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2 Thessalonians and the Man of Sin

Prophecy Study Paper

Prepared by the Prophecy Advisory Committee
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In 2 Thessalonians 2 we have a picture of an individual to arise in the end time called “the man of sin.” Here is what the apostle Paul says of him:

“Let no one deceive you by any means; for *that Day will not come* unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains *will do so* until He is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. The coming of the *lawless one* is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved” (2 Thessalonians 2:3-10).

The Church has traditionally taught that this man of sin is a powerful religious figure to appear in the end time prior to Christ’s return. The United Church of God in its booklet *The Book of Revelation Unveiled* has reaffirmed this teaching. Notice under the subhead, “The religious factor” (page 25), that the connection is made to the second beast of Revelation 13.

“Next John says: ‘Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he *spoke like a dragon*. He exercised *all the authority* of the first beast *on his behalf*, and made the earth and its inhabitants *worship* the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed’ (Revelation 13:11-12, NIV).

“Who is the second beast? He is a tool of Satan who uses his position and authority to influence humankind to *worship* the first beast.

“How will he persuade the masses to accept such arrogance? He will be a skillful deceiver directly manipulated and empowered by Satan. ‘He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men. And he deceives those who dwell on the earth by those signs which he was granted to do in the sight of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who was wounded by the sword and lived. He was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed’ (verses 13-15).

“John later describes the powerful religious leader as *‘the false prophet* who had performed the *miraculous signs* on his [the beast’s] behalf’ (Revelation 19:20, NIV).

“Paul also predicted the coming of a super powerful deceiver: ‘And then the lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with *all power, signs, and lying wonders*, and with *all unrighteous*

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deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved' (2 Thessalonians 2:8-10)."

Comparison With the Second Beast of Revelation 13

We have connected this figure with the second beast, the false prophet, of Revelation 13. A comparison of the description of the man of sin in 2 Thessalonians and the second beast of Revelation 13 (understood to be the false prophet) shows several similarities.

Look at the description of the second beast of Revelation 13 that we understand to be a miracle-working false prophet:

Revelation 13:13-14	2 Thessalonians 2:9-11
<p>13 He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men.</p>	<p>9 The coming of the <i>lawless one</i> is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders,</p>
<p>14 And he deceives those who dwell on the earth by those signs which he was granted to do in the sight of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who was wounded by the sword and lived.</p>	<p>10 and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved.</p>
	<p>11 And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie,</p>

Both are doing signs and engaging in a work of deception. It is true the second beast (false prophet) causes the world to worship the first beast (political ruler) of Revelation 13:12. However, one could read from verse 12 that, by exercising the authority of the first beast and causing the world to worship the first, the second takes on a role that is no less than one of equality. This is important to note. There is no hint of subordination in any description of this miracle-working false prophet.

At this point we should note who the source of authority is for both figures in Revelation 13. There is a line pointing directly at Satan who deceives the world. Revelation 12:17 shows the enraged dragon going to "make war with the rest of her [the Church's] offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ."

The world worships the dragon and the first beast (Revelation 13:4). The dragon also gives authority to the beast. The second beast is also said to cause the world to worship the first beast (verse 12). He, the second beast, exercises all the authority of the first beast. Remember that the authority comes from the dragon. This second beast seems to lend an authenticity to the first beast that he does not have. The first beast has great authority and prestige but not enough to

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pull off what must come later. For that he needs the imprimatur of a miracle-working person whose support allows enforcement of something the world has never before experienced.

Scripture does not indicate one of these figures to be lesser or greater than the other.

Context of 2 Thessalonians

When reading 2 Thessalonians 2 alone we must conclude the man spoken of is a *religious* figure. The whole chapter is speaking to the Church about religious deception. Paul is warning the members of a deception that he must have discussed when he was among them (verse 5). Below is the section with highlights amplifying the work of the man of sin. (Comments in brackets are those of the author.)

“Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. Let no one deceive you by any means; for *that Day will not come* unless the falling away [**the falling away is from biblical truth**] comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition [**a term used one other time—to refer to Judas, a renegade disciple**], who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God [**most commentators agree this is referring to a literal temple**], showing himself that he is God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. For the **mystery of lawlessness** is already at work [**speaking of religious deception**]; only He who now restrains *will do so* until He is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. The coming of the *lawless one* is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception [**this must mean deceptive religious teaching**] among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved [**thus spiritual salvation is the subject of this verse**]. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12).

The work of this man of sin is described in spiritual terms, which the Church would easily relate to their circumstance. Notice verse 3 where a “falling away” is described. The term describes a falling away from biblical truth. The man of sin is called, “the son of perdition,” a term used one other time when referring to Judas Iscariot who betrayed Christ into the hands of the Romans. What other conclusion would a member reach after hearing this letter read during church services? He would look for a person posing as a great religious leader.

When this figure sits in the temple as God it is understood that this is speaking of a literal temple. Notice what *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* says:

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“...This individual ‘opposes and exalts himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped.’ His direct and determined opposition to the true God will be a leading feature of the continuing apostasy. It will be especially marked by removal of the symbolic articles from the Jerusalem temple. The man of lawlessness will occupy the holy precincts in order to accept and even demand worship that is due God alone. This evidently is a Jewish temple to be rebuilt in Jerusalem in the future. Dependence of these words on Daniel 9:26, 27; 11:31, 36, 37; 12:11 (cf. Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14) demands such a reference.”

Verse 7 refers to a “mystery of lawlessness” already being at work. This Greek word for lawlessness is *anomia*, a term describing willful opposition to the law or a sinful person, (Sacra Pagina, Vol. 11; First and Second Thessalonians, p. 327). This commentary goes on to say, “...one should envision this figure as an individual who is at the service of the power of lawlessness that is opposed to God and divinely established order” (ibid.). Whatever this mystery is, the concept of lawlessness must refer to the biblical definition of sin, “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4).

Verse 10 speaks of unrighteous deception on those who “receive not a love of the truth.” Spiritual salvation is the subject of this verse. The end result of this man and his work is spiritual shipwreck for those who heed his teachings and worship his ways.

Verse 11 centers on a message to the believer in unmistakable terms. He, the believer, is subject to the deception unless he holds on to the truth with a singular love. Christ warned that a characteristic of the end would be a waning of the love brought on by an increase in lawlessness (Matthew 24:12-13).

The “first love” or deep commitment to the truth disappears or becomes weak. People are susceptible to the activity of the lawless one. It is important to remember that Revelation 12:17 shows the prime focus of Satan’s efforts is to “make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.”

Consider the original setting of this letter. Paul writes to the congregation in Thessalonica some time after having founded the church there. They hear this letter read to them on a given Sabbath. What would they think when they hear this warning about a lawless one, a man of sin, working unrighteous deception and strong delusion? What would they imagine when they hear the chilling prediction of people who will “fall away”? These are spiritual concepts, which would lead people to look for a religious figure to fulfill the description. To say that people would think of Daniel’s prophecies and make the connection to Antiochus is to read something into the text that is not clearly there.

Today, as the Church reads this section, the same thoughts must come to mind. The danger to the modern Church is a spiritual deception. It is always the same. Christ’s first warning of the sign of the end was to beware of religious deception in those claiming to represent Him, “And Jesus answered and said to them: ‘Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will

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come in My name, saying, "I am the Christ," and will deceive many" (Matthew 24:4-5). Spiritual deception is the primary problem of humanity.

Comparing Daniel and Paul

Some feel that this man of sin Paul speaks of is not a religious figure but a powerful political figure, the "beast" of Revelation. Support for this view is found by comparing the statements made in Daniel of the forerunners, or types of this powerful end-time figure. While we can acknowledge similarities between Paul's prophecy and Daniel's description of a tyrannical political ruler who opposes the people of God, we must be careful not to draw a continuous thread from Daniel to Paul. It is not like we can treat 2 Thessalonians 2 as a perfect overlay for Daniel. Let's look at those similarities.

Daniel 8 and 11	2 Thessalonians 2
<p>4 I saw the ram pushing westward, northward, and southward, so that no animal could withstand him; nor <i>was there any</i> that could deliver from his hand, but he did according to his will and became great.</p>	<p>3 Let no one deceive you by any means; for <i>that Day will not come</i> unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition,</p>
<p>9 And out of one of them came a little horn which grew exceedingly great toward the south, toward the east, and toward the Glorious <i>Land</i>.</p>	<p>4 who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.</p>
<p>10 And it grew up to the host of heaven; and it cast down <i>some</i> of the host and <i>some</i> of the stars to the ground, and trampled them.</p>	<p>9 The coming of the <i>lawless one</i> is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders,</p>
<p>11 He even exalted himself as high as the Prince of the host; and by him the daily sacrifices were taken away, and the place of His sanctuary was cast down.</p>	<p>10 and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved.</p>
<p>12 Because of transgression, an army was given over <i>to the horn</i> to oppose the daily <i>sacrifices</i>; and he cast truth down to the ground. He did <i>all this</i> and prospered.</p>	
<p>23 And in the latter time of their kingdom, when the transgressors have reached their fullness, a king shall arise, having fierce features, who understands sinister schemes.</p>	
<p>24 His power shall be mighty, but not by his own power; he shall destroy fearfully,</p>	

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and shall prosper and thrive; he shall destroy the mighty, and *also* the holy people.

25 Through his cunning he shall cause deceit to prosper under his rule; and he shall exalt *himself* in his heart. He shall destroy many in *their* prosperity. He shall even rise against the Prince of princes; but he shall be broken without *human* means.

Daniel 11:36

36 Then the king shall do according to his own will: **he shall exalt and magnify himself above every god, shall speak blasphemies against the God of gods,** and shall prosper till the wrath has been accomplished; for what has been determined shall be done.

37 He shall regard neither the God of his fathers nor the desire of women, **nor regard any god; for he shall exalt himself above them all.**

These similarities have been pointed out by those who see a continuous thread. It is tempting to say this establishes continuity, thus making Paul's man of sin the willful king of Daniel 11. There is, however, one major difference. Daniel's figure does not deal in religious apostasy or deception, as does Paul's man of sin. Look carefully at the descriptors from Daniel in the passages above to see a connection to a supreme religious deception attached to these historic types. There are none.

Paul's man of sin deceives "with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved" (2 Thessalonians 2:10). This man of sin distorts revealed truth. Nowhere in Daniel's writings do we see this connection.

The man of sin not only claims to speak for God or claim godlike power and authority, he claims to be God. Such an act moves beyond any messiah-like claim. This man does not claim to be the human representative of God, but rather that he is God. Nowhere in Scripture do we see such a claim.

This is an important distinction. To conclude we have a perfect overlay of Daniel's descriptors and that of Paul's is not entirely correct. We should be careful not to draw such a firm conclusion that the same person is being described.

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We have seen that the man of sin is “like” the political powers of the past, but only “like.” This argument becomes diluted when we see that mankind from the beginning has taken to itself divine prerogatives. Notice how Satan appealed to Adam and Eve, “For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5).

Adam and Eve’s sin was to take to themselves the prerogative for deciding good from evil. This was in direct violation of God’s purpose and will for mankind. This type of decision is something God reserves only to Himself. Adam and Eve made the choice and mankind has suffered ever since.

Under the sway of Satan’s deceptive influence, man has aspired to be as God from the beginning. In the end these aspirations will be personified through two individuals. But one will have power to deceive with signs and miracles. No political power in the Bible is ever depicted as using signs and miracles. No political power is seen to be deceiving the righteous.

On two occasions we see religious figures using signs and miracles to perform a work of deception. The first is when the magicians of Pharaoh seek to dispel the influence and authority of Moses (Exodus 7-9).

One other occasion is Simon Magus in Acts 8:

“But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, ‘This man is the great power of God.’ And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time” (Acts 8:9-11).

Here is another religious figure using sorceries to deceive people. Note that Simon also claimed to be “the great power of God.” Again we see signs and sorceries intending to deceive associated with a religious figure.

Daniel’s picture of a willful king exalting himself is a powerful image. The man of sin in 2 Thessalonians is certainly like this political figure, but exceeds anything said about him. Paul describes a man who is characterized by *anomia*, a term describing willful opposition to the law. It is a person who is at the service of the power of lawlessness. He is opposed to God and all divinely established order.

This lawless one simply acts like the worst godless figure of apocalyptic tradition. As in Revelation 13, this human personification of satanic power will attempt to usurp the place and power of God and will try to entice the righteous away from the truth and God’s ways. He is Satan’s agent who opposes God and the divine plan for human salvation. His followers believe “the lie” and deny God’s purpose for human life.

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A House Divided

Are we talking about the same mind, that is, Satan, divided historically and prophetically between two persons, the political “beast” and the religious “false prophet”? Christ said that a house divided against itself cannot stand. Satan has divided his efforts to thwart the plan of God between the political and the religious realm.

“And He was casting out a demon, and it was mute. So it was, when the demon had gone out, that the mute spoke; and the multitudes marveled. But some of them said, ‘He casts out demons by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.’ Others, testing *Him*, sought from Him a sign from heaven. But He, knowing their thoughts, said to them: ‘Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and a house *divided* against a house falls. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? Because you say I cast out demons by Beelzebub. And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast *them* out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:14-20).

The reason the language in Daniel, Thessalonians and Revelation is similar when describing the little horn, the prince, etc., is that the same mind is behind each. To conclude that the references are all talking about the same person is to miss the point.

Satan’s “system” or “empire” underwent a change during the first-century period at the time the spiritual Church of God was coming into existence. Up to and including the time of the Rome, the fourth beast of Daniel 7, Satan worked through a system wherein religion and politics was essentially under one head—Nebuchadnezzar, Alexander and Caesar. After the rise of the false church, a division comes to fruition at the time of Rome’s fall and the false church’s rise to prominence. From that point on we see the same deceptive system of Satan now divided into two spheres. We see in history an age-long conflict between the Roman church and the political leaders of Europe. This is well documented.

Satan’s house has been divided against itself. For one moment in time, prior to Christ’s return, they will be brought back together in a supersystem that will grip the earth. But it will not last. Indeed, it will turn on itself. Revelation 17:16-17 describe the beast turning on the woman and devouring her. Verse 17 says it is because “God has put it into their hearts to fulfill His purpose, to be of one mind, and to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled.”

The nature of this whole system is that it deceives the whole world. Paul warns his audience in unmistakable spiritual terms. Commentators admit there is sufficient ambiguity in his language that only those in Thessalonica who heard him would know what he meant. Perhaps the point is that only those truly led by the Spirit of God will avoid this end-time deception. Those who “receive the love of the truth” will not believe “the lie.” It will take two personages to work deception on the world. Their partnership will be unlike any other in history. Together they will convince the world to resist the armies of Christ at His return. How this fantastic event will be done is beyond our ability to imagine. Paul is saying, “Love the truth, and resist all

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unrighteousness. Therein we have the hope of escaping the ‘strong delusion’ to come upon the world.”

Conclusion

This coming “man of sin” represents the apex of evil and rebellion against God. Other than Jesus Christ and God the Father, no other biblical figure makes the claim that “he is God.” Historically both political and religious figures have claimed to be “a god” or stand “in the place of God,” but now one of note will claim to *be* God. The deception this man works will be worldwide and total. As part of the system of Babylon, it will hold the world in the grip of deception (Revelation 18:3).

Scholars have been divided in their interpretation of this man. Some clearly see him as a great religious figure who will work signs and miracles. Others, looking at the same scriptures, conclude this can only be a political figure similar to Antiochus Epiphanes of ancient times. You can look further and see scholarly commentary that adopts a middle ground and does not slot him into either a political or religious role.

The Church of God has understood and taught that this figure is a great religious leader to arise in the days immediately preceding the return of Christ. From the internal evidence presented in this paper, it appears that this is still the best way to understand this passage of Paul’s writings.

Regardless of whether this man is a political or religious leader, Paul is clear that the one sure way to escape the deception of the age will be to receive a love of the truth. “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work” (2 Thessalonians 2:15-17).