

### Lawless Man Incites Rebellion

As we propose to look again at Paul's predictions of things to come in his second letter to the Thessalonians, it is not without some trepidation. The second chapter of this epistle tells of the coming of the "man of sin" and the "falling away." Countless speculations have been advanced in explanation of these subjects with the truth and sanity so often forsaken in chasing after fantastic, even fanatical, opinions. How could I possibly clarify these matters in one volume, much less in a brief essay, even if I had all the answers?

For those led by emotion, inaccuracy and confusion blend to add mystery to reveal in. It is somewhat like pouring "half-and-half" in our coffee. Formerly, I thought that was half milk and half cream, but no such claim is made for it on the carton. Now I see that they are selling non-fat "half-and-half"! So what we infer from "half-and-half" may be termed "half-truth- and half-deception" like popular inferences about the man of sin and the falling away.

In his first letter to them Paul clearly taught that the coming of the Lord was so near that their bodies might be kept alive until that time. After Paul had taught them of the "parousia" in person and in his first epistle, some were disturbing others by saying the Lord had already come. A strong point must be faced here by modern interpreters who contend that Jesus will return in physical body visible to every eye while catastrophic cosmic changes take place. The disciples at Thessalonica had not been taught to expect that and were not looking for such! Otherwise, Paul could have written bluntly, "You stupid people! Have you seen Jesus or any changes about you? Can't you see that the tombs are still intact and the universe is still in operation? I was not telling you about Jesus coming physically or about him raising physical bodies."

In the first chapter Paul commends them for enduring persecution, affliction, and suffering for the kingdom's sake. God would soon "repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant rest with us to you who are afflicted, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (1:6-8). In FR 87 we pin-pointed the time of that coming as being at the end of the age in the events surrounding A.D. 70. They were to be granted rest with Paul from persecution by destruction of the Jewish people who were instigating the persecution. That information would have been of little comfort if it was to occur hundreds of years after their deaths.

No, Paul assured them, the Lord had not come. He begged them "not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, ...to the effect that the day of the Lord has come" (2:1-2). They were to look for developments leading to it, "for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is

revealed.” (2:3). Did they think what Paul said was to transpire thousands of years in the future had already happened? Absurd. They understood that it would be in their time. These things were written to them, not to us in 2001.

We wish to be clear without too much repetition. These essays have overlapped. So I refer you back to FR 44, “The Falling Away” and to FR 34, “The Antichrist” for more details.

As Paul had gone about his evangelism, his successes were cut short by Jews who followed him from city to city stirring citizens up against him. In Thessalonica “the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked fellows of the rabble, they gathered a crowd, set the city in an uproar...” (Acts 17:5), thus initiating a persecution. Evidently, those persecutions continued. Also, zealots among the Jews, especially in Judea, resisted Roman rule so as to bring persecutions from the Romans throughout the empire.

In his letter to them, Paul informed them that a man who would set himself above law -- man of sin / lawlessness -- “sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4) was to be revealed. Already the insidious maneuvering of corrupt men was setting the stage for him. “For the secret power / mystery of lawlessness is already at work...” (2:7 NIV & RSV). He would eventually operate out of the Temple (which was still standing), defying both God and the Romans, and leading a disastrous revolt against Rome. This defiant development by godless men was being restrained at the time of Paul’s writing (the disciples knew this- 2:6), but its eventual leader would be revealed and destroyed at the soon coming of the Lord.

God would send a strong delusion to cause rejecting Jews to follow that deceptive leader (2:9-11). It was a way in which God brought his judgment against their rebellion by means of the Roman army. God used “the powers that be” to avenge his people and destroy their nation.

It is unfortunate that earlier versions speak of the “falling away” instead of the “rebellion.” Because of that, most of us concluded that Paul referred to a falling away of the church. Since disciples in the last days were to receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken like the earthly kingdom they would live to see destroyed (Heb.12:23-28) and because it is “the eternal kingdom” (2 Peter 1:11), we should have never inferred that it was the spiritual kingdom which would suffer apostasy. But with that misdirection, we looked for fulfillment in Rome, the Roman emperors, in the development of Catholicism, and the papacy. However, Paul was dealing with developments much more immediate involving Israel. They would transpire to complete redemptive history very soon after the end the Bible record.

It is true that Paul later wrote that “in later times some will depart from the faith” (1 Tim. 4:1). Jesus had elaborated on that in Matthew 24. It is not clear if Jesus meant some disciples would fall away from faith in Christ or some Jews would

fall away from their faith in God. Even if it is referring to the church, it does not indicate that it would be total apostasy giving cause for our restoring a destroyed church rather than reforming a misguided people.

This rebellion against Rome brought the great tribulation on the city of Jerusalem. It may be that Jews were the “elect” for whose sake the days of tribulation were shortened (Matt. 24:21-22).

Who was (not is) that man of sin and perdition (doomed to destruction-NIV) who incited the ultimate rebellion against Rome resulting in the destruction of their nation? Admittedly, we are butting our head against a stone wall of fantastic suppositions built by futurists of today. If you have read our writings beginning with FR 30 and onward, you may be ready for a more sober interpretation which sees all these events fulfilled in “the last days” of Judaism. So, we can look for some person, type of person, or office that would fit the role of this character which we have mystified.

The “mystery of iniquity” (Doesn’t that term excite the imagination?) was already at work. This is translated “secret power of lawlessness” in the NIV. The rebellion was not an instant eruption, but greedy ambitions were motivating deceitful men. For years there had been unrest and resistance by the Jews that brought Roman repression throughout the empire. John Bray has written, “As we have discussed previously, the nation of Israel and Jerusalem were certainly falling away, or revolting, or rebelling, against Rome at this time. This was the apostasy. The rebellion was growing stronger, conflict and confrontation were the order of the day, and war was inevitable. Rome would not allow this province to be separate from its empire. As the war developed between the Jewish zealots and Rome, a strong leader would soon appear on the scene who would fulfill the prophecy made by Paul. He would be revealed after the one who hindered was taken out of the way.”

John Bray then quotes Josephus about conditions in Israel: “There were besides disorders and civil wars in every city; and all those that were at quiet from the Romans turned their hands one against another. There was also a bitter contest between those that were fond of war and those that were desirous of peace. At the first this quarrelsome temper caught hold of private families, who could not agree among themselves; after which these people that were dearest to one another, broke through all restraints with regard to each other, and every one associated with those of his own opinion, and began already to stand in opposition one to another; so that seditions arose everywhere, which those that were for innovations, and desirous of war, by their youth and boldness, were too hard for the aged and the prudent men; and, in the first place, all the people of every place betook themselves to rapine; after which they got together in bodies, in order to rob the people of the country, insomuch as for barbarity and iniquity those of the same

nation did no way differ from the Romans; nay, it seemed to be a much lighter thing to be ruined by the Romans than by themselves.” (Josephus, p. 292).

Josephus, a Jewish military officer spared by the Romans and enlisted to record the current happenings for the Romans, tells about a certain Jew, John Levi of Gischala who came upon the scene. He was a selfish, unscrupulous man with persuasive powers who convinced many that he was sent by God to liberate them. He disregarded the laws of God, desecrated the temple, melted down many of the sacred vessels of the temple, plundered the people, and committed all sorts of unscrupulous atrocities described in detail by Josephus. In a passion of tyranny he convinced the Jews that they should go to war against the Romans.

John Levi had over-riden all restraints except that of the high priest, Ananus. But John enlisted aid from the Idumeans who killed 8,500 of the people including the high priests and Ananus in particular. Josephus recognized the great significance of this, recording, “I should not mistake if I said that the death of Ananus was the beginning of the destruction of the city, and that from this very day may be dated the overthrow of her wall, and the ruin of her affairs” (Josephus, p. 313). That which restrained was taken out of the way just as Paul had told them. This unbelieving Jewish historian points to this most sinful / lawless character as the one most responsible for inciting the rebellion which ultimately brought the vengeance of God against Israel and their city -- the great tribulation.

Of course, we cannot be dogmatic in pointing out John Levi, but since Jesus and inspired writers definitely taught that all this would happen in their generation, we certainly cannot point to the emperors, the papacy, Hitler, or other favorite candidates of later history. If it was not John Levi, it was some other person or group of that generation -- deflating as that might be to modern fantastic speculative theories.

In this discourse I have quoted and borrowed freely from a 48-page booklet, “The Man of Sin of II Thessalonians 2” by Evangelist John Bray, P O Box 90129, Lakeland, FL 33804. Send a couple of dollars for this very informative booklet and info about his extensive writings concerning fulfilled prophecy.

(Cecil Hook, September 2001) []