

When Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians, many Christians believed the day of the Lord had come. They thought the rapture and the return of Christ had already occurred.

Correcting this deception, Paul solemnly laid out what must happen before Jesus returns. He said, “Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come [the Day of the Lord and the second coming of Christ] unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God” (2 Thess. 2:1-4).

Paul’s warning is clear: *The apostasy comes first.*

The word *apostasy* means a *falling away, defection, or revolt*.<sup>1</sup> Strong’s defines it as a *defection from truth*.<sup>2</sup> The dictionary definition is *the abandonment or renunciation of a religious belief*.<sup>3</sup>

Adding further insight into the apostasy, “The Spirit explicitly says,” wrote Paul, prophesying of an end-time move of hell, that “some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1).

As we approach the Lord’s return, because many will be unable to “endure sound doctrine,” they “will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth” (2 Tim. 4:3-4). Wanting “to have their ears tickled,” many will depart from “the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” (2 Tim. 4:3-4; Jude 1:3).

To “reach” those wanting their ears tickled, many false teachers will arise with a water-downed, seeker-sensitive gospel. A gospel that has self at the center and God as the benefactor—a Santa Clause figure who exists to dispense blessings to kids of the King. As a result, many once-loyal Christ followers will embrace, to quote Paul, *another Jesus*—a deceptive idol fashioned by false teachings, doctrines of demons, deceitful spirits, and a different gospel (2 Cor. 11:4).

As this apostasy intensifies, many will renounce Christ and the inerrancy of the Word of God, bowing their knee to idolatrous ideologies promulgated from the pluralistic one-world religion.

Ultimately, apart from repentance, the harlot’s intoxicating wine will seduce numerous Christians to pledge their allegiance to the antichrist, take the mark of the beast, and bow their knee in worship to him.

I realize these are sobering and unpleasant thoughts. Nevertheless, it’s important to receive God’s clear warning in Scripture of what’s coming. It’s also wise to study how God’s people apostatized in history so we don’t repeat their mistake. Therefore, let’s spend some time now looking at how ancient Israel turned from following God wholeheartedly to eventually bowing their knee to two demonic gods, Baal and Asherah. We will see this apostasy didn’t happen overnight. It was a long, drawn-out process over many years. Small compromises ultimately lead Israel into full-blown apostasy and outright demon worship.

## Solomon’s Apostasy

The story of Israel’s apostasy begins with King David. No, David did not lead Israel to worship other gods. In fact, he did the exact opposite. Under his leadership, Israel was united in 24-7 worship of Yahweh in what Scripture refers to as the Tabernacle of David. In this makeshift tent, where the ark of the covenant and God’s glory resided, worshipers experienced the bliss of nonstop praise and worship in God’s manifest presence. Never in Israel’s history was the nation closer to the Lord than it was under King David.

Then came Solomon. Though one of the wisest humans to ever live, Solomon was vulnerable to beautiful women. He outright ignored God’s warning to Israel not to be united with foreign women, for they would turn the sons of Israel’s hearts away from the Lord to false gods. This is exactly what happened with Solomon, who “loved many foreign women” (1 Kings 11:1). According to Scripture, Solomon had 700 wives, princesses, and 300 concubines. Yoked together with darkness, Solomon paid the ultimate price, for “his wives turned his heart away” from the Lord.

At the end of his life, “Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians and after Milcom the detestable idol of the Ammonites” (1 Kings 11:5). Going further, “Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable idol of Moab, on the mountain which is east of Jerusalem, and for Molech the detestable idol of the sons of Ammon. Thus also he did for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods” (1 Kings 11:7-8). This apostasy wasn’t corporate, but only individual. Nevertheless, Solomon’s apostasy paved the way for Israel’s corporate apostasy.

## The Sins of Jeroboam

To punish Solomon for his sins, God divided Israel after his death. The northern kingdom consisted of 10 tribes while the southern kingdom was comprised of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

Judah was home to the temple, the city of Jerusalem, and the Levitical priesthood. For many years, Judah vacillated between kings who were loyal to the Lord and those who led Israel into apostasy, until finally, Nebuchadnezzar took the Jews to Babylon in 586 B.C.

Unlike Judah, the northern kingdom, from its inception until it went into Assyrian captivity in 722 B.C., never had a king whose heart was completely loyal to the Lord. The northern kingdom's first king, Jeroboam, established a system of idolatry from which Israel never recovered.

Jeroboam didn't lead Israel to worship other gods. Rather, he established a perverted worship of Yahweh. This compromised religious system was rooted in Jeroboam's self-preservation, for he feared losing his kingdom, influence, honor, privileges, and wealth. Specifically, Jeroboam didn't want his people going to Jerusalem to worship the Lord at the temple. Frequent pilgrimages to the holy city, he thought, might mean the people would eventually remove him as king (1 Kings 12:27). Therefore, he established his own set of religious practices—instituting golden calf worship in Bethel and Dan, building high places to burn incense, and creating a priesthood forbidden by the Torah. In addition, Jeroboam instituted his own feast days rather than those prescribed by the Law.

Afraid he might lose people, prominence, power, and prosperity, Jeroboam placed himself above the Lord and His ways. He created a false religious system rooted in compromise rather than the biblical prescription—a worship system of convenience rather than sacrifice.

To be clear, Jeroboam's religious system still had Yahweh at the center of it. But it was another Yahweh, one fabricated by his own desires, designed to help him maintain his own kingdom. Jeroboam took advantage of Israel's tendency to turn from the Lord to idols, establishing a user-friendly, seeker-sensitive form of Yahweh worship.

After consulting with his leadership team, Jeroboam had two golden calves constructed, much like the one Aaron built after the exodus from Egypt. Borrowing from Aaron's speech hundreds of years before, Jeroboam said to the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem; behold your gods, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt" (1 Kings 12:28).

If you notice carefully, Jeroboam didn't tell the people to forsake the Lord. Rather, he crafted a new form of Yahweh worship that was easy, not too costly, and more manageable. This culturally relevant version of Yahweh allowed Israel to remain religious while giving them freedom from the heavy burden of the Law.

These golden calves were not images of another god, such as Baal, Asherah, Isis, or Molech. Instead, these idols were a more palatable version of the God their ancestors worshiped for centuries. One they could relate to on their own terms and conditions. One fashioned by their personal preferences—a convenient god who was more pragmatic and fit better into their busy lifestyle.

## Ahab and Jezebel

After the death of Jeroboam, this perverted worship of Yahweh continued. King after king, who followed Jeroboam, also "walked in the way of Jeroboam and in his sin which made Israel sin" (1 Kings 15:34). This idolatrous pattern continued until King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, who took idolatry to an entirely new level.

Ahab, the shrewd political leader he was, married Jezebel, the king of Tyre's daughter. This afforded Ahab with many political advantages, but unfortunately for him and Israel, she brought some serious baggage into their marriage, including witchcraft and Baal and Asherah worship.

It is written of Ahab, "There was no one like [him] who sold himself to do evil in the sight of the Lord, because Jezebel his wife incited him. He acted very abominably in following idols, according to all that the Amorites had done, whom the Lord cast out before the sons of Israel" (1 Kings 21:25-26, emphasis mine). Specifically, Ahab "erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal which he built in Samaria" and he "made the Asherah" (1 Kings 16:31-33).

There is a *huge* difference between perverted worship of Yahweh and worshipping Baal and Asherah, for behind these idols were two powerful and strong demons. Unlike Solomon, who seemed to keep his idolatry to himself, Ahab and Jezebel made Baal and Asherah worship the official religion of the state.

In Baal worship, it was common practice to sacrifice a first-born son to this false god. As the mother screamed in horror, the priest of Baal would dance, shriek, bang on musical instruments, cut themselves with knives, and cry out to him in prayer.

Alongside child sacrifice were ritual prostitution and homosexuality. Although Asherah was believed to be Baal's mother, she was also his mistress. And when these two gods came together in sexual union, it supposedly produced fertility, resulting in an abundant harvest in the land and prosperity for the nation. This belief led to religious prostitutes of Baal and Asherah (1 Kings 14:23-24). The priest—a male member of the community—represented Baal. The priestess—a female member of the community—represented Asherah. When these two worshipers engaged in ritualistic sex, it was believed Baal and Asherah would also join together, ultimately resulting in prosperity for the land.

Not only was this religion marred by gross immorality, but witchcraft also permeated Baal and Asherah worship. The 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah prophesied by demons. They also pierced and cut themselves to appease these gods and call forth their blessings.

In addition, because this state-sanctioned religion wanted no rival, Jezebel sought to eradicate Yahweh worship from the land. It is written of Jezebel that she “destroyed the prophets of the Lord” (1 Kings 18:4). Energized by demons, Ahab and Jezebel made Yahweh worship illegal. Those who clung to the God of Israel were forced into seclusion and hiding. At Jezebel's command, the altars of the Lord were torn down, Yahweh worshipers were persecuted, and many of the Lord's prophets were killed (1 Kings 18:4). Jezebel did everything in her power to destroy the worship of the one true God and replace it with Baal and Asherah worship.

Ahab and Jezebel—and the demonic powers behind Baal and Asherah—totally disregarded the Law. As a result, unbridled lawlessness pervaded the land, including idolatry, gross sexual immorality, and ritualistic child sacrifice. Through the national religion of Baal and Asherah, these abominations were normalized and institutionalized, creating a dark, dense cloud of sin, depravity, and apostasy over the entire northern kingdom.

Studying Israel's apostasy under Jeroboam and Jezebel provides invaluable insight into the end-time apostasy, for this is a blueprint of how Christians are being led astray from Christ today and how this apostasy will intensify in the days to come.

Considering this, let me explain how the end-time apostasy is presently unfolding and what it will look like as we approach the Lord's return.

## Three Phases of the Apostasy

Recall Paul's warning that *the apostasy comes first*. When I think about this end-time apostasy, I believe it will unfold in three phases.

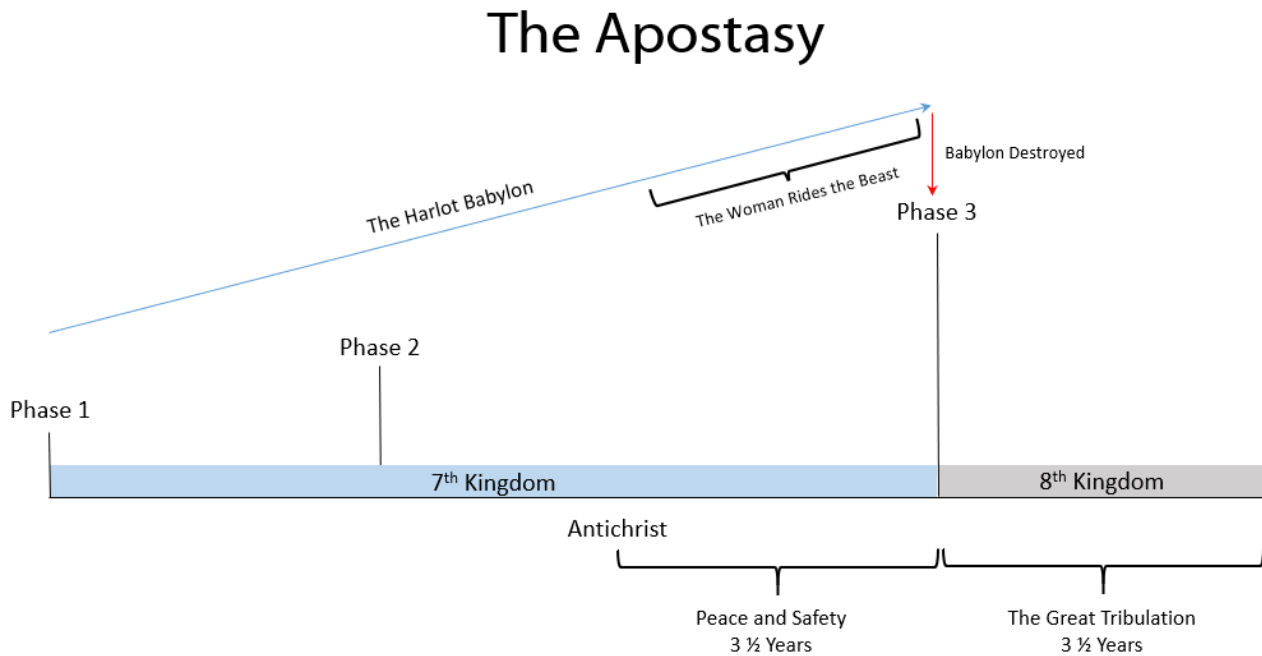
*Phase 1* is patterned after the sins of Jeroboam. That is, through doctrines of demons, deceitful spirits, ear-tickling messages, and a different gospel, self-seeking ministers, interested in building and preserving their own kingdoms, are crafting an idolatrous version of Jesus. In the words of Paul, they are presenting “another Jesus” (2 Cor. 11:4). Through these influences, numerous once-loyal Jesus followers are living compromised lives. Some have already renounced Christ and departed from the faith.

*Phase 2* will be modeled after Jezebel's state-sanctioned religion and will bring the apostasy to an even greater level. As the harlot city spews out her universalism to the nations, many undiscerning Christians will be duped. They will be intoxicated by the wine of Babylon, entangled in her web of witchcraft and false religion. Their minds will be warped, their souls compromised—even demonized. Like a drunkard trying to walk in a straight line, these Christians will become delusional, unable to separate what is true from false. They will call good evil and evil good. That's why the Lord strongly warned in Revelation 18:4, “Come out of her, my people.” It's sobering to think of how many Christians will be compromised by the harlot's wine of strong delusion.

*Phase 3* will commence 3.5 years before Christ returns, when the antichrist is unmasked, revealed as a man of lawlessness who craves worship from the nations. After he burns the harlot city and her religion, the antichrist will force the world to convert to his religion or die. During this time, many Christians will be faced with the toughest decision of their lives. Will they renounce Christ, pledge their allegiance to antichrist, and be branded as his own by the mark of the beast? Or will they repent, break free from the delusion of Babylon's wine, return to the one true God, and pledge their allegiance to Jesus Christ alone? The more

intoxicated they are from the harlot's strong drink, the more difficult it will be to make this tough decision. For those who do, it could very well cost them their lives.

The three phases of the end-time apostasy are depicted in the chart below.



With this overview in place, we will take a more detailed look at these three phases of the apostasy in the next several sessions.

<sup>1</sup> Outline of Bible Usage, see <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=G646&t=NASB95>, referenced on 3/9/2021.

<sup>2</sup> Strong's Dictionary, see <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=G646&t=NASB95>, referenced on 3/9/2021.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.google.com/search?q=apostasy+def>, referenced on 3/9/2021.