



## 2 Thessalonians

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### Introduction

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The second letter to the Thessalonians (2 Thessalonians) is found in the Pauline corpus, though it belongs to the set of texts often referred to as 'disputed Paulines', meaning it is debated whether Paul—the apostle and one of the great figures in Christianity's early spread—was responsible for its authorship. There are a number of reasons that scholars think it is pseudonymous, such as the numerous literary parallels between 1 and 2 Thessalonians (suggesting direct copying to some) and the supposedly colder and more authoritarian tone of 2 Thessalonians. Many also observe significant differences between the two eschatologies. The debate is at a stalemate and is unlikely to be resolved any time soon, if ever. Though 2 Thessalonians may or may not be by Paul, it certainly belongs to the wider Pauline family and should be read alongside the rest of the letters (though particularly with 1 Thessalonians).

Because of the dispute over authorship, it is difficult to say much about the date or occasion of the letter. If the letter is by Paul it was likely written very shortly after 1 Thessalonians and probably sought to correct an even more dire situation among the community than that addressed in the first letter, where the misunderstandings about eschatology and work had grown to a point of crisis. If not by Paul, there is even less to be said. If pseudonymous, it was likely composed towards the end of the first century. Possibly it was written to correct 1 Thessalonians—or a supposed misunderstanding of 1 Thessalonians. For example, it could have been written in light of the 'delay of the *parousia*' to explain why Jesus still had not returned despite Paul's suggestions that his return was imminent. [Apocalyptic literature](#) often arises in contexts of suffering and persecution, which seems to be the case for 2 Thessalonians (or, at the very least, if the author has fictionalized the entire situation, then the imagined situation is one of persecution). Whatever the occasion, it is clear that the letter was written in order to correct some sort of eschatological misunderstanding and to provide comfort and confidence in God's judgment in the face of difficult circumstances.

Similarly to 1 Thessalonians, the letter is focused on eschatological topics such as the *parousia*, the day of the Lord, final judgment, and God's wrath. Compared to 1 Thessalonians, it contains more obviously apocalyptic language. These topics will all be explored in this entry.

## Parousia

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The eschatological 'coming' (παρουσία, *parousia*) of Jesus is a major focus in this letter, as it is in 1 Thessalonians. It is first described in chapter 1 as an 'apocalypse' (ἀποκάλυψις, *apokalypsis*) or 'revelation' from heaven (demonstrating where the author sees Jesus as currently located) (1:7; unless otherwise stated, all quotes are my own translation). The word *apokalypsis* is not always explicitly eschatological. The Book of Revelation, for example, describes the vision as an *apocalypse*, by which it seems to mean a revelation about who Jesus is and what he has done rather than another word for the *parousia*. However, often *apokalypsis* does occur in eschatological contexts. For example, in 1 Corinthians 1:7–8 it is connected with *parousia*, and in Romans 8:18–19 it relates to Jesus's future glorification. Outside the Pauline corpus, *apokalypsis* also describes Jesus's return in 1 Peter 1:7,13 and 4:13. The use of *apokalypsis* rather than *parousia* in 1:7 may suggest a nuance about Jesus currently being hidden from sight but being visible to all when he comes, even those who have rejected him.

Throughout the eschatological descriptions in 2 Thessalonians there are a host of possible Jewish scriptural influences. Jesus appears in flaming fire in his *apokalypsis*, imagery that calls to mind theophany texts in which God appears, such as Exodus 19. Additionally, fire imagery appears in Daniel 7 in connection with God's appearance and judgment. In Daniel 7:10–11, the beast with the boastful horn is killed and thrown into the fire of God's throne as punishment. In 1:7, angels accompany Jesus in his *apokalypsis*. This is common imagery in both theophany and 'coming of God' texts in the Jewish scriptures and throughout the New Testament (Exodus 19:13,16,19; Psalm 68:18; Zechariah 14:5; Isaiah 13:3–5; Jude 14; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 4:16; Mark 8:38; 13:26; Revelation 19:14). In chapter 2, *parousia* is connected with the 'gathering' (ἐπισυναγωγή, *episunagōgē*) of God's people together. It is a similar picture to the 'catching up' that occurs in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, where believers meet Jesus in the air as he descends (though a different word appears there). Throughout Second Temple and early Christian literature, *messiah* figures gather together God's people in the end times (Psalms of Solomon 17:26; Mark 13:27; Matthew 24:31; Didache 10:5). Though Jesus is not identified explicitly as God in 2 Thessalonians, these images all serve to set up Jesus's arrival as a theophany, or at the very least a Christophany. Just as in other writings God's presence is accompanied by angels and fire, so here Jesus is the one accompanied by both. When Jesus comes, God's people are gathered to him while his enemies face punishment.

The *parousia* is further described as an 'epiphany' or 'appearance' (*epiphaneia*) in chapter 2. This language links 2 Thessalonians to the Pastoral Epistles, which prefer the term over *parousia*. Unlike in the Pastorals, however, the term here refers solely to the future appearance of Jesus rather than relating it to his first appearance on earth. In fact, it is connected with *parousia* to talk about 'the appearance of his coming'. This also conceptually connects with *apokalypsis*—Jesus's arrival is understood as visible. When he appears, things are made clear and put right. Throughout the letter, this event of Jesus's appearance is presented as a decisive moment of both salvation and judgment. When he comes, Jesus kills the man of lawlessness; when he is revealed from heaven, those who do not believe in him face destruction. At the same time, at his appearance those who belong to him receive glory (1:12). In each of these descriptions, Jesus's arrival is portrayed as a future moment that has not occurred yet. The audience is still waiting—and may have a while to wait yet.

## Judgment

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Eschatological judgment is a recurring theme in 2 Thessalonians, with two possible outcomes: salvation or punishment. Chapter 1 describes God's judgment, showing how at the end there will be a reversal of fortunes: those who are currently afflicting God's people will be judged and themselves afflicted (1:6), while believers will receive rest (1:7). It is a case of total reversal of fortunes in the end, where the punishment matches the crime. There is, however, a broadening out in 1:8 to the judgment of all nonbelievers, all 'those who do not know God' and 'those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus' (though some have seen two groups here, such as Jews and Gentiles). This judgment is reserved for the future. In 1:6–7, it is made clear that God's 'paying back' occurs at the moment of Jesus's revelation, and Jesus is shown to be the agent of vengeance in 1:8, as he brings ἐκδίκησις/*ekdikēsis* ('vengeance,' 'punishment') with him in his coming.

The punishment that nonbelievers experience is 'eternal destruction'. The word for 'destruction', ὄλεθρος/*olethros*, is common in Greek versions of Jewish scriptures in eschatological contexts (Jeremiah 28:55; 31:3,8,32; 32:31; Ezekiel 6:14; 14:16). It also occurs in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 in the discussion about God's wrath that will come on the day of the Lord. With the qualifier 'eternal,' it could here connote annihilation—the literal destruction of nonbelievers. On the other hand, it may have a metaphorical meaning about an ongoing state of punishment. This is because αἰώνιος/*aionios* can either mean 'everlasting' or 'a long period of time'. Though the exact nature of the destruction is not spelled out, one aspect of it certainly has to do with the presence of Jesus. In this passage, depending on how one reads the preposition, destruction either means separation from the Lord's presence or is directly caused by the Lord's presence. The presence of God is destructive in texts such as Jeremiah 4:26. However, there is a direct textual parallel here between 2 Thessalonians 1:9 and Isaiah 2:10, 19, 20. In this day of the Lord text, the unrighteous hide from the presence of the Lord. Given the identical phrasing, it seems likely that the phrase functions in the same way: destruction means being outside the presence of the Lord. This banishment occurs on the same day that believers are glorified: the day Jesus is revealed. Whether a complete annihilation or an eternal fate of separation from God, the punishment is certainly understood as something that will happen in the future—precisely, when Jesus appears.

For those who belong to God, their fate is not destruction but rather the inheritance of a kingdom. The phrase 'kingdom of God' appears throughout the Pauline corpus: Romans 14:17, 1 Corinthians 4:20; 6:9–10; 15:50; Galatians 5:21; Colossians 4:11; Ephesians 5:5; 1 Thessalonians 2:1. Several of these occurrences urge worthy living with the purpose of inheriting the kingdom in the future. This places the kingdom of God in the future, as an eschatological inheritance. There are, however, conditions for receiving this inheritance. For example, purification and cleansing in order to be worthy to enter God's kingdom seems to be a theme in 2 Thessalonians. Those who are to be part of God's kingdom must be 'counted worthy' (1:5) and indeed 'made worthy' (1:11). This is similar to Daniel 11:32–35, where the end-time suffering of God's people is related to their purification. So, similarly, it seems 2 Thessalonians 1:5 connects the audience's current suffering with preparation for the kingdom in some way, whether as evidence of their ultimate fate or part of the process of inheriting the kingdom. The receipt of the kingdom happens when Jesus appears, which seems to suggest that inheriting the kingdom is about being in the presence and glory of Jesus. Beyond this, however, 2 Thessalonians does not speculate on what the kingdom of God looks like. As is common in [apocalyptic literature](#), there are two groups of people with two different fates. Those who belong to God will experience salvation; those who are classed as his enemies

will suffer his vengeance.

## Day of the Lord

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In 2 Thessalonians, very little is said specifically about the day of the Lord. It is connected to the *parousia* in some way, as seen in 2:1-2, even if not exactly equivalent with it. The author responds to a claim that 'the day of the Lord has come' (2:2), asserting that it certainly has not yet come and laying out other events that must first happen. For a time, it was popular to claim the phrase 'the day of the Lord has come' meant that the day was imminent, not that it had already occurred (see Peerbolte 1996, 73-74). Scholars could not imagine how anyone would believe the day had actually occurred, so preferred the 'imminent' interpretation (Wrede 1903, 41-42; Dobschütz 1909, 267-68; Dibelius 1937, 44; Trilling 1980, 78). However, scholars have more recently recognized that the claim is about something that has already occurred since elsewhere in the New Testament the verb used (ἐνίστημι/*enistēmi*) in the perfect tense always refers to something present, not imminent (Romans 8:38; 1 Corinthians 3:22; 7:26; Galatians 1:4; Hebrews 9:9; Wanamaker 1990, 240; Nicholl 2004, 115-24). What is less obvious is precisely what this claim was asserting. One proposed suggestion is that the day of the Lord had come spiritually, not physically (Schmithals 1972, 202-8; Bailey 1979, 142-43; Jewett 1986, 161-78; Malherbe 2000, 429), though this interpretation is less popular today. Others argue that there is a misunderstanding of 1 Thessalonians in which the *parousia* and day of the Lord are seen as two temporally separate events, and so certain people believed the day of the Lord had occurred already—likely because of some sort of disastrous event, such as an earthquake or famine—while the *parousia* was about to occur (Barclay 1993, 527-28); or, they might have believed that the *parousia* had either bypassed them or failed to occur altogether, leading to despair in the community about their fate (Nicholl 2004, 185; Tooth 2020, 300-302). On the other hand, some (who believe that the letter is not by Paul) suggest that the author made up the occasion (in other words, no one was actually claiming the day of the Lord had arrived) in order to respond to criticism or doubts over the delay of the *parousia* (Furnish 2007, 140). All recent interpreters agree, however, that 2 Thessalonians strongly urges the audience to recognize that the day of the Lord is still to occur in the future.

## Rebellion

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In correcting whatever eschatological views the audience held, 2 Thessalonians draws out the events that need to happen before the day of the Lord will come. One aspect of this [apocalyptic](#) scheme is the 'rebellion' or 'apostasy' (ἀποστασία, *apostasía*) that will occur (2:3). The word *apostasía* can mean a political or military rebellion, or in a religious context it can describe rebellion against God or abandoning the faith. In Acts 21:21, it describes a turning away from Jewish ancestral traditions. Many other apocalyptic texts describe a heightened time of lawlessness, deceit, and suffering in the final days (1 Enoch 91:7; Ephesians 6:13; 2 Timothy 3:1-9; Revelation 13; Didache 16:3-5; Mark 13:22; Matthew 24:24). The Synoptic eschatological discourse describes the deceit that will occur near the end, when many false [messiahs](#) and [prophets](#) will seek to lead astray even those among the believing community. It is this same sense of a widespread, blatant rebellion against God in the 'end times' that is suggested by 2 Thessalonians. In contrast to the synoptic gospels, however, 2 Thessalonians suggests that only outsiders

will be deceived (2:10: 'those who are perishing')—that they are in fact destined by God to be deceived by the man of lawlessness so that they are condemned in the end (2:12). Such people are specifically contrasted to believers, who have been set aside for salvation (2:13). They will not be part of the *apostasia*. We see here again a dualism between those who will be saved and those who will be punished.

## Man of Lawlessness

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Chapter 2 contains two of the most intriguing characters in the Pauline letters: the man of lawlessness and the restrainer. The man of lawlessness appears in 2 Thessalonians as an eschatological opponent figure who is set up against Jesus and who will be defeated by Jesus at the *parousia*. In fact, one of the first pieces of information about this figure is that he is a 'son of destruction' (2:3)—in other words, doomed to destruction in a cosmic battle. This opponent sets himself up in the temple—presumably the Jerusalem temple, though it is not explicitly stated—and proclaims himself to be greater than God or any other object of worship. Notably, this figure is specifically not identified as Satan but as a representative sent by Satan (2:9). There is some debate about whether this figure is simply human or is a supernatural entity. In any case, he is imbued with miraculous abilities through the power of Satan and is granted licence to deceive by God himself.

There is a large range of possible influences for this figure. For example, there are similar descriptions of kings opposed to Israel in the Jewish scriptures, such as Ezekiel 28:2, describing the king of Tyre: 'you have said, "I am a god; I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas," yet you are but a mortal, and no god, though you compare your mind with the mind of a god' (translation from NRSV). Yet, most suggest that the language of lawlessness and the lawless one are clearly influenced by Daniel 7–12. In Daniel 11, there is a figure who convinces many to join a rebellion and set up the 'abomination of desolation' in the temple. Most scholars recognize the original reference to be about Antiochus IV Epiphanes (c. 215–164 BCE), who set up a statue of Zeus in the Jerusalem temple after conquering it (see 1 Maccabees 1:20–24, 41–50, 54–59; 2 Maccabees 5:11–21; 6:1–6). It is also possible that the Roman general Pompey (106–48 BCE) influenced this portrait. He was notorious among the Jewish people for his desecration of the temple by going into the holy of holies during his conquest of Jerusalem in 63 BCE. Indeed, Psalms of Solomon 17:11 describes Pompey as 'the lawless one'. On the other hand, some of the Greek versions of Daniel 11–12 use *anomos* repeatedly to describe the situation at the end and the actions of those who rebel, so the language may originate from a similar version of Daniel. Others have suggested that the man of lawlessness is influenced by the actions of Caligula (12–41 CE) in 40 CE, when he sought to set up a temple of himself in the temple of Jerusalem. These plans never came to fruition due to his death, but the threat remained seared into the mind of many Jews. A few scholars argue for Nero (37–68 CE) as the inspiration for this imagery, highlighting the Nero *redivivus* rumour that he had not actually died and instead would return soon (Kooten 2005, 177–215).

Summing up all the possible influences on this imagery, James Harrison (2011, 85) states:

*In the variegated traditions of Second Temple Judaism the figure of the 'lawless one' emerges as an amalgam of Antiochus IV 'Epiphanes,' Nicanor, the 'Wicked Priest,' Pompey, and Caligula, each of whom defiled (or attempted to defile) the Jerusalem Temple.*

Given the strong parallels with the account in Daniel, that is likely the foremost influence in the author's mind. However, the author may have seen the same pattern repeated over and over in these various other figures as pointing towards an eschatological opponent in the same tradition. Just as Jesus has his own revelation in chapter 1, so will the lawless one be revealed according to 2:3. Because the 'mystery of lawlessness' is now at work, this is likely a reference to a public unveiling of the evil that has already been at work but is made obvious at the end. This revelation has not yet occurred because the lawless one is currently held in restraint by another mysterious figure. And, because the lawless one has not been revealed yet, the day of the Lord also cannot have occurred; the author's overarching goal in describing this eschatological drama is to clarify this timing.

## The Restrainer

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The other mysterious figure in this [apocalyptic](#) drama is 'the restrainer', whose identity is difficult to establish for a number of reasons. In the first place, there are two different forms of the same verb used to describe this figure: first a neuter participle—τὸ κατέχον/*to katechon* ('what is restraining')—and then a masculine participle—ὁ κατέχων/*ho katechōn* ('the one who restrains'). This mixing of the impersonal and personal is similar to the treatment of lawlessness in this chapter: the impersonal concept of lawlessness (1:7) alongside the personal man of lawlessness/lawless one (1:3,8,9). There have been multiple and varied suggestions over the centuries for what this figure could represent. Early Church Fathers and medieval interpreters tended to see the Roman Empire embodied here, with God providing the empire and emperor as restraints on the full expression of lawlessness until the end (Cartwright and Hughes 2001, 26–27). Some see God himself as the one holding things in restraint until the appointed moment (Aus 1977; Tonstad 2007). Others suggest an evil figure who had 'seized' or 'possessed' the community rather than restraining anything, and had led them astray with false eschatological teaching (Giblin 1967, 167–242). Some even suggest this was simply a rhetorical device the pseudonymous author used to answer why the *parousia* had not yet occurred; by connecting this with previous teaching as suggested in 2:5, the author could then keep the discussion vague (Peerbolte 1996, 139).

Recently, interpreters have been gravitating towards the idea that the 'restrainer' might be a supernatural or angelic figure. For example, Colin Nicholl (2000) suggests that the restrainer is the archangel Michael, who is involved in Daniel 12. In the narrative of Daniel 10–12, there is a supernatural war occurring between the angels of various nations and God's people. Throughout, Michael helps God's people to resist the evil nations and their patron angels. In Daniel 12:1, Michael, the angelic protector of God's people, 'arises' or 'stands' in the final days and at that point there is a time of tribulation that is worse than anything that has ever occurred before. This moment of distress is also the moment of deliverance for the people of God and, according to verse 2, brings about a general resurrection of all the dead. Though the same verb, κατέχω/*katechō*, is not used in any of the Greek versions of Daniel, Nicholl demonstrates how Michael is referred to with *katechō* in the *Greek Magical Papyri* (PGM IV.2768–72). Additionally, the binding of Satan/demons is a common motif in Second Temple literature (Tobit 8:3; 1 Enoch 10:4). In Revelation 20:1–3, Satan is bound with a chain and thrown into a pit so that he will not deceive for a period of time. Michael is connected to the defeat of 'the great dragon' in Revelation 12:7–9; after this, Satan is cast down to earth and opposes God's people. Though not held by many early interpreters, this view is becoming more popular among modern scholars as making the best sense of the evidence and parallel literature. As Gupta (2019, 256–57) argues, 'While the restrainer conundrum is not considered "solved," still the

archangel Michael theory appears to be the one that satisfies the most exegetical problems.' Whatever one decides about the identity of the restrainer, the author's point is that this figure is still active and so there are still a number of events that must happen before the day of the Lord can occur.

## Reception

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From ancient interpreters through to the present day, 2 Thessalonians has proved to be a book that has elicited both great interest and great confusion. Several of the [apocalyptic](#) elements of the letter take on a life of their own in later interpretation. In particular, the man of lawlessness from chapter 2 is often understood synonymously with the [Antichrist](#), though that term is not used in this letter but rather comes from the Johannine epistles, which refer both to multiple 'Antichrists' and a singular 'Antichrist' (1 John 2:18, 2:22, 4:3; 2 John 7). The multiple false [prophets](#) of the synoptic gospels and the multiple antichrists of the Johannine epistles are here condensed into this singular figure, who opposes [Christ](#) but who will be defeated by Christ when he returns. Modern construals of 'the Antichrist' are based heavily on the portrayal of the man of lawlessness here and the beast of Revelation.

A number of the Church Fathers showed much interest in the man of lawlessness, identifying him as the [Antichrist](#) (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.25.1; Tertullian, *Five Books Against Marcion* 5.16; Augustine, *City of God* 20.19). Early medieval writers were also particularly interested in the man of lawlessness in works on 2 Thessalonians. Ninth-century interpreter Haimo of Auxerre and tenth-century writer Thietland of Einsiedeln both wrote apocalyptic commentaries on the letter. Both interact with popular medieval legends about the Antichrist. For example, Haimo suggests that the Antichrist will be born in Babylon and will lead astray the Jews, who will rebuild the temple (see Cartwright and Hughes 2001, 26). At this point there was a shift in thought on the Antichrist, where the idea 'went from being mere apostates and heretics in the New Testament to being a truly satanic figure, a powerful political leader who would persecute Christians and deceive the rest of the world' (Cartwright and Hughes 2001, 7). Not everyone thought the Antichrist would be a (purely) political leader, however. Protestant Reformers regularly identified the pope (or the papacy as a whole) as the Antichrist/man of lawlessness (e.g. see Westminster Confession, Article 25.6). Despite the Reformers' view, the majority of interpreters continued to speculate about a political figure, and such speculations have continued to develop in modern thought.

Though many may not realize it, modern conceptions of eschatological timetables and apocalyptic scenarios are heavily influenced by 2 Thessalonians, read alongside other apocalyptic texts. For example, the description of the man of lawlessness as seating himself in the temple, connected with descriptions of the eschatological temple in Ezekiel 40–48, influences contemporary predictions of a future restored temple in Jerusalem before Jesus returns—the so-called Third Temple. The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 led to expectations that the temple in Jerusalem would be rebuilt, and in certain Christian groups (particularly dispensationalists) that expectation continues.

In popular culture, the portrait of the man of lawlessness in chapter 2 continues to affect eschatological imagination in the Christian world, though it also has impact beyond that. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins's best-selling *Left Behind* series, for example, focuses on Nicolae Carpathia, an [Antichrist](#) figure who is the leader of a type of 'New World Order' government. This follows the portrayal of 2 Thessalonians' eschatological opponent as an explicitly human, not supernatural, figure. As mentioned, this figure is

increasingly identified as the Antichrist through patristic and medieval exegesis, and as the myth of Antichrist developed it has taken on a decidedly political nature, as exemplified in the *Left Behind* portrayals. Even in non-premillennial readings, where it is assumed the Antichrist will appear before Christ's *parousia*, various figures have been identified as the Antichrist/man of lawlessness, from various popes (or the papacy itself), as observed above, to Hitler to political leaders such as Barack Obama.

The apocalyptic language and imagery of 2 Thessalonians resonate beyond just the [Antichrist](#) aspect. In the TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* (Season 3, Episode 1, 'Night'), the protagonist, June, quotes a slightly modified version of 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8 during a cathartic scene of vengeance as follows: 'Lord Jesus, be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels. In flaming fire, thou shall take vengeance.' The apocalyptic imagery here serves the show well to signify the retribution that the two oppressed women carry out against their oppressor. In this theocratic society, June turns the scriptures that have so often been used against her back against her abusers as she experiences a hint of hope that things could change.

## Conclusion

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The second letter to the Thessalonians is an undeniably [apocalyptic](#) letter. It is influenced by other apocalyptic works, such as Daniel 7-12, and it uses heightened imagery—flames of fire, eternal punishment, widespread rebellion, destruction of enemies, divine warfare—to discuss the state of the world and what is to come. Like 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians presents a future-oriented eschatology, where believers currently persevere and wait for the defeat of lawlessness at Jesus's return. Whether written by Paul or not, it is certainly evidence of the apocalyptic stream present within wider Pauline theology. This apocalyptic material and the evocative imagery continue to exert influence both in theological contexts and at the popular level, sustained throughout the centuries in theories and depictions of '[the Antichrist](#)' and other eschatological speculations.

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