

The Antichrist in the Epistles of John

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Introduction

The historical identification of the “antichrist” has vexed Christian scholarship for centuries. This term is not recorded anywhere outside of the Christian circles. Until the middle of the second-century, the term appears no more than six times in total: five in and peculiar to the Johannine writings (1 John 2:18 [2x], 22; 4:3; and 2 John 7), and once in Polycarp’s Letter to the Philippians 7:1 (ca. 130 to 140). By the end of the second- and the beginning of the early third-centuries, the term began to be more widely used by Christian writers, who employed it in their various forms of refutation of heresies (cf. Irenaeus, Against Heresy 5.25-30; Hippolytus, Treatise on Christ and the Antichrist 5.204-219). In the five incidents in First and Second John, the plural use of antichrist occurs only once: in the second-half of 1 John 2:18. Based on the interchangeable explanations in 1 John 2:18 and 2 John 7, the notion of antichrist can be figuratively and metaphorically argued to be the one and also the many antichrists.

Bernard McGinn attempted to survey the history of debates and understandings of the notion of antichrist in his comprehensive study of Antichrist, which he also put well in the subtitle: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil (1994). In a recent study, Craig R. Koester correctly pointed out that by appealing to the antichrist theme in First and Second John, much of the later tradition, including that of Polycarp, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus, “has shaped many *readers* of the Epistles, and it continues to influence the interpretations of these passages” (2014, 188). One of the many problems, I think, in the notion of antichrist as associated with the devil lies in the human attitudes in labelling others out of expedience. What is more convenient than calling another person of disparateness wrong! This act of branding and labelling is true especially when the matter comes sensitively near the Christian faith.



Luca Signorelli's 1501 depiction of the face of antichrist, from the Orvieto Cathedral. Photo taken from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antichrist>. Accessed on 04/16/2018.



Antichrist – detail from a fresco at Osogovo Monastery in the Republic of Macedonia. The inscription reads “All kings and nations bow before the Antichrist.” Photo taken from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antichrist>. Accessed on 04/16/2018.

The Antichrist in 1 John and 2 John

There is no agreement among scholars of the Epistles of John concerning the exact meaning of antichrist. But two trends are notable: the historical and polemical versus the non-historical and non-polemical interpretations

Historical and Polemical Interpretation

On the one hand, some scholars such as Raymond E. Brown and Urban C. von Wahlde analyze these Epistles from the angles of the history and identity of the Johannine community and ecclesiology. They argue that the antichrists are the secessionists who are former Jewish

Christians, but who now have decided to secede from this Johannine church. Their departure results from their denial of a confession that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God, who has come in the flesh (1 John 2:18-22). This trend of reading the notion of antichrist lays much stress and culpability on the former members who have now left the communities, and who are sometimes targeted as Jewish Christians. The difficulty of this interpretation is that it tends to be polemical and historical. Added to this challenge is the fact that there is neither mention of Jewish background nor allusion to Judaism in any of these Epistles of John.

Non-Historical and Non-Polemical Interpretation

On the other hand, other scholars such as Judith Lieu and Hansjörg Schmid have suggested that readers ought to read the Epistles of John non-polemically. We neither have to pin down the historical identity of the antichrists nor simply denounce whomever the term antichrist might have referred to. In other words, we should not readily label the antichrist as the enemy of Jesus Christ nor the former Jewish Christians. I prefer reading these Epistles less polemically. So I shall refer the term antichrist to the “false Christian.”

The Usage and Context of Antichrist in First John

We can begin with the passage in 1 John 2:18-22, which consists of the first three of five occurrences of the false Christian. Here the author warns against the false Christians and discusses their apostasy. He develops the overall theme in three arguments: the arrival of the false Christians at the last hour (2:18-19), the holy anointing that preserves true faith (2:20-21), and a definition of falsehood (2:22-23). Then he concludes this passage by reminding the Christians regarding their embodied gift of the Holy One (2:26-27).

In 1 John 2:18 the author addresses a group of Christians. The expression of “the last hour” (eschatē hōra) here in verse 18 (2x) does not imply an eschatological warning, but refers to an imminent reality. The author seems to envision the immediate arrival of the false Christians.

In fact, the perfect tense of the verb “[they] have come” implies that these false Christians have already made their appearance in the community. The author also explains that these false Christians are people who formerly belonged to the community, but have now gone out from it (2:19). Because they have left the Christian community, the author denies that these false Christians had ever had any true association with his community.

In 1 John 2:20-21, the author first associates the way of the false Christians with falsehood (pseudos; v. 21), then maintains that the remaining community members already know the truth. The author supports this argument by stating that true Christians possess an anointing (chrisma) from “the Holy One” (v. 20). In this instance, the Holy One can refer to God, Jesus, and/or the Holy Spirit conferred upon the person at his/her baptism. The stark contrast between the false Christians and the true Christians is that the former walk in falsehood, while the latter have been anointed with the Spirit of truth (cf. John 14:15:26; 16:13). But the author’s appeal to the Spirit of truth is contested, as I shall discuss below.

In 1 John 2:22-23, the author now characterizes the practitioners of falsehood with the term “liar” (pseustēs). The move from the abstract “falsehood” to the concrete “liar” suggests that the author is speaking of the known and ongoing fact of schism and apostasy. Although verse 22 reads like a rhetorical question, the author’s intention is quite simple. He identifies the liar with the one who denies that Jesus is “the Christ” (ho Christos), that is literally “the anointed one,” as explained above. For the author, while Christians possess a chrisma “gift of knowledge” from the Holy One (2:20), Jesus himself is the Holy One and the Son of God (cf. 1 John 1:2; 2:1; John 1:1-2; 20:31). Thus, denying that Jesus is the Christ means falsifying his divinity, and the denier thus denies both the Father and the Son.

In 1 John 2:26-27, the author concludes this passage on the Christ and the false Christians by affirming that the reason for his writing “these things” concerns an ongoing possibility of false Christology among the believers. The chrisma that Christians receive from the Holy One will lead them to further truth.

The next occurrence of the false Christian is in the passage of 1 John 4:1-3, in which the author distinguishes the Spirit of truth from the spirit of falsehood. Because everyone can appeal to the spirit, the author maintains that Christians must put the spirits to the test. In using the phrase “you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge” in 1 John 2:20, the author says that the anointing of the Holy Spirit imbues Christians with a gift of knowledge. In this context, knowledge is a process of spiritual discernment; it is not a given or to be taken for granted. Christians are therefore called to distinguish true knowledge from falsehood. Just as there is only one true God as opposed to many false gods, so also there is only one true Spirit (to pneuma) as opposed to many false spirits (ta pneumata).

Although it is the task of every Christian to test and distinguish the true Spirit from the false ones, the ability to make this distinction is difficult. The author gives one criterion in 1 John 4:2: “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.” He then explains the opposite of this criterion in 1 John 4:3a: “And every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the false Christian.” Earlier in 1 John 2:22, the author relates falsehood to the denial that Jesus is the Christ. Here in 1 John 4:2, falsehood is analogous to the denial that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. Notice how the author affirms the dual nature of Jesus, who is God’s Anointed One and who has come in human flesh (1 John 1:1; 2 John 7. See also John 1:11, 14).

The Usage and Context of Antichrist in Second John

The last occasion of the false Christian occurs in 2 John 7. Here the author of this Second Epistle of John similarly speaks of the departure of the deceived Christians. After announcing the good deeds of some children who are members of an unidentifiable Christian community, the author provides a reason why he continues to exhort them to live rightly. In verse 4, “some of your children” suggests that some were walking in the truth. By employing this term, the author

also implies that other Christians in this same community may not have walked in the truth. Here the author asserts that many deceivers have left the community and gone out into the world. Typical of the Johannine Epistles (cf. 1 John 2:18-27; 4:1-6; 5:6-12; 2 John 7-11; 3 John 10), the author refers the term “false Christian” to those who do not confess that Jesus has come in the flesh (v. 7). He calls on those who still remain in the community and who are constantly walking in the truth to be on their watch, so that they may not lose everything they have hitherto accomplished and thereby receive a full reward (v. 8; cf. 1 John 3:7; 4:1-3). Although the author does not clearly indicate what the full reward may be in this context, hints of this have been given elsewhere: eternal life with God and Jesus (1 John 1:2), and the realization of the fullness of life as God’s children (1 John 3:1-3; John 1:12).

Christian Love Trumps Differences

It is true that these five incidents speak loud and clear about the false Christians; but they are not and should not be the focus of the authors of all three Epistles of John. Louder and clearer in these documents, I believe, are the notion and practice of Christian love: *agapē*. In 1 John, for instance, the author spends the last three chapters of this five-chapter Epistle expounding on his understanding of God’s love for the world. The author indeed believes and teaches that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). For the author, this divine love has been manifested and achieved through the sending of Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God into the world (1 John 4:7-10, 16; John 3:16-17). The fact that Jesus came into the world, died, and now sits as the Advocate before God the Father for all humans who may fall under the grip of any wrongdoing (1 John 2:1-2), means that we in turn should reflect and imitate God’s love and Jesus’ sacrificial death by showing and doing love for one another (1 John 3:1, 14, 16-18, 23; 4:7, 11, 19, 21; 5:2; 2 John 1, 3, 5, 6; 3 John 5, 6).

I stress this Christian *agapē* here for several reasons. First, the texts of these three Epistles are overwhelmingly filled with the notion and practice of loving one another because we are

human beings, and especially because we are Christians. Second, the theme for this issue of *The Bible Today* is also Jesus' teaching on love in the Gospel of John: "Remain in my love" (John 19:9). Third, we Christians ought to focus our attention, not on the negativity, but on the positiveness of those who are different from us or who simply display differences.

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