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Introduction

While some errors of biblical interpretation are rather inconsequential, or simply a nuisance, others are far more weighty and deserve to be addressed seriously by biblical scholars. Among the most conspicuous of these is the interpretation of the New Testament term *antichristos*. Interestingly, a number of errors continue to be made by popular and scholarly readers of the Bible alike regarding the most fitting ways to understand *who* or *what* is meant in the Bible by the word, 'Antichrist'. Further, these problems extend not only to the challenge of identifying the historical errors of the biblical antichristic figures in their original settings, but they also extend to errors of interpretive association. These subjects produce variant and wondrous readings of the Bible, which often are quite harmless, but not in all cases. At the beginning of a new millenium, it behooves us to take a close look at what the Bible says on this important theme…and perhaps more importantly, what it does *not*.

An inventory of ways biblical *antichristos* passages are interpreted reveals several tendencies. The term is often used as a projection of one's fears or as a means of furthering group solidarity against perceived threats. 'Those who would threaten *our* values and beliefs', an apologist might argue, 'are doing the work of "the Antichrist"'. Associations establish linkages, then, with other biblical threats and villains, and before you know it, entire theological systems of antichristic speculation come to dominate the apologetic landscape, functioning *theologically* as a means of eschewing perceived threats and reinforcing commitment to particular interpretive stands. Hence, additional interests in dividing truth from error become attached to antichristic passages as a means of constructing larger rhetorical arguments against perceived religious threats—both real and imagined.

Even exegetically, however, the contributions of many biblical scholars have been less than successful at identifying from a historical-critical standpoint who these first-century threats might have been. Antichristic errors of

interpretation continue to be made by scholars, and the resulting lack of scholarly consensus[1] may be a leading reason as to why popular readings continue in ways largely unaffected by biblical scholarship. Additionally, mere railing against biblicists by critics or secularists fails to produce a long-term solution to interpretive problems. The Bible is here to stay, and being anti-Bible is no moral or practical improvement over the interpretive problems one might wish to address. Flawed exegesis is best overcome by *better* exegesis; the pejorative rhetoric of antichristic projections cannot be amended by ideological critique or pejorative rhetoric alone. The goal of the present essay is thus to ascertain what the particular errors of the Johannine Antichrists might have been—literally and in historical-critical perspective—thereby challenging some interpretations as erroneous and affirming others. In so doing, some excesses and errors of interpretation are confronted, and more existentially adequate interpretations are advanced. Therefore, a fresh look at the *particular errors of the Johannine Antichrists* in that late first-century situation serves to correct *errors of antichristic speculation* for conscientious interpreters, both now and in the future.

Antichristic Rhetoric in Psychological and Sociological Perspective

One of the great speculative ventures of Christianity involves identifying threats to Christianity—theologically and otherwise—with the biblical 'Antichrists'. Such a move has great organizing and motivational potential. It functions to yoke the threatening of Christianity's highest value, allegiance and faithfulness to Christ, with contemporary threats involving persons, groups, or things that pose an impending threat to be opposed at all costs.

1. In addition to the sources listed in 'Bibliography IV: Johannine Christianity', in my *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), pp. 293-95, several important treatments of the Johannine situation include: John Painter's revised edition of *Quest for the Messiah: History, Literature and Theology of the Johannine Community* (London: T. & T. Clark International, 2006); Allen Callahan, *A Love Supreme: A History of the Johannine Tradition* (Philadelphia: Augsburg/Fortress Press, 2004); J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 3rd edn, 2003); Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* (ed. Francis J. Moloney; New York: Doubleday, 2003); Adele Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John* (New York: Continuum, 2002); Robert H. Gundry, *Jesus the Word according to John the Sectarian* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Garrett C. Kenney, *Leadership in John: An Analysis of the Situation and Strategy of the Gospel and Epistles of John* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000); and Anthony J. Blasi, *A Sociology of Johannine Christianity* (TSR, 69; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996).

Indeed, religious values are pitted against perceived adversaries, and the denotation of such as playing the role of the biblical 'Antichrists' becomes an impressive motivational force. The effect is powerful, both psychologically and sociologically.

Psychologically, an individual's highest aspirations are levied to stand against an identified foe, and such will always be the case for motivational endeavors. 'If you believe and value X, *you* must oppose anti-X, its nemesis!' This syllogism intentionally creates a psychological dilemma. One cannot have it both ways, because allowing one option will threaten another dearly held value. Therefore, the psychological effect of antichristic villainization functions to polarize one's loyalties inwardly. If one would be true to Christ and his way, so the rhetoric goes, one cannot abide the antichristic threats of the day. Personal adherence to particular values is thus bolstered individually, and its measure tends to be meted inwardly.[2]

Sociologically, a group's highest commitments are rallied against a purported threat with the use of antichristic rhetoric. Again, the sociological effect runs in ways parallel to the psychological. 'If we would adhere to X, *we* must oppose anti-X, its antithesis!' Whether such a claim is indeed true is another matter for consideration, but group loyalties will always be marshaled to stand for identified causes, and likewise to stand against purported dangers. Sociological aspects of this move function a bit differently than psychological ones because they seek to normatize aspects of being 'us' and to villainize markers of being 'them'. Therefore, emphasis gets placed more squarely on the markers of alterity, and the sociological measure of value-adherence tends to be meted outwardly.[3]

On both of these levels, the degree of interpretive adequacy has yet to be ascertained. While the formal structure of either of the above syllogisms may be *valid* (an identified threat *may indeed jeopardize* religious faith and practice), however, the *soundness* of an argument also requires the *veracity*

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2.   Note the powerful organizing potential of the 'Left Behind' series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, especially books 3 and 9: *Nicolae: The Rise of Antichrist*, and *Desecration: Antichrist Takes the Throne* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998 and 2002), where the evil protagonist embodies many of the attributes deserving of disdain. See analyses of these and other books on the subject by Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004).

3.   In his impressive analysis of Antichristic rhetoric throughout the history of Christianity, Bernard McGinn, in his *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), outlines the many ways Antichristic rhetoric has functioned to mark insiders and outsiders to one's religious group and its cause. For an analysis of prophecy speculation in America, see Paul Boyer's *When Time Shall be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1992).

of its premises. One aspect of Christian values might be threatened, for instance, but others might actually be furthered by the challenge as something of a tradeoff. Or, the *degree* to which an assertion is true always falls within a continuum, and either/or thinking is often well tempered by both/and reflection. Nonetheless, the point of the above discussion is to note the impressive motivational power of antichristic rhetoric within Christianity and to understand the workings of its employment.

A further aspect of psycho-social effect is the eschatological and cataclysmic element in antichristic speculation.[4] Given that biblical apocalyptic literature often builds upon catastrophe and tribulation, heralding them as signal markers of divine irruption into human history, they intentionally raise anxiety and sound an alarm in the experience of the hearer/reader. The effect may motivate repentance and changes in attitude or action, but it also disrupts the hearer/reader's sense of normalcy. Where their uses are well-founded, antichristic warnings may be a profitable and legitimate means of motivation, but too often either the premises are flawed or the intensity is overblown. These involve antichristic errors of interpretation, and they include both popular and scholarly inferences.

Antichristic Errors of Interpretation

Any such investigation must begin with a survey of uses and abuses of such terms, on popular and scholarly fronts alike. Interpretations vary in their adequacy, but the particular interest of this investigation is to analyze critically the degree to which antichristic errors contribute to problematic uses of these terms. By antichristic errors, I mean errors pertaining to the ways the words *antichristos* and *antichristoi* are exegetically assessed with reference to the ways they appear in the New Testament. Obviously, interpreters tend to be influenced by what they associate with the motif, but when these particular biblical texts are scrutinized closely, many associations may be completely devoid of textual substantiation. Consider the following treatments of 'the Antichrist' and 'Antichrists' in Scripture, beginning with popular uses.

Popular Uses and Abuses of Antichristic Passages
Throughout Christian history, antichristic rhetoric has characteristically been marshaled against perceived religious threats, and the legitimacy of such a

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4.   This is precisely the way Jewish-Christian apocalyptic literature was designed to work in its original settings, as well as eventual ones. See John Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 1998); and Scott M. Lewis, *What are they Saying about New Testament Apocalyptic?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004).

venture is tied directly to the adequacy of interpretation. In each of the cases below, some of the abuses will be considered first before identifying more adequate uses of these terms. Again, the lists are not meant to be exhaustive, but simply representative, and the goal is not to take on any particular interpretation adversarially, but simply to connect the use/abuse assessment with an inference of exegetical adequacy.

(a) *Adversary-Generalization and De-contextualized Eisegesis*. One of the clearest abuses of a conservative, exegetical approach to the literal meaning of Scripture is the generalization of biblical adversaries and divorcing textual meanings from their original contexts. Such a process functions as the selecting of negative biblical references—not all of them by any means, but a smattering of several—and mixing them up in a 'villainous stew' of biblical adversaries. Pejorative references are especially lifted from Daniel, Ezekiel, the Synoptics, 2 Thessalonians, the Johannine Epistles, and Revelation, whether or not there was any historical or literary connection between these biblical writings. Then, meanings are forged into a unified amalgam which targets a contemporary threat or set of threats. Eisegesis obliterates exegesis within this approach, and the single instrument of control is most often the subjective, rhetorical interest of the interpreter. Rather than upholding biblical authority, this approach co-opts the authority of Scripture into the political and religious agendas of the interpreter. Ironically, otherwise 'conservative' biblical interpreters take grossly speculative exegetical liberties along these lines, demonstrating *anything but* a conservative approach to the biblical text.

Nowhere is this tendency as corrupt and extensive as the clustering of pejorative terms around the biblical 'Antichrist' figure. Plausibly, 'the abomination which causes desolation' (Mk 13.14) refers to Vespasian, who, after the manner of Antiochus Epiphanes (Dan. 9.27; 11.31; 12.11), desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem; 'the man of lawlessness' (2 Thess. 2.3-12) refers to Nero, who persecuted Christians in Rome; and the second beast and 666 (Rev. 13.11-18) most likely refer to Domitian, who required emperor worship in Asia Minor and elsewhere in the Roman Empire. Note the fact that *none* of these are implied directly or otherwise by the Johannine Antichrist passages. They refer to completely different threats—literally and historically. The Johannine Antichrists were neither Romans nor Syrians; they were *Johannine Christians* who had either left the community as *deserters* (1 Jn 2.18-25) or were coming to the community as *false teachers* (1 Jn 4.1-3; 2 Jn 7). On this score, the generalized stirring of these images into an 'antichristic stew', allowing the interpreter to dip into it and pick out the pieces that relate to contemporary details in a seeming confirmation of conspiratorial speculation, *distorts* the biblical picture of these figures rather than clarifying it.

Motivationally and rhetorically, the aggregating of biblical malevolence into an amalgamated image of evil has great organizing potential. The villains of the past are linked with challenges of the present, and calls for standing with the good against evil are levied with apocalyptic alarmism. Conveniently, the multiplicity of disparate biblical passages drawn into discussion provides great latitude for speculation, and the connections appear impressive. In nearly every case, though, a sound exegetical approach yields different results. Parallel calls for standing against evil and resisting corruption may be worthy, but the villainous references themselves, *literally*, are invariably focused upon threats contemporary with the ancient biblical writers and audiences rather than pointing directly to figures known to today's readers.

(b) *Futuristic Speculation and Impending Actualization*. A second prevalent abuse of antichristic interpretation involves futuristic speculation and the sketching of impending actualization.[5] Because some futuristic themes are associated with *antichristos* and *antichristoi* passages in the Bible, the mistake is to assume they had *no* relevance until the contemporary moment. This move is bolstered by pervasive ignorance of the first-century Christian, Jewish, and Greco-Roman situation. Its liabilities are compounded, then, by total unfamiliarity with Jewish apocalyptic literature and its attending features, and by a likewise profound under-appreciation of how such motifs have been interpreted throughout Christian history. Nonetheless, viewing current developments in the light of constructed eschatological timelines, connected biblical details, and impending divine action adds a great sense of urgency to the hortatory appeal. Decisive action *now* might avert an eschatological catastrophe in the near future, and everyone wants to be on the side of the winners, not the losers.

Popular examples include the Fifth Monarchist movement in seventeenth-century England and American speculation about the return of Christ, the rapturing of the faithful, and divine victory over 'the Antichrist' and his

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5. While the eschatological rhetoric of the Johannine Apocalypse is distinct from that of the Epistles, even Revelation's eschatology is largely contemporary in its targeted urgency, rather than futuristic. M. Eugene Boring heightens this fact in *Revelation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Interpretation; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989), as he emphasizes the contemporary character of those things about to transpire. As Bruce Metzger puts it in his *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 106, 'The book of Revelation provided pastoral encouragement for Christians who were confronted with persecution and cruelty'. Nonetheless, millenarian and chiliastic interpretation possesses an extensive history of interpretation, as Reginald Stackhouse has outlined in *The End of the World? A New Look at an Old Belief* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997). Millennial references, however, do not occur anywhere near the Johannine antichristic passages and cannot be linked directly.

minions in the world. For example, in 1843 William Miller bolstered the hopes of thousands in upstate New York awaiting the coming of Christ. When it did not happen, the date was revised and awaited again—several times over the next year or so—but with the same result. It became known as 'the Great Disappointment'. Accompanying the emerging trajectories of American dispensationalism over the next century or more have been the identifying of threats to particular Christian values as 'the Antichrist'. Especially with the yoking of timelines related to Israel's becoming a state in 1948, predictions of timelines for the rapture and attempts to identify the Antichrist have been a virtual growth industry within American fundamentalism. With multiple recalibrations of the apocalyptic timetable by Hal Lindsay and others, it is no surprise that the book, *88 Reasons Why Christ Will Return in 1988*, sold so much better than its *sequel*![6]

(c) *Projective Villainization and Narcissistic Appropriation.* The most telling feature, however, of antichristic references is their role in projecting one's fears onto real and imagined threats—counterbalanced by a feeling of personal security in one's adversarial opposition to purported ill. Whereas Augustine generalized the adversaries as failures to adhere to ideal standards, Joachim of Fiore connected all three of these tendencies and speculated that the predicted Antichrist was eschatologically present in the impending threat of the Islamic leader: the unnamed seventh head of the Beast, following Saladin.[7] Saladin had indeed threatened Christian Europe and the Mediterranean world by his military advances, and spanning the era of the Crusades, antichristic rhetoric was used by Christians against Islamics as prolifically as satanic rhetoric was used by Islamics against Christians. It was a powerful factor of projective villainization.

Antichristic speculation continued over the next half millennium within Christianity, as challengers to the Church were accused of being antichristic schismatics who departed from the community of faith (1 Jn 2.18-19) and refused to listen to authority (3 Jn 9–10). Reformers, then, challenged the Catholic Church with antichristic rhetoric, connecting the adversaries of the Johannine Epistles with those of the Apocalypse, melding a gripping image of a Rome-centered religious power which persecuted authentic and

6. In 1970, Hal Lindsey's book, *Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), captured the imagination of rapture-attentive America. It sold 35 million copies and was translated into 54 languages, according to his website. Furthering the countdown speculation, Edgar Whisenant's *88 Reasons Why the Rapture is in 1988* (Nashville: World Bible Society, 1988); following the turn of the year, a second edition came out entitled *89 Reasons Why the Rapture is in 1989* (self-published, 1989). It sold remarkably fewer copies, however, than the first edition.

7. See McGinn, *Antichrist*, pp. 114-42. Apparently the coming Antichrist will continue the work the Islamic warriors had advanced under Saladin, and the appeal for watchfulness is acute.

confessional followers of Christ. Of course, the Spanish Inquisitions and harsh treatment by religious and political authorities supporting the Roman Church made these projections seem entirely legitimate. Conversely, associating one's own stance with the authentic Christ and the forces of good functioned to *see one's own reflection* in the heroic passages of the Bible. This is not to say that such interpretations were existentially flawed; apocalyptic literature is ever the hometown eschatological newspaper of the oppressed. It is to say is what is meant by narcissistic appropriation.

The result of these three tendencies among popular and pre-critical interpreters is to add functional specificity to the rhetorical impact of one's personal, religious, and political struggles. While some of these connections are indeed factors of projection—even leading to self-fulfilling prophecy as events and connections unfold—it would be a mistake to infer a one-way street. Sometimes connections emerge simply from reading the Bible, and parallels of earlier struggles find a home within the struggles of later readers. Some of these connections, thus, are incidental rather than intentional. Overall, though, among popular and pre-critical interpretations of the Johannine Antichrists, one primary feature can be seen. Biblical virtue is appropriated toward one's own cause and identity, while contemporary adversaries are associated with antichristic and other villainous figures in the Bible.

Scholarly Uses and Abuses of Antichristic Passages

One would think that the rise of critical biblical analysis in the modern era would rectify tendencies toward exegetical error in interpretations of the Johannine Antichrists, but this is not entirely the case. While much of exegesis has improved in its methodology and approach, flaws still remain, even among critical scholars of the modern era. Sometimes these errors reflect carryovers from pre-critical eras—old associations die hard—but such is not necessarily the case. Trajectories also emerge within biblical scholarship, which often help the interpreter if adequate. If flawed, however, they can become a detriment to sound interpretation. Following are several examples of antichristic errors committed by recent interpreters, even skilled and thoughtful ones.

(a) *Apocalyptic Over-Reading*. Perhaps the most inexcusable error among scholars is the failure to distinguish the Antichrists of the Johannine Epistles from the Beast, 666, and other adversaries of the Johannine Apocalypse.[8]

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8. While he was not alone in this feature, even as fine a scholar as George Eldon Ladd, in *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), used 'Antichrist' and 'the Beast' nearly interchangeably, despite the fact that 'Antichrist' appears nowhere in Revelation. Likewise, Merrill Tenney's influential *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) uses 'Antichrist' interchangeably with 'the Beast' of Revelation (pp. 113, 138, 158, 152, 155, 165, 194, 197) and yet makes no reference to *any* of the antichristic passages in the Johannine Epistles in his treatment of the theme.

Indeed, it is possible that such appellations as 'the Beast', 'the Antichrist', and '666' all refer to the same threat, but when the respective passages are considered—exegetically and literally—this is absolutely *not the case*. For one thing, the terms *antichristos* and *antichristoi* occur *only* in the Johannine Epistles, *not* in Revelation. This is a literary fact, and any 'literal' interpretation that does not construct itself upon the literary form and facts of the text cannot claim to be a literal or conservative reading. Nor can it claim to be a critically adequate reading. It reflects an apocalyptic *over-reading* of the text. Themes in the Johannine Epistles and Apocalypse may indeed be related, but it is a fundamental mistake exegetically to assume that one adversarial reference in the New Testament, and even in the Johannine corpus, is identical to others without having established a link rooted in particular and compelling evidence.

Another fact is that the term has no direct precedents, and it is erroneous to build too much upon earlier speculation that Jewish predictions of an 'anti-Messiah' were implied directly in the reference to what was predicted in 1 Jn 2.18-25.[9] Indeed, the pejorative authority of impending dangers anticipated in the distant past is brought to bear on impending circumstances by the Johannine Elder, but no further connection than that need be inferred. Simply put, the terms *antichristos* and *antichristoi* were used to amass opposition to threats on the basis of posing direct threats to the highest community value—commitment to Christocentric existence at any cost. In that sense, the rhetorical work of the Epistle writer trades on the arch-loyalties of his audiences as a means of combating contemporary crises as arch-threats. Furthermore, he may have done so more than once, using the same abrasive term to stave off more than one crisis.

(b) *Reductionistic Under-Reading*. The obverse tendency is also a problem. Many scholars who successfully divorce the Antichrists of the Johannine Epistles from other villains in the Bible nonetheless make the mistake of seeking to harmonize the three antichristic passages of 1 Jn 2.18-25; 4.1-3; and 2 John 7 into the *same* threat. Thus, reductionistic speculation strains to reconcile the rejection of Jesus as the Messiah/Christ with the refusal to acknowledge him as having come in the flesh, and the Johannine adversaries commonly get assigned to the pan-convenient 'Gnostic' threat. Many a commentary and introductory New Testament text thus identifies the Johannine

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9.   While there is something of a background of anti-Messiah mythology in ancient Jewish culture, this does not imply that the writer of the Johannine Epistles was heavily, or even at all, influenced by such constructs. Nonetheless, see Wilhelm Bousett, *The Antichrist Legend: A Chapter in Jewish and Christian Folklore* (trans. E.H. Keane; Text and Translation, 24; Atlanta: AAR, 1999 [first published 1896]); and Gregory C. Jenks, *The Origin and Early Development of the Antichrist Myth* (BZNW, 59; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1990).

adversaries as Gnostics, Cerinthians, or some other vaguely known threat as a result.[10] This allows, then, the application of any feature attributed to Gnosticism over the next two centuries to be attributed to the hypothe-sized Johannine adversaries in ways that resist measures of exegetical control.

Indeed, there may have been Cerinthians or proto-Gnostics in the Johan-nine situation, but several looming problems follow. First, little is known about the historical Cerinthus or whether the problems he introduced to Johannine Christianity were Gnostic-related as opposed to simply being factors of flawed faith and/or practice. It cannot be assumed, for instance, that he would have thought of himself as Gnostic as opposed to simply being a Hellenistic convert to Christianity. Second, while all Gnostics were Docetists, not all Docetists were Gnostics. Therefore, most of these connec-tions are often by default as opposed to being connected to telling evidence. Despite the facts that the Antichrists of 1 Jn 4.1-3 and 2 John 7 rejected the teaching that Jesus came in the flesh, and that later Gnostics denied the humanity of Jesus, this does not prove all docetizing Christians to have been full-blown second-century Gnostics with their attending excesses and heresies. Third, scholars often fail to notice that the theological, temporal, and sociological features of the first and second antichristic passages are thoroughly different—implying at least *two distinct groups and crises.* Nonetheless, scholars too easily lump them into the same group, requiring a harmonization of the differences when better options exist. Such work amounts to a reductionistic under-reading of the text. Therefore, the larger Johannine Situation must be considered in determining the identity of the Johannine Antichrists, and corroborative evidence will strengthen any particular inference.

(c) *Exegetical Miscalculation.* Whether over-reading or under-reading the text of the Johannine Epistles, exegetical miscalculations inevitably occur. As authentic scholars endeavor to bring their inferences in line with the best evidence possible, new and better readings provide helpful ways forward. However, foundational flaws of interpretation distort other aspects of inter-pretation, as well. For instance, those who 'claim to be without sin' in 1 Jn 1.8-10 get connected with references to the refusal to believe Jesus 'came in

10.   Because nearly all Gnostics were Docetists, and because 1 Jn 4.1-3 and 2 Jn 7 warn against teachers with docetic christological teachings, it is commonly assumed that the false teachers must have been Gnostics. Given the fact that second-century Gnostics, including Heracleon, are known to have embraced the Johannine Gospel, the common assumption is that these adversaries were Gnostics. However, not all Docetists were Gnostics; they simply may have diminished the suffering and death of Jesus in their beliefs and teachings. Therefore, it is safest to infer that while these teachers may have been Docetists, proving that they were Gnostics has yet to be done.

the flesh' in 1 Jn 4.3, and later strains of Gnostic perfectionism linked with docetic belief get used to bolster the inference that the antichristic adversaries were Gnostic antinomians and/or perfectionists. Additionally, the reference to the expiatory sacrifice of Christ (1 Jn 1.7; 2.2; 4.10) is drawn in to support this conjecture, as some Gnostics are inferred to have questioned the atoning work of Christ—an example of their supposed heretical doctrine. Better explanations, though, may exist.[11] For instance, 'claiming to be without sin' (1 Jn 1.8–2.1) might not be an assertion of static perfectionism, but simply a denial that a particular practice is 'sinful' (see 1 Jn 1.6-7; 2.3-6, 9-11, 15-17, 26-29; 3.4-9, 12-18; 4.7-10; 5.16-17, 21). Therefore, speculations about Cerinthianism or Gnostic perfectionism may be totally off-course as a foundation for contextual interpretation. Community members may simply be claiming that a particular action (say, the idolatry—was it submitting to emperor worship under Domitian?—mentioned explicitly in the last verse of the letter) was *not* sinful, and that they were 'without sin' in having acquiesced to worldly pressures of the Empire.

Likewise problematic is the inference that those who claimed to be 'without sin' must have been charismatic types (or even proto-Montanists) or pneumatists, who claimed to be led by the Spirit instead of being willing to submit to ecclesial authorities. As Raymond Brown has laid out with intriguing clarity in his book on leadership structures in the early church,[12] the sort of thing that happens with those who claim to be led by the *Paraklētos* is that they are neither corrigible by reason or tradition. He thus

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11.   Some might even infer that these adversaries must have claimed a form of gnostic perfectionism, and that they were denigrating the Atonement based upon 1 Jn 2.2 and 4.10. This is what Raymond Brown argues in one of the most definitive commentaries on the Johannine Epistles, *The Epistles of John* (AB, 30; New York: Doubleday, 1982), pp. 104-106, and many other commentators have followed his lead on that score. However, was the emphasis upon Christ's sacrifice a reflection of schismatics' inadequate theology, proper, or was it an *implication* of their teaching, which the Elder focuses upon in order to counter their larger set of errors? Relatedly, the claim to being 'without sin' could have been a reference to a *particular ethical practice* rather than *static perfectionism*, or even an echoing of the Elder's *own* statements that those who were in Christ could not be sinners. The *hilasmos* theme is employed as an emphasis on Christ's suffering and death (and its implications for discipleship) rather than an explicit reference to the adversaries' rejection of the blood of Christ theologically.

12.   See the chapter 'The Heritage of the Beloved Disciple and the Epistles of John: A Community of Believers Guided by the Holy Spirit', in his *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984), pp. 102-23, for strengths and weaknesses of pneumatic communities. Note the implications as developed in Gerald Sloyan's commentary on the Johannine Epistles, *Walking in the Truth: Preservers and Deserters* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), where even Diotrephes is numbered among the secessionists who are deserters from the main church and tradition, going their own antichristic ways as challengers of church authority.

conjectures that their pneumatism may have been a factor in their secessionist tendencies. Two major problems accompany this view, however. First, the schismatic group appears to have left, so the Elder seems to be addressing issues at hand *within* the community and among those who had been left behind. Second, this approach fails to consider the more likely possibility that if this group were primarily in disagreement over a particular matter being sinful, their claims to not having sinned might simply be echoes of the Elder's own teachings that those who abide in Christ *cannot continue to sin* (1 Jn 3.4-10; 5.18-20)! Therefore, scholars must be especially cautious before claiming too much about who these adversaries must have been.

Indeed, scholars work rigorously to challenge one another's views on the identities the Johannine Antichrists, and the best of evidence normally gets a good hearing. In so doing, the relation of the Johannine Epistles to the Apocalypse, to the Gospel, and to each other become factors in the discussion. The more traditional view that the five Johannine writings were all produced by the same person, John the Apostle, has fewer adherents than it used to, and this is for good reasons. Indeed, Revelation is the most different, and despite some similarities of theme and style, its form and syntax are pronouncedly different from the other four pieces. And, while the Johannine Gospel is thoroughgoingly dialectical in its exploration of truth, the Epistles are not.[13] They pose either–or solutions to challenges rather than both–and reflections. More plausible is the view that the final editor of the Gospel (who added Jn 1.1-18; chs. 6; 15–17; and 21, plus several other bits to an earlier edition of John) was also the author of the Epistles.[14] Whether these five writings reflect the same community, or even the same sector of early Christianity, is also debated. What cannot be claimed, though, is that there was *absolutely no connection* between the situations faced by the writers and

13.   See Anderson (*Christology of the Fourth Gospel*) for an extensive analysis of the dialectical thinking of the Fourth Evangelist (pp. 137-65), which is notably missing in the Johannine Epistles (pp. 248-49).

14.   Indeed, this is one aspect of Bultmann's composition hypothesis where the evidence is strong (see Appendix A, below). As Raymond Brown points out in his commentary (*An Introduction to the Gospel of John*), the language of the Prologue of 1 John is quite similar to the language of the Prologue of the Johannine Gospel (p. 179), and several other features of the supplementary material added to the Gospel are commensurate with those of the Epistles: authority appeals, eyewitness references, emphases on a *Paraklētos*, reiteration of the love command, exhortations to 'love not the world', and connecting the present with 'the beginning'. It also appears that the Beloved Disciple had died by the time the Johannine Gospel was finalized (Jn 20.18-24), so the Gospel was finalized by another hand—plausibly the Johannine Elder. The Johannine Apocalypse is more difficult to connect with the other Johannine writings; it should at least be considered a parallel-though-distinct addressing of issues in a common larger situation.

audiences of the Johannine writings.[15] Therefore, a measured analysis of the larger Johannine corpus, aided by considering relevant additional material, provides a firm basis on which to proceed. The Johannine Gospel, Epistles, and Apocalypse do indeed represent a common sector of early Christianity, although the particular settings of these writings are not necessarily identical in terms of place, time, and character. This moves us from the assessment of antichristic errors of interpretation to the more central concern—an inference of the *errors* of the Johannine Antichrists.

Errors of the Johannine Antichrists— Faith and Praxis—Confronted

While members of Johannine Christianity faced more than one threat over the thirty-year period we might call 'the Johannine Situation', at least two of these are typified by the uses of the words *antichristos* and *antichristoi* in 1 and 2 John. In considering who these people might have been, several considerations are significant for constructing a sound interpretive foundation. When asking, however, why such persons might have presented a threat to the Johannine leadership, the answer will likely involve aspects of both faith and praxis. And, as is often the case in political and religious controversies in every generation, it may have been the *practical* matters and implications that drove the resistance to the perceived theological errors of the opponents.

Basic Components of a Solid Interpretive Foundation
Sound biblical interpretation begins with the text. Rather than reading things into a description eisegetically, the best exegetical practice is to let the text speak for itself, noticing everything. Because these texts are easy to overread, the individual elements of the descriptions of the Johannine adversaries deserve to be considered. Having done so, they can be analyzed more effectively in the light of what is known in the late first-century Johannine Situation, leading to a fuller understanding of the original threats. Basic components of a solid interpretive foundation include the following.

15. J. Louis Martyn comes close to asserting such in his uncoupling the Johannine Gospel and Epistles (*History and Theology*, p. 122 n. 188). While part of his interest might have been heightening the Johannine–Jewish set of dialogical tensions, perhaps feeling the need to distance those issues from the clearly Johannine–Docetist tensions reflected in 1 Jn 4.1-3 and 2 Jn 7, the first antichristic passage in 1 Jn 2.18-25 actually *bolsters* and illuminates the very Johannine–Jewish tensions Martyn infers in Jn 9. It appears to reflect a situation where the schismatics' interest in preserving monotheistic loyalty to the Father led to their abandonment of Jesus as the Son and Messiah. Hence, 1 Jn 2.18-25 should be read alongside Jn 9, and also Jn 5 and 7–8. The mistake is to read 1 Jn 4.1-3 into 2.18-25, through the lens of Docetism, when it was likely a different threat altogether.

(a) *Notice that the number of the 'Antichrists' is not singular, but plural.* While much antichristic speculation seeks to identify 'the' biblical Antichrist, most of the biblical antichristic references are plural rather than singular. Despite the fact that the antichristic threat predicted long ago and the spirit of the Antichrist are described in singular terms (1 Jn 2.18, 22; 4.3; 2 Jn 7), the particular embodiments of those negative typologies are almost universally plural. Now *'many Antichrists* have come' (1 Jn 2.18); *'they* went out from us', *'they* [therefore] did not belong to us', 'if *they* would have belonged to us *they* never would have abandoned us, but *their* departure revealed that *none of them* belonged to us' (1 Jn 2.19); *'anyone who denies (all who deny) that Jesus is the Christ* is the liar and the Antichrist' (1 Jn 2.22); *'no one (none of those who) who denies (deny) the Son* has the Father, but *whoever (the one who) confesses the Son* also has the Father' (1 Jn 2.23); and all of this is a reference to *those who would deceive* the Johannine Christians (1 Jn 2.26). In the first antichristic passage, other than the two references in vv. 18 and 22, *all eleven* of the references to these figures are either general (three) or plural (eight).

In the second and third antichristic passage, most of the references are also plural: *'many false prophets'* have gone out into the world (1 Jn 4.1); *'every spirit that does not confess Jesus'* has 'come in the flesh' is not from God but is the spirit of the Antichrist (1 Jn 4.3); the Johannine believers have 'conquered *them'* (1 Jn 4.4); *'they* are from the world, therefore what *they* say is from the world and the world listens to *them'* (1 Jn 4.5); and *'whoever is not from God* does not listen to us' (1 Jn 4.6). Likewise, *'many deceivers* have gone out into the world, *those who do not confess Jesus has come in the flesh'*; and *'any such person* is the deceiver and the Antichrist' (2 Jn 7); *everyone not abiding in the teaching about Christ,* but going beyond it, is not of God (2 Jn 9); *anyone not bringing authentic teaching* is not to be welcomed into the household of faith (2 Jn 10); and to welcome *such a person* is to participate in that person's evil deeds (2 Jn 11). All thirteen passages here refer either to a hypothetical person in error (six) or to the plurality of antichristic deceivers (seven), who appear to be teaching a false message. The point is that the antichristic references here are pervasively general (nine times) and explicitly plural (sixteen times) rather than predictive of a particular individual.

The interpretive implications of the plural antichristic associations are indeed significant! While the spirit of the Antichrist, or the typological adversary predicted long ago—and is now here—is used in the singular, the plurality of the adversaries assists the interpreter in understanding more about the particular threats involved. Groups of people who posed a threat to Johannine Christians, and 'any person' who acts or teaches with falsehood, are tagged with the ultimate of pejorative labels: 'Antichrists'. Note also that

all of these references are literally references to *impending* dangers in the first-century Johannine Situation—contemporary contextual threats—rather than being futuristic dangers to be ferreted out climactically at the end of the age. Therefore, literally and historically, the antichristic references in the Johannine writings refer to a plurality of actual and impending threats within the context of the Johannine Situation, rather than predicting a singular person or threat in later generations. Implications extend to every age, but the primary targets were contemporary with the Johannine audiences, and they would have understood with full clarity *which persons and groups* were being named. This is not a loose reading of the text; it is a literal reading of it.

(b) *The term appears to refer to more than one crisis.* Not only were the adversaries plural rather than a singular one (in contrast to 'the man of lawlessness' in 2 Thess. 2.3-11), references to them also appear to reflect at least two distinct threats. While some commentators do a decent job of pointing out the contrasts between the first antichristic passage and the other two, many fail to notice clear differences between them. The first antichristic threat (1 Jn 2.18-28) appears to have involved members of the Johannine community who had escaped notice until they broke off and departed. Their error appears to have been primarily a factor of their defection, rooted in false beliefs about the Father and the Son, although the danger of being deceived by their example is also warned against as a problem (1 Jn 2.26-28).

Conversely, the second antichristic threat (1 Jn 4.1-6; 2 Jn 7–11) is described with such terms as 'false prophets' (1 Jn 4.1), those who are 'of the world' and to whom the world listens (1 Jn 4.5), 'many deceivers' (2 Jn 7), and those who 'run ahead' beyond the teaching of Christ (2 Jn 9). This second set of references suggests *a different identity* from the first crisis. Rather than posing a schismatic danger whereby *insiders* abandon the community, this threat alerts hearers/readers to the danger of *outsiders* who might lead people astray. It is far more connected to false teachers who should be screened out, lest they corrupt the 'chosen Lady's' household of faith. This distinction is further confirmed by several other kinds of differences.

(c) *The timing of the threats is different.* Another fact of the presentation is that the first threat is *largely past*, while the second is *impending*—pressing upon Johannine Christians in the immediate future. The first crisis is reflected upon, and an explanation is offered as a means of accounting for the fact that the defection had apparently taken the community by surprise. 'We thought they were a part of us', declares the Johannine Elder, 'but their departure shows they really never were a part of us', he surmises, in a sour-grapes explanation of the loss (1 Jn 2.19). He then, however, turns to the

remnant and affirms their authenticity, challenging them to remain faithful to the community and its Christocentric commitments. He calls for faithfulness and abiding in the teaching about Christ precisely because the crisis of the schismatics was *already actualized*.

The second threat, however, appears still to be on the way and *in the near future*. Thus, the polemical authority of antichristic labeling is applied now to a new threat, which is purportedly just as bad as the earlier one. 'False prophets', 'liars', 'deceivers', and other pejorative slogans are used to alert Johannine Christians to false teachers that might be coming to their communities. Their message might seem attractive, but a litmus test is posed so as to distinguish the true prophet from those with a flawed message. They have 'gone out into the world' (2 Jn 7), but this does not imply an internal schism—simply that the threat is 'out there and on the way!' Likewise, the household of the Chosen Lady is warned to be on their guard and advised not to receive into their community of faith any who in the impending future might bring such a deceptive message (2 Jn 8–11). Therefore, the first threat was actualized, while the second threat was still on the way.

(d) *The movements of the threats are contrary*. Putting the above points in sharper focus, the movement of the first threat is *away from* the audience, while the movement of the second threat is *toward* the audience. The importance of this point is that while the first threat involved *schismatics*, the second threat did not. It involved *invasionists*. Both involved false teachings, but the threat of schism and community-abandonment is fundamentally different from the threat of invasion by false teachers from without. Therefore, the first and second threats may at least somewhat be distinguished accordingly as schismatics and invasionists.[16]

This, then, impacts the ways that each of these threats are addressed by the Johannine Elder. Regarding the first threat, the call is to *abide*, to remain in the community and not to defect. As a means of legitimating such an appeal, aspects of group solidarity and assuredness of one's faith are both levied to apply centripetal force against centrifugal tensions. Conversely, the second threat is addressed by calling believers to weigh the teaching and to reject the purveyors of false doctrine that are out and about. The Elder is later forced to remind the likes of Gaius in 3 John also to be a generous extender of hospitality, despite its having been denied Johannine Christians by the likes of Diotrephes. Of course, this is precisely what the Elder advocates in the second and third antichristic passages: 'Keep them out, and

16. In his extensive commentary (*The Epistles of John*, pp. 69-115), Raymond Brown acknowledges several of the differences between the antichristic adversaries of 1 Jn 2.18-25 and 4.1-3, but he refers to both threats as 'schismatic'. In that sense, he does not distinguish them enough; I would assert that there was close to zero overlap between the two groups, rather than an amalgamated threat with a bit of variety.

refuse them welcome in your churches if they bring false teachings typified by a non-fleshly Jesus!' Thus, religious certainty and community mainte- nance is used to address the first crisis, while discernment and matters of hospitality become factors in the addressing of the second.

(e) *The theological tenets of the threats are entirely incongruous*. The above differences are cast into especially clear relief when the theological measures of these antichristic threats are compared. The first group failed to believe Jesus was the *Messiah/Christ*; the second group fails to acknowledge that Jesus has *come in the flesh*. These involve two very different constella- tions of beliefs, and the rhetorical work of the Elder casts a bit more light on why those beliefs might have been attractive to each of these different groups. Rather than trying to piece together a speculative, Cerinthian doc- trine involving rejections both of Jesus' divinity and his humanity, it is best to see these as two different groups.

The first antichristic threat shows that Johannine Christians had defected from Johannine Christianity on the basis that they had come to question whether Jesus was indeed the Messiah/Christ. To combat the basis for their departure, the Elder draws in adherence to the Father—likely the very reason they had decided to leave. The inferred rhetorical syllogism of 'if you embrace one God—the Father, you cannot adhere to Jesus as the Christ—the purported Son' is countered by another: 'if you aspire to please the Father, you must receive the one he sent—Jesus'. Put another way, 'to reject the Son is to forfeit the Father—the representative agent of the Father's love'. In so doing, the very coin motivating the Johannine secession is turned against the secessionists by the Elder. To forsake Jesus as the Jewish Messiah/Christ is to forfeit the very benefits of monotheistic Judaism they endeavored to preserve.[17]

The second antichristic threat betrays an entirely different theological problem. These false teachers, evidently involved in traveling ministry among the Johannine churches, were apparently teaching a doctrine that was legitimated by a docetic presentation of Jesus. The issue here had no relation to *the reluctance to confess Jesus as the Messiah/Christ*; rather, it involved *the refusal to believe that Jesus had come in the flesh*. It must be clarified, though, that these teachers' primary concern was not necessarily a docetic Christology—such was at least the gauntlet thrown down by the Johannine Elder's challenge to their teaching. Rather, it was the practical *implications* of a non-suffering Jesus that drove both their teaching and the Johannine resistance to it. If Jesus did not suffer, neither should his followers be

17.   For an in-depth analysis of the Father–Son relationship in the Johannine Situation and its developing tradition, see my essay, 'The Having-Sent-Me Father—Aspects of Agency, Irony, and Encounter in the Johannine Father–Son Relationship', *Semeia* 85 (1999), pp. 33-57.

expected to do so. Therefore, the primary issue at hand was likely one or more aspects of assimilation within their Greco-Roman setting.[18]

(f) *The two antichristic threats bore distinctive religious identities.* Not only did the Johannine Antichrists reflect two different threats, happening at slightly different times and involving different movements and varying theological concerns, but the two groups also likely bore distinctive religious identities as well. Putting it conversely clarifies the point. It is highly unlikely that Jewish Christians would have had trouble with the humanly flesh of Jesus, but *Gentile* Christians within a Hellenistic setting would have. Likewise, Gentile Christians would not have been pressured to abandon Jesus' Messiahship or to deny his being the Christ out of a concern for monotheism, but *Jewish* Christians would have. Therefore, the first antichristic threat was likely to have involved *Jewish Christians* departing from Johannine fellowship and rejoining the Synagogue; the second antichristic threat was likely to have involved *Gentile Christians* teaching a doctrine of assimilation bolstered by the image of a non-suffering Jesus.

These two religious identities therefore would have involved two differing sets of loyalties and interests. Again, the christological elements, while raised as primary concerns by the Elder, were likely to have been factors or consequences of *other* interests. For the Jewish Christians, the *religious certainty* of the way of Moses, the promise of Abraham, the authority of the Torah, the community life of the Synagogue, Jewish family and friends, the particularity of Jewish customs, and the primacy of monotheism were likely all to have motivated Jewish re-proselytization of Johannine Christians. Having been marginalized and perhaps even unintentionally driven out of the Synagogue by the endeavor to diminish adherence to the Nazarene (this is what motivated the call for a *Birkat* against the ditheistic *Minim*), they are now recruited back into fellowship with their religious heritage. Here, the backdrop of the Johannine Gospel brings a good deal into focus. The appeals of being the true children of Israel and embracing the way of Moses must have spoken acutely to the Johannine audience (Jn 5; 7–10), and emphases upon Jesus' being the authentic Jewish Messiah, the fulfillment of typological Israel (especially with the I-Am sayings), the embodiment of Elijah-type semeiology, and the anticipated Prophet like Moses (Deut. 18.15-22) amassed a considerable rhetorical counterattack.

Conversely, the primary interests of Gentile preachers and teachers accused of Docetism probably had little interest in a high Christology alone as an abstraction. They were happy to regard Jesus as the Light-revealer of

18. See my fuller discussion of the attractiveness of Docetism within the Johannine Situation as a legitimator of non-costly discipleship, challenged by the evangelist's emphasis upon martyrological willingness to ingest the flesh and blood of Jesus in Jn 6, in *Christology* (pp. 110-36, 194-220).

humanity and the *Logos*-orderer of the *Cosmos*, and regarding Jesus as Savior and Son of God may have resonated with their understanding of the gospel. Their reluctance, though, to put much stock in the humanity of Jesus probably related to Christian praxis in the Greco-Roman situation, where Jewish–Christian moral norms and lifestyle expectations were likely an irritant to newcomers to faith in Christ. More acutely, Gentile Christians would probably have been less troubled by the growing requirement of emperor worship under Domitian, who reigned from 81–96 CE. Gentiles of Asia Minor and elsewhere in the Mediterranean region probably had few, if any, principled reservations about reverencing Caesar, saying 'Caesar is Lord', or offering incense to Caesar's stature. Also, as a consequence of being distanced from the Jewish Synagogue, Johannine Christians were no longer given a dispensation against having to show reverence to the Empire. Therefore, Gentile preachers and teachers probably brought a doctrine of assimilation legitimated by a docetizing Christology. Both their teaching and its resistance by the Elder, however, were motivated by the *implications* of docetic Christology: if Jesus did not suffer, neither need his followers. If he did suffer and die, though, his followers must be willing to do the same.

(g) *The two antichristic crises are corroborated by other presentations.* While these two antichristic crises were largely sequential, with the Jewish crisis preceding the docetic crisis, they were also somewhat overlapping.[19] In real life one crisis rarely waits until another is over before presenting itself. Any religious or political leader can attest to this fact! Additionally, however, these two crises are corroborated by other presentations of evidence, as are two other crises: tensions with Rome, and the effects of centralizing Christian institutionalization. In that sense, there were likely at least four or five crises in this phase of the Johannine Situation, of which the antichristic ones are best regarded as the first and the third chronologically.

19. See Appendix II in my other essay in this collection. Note three presentations of the Johannine situation offered by me from slightly different angles: each of them allowing for some overlap and largely sequential progressions. In 'Table 21: Three acute Intramural Crises Faced by Johannine Christianity' (*Christology*, pp. 245-48), three intramural threats to the Johannine situation are sketched in outline form; in 'The *Sitz im Leben* of the Johannine Bread of Life Discourse and its Evolving Context', in Alan Culpepper (ed.), *Critical Readings of John 6* (BIS, 22; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), pp. 1-59, four crises in the Johannine situation are considered through the lens of Jn 6 (adding the dialogical engagement of Synoptic themes); and a full sketching of all seven crises in the Johannine situation in longitudinal perspective (including two in the first Period, and the Romans as an extramural crisis in the second) is provided in 'Appendix II: A Historical Outline of Johannine Christianity', in my *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus: Modern Foundations Reconsidered* (LNTS, 321; London: T. & T. Clark International, 2006), pp. 196-99.

Elsewhere in the Johannine corpus, these two antichristic threats can be seen in the first and second editions of the Johannine Gospel. If indeed the Prologue, chs. 6; 15–17; and 21, and other passages including references to the eyewitness and the Beloved Disciple were added to the first edition of John around 100 CE, two things are apparent. Tensions with Jewish leaders (chs. 5 and 7–10) and presentations of the Romans (chs. 18–19) were part of the first edition material, while the incarnational and anti-docetic motifs (Jn 1.14; 6.51-66; 19.34-35) and the ecclesial motifs (Jn 6.67-70; chs. 15–17 and 21) are part of the later supplementary material. All four crises present themselves within John 6, as history and theology played themselves out among the presentation of discussants with Jesus. Rather than *only one crises*, though, as presented by Martyn's analysis of John 9, a careful analysis of John 6 betrays no fewer than *four or five crises* in the Johannine Situation in its later phases.

Therefore, John 6 shows evidence of engaging dialogically audiences representing Synoptic valuations of miracles, Jewish appealing to Torah and Moses, docetic reluctance to ingest the flesh-and-bloodness of Jesus, and Peter's returning the Keys of the Kingdom to Jesus—all with the hegemony of Roman occupation in the background. Therefore, parallel to the way of life and way of death dichotomy of the *Didache*, Johannine audiences are exhorted to seek the life-producing food which Jesus gives and is (Jn 6.27) vs. lesser forms of 'bread'. Likewise, all four crises are also present in the Johannine Apocalypse.[20]

Beyond the Johannine corpus, the letters of Ignatius betray tensions with a Judaizing presence, accompanied then by the threat of a docetizing one.[21] Rome's persecution is still in the background, even a decade or two after the

20. My *Sitz im Leben* essay (n. 19) applies Martyn's approach to Jn 9 to two-level reading of Jn 6 and comes up with a multiplicity of dialogical partners within the Johannine situation instead of only one. Likewise, in the Johannine Apocalypse, Jewish, Roman, Docetist, and Petrine dialogical targets in the audience can be inferred. For an outlining of a two-edition theory of composition, see Appendix I in my other essay in this collection and a fuller treatment in *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus* (pp. 37-41). In this book an interfluential theory of Gospel relations is also spelled out in graphic form, including particular inferences of John's dialogical autonomy (pp. 98-126). The crises mentioned above took place in the second and third periods in the Johannine situation as outlined in Appendix II in my other essay in this collection.

21. See Cyril Charles Richardson's essay, 'The Evidence for Two Separate Heresies', in his *The Christianity of Ignatius of Antioch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), pp. 81-85, where he argues that a Jewish set of dialogues preceded a docetizing set of dialogues among the Ignatian churches in Asia Minor. While the Ignatian correspondence was probably a decade or two later than the Johannine Epistles, there were likely some similarities between their socio-religious situations. Note that here also we have Jewish, Roman, and Docetist crises to which a Petrine and hierarchical way forward is posed.

Johannine Epistles were written, and in response to the Docetism-related crises of authority, a monepiscopal centralization of ecclesial leadership is advocated. Additionally, histories of Jewish and Roman developments between 70 and 100 CE provide independent verification of such scenarios, thus confirming the appraisal of at least the two antichristic threats among other sets of developments. In all of these struggles, however, it should be remembered that matters of faith and praxis were often conjoined in the perceived threat and in the intended countermeasures. As in many situations, the practical implications of other factors often provoked the concerns, and they tended to be addressed with christological countermeasures.

Conclusion

In sum, an adequate consideration of the biblical Antichrists is sorely needed among popular and scholarly interpreters alike. Because of the pejorative power of the term, 'antichristic' speculation tends to be rife with projective power, but those aiming to tie their interpretations to sound exegesis rather than irresponsible eisegesis are well advised to take a further look at the text. The term *antichristos* never occurs in Revelation but is solely found in the Johannine epistles, so their backdrop should be the primary consideration. While the threat has been predicted long ago, it is not used in futuristic ways, but in actualized ones—literally. While 'the spirit of the Antichrist' is used in the singular, nearly all the references to that threat are plural: 'Antichrists'. Further, more than one antichristic threat seems to have reared its ugly head within the Johannine Situation, pointing to a recent schismatic threat and an impending threat involving false teachings. As the Christological beliefs of these two groups appear also to be different, they appear also to have been different groups with distinctive theological beliefs and sociological investments. Only as we understand the particular errors of the Johannine Antichrists in their original settings can we correct Antichristic errors of interpretation for today.