

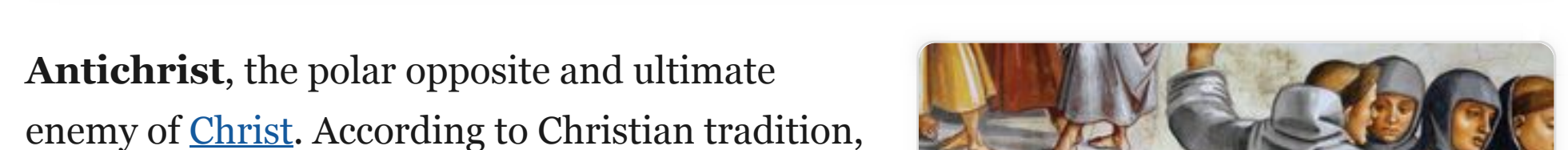
Antichrist

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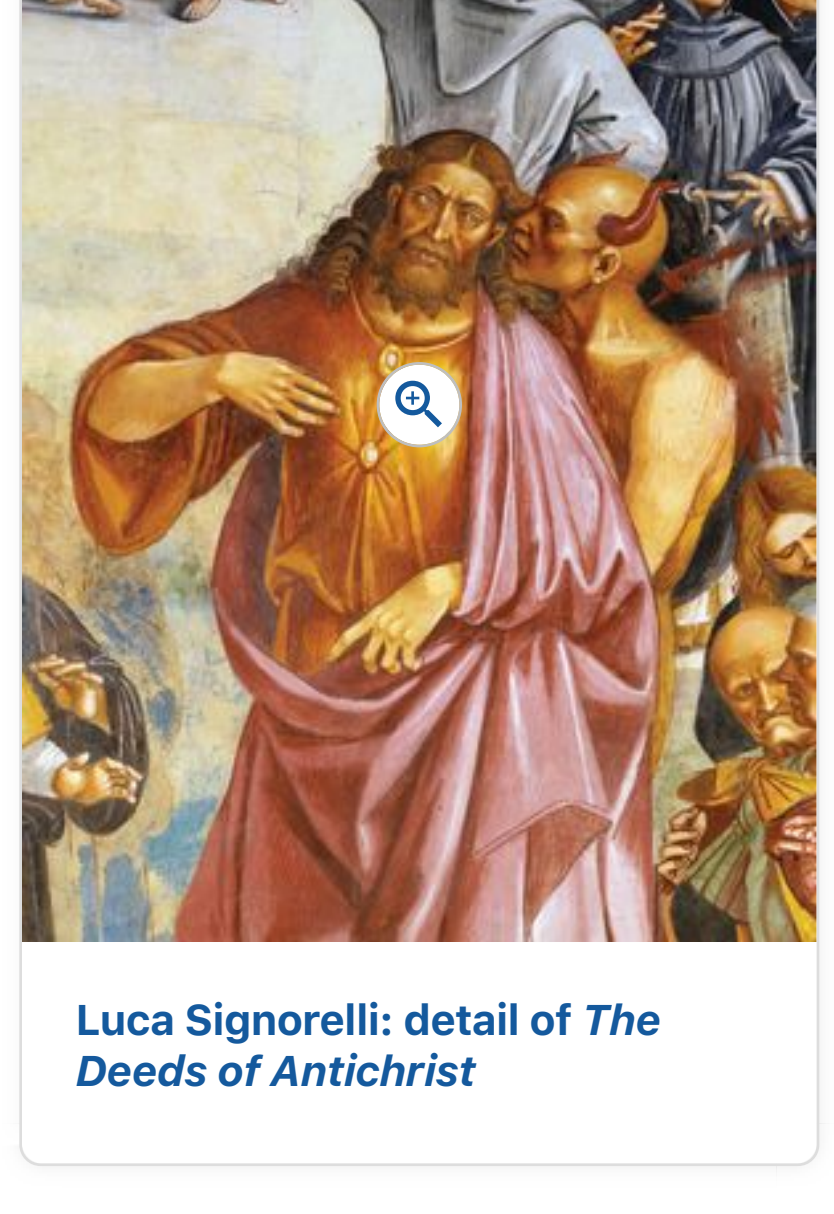
Antichrist

Christianity

Written by Robert E. Lerner
 Fact-checked by The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica
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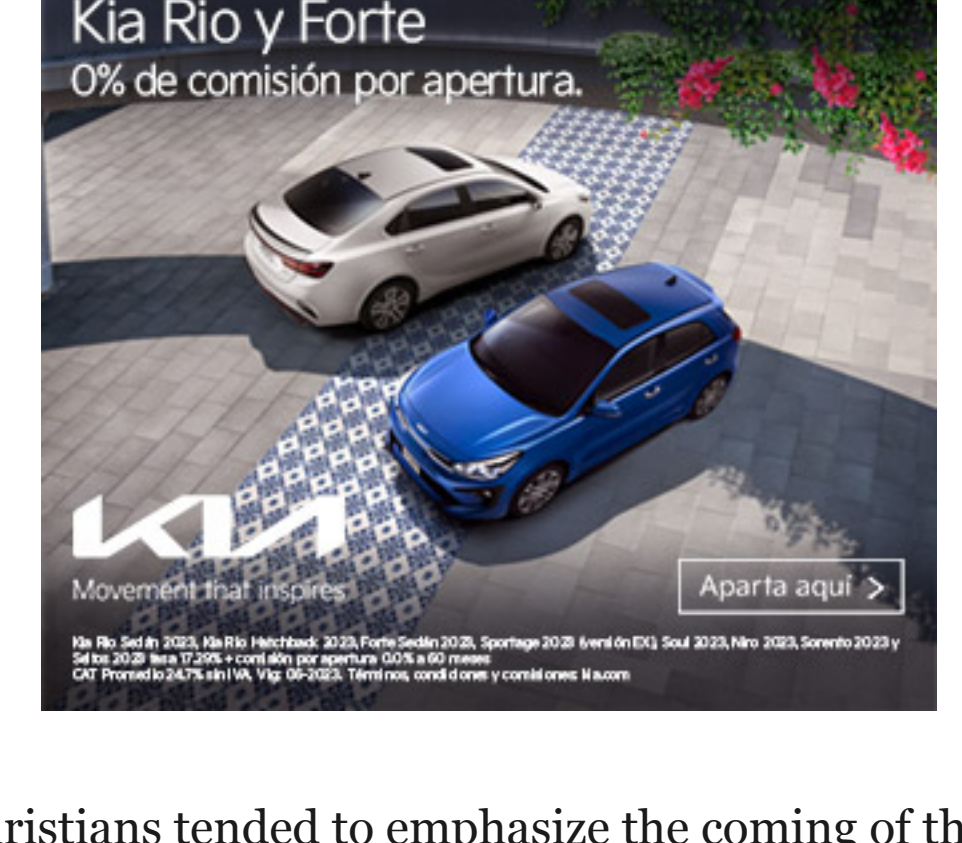
Antichrist, the polar opposite and ultimate enemy of **Christ**. According to Christian tradition, he will reign terribly in the period prior to the **Last Judgment**. The term Antichrist first appeared in the **Letters of John** (1 John 2:18, 2:22, and 4:3; 2 John 1:7), and the fully developed story of Antichrist's life and reign is found in **medieval** texts. As applied to various individuals and institutions for nearly two millennia, *Antichrist* and *precursor of Antichrist* have been, and remain, terms of the most intense opprobrium.



The Christian **conception** of Antichrist was derived from Jewish traditions, particularly **The Book of Daniel** in the **Hebrew Bible**. Written about 167 BCE, it foretold the coming of a final persecutor who would “speak great words against the most High and wear out the saints of the most High, and think to change times and laws” (7:25). Scholars agree that the author of Daniel was **alluding** to the contemporary Hellenistic ruler of Palestine, **Antiochus IV Epiphanes**, who attempted to extirpate **Judaism**. But because Antiochus was not named, later readers could apply the prediction in Daniel to any persecutor. Early Christians applied it to the Roman emperors who persecuted the **church**, in particular **Nero** (reigned 54–68 CE).

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The four books of the **New Testament** that fueled Christian belief in Antichrist were the first two epistles of John, the **Revelation to John**, and the **Second Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians**. The first three of these were written near the end of the 1st century CE; the last was written either by **St. Paul the Apostle** shortly after 50 CE or by one of Paul's immediate **disciples** some 20 or 30 years later. Neither 2 Thessalonians nor Revelation uses the term Antichrist, but both works refer to a coming persecutor who is evidently the same person. The first epistle of John introduces an important distinction between “the” Antichrist who will come and the many antichrists who are already active in the world. This distinction not only enabled believers to **denigrate** contemporaries as “antichrists” without having to label a single individual as “the” Antichrist but also allowed them to identify the “body of Antichrist” as a collectivity existing in the present but destined to have its day of triumph in the future.



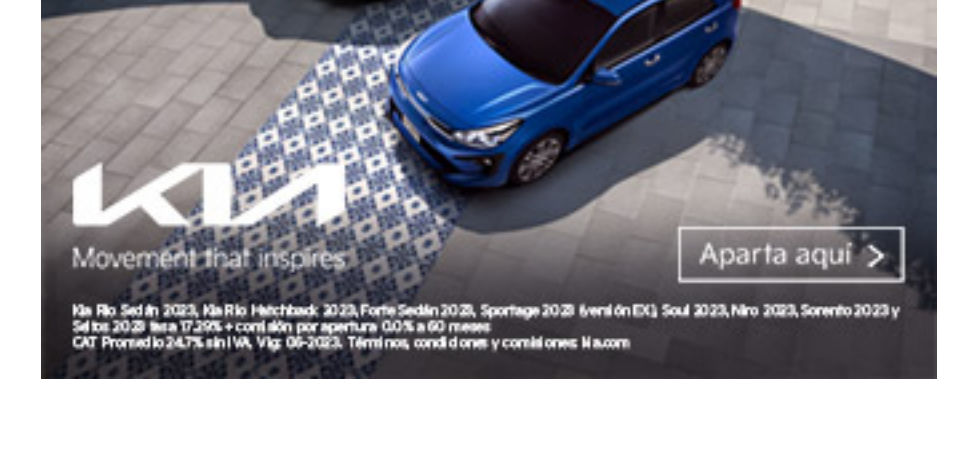
Nevertheless, early Christians tended to emphasize the coming of the one great Antichrist. The Revelation to John refers to this figure as “the Beast from the Abyss” (11:7) and “the Beast from the Sea” (13:1). In the most sustained account of his appearance, 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12, he is called “the man of sin” and “son of perdition.” He will come at a time of general **apostasy**, deceive people with signs and wonders, sit in the temple of God, and claim to be God himself. Finally, he will be defeated by Jesus, who will destroy him by “the spirit of his mouth” and “the brightness of his coming” (2:8).

Because even 2 Thessalonians is sketchy about the details of Antichrist's person and the nature of his reign, a succession of biblical commentators and pseudonymous apocalyptic writers from the era of the **Church Fathers** and the early **Middle Ages** began to provide the missing features. Their work was **integrated** into a brief **treatise** in the 10th century (c. 954) by a monk from Lorraine, **Adso of Montier-en-Der**, in a letter to Queen Gerberga of France. Adso's letter became the standard medieval reference work on Antichrist. In the 13th century it was partially supplanted by several chapters on Antichrist in Hugh Ripelin's extremely popular handbook, *Compendium theologicæ veritatis* (c. 1265; “Compendium of Theological Truth”). Although it was more orderly, Ripelin's account differed from Adso's only in minor details.

The medieval view of Antichrist communicated by Adso, Ripelin, and a host of other writers rested on the principle that Antichrist is the parodic opposite of Christ in all things. (*Antichrist* literally means “opposed to Christ.”) Thus, as Christ was born of a virgin by means of **conception** by the **Holy Spirit**, so Antichrist will be born of a whore by means of conception by a diabolical spirit. Although opinions differed as to whether Antichrist's father will be a man or a demon, in either case Antichrist will be, as commonly noted in the Middle Ages, “full of the devil” from the time of his conception. Both Christ and Antichrist are born of the Jews, but Antichrist will be born of the tribe of Dan—“the viper in the road” (Genesis 49:17)—rather than the tribe of Judah, and in Babylon, not Bethlehem. Like Christ, Antichrist will grow up in obscurity and begin his open “ministry” at age 30, gaining followers by giving signs and performing miracles. The signs and miracles once more are polar opposites of Christ's, because Antichrist's supposed miracles will be only tricks.

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Antichrist's triumphant reign (never clearly distinguished from the start of his ministry) will last for three and a half years. Like Christ, Antichrist will come to **Jerusalem**, but, as the opposite of Christ, he will be enthusiastically hailed and **reversed** by the Jews. During his reign he will rebuild the Temple and sit on the throne of Solomon in a sacrilegious and hideous inversion of just priesthood and just kingship. He will convert the rulers of the earth to his cause and persecute Christians dreadfully. All those who resist his wiles will be tortured, and—as Jesus prophesied in Matthew 24:21—there will be “great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now.” The two great prophets Enoch and Elijah, who never died but were spirited away to the earthly paradise, will arrive to preach against the tyrant and comfort the elect, but Antichrist will slay them. At the end of the allotted three and a half years, however, Antichrist will be destroyed by the power of Christ, whereupon, after a very brief interval, there will come the Last Judgment and the end of the world.



One important medieval thinker who departed substantially from the received teachings about Antichrist was the 12th-century Calabrian monk **Joachim of Fiore**. Joachim formulated a view of successive past and future persecutions of the Christian church that inspired him to propose the appearance of a **succession** of “antichrists” (e.g., Nero, **Muhammad**, and **Saladin**) before the arrival of the great Antichrist. As for the great Antichrist, according to Joachim, he will not be a Jew from “Babylon” but rather the embodiment of the worst evils arising out of Joachim's own society, preeminently the crimes of **heresy** and oppression of the church. Lastly, since Joachim expected the coming of a wondrous millennial era on earth between the death of Antichrist and the Last Judgment, he found himself obliged to foretell the coming of another enemy of God, a “final Antichrist.” Although Joachim was vague about the nature of this last **antagonist** of God, he referred to him as “Gog,” implying that the final Antichrist will be allied with, or identical to, the enemy forces of **Gog and Magog**, which will appear to do final battle with the saints after the millennium and before the Last Judgment (Revelation 20:7–9).

The expectation of the **imminent** reign of Antichrist in the later Middle Ages encouraged the belief among many that his forerunners were already in the ascendant or, indeed, that Antichrist himself had arrived in the person of a given ruler or pope. Such beliefs were attached in particular to the “antipapal” emperor **Frederick II** (reigned 1212–50) and to a persecutor of **ecclesiastical** dissidents, Pope **John XXII** (reigned 1316–34). The tendency to identify a hated contemporary ruler as Antichrist in some cases outlasted the Middle Ages. The Russian **tsar Peter the Great** (reigned 1689–1725), for example, was named Antichrist by his opponents, the **Old Believers**. Even in the 20th century some commentators identified **Benito Mussolini**, the Italian fascist dictator, as Antichrist because of his attempt to revive the **Roman Empire**.

Nevertheless, beginning in the 16th century, the fixation on Antichrist as a coming or present terrible individual gave way to the view of Antichrist as a **collective** body of evil. This position had been accepted in the abstract by some medieval theologians, but it was made concrete and popular by **Martin Luther**, who insisted that the institution of the **papacy**, rather than any given pope, was Antichrist. Modern **Protestants** have characteristically preferred to conceive of Antichrist as whatever resists or denies the lordship of Christ, though the idea of an individual as the Antichrist gained popularity among some Evangelical and fundamentalist Christians in the 20th century. **Roman Catholics** have become less inclined to identify Antichrist as a specific coming individual.

Vestiges of the medieval Antichrist tradition can be found in contemporary popular **culture**, as in Hollywood films such as *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Omen* (1976 and 2006) and its sequels. The view of Antichrist as a diabolical institution is also reflected to some extent in the superstition that **credit cards** and electronic bar codes mysteriously mark innocent people with Antichrist's sign, the number **666** (Revelation 13:18).

Robert E. Lerner

Revelation to John

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Revelation to John

New Testament

Also known as: *Apocalypse of John*, *Book of Revelation*
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Revelation to John, also called **Book of Revelation** or **Apocalypse of John**, abbreviation **Revelation**, last **biblical** book of the **New Testament**. It is the only book of the New Testament classified as **apocalyptic literature** rather than **didactic** or historical, indicating thereby its extensive use of visions, symbols, and **allegory**, especially in connection with future events. Revelation to John appears to be a collection of separate units composed by unknown authors who lived during the last quarter of the 1st century, though it purports to have been written by an individual named John—who calls himself “the servant” of Jesus—at **Patmos**, in the **Aegean Sea**. The text includes no indication that John of Patmos and **St. John the Apostle** are the same person.

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Although **Christ** is clearly the central figure of Revelation, an understanding of the text presupposes familiarity with **Old Testament** language and concepts, especially those taken from the books of **Daniel** and **Ezekiel**. The author uses the number **seven**, for example, in a symbolic sense to signify “totality” or “perfection.” References to “a thousand years” (chapter 20) have led some to expect that the final victory over evil will come after the completion of some **millennium** (see **Millennialism**).

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica
 This article was most recently revised and updated by Melissa Petruzzello.