



Antichrist Then and Now: The Johannine Epistles and Antichrist in Popular Culture

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Ask people where *antichrist* is mentioned in the Bible and the response will likely be, “In the book of Revelation.” What is surprising is that Revelation does not use that term, and the Greek word *antichristos* occurs only in the Johannine Epistles (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). Impressions about who or what the Antichrist might be typically come from popular culture. Doing an internet search readily yields lists of the current candidates for Antichrist, who are given that label in order to vilify them as figures who threaten global security. The Left Behind novels picture Antichrist as the agent of Satan on earth.¹ The character is named Nicolae Carpathia: a political leader who reigns during the final seven years of this present age, seizes control of the global economy, and persecutes those who refuse to worship him. But in the end Christ returns and destroys the Antichrist

¹ The series was written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. See especially vol. 3, *Nicolae: The Rise of the Antichrist* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1997).

Most people understand “the Antichrist” as a singular figure of evil involved in the events of the end of the world. But in the Johannine Epistles, from which the term comes, the antichrist is a multiple and present reality: liars who deny the person of Christ. By words and actions these liars threaten the beloved community; these “antichrists” may, at times, even be us!

at the battle of Armageddon. The plot is standard in popular literature about the end times.²

Yet this scenario has little to do with 1 and 2 John. A comparison of the way antichrist language functions in the Johannine Epistles with its use by later writers can be illuminating. Here I want to consider three questions: First, according to the Johannine Epistles, what are the traits of antichrist? Second, how do these Epistles relate antichrist to an eschatological battle? And third, how do the Epistles either encourage or subvert the polemical use of antichrist language?

THE TRAITS OF ANTICHRIST

Left Behind and books like it can trace their views of antichrist back to Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* 5.25–30 and Hippolytus's *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*, which were composed in the second and early third centuries. Their goal was to synthesize various biblical passages into a unified portrait of antichrist as the great eschatological enemy. They took the various references to antichrist in the Johannine Epistles and combined them with Revelation's vision of the great seven-headed beast, who tyrannizes the people of the world, becomes the focus of the ruler cult, and persecutes the followers of Jesus. A second figure, depicted as the beast from the land and a false prophet, promotes the ruler cult by working miracles and marking people with the name and number of the great beast, which is six hundred and sixty-six (Rev 13:1–18). Then Irenaeus and Hippolytus wove in references to the man of lawlessness from 2 Thess 2:1–12, a figure whose coming is to be heralded by signs and wonders. In this scenario the man of lawlessness actually takes his seat in the temple of God, which fueled speculation that the antichrist might rebuild the temple, which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. A formidable adversary indeed.

Apart from the name, however, this composite picture of antichrist has almost nothing to do with the Johannine Epistles. Those writings mention no eschatological signs and wonders or violent persecution of the saints. We find that in these Epistles, antichrist does not make himself the object of worship or sit in the temple. Instead, antichrist works by negating what the early Christians believed about Jesus. The Johannine Epistles say that the central confession of the community is that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (1 John 4:2). Antichrist negates that belief: "Who is the liar but the one who *denies* that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who *denies* the Father and the Son" (1 John 2:22). "The deceiver and the antichrist" does "*not confess* that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (2 John 7).

What makes antichrist such a threat to the Johannine readers is his subversive quality. Instead of violently persecuting them, antichrist simply drains their faith of its content. Notably, antichrist does not make himself an alternative

² For an overview and critique see Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 18–27.

focus for worship, as in the scenarios noted above. The problem is suggested by the ambiguities in the Greek term *antichristos* itself. The Greek prefix *anti-* can mean “against,” as the prefix does in English, so that this figure is indeed “against Christ.” But the Greek prefix can also mean “in place of,” which might suggest that he fosters a belief that is a “substitute” for Christ.³ The Synoptic Gospels do warn that in the end times there will be many false messiahs (*pseudochristoi*) who will come in Jesus’s name and say, “I am he” (Matt 24:24; Mark 13:6). Yet in the Johannine Epistles, antichrist is more subtle. He does not say, “Believe that I am the Christ and Jesus is not.”

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Instead, antichrist presses for an apparently attractive spirituality that may identify “Christ” as a lofty ideal but has let go of any meaningful connection with the particular human being named Jesus. For modern readers that may seem peculiar, since on one level it seems easy to affirm that Jesus was a human Jewish rabbi who lived in the first century. It is the higher claims about Jesus as Son of God that in our context seem problematic. But in the Johannine Epistles, the humanity of Jesus is inseparable from the particularity of Jesus. The Epistles of John are in the tradition of the Gospel of John, which said that God’s Word was embodied in a particular human being, Jesus of Nazareth, who revealed God by what he said and did, and by who he was (John 1:1–18), so that the Word of life could be seen, heard, and touched (1 John 1:1–5). More scandalously, God’s glory was revealed in Jesus’s crucifixion, which conveyed the fullness of divine love (1 John 1:7; 4:10). What antichrist does, however, is to deny that Jesus’s humanity had any salvific significance, leaving the community with a substitute Christ, a figure they may equate with the spiritual ideal of divine love without the offensive particularity of divine love, or the challenge to live out that love in embodied form in their own community (1 John 4:7–11).⁴

The way the Johannine Epistles emphasize the embodied and particular traits of Christ has implications for their depiction of antichrist. We find that the antichrist—if he is true to his own character—will not assume his own incarnate form. The later tradition will picture the eschatological adversary as one particular human being who incarnates evil, and some even speculated about his appearance: eyebrows reaching to his ears, tuft of gray hair on his forehead, a leprous spot on his hand, according to some ancient accounts. But in the Johannine Epistles, antichrist has no flesh of his own. The antichrist denies the flesh of Jesus and stops

³ Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Bible 30 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 333.

⁴ Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 505.

short of taking fleshly form himself. More subtly, antichrist takes up residence in the people who give voice to the beliefs he promotes. That is why the author warns that “many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. *This person* is the deceiver and the antichrist” (2 John 7; cf. 1 John 2:22–23).

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Here the Johannine Epistles do serious business with readers, both ancient and modern. These texts do not allow people to equate antichrist with one particular tyrant who becomes the consummate agent of Satan so that people can reduce antichrist to “that one,” the person “over there.” Instead, the Epistles use the term *antichrist* in the singular for any person who denies the significance of Jesus’s humanity—and the one becomes many. *The* antichrist turns into *many* antichrists. The author of 1 John says that readers “have heard that antichrist is coming,” but then he adds that now “many antichrists have come” in the form of ordinary people, who have now left the author’s faith community (2:18–19). Modern readers looking for the miracle-working tyrant may find themselves bewildered, for in the Johannine Epistles the antichrist is not known through signs and wonders or the horrors of persecution. Instead, the antichrist is known by words that negate the significance of Jesus’s humanity, words that are spoken by the kind of people the readers might encounter anywhere, including some people whom the readers had previously considered to be their brothers and sisters in the faith. So, given such a diffused presence of the antichrist, what does this mean for the eschatological battle?

ENGAGING IN BATTLE WITH ANTICHRIST

Christian tradition has often pictured a cosmic battle occurring at the end of the present age. Popular media usually draw on Revelation, which portrays the beast and the false prophet drawing earth’s leaders into doomed attack against Christ at the battle of Armageddon, a scenario that now usually includes planes, tanks, and missiles with nuclear warheads. But in the end, the beastly antichrist is defeated and hurled into the lake of fire, while the corpses of his slaughtered allies provide a grisly banquet for the birds of the air, who feast on the carnage of the battlefield (Rev 16:12–16; 19:11–21).

To some extent, the Johannine Epistles share the sense of drama. They portray a cosmic struggle between God and the devil, who has been sinning from the

beginning, and announce that God has taken decisive action by sending his Son into the fray. They tell of the militant Son of God coming to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). Yet they acknowledge that despite Christ's attack on the devil's realm, the world remains "under the power of the evil one" (5:19). The Johannine Epistles understand the world to be the scene of ongoing spiritual warfare. Two spirits, the spirit of truth and the spirit of deceit, are operative in the world (4:6), and the spirit of deceit is the spirit of the antichrist (4:3). In the conflict, the antichrist is engaging in covert operations, for his agents include the "many false prophets" who "have gone out into the world" to deceive people into denying the significance of Jesus's flesh (4:1).

What is striking is that the cosmic conflict is actually a war of words. The weapons wielded by combatants are a claim and a counterclaim. Some confess that the human being named Jesus is truly the Christ, while others deny that Jesus's humanity has any place in God's designs. For the writer of 1 John, the current struggle is not merely the prelude to the final battle, because it is the great battle with the antichrist.⁵ The conflict is not waged by a heavenly warrior on a white horse and a seven-headed beast, as depicted in Rev 19:11–21.⁶ Instead, the warriors are people like the readers, who find themselves in the middle of the fray, being called to distinguish truth from falsehood. The scenario is bewildering, challenging, and remarkably relevant, because in the Johannine Epistles the single antichrist is transformed into many antichrists and the future becomes present. The writer will insist that "it is the last hour," and that it is precisely the coming of the many antichrists that allow readers to "know that it is the last hour" (1 John 2:18; cf. 4:3).

The Johannine author addresses a crisis of perception. In the eyes of many the war would seem to be ending in defeat. After all, the antichrist's agents, the false prophets, have gone out into the world, where they find that many are receptive to their views. The author acknowledges the gravity of the situation by saying, "They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them" (1 John 4:5). Nevertheless, in the face of apparent defeat, the author of 1 John pronounces victory—a victory that is manifest not in fire from heaven but in faith on earth. He insists that where the Spirit of God moves people to confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, there one finds true victory. He tells the readers, "You . . . have conquered them" (4:4). For "whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (5:4–5; cf. 2:13–14).

⁵ The epistolary author identifies the eschatological appearance of the antichrist in the many that have left the author's community. See Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 337; Hans-Josef Klauck, *Der Erste Johannesbrief*, EKK XXII/1 (Zürich and Braunschweig; Benzinger and Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1991), 150–51.

⁶ It is significant that even in Rev 19:11–21, where Christ is portrayed as a warrior, there is only one weapon: the sword that comes from Christ's mouth, symbolizing his word. Victory is won by Christ's word alone.

For the writer of 1 John, the cosmic battle between Christ and antichrist is being fought and won in the present. The author does not treat the readers as spectators but casts them in the role of participants who are called to resist the incursions of falsehood and to overcome them with the truth that fosters faith. According to 1 John, God sent Jesus to destroy the works of the devil, and such works include unbelief and the forms of sin that flow from it. These are marked by hatred and death (3:8, 12–15). The battle against false belief is won when genuine faith is created, and such faith, from the author's perspective, is manifested in love and is characterized by life (4:7–21; 5:11). This is a battle of the most peculiar sort, for triumph over the antichrist does not come by inflicting death on his followers but by fostering life through the words that express and engender faith.

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POLEMICAL USE OF ANTICHRIST LANGUAGE

Our final question is how to understand the polemical quality of the antichrist language in the Johannine Epistles. Christ may be the agent of life and Savior of the world, but the way the author vilifies the opponents as “antichrist” seems at odds with the repeated reminders about the importance of love. Moreover, in popular culture, the term *Antichrist* is widely used to vilify people, a problematic practice that has been common for centuries. In the thirteenth century, popes and emperors hurled the epithet “Antichrist” at each other and the practice continued unabated, as the Protestant Reformers labeled the pope the Antichrist, and later generations used the term to discredit political and religious figures of their own times.⁷

So how does the term *antichrist* actually work in the Johannine Epistles? The author levels the charge of “antichrist” against those who have left his community. He says, “They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us” (1 John 2:19). The author draws a sharp line between those who belong to Christ and those who belong to antichrist. The author assumes that people remain in his faith community because they value its confession and manner of life. But the writer also identifies the opposing group with antichrist in order to raise a barrier against leaving the community. In these

⁷ See Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Robert C. Fuller, *Naming the Antichrist: The History of an American Obsession* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Epistles, joining the other side is more than just adopting an alternative Christology. It means joining the agents of evil.⁸

The sharp contrasts in these texts seem to leave us with a simple “us versus them” situation in which the author’s group belongs to Christ and the other group has become antichrist. Yet having established this clear division, the author also subverts it. The struggle against antichrist cannot be reduced to one group versus another. It is a struggle that goes on within the author’s community and, by extension, within each member of that community.

The Johannine Epistles identify antichrist with the negation of the community’s confession of Jesus. Yet they also recognize that people can negate the confession through their actions as well as their speech. The author assumes that if Christ is embodied, then faith must be embodied and conveyed in deeds that are consistent with the words. First John points to the irony that those who confidently confess their faith with their lips can effectively deny it with their lives—and when they do so, even those who belong to the community exhibit the traits of antichrist. Note how the Epistles use the term *liar*. The author can say, “Who is the liar (*pseustēs*) but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist” (1 John 2:22). But he can also say, “Whoever says, ‘I have come to know him,’ but does not obey his commandments, is a liar (*pseustēs*),” which means that the person who professes faith without living it out takes on the traits of antichrist (2:4; cf. 4:20). Also note what is said about deception. Second John can say that if one does “not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, *that person* “is the deceiver (*planos*) and the antichrist” (2 John 7). Yet 1 John also says, “If we say we have no sin, *we deceive* (*planōmen*) ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

When the warnings against the deceptive qualities of the antichrist are read in light of the warnings about the readers’ own propensities to self-deception, then the antichrist can no longer be comfortably externalized and located only within the other group. When the threat of denying Christ is extended to include not only words but actions that are inconsistent with the words, then it becomes an inducement to self-examination *within* the author’s own community. This way of reading the antichrist passages may have been obscured in the later tradition, but it was not lost. It surfaces, for example, in Augustine’s sermons on 1 John. He notes that according to this epistle, the people called “antichrist” have gone out of the community, but this also means that before going out, they were present within it. Antichrist is not purely external. It is a force that operates within the community of faith itself. Therefore, Augustine comments that members of the community must ask themselves whether they might be antichrists. And the criterion that Augustine says they should use? Whoever “in his deeds denies Christ is an antichrist” (*Tractates on the Epistles of John* 3.4, 8). And the deeds that most effectively deny Christ are those that violate the command to show love.

The Johannine Epistles have contributed to the highly charged use of antichrist language in Western culture. But when that language has been taken more

⁸ Judith Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 85.

contextually, the Epistles have also played a distinctive and subversive role, which sets them apart from aspects of the later tradition. In the Epistles the one antichrist is transformed into many, the future becomes present, and the enemy cannot be comfortably externalized but is a force that can operate within the believing community itself.

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According to the Epistles, the authentic Christ is made tangible in Jesus and authentic faith is made tangible in love. The term *antichrist* identifies the opposite of this. The Epistles call readers to actively discern where the spirit of the antichrist might be at work in the world and in communities other than their own. But these same texts also call readers to discern their own propensities for self-deception and the ways they negate the work of Christ through acts of hatred, which diminish life. As Bernard McGinn puts it, "Antichrist is meant to warn us against ourselves."⁹ The Epistles may do their most subversive work when they move the readers to say: "We have seen the antichrist, and he is us." ⊕

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⁹ McGinn. *Antichrist*, xvi.