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ANTICHRIST IN THE CONTEXT OF 1 JOHN 2

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## ANTICHRIST IN THE CONTEXT OF 1 JOHN 2

Antichrist is a word that has been used to write fantastical novels and make inventive movies that have captured the imaginations of millions of Christians worldwide. It is also a word that has been used by church leaders over the centuries to either predict the events surrounding the eschaton or to slander opponents.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the context of 1 John 2 as the pericope containing the earliest mention of this word within the biblical canon is often overlooked in favor of speculation concerning the Apocalypse. As a result the Church has seemingly forgotten the important message that was conveyed to the community of 1 John. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the context of 1 John 2 in order to discover and promote a more biblical understanding of the meaning of the antichrist theme within the Johannine corpus. Key elements such as the historical and exegetical situation of 1 John 2 and its connection with other pericopes within the Johannine Epistles will be revealed. In addition, this work will make use of biblical, extra-biblical, and theological texts so that this vital theme can be further clarified.

### Context of 1 John 2

Over the years scholars have attempted to describe the context of 1 John by locating the relationship between either the writer and audience or the writer and those who are the subject of his polemic. The majority of scholars over recent decades have chosen to focus on a model which seeks to determine the *Sitz im Leben* (life setting) of 1 John by attempting to understand the letter's polemic against the antichrists of 1 John 2:18.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, scholars such as Judith

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1. Speculation regarding the word antichrist or antichrists can be found throughout Church history and in leaders such as Polycarp, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Augustine, Hilary of Poitiers, Pope Gregory IX, Martin Luther, Thomas Muntzer, John Calvin, John Knox, Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, and J. Dwight Pentecost just to name a few. For further study see Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994).

Lieu have sought to discredit this method as circular argumentation in favor of a rhetorical critical approach which seeks to explain the language of persuasion and identity.<sup>3</sup> Lieu describes the context of 1 John by expounding upon the writer's use of first and second person plural verbs and pronouns as a method of persuasion.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, she seems to come to the conclusion that the writer of 1 John is at least using insider versus outsider language in order to define the relationship between the writer's group, recognized as 'we', and his audience, recognized as 'you'. The weakness of this approach is that it fails to understand the purpose of the occasion for the letter. Lieu argues that the writer is mainly concerned for his relationship with his audience, almost as if the opponents mentioned are a rhetorical device. However, the entire work seems to revolve around the reality that the author wishes to address a situation within his church in which false teachers are deceiving those who he has brought into the faith. This fact can be seen in the author's repeated use of insider versus outsider language and his encouragement to remain in his teaching about Christ while rejecting the world.

1 John has traditionally been connected with one or more churches in Asia Minor with which John was very familiar.<sup>5</sup> Even with a cursory reading of the text it would seem that John had a very close relationship with this group which likely included him preaching the gospel and

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2. For an example of this see Raymond Edward Brown, *The Epistles of John* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982). All English scripture references are taken from the *New American Standard Bible* (LaHabra: The Lockman Foundation, 1995) unless indicated otherwise. All Greek scripture references are taken from Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Matthew Black et al., *The Greek New Testament*, 4th ed. (Federal Republic of Germany: United Bible Societies, 1993).

3. See Judith Lieu, "Us or You? Persuasion and Identity in 1 John," *Journal of Biblical Literature* vol. 127, no. 4 (2008), 805–819.

4. *Ibid*, 808.

5. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 25.

leading them to conversion (cf. 1:1–4).<sup>6</sup> As aforementioned, it seems as though heresy had begun to divide the church and caused some to leave. John then writes to his audience in order to appeal to them to keep the teaching that they have heard from the beginning (2:24). While the relationship between the author and his audience seems clear, the identity of his opponents has been a point of contention for biblical scholars.

Scholars since the time of Irenaeus (c. AD 200) have held that Cerinthus' (c. AD 100) teaching was the source of the antichrist's beliefs in 1 John.<sup>7</sup> Cerinthus was a proto-Gnostic Christian who denied the divinity of Jesus and held that the Christ came to Jesus at his baptism, guided him in his ministry, but left him at the crucifixion. According to Westcott, Cerinthus evidently combined the beliefs of the Ebionites which presented Jesus as a "mere man" with the beliefs of Docetism which presented him as a "mere phantom".<sup>8</sup> Some have even postulated that this is the same opponent that John wrote about in the Fourth Gospel.<sup>9</sup> In more recent scholarship, others see John's opponents as Docetic or proto-Gnostic Christians which

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6. Although there is much debate as to the authorship of the Johannine Epistles, I prefer to attribute the writing of at least 1 John to the Apostle John. Furthermore, I believe this position to be acceptable considering that most scholars grant authorship to the Johannine Community. In this essay I refer to John as the author of the Johannine Epistles in order to both avoid issues of authorship where unnecessary and for ease of writing. For a better discussion concerning John's authorship of the Johannine Epistles see John Christopher Thomas, *The Pentecostal Commentary on 1 John, 2 John, 3 John* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004).

7. Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John: The Greek Texts with Notes and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1883), xxxiv–xxxv. For further discussion on the beliefs of Cerinthus see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (Indianapolis: Ex Fontibus, 2010).

8. Ibid.

9. For further discussion on the connections between John's Gospel and the Johannine Epistles see R. Alan Culpepper, *1 John, 2 John, 3 John* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) or Thomas, *The Pentecostal Commentary* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004).

believed “that Christ only appeared to be human when in fact he was pure spirit.”<sup>10</sup> Smalley argues that four different camps emerged within the Johannine community.

(a) Johannine Christians who were committed to the apostolic gospel of Jesus as they had received it; (b) heretically inclined members from a Jewish background; (c) heterodox followers from a Hellenistic (and/or pagan) background... (d) and secessionists.<sup>11</sup>

Yet scholars such as Lieu prefer a more ambiguous reading which does not offer speculation.

Perhaps the best explication concerning the antichrists is that their teaching was some early form of Gnostic-like belief which also purported a Christian libertinism. The only clues that are provided can be found by examining the text.

## 1 John 2

After reminding his audience of the message that has been delivered to them concerning Christ, John turns his attention to addressing his τέκνία (little children) in a more personal manner. In the beginning of the letter, he uses first person plural verbs such as ἀκηκόαμεν (we have heard) and ἑώρακάμεν (we have seen) in order to show his position of leadership in relation to his audience who he refers to as ὑμῖν (you). Lieu argues that this is in contrast to the Pauline apostolic greeting of authority and is an indication of separation.<sup>12</sup> However, this view seems problematic in light of John’s quick turn to more intimate language in 2:1 and that his basis of authority in 1:1–5 clearly rests upon his apostolic first hand witness. In 2:1 John uses a more personal greeting by saying “τέκνία μου, ταῦτα γράφω ὑμῖν” (my little children, I am writing these things to you). John uses the words τέκνία seven and παιδιά (child or little child) two times

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10. Robert Kysar, *I, II, III John* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 17. Docetism is considered a part of Gnosticism for its rejection of the material world in favor of the spiritual.

11. Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (Waco: Word, 1984), xxiv.

12. Lieu, “Us or You?,” 808.

within 1 John as a form of intimate address (2:1, 12, 14, 18, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4 and 5:21). Τεκνία is a diminutive of τέκνον (child) as παιδία is of παιδίον (child). Τεκνία was used by Jesus in loving address to his disciples and by apostles to their spiritual children while παιδία was the most common word used for children by the New Testament writers (cf. John 13:33; Luke 18:17; Gal. 4:19).<sup>13</sup>

Τεκνία not only serves as an intimate address between John and his audience, it is language that effectively separates those who partake of that relationship and those who do not. This is clear considering the bond that the phrase “little children” implies. John indicates that he is writing these things to his children so that they may not sin (1 John 2:1). He follows this by comparing and contrasting the actions of those who follow Christ with those who do not. This insider versus outsider language continues throughout 1 John. In fact, John seems to use this pattern of comparing and contrasting insiders versus outsiders as a paradigmatic element.

John’s use of antithetical phrases, such as the one that appears at the beginning of chapter two, is the most clear example of insider versus outsider language. In contrast to those who prove their knowledge of Christ by obeying his commands (2:3,5), John says that “the man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (2:4).

Other examples of antitheses within chapter two are as follows:

- (i) Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness/  
Whoever loves his brother lives in the light... (2:9/10a)
- (ii) No one who denies the Son has the Father;  
whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also (2:23a/b).
- (iii) ...everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him.  
Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness... (2:29b/3:4a)

F. F. Bruce illustrates a series of antitheses in 2:28–3:10. He then says that it is a “perfectly

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13. For a discussion on τεκνία see Brown, *Epistles*, 213–214.

reasonable, and even probable, supposition that the Elder, in his teaching, whether oral or written, was accustomed to sum up the contrast between the true way and all others in pairs of antitheses like these.”<sup>14</sup> While Bruce’s assertion concerning the Elder may be challenged, the use of insider versus outsider language is indubitable. It is also clear that John uses this language in order to directly address the issues that have been brought up by the ones he refers to as antichrists.

The Johannine Epistles contain the only mention of the term ἀντίχριστος in the entire Bible (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). The pericope in chapter two, which begins with verse 18 and ends at 28 or 29, contains the first reference to antichrist and is built upon an eschatological framework.<sup>15</sup> John brackets this section with the phrase “it is the last hour” and a reference to the second coming of Jesus (2:18, 28). According to Kysar, “it is positioned here by our author because of the fact that the proceeding section has ended with a reference to the approaching demise of evil.”<sup>16</sup> Thomas aptly points out that the author uses παιδία at the beginning of this section in order to both encourage his followers and contrast them with the antichrists.<sup>17</sup> In this regard the antichrists represent the darkness that John has been critiquing

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14. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 78.

15. There is difference of opinion regarding the end of this section within chapter two. Some, like Westcott, prefer to expand this section into chapter three while others, such as Thomas prefer to end it at verse 27. Meanwhile, Kysar accepts verses 28 and 29 as attached to this pericope in order to provide transition into John’s next discussion.

16. Kysar, *I, II, III John*, 58.

17. Thomas, *The Pentecostal Commentary*, 124.

from the beginning of his letter. In fact, they are the ones who his audience has been expecting in the last days (2:18).<sup>18</sup>

John's message to his children could not be any clearer; the last days are upon you and the one or one's that you have been expecting has arrived in the form of these false teachers. Some have proposed that what made these outsiders to be antichrists for John was that they showed a lack of love.<sup>19</sup> Still others point to the act of leaving the community, Christological differences, or both as the main offense.<sup>20</sup> Most prefer to focus on the specific Christological heresy as the main point of contention between John and the false teachers because they see the statement in verse 22 that the antichrist is the one who denies the Father and the Son as a qualifying phrase.<sup>21</sup> All of these arguments seem to have validity considering the fact that John deals with each of these subjects within the first two chapters of 1 John. Perhaps the best way to discover the nature of the antichrists in 1 John is to take a look at the other references to antichrist in the epistles.

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18. It is beyond the scope of such a small treatise to cover the entire history of the antichrist tradition. However, redemptive-historical scholars argue that this expectation goes back to the beginning of the biblical text with the appearance of the serpent and the desire of humanity to be creator and not creation (Gen. 3:1–24). The Old Testament contains many stories of opposition to God (i.e. Gen. 10:8–12; 11:1–9; 2 Kings 24:13–14; Dan. 4:28–30). Antiochus Epiphanes is depicted as evil opposition in 2 Maccabees, and Jesus warned of the appearance of false christs and prophets (Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22; Luke 21:8).

19. McKenzie, Steven L. "The Church in 1 John." *Restoration Quarterly* vol. 4, (1976), 214.

20. See R. Alan Culpepper, *1 John, 2 John, 3 John* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 45. Culpepper seems to prefer a combination of both theological differences and leaving the community as a reason for the tension at this point.

21. See Tom Thatcher, "'Water and Blood' in AntiChrist Christianity (1 John 5:6)" *Stone-Campbell Journal* vol. 2, (2001), 240.

### Intra and Intertextual Evidence

A quick glance at 1 John 4:3 indicates that John is repeating his argument from 2:18–29; the spirit of the antichrist is the one that does not acknowledge Jesus. However, the passage in 4:3 supplies a further indication that is not listed or only alluded to in the first two chapters of 1 John. While the first few chapters allude to Jesus coming in the flesh (1:1) compare and contrast insiders versus outsiders (2:3–5, 9–10, 23, 29; 3:4) and speak of the rejection of Jesus (2:22), chapter four says that “every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the *flesh* is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist...” (4:2b–3). This qualifying statement seems to indicate that John has a specific Christological heresy in mind which links to some form of early or proto-Gnosticism. However, John also follows this qualification concerning the antichrists in 4:2–3 with a discussion on love (4:7–12). Schnackenburg states that “the new range of thought that begins in 4:1 incorporates all that has been previously expressed and develops the argument further in a particular way.”<sup>22</sup> According to Schnackenburg the two commandments of true faith and love which have been stated in the previous chapters are now “the subject of a protracted discussion.”<sup>23</sup> As in chapter two, it would appear that the antichrists are ones who have both promoted heretical Christological views and broken the bond of love within the community. Nevertheless, John addresses the theme of antichrist one more time in his second epistle.

Upon reading 2 John it is immediately obvious that there are several connections with 1 John. As with 1 John, the pressing concern expressed is for truth and love (2 John 1). There is

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22. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles: Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 196.

23. *Ibid.*

also a repetition of John's statement in 1 John concerning the command that he is writing.

- (a) I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning (1 John 2:7).
- (b) I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning (2 John 2:5).

As in the pericope in 1 John, the writer of 2 John then encourages the community to love one another. 2 John 7 then turns to address the *πλάνοι* (deceivers) who “have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ *as* coming in the flesh.” This phrase connects with “even now many antichrists have appeared” from 1 John 2:18 and “many false prophets have gone out into the world” from 1 John 4:1. Furthermore, John's concern in writing his children so that they “may not sin” (2:1) is expressed again in his warning of 2 John 8 that they watch themselves so that they do not lose what they have accomplished. These connections indicate that the writer has the same antichrists in mind as in 1 John. The difference is that John now encourages his followers to decline their hospitality to these antichrists. Itinerant ministers would often require the hospitality of local congregations in order to be successful in spreading their message in the surrounding area. This aspect also possibly included teaching from within the home of the host. John thus indicates that offering hospitality to the antichrists is tantamount to participating in their evil deeds (2 John 10–11).

### *Fin*

The mention of the antichrists or deceivers in 2 John confirms and expands the knowledge of the antichrists that was supplied in 1 John. First, these are a group of people who have denied that Jesus came or comes in the flesh (1 John 4:2–3; 2 John 7). Second, these people have left the community and are apparently encouraging others to do the same (1 John 2:19; 4:1;

2 John 7). Third, the antichrists are a major threat to the community in part because they purport a libertine attitude while claiming to have no sin (1 John 1:8; 3:5–8). Finally, based upon the fact that they are deceiving teachers (2 John 7) and are evidently taking advantage of the community's hospitality (2 John 10–11), these people appear to be involved in missionary type activity in order to persuade members of the Johannine community to join them.<sup>24</sup>

Now that I have examined the context of 1 John 2 and compared it with both intra and intertextual data in order to discover and promote a more biblical understanding of the meaning of the antichrist theme within the Johannine corpus, it is important to understand the significance of this theme for the modern Christian community. Like the Johannine community, the modern Church needs to be reminded of the fact that the last day is upon them and that many antichrists are attempting to deceive them. The Church also needs to be reminded of John's command to love each other. It is only when the Church takes notice of John's crucial and timely warnings that they may truly be able to function as one community which exemplifies Christ.

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24. See Thomas, *The Pentecostal Commentary*, 46.

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