

# THE ANTICHRIST: FURTHER REFLECTIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

Eschatology is often a divisive topic among Christians. Too often, discussions about the end times have produced more heat than light! Indeed, some Christians seem to think that no profit can be gained by paying attention to the topic, seeing only unnecessary and destructive divisions occurring as a result. A cartoon in a church bulletin reflected this position, when it portrayed Christians on the road to heaven. As they neared the walls of the heavenly city, the road divided and various Christians followed their respective roads to doors in the wall marked “pre-millennial”, “post-millennial”, “amillennial”, and so on. On the other side of the wall, the roads converged into one again!

However, eschatology is a prominent theme in the New Testament, and Christians cannot be loyal to their apostolic heritage without taking eschatology seriously. As a biblical theme, it deserves attention. Its prominence in the Bible, indeed, demands urgency. Thus, Hane Kila’s article on the Antichrist in volume 19-1 of the *Melanesian Journal of Theology* was a very welcome sight indeed.<sup>1</sup> Its irenic spirit provided a textbook-like example of how eschatological issues should be discussed among Christians. I would like to suggest some area of agreement, and some of disagreement, with Mrs Kila’s presentation, before drawing

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<sup>1</sup> Hane Kila, “The Antichrist”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 19-1 (2003), pp. 118-123.

attention to an overlooked theme that adds considerable richness to the whole discussion.

## **APPRECIATION**

There is much of value in Mrs Kila's article. She is certainly correct in tracing the concept back through the various symbolisms and designations of scripture: the "little horn", the beast, the man of sin, the abomination of desolation, etc.<sup>2</sup> In a similar way, Mrs Kila is quite correct in her description of the extent of the antichrist's power. It is instructive to notice that Christ's eschatological sermon (Mark 13, Matt 24; Luke 21) reaches something of a crescendo in the worldwide proclamation of the gospel. This is immediately followed by reference to the "abomination of desolation" (or the antichrist), which Revelation identifies as having similar worldwide influence. Again, Mrs Kila accurately describes the defeat of the antichrist. She draws exclusively on the book Revelation at this point. However, the scenario, derived from Revelation, is easily confirmed by an examination of the earlier descriptions of the career of the antichrist. For example, Dan 7 associates the demise of the little horn with the coming of the "one like a human being" (Dan 7:13, NRSV) and Paul describes the "man of sin" as being one "whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming" (2 Thess 2:8).

## **RESERVATION**

There are two specific issues on which I would differ from Mrs Kila in my own interpretation. Firstly, in response to the question of whether the antichrist is a person or a movement/power, Mrs Kila argues for the personal interpretation.<sup>3</sup> Such a position has certainly been held by many Christians throughout history, but it is not as dominant as Mrs Kila suggests.<sup>4</sup> In pre-reformation times, an identification of Islam with the

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<sup>2</sup> On the relationship of these symbols and designations, see D. Ford, *The Abomination of Desolation in Biblical Eschatology*, Washington DC: University Press of America, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Kila, "Antichrist", pp. 117-118.

<sup>4</sup> L. E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, Washington DC: Review & Herald, 1946-1954.

antichrist was common. The Protestant reformers were unanimous in applying the designation to the papacy, as were the Puritan divines.<sup>5</sup>

The personal character of the description of the man of sin in 2 Thess 2 is easy to exaggerate. After all, Paul says that “the mystery of lawless is *already* at work [in his day]” (2 Thess 2:7), and would be fully revealed when the “restrainer” was removed (2 Thess 2:6-7). Certainly no human *individual* was active in Paul’s day, and yet still awaits eschatological revelation. The “mystery of lawlessness” and the “lawless one” – or “man of sin” – appear to be directly-parallel expressions. In the light of these observations, it may be best to say that the antichrist represents a spirit of on-going rebellion against God, which simmers throughout the Christian age (and even in pre-Christian times), coming to the boil when the circumstances are right, immediately preceding the second coming of Christ.<sup>6</sup> (Of course, that climax may not be focused directly on one individual either).

A similar point may be made, with regard to John’s comments. John is not distinguishing between one future eschatological antichrist and the many antichrists of the past, as Mrs Kila suggests. Rather, he acknowledges the belief in the coming of an eschatological antichrist, held by the recipients of his letter (1 John 2:18). He regards this as *fulfilled* in the existence, in his day, of “many antichrists”. These are not precursors of the eschatological

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<sup>5</sup> B. W. Ball, *The English Connection*, Cambridge UK: James Clarke, 1981, pp. 193-212. The Puritan position is illustrated in the preface to the King James Version of the Bible (which is still published in some KJVs: “And this, their contentment, doth not diminish or decay, but every day increaseth and taketh strength, when they observe, that the zeal of Your Majesty toward the house of God doth not slack or go backward, but is more and more kindled, manifesting itself abroad in the farthest parts of *Christendom*, by writing in defence of the truth, (*which hath given such a blow unto that man of sin, as will not be healed*), and every day at home, by religious and learned discourse, by frequenting the house of God, by hearing the Word preached, by cherishing the Teachers thereof, by caring for the church, as a most tender and loving nursing Father” [Italics added]).

<sup>6</sup> A close reading of Mrs Kila’s article shows that the difference between us on this point is one of emphasis. She acknowledges, explicitly, the working of sin and rebellion throughout earth’s history, and I certainly agree with her that such rebellion will reach an eschatological climax.

antichrist; they *are* the eschatological antichrist! Thus, he stresses that it is “the last hour”.<sup>7</sup>

The second area of Mrs Kila’s argument that I am troubled by is the question of how literally the symbolism of Revelation is to be taken. This comes to clearest focus in the confident affirmation that the antichrist will exercise absolute power for 42 months or three-and-one-half years.<sup>8</sup> This is explicitly tied to a pre-tribulational understanding of eschatology in general.<sup>9</sup> However, a discussion of issues relating to the interpretation of Dan 9 – the so-called “dismal swamp of OT criticism”<sup>10</sup> – and the rapture would take us too far afield here.<sup>11</sup>

But the question remains: should the 42 months of Rev 13:5 be taken literally or symbolically? Revelation is a highly-symbolic book. John introduces his book by saying that “he [God]<sup>12</sup> made it known by sending His angel to His servant John” (Rev 1:1 NRSV). The Greek word here

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<sup>7</sup> R. E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, in Anchor Bible 30, New York NY: Doubleday, 1982, p. 330. Numerous attempts have been made to wrestle with the fact that 2,000 years of subsequent history demonstrate that it was manifestly *not* the last hour. Brown is content with simply admitting John was in error (p. 330). C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1946, p. 51, falls back on his understanding of “realised eschatology”. I. H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1978, pp. 148-151 suggests that John shares a viewpoint, which sees the time between the Cross and the second coming as being “the last hour”. Ford, *Abomination of Desolation*, pp. 68-76, relies on a hermeneutic of conditionalism making John mean in effect, “it is *potentially* the last hour”. However, the fact that the solution to this problem is not readily evident should not prevent us from acknowledging what John is actually saying in this verse.

<sup>8</sup> Kila, “Antichrist”, p. 120.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>10</sup> J. A. Montgomery, *The Book of Daniel*, in International Critical Commentary, Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1927, p. 400.

<sup>11</sup> On the interpretation of Dan 9, I would recommend G. F. Hasel, “Interpretations of the Chronology of the Seventy Weeks”, in *70 Weeks, Leviticus, Nature of Prophecy*, F. B. Holbrook, ed., Washington DC: Biblical Research Institute, 1986, 3, p. 63; and on the rapture question, G. E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1956.

<sup>12</sup> Some have argued that the referent of the pronoun is actually the Son rather than the Father. See, for example, R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St John*, in International Critical Commentary, Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1920, p. 6.

translated “made it known” is *σημαίνω* *sēmainō*, which is derived from the word *σημείον* (*sēmeion*), “sign”, and has the root meaning, “show by a sign, indicate, point out”.<sup>13</sup> The use of this word here is deliberate. It provides a hermeneutical key – a reminder in advance – to take the symbolic nature of the book seriously.<sup>14</sup>

There are further reasons for suspecting that the 42 months are not to be taken literally in Rev 13:5. Context suggests a literal reading is unlikely. Is the “beast” a literal animal? Clearly not. It is clearly an amalgam of the beasts of Dan 7. The same beast appears again in Rev 17,<sup>15</sup> where the seven heads are later identified as seven mountains and seven kings (Rev 17:9-10); the ten horns are likewise identified as ten kings (Rev 17:12). The beast emerges from the waters of sea – latter identified as “peoples and multitudes and nations and languages”, rather than literal waters (Rev 17:15). The beast’s utterings or blasphemies, and, indeed, its 42-month duration, derive from the imagery of the little horn in Dan 7.<sup>16</sup> But, again, the horn is not a literal horn, but is identified as a “king” (Dan 7:24). If the beast, the heads, the horns, and the sea are all symbolic, what is the basis for taking the time period as being literal?<sup>17</sup> The most natural way of expressing such a time period would, in fact, be “three-and-one-half years”, and even though the period is referred to in three different ways, this most natural and literal of designations is avoided!<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> H. G. Liddel, and R. Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon: with a Revised Supplement*, 9th edn, Oxford UK: Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 1592.

<sup>14</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, in *New Century Bible Commentary*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974, p. 51; P. E. Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1990, p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1972, p. 223.

<sup>16</sup> That the “forty-two months” is derived from Daniel’s “time, two times, and half a time” (Dan 7:25) is made clear by the parallels between Rev 12:15 (“a time, and times, and half a time”), Rev 12:6 (“one thousand two hundred sixty days”), Rev 11:3 (“one thousand two hundred and sixty days”), and Rev 11:2 (“forty-two months”).

<sup>17</sup> The question of literalness can be asked at several other important points in Revelation as well. Are literal Jews referred to (as Mrs Kila suggests)? Literal Babylon? Literal Jerusalem? Literal Meggido? These are matters too vast to go into here.

<sup>18</sup> D. Ford, *Daniel*, Nashville TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1978, pp. 301-302.

The 42 months is better taken as referring to a *quality* of time, rather than a *length* of time. The Old Testament narrative of Elijah provides one key to understanding this. At the heart of this narrative, is a drought of three-and-one-half years' duration.<sup>19</sup> During this time, Elijah, representing the people of God, is in the wilderness. His life is sought by a wicked queen. This section of the narrative ends with a contest at Mt Carmel, which is located at the end of the Meggido Valley, over the worship of the true God, which involves fire falling from heaven. The parallels with Revelation are obvious. There, the people of God, represented by a pure woman, flee into the wilderness (Rev 12:6). During their time in the wilderness, there is a drought (Rev 11:3, 6). Their deadly foe is a wicked woman, a queen, who rules over the nations (Rev 17:18).<sup>20</sup> The conflict reaches a climax at Armageddon, the mountain of Meggido, which (if a literal mountain is meant), can only be Mt Carmel.<sup>21</sup> Again, fire falls from heaven, or, at least, appears to, but this time it falls onto the wrong altar.<sup>22</sup>

## FURTHER INSIGHT

Beyond the details outlined by Mrs Kila, lies an important motif that she has not developed. An appreciation of this motif, however, adds a depth and richness to our understanding of the antichrist. Therefore, I offer the following comments, as a supplement to Mrs Kila's description, rather than a correction.

A key word in Rev 13 is the word "worship", occurring, as it does, five times (Rev 13:4 [twice], 8, 12, 15). This is crucial in understanding the nature of the antichrist. Revelation draws heavily – but allusively – on the

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<sup>19</sup> The length of the drought is not given in the Old Testament, but is found in James 5:17.

<sup>20</sup> There are a number of parallels that can be drawn between this woman and the false prophetess at Smyrna, who is explicitly named Jezebel (Rev 2:20-23).

<sup>21</sup> H. K. LaRondelle, "The Etymology of *Har-Magedon* (Rev 16:16)", in *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 27 (1989), pp. 69-73.

<sup>22</sup> The matter hinges on the unanswerable question of whether "in the sight of all [literally: "men"]" (Rev 13:13) means people really saw fire fall from heaven, or a misguided human perception and interpretation thought fire came down from heaven. The issue is not fundamentally important. In either case, the effect is to mislead and to deceive.

Old Testament.<sup>23</sup> The theme of worship, associated with the threat of death for true worship, is found in the Old Testament. In the Elijah narrative, the issue is indisputably worship: “Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, ‘How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him’ ” (1 Kings 18:21 NRSV).

However, conflict over worship goes back even further in the Old Testament, first coming into explicit focus in Gen 4. Cain and Abel worship differently – they bring different sacrifices (Gen 4:3-4), only one of which God accepts (Gen 4:4-5). The false worshipper then attacks and kills the true (Gen 4:8). Revelation contains at least one clear allusion to this story. The fifth seal symbolises the souls of the martyrs as being under the altar, where the *blood* of sacrifice was poured out in the Old Testament sanctuary (Lev 4:7, 18, 25, 30, 34; 5:9; 8:15).<sup>24</sup> They are crying out for vindication, even as the blood of Abel cried out in Gen 4:10. The martyrs are thus linked back to Abel. The antichrist threatens the lives of God’s people, and actually kills some. The woman on the beast in Rev 17 is drunk on the martyr’s blood (Rev 17:6).

Another Old Testament story of great relevance to this theme is that of the three worthies in Dan 3. Here, again, worship is a central theme. The word occurs 11 times (Dan 3:5-7, 10-12, 14, 15 [twice], 18, 28). As in Rev 13, an image is built, and the command is given that it be worshipped, on the pain of death (Dan 3:3-6). However, the worshippers of the true God are delivered, and their enemies confounded.

Such stories indicate that the essential issue, with regard to the antichrist, is not politics, economics, or any such thing. It is worship. In Revelation, the redeemed worship the Lamb, who died to save them (Rev 7:9-10), but the unrepentant cry out “Who is like the beast?” (Rev 13:4). The issue, in the final climax of earth’s history, will not be novel. Rather, it will be an amplification of the same issue that has been at the heart of human

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<sup>23</sup> J. Paulien, *Decoding Revelation’s Trumpets*, Berrien Springs MI: Andrews University Press, 1987, pp. 49-70.

<sup>24</sup> It is significant, in this regard, that the Old Testament states explicitly that the “life” or “soul” is in the blood (Gen 9:4; Deut 12:23).

existence since the Garden of Eden: worship. This was a live issue in Old Testament times (as shown above); but, equally so, in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes (see especially 1 Macc 1:10-14)<sup>25</sup>; the days of the apostles, when a pinch of incense on the altar of Caesar could mean the difference between life and death<sup>26</sup>; in the middle ages<sup>27</sup>; in Islamic countries today; in the godless regimes of communism; in the increasingly repaganised modern Western world; in the final eschatological drama, and *in all other times and places*.

## CONCLUSION

The study of eschatology is not a diversion for Christians. Such study is wasted if it becomes the pretext for unChristian behaviour or attitudes. However, the study of eschatology has a real practical benefit for the Christian life, because the issues of the great eschatological crisis of the future are not different in *kind* – only in *intensity* – to the issues faced today. Thus, when understood correctly, eschatology is not primarily about the future. It teaches us, in a fundamental way, about today. It challenges the student with the most urgent questions of the ages: “How then should I live?”, “Who shall I worship?”, “What will be my God?”

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<sup>25</sup> J. E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, in Word Biblical Commentary 30, Dallas TX: Word Publishing, 1989, pp. 188, 267-268.

<sup>26</sup> F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1971, pp. 421-428.

<sup>27</sup> H. K. LaRondelle, “The Middle Ages within the Scope of Apocalyptic Prophecy”, in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32-3 (1989), pp. 345-354.

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