

Antichrist: From Persian dualism to contemporary Christianity

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Thanks to Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins in the Left Behind series, the most popular depiction of the “antichrist” is Nicolae Carpathia, a wealthy Romanian businessman described as the devil-incarnate ruler of the United Nations and tyrannical opponent of the forces of good. His goal commits him to achieving world domination and to crush Christianity. Despite the fact that this character is fictional, most Christians are convinced that the antichrist will be like Carpathia. Carpathia represents the archetypical antichrist, a single man endowed with all the evil of the devil, who works against the forces of good.

The ancient Near Eastern culture had their equivalent to Nicolae Carpathia as well—Beliar. *Beliar* or *Belial* in Hebrew means a worthless person. The term came to be associated with Satan and the antichrist during the intertestamental period (200 B.C.—A.D. 4).¹ The Beliar/antichrist concept was originally derived from classic Persian dualism and was incorporated in Jewish noncanonical apocalyptic writings: “This fanciful concept seems to have had its origin in the Persian eschatology, where the battle between Ahura Mazda, the god of light, and Angra Mainyu, the god of darkness, plays a predominant role. And from there it found its way into Jewish apocalyptic literature, where the

opposition between God and the devil, who is introduced under the various names of Beliar, Satanus, Diabolus, Pneuma-aerion. . . . Beliar, who originally was probably nothing else than incarnate devil, was soon expanded, under the influence of certain historical conditions to be the opposer of God in the last times.”²

Although Beliar’s description evolved through ancient literature, certain characteristics have remained to create the modern antichrist concept. Most of the descriptions of Beliar in the intertestamental writings were based upon dualistic parallelism between the Messiah and the antichrist. The descriptions found in these writings of the Messiah figure were reciprocally applied to the antichrist and vice versa. Apparent in the *Psalm of Solomon* (Pss. Sol.),³ this theme of dualistic parallelism describes the “Anointed One” as a literal “Son of David,” a man, who relies upon God’s help to defeat God’s enemies and save His people (Pss. Sol. 17:23–25). Reciprocally, it describes the antichrist to be a Gentile aided by Satan to crush God’s people (Pss. Sol. 2:24–29; 17:13–15). In another place, the Messiah figure reigns with mercy and justice (Pss. Sol. 17:23, 32), while the antichrist remains a tyrant (Pss. Sol. 17:13–17). Thus G. W. Lorien concludes, “in Pss. Sol.17, the theme of the Anointed One almost completely mirrors the Antichrist theme.”⁴

This theme is not limited to the *Psalm of Solomon*. In the *Sibylline Oracles*, the dualistic parallelism also exists.

God will send a messiah who will eliminate some through warfare and who will bind others to himself by loyalty. He will do this in the form of a human figure, and in total dependence on God. It has been stated that the way the Antichrist is portrayed is determined in part by the messiah figure. . . . From our reading of this description of the messiah, we can conclude about the Antichrist: “An Antichrist set by Satan will eliminate some through warfare and bind others to himself by loyalty; he will do this in a human figure and in total dependence on Satan.”⁵

Recognizing this theme in the *Ascension of Isaiah*, L. J. Lietaert Peerbolte writes,

The description of Beliar makes it clear that he is thought of as a heavenly figure. He will “come down in the form of a man” (4, 2). This is probably an allusion to the incarnation of Christ. The passage 10, 9–11 is a description



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of how Christ transformed himself into the likeness of those he visited in his descent through the vaults of heaven, and how in the end he took the form of man. In the same way Beliar disguises himself as a man. But the imitation goes even beyond this. As v. 6 phrases it: "he will act and speak like the Beloved and will say, It is I who am Lord, and before me there has been no other." Beliar appoints himself as the Christ, thus proving himself to be a deceiver.⁶

Similar reciprocal comparisons between the Messiah and the antimesiah are found in numerous places, but we will note just three. According to the *Testament of Dan*, Beliar, the antichrist, is a man imbued with satanic power, facing off against the "Lord," a man imbued with godly power.⁷ In the same book, the authors describe Beliar as a Jew from the tribe of Dan to oppress the Jews, whereas the Messiah arises from both Judah and Levi to save them.⁸ In the *Assumption of Moses*, the antichrist possesses the title of "king of kings," a title normally reserved for the Messiah.⁹ In *Pseudo Ezekiel*, the antichrist is called the "son of Beliar" who opposes the "son of God."¹⁰

Influence upon the church fathers

The influence of the Beliar myth upon the church fathers became quite pronounced.¹¹ Although certain characteristics vary from witness to witness, the concept of a single powerful, evil-end tyrant is pervasive throughout their writings.

Take Irenaeus, for example. Explaining Irenaeus's views on the antichrist, Gregory C. Jenks concludes, "In the case of Irenaeus, the relationship between Antichrist and Satan was expressed in terms of his doctrine of recapitulation. Just as Christ gathered up all mankind in himself for justification, so the Antichrist figure was understood as a person who would recapitulate in his human existence all the sin and apostasy of earthly and heavenly history."¹²

This theme of dualistic parallelism is even more pronounced in the writings of Hippolytus, a former student of Irenaeus.

Hippolytus's writings transparently reveal the influence of the Beliar myth. Notice the pervasiveness of the dualistic parallelism theme in his description of the antichrist:

For the deceiver seeks to liken himself in all things to the son of God. Christ is a lion; so Antichrist is also a lion; Christ is a king, so Antichrist is also a king. The Savior was manifest as a lamb; so he too in the like manner, will appear as a lamb, though within he is a wolf. The Savior came into the world in the circumcision, and he will come in the same manner. The Lord sent apostles among all nations, and he in the like manner false apostles. The Savior gathered together the sheep that were scattered abroad, and he in like manner will bring together a people that is scattered abroad. The Lord gave a seal to those who believed on Him, and he will give one in like manner. The Savior appeared in the form of a man, he too will come in the form of a man. The Savior raised up and showed His holy flesh like a temple, and he will raise a temple of stone in Jerusalem.¹³

Irenaeus and Hippolytus were important figures because their interpretation of the antichrist established an important precedent that many of the church fathers followed.

Ideas concerning the antichrist were borrowed and enhanced. For instance, Origen, describing the antichrist, argued that since Jesus was the Son of God, then the antichrist would be the son of the evil demon Satan.¹⁴ Victorinus inspired by patristic precedent believed that the antichrist would be a reappearance of Nero, a pseudomoral character, to deceive God's people.¹⁵ John Chrysostom, too, believed in the Nero myth, stating, "For the mystery of lawlessness doth already work. [Paul] speaks here of Nero, as if he were the type of Antichrist."¹⁶ Ambrose was of the view that just "as the Son of God in His humble birth manifested His divine nature, so also shall Satan appear in human form."¹⁷ Likewise, Theodoretus wrote, "For the persecutor of men

simulates the incarnation of our God and Savior; as He by assuming our human nature accomplished our salvation, so that one also by making choice of a man capable of receiving the fullness of his power shall tempt men?"¹⁸ Jerome, being thoroughly indoctrinated by the church fathers wrote, "Nor let us think that he [Antichrist] . . . is the devil or a demon, but one of men in whom Satan is wholly to dwell bodily."¹⁹ Although the early fathers made their own innovations here and there, they did not depart from the script derived from nonbiblical witnesses.

The church fathers were clearly influenced by the Beliar myth and sought to interpret the biblical record with the lenses they acquired from the Apocrypha and pseudepigrapha. Their interpretation influenced one generation of Christians after another

an appropriation from the sectaries of the late Middle Ages of two devastating ideas: eschatology and predestination. Luther, like the sectaries, believed in the speedy advent of Christ to overthrow his great enemy Antichrist, identified with the pope. There was this difference, however, between the view of Luther and that of his precursors. They equated particular popes with Antichrist because of their evil lives. Luther declared that even the exemplary popes were Antichrist because [they were] the representatives of an institution opposed to Christ.²⁰

Luther's view of the antichrist as a system or institution rather than a person was a clear break from the church fathers whose view was based on the Beliar myth. Luther's view of the antichrist

that of diverting men's minds from perceiving the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Antichrist in the Papal system. The Jesuit Alcasar devoted himself to bring into prominence the Preterist method of interpretation . . . thus endeavored to show that the prophecies of Antichrist were fulfilled before the popes ever ruled at Rome, and therefore could not apply to the Papacy. On the other hand the Jesuit Ribera tried to set out the Futurist system, which asserts that these prophecies refer not to the career of the Papacy, but to that of some future supernatural individual, who is yet to appear, and continue in power for three and a half years.²²

To sell these concocted interpretations, a reemphasis was placed upon the

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until the Reformation. However, since the Reformation, the Beliar myth has regained prominence.

Beliar myth and contemporary influence

Prior to the Reformation, most Christians espoused the Beliar-inspired view of the antichrist. However, with the advent of the Reformation, this view began to crumble. The Reformers, whose battle cry was *sola scriptura*, developed a prophetic interpretation independent from the church fathers. Focusing on the Bible and history, they were led to a distinctive view of the antichrist. This new interpretation of the antichrist was one of the bulwarks of the Reformation.

These attacks on the authority [of the Catholic Church] were supported by

influenced Protestantism, not only in "Germany but Switzerland, England, Scandinavia, and even France."²¹ The single individual antichrist theory was crumbling because theologians sought to read the Bible afresh.

The distinctive Protestant understanding of the antichrist exerted a great influence, and the papacy sought to invent new means to counter it. To do this, the papacy decided to invent two false systems of prophetic interpretation to eliminate the Protestant teachings on the antichrist.

Towards the close of the century of the Reformation, two of her [the Catholic Church's] most learned doctors set themselves to the task, each endeavoring by different means to accomplish the same end, namely,

church fathers and their Beliar-inspired antichrist concept evident in the writings of Jesuit Cardinal Bellarmine and Thomas Malvenda, who cite the patristic authorities to support their conclusions of a single person antichrist arising from the Jews.²³

The efforts of the Jesuits to reintroduce the eschatological views of the church fathers, who were inspired by the Beliar myth, have had an immeasurable effect upon Protestantism. This can be clearly seen from the success of the Left Behind series.

Changing traditional Protestant identity of the antichrist was not an easy task. It was largely done by convincing Protestants to receive the eschatology of the church fathers over their immediate Protestant predecessors. Most arguments follow the reasoning of John

Henry Hopkins, who wrote in his book *A Candid Examination of the Question Whether the Bishop of Rome is the Great Anti-Christ of Scripture*:

The oldest Fathers lived nearest to the Apostles, and therefore they were more likely to retain the sense of the Apostles in their interpretation of the scripture. . . . This is the main statement of those primitive writers (that the Antichrist is a single man inspired by Satan from the tribe of Dan). And therefore it is indisputable that they stand entirely opposed to our modern interpreters, who have labored so ingeniously to make Antichrist correspond to the Pope of Rome. But here we must ask, Who were the best qualified to understand these prophecies? Those eminent Fathers who lived nearest to the Apostolic times, and searched the scriptures without any interest or prejudice to warp their judgment? Or those men of modern days, doubtless equally honest and sincere, but who formed their opinions under the powerful bias produced by the struggles of the Reformation, when there was so strong an inducement to associate the domineering and persecuting spirit of Popery with the predictions concerning the Man of Sin and Son of Perdition?²⁴

Sadly, amongst a professed Bible standard bearing people, this argument of craft eventually won out. Without appealing to the Bible, history, or the evidence the Reformers had compiled, Hopkins with one broad stroke repeals a fundamental tenet of Protestantism. Resting on tradition and the memory of the church fathers, Hopkins and others were able to abrogate one of the key doctrines of the Reformation—that Catholicism was the system of the antichrist. Contemporary theologians and Christian leaders believing in a single, Satan-inspired, human antichrist have essentially recycled Hopkins's arguments. Ignominiously, Protestants who accept this interpretation of the church fathers are ignorantly espousing pagan mythology.

Thus the Nicolae Carpathia ideal—a devil incarnate man evolved from ancient Persian dualism—was incorporated in apocalyptic noncanonical writings in the form of a mythical character called Beliar. The church fathers adopted this archetype giving it a Christian makeover. During the Reformation, Bible investigation led to Protestant denial of Beliar as antichrist and the viewing of the antichrist as a corrupt system. However, due to the efforts of the Jesuits, who placed an emphasis on the church fathers, the Beliar concept now enjoys a renaissance. The popularity of Nicolae Carpathia represents a sad trend in contemporary Christendom, demonstrating that Christians are more likely to accept pagan tradition as Bible truth. ❏

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- 2 LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, vol. 1, *Early Church Exposition, Subsequent Deflections, and Medieval Revival* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1950), 299.
- 3 See G. Buchanan Gray's translation of *Psalm of Solomon* in *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English Oxford*, ed. R. H. Charles (London: Clarendon Press, 1913), 2:631–652.
- 4 G. W. Lorein, *The Antichrist Theme in the Intertestamental Period* (London: T & T Clark International, 2003), 106.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 56.
- 6 L. J. Lietaert Peerbolte, *The Antecedents of Antichrist: A Traditio-Historical Study of the Earliest Christian Views on Eschatological Opponents* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1996), 201.
- 7 R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), 2:282–367.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 G. W. Lorein, *The Antichrist Theme*, 141.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 151.
- 11 Froom, *The Prophetic Faith*, 1:468.

- 12 Gregory C. Jenks, *The Origins and Early Development of the Antichrist Myth* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), 51.
- 13 Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 5:206.
- 14 Jenks, *Origins and Early Development*, 53.
- 15 W. Bousset, *The Antichrist Legend: A Chapter in Christian and Jewish Folklore*, trans. A. H. Keane (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1999), 29.
- 16 Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 389.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 142.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Bousset, *The Antichrist Legend*, 129; brackets in the original.
- 20 Roland H. Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1952), 43, 44.
- 21 Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, vol. 2, *Pre-Reformation and Reformation Restoration, and Second Departure* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1950), 356.
- 22 Joseph Tanner, *Daniel and the Revelation: The Chart of Prophecy and Our Place in It; A Study of the Historical and Futurist Interpretation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1898), 16, 17.
- 23 Froom, *The Prophetic Faith*, 2:499, 501, 502, 504, 505.
- 24 John Henry Hopkins, *A Candid Examination of the Question Whether the Bishop of Rome is the Great Anti-Christ of Scripture* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1868), 112, 113.

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