

2014

The antichrist theme in the Johannine Epistles and its role in Christian tradition

Craig R. Koester

Luther Seminary, ckoester@luthersem.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Koester, Craig R., "The antichrist theme in the Johannine Epistles and its role in Christian tradition" (2014). *Faculty Publications*. 23.
http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/23

Published Citation

Koester, Craig R. "The Antichrist Theme in the Johannine Epistles and Its Role in Christian Tradition." In *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles*, edited by R. Alan Culpepper, 187–96. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014.

**THE ANTICHRIST THEME IN THE JOHANNINE EPISTLES
AND ITS ROLE IN CHRISTIAN TRADITION**

Craig R. Koester

Some of the most provocative and influential comments made in 1 and 2 John have to do with the notion of antichrist. These texts contain the earliest known occurrences of the term “antichrist” or ἀντίχριστος, and they bequeathed it to the generations that followed.¹ By the late second and third centuries C.E. the question of antichrist had become the focus of speculation and comment in some Christian circles, and the power of the term to engage the imagination has continued down to the present. Bernard McGinn’s comprehensive study of the antichrist idea in western culture put it well in its subtitle. He called it *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (McGinn 2000).

The usual picture of the antichrist has many sides to it. Writers from antiquity onward have envisioned the antichrist as a singular figure, the consummately evil human being, who is to be the agent of Satan on earth. He is often pictured as a political ruler, who will reign during the final years of this present age and persecute those who refuse to worship him. But in the end there will be a cosmic battle, in which the returning Christ will destroy the antichrist and bring him to a fiery end.

What is so striking is how little of the traditional scenario has to do with 1 and 2 John.² These two epistles may supply the term “antichrist,” but much of the content comes from elsewhere. One might wonder whether the letters might refer so briefly to the antichrist because the tradition about this figure was so well-known. After all, 1 John assumes that readers have already heard that the antichrist is coming (2:18; 4:3). Over a century ago, Wilhelm Bousset of the history-of-religions school argued that there was a unified antichrist tradition that circulated in Jewish communities long before the Epistles were written (Bousset 1896). He thought that it envisioned an antichrist much like that described by Christian writers several centuries later. But more recent studies have shown that Jewish beliefs about an eschatological adversary were marked by variety, not uniformity, and that

¹ The term ἀντίχριστος appears in 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7. The next occurrence is in Pol. *Phil.* 7:1, which seems dependent on the Johannine Epistles, since it links the antichrist to those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

² Interpreters are uncertain whether 1 and 2 John were written by the same author. Some consider common authorship plausible, though not certain (e.g., Brown 1982, 16-19; Rensberger 1997, 19). Others think it likely that they were written by different people, though the two works share some common traditions (Lieu, 2008, 6-9; Painter 2002, 50-51; Strecker 1996, xl). Since the references to the antichrist in 1 and 2 John are so similar, they will be treated together as expressions of a common outlook.

the notion of an anti-messiah seems to have been developed by Christians (Peerbolte 1996; cf. Jenks 1991; McGinn 2000, 3).

When I consider 1 and 2 John in light of the later tradition, I do not assume that the later sources reveal the ideas that shaped *the writer* of the Epistles. Rather, the later tradition has shaped many *readers* of the Epistles, and it continues to influence the interpretation of these passages, sometimes in subtle ways. The long history of speculation about the antichrist and the polemical use of antichrist language is difficult to ignore, even when interpreters try to limit their work to the context in which the Johannine Epistles were composed.

Attention to the history of reception of the antichrist idea can make us more aware of assumptions that are often brought to the reading of 1 and 2 John.³ By comparing later portrayals of the antichrist with passages from the Epistles, we can better discern what the interpretive assumptions are and can able to ask whether or not we want to affirm those assumptions. Then the study of reception history comes full circle when it brings each interpreter back to a renewed engagement with the biblical text itself. So by giving attention to reception history I want to consider three questions: First, how do the Johannine Epistles portray the antichrist? Second, how do the Epistles depict the eschatological battle? And third, how do the Epistles encourage or subvert the polemical use of antichrist language?

THE PORTRAYAL OF THE ANTICHRIST

Two of the principal architects of the antichrist tradition were Irenaeus and Hippolytus, who wrote in the late second and early third century C.E.⁴ Their approach was to create a unified portrait of the antichrist by synthesizing elements from various biblical passages. The term “antichrist” was taken from the Johannine Epistles, and this was combined with Revelation’s description of the tyrannical ruler, who is pictured as a seven-headed beast. According to Revelation 13, this beast is the agent of Satan and it rises from the sea to dominate the peoples of the world. The beast is the center of the ruler cult, so that the beast himself becomes an object of worship. This beast makes war on the saints, while a second figure—known as the false prophet or beast from the land—promotes the ruler cult by working miracles, slaughtering his opponents, and marking people with the name and number of the great beast, which of course is six hundred and sixty-six. This vision from Revelation was fused with 2 Thessalonians 2, which warns about the man of lawlessness, whose coming is to be heralded by signs and wonders. In this scenario the man of lawless not only makes himself the object of worship but actually takes his seat in the temple of God. This in turn led to speculation that the antichrist might even rebuild the temple, since the temple had been destroyed by the Romans more than a century before Irenaeus and Hippolytus wrote (Koester 2014: §25E).

³ For a useful introduction to reception history or *Wirkungsgeschichte* see Luz 2007, 63. He points out that one never encounters biblical texts in abstract space. Interpreters inevitably have presuppositions that are shaped to some extent by tradition. The interpretive process involves thinking critically not only about the text but about the perspectives the interpreter brings to the text.

⁴ See especially Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.25-30 (ANF 1:553-60) and Hippolytus’s *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist* (ANF 5:204-19).

When we return to the Johannine Epistles, however, it is remarkable how nearly all of this vanishes. There are no signs and wonders. There is no violent persecution of the saints. And most significantly, the Johannine antichrist is not a figure who makes himself the object of worship. Instead, the antichrist works by way of negation. In the Epistles, the established confession of the community is that Jesus is the Christ, who has come in the flesh. The work of the antichrist is to negate this. The author of 1 John can ask, “Who is the liar but the one who *denies* that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who *denies* the Father and the Son” (1 John 2:22). And 2 John will insist that “the deceiver and the antichrist” is the one who does “*not confess* that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (2 John 7).

If the confession that Jesus is the Christ constitutes the norm, then the antichrist drains this confession of certain content, but the Epistles do not suggest that the antichrist makes himself an alternative focus for belief as in the scenarios above. To be sure, some have noted that the word antichrist begins with the Greek prefix *anti-*, which has multiple meanings. It almost certainly means that this figure is “against” Christ, but the prefix could also suggest that he is a “substitute” for Christ, since the prefix *anti-* can also mean substitution or replacement (Brown 1982, 333). The Synoptic gospels do warn that in the end times there will be many false messiahs (ψευδόχριστοι), who will come in Jesus’ name and say “I am he” (Matt 24:24; Mark 13:6). But significantly, the Johannine Epistles do not picture an antichrist who says, “Believe that I am the Christ and that Jesus is not.”

Instead, what the antichrist does according to the Epistles is to offer a substitute form of belief by denying certain claims about Jesus. Interpreters have tried to determine more precisely what this negation might have meant. When read in light of later docetic Christology, it could be taken to mean denying that Jesus was truly human. The idea would be that Jesus appeared to be human, but in reality was not, or perhaps that his divine nature merely took up temporary residence in the body but was not connected to it. The problem is that it is not clear that these later views can be ascribed to the context of the Epistles (Lieu 2008, 169; Strecker 1996, 65-76)

The essence of the antichrist’s work, according to the Epistles, is to sever the connection between the title “Christ” and the human being named Jesus. The author of 1 and 2 John sometimes uses the word “Christ” as a title, referring to Jesus as “the Christ” or Anointed One (1 John 2:22; 5:1). He also makes it a part of the name “Jesus Christ” (e.g., 2:1; 5:6; 2 John 7), and links the term to Jesus’ identity as “the Son of God” (1 John 1:3; 2:22; 3:23; 2 John 3). Traditionally, the idea that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God drew on Jewish messianic hopes, though in the Johannine tradition the titles came to have an expanded significance, connoting Jesus’ unity with God his Father (Koester 2008, 89-107).

For the writer or writers of the Epistles, the Christ is the Son of God, the one through whom God acts. It was out of love that God sent him to bring atonement, life, and salvation to the world (1 John 4:7-14). And Jesus did so in the flesh, so that he conveyed God’s truth and love in a manner that could be heard and seen and touched (1:1-2). What the antichrist does is to negate the idea that being God’s agent has anything to do with the flesh of Jesus, which meant denying that Jesus’ humanity had any salvific significance (Brown 1982, 505).

This dimension has intriguing implications for the Johannine portrayal of antichrist. It means that the antichrist—if he is true to his own character—will not assume his own incarnate form. The later tradition will picture the eschatological adversary as one particular human being, who incarnates evil. But the Johannine antichrist has no flesh of his own. The

one who denies the flesh of Jesus does not claim it for himself—at least not directly. Instead, he takes up residence in the people who give voice to the beliefs he promotes. That is why the author warns that “Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. *This person* is the deceiver and the antichrist” (2 John 7; cf. 1 John 2:22-23).

The Johannine Epistles do not allow readers the luxury of equating the antichrist with one particular tyrant, who becomes the focus of all evil. Instead, they use the term “antichrist” in the singular for any person who denies the value of Jesus’ humanity. And this means that the one becomes many. *The* antichrist turns into *many* antichrists.⁵ The author of 1 John says that the readers “have heard that antichrist is coming,” but then he adds that now “many antichrists have come” in the form of ordinary people, who have now left the author’s faith community (2:18-19). Those looking for the miracle-working tyrant may find themselves bewildered, for in the Johannine Epistles the antichrist is not known through signs and wonders or the horrors of persecution. Instead, the antichrist is known by words that negate the significance of Jesus’ humanity, words that are spoken by the kind of people the readers might encounter anywhere, including some people whom the readers had previously considered to be their brothers and sisters in the faith. So given such a diffused presence of the antichrist, what does this mean for the eschatological battle?

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL BATTLE

Christian tradition has often pictured the great battle with scenes of high drama. Writers typically rely on 2 Thessalonians, where Christ comes from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire to inflict vengeance on the godless and to annihilate the man of lawlessness with the breath of his mouth. Other details came from Revelation, which portrays the great battle in which the beast and false prophet lure the kings of earth into a futile attack against the returning Christ at the battle of Armageddon. It is there that the beast is defeated and hurled into the lake of fire, while the corpses of his slaughtered allies provide a grisly banquet for the birds of the air, who feast on the carnage of the battlefield (Rev 16:12-16; 19:11-21).

Initially, the Johannine Epistles also seem to hold dramatic promise. They depict a cosmic struggle between God and the devil, who has been sinning from the beginning. As readers we enter the story midway, for God has already taken action by sending his Son to do battle. According to 1 John, the Son of God has taken on a militant role by coming to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). Yet despite Christ’s attack on the devil’s realm, the world remains under the power of the evil one (5:19). This situation makes the world or *kosmos* the scene of continued spiritual warfare. The author tells of two spirits, the spirit of

⁵ Note that those who profess the opponents’ Christology become “antichrists” (ἀντίχριστοι) but those who adhere to the author’s Christology do not thereby become a multiplicity of “christs” (χριστοί). The difference is significant. The readers have received an anointing or χρίσμα, which probably refers to the Spirit (Klauck 1991, 168; Strecker 1996, 76). This anointing enables them to confess that Jesus is the Anointed One; the χρίσμα (1 John 2:20, 27) enables them to confess Jesus as Χριστός (2:22). Yet the author also maintains a critical distinction between Jesus as the Anointed One and those who have received the anointing that enables discernment. Since Christ is not simply equated with the believers, the believers remain reliant on and accountable to someone beyond themselves. This differentiation is integral to 1 John’s words of encouragement and rebuke.

truth and the spirit of deceit, which are operative in the world (4:6). And the spirit of deceit is the spirit of the antichrist (4:3). Readers are warned about the antichrist's covert operations, for his agents include the many purported prophets, who have gone out into the world to deceive people into denying the significance of Jesus' flesh (4:1).

This is war, but a war of words. The weapons in the conflict are a claim and a counter-claim: the confession that the human being named Jesus is the Christ versus the conviction that Jesus' humanity has no place in God's designs. For the writer of 1 John, this is not merely the prelude to the final battle; it is the great battle with the antichrist.⁶ The combatants are not a heavenly warrior on a white horse and a seven-headed beast.⁷ Instead, the combatants are people like the readers, who find themselves in the middle of the fray, being called to distinguish truth from falsehood. The single antichrist is transformed into many antichrists and the future becomes present. The writer will insist that "it is the last hour," and that it is precisely the coming of the many antichrists that allow readers to "know that it is the last hour" (2:18; cf. 4:3).

In the eyes of many the situation would seem to be a defeat. For the antichrist's many agents, the false prophets, have gone out into the world, where they find a ready reception for their views. The author says, "They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them" (4:5). Yet in the seeming darkness of defeat, the author of 1 John pronounces victory—a victory that is manifest not in fire from heaven but in faith on earth. He insists that where the Spirit of God moves people to confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, there one finds true victory. He tells the readers, "you have conquered them" (4:4). For "whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (5:4-5; cf. 2:13-14).

For the writer of 1 John, the cosmic battle between Christ and antichrist is being fought and won in the present. The author does not treat the readers as spectators but casts them in the role of participants, who are called to resist the incursions of falsehood and to overcome them with the truth that fosters faith. According to 1 John, God sent Jesus to destroy the works of the devil, and such works include unbelief and the forms of sin that flow from it. These are marked by hatred and death (3:8, 12-15). The battle against false belief is won when genuine faith is created, and such faith from the author's perspective is manifested in love and is characterized by life (4:7-21; 5:11). This is a battle of the most peculiar sort, for triumph over the antichrist does not come by inflicting death on his followers but by fostering life through the words that express and engender faith.

THE POLEMICAL USE OF ANTICHRIST LANGUAGE

This brings us to our final question, which concerns the polemical quality of the author's antichrist language. Christ may be the agent of life and Savior of the world, but the way the

⁶ Some interpreters maintain that 1 John might continue to envision a future and final antichrist (Smalley 2007, 95). Others, however, point out that the epistolary author identifies the eschatological appearance of the antichrist in the many that have left the author's community. See Brown 1982, 337; Klauck 1991, 150-51.

⁷ It is significant that even in Rev 19:11-21, where Christ is portrayed as a warrior, there is only one weapon: the sword that comes from Christ's mouth, symbolizing his word. The great battle in Revelation is won through the power of the word.

author castigates the opponents as “antichrist” certainly sits awkwardly with the reminders about the importance of love (Thatcher 2012). Moreover, the term “antichrist” was frequently used as an epithet by writers of later generations, who found it a convenient way to vilify political and religious figures of their own times.⁸ So as we consider the role of the antichrist in the Johannine Epistles, it is important to ask how the polemics work.

Rhetorically, the author levels the charge of “antichrist” against those who have left his community. He says “they went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us” (2:19). In this conflicted situation the author draws a sharp line between two groups: those who belong to Christ and those who belong to antichrist. The author seems to recognize that the main reason that people should remain in the community is that they find its confession and manner of life to be compelling. But at the same time, identifying the opposing group with antichrist is rhetorically powerful because it raises the barrier against leaving the community. The writer insists that joining the other side is more than just adopting an alternative Christology. It means joining the agents of evil (Lieu 1991, 85).

This language seems to leave us with a simple “us versus them” situation in which the author’s group belongs to Christ and the other group has become antichrist. Yet having established this clear division, the author also subverts it. The struggle against antichrist cannot be reduced to one group versus another. It is a struggle that goes on within the author’s community and, by extension, within each member of that community.

The Johannine Epistles identify the antichrist with the negation of the community’s confession of Jesus, and they also recognize that negating the confession can occur through actions as well as through speech. The author assumes that if Christ is embodied, then faith must be embodied and conveyed in deeds that are consistent with the words. First John points to the irony that those who confidently confess their faith with their lips can effectively deny it with their lives—and when they do so, even those who belong to the community exhibit the traits of the antichrist. Note how the Epistles use the term “liar.” The author can say, “Who is the liar (ψεύστης) but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist” (2:22). But he can also say, “Whoever says, ‘I know him,’ but does not obey his commandments, is a liar (ψεύστης),” which means that the person takes on the traits of antichrist (2:4; cf. 4:20). The same is true with the notion of deception. Second John can say that that if one “does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, that person “is the deceiver (πλάνοϋς) and the antichrist” (2 John 7). Yet First John also says, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive (πλανῶμεν) ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

When the warnings against the deceptive qualities of the antichrist are read in light of the warnings about the readers’ own propensities to self-deception, then the antichrist can no longer be comfortably externalized and located only within the other group. When the threat of denying Christ is extended to include not only words but actions that are inconsistent with the words, then it becomes an inducement to self-examination *within* the author’s own community. This way of reading the antichrist passages may have been

⁸ Identifying the antichrist with figures of one’s own time became especially common from the twelfth century onward. Examples included Pope Gregory IX (1241) and Innocent IV (d. 1254) as well as the Emperor Frederick II (d. 1250). During the sixteenth century, many Protestants came to identify the papal office itself with the antichrist. Later candidates have ranged from the emperor Napoleon to modern American presidents. See McGinn 2000, 200-49; Fuller 1995; Koester 2014: §25E.

obscured in the later tradition, but it was not lost. It surfaces, for example, in Augustine's sermons on 1 John.⁹ He notes that according to this epistle, the people called "antichrist" have gone out of the community, but this also means that before going out they were present within it. The antichrist is not purely external. It is a force that operates within the community of faith itself. Therefore, Augustine comments that members of the community must ask themselves whether they might be antichrists. And the criterion that Augustine says they should use? Whoever "in his deeds denies Christ is an antichrist" (*Tract. ep. Jo.* 3.4, 8). And the deeds that most effectively deny Christ are those that violate the command to show love.

The Johannine Epistles have contributed to the highly charged use of antichrist language in western culture. But when that language has been taken more contextually, the Epistles have also played a distinctive and subversive role, which sets them apart from aspects of the later tradition. In the Epistles the one antichrist is transformed into many, the future becomes present, and the enemy cannot be comfortably externalized but is a force that can operate within the believing community itself.

According to the Epistles the authentic Christ is made tangible in Jesus and authentic faith is made tangible in love. The term "antichrist" identifies the opposite of this. The Epistles call readers to actively discern where the spirit of the antichrist might be at work in the world and in communities other than their own. But these same texts also call readers to discern their own propensities for self-deception and the ways they negate the work of Christ through acts of hatred, which diminish life. The Epistles may do their most subversive work when they move the readers to say: "We have seen the antichrist, and he is us."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bousset, Wilhelm. 1896. *The Antichrist Legend: A Chapter in Jewish and Christian Folklore*. London: Hutchinson.
- Brown, Raymond E. 1982. *The Epistles of John: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. AB 30. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Fuller, Robert C. 1995. *Naming the Antichrist: The History of an American Obsession*. New York: Oxford University.
- Jenks, Gregory C. 1991. *The Origins and Early Development of the Antichrist Myth*. BZNW 59. Berlin and New York: de Gruyter.
- Klauck, Hans-Josef. 1991. *Der Erste Johannesbrief*. EKK XXII/1. Zürich and Braunschweig: Benzinger and Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener.

⁹ The importance of Augustine's approach and the way similar ideas are reflected in Gregory the Great and others plays an important role in McGinn's work (McGinn 2000, xv, 77, 82, 278-80). McGinn comments, "Antichrist is meant to warn us against ourselves" (ibid., xvi).

- Koester, Craig R. 2008. *The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- _____. 2014. *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Yale Bible 38A. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Lieu, Judith. 2008. *I, II, & III John: A Commentary*. NTL. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- _____. 1991. *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- Luz, Ulrich. 2007. *Matthew 1-7*. Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- McGinn, Bernard, 2000. *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil*. New York: Columbia University.
- Painter, John Painter. 2002. *1, 2, and 3 John*. SP 18. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press.
- Peerbolte, L. J. Lietaert. 1996. *The Antecedents of Antichrist: A Traditio-Historical Study of the Earliest Christian Views on Eschatological Opponents*. JSJSup 49. Leiden: Brill.
- Rensberger, David. 1997. *1 John, 2 John, 3 John*. ANTC. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Smalley, Stephen. 2007. *1, 2, 3 John*. Rev. ed. WBC 51. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
- Strecker, Georg. 1996. *The Johannine Letters*. Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Thatcher, Tom. 2013. "Cain the Jew the Antichrist: Collective Memory and the Johannine Ethic of Loving and Hating." Pages 350-73 in *Rethinking the Ethics of John: "Implicit Ethics" in the Johannine Writings*. Edited by Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann. WUNT 291. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.