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THE ETHNICITY OF THE ANTICHRIST

Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

A widely held belief throughout the history of the church has been the notion that Antichrist will be of Jewish origin. This view is still somewhat popular in our own day. However, upon closer examination we find no real Scriptural basis for such a view. In fact, the Bible teaches just the opposite that the Antichrist will be of Gentile descent.

BACKGROUND

A decade ago, when I was doing extensive research into the Pseudo-Ephraem sermon that contained a rapture statement from early-medieval times,¹ I noticed the almost universally held belief of the time that Antichrist was to be a Jew. During the late-medieval period, we see a shift from a personal Antichrist to a corporate one as some Catholics and most Reformers tended to see the successive Popes and the Roman Church as Antichrist. However, the early and medieval church always saw an individual Antichrist. For the last two hundred years, with the revival of the literal and thus futurist interpretation of prophecy, the historic protestant notion that Antichrist was the system of the Roman Catholic Church has been in decline. Bernard McGinn tells us:

After Vatican II, traditional Lutheran and Reformed claims that the pope was Antichrist have been either forgotten or explicitly rejected. Even the Evangelical Fundamentalists, for whom Antichrist is certainly alive and well, have been uncomfortable with a papal Antichrist.²

Some of the earliest expounders of Antichrist, Irenaeus and Hippolytus of the second century, taught that Antichrist would be a Jew. "It seems clear that the bishop," McGinn says of Irenaeus, "depended on earlier traditions, both Jewish and Christian, in claiming that Antichrist would be born a Jew, specifically from the tribe of Dan."³ Hippolytus, a disciple of Irenaeus, wrote extensively on the Antichrist. Hippolytus believed that "Antichrist is a Jewish false messiah whose coming is still some time in the future."⁴ Origen, Chrysostom, Jerome, and likely Augustine all continued the early church tradition that the Antichrist was to be of Jewish descent.⁵ The tradition of a Jewish Antichrist, who would likely be of the tribe of Dan, was reinforced throughout the middle ages.

A Jewish Antichrist notion is sometimes taught by our own dispensational prophecy teachers of today. A. W. Pink provides just such an argument in his well-known work on Antichrist as follows:

It should, however, be pointed out that there is no express declaration of Scripture which says *in so many words* that this daring Rebel *will be* "a Jew"; nevertheless, the hints given are so plain, the conclusions which must be drawn from certain statements of Holy Writ are so obvious, and the requirements of the case are so inevitable, that we are forced to believe he *must* be a Jew.⁶

Such a statement not only reveals his viewpoint, but also is also telling in that he tacitly

admits that his view lacks direct biblical support, as I shall seek to demonstrate.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST A JEWISH ANTICHRIST

Three reasons are often given in support of the argument that Antichrist will be Jewish.⁷ First, it is argued that he will be a Jew since the Jews are responsible for the world's problems. Thus, it follows that the greatest problem of history—Antichrist—will also be Jewish. This is the Anti-Semitic reason. Since we do not have enough space in this article to give an in-depth refutation of Anti-Semitism,⁸ it should be clear that since Anti-Semitism is unbiblical so is any logic that reasons upon such a premise. This is rarely if ever a viewpoint put forth by dispensational writers.

The second major argument is that the Antichrist must be a Jew since the Jews would only accept a Jew as their Messiah. An advocate of this view is Grant Jeffery who reasons that:

the Jews would one day accept for a time the false claims of the Antichrist as their promised Messiah. . . . Since the prophecies tell us that the Antichrist will present himself to Israel as the Messiah many scholars have concluded that he must be Jewish. Certainly no religious Jew would dream of accepting a Gentile as the Messiah of Israel.⁹

This view is also built upon the logic that since the Antichrist is just that, an anti-Messiah, then his career must be a counterfeit of Jesus' first coming. While some of this is true, such symmetry can be carried too far. The specific descriptions of the Antichrist are more like that of a political leader than a mere converse of Jesus, as shall be noted below. In other words, the mere term "Antichrist" appears in the minds of many to be the justification for thinking that since Jesus was a Jew then so must be the Antichrist.

Hebrew Christian scholar, Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum offers a refutation of this reason which he calls "The Logical Reason." He writes:

Stated in a syllogism, this argument goes as follows:

Major Premise: The Jews will accept the Antichrist as the Messiah

Minor Premise: The Jews will never accept a Gentile as the Messiah.

Conclusion: The Antichrist will be a Jew.¹⁰

The difficulties of this argument are many, not the least of which are the two premises. Neither premise can be supported from the Bible. Just because the Jews make a covenant with the Antichrist (Isa. 28:15; Dan. 9:26), does not mean that they accept him as their Messiah. It does not follow from these texts either textually or logically that Israel accepts him as Messiah (or Antichrist). Secondly, since they are not accepting him as Messiah, the fact that he is a Gentile peacemaker is irrelevant. Since both premises are faulty, it therefore follows that the conclusion is faulty as well.

Fruchtenbaum notes another variation of this argument, which he calls "the Scriptural reason."¹¹ This line of reasoning is put forth by combining a major premise and a minor premise from Revelation 7:4–8.

Stated in a syllogism, this argument goes as follows:

Major Premise: The tribe from whom the Antichrist would come would not be listed among the 144,000.

Minor Premise: Dan is not among the 144,000.

Conclusion: The Antichrist is from the tribe of Dan.¹²

The problem with this argument is that it is an argument from silence. Only God knows why Dan was left out. Would not it be just as important to note that the tribe of Dan will be included in millennial Israel (Ezek. 48:2)? What is one to make of that if the tribe of Dan has a curse on it? Further, this entire argument is based upon circular reasoning. The major premise contains a Jewish assumption as a starting point. So is it surprising that this line of reasoning concludes that the Antichrist is of Jewish descent? Not at all since that what circular reasoning is all about: assuming your conclusion as a starting point. Yet, the starting point is not stated in Scripture, it is merely presupposed.¹³

Some argue that Daniel 11:37 has to be a reference to a Jew since in the King James Version of the Bible it says "And he will show no regard for the God of his fathers." It is argued that this is a reference to the God of the Bible. However, such is not the case. Almost all other English translations render this text, as does the New American Standard Version, "And he will show no regard for the gods of his fathers." When one studies this passage in the original Hebrew it becomes clear that it is a reference to Gentile gods. "Any student of Hebrew would see from the original Hebrew text that the correct translation should be 'the gods of his fathers' and not the 'God of his fathers' as the King James has rendered it," declares Fruchtenbaum. "The fact the plural form of the word 'god' is used makes this a reference to heather deities and not to God of Israel. There is much external evidence to show that this is the correct rendering of the Hebrew Text."¹⁴

The third argument is made by those who attempt to say that Scripture teaches that Antichrist will be a descendant from the Jewish tribe of Dan. Support for this view is inappropriately derived from Genesis 49:17; Deuteronomy 33:22; Jeremiah 8:16; Daniel 11:37; Revelation 7:4-8. Even though many passages are cited in support of this argument, none of them actually support the notion since they are all taken out of context. In reality, only Daniel 11:37 refers to the Antichrist. Even though some believe that the phrase in Daniel 11:37 "the God of his fathers" (KJV), implies a Jewish apostasy, the phrase is more accurately translated "the gods of his fathers" (NASB). Since Antichrist will in fact be a Gentile, as will be shown below, the argument is unfounded. Since the original Hebrew supports the NASB translation and not the KJV, Antichrist's apostasy will be Christian and not Jewish.¹⁵

ARGUMENTS FOR A GENTILE ANTICHRIST

We have seen that the Bible does not teach that Antichrist will be Jewish. However, Scripture does teach that he will be of Gentile and possibly of Roman descent (at least from the Revived Roman Empire).

This can first be seen from biblical typology. Most commentators agree that Daniel 11 speaks of Antiochus Epiphanes, a Gentile, who typifies the future Antichrist. "Nowhere is a Gentile ever seen as a type of Christ; and for good reason too since Christ Himself was to be a Jew."¹⁶ Since Antiochus is a Gentile, then so will be Antichrist.

Secondly, biblical imagery supports a Gentile origin of Antichrist. Scripture pictures Antichrist as rising up out of the sea (Rev. 13:1; 17:15). In prophetic literature the sea is an image of the Gentile nations. Thus, Antichrist is seen as a Gentile progeny.

Thirdly, the nature of the "Times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24) supports a Gentile Antichrist. Fruchtenbaum notes:

It is agreed by all premillennialists that the period known as the Times of the Gentiles does not end until the second coming of Christ. It is further agreed that the Antichrist is the final ruler of the Times of the Gentiles. . . .

If this is so, how then can a Jew be the last ruler at a time when only Gentiles can have the preeminence? To say the Antichrist is to be a Jew would contradict the very nature of the Time of the Gentiles.¹⁷

Fourthly, the Bible not only teaches that Antichrist will be Gentile, but it also tells us he will be of Roman descent. This is understood from Daniel 9:27 where the one cutting a covenant with Israel is said to represent the revived Roman Empire, since it was the Romans who destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70.

Finally, that Antichrist is a Gentile ruler is also the thrust of Revelation 17:9–12. This passage says that the Beast (John's term in Revelation for the Antichrist) is one of "seven kings" (17:10), thus, a Gentile (Roman) ruler. G. H. Lang notes:

This eight would be one of the former seven, and so in 13.3 one of his heads had been smitten unto death, and this death-stroke was healed, that is, a man formerly slain by violence is brought again to life. That he had been a former Gentile monarch seems to forbid that he is a Jew. I know not a word of Scripture that suggests this last notion.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

While I think it may be possible that the False Prophet (Rev. 13:11–18; 16:13; 19:20; 20:10) could be a Jew (I am not saying that I necessarily think he will be), there does not appear to be any Scriptural grounds to think that the Antichrist will be of the tribe of Dan nor of Jewish descent. It appears that he will be a Gentile and will arise from within the Revived Roman Empire. In the middle of the tribulation he will take his seat in Israel's rebuilt Temple and claim to be God Himself (2 Thess. 2:4). His career will be a short-lived seven-year period for which he will spend eternity in the Lake of Fire upon Christ's return to planet earth (Rev. 19:20; 20:10). Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ See Thomas Ice, "The Rapture in Pseudo-Ephraem," on our Pre-Trib website at the following: www.pre-trib.org/article-view.php?id=52. Our website also contains a translation of Pseudo-Ephraem's sermon.

² Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of The Human Fascination With Evil* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994), p. 252.

³ McGinn, *Antichrist*, p. 59.

⁴ McGinn, *Antichrist*, p. 63.

⁵ As indicated in Wilhelm Bousset, *The Antichrist Legend: A Chapter in Christian and Jewish Folklore* (London: Hutchinson, 1896), pp. 133–147.

⁶ (Italics original) Arthur W. Pink, *The Antichrist* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, (1923), 1988, p. 42.

⁷ These three reasons were gleaned from Arnold Fruchtenbaum, "The Nationality of the Anti-Christ" (Englewood, NJ: American Board of Missions To The Jews, n.d.).

⁸ For more on the unbiblical nature of anti-Semitism see my forthcoming book due out in the Summer of 2005, *The New Anti-Semitism: Why The World Hates Israel* from Balfour Books.

⁹ Grant R. Jeffrey, *Prince of Darkness: Antichrist and the New World Order* (Toronto: Frontier Research Publications, 1994), p. 39.

¹⁰ Fruchtenbaum., "Nationality," p. 8.

¹¹ Fruchtenbaum., "Nationality," p. 11.

¹² Fruchtenbaum, "Nationality," p. 11.

¹³ Arguments taken from Fruchtenbaum, "Nationality," pp. 12-13.

¹⁴ Fruchtenbaum, "Nationality," pp. 17-18.

¹⁵ Fruchtenbaum, "Nationality," pp. 11-22.

¹⁶ Fruchtenbaum, "Nationality," p. 23.

¹⁷ Fruchtenbaum, "Nationality," pp. 24, 26.

¹⁸ G. H. Lang, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ: Selected Studies* (Miami Springs, Fl.: Conley & Schoettle Publishing Co., (1945), 1985), p. 223.