Clarifying “the antichrist”

A Grammatical & Contextual Look at 1 John 2

When discussing end-times prophecy, many Christians immediately turn to the concept of **“the Antichrist”**—a singular, sinister, end-times world leader. This figure is often read back into the New Testament epistles, particularly the writings of the Apostle John. So, we need to read in context and begin in 1st John chap 2 verse 18 [i], this is a key verse used to support the view just mentioned. However, a close examination of the original Greek text and the immediate context of John’s letter reveals a different, more urgent meaning for his original audience and for us today.

This article will demonstrate that John’s primary focus was not on identifying a distant future dictator, but on exposing a present and active spiritual deception already threatening the church.

The Problem in the Pews: Why John Wrote

First John was written to a community facing false teachers arisen from within their own congregation (1 John 2:19). These individuals denied core truths about Jesus Christ, specifically that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh (1 John 2:22, 4:2-3). This was not an abstract theological debate; it was a heresy ripping the church apart. John writes to reassure the faithful, expose the deceivers, and draw a clear line between truth and error.

A Closer Look at 1 John 2:18

The pivotal verse reads in the **NKJV translation**: *"Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard* ***that the Antichrist*** [ii] *is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour."* (the NKJV similar in others)[iii]

At first glance, the text appears to support the idea of a future "Antichrist." But the original Greek text and its grammar tell a different story.

1. The Missing **"The":**[iv]

The most authoritative Greek manuscripts (the *Nestle-Aland/United Bible Societies* text) for verse 18, omits the definite article **"the"** before **"antichrist."**[v] A footnote in some Bible text says **"NU-Text omits the."** confirming this. The original reading is simply, **"you have heard that antichrist is coming."** The absence of **"the"** is grammatically significant. It shifts the meaning from a specific, unique individual ("**the Antichrist**") to a type or category of person—"**a Christ-opposer**."

2. A Common Noun, Not a Proper Name:

The word **antichristos** is a common noun, not a proper name [see Appendix A] like "**Jesus**" or "**Caesar.**" This is proven conclusively by the second half of the same verse, which states "**many antichrists have come.**" A proper name cannot be pluralized. You cannot have "**many Jesuses**," but you can have "**many opponents-of-Christ.**" John is defining "**antichrist**" by its action: opposing the true nature and mission of Jesus.

3. The Meaning of "Singular":

While the word is in the singular (“**antichrist is coming**“), this is a generic singular, used to describe a class of being. It is similar to saying, “**A wolf is dangerous to sheep.**” The statement isn’t about one specific wolf, but about the nature of wolves in general. John is saying, “**You have been taught that the principle of a Christ-opposer will manifest itself.**“

John’s logic is powerful and immediate: The spirit of opposition you were warned about is no longer a future threat. Its proof is visible right now in the “**many antichrists**“—the false teachers who have left your fellowship (2:19). Their deception is the definitive sign that you are living in the “**last hour**” of this age.[vi]

All Mentions of “Antichrist” in John’s Epistles

To understand John’s full meaning, it’s helpful to see all his uses of the term. Each instance reinforces the concept of a deceptive spirit embodied in people who deny essential Christian doctrine.

1 John 2:18**:** As discussed, introduces the concept of “**many antichrists**” as evidence the “**last hour**” has come. 1 John 2:22 defines the antichrist explicitly. *“Who is a liar but **he who denies that Jesus is the Christ**? He is **antichrist** who denies the Father and the Son.”* (KJV) Here, “**antichrist**” is directly equated with a Christ-denier.

Expanding on 1 John 2:22: Article “the” and Its Meaning

A common objection to the grammatical analysis of verse 18 arises from the very next use of the term in verse 22. The verse reads: *“Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is “**the antichrist**” who denies the Father and the Son.”* (NKJV) Some English translations “**do**” include the definite article “**the**” before “**antichrist.**” This seems, at

first glance, to contradict the previous point and support the idea of a specific individual. However, a closer look at the **Greek grammar and a fundamental rule of language** clarifies the issue.

1. The Greek Text: The Greek phrase in question is `ὁ ἀντίχριστος` ("ho antichristos"). Yes, it includes the definite article `ὁ` (**ho**).

2. The Grammatical Rule – **Anaphora**: The presence of the article here does not point to a unique, prophesied figure known as "**the Antichrist**." Instead, it is a standard grammatical feature known as **anaphora** [see Appendix B]. Anaphora occurs when a definite article is used to refer back to a previously introduced subject or concept. The article "**the**" points the reader backward to the **subject already under discussion**.

John introduced the **category** or **type** of person called an **antichrist** in verse 18. In verse 22, he is now defining **that very category**. He is saying, in effect: "You've heard about this concept of **'an antichrist'** (v. 18). Well, **the** antichrist I'm talking about—**the** one who fits that description—is whoever denies the Father and the Son."

This is a common usage in both Greek and English. For example: "I saw **a dog** yesterday. **The dog** was barking." The article "**the**" in the second sentence refers back to the specific dog already mentioned. "Beware of **a spirit** of deception. **The spirit** I mean is the one that denies truth." The article "**the**" points back to the category just introduced.

John is not saying, "He is **THE Antichrist** of prophecy." He is making a definitive, identifying statement: "**He is the [aforementioned] antichrist**," or more plainly, "**That person is an antichrist.**"

3. **The Context Confirms This:** The verse itself defines the term functionally, not prophetically. It is a question **of**

identity and action, not a title. The identifier is "*who denies that Jesus is the Christ.*" The consequence of that denial is that the person also "*denies the Father and the Son.*" The person who does this **is** the embodiment of the "antichrist" principle John introduced. The article serves to tightly link the definition back to the concept just introduced.

Therefore, the use of the definite article in 1 John 2:22 does not undermine the argument from verse 18; it strengthens it. It proves that John is using the term as a descriptive common noun for a class of false teachers. The article "**the**" is used anaphorically to define that class with precision for his readers, leaving no room for doubt about who these "**antichrists**" are. They are not a shadowy future figure, but present-day deniers of Christ's divinity.

1 John 4:3 explains the spiritual source of the phenomenon. "*Every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the* ***antichrist****, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.*" This is the climax of John's argument: the "**spirit of the antichrist**" is already actively at work.

2 John 1:7 repeats the warning for emphasis. "*Many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an* ***antichrist****.*"

Every single use points to a present reality, not a future person. The "**antichrist**" is anyone, at any time, who promotes a false Jesus and leads people away from the truth of the Gospel.

Conclusion: John's Urgent Warning for Then and Now

John's message to the first-century church is profoundly practical. He is not giving them a cryptic timeline to decipher about a far-off dictator. He is sounding an alarm about a clear and present danger: doctrinal deception from within. He clears the air by defining the "**antichrist**" not as a mysterious figure from a future prophecy, but as the tangible **spirit of denial** that was already seducing believers and producing many false teachers.

The application for us is direct and must be understood on John's own terms. We must resist the temptation to harmonize his clear teaching with other apocalyptic passages, such as Paul's distinct description of a specific "man of lawlessness" (2 Thessalonians 2:3)[vii]. While Paul describes a future, singular figure of ultimate rebellion, John is describing a **present, plural, and pervasive spirit of deception**. Conflating the two distinct concepts—reading Paul's "**man of lawlessness**" *into* John's "**antichrists**"—is a hermeneutical error (**eisegesis**)[viii]. It ignores John's immediate context and grammatical construction, which purposefully uses a common noun to describe a category of Christ-denying individuals.

Therefore, our calling is not to speculate about a single future figure but to embrace the discernment John commands. We are to cling to the apostolic truth about Jesus and recognize that **any spirit, teaching, or person that denies the fundamental truth of Christ is, by John's definitive diagnosis, antichrist.** This was the threat to the first-century church, and it remains the primary threat to the church today.

Appendix A

It's important to hit on the absolute crux of the entire issue of proper vs. common nouns, yet it's surprising to see a deep-seated inconsistency in how many English translations handle this term.

The ten-thousand dollar question: is "**Antichrist**" a proper name (capital 'A'), and yet how can it be pluralized? The answer is, it can't. This is the grammatical "smoking gun" that proves the capitalizations in verse 18 are an "**interpretive decision, not a grammatical one**."

Let's break down why this is such a critical point:

1. The Grammatical Rule in English and Greek

In English: You cannot pluralize a proper name. You cannot have "three Christs," "several Jerusalems," or "many Apostle Johns" (if referring to the Apostle). If you write it "antichrists, or Antichrists" you are, by the rules of English grammar, declaring that "antichrist" is a **common noun**, because a common noun can be made plural because it describes a category ("many **kings**," "**several deceivers**," "three **actors**").

In Greek: The same logical principle applies. The word **antichristos** is declined like a common noun. The very fact that John effortlessly moves from the singular (**antichristos**) to the plural (**antichristoi**) in the same sentence is the strongest possible grammatical evidence that he is using it as a common noun, **not** as a title or proper name.

2. The Translators' Dilemma and Inconsistency

We now can see or notice the fatal flaw in the logic of translations like the NKJV or others that capitalize "Antichrist" in verse 18. They are trying to have it both ways:

Verse 18 (NKJV): ***"…you have heard that** [ὅτι] **the** [ὁ ho]*

***Antichrist** is coming, even now **many antichrists** have come…”,* remember the Greek text has no article **“the ὁ ho”** in verse 18, only **“that ὅτι”**

They want the first instance to be read as a **Title** (“the Antichrist”), which implies a specific, unique individual. But then they are forced to immediately lowercase the plural (“antichrists”) because their own translation logic would break down if they wrote “**many Antichrists**.” That would be nonsense.

This inconsistency reveals that the translators know, on some level, that the word is fundamentally a common noun. The capitalization in the first half is an **editorial imposition** meant to steer the reader toward a specific interpretive tradition (futurist dispensationalism), even though it contradicts the grammar of the very verse they are translating.

3. The Exegetically Consistent Approach

A translation that is strictly faithful to the grammar would render it something like: **“you have heard that an antichrist** is coming, even now **many antichrists** have come…” (Indefinite article for the singular, lowercase for both)

Or: **“you have heard that antichrist** is coming…” (Treating it as an abstract mass noun, like “war” or “deception,” which is then manifested in plural entities)

This is why translations like the **ESV, NASB, CSB, and KJV** all use lowercase for both occurrences—**“antichrist”** and **“antichrists.”** They prioritize grammatical consistency over interpretive tradition.

4. Here is the accurate categorization

KJV: Does **NOT** capitalize. It reads: “that **antichrist** shall come” and “many **antichrists**.”

NKJV: DOES capitalize the singular: “that the **Antichrist** is coming” (and lowers the plural: “many **antichrists**“).

This is a crucial distinction. The change occurred with the **NKJV** which intentionally introduced the capitalization as a doctrinal marker.

Accurate Translation Breakdown for 1 John 2:18

Lowercase (Treating the word as a common noun)

KJV (1611): “that **antichrist** shall come” / “many **antichrists**“

ESV: “that **antichrist** is coming” / “many **antichrists**“

NASB: “that **antichrist** is coming” / “many **antichrists**“

CSB: “that **antichrist** is coming” / “many **antichrists**“

The translation history reveals a significant shift. The original **King James Version (KJV)**, along with many modern scholarly translations like the **ESV, NASB, and CSB**, use lowercase for both occurrences—’**antichrist**‘ and **‘antichrists.’** This treats the word as a common noun, consistent with its grammatical function in Greek.

In summary: The act of pluralizing the word is definitive proof that it is a common noun. The capitalization in some translations is a hermeneutical lens placed over the text, a tradition that contradicts its own logic within a single verse. Discernment on this point is needed to understand John’s meaning of antichrist—it’s the very heart of sound biblical interpretation versus imported tradition. ↵

Appendix B

Anaphora (*pronounced uh-NAF-er-uh*) is a fundamental grammatical and rhetorical device where a word (often a

pronoun or a word with a definite article like “the”) refers back to an earlier word or phrase in the text. Its primary purpose is to avoid repetition and create cohesion by pointing the reader to something already established.

Think of it as a grammatical arrow that shoots backward in the sentence or paragraph.

Simple Examples of Anaphora:

1. **With Pronouns:**

“John finished **his** book. Then **he** put it on the shelf.”

The words “**his,” “he,” and “it”** are anaphoric. They point back to **“John” and “book,”** which were introduced first.

2. **With the Definite Article “The”:**

“I saw **a strange man** in the park yesterday. **The man** was wearing a purple hat.”

The first mention is indefinite (”**a** strange man”). The second mention uses the definite article (“**the** man”) because it is now referring back to that specific, *already-introduced* man.

Anaphora in 1 John 2:18-22

This is precisely what is happening in these verses. John uses anaphora with the definite article **“the”** to create a tight, logical connection for his readers.

1. **Verse 18 (The First Mention):** John introduces the concept.

– “you have heard that **antichrist** [Greek: `ἀντίχριστος` without the article] is coming.”

– This is the **indefinite** introduction of the category or type of person.

2. **Verse 22 (The Anaphoric Reference):** John defines the concept he just introduced.

"He is **the antichrist** [Greek: `ὁ ἀντίχριστος` *with* the article] who denies the Father and the Son."

The article **"the"** is **anaphoric**. It functions as a pointer, saying: "Remember that concept of **'antichrist'** I just brought up in verse 18? **That** is what I'm talking about. **The** antichrist is defined as anyone who denies the Father and the Son."

The article ὁ does not mean **"the one and only final Antichrist of prophecy."** It means **"the aforementioned** antichrist-type we are discussing."

Why This Matters:

Understanding anaphora dismantles the argument that the article in verse 22 points to a unique, singular entity. Instead, it confirms that John is using the term as a **descriptive label** for a group of people defined by their actions (denying Christ), not as the personal name for a specific end-times figure. The grammar shows he is clarifying a present danger, not revealing a future prophecy. ↵

Footnotes:

[i] For a similar view of this verse and another look at the Greek meaning of words "that" and the term "antichrist", (link HERE).

[ii] The text in the NKJV conveys there is a singular person, proper noun with capital A, named Antichrist, implying the idea there is one who will come at some future time. Versions along with NKJV use a capital A for antichrist. – HCSB, The Message, NLT, Bible in Basic English Douay-Rheims Catholic Bible TMB TMBA

[iii] When we look at the The Bible in Basic English this is a translation that makes the point where incorrect capitalization conveys the wrong message, both occasions of 'antichrist' are capitalized. An error we'll see later.

[iv]The assumption I gave during Friday's study, and Amber brought up as well, that there was no article 'the' before 'antichrist' in 1 John 2:22. My error. I was recalling there wasn't the article 'the', but my memory was wrong, it was verse 18 that article 'the' is not in the Greek text.

[v] Rendering with article 'the' can be seen in these English bibles. – New International Version, New King James Version, New Living Translation, The Bible in Basic English, Berean Standard Bible, Common English Bible, Common English Bible w/ Apocrypha, Hebrew Names Version , World English Bible, Young's Literal Translation. These 10 with article 'the' are included in a list of 40 translations that can be viewed HERE.

[vi]The 1st century for which the sacrificial system would end when the Roman army destroyed the Temple and Jerusalem is a teaching framework by some and isn't expanded on in this study.

[vii] Harmonizing with Paul's words or Daniel's "beast" is a separate discussion and not covered here.

[viii] This is eisegetical speculation being imported into the text without evidence being offered for its validity.