

MATEUSZ KUSIO

The Antichrist Tradition in Antiquity

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe*

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Mohr Siebeck

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Mateusz Kusio

The Antichrist Tradition in Antiquity

Antimesianism in Second Temple and
Early Christian Literature

Mohr Siebeck

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Feast of St Timothy, 26 January 2020
Warsaw

Mateusz Kusio

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Chapter 1

Introduction

A. The argument

The story of the Antichrist has over the centuries grown to become one of the most potent aspects of the apocalyptic mindset. It stemmed from a plethora of eschatological antagonists envisaged by the Abrahamic faiths in antiquity and the early Middle Ages and exerts noticeable influence on modern secular culture. Attempts to characterise and identify this figure have long continued to occupy the minds of exegetes, theologians, and believers and fuelled eschatological expectation. Understanding their cultural heritage and, to some extent, the present cultural moment requires investigating the ancient idea of the Antichrist which gave rise to all of its later iterations and metamorphoses. This book is devoted to such an investigation.

The present state of scholarship on the topic reveals several unresolved issues. The claim that a stable idea of an Antimessiah¹ was transmitted from Jewish into early Christian milieux – as it was usually argued around the beginning of the 20th century – has been seriously challenged, but not defeated, in the last decades. Thus, the question whether antimessianism is to be found in the pre-Christian Jewish sources remains open. Furthermore, no satisfying framework for the study of the Antichrist has been fully formulated, whereas the collection of sources that is usually investigated fails to yield a complete picture of the antimessianic expectation. Finally, scholars have heretofore failed to fully acknowledge the various distinct ways in which different ancient texts envisage the eschatological opponents to counter the Messiah.

These problems reveal that the ancient idea of the Antichrist continues to be a source of perplexion for critical scholarship. The following three core claims will be asserted in order to resolve these issues:

(1) the Antichrist story functioned as a tradition, i.e. a transmission and re-use of certain core texts, stories, ideas, and motifs which are elaborated on by subsequent authors;

¹ In general, the terms ‘Antichrist’ and ‘Antimessiah’ are to be treated as synonymous. In what follows, ‘Antimessiah’ is used to describe the messianic opponents in the Jewish sources, and both ‘Antimessiah’ and ‘Antichrist’ with reference to the Christian sources.

(2) the tradition about the Antimesiah / Antichrist is to be found across ancient Jewish eschatology, in Christian and non-Christian sources alike;

(3) two motifs are the crucial marks of ancient antimessianism, namely violent conflict between the Messiah and his opponent, and mimetic rivalry on the part of the latter; these motifs show antimessianic expectation to be a phenomenon dependent on ancient messianism.

The value of these claims will be clearer once the history of scholarship on the Antichrist has been sketched within the context of which these claims function and become meaningful. The survey of the research history of this topic will reveal not only the undoubtable value of the previous academic engagements with the Antichrist, but also their confusion and shortcomings which this treatment of the antimessianic tradition seeks to amend.

B. History of scholarship on Antichrist

I. Earliest scholarship (*Malvenda, Gunkel*)

Although most reviews of the Antichrist scholarship begin with the work of Wilhelm Bousset, it is important to realise that his was not the first attempt to offer a historical analysis of that figure. This title can only be awarded to Tomàs Malvenda's (1566–1628) monumental *De Antichristo*, first published in 1604 in Rome (reprinted in 1621 in Valencia) and later expanded in the posthumous Lyon edition of 1647.

The Dominican's work constitutes the point at which an actual expectation of the Antichrist's Parousia begins to give way to a scholarly survey and assessment of those expectations. Malvenda most certainly harbours a futuristic expectation of the Antichrist, but at the same time takes great pains to assemble and scrutinise the relevant Biblical and Patristic evidence. He critically evaluates multiple past identifications of the Antichrist, from Antiochus IV Epiphanes to Martin Luther, showing that none of them exhaust the evil to be expected from Christ's deceitful counterpart.

De Antichristo is frequently referred to by Bousset, while McGinn calls it "the most complete treatment of the subject".² Such accolades are, however, rare. In spite of the current oblivion into which he has fallen, Malvenda must be recognised as the one who laid down the foundations for future scholarship.

² McGinn 1988: 1.

Another foundational work for the study of the Antichrist is Hermann Gunkel's *Schöpfung und Chaos* (1895; reprinted in 1921).³ His argument, whose reverberations are palpable in scholarship to this day, is that Revelation 12 cannot be an originally Christian composition, but rather it preserves ancient Babylonian creation and combat mythology. This background is also present in the creation story in Genesis, on which Revelation 12 heavily draws, and in multiple other passages of the Hebrew Bible.⁴ The value of Gunkel's work, even though it was eclipsed by later scholarship in its details, lies in making the study of ancient mythologies into a key component of the exegesis of many parts of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (NT), especially Revelation 12. His conclusion that this chapter is somehow alien to the rest of the book and, more generally, to the early Christian belief system, has been widely accepted by later exegetes.

Most importantly for the present purpose, *Schöpfung und Chaos* had a formative influence on Bousset. Gunkel's claim about the transmission of the mythic material through an esoteric oral tradition is Bousset's main assumption for the development of the Antichrist myth.⁵ The way Gunkel understood the inner structure of the apocalyptic came to establish the ways Jewish and Christian antimessianism was to be studied for decades to come.

II. The initial consensus (Bousset, Charles)

As rightly noted by G. Jenks,⁶ Bousset ought to be considered the father of the critical study of the Antichrist myth which started with his *Der Antichrist in der Ueberlieferung des Judentums, des neuen Testaments und der alten Kirche* (1895; English: *The Antichrist Legend: A Chapter in Christian and Jewish Folklore*, 1896). His work, steeped in the tradition of *Religionsgeschichte* and following in Gunkel's footsteps, attempts to show that the mentions of Antimessiahs in the Jewish sources of the Second Temple period, the NT, and the Church Fathers hark back to an oral apocalyptic tradition of Jewish origin.

³ Omitted here is Ernest Renan's *L'Antéchrist* (1873; English: *Renan's Antichrist*), the fourth of the seven volumes constituting his magisterial *Histoire des Origines du Christianisme* (of which the famous *Vie de Jésus* is the first). Renan does not critically approach the historical testimonies about antimessianic figures, but rather recounts the story of the early Church under the reign of Nero whom Renan identifies as the main antagonist of the nascent Christianity. Aside from that underlying claim, the book does close to nothing in exploring the Antichrist specifically. Renan's work enjoyed sizeable popularity and was reprinted in 1893 and 1905.

⁴ In the remainder of the study the term "Hebrew Bible" (HB) rather than "Old Testament" (OT) is used apart from those cases when the explicitly Christian reception of those writings in Pseudepigraphic and Patristic texts is discussed.

⁵ Gunkel 1921: 252–7; Bousset 1896: 6.

⁶ Jenks 1991: 5.

This idea guides the way Bousset's work itself is structured. He first analyses the sources available to him, from which he later attempts to distil a coherent narrative about the Antichrist. He distinguishes several commonplaces which are widely exemplified in various writings and were supposedly present in the original legend, such as the Antichrist's Jewish origin, association with the end of the current political regime, session in the Temple, slaughtering of the two witnesses (usually Enoch and Elijah), etc.

Bousset's work has been rightly praised for its learning, breadth of the scrutinised sources, and pioneering historical-critical approach to the problem of the Antichrist. Many of his conclusions hold to this day, while his recounting of the story of the Antichrist still provides a good overview of its main motifs. Nevertheless, the selection of texts Bousset approaches has been criticised as arbitrary as he excludes some, such as *1 Enoch* and the *Psalms of Solomon*, and incorporates others, e.g. the much later pseudo-Ephremic writings. His recourse to an overarching secret oral tradition behind all of its particular textual instantiations is deeply problematic, too. It seems methodologically unsound to posit the existence of such narrative, as the existing evidence can more easily be explained as texts influencing one another directly.

Bousset's contribution to the Antichrist research is not limited to *The Antichrist Legend*. In *Die Religion des Judentums im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter* (1903) he comes into dialogue with R.H. Charles and deemphasises the supposition of the esoteric oral tradition.⁷ A fuller, but essentially very similar summary is offered in his entry on the Antichrist in the first volume of the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, published in 1908.⁸ Slightly earlier, in his commentary on Revelation, Bousset references the Antichrist tradition briefly in an excursus on Rev 11:1–13:5, reiterating most of his previous conclusions.⁹

R.H. Charles – a towering figure in the early scholarship on apocalypticism and the Pseudepigrapha – continued and developed Gunkel's and Bousset's work. His main contribution to the scholarship on the Antichrist is included in the introduction to his edition of the *Ascension of Isaiah* and his commentary on Revelation.¹⁰ Charles generally follows Bousset, while at the same time correcting, expanding, and systematising his repertoire of sources. In a move later criticised by scholars, he fits the available evidence for the eschatological opponents into three categories, namely the myths about the Antichrist, Beliar, and Nero. He argues that the Antichrist tradition merged with the one about Beliar (which is supposedly the case in 2 Thessalonians 2) and, separately, with the Neronic legend (as in the *Assumption of Moses* 10:1). Finally, in Charles'

⁷ Bousset 1903: 242–4.

⁸ Idem 1908: 578–82.

⁹ Idem 1906: 324–30.

¹⁰ Charles 1900: li–lxxiii; 1920: 76–87.

understanding, all these entangled strands of the antimessianic speculation are fused together into several related forms.¹¹

Charles' treatment of the Antichrist is more systematic than Bousset's, as he is focused on the Second Temple and early Christian sources and offers a clear taxonomy of the traditions they represent. He also incorporates important material absent from *The Antichrist Legend*, most importantly the Beliar tradition.

The robust classification offered by Charles cannot, however, be seen as unproblematic. The strands of tradition he identified are said to be merged in earlier writings (the Beliar-Antichrist myth in 2 Thessalonians), only to reappear as distinct in the later ones (Antichrist in 4 *Ezra*, Beliar in Revelation 12). In spite of his explicit intention, Charles does not succeed in producing a diachronic panorama of eschatological enemies.¹²

As noted by Jenks, the scholarship of Charles and Bousset has had decisive influence over the decades of discussion to follow, producing "the Bousset-Charles' consensus".¹³ It spread mainly through dictionary entries and NT commentaries, usually on 2 Thessalonians, the Johannine Epistles, or Revelation, with later monographs on the Antichrist were produced only by those challenging the consensus. Thus, the idea of a myth / legend of the Jewish Antichrist, which fuses with other distinct traditions and makes its way into Christian eschatology became the standard scholarly view until Jenks' 1991 book, in spite of the serious criticisms raised in the meantime.

III. The first challenges (*Friedländer, Billerbeck, Rigaux, Ernst*)

The Bousset-Charles' paradigm encountered its first challenge as soon as 1901 when M. Friedländer published his *Der Antichrist in den vorchristlichen jüdischen Quellen*. The work is hardly ever referred to, let alone critically engaged with by scholars of apocalypticism and eschatology. The main reason for that is Friedländer's attempt, later widely criticised, to localise the esoteric teaching behind the Antichrist legend in the putative sect of Minim. The work, however, offers in its last four chapters a cogent analysis of sources pertaining to Beliar and the Antichrist.

Friedländer argues that one aspect of the gnostic teaching of the Minim was the fall away from God. This fall in turn was personified by Beliar, the forerunner of the Antichrist.¹⁴ Friedländer identifies Beliar primarily as a deceiver, based on the usual LXX rendering of the Hebrew בְּלִיַּאֵל as παράνομος.¹⁵ Friedländer reasons that the appearances of παράνομος in the Second Temple

¹¹ Charles 1900: lxvii; this typology is repeated in idem 1920: 83–4.

¹² Charles 1920: 77.

¹³ Jenks 1991: 16–7 with an enumeration of the works within the consensus.

¹⁴ Friedländer 1901: 118–9, 131.

¹⁵ Ibid. 119–20.

Hellenistic literature, e.g. 1–2 Maccabees, should therefore be explained as referring in some way to Beliar.¹⁶ He then adduces rabbinic passages which identify Belial or Belial's sons as the transgressors of the law.¹⁷ This apparently stable tradition leads Friedländer to make inferences about texts, such as *Sib. Or.* 3.63–74, arguing for their closeness to the Beliar tradition and, consequently, its Jewish origin.

The figure of the Antichrist is treated at greater length. Friedländer identifies this figure as the chief apostate and opponent of God.¹⁸ Although Friedländer speaks about the Antichrist as a primarily Christian phenomenon, he sees it as being in essential unity with the Beliar tradition. The selection of the Christian sources he works with does not differ substantially from the primary sources discussed by Bousset and Charles, as he makes use of the NT, the *Sibylline Oracles*, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus. In line with the governing thesis of his book, he sees parallels between the Jewish ideas about a lawless end-time opponent coming from the Minim and the Antichrist arising from among the Jews. These parallels extend further, as Friedländer offers a closer look at the two peculiar features of the Jewish as well as Christian antimessianic belief, i.e. that the Antimessiah would originate from the tribe of Dan and would come from Capernaum.

A scholarly assessment of Friedländer's work, although it must reject his overarching thesis about the connection between the putative Minim and the Antichrist tradition, ought to recognise the author's enduring contributions. He was the first – and, sadly, one of the very few so far – to give a fair hearing to the Jewish rabbinic sources that might be relevant to the discussion. The reach back to the HB and its translations to find the possible sources for the later development of the antimessianic traditions is also commendable. Friedländer also keenly notes the mimetic aspect of the Antichrist, as he claims him to be a copy and a forger of Christ.¹⁹

It must be noted, however, that the book suffers from serious shortcomings, as it overestimates the role of the Beliar material in the antimessianic tradition as a whole, and disregards the influence of other sources, such as Daniel. Nevertheless, *Der Antichrist in den vorchristlichen jüdischen Quellen* has been unjustly forgotten in the subsequent research and this study will utilise Friedländer's specific insights.

Even less specific attention has been offered to the treatment of the Antichrist by P. Billerbeck.²⁰ While commenting on 2 Thess 2:3 in the monumental

¹⁶ Ibid. 121.

¹⁷ Ibid. 122–6.

¹⁸ Ibid. 132.

¹⁹ Ibid. 174.

²⁰ Billerbeck's contribution to the Antichrist scholarship is very rarely acknowledged; the only author to do so is Horbury 2003: 366.

and otherwise widely acclaimed *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (1926, published jointly with H.L. Strack), he approaches the question of the Antichrist and his supposed Jewish origin.²¹ Billerbeck's claim is contrary to the basic tenets of the Bousset-Charles' paradigm, as he argues that there are no points of contact between ancient Jewish literature and the depiction of the Antichrist in the NT.²² Whilst he is ready to concede that the Jewish ideal of a Messiah could face political enemies, such as Rome or Gog and Magog, no evil religious counterpart is in sight in the Second Temple and early rabbinic sources.²³ A figure combining these two strands would not arise in Jewish literature until the post-Talmudic times which saw a growth of interest in Armilus.

Billerbeck has done a great favour to scholarship by amassing a wealth of sources on the rabbinic ideas of antimessianic opponents. Nevertheless, his conclusion has not stood the test of time. The findings at Qumran, obviously unknown to him, necessarily changed the scholarly view of antimessianism in the Second Temple period. Furthermore, the distinction between the political and the religious Antimessiah is anachronistic,²⁴ since the ancient concepts of politics and religion are usually entangled beyond separation. The attempt to introduce an imperial statue into the Jerusalem Temple by Gaius Caligula, which was recounted by Philo and Josephus and possibly known to the earliest NT authors, shows exactly that. There one sees a political figure asserting their authority through an act of profoundly hostile religious implications for Judaism. Consequently, Billerbeck's division of the Antimessiahs is problematic, and hence his scepticism about there being a Jewish antimessianism in the pre-Talmudic era seems ungrounded.

A less sharp, but still notable attack on the Bousset-Charles' paradigm happened with the publication of B. Rigaux's *L'antéchrist et l'opposition au royaume messianique dans l'Ancien et le Nouveau Testament* (1932). He departs from the line of his predecessors especially by extending his scrutiny firmly into all of the Hebrew Bible. He rightly argues that the study of the antimessianic material there contained is justified in and of itself, but can also inform the Christian teachings; the same holds true for the research into Apocrypha.²⁵ He acknowledges the research done by his predecessors; nonetheless, he sees Bousset's work as outdated and Charles' treatment in his commentary as too brief.²⁶

²¹ Str-B 3:637–40.

²² Ibid. 637.

²³ Ibid. 638.

²⁴ For this criticism, see also Horbury 2003: 380.

²⁵ Rigaux 1932: x.

²⁶ Ibid. x–xi. There is almost no interaction with Friedländer.

Rigaux's study of the antimessianic tradition in the Hebrew Bible relies on a very broad understanding of the term which would encompass the foreign rulers and opposition to God and Israel. This classification allows him to detect relevant material in Genesis 3, some Pentateuchal passages, as well as the prophets, especially Ezekiel, and Daniel. He transports the notion of the opposition to Israel as *per se* antimessianic into his reading of the Apocrypha, as he approaches *1 Enoch*, *Jubilees*, and the *Testaments of Twelve Patriarchs*.²⁷ The concept of messianic opposition becomes sharper in the analysis of the *Psalms of Solomon*, especially *Psalms 17 and 18*, *4 Ezra*, *2 Baruch*, and the *Sibylline Oracles* where the images of the Messiah and of his enemies alike gain specificity.²⁸ Rigaux concludes that, as far as the HB and the Apocrypha are concerned, the antimessianic opposition is primarily political and national in nature.²⁹

The second part of the book investigates the Antichrist in the writings of the NT, especially the Gospels (Synoptics as well as John), 2 Thessalonians, the Johannine Epistles, and Revelation. Rigaux sees a fundamental discontinuity between the perception of antimessianism in these and the HB, as the belief in Jesus necessarily eliminates the nationalistic element of any such enmity. Conversely, the Antichrist becomes the present persecutor of the Church.³⁰ On the other hand, the spiritual and supernatural opponent of Christ is the focal point of the future embattlement and deception of the believers at the Eschaton.³¹

Jenks might be right in counting Rigaux in the Bousset-Charles paradigm,³² as he did not depart from their methods, nor did he arrive at remarkably different results, his criticism of their faults notwithstanding. Lietaert Peerbolte and Lorein also have a point in noticing serious shortcomings in Rigaux's work which overestimates continuity of traditions in the HB, interprets all opposition to God and Israel as antimessianic, and does not pay enough attention to the sources of the Second Temple period.³³ Rigaux is also too keen to differentiate between the political and the religious aspect of the antimessianic opposition, as these two spheres cannot be easily distinguished in ancient contexts. For instance, the political foreignness of the opponents of Israel was at least to some degree caused by their divergent religious practice; it cannot be then claimed that their enmity was solely political.

The value of Rigaux's book, and the mark that distinguishes it from Bousset and Charles, is its thorough-going emphasis on the importance of the HB for

²⁷ Ibid. 174–9.

²⁸ Ibid. 180–202.

²⁹ Ibid. 203–204.

³⁰ Ibid. 396–7.

³¹ Ibid. 397–8.

³² Jenks 1991: 16.

³³ Lietaert Peerbolte 1996: 10; Lorein 2003: 18.

understanding the Antichrist tradition. He points to the value of looking for its traces beyond the repertoire of sources used by Bousset, Charles or even Friedländer. Something to be accentuated throughout this book is that the pertinent Second Temple or early Christian sources draw heavily on the Scriptures, thus making the Antimesiah or the Antichrist not only a future tyrant, but also an exegetical construct.

An important step forward in Antichrist scholarship was afforded by J. Ernst in his *Die eschatologischen Gegenspieler in den Schriften des Neuen Testaments* (1967) which is the most substantial book on the topic in the period between the works of Charles and Jenks. The argument of the work is plain from the very start, as Ernst argues that the NT does not know of a singular Antichrist, but rather speaks about multiple different eschatological opponents.³⁴ As opposed to Bousset and Charles, Ernst is not interested in arriving at a stable mythic story about the Antichrist but rather in the genealogy of the particular end-time antagonists.³⁵

Four passages from the NT receive direct attention from Ernst: the Synoptic apocalypse, i.e. Mark 13 and its parallels, 2 Thess 2:1–12, Revelation, and the Johannine Epistles. He is careful to observe the specific differences between these sources, such as the character of the opposition or whether the opponent is an individual or a collective, and not to force them into a uniform pattern.

The great methodological value of Ernst's work lies in the claim that the NT authors he discussed "keineswegs nur das niederschreiben, was ihnen unmittelbar eingegeben wird, sondern aus reichem Traditionsgut schöpfen".³⁶ Therefore, in a move not unlike that performed by Rigaux, he seeks in the HB the sources of inspiration and motifs for the later antimessianic tradition. His list includes seven such places: (1) Daniel, (2) the Gog oracle in Ezekiel, (3) the enemy from the north, (4) the eschatological opposition of the nations, (5) the serpent in Genesis 3, and finally (6) the mythical material. Each of these has contributed in a particular way to the later antimessianic depictions, with Daniel exerting the most pervasive influence on the nt in that regard.

As rightly noted by Jenks and Lietaert Peerbolte,³⁷ Ernst's work marks a shift in the academic discussion, since it moves away from the all-encompassing theories of Bousset and Charles towards an appreciation of the evidence in its diversity. The present study will also draw on Ernst's methodological innovation, as he seeks to unearth the genealogy of the antimessianic discourse. His investigation of the Scriptural sources of this opposition is commendable and still deserves careful scholarly attention. Ernst does justice to the Antichrist as

³⁴ Ernst 1967: 3.

³⁵ Ibid. xi.

³⁶ Ibid. 182.

³⁷ Jenks 1991: 18–9; Lietaert Peerbolte 1996: 11–2.

a tradition which arises from, preserves, and creatively rethinks key Biblical passages.

Nevertheless, it remains problematic that Ernst makes very little use of the Pseudepigrapha and none whatsoever of the DSS (some of which, including the *War Scroll*, had already been published by that time). This omission undercuts the value of his recourse to the HB as the source of inspiration for the antimessianic tradition. The ancient authors most certainly read and interpreted their Scriptures to inform their eschatology, but did so in and under the influence of their peculiar theological and cultural milieu, which can only be illuminated by the scrutiny of extracanonical writings and the DSS.

Ernst produced, despite his shortcomings, the most substantial and valuable corrigendum to the Bousset-Charles' paradigm, as he offered new ways of looking at the relevant Biblical material.

IV. *The revision of the consensus (Jenks, Lietaert Peerbolte)*

The Origins and Development of the Antichrist Myth (1991) by G.C. Jenks is the consummation of the erosion of what he himself calls the Bousset-Charles' consensus about the Antichrist. Jenks' main argument is that what came to be known as the Antichrist was a Christian appropriation of the earlier Jewish traditions about the opposition to God with a Christocentric tendency to it.³⁸ He rejects Bousset's idea of a much older oral tradition standing behind the extant testimonies about the Antichrist, granting at the same time the importance of oral transmission of some of those texts.³⁹

Jenks' method is revealed in the order he approaches the sources. The first part of his book analyses the evidence from the period 180–300 CE. This constitutes a break from the scholarly tradition which saw Patristic testimonies as a later development and clarification of the already existing traditions. Jenks argues that “[p]rior to Irenaeus the evidence for the Antichrist myth is problematic, but from ca 180 onwards there is no doubt that such a figure is being written about.”⁴⁰ On the basis of his reading of the NT, as well as the Christian apocrypha and the Patristic sources, he develops what he calls “sketches” of the Antichrist.⁴¹ These characteristics are ultimately not unlike those presented by Bousset, although Jenks places emphasis on the Antichrist's pride and cunning.

This pattern is later imposed onto earlier sources as Jenks attempts to trace the development of the Antichrist myth. He distinguishes four distinct pre-Christian Jewish strands of tradition: *Chaoskampf*, the Satan myth, the False

³⁸ Jenks 1991: 361–3.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 359.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 27.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 49–116.

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