



RETHINKING BIBLE PROPHECY IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

'Eschatology' is the study of last things. Christians should never fear having their eschatological 'system' scrutinised by the plain teaching of the Bible. If you subscribe to the currently popular "Left Behind" system of eschatology, prepare to be challenged by Scripture and history. Moreover, prepare to gain a greater respect for the integrity of the Bible.

IDENTIFYING ANTICHRIST

FROM
Last Days Madness

BY GARY DEMAR



Hal Lindsey wrote in 1970 that he believed that the Antichrist was alive somewhere in the world. He repeated this belief in 1977 when he wrote that it was his "personal opinion" that "he's alive somewhere now. But he's not going to become this awesome figure that we nickname the Anti-Christ until Satan possesses him, and I don't believe that will occur until there is this 'mortal wound' from which he's raised up."¹ In 1980 he restated this conviction by writing that "this man [Antichrist] is alive today—alive and waiting to come forth."² Although Lindsey believes the Antichrist is alive somewhere in the world today, and actually has been since at least 1970, he has stated that "we must not indulge in speculation about whether any of the current world figures is the antichrist."³ Anyway, determining the identity of the Antichrist does not really matter since Lindsey and others believe "that Christians will not be around to watch the debacle brought about by the cruelest dictator of all time."⁴

Not to be outdone, Dave Hunt voices a similar opinion: "Somewhere, at this very moment, on planet Earth, the Antichrist is almost certainly alive—biding his time, awaiting his cue. Banal sensationalism? Far from it! That likelihood is based upon a sober evaluation of current events in relation to

Bible prophecy. Already a mature man, he is probably active in politics, perhaps even an admired world leader whose name is almost daily on everyone's lips."⁵ Salem Kirban wrote in 1977 that "those of us familiar with Scriptures can easily see the handwriting on the wall as the way is prepared for the coming Antichrist."⁶

Lindsey, Hunt, Kirban, and many others share a belief that is strikingly similar to that of fortuneteller Jeane Dixon. Dixon claimed to have received a divine vision on February 5, 1962, about a coming world religious-political ruler; her "prophecy" strikingly resembles the modern doctrine of Antichrist: "A child, born somewhere in the Middle East shortly before 7 A.M. (EST) on February 5, 1962, will revolutionise the world. Before the close of the century he will bring together all mankind in one all-embracing faith. This will be the foundation of a new Christianity, with every sect and creed united through this man who will walk among the people to spread the wisdom of the Almighty Power."⁷ "Mrs. Dixon claims that this man's influence will be felt in the early 1980s and that by 1999, the ecumenical religion will be achieved."⁸ Why should we believe present-day prophetic prognosticators when we have been offered assurances of the identity of the Antichrist numerous times over the centuries?

"It is time for God's people to acknowledge the greatness of Christ's Great Commission and to stop fretting about the so-called Great Tribulation, which was the great tribulation for Israel in A.D. 70, not a future event."

Gary North, in *Rapture Fever*

Saint Martin of Tours, who died in A.D. 397, wrote of the coming Antichrist whose reign would signify the last days. His prediction sounds strangely familiar. "Non est dubium, quin antichristus... There is no doubt that the Antichrist has already been born. Firmly established already in his early years, he will, after reaching maturity, achieve supreme power."⁹ Now go back and reread the quotations of Lindsey and Hunt. Christians should repudiate the writings of anyone who speculates that the Antichrist is a contemporary figure. Such speculation is biblically unsound, as will become evident as we survey the passages used to make the identification. Why all the confusion over who the Antichrist is? The confusion arises because of two misconceptions: (1) treating divergent biblical references as if they all refer to the same person thereby creating a composite figure that is not found in Scripture; and (2) mistaking the time period in which these divergent figures are to appear.

The Composite Modern-Day Antichrist

Before we begin to sort through this confusion, let's first establish what generally passes as the modern understanding of Antichrist. The Antichrist of today's speculative theology combines the characteristics of Daniel's "prince who is to come" and other features from the Book of Daniel (9:26; 7:7-8, 19-26; 8:23-25); elements from Matthew and Daniel's "abomination of desolation" (Matthew 24:15; Daniel 9:27); Paul's "man of lawlessness" (2nd Thessalonians 2:3); John's "antichrist" language (1st John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2nd John 7); and John's "Beast" (Revelation 13:11-18).

This futurised composite Antichrist supposedly will make himself known after the Rapture of the church during the seven-year tribulation. It is speculated that he will arise out of Europe since he arises out of the midst of the "ten horns" on the head of the "fourth beast" (Daniel 7:7-8, 19-26). This "fourth beast" with its "ten horns" is said to be a revived Roman Empire. This is the same beast that rises out of the sea of Revelation 13 (verses 1-10). Some believe the Beast or Antichrist must be a Jew since he will come "up out of the earth" or land (Revelation 13:11). Others believe that since he arises out of the sea, a designation for Gentile nations, he must be a Gentile (cf. Isaiah 57:20).

The modern Antichrist is pictured as a

charismatic political figure, the perfect media man. In the 1960s John F. Kennedy seemed to fit all the criteria for a modern-day Antichrist, and his mortal head wound clinched it for many gullible Christians. The Antichrist purportedly will have the eloquence of a Winston Churchill (Revelation 13:5) and the raw emotion and crowd appeal of an Adolf Hitler (Daniel 7:20; 8:23).

The conjecture which surrounds this figure continues with amazing detail based on scant biblical evidence. The Antichrist will come to prominence as part of a ten-nation confederation approximating the land area of the old Roman Empire. Initially he will gain control through war, subduing three of the powers in the confederation. Some speculate that the ten-nation confederation will begin with thirteen. Once he secures power, he will pursue avenues of peace like Adolf Hitler (Daniel 8:25). His talk of peace will be attractive to an apostate Christianity (1st Thessalonians 5:3). As with Hitler who made peace with the "Holy See" of Rome, these overtures of peace will act like sedatives on the people.

In his speech of March 23, 1933, to the Reichstag when the legislative body of Germany abandoned its functions to the dictator, Hitler paid tribute to the Christian faiths as "essential elements for safeguarding the soul of the German people," promised to respect their rights, declared that his government's "ambition is a peaceful accord between Church and State" and added—with an eye to the votes of the Catholic Center Party, which he received—that "we hope to improve our friendly relations with the Holy See."¹⁰

As a man of peace, the Antichrist will make a covenant with the Jews guaranteeing them peace and security in their own land. In the middle of the covenant period, he will break the covenant and turn on the Jews. He will then make war with the Jewish saints and will overcome them (Revelation 13:17; Daniel 7:21). Of course, during this three-and-one-half year period of time two-thirds of the Jews living in Palestine will be killed (Zechariah 13:8-9). Since he hates God, the Antichrist will blaspheme God and His tabernacle (Revelation 13:6).

As a counterfeit Christ, the Antichrist will be given great powers by the devil to try to duplicate Jesus' work. He will even seek to match the resurrection; the Antichrist will seem to have suffered a mortal blow to the head but will then be miraculously resurrected.¹¹ He will im-

mediately become an object of worship (Revelation 13:3-8) and will set himself up as God in the temple in Jerusalem (2nd Thessalonians 2:4). The false prophet will erect an image or idol to the Antichrist. He will then cause the statue to come alive and to speak (Revelation 13:14-15).

According to this elaborate scenario, the world will be living under a tyranny directed by Satan through his Beast-Antichrist and false prophet. Each and every person will be stamped with the dreaded 666! This recipe for disaster will eventually lead to Armageddon where all the nations of the world will be brought against Israel. Only the return of Christ will save Israel and the world.

When tested against sound biblical interpretation, will such a theory hold up? Quoting verses from one book of the Bible and claiming that they correspond to statements in another book of the Bible does not constitute truth. In addition, the issue of timing invalidates the entire theory. Is it possible that what was prophecy is now history? Could the Beast of Revelation 13 and his attendant number 666 be referring to a well-known historical figure who played a prominent role during the time in which the Book of Revelation was written?

As we will see, the modern doctrine of Antichrist is an amalgamation of biblical concepts and events that either are unrelated or find their fulfillment in past events. This is why confusion persists. Modern Antichrist hunters are pursuing a figure who does not exist. Let's look at the biblical evidence.

The Biblical Antichrist

First, we must find a biblical definition of Antichrist. The word "Antichrist" appears only in John's epistles (1st John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2nd John 7). "What is taught in these passages constitutes the whole New Testament doctrine of Antichrist."¹² John's description of Antichrist is altogether different from the modern image. John's Antichrist is

- Anyone "who denies that Jesus is the Christ" (1st John 2:22).
- Anyone who "denies the Father and Son" (1st John 2:23).
- "Every spirit that does not confess Jesus" (1st John 4:3).
- "Those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist" (2nd John 7).

None of what John writes relates to the modern doctrine of the Antichrist as

previously outlined. John's Antichrist doctrine is a theological concept related to an apostasy that was fomenting in his day. John did not have a particular individual in mind but rather individuals who taught that Jesus Christ is not who the Bible says He is:

In one word, "Antichrist" meant for John just denial of what we should call the doctrine, or let us rather say the fact, of the Incarnation. By whatever process it had been brought about, "Christ" had come to denote for John the Divine Nature of our Lord, and so far to be synonymous with "Son of God." To deny that Jesus is the Christ was not to him therefore merely to deny that he is the Messiah, but to deny that he is the Son of God; and was equivalent therefore to "denying the Father and the Son"—that is to say, in our modern mode of speech, the doctrine—in fact—of the Trinity, which is the implicate of the Incarnation. To deny that Jesus is Christ come—or is the Christ coming—in flesh, was again just to refuse to recognise in Jesus Incarnate God. Whosoever, says John, takes up this attitude toward Jesus is Antichrist.¹³

Is this interpretation possible? Aren't we supposed to look for a future apostasy out of which the Antichrist will arise? As the New Testament makes clear, apostasy was rampant almost from the church's inception. The apostasy about which John wrote was operating in his day. Paul had to counter a "different gospel" that was "contrary" to what he had preached (Galatians 1:6-9). He had to battle "false brethren" (Galatians 2:4, 11-21; 3:1-3; 5:1-12). He warned the Ephesian church leadership that "men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:28-30). Theological insurrection came from within the Christian community.

Many people prior to Jerusalem's destruction in A.D. 70 questioned and disputed basic Christian doctrines like the resurrection (2nd Timothy 2:18); some even claimed that the resurrection was an impossibility (1st Corinthians 15:12). Strange doctrines were taught. Some "Christians" prohibited marriage (1st Timothy 4:1-3). Others denied the validity of God's good creation (Colossians 2:8, 18-23). The apostles found themselves defending the faith against numerous false teachers and "false apostles" (Romans 16:17-18; 2 Corinthians 11:3-4, 12:15; Philippians 3:18-19; 1st Timothy 1:3-7; 2nd Timothy 4:2-5). Apostasy increased to such an extent that Paul had to write letters to a young

pastor who was experiencing these things firsthand (1st Timothy 1:19-20; 6:20-21; 2nd Timothy 2:16-18; 3:1-9, 13; 4:10, 14-16). In addition, entire congregations fell to apostasy:

One of the last letters of the New Testament, the Book of Hebrews, was written to an entire Christian community on the very brink of wholesale abandonment of Christianity. The Christian church of the first generation was not only characterised by faith and miracles; it was also characterised by increasing lawlessness, rebellion, and heresy from within the Christian community—just as Jesus foretold in Matthew 24.¹⁴

The Book of Revelation recounts such heretical teachings: "evil men" (2:2), "those who call themselves apostles" but who are found to be "false" (2:6), a revival of "the teaching of Balaam" (2:14), those "who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans" (2:15), the toleration of the "woman Jezebel...who leads" God's "bond-servants astray, so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols" (2:20). The apostasy was alive and well on planet Earth in the first century (2nd Thessalonians 2:3).

Antichrist is simply any belief system that disputes the fundamental teachings of Christianity, beginning with the person of Christ. These antichrists are "religious" figures. The Antichrist, contrary to much present-day speculation, is not a political figure, no matter how anti-(against) Christ he might be. The modern manufactured composite Anti-christ is not the Antichrist of 1st and 2nd John: "Putting it all together, we can see that Antichrist is a description of both the system of apostasy and individual apostates. In other words, Antichrist was the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy that a time of great apostasy would come, when 'many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many' (Matt. 24:10-11)."¹⁵

In addition, you will not find the word Antichrist in the Book of Revelation. This is significant since the John who defines Antichrist for us in his first two letters is the same John who penned the Book of Revelation.

It is remarkable that a word so "characteristic of the School of John" does not appear in the Apocalypse, where it might have served the writer's purpose in more than one passage. That the conception of a personal Antichrist existed among the Christians in Asia in the first century is certain from 1st John 2:18.¹⁶

Second, according to the Bible, Anti-

christ is not a single individual. John wrote, "Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen; from this we know that it is the last hour" (1st John 2:18). "He calls them just "Antichrists," and he sets them over against the individual Antichrist of which his readers had heard as the reality represented by that unreal figure."¹⁷ It is possible that the early church "heard" that one man was to come on the scene who was to be the Antichrist. John seems to be correcting this mistaken notion: "John is adducing not an item of Christian teaching, but only a current legend—Christian or other—in which he recognises an element of truth and isolates it for the benefit of his readers. In that case we may understand him less as expounding than as openly correcting it—somewhat as, in the closing page of his Gospel, he corrects another saying of similar bearing which was in circulation among the brethren, to the effect that he himself should not die but should tarry till the Lord comes (John 21:18-23)."¹⁸ In a similar manner, the people in Jesus' day had "heard" certain things that were only partially true. Jesus corrected them in their misreading of the Bible (Matthew 5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43).¹⁹

Third, whether there was to be only one or many antichrists, John made it clear that "it is the last hour" for those who first read his letters (1st John 2:18). How do we know this? John said, "Even now many antichrists have arisen." And in case you did not get his point, he repeated it: "From this we know that it is the last hour." John did not describe a period of time thousands of years in the future. It was the "last hour" for his contemporaries. Keep in mind that Jesus had told His disciples years before, John among them, that their generation would see the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem (Matthew 24:1-34). John, writing close to the time when this prophecy was to be fulfilled, described its fulfillment in the rise of "many antichrists," that is, many who preach and teach a false religious system, the denial that Jesus had come in the flesh (2nd John 7). The apostle's knowledge about coming antichrists was probably taken from Matthew 24:24: "For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect."

They had heard that "the spirit of antichrist" was coming. For them, "now it is already in the world" (1st John 4:3). Antichrists had arrived. It is inappropriate

ate to look for a contemporary rising political leader and describe him as the Antichrist. Such a designation cannot be supported from Scripture. Does this mean that the spirit of Antichrist cannot be present in our day? Not at all. It does mean, however, that a figure called the Antichrist cannot be alive somewhere in the world today. Having said this, we still must conclude that John had the time prior to Jerusalem's destruction in mind when he described the theological climate surrounding the concept of the Antichrist.

An Antichrist, therefore, is anyone who "denies that Jesus is the Christ" and anyone "who denies the Father and the Son" (1st John 2:22). "Every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of antichrist" (1st John 4:3). "For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist" (2nd John 7). John "transposes Antichrist from the future to the *present*. He expands him from an individual into a *multitude*. He reduces him from a person to a *heresy*."²⁰ From this study we can conclude that it is *unbiblical* to use the term "Antichrist" for a present-day or future political ruler. The proper context is theological and pre-A.D. 70.

END NOTES

1. "The Great Cosmic Countdown: Hal Lindsey on the Future," *Eternity* (January 1977), 80.
2. Hal Lindsey, *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon* (King of Prussia, PA: Westgate Press, 1980), 15.
3. Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, [1970] 1971), 113.
4. Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, 113.
5. Dave Hunt, *Global Peace and the Rise of Antichrist* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1990), 5.
6. Salem Kirban, *Countdown to Rapture* (Irvine, CA: Harvest House, 1977), 181.
7. Quoted in Robert Glenn Gromacki, *Are These the Last Days?* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1970), 90.
8. Gromacki, *Are These the Last Days?*, 90.
9. Quoted in Otto Friedrich, *The End of the World: A History* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1982), 27.
10. William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 234.
11. Lindsey says that he "does not believe it will be an actual resurrection, but it will be a situation in which this person has a mortal wound. Before he has actually lost life, however, he will be brought back from this critically wounded state. This is something which will cause tremendous amazement throughout the world" (*Late Great Planet Earth*, 108). This is highly doubtful. The world would not be amazed. A vast majority would consider it a trick. They've seen too much of the magician David Copperfield.
12. Benjamin B. Warfield, "Antichrist," in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. 1, ed. John E. Mecer (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 356.
13. Warfield, "Antichrist," 360-61.
14. David Chilton, *Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985), 108.
15. Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, 111.
16. Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indices* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1906), lxxv.
17. Warfield, "Antichrist," 359.
18. Warfield, "Antichrist," 357.
19. Gary DeMar, "You've Heard It Said": 15 Biblical Misconceptions that Render Christians Powerless (Atlanta, GA: American Vision, 1991).
20. Warfield, "Antichrist," 358.

INTRODUCTION TO PRETERISM

When America's beloved theologian, R.C. Sproul, published his first work on eschatology (doctrine of last things) in 1998, the theological world was stunned to see that he had adopted a Preterist view of first century end-time fulfillment.

Since the publishing of *The Last Days According to Jesus*, mainstream Christianity has found the Preteristic idea more difficult to dismiss than it had been during the previous century of Dispensationalism's dominance. With thousands of people departing from "orthodox" theology, due (in part) to the continual postponements of prophecies, and the extremism of modern end-time doctrine, the Preterist view of the Bible (From the Hebrew language's *Preterit* [Past Perfect] tense according to Milton Terry) has gone from simply being a grass-roots movement, to being the cutting-edge theology of the day. This view of eschatological fulfillment is gaining a strong foothold in every niche of Christianity, and has seen a gathering of fine people from nearly every doctrinal background.

Simply approaching theology from such a radically different point of view would yield great insights—but the Preterist view (which is not a denomination) doesn't simply present new ideas, it delivers numerous answers to centuries-old questions.

R.C. Sproul defined Preterism as follows:

Preterism: An eschatological viewpoint that places many or all eschatological events in the past, especially during the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

The term 'Preterist' is a somewhat obscure way of labelling those who believe that the Roman-Jewish War in the first century is to be associated with end-times Bible fulfillment.

Many (if not most) historical Christian theologians have identified the fulfillment of the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24) with the fall of Jerusalem. Showing this unanimity in the fourth century, Chrysostom wrote regarding the fulfillment of the discourse :

"Was their house left desolate? Did all the vengeance come upon that generation? It is quite plain that it was so, and no man gainsays it." (A.D. 347, Homily LXXIV, Sec. 3)

The "Last Days" of the Old Covenant, not the New

New Testament eschatology is focused on the ending of the Old Covenant (the body's shadow) for the establishing of the New (the actual body). The book of Hebrews, which opens with a declaration of the present "last days" (1:1) declares that it was the Old Covenant which was in its last days, stating, "that which waxeth old and decayeth is ready to vanish away" (Heb. 8:13).

This is of utmost importance, as the ending of the Old Covenant was the establishing of the New. Hebrews 9:8 lays out the case that until the physical temple and accoutrements of the law passed away, the spiritual realities for which they stood as temporal symbols could not be fully established and glorified. Therefore, end-times prophecies in the New Testament were focused on the dissolution of Old Covenant Israel, as were the end-times prophecies of the Old Testament. This is why the fulfillment of the New Testament end-times prophecies were said to be in fulfillment of the words of the prophets of old (Luke 21:22; Acts 3:21; Revelation 10:7).

Consider the following verses in support of this Preterist assertion, and make up your own mind as to whether or not the last days were upon that generation:

"This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled." Matthew 24:34

"But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel; And it shall come to pass in the last days..." Acts 2:16,17

"Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son" Hebrews 1:2

"Who (Christ) verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you." I Peter 1:20

"Little children, it is the last time:... whereby we know that it is the last hour." I John 2:18

The Preterist position holds that the Old Covenant and all of its elements (Galatians 4:3; cf. II Peter 3:10) ceased at the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D.70, and that the New Covenant and all of its spiritual elements for which they stood only in shadow (Galatians 3:25; Colossians 2:17; etc.) have been in place ever since.