vv. 13-18. *The Operation of the Second Beast.* The author saw in the false prophet all powers or persons, be they priestly or political, who promoted the Emperor cult.¹⁹ The false prophet employs three means of attaining these ends: (1) By performing signs and wonders to deceive mankind (v. 13). It was part of Jewish and Christian tradition about the Antichrist and false prophet that they were able to perform miracles in order to induce men to worship the image of the Beast. (2) The image of the Beast set up for men to worship, under the patronage of a political priesthood. This was not a lifeless image, but one capable of speech and action (v. 15). (3) The elevation of this worship to the level of a political demonstration of loyalty to the corrupt state. Everyone is to bear either the mark of the Lamb or the mark of the Beast, but only those who are branded as the Beast's property are able to buy and sell. Everyone is to be seen for what they are, and their loyalties are to be open. A man's life depends on his mark. Those who refuse the mark of the Beast and refuse to offer the idolatrous worship are to be slain. But their death is the paradoxical victory of the martyr. The number of the Beast, 666, is an enigma, and one must beware of attributing a mathematical genius to the author of the Apocalypse that would be required if some of the solutions offered are to be considered even remotely possible. The important thing is that "it is a human number." The Beast is not a demon, but a human agent. His name might well be *Kaisar Theos*, or any other name that claims God's place and attempts to back up that claim with political and spiritual force.

¹⁹ Cf. Deut. 13: 13ff. concerning the fate of the one who misleads Israel to idolatry.

One final note about the fate of the Antichrist and the false prophet. In Rev. 19: 19f. the Beast and the false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire in which they are destroyed, but Satan himself, the Dragon, remains. Satan is distinguished from the secular powers and the attendant religious cults. He uses them and operates through them, but is not to be identified with them. He has an existence that outlasts all human groups, movements and powers. His origin is in heaven and he survives to devastate the earth during the millennium, in his last vain attempt to regain control. The lesson here might be that Antichrist, the false prophet, and all the forces of evil that assail man on earth can be traced to human pressure groups and to the accumulated and devastating effect of the aggregate of human sin; but that beyond these human agents, which are all that we can see, there is another who is making his war upon God. Of course we are faced with difficulties—of being charged with dualism, and of how far we are to demythologize. Nevertheless it seems less than satisfactory merely to equate all these forces of evil with man alone.

St. Helen's, Lancs.