Antichrist.

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We read of Antichrist nowhere in the New Testament except in certain passages of the Epistles of John (1 Jn $2^{18.22}$ 4^{3}, 2 Jn 7). What is taught in these passages constitutes the whole New Testament doctrine of Antichrist. It is common, it is true, to connect with this doctrine what is said by our Lord of false Christs and false prophets; by Paul of the Man of Sin; by the Apocalypse of the Beasts which come up out of the deep and the sea. The warrant for labelling the composite photograph thus obtained with the name of Antichrist is not very apparent. The relations to one another of the figures which enter into this composite portrait are at best *sub lite*, and can be determined only when each of them lies clearly before us in the light of the passages which plainly present it to us. The name of Antichrist occurs in connexion with none of them except that presented in the passages of the Epistles of John already indicated; and both the name and the figure denoted by it, to all appearance, occur there first in extant literature. The Old Testament tells us nothing of Anti-Messiah. Neither has he been discovered in any of the fragments of pre-Christian Jewish literature which have come down to us. If John had not himself told us that a doctrine of Antichrist was already current when he wrote, both the doctrine and the name might have been with great plausibility ascribed to him as their originator.

John does not tell us in what quarter the doctrine of Antichrist to which he alludes was current. Nor does his allusion enable us to form any very full conception of the doctrine that was current. We learn merely that there were people who declared 'Antichrist is coming!' It appears to be implied that Antichrist was thought of as an individual, and his coming as, though certain, yet still future—as apparently, in fact, a sign of the impending end. We cannot go beyond that; perhaps not quite so far as that. And as to who it was who were asserting, 'Antichrist is coming!' John leaves us completely in the dark. Possibly he is adducing a current Christian belief, some more or less 'faithful saying and worthy of all acceptation' in circulation in the Christian community. It is even conceivable that he is adducing an item of authoritative Christian teaching, of which we should have known nothing had he not preserved it for us—a fly in his amber. This, however, does not seem very likely in itself, and does not find much support in the use John makes of the saying he quotes. He does not deny, it is true, that there is truth in it; and he utilizes the truth that is in it for his own teaching. But he at least seems to correct it; and in correcting to supersede it. If it is an item of authoritative Christian teaching, it certainly is valid to us only as preserved for us by John and in the interpretation which he puts upon it in preserving it.

It appears far more probable, however, that John is adducing not an item of Christian teaching, but only a current legend—Christian or other—in which he recognizes an element of truth and isolates it for the benefit of his readers. In that case we may understand him less as expounding than as openly correcting it—somewhat as, in the closing page of his Gospel, he corrects another saying of similar bearing which was in circulation among the brethren, to the effect that he himself should not die but should tarry till the Lord comes. The language in which he speaks of the manner in which his readers came into knowledge of this saying does not forbid this view of its origin. When he says, 'Ye heard, "Antichrist is coming!"' it is not implied that they heard it 'once for all' in the sense that they had it from a source confessedly authoritative (cf. Mt 5^{43}). It is only implied that what they heard was something which was definitely communicated to them, so as to be put completely in their possession. From whomsoever they heard it, what they heard was unquestionably this—'Antichrist is coming!' When John replaces the aorist here with the perfect at 4^{3}, he does not confound his tenses, but only emphasizes the fact that what his readers had heard still lay in their minds as part of their effective contents. He is correcting not only a statement which his readers remembered once to have heard, but an assertion present at the moment to their thought, and exercising, or in danger of exercising, actual influence upon their beliefs and expectations.

Now John is not willing to leave matters in this condition. Whether he is merely expounding the

true meaning of what his readers had heard, or is substituting for it a truer doctrine, he makes three declarations concerning Antichrist which appear to traverse its implications. He transposes Antichrist from the future to the present. He expands him from an individual into a multitude. He reduces him from a person to a heresy.

The phrase which, John tells us, his readers had heard—'Antichrist is coming!' does not in its very language, to be sure, project his coming into the future. It is the certainty rather than the futurity of Antichrist's coming which it emphasizes; and it had perhaps, as heard by his readers, put them in a quiver of expectation of his coming—creating some such situation as that against which our Lord had warned His followers (Mk $13^{21f.}$). It was so far future, however, that it was supposed not yet to have taken place. When men are saying to one another, 'Antichrist is coming!' they mean very distinctly to say that he has not yet come. And we cannot be wrong in inferring, from the use which John makes of the saying, that his coming was connected, by those who made use of this cry, with the end-time. The coming of Antichrist seems then to have been presented as a matter of dread anticipation by which men's imaginations were oppressed. John meets the situation thus produced by a very definite assertion, that, so far from being a matter of future expectation, the coming of Antichrist had already taken place. Antichrist is not a future but a present phenomenon; not a thing to be looked forward to in nameless dread, but a thing to be courageously met in our everyday living. John makes this assertion with the utmost emphasis (4^3). This thing, he says, 'is *now* in the world—already,' that post-posited 'already' carrying with it the utmost strength of assertion. There is no doubt about it at all; Antichrist is here among us, now, already.

In doing this John does not so much separate Antichrist from 'the last hour' with which he had been connected as correct the notion which had perhaps been entertained of the phrase, 'the last hour.' 'The last hour' no more than the Antichrist is a matter of the future; it too belongs to the present. The time we are living in—that is 'the last hour.' For 'the last hour' means just the Messianic period, the period after the Messiah has come. We may call it, with reference to the true coming of our Lord, the inter-Adventual period. Of course there could be no Antichrist until this 'last hour' had come. How could there be an Antichrist before there was a Christ? The fact, then, that Antichrist has come (γεγόνασιν, 2^{18})—that the phenomenon is 'now in the world—already' (4^3),—is proof enough that the time we are living in is the 'last hour' (2^{18}). Thus, with the dismissal from reality of a distinctively future Antichrist, John dismisses from reality a distinctively future 'last hour.' The 'last hour,' as he knows it, began with the coming of Christ, and fills the whole spacious period which extends till He shall come again.

He not only, however, dismisses Antichrist from the future; he deprives him of his individuality. In the place of an Antichrist, he substitutes 'many Antichrists.' And he declares that, already when he wrote, still in the first Christian century, a multitude of these Antichrists had come into existence. It is very customary, it is true, to represent John's 'many Antichrists' as rather forerunners of Antichrist, types of Antichrist, preliminary embodiments of the spirit of Antichrist and the like. It is not so, however, that John describes them. He calls them just 'Antichrists,' and he sets them over against the individual Antichrist of which his readers had heard as the reality represented by that unreal figure. His precise 'just as . . . so' cannot be robbed of its assertion of the exact correspondence of their appearance with all that was really to be expected from the assertion that Antichrist would come. Nor can his argument be stultified, that the presence of these Antichrists in the world prove it was already 'the last hour.' Predecessors of Antichrist might prove that 'the last hour' was approaching, only actual Antichrists could prove that 'the last hour' had already come. There can be no question, then, that John volatilizes the individual Antichrist into thin air and substitutes for him a multitude of 'Antichrists.' We may say, no doubt, that they embody the spirit of Antichrist; but not as if they prepared the way for its subsequent concentration in a single baleful figure, but as superseding that figure altogether and taking the place which had been assigned to it. Least of all can we appeal to Jn 4^3, 'And this is the *spirit* of the Antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it cometh; and now it is in the world already,' as implying that John after all recognized the reality of an individual Antichrist. These words recognize only the actual existence in the world of an antichristic spirit. Even this, indeed, is probably more than is said; the generalizing phrase which is used seems to be

studiedly indefinite, and perhaps declares only that refusal to 'confess Jesus' sums up in itself all that is true in 'this whole matter of the Antichrist.'

For John not only erases the individual Antichrist from the scroll of prediction, but reduces him just to a heresy. 'Who is the liar,' he demands, 'but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the Antichrist,—he who denies the Father and the Son' (1 Jn 2^{22}). 'Every spirit,' he declares, 'which confesses that Jesus is Christ come in flesh is of God; and no spirit which does not confess Jesus, is of God: and this is that antichrist of which you have heard that it is coming: and it is now in the world already' (4^{3}). 'There are many seducers,' he declares again, 'who went out into the world, even those who do not confess Jesus as Christ coming in flesh. This is the seducer and the antichrist' (2 Jn 7). In one word, 'Antichrist' meant for John just denial of what we should call the doctrine, or let us rather say the fact, of the Incarnation. By whatever process it had been brought about, 'Christ' had come to denote for John the Divine Nature of our Lord, and so far to be synonymous with 'Son of God.' To deny that Jesus is the Christ was not to him therefore merely to deny that He is the Messiah, but to deny that He is the Son of God; and was equivalent therefore to 'denying the Father and the Son'—that is to say, in our modern mode of speech, the doctrine—in fact—of the Trinity, which is the implicate of the Incarnation. To deny that Jesus is Christ come—or is the Christ coming—in flesh, was again just to refuse to recognize in Jesus Incarnate God. Whosoever, says John, takes up this attitude toward Jesus is Antichrist.

This was an attitude which could not fail to be taken up in the presence of the lofty claims made by and for Jesus as the Incarnate God. Wherever these claims were made known, there this attitude was sure to show itself. The presence of the God-man in the world inevitably produced it. It is therefore an attitude which characterizes the age of the God-man, and that is as much as to say the Messianic period, to which the name of 'the last hour' was given. This is why it was natural for John therefore to connect the presence in the world of this heresy—which he speaks of as 'Antichrist'—with the 'last hour,' which is only another name for the Messianic age. That Antichrists existed in John's day was accordingly a matter of course. It is equally a matter of course that they continue to exist in our day. So long as a Divine Christ is confessed in the midst of a gainsaying world, so long will there be, as in John's day, many Antichrists.

What John's allusions to Antichrist teach us therefore is that the development of Christianity in the world—the transformation of the world by Christianity—is not to be accomplished without conflict. If Christianity is an evolution, it is also (as all evolution is) a struggle; and Christianity survives in the end only as the survival of the fittest. We cannot proceed on the supposition that the world may be overcome without strife; and the strife is mortal. For two thousand years now the battle has been in progress. It is far from fought out yet. The many Antichrists which still beset Christianity and clog its progress will certainly be succeeded by many yet to come, who will certainly not be behind those which have preceded them in baleful power. Are they to increase in malignancy until at last all that can be called Antichrist is summed up in one great Anti-Christian movement, or perhaps in one great Anti-Christian person, the Antichrist by way of eminence? It may seem that in the nature of the case this might well be so. As the knowledge of Christ grows in clarity as well as in extension, the opposition to Christ might well be ever more and more compacted into ever deeper hatred, expressing itself with ever more concentrated effect. This, however, is not John's representation. Such a history for Christianity in the world he certainly did not contemplate. He does not even suppose that Antichrists will always exist in the world. He tells us plainly enough that Christianity must fight its way to victory. But he tells us equally plainly that it is to victory that it fights its way. He sees the victory as clearly as he sees the conflict. 'The world,' says he,—the evil world of unbelief—'is passing away'—is in actual process of passing away. It required some courage of faith for John, looking out from the midst of the little group of despised Christians in Asia Minor upon the surrounding masses of heathenism, to say that. But he says it. 'The darkness is passing away,' he says again, 'and the true light is already shining.' 'Already'—that little word carries in its bosom a glorious prophecy. John already foresees the time when the Antichrists who swarmed around him and who are now swarming around us, shall no longer exist, because the light which he saw already shining, shall have broadened into the fullness of the day.