

WHO OR WHAT IS “THE MAN OF SIN?”

Second Thessalonians 2:3–4

By Dub McClish

Introduction

Second Thessalonians 2:3–4 reads as follows from the ASV:

Let no man beguile you in any wise: for it will not be, except the falling away come first, and the man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition, he that opposeth and exalteth himself against all that is called God or that is worshipped; so that he sitteth in the temple of God, setting himself forth as God.

Who or what is the “Man of Sin”? Is he a specter of the past, is he yet to appear, or is he presently stalking the earth? The Thessalonians apparently understood this passage. Its specific application has been more or less enigmatic to every generation from the second century forward. There are comments extant on this passage beginning with the early post-Biblical ecclesiastical authors. Justin Martyr made reference to it in his *Dialogue With Trypho*.¹ Irenaeus, Origen, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Cyprian, Jerome, Chrysostom, Augustine, and others all discuss this passage.²

Who/What Is “the Man of Sin”?

There are possibly several suggested fulfillments that do no violence to history or other Scripture. Likewise, there are some theories that must be rejected because they either pervert history or Scripture or both. Kenneth S. Wuest has one of the more fanciful hypotheses on this passage.³ Wuest views the expression, *falling away* (v. 3) as interpretation rather than translation, arguing that *departure* should be used, meaning the departure of the church from the earth. He positively identifies *the man of sin* with Judas, since Paul calls him the “son of perdition,” the same term our Lord applied to his betrayer (John 17:12). Being a devout Premillennialist, Wuest weaves quite a fabric of fantasia to make this passage fit his theory.

The only point of near universal agreement among the commentators concerning the identity of *the man of sin* is that he is Anti Christ (1 John 2:18, et al.). From this point on the views differ considerably on who or what might fit Paul's description. These speculations may be divided into two categories: those who believe that Paul has in mind only a single individual and those who believe *the man of sin* may refer to a succession of men or a system of error. Which of these basic views one adopts will limit to some degree how one applies the passage.

One of the oldest identities of Paul's “man of sin” is with Nero. Even Augustine was familiar with it. The theory that Nero did not really die in 68 A.D., but was hiding to later reappear as the “man of sin,” or that he really died and was to be resurrected, was revived in

modern times by Kern in the 19th century and attracted some support.⁴ This idea is impossible to accept by Bible believers since Nero never returned. Various other Roman emperors have been called "the man of sin," including Caligula, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian.⁵ Hendriksen points out that the whole context seems to be eschatological, which is an insurmountable objection to this view.⁶

Barnes cites the view that "the man of sin" was the Jewish nation and the "day of the Lord" the destruction of Jerusalem.⁷ But this view seems forced. Besides, the destruction of Jerusalem was imminent to the writing of Second Thessalonians, but "the day of the Lord" was not imminent. Others have held that Simon Magus, alleged founder of Gnosticism in the first century, was "the man of sin."⁸ This requires referring *the day of the Lord* to the destruction of Jerusalem, also.

The view that *the man of sin* referred to the papacy became public as early as the 10th century.⁹ This view came to be common among the hardy opponents of popery during the Middle Ages, including Savonarola, the Albigenses, the Waldenses, and others.¹⁰ The sixteenth-century Reformers generally adopted this view. They held it so strongly that it was included in both the Augsburg and Westminster Confessions. The dedication statement of the King James Version translators assumes that all of its readers understand the pope to be "that man of sin." This has been the most popular view among Protestants. It is probably still generally held among our brethren. Hendriksen, taking the view that he is to be a single eschatological person, rules out a reference to the pope, while admitting many similarities.¹¹ One will find able advocacy of the papal application in *Pulpit Commentary*,¹² *Barnes' Notes*,¹³ *Standard Bible Commentary on Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians and Romans*,¹⁴ and *The Biblical Illustrator*.¹⁵

Interestingly, some papists have seen the rise and growth of Protestantism in this passage, with Luther as their "man of sin."¹⁶ The Greek Church has seized upon Mohammed as "the man of sin."¹⁷ Both Hendriksen¹⁸ and Raymond Kelcy¹⁹ mention the hypothesis advanced in recent years that points to Babylonian mythology for fulfillment. However, this view makes the passage depend upon heathen mythology, which the Bible believer rejects *prima facie*.

Some hold that Satan himself is Paul's "man of sin," but the fact that he is to come "according to the working of Satan" seems to distinguish him **from** Satan. Further, some believe that Paul is personifying the "principle of evil" that will finally make itself known in a single individual.²¹

Conclusion

I am not able to declare to whom Paul is specifically referring. It does seem that he has some specific historic person in mind, after considering the use of the definite article (“**the** man of sin”), the detailed description of his work and the way his working and character are contrasted with those of the Christ.²² Paul says that the "mystery of lawlessness" was already at work when he wrote (v. 7). This force can probably be identified with his other warnings concerning apostasy²³ and with John's warnings.²⁴ Some thing (v. 6) or some one (v. 7) was retarding the spread of evil and lawlessness, but the restraint is eventually to be removed (v. 7), at which time a general apostasy would develop (v. 3). Out of the great apostasy shall “the man of sin” arise who shall deceive many more (vv. 3, 8–12). We should remember in studying this passage, that whatever we conclude about it, Paul's main point is to correct the Thessalonians' misapprehension that the Lord's coming was imminent. Paul introduces the necessary precedent events to teach them otherwise. The information about “the man of sin” are somewhat incidental to his main point. Therefore, our understanding of who or what he is should not be made a matter of obligatory belief—as long as one does not adopt some view that perverts the plain teaching of Scripture otherwise.

Perhaps the apostasy of Romanism, the corruption of the Greek Church, the cruelties of Mohammedanism, and Communism, the blatant materialism, Atheism, and theological liberalism of modern times will all be embodied in some monstrous person some day. As horrible as that thought is, may we not forget the comforting words that our "Lord Jesus shall slay (him) with the breath of his mouth, and bring him to nought by the manifestation of his coming" (v. 8). “Amen; Come, Lord Jesus!”

Endnotes

1. William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary—1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1955), p. 178.
2. H.D.M. Spence. Joseph S. Exell (ed.), *Pulpit Commentary* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1950), XXI, pp. 52-53 (in section on *2 Thessalonians*); J.W. McGarvey, P.Y. Pendleton, *The Standard Bible Commentary on Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians and Romans* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Standard Publishing Foundation) p. 42.
3. Kenneth S. Wuest, *Prophetic Light in the Present Darkness* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956), pp. 38, 67-68, 75-79.
4. Hendriksen, *op. cit.*, p. 173.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament—1 Thessalonians—Philemon* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1949), p. 79.

8. *Ibid.*
9. Spence, Exell, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Hendriksen, *op. cit.*, pp. 173–175.
12. Spence, Exell, *op. cit.*, pp. 58–60.
13. Barnes, *op. cit.*, pp. 81–82.
14. McGarvey, Pendleton, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
15. Joseph S. Exell (ed.), *The Biblical Illustrator—1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1955), pp. 37, 40–41.
16. Spence, Exell, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
18. Hendriksen, *op. cit.*, p. 175.
19. Raymond C. Kelcy, *The Living Word Commentary* (Austin, Texas: R.B. Sweet, 1968), XIII, p. 162.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 162–163; Hendriksen, *op. cit.*, p. 170.
21. Kelcy, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
22. For excellent summaries of these contrasts, cf. McGarvey, Pendleton, *op. cit.*, pp. 39–40; Spence, Exell, *op. cit.*, pp. 28, 35–36.
23. Acts 20:29–30; Col. 2:4–8; 1 Tim. 4: 1–3; et al.
24. 1 John 2:18–26; 3:7–8; 4:1–3; 2 John 7–11; et al.

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