



The great rebellion and the mystery of lawlessness in 2 Thessalonians 2,1-12

La gran rebelión y el misterio de la iniquidad en 2 Tesalonicenses 2,1-12

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Abstract

This article provides an expository study of 2 Thessalonians 2,1-12 in which Paul delineates the Christian history from his day until the Second Coming. The apostle contends that the Christian history will be characterized by a great spiritual rebellion against God organized by Satan. The apostle points to the central roles of two entities in that great rebellion, which he defines in terms of “the man of lawlessness” as the agent of Satan and “the restrainer” who for some time holds back the full revelation of that lawless figure on the world scene. Bible commentaries offer various proposal on the identity of these two entities. This study provides a careful exposition of 2 Thessalonians 2,1-12 within its literary context and in the relation with corresponding Daniel 7 and Revelation 13 and offers a fresh interpretation of this apocalyptic text of Paul.

Keywords

Eschatology – Prophecy – Apocalyptic – Antichrist – Pauline writings

Resumen

Este artículo ofrece un estudio expositivo de 2 Tesalonicenses 2,1-12, donde Pablo delinea la historia cristiana desde sus días hasta la segunda venida. El apóstol sostiene que la historia cristiana se caracterizará por una gran rebelión espiritual contra Dios organizada por Satanás. El apóstol señala los papeles centrales de dos entidades en esa gran rebelión, que define en términos de “el hombre de pecado” como el agente de Satanás y “el freno” que durante algún tiempo detiene la plena revelación de esa figura inicua en la escena mundial. Los comentarios bíblicos ofrecen diversas propuestas sobre la identidad de estas dos entidades. El presente estudio ofrece una cuidadosa exposición de 2 Tesalonicenses 2,1-12 dentro de su contexto literario y en relación con Daniel 7 y Apocalipsis 13, y ofrece una nueva interpretación de este texto apocalíptico de Pablo.



Palabras claves

Escatología – Profecía – Apocalíptico – Anticristo – Escritos paulinos

Introducción

1 and 2 Thessalonians are most likely the earliest epistle written by Paul. The second epistle supplements the theme of the Second Coming that was discussed in the first letter. In his second letter, Paul outlines the course of Christian history from his day until the Second Coming. He explains that the Christian history will be characterized by a great rebellion against God, orchestrated by the usurper Satan. The central apocalyptic text in this letter is 2 Thessalonians 2,3-12 where the apostle refers to the key figure in that scenario in terms of the lawless figure as the agent of Satan. This passage is difficult to interpret due to the fact that Paul nowhere in the text identifies this anti-Christ entity because he explained it to the Thessalonian believers while he was the first time with them. Commentaries offer numerous views and proposals regarding the identity of that anti-Christ figure.

This article offers an expository analysis of 2 Thessalonian 2,1-12 in order to establish the likely identity of the lawless figure referred to in the text. The interpretation will be done in the close examination of the text within its literary context with particular attention to the original language in which the two letters were written.

The historical background

1 and 2 Thessalonians were originally sent to the Christian community in the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. In order to understand the reason for Paul's correspondence with the church, it is important to understand the historical context within which the two letters were written.

Paul founded the church in Thessalonica during his second missionary journey (Acts 17,1-4). At that time, the city was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. As a seaport on the Aegean Sea ideally and situated on the highway Via Egnatia that connected the east with the

west, the city was a wealthy commercial and political center. Thessalonica was the largest city in the province with predominantly Roman population. It had also a sizable Jewish community. The church in Thessalonica was established as a result of Paul's three-week campaign, as a number of God-fearing Greeks and some prominent women responded to the gospel. It appears that by the time of the writing of the first letter, the church was largely made up of gentiles (1 Thess 1,9). After working in the city for about three weeks, Paul had to abruptly leave the city because of the persecution, thereby leaving the new converts who were lacking instruction and Christian experience and who were not firmly grounded in Scripture (Acts 17,5-9). This particularly concerned the gentiles who did not have an adequate knowledge of the grasp of the Scriptures.

Paul worried that Satan could somehow divert those new converts from the faith. His concern for their spiritual well-being compelled him to send Timothy back from Athens in order to obtain information about the situation and strengthen the young church (1 Thess 3,1-5). In meantime, Paul probably moved to Corinth. When Timothy and Silas joined him in Corinth, they brought a report of the situation in the church (2 Thess 3,6). While the believers were still standing in faith in spite of the adverse circumstance, Paul learned of some problems among them—lacking in faith (3,10), immorality (4,1-7), and idleness (4,9-12)—and some questions that were troubling the believers such as, about the fate of those believers who would die before Christ's return (4,13-17) and the date of the Second Coming (5,1-3). This prompted Paul to write a personal and warm letter in order to encourage and strengthen those new converts, in particular those who had lost loved ones.

The bearer of the letter to the church evidently upon the return brought to Paul an update on some new developments in the Thessalonian church. The believers were still undergoing persecution (2 Thess 1,4-5). Some among them were confused and misunderstood what Paul wrote in the first letter about the Second Coming and were caught up with end-time excitement (2,2). Also, the idleness that Paul addressed in the first letter (1 Thess 4,10-12) was now more serious; the excitement about the Lord's soon return had led some of them to give up working (2 Thess 3,6-12).

These things caused a great disruption in the life of the congregation. Upon learning of this new development, Paul decided to write a second letter from Corinth with the primary purpose to correct the misunderstanding regarding the timing of the Lord's return (2,1-12), but also to encourage the members who were experiencing the hardship of persecution (1,5-12) and to instruct them regarding the orderly conduct and righteous living (3,6-15).

2 Thessalonians was most likely written a short time after the first letter. This whole epistle was written from the perspective of the second coming of Christ (2,1-3; cf. 1,10). While in 1 Thessalonians Paul referred to the Second Coming as a joyous event for the faithful, in 2 Thessalonians he focuses on the events in the world preceding the Second Coming.

Textual analytical of 2 Thessalonians 2,1-10

Having encouraged the new converts in Thessalonica experiencing persecution, Paul turns to correct some misconceptions among them regarding the Second Coming. In trying to correct their wrong views, he delineates the events to precede the Parousia.

Problem among the believers

Paul begins this new section by pointing to two points: "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2,1) or "the day of the Lord" and "our being gathered together to him" (2,1).¹ In the New Testament, the day of the Lord refers exclusively to the Second Coming (cf. 1 Thess 5,2; 2 Pet 3,10). The concept of eschatological gathering of the faithful is rooted in the Old Testament prophetic texts proclaiming the gathering of the Israelites on the day of the Lord in the aftermath of the exile (Isa 27,13; Isa 43,4-9; 27,12; 56,7-8; Jer 31,8). Jesus himself spoke about the gathering of God's elect at His return (Matt 24,31). The gathering of the believers to Christ in connection with "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" and "the day of the Lord" are the things that Paul addressed in the previous

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in this article are taken from English Standard Version.

letter (1 Thess 4,13-5,4). This shows that since the time of the writing of the first letter, some new concerns occupied the attention of the young believers. So, Paul decided to tackle the issue.

The apostle begins by admonishing the members “not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed” (2,2). The word “quickly” (ταχέως) refers to the very short time that elapsed since Paul initially preached the gospel to them. Paul described the threat they are facing by using two verbs. The first is “shaken in mind”. While the Greek word behind the verb “shaken” (σαλευθῆναι) refers to various kinds of shaking, it also refers to something, like a ship, being swayed by stormy winds or tossed by waves (cf. Luke 6,48; 7,24; cf. Matt 11,27; 24,29). In the New Testament, the word is used figuratively in the sense of being disturbed or shaken within a person (Luke 6,48; Acts 2,25; 17,13).² The word “mind” (νοῦς) refers to the reason, the process of thinking. The Thessalonian believers were in a danger of being quickly tossed and carried away in their minds by the winds of an erroneous teaching. The second word “disturbed or “alarmed” (θροεῖσθαι) refers to the inward emotional and mental anxiety caused by disturbing news.³ The word is used elsewhere in the New Testament only in the warning of Jesus to the disciples not to be disturbed or alarmed when they “hear of wars and rumors of wars” (Matt 24,6; Mark 13,7). The present tense in Greek suggests that the believers in Thessalonica were still in that state at the time when Paul wrote this letter.

The Christians in Thessalonian had a good start. They readily accepted the gospel that was proclaimed to them by Paul and his associates. Yet, they were relatively new converts without being firmly established in the Scriptures (as Acts 17,11 suggests). Not too long later, they became alarmed by speculative teaching that was introduced among them.

² Walter Bauer, *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian literature* (BDAG), ed. by Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 911.

³ G. K. Beale, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series 13 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 202; Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 303; Abraham J. Malherbe, *The letters to the Thessalonians: A new translation with introduction and commentary*, The Anchor Bible 32B (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2000), 415.

The context shows that Paul is not sure of the source of that false teaching.⁴ So he refers to three potential sources: the first is “spirit” (πνεῦμα), which refers most likely to the Spirit of prophets (*cf.* 1 Thess 5,19-20). In this case, the apostle refers to false prophets invading the church (like in 1 John 4,1) claiming to have authority from the Holy Spirit. The other two sources are the spoken “word” (λόγος) and/or a written “letter” (ἐπιστολή) as it supposedly came from Paul or/and his co-workers.⁵ The “word” refers a misinterpretation of what Paul orally preached to them, and “letter” refers either to a false letter sent in his name or a misunderstanding of what he wrote in his authentic letters, particularly 1 Thessalonians concerning the day of the Lord (2,2b; *cf.* 1 Thess 5,2). This is the reason that later in the text the apostle urges the believers to uphold what they were taught whether “by our spoken word or by our letter”, without mentioning the “spirit” (2,15).

Whatever the source of such an erroneous teaching, the Thessalonians were caught up with the idea “that the day of the Lord has come” (2,2b). The Greek verb ἐνίστημι is in the perfect tense (ἐνέστηκεν) meaning “has come”, not “is near” or “at hand”. Among ancient Greeks and in Paul’s letters, the word denotes the present time in contrast to the future (Rom 8,38; 1 Cor 3,22; 7,26).⁶ Having being misled by false teachers, the Thessalonian believers could have assumed that the coming of Christ was imminent or that it had already occurred in some secret, spiritual manner.⁷ The latter was most likely in view.⁸ The similar teaching Paul and Timothy met in Ephesus where false teachers taught that the resurrection had already taken place, and thus were destroying the faith of some believers (2 Tim 2,18).

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *The first and second letters to the Thessalonians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 273-275.

⁵ On different options of the meaning of the “letter” and evaluation see D. Michael Martin, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H, 1995), 225-227.

⁶ Beale, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 199.

⁷ See David Williams, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, New International Biblical Commentary 12 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 131-132; Beale, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 200.

⁸ See F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary 45 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 165; Martin, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 227-228.

The Thessalonians obviously thought that they were suffering the persecution in connection with the day of the Lord.⁹ They have failed to heed Paul's warning in 1 Thessalonians regarding date setting for Christ's return (5,1-3) and that his coming will be literal and visible (4,15-17). In such a way, they were in danger of losing their focus and were being carried by such erroneous teachings. As Paul shows later, such a situation had an alarmingly negative impact on their spiritual life and conduct (see 3,6-15) and they were in danger of losing their focus.¹⁰ This is the reason why at the conclusion of this section, the apostle urges them to stand firm and hold to the what he had taught either by spoken word or by letter from us" (2,15).

The great rebellion (2,3-4)

The current confusion among the believers in Thessalonica prompted Paul to write his most extensive outline of final events. The apostle emphatically rejects those erroneous teachings as a deception and warns the believers: "Let no one in any way deceive" (2,3a). The Greek word behind the verb "deceive" (ἐξαπατάω) means "to causes someone to accept false ideas about something", to lead astray (cf. Rom 16,18).¹¹ The admonition "Let no one in any way deceive you" points to a deliberate misleading such as the serpent's deception of Eve (2 Cor 11,3; 1 Tim 2,14). This is the warning Jesus gave to his disciples in his apocalyptic discourse (Matt 24,4). Paul admonishes the Thessalonian Christians not to be misled by those deceptive teachings because Christ's coming¹² has not and will not occur until two closely related events take place.

The first event that must take place is stated in Greek as *apostasía*, which denotes "a defiance of established system or authority".¹³ The word

⁹ Robert L. Thomas, *2 Thessalonians*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 12:464.

¹⁰ Fee, *The first and second letters to the Thessalonians*, 273.

¹¹ Bauer, *Greek-English lexicon*, 345.

¹² The clause, "that day will not come" is not found in the Greek text but is appropriately supplied by translators.

¹³ Bauer, *Greek-English lexicon*, 120.

has been variously translated as “apostasy” (NASB), “falling away” (KJV), “rebellion” (RSV, NRSV, NIV, ESB). Among ancient Greeks, the word denoted political or military rebellion.¹⁴ In the Septuagint, the word is given a religious connotation (*cf.* Josh 22,22; 2 Chron 29,19; Jer 2,19).¹⁵ In the New Testament, it is used with reference to a rebellion against God, apostasy—for instance, in Acts 21,21 where the leaders in Jerusalem told Paul about the rumor spreading among Jews that he was teaching an apostasy from Moses. Paul uses the word here in a spiritual sense with reference to an upcoming massive religious uprising in opposition to God orchestrated by evil forces. The definite article “*the* rebellion” points to the rebellion known to the Thessalonian believers of which Paul spoke when he was for the first time with them (*cf.* 2,5).¹⁶

In the context of the great rebellion there will be the revelation of “the man of lawlessness.” Some Greek manuscripts instead of “the man of lawlessness” (ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας) have “the man of sin” (ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἁμαρτίας).¹⁷ The reading “the man of lawlessness” is supported by the identification of this apostate figure as “the mystery of lawlessness” (2,7) and “the lawless one” (2,8). These references mirror the warning by Jesus that prior to His coming lawlessness will increase (Matt 24,12). The genitive noun “of lawlessness” and the adjectival noun “the lawless one” describes this anti-divine figure as a true agent of Satan (v. 9) who would strive to place himself against and above the law of God and act contrary to God’s government and order. The word “man” occurs here with the definite article “the man” (ὁ ἄνθρωπος), which shows that

¹⁴ Josephus used the word with reference to political rebellion of the Jewish revolt against the Romans (Vita 43); Jewish Antiquities 13.219; Against Apion 1.135; also 1 Esdras 2,23. See further Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English lexicon*, 8th ed. (Oxford, GB: Clarendon Press, 1985), 218.

¹⁵ Thomas, “2 Thessalonians,” 12:465.

¹⁶ Williams, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 123.

¹⁷ See Bruce M. Metzger, *A textual commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1975), 635.

Paul refers to a definite opponent about which he had previously spoken to the Thessalonians (*cf.* v. 5).¹⁸

The context shows that the two aforementioned events—the great rebellion and the revelation of the man of lawlessness—are closely related. They would be revealed in the context of the great rebellion. In the Septuagint translation of Psalm 88,22, David refers to his enemy as “a son of lawlessness (υἱὸς ἀνομίας)” which is a Hebrew expression for a rebel.¹⁹ The appearance of the man of lawlessness is expressed in the Greek word ἀποκαλύπτω (2,3.6.8) meaning “to reveal” or “uncover” of something that was previously hidden.²⁰ Paul used earlier the noun ἀποκάλυψις (“revealing,” unveiling”) with reference to Christ’s coming (2 Thess 1,7), which points to the man of lawlessness as an anti-Christ figure. The fact that this lawless figure must be revealed indicates that his identity is kept hidden in Paul’s time. Paul further explains that although this “mystery of lawlessness” was already at work, its ultimate revelation was restrained (2,6-7). Its unveiling will occur in an unforeseen future from the perspective of Paul and the Thessalonian believers (2,8).

Paul further identifies this man of lawlessness in term of “the son of destruction”. He uses here the language from the Septuagint reading of Isaiah 57,4 where the apostate and rebellious Jews are referred to as the “children of destruction, a lawless seed”.²¹ The word “son” is a Semitic expression meaning “a human being” (the man of lawlessness). The Greek noun ἀπώλεια (translated as “perdition” in KJV) means “destruction”.²² In the New Testament, the word is regularly used of the destruction of those who oppose God and his purposes (*cf.* Rom 9,22; 1 Phil 3,19; 1 Tim 6,9; 2 Pet 3,7.16).²³ The expression “the son of destruction” is another way of saying that this enemy figure is doomed to destruction,

¹⁸ *Seventh-day adventist Bible commentary*, 2nd ed., ed. by F. D. Nichol (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1980), 6:270.

¹⁹ Fee, *The first and second letters to the Thessalonians*, 282, footnote 48.

²⁰ Bauer, *Greek-English lexicon*, 112.

²¹ Fee, *The first and second letters to the Thessalonians*, 282; also footnote 48.

²² Bauer, *Greek-English lexicon*, 127.

²³ Green, *The letters to the Thessalonians*, 309.

denoting his fate.²⁴ The expression may mirror “son(s) of death” in the Old Testament that referred to a person doomed to die (2 Sam 12,5; *cf.* 1 Sam 26,16; Ps 101,20 LXX).

While “the man of lawlessness” points to the rebellious aspect of this anti-Christ figure, which is described in verse 4, the phrase “the son of destruction” spells out his ultimate doom, like in the case of Judas (John 17,12). Paul spells out the fate of this anti-Christ figure in verse 8: “whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and the brightness of His coming”. Thus, Paul describes this lawless one by pointing to his fate with the intent to provide God’s people with comfort that the great rebellion against God and his plan for this world, which is orchestrated by evil forces, will not last forever but will find it ultimately demise with the Second Coming.²⁵

While Paul does not provide the identity of this man of lawlessness because he obviously assumes that the Thessalonian believers know it (*cf.* v. 5), the characteristic that he mentions provide some identifying clues. His rebellious behavior (v. 4) reflects the conduct of Satan in the Bible.

First, he “opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship”. That he “opposes” (*ἀντίκειμαι*) God brings to mind the malicious activities of Satan in Zechariah 3,1 opposing God and his people (see also Dan 7,25). In the Septuagint, the word translates the Hebrew word *יָשׁוּב*, “adversary”.²⁶ In 1 Timothy 5,14-15, Paul describes Satan as the opponent (*ὁ ἀντικείμενος*, “the opposing one”).²⁷ The same word is used with the reference to Satan in the early patristic writings.²⁸ The lawless one “exalts” (*ὑπεραίρω*) himself against every so-called god or object

²⁴ Also “the sons of the pit” in Dead Sea Scrolls (Damascus Document [CD] 6.15; 13.14).

²⁵ Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014), 515.

²⁶ Williams, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 125.

²⁷ See Ceslas Spicq, *Theological lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:129-130.

²⁸ E.g., 1 Clement 51:1; Martyrdom of Polycarp, 17:1.

of worship”—either false gods or the true God²⁹—anything that people may worship which recalls the description of the figure of the King of the North in Daniel 11 who “he will exalt and magnify himself above every god” (v. 36).³⁰ The Old Testament portrays Satan as exulting himself above God and presents his desire to sit on God’s throne (*cf.* Isa 14,12-15; Ezek 28,12-19).

As the climax of his rebellious behavior, the man of lawlessness “takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God” (NASB). The temple in the New Testament is used as one of several metaphors for the church (1 Cor 3,9-17; Eph 2,21-22). The verb “displaying” in Greek (*ἀποδεικνύντα*) means here in the text “to show forth for public recognition as so and so”, “exhibiting”.³¹ This anti-divine figure will occupy a place in the church displaying himself as God and placing himself in place of God claiming the worship that only God is entitled to. This shows that this great apostate rebellion against God is to take place in the church which has generally fallen away from the purity of the gospel and loyalty to God.³²

Throughout the history of interpretation, various proposals have been offered regarding the identity of this lawless figure—including the Syrian ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes who desecrated the temple and tried to obliterate Jewish religion;³³ the Roman general Pompey who seized Jerusalem and desecrated the Most Holy place in the temple in Jerusalem in 63 B.C was referred to by *Psalms Solomon* as “the lawless one”;³⁴ the emperor Caligula who attempted to set his own stature in the temple in A.D. 40;³⁵ the emperor Nero who persecuted Christians;³⁶ and some future

²⁹ Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 516-517.

³⁰ See Beale, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 206.

³¹ Bauer, *Greek-English lexicon*, 108.

³² Beale, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 209-210.

³³ See Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 180-181.

³⁴ See *Psalms of Solomon* 17:11, 18.

³⁵ See Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 180.

³⁶ See Philip W. Comfort, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary 16 (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2008), 400.

eschatological Antichrist figure who will recapitulate the features of all past rebels against God in an effort to take his place in the world.³⁷ Such interpretations, however, are not supported by the contextual evidence.

In Greek, the blasphemous activities are stated with present participles: “the one opposing and exalting himself” and “displaying himself as being God”. The present participle denotes a continual activity that are not restricted to a certain period of time. Paul considered the lawless rebel as the entity operating already in his day (2,7) and that his activities would continue so until the Second Coming (2,8). All these facts point to Satan himself as the ultimate personification of lawlessness and all rebellion against God.

However, we must remember that, as the Bible shows, in the history of his rebellion and opposition to God, Satan has operated through various human agents and institutions and systems to hinder God’s work in the world—like for instance the king of Babylon (Isa 14,4.12-15), the king of Tyre (Ezek 28,12-18), and the symbolic little horn figure in the book of Daniel (7,25) and the sea beast in Revelation—signifying the Medieval papacy—which has received the authority and power from Satan (Rev 13,2). It is evident that the description of the lawless figure in 2 Thessalonians 2 echoes in particular Daniel’s prophecy of the blaspheming figure of the little-horn used by Satan to oppose God and His people (8,9-12.23-25; 11,36-39).

Both Daniel and Paul point to Satan working through his antichrist agent down through history in opposing and exalting himself above God and taking his place in the church, displaying himself as God (2,4). The description of this anti-Christ man of lawlessness has also the striking similarities with the sea beast of Revelation 13,1-7.

Thus, in 2 Thessalonians 2,3-4, Paul foresaw the great apostasy in the Christian church foretold by Daniel and later by John the Revelator that would occur sometime in the future from his perspective. The only period

³⁷ See Gary S. Shogren, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 282-283; Anthony A Hoekema, *The Bible and the future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 161-162.

that aptly fit into this temporal framework is the Dark or Middle Ages, during which the established church of Western Europe claimed the pope as its head. This position also claimed the prerogatives of God. No doubt that the medieval papacy fulfilled the description both as a religious and political institution (neuter) and the human figure (masculine) of which both Daniel (“the little horn” figure), John the Revelator (the sea beast figure), and Paul spoke.

The Restrainer (2,5-7)

Verses 5-6 function as a parenthesis. Paul reminds the Thessalonians of his previous teaching regarding these things when he was first with them: “Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?” (v. 5). “I told you” is in imperfect tense expressing repeated past activities. Paul was instructing them at some length about the eschatological scenario when he was first with them.

The apostle further explains that the revelation of the man of lawlessness is for the present time being held back. He expects from them to “know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time” (v. 6 ESV). The revelation of the man of lawlessness is for the present time being held back, and the believers in Thessalonica should know what is restraining it. The Greek compound verb *κατέχων* (*κατά* and *ἔχω*) may mean “hold fast” (cf. 1 Thess 5,21) or “prevent”, “suppress” (Rom 1,18), “restrain”. The last is in view here denoting a force that hinders the anti-Christ adversary from appearing in the open opposition to God for the time being, and thus ultimately holds back the Second Coming.³⁸ Paul refers to the restrainer by using the neuter participle “the restraining one” (*τὸ κατέχων*), which points to an impersonal power. However, neuter forms in the New Testament often denote persons rather than things (cf. 1 Cor 1,26-27; Heb 7,7; Rev 2,2). So, later in verse 7, the apostle refers to the restrainer by using the masculine participle (*ὁ κατέχων*) as a personal figure.

³⁸ Bauer, *Greek-English lexicon*, 532.

In continuing, Paul further explains that “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work” in the present time (v. 7). The word “mystery” (μυστήριον) in the New Testament usually refers to something that is hidden until the time it is revealed (Rom 16,25; Eph 3,3-5).³⁹ Paul uses it here with reference to the activities of Satan through his agent.⁴⁰ While its presence is felt in the world, the lawlessness stays hidden behind the scene not to be publicly revealed until “he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way”. The Greek text reads literally “until the one restraining now gets out of the middle” (ἐκ μέσου γένηται). In contrast to the neuter participles used in verse 6, Paul now refers to the restrainer with the masculine participle (ὁ κατέχων, “the restraining one”) pointing to a personal figure.

Who is this enigmatic restrainer? Its identity has been a debatable subject throughout Christian history. As a result, numerous proposals have been made by both ancient and modern commentators—including the Roman Empire, the civil law and order, the Jewish state, the Holy Spirit, the preaching of the gospel by Paul, angels, or God himself.⁴¹

The difficulty is that Paul nowhere in the letter identifies him nor explains who he is for the simple reason that he assumes that the Thessalonians know who he is. What is obvious about the description of the restrainer is that, first of all, Paul refers to him as a personal figure; he is holding back the revelation of the lawless one in his day; his restraining work will be removed at the proper time; and he is powerful enough to restrain the revelation of Satan and his agents. All these descriptions unequivocally point to God Himself who had ultimately restrained the revelation of the lawless one until the proper time when he appeared on the world scene.⁴²

³⁹ Fee, *The first and second letters to the Thessalonians*, 288.

⁴⁰ Green, *The letters to the Thessalonians*, 317.

⁴¹ For the list of different proposals and evaluation see I. Howard Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 196-200; Beale, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 214-216.

⁴² Leon Morris, *The first and second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 228.

Only God is powerful enough to restrain the appearance and activities of the evil forces. A number of New Testament texts describe God as restraining the evil forces until a proper time when they are released to perform their evil activities—such as Revelation 7,1-3 where God restrains the destructive winds from blowing upon the earth for some time, and also 9,1 where the removal of the restrainer unleashes the demonic activities. On the other hand, it is possible that Paul had in mind the Roman Empire, which God used for a period of time to restrain the revelation of the anti-Christ figure.

The end-time revelation of Satan (2,8-12)

After the restrainer is taken out of the way, “then the lawless one will be revealed” (v. 8a). This “then” stands in contrast with “now” in verse 6. The appearance of the lawless one is stated in the passive “revealed” both in verses 3 and 8. The passive form functions here as the Hebrew *passivum divinum* denoting a divine act. In Paul’s day, because Jews believed that God’s name was too sacred to be uttered except in rare circumstances, they usually referred to God’s actions by using the divine passive. Paul showed that it was God who ultimately held back the lawless one from appearing on the world stage, and he now shows that it is God who will at the proper time let him be “revealed” (ἀποκαλύπτω). The apostle speaks about the revelation of the lawless one in the way he described the “revelation” (ἀποκάλυψις) of Lord Jesus coming from heaven (2 Thess 1,7).⁴³

While Paul stressed that “mystery of lawlessness” operated in his day and that it would operate during much of Christian history, he endeavors to show that at the close of world’s history, the activity of lawlessness defying God and his laws will be even more intensive and worldwide in scope. The apostle sets the description of the revelation of man of lawlessness by focusing to his fate. He previously identified this anti-Christ figure as “the son of destruction” (v. 3) by which he showed that his focus is not on the anti-Christ activities in the Christian history as described in Daniel 7 and Revelation 13, but on its demise.

⁴³ Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 221.

This is the reason that the apostle switches from the revelation of the lawless one in past history to its manifestation in the context of the Parousia—as the counterfeit of Christ’s coming—and his ultimate doom. The closest parallel to this revelation of the lawless figure is the appearance of Antichrist at the climax of history in 1 John 2,18, who is identified as the deceiver (2 John 7).⁴⁴ The “spirit of Antichrist” was at work already in the first century, while its full manifestation will be at the time of the end. There is no any doubt that Paul and John referred to the same end-time anti-Christ manifestation.⁴⁵

Now, Paul focuses furthermore on the end-time drama. He portrays the end-time activities of the lawless one in the manner of Christ. His revealing (*ἀποκαλύπτω*; 2,8) and coming (*παρουσία*; 2,9) mirror the revealing (*ἀποκαλύψις*; 1,7) and coming (*παρουσία*; 2,8) of Christ. Thus, the end-time appearance of the end-time Antichrist power will be satanic, “in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and, and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness” (vs. 9-10a). This points to the lawless one as the true agent of Satan acting in the power of Satan.⁴⁶ He will perform counterfeit miracles and deceptive signs, thus usurping the power that only belongs to God. It counterfeits the miracles and signs that Jesus did while on earth, which Peter described as evidence of divine power (Acts 2,22). This echoes Jesus’ warning of false Christs imitating His coming by means of deceptive signs and wonders in order to deceive, if possible, even the elect (Matt 24,24-27).

Later, John the Revelator uses that same language in describing the end-time deceptive activities of the lamb-like beast empowered by Satan prior to the Second Coming (Rev 13-14; cf. 16,13-14). It appears that Paul uses deliberate language to portray the end-time revelation and

⁴⁴ See Manfred T. Brauch, *Hard Sayings of Paul* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1989), 245-246

⁴⁵ On the concept of the Antichrist in the Bible and the development of the concept in Christian history see Bruce, *1 and 2 Thesalonians*, 179-188.

⁴⁶ Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thesalonians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 259; Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thesalonians*, 425.

activities of Satan as a parody of Christ's activities, impersonating Christ and counterfeiting His coming to earth in an effort to deceive all who have spurned the truth as revealed in the gospel.

However, as Paul shows, this end-time satanic manifestation will end in a total defeat as the Lord will consume him with "the breath of His mouth" and destroy by "the appearance of His coming" (2,8b; *cf.* 1,8-9). The two words, "appearance" (ἐπιφάνεια) and "coming" (παρουσία), are used in the Septuagint for the appearance in the coming of God (*cf.* 2 Sam 7,23). Paul also draws from the Old Testament where the breath of the mouth is the instrument of executing the judgment upon the wicked (Job 4,9; 15,30; Isa 30,33).⁴⁷ In 1,8-9, he states that the wicked will be destroyed by the glory of Lord's power at his coming. In Revelation, the weapon by which Christ will destroy the wicked in the final eschatological war is the sword coming out of Christ mouth (Rev 2,16; 19,21). It is likely that Paul sees the destruction of this lawless one as the direct fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of the messianic Branch slaying the wicked with the breath of His mouth (Isa 11,4).

The purpose of this end-time revelation of Satan is to deceive "those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved" (10b). These are doomed to share the fate of the "son of destruction". Paul shows here that Satan's end-time deception will be in the context of the preaching of the gospel (*cf.* Matt 24,14). It is the acceptance of the gospel and the love of the truth (ἀλήθεια) that will be the Christian's protection from the final deception. In Paul's letters, the truth is often synonymous with the gospel (2 Cor 13,8; Gal 5,7); it is in this sense that Paul uses it here in the text.⁴⁸ The phrase "the love of the truth" parallels "believe the truth" in verse 12. Believing the truth inevitably leads to loving the truth.

As a result of rejecting the love for the truth, "God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false" (v. 11). In the Bible, when people harden their hearts, God hardens their

⁴⁷ See same concept is found in the Jewish extra-biblical writing: 4 Ezra 13,10-11; 1 Enoch 62,2; Ps. of Solomon 17,24.35.

⁴⁸ Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 261.

hearts.⁴⁹ The cases are numerous. When people reject God and embrace iniquity, God gives them over to their deliberate choices and decisions (cf. Rom 1,24.26.28; Rev 17,17).⁵⁰ In Greek, the phrase “believe what is false” means literally “believe the lie”, the falsehood (ψεῦδος), which is opposite of the truth found in the gospel. To believe the lie is the result of not believing and loving the truth (vs. 10, 12).

At the time of the end, in response to people’s rejection of the truth, God will give them over to satanic deception. As a result, they all will be condemned (κρίνω, “judged”) because they “did not believe the truth but took pleasure in wickedness”. The Greek noun behind the word wickedness (ἀδικία) denotes an act of unrighteousness or wrongdoing in contrast to righteousness and right doing.⁵¹ Thus, taking pleasure in wickedness stands in contrast to believing and fulfilling “all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power” (1,11). The choice people make regarding the truth has moral implications. While the love of the truth results in salvation (v. 10), the rejection of the truth inevitably leads to taking delight in sin and wrongdoing, which results in condemnation and eternal loss.

Conclusions

In an effort to correct the misunderstanding among the Thessalonian believers regarding Christ’s return, Paul wrote his most extensive description of the events that will precede the Second Coming (2,1-12), which resonates significantly with Revelation 13. In summary, 2 Thessalonians 2,3-10 outlines the course of Christian history from Paul’s time until the Second Coming. Before the Second Coming, there will be a spiritual rebellion against God orchestrated by Satan. In the context of the rebellion, there will be the appearance of the anti-Christ figure whom Paul refers to in the terms of the man of lawlessness and the lawless

⁴⁹ William Hendriksen, *Commentary on II Thessalonians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 186.

⁵⁰ See also Ps 81,11-12; 1 Kings 22,23; Ezek 14,9; Acts 8,42; 14,16.

⁵¹ Bauer, *Greek-English lexicon*, 2.

one. The spirit of lawlessness was already felt in Paul's day operating undercover because God restrained its full revelation. Then, somewhere in the future, God would at the proper time remove the restraint, and the man of lawlessness would eventually be fully revealed as the agent of Satan and would rebelliously operate in the course of Christian history (vs. 3-7). Then, at the end, there will be an outbreak of satanic activities, as Satan will launch the greatest deception ever witnessed in history.

In dealing with Paul's description of the great apostasy and lawless rebellion in the course of Christian history, we should remember that 2 Thessalonians 2 does not provide an exhaustive description of the great apostate rebellion during the history of Christendom. It rather points to Paul's effort to correct the misinformation among the believers in Thessalonica regarding the Second Coming by refreshing their memory of what he had previously told them (2,5). It is necessary for readers today to study this section along the corresponding texts, particularly Daniel 7,23-25 and Revelation 13,1-7.

These passages point to the rebellious anti-Christ system that would step on the stage of history after the fall of the pagan Roman Empire. The only power in history that fulfils the characteristics specified in these passages is the medieval papacy. Many interpreters from the Middle Ages on, and even to this day, have designated the papal institution as the anti-Christ system and power foretold in the biblical prophecies. (Only in the last century or two have the vast majority of Christians moved away from this interpretation). This identification of the medieval papacy fits the specifications presented in 2 Thessalonians 2 that this anti-Christ man of lawlessness would be both an institution (neuter) and a person (masculine).

We should keep in mind that the biblical prophecy points to Satan as the key player in the great rebellion known as the Great Controversy. Paul warned Christians that the spiritual war they are involved in is not against human powers and authorities, but the spiritual satanic forces (Eph 6,12; 1 Cor 10,33-4). Yet, the Bible shows that in the history of the great rebellion and opposition against God, Satan used different system and institutions. The same will characterize the eschatological drama. In describing

the end-time scenario, Paul shows that the coming of Christ would be preceded by the activities of Satan through the agency of the anti-Christ figure of the man lawlessness. That revelation and coming of the man of lawlessness as the agent of Satan will be in the manner of the revelation and coming of Jesus from heaven, thus counterfeiting the Second Coming.

Paul makes very clear that the final deception will be so convincing that all those who do not receive “the love of the truth” will be deceived (2 Thess 2,10). Commenting the end-time scenario, Ellen White wrote:

As the crowning act in the great drama of deception, Satan himself will personate Christ. [...] Only those who have been diligent students of the Scriptures and who have received the love of the truth will be shielded from the powerful delusion that takes the world captive. By the Bible testimony these will detect the deceiver in his disguise.⁵²

This is in the line what Paul stresses. In order to stand firm in the face of the end-time deception, the faithful must stand firm in the biblical truth, so to be saved (2 Thess 2,10).

⁵² Ellen G. White, *The great controversy* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), 624-625.