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Peerbolte, L. J. Lietaert.
The Antecedents of Antichrist: A Traditio-Historical Study of the Earliest Christian Views on Eschatological Opponents

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This Leiden dissertation (1995) attempts to shed new light on early Christian expectations of eschatological opposition and the Jewish antecedents for these traditions. Peerbolte's main thrust, a critique of the idea that there was any early unified tradition of the Antichrist, is not particularly new, and his main findings, that Christian expectations of eschatological opposition are diverse and are based on Jewish traditions, are not particularly robust. Peerbolte is more successful describing how changes in Christian expectations of eschatological opposition corresponded to changes in expectations of the imminence of the *parousia*.

Chapter one contains a comprehensive history of research on "Antichrist" traditions and other notions of eschatological opposition, in which he critiques the theories of W. Bousset and R. H. Charles. Peerbolte's book is primarily an extension of earlier work. E. Lohmeyer critiqued Bousset's theory of a unified, pre-Christian Antichrist legend in his 1941 *RAC* article on "Antichrist," and J. Ernst (*Die eschatologischen Gegenspieler in den Schriften des Neuen Testaments* [Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1967]) extended this critique in a study of the eschatological opposition passages in the NT. G. C. Jenks (*The Origins and Early Development of the Antichrist Myth* [BZBW 59; Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1991]) argued that the Antichrist tradition originated in Christocentric adaptations of earlier traditions. Peerbolte critiques Ernst and Jenks's tendency to presuppose a Christian Antichrist tradition in their treatment of earlier sources (Peerbolte places the development of this tradition after Irenaeus, but this crucial point is asserted rather than proved). But by and large, Peerbolte refines Jenks's work and extends the work of Lohmeyer and Ernst to a broader corpus of texts.

Peerbolte selects pre-Irenaeus Christian texts "that explicitly deal with the phenomenon of eschatological opposition preceding the *parousia* of Christ" (p. 15): Mark 13 par.; 2 Thess 2:1-12; 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7; Revelation; *Didache* 16; *Barnabas* 4; *Ascension of Isaiah* 4; (*Ethiopic*) *Apocalypse of Peter* 2:7-13; and Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* 32 and 110. Peerbolte proposes to ask for each text: (1) which views concerning

eschatological opposition the literature contains; (2) the reasons the early Christian authors incorporated these eschatological traditions in their writings; and (3) the traditio-historical backgrounds for these views of eschatological opposition (pp. 15, 19). Question one suggests presuppositions about the "available" views at the time, a presupposition Peerbolte critiques in Ernst and Jenks. If Peerbolte's main concern is tradition history, as questions one and three suggest, why does he also try to discuss the reasons authors incorporated these traditions? Peerbolte never explicitly describes a method for determining an author's "reason" for including a tradition (if anyone, including the author, could articulate this) nor how a text functions in a community (which may in fact have little or no relationship to an author's "reasons").

Part One consists of a roughly chronological study of these Christian texts (Peerbolte pairs Mark and the *Apocalypse of Peter*, 2 Thessalonians and Justin, and the Johannine epistles and Polycarp's *Philippians* on thematic grounds). Peerbolte's exegesis is characterized by admirable attention to grammatical, history-of-religion, and tradition-history concerns. But he takes on every issue, whether it pertains to his topic or not. The reader is lost in the detail (turning to the "Conclusions" provides some needed focus). Peerbolte writes that he intends to study these sources "in their own right" and "according to their own contents" (pp. 14, 19). But he never demonstrates an ability for narrative exegesis, a shortcoming which seriously undercuts his analysis (see, for instance, the discussion of 2 Thess 2:1-12 on pp. 85-86, in which he brings in the description of the *parousia* in 2 Thess 1:5-10 only as an afterthought). Confining himself to "explicit" references to eschatological opposition constricts the concept of a tradition and leads to atomistic, often wooden exegesis (contrast Susan R. Garrett's *The Demise of the Devil* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989] for a subtler reading of implicit *and* explicit references to Satan in a narrative world). Peerbolte's intense focus on individual words or phrases leads him to ignore thematic connections and emerging traditions, such as possible correspondences between 2 Thess 2:1-12 and Revelation 13. He would have done well to reorganize Part One in light of his conclusions, in particular how changes in Christian notions of eschatological opposition corresponded to changes in expectations of the *parousia*, rather than taking the reader through every step of analysis.

Part Two treats Jewish sources in an attempt to reconstruct the traditio-historical background of the eschatological motifs in the Christian texts. The texts discussed in Part Two are Daniel; *Jubilees*; *1 Enoch*; Qumran literature (1QM; 1QS; CD; 11QMelch 4Q'Amram; 4Q280; 1QpHab; 4QFlor, 4QTestim; 4Q246); the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*; the *Assumption of Moses*; 4 Ezra; 2 Baruch; and the *Sibylline Oracles*. The relatively cursory treatment of Jewish sources in Part Two contrasts with the detailed analysis of the Christian texts in Part One. Peerbolte does not explain the ordering of the texts in Part Two nor why his analysis of Jewish texts should follow the discussion of Christian texts in a traditio-historical analysis. Since the conclusions are presented thematically (in charts, pp. 211 and 342), a similar presentation of the textual evidence would be preferable. Grouping texts under thematic categories such as "The Climax of

Evil" or "The Gentile Assault" would do justice to the layers of tradition in texts such as *I Enoch* and would obviate the need for full introduction of texts that make small contributions to his final results. The criticism applies to Part One as well. If Peerbolte had revised his dissertation in light of his conclusions, there would not be a need for a full introduction of every text.

In his survey of Jewish sources, Peerbolte is careful to deny any hints of a pre-Christian notion of an Antichrist or "anti-messiah" who acts as the eschatological adversary of God (e.g., p. 330). But given that Peerbolte details the developing notions of the climax of evil, the rise of the eschatological tyrant, the rule of Belial, the chaos monsters, and, most suggestive for the conflict of Christ and the Antichrist, the confrontation between Michael and Belial/Beliar or Melchizedek and Melchiresha, I often had the impression that he was undercutting his own arguments. The same criticism applies to Part One. In his emphasis on the variety of Christian eschatological views, Peerbolte includes a wealth of detail on each verse but fails to recognize unifying themes.