Eschatology is a perennially thorny issue in church history. Its difficulty arises from the enormity of its task, and from various complex issues with which it deals. Let us consider one of the very difficult eschatological passages of Scripture, one rivaling Daniel 9 in the intensity of interpretive controversy: 2 Thessalonians 2. This famous eschatological reference contains Paul’s reference to the “Man of Lawlessness” (Nestle’s Text) or “Man of Sin” (Majority Text).

The passage is noted for its exceptional difficulty. The noted church father Augustine writes of a certain portion of the passage: “I confess that I am entirely ignorant of what he means to say.” New Testament Greek scholar Vincent omits interpreting the passage in his four volume lexical commentary: “I attempt no interpretation of this passage as a whole, which I do not understand.” Renowned Greek linguist Robertson despairs of the task of interpreting this passage because it is “in such vague form that we can hardly clear it up.” Morris urges “care” in handling this “notoriously difficult passage.” Bruce notes that “there are few New Testament passages which can boast such a variety of interpretations as this.” There are even some dispensationalists who admit that it is an “extremely puzzling passage of Scripture that has been a thorn in the flesh of many an expositor.”

As with the hotly debated Daniel 9:24-27 passage, so it is here: An exceedingly difficult prophecy becomes a key text for dispensationalism. Note the following comments by dispensationalists. Constable observes that “this section of verses contain truths found nowhere else in the Bible. It is key to understanding future events and it is central to this epistle.” According to Walvoord, the Man of Lawlessness revealed here is “the key to the whole program of the Day of the Lord.” Of 2 Thessalonians 2 Chafer notes: “though but one passage is found bearing upon the restraining work of the Holy Spirit, the scope of the issues involved is such as to command the utmost consideration.” Ryrie and Feinberg employ Thessalonians 2:4 as one of the few passages used “to clinch the argument” for the rebuilding of the Temple. There is no doubt that antipostmillennial commentators place considerable weight on this passage.

Because of its enormous difficulties, 2 Thessalonians 2 has generated lively debate in eschatological studies. The pessimistic eschatologies of amillennialism, premillennialism, and dispensationalism frequently employ this passage as evidence of worsening world conditions until the final apostasy. When setting forth objections against postmillennialism, amillennialist Hoekema makes but a cursory reference to this passage in a mere two sentences, confident that it offers a self-evident refutation of postmillennialism. Though a perplexing passage requiring caution, there are sufficient data in it to remove it at least as an objection to postmillennialism.

The Historical Setting
During Paul’s visit to Thessalonica he preached to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 17:1-3). Though some Jews believed Paul, others were riled to mob action regarding the Christian message (17:4-5). They dragged “some of the brethren to the rulers of the city” complaining: “These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king - Jesus” (17:6-7). After taking security from Jason and the others, the civil rulers let them go (17:9). This allowed Paul to depart safely to Berea. The Jews were not so easily quieted, however, for “when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds” (17:13). This resulted in the immediate sending away of Paul to Athens (17:14-15).

This explains the strong language against the Jews in the Thessalonian epistles, and helps uncover some of the more subtle concerns therein. In his first letter he writes: “For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost” (1 Thess. 2:14-16).

This Jewish context is important for grasping the situation Paul confronts. I show in the exposition to follow that there are a number of allusions to the Olivet Discourse.

**Exposition of the Text**

Verses 1-2. Paul’s reference “concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him” (2 Thess. 2:1) is the crux interpretum of this passage. Paul is here speaking of the A.D. 70 judgment on the Jews - the very judgment given emphasis in the first portion of the Olivet Discourse, the Book of Revelation, and several other passages of Scripture.

Though he speaks of the Second Advent just a few verses before (1:10), he is not dealing with that issue here. In 2 Thessalonians 1:10 Paul even employs a different word for the coming of Christ (even) from what he uses in 2:1 (parousia). There the Second Advent judgment brings “everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord” (1:9); here a temporal “destruction” (2:8). There the Second Advent includes “his mighty angels” (1:7); here the temporal judgment makes no mention of these mighty angels (2:1-12). Thus, the Second Advent provides an eternal resolution to their suffering; the A.D. 70 Day of the Lord affords temporal resolution (cf. Rev. 6:10).

Furthermore, the “gathering together to Him” mentioned by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:1 picks up on the reference of our Lord in Matthew 24:31. The word translated “gather together” here is episunagogé. Its cognate verb form is found in Matthew 24:31, where the gathering is tied to “this generation” (Matt. 24:34) and signifies the calling out of the elect into the body of Christ with the trumpeting in of the archetypical Great Jubilee (cf. 2 Thess. 1:11; 2:14). Here it functions the same way. With the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, Christians would henceforth be “gathered together” in a separate and distinct “assembly” (episunagogé: the Church is called a sunagogé in James 2:2). After the Temple’s destruction, God would no longer tolerate going up to the Temple to worship (it would be impossible), as Christians frequently did prior to A.D. 70.  

Paul consoles them by denying the false report that “the day of Christ had come” (2 Thess. 2:2). Apparently, the very reason for this epistle, written so soon after the first one, is that some unscrupulous deceivers had forged letters from Paul and had claimed erroneous charismatic insights relevant to eschatological concerns. In his earlier letter, he had to correct their grief over loved ones who had died in the Lord, as if this precluded their sharing in the resurrection (1 Thess. 4:13-17). Now new eschatological deceptions were troubling the young church (2 Thess. 2:1-3a): Some thought that the Day of the Lord had come and, consequently, they quit working (2 Thess. 3:6-12).

The word “trouble” (thoreo; 2:2) is in the present infinitive form, which signifies a continued state of agitation. It is the same word used elsewhere only in the Olivet Discourse (Mark 13:7; Matt. 24:6). There it is even found in the same sort of theological context: one warning of deception and trouble regarding the coming of the Day of Christ (Mark 13:5-7).

Verses 3-7. Paul is quite concerned about the deception being promoted (v.3a). To avoid the deception and to clarify the true beginning of the Day of the Lord upon Jerusalem, Paul informs them that “the Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition” (2 Thess. 2:3). Before they could say the Day of the Lord “is come,” then, there must first (see RSV) be the falling away and the revelation of the man of lawlessness, who is also called “the son of perdition.” (These do not have to occur in the chronological order presented, as even dispensationalists admit. Verse nine is clearly out of order and should occur in the midst of verse eight, if strict chronology were important.)

The word “falling away” is apostasia, which occurs in the New Testament only here and in Acts 21:21. Historically, the word can apply to a revolt: either political or religious. But to which does it refer here? Does it refer to a future worldwide apostasy from the Christian faith, as per pessimistic eschatologies? Amillennialist William Hendriksen writes that this teaches that “by and large, the visible Church will forsake the true faith.” Dispensationalist Constable comments: “This rebellion, which will take place within the professing church, will be a departure from the truth that God has revealed in His Word.” Or does the apostasia refer to a political rebellion of some sort?

A good case can be made that it speaks for the Jewish apostasy/rebellion against Rome. Josephus certainly speaks of the Jewish War as an apostasia against the Romans (Josephus, Life 4). Probably Paul merges the two concepts of religious and political apostasy here, although emphasizing the outbreak of the Jewish War, which was the result of their apostasy against God. The emphasis must be on the revolt against Rome because it is future and datable, whereas the revolt against God is ongoing and cumulative. Such is necessary to dispel the deception that Paul was concerned with. In conjunction
with this final apostasy and the consequent destruction of Jerusalem, Christianity and Judaism were forever separated and both were exposed to the wrath of Rome. 12

The Man of Lawlessness is Nero Caesar, who also is the Beast of Revelation, as a number of Church Fathers believed. 13 The difficulty of this passage lies in the fact that Paul “describes the Man of Sin with a certain reserve” (Origen, Celsus 6:45) for fear of incurring “the charge of calumny for having spoken evil of the Roman emperor” (Augustine, City of God 20:19). Paul and his associates had already suffered at the hands of the Thessalonian Jews for “acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king – Jesus” (Acts 17:7). Wisdom demanded discreetness in referring to imperial authority; his recent (1 Thess. 2:17) personal ministry among them allowed it: they were to “remember” that while with them he “told [them] these things” (2:5).

It is at least clear from Paul that something is presently (ca. A.D. 52) “restraining” (present participle) the Man of Sin “that he may be revealed in his own time” (2:6). The Man of Lawlessness was alive and waiting to be “revealed.” This implies that for the time being, Christians could expect at least some protection from the Roman government: the Roman laws regarding religio licita were currently in Christianity’s favor, while it was considered a sect of Judaism but before the malevolent Nero ascended the throne. Paul certainly was protected by the Roman judicial apparatus (Acts 18:12ff) and made important use of these laws in A.D. 59 (Acts 25:11-12; 28:19) as protection from the malignancy of the Jews. He expressed no ill-feelings against Rome when writing Romans 13 in A.D. 57-59: during the early reign of Nero, the famous Quinquennium Neroes. 14

When Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians 2, he was under the reign of Claudius Caesar. It may be that he employs word play on Claudius’ name. The Latin word for “restraint” is claudere, which is similar to “Claudius.” 15 It is interesting that Paul shifts between the neuter and masculine forms of “the restrainer” (2 Thess. 2:6,7). This may indicate he includes both the imperial law and the present emperor in his designation “restrainer.” While Claudius lived, Nero, the Man of Lawlessness, was forever separated and both were exposed to the wrath of Claudius’ name. The latter he gives Nero’s name. The former he gives Claudius’ name. The Latin word for “restrain” is claudere, which is similar to “Claudius.” 15 It is interesting that Paul shifts between the neuter and masculine forms of “the restrainer” (2 Thess. 2:6,7). This may indicate he includes both the imperial law and the present emperor in his designation “restrainer.” While Claudius lived, Nero, the Man of Lawlessness, was forever separated and both were exposed to the wrath of Claudius’ name. The latter he calls God or that is worshiped” (2:11) Christ by his own people while the Roman authorities could not touch him (Acts 19:1-5). Nero could surpass Claudius in this respect because he was emperor, while Claudius was merely Caesar. When Paul writes 2 Thessalonians 2, he was under the reign of Claudius Caesar. It may be that he employs word play on Claudius’ name. The Latin word for “restraint” is claudere, which is similar to “Claudius.” 15 It is interesting that Paul shifts between the neuter and masculine forms of “the restrainer” (2 Thess. 2:6,7). This may indicate he includes both the imperial law and the present emperor in his designation “restrainer.” While Claudius lived, Nero, the Man of Lawlessness, was forever separated and both were exposed to the wrath of Claudius’ name. The latter he gives Nero’s name. The former he gives Claudius’ name. The Latin word for “restrain” is claudere, which is similar to “Claudius.” 15 It is interesting that Paul shifts between the neuter and masculine forms of “the restrainer” (2 Thess. 2:6,7). This may indicate he includes both the imperial law and the present emperor in his designation “restrainer.” While Claudius lived, Nero, the Man of Lawlessness, was forever separated and both were exposed to the wrath of Claudius’ name. The latter he calls God or that is worshiped” (2:11) Christ by his own people while the Roman authorities could not touch him (Acts 19:1-5).

The evil “mystery of lawlessness” was “already working,” though restrained in Claudius’ day (2 Thess. 2:7). This is perhaps a reference to the evil concerning and plotting of Nero’s mother, Agrippina, who may have poisoned Claudius so that Nero could ascend to the purple (Tacitus, Annals 12:62ff; Suetonius, Claudius 44). The Roman emperor, according to Paul, “exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped” (2 Thess. 2:4a). The evil potential of emperor worship was publicly exhibited just a few years before, when the emperor Caligula (a.k.a. Gaius, sometimes spelled: Caicus) attempted to put his image in the temple in Jerusalem (Josephus, Ant. 18:8:2-3).

The phrase “so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God” is interesting. When hoste (“so that”) is followed by an infinitive (hathasisai, “to sit”), it indicates a purpose intended, not necessarily a purpose accomplished. 16 It was Caligula’s intention to sit in “the temple of God” in Jerusalem; it was the emperor’s desire to “show himself that he is God.” In fact, Philo tells us that “so great was the caprice of Caicus [Caligula] in his conduct toward all, and especially toward the nation of the Jews. The latter he so bitterly hated that he appropriated to himself their place of worship in the other cities, and beginning with Alexandria he filled them with images and statues of himself.” 17

This was for all intents and purposes accomplished by future emperor Titus, who concluded the devastation of Jerusalem set in motion by Nero. Titus actually invaded the Temple in A.D. 70 (Josephus, Wars 6:6:1). This parallels Matthew 24:15 and functions as Paul’s abomination of desolation, which was to occur in “this generation” (Matt. 24:34).

Not only so but in Nero the imperial line eventually openly “opposed” (2 Thess. 2:4) Christ by persecuting His followers. Nero even began the persecution of Christians when he presented himself in a chariot as the sun god Apollo, while burning Christians in order to illuminate his self-glorifying party. 18

Verses 8-9. Verses 8 and 9 read: “and the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the
brightness of His coming. The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders." 19 As indicated, the lawless one was eventually openly revealed. The mystery form of his character gave way to a revelation of his lawlessness in Nero's wicked acts. This occurred after the repressor [Claudius] was "taken out of the way," allowing Nero the public stage upon which he could act out his horrendous lawlessness.

In that judgment-coming against Jerusalem, there is also judgment of the Man of Lawlessness, Nero. There is hope and comfort in the promised relief from the opposition of the Jews and Nero (2 Thess. 2:15-17). Not only was Jerusalem destroyed within twenty years, but Nero himself died a violent death in the midst of the Jewish War (June 8, A.D. 68). His death, then, would occur in the Day of the Lord in conjunction with the judgment-coming of Christ. He would be destroyed by the breath of Christ, much like Assyria was destroyed with the coming and breath of the LORD in the Old Testament (Isa. 30:27-31) and like Israel was crushed by Babylon (Mic. 1:3-5).Ω


For political apocatastasis see the Septuagint at Ezra 4:12, 15, 19; Neh. 2:19: 66. For religious apocatastasis, see: Septuagint at Josh. 22:22; 2 Chr. 29:19; and 33:19, and in the New Testament Acts 21:21.


For example: Augustine, City of God 20:19; Chrysostom cited in Alford, Greek Testament, 2:80. If we are correct in equating him with the Beast, we could add: Victorinus, Apocalypse 17:16; Lactantius, On the Death of the Persecutors 2; Sulpicius Severus, Sacred History 2:28, 29. See my book, Beast of Revelation.


Philo, Legatio ad Caesar 43, as cited by Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 2:62.

Gentry, Before Jerusalem Fell, pp. 279-284. Tacitus, Annals 15:44.

Such imperial arrogance would produce alleged miracles as confirmation. Vespians is called "the miracle worker", because by him "many miracles occurred." Tacitus, Histories 4:81; Suetonius, Vespasian 7.