

Who Is the Man of Sin?

Forrest D. Moyer

Anytime we look at Bible prophecy we are faced with the problems of finding a genuine fulfillment unless, of course, there is inspiration to tell us the meaning and the exact fulfillment. In the New Testament we have some inspired statements telling us the precise fulfillment of some Old Testament prophecy. For example, Acts 2:16ff tells us of the fulfillment of Joel 2:28ff. Luke 3:3-6 tells us the fulfillment of Isa. 40:3-5. Matt. 1:21ff shows the fulfillment of Isa. 7:14. These are but a few of the many examples that could be given.

However, in a case where there is New Testament prophecy that would be fulfilled after the close of New Testament revelation, it becomes much more difficult to interpret since we are not inspired. I am sure that the time will come when we shall fully understand all that inspiration wrote. Until then we must continue to study earnestly and seek to understand with an open mind what the Lord teaches.

One very perplexing bit of New Testament prophecy is found in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. The question, "Who is the man of lawlessness?" is not an easy one to answer, and there are several different interpretations of this passage. There are three basic positions taken regarding this "man of sin."

1. *The Papacy.* Many early protestant commentators and several current ones take the position that this refers to the development of Catholicism and the rise of the papacy. For a full discussion of this position, see Lenski, *Interpretation of Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, pp. 432-436. I would also refer you to Clarke's notes at the end of his comments on 2 Thess. 2. Also MacKnight discusses this. I would encourage you to look at these discussions.

2. *The "Anti Christ."* This position is that just prior to the coming of Jesus there will arise a person who is so diabolical and evil that he will be known as the "anti Christ." He will lead many people into great iniquity. He will attempt to totally overthrow Christianity, but Jesus will come and obliterate him. For a full discussion of this position, see Hendricksen, *New Testament Commentary, Exposition of I and II Thessalonians*, pp. 170-179.

3. For a lack of a better terminology, I will refer to the third position as the *Roman Emperor*. This position may be stated in this way: The "man of sin" is the Roman emperor(s) who brought severe persecutions against Christians as foretold by Daniel and pictured in Revelation 13ff. I should like to discuss this and ask you to carefully consider the reasoning that I shall use. Before presenting some arguments for this position, it would be in order to look at the passages under consideration.

In 2 Thess. 2:1-5 Paul is correcting a false impression that the Thessalonians had. They had come to believe that the coming of Jesus was imminent. He wrote so that they would "not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed" (vs. 2). Paul did not want them to lose their heads over this matter but to keep their mental balance. Evidently, someone claimed that Paul or Silas or Timothy had received a prophetic revelation ("spirit") claiming that the time of the coming of Jesus was here. Perhaps someone said

that there was a letter from them to that effect. Paul is denying any such revelation or letter. So, he said, “don’t let anyone deceive you in any way about this matter. Remain firm.”

The reason that they should not be shaken is that the coming of Jesus would not take place until there was a falling away and until there was the revealing of “the man of lawlessness, the son of destruction” (vs. 3). A time would come when “because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold” (Matt. 24:12). This would be a “falling away.” Then there would also be a man of lawlessness, one who would have “contempt and violation of law” (Thayer, p. 42). This man would act with utter contempt for God and His way. He is called the “son of destruction.” *Apoleia*: “the destruction which consists in the loss of eternal life, eternal misery, perdition ... a man doomed to eternal misery. 2 Th 2:3” (Thayer, p. 71). This man of sin would be eternally damned as a result of his godless iniquity and opposition to all that is holy.

In verse 4 this man of sin “opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god (all that is called God) or object of worship so that he takes his seat in the temple of God displaying himself as being God.” His lawlessness consists in opposing God and God’s people and in exalting himself to a position of honor and worship that belongs only to Deity. He claims a higher position than could ever belong to man, a position in which he demands worship from man.

In verses 6-12 this lawless one is described. But at the time of Paul’s writing, there was something that restrained the diabolical work of this man of sin. The Roman empire and emperors controlled the world. The Christians were protected to some extent by the Roman authorities. Rome looked upon Christianity as an extension of Judaism, and, therefore, considered it as legal. (Any religion that existed when Rome captured a nation was accepted as legal. However, no new religion was allowed to being.) When Rome became aware that Christianity was not a part of Judaism, it was then declared to be illegal. This explains why Paul was released from his first Roman imprisonment and yet executed for spreading an illegal religion during his second imprisonment. In Acts 21 when the Jews sought to kill Paul, the Roman commander rescued him (22-29). In Acts 18 when some Jews were trying to stop Paul’s preaching, it was the Roman proconsul who protected him (12-17). However, when Rome began to look on Christianity as illegal, this changed and there was no restraining power to stop persecutions against Christians.

This man of sin would be used as an instrument of Satan (vs. 9). He would come with “all power and signs and false wonders and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish.” But one thing is for sure: this man of sin will be destroyed by the power of the Lord Jesus Christ (vs. 8).

Who is This Man of Sin?

Daniel Seven

In order to adequately answer our question, we need to consider Daniel’s vision and what it symbolizes. Let us look at Dan. 7:1-12. Daniel tells of his vision of the “four great beasts ... coming up from the sea” (vs. 3). The first was like a lion and had the wings of an eagle (4), the second resembled a bear (5), the third was like a leopard with four heads (6) and the fourth was “dreadful and terrifying and extremely strong; and it had

large iron teeth ... and it had ten horns” (7). While Daniel looked, he saw “another horn, a little one, came up among them ... this horn possessed eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth uttering great boasts” (8-9). “Then I kept looking because of the sound of the boastful words which the horn was speaking; I kept looking until the beast was slain, and its body given to the burning fire” (vs. 11).

In vv. 15-28 Daniel was quite distressed about the vision and asked one standing by (an angel?) the exact meaning. “So he told me and made known to me the interpretation of these things” (vs. 16). He was told that the four beasts were four kings or kingdoms (vs. 23) which will arise. These correspond to the four kingdoms of chapter 2. Daniel was especially concerned about the fourth beast, the ten horns and the other horn which came up (vs. 20). “I kept looking, and that horn was waging war with the saints and overpowering them...” (21). “The fourth beast will be a fourth kingdom on the earth, which will be different from all the other kingdoms, and it will devour the whole earth and tread it down and crush it” (23). The horns represent kings; the little horn that came up represents a king who “will speak out against the Most High and wear down the saints of the Highest One ... and they will be given into his hand for a time, times and half a time” (25). Yet the time will come when his dominion will be taken away and the kingdom of God will prevail (26-27).

We recognize Babylon as the kingdom represent by the lion. Medo-Persia was the second followed by Greece, symbolized by the leopard. The great and terrible fourth beast represented the Roman Empire. Therefore, the horns were emperors. The number ten should be taken in the sense of a completed number rather than ten literal kings. There would arise a persecuting emperor who would severely make havoc of the people of God. He would be arrogant and boastful even against God.

Revelation 13

Daniel’s visions are complemented by John’s visions in Rev. 13. In chapter 12 we saw the dragon (Satan) trying to destroy the man child (Jesus) but failing in his attempt. Then he turned to the people of God in an effort to overcome them. Chapter 13 tells of the agency he was using to overcome God’s saints. There was a beast that came up out of the sea (remember Dan. 7:3?). This beast was an amalgam of the four beasts of Daniel. He was like a leopard with feet like a bear, and a mouth like the mouth of a lion. He is that dreadful and terrible beast that Daniel saw. He had ten horns and seven heads. One of his heads was wounded and yet his fatal wound was healed. He received worship from the people of the earth. “And there was given to him a mouth speaking arrogant words and blasphemies; and authority to act for forty-two months” (5). The forty-two months correspond to the three and one-half years of the “horn” of Dan. 7. As in Dan. 7, this beast makes war with the saints and seeks to overcome them (7), “and all who dwell on the earth will worship him” except those whose names are in the book of life.

Then we see a second beast arising. This one looks like a lamb but has the voice of a dragon. His sole activity is to persuade the people of the earth to worship the first beast whose fatal wound was healed (12). In doing so, he performed “great signs, so that he even makes fire come down out of heaven to the earth ... and he deceives those who dwell on earth because of the signs.” He enforces emperor worship.

We have little difficulty in seeing the persecuting emperor(s) of Rome in this

chapter and the committee going through the Roman Empire seeking to enforce emperor worship. Whether this refers to Nero or Domitian (“the fatal wound healed”?) or both is not the particular point of discussion at present. We just want to see that both Daniel and John saw the diabolical evil “king” persecuting the people of God for “forty-two months” or 3 1/2 years or 1,260 days. Of course, this is not a specific, literal timeframe, but incomplete time (one half of the perfect number, seven).

The Man of Sin

Now, how does all this help us define the man of sin?

1. His “coming is in accord with activity of Satan” (vs. 9) just as in Rev. 13:2, 4. He is acting as an agent of the devil.

2. He comes “with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish” (vv. 9-10). This is also seen in Rev. 13:14.

3. There is the claim of deity – “exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship displaying himself as being God” (vs. 4). We also see this in Rev. 13:4, 14.

4. Paul predicted a “falling away” in which souls would be deceived and be lost (vv. 3, 11). Daniel told how the “little horn” would “wear down the saints of the Highest One” for 3 1/2 times. In Rev. 13 the beast would “make war with the saints and overcome them” (vs. 7). Jesus said, “And because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold” (Matt. 24:12). (I realize that Jesus is speaking of events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in this context. The comparison is that lawlessness causes the people to fall away.)

5. This “lawless one” will be slain by the Lord with the breath of His mouth and brought to an end by the brightness of His coming (vs. 8). Daniel saw the beast slain and its body destroyed and given to the burning fire (7:11, 26). In Revelation the beast was defeated, seized, and thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone (19:19-20).

Because of these similarities, it seems most logical that Paul is speaking of the same personage as was Daniel and John. In so doing, he was helping prepare them for the coming persecutions that many of them would have to face. I fail to see that advantage to these people for Paul to be speaking of some far removed event. I urge you to study this diligently and reach your conclusions carefully. In so far as it is possible, we need to allow the Bible to help us understand prophecy. We do not need speculation.

(Guardian of Truth, Feb. 18, 1988)