

BOOK REVIEWS

Almond, Philip C. *Antichrist: A New Biography*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2020. xvi + 323 pp. Hardcover. USD 39.99.

Studies on the development of the antichrist biblical motif either focus on the antecedents and early Christian interpretations (e.g. Gregory Jenks, Lambertus Peerbolte), or its broad history from the Apostolic Fathers to the present time (e.g. LeRoy Froom, Bernard McGinn, Stephen Vicchio). Almond's *Antichrist* adds to the latest group of fine studies on this topic. Although the examples of specific interpretations on the identity of the antichrist from the second to the twenty-first century presented by Philip Almond are found elsewhere, his organization is concise and to the point.

This is a great work of scholarship, impressive in its breadth at the same time that it is clear and succinct in its presentation. A good history for sure, full of dates, names, and details. Almond's historical analysis reads smoothly and covers a lot of ground, like other works of its kind. And though careful attention is given to the presentation of details of a subject that already begs patience by the non-specialist, readers will not find the minutia cumbersome, but quite entertaining. To add colors to his nicely constructed narrative, Almond also includes the inimical eschatological figure of the Jews (Armilus), and Muslims (Al-Dajjal), and a few recent secular applications of the name antichrist as a comparison.

Unlike the modern critical commentaries on important biblical passages (mainly Dan 7; 2 Thess 2; Rev 11–13, 17), used historically as indicative of the identity of the antichrist figure(s), this history gives little attention to figures from the time of the NT writers. Just looking at the index, it is clear that Antiochus Epiphanes (for Daniel) or Nero (for Revelation) are minor figures in this story of biblical interpretation. Meanwhile, a future Jew, the papacy, and Islam looms large on the horizon of Christian interpreters' identification of the final Satanic animosity against the people of God. Instead of an explicit pagan, idolatrous, and antagonistic force of the past, most Christian interpreters throughout history have identified the spirit of the antichrist closer to home and in the future of the biblical authors. The reason for this is simply based on interpretative commitments. Most ancient readers of the Bible believed that the prophetic antichrist would be a figure of the end-times, and not a dead character of the past, a hermeneutical choice negated by most biblical scholars today.

But among believers in the eschatological thrust of the biblical material, not one contour of the eschatological enemy was widely agreed about, as this

biography makes it clear. The author highlights the important characteristics of the antichrist motif and suggests a synthesis of the identity of this literary figure which is quite helpful. Almond distinguishes two major ideological poles around which many characteristics attributed to the antichrist would gravitate (2–4), although he repeats some of them. The main polarized views about the identity of the antichrist as understood by most interpreters are (A) a tyrannical antichrist from outside the church and (B) a deceiver and apostate from within the church.

Methodologically, Almond's *Antichrist*, as most studies on the antichrist I am familiar with, follows Irenaeus's application of the term antichrist. Philip Almond recognizes and explains that the word antichrist, first used by John (1–2 John), does not identify an eschatological figure but many members of the Christian communities that were professing unorthodox doctrines. Irenaeus in the second century already, who does not even refer to 1 John in this context, chose the Johannine term antichrist as the label of choice for the "final eschatological opponent" of God (41), though this literary figure is prominent in apocalyptic prophecies such as Dan 7, 2 Thess 2, and Rev 13, not in Johannine correspondences. Almond rightly observes that this eschatological application of the language from 1 John created a tension that would persist in the history of this motif, mainly based on the temporality of the appearance of the antichrist(s)—in the distant future or currently present. Thus, a terrible persecutor of Christians would also be characterized as a pious follower of Jesus, at least in appearance. He would be both a teacher of Scriptures and a denier of its teachings; an apostate, and a deceiver. And with this catch-all word, almost anything against someone's religious or even political perspective has been identified as *an* antichrist. But as I point out below, one major element of this eschatological motif from Scriptures is its desecrating presence in the sanctuary of God. The locus of activity of the antichrist is a good reference point against which different interpretations could be measured. Philip Almond's book of course is not trying to evaluate the exegetical coherence of the interpretations he explains.

These polarities (outsider idolater or pagan tyrant versus a pseudo-Christian deceiver) framed the discussion on the antichrist since Irenaeus set the interpretative parameters in the second century, mainly the vocabulary and the temporal application of the prophecies. The antichrist from within was seen both as one professed Christian individual influential in the church who would appear in the future; and corporately (many) present in the church, frequently seen as a spiritual force of evil even inside of the believer. Springing from the epistles of John, trickling down to Origen, Tyconius to later interpreters such as Pope Gregory I, Joachim of Fiore, and many Reformers, the major idea in this view of the antichrist from within is that Christians should look inward for the epitome manifestation of evil. The specific identification of course would vary from oneself to the pope, to the Greek patriarch, and some heretics.

To others, however, the antichrist was an anti-Christian force, thus it could not be a Christian in any form or shape. Maybe a Jew (an early and very influential view), or a pagan king. In this view, the antichrist could not be identified in the present, until of course, its appearance. These elements are mainly extracted from Daniel's and Revelation's persecuting beasts and arguably Hippolytus of Rome is its main influencer. Almond highlights Fiore (11th CE) and Adso (9th CE), respectively, as the main historical interpreters of the two kinds of antichrists.

Fiore and Adso are good representations, but readers should be aware that the seminal ideas of the antichrist within or without, are not original in them. That the antichrist would be a Jew from Babylon living in the land of Israel persecuting Christians (Adso) was proposed earlier by Andrew of Caesarea in the seventh century; that it could be a Jew or a Christian springing inside of the church was already proposed by Pope Gregory I. Certainly, the interpretations of the antichrist motif cannot be neatly isolated into these two camps, but they become helpful heuristic tools, and Almond's bifurcation highlights important elements of the development of the antichrist in Christianity. Similar to the multiple characterizations of the Messiah in ancient Jewish interpretation (e.g. a priest, a prophet, son of David, son of Joseph, son of Levi), Christian views on the anti-messiah would combine diverging or apparent antagonistic elements found in Scriptures. Many Christian interpreters would mix both elements of a pagan persecuting power, and/or a pretense Christ, to the point of even seeing two eschatological antichrists working simultaneously. Like in the Reformation period, Luther labeled both the Papacy and the Muslims as the manifestations of antichrist. Following the concept from I John, in this view what is called antichrist is a spirit of antagonism toward Jesus, manifested in different entities.

Back to Almond's presentation, I expected the author to give historical trajectories of the motif towards its conclusion, based on his perceptive interpretative concepts laid out in the introduction. Since he didn't do it, I point out a few of them below, which are already pointed out by LeRoy Froom, whose work is cited only in Almond's description of the Reformation. So, most of the time, the antichrist from within (1 John), would be mainly characterized as an apostate influence on other Christians. This concept was taken from the reference in 2 Thess 2 that before the man of sin (antichrist) would arrive (future), there would be an apostasy (departure) from the church. Although the term lends to a view of a specific previous believer, thus a false Christian, some would generalize the term as anything that is against the interpreters' (Christian) view of God (e.g. Muslims, heretics, Jews). As Almond's biography shows, the identified antichrist reveals a lot about the interpreter's perspective on what God is not like.

Another related interpretative crux often seen in the examples discussed by Almond is the time of the antichrist's appearance. Two biblical passages were influential in this matter, 2 Thess 2 and its "restrainer" before the antichrist; and

Rev 20 and the millennium to the destruction of the antichrist. Taken together they were used to form a chronology of the antichrist, for example (not the only one), starting its activities after the fall of the Roman empire (understood differently), and ending after Jesus's reign of a thousand years (also applied differently in history). One could add to the chronological discussions of the power of antichrist the 1260 days, or forty-two months, or three years and a half from Dan 7, 12, and Rev 11–13. Often these times (1000, and 1260 years) were combined to point to the end of the antichrist and the return of Jesus, creating a conflict with the teachings of Jesus that no one knows exactly this time (Matt 24:36; Acts 1:7). Therefore, most interpreters involved in the specific application of these prophetic numbers in history hesitated to say exactly when they would end. A few tried, but as Almond indicates, the disappointment would just vindicate the allegorical and non-specific reading of prophetic time from Origen and Augustine.

Besides the reference to time, I found that the location of the antichrist has been an important interpretative marker in identifying the antichrist. Mainly based on 2 Thess 2:4, where it is pointed out that the man of sin will sit in the “sanctuary of God.” Almond's copious examples, as found also elsewhere, show that when the temple in Jerusalem was the proposed location, the antichrist was not identified as an apostate Christian, but most often a Jew. When the “sanctuary of God” was identified as the church, suddenly, Christian teachers like the pope become suitable candidates for the antichrist. In my opinion, this is an important marker that has not been adequately explored. The potential here for understanding the interpretative process of this motif is that it allows researchers to see how one element could govern other elements in a given interpretative theory on the so-called antichrist story. I find this marker relevant because it gives priority to the biblical characterization of the eschatological enemy, since it is a repeated motif in Scriptures, unlike other purported characteristics of the antichrist later inferred by interpreters. Interpreters who see two historical antichrists at the same time almost ignore this description from Dan 8 and 2 Thess 2.

Another trend I could see in Almond's account is the increased interest in the identification of the number of the beast, the 666 of Rev 13. Many would use gematria (numerical values to letters) and apply them to currently perceived enemies as a good fit for the antichrist. Good examples of how this was wildly used can be found in ch 7, where one can also see how some interpreters identified Napoleon Bonaparte as the antichrist, based on the connection between the name Apollyon in Rev 9:11 and the allegedly Corsican version of it, n'appolione (257). Those familiar with the Seventh-day Adventist views on the 666 (*vicarius filii dei*; and a human number from Dan 3) will find in Almond's account many interesting parallels and context to these views as thoroughly discussed in Edwin de Kock's *The Truth about 666 and the Story of the Great Apostasy* (Edinburg, TX: Edwin de Kock, 2011). For the Seventh-day Adventists, the

examples found in Almond's *Antichrist* illuminate with historical parallels, many Adventist eschatological scenarios, like the interpretations on Dan 11 mainly divided between the seminal ideas of James White (Spiritual), and Uriah Smith (Papacy and Ottomans-Islam). From the examples in Almond's book, one can evaluate hermeneutically the origins of current Adventist proposals, an exercise I found valuable.

The examples of history can also illuminate the eschatology of dispensationalist evangelicals, and its ambiguous view about Jerusalem in prophecy. Unfortunately, Almond has nothing to say about Seventh-day Adventist eschatology, and just a brief mention of evangelical dispensationalism (270, 274, 278). This I found to be a major gap in a great historical work. Not only because I am a Seventh-day Adventist, but because these two views of prophecy are highly influential today and were forged in the nineteenth century, the period covered by Almond. Instead, one can find a quite extensive description of Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyev's eschatology, which sounds a lot like the famous series of the theological fiction *Left Behind*, by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, which he labels as "Nietzsche's 'superman' (*Übermensch*) gone Adsonian apocalyptic" (280). Well stated.

I also missed a summary conclusion with trends. Almond could have briefly built a timeline of the two views (inside – Fiore, outside – Adso), similar to Edwin Froom's charts in *Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* that would add to its usefulness. But instead, he decided to write an ethical appeal, leaning to the immanent and spiritual reading of the antichrist, which is okay. At last, in the spirit of a teacher and researcher, I was disappointed to not find a Scriptural index to help me find what particular passages were used by which interpreters. One could argue that the book is a historical biography, not one on biblical studies. However, I still think, based on the biblical nature of the subject that it deserved an index since the interpretation of particular passages is central in the development of this story, which is masterfully told, as readers expect from Philip Almond's books. He has written great stories on demonic possessions and witchcraft (2004, 2011, 2012), *The Devil* (Cornell University Press, 2014), and *God* (Tauris, 2018), setting a high standard to any future history on these subjects. Some are good researchers, others, great storytellers. I found him to be both. Therefore, I congratulate Philip Almond for another helpful account of an important religious subject.

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