

PAUL'S PROPHETIC OUTLINE IN 2 THESSALONIANS 2*

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The Apostle Paul's intriguing prophetic delineation in 2 Thess 2 forms an important link between the Synoptic Apocalypse and the large-scale Apocalypse of John. Paul responds to meet a practical need; namely, to correct a false teaching in the church of Thessalonica that the Day of the Lord had already begun or at least was so imminent that it could occur at any moment (2 Thess 2:2). It may have been based on a misunderstanding of Paul's first letters to the Thessalonians—on 1 Thess 4:17, in particular. But Christ had already warned against deceptions concerning his second advent (Matt 24:23-24).

The idea of imminency had led some Thessalonian church members to quit their daily work, become idle and disorderly and overly excited (2 Thess 3:6-15). Paul corrects this deception of an any-moment expectation of the Day of the Lord by reminding the church of his oral teaching that *first* (*prōtos*, omitted in the NIV translation) "the rebellion" (*hē apostasia*) or "the man of lawlessness" (*anomos*) must be revealed in the temple of God, together with all his "counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders." Only thereafter will the Lord be revealed in his glorious appearing, destroying "the lawless one" "by the splendor of his *parousia*" (2:3-9).

This stress on the basic chronological order of the two major prophetic events teaches that ethical preparedness *and* knowledge of the prophetic sequence of basic events can be in harmony with, and complementary to, one another. In Paul's view, knowledge of the sequential order of events was essential to meet an erroneous view which had led to a misdirected hope and to ethical disorder.

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1. *Backgrounds to Paul's Discussion*

The connection between Christ's teaching about the future "desolating abomination" in the "holy place" in Mark 13:14 (masculine form: *hestēkota*; cf. Matt 24:15) and Paul's teaching about the coming "man of lawlessness, the son of perdition" who will set "himself up in God's temple proclaiming himself to be God," has been considered by many as pointing to the desecration of God's temple by *the same* apocalyptic opponent of Christ, called by John the antichrist (1 John 2:18). In order to receive insight concerning the historical rise of the antichrist and the nature of his religious apostasy, it is mandatory to view the forecasts of Christ and Paul against the background of Daniel's original prophecy of the Anti-Messiah in its total historical perspective. It is by thus placing the NT antichrist prophecies within the framework of Daniel's apocalyptic root context that new light can be shed on the historical order and differentiation between events which are merely blended into two foci in the prophetic eschatology. Both the essential christological unity of the OT prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology, on the one hand, and the fundamental distinction of the unconditionally determined historical outline of human history in Daniel's apocalyptic book, on the other hand, need to be integrated in the exegesis of the NT apocalyptic sections.

Two features require careful analysis in Paul's historical outline: *the chronological development* of the antichrist, and *the theological character* of his apostasy. Paul's treatment of the expected phenomenon of the "man of lawlessness" in 2 Thess 2 is evidently only a brief summary of his more elaborate oral expositions (he appeals to their memory, "Do you not remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things?" [vs. 5; cf. vs. 15]). The identity of several linguistic key expressions used in 2 Thess 2 with expressions used in Dan 11:36, Ezek 28:2, and Isa 11:4 (see margin of Nestle's Greek NT), leads to the conclusion that Paul draws his antichrist description from a conflation of three OT revelations about anti-God powers: (1) the historical rise and desecrations of the Anti-Messiah in Dan 7:25; 8:10-13; 11:36-37; (2) the demonic nature of the self-exaltation and self-divinization of the kings of Tyre and Babylon in Ezek 28:2, 6, 9, and Isa 14:13-14; and (3) the final destruction of the wicked one by the glorious appearance of the royal Messiah, in Isa 11:4. Reproduced here for

the sake of convenience is the specific section on 2 Thess 2 in *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament*, rev. ed., ed. R. G. Bratcher (London: United Bible Societies, 1967), p. 55 (text from English Revised Version of 1881):

2 THESSALONIANS

OT PASSAGES

2:4a (Allusion):

... he that exalteth himself
against all that is called God

...

2:4b (Allusion):

... he sitteth in the temple
of God, setting himself forth
as God.

2:8 (Allusion):

... the lawless one, whom
the Lord Jesus shall slay with
the breath of his mouth ...

Dan 11:36:

... he shall exalt himself ...
above every god ...

Ezek 28:2:

I sit in the seat of God ...
thou didst set thy heart as
the heart of God.

Isa 11:4:

... and with the breath of
his lips shall he slay the
wicked.

Charles H. Dodd's classical study, *According to the Scriptures: The Substructure of New Testament Theology* (London, 1952), has established the concept that the NT writers for their christological interpretation do not argue with detached proof-texts from the OT, but quote single phrases or sentences only as a pointer to a whole context in the OT.¹ That larger context unfolds the "plot" within Israel's history and provides the key for the unique significance of the mission and mandate of Jesus as the hidden Son of Man, to be fully revealed in his glory at his *parousia*. The same style of literary allusions to the OT applies for the NT description and characterization of the antichrist.

This hermeneutical principle of what might be called "concept allusions" opens up the context in organic units or patterns in Daniel (chaps. 7 and 8-12), in Ezekiel (chap. 28), and in Isaiah (chaps. 11 and 14) for the historical and theological identification of "the man of lawlessness" in 2 Thess 2.

¹Also, C. H. Dodd, *The Old Testament in the New* (New York, 1971); H. M. Shires, *Finding the Old Testament in the New* (Philadelphia, 1974); F. F. Bruce, *New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1968).

2. *Historical Sequence and Backgrounds from Daniel*

In Dan 7 the blasphemous "little horn" arises only *after* the Roman Empire will have been divided into ten simultaneously ruling kingdoms (7:7, 8, 24). This historical sequence—first the "beast" and then the rise of the antichristian "horn"—lies at the basis of Paul's historical outline in 2 Thess 2. Only when held against the background of this historical perspective of Dan 7 will the riddle of Paul's mysterious "restrainer," who hinders the development of the antichrist, be understood.

Paul must have referred to the presence of the lawful government of the Roman emperors, which as such prevented the rise to power of the intolerant antichrist. Paul had been protected more than once from the wrath of Jewish crowds by the civil rulers of Rome (Acts 18:12-16; 22:22-29; cf. Rom 13:4). The apostolic church had no question about the identity of the "restraining" power because Paul states, "And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time" (2 Thess 2:6, emphasis supplied).

It is interesting that most of the early Fathers in the post-apostolic church taught that the civil order of the Roman Empire, with the emperor at its head, was the hindering power Paul referred to in 2 Thess 2:6-7.² In spite of various new theories, several leading scholars today maintain that "the classical interpretation . . . is quite satisfying."³

More important than the "restrainer" is what Paul writes about the coming "man of lawlessness" (*anthrōpos tēs anomias*) or, according to less authoritative manuscripts, "man of sin" (*hamartias*),⁴ "the son of perdition" (vs. 3). Without providing a

²See J. T. Forestell in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, R. E. Brown, et al., eds. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 234.

³G. E. Ladd, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1978), p. 68. See discussion in G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1974), p. 560, concerning the interpretations of Dispensationalism (the restrainer is the Holy Spirit) and of Oscar Cullmann (it is Paul himself and his missionary mission). Cf. also R. H. Charles, *Eschatology* (New York, 1963), p. 440, and J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (New York, 1973), p. 565.

⁴See B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 3d ed. (New York, 1975), p. 635.

historical identification, the Apostle states that the public unveiling of "the lawless one" (*ho anomos*, vs. 8) will only be the result of a protracted historical process of the secret working of entities which were already active in Paul's own time: "The secret power of lawlessness is already at work" (vs. 7). Paul places the *actual unveiling* of the lawless one, however, not until the Roman Empire (the "restrainer") has been "taken out of the way" (2 Thess 2:7)—in other words, after the Roman Empire has expired. Nevertheless, he describes the essential characteristics of the apocalyptic "rebellion" (*apostasia*) in terms derived from a conflation of the descriptions of (1) the religious apostasy and downfall of the ancient king of Tyre in Ezek 28, and (2) the persecuting Anti-Messiah in Dan 8 and 11.

3. *Theological Backdrop from Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Daniel*

Ezekiel's remarkable judgment oracle against the king of Tyre concentrates on his blasphemous claim of *self-deification*—"I am god; I sit on the throne of a god" (see Ezek 28:2, 12, 14, 15)—against the backdrop of his original perfection and blamelessness in the position of an anointed guardian cherub of Yahweh. The same downfall into the apostasy of self-divinization is charged by Isaiah against the king of Babylon (Isa 14:12-14). This demonic characteristic of apostasy—from being an anointed guardian to seeking the throne of God in self-deification—Paul now applies to the predicted "lawless one" who will usurp God's place in the temple of God during the Christian dispensation (2 Thess 2:4).

Paul's future application of OT national-judgment oracles is justified because of the hermeneutical structure of typology which is inherent in the doom prophecies of Tyre and Babylon—apparent also in the unprecedented description of the nature of the apostasy which clearly transcends the mundane historical reality of the kings of Tyre and Babylon (see Ezek 28:13-14; Isa 14:12). Paul simply *unfolds* the religious and theological apostasy of Tyre and Babylon in a typological sense and applies it now to the eschatological archenemy of Christ and his church.

Paul does this, however, in an intriguing complexity. He blends his *typological* reference with his reference to the *historical continuity* of Daniel's apocalyptic, with its specifically appointed times (Dan 11:29, 35). Thus, he describes the religious apostasy of the apocalyptic enemy of Christ and his Church in terms of a

confluence of prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology: "He opposes and exalts himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, and even sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God" (2 Thess 2:4; cf. Dan 11:36).

As in Dan 8 and 11, Paul localizes the blasphemous apostasy of the eschatological enemy of God and God's people "in the temple of God" (*naos*). Without a christological-ecclesiological hermeneutic, the pitfalls of literalism or allegorism with regard to "the temple of God" seem inescapable. Some interpreters see "God's temple" as a literal, rebuilt temple in Jerusalem in which the antichrist will personally set himself up to demand worship from the Jews, after the faithful church of Christ has been raptured away from earth to heaven.⁵ Other exegetes prefer to interpret the "temple" in 2 Thess 2:4 as a symbol for God's throne in heaven, with an appeal to Isa 14:13-14 and 66:1. In other words, "temple of God" is understood as a metaphor to describe that the lawless one "tries to usurp the place of God and demand that men worship him instead of the Lord."⁶ This is then applied historically to any totalitarian system of government—to the deification of the state—when law and order will break down and demonic lawlessness will burst forth in persecution of the church.

The foregoing interpretations of 2 Thess 2:4 may seem attractive and convincing to some. But a vital question is: Have they given due consideration to the OT root contexts?

As far as our hermeneutical method is concerned, Paul's undeniable allusion to Dan 11:36 should lead us first to analyze the religious pattern of behavior of the "king of the north" in Dan 11:31-45, as well as of the enemy of God in Dan 8:9-13. Protestant expositors since Luther and Calvin have traditionally interpreted the self-exalting king of Dan 11:36 and the lawless one of 2 Thess 2:4 as an excessively proud and self-deifying individual, who will exalt himself *above all gods* (Dan 11:37), not as an ideological atheist.⁷ Our hermeneutical principle requires first a

⁵This is the view held by Dispensationalists.

⁶Ladd, *Last Things*, p. 67. The view is held by various Roman Catholics as well as evangelical Protestant interpreters.

⁷See tabulations in L. E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, 4 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1946-1954).

Careful structural and thematic analysis of Dan 11:36 within its own theocentric context (Dan 11 and 8), and then furthermore a careful analysis of the literary and conceptual application by Paul in his christocentric context for the NT dispensation.

We may well capture the theological essence of Daniel's desolating abomination in the observation that both Dan 8 and 11 portray a king(dom) who attacks the saints of God by invading the holy land, city, and temple, and who then abolishes the sacred temple cultus and tramples underfoot its holy worshipers. However, the worst is still to come: the desolator will then *set up in its place a counterfeit system of cultic worship as the blasphemous abomination*, with regard to the only way of salvation appointed for man in the holy covenant of God (cf. Dan 8:11-13; 11:31; 12:11). This is "the rebellion" (*peshah*^c, "deliberate sin") of Daniel's Anti-Messiah, who is in combat with the Prince of the host, the Prince of princes, and with *his* sanctuary and his atoning cultus (Dan 8:11, 13, 25).

In Christ's application of Daniel's "desolating abomination" to the Roman army which planted its idolatrous banners in the temple court (Matt 24:15; Mark 13:14), we may discern a partial historical fulfillment which as a *type* points beyond A.D. 70 to its universal, eschatological antitype of the greater blasphemous abomination in the temple of God. In 2 Thess 2:4, Paul explains therefore to an overly excited church (with imminency hope) that first the *full* revelation or unveiling of the desolating abomination in God's temple must take place before the coming of Christ in glory. This apostasy will become apparent when the lawless one will seat himself in the place of God's temple, thereby changing the divinely ordained cultic worship according to his own will.

This counterfeit cultus is the eschatological desolating abomination. This cultic perspective comes only from the more complete context of Dan 8 and 11 and the historical-typological application by the Synoptic Apocalypse. With regard to "the temple [*naos*] of God" in 2 Thess 2:4, the interpreter is not forced to choose between either an earthly *or* heavenly temple. There is no real separation between the two liturgies of worship in Scripture (cf. Isa 6:1-3; Ps 11:4). The crucial matter is *not to separate* the two temples, but to identify correctly the true temple of God on earth, where Christ and the Spirit of God dwell, that is among those who worship God in truth and in the Spirit (Matt 18:20; John 4:23-24).

Paul himself expresses in unambiguous terms his concept of the temple of God on earth as those among whom Christ dwells through the Spirit, as a study of *naos* in his other letters reveals (see especially 1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16 [applying Ezek 37:27]).⁸ This leaves little doubt but that the Apostle teaches an emphatic *christological* and *ecclesiological* application and realization of Israel's Old-Covenant temple for the New Covenant, without thereby denying the reality of the heavenly mediation of Christ (Rom 8:33, 34; 1 Tim 2:5; cf. Heb 8:1, 2; 10:19). This can be seen confirmed in his farewell speech to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:29-31.

Paul's picture of the *parousia* of the antichrist has been strikingly called "a parody of the parousia of Christ."⁹ It seems to anticipate the characterization of the two satanic "beasts" in Rev 13, each of which bears some features which *imitate* those of the Lamb of God (e.g., horns like a lamb, resurrection after a mortal wound, miraculous signs). This tension of polarization seems to be present also in Paul's description of the eschatological deception. As expressed by R. H. Charles, "Thus as the revelation of God culminated in Christ, so the manifestation of evil will culminate in Antichrist, whose parousia (2 Thess ii.9) is the Satanic counterfeit of the true Messiah."¹⁰

One may wonder if the "counterfeit miracles" to which Paul refers as accompanying the full unveiling of the man of sin (2 Thess 2:9) might not include a satanic counterfeit of Christ's glorious *parousia*. Such an overmastering delusion could only be met by the immediate judgment of Christ from heaven by his own *parousia*. In any event, just as the Anti-Messiah in Dan 8 is suddenly destroyed "not by human power" (vs. 25), and as "the king of the north" is suddenly destroyed with no human helper (Dan 11:45), so will the antichrist be destroyed by the splendor of Christ's appearance, "by the breath of his mouth" (2 Thess 2:8; cf. Isa 11:4).

4. Conclusion

By correlating the theocentric themes of Ezekiel's and Isaiah's doom prophecies and of Daniel's apocalyptic portrayals with

⁸See W. von Meding, in *NIDNTT* 3:784.

⁹Forestell, p. 235.

¹⁰Charles, p. 439.

Christ's historical application in the Synoptic Apocalypse and with Paul's ecclesiological and apocalyptic applications, a basic pattern of apocalyptic interpretation is uncovered which can serve as a *norm* by which to assess the truthfulness of positions mentioned above. This norm is the NT gospel hermeneutic of the christological-ecclesiological interpretation of the OT prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology.

This gospel hermeneutic, which can be established further by a more comprehensive investigation of the NT use of the OT,¹¹ is intrinsic in the four Gospels and could be called "the apostolic principle." It binds the OT and NT eschatologies together in an organic theological unity and thematic continuity. By it, the hermeneutics of literalism and allegorism are unmasked as distortions or reductions of the whole truth because they isolate the sacred terms from their full theological contexts and structural center—Jesus Christ and his redeemed people.

¹¹I have given this more complete discussion in my *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* (Berrien Springs, Mich., 1983).