

DOES GOD DECEIVE? THE “DELUDING INFLUENCE” OF SECOND THESSALONIANS 2:11

Gregory H. Harris*

Scripture uses several Greek and Hebrew words to denote deception, particularly in relation to the future period of Tribulation. Second Thess 2:11 is of special interest in discussions of deception during that future time, because God is the agent who sends the “deluding influence” (energeian planēs) among unbelievers. Two OT passages which present God as in some way deceiving are analogous to God’s future activity of this kind, 1Kgs 22:22 and Ezek 14:9. Romans 1:18-32 is partially parallel to that future action. Just as divine judgment of the rebellious was at the heart of God’s deceptive activity in the two OT examples, so it will be during the future Tribulation. His judgment on a rebellious world will take many forms with deception being only one of them. In all cases of His use of deception, He exposes falsehood by presenting His truth. His particular opponent in the future will be “the man of lawlessness” (2 Thess 2:3) who will offer “the lie” (2 Thess 2:11) in place of the truth. This agent of evil will have a very wide following because of his use of deceptive methods. God will then add to the deception of this man’s followers by sending them the “deluding influence” that will move them beyond the possibility of receiving the truth.

* * * * *

Preliminary Considerations Regarding Deception

From the earliest deception of Eve in Genesis 3 up through Satan’s final attempt to deceive the world in Revelation 20, deception has played a significant role in the history of man. It is fitting that Scripture presents Satan at both the first and last efforts to deceive mankind, because ultimately all religious deception is traceable to Satan, “the serpent of old . . . who deceives the whole world” (Rev 12:9).¹ Multiple verses in Scripture bear witness of this, such as John 8:44, which states of Satan, “Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is

*Professor Harris is Associate Professor of Bible Exposition at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, North Carolina.

¹Scripture quotations are from the 1971 ed. of the New American Standard Bible.

a liar, and the father of lies.”² Two other verses specifically identify Satan’s role as a deceiver, especially in regard to the fall of man. In 2 Cor 11:3 Paul warned, “But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.” In an even more succinct statement, Paul later wrote in 1 Tim 2:14, “[I]t was not Adam who was first deceived, but the woman being quite deceived, fell into transgression.”

Deception, at its core, is a lie in place of the truth. The NT words repeatedly used for deception, *πλανᾶω* (*planaō*) and *ἀπατάω* (*apataō*), bear this out.³ The two words are used interchangeably throughout Scripture and seem to have no major distinction between them.⁴ The verb *planaō* is rendered “to cause to wander, lead astray,”⁵ or “to lead astray, mislead by means of deception.”⁶ The passive voice conveys the idea, “to let oneself be misled, deceived.”⁷ The noun derivative “deception” (*πλάνη*, *planē*) means, “wandering from the path of truth, error, delusion, deceit, deception to which one is subject.”⁸ That satanic deception always stands in contrast to the standard of God’s revelatory truth is of utmost importance.⁹ The other Greek verb for deception, *apataō*, does not occur as frequently in the NT as *planaō*, but it likewise conveys the idea of deceiving, cheating, or misleading someone.¹⁰ An intensified derivative (*ἐξαπατάω*, *exapataō*) expresses a

²For a discussion of other references to Satan’s deception, see this writer’s article, “Satan’s Work as a Deceiver,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (April-June 1999):190-202.

³The OT contains surprisingly little in regard to the deceptive work of Satan. In fact, the OT presents relatively few verses on Satan (D. Edmond Hiebert, “Satan,” in *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975] 5:282). Many of the events of satanic deception are later revealed in the NT. Only one passage specifically links tribulational deception to the Antichrist. Daniel 8:25 reads, “And through his shrewdness he will cause deceit to succeed by his influence.” The Hebrew word used here is *מְרַמֵּה*, from the verb stem *רָמָה*. The root carries the sense of “beguile, deceive, mislead.” It occurs repeatedly in regard to treacherous or deceitful speech and is never used in any kind of positive manner (William White, “*מְרַמֵּה*,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, vol. 2 [Chicago: Moody, 1980]:849; so also Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Edward Robinson [Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1959], s.v. “*רָמָה*” 941).

⁴G. B. Winer, *Grammar Idiom of the New Testament*, trans. J. Henry Thayer (Andover, Mass.: Flagg and Gould, 1825; reprint, Andover, Mass.: Draper, 1970) 500.

⁵George Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1952) 363.

⁶Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed., rev. Henry Stuart Jones (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940) 2:1411.

⁷Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979) 665. Compare this use of the passive in Matt 24:24; Luke 21:8; John 7:47; Rev 18:23.

⁸*Ibid.*, 671.

⁹Gottlieb Lünemann, “First and Second Thessalonians,” in *Meyer’s Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1880) 46. For more detail on this important aspect of satanic deception, see Harris, “Satan’s Work as a Deceiver” 193-96.

¹⁰Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* 81-82.

strengthened form of deception.¹¹

The Bible repeatedly uses both words for Satan's activities of deception in history past as well as for the deception associated with the future Tribulation. In fact, the Tribulation will be a time of satanic deception unlike any other in history. As bad as Satan's previous deceptions have been, it will pale in comparison to what awaits the world ahead. Every major NT passage that details events and persons operative during the Tribulation (Matthew 24–25/Mark 13; 2 Thessalonians 2; Revelation 4–20) presents statements and warnings about tribulational deception.¹² Both Greek words for deception occur repeatedly, with forms of *planaō* occurring more in Revelation than in any other NT book.¹³ In fact, not only does the Bible predict a greatly intensified deception during the Tribulation, it also discloses the agents of that deception. Specific agents of deception will be false Christs (Matt 24:4-5; Mark 13:5-6), false prophets (Matt 24:11; Mark 13:22), the Antichrist (Dan 8:25; 2 Thess 2:10; 2 John 7), Satan (Rev 12:9; 20:2-3, 7-8, 10), the false prophet (13:14; 19:20), Babylon (18:23), and in a completely different sense to be discussed below, God (2 Thess. 2:11).¹⁴

The Controversy over 2 Thess 2:11

That Scripture predicts deception of the unbelieving world during the Tribulation is not surprising, especially in light of Satan's past history. However, 2 Thess 2:11-12 introduces an unexpected party associated with deception during that period: "And for this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness." The "deluding influence" (ἐνέργειαν πλάνης, *energeian planēs*) is highly controversial and has caused much debate. A striking aspect is the linking of the same word used elsewhere for satanic deception (*planaō*) with a work of God. In fact, with the exception of 2 Thess 2:11, every other Scripture predicting tribulational deception attributes the deception to Satan and his agents. Second Thessalonians depicts the man of lawlessness as coming in accord with "the activity of Satan" (2:9), as well as with "all the deception of wickedness" (2:10). One would expect a continuation of Satan's role in empowering such a person. Instead, Paul switches to God as the sender of the *energeian planēs*. To associate God with any form of deception is unusual; one should approach this verse cautiously.

Multiple questions emerge because of this verse. Does 2 Thess 2:11 present God as the source for any deception predicted for the Tribulation? If so, this has theological consequences. For instance, does God actively deceive? If God deceives,

¹¹Archibald T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1930; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.) 6:49. For the various uses of this word throughout Scripture, see Harris, "Satan's Work as a Deceiver" 195-96.

¹²For a detailed analysis of the statements and warnings see this writer's "The Theme of Deception During the Tribulation" (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, May 1998) 20-28.

¹³Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992) 12.

¹⁴Harris, "Satan's Work as a Deceiver" 197.

then one who is judged by God can blame God for his sinful actions, since God deceived him. Such reasoning carried to its logical conclusion would lead to the biblically untenable conclusion that God is a liar—since deception at its core is a lie—and that God is the author of sin. Because of these and other related questions, examining 2 Thess 2:11 in regard to tribulational deception is essential.¹⁵

Though the previous questions concerning God and the deception of the Tribulation are pertinent, they should not detract from the core truth of 2 Thess 2:11: God will send the deluding influence in the Tribulation. Whatever the *energeian planēs* will be, it will not be a by-product of some previous action. The finite and transitive verb πέμπει (*pempei*, “sends”) underscores the fact that the deluding influence is, in fact, sent; it will not merely result from an outworking of related events.¹⁶ Accordingly, Alford warns against reducing the significance of the term, stating it “must not for a moment be understood of *permissiveness* only on God’s part—He is the judicial sender and doer.”¹⁷ He further notes that many versions have “weakened, indeed almost stultified the sentence by rendering . . . (it) ‘a strong delusion,’ i.e. the passive state resulting, instead of the active cause.”¹⁸ Lünemann concurs, noting that it is “not a statement of the consequence [for sin leading on to

¹⁵For discussions and views on theodicy, including God’s use of intermediary agents of evil, see John Hick, *Evil and the Love of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966); Jacques Maritain, *God and the Permission of Evil* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Bruce Publishing Co., 1966); Frederick Sontag, *Why Did You Do That?* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970); Henry John McCloskey, *God and Evil* (The Hague: Nijhoff Publishers, 1974); Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); David Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Westminster 1976); W. Sibley Towner, *How God Deals With Evil* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976); Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Hope for a Despairing World: The Christian Answer to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977); S. Paul Schilling, *God and Human Anguish* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977); Bruce R. Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God* (New York: Fordham University, 1982); James L. Crenshaw, *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); Michael L. Peterson, *Evil and the Christian God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982); Dan R. Stiver, “The Problem of Theodicy,” *Review and Expositor* 93 (Fall 1996):507-17; Albert W. J. Harper, “The Theodicy of Suffering,” *Scripta Theologica* 28 (Summer 1996):103; James A. Keller, “The Hiddenness of God and the Problem of Evil,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 37 (Fall 1995):13-24; Terrence W. Tilley, “The Evils of Theodicy,” *Scripta Theologica* 26 (January-April 1994):338-39; Daniel B. Clendenin, “God is Great, God is Good: Questions About Evil,” *Ashland Theological Journal* 24/35-54 (1992):35-54; William Hasker, “Providence and Evil: Three Theories,” *Religious Studies* 28 (March 1992):91-105; William Hasker, “The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil,” *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (January 1992):23-44; Grant R. Osborne, “Theodicy in the Apocalypse,” *Trinity Journal* 14 (Spring 1993):63-77.

¹⁶In reference to 2 Thess 2:11, Aus states, “God is the subject; he does the deluding, although it is based on the individual’s rejection of the gospel. The theocentric significance of this summary statement should not be overlooked because of the more interesting details of the whole paragraph, 2:1-13” (Roger D. Aus, “God’s Plan and God’s Power: Isaiah 66 and the Restraining Factors of 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 [1977]:500). However, whether God deludes or deceives will be discussed below.

¹⁷Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament* (London: Longmans, Green, Co., 1903; reprint, Chicago: Moody, 1958) 3:292.

¹⁸Ibid.

sin], but of the *design* of God Himself.”¹⁹ Marshall summarily advises, “Various commentaries have rightly warned against any attempt to weaken the force of Paul’s statement, no matter how unwelcome it may be to modern readers.”²⁰

Still much debate on defining this term, and especially how it relates to God, remain. Usually the suggested definitions are quite broad since the particulars of this verse are difficult to ascertain. Some describe the deluding influence as a “powerful working of error” whose sending is attributed to God.²¹ One view presents God as subjecting the unbelievers of the Tribulation to the powerful delusion that comes from their choosing error over truth.²²

Other views highlight the element of power normally associated elsewhere with *energeia*.²³ Along with the etymological considerations of the word, a major reason the power aspect is often highlighted is Paul’s previous use of *energeia* in the context of 2 Thessalonians 2. Since Paul’s emphasis was on the active, powerful activity of Satan (ἐνέργειαν τοῦ Σατανᾶ, *energeian tou Satana*) through his earthly agent (2:9), then an active, powerful activity should be expected as well in the deluding influence that will originate from God (v. 11). Accordingly, the *energeian planēs* sent by God is defined variously as “the power that leads to deception,”²⁴ or as the working of error that could be best be rendered “an active power of misleading.”²⁵ An even more challenging interpretation asserts that God Himself “leads unbelievers into error.”²⁶ Morris agrees, noting that throughout Scripture *energeia* always “denotes power in action,” so that the reference to God sending a deluding influence in 2 Thess 2:11 likewise “indicates not merely a passive

¹⁹Gottlieb Lünemann, “Critical and Exegetical Handbook of the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians,” in *Meyer’s Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. H. A. Meyer (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1884; reprint, Winona Lake, Ind.: Alpha, 1980) 8:222.

²⁰I. Howard Marshall, “1 and 2 Thessalonians,” in *The New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 204.

²¹Charles C. Ryrie, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Chicago: Moody, 1959) 114. Similar wording appears in Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* 4:53-54; Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 233.

²²Thomas L. Constable, “Second Thessalonians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1981) 720. Though it is true the choosing of error over the truth will be the basis for God’s judgment, this interpretation associates the sending of the ἐνεργεῖαν πλάνης with the normal outworking of God’s judgment, such as in Rom 1:18-25. Whether this is a legitimate association will be addressed below.

²³Specifics of the word ἐνεργεῖα will be addressed later in this article.

²⁴Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 262-63.

²⁵Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons; 1887; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 3:66-67.

²⁶Paul Ellingworth and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on Paul’s Letters to the Thessalonians*, Helps for Translators Series (London, New York, Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1976) 178. Herein will be one of the main considerations in determining the meaning of the ἐνεργεῖαν πλάνης: Does God lead the unbelievers into sin? Ellingworth and Nida go even further by concluding that a possible translation is, “God causes them to act very wrongly” (*ibid.*, 179). This point will be discussed below.

acquiescence in wrong-doing, but an active forwarding of evil.”²⁷ Lünemann accordingly translates the term as an “active power of seduction.”²⁸

Another line of reasoning places more emphasis on the inward effect the *energeian planēs* will have on others. Consequently, God will remove from the unregenerate of the Tribulation “their power of discerning the true from the false.”²⁹ Eadie likewise defines the term as “an inworking error” so that “*indifference to the truth* gets its divine recompense in its facile seduction into gross and grosser errors.”³⁰ However, the use of an aorist indicative in 2:10 in describing the deceived as those “who would not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved” points more to blatant rejection of the truth, not indifference to it. Likewise, the adamant refusal of the unredeemed to believe the truth, coupled with their active taking pleasure in wickedness in 2:12, argues against indifference to the truth as the basic problem.

A few factors should be in the forefront in characterizing the future deluding influence. Initially, for God to send some element of deception is not exactly equivalent to God actively deceiving. He sends someone or something which deceives; He Himself is not named as the deceiver. Second, the uniqueness of the future period must be emphasized. The Tribulation will be an unprecedented period of God’s judgment on earth with many unique events.³¹ Consequently, establishing a precise definition for the deluding influence by either historical or present analogies may not be possible, since no historical situation is directly comparable.³² The wise course is to deal with specifics of the text instead of attempting to explain it by current analogies. Though some biblical accounts may be similar, no previous account will match perfectly. Another factor to consider is the judicial nature of God’s sending of the *energeian planēs*, something clearly attested in 2 Thess 2:12 as developed below. Finally, the claim by some that God leads unbelievers into sin,³³ particularly by means of the deluding influence, must be examined, especially in view of the previously stated controversies. It is necessary to consider these and other matters along with other passages associating God with deception.

Biblical Examples of God’s Use of Deception as a Means of Judgment

The Tribulation will be a unique time of intensified satanic deception, as well as the time of God’s sending of the deluding influence, but the Bible indicates

²⁷Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* 134.

²⁸Lünemann, “First and Second Thessalonians” 222.

²⁹A. J. Mason, “The Epistles to the Thessalonians,” in *Ellicott’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, ed. Charles John Ellicott (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.) 8:158.

³⁰John Eadie, *Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians* (New York: Macmillan, 1877; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 287 [emphasis added].

³¹For example, two important elements among several will be the removal of the restrainer (2 Thess 2:6-7) and the presence of the beast who will exercise the full extent of Satan’s power for three and a half years (Rev 13:1-5).

³²For instance, trying to define precisely the meaning and nature of the mark of the beast in Rev 13:16-18 is, at best, conjectural since such a mark has never been given.

³³Ellingsworth and Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on Paul’s Letters to the Thessalonians* 178-79.

God has already used deception as a means of judgment against those who reject His truth. Two OT passages—1 Kgs 22:22 and Ezek 14:9—specifically present God as using deception for His purpose; a NT passage—Rom 1:18-32—may also be relevant.

First Kings 22:22

First Kgs 22:22 is the initial biblical account that associates God's use of deception to suit His purpose. Here God instructed a spirit who volunteered to be a deceiving spirit among the false prophets of King Ahab, "You are to entice³⁴ him and also prevail. Go and do so." Wide disagreement exists among scholars concerning the identity of this spirit. Whether the spirit is an angel of God,³⁵ a demonic being,³⁶ or Satan Himself,³⁷ is not the primary focus of this article. God's role in commanding the deception to occur is the main point. In this episode God commissioned the spirit, either holy or evil, to deceive, something not normally associated with the God who cannot lie (Heb 6:18).

Contextual factors in 1 Kings 22 help to understand this occasion when God employed deception to accomplish His purpose. The chapter records the encounter of Micaiah the prophet as he stood against kings Ahab and Jehoshaphat and their collective prophetic corps. The pending issue was Syria's possession of Ramoth Gilead, a town Ahab felt rightly belonged to Israel. Before going into battle to recapture the city, Jehoshaphat requested that an inquiry be made of the LORD (22:5). Ahab gathered approximately four hundred prophets before him,³⁸ all of whom counseled going into battle, assuring the kings "the Lord [also LORD] will give it into the hand of the king" (22:6, 11-12).

Despite the unanimity of the prophets' decree, Jehoshaphat was not convinced. Instead he asked, "Is there not yet a prophet of the LORD here, that we may inquire of him?" (22:7). Ahab summoned Micaiah, who was asked by the messenger to speak favorably to the king (22:13). Micaiah's response establishes a

³⁴The verb הָתַף, translated "to deceive" or "to entice," appears twenty-seven times in the OT. Among other places, it is used of Delilah's enticing of Samson to learn his riddle (Judg 14:15-16), of a man seducing a woman (Exod 22:15), of a warning about being deceived by false gods (Deut 11:16), and of Jeremiah's complaint that God deceived him (Jer 20:7-9) (Louis Goldberg, "הָתַף," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2:742-43).

³⁵Robert B. Chisholm, "Does God Deceive?," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 [January-March 1998]:15-16. An aspect of Chisholm's rationale is that the spirit is among the "host of heaven" (1 Kgs 22:19), an expression normally associated with the holy angels of God. E.g., Deut 4:19; 17:3; 2 Kgs 17:16; 21:3, 5; 23:4-5; 2 Chron 33:3,

³⁶J. A. Thompson, *Second Chronicles*, The New American Commentary, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994) 9:286. For a listing of other scholars who hold this position, see Richard L. Mayhue, "False Prophets and Deceiving Spirits," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 4/2 (Fall 1993):142-43.

³⁷Mayhue offers eight supports that Satan is the deceiving spirit of 1 Kings 22, one of which is its harmony with God sending the deluding influence in 2 Thess 2:11-12 (*ibid.*, 146-48). He also presents a listing of various scholars who hold this position (*ibid.*, 147).

³⁸First Kgs 22:12, 24 shows these prophets claimed to be and were considered prophets of the LORD, not prophets of Baal and the Asherah. Further, the false prophet Zedekiah, who struck Micaiah on the face, rebuked the true prophet, asking, "How did the Spirit of the LORD pass from me to speak to you?"

crucial aspect in understanding the deception that will follow. In 1 Kgs 22:14 Micaiah declared, "As the LORD lives, what the LORD says to me, that I will speak." When asked by the king concerning the pending attack, Micaiah mockingly responded by mimicking the prophets, telling Ahab to go to battle because the LORD will give victory to the king (22:15). Something in the prophet's demeanor must have reflected his sarcasm. Ahab readily recognized Micaiah's insincerity, issuing a second crucial injunction that dramatically changes the course of the conversation. The king chastened Micaiah, saying, "How many times must I adjure you to speak to me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD" (22:16). Thus, the core issue comes to the forefront: who speaks for God, or, more precisely, what is the truth of God?³⁹ That two distinct sides existed who both made claim to speaking divine truth is foundational in understanding God's upcoming use of deception. Both sources of "truth" could not be correct; neither could both opposing factions speak for God. One or both were false.

After prophesying that the attack would end in certain defeat and destruction, Micaiah revealed the heretofore unknown spiritual realities beyond the present earthly realm in 1 Kgs 22:19-23: "Therefore, hear the word of the LORD. I saw the LORD sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by Him on His right hand and on His left. And the LORD said, 'Who will entice Ahab to go up and fall at Ramoth Gilead?' And one said this while another said that. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD and said, 'I will entice him.' And the LORD said to him, 'How?' And He said, 'I will go out and be a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' Then He said, 'You are to entice him and also prevail. Go and do so.' Now therefore, behold, the LORD has put a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets, and the LORD has proclaimed disaster against you." Three times in this account a form of פְּתָה (pāṭāh) is used (22:20-22). That a means of deception will be employed by God is also seen in the twofold use of "deceiving spirit" (רוּחַ שֶׁקֶר, *rūah šeqer*). The verb שָׁקַר (šāqar), a close synonym of pāṭāh, is used of breaking a promise or of words or activities which are false because they are without any factual basis.⁴⁰

God's sending of a member from the host of heaven to be a deceiving spirit may surprise some, but other factors are relevant.⁴¹ First, it is difficult to call God a liar or deceiver when He announced *before* Ahab went to battle that a deceiving spirit had been placed in the mouths of all his prophets and that certain defeat awaited Ahab.⁴² Second, God sent a spirit to counsel Ahab to take the wrong course of action Ahab had already decided to take. God did not lure Ahab into sin, nor did

³⁹Chisholm notes that this was the first time "truth" factored in the account and sets the stage for Micaiah's response. "Only when the king insisted on the truth . . . did Micaiah give him an accurate prophecy of how the battle would turn out" ("Does God Deceive?" 14).

⁴⁰Hermann J. Austel, "שָׁקַר" in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, eds. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 2:957-58.

⁴¹If the spirit was, in fact, an evil spirit, this poses no theological dilemma. It should be noted that God may send or use evil spirits to accomplish His purpose, such as in the case of the tormenting of Saul (1 Sam 16:14, 23) and the demons yet to be released from the abyss in Rev 9:1-12.

⁴²Paul A. House, *1, 2 Kings*, The New American Commentary, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995) 8:237-38.

God entice him to change his intentions. Simply put, God did not lead Ahab into sin. Ahab had already determined what he intended do; he was simply looking for religious permission to pursue his own course of action, and even that permission came only because of the request of Jehoshaphat. Nothing—including God’s specific revelation whereby He had proclaimed disaster against Ahab (22:23, 28)—would deter him.

A sequential development occurs in the broader context of 1 Kings 22, especially in reference to divine truth. In addition to the revelatory truth of the OT up to that time, God also set forth His truth by means of Elijah (1 Kings 17), and His other true prophets (19:10, 14), including Micaiah (22:13-28). Ahab rejected God’s truth and ultimately became responsible for the deaths of the majority of God’s prophets (19:10, 14). Ahab replaced God’s revealed truth with “another truth” by erecting an altar to and worshiping Baal (16:31-32), making the Asherah (18:19), as well as giving place to the hundreds of false prophets associated with these false gods. The four hundred false prophets also replaced God’s truth when they traced their message to the true God of Israel (22:11-12). Ahab did not believe God’s revealed truth but instead readily accepted multiple sources of falsehood. Ironically, God then used “other truth” Ahab had chosen as a means of judgment against him. Despite his disguise and precautions, Ahab died in battle, true to the prophetic word of the LORD through the prophet Micaiah (22:29-38).

Ezekiel 14:9

Another OT passage associates God with deception as a means of judgment. In Ezek 14:9 God promised, “But if the prophet is prevailed upon⁴³ to speak a word, it is I, the LORD, who have prevailed upon that prophet, and I will stretch out My hand against him and destroy him from among My people Israel.” While particular circumstances differ in this account, the overall framework is virtually identical to that of 1 Kings 22, as are many of the same questions. For instance, if God incited an individual to sin, why would God hold that individual accountable for his wrongdoing?⁴⁴

As with 1 Kings 22, events leading up to this verse are relevant in understanding this second instance of God’s use of deception. In the fifth year of King Jehoiachin’s exile the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel (Ezek 1:1-3). This statement is important since the one who spoke for God will again be a major consideration of the pending deception. Ezekiel had repeatedly prophesied that God would judge His people for their rebellion against Him. Many Jews, both in Israel and Babylon, rejected Ezekiel’s prophecies. The lack or slowness of God’s action became a derisive proverb throughout the land: “The days are long and every vision fails” (12:22). However, the failure was about to change quickly. In 12:23b-25 God instructed Ezekiel to inform the nation, “Thus says the Lord God, ‘I will make this proverb cease so that they will no longer use it as a proverb in Israel.’ But tell them, ‘The days draw near as well as the fulfillment of every vision. For there will no longer be any false vision or flattering divination within the house of Israel. For I the

⁴³As in 1 Kings 22, הִתְנַחֵם is used.

⁴⁴Chisholm, “Does God Deceive?,” 23.

LORD shall speak, and whatever the word I speak will be performed. It will no longer be delayed, for in your days, O rebellious house, I shall speak the word and perform it,' declares the Lord GOD."

God not only set forth His truth of pending judgment, He also identified and denounced the false prophets of Israel whom the people foolishly respected and revered. God revealed that such false prophets prophesied from their own inspiration, even though they presented their message as originating with Him (13:2). God renounced them, declaring, "Woe to the foolish prophets who are following their own spirit and have seen nothing" (13:3). Further, "They see falsehood and lying divination who are saying, 'The LORD declares,' when the LORD has not sent them; yet they hope for the fulfillment of their word" (13:6). God declared His open and active opposition against such lying prophets who misled His people (13:8-10a), as He promised certain wrath and destruction against them (13:10b-16). Included in this denunciation were the women who practiced magic and falsely prophesied, thus profaning God's name to the people (13:17-19). Consequently, God identified and renounced two tragic effects of false prophets: they "disheartened the righteous with falsehood when I did not cause him grief, but have strengthened the hand of the wicked not to turn from his wicked way and preserve life" (13:22). Contained within this verse is an indication of God's desire for the wicked to repent, but He realized false prophets hindered the rebellious from turning to Him. In keeping with His earlier promise of immediate action, God pronounced judgment on such false prophets (13:23a). The culminating result would be, "Thus you will know that I am the LORD" (13:23b). As in 1 Kings 22, God openly presented His truth as well as exposed the source of falsehood. Anyone who then chose to ignore God's Word and instead replaced it with "another truth," such as the teachings of the false prophets, stood in active, deliberate opposition to God and would receive the just consequences of rebellious actions. Whereas the false prophets may have previously deceived the nation by not being detected (although this is not certain), such an argument could no longer be made after Ezekiel 13. God exposed both the lie and the liars by His truth.

God's enticing or deceiving by means of false prophets in Ezek 14:9 occurs in this context. Having concluded his previous prophecy, Ezekiel was approached by some of the elders of Israel (14:1). God identified the intentions of their heart by saying, "Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts, and have put right before their faces the stumbling block of their iniquity. Should I be consulted by them at all?" (14:3). Having previously denounced the false prophets and having warned the nation that He opposed them—for one who would nonetheless approach the LORD to inquire by a prophet—God promised, "I the LORD will be brought to give him an answer in the matter in view of the multitude of his idols" (14:4b).⁴⁵ God strongly admonished the participants to repent and turn away from their idols (14:6), repeating His warning that He Himself would answer when one seeks inquiry by a false prophet (14:7). As with His pronouncement against Ahab long before,

⁴⁵Even though in this case the elders sought a word from the true prophet Ezekiel, the intents of their heart indicate that they had by no means severed their relationship with the false prophets. Because of this God would use the occasion of their seeking a word from Him as a means of pronouncing their doom, through either His true prophets (14:7-8) or false prophets (14:9-10).

God forewarned what the outcome would be: He will set His face against that man and destroy him (14:8a). Just as with His warning in 13:23, God affirmed when such judgment transpired, “So you will know that I am the LORD” (14:8b).

In spite of such specific warnings about the consequences of seeking the counsel of false prophets, some would nonetheless totally disregard God’s word. To these God declared, “But if the prophet is prevailed upon [“enticed; deceived”] to speak a word, it is I, the LORD, who have prevailed upon that prophet, and I will stretch out My hand against him and destroy him from among My people Israel” (14:9). Stated in clear and distinct terms, God promised wrathful judgment on both parties: “And they will bear the punishment of their iniquity; as the iniquity of the inquirer is, so the iniquity of the prophet will be” (14:10). Such a pronouncement against both inquirer and false prophet merely expands the pronouncement of God previously made in singling out Ahab for destruction; the core issues are identical. When a false prophet is enticed into compromising with idolaters, the LORD will deceive him as a means of judgment.⁴⁶ Instead of light, those who aligned themselves with evil would receive darkness; instead of life they would choose death.

In a pattern analogous to 1 Kings 22, God addressed those who would yet choose to rebel against Him and seek the word of false prophets. As with the prophetic announcement of Ahab’s doom, God announced beforehand what would result. No deception occurred in either the identity of those who prophesied falsely or in any question of the outcome for those who, in spite of the strong warnings, would still seek such false prophets. In addition to this, God did not deceive by hiding truth. Neither could it be argued that God led anyone into sin. As was true for Ahab, those of Ezekiel’s day who refused God’s warning and chose instead to consort with false prophets continued in the inclination of their own sinful heart already established. Such individuals also would seek the false prophet even after specifically forewarned by God not to do so. Similar to Ahab, what they used to replace God’s truth would eventually become the instrument of judgment God would use against them. If a false prophet in Ezekiel’s day received a word to give an idolater, it would be a deceptive word from God that would destroy both false prophet and idolater.⁴⁷ The people were forewarned by God. Their choice lay in whom they would believe, the true or the false, a choice that would result in good or bad consequences.

Romans 1:18-32

A third Scripture may contain factors relevant to the deluding influence God of 2 Thess 2:11, but it differs from the two OT passages cited. Some see a similar concept of divine judgment in Rom 1:18-32 with the threefold statement of God giving people over to the course of sin they choose.⁴⁸ Though some common elements exist between this and the two previous accounts, other matters do not

⁴⁶Chisholm, “Does God Deceive?” 25.

⁴⁷Charles H. Dyer, “Ezekiel,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Ill.L: Victor, 1983) 1253.

⁴⁸E.g., Constable, “Second Thessalonians” 720.

harmonize. Of particular importance, Romans 1 does not present God as actively sending any means of deception to accomplish His purpose. Instead the text presents the judicial standard according to which God turns over those who devolve from blatant sin into an even deeper bondage of sin.⁴⁹ If this text involves deception, it could be more readily attributed to Satan rather than God (2 Cor 4:3-4). Another notable difference in Romans 1 versus the Kings and Ezekiel accounts is that it exposes no hidden spiritual agents, such as false prophets who present themselves as speaking divine truth. Such false teachers or false prophets may factor in the spiritual degradation for some of those who fit the description of Rom 1:18-32, but Paul does not identify them. As previously noted, the Tribulation, on the other hand, will have numerous agents of deception.

However, in spite of differences, some core similarities between Romans 1 and the two OT examples can be seen. As with 1 Kings 22 and Ezekiel 14, God's judicious use of one's choice is evident. God sets forth His truth, in this case clearly seen general revelation that a creator exists (Rom 1:19-20), so that those who view it are without excuse. Several reject God's truth by suppressing it (1:18), and turn instead to futile speculation (1:21). In essence they exchange "the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures" (1:23). Because of their previous rejection of God's truth, God intervenes and pronounces His threefold judgment against them.⁵⁰ God gives such people over to the lusts of their hearts and impurity (1:24), to degrading passions (1:26), and to a depraved mind to do those things which are not proper (1:28). As with 1 Kings 22 and Ezekiel 14, God does not lead people into sin but instead uses the determined course the unrighteous choose as a means of judgment against them.⁵¹ As with the two previous OT accounts, those referred to in Romans 1 replace God's truth with something else, namely, "they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (1:25). Such action opens the way for additional sin which, unless repentance occurs, ultimately culminates in God's judgment (1:18; 2:2, 5). In keeping with the two previous accounts, God openly declares His pending judgment for such a course of action.

It has been demonstrated from 1 Kings 22 and Ezekiel 14, and to a limited degree from Romans 1, that under certain circumstances God may use deception to accomplish His judgment. Consistencies between the three accounts emerge. God's

⁴⁹In the account of God hardening Pharaoh, Chisholm's conclusion harmonizes with that of Romans 1:18-25. When God hardened Pharaoh, "He did not override the human will, but this was not inconsistent with His justice, nor was it a violation of human moral freedom. In Pharaoh's case, Yahweh gave the Egyptian ruler several 'windows of opportunity,' each of which the stubborn king closed. Divine hardening was Yahweh's sovereign response to Pharaoh's arrogant rejection of His authoritative demands" (Robert Chisholm, "Divine Hardening in the Old Testament," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 [October-December 1996]:434).

⁵⁰"Therefore" in Romans 1:24, $\delta\tau\acute{o}$ instead of $\omicron\upsilon\upsilon$, heightens the logical consequence of the previous actions.

⁵¹Again similarity to God's dealing with Pharaoh is evident. "Six times Yahweh gave Pharaoh a window of opportunity by issuing a demand and warning, but each time Pharaoh closed it. . . . When he closed these windows, he placed himself in a position to be hardened" (Chisholm, "Divine Hardening in the Old Testament" 428).

use of deception is never capriciously wrought but rather is reserved for those who blatantly turn away from His declared truth and replace it with something or someone they deem truthful. In each case an open rejection of God and rebellion against Him occurs after He has revealed His truth. In the two OT examples where God actively employed deception as a means of judgment, God initially exposed and identified the source of falsehood before sending His judgment. He further forewarned of the severe repercussions that would certainly follow for anyone who chooses to align himself or herself with the exposed agents of evil. No charge of deception against God is appropriate. The absence of faith and obedience rather than ignorance or innocence played a substantial part in those who would be deceived. Anyone who chose a course of rebellion had their wrathful doom announced beforehand.

Divine Judgment in Tribulational Deception

Divine judgment of the rebellious who spurned God's revealed truth is at the heart of God's deception in 1 Kings and Ezekiel. The same will be true for God's use of deception during the Tribulation. Though Scripture contains many details regarding Satan's activities in the Tribulation, overwhelming scriptural attention focuses upon God's judgment against an unbelieving and rebellious world during that period (e.g., Rev. 3:10). Satan will actually play a key yet secondary role. The wrath inflicted on the world is from neither men nor Satan, except as God uses them as channels to execute His will; the Tribulation is from God.⁵² God's active involvement is apparent in such ways as Christ instigating the tribulational judgments through the breaking of the seals of the scroll (Rev 6:1–8:1). However, unbelievers alive at the time will at first view God as one defeated and impotent—if He exists at all. The unbelieving world at large will see the forces of Satan as having no equals and will worshiping both Satan and the beast (Rev 13:3). During this time God will send the *energeian planēs* with the express purpose of judging unbelievers for accepting the lie instead of God's truth (2 Thess 2:11-12). An examination of relevant factors in 2 Thessalonians 2 and how they resemble or differ from the two OT accounts of God's use of deception will provide clarification.

As was true when God announced beforehand that He would use deception, 2 Thessalonians also exposes what is false by comparing it with what is true. Having warned the Thessalonians that they should not be deceived by false channels of revelation (2:3), Paul exposed falsehood by detailing attributes and activities of the satanic agent yet to appear. Paul described him as "the man of lawlessness" (ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας, *ho anthrōpos tēs anomias*), using a Hebraism to indicate his intrinsic character, not merely his title or name.⁵³ Lawlessness will be evident in all he does since it will be of his innate nature to live that way. The second

⁵²J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1958; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964) 236.

⁵³James Everett Frame, *The Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912) 257. The term reflects a Hebraism similar to "man of knowledge" (Prov 24:5) or "man of sorrows" (Isa 53:3) (C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians* [Glasgow: Pickering and Inglis, 1929] 247).

description, “the son of destruction” (ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀπωλείας, *ho anthrōpos tēs apōleias*), is likewise a Hebraism indicating either character, as in “son of peace” (Luke 10:6) and “sons of light” (1 Thess 5:5), or destiny, as in “son of death” (1 Sam 20:31).⁵⁴ This case refers to destiny, a loss of this person’s well-being, not to a cessation of his existence.⁵⁵ In the NT *apōleia* is the opposite of salvation, the loss of eternal life and the resultant suffering of eternal perdition and misery.⁵⁶ The certain demise of the man of lawlessness surfaces before any of his other characteristics. Regardless of the power or authority he will temporarily display, and despite the unbelieving world’s assessment that he has no equal, his demise is a divinely promised certainty.

In 1 Kings 22 and Ezekiel 14, God exposed falsehood by setting forth His truth. He does so in 2 Thessalonians 2 as well, as He does with other passages relevant to the Tribulation. In fact, an unprecedented presentation of God’s truth to the entire world will characterize the Tribulation. Matthew 24:14 records Jesus’ words: “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come.” The ways in which God will proclaim His truth in the Tribulation will be quite numerous, different opinions over chronology notwithstanding. Such means will include the witness of the martyrs of Rev 6:9, who will be slain “because of the word of God and because of testimony which they had maintained.” The 144,000 sealed in Revelation 7 most likely have a great deal to do with the great multitude from all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues standing before God’s throne (7:9). Further, the 1,260-day ministry of the two witnesses of Revelation 11 will be a means of God’s setting forth of His truth and exposing the lies of Satan. The global impact of the two is evident in the worldwide celebration at their death (11:9-13). Because of the open witness of God in exposing the lies of Satan, who or what is false may be contrasted with who or what is true. As with the previous biblical examples, people will stand forewarned before God’s judgmental use of deception overtakes them.

Second Thessalonians reveals additional characteristics of the coming agent of evil. The participles used to describe him evidence the extreme of this man’s lawlessness, including his total disregard for any so-called god, especially for the one true God. The base nature of the man of lawlessness will be to oppose any rival by describing him in 2:4 as “the one who opposes” (ὁ ἀντικείμενος, *ho antikeimenos*), taken from the verb ἀντίκειμαι (*antikeimai*), whose literal meaning is “to lie opposite to.”⁵⁷ Further self-exaltation will characterize him according to the use of ὑπεραιρόμενος (*hyperairomenos*), from the cognate meaning “to lift up above,” or “to raise oneself over.”⁵⁸ In the pinnacle of his rebellion he will seat

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid., 248.

⁵⁶Earnest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, Black’s New Testament Commentaries (London: Adams & Charles Black, 1972) 285; Joseph Henry Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Being Grimm Wilke’s Clovis Notii Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962) 71.

⁵⁷Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* 41.

⁵⁸Thayer, *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament* 640.

himself in the temple of God and present himself to the world that he is God.⁵⁹ That he would enter the temple of God would be brazen enough; sitting there demonstrates a minimum of respect toward God and a maximum claim to deity.⁶⁰

Having alluded to the destiny of the coming one in “the son of destruction,” Paul explicitly pronounces his certain doom before his advent by describing him as the one “whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth” (2:8), indicating that merely Christ’s spoken word will destroy the Antichrist. In any regard, no extended battle is in view, nor will there be any debate as to the outcome. The mere presence of the Lord will render the man of lawlessness inoperative (καταργήσει, *katargēsei*), bringing his lawlessness, but not him, to an end.⁶¹ Before his demise, however, the man of lawlessness will exercise heretofore unparalleled satanic authority and activity on earth. Paul described the Antichrist as “the one whose coming is in accord with the activity (*energeian*) of Satan” (2 Thess 2:9), indicating that a major aspect of the Antichrist’s attraction will be in the extensive power he will display. Because of such factors, the Antichrist will be tremendously effective in misleading the world into thinking that he is God and has no equals.

Having exposed what is false by means of God’s truth, and paralleling Ezekiel 14, Paul next sets forth the predetermined and preannounced fate of those who would still choose to reject God and align themselves instead with the man of lawlessness. Second Thessalonians not only offers significant details about the advent and activities of the Antichrist; it also gives insight into the unbelieving world’s reception of him. Before the demise of the Antichrist at the return of Christ, he will enticingly deceive the totality of unredeemed humanity. Paul presents the Antichrist’s advent as being in accord with the activity of Satan, explaining that he will come “with all the deception of wickedness” (ἐν πάσῃ ἀπάτῃ ἀδικίας, *en pasē apatē adikias*) (2:10). Herein is the heart or core of tribulational deception, namely, Satan. He is the agent of deception—not God. Milligan notes that with “its union with ἀπάτῃ, ἀδικία is evidently thought of here as an active, aggressive power which, however, can influence only τοῖς ἀπολλυμένοις.”⁶² Braun sees this satanic deception as uniting all the motifs previously discussed regarding deception in 2 Thessalonians 2, especially the suprahuman element of the eschatological error.⁶³ Satan will deceive the world at large so they will gladly accept the claims of Antichrist. Yet unbelievers will be held accountable for allowing themselves to be deceived, as Findlay observes:

The dupes of Antichrist are treated after their kind; as they would not love truth, they

⁵⁹The present participle ἀποδεικνύντα indicates that he displays himself continually as God, not as a one-time event (D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles* [Chicago: Moody, 1974] 308).

⁶⁰Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* 286.

⁶¹Robert L. Thomas, “Second Thessalonians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 328.

⁶²George Milligan, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: Macmillan, 1908) 104. This harmonizes with the massive tribulational deception Jesus predicted in Matthew 24:24.

⁶³Herbert Braun, “πλανάω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968) 250.

shall not have truth, lies must be their portion. . . . For δέχομαι, implying *welcome*, the opening of the heart to what is offered, cf. I. i. g; ii. 13, describing the opposite conduct of the Thessalonian readers.⁶⁴

The activity of the Antichrist will be of such nature that it will be awe-inspiring and humanly unexplainable.⁶⁵ However, despite his superior power on a human or satanic level, his promised demise has already been pronounced (2:8). With truth exposing falsehood, the only real issue is whom one will believe. Consequently, those who reject God's truth will perish, as will the one whom they follow (2:10). As in Ezekiel 13–14 and 1 Kings 22, when God demonstrated His mercy by warning those endorsing the lie, the same grace is offered here. Those forewarned could substitute salvation for perishing through accepting the love of the truth (2:10b). However, most will adamantly reject God's grace and forgiveness extended to them, bringing divine judgment on themselves as a consequence of their action. Rejection of the truth of God leads to the same damnation promised for the man of lawlessness, as God will hold his followers culpable for the choice they make.

A final element to consider is the substance or heart of their deception. Paul indicates the deluding influence God will send will be for the express purpose "so that they might believe what is false" (2 Thess 2:11). "What is false" is rather a loose translation. Paul stated the unbelieving world at large will accept a specific lie, namely "the lie" (τὸ ψεῦδος, *tō pseudei*), not lies in general. "The lie" contrasts starkly with "the truth" of 2:10, which they have previously rejected. Findlay well observes, "ἡ ἀλήθεια is not the moral quality, 'truth' as sincerity in the person, but the objective reality—the 'truth' coming from God in Christ, viz. the Gospel."⁶⁶ Especially in its contrast with "the truth," "the lie" of 2 Thess 2:4 is significant. In that verse the Antichrist is "displaying himself as being God."⁶⁷ Again, Findlay's comments are significant:

τὸ ψεῦδος the opposite of ἡ ἀλήθεια (v. 10), the truth of God in the Gospel, . . . is here "the lie" *par excellence*, the last and crowning deception practised by Satan in passing off the Lawless One as God (vv. 4, 9f.). This passage, in fact, ascribes to God

⁶⁴George G. Findlay, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians* Cambridge Greek Testament (Cambridge: University Press, 1904), 183.

⁶⁵For arguments that the miracles of the Tribulation by Satan and the two beasts will be, in fact, authentic miracles, see this writer's "Satan's Deceptive Miracles in the Tribulation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (1999):156, 308-24.

⁶⁶Findlay, "The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians" 183-84. Compare a similar understanding of the term in John 8:32; Rom 1:18, 25; 2:8; 2 Cor 4:2; Gal 5:7; Eph 4:24; Col 1:5; 1 Tim 3:15.

⁶⁷Weinrich states that the vast majority of the Fathers understood that Paul's reference to the temple of God to mean the temple in Jerusalem. Since the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, they concluded that the Antichrist would rebuild the temple. Accordingly, the Antichrist displaying himself as God is crucial in understanding the deception of the Tribulation (William C. Weinrich, "Antichrist and the Early Church," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 49 [April-June 1985]:141-42).

the delusion that we have hitherto been regarding as the masterpiece of Satan.⁶⁸

Such an interpretation fits the context of 2 Thessalonians 2 since the Antichrist will be the major focus of the deception in the Tribulation. He will present himself to the world that he is God and will require universal worship of himself, deceiving the masses who will willingly so acknowledge him.⁶⁹

With these factors in mind, attention turns to the deluding influence of 2 Thess 2:11. A proper study of the verse can proceed only with an understanding of the preceding context as is evident from *καὶ διὰ τοῦτο* (*kai dia touto*, “and for this reason”) that introduces the verse. The setting forth of the truth of God, the exposure of the wickedness at its very core, and then the blatant rejection of God by those who choose the deception instead of the truth leads to God’s sending the *energeian planēs*. In harmony with 1 Kings 22 and Ezekiel 14, what is deemed as the truth ultimately becomes a means of judgment against the participants. However, this will not be the normal consequences of sin, but rather God’s actively sending judgment on those who reject His truth. As was true with Ahab and as with those who would inquire of a false prophet in Ezekiel’s day, God will lead no one into sin. Instead He will employ the agents of sin, whom the unredeemed have already welcomed, as agents of judgment and destruction against them. After the unregenerate choose the lie over the truth, God will respond by sending the *energeian planēs* so that they will believe the lie they have already chosen even more. Perhaps this harmonizes with the angel’s pronouncement of doom on those who will worship the beast and receive the mark of his name (Rev 14:9-11). One who receives the mark of the beast will have already chosen his course and have his judgment declared beforehand by God. The same will be so for those affected by the deluding influence. From this point onward they will have no hope of repentance and salvation. Just as Rev 14:9-11 is a pronouncement of doom before the events take place, so is 2 Thess 2:11. The course of the rebellious is settled, God’s bringing it to its previously revealed conclusion being all that remains.

Defining the *Energeian Planēs* of 2 Thess 2:11

Obviously, God will send the *energeian planēs* as a means of judgment against the unredeemed, but determining precisely the substance of this expression is difficult, perhaps even impossible, prior to the Tribulation, since history furnishes no analogy. Consequently, approaches to establishing a definition vary. An initial point to consider is the possibility that the *energeian planēs* of 2 Thess 2:11 may be a person, that is, another way of referring to the man of lawlessness of 2:4. That would then be equivalent to the breaking of the first seal in Rev 6:1-2, and would harmonize with the sending required in 2 Thess 2:11. God, through Jesus Christ,

⁶⁸Findlay, "The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians" 185. Findlay's reasoning best suits the emphasis of the context. Failure to specify that *the* lie of the Antichrist is presenting himself as God significantly weakens the deception that will occur during the Tribulation.

⁶⁹For considerations of how the wound of the beast will relate to the worldwide deception predicted for the Tribulation, see this writer's "Satan's Deceptive Miracles in the Tribulation" 459-68.

will break the seal and will send forth the rider on the white horse.⁷⁰ Four components support the *energeian planēs* as the Antichrist. First, the judicial nature of this act is clearly seen, since God will send the rider as a means of judgment, as He will do with the remaining seals. Second, the sent rider is specifically linked to the tribulational deception of 2 Thess 2:10. Third, that the man of lawlessness is Satan's agent, not God's, is no insurmountable problem, since to accomplish other purposes God will use satanic beings, such as the demons from the abyss (Rev 9:1-11). Fourth, although he will be embraced by the unbelieving world at large, the Antichrist will become an agent of judgment against those who rebel against God; both he and his followers will ultimately share the same doom (2 Thess 2:8, 11-12; Rev 14:9-11; 19:20-21; 20:10-15).

Other factors, however, are against identifying the *energeian planēs* as a person. Second Thessalonians 2 clearly presents specific individuals in the context: God the Father, Jesus Christ, Satan, the man of lawlessness. To refer to the man of lawlessness in ambiguous terms breaks that mold. Even more to the point, God will send the *energeian planēs* as a result of the world's rejection of His truth and reception of *the lie* (2:4, 11-12). The deluding influence comes *after* the Antichrist's revelation and acceptance by the masses, not simultaneous with his advent. In addition to this, nowhere else in Scripture does *energeia* refer to a person; it is an active, working, operative power, that is, power in action.⁷¹ Such power is always associated with supernatural activities, but nowhere is it a description of the one(s) performing such acts.⁷² So while *energeia* may be a component of Antichrist's deceptive works, it is not synonymous with him. Finally, that *energeian planēs* cannot refer to a person is evident when Paul describes the man of lawlessness in 2 Thess 2:9 as coming "in accord with the activity of Satan" (*energeian tou Satana*). Paul employed the same word to describe what God sends in 2:11. A person is not in view in 2:9; no hermeneutical grounds give reason to switch to a person two verses later.

Since the phrase does not refer to an individual, one must seek indications of what it is. A few factors help. First, since the *energeian planēs* is yet to be sent by God, no viable analogy exists. The principles from 1 Kings 22 and Ezekiel 14, or to a lesser degree, Romans 1, are available, but not a historical precedent. The *energeian planēs* will be more extensive in content and scope than the deception in the two OT accounts, and substantially more effective. The removal of the Spirit's restraining ministry *before* the occurrence of the *energeian planēs* (2 Thess 2:6-7)

⁷⁰For various views concerning the identity of the rider on the white horse, see Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7* 418-23. While acknowledging that the Antichrist will be an aspect of the first-seal judgment, chronological factors plus a similarity to the three other horsemen lead Thomas to conclude the rider is a personification of the antichristian forces operative during the early part of the Tribulation. "The beast out of the sea (Rev. 13:1-8) will be part of this movement and on his way to the top, but at the time represented by the first seal, he will not have risen to be the pre-eminent one of the movement. At the very beginning of the period . . . he will be one of many impostors who constitute this antichristian force of which this first rider is an emblem" (ibid., 422).

⁷¹Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* 153; Thomas, "Second Thessalonians" 326; Milligan, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians* 104.

⁷²Thomas, "Second Thessalonians" 326.

increases the unlikelihood of fully defining this unique act of God before the Tribulation.⁷³ The *energeian planēs* will be different from God's previous works.

Energeian occurs only eight times in Scripture, all eight in Paul's epistles. Every instance but one refers in some way to the active, supernatural working of God.⁷⁴ For instance, it refers to the efficacious power of God by which He raised Jesus Christ from the dead (Eph 1:19; Col 2:12), the exertion of Christ's power to subject all things to Himself (Phil 3:21), the equipping of the apostles for their office (Eph 3:7; Col 1:29), and to the divinely ordained working of each part of the body of Christ (Eph 4:16).⁷⁵ The only other uses of *energeia* refer to the man of lawlessness coming with "activity of Satan" (*energeian tou Satana*) (2 Thess 2:9) and the *energeian planēs* sent by God (2:11). In each case, supernatural activity is present, and in each case, except 2 Thess 2:9, reference is made to God's divine working.⁷⁶ In keeping with other biblical uses of *energeia*, the *energeian planēs* of the Tribulation must likewise be supernatural and not merely have the appearance of the supernatural.⁷⁷

The *energeia* sent by God will be one which will magnify the deception of the Tribulation. The genitive *planēs* is objective and could be translated, "a working that enhances and develops error" or "a working that energizes deception," as evidenced in the εἰς τό (*eis to*) clause which follows (εἰς τό πιστεῦσαι αὐτοῦς τῷ ψεύδει, *eis to pisteusai autous tō pseudei*, "that they might believe what is false").⁷⁸ God will work actively to enhance the lie of the Antichrist to its fullest measure to make it irresistible to rebellious humanity.⁷⁹ The lie which unbelievers will welcome will become one that they cannot help but believe; they will be unable to resist obeying the Antichrist to whom they have previously committed themselves.⁸⁰ Once more, this is not a matter of God deceiving but rather of God using the lie the followers of the Antichrist have already chosen. Second Thessalonians 2:11 seems to say that the satanic deception of the unbelieving world would be impossible unless God actively sends the *energeian planēs*. God Himself will not deceive, but He will send an energized work that will allow deception to

⁷³For the relationship between the restrainer of Second Thessalonians 2:6-7 and the deluding influence, see this writer's "The Theme of Deception During the Tribulation" 86-94.

⁷⁴Han-Christopher Hahn, "Work, Do, Accomplish [ἐργάζομαι]," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, trans. G. H. Boobyer et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 3:1152.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Hahn notes the proximity of the two terms used of both Satan and God in 2 Thessalonians and their similarity indicates Satan is also ultimately subject to God even in this exercise of power (ibid.).

⁷⁷Thomas, "Second Thessalonians," 326, 328.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Revelation 17:17 is a similar concept of God working in the unredeemed to accomplish His purpose. The ten horns and the beast who will devour the harlot accomplish the intended will of God: "For He has put it in their hearts to execute His purpose . . . until the words of God should be fulfilled." The ἐνέργειαν πλάνης will be beyond this divine work, differing particularly in the outer manifestation of activity, instead of the internal workings of the heart.

manifest itself to its fullest capacity.

In light of those considerations, the *energeian planēs* sent by God appears to be God's creating the environment by which evil can manifest itself to its fullest capacity, allowing satanic power and works of such magnitude as not previously permitted by God. The *energeian planēs* may be similar to God expanding Satan's realm of operation under Job, but with an intensified form beyond this because of factors related to the word *energeia* and the impossibility of survival unless God limits its duration (Matt 24:21-22). An aspect of this expansion of satanic operation may be the cessation of the Spirit's restraining work, but 2 Thess 2:11 requires an active sending of something by God; the *energeian planēs* will not be an indirect consequence of another act of God. The man of lawlessness will support his claims of deity with miraculous works and with the full activity of Satan, creating the delusion that he is God. Not only will God not hinder or limit his earthly realm of operation, but He will also "energize" the deception so as to extend it beyond any human explanation and cause the entire world to marvel. The *energeian planēs* will confer judgment on those who do not believe the truth, but take pleasure in wickedness, and the wickedness in which they will take pleasure will ultimately become an avenue of their judgment.

Summary and Conclusion

God's sending of the *energeian planēs* in 2 Thess 2:11 is a major aspect of tribulational judgment to come upon the unredeemed. Though unique to the Tribulation and unparalleled to any of God's previous work, the framework of the deluding influence is virtually identical with two occasions when God used deception to accomplish His will. In 1 Kings 22 and Ezekiel 14, God employed deception as a means of judgment. However, before judgment He openly presented His truth to the people, even announcing beforehand what would transpire. Second Thessalonians 2:10 demonstrates the same as true during the Tribulation. The recipients of the *energeian planēs* will know at least the content of the Gospel. Lack of access to God's truth will play no role in their judgment. Similar to God's warning in 1 Kings 22 and Ezekiel 14, God shows His grace in exposing the lies by means of truth, long before the advent of the man of lawlessness. God also establishes a means by which one may avoid the worldwide deception.

A second similarity to 1 Kings 22 and Ezekiel 14 is God's sending of the deluding influence to those who will have already committed to rejecting God and following "another truth," a "truth" identified as satanic falsehoods. Second Thessalonians 2:10 states that such people will perish because they did "not receive the love of the truth to be saved." Lack of warning plays no part in their sinful reception of the man of lawlessness. Their volitional decision is further seen in that they will not believe the truth but instead will take pleasure in wickedness, that is, the specific wickedness associated with the lie of 2:4. In addition to this, the recipients of the *energeian planēs* will refuse to believe the truth (2 Thess 2:10b), which again shows they will understand to a degree what comprises the truth. Consequently, their status can best be described as "those who perish" (2:10a) even though the culmination of their judgment is still future.

Another similarity in these accounts is merely a logical step in the process.

With God's truth available and having summarily been rejected, "another truth" must take its place. As with the other accounts, God will use what (or who) the people will choose as a means of judgment against them. God will send the deluding influence with the express purpose "that they may believe the lie," the very embodiment of the lie they have chosen to replace the truth of God. As in 1 Kings 22, Ezekiel 14, and Romans 1, God will not lead such people into sin. They will reject God's truth and pursue the agents of sin. They will receive, worship, take pleasure in the lie, the one who sits in the temple of God, displaying himself as God (2:4). They also will worship the dragon who gives his authority to the beast (Rev 13:4). The judgmental goal of God's sending the *energeian planēs* is clearly stated: "in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness" (2 Thess 2:12). In Ezek 14:9 the prophet and the one who sought after him would share the same fate. The same will be true for those who reject the truth of God and receive the lie of the Tribulation. They will experience not only physical death (2 Thess 2:8; Rev. 19:20), but ultimately will share eternal torment in the lake of fire (Rev 19:20; 20:10, 15). As with the OT accounts cited, people of the Tribulation stand forewarned of the deception before it occurs and will be held accountable before God for their own deception.