

# **‘The Ultimate Sinner’: Paul & the Antichrist in Political Context**

James R. Harrison, *Wesley Institute*

## **1. INTRODUCTION TO THE MODERN SCHOLARLY DEBATE**

In 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 Paul portrays the ‘man of lawlessness’ as a self-exalting deity seated in God’s Temple.<sup>1</sup> In this article it will be argued that in the context of Second Temple Judaism the figure is an amalgam of figures such as, among others, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, Pompey, and Caligula, each of whom defiled (or attempted to defile) the Jerusalem Temple. This could be Paul’s symbolic way of referring to the (developing) Antichrist tradition, alluding to the teaching of the historical Jesus and to the Old Testament and intertestamental traditions. But, in Paul’s view, it may primarily refer to Caligula who had become the historical precursor to the destruction of the Temple and (perhaps) to the eschaton itself. The time is overdue for such an investigation.

Recent studies on Paul’s epistles have pursued with interest the imperial context of the house churches at Thessalonica. E.A. Judge explored the charge that the early Christians had somehow violated Caesar’s decrees by preaching the gospel of an alternate messianic King (Acts 17:1ff), arguing that the charge was to be understood against the backdrop of the Caesarian loyalty oaths.<sup>2</sup> H. Hendrix and K.P. Donfried unveiled the benefaction and cultic culture of Roman Thessalonica,<sup>3</sup> with Donfried emphasising the interrelatedness of imperial and local religious cults in 2 Thessalonians 2.<sup>4</sup> J.R. Harrison has argued that in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 Paul confronts the eschatology of the imperial gospel with his apostolic gospel, challenging its apotheosis traditions, and undermining its terminology and providential world-view.<sup>5</sup> In the most recent book on the political dimensions of

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<sup>1</sup> I will assume Paul’s authorship of 2 Thessalonians, notwithstanding the fact that there is an increasing tendency to regard the epistle as pseudonymous. For a defence of Paul’s authorship of 2 Thessalonians, see A.J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 364-370; contra, K.P. Donfried, ‘2 Thessalonians and the Church of Thessalonica’, in *id.*, *Paul Thessalonica, and Early Christianity* (London-New York: T & T Clark, 2002) 49-67; L.J. Lietaert Peerbolte, *The Antecedents of Antichrist: A Tradition-Historical Study of the Earliest Christians* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996) 64-68.

<sup>2</sup> E.A. Judge, ‘The Decrees of Caesar at Thessalonica’ *RTR* 30 (1971) 1-7.

<sup>3</sup> H.L. Hendrix, *Thessalonians Honor Romans* (ThD diss., Harvard 1984); *id.*, ‘Archaeology and Eschatology at Thessalonica’, in B.A. Pearson (ed), *The Future of Christianity* (Minneapolis 1989), 107-118; K.P. Donfried, ‘The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence’, in *id.*, *Paul, Thessalonica and Early Christianity* (London: T & T Clark, 2002) 21-48.

<sup>4</sup> Donfried, ‘The Cults of Thessalonica’ 46-48.

<sup>5</sup> J.R. Harrison, ‘Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki’, *JSNT* 25 (2002) 71-96. However, see P. Oakes’ criticism of my arguments in *id.*, ‘Re-mapping the Universe: Paul and the Emperor in 1 Thessalonians and Philippians’, *JSNT* 27/3 (2005) 301-322, esp. 312-313, 315-318. But, significantly for the 2 Thessalonians political context, Oakes

Paul's gospel, J.D. Crossan and J.L. Reed, in their discussion of the Thessalonian epistles, have expanded on the issues raised by Harrison, setting out the wider significance of the *parousia* in its imperial context.<sup>6</sup>

It is surprising, therefore, that there has been no substantial study of Paul's interaction with the developing anti-Christ tradition of early Christianity and Second Temple Judaism, as enunciated in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-10, in its imperial (i.e. Caligulan) context. To be sure, P. Bilde has devoted a study to Caligula's attempted desecration of the Temple in AD 40, but he does not relate his first-rate analysis of the ancient evidence to the portrayal of the 'lawless one' in 2 Thessalonians 2.<sup>7</sup>

Commentators have speculated regarding the identity of the 'lawless one' of 2 Thess 2.4 in varying contexts. D.E.H. Whitely argues for the referent being either Antiochus IV Epiphanes (Dan 11:36ff) or Caligula (Tacitus, *Hist.* 5:9; Philo, *Leg.*; Josephus *AJ* 18:257-309; *BJ* 2:184-203),<sup>8</sup> whereas A.J. Malherbe restricts the reference to Antiochus alone.<sup>9</sup> Some scholars fuse together well-known historical figures (e.g. Antiochus; Pompey; Caligula) with hubristic individuals denounced by the Old Testament prophets (e.g. Is 14:13-14 [king of Babylon]; Ezek 28:2 [king of Tyre]), or with powers depicted in Jewish apocalyptic as destroyers of Jerusalem and its Temple (e.g. Rome: 4 Ezra; 2 Baruch). These scholars also refer to the 'abomination of desolation' of the Jesus tradition as another cryptic allusion to the 'lawless one', namely Caligula (Mk 13:14 *et par*).<sup>10</sup> Other scholars restrict the reference to the Jewish apocalyptic figure of Belial or Beliar who is depicted as setting up his image in every city (*Asc. Isa.* 4:11), denying thereby any allusion to an historical figure.<sup>11</sup> The closest modern commentators come to restricting the reference entirely to Caligula is F.F. Bruce. He asserts that

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concedes that ἐπιφάνεια (2 Thess 2:8) is a prominent term in Roman eschatology (*ibid.*, 317).

<sup>6</sup> J.D. Crossan and J. L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus' Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom. A New Vision of Paul's Words and World* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 2004) 152-177. See also G.N. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 47-49.

<sup>7</sup> P. Bilde, 'The Roman Emperor Gaius' (Caligula)'s Attempt to Erect His Statue in the Temple of Jerusalem', *Studia Theologica* 32 (1988) 67-93.

<sup>8</sup> D.E.H. Whitely, *Thessalonians in the Revised Version with Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) 100. Similarly, R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937) 409-410.

<sup>9</sup> A.J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* 420.

<sup>10</sup> B. Rigaux, *Saint Paul: les épîtres aux Thessaloniens* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1956) 658-659 (omitting Pompey and Caligula); E.J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Collegeville: Michael Glazier-Liturgical Press, 1995) 350-351.

<sup>11</sup> W. Neil, *Thessalonians* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1950) 161-162; J.E. Frame, *The Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912) 256-257.

The attempt of the Emperor Gaius (Caligula) in AD 40 to have his statue set up in the Jerusalem Temple, in assertion of his claims of divinity which the Jews refused to acknowledge (Philo, *Leg.* 203-346; Josephus, *AJ* 18.261-301), provided a foretaste of what the final Antichrist was expected to do.<sup>12</sup>

Nor have studies devoted to the Antichrist as a motif in itself thrown light on whether there is a distinctly *Roman political* context for the Antichrist traditions at Thessalonica. Several examples of scholarship in this area will suffice. W. Bousset dismisses the idea of a Caligulan referent for 2 Thess 2:3-4 because it involved the ‘threatened profanation of the Temple by foreign armies’.<sup>13</sup> He argues that the Antichrist envisaged in 2 Thessalonians is a false Messiah in Jerusalem who performs signs and wonders in an ‘unpolitical eschatology’.<sup>14</sup> B. Rigaux confines his coverage of the Antichrist traditions to the Israelite evidence because, in his view, it is entirely a *Jewish* phenomenon.<sup>15</sup> L.J. Lietaert Peerbolte asserts that the variegated expectations of early Christian expectations of eschatological opponents arose from Jewish eschatology, but they coalesce around a single eschatological opponent only from the time of Irenaeus onwards.<sup>16</sup> The ἀνομία of 2 Thessalonians 2:3 (cf. v.8: ὁ ἄνομος) is eschatological and the arrogance of the eschatological opponent in v.4 is best explained by Daniel 11:36.<sup>17</sup> The excellent study of G.W. Lorein covers the intertestamental texts dealing with the Antichrist,<sup>18</sup> criticising Bousset for not distinguishing sufficiently between the figures of Antichrist and Belial in the case of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-10.<sup>19</sup> Finally, G.C. Jenks proposes a Roman context for the man of ‘lawlessness’ in 2 Thessalonians. In Jenks’ view, Paul considered the Claudius to be the ‘restrainer’ of the Rebel until the eschatological outbreak of evil under Nero, notwithstanding the fact that the apostle was mistaken regarding the imminent arrival of the eschaton in Nero’s reign.<sup>20</sup>

A series of questions emerge from this overview of scholarship on 2 Thessalonians 2:1-10.

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<sup>12</sup> F.F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Waco: Word Books, 1982) 168. See, too, Bruce’s excellent excursus on the Antichrist, *ibid.*, 179-188. However, see now G.L. Green’s first-rate distillation of the imperial context of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, though without an exclusive concentration on the Caligulan context (*The Letters to the Thessalonians* [Leicester: Apollos, 2002] 38-43, 307-313, 319-320).

<sup>13</sup> W. Bousset, *The Antichrist Legend: A Chapter in Christian and Jewish Folklore* (orig. 1896; rpt. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999) 22.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> B. Rigaux, *L’Antéchrist et l’opposition aux royaume messianique dans l’ancien et le nouveaux testament* (Paris: Gabalda, 1932).

<sup>16</sup> L.J. Lietaert Peerbolte, *The Antecedents of Antichrist*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-78.

<sup>18</sup> G.W. Lorein, *The Antichrist Theme in the Intertestamental Period* (London-New York: T & T Clark, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 29. On Belial, see G.C. Jenks, *Antichrist Myth* 123-152.

<sup>20</sup> G.C. Jenks, *The Origins and Early Development of the Antichrist Myth* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990) 222-224. Jenks endorses the proposal of ‘Early Eschatological Development in Paul: The Evidence of I and II Thessalonians’, *NTS* 27 (1980) 137-157, esp. 156.

1. What Jewish apocalyptic antecedents best fit the portrait of ‘the man of lawlessness’ in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4? Do they sufficiently account for the historical and ecclesiastical context that Paul is facing and responding to? And what is the relation between the eschatological ‘man of lawlessness’ (ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας; 2 Thess 2:3; ὁ ἄνομος; 2 Thess 2:8) and the ‘mystery of lawlessness’ (τὸ μυστήριον τῆς ἀνομίας) already operative (ἤδη ἐνεργεῖται) in the Roman empire?
2. What is the historical tradition underlying the contemporary accounts of Caligula’s attempt to defile the Temple? Does it accurately reflect the social realities of Caligula’s reign?
3. What textual indications are there that Paul might have had Caligula’s reign in view in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-8? If this is a possibility, how does this critique fit into the wider presentation of imperial power in Paul’s epistles?

In what ensues, I will focus on key themes in select verses of 2 Thessalonians 2 (vv.3-4, 8) as opposed to a detailed discussion of the pericope verse by verse. I intend to demonstrate that Paul believed that Roman power under Caligula had assumed the character of the Antichrist and that Caligula was, in some sense, as F.F. Bruce ventured, a precursor of the final Satan-inspired Antichrist.

## 2. JEWISH PRECEDENTS FOR THE ‘MAN OF LAWLESSNESS’ IN THE INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD

In 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 Paul describes the revelation of the man of lawlessness thus:

Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one (ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας) is revealed (ἀποκαλυφθῆ), the one destined for destruction. He opposed and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship (ἐπὶ πάντα λεγόμενον θεόν), so that he takes his seat in the Temple of God, declaring himself to be God (ὅτι ἔστιν θεός).

Several texts highlight the profanation of the Temple by historical figures in a manner similar to, though not identical to, the profanation of the Temple presented in 2 Thess 2:4.<sup>21</sup> Daniel 11:36-37 portrays Antiochus Epiphanes IV as exalting and magnifying himself above every god and speaking against the God of gods. 2 Maccabees 5:11-17 presents the hubris of Antiochus’ desecration of the Temple in 167 BC in the following manner:

Not content with this, Antiochus dared to enter the most holy Temple in all the world, guided by Menelaus, who had become a traitor both to the laws and to his country. He took the holy vessels with his polluted hands, and swept away with profane hands the votive offerings that other kings had made to

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<sup>21</sup> We leave out of our discussion the reference to Nero seizing the ‘divinely built Temple’ (SibOr 5.150) because the Neronian referent post-dates (in our view) the genuinely Pauline epistle of 2 Thessalonians written (early or late) in AD 51. Similarly, we discount the suggestion that a (later) pseudonymous author is referring in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 to the Roman profanation of the temple in AD 70. For discussion, see F.F. Bruce, *Thessalonians* xxxiv-xxxv.

enhance the glory and honour of the place. Antiochus was elated in spirit and did not notice that the Lord was angered for a little while because of the sins of those who lived in the city, and that this was the reason he was disregarding the holy place.<sup>22</sup>

The ‘superhuman arrogance’ of Antiochus (2 Macc 9:8) — demonstrated in his belief that he could command the waves of the sea and weigh the high mountains in a balance — is requited in his grisly death (2 Macc 9:8ff). The writer of 2 Maccabees also nominates Nicanor, the Syrian governor of Jerusalem, as another figure who subsequently attempted to profane the Temple: ‘[Maccabeus] showed them the vile Nicanor’s head and that profane man’s arm, which had been boastfully stretched out against the holy house of the Almighty.’

In the case of Pompey’s capture of Jerusalem and profanation of its Temple in 63 BC, the writer of the *Psalms of Solomon* asserts that God had judged the sins of the Hasmonean priestly royalty by raising up the Roman general Pompey against the Temple. The writer (Pss Sol 2:2-3; cf. 1:7-8; cf. T. Ash 7:2-3) speaks of God’s providential ordering of the event in this way:

Arrogantly the sinner broke down the strong walls with a battering ram  
and you did not interfere.  
Gentile foreigners went up to your place of sacrifice;  
they arrogantly trampled (it) with their sandals.  
Because the sons of Jerusalem defiled the sanctuary of the Lord,  
they were profaning the offerings of God with lawless acts ...

Significantly, in Pss Sol 17:11-15, our writer sows the terminological seed for Paul’s reference to a ‘lawless one’:

The lawless one (ὁ ἄνομος) laid waste our land, so that no one inhabited it;  
they massacred young and old and children at the same time.  
In his blameless wrath he expelled them to the west,  
and he did not spare even the officials of the country from ridicule.  
As the enemy (was) a stranger  
and his heart alien to our God, he acted arrogantly.  
So he did in Jerusalem all the things  
that gentiles do for their gods in their cities.  
And the children of the covenant (living) among the Gentile rabble  
adopted these (practices).

Finally, *IqpHab* 12.7-9 asserts that that the Wicked Priest of Jerusalem, one of the Hasmonean priestly royalty (John Hyrcanus? Alexander Jannaeus?), desecrated the sanctuary through his impious behaviour:

Its interpretation: the city, that is Jerusalem, where the Wicked Priest did wicked things and defiled God’s sanctuary.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> For discussion of Antiochus in Jewish tradition, see G.C. Jenks, *Antichrist Myth* 153-168. For a silver tetradrachma of Antiochus, who is depicted as the incarnation of Zeus, that bears the legend θεὸς ἐπιφανής, see N. Turner, ‘Antiochus’, in G.A. Buttrick (ed.), *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible Volume 1: A-D* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) 150 fig.34.

These Old Testament and intertestamental texts demonstrate that various historical figures (Antiochus, Nicanor, the ‘Wicked Priest’, and Pompey) had become enemies of God and his covenantal people. They are presented stereotypically as ‘arrogant’, ‘wicked’, ‘lawless’, ‘sinners’, and ‘profaners of the Temple’. But, significantly, there is no reference in the texts to these opponents declaring themselves to be God or to taking seat in the Temple of God.<sup>24</sup> Rather, they reverence the deities of their own nation or other foreign deities (e.g. Dan 11:38-39) while at Jerusalem. Moreover, the emphasis is more upon the way that covenantal Israel and its priestly rulers — or the ‘sons of darkness’ and the ‘Wicked Priest’ in the case of the Qumran covenanters — had departed from God through their sin and compromise with the ruling power. The strong focus on God’s providential judgement underscores that the Israelites are as much to blame as the Gentile oppressors themselves.

Undoubtedly, 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 is terminologically and conceptually indebted to Old Testament and intertestamental traditions in its picture of the Antichrist. However, Paul’s approach has distinctive elements that must be accounted for, either within his ecclesiastical and historical context, or from the scriptural traditions that he has inherited.

### **3. CALIGULA’S ATTEMPT TO DEFILE THE JERUSALEM TEMPLE (AD 40)**

As far as the contemporary Jewish sources, both Philo and Josephus discuss Caligula’s short-lived attempt to erect his statue in the Jerusalem Temple (Philo, *Leg. passim*; Josephus *AJ* 18:257-309; *BJ* 2:184-203). There is disagreement between each writer regarding Caligula’s provocation of the Jews and there exists chronological confusion between the accounts.<sup>25</sup> Notwithstanding, both writers agree that Caligula’s frenzied promotion of the imperial cult led to the collision between the Romans and the Jews, causing the smooth diplomatic relations between the ruler and his Jewish subjects,

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<sup>23</sup> In CD 4.12-19 one of the three nets that Belial uses to catch Israel is the ‘defilement of the Temple’.

<sup>24</sup> In light of the fact that the *Jerusalem* temple is often the focus of the intertestamental Antichrist traditions, the assertion of C.H. Giblin (*The Threat to Faith: An Exegetical and Theological Re-examination of 2 Thessalonians 2* [Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967] 76-78) that Paul is referring to the Christian church in his use of *naos* in 2 Thessalonians 2:4 is highly unlikely. For the most recent defence of the view that the church is Paul’s referent here, see G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians* (IVP: Downers Grove, 2003) 207-211. By contrast, G.L. Green (*The Letters to the Thessalonians* 312-313; cf. 39) argues that Paul is alluding to the Thessalonian temple dedicated to the divine Julius and Augustus his son.

<sup>25</sup> On the contradictions and chronological confusion between the original source accounts, see J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *The Emperor Gaius (Caligula)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934) 111-113, 136-137; P. Bilde, ‘The Roman Emperor’; A.A. Barrett, *Caligula: The Corruption of Power* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1989) 188-191; E.M. Smallwood, ‘The Chronology of Gaius’ Attempt to Desecrate the Temple’, *Latomus* 16 (1957), 3-17; S. Wilkinson, *Caligula* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005) 54.

established in the past by Julius Caesar and maintained by Augustus, to deteriorate rapidly (Philo, *Leg.* 184-348; *AJ* 18:261-309).

Two flash points precipitated the crisis.<sup>26</sup> First, there was the ‘ethnic cleansing’ of the Jewish ghetto in Alexandria, instigated by Flaccus, Prefect of Egypt, at the prompting of Greek activists who wanted to curtail Jewish privileges in the city.<sup>27</sup> The Jews and the Greeks sent separate delegations to Caligula, the Jewish delegation being led by Philo Judaeus, our major ancient source on the episode. Upon Caligula’s return from Gaul in AD 40, the ruler met with both delegations on the Gardens of Agrippina outside the *pomerium* at Rome, promising them an audience with himself later. The two points in dispute — Jewish civic rights at Alexandria and, more specifically, the continued right of the Jews to exemption from the imperial cult because of their monotheism (e.g. celebrating the emperor’s birthday) — remained unresolved.

Second, towards the end of May in AD 40 the Jews tore down an altar at Jamnia erected by Greeks to Caligula. Consequently, Caligula attempted to erect his own statue in the Jerusalem Temple inscribed with the words ‘Gaius, the new Zeus made manifest’ (Διὸς Ἐπιφανοῦς Νέου χρηματίζη Γαίου: Philo, *Leg.* 346). Undoubtedly, Caligula was induced into this foolish decision either by the over-reaction of the imperial procurator of Jamnia to the event or by his own desire to bring the increasingly contumacious behaviour of the Jews more into line with the imperial cult as practised by Rome’s provincial subjects elsewhere. Caligula ordered the governor of Syria, Petronius, to prepare the colossal statue and, taking part of his army, to set it up in the Temple. Petronius, well aware of Jewish sensitivities, suspected that this would plunge Jewish Palestine into rebellion and involve Syria in a highly costly war. Petronius employed clever delaying tactics and succeeded in staving off the threat of war. Initially, upon the intervention of his friend Herod Agrippa, Caligula rescinded his decree, but subsequently countermanded his order to Petronius.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, only the assassination of Caligula by his praetorian guard in AD 41 brought the crisis to an end for the Jews.

But two historical issues must be addressed before we can lay the ground for this event being relevant for our understanding of 2 Thessalonians 2. First, S. Wilkinson has

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<sup>26</sup> For discussion of the event, see R. Auget, *Caligula ou le pouvoir à vingt ans* (Paris: Payot, 1975) 137-141; J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *The Emperor Gaius* 135-138; P. Bilde, ‘The Roman Emperor’ *passim*; A.A. Barrett, *Caligula* 186-191; A. Ferrill, *Caligula: Emperor of Rome* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991) 140-148; *Philonis Alexandri Legatio ad Gaium: Edited With an Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970); 31-36; S. Wilkinson, *Caligula* 53-61.

<sup>27</sup> The events leading up to this are related primarily in Philo’s *In Flaccum*, with the *De Legatio ad Gaium* picking up the narrative with the Greek riots of August, AD 38, at Alexandria.

<sup>28</sup> In regards to the role of Petronius, R. Auget (*Caligula* 140) observes that ‘la corruption de ce haut fonctionnaire’ added to Caligula’s general irritation over the affair and partially explained the ruler’s obsession with ‘ce projet absurde’. As proof, Auget points to Caligula’s letter to Petronius (towards the end of AD 40). In the letter Caligula insinuates that the procurator’s tardiness in erecting the statue was explained by his preference for gifts from the Jews over against the commands of his ruler (Josephus, *AJ* 18.304).

recently observed that since no statue was ever set up due to Caligula's assassination, it is likely that Caligula's order was not implemented or, given our hostile sources, not ordered at all, or, alternatively, was merely an offhand joke on the ruler's part.<sup>29</sup> Wilkinson argues that the missing palinode from Philo's *De Legatio ad Gaium*<sup>30</sup> — which, in Wilkinson's view, may have even contained a retraction of what Philo had written — casts doubt on whether we can trust Philo's evidence. Suetonius, Seneca, and Dio are all silent regarding the attempted Temple profanation. This is a curious omission given the penchant of Suetonius and Dio to emphasise Caligula's inflated sense of his divinity.<sup>31</sup> If Wilkinson is right, the attempted profanation of the Temple under Caligula has no historical basis and cannot therefore belong to the rhetorical and historical tradition animating 2 Thesalonians 2:1-10.

However, in my opinion, Wilkinson's case is a shaky edifice built on an extended *argumentum ex silentio*. Furthermore, although Tacitus' account of Caligula's reign in the *Annals* is tragically lost, we still have one important snippet of evidence from *Histories* 5:8 that points to the likelihood that Tacitus referred to the Temple profanation in the *Annals*:

Then, when Caligula ordered the Jews to set up his statue in their Temple, they chose rather to resort to arms, but the emperor's death put an end to their uprising.<sup>32</sup>

It would seem, then, that the tradition about Caligula's profanation of the Temple remains secure and that, contrary to Wilkinson, the contemporary evidence of Philo has to be taken seriously, notwithstanding the fact that the *De Legatio ad Gaium* is charged with invective against Caligula and manipulates the chronology in order to blacken him further.<sup>33</sup>

Second, many scholars play down Caligula's claim to deity. They place his inflated claims (including his rivalry with Jupiter, his prostration rituals, his acceptance of the designation *Optimus Maximus Caesar*), his temple building programs, and his

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<sup>29</sup> S. Wilkinson, *Caligula* 55-56.

<sup>30</sup> Philo indicates that there is a missing *palinode* (*Leg.* 373) at the end of the *De Legatio ad Gaium*. From Eusebius (*HE* 2.5.1) we learn that 'Philo has related in five books what happened to the Jews in the time of Gaius'. Rather than speculate what Philo's five books might originally have been, it is safer to assume that Philo's missing *palinode* in this instance included coverage of the events directly after Gaius' death (E.M. Smallwood, *Philonis Alexandri Legatio ad Gaium* [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970] 43).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-58.

<sup>32</sup> Wilkinson (*Caligula* 59) argues that Tacitus would surely have seen the Jewish sources containing the command. Not only is this statement hypothetical, it also assumes that the astute Tacitus would not have seen through (in Wilkinson's view) the outlandish propaganda of the Jewish sources.

<sup>33</sup> On Philo's manipulation of chronology, see E.M. Smallwood, *Philonis Alexandri Legatio ad Gaium* 3. For an excellent discussion of the politics of the *De Legatio ad Gaium*, see E.R. Goodenough, *The Politics of Philo Judaeus: Practice and Theory* (New Haven: Yale University, 1938) 12-20. In the view of Goodenough (*ibid.*, 19), Philo wrote the *De Legatio ad Gaium* after the accession of Claudius in order to present to him as Caligula's successor the function, qualities, and effects of the ideal ruler's rule.

impersonations of deities, more in the category of the traditional religious practices of his Julian forebears. Barrett argues that evidence for a formal Caligula cult at Rome is to be understood more in terms of the worship of his *numen* rather than worship of the ruler as deity. To be sure, *numen* could mean ‘godhead’ as much as ‘divine will’ or ‘power of the gods’.<sup>34</sup> But, in the view of Barrett and C.J. Simpson,<sup>35</sup> *numen* had become interchangeable with worship of the ruler’s *genius*, that is, worship of his spirit with its divine qualities. Moreover, even where Caligula is credited with deity (as in the preface to the oath of the Assians [πᾶν ἔθνος ἐπὶ τὴν ψοῦ θεοῦ ὄψιν ἔσ[π]ευκεν: *SIG*<sup>3</sup> 797], or is called the ‘New Sun’ [ὁ νέος Ἡελίος: *SIG*<sup>3</sup> 798]), these are merely the traditional epithets accorded the benefactor-king in the ruler and imperial cults of the Greek East.<sup>36</sup>

While this is true from an eastern provincial perspective, the distinction between worship of the ruler’s *numen* (the divine nature of his power and authority) and the ruler as *praesens deus* (the rulers as a manifest god) was a tenuous distinction for first-century monotheistic Jews, including Philo and Paul (e.g. Philo, *Leg.* 114-118; 1 Cor 8:5-6).<sup>37</sup> Moreover, even in the case of Rome itself, as Simpson observes,<sup>38</sup> there is evidence that Caligula wished to blur the distinction in the last few months of his reign.<sup>39</sup> The fact that these significant moves on Caligula’s part were confined to a very brief aperture of time

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<sup>34</sup> A.A. Barrett, *Caligula* 140-153, esp. 151-153. See, too, the excellent article of C.J. Simpson, ‘The Cult of the Emperor Gaius’, *Latomus* 40 (1981) 489-491. Additionally, R. Auguet, 130-137; *Caligula* J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *The Emperor Gaius* 157-173; A. Ferrill, *Caligula* 133-137; S. Wilkinson, *Caligula* 27-28. For commentary on Suetonius’ discussion of Caligula’s religious policy (*Calig.* 22.1-3), see J.H. Betts, *Suetonius, Caligula. Edited With Introduction and Commentary* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, Bristol); D.W. Hurley, *An Historical and Historiographical Commentary on Suetonius’ Life of C. Caligula* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993); R.R. Rosborough, *An Epigraphic Commentary on Suetonius’ Life of Gaius Caligula* (Philadelphia: unpub. thesis University of Pennsylvania, 1920).

<sup>35</sup> For C.J. Simpson’s discussion of *numen*, see *id.*, ‘The Cult’ 508-511, esp. 509 n.69.

<sup>36</sup> E.g. θεὸν Σεβαστόν (‘God Augustus’: referring to Augustus): V. Ehrenberg and A.H.M. Jones (eds), *Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Augustus and Tiberius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) §72. E.g. τὴν τε μεγαλιότητα τοῦ θεοῦ (‘the greatness of our God Caesar’: Prefect of Egypt speaking of the contents of Claudius’ letter): Tcherikover, *CPJ* II §153. E.g. Ἡλιε βασιλεῦ (‘Sun King’: referring to Ptolemaeus VI): *UPZ* 1, 15, 33.

<sup>37</sup> Note the revealing comment of A.A. Barrett (*Caligula* 142; cf. 152) regarding the subtle difference between *numen* and *genius*: ‘it is far from certain that the unsophisticated were aware of the distinction’. On the entire issue, see D. Fishwick, ‘Genius and Numen’, *HTR* 62 (1969) 356-367. In the case of monotheistic Jews, however, the distinction would have been irrelevant. For discussion of Paul’s critique of the imperial cult in 1 Cor 8:5-6, see B.W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 269-286, esp. 281-282.

<sup>38</sup> C.J. Simpson, ‘The Cult’ 509.

<sup>39</sup> A. Ferrill (*Caligula* n.432 179) estimates that the period in question spans the few months from the summer of AD 40 to Caligula’s death in January, AD 41.

in his reign explains why there is no relevant epigraphic, numismatic, or archaeological evidence documenting the change.<sup>40</sup>

Relevant to our discussion of the Jerusalem Temple incident, at least by way of Caligula's policy regarding the imperial cult, is the establishment of a temple devoted to his *numen* on the Palatine at Rome. Suetonius (*Calig.* 22.3) describes it as follows:

He also set up a special temple to his own godhead (*suo numin proprium*), with priests and victims of the choicest kinds. In this temple was a life-sized statue of the Emperor in gold, which was dressed each day in clothing such as he wore himself. The richest citizens used all their influence to secure the priesthood of his cult and bid high for the honour. The victims were flamingos, peacocks, woodcock, guinea-hens and pheasants, offered day by day each after its own kind.<sup>41</sup>

Is Caligula simply acting within traditional boundaries here? Some ancient historians have argued regarding the Palatine temple that the transfer of imperial worship from the provinces to the capital had Augustan precedent. Before we can assess the truth of this claim, we need to ask what was Caligula's policy in the East regarding his cult.

In AD 40-41 Caligula annexed a temple at the site of Didyma, situated within the territory of Miletus and being built for Apollo, for the purposes of his own cult (Cass. Dio 59.28.1). From an inscription we know that inside the temple Caligula placed his own statue and established there for the operations of his own cult an *archierus* (high priest), a *neokoros* (temple warden), a *sebastoneos* (an official devoted to the imperial cult) and a *sebastologos* (an official who recited prose eulogies of the ruler at cult ceremonies).<sup>42</sup> The parallels, therefore, between Caligula's actions at Didyma near Miletus and his proposed actions regarding the Jerusalem Temple are important and should give pause to scholars who regard Philo's *De Legatio ad Gaium* as unhistorical.<sup>43</sup> When Caligula transfers the imperial cult from the Greek East (as practised at Didyma near Miletus) to the Palatine at Rome in the Latin West, however, we are witnessing (what seems to be) a high-handed act of cultic presumption.

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<sup>40</sup> The absence of documentary, numismatic, and archaeological evidence is (correctly) raised by those scholars who deny that Caligula claimed deity in any exalted sense: e.g. J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *The Emperor Gaius 167-168*; S. Wilkinson, *Caligula 27*. A. Ferrill (*Caligula* 136) says that the absence of any archaeological evidence for a Caligula cult is explained by the fact that the cult ceased upon the ruler's death.

<sup>41</sup> Dio (59.28.2) mentions that Caligula erected two temples at Rome, one by vote of the Senate on the Capitoline, the other at his expense on the Palatine. On the historicity of Dio's traditions, see D.W. Hurley, *Commentary* 88. See also Hurley (*ibid.*, 89) for arguments (citing E. Köberlein, *Caligula und die ägyptischen Kulte* [Meisenheim an Glan: Hein, 1962] 46-49) that the cult of his *numen* was based on Isis worship.

<sup>42</sup> For a translation, see R.K. Sherk, *The Roman Empire: Augustus to Hadrian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988) §43. Note, however, the comment of J.V.D.P. Balsdon (*The Emperor Gaius* 162) regarding the Miletus inscription: 'in the form of the dedication, in which neither senate or Rome was associated with Gaius, there was certainly a break with tradition'. Similarly, A.A. Barrett, *Caligula* 143-144.

<sup>43</sup> A.A. Barrett (*Caligula* 143) sees the planned temples at Miletus and Jerusalem as 'two striking illustrations of Caligula's policy towards his cult in the east'.

But, to return to our question, there was the precedent of Augustus instituting an altar to his *numen* on the Palatine in AD 9 — even though he already had a temple of Augustus and Rome devoted to his worship at Pergamon in the Greek East. As Wilkenson posits, Caligula may simply be taking the Augustan precedent a step further by introducing worship of his *numen* to Rome and by moving from an altar to a temple.<sup>44</sup>

Nonetheless, there still remain serious challenges to Julian precedent on Caligula's part. First, we have noted the absence of any mention of the Senate or Rome in the Miletus inscription (*supra* n.42) — a telling omission for a ruler with tendencies towards megalomania.

Second, the temple on the Palatine had been intended to house Pheidias' famous statue of Zeus at Olympia. It was to be brought to Rome and its head replaced with a portrayal of Caligula's head. Somehow Regulus managed to dissuade the ruler regarding the implementation of his plan (Suet., *Calig.* 22.2; 57.1; Cass. Dio 59.28.3; Jos., *AJ* 19.8-10). Therefore Caligula's decision to replace Pheidias' statue with a gold cult statue of himself assumes a new cultic significance. In the view of D.W. Hurley, Caligula's decision is just another case of his extravagance because gold was not reserved for statues of the gods.<sup>45</sup> But the arrogance of the ruler's act is more to be seen in the contrast between Caligula and Augustus regarding the placement of their statues at Rome. Augustus removed eighty silver statues of himself from the city (*Res Gestae* 24.2; Suet., *Calig.* 52) precisely because the use of silver for statues implied divinity in the Roman mind.<sup>46</sup> The restraint of Augustus (*Res Gestae* 4.1; 6.1; 21.3; Cass. Dio 53.27.3) and, indeed, of Tiberius (Suet., *Tib.* 26.1; Tac. *Ann.* 4.37-38) stood in contrast to the unbridled hubris of Caligula in cultic matters.

Third, as Ferrill correctly observes,<sup>47</sup> Caligula's actions do not show the restraint of his grandfather Germanicus who rejected the 'odious' and 'god-like' appellations of the Egyptians regarding himself.<sup>48</sup> Although many scholars justifiably situate individual actions of Caligula within the conventions of his Julian forebears, conceding in certain cases small violations of Roman custom, it is the *cumulative* effect of Caligula's challenge to the *mos maiorum* ('traditions of the ancestors') that pushes his reign beyond the bounds of religious propriety. Also fascinating is the fact that some of the rich citizens of Rome, if Suetonius (*Calig.* 22.3) is trustworthy, made bids for priesthoods in Caligula's cult on the Palatine. In seeking to become clients of the ruler and by competing against each other in the vein of the Republican nobles, the wealthy were complicit in Caligula's challenge to religious convention.

Thus we have to take seriously Paul's language of deity for the 'lawless one' in 2 Thessalonians 2:4, if he is alluding to Caligula, even though the rulers in the Latin West normally meant by such language the worship of their *numen* or *genius*. We have seen that in Caligula's case there is reason to agree with the uniform witness of our literary

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<sup>44</sup> S. Wilkinson, *Caligula* 28.

<sup>45</sup> D.W. Hurley, *Commentary* 88.

<sup>46</sup> E.A. Judge, 'Augustus in the *Res Gestae*', in E.A. Judge (ed. J.R. Harrison), *The First Christians in the Roman World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming 2006).

<sup>47</sup> A. Ferrill, *Caligula* 138.

<sup>48</sup> V. Ehrenberg and A.H.M. Jones (eds), *Documents* §320. For a translation, see R.K. Sherck, *The Roman Empire* §34B.

sources that he did move well beyond the traditional boundaries of religious propriety. R. Auguet notes that it is difficult to sift the true from the false in all of this, especially when the official documents of Rome do not confirm the presence of a Caligulan cult at the capital. But, as Auguet continues, there is no smoke without fire as far as contemporary perceptions of Caligula:

il paraît hors de doute que l'empereur prétendit *sacriliser*, come nous disons de nos jours, sa personne et la dynastie qui devait lui survivr.<sup>49</sup>

In this regard, a revealing insight into the consequences of this approach for Caligula comes from Seneca. On observing of another of Caligula's challenges of Jupiter to a duel, Seneca drew a telling conclusion regarding the ruler's sacrilegious behaviour: 'What madness! I think that this was instrumental in inciting conspirators against him!'.<sup>50</sup>

In sum, in the case of Caligula's introduction of the cult of his *numen* into new or existing temple sites (Didyma at Miletus, the Jerusalem Temple, and the Palatine at Rome), there is a consistency of purpose on the part of the ruler. In Caligula's view, the elaborate rituals of his cult and the activities of the temple personnel were to be observed by the clients of the Julian house and by its provincial subjects, whether in the East or in the West. This is not to say that Caligula legally enforced his wish to be treated as a god.<sup>51</sup> But in the honour-driven society of Rome — which embraced the realm of the gods and the eternal city they protected — few risked dishonouring the ruler by ignoring the cult of his *numen*.

#### 4. DOES PAUL SPEAK OF CALIGULA IN 2 THESSALONIANS 2:3-4, 8?

In Section 2 we demonstrated that 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. We have also seen that Pompey is portrayed as 'the lawless one' in Psalms of Solomon 17:11. Clearly, Old Testament prophetic texts have contributed to the portrait of the arrogance of the 'lawless one' in 2 Thessalonians 2:4, though the Hebrew Scriptures do not locate the revelation of the hubris of God's enemies (the kings of Tyre and Babylon) in the Jerusalem Temple but rather in the heavens.

In Ezekiel 28 the haughty city of Tyre, we are told, considered that it was a god because of its wisdom, wealth and beauty, (Ezek 28:5, 6, 11, 17). Through the mouth of his prophet God exposes the bristling arrogance of the ruler of the city in a searing denunciation (28:1-2):

The word of the Lord came to me: 'Son of man, say to the prince of Tyre: 'Thus says the Lord God: 'Because your heart is proud, and you have said, "I am a god,

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<sup>49</sup> R. Auguet, *Caligula* 132.

<sup>50</sup> Sen., *De Ira* 1.8-9. I am indebted to A. Ferrill (*Caligula* 135) for this reference.

<sup>51</sup> J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Caligula* 168-169. Our sources, nonetheless, indicate that Caligula wanted to be considered a god (e.g. Cass. Dio 59.25.5; 26.5; Philo, *Leg.* 76-77).

I sit in the seat of the gods,  
in the hear of the seas',  
yet you are a man , and no god,  
though you consider yourself wise as a god —

Similarly, in Isaiah 14:13-14, a stinging oracle against the king of Babylon exposes his high-handed presumption:

You said in your heart,  
'I will ascend to heaven;  
above the stars of God  
I will set my throne on high;  
I will sit on the mount of assembly  
in the far north;  
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds,  
I will make myself like the Most High.'

Nor must we forget the graphic portrait of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in Daniel 11:36. The attitude of Antiochus is described in terms that echo 2 Thessalonians 2:4:

The king will do as he pleases. He will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things against the God of gods.<sup>52</sup>

Seemingly, the conclusion is inescapable. Paul draws his imagery from the Old Testament and Jewish intertestamental traditions for his portrait of the Antichrist in 2 Thessalonians 2:4. There seems to be little room here for a Caligulan referent. However, we would do well to remember the valuable perspective that 'post-colonial' studies throws on our text in this instance. J.C. Scott has argued that subordinate groups, in response to their rulers, create hidden manuscripts that obliquely critique their oppressors.<sup>53</sup> Are we seeing something similar occurring here?

Although Paul draws upon the Old Testament and the traditions of Second Temple Judaism in portraying the Antichrist, his language would also have resonated with his audience at an imperial level. Paul's auditors probably heard his hidden transcript as a warning to them regarding the demonisation of Roman political power that had recently occurred under the reign of Caligula. Other incidents would also have fuelled concern among Jewish provincial communities about the rising tide of Roman political interference. As a Jew Paul would have been aware of the expulsion of his kinsmen from Rome under Tiberius (AD 19), the insensitivity of Pilate towards the Jews, and of Flaccus' complicity in the 'ethnic cleansing' of the Jewish ghetto in Alexandria (AD 38). More recently, Paul and his retinue had collided with the local authorities at Thessalonica who, in their anxiety not to offend their Roman benefactors, refused to condone the 'seditious' message of the Christian missionaries (Acts 17:6-8). Thus the presence of a 'hidden transcript' in 2 Thessalonians 2 is seen in the overlap of Paul's Jewish

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<sup>52</sup> B. Rigaux (*L'Antéchrist* 260) draws attention to this parallel, as does G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians* 206-207.

<sup>53</sup> J.C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

apocalyptic terminology with a transcript critical of the imperial cult. Three examples will suffice to demonstrate our point.

#### 4.1. Paul and the language of epiphany (2 Thess 2:8)

We have already seen in Section 3 that Caligula wanted to erect his gold statue in the Jerusalem Temple as ‘Gaius the new Zeus made manifest (Διὸς Ἐπιφανοῦς Νέου χρηματίζῃ Γαίου)’. Ἐπιφάνεια was also used for the accession of Caligula in an inscription from Cos.<sup>54</sup> In 2 Thessalonians 2:8 Paul speaks about the revelation of the ‘lawless one’ in this manner:

And then the lawless one (ὁ ἄνομος) will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming (τῇ ἐπιφανείᾳ τῆς παρουσίας αὐτοῦ)

Does Paul’s language of epiphany in verse 8 carry imperial overtones for his first-century auditors?

At the outset, we need to be sensitive to the Jewish foundation of Paul’s epiphanic language in 2 Thessalonians 2:8. Scholars have drawn attention to the fact that the language of epiphany (ἐπιφάνεια [‘appearance’, ‘manifestation’]; ἐπιφάνης [‘coming to light’, ‘appearing’, ‘manifest’, ‘distinguished’]) features prominently in 2 and 3 Maccabees.<sup>55</sup> What has not been sufficiently appreciated is the fact that in its Maccabean context the language of epiphany was used of God appearing to overthrow Israel’s political enemies in acts of salvation that ensured the triumph of Israel and its Temple. Significantly, two of the enemies conquered by God’s epiphanies in 2 and 3 Maccabees feature in the Antichrist traditions of Second Temple Judaism: namely, Antiochus IV Epiphanes and Nicanor, discussed previously (*supra* §2).

An important thrust of 2 Maccabees was to underscore God’s epiphanic acts of deliverance on behalf of those committed to Judaism and its icon of God’s presence, the Temple:

The story of Judas Maccabeus and his brothers, and the purification of the great Temple, and the dedication of the altar, and further the wars against Antiochus Epiphanes and his son Eupator, and the appearances (ἐπιφανείας) that came from heaven to those who fought bravely for Judaism so that though few in number they seized the whole land and pursued the barbarian hordes, and regained possession of the Temple famous throughout the world ...<sup>56</sup>

Accordingly, in 2 Maccabees 3:24, ‘the Sovereign of spirits and of all authority’ caused so great a manifestation (ἐπιφάνειαν μεγάλην) that Heliodorus, the representative of

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<sup>54</sup> *LSJ*, ἐπιφάνεια II.4: *Inscr. Cos* 391 (Γερμανικοῦ Σεβαστοῦ ἐπιφανεία); cf. Philo, *Leg.* 346. The editors (W.R. Paton and E.L. Hicks, *The Inscriptions of Cos* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891] 281) observe that ‘His accession is called an “epiphany” because he wished to be regarded as an incarnate god’.

<sup>55</sup> For a useful coverage of the language of epiphany, see B. Rigaux, *Thessaloniens* 673. See also A.D. Nock, ‘Notes on Ruler-Cult, III’, *JHS* 48 (1928) 38-41.

<sup>56</sup> 2 Macc 2:19-21.

King Seleucus IV Philopator, was not able to confiscate funds from the Jerusalem Temple treasury for the royal coffers.

In 2 Maccabees 14:1-15:37, the author recounts the defeat and death of Nicanor, the Syrian governor of Judaea, at the hands of Judas Maccabeus. In 2 Maccabees 14:15 the author highlights how the Jews were powerless to stop Nicanor's attack unless they showed prayerful dependence upon the epiphanic acts of God:

[the Jews] sprinkled dust on their heads and prayed to him who established his own people forever and always upholds his own heritage by manifesting himself (μετ' ἐπιφανείας ἀντιλαμβανόμενον τῆς ἑαυτοῦ μερίδος).

Not unexpectedly, God's manifestation was later experienced when the Jews laid low thirty-five thousand Syrians (2 Macc 15:27: ἐπιφάνεια) and kept the Temple undefiled (15:34: τὸν ἐπιφανῆ Κύριον).

In 3 Maccabees the enemy that the Jews face is Ptolemy IV Philopator. In a manner reminiscent of 2 Maccabees 3, Philopator is prevented by divine intervention from entering the Temple. His subsequent threats to massacre the Jews, ravage Judah, and burn their Temple are all brought to nought by the epiphanies (ἐπιφάνεια, ἐπιφανής) of God (3 Macc 2:9 ['your magnificent manifestation']; 5:35 ['the manifest Lord God, King of Kings']; 5:51 ['imploing the Ruler over every power to manifest himself']).

While Paul's epiphanic terminology is indebted to the Maccabean traditions regarding the saving appearances of God on behalf of His people in times of crisis,<sup>57</sup> the language of epiphany also featured prominently in the imperial cult. We have already drawn attention to two epiphanic references to Caligula (*supra* n.54). The adjectival cognate of ἐπιφάνεια (ἐπιφανής: 'manifest', 'distinguished') is regularly applied to other Julio-Claudians, as was the case in the ruler cult of Antiochus Epiphanes previously (*supra* n.22). Julius Caesar is eulogised as 'the god manifest (descended) from Ares and Aphrodite (τὸν ἀπὸ Ἄρεως καὶ Ἀφροδε[ί]της θεὸν ἐπιφανῆ), and the general saviour of human life'.<sup>58</sup> G.L. Green points to a coin of Hadrian commemorating the 'epiphany of Augustus' (ἐπιφάνεια Αὐγούστου).<sup>59</sup> The first decree of the Asian League concerning the new provincial calendar (Priene: 9 BC), if the editors have correctly restored the missing words on the stone, speaks of the effects of Augustus' providential epiphany thus: '[and (since) with his appearance ([ἐπιφανείσ])] Caesar exceeded the hopes of all those who had received [glad tidings] before us ...'.<sup>60</sup> Finally, on a statue

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<sup>57</sup> The pre-Christian Paul would have familiar with the Maccabean traditions of divine epiphany because he formerly belonged to the Phinehas and Maccabean tradition of 'Torah' zeal (Acts 22:3 [cf. 9:1-2]; Gal 1:14; Phil 3:6). For a discussion of 'zealot' traditions in relation to Galatians, see J.R. Harrison, 'Why Did Josephus and Paul Refuse to Circumcise?', *Pacifica* 17/2 (2004) 137-158.

<sup>58</sup> *I. Eph.* II.251 (48 BC).

<sup>59</sup> G.L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* 320 n.67, citing A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 373.

<sup>60</sup> V. Ehrenberg and A.H.M. Jones, *Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Augustus and Tiberius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) §98b.

base Claudius is honoured as ‘Tiberius Claudius Caesar Sebastos Germanicus god manifest (θεὸν ἐπιφανῆ), saviour of our people too’.<sup>61</sup>

The implication of what Paul is saying in hidden transcript in an imperial context is obvious enough. Just as God in the Ptolomaic and Seleucid eras had destroyed the enemies of his people by the appearance of his saving power (e.g. Ptolemy IV Philopator, Seleucus IV Philopator, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, Nicanor), so at the *parousia* of his glorified Son he would destroy the ‘ultimate sinner’, the Antichrist, as the recent demise of his demonised precursor, Caligula, had amply demonstrated. In the present time (2 Thess 2:7: ἄρτι), there is one who restrains the mystery of lawlessness ‘already at work’ (ἤδη ἐνεργεῖται). The reference to the ‘mystery of lawlessness’ (τὸ μυστήριον τῆς ἀνομίας) is possibly an allusion, as we will argue on the basis of Philo’s evidence, to the lawlessness recently displayed in the reign of Caligula and to its continuing effects throughout the empire. As Richards correctly notes,<sup>62</sup> the phrase refers ‘not to the apostasy or tribulations of the end-days but rather to the evils and persecutions which the community is undergoing (1:3-4)’, especially (I would add) at the hands of the local Thessalonian officials who were clients of the Roman rulers and their benefactors.

For Paul, however, there is only one *epiphany* and *parousia* worth waiting for — Christ’s. An understanding of this eschatological reserve was essential for Paul’s converts. The apocalyptic enthusiasm aroused in the Thessalonian believers by Paul’s critique of imperial eschatology and Augustan apotheosis traditions in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 was already spiralling out of control (2 Thess 2:2, 5).<sup>63</sup> In their spiritual immaturity, some Thessalonian believers may have misinterpreted Paul’s anti-imperial eschatology as a prophecy of the *immanent* overthrow of the Roman order by the returning κυρίος. This was understandable given the shock of their recent and continuing persecutions (2 Thess 1:4, 6).<sup>64</sup> The Thessalonian *politarchs* were sympathetic to the

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<sup>61</sup> TAM ii 760c. For additional example from the reigns of Claudius and Trajan, see J.R. Harrison, ‘Imperial Gospel’ 83 n.50.

<sup>62</sup> E.J. Richard, *Thessalonians* 330.

<sup>63</sup> See J.R. Harrison, ‘Imperial Gospel’.

<sup>64</sup> E.J. Richard (*Thessalonians* 330) argues that the Thessalonians misread their persecutions (2 Thess 1:4-6) as ‘signs of the Lord’s Day’. Contra, F.F. Bruce (*Thessalonians* 165): ‘in the list of factors which might possibly have led the Thessalonians to their conclusion about the Day of the Lord no conclusion is made of the force of circumstances or the severity of persecution’. Both Richard and Bruce, however, overlook the possibility that Paul’s prior critique of imperial eschatology (1 Thess 4:13-5:11) may have stirred up in the Thessalonians unrealistic eschatological hopes for their *imminent* deliverance from imperial rule (2 Thess 2:2c: ἐνέστηκεν). Subsequently, the hopes of the Thessalonian believers were frustrated by further persecution (2 Thess 1:4-6: cf. 2:2a: ‘not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed’), or were apocalyptically renewed by a false ‘prophecy’ from within the house churches (2 Thess 2:2b; cf. 1 Thess 5:19-22) or by a spurious ‘report’ or ‘letter’ emanating from outside (2 Thess 2:2b; 3:17b: e.g. 2 Tim 2:17-18; 2 John 7, 10). On the twofold nuance of ἐνέστηκεν (2 Thess 2:2: ‘has come’, ‘is about to come’), see L.J. Lietaert Peerbolte, *The Antecedents of Antichrist* 73-74. With considerable justification, G.L. Green (*The Letters to the Thessalonians* 305) has recently argued for the idea of immanence over against the idea of a realised

imperial rulers, as were the Roman benefactors of the city. Believers, therefore, could not expect an impartial hearing at their tribunal when faced with sporadic mob violence (Acts 17:6-9).<sup>65</sup> Thus the apostle needed to dampen the unrealistic and spiritually dangerous expectations of his Thessalonian converts. To be sure, many penultimate Antichrists would appear, including the one who had already appeared in the figure of Caligula (Mk 13:14, 21-22 [cf. 2 Thess 2:9]). But the ‘ultimate sinner’ was still to appear after the eschatological rebellion.

#### 4.2. Paul and the language of lawlessness (2 Thess 2:3, 7, 8)

We have seen that in 2 Thessalonians 2 Paul refers to the eschatological revelation of a ‘lawless one’ (v.3: ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας; v.8: ὁ ἄνομος) and to the ‘mystery of lawlessness’ already operative in the Roman empire (v.7: τὸ μύστηριον τῆς ἀνομίας).<sup>66</sup> As noted (*supra* §2), the *Psalms of Solomon* applied the epithet, ‘lawless one’, to the Roman general Pompey in his conquest of Jerusalem. What evidence is there that first-century Jews viewed Caligula in similar vein?

Philo adopts a similar rhetorical strategy to the writer of the *Psalms of Solomon* when he depicts the reign of Caligula as one of ‘lawlessness’. He graphically underscores the ‘lawlessness’ of Caligula over against the law-based rule of his Julian forebears in *Leg.* 119:

And his subjects are slaves of the emperor, even if they were not so to any one of the former emperors, because they governed with gentleness and in accordance with the laws (μετὰ νόμων), but now that Gaius had eradicated all feeling of humanity from his soul and had admired lawlessness (παρὰ νόμιον ἐζηλωκότος). For looking upon himself as the law (νόμον γὰρ ἡγούμενος), he abrogated all the enactments of other lawgivers (τῶν ἑκάστοχου νομοθετῶν) in every state and country with many vain sentences ...

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eschatology in regards to Paul’s use of ἐνέστηκεν in 2 Thessalonians 2:2b. In proposing that *some* Thessalonian believers may have mistakenly interpreted Paul’s eschatology as a prophecy of the *imminent* demise of imperial power, in a manner similar to the Second Temple apocalyptic literature (e.g. 4 Ezra; 2 Baruch), I am not discounting the possibility that *other* Thessalonian believers may have fallen prey to the early Christian *realised* eschatology abroad elsewhere (e.g. 1 Cor 15:12-24; 2 Tim 2:18; 2 Pet 3:3-13; Jn 21:22-23; cf. G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians* 200). The eschatological enthusiasm of the Thessalonians may well have unravelled into several strands, with believers disagreeing over its precise shape and its political implications, as they wrestled with the complexities of the apostolic tradition (2 Thess 2:5, 15; 3:6b, 14-15) and the false teaching of the apocalyptic enthusiasts (2 Thess 2:2). As a useful parallel for understanding the *political* context of the Thessalonian eschatology, B.R. Gaventa (*First and Second Thessalonians* [Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989] 109-110) has pointed to the hopes of some Jews for divine intervention during the occupation of the Temple in AD 70 (Josephus, *BJ* 6.284-287).

<sup>65</sup> On the historicity of the Acts account, see J.R. Harrison, ‘Imperial Gospel’ 80 n.33.

<sup>66</sup> On the possible subtle distinction between ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας and ὁ ἄνομος, see G.S. Holland, *The Tradition that You Received from Us: 2 Thessalonians in the Pauline Tradition* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988) 107.

Paul, too, probably alludes to the *Psalms of Solomon* in designating the penultimate Antichrist — with Caligula firmly in view in this case — as the ‘lawless one’ (2 Thess 2:3, 8) who was spreading abroad ‘the mystery of lawlessness’ (2 Thess 2:7).<sup>67</sup> The ‘lawlessness’ of Caligula, seen supremely in his attempted profanation of the Temple (2 Thess 2:3-4; cf. Mk 13:14, 21-22), pointed to the ‘lawlessness’ currently engulfing the empire of Rome (2:7).<sup>68</sup> Since Philo had made a similar point barely a decade ago, it should hardly surprise us to find Paul adapting contemporary Jewish political polemic against Caligula to his own eschatological ends in 2 Thessalonians 2:7.<sup>69</sup>

However, in true apocalyptic form, Paul argues that this penultimate ‘lawlessness’ would be held firmly in check by an (unnamed) restraining archangel (2 Thess 2:7b: ὁ κατέχων; cf. Michael: Daniel 10:13b, 21; 12:1),<sup>70</sup> until the final rebellion had occurred

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<sup>67</sup> However, G.L. Green (*The Letters to the Thessalonians* 308) rightly draws attention to the fact that the manuscript tradition for ἄνομος in *Psalms of Solomon* 17:11 is not secure. For suggestions that ὁ ἄνομος (2 Thess 2:8; cf. v.3) is synonymous with the Old Testament phrase ‘man of Belial’, see F.F. Bruce, *Thessalonians* 167-168; M. Dibelius, *Die Briefe des Apostels Paulus: An die Thessalonicher I/III. An die Philipper* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1911) 30. A.J. Malherbe’s suggestion (*Thessalonians* 419) that ὁ ἄνομος was prompted by Ps. 88:23 (LXX) is unconvincing due to the absence of any νόμος terminology. E.J. Richard (*Thessalonians* 327), after discussing Old Testament ἀνομία terminology (e.g. Ps 31:15) opts for the reference to Pompey as the ‘lawless one’ (Pss Sol 17:11, 18), noted above. Regarding the ‘mystery of lawlessness’ (2 Thess 2:7), despite the ‘parallels’ adduced by various commentators (e.g. F.F. Bruce [*Thessalonians* 170], A.J. Malherbe [*Thessalonians* 423], E.J. Richard [*Thessalonians* 330]), Malherbe comes closest to the mark when he concludes that the phrase is probably an ‘ad hoc formulation’ of Paul.

<sup>68</sup> S.G. Brown (‘The Intertextuality of Isaiah 66:17 and 2 Thessalonians 2:7: A Solution to the “Restraint Problem”’, in C.A. Evans and J.A. Sanders (eds), *Paul and the Scriptures of Israel* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993] 257) points out that πρῶτον (‘first’: 2 Thess 2:3) parallels the particles νῦν (‘now’: 2:6a), ἤδη (‘already’: 2:7) and ἄρτι (‘just now’: 2:7). As Brown observes, ‘These parallels indicate that the wickedness normally associated with the man of sin was affecting Paul’s readers at that time and obviously accounted for their suffering (cf. 1 Thess 4:4-5). Thus the church at Thessalonica experienced or tasted the apostasy and its arch-agent’. This observation strengthens the possibility that Paul saw Caligula’s recent profanation of the Temple (2 Thess 2:3-4) as a chilling instance of the apostasy presently abroad in the Roman empire (2:7) and ultimately as a precursor of the eschatological Antichrist-to-come (2:8-10).

<sup>69</sup> B.R. Gaventa (*First and Second Thessalonians* 111) restricts the ‘lawlessness’ to ‘the refusal to submit to the authority of God as creator’. Yet the reference is wider than that. As G.L. Green notes (*The Letters to the Thessalonians* 309-310), the ‘man of lawlessness’ opposes false deities as much as the true God, exalting himself over ‘any sanctuary, idol, or person that receives adoration’ (*ibid.*, 310). This is consonant with the prototypical ‘divine claim of the emperor in the imperial cult’ (*ibid.*).

<sup>70</sup> C. Nicholl, ‘Michael, The Restraint Removed (2 Thess 2:6-7)’, *JTS* 51/1 (2000) 27-53; G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians* 215-216. For a discussion of Paul’s angelology, see

(2:3a). Then the Satan-inspired ‘lawless one’ would be finally revealed, with the result that the Antichrist would deceive the perishing with eschatological signs until his destruction by the epiphany of Jesus’ parousia (2:8-12). Paul’s point for the immature and excitable Thessalonians was plain. The Day of the Lord and the hope of eschatological glory were still to come (2 Thess 2:15-16) and the Thessalonians had to stand firm in the gospel tradition and in its practical outworking in their lives (2:16-17). Any talk of the imminent eschatological demise of the imperial rulers was premature.

#### 4.3. Paul and the language of deity (2 Thess 2:4)

It would be difficult for first-century monotheistic Jews not to react negatively to some of the honours and epithets conveyed to the ‘divine’ ruler at Rome. Both Philo and Josephus agree that Caligula’s promotion of the imperial cult was the central issue in arousing Jewish opposition to his rule (Philo, *Leg.* 184-348; Jos., *AJ* 18.261-309). In the eyes of these two Jews at least, Caligula was the first Roman ruler to sponsor aggressively his own divinity by having cult statues from Greece shipped to Rome, where their heads were replaced with models of his own. In a previous section (*supra* §3), we have argued that there is warrant for thinking that in the last months of his reign Caligula deliberately blurred the divide between the gods and humanity in promoting the cult of his *numen* at Rome as much as in the East. Elsewhere I have argued that the rapturous preface to the loyalty oath of the Assians to Caligula (AD 37), in which the ruler is identified as the ‘hoped and prayed for’ *theos*, linked the ideas of *parousia* and *epiphany* in the eschatological context of the ruler’s coronation.<sup>71</sup> For Paul in the Greek East, there would have been little doubt that this was a clear assertion of the ruler’s divinity on the part of his provincial clients, legitimately grateful as they were for his benefactions. In Paul’s view, something more disturbing than the obsequious ‘divine’ honours of the ruler cult had begun to emerge in Caligula’s reign. In this regard, G.S. Holland has argued that Paul’s phrase λεγόμενον θεὸν ἢ σέβασμα (2 Thess 2:4) captures the ‘blasphemous claims of pagan rulers’, with its pun on the ‘Roman emperor’s honorific title of Σεβαστός, “Augustus”’.<sup>72</sup>

Above all, this impression was confirmed by the ruler’s arrogant attempt to set up his own cult in the Jerusalem Temple. We must remember that notwithstanding Paul’s transfer of ‘priestly’, ‘purity’, ‘cultic’ and ‘temple’ terminology to the Body of Christ,<sup>73</sup> the Jerusalem Temple was still standing at the time of writing. It symbolised the continuing privileges that God still mercifully extended to Israel in spite of its present stumbling (Rom 9:4: ‘the glory ... the worship’; cf. 1:16b; 3:1-4; 9:22; 11:1-2, 24b-32).

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J.R. Harrison, ‘In Quest of the Third Heaven: Paul and His Apocalyptic Imitators’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 58/1 (2004) 24-55, esp. 43-46.

<sup>71</sup> J.R. Harrison, ‘Imperial Gospel’ 91-92.

<sup>72</sup> G.S. Holland, *The Tradition that You Received* 108.

<sup>73</sup> See J.R. Harrison, ‘In Quest of the Third Heaven’ 54 n.101; also, B. Gärtner, *The Temple and the Community in Qumran and the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965); M. Newton, *The Concept of Purity at Qumran in the Letters of Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); J. Neyrey, *Paul, In Other Words: A Cultural Reading of His Letters* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990).

Indeed, members of the early Jerusalem church continued to worship and teach in the Temple (Acts 2:46; 3:1, 8; 5:19-21, 25; 21:17-26). Although Caligula did not literally take his seat in the Temple of God at Jerusalem,<sup>74</sup> the imagery should be viewed apocalyptically in light of the hubristic claims of the king of Tyre (Ezek 28:1-2) and the king of Babylon (Isa 14:13-14), as well as Antiochus Epiphanes IV (Dan 11:36).<sup>75</sup> As noted, in the cases of the kings of Tyre and Babylon in particular, as apocalyptic precursors of Caligula, each man set up his throne in the heavens.<sup>76</sup> The claim to deity could not be clearer in its Jewish context.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the multivalence of the apostle's imagery, Paul probably believed that the Roman authorities had exceeded their divine mandate under Caligula (Rom 13:1-7; cf. 16:20). Caligula had displayed hubris in attempting to place his statue in the Temple. In Paul's view, the Eastern *poleis* were no longer just registering appropriate honour to the ruler (e.g. Rom 13:7), securing his favour through the imperial cult. Rather, by means of the cult, Caligula was now sponsoring his claim to divinity in the East and the West (Jos., *AJ* 18.261ff; Philo, *Leg.*, *passim*) or, more likely, in Roman parlance, the veneration of his *numen*. If this assessment of imperial power in 2 Thessalonians 2 is correct, a positive imperial interpretation of 'the restraining principle' (2 Thess 2:6: τὸ κατέχον) and 'the restraining person' (2 Thess 2:7: ὁ κατέχων) is unlikely.

Elsewhere in his letters, Paul warned believers about the idolatry of the imperial cult (1 Cor 8:5-6, 10; 10:14ff: *supra* n.37).<sup>77</sup> He established Jesus' superiority over the apotheosised Augustus (1 Thess 4:13-5:10; Phil 2:9-11; 3:20-21) and his iconic reign of unparalleled beneficence (*Res Gestae* 15-24; cf. Rom 5:12-21).<sup>78</sup> Moreover, the apostle highlighted Christ's peace over the celebrated Neronian 'quinquennium' (Rom 5:1; cf. Rom 13:1-7).<sup>79</sup> He demotes the ruler to the status of 'God's servant' in Romans 13:1-7

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<sup>74</sup> Note the comment of G.S. Holland ( *The Tradition that You Received* 108): 'Although the statue was never actually placed there, this was because of chance, and certainly not because Caligula thought better of the idea. He claimed to be an incarnation of Zeus during his lifetime, as Antiochus was also reputed to have done ...'.

<sup>75</sup> E.J. Richard, *Thessalonians* 328.

<sup>76</sup> B.R. Gaventa (*First and Second Thessalonians* 112) points to Old Testament traditions of God's dwelling place being a heavenly temple (Ps. 11:4; 18:6; Isa 66:1; Hab 2:20). For intertestamental references, see G.L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* 312.

<sup>77</sup> B.W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 269-286.

<sup>78</sup> On imperial apotheosis traditions in relation to I Thessalonians, see J.R. Harrison, 'Imperial Gospel'. On the Philippian context, see P. Oakes, *Philippans: From People to Letter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 129-174. On the Augustan reign of grace, see J.R. Harrison, *Paul's Language of Grace in Its Graeco-Roman Context* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) 226-242.

<sup>79</sup> B. Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 305-308.

and denies the *aeternitas* of the Roman empire (Rom 13:11-12).<sup>80</sup> In 2 Thessalonians 2:1-10, however, Paul exposes the demonic potential of Roman rule, a perspective that John expanded on a generation later (Rev 13:1ff). What we are witnessing here is a highly adaptable political thinker who engages the ‘powers that be’ in the differing pastoral and social contexts of his house churches and who critiques the alternate imperial gospel in light of the gospel of the risen and reigning Lord.

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<sup>80</sup> B.W. Winter, ‘Roman Law and Society in Romans 12-15’, in P. Oakes (ed.), *Rome in the Bible and the Early Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002) 67-102