

Article

## Antichrist as (Anti)Charisma: Reflections on Weber and the ‘Son of Perdition’

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**Abstract:** The figure of Antichrist, linked in recent US apocalyptic thought to President Barack Obama, forms a central component of Christian end-times scenarios, both medieval and modern. Envisioned as a false-messiah, deceptive miracle-worker, and prophet of evil, Antichrist inversely embodies many of the qualities and characteristics associated with Max Weber’s concept of *charisma*. This essay explores early Christian, medieval, and contemporary depictions of Antichrist and the imagined political circumstances of his reign as manifesting the notion of *(anti)charisma*, compelling but misleading charismatic political and religious leadership oriented toward damnation rather than redemption.

**Keywords:** apocalypticism; charisma; Weber; antichrist; Bible; US presidency

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### 1. Introduction: Obama, Antichrist, and Weber

On 4 November 2012, just two days before the most recent US presidential election, Texas “Megachurch” pastor Robert Jeffress (1956– ) proclaimed that a vote for the incumbent candidate Barack Obama (1961– ) represented a vote for the coming of Antichrist. “President Obama is not the Antichrist,” Jeffress qualified to his listeners, “But what I am saying is this: the course he is choosing to lead our nation is paving the way for the future reign of Antichrist” [1]. Over the last four years, other evangelical Christians and additional critics of the president have been less circumspect about the apocalyptic implications of Obama’s presidency and his identity as Antichrist. One popular email-chain that made the rounds in the fall 2008 alerted readers, referring to the Book of Revelation as its source:

“The anti-Christ will be a man, in his 40s, of MUSLIM descent, who will deceive the nations with persuasive language, and have a MASSIVE Christ-like appeal....the prophecy says that people will flock to

him and he will promise false hope and world peace, and when he is in power, will destroy everything. Is it OBAMA?" [2].

Naysayers have refuted this particular claim, pointing out (among other things) that the Book of Revelation says nothing directly about Antichrist, his age, or his status as a Muslim. The association of Barack Obama with Antichrist, however, will not be easily turned aside. One video posted on Youtube from January 2009, titled "Is Barack Obama Antichrist?" opens with scenes of Hitler and his mesmerizing political performances before cutting to scenes of Obama on the campaign trail in 2008 [3]. The implications are clear. This video goes on to claim that certain letter-sequences in the Book of Revelation link Obama to Antichrist. As of December 2012 it has garnered close 1.5 million hits. A more recent video posted in September 2012 confidently declares "The Antichrist is Barack Obama." While ominous music plays in the background, this production combines scriptural citations with recent clips from the media to assert that the president meets an impressive 14 out of 16 characteristics required for being Antichrist [4].

As an elected office holder, the executive leader of a massive—one is tempted to say Byzantine—bureaucratic governmental system, Barack Obama does not at first glance fit the bill for a bearer of "charismatic" authority as defined by the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1820) ([5], pp. 18–27; [6], pp. 46–47). Obama's association with Antichrist, however, speaks to possible connections between the U.S. president and Weber's model of charisma, framed not just in historical but eschatological terms. Looking beyond Obama specifically, Antichrist suggests a fascinating portrait of inverse Weberian charisma in action, what one might call (anti)charisma, charisma with a reverse charge or polarity. After all, who or what is Antichrist? As commonly understood, the Christian idea of Antichrist posits the coming of a false prophet, a deceptive miracle-worker, a person filled with the spirit of evil who will attract throngs of followers believing in him as the true messiah during the trials of the end-times ([7], pp. 1–7). (Anti)charisma in this regard does not mean the opposite of charismatic authority, which might be called "anti-charisma." Anti-charisma suggests perhaps nothing more than the extreme "routinization" of charisma, as Weber called it, whereby charisma metamorphoses into institutional rule by officials and laws, into leadership without the personal, compelling appeal of the charismatic king or prophet or other leader ([5], pp. 48–65). Rather, (anti)charisma denotes a "dark" charisma, what today we might call the "cult of personality," an immediate, inspirational, and compelling act of creating what seems to be legitimate authority and a sense of prophetic mission—but turns out to be a misleading guide into political and perhaps eternal damnation rather than redemption.

### 1.1. Barack Obama as Antichrist/Messiah

Obama is hardly the first U. S. president or major contemporary political figure to be linked with the eschatological figure of Antichrist, who plays the role of Satan's earthly minion during the apocalyptic trials and tribulations of history's end. As is often the case when a political leader's detractors denounce him in these terms, it remains difficult to gage the sincerity of these accusations in terms of religious conviction. Bernard McGinn has found it useful to distinguish between Antichrist *language*, using the term to attack opponents without any commitment to a vision of salvation history, and Antichrist *application*, representing a genuine effort to interpret historical events and personages

as part of an apocalyptic scheme ([6], p. 21). One imagines that some contemporary Americans employ the label Antichrist as a provocative slur encapsulating their general dislike of the president, while others, especially Christians steeped in popular end-times scenarios, take the premise of his apocalyptic role quite seriously. Regardless, in Obama's case the question of his possible status as Antichrist assumes a far more elevated profile and sometimes emotionally intense condition than it did with his predecessors in office. Witness the heckler at a 2011 fundraiser in Los Angeles who screamed at the president "The Christian God is the one and only true living God" and "Jesus Christ is God" before yelling at him "you're the Antichrist!" [8].

The relatively widespread conviction or convenient slander that Obama is Antichrist seems to exist in an inverse relationship with the equally pervasive notion that Obama represents a messianic figure, a secularized civil savior for the American dream and political experiment. Referred to as "the One," he channels some of the qualities identified with a charismatic leader in the Weberian mode, inspiring something akin to hero-worship among some of his followers [9].<sup>1</sup> The blog "Is Barack Obama the Messiah" provides a clearing house for numerous articles, essays, videos, and excerpts from literature exploring various aspects of Obama's "messianic" or "prophetic" qualities (along with links to sources skeptical of such claims) [10]. For others, Obama's status as the One has grown to such proportions that it requires some gentle or not-so-gentle mockery. In his acceptance speech at the 2012 Republican National Convention, Mitt Romney played with this theme by making a side-ways reference to the issue of climate change, declaring "President Obama promised to begin to slow the rise of the oceans, and to heal the planet. My promise is to help you and your family" [11]. On occasions, even Obama has gotten in on the act, joking at the Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation dinner in October 2008 that "Contrary to the rumors you have heard, I was not born in a manger. I was actually born on Krypton and sent here by my father Jor-El to save the Planet Earth" [12]. For his opponents, however, this very idea of the president as a redemptive figure precisely illustrates the danger he poses to American society and provides vivid proof of Obama's Antichrist-like qualities—his ability to deceive the masses, tricking them into thinking that he is a messiah who can redeem the world. His very charismatic appeal condemns him, revealing him to be a false-messiah, whose meteoric rise to power portends evil deeds before the end of all things.

### *1.2. The Scriptural Basis for Antichrist*

Contemporary Christians not familiar with the Bible might be surprised at the lack of direct scriptural attention paid to Antichrist given his prominent role in subsequent apocalyptic scenarios ([7], pp. 33–45). In the New Testament's so-called "Little Apocalypse" (Mk. 13:1–37; Mt. 24:1–15:46; Lk. 21:5–38), Christ warns his disciples of those who will come claiming to be the messiah during future tribulations that will include war, earthquakes, famines, and other forms of suffering. As he says in the Gospel according to Mark, 13:21–23:

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<sup>1</sup> In her article "The Charisma Mandate," Zernike [9] explicitly discusses Obama during the 2008 campaign in the terms of Weberian Charisma.

“And then if any man shall say to you, behold, here is Christ; behold, he is here: do not believe. For there will rise up false Christs and false prophets, and they shall show signs and wonders to seduce (if it were possible) even the elect. Take you heed therefore; behold I have foretold you all things.”

Among other signs of the approaching end, the sun will be darkened, the moon will not shine, and the stars will fall from the heavens.

Christ also speaks about the “Abomination of Desolation” (Mk. 13:14–20), one of many references in the Little Apocalypse to the Old Testament Book of Daniel (including Dan. 11:31; 12:11). As interpreted by later Christian exegetes, Daniel provided a crucial source of scriptural support for the notion of Antichrist and apocalypticism more generally. This particular passage about the Desolation of Abomination “predicts” the profanation of the Jewish Temple by the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV (r. 175–164) in the second century BCE, the same period as the book’s final redaction. For the first generation of Christians, the Roman sack of Jerusalem in 70CE seemed to confirm the Abomination of Desolation as again prophesized by Christ. By the second and third centuries, however, Christians understood the Abomination of Desolation as referring to a future figure of the evil and persecution, the “the Son of Perdition” described in Second Thessalonians (II Thess. 2:1–12). Second Thessalonians provides the most detailed predictions in the Bible about the coming of Antichrist (albeit without using that precise label). As Paul writes:

“And then that wicked one shall be revealed whom the Lord Jesus shall kill with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming, him, whose coming is according to the working of Satan, in all power, and signs, and lying wonders, and in all seduction of iniquity to them that perish, because they receive not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. Therefore God shall send them the operation of error, to believe lying: That all may be judged who have not believed the truth, but have consented to iniquity.”

For Paul, the “wicked one” is an individual figure, whose coming will only occur after the “restrainer” or “restraining force” gives way. As discussed below, early Christians typically understood this restraining force as a reference to the power of the Roman Empire, meaning that Antichrist would not arrive until Roman power failed ([7], pp. 43, 61–62).

### 1.3. *Antichrist as Corporate Evil*

At this point, one should also take note of an alternative notion of Antichrist as a corporate entity rather than individual figure, paralleling the “body of Christ” as the assembly of the faithful ([7], p. 78). Although the first letter of John 2:16–21 indicates the coming of Antichrist at the “last hour,” this biblical text suggests a collective sense of Antichrist as anyone who denies God the Father and the Son. For patristic Christian theologians such as Augustine of Hippo (354–430), this idea of a corporate Antichrist held great appeal as a far safer mode of historical interpretation. Augustine did not deny the future reality of Antichrist as an individual who will come to persecute the faithful during the end of days. Nevertheless, in works such as his magisterial *City of God*, he spent little time indulging in the imagined details of Antichrist’s reign. As is well known, by his mature phase of thinking, Augustine opposed overt forms of apocalyptic speculation about the future course of history, including the notion that there would be a transformative millennial age of peace and justice on earth after the defeat of Antichrist along with the “binding” of Satan (Rev. 20: 1–2) and the coming of the Lord in Final

Judgment. For Augustine, such fantasies about a Sabbath age were fit only for “carnal-minded” Jews and heretics, distracting from the true eschatological culmination of history in God’s eternal kingdom ([7], pp. 76–77; [13,14]). In this regard, Augustine and other conservative patristic figures emphasized the nature of Antichrist as the collective embodiment of those things, peoples, and deeds opposed to Christ, creating an influential counterweight to the individual “Son of Perdition,” discussed here as an anti(charismatic) individual coming at the end of time.

#### 1.4. Historical Antichrists

Another important view of Antichrist orients our attention on the past rather than the future, looking back into history for representatives of Antichrist’s power that anticipate the coming of *the* final Antichrist. In such scenarios, Antichrist typically represents an external force of outright persecution against the elect, rather than some sort of (anti)charismatic figure who would lead the faithful astray from within. The Roman emperor Nero (r. 54–68) emerged as such a persecutory figure in early Christian views of apocalyptic evil, associated with the initial pagan attacks on the Christian Church in the first century CE ([7], pp. 45–54). Later Roman emperors often joined this list of persecutors until the fourth-century conversion of Constantine I (306–337) to Christianity. Even after Constantine, heretical Christian Roman emperors, such as the Arian ruler Constans (r. 337–350), could still function as a representative of Antichrist’s evil power. (For that matter, “heretical” groups like the Donatists in northern Africa continued to view Constantine as a persecutory, anti-Christian figure even after his conversion to “orthodox” Christianity.) As discussed below, after the rise of Islam in the seventh century, Christians located another external source of apocalyptic persecution against the Church in the Muslim community, associating Muhammad with Antichrist [15].

The notion of multiple historical Antichrists remains operative in contemporary American apocalyptic thought, although it does not occupy the same prevalent place as it did in medieval theology of history. Those who subscribe to the idea that Obama represents Antichrist sometimes hedge their bets on whether he is *the* final Antichrist or one more historical manifestation of Antichrist’s evil. As noted above, the video titled “Is Barack Obama the Antichrist” links Obama with past figures of anti-Christian wickedness by opening with clips of Hitler’s demagoguery in action, followed by still-shots of Obama speaking to equally captivated crowds. Obama is also associated with Stalin and Mao in a similar fashion ([3], pt. 1). (Contrariwise, messianic-narratives link Obama with figures such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., suggesting his status as the most recent manifestation in a line of redemptive peace-making prophets.) In this regard, one can easily target a political figure like Obama as one of many Antichrists without firmly committing to any sort of imminent apocalyptic scenario.

#### 1.5. Christ-Antichrist/Charisma-(Anti)Charisma

The most compelling and best-known theory of Antichrist remains the projection of an individual figure that will come just before the end of time and effectively seduce the faithful through his (anti)charismatic leadership before beginning the open persecution of the elect. For Weber, charisma denotes a “natural leader,” the holder of “specific gifts of the body and spirit” ([5], pp. 18–19). The charismatic individual is “set apart from ordinary men and is treated as endowed with supernatural,

superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” ([5], p. 48). His faithful followers recognize and thereby validate the charisma-bearer’s mandate to lead.<sup>2</sup> Genuine charisma cannot exist without devotion, a devotion “born of distress and enthusiasm” ([5], p. 23). Charismatic authority stands “outside the realm of everyday routine and the profane sphere” ([5], p. 51). In Weber’s analysis, the “prophet” represents a particular manifestation of legitimate authority, a “purely individual bearer of charisma, who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or divine commandment” ([5], p. 253). Jesus Christ (along with Zoroaster and Muhammad) numbers among his examples of such prophetic charisma, demonstrated through magic, miracles, and other displays of power such as exorcizing demons. “The entire basis of Jesus’ own legitimation,” Weber writes, “was the magical charisma he felt within himself. It was doubtless this consciousness of power, more than anything else, that enabled him to traverse the road of the prophets” ([6], p. 270).

If Christ represents a classic example of Weberian charismatic authority, one might reasonably consider the case of Antichrist as a projection of (anti)charisma, an example of a “false prophet,” a simulacrum of the messiah expected at the end of days. Charisma, viewed through the lens of the Antichrist tradition, takes on a negative rather than positive charge. In this regard, charisma can be imagined as part of the “profane sphere,” albeit understood as (anti)charisma. One might object that Antichrist is an eschatological fiction, a theological and literary construction with no basis in reality as a historical personage. For our purposes here, this hardly seems important. Except for his earliest followers, and for mystics claiming a direct encounter with Jesus, Christians have known (and still know) Christ’s prophetic authority as a textual phenomenon mediated through the narrative of the New Testament. Christ and Antichrist both exist within the framework of Christian hermeneutics, and both provide a locus for the consideration of Weberian charisma/(anti)charisma.

## 2. (Anti)Charisma and End-Times

According to Weber, charismatic authority flourishes in times of “psychic, physical, ethical, religious, political distress” ([5], p. 18). The period preceding the end of the world, as typically imagined by medieval and modern Christian apocalyptic thinkers, will unmistakably meet such conditions of crisis and upheaval. Antichrist’s individual (anti)charisma depends upon, harnesses, and enhances this disruption. As developed over time, the projected life of Antichrist functions like photo-negative of Christ’s story in the Gospels, including his charismatic preaching, miracles, and overall ministry. As the ultimate false prophet in a time of political, economic, and natural disorder, Antichrist encapsulates the very same qualities and characteristics of prophetic-messianic charisma as envisioned by Weber in a state of reverse polarity—oriented toward damnation rather than redemption.

### 2.1. Antichrist’s Medieval Life

Vague as it is, the biblical scenario for an individual Antichrist promises the coming of the Son of Perdition, who will profane the rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem, perform miracles, and deceive many into recognizing him as the messiah. Early Christian theologians did not offer much in the way of personal

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<sup>2</sup> As noted by Gary Dickson in the introductory essay to this volume, Weber does not seem to have explicitly addressed the possible qualities and characteristics of specifically female charisma.

details about the life of Antichrist, but they did expand upon his apocalyptic role. According to Irenaeus (c. 140–202) in book five of his *Against Heresies* and Hippolytus (c. 170–235) in his tract *On Christ and Antichrist*, Antichrist will be a Jew born from the tribe of Dan, who will defeat the ten petty kings of the world and unite unbelievers everywhere under his reign before persecuting the elect who refuse to acknowledge his rule ([16], pp. 121–28; [17]). In these early Christian scenarios, Antichrist will reign for three-and-a-half years—a figure based on the forty-two months referenced in Revelation (Rev. 11:3)—before the Second Coming of Christ, who will cast him down before the defeat of Satan and Final Judgment. According to some early Christian and medieval thinkers, God will allow a period of “rest” for those who lapsed during the trials of Antichrist to do penance, a space of time that offers a corollary of sorts to the notion of the millennium as an age of peace and justice on earth before coming of God’s kingdom [18]. In such works, however, details about the life of Antichrist are scant. For the most part, exegetes tried to demonstrate the scriptural basis for the very notion of Antichrist and the overall Christian apocalyptic scenario, rather than dwelling upon the narrative elements of what Antichrist’s life would look like [19].

This lack of descriptive embellishment changed in the Middle Ages. In the tenth century, the popular work *On the Birth and Time of Antichrist* by the French abbot Adso of Montier-ed-Der (d. 992) offered a highly influential “biography” of Antichrist, drawing together various earlier traditions into concisely packaged exposé on the end-times ([20], pp. 20–30; partial translation in [21], pp. 82–87). Adso’s work formed something like a standard view of Antichrist over the following centuries, modified and incorporated into various textual settings including prophecies and biblical exegesis. Adso structured his vision of the Son of Perdition around the basic notion that Antichrist “will be contrary to Christ in all things, and do contrary things to Christ” ([20], p. 22; [21], p. 84). Antichrist will be a Jew from the tribe of Dan, born from the sexual union of a man and women, not from a virgin birth as some claimed. He will, however, be conceived in sin, with the spirit of the Devil filling the woman’s womb just like the Holy Spirit filled Mary. Born in Babylon, raised in Bethsaida and Corozaim, Antichrist will be raised “in every iniquity” by “magicians, sorcerers, soothsayers, and wizards,” who will train him in black arts. Eventually, he will come to Jerusalem, persecuting those Christians that he cannot convert to his cause, and install himself in the rebuilt Temple of Solomon ([20], pp. 24).

Displaying miracles, a key characteristic of Weber’s prophetic form of charisma, will represent a crucial component in Antichrist’s rise to power. According to Adso, Antichrist will produce “great and unheard of miracles,” calling fire from heaven, making trees to flower suddenly and wither, disturbing and calming the seas, changing the winds, and raising the dead. He will even pretend to die and after three days come back to life like Jesus. He will thereby try to “lead the elect into error.” “For when they see so many and such great signs, those who are perfect and the elect of God, they will doubt whether or not he is Christ, who will come at the end of the world, according to Scripture” ([20], pp. 24–25). For three-and-a-half years, Antichrist will reign over the elect with terror, gifts, and miracles, seeking to frighten them, bribe them, or seduce them into submission. At the beginning of his open persecution of the election, he will kill the two prophets, Enoch and Elijah, who will be sent back by the Lord to comfort the faithful. The Jews, Adso also notes, will flock to him and recognize him as the messiah. Finally, Antichrist will prepare for his own ascension on Mount Olives; before this can

happen, however, Jesus Christ will return to triumph over him. Either Christ or the archangel Michael will slay Antichrist, ending his reign ([20], pp. 27–29).

As pointed out by Richard K. Emmerson, Adso's *vita* of Antichrist effectively forms a work of "anti-hagiography," that is, an inverted saint's life, wherein good becomes evil, miracles become sorcery, and the Holy Spirit becomes the Spirit of Lies [22]. Just as saint's lives drew upon Christ as their model and inspiration, the *vita* of Antichrist closely parallels the life of Christ as revealed in the Gospels. Yet, as Emmerson points out,

"Antichrist imitates only the outward forms of Christ's life. His is essentially the opposite of Christ, a parodic imitation of the Savior in order to more effectively deceive the world. Although apparently like Christ, Antichrist is actually 'contrary' to Christ, 'id est Christo contrarius.' Nevertheless, Antichrist's false *imitatio Christi* in order the better to deceive the faithful in the last days underlies many of his actions, from birth to death. In other words, the events in the life of Antichrist parallel those of Christ ([22], pp. 184–85).

Emmerson's point is well taken. Antichrist is not the true messiah. The "outward" parody of Christ's life by Antichrist, however, is not just skin-deep. As imagined in this corollary status to Christ, Antichrist embodies an (anti)charismatic authority equally as persuasive as Christ's, filled with (evil) spiritual inspiration and miraculous—albeit deceptive—powers.

## 2.2. Antichrist's Modern Life

Passing over later medieval and early modern depictions of Antichrist, one can chart out some basic biographical characteristics of Antichrist in the popular American imagination, above all associated with forms of "pre-millennial dispensationalism," that is, predominantly evangelical Protestant beliefs involving the Rapture (when the elect will be taken up into the skies), a seven-year Great Tribulation (including the reign of Antichrist), and the coming of Christ and battle of Armageddon followed by a thousand-year kingdom of peace and justice on earth before Final Judgment. Although the details vary, the life of Antichrist will be characterized by his rapid rise to power, his creation of false world peace, and his unleashing of horrible persecution against those who reject his authority.

In his best-selling book *The Late Great Planet Earth*, first published in 1970, Hal Lindsay (1929– ) offers what has become a more or less typical contemporary American description of Antichrist ([23], pp. 98–113). He skips over the early life of Antichrist (the details of which are captured for many modern observers in the 1976 movie, *The Omen*), presenting the Son of Perdition or "the Great Dictator" as a political figure of astonishing acumen. He will be European, emerging from the "restored" Roman Empire with "an air about him that is self-assured and proud" ([23], p. 106). Miracles, again, will play a key component in the narrative of his meteoric rise to (anti)charismatic authority, seducing the faithful along the way. As Lindsay warns his readers:

"Satan himself is going to give him fantastic power. This is one reason that Christians should not get too excited when they see a miracle. It may not be a miracle of God. Satan is a miracle-worker and he has been able to work miracles from the beginning...Satan is going to send this man, his masterpiece, with all sorts of signs and wonders and miracles" ([23], p. 106).

Recovery from what seems to be a fatal wound (a reference to Rev. 13:3) will be one miraculous sign of Antichrist's identity and a parody of Christ's resurrection. For Lindsay, the Antichrist will hold

sway as a demagogue, through the force of his personal, charismatic qualities: “He will have a magnetic personality, be personally attractive, and a powerful speaker. He will be able to mesmerize his audience with his oratory” ([23], p. 108).

Lindsay in fact cautions against associating any given political figure with Antichrist ([23], p. 113). Nevertheless, in sermons, popular media, and on the Internet the temptation to do so seems far too great to resist, above all during the recent years of the Obama administration. This overall vision of Antichrist clearly informs the 2008 email-chain suggesting that Barack Obama might be Antichrist: a man in his 40s (presumably hale and handsome, in the prime of his life), who will trick people with “persuasive language” and possess “massive” Christ-like appeal. In recent years, Lindsay’s prediction that Antichrist will be European has clearly given way to the far more immediate anxiety that Antichrist will be an American political leader, although, in Obama’s case, one could argue that he is a foreigner rather than a “real” American. Although not always explicit in the discussions of Obama as Antichrist, the claim of the so-called “birthers” that Obama’s Hawaiian birth-certificate is a fake and that he was actually born in Kenya complements this scenario nicely [24]. The belief that Obama is a Muslim, and that Antichrist will be a Muslim, makes Obama’s ambiguous status as an (false) insider and (deceptive) outsider apocalyptically unmistakable. As an end-times figure, Obama is anti-American, anti-Christian, and (anti)charismatic all rolled into one.

### 2.3. *The Political Landscape of the Apocalypse*

The Antichrist tradition places a particular emphasis on the political circumstances that will accompany the reign of Antichrist. Specifically, drawing upon the Book of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the alloyed statue (Dan. 2), the apocalyptic scenario for the reign of Antichrist involves a progressive theology of history based on “world empires.” The statute possesses a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron and feet of iron mixed with clay, representing a succession of deteriorating imperial powers. Christians also mapped the four world empires onto Daniel’s vision of the four beasts (Dan. 7), including the fourth beast with ten horns, and a little horn (*i.e.*, Antichrist) emerging from the others. These beasts, in turn, formed a source of textual inspiration for similar beasts featured in the Book of Revelation, including the huge red dragon with seven heads and ten horns (Rev. 12:3) and the beast from the sea (Rev. 13:1–3) with seven heads and ten horns. In the third century, Hippolytus described the situation in this way, declaring that “in distinguishing the kingdoms that are to rise after these things,” Daniel’s visions “showed also the coming of Antichrist in the last times, and the consummation of the whole world” ([17], p. 13). Hippolytus and other early Christians fixed this progression of empires on the Babylonians, the Persians, the Hellenistic Greeks, and finally the Romans. The feet mixed of iron and clay, along with the ten horns, represent the end-times fragmentation of Roman power into various kingdoms that will set the stage for Antichrist’s rise to power ([17], pp. 13–18).

The emphasis on Roman power as the final world empire also connects with Second Thessalonians’ description of a “restraining force” that will lapse just before the coming of Antichrist. By this logic, as long as the Roman Empire stands, the end will not—cannot—arrive. For the earliest Christians, periodically persecuted by Roman authorities from the first to the early fourth century, the status of Rome as the restraining force complemented the idea of the Roman as the “New Babylon,” the

“Whore” seated on the beast in Revelation 17. With the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity starting the fourth century, Christian apocalyptic attitudes toward the empire naturally became more ambivalent, but the idea of Rome as the restraining force endured. For thinkers like Saint Jerome and Augustine, both of them rather cool toward fervid apocalyptic speculation, the apparent collapse of Roman imperial power in Western Europe during the fourth and fifth centuries required them to generally downplay the idea that Rome’s current political problems represented a clear and present sign of the end. For medieval thinkers, starting with Adso, the renewal of the imperial title under Charlemagne (r. 774–814) and the Carolingian dynasty, followed later by the Ottonians, Salians, and Hohenstaufens provided a neat solution to this problem. The Roman Empire had not fallen, but had rather been “transferred” to new bearers, leaving the restraining force in place [25].

Apparently, the Roman Empire has still not fallen. In modern apocalyptic scenarios, the tribulations of the end have widened to encompass all sorts of social ills and environmental disasters that medieval theologians could have scarcely imagined, including AIDS and global warming, not to mention traditional biblical trials such as earthquakes, famine, and war. The idea that the Roman Empire must endure until the closing chapters of history, however, has proven remarkably durable. In *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Hal Lindsay recycles the basic exegesis of Daniel (including the statue in Book 2 and four beasts in Book 7) to posit the progression of world empires leading up until his own day, when NATO, the European Common Market (formed from 10 nations, matching the “ten horns” or kingdoms featured in Daniel), the World Bank, and other institutions provided evidence of a reborn or reconstituted “Roman Empire” in Europe ([23], pp. 88–97). As Lindsay describes the situation, the “time is ripe and getting riper for the Great Dictator, the one who is predicted in the scriptures very clearly and called the ‘Antichrist’” ([23], p. 103). In more recent evangelical apocalyptic literature, such as the South Carolina-based periodical *Midnight Call*, the European Union and creation of the euro serve to further confirm the emergence of the correction political circumstances for the rise of Antichrist’s (anti)charismatic authority [26].

In recent narratives of Obama’s rapid rise to power, there are plenty of apocalyptic traumas to set the stage for his apparently messianic but deceptive leadership, including war, natural disasters, and the financial meltdown that started in late 2007. Fears that the United Nations might be plotting to invade the United States and deprive the country of its sovereignty, although not unique to the period of Obama’s presidency, seem to overlap with apocalyptic anxieties that new forms of world government are setting the stage for Antichrist’s reign. In any event, the promise of apocalyptic trauma continues to play a critical role in predictions about Antichrist’s Svengali-like abilities to deceive the masses and lead them into error by dint of his magnetic personality and (anti)charismatic qualities. Trauma sets the stage for the misleading parody of Christ’s prophetic role as a charismatic figure of redemption.

#### 2.4. Antichrist and Judaism

From its earliest stages, Christian apocalyptic thinkers have assigned a prominent place to “the Jews” in their projected narratives for the end times, based in part upon the implication in Paul’s letter to the Romans (Rom. 9:27; 11:25–26) that a “remnant” of the Jews will convert after the remaining Gentiles have embraced Christianity. Eschatological Jewish conversion to Christianity quickly became

a staple of such Christian apocalyptic scenarios. As seen above, however, Jews hold a particularly uncomfortable place in the medieval end-times imagination. As noted by Adso among others, Antichrist will be a Jew; Jews will flock to him and serve him. This fraught position persists in modern dispensationalist scenarios, which argue that a Jewish presence is required in the Holy Land as a precondition for the apocalypse. In this reading of events, the foundation of the modern state of Israel formed an event of biblical proportions, as did the expansion of Israeli territorial control during the Six-Day War, including the capture of Jerusalem. An attack on Israel will help to usher in the final tribulations; Antichrist will establish himself in Jerusalem, profaning the rebuilt Temple; and the final battle between Christ and Antichrist will happen at nearby Armageddon. Around this time, the remnant of Jews—perhaps implying that many if not most of them will be destroyed as servants of Antichrist—will convert to Christianity [27]. One scene in the 2012 video “The Antichrist is Barack Obama” that features Obama (on his visit to Israel during his 2008 campaign) at the “Wailing Wall” seems particularly suggestive of the enduring notion that Antichrist will establish his rule in Jerusalem, rebuilding the Temple of Solomon ([4], min. 7:28).

As pointed out by Paul Boyer, evangelical apocalyptic thought about Jews should not just be seen as a “mask for anti-Semitism” ([27], p. 322). In Protestant dispensationalist schemes, one finds something close to a new philo-Judaism among Christians toward the Jews as God’s original Chosen People, creating (among other consequences) a strong source of political support for Israel in American evangelical circles. Boyer asserts that such “positive pronouncements” about Jews “mark a major discontinuity between medieval and Reformation-era prophetic interpretations and those of the modern era” ([27], p. 323). To some extent Boyer is correct, although such apocalyptic philo-Judaism in fact predates modernity. As pointed out by Robert Lerner [28], Anna Sapir Abulafia [29], E. Randolph Daniel [30] and others [31], certain medieval Christians starting with highly influential twelfth-century apocalyptic thinker Joachim of Fiore (1132–1202) placed a remarkable emphasis on the irenic conversion of the Jews at the end of time, suggesting that they would resume their place as God’s Chosen People, perhaps even retaining some element of the distinct identity as Jews in the millennial kingdom ([32], pp. 100–24). Joachim became one of the first—if not the first—Christian thinkers to break with the long-standing tradition that Antichrist would be a Jew and declared that the Son of Perdition would in fact be born a Christian ([33], pp. 566–70). In this regard, Christian apocalyptic scenarios have long been characterized by ambivalence toward Judaism that remains until the present.

### 2.5. *Antichrist and Islam*

Christian apocalyptic attitudes toward Islam show far less uncertainty or conflicted- feelings. As described above, Obama’s supposed status as a “crypto-Muslim” indicates possible links between his apocalyptic role and the Islamic religious tradition. Such connections between Islam and Christian eschatological scenarios are hardly new. The Middle Ages saw critical developments in the apocalyptic significance attributed to Muslims, including links between Antichrist and Muhammad, commonly presented in medieval Latin sources presented as a “false prophet” who produced Islam by perverting Christian truth through his heretical teachings.

Early medieval Christian thinkers did not tie Islam into the apocalyptic imagination as readily or quickly as one might imagine [15]. The so-called *Pseudo-Methodius*, a product of Syrian Christian circles dating from the later seventh but attributed to the fourth century “prophesied” the Islamic conquests of the Middle East and northern Africa, predicting that the devastation wrought by these “sons of Ishmael” prefigured the end-times ([34]; partial translation in [21], pp. 70–76). In various forms and Latin translations, this text became extremely popular in medieval Europe. Adso, however, who was probably familiar with some version of the Pseudo-Methodian tradition, made no references to Islam in his tract on Antichrist. In fact, Christians’ apocalyptic associations of Islam with end-times tribulations did not really emerge until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a development no doubt spurred by the crusades. Particular interest in Muhammad as a sort of debased prophet and Christian heretic surged during this period, as seen for example in Guibert of Nogent’s chronicle of the First Crusade, which includes a detailed account of Muhammad’s origins as a sensual deceiver. One finds similar presentations of Muhammad embedded in Matthew Paris’s thirteenth century world chronicle, which presents Muhammad as a libidinous charlatan [35].

For the most part, however, the apocalyptic role assigned to Islam remained one of external enemy, an apocalyptic agent that would openly attack Christendom rather than try to convert or seduce it. In the works of Abbot Joachim of Fiore, Muhammad figures as one of many Antichrists in a long-tradition of persecution. This view of Antichrist can be seen at a glance in the so-called *Book of Figures*, attributed to the abbot or one of his immediate devotees, featuring among other images a representation of the seven-headed dragon from the Book of Revelation ([36], table 10). The seven heads are commonly presented as Herod, Nero, Constantine, Muhammad, Mesometus (another Muslim ruler, probably in Spain), and Saladin, the Muslim leader who recaptured Jerusalem from crusader-Christian hands in 1187 (an event that happened in Joachim’s own lifetime). The prominence attributed to Muslim figures in this scenario is remarkable. Nevertheless, for the most part, Joachim and his many admirers did not attribute subversive role to Islam as the source of *the* final Antichrist, who would—as noted above—be a Christian.

Generally speaking, in contemporary American apocalyptic thought Islam continues to offer an external threat to Christianity/Western Civilization. Its significance in this regard has increased in recent decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which—in *The Late Great Planet Earth*, for example—typically played the central role in triggering the end-times political conflagration ([23], pp. 59–71). The events of 9/11 and increased visibility of al-Qaeda (which offers its own apocalyptic scenarios involving the defeat of the United States as a force of evil in the world) have further contributed to the notion that Muslim powers such as Iran might play a key role in the end of things by attacking Israel ([27], pp. 326–35). Joachim of Fiore, it is worth noting, did allow for a subversive connection between Muslims outside of Christendom and heretics within it, an unholy alliance for the destruction of the faithful. In this regard, Obama’s suggested status as a secret Muslim and Antichrist is not without precedent. Nevertheless, in terms of an (anti)charismatic role for Antichrist, Islam largely remains a direct threat rather than a source of prophetic inspiration that might lead the faithful astray.

### 3. Antichrist and World Governance

Although it is argued here that Antichrist represents an individual, (anti)charismatic figure of inspired but diabolic end-times leadership, his reign as featured in medieval and modern apocalyptic scenarios will not be confined to the personal exercise of his deceptive powers. Rather, Antichrist will expand and exercise his rule through governing institutions. As Gary Dickson suggests in his introductory essay to this present volume, Weber allowed room for a certain level of charisma contained in offices; he also raised the possibility of particular ways that charisma might play out in economic terms. It might be a stretch to refer to the “routinization” of (anti)charisma, thereby invoking Weber’s contention that the fluid, inspired, and personal nature of charismatic leadership transforms into stable, bureaucratic, and impersonal kinds of authority. The fact remains, however, that projections of Antichrist as an inverted vision of Christ’s prophetic ministry involve the claim that Antichrist will quickly—remember, his time frame for apocalyptic agency typically runs three-and-a-half or seven years—route his personal magnetism through universal organs of government and economics.

#### 3.1. *The (Anti)Charismatic Office*

In early Christian and medieval apocalyptic scenarios, the impact of Antichrist’s individual, (anti)charismatic authority will not remain limited to those in his immediate orbit. Instead, Antichrist will quickly “universalize” his mission of deception and open persecution against the faithful. As Adso of Montier-en-Der put it in the tenth century, “First, he will convert kings and princes, then others, dispatching his preachers and envoys throughout the entire world,” with the result that his power will stretch from “sea to sea, from east to west, from north to south” ([20], p. 24). Over the following centuries, Latin apocalyptic thinkers contributed important innovations to the idea of Antichrist as an imperial or papal figure, occupying what in theory represented the two most elevated offices in Christian society. Much of this development occurred in response to the ongoing struggle between emperors and popes for a position of supreme authority over Christian society. From the initial contest between Emperor Henry IV (r. 1084–1106) and Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073–1084) over the investiture of bishops with the symbols of their office to the bitter warfare between Emperor Frederick II (r. 1212–1250) and Pope Innocent IV (r. 1243–1254), partisans on both sides began to slander their opponents as representatives or members of Antichrist’s evil [37,38]. In apocalyptic terms, Frederick II represented something like the Barack Obama of the thirteenth century: a powerful political leader seen by some as a compelling, messianic figure and by others as Antichrist himself.

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, those who drew inspiration from the apocalypticism of Joachim of Fiore, so-called “Joachites,” made some additional contributions to the association of the papacy with the reign of Antichrist. This belief emerged in part due to a controversy in the Franciscan order over the role of poverty in the Franciscan way of life, leading some “rigorist” or “spiritual” members of the order to reject papal authority when Rome opposed their cause. For one Joachite thinker, the Franciscan Peter John Olivi (1248–1298), the present-day Roman Church represented a new Babylon and source of persecution against the true Christian faithful (consisting largely of rigorist Franciscans). Olivi declared that there would be two Antichrists at the approaching end of time, a “mystical” and “great” Antichrist. That future “mystical Antichrist” would be pope, working in an evil

alliance with the great Antichrist, who would be the Roman emperor ([32], pp. 207–12). In the early 1300s, the controversial papacy of Boniface VIII—no friend to the Spiritual Franciscans—added fuel to this fire, elevating the association of the papacy with Antichrist to new levels. The late medieval association of the Roman papacy with Antichrist endured as one of the more popular apocalyptic ideas of the early modern and modern eras, heightened by the Protestant Reformation and general Protestant associations of Rome with the “whore” of Babylon from Revelation ([7], pp. 200–30).

In modern apocalyptic scenarios, this projection of Antichrist’s power and influence plays an especially prominent role, as the Son of Perdition’s magnetism enables him to effectively co-opt major global institutions. As noted above, numbering among such official conduits for Antichrist’s reign will be the World Bank, the United Nations, and the European Union. In recent years, as seen in *Midnight Call*, the European Union has become the prime suspect for the “reborn” Roman Empire, starting with its origins in the ten-nation European Common Market. One video posted on Youtube titled “The First Horseman of the Apocalypse—the EU & Antichrist,” traces for viewers links between Daniel’s prophecies, the sack of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70CE, and the reemergence of the Roman Empire—sleeping, not dead—in the guise of European Union. Caesar’s throne, the video declares, has been moved to Strasburg, site of the European Union parliament building that was built in 1998 (multiply  $666 \times 3$ , the video explains, and the sum = 1998). An aerial view of the structure reveals its shape like a bow and a crown, two objects associated with the first horseman of the Apocalypse (Rev. 6:2). Not coincidentally, the parliament building also resembles the Tower of Babel. Through such number-crunching and visual “evidence,” the association of the European Union and the end of days seems clear, setting the stage for the arrival of Antichrist [39].

### 3.2. *The (Anti)Charismatic Economy*

Medieval apocalyptic thinkers, naturally, were not quite as attuned to economic forces as modern ones might be, the latter responding to the rise of global capitalism as they develop their eschatological speculations. Nevertheless, premodern Christian apocalypticism contributed key elements to an imagined future wherein the (anti)charismatic forces of Antichrist’s evil will shape fundamental characteristics of economic life for all people. Based on a passage in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 13:16–18), the Son of Perdition will attempt to enforce what we would now call commercial monopoly:

“And he shall make all, both little and great, rich and poor, freemen and bondmen, to have a character in their right hand, or on their foreheads, that no man might buy or sell, but he that has the character, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. Here is wisdom. He that has understanding, let him count the number of the beast. For it is the number of a man: and the number of him is six hundred sixty-six.”

As early as the second and third centuries, Christian exegetes such as Hippolytus further explained that Antichrist will erect “incense-pans” for making pagan sacrifices everywhere, and that any who refused to sacrifice will be barred from buying and selling ([17], p. 29). In the regard, the (anti)charismatic economy of Antichrist reinforces his mission to undermine Christianity and install new forms of world-wide worship.

This so-called number of the beast remains a popular fixture in the contemporary American apocalyptic imagination. In *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Lindsay noted that this “economic vise” was

already being put in place: “In our computerized society, where we are all ‘numbered’ from birth to death, it seems completely plausible that some day in the near future the numbers racket will consolidate and we will have just one number for all of our business, money, and credit transactions” ([23], p. 113). Since the first publication of Lindsay’s book in 1970, the creation of the euro and overall intensification of global capitalism have only served to heightened this strain of apocalyptic thinking about the creation of an economic “world system” that will serve the evil ends of Antichrist, reinforcing his personal (anti)charismatic appeal and control of political organs such as the UN or EU.

Financial crisis, not just expansion, can also be interpreted as part of such schemes. According to a February 2012 piece on the *Midnight Call* website by Wilfred Hahn, listed as an investment banker who writes the “Money Ends and Trends” column, the current financial crisis in the euro-zone calls for a rethinking of recent apocalyptic speculation about the European Union [40]. The economic meltdown, the author points out, has centered on Greece—the tenth nation to join the European Common Market in 1981, an event which at the time led to the reasonable assumption that the international coalition represented the “ten kingdoms” predicted by Daniel. Soon, however, Spain and Portugal joined pushing membership up to twelve. At present the European Union numbers 27 members. From this perspective, Hahn declares, one might assume that the European Union must give way to a new alliance of ten “Roman” nations, which might not even be in Europe but could include other inheritor countries of the Roman tradition like Canada or the United States. The European financial crisis that started in 2008 might therefore signal the collapse of the euro-zone and European Union, opening the door to such a new configuration. As Hahn puts it, “We are today witnessing the birth pangs that will lead to the emergence of this last 10-king global power coalition.”

#### **4. Conclusion: Apocalyptic Heroes and the End of Charisma/(Anti)Charisma**

It has been argued here that the figure of Antichrist, an eschatological projection of Christianity’s false messiah, embodies a form of (anti)charisma in the Weberian mode: an inversion of all the qualities that make Christ a classic example of individual charisma as formulated by Weber. The (anti)charismatic energies embodied by the Son of Perdition, moreover, do not stop at his individual person, but spread outward to permeate the hierarchy of governing and economic bodies. At a rapid pace, given the compressed time-span for his reign, Antichrist’s mission of perdition will subsume the world. Yet the point of such Christian apocalyptic scenarios is not despair, but hope, or at least, a healthy dose of despair leavened by hope. This present essay is hardly the place to explore Christian millennial expectations, alluded to at various points above, in which apocalyptic suffering opens the door to an earthly era of peace and justice before a final flair up of apocalyptic evil and Final Judgment. Even during the expected times of apocalyptic crisis however, God will not completely abandon the elect. As indicated in the Book of Revelation, the Lord will send his two prophets, Enoch and Elijah, to provide solace and spiritual leadership for the faithful for three-and-a-half years before Antichrist slays them (Rev. 11:3). The role of these two end-times prophets remained a staple of early Christian and medieval apocalypticism, providing a charismatic counter-point to Antichrist’s (anti)charisma ([7], p. 61).

Medieval thinkers fashioned additional apocalyptic heroes and messianic figures. One of the most important in this regard was the so-called Last World Emperor, a concept that first emerged in

Pseudo-Methodius and certain “Sibylline” prophecies, late antique texts attributed to earlier pagan prophets. According to this tradition, before the trials of the end-times, a new Roman emperor will arise, who will unite God’s people, defeat the enemies of the Church (including, in many versions, Islam), and spread Christianity among all peoples. Having created world peace, he will go to Jerusalem and surrender his crown, setting the stage for the coming of Antichrist ([32], pp. 17–18). As noted above, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Joachite apocalyptic thinkers contributed to lasting associations of the Roman papacy with the evils of Antichrist. They also helped to create, however, the notion of the “Angelic Pope,” a coming pontiff who will succor the faithful during the end-times and help to usher in the millennial Sabbath age. This idea of the Angelic Pope would prove remarkably durable throughout the Later Middle Ages, a way of critiquing the papacy while holding out hope for its future reform and spiritual renewal [41].

Unlike their medieval counterparts, modern Christian apocalyptic thinkers seem disinterested in eschatological heroes, charismatic figures who will help to alleviate the suffering of the faithful and provide leadership during the end-times. Indeed, the prominence of the Rapture in dispensationalist scenarios—the belief that God will lift up the elect into the heavens before the seven-year reign of Antichrist—means that true believers might not even have to face the suffering of the end-times ([23], pp. 135–45). Perhaps for American Protestants such roles assigned to saints smack too much of Catholicism and detract from the ultimate place of Jesus as Redeemer before, during, and after Last Judgment. In this regard, Christ stands alone as the apocalyptic hero who will come and save those “left behind” (that is, the un-Raptured who are still deserving of redemption), defeating the Son of Perdition, ushering in the millennial age, and allowing all of the faithful to enjoy an era of peace and justice on earth. Even if Antichrist and Satan succeed in one final challenge against God after the millennium, their end is a foregone conclusion. Medieval and modern presentations of Antichrist certainly share one thing in common: his (anti)charismatic authority might be vivid, captivating, and compelling, but it is doomed to failure. Antichrist’s parody of Christ’s life and charismatic appeal can only go so far. With Christ’s Second Coming, moreover, the Son of God no longer represents a prophetic figure, the charismatic God-man; he is transcendent, coming to judge the living and the dead. Ultimately, both (anti)charisma and charisma imagined as Weberian categories will no longer serve any purpose, as history reaches its apocalyptic conclusion and yields to the timeless kingdom of God.

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