

II Thessalonians 2 and the Man of Lawlessness

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Scripture text for this study: [II Thessalonians 2:1-12](#)

Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you ² not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. ³ Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, ⁴ who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.

⁵ Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? ⁶ And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. ⁷ For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. ⁸ And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. ⁹ The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, ¹⁰ and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. ¹¹ And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, ¹² that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

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Background and Introduction

Looking at Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, he wrote to a church that was experiencing persecution ([II Thess. 1:4-7](#)). Paul spoke of their "*persecutions and tribulations*," but also their patience, faith, and endurance (verse 4). He spoke of their suffering and troubles (verses 5-6), but also promised that those who troubled them would be repaid with tribulation (verse 6) and that they would receive rest "*when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God*" (verses 7-8).

If this prophecy is still not fulfilled, as many believe and teach today, then none of those believers lived to experience that relief. Also those who troubled them have not yet been repaid with tribulation, according to this idea.

The persecution experienced by the Thessalonians was evidently coming from the Jews. It also appeared to be directed by religious leaders in Jerusalem, where the man of lawlessness would later make his headquarters:

"For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they might be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last" (I Thess. 2:14-16; see also [Acts 17:1-13](#)).

It's believed that II Thessalonians was written around AD 52. Great judgment came upon the Jews 14 years later during the Jewish-Roman War (AD 66-73). When we recall the words of Jesus, it's no surprise that Paul expected his first century readers to personally experience relief from their afflictions. Jesus had likewise promised to come in His kingdom, in judgment, with His angels, and in His Father's glory while some of His 12 disciples were still alive (Matthew 16:27-28). Paul viewed the coming judgment upon apostate Israel as a good development for the spread of the gospel among the nations.

The "*man of lawlessness*" and the "*mystery of lawlessness*" were direct concerns for the believers living in Thessalonica in Paul's day. What was already happening in Jerusalem, and what would soon reach a crisis level, affected their lives in a significant way.

VERSES 1-2

Paul wrote to a church that was apparently entertaining concerns that they had missed Christ's coming, for Paul wrote: "*Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come*" (II Thess. 2:1-2). We must consider the nature of their expectation about these things. For if their expectation of the Lord's coming was that it would bring an end to the world, or that it would result in the instant removal of all believers from the planet, it's hard to imagine how they could be led to believe that these things had already occurred. If the Day of the Lord referred to "a rapture," and they thought it may have already occurred, why would Paul still be around? As [David Lowman, a Presbyterian pastor, has written](#),

“Now, if on the other hand, the Thessalonians believed the Day of the Lord to be the coming judgment against apostate Israel, then asking about that event would make sense. And if they had friends or relatives in the Judean area it would easily explain their concern that the Day of the Lord had passed.”

David points out that the Greek word for the phrase “gathered together,” *episunagoge*, used in II Thess. 2:1, appears three times in the New Testament: [1] in Matthew 24:31 (“...and He will send out His angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will **gather** His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other”; see [our study of this passage](#)), [2] here in this passage, [3] and in Hebrews 10:25 (“not neglecting to **meet together**, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near”).

VERSES 3-4

Paul stated that two events had to occur before the day of the Lord would come: [1] the rebellion, and [2] the revealing of the man of lawlessness.

The Greek word “*apostasia*” in verse 3 is rendered by most modern translations as “*the rebellion*” or “*the revolt*.” According to Strong’s Concordance, it’s a word that can mean either [a] revolt (rebellion) or [b] defection/departure (falling away). Did Paul predict a spiritual falling away? This is a popular idea, but this word can also indicate a social or political rebellion. We know from the Jewish historian Josephus and other sources that in AD 66 AD a large-scale rebellion rose up in Israel through the efforts of the Zealots, leading to Rome declaring war on Israel. This rebellion began about 14 years after Paul wrote this letter, although the seeds of that rebellion were already taking root by the time of Paul’s writings and there had been smaller outbreaks even earlier. So in verse 3, Paul made the argument that Christ’s coming in judgment against Israel would not take place before the great rebellion led by the Zealots had already begun.

What is the significance of the title “*man of lawlessness*”? Some may be tempted to simply see this man as a reckless leader with no regard for local or international laws. However, the “law” that was held in the highest regard in Paul’s world was the Mosaic Law, the Law of Moses. It’s very likely that Paul was saying that this man would trample on the Law of Moses and freely commit sins under the law. The fact that he would sit in the temple is another clue to the meaning of “lawlessness” because the temple was central to the practice of Mosaic Law. This would also confirm that he was revealed while the law was still being practiced (Hebrews 8:13), i.e. before the temple was destroyed in AD 70.

We can also note the close relationship between “*lawlessness*” and “*rebellion*” in these verses. The Zealots were about to lead a massive rebellion against Rome, and Paul’s readers knew this had been their goal for some time. So the man of lawlessness would naturally come from their ranks. Josephus, who chronicled that rebellion in *Wars of the Jews*, ran out of adjectives to describe how wicked it was and how profoundly the Zealots violated the Law for which they were supposed to be so zealous.

Verse 4 says that the man of lawlessness “*opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.*” The temple known to the Thessalonians, and which was famous throughout the Roman Empire, was burned

and destroyed in AD 70, only about 18 years after Paul wrote this letter. At the end of this study, we will look at what took place in the temple during its final years, and what I believe fulfilled this prophecy.

Briefly, though, I would like to address the popular belief that a third temple must soon be rebuilt in Jerusalem, and that a future antichrist figure will then be enthroned in that temple. Is there any way that the Thessalonian believers would have understood Paul's words this way? They knew from Jesus' own prophecies that the temple (the one they knew and most likely had visited) would be destroyed in their own generation (Matthew 23:29-24:1, 24:3, 24:34; Luke 19:41-44, Luke 21:5-33, etc.).

There are no clues in the text pointing to a different temple than that one being involved in this prophecy. How strange it would have been for them to think that Herod's temple would later **be replaced** in order for a lawless individual to proclaim his divinity in a new temple. Even more strange would be the fact that they wouldn't need to be concerned about him because he was many centuries away from appearing. Yet Paul clearly wrote to them about the lawless one as if he would directly impact their lives or the lives of those they cared about.

Such a rebuilt temple in the 21st century would also certainly not be "*the temple of God.*" Those who are trying to initiate this project today are hoping to resume old covenant sacrifices, which would be a rejection of Christ and His work on the cross. It's a tragedy that many professing Christians in America today are passionate about seeing such a project come to pass in modern Israel and have donated millions of dollars to see it happen, even though it would raise tensions and could cause a major war to break out.

VERSES 5-7

Paul reminded the Thessalonians that he had already discussed with them in person about the man of sin, the coming rebellion, etc. (verse 5). We are not given many details of that earlier conversation. Apparently, Paul had privately discussed with them the identity of the man of lawlessness and the entity that was restraining him, because he says, "*And **YOU KNOW** what is restraining him **NOW** so that he may be revealed in his time*" (verse 6). This again points to a first-century fulfillment, as does Paul's next statement: "*For the mystery of lawlessness is **ALREADY** at work. Only he who **NOW** restrains it will do so until he is out of the way*" (verse 7).

James Stuart Russell, whose book, "*Parousia*," in 1878 has been cited favorably by Charles Spurgeon and (more recently) R.C. Sproul, wrote the following about the immediate relevance of this subject to the Thessalonians (p. 179):

"Is it not obvious that whoever the man of sin may be, he must be someone with whom the apostle [Paul] and his readers had to do? Is he not writing to living men about matters in which they are intensely interested? Why should he delineate the features of this mysterious personage to the Thessalonians if he was one with whom the Thessalonians had nothing to do, from whom they had nothing to fear, and who would not be revealed for ages yet to come? It is clear that he speaks of one whose influence was already beginning to be felt, and whose unchecked and lawless fury would [before] long burst forth..."

The Mystery of Lawlessness

I would like to suggest that the “mystery of lawlessness” was a reference to the Zealot movement which had been gaining steam since Hezekiah the Zealot rose up in 47 BC, and especially since his son, Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:37), led a failed rebellion in AD 6. (See [this post](#) for a detailed overview of that movement and its key leaders.) The goal of this movement was to regain for Israel the full independence which had been won by the Maccabees from 164 – 142 BC, but which was lost after Pompey the Great invaded in 63 BC and Herod the Great began to rule over Judea in 37 BC. Their long-planned rebellion finally exploded into a full-scale war around August AD 66, according to Josephus ([Wars 2.17.2](#)), and it resulted in Jerusalem being filled with abominations ([Wars 2.17.10](#)).

The Restrainer

I would also like to suggest that the restrainer was, collectively, the Jewish high priests who led the peace movement in Jerusalem. Josephus, in *Wars of the Jews*, wrote a great deal about how they were a thorn in the side to the Zealots, at times preventing the Zealots from fully doing as they pleased. When the Jewish-Roman War began in AD 66, this peace movement was led by Ananus ben Ananus and Jesus ben Gamaliel. Their long speeches against the Zealots can be seen in [Wars 4.3.10](#) and [Wars 4.4.3](#). Josephus said that Ananus “preferred peace above all things,” was “a shrewd man in speaking and persuading the people,” and “**had already gotten the mastery of those who opposed his designs or were for the war**” ([Wars 4.5.2](#)).

In late AD 67 the Zealots appointed a fake and completely unqualified high priest, Phannias, who essentially became their puppet ([Wars 4.3.6-8](#)). At this point, the people of Jerusalem “could no longer bear the insolence of this procedure, but did altogether run zealously, in order to overthrow that tyranny...” ([Wars 4.3.9](#)). In the speech of Ananus ([Wars 4.3.10](#)), he pledged to lead the people in an all-or-nothing attack against the Zealots, not sparing his own body. Ananus and his followers actually gained the upper hand against the Zealots, forcing them into the inner temple and gaining control of the rest of the city ([Wars 4.3.12](#)), but their progress came undone because of the trickery of John Levi of Gischala ([Wars 4.3.13-14](#)). More details about what happened can be seen in [this post](#).

Ananus and Jesus were both killed, along with other priests, during the [Zealot Temple Siege](#) of February-March AD 68. I believe this was when the restrainer was taken “*out of the way*.” Their deaths marked a significant turning point for Jerusalem, according to Josephus:

“I should not mistake if I said that **the death of Ananus was the beginning of the destruction of the city**, and that from this very day may be dated the overthrow of her wall, and the ruin of her affairs, whereon they saw their high priest, and the procurer of their preservation, slain in the midst of their city... to say all in a word, **if Ananus had survived they had certainly compounded matters**... And the Jews had then put abundance of delays in the way of the Romans, if they had had such a general as he was” ([Wars 4.5.2](#)).

After their deaths, the Zealots were unrestrained. They “fell upon the people as upon a flock of profane animals, and cut their throats.” Others endured “terrible torments” before finally meeting their deaths. At least 12,000 died in that massacre ([Wars 4.5.3](#)). Josephus described how the Zealots increased their wickedness because the peace-loving high priests were no longer there to hinder them:

“[T]he zealots grew more insolent, not as deserted by their confederates, **but as freed from such men as might hinder their designs, and put some stop to their wickedness.** Accordingly they made no longer any delay, nor took any deliberation in their enormous practices, but made use of the shortest methods for all their executions, and what they had once resolved upon, they put in practice sooner than anyone could imagine...” ([Wars 4.6.1](#)).

VERSE 8

Paul said that once the restrainer was “*taken out of the way*” (verse 7), “*the lawless one [would] be revealed, whom the Lord [would] **consume** with the breath of His mouth and **destroy** with the brightness of His coming*” (verse 8; NKJV). Do the words “*will consume...and destroy*” mean that the lawless one would be killed? Or, as John Noe suggested in [a 2002 article](#), is it possible that they meant something other than immediate death? This is an important question to consider as we look at a couple of candidates for the man of lawlessness at the end of this article.

The Greek word rendered as “consume” in verse 8 is “*analisko*.” According to Strong’s Concordance, it means “to use up, i.e. destroy: consume.” It’s used two other times in the New Testament: Luke 9:54 and Galatians 5:15. Vine’s Expository Dictionary offers [the following explanation](#) for this word:

"to use up, spend up, especially in a bad sense, to destroy," is said of the destruction of persons, (a) literally, Luke 9:54 and the RV marg. of 2 Thessalonians 2:8 (text, "shall slay"); (b) metaphorically, Galatians 5:15 "(that) ye be not consumed (one of another)."

The Greek word rendered as “destroy” above is “*katargeo*.” According to Strong’s Concordance, it means “to be (render) entirely idle (useless), lit. or fig.:-abolish, cease, cumber, deliver, destroy, do away, become (make) of no (none, without) effect, fail, loose, bring (come) to nought, put away (down), vanish away, make void.” The Vine’s entry for this word [can be seen here](#) (redirected from [here](#)).

Different Bible versions vary in how they translate these two Greek words that describe what would happen to the lawless one. The following chart is based on the 25 versions [listed at Bible Hub](#):

BIBLE VERSION	TRANSLATION OF “ANALISKO”	TRANSLATION OF “KATARGEO”
1. New International Version	Overthrow	Destroy
2. New Living Translation	Kill	Destroy
3. English Standard Version	Kill	Bring to nothing
4. Berean Study Bible	Slay	Abolish
5. Berean Literal Bible	Consume	Annul
6. New American Standard Bible	Slay	Bring to an end
7. King James Bible	Consume	Destroy

8. Holman Christian Standard Bible	Destroy	Bring to nothing
9. International Standard Version	Destroy	Rendering him powerless
10. NET Bible	Destroy	Wipe out
11. New Heart English Bible	Kill	Destroy
12. Aramaic Bible in Plain English	Consume	Destroy
13. God's Word Translation	Destroy	Put an end to
14. New American Standard 1977	Slay	Bring to an end
15. Jubilee Bible 2000	Consume	Remove
16. King James 2000 Bible	Consume	Destroy
17. American King James Version	Consume	Destroy
18. American Standard Version	Slay	Bring to nought
19. Douay-Rheims Bible	Kill	Destroy
20. Darby Bible Translation	Consume	Annul
21. English Revised Version	Slay	Bring to nought
22. Webster's Bible Translation	Consume	Destroy
23. Weymouth New Testament	Sweep away	Utterly overwhelm
24. World English Bible	Kill	Destroy
25. Young's Literal Translation	Consume	Destroy

Here are the results from these 25 Bible versions:

<i>Analisko</i>	<i>Katargeo</i>
Consume (9x)	Destroy (11x)
Kill (5x)	Bring to nothing/nought (4x)
Slay (5x)	Bring to an end/put an end to (3x)
Destroy (4x)	Annul (2x)
Overthrow (4x)	Abolish (1x)
Sweep away (1x)	Remove (1x)
	Rendering him powerless (1x)
	Utterly overwhelm (1x)
	Wipe out (1x)

VERSES 9-12

Paul said in verses 9-12 that the coming of the lawless one would be accompanied by power, signs, lying wonders, the working of Satan, and unrighteous deception. God would also send delusion to those who *“did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”*

In *Antiquities of the Jews* and *Wars of the Jews*, Josephus wrote about a phenomenon taking place in the Jewish world before and during the Jewish-Roman War, especially in Judea and Galilee. During this time, said Josephus, there were **“a great number of false prophets suborned by the tyrants [Zealots] to impose on the people.”** Here Josephus described the close working relationship between the Zealots and false prophets. Many of the people, he said, were persuaded **“by these deceivers,”** who were **“such as belied God himself”** ([Wars 6.5.2-3](#)).

In [Antiquities 20.8.6](#) Josephus wrote the following about numerous false prophets who deceived the Jews during the time of the Procurators Felix (52-58 AD) and Festus (59-62 AD). He mentioned their lying wonders, and showed that they shared the war agenda of the Zealots:

“These works, that were done by **the robbers**, filled the city with all sorts of impiety. And now **these impostors and deceivers** persuaded the multitude to follow them into the wilderness, **and pretended that they would exhibit manifest wonders and signs, that should be performed by the providence of God...** And again **the robbers stirred up the people to make war with the Romans**, and said they ought not to obey them at all; and when any persons would not comply with them, they set fire to their villages, and plundered them.”

In [Wars 2.13.4-6](#) Josephus wrote more about the various false prophets and deceivers who worked on behalf of the Zealots to persuade the people to revolt. They “deceived and deluded the people under pretense of Divine inspiration” and “prevailed with the multitude to act like madmen.” In [Wars 7.11.1](#) Josephus wrote about one of the Sicarii (a branch of the Zealots) who led many astray with his promises of signs and wonders:

“And now did the madness of the Sicarii, like a disease, reach as far as the cities of Cyrene; for one Jonathan, a vile person, and by trade a weaver, came thither and prevailed with no small number of the poorer sort to give ear to him; he also led them into the desert, **upon promising them that he would show them signs and apparitions**. And as for the other Jews of Cyrene, he concealed his knavery from them, and **put tricks upon them**.”

Jonathan also “taught the *Sicarii* to accuse men falsely” (Wars 7.11.2), which was a work of Satan (Revelation 12:10).

Other sources could also be called upon, such as “The Zealots” by Martin Hengel, but these citations should be enough to show that the rebellion led by the Zealots was indeed accompanied by deception, lying wonders, magic and tricks, false prophets, claims of signs and wonders, and the working of Satan.

Top Two Candidates for the Man of Lawlessness

In this passage, Paul specifically stated that the man of lawlessness was one who:

[1] *“opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God”* (verse 4);

[2] *“the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming”* (verse 8).

During the Jewish-Roman War, there were two Zealot leaders who took their place in the temple:

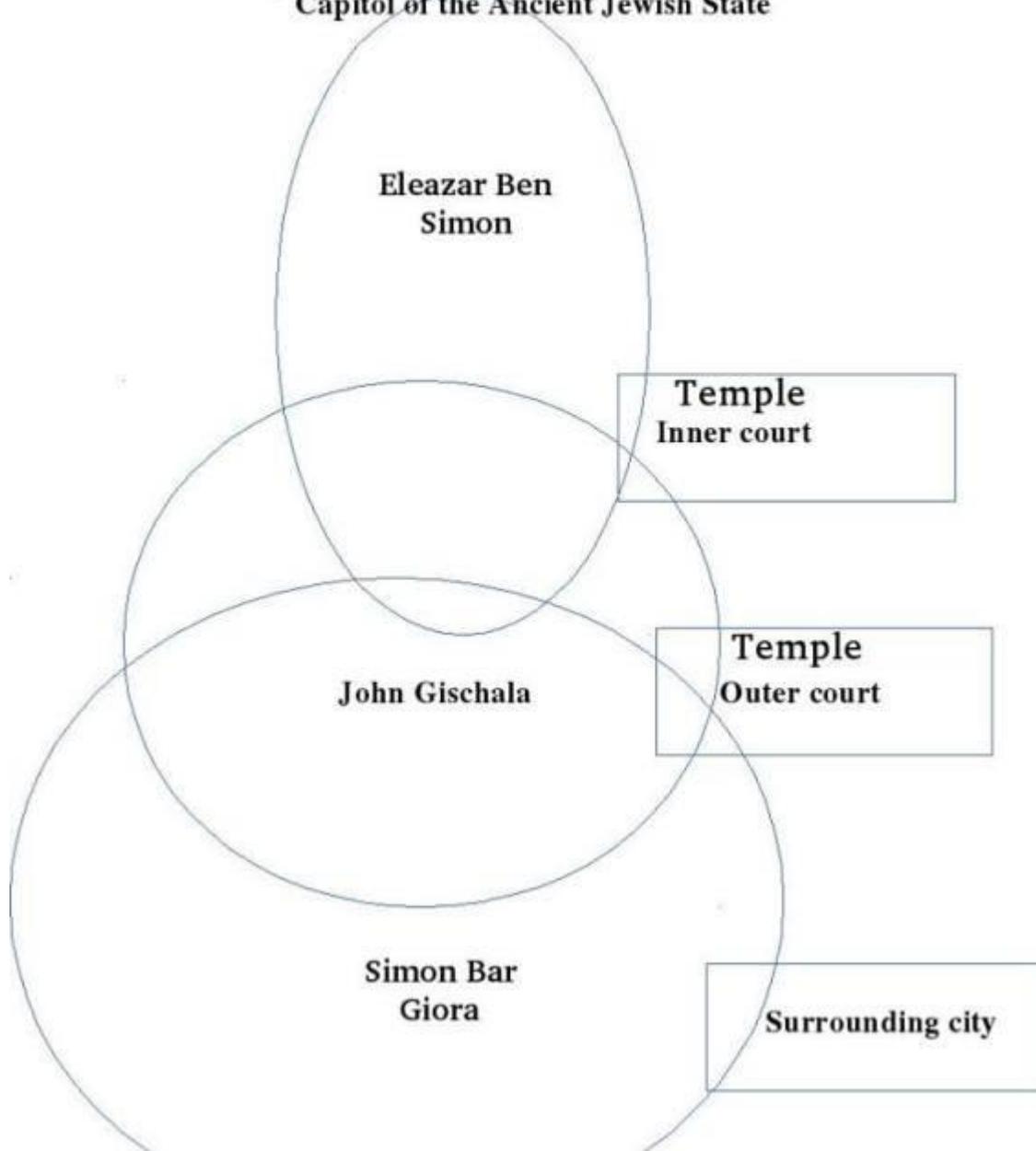
[1] The first one made the temple, including the inner court, his headquarters for about 3.5 years (from the fall of AD 66 until April AD 70). He was killed in Jerusalem in AD 70. That was Eleazar ben Simon.

[2] The second one took over the inner court about five months before the temple was destroyed, precisely when the Roman general, Titus, arrived and began his siege against Jerusalem (from April - August AD 70). He was captured, taken to Rome, and sentenced to life in prison. That was John Levi of Gischala.

The Abomination of Desolation

A.D.66 TO 70

**In the Second Temple and Jerusalem, the
Capitol of the Ancient Jewish State**



Source: Mark Mountjoy, New Testament Open University ([June 9, 2015](#))

The following is a profile of both of these men and their careers as leaders of the Zealot movement.

Eleazar ben Simon

Eleazar ben Simon came from a priestly family ([Wars 4.4.1.225](#)) and was the nephew of Simon Bar Giora ([Wars 6.4.1](#)). Eleazar was first introduced by Josephus in [Wars 2.20.3](#) as a war hero in the victory over Cestius Gallus in November AD 66. According to Josephus, he “had gotten into his possession the prey they had taken from the Romans, and the money they had taken from Cestius, together with a great part of the public treasures.”

Soon after this victory, the rebels appointed [10 “generals for the war”](#) ([Wars 2.20.3-4](#)). Josephus spoke of Eleazar ben Simon as a natural choice for one of those positions due to his bravery and success in the battle against Cestius Gallus. Instead he was kept out of that office because of his terrible temper and the extreme loyalty of his followers, but he managed to become the main leader of the Zealots anyway:

“They did not ordain Eleazar the son of Simon to that office... because they saw he was of a tyrannical temper; and that his followers were, in their behavior, like guards about him. However, the want they were in of Eleazar’s money, and the tricks by him, brought all so about, that the people were circumvented, **and submitted themselves to his authority in all public affairs**” ([Wars 2.20.3](#)).

This was still true almost 1.5 years later, in early AD 68. Josephus said that among the Zealot leaders, he was “the most plausible man, both in considering what was fit to be done, and in the execution of what he had determined upon” ([Wars 4.4.1](#)). Eleazar joined forces with John Levi at this time, and, after killing Ananus ben Ananus and other high priests in February-March AD 68 AD, together they seized control of the entire city of Jerusalem ([Wars 4.4.1 – 4.6.3](#)).

Eleazar made the temple his headquarters for nearly 3.5 years, from late AD 66 until he was defeated by John Levi’s forces in mid-April AD 70. Josephus said that it was “Eleazar, the son of Simon, who made the first separation of the zealots from the people, and made them retire into the temple” ([Wars 5.1.2](#)). Around December AD 67, Eleazar and the other Zealots made the sanctuary of the temple “a shop of tyranny” by casting lots to select a fake high priest named Phannias. He was chosen against his will from a village in the countryside, fitted with “a counterfeit face” and the sacred garments, and “upon every occasion [they] instructed him what he was to do” ([Wars 4.3.6-8](#)).

In the spring of AD 69, Eleazar “was desirous of gaining the entire power and dominion to himself” and he “revolted from John [Levi].” **He and his followers “seized upon the inner court of the temple” and made use of the sacred things in there (Wars 5.1.2).** At this time, he led one of three Zealot factions, with the other factions being led by John Levi and Simon Bar Giora ([Wars 5.1.1, 4](#); Revelation 16:19).

Eleazar ben Simon was tricked and defeated by John Levi’s forces in mid-April AD 70, just as the Roman general Titus began his siege. This happened at the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Eleazar opened the gates to the inner court of the temple

“and admitted such of the people as were desirous to worship God into it. But John made use of this festival as a cloak for his treacherous designs, and armed the most inconsiderable of his own

party, the greater part of whom were not purified, with weapons concealed under their garments, and sent them with great zeal into the temple, in order to seize upon it; which armed men, when they were gotten in, threw their garments away, and presently appeared in their armor... **These followers of John also did now seize upon this inner temple, and upon all the warlike engines therein, and then ventured to oppose Simon. And thus that sedition, which had been divided into three factions, was now reduced to two**" ([Wars 5.3.1](#)).

After this treachery, Josephus records that Eleazar ben Simon's 2,400 men stopped opposing John Levi and joined forces with him, but Eleazar remained as their commander:

"John, who had siezed upon the temple, had six thousand armed men, under twenty commanders; the zealots also that had come to him, and left off their opposition, were two thousand four hundred, and had the same commander that they had formerly, Eleazar, together with Simon the son of Arinus" ([Wars 5.6.1.250](#)).

Eleazar ben Simon is mentioned one last time in *Wars of the Jews*. Josephus described the state of affairs as of the 8th of Av (late July or early August) in AD 70 when two of the Roman legions completed their banks. Josephus mentioned that Eleazar was still involved in the fighting at this time: "Of the seditious, those that had fought bravely in the former battles did the like now, as besides them did Eleazar, the brother's son of Simon the tyrant" ([Wars 6.4.1](#)).

Eleazar's death is not mentioned in *Wars of the Jews*, but there is also no mention of his survival or capture (unlike the other two main Zealot leaders, John Levi and Simon Bar Giora). Various online sources seem to be unanimous that Eleazar died in AD 70 around the time when the temple was burned and destroyed.

John Levi of Gischala

John Levi was from Gischala in Galilee. Josephus wrote extensively about him in his book, "*The Life of Flavius Josephus*." John was not a Zealot from the beginning. At one point, when the people of Gischala wanted to revolt against the Romans, John tried to restrain them and he urged them to "keep their allegiance to [the Romans]. However, Gischala was then attacked, set on fire, and demolished by non-Jews from neighboring regions. At that point, John became enraged, "armed all his men," joined the battle, but also rebuilt Gischala "after a better manner than before, and fortified it with walls for its future security" ([Life 10.43-45](#)).

In *Wars of the Jews*, John was first mentioned in [Wars 2.21.1](#) as "a treacherous person," a "hypocritical pretender to humanity," and as one who "spared not the shedding of blood" and "had a peculiar knack of thieving." According to Josephus, John gathered together a band of four hundred men mostly from Tyre, who were greatly skilled "in martial affairs," and they "laid waste all Galilee." These things took place while Josephus was "engaged in the administration of the affairs of Galilee," beginning around December AD 66, since he had been appointed as a general for the war ([Wars 2.20.3-4](#)).

Josephus said that John Levi became wealthy through an oil scheme, and he also wanted to "overthrow Josephus" and "obtain the government of Galilee" for himself. He had a number of "robbers" under his command. He spread a rumor that Josephus was planning to give Galilee to the Romans and engaged in

other plots against him (Wars 2.21.2), including a murder attempt that Josephus barely escaped (Wars. 2.21.6).

John escaped to Jerusalem in November AD 67, a year and three months after the Jewish-Roman War began. He and his followers immediately told tall tales about their fight with the Romans at Gischala:

“Now upon John’s entry into Jerusalem, the whole body of the people were in an uproar, and ten thousand of them crowded about every one of the fugitives that were come to them, and inquired of them what miseries had happened abroad, when their breath was so short, and hot, and quick, that of itself it declared the great distress they were in; **yet did they talk big under their misfortunes, and pretended to say that they had not fled away from the Romans**, but came thither in order to fight them with less hazard; for that it would be an unreasonable and a fruitless thing for them to expose themselves to desperate hazards about Gischala, and such weak cities, whereas they ought to lay up their weapons and their zeal, and reserve it for their metropolis. But when they related to them the taking of Gischala, and their decent departure, as they pretended, from that place, many of the people understood it to be no better than a flight; and especially when the people were told of those that were made captives, they were in great confusion, and guessed those things to be plain indications that they should be taken also. **But for John, he was very little concerned for those whom he had left behind him, but went about among all the people, and persuaded them to go to war, by the hopes he gave them.** He affirmed that the affairs of the Romans were in a weak condition, and extolled his own power. He also jested upon the ignorance of the unskillful, as if those Romans, although they should take to themselves wings, could never fly over the wall of Jerusalem, who found such great difficulties in taking the villages of Galilee, and had broken their engines of war against their walls.

These harangues of John’s corrupted a great part of the young men, and puffed them up for the war; but as to the more prudent part, and those in years, there was not a man of them but foresaw what was coming, and made lamentation on that account, as if the city was already undone; and in this confusion were the people...” ([Wars 4.3.1-2](#)).

Soon after this, Phannias was chosen by lots and installed as a fake high priest and a puppet of the Zealots (Wars 4.3.6-8). Ananus ben Ananus and the other priests shed tears as they watched this mockery take place. Ananus gathered a multitude of the people and gave a speech rebuking them for allowing the Zealots to fill the temple with abominations, plunder houses, shed the blood of innocent people, etc. Ananus said that nothing they could undergo from the Romans would be harder to bear than what the Zealots had already brought upon them. He urged them to rise up together against the Zealots, and said that he was willing to die leading them in that effort (Wars 4.3.10).

Ananus and his followers attacked the Zealots and tried to trap many of them in the temple complex (Wars 4.3.12). John Levi pretended to share their opinion and “at a distance was the adviser in these actions.” He consulted with Ananus and other moderate leaders every day and “cultivated the greatest friendship possible with Ananus, but “he divulged their secrets to the zealots.” His deceit became so great that “Ananus and his party believed his oath” to them, and “sent him as their ambassador into the temple to the zealots, with proposals of accommodation” (Wars 4.3.13).

John betrayed Ananus and falsely claimed that he had invited the Roman general, Vespasian, to conquer Jerusalem (Wars 4.3.14). In response, the Zealot leaders, Eleazar ben Simon and Zacharias ben Phalek,

requested help from the Idumeans, who lived south of Judea, and the Idumeans quickly prepared an army of 20,000 directed by four commanders ([Wars 4.4.2](#)). The day they arrived (in late February AD 68) they were prevented from entering the city, but the next day they managed to hunt down and kill Ananus and Jesus ([Wars 4.5.2](#)).

As part of the unrestrained behavior of the Zealots after the death of Ananus, John Levi began to tyrannize, didn't want anyone to be his equal, and gradually put together "a party of the most wicked" of all the Zealots and started his own faction ([Wars 4.7.1](#)). By the time that there were "three treacherous factions in the city" ([Wars 5.1.4](#)), John had the second largest contingent of Zealot fighters ([Wars 5.6.1](#)):

- [1] Simon Bar Giora: 10,000 men and 50 commanders; 5000 Idumeans and eight commanders
- [2] John Levi: 6,000 men and 20 commanders
- [3] Eleazar ben Simon: 2,400 men

As we've already seen, John's forces tricked and killed Eleazar ben Simon in mid-April AD 70 ([Wars 5.3.1](#)), just as Titus was laying siege to Jerusalem. **He then had access to the inner court of the temple** and didn't hesitate to commit sacrilegious acts during the siege ([fulfilling Revelation 6:6](#)):

"But as for John, when he could no longer plunder the people, he betook himself to sacrilege, and melted down many of the sacred utensils, which had been given to the temple; as also many of those vessels which were necessary for such as ministered about holy things, the caldrons, the dishes, and the tables; nay, he did not abstain from those pouring vessels that were sent them by Augustus and his wife; for the Roman emperors did ever both honor and adorn this temple; whereas this man, who was a Jew, seized upon what were the donations of foreigners, and said to those that were with him, that it was proper for them to use Divine things, while they were fighting for the Divinity, without fear, and that such whose warfare is for the temple should live of the temple; on which account **he emptied the vessels of that sacred wine and oil**, which the priests kept to be poured on the burnt-offerings, and which lay in the inner court of the temple, and distributed it among the multitude, who, in their anointing themselves and drinking, used [each of them] above an hin of them" ([Wars 5.13.6](#)).

Toward the end of the siege, as Jerusalem was on fire, John joined "the tyrants and that crew of robbers" whose last hope was to hide "in the caves and caverns underground" ([Wars 6.7.3](#); Revelation 6:15-17). Due to great hunger, he surrendered to the Romans, was taken captive, and was "**condemned to perpetual imprisonment**" ([Wars 6.9.4](#)). Among the captives who were carried off to Italy for a triumphal parade, John was considered to be their second leader, after Simon Bar Giora, "the general of the enemy" ([Wars 7.5.3](#), [Wars 7.5.6](#)).

Summary and Conclusion

The Thessalonians were told by Paul that before Christ would come, a rebellion would begin and the man of lawlessness would be revealed (verses 1-3). Paul told them that "the mystery of lawlessness" was already at work in their first century world (verse 7). They were also told that something was restraining it (verse 7) and that they knew what it was (verse 6). Paul kept these details to a minimum in his letter because he was reminding them of what he had already told them in person about these

things (verse 5). The man of lawlessness would exalt himself above God, sit “as God” in the temple (verse 4), and his coming would be accompanied by power, signs, lying wonders, deception, and the working of Satan (verses 9-12). However, at the Lord’s coming, the man of lawlessness would be consumed and destroyed (verse 8).

The Zealots had been planning a rebellion for about 100 years when Paul wrote his letter, and smaller uprisings had already taken place. Their grand rebellion began in AD 66 and one of their leaders, Eleazar ben Simon, took his place in the temple at that time, even controlling the inner court. Under his watch, many abominations took place, much blood was shed, the sacred temple items were abused, and a fake high priest was installed. When Titus and the Romans arrived in April AD 70, another Zealot leader, John Levi, tricked him and took his place in the inner court of the temple, committing abuses there as well. During and before the rebellion, according to Josephus, the activities of the Zealots and their close partners, the false prophets, were marked by deception, lying wonders, magic and tricks, and the working of Satan. Around August AD 70, John was captured and then given a life sentence in a Roman prison, but Eleazar was killed.

I personally lean toward Eleazar ben Simon being the man of lawlessness because [1] he made the temple his central command post for the entire first half of the Jewish-Roman War (3.5 years) [2] he oversaw so many lawless acts in the temple for an extended period of time, and [3] he was killed at the time of the temple’s destruction. What are your thoughts?

(This article can also be seen here: [II Thessalonians 2 and the Man of Lawlessness.](#))