



Unraveling the Mystery of the Lawless One (Part One)

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In 2 Thessalonians 2, we are introduced to the man of lawlessness, also called the lawless one and the son of perdition. To many modern Christians, Paul is describing a modern figure, using modern technology, in order to unleash mayhem on the modern-day world. To those who strive to place a high priority on the original context of the passage and its historical setting, Paul is describing an ancient figure during ancient times who unleashed mayhem on the ancient world of first-century Israel.

The road that each approach takes diverges from the start, and never the two shall meet. The first approach has little if anything to do with the text itself or the time in which it was written, while the second approach has everything to do with both. Comparing and contrasting these two divergent views demonstrates the need to understand the Bible in the context of its own time, rather than ours.

The Day of the Lord

The mystery of the lawless one (2 Thess. 2:7-8) comes to us amidst Paul's attempt to correct the mistaken notion that the Day of the Lord had already come (2 Thess. 2:2). In and of itself, this is evidence enough to dispel the prevailing notion that the Day of the Lord is a world-ending event. For example, according to Pastor Paul Begley, host of *The Coming Apocalypse*: "the earth will explode...the Bible predicts it" [\[2\]](#) In light of 2 Thessalonians 2:2, however, this doesn't make much sense at all.

If Jesus were coming back to obliterate the planet, how could anyone have possibly thought it had already happened? More to the point, answering the Thessalonians' misunderstanding would have been

easy for Paul. The Thessalonians were still there, Paul himself was still there, and the planet hadn't blown up yet. In other words, Paul could have simply pointed out the obvious and called it a day.

Instead, Paul proceeds to delineate several things that must happen first – before the Day of the Lord arrives. According to Paul, there would be an “apostasy” or “rebellion,” and then “the man of lawlessness” would be “revealed” (2 Thess. 2:3). The “mystery of lawlessness” was “already at work” when Paul wrote, but a “restrainer” was holding the “lawless one” back (2 Thess. 2:6-7). Once the “restrainer” was removed, the “lawless one” would be unleashed (2 Thess. 2:6). Paul's sequence of events should sound familiar and ring a bell in the mind of the reader.

Scripture interprets Scripture, and, as we shall see, Paul's words seem to be echoed in John's words as he penned the book of Revelation on the island of Patmos. Those echoing words pull us back to the echoing past rather than move us forward to the future of our own day and age.

Parallels with Revelation 20

The sequence of events in 2 Thessalonians 2 runs a close parallel to Revelation 20.^[3] Paul and John both speak of a restraint and a release of evil connected with “deception.” This three-fold theme of restraint, release, and deception is loud and clear in the words of both passages. In Revelation 20, the restraint, release, and deception are specifically linked to Satan's ability to gather the nations together for “the war” (Rev. 20:8). In God's sovereignty, Satan is not allowed to commence this war prematurely.

While the popular approach of our day views this war as the final war of mankind's history, this seems unlikely given the time of writing. With a major war looming on the horizon when John wrote, that being the Roman-Jewish War, it's difficult to imagine that his readers would have thought of any other war than the one they were about to witness, experience, and see with their own eyes during their own time. It's hard to believe that John was expecting them to imagine some other war thousands of years in the future. With the growing unrest among the Jews in Judea and Asia Minor, one wonders what possible relevance a far distant and unrelated conflict could have even had to the original audience.

With that said, the Roman-Jewish War was largely triggered by a Zealot-lead rebellion in Judea against Rome. The Zealots were kept at bay for the most part as long as the legitimate priesthood remained in power. Once the true priesthood was removed, all hell broke loose. Josephus refers to the Zealots as the “seditious” party who “excited the people to go to war,”^[4] while “the high priests” were “part of the multitude that were desirous of peace.”^[5] Generally speaking, there were two competing factions trying to sway the populace in Jerusalem. One side was pushing to maintain peace with Rome while the other side was pushing for war.

Looping this in with 2 Thessalonians 2, the restrainer had to be taken out of the way before the lawless one was set free to cause total havoc. Given the historical context of the time, the lawful priest and/or priesthood looks to be a good candidate for the restrainer, while the man of lawlessness was most likely a Zealot leader and/or the Zealot movement itself.

This coincides with Revelation 20 in that the Zealots would have been the tool that Satan used to set the events in motion that would escalate the war. Paul tips his readers off to this by calling the man of lawlessness “the son of perdition” (2 Thess. 2:3) and noting that his “coming” is “by the activity of Satan” (2 Thess. 2:9). The only other time the term “the son of perdition” appears in Scripture is in

conjunction with Judas (John 17:12), who was used by Satan. It's hard to avoid the conclusion that Paul and John were tracking on the same theme.

Revelation 20 and 2 Thessalonians 2 appear to fit together perfectly, and both are a perfect fit for the events leading up to and including the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. In other words, the rebellion in 2 Thessalonians 2 is intrinsically connected to the war in Revelation 20.

The Rebellion

Regarding this rebellion, Paul says, "Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first..." (2 Thess. 2:3a). The word for "rebellion" is *apostasía*, and it carries the ideas of:

- defiance
- rebellion
- abandonment
- a breach of faith or betrayal.^[6]

The Zealot movement checks all four boxes with regard to the meaning of *apostasía*. The Zealots were defiant. They orchestrated a rebellion. They abandoned their own people. And like all first-century Jews who rejected their Messiah (i.e., Jesus), they breached the true faith of Yahweh and betrayed their own God. Every nuance of the word is captured in the Zealot uprising in first-century Israel.

The Son of Perdition

Paul tells his readers that "the man of lawlessness will be revealed" in conjunction with this "rebellion" and, as noted above, refers to him as "the son of perdition" (2 Thess. 2:3b). Like Judas, the lawless one's actions are "in accord with the activity of Satan" (2 Thess. 2:9). Satan would use the lawless one just as he had used Judas. Judas set the events of the crucifixion in motion. Once God allowed Satan to be released to jump start the war, the Zealots would likewise become his tool to set that in motion as well.

Displaying Himself as God

Paul informs his readers that this lawless one "opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God" (2 Thess. 2:4). Since some translations use the word "proclaiming" instead of "displaying," many interpreters understand this to mean that "the man of lawlessness promotes himself in place of God Almighty as the central deity to be worshiped."^[7] As popular as this approach may be, however, the idea that the lawless one would make claims to deity isn't really required by the text.

As Daniel E. Harden points out, "It wasn't necessary for the Man of Lawlessness to proclaim in words that he is God or a god. Nor is the word 'proclaim' actually in the verse. The word *apodeiknumi* is better understood in terms of display, exhibit, demonstrate. It is indicative of what his actions amount to, not his words. He doesn't need to openly proclaim himself as God to fulfill this verse. He only needs to go someplace that only God and/or God's representative is allowed to go. Actions speak louder than words. By merely sitting down in the temple of God, he demonstrates his intentions."^[8]

Likewise, Fr. Stephen De Young observes: “In the ancient world, to sit when in someone’s presence, rather than standing, was to treat that person as an equal or inferior. This is an idiomatic way of stating that he places himself as God’s equal.”^[9]

With this in mind, the authorities in the temple were said to have “seated^[10] themselves in the chair of Moses” (Matt. 23:2). One is immediately reminded of Exodus 4:16, where God tells Moses that he would be “as God” to Aaron. Prior to the Zealot rebellion, the rightful Jewish leaders held this seat of authority. “Those usurping the role of Moses,” writes Kim Burgess, “would then be assuming this role of being ‘as God’.”^[11] Rather than pointing to some futuristic incarnation of a false god, this points directly to first-century Israel and the Zealots’ takeover of the temple. “The context returns things to the Jewish category,” continues Burgess, “and therefore the apostate Judas figure in 2:3.”^[12]

The Mystery of Lawlessness Already at Work

In the passage, Paul says that the “mystery of lawlessness” was “already at work” (2 Thess. 2:7) when he wrote the letter. Charlie Bing of Grace Life Ministries^[13] claims that “Paul was looking to a future event that we now know was at least 19-hundred years from the time of Paul’s writing.”^[14] A red flag should immediately go up in the reader’s mind when he/she reads a statement like this. This is especially the case since Bing tries to tie the mystery of lawlessness to modern-day AI technology. To belabor the obvious, AI technology did not exist 1900 years ago. In its current form, it didn’t even exist 19 years ago. To unravel the mystery of lawlessness, we must look to something that was happening in the Thessalonians’ own day and age rather than ours.

As Gary DeMar writes, “The time texts, the present restraining, and the ‘mystery of lawlessness already at work,’ restricts the passage’s time of fulfillment to the first century.”^[15] With this in mind, “the Zealot movement” began “gaining steam” when “Hezekiah the Zealot rose up in 47 BC.”^[16] This coincides nicely with 2 Thessalonians, written around 51 AD.^[17] With the Zealot movement seemingly on the rise (wars and rumors of war, so to speak), it’s feasible that the Thessalonians could have thought that everything was already being fulfilled. Nonetheless, the restrainer hadn’t been taken out of the way yet. Paul was writing to tell them not to jump the gun, that it was far too early.

The Restrainer

In verses 5-7, Paul says the restrainer who was curtailing the lawless one’s ability to rise to power would do so only until he was taken out of the way” (2 Thess. 2:5-7). This naturally raises the question, “Who or what is the restrainer?”

The Restrainer as the Holy Spirit?

For the Dispensationalist, the restrainer is, specifically, the Holy Spirit. This was the view of John Nelson Darby as well as John Walvoord.^[18] When the Church is removed in the Rapture, the Holy Spirit’s restraining power goes with it. This, however, creates a huge loose end that cannot be tied up. Even those of this persuasion recognize the glaring problem here. For example, Phillip J. Long writes, “...the Old Testament very clearly indicates that the Holy Spirit will be active in the tribulation (Joel 2, for example.) If he is removed at the beginning of the Tribulation, how can he be ‘poured out’ as Joel predicts?”^[19]

Long's answer to this seeming dilemma amounts to somewhat of an equivocation: "Therefore it is best to conclude that the Restrainer [sic] power is God, through the Holy Spirit and the positive effects of the preached Gospel. The Spirit is active in the world as a preserving agent, a ministry that will end at the time of the Rapture, allowing the events of the tribulation to unfold." [20] It's unclear in what way this solves the problem of how the Holy Spirit can be both absent and active at the same time.

The Restrainer as the Legitimate Priesthood

Adam Maarschalk offers several insightful observations on the historical situation at the time that point to the restrainer as "...collectively, the Jewish high priests who led the peace movement in Jerusalem." [21]

According to Maarschalk: "Josephus, in Wars of the Jews, wrote a great deal about how they were a thorn in the side of the Zealots, at times preventing the Zealots from fully doing as they pleased. When the Jewish-Roman War began in AD 66, this peace movement was led by Ananus ben Ananus and Jesus ben Gamaliel. Their long speeches against the Zealots can be seen in Wars 4.3.10 and Wars 4.4.3. Josephus said that Ananus 'preferred peace above all things,' was 'a shrewd man in speaking and persuading the people,' and 'had already gotten the mastery of those who opposed his designs or were for the war' (Wars 4.5.2)." [22]

Ananus and Jesus were both killed, along with the other priests, during the Zealot siege of the temple. [23] At that point, the restrainer was completely "taken out of the way." Their deaths marked a significant turning point for the fate of Jerusalem according to Josephus.

Josephus writes, "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, whereon they saw their high priest, and the procurer of their preservation, slain in the midst of their city... to say all in a word, if Ananus had survived they had certainly compounded matters... And the Jews had then put abundance of delays in the way of the Romans, if they had had such a general as he was" (Wars 4.5.2). [24]

In another place, Josephus says that Ananus "perhaps would have saved the city if he could but have escaped the hands of those that plotted against him. Those men who made the temple of God a stronghold for themselves..." [25] In the end, the city was not saved because the one who "perhaps" could have done it was taken out of the way.

None of this is to say that the legitimate priesthood itself wasn't corrupt. They certainly weren't friends to the believer as they were the very ones who delivered Jesus over to Pilate to be crucified (Matt. 27:21-22). Additionally, they were responsible for the continued persecution of His followers. Nonetheless, during the infighting within first-century Judaism, the rightful priesthood and lawful leadership were sharply at odds with the Zealots and their thirst for revolution. Once the official Jewish leadership was taken out of the way, there was no longer anything to stand in the Zealots' way.

[This concludes part one. Part two will focus on verses 8-12]

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[2] <https://www.express.co.uk/news/weird/1341886/End-of-the-world-doomsday-Earth-explode-Bible-prophecy-Jesus-Christ-Second-Coming>

[3] Doug Wilson makes the connection between the two passages: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nezm8Farfko>

True to the course of his mostly excellent commentary on Revelation, however, this is the one portion of John’s prophecy that Wilson does not interpret in terms of past fulfillment. “That’s yet in our future,” he says. This seems problematic. Wilson correctly views the majority of John’s prophecy as relating to the Roman-Jewish War of the first century and the events leading up to it, but he then relegates a passage which specifically mentions “the war” (Rev. 20:8) to a time far removed from the very war which the prophecy is about. It’s difficult to ascertain how John’s audience could have understood “the war” as anything other than the war which he had been talking about all along up to this point.

[4] Ibid, II:17, 2, p.

[5] Ibid, II:17, 2, p. 199.

[6] According to Michael Heiser: “If you looked up apostasia in a good Greek lexicon like BDAG (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich), you would get English glosses like ‘defiance,’ ‘rebellion,’ ‘abandonment,’ ‘breach of faith’ (like a betrayal). All of those are legitimate ways to translate apostasia, and they’re all semantically related.” Heiser concludes that “all four of these semantic options (defiance, rebellion, abandonment,

and breach of faith, i.e., betrayal) are operable in 2 Thessalonians 2:3.” <https://nakedbiblepodcast.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/NB-224-Transcript.pdf> , p. 3.

[7] <https://www.crossway.org/articles/who-is-the-man-of-lawlessness-2-thessalonians-23-10/>

[8] Email (July 11, 2023).

[9] <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/wholecounsel/2020/07/17/the-antichrist-the-lawless-one/>

[10] This is the same word that Paul uses in 2 Thessalonians 2:4, καθίζω (kathizō) ‘to sit.’

[11] Private message (Facebook Messenger, July 11, 2023).

[12] Ibid.

[13] <https://gracelife.org/aboutus.php>

[14] Ibid.

[15] Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2019), p. 290.

[16] <https://adammaarschalk.com/2018/01/27/ii-thessalonians-2-and-the-man-of-lawlessness/>

[17] Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, *Talk Through the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983), p. 421.

[18] <https://readingacts.com/2012/12/03/what-who-is-the-restrainer-in-2-thessalonians-2/>

[19] <https://readingacts.com/2012/12/03/what-who-is-the-restrainer-in-2-thessalonians-2/>

[20] Ibid.

[21] Maarschalk, Ibid.

[22] Maarschalk, Ibid.

[23] Maarschalk, Ibid

[24] Maarschalk, Ibid

[25] Q: John L. Bray, *The Man of Sin of II Thessalonians 2* (Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministries, 1997), p. 33.