



The letter containing this month's question concerns 'antichrist' and 'the man of lawlessness', (in the A.V., is called 'the man of sin'). Here is the question.

"1st John 2:18 refers to 'antichrist' and 'the antichrist'; are Satan and the lawless man of 2nd Thess. 2 one and the same?"

Are the events described in 2nd Thess. 2. in the future and do some Christians face a terrible persecution?

Are all people who deny the Sonship and incarnation of Jesus to be regarded as antichrists, or is the term reserved for N.T. gnosticism and docetism?"

In dealing with the questions I would like, first, to make an observation about the opening statement; '1st John 2:18 refers to 'antichrists' and 'the antichrist'; and then we should be ready to consider the three questions raised in the 'question', which I have numbered for the sake of clarity.

- (1) *Are Satan and the lawless man of 2nd Thess.2 one and the same?*
- (2) *Are the events described in 2nd Thess.2 in the future and do some Christians face a terrible persecution?*
- (3) *Are all people who deny the Sonship and incarnation of Jesus to be regarded as antichrists, or is the term reserved for NT gnosticism and docetism?"*

About the opening statement. It is important that we should notice that nowhere does John use the term 'The Antichrist'. In fact, in the New Testament scriptures the word '*antichristos*' is unique to John's first and second letters, and the definite article is not found in the Greek text. The word simply means '*against Christ*', and it is used in an adjectival sense. In other words, it is not used as a title, but defines an attitude or disposition of rejection of the Christ. This becomes evident if we summarize what John wrote.

In his first letter Chapter 2:18, he introduced the subject:-

- I. **"You have heard"**, - in these words he implied that he was reminding them of something about which they had already been forewarned. (Paul uses similar language in 2nd Thess. 2:5)
- II. **"that antichrist is coming"**. Notice that he used the future tense.
- III. **"even now there are many antichrists"**. He revealed that this opposition to Christ already existed. (Paul endorses this in 2nd Thess.2:7).
- IV. "He is antichrist, who denies the Father and the Son". John then defined the word 'antichrist' in terms which cannot be misunderstood.

This definition is expanded at verse 7 of his second letter, where he declared that **"many deceivers have gone out into the world"**; people **"who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh: any such person is a deceiver and an antichrist."**

So, according to the literal definition of the word, '*antichristos*' means contra, or against Christ. It does not describe one who *claims* to be the Christ or who usurps the authority of the Christ, but identifies one who *denies* the identity of Christ and His authority. The Lord himself said, **"He who is not with me is against me."** (Matt.12:30).

In fact, John did use the word '*pseudochristos*' in referring to those whom he described as '*antichrist*'. He was not writing about '*false Christs*' nor was he accusing these people of claiming to be Christ. According to Matt. 24:24; and Mark 13:22, '*pseudochristos*' was the term use by the Lord Himself in answering His disciples' questions about the destruction of the Temple.

How, then, has the concept of '*The Antichrist*' arisen? Why has this attitude of opposition to Christ become 'personified'? To find the answer to this question it is necessary to go back to the Old Testament scriptures. After the Babylonian Captivity there grew up among the Jews a belief which declared that, at some time in the future, *someone* or *some power*, would come to wage war against the people of God. They believed that this enemy of the God's people would appear before the coming of the Messiah and would be defeated by 'the Coming One' (i.e., the Messiah).

There are several passages, notably in the Book of Daniel, which relate to the future of the Kingdom of Judah after Captivity, and which contain references to this coming conflict and the one who would instigate it. (See Dan.7 vv 8,20,24: 11:36f). It is surely not difficult, then, to appreciate that the early Christians, and the Jewish Christians in particular who were certainly familiar with the Old Covenant scriptures and who recognised themselves as the true spiritual people of God, would find it easy to relate to this idea.

When Paul wrote 2ndThessalonians, he knew that his readers were concerned about the Lord's return, believing that it was imminent. But, in Chapter 2, he pointed out that the return of the Christ would be preceded by a falling-away from the faith and by the revelation (*apokalupsis*) of 'the man of sin', whom he further describes as 'the son of perdition'.

However, when we try to identify this 'man of sin', we run into difficulties! Are we to look for an evil person or an evil system or organisation? We may immediately rule out the notion that a *system or organisation* is indicated because Paul said that 'the son of perdition' would be identified by his conduct.

- a) He would *oppose and exalt himself against every so-called god or object of worship.*
- b) He would *take his seat in the temple of God.*
- c) He would *claim to be God.*
- d) Although *not himself Satan*, he would be the tool of Satan, since his coming would be 'by the activity of Satan'.

These identification marks certainly appear to point to an evil individual rather than to an organisation. When Paul wrote these things it is understandable that, in the light of the persecution being suffered by the Church, these early Christians thought that this was a reference to the power of the Roman Empire, and, even more particularly, to one or other of several Emperors personally responsible for instigating religious persecution.

It was widely known, for instance, that the Emperor Caligula had planned to erect an image of himself in the Temple in Jerusalem, believing himself to be a god, so the connection was not difficult to make. Since, however, Caligula was assassinated in 41 A.D., and Paul wrote 2nd Thessalonians ten years later, Caligula, vicious man though he undoubtedly was, could not possibly be the person to whom the passage refers. [In any case, Paul clearly predicted that this person would make his appearance at some time in the future].

Closer to our own time, the Protestant Reformers were convinced that the occupant of the Vatican throne was the one concerning whom Paul had prophesied, and no doubt there are still some folk who hold this view.

Let me, then, summarize my answer to the questions.

1. Satan and the 'man of sin' are not the same person. Satan is nowhere in the Scriptures described in human terms. He is never called a 'man'. The man of sin is his tool.
2. Since the events described by Paul in 2nd Thess., must precede the Lord's return, it is reasonable to believe that there will, indeed, be a *future* time of persecution, and John is warning his readers that, at some time in the future, there would be a intensification of the rejection of, and opposition to, Christ which already existed in his own days. Is not this the thought behind the rhetorical question posed by the Lord Himself?
"When the Son of Man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" Luke 18:8.
3. Although it is true that the 'Docetics' denied that the Lord's body was human but only 'seemed to be real'; and the 'Gnostics' claimed that Jesus was only 'a messenger of the supreme God', sent to bring 'gnosis'- knowledge', the scriptures make it abundantly clear that *anyone* who denies the Father and the Son is an 'antichrist', 1 John 2:22, no matter the reason for the denial.

After nearly 2000 years the situation has not changed. By means of the preaching of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit continues to bear testimony to the fact that *Jesus is the Christ, the son of the Living God*, and anyone who hears this testimony, understands it and refuses to believe it, is antichrist and stands under condemnation. We still need to preach Matt. 28:18-20.

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