

The Delay of the Coming of the Lord is Controlled by God

Eduard Verhoef - Hollandsche Rading

In 2 Thess. 2:6-7 we read the much-discussed words τὸ κατέχων, literally 'that what restrains' or 'that what prevents' and ὁ κατέχων, 'he who restrains' or 'he who prevents'. What is meant by τὸ κατέχων and ὁ κατέχων? Does 'it' or 'he' work on the side of the lawless one spoken of already in 2 Thess. 2:3 or on the side of God? Many explanations of these words have been proposed, such as the Roman Empire, an evil spirit, the Holy Spirit, an angel or the archangel Michael. It has also been suggested that τὸ κατέχων is God's control of history, which prevents things from happening before the right time and so in this case prevents the lawless one from being revealed.¹ Each exegete wishing to explain 2 Thess. 2, should answer the question who or what is meant by these words. In this paper I will suggest that the best explanation is to interpret these words against the background of the idea that it is God who determines the right time for all things to happen and it is he who decides to delay the coming of the Lord. This opinion has been defended earlier², but the point can be made stronger.³

First of all I would like to make two preliminary remarks. The first remark is that in my opinion the author of 2 Thessalonians wrote to the addressees on the assumption that his epistle was understandable for the readers. This remark has to be made because the Dutch author Lietaert Peerbolte suggested that the author intentionally wrote very vaguely. "He uses the vague terms κατέχων and κατέχων in order to refrain from giving the true reason for this postponement while at the same time creating the illusion that Paul had taught them about this subject, and that the Thessalonians were therefore familiar with the identity of the withholding force."⁴ I do not agree with this reasoning. In verse 5 the author states that he already told them what is discussed in these verses: "Do you not remember that, when I was still with you, I spoke to you about these things?" Why then should he "refrain from giving the true reason for this postponement"? In my opinion with the terms κατέχων and κατέχων the author does give the true reason for the delay.

Lietaert Peerbolte argues against such a reasoning that we do not know anything of instruction as referred to in verse 5.⁵ But that is not a valid argument. In the same way Paul referred to given education and common knowledge in 1 Thess. 3:4 and 5:2, respectively. In these cases we do not have the relevant information either.

The second remark I would like to make is: the author wrote and sent this letter to the *Thessalonians* in order to correct misconceptions about the Day of the Lord. It seems to be self-

¹ A convenient recent survey of the different interpretations of these words can be found in F. Bassin, *Les Épitres de Paul aux Thessaloniens*, Vaux-sur Seine 1991, 238-241.

² See for example M.J.J. Menken, *2 Thessalonians*, London, New York 1994, 110-112.

³ This is a slightly revised version of a paper presented at the 1999 International SBL-Meeting in Helsinki. I would like to thank Mrs. Drs. J.W. van Arenthals for her critical remarks.

⁴ L.J. Lietaert Peerbolte, THE KATÉXON/KATÉXΩN OF 2 THESS. 2:6-7, *Novum Testamentum* 39 (1997), 149. See also L.J. Lietaert Peerbolte, *The Antecedents of Antichrist*, Leiden 1995, 83: "the author purposefully employed abstract language for reasons of pseudepigraphy."

⁵ L.J. Lietaert Peerbolte, THE KATÉXON/KATÉXΩN OF 2 THESS. 2:6-7, *Novum Testamentum* 39 (1997), 148 thinks it to be a "major objection" that we do not have "information that Paul taught anything about the coming of an eschatological opponent of Jesus Christ."

evident that the author sent this letter to the Thessalonians, but recently it has been argued that this letter would have been sent to another congregation. Lietaert Peerbolte suggests that this letter was meant to replace the first letter to the Thessalonians. He writes then: "If 2 Thessalonians was indeed written to replace 1 Thessalonians, it is not very likely that it would have been sent to the Thessalonian congregation. [...] A congregation outside Thessalonica would have been far less suspicious of a forgery than the Thessalonian congregation itself."⁶ In my opinion we have to consider 2 Thessalonians in the following way. In spite of different theological opinions we find many literal similarities between 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians.⁷ The best explanation for these similarities is the recognition that 2 Thessalonians is a pseudographic epistle and that the author used 1 Thessalonians and adapted its statements to the new circumstances of a later time.⁸ In this way the author tried to give support to the Thessalonian community. He wanted to state very clearly that the Day of the Lord has not yet come and that it will take some more time. If the author wrote 2 Thessalonians in order to correct misconceptions about the Day of the Lord, in his view presumably misconceptions caused by 1 Thessalonians, then this epistle was sent to the Thessalonian congregation. What would another congregation have done with an epistle addressed to the Thessalonian community? And why would another congregation have been "less suspicious" with regard to an epistle which suddenly turns up? It seems to me that the author not only addressed this letter to the Thessalonian community but also sent it to this congregation. The reasoning that the author addressed this epistle to the Thessalonians but sent it to another congregation, is fantastic and untenable. Consequently 2 Thessalonians is an epistle written and sent to the Thessalonians, and in this epistle the author writes about what seems to be a controversial issue: the time that the Lord will come or the time that the Day of the Lord will be there.

This concludes my preliminary remarks. We will now point our attention to the discussion of 2 Thess. 2, especially of the difficult verses 6-7. With a certain reservation we will interpret this text using the rhetorical categories.⁹ 2 Thess. 2 can then be divided in the following way:¹⁰
 2 Thess. 2:1-2. *Propositio*: the Day of the Lord has not yet come.
 2 Thess. 2:3-17 can be characterized as *probatio*. It has been argued in 2:3-4 that before the Day of the Lord the apostasy must come and the man of the lawlessness must be revealed. In

⁶ L.J. Lietaert Peerbolte, *THE KATÉXON/KATÉXΩN OF 2 THESS. 2:6-7*, *Novum Testamentum* 39 (1997), 148-149.

⁷ See the list of similarities in: B. Rigaux, *Les Épitres aux Thessaloniens*, Paris 1956, 133-134.

⁸ E. Verhoef, *The Relation between 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians and the Inauthenticity of 2 Thessalonians*, *Hervormde Theologische Studies* 53 (1997) 1&2, 163-171; E. Verhoef, *De brieven aan de Tessalonicenzen*, Kampen 1998, 33-35.

⁹ In my opinion we should be cautious with the use of rhetoric. We must use it to *describe* the way an epistle is structured, not to *prescribe* a particular analysis. See for a warning against an overly enthusiastic use of rhetoric R.D. Anderson, *Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Paul*, Kampen 1996, 109 and J.A.D. Weima, *What Does Aristotle Have to Do with Paul? An Evaluation of Rhetorical Criticism*, *Calvin Theological Journal* 32 (1997), 465-468.

¹⁰ See E. Verhoef, *De brieven aan de Tessalonicenzen*, Kampen 1998, 26-27. Cf. also S.E. Porter, *Paul of Tarsus and his Letters*, in: S.E. Porter (ed.), *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period*, Leiden 1997, 533-585, esp. 550.

verse 5 the author states that he already spoke about that when he was in Thessalonica. In 2:6-12 the argumentation of the verses 4-5 is elaborated on in more detail and it is said that the man of the lawlessness is still restrained. The probatio is concluded in 2:13-17 with giving thanks to God.¹¹

What or who prevents the lawless one from being revealed? The text of 2:6-7 runs as follows:

6. καὶ νῦν τὸ κατέχον οἴδατε εἰς τὸ ἀποκαλυφθῆναι αὐτὸν ἐν τῷ ἑαυτοῦ¹² καιρῷ. 7. τὸ γὰρ μυστήριον ἤδη ἐνεργεῖται τῆς ἀνομίας, μόνον ὁ κατέχων ἄρτι ἕως ἐκ μέσου γένηται.

6. And now, you know what is restraining so that he may be revealed in his time. 7. For the mystery of lawlessness is working already, only he who now restrains¹³ ... until he is out of the way.

As was said above the rather short remarks of the verses 3-4 are developed in 2:6-12. Now the author gives detailed information about the procedure before the coming of the Lord. The words καὶ νῦν in 2:6 refer to the present situation of the addressees in contrast with the situation referred to in verse 5. Some time ago they were told (verse 5) that the lawless one must be revealed first (verse 4) and now (verse 6) they know what prevents him from being revealed.¹⁴ After the revelation of the lawless one the Lord will come and destroy him; see 2 Thess. 2:8. So it is clear that this lawless one is an adversary of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the meantime the lawlessness is already at work. The word μυστήριον, mystery (verse 7), means that the lawlessness is working in secret.¹⁵ It is often used in passages about eschatolo-

¹¹ S.E. Porter, Paul of Tarsus and his Letters, in: S.E. Porter (ed.), *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period*, Leiden 1997, 550 thinks 2:16-17 to be the *peroratio*.

¹² I have adopted here the text given in Nestle-Aland (27th edition). But we have a textual problem in the last words of verse 6. Should we read: ἐν τῷ ἑαυτοῦ καιρῷ, in his own time, or ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ καιρῷ, in his time? In the first case a reflexive pronoun is used and then the time of the lawless one is spoken of. In the second case αὐτοῦ can refer either to the lawless one or to τὸ κατέχον, the restraining factor. We do not have conclusive arguments for either of these readings. In Nestle-Aland (25th edition) it said: αὐτοῦ. In Nestle-Aland (26th and 27th editions) we read ἑαυτοῦ. B. Rigaux, *Les épîtres aux Thessaloniens*, Paris 1956, 663 remarks that ἑαυτοῦ may be a correction to bring the pronoun in line with αὐτόν. If that is true, than the corrector who added the ε-, understood these words referring to the lawless one: *his* time was intended. In my opinion the potential corrector was right in this interpretation. The pronoun, ἑαυτοῦ or αὐτοῦ, refers to αὐτόν, the lawless one.

¹³ This sentence is elliptic; see J.L. Galanis, *The Second Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Thessalonians*, Thessaloniki 1989, 202 (in Greek) and E. Verhoef, *De brieven aan de Tessalonicenzen*, Kampen 1998, 268.

¹⁴ The place of the adverb νῦν makes clear that it has to be connected with the conjunction καί. Therefore Richard is incorrect in connecting νῦν with τὸ κατέχον, as if the author wrote τὸ νῦν κατέχον; see E.J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Collegeville 1995, 329. F.F. Bruce, *1&2 Thessalonians*, Waco 1982, 169 speaks of a "solecism" regarding to such an explanation. Already G. Lünemann, *Die Briefe an die Thessalonicher*, Göttingen 1850, 195 rejected this interpretation of νῦν. F. Blass, A. Debrunner, F. Rehkopf, *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch*, Göttingen¹⁶ 1984, 372.405 keep open both interpretations.

¹⁵ P. Müller, *Anfänge der Paulusschule*, Zürich 1988, 51: "Der Genitiv ist expegetisch: die Macht des Bösen ist als Geheimnis schon in der Gegenwart [...] wirksam." See also W. Trilling, *Der zweite Brief an die Thessalonicher*, Zürich, Einsiedeln, Köln, 1980, 93.

gical topics, as it is in this text.¹⁶ The interpretation of R. Schippers, who writes, quoting R. Brown, that *μυστήριον* signifies “the mysterious disposition of divine providence whereby evil is allowed to exist and to work in the world” cannot be upheld.¹⁷ Such a theory is not under discussion here and it cannot be founded on these verses.

After this short analysis of 2 Thess. 2 we return to the question: what and/or who is meant with τὸ κατέχον and ὁ κατέχων? Discarding Lietaert Peerbolte’s opinion that τὸ κατέχον and ὁ κατέχων are intentionally chosen “vague terms”¹⁸, I will discuss the interpretations mentioned above: the Roman Empire, an evil spirit or the Holy Spirit, an angel or the archangel Michael, or the scheme of God according to which all things happen at a fixed time.

The verb κατέχω is used seventeen times in the New Testament.¹⁹ The meaning of this verb ranges from ‘to hold’, ‘to hold fast’, ‘to possess’ to ‘to retain’, ‘to withhold’ and ‘to restrain’.²⁰ In spite of some subtle distinctions most scholars agree that in these verses the meaning of the verb κατέχω must be ‘to restrain’, ‘to withhold’.²¹ We find this verb in a similar meaning already in Homer’s *Odyssey* 15,200: μή μ’ ὁ γέρων ἀέκοντα κατάσχη, let not the old man restrain me against my will. Cf. also Plato, *Phaidon*, 117d: κατέχειν τὰ δάκρυα, to hold back his tears. In the Septuagint this verb is used more than fifty times. We find it for example in apocalyptic passages such as Dan. 7:18.22 with the meaning ‘to possess’ or ‘to get possession of’. Another example is Gen. 24:56, μή κατέχετέ με, do not delay me. These words are said by Abraham’s servant who wants to go home with Rebekah, the intended wife for Isaac. The verb κατέχω is here the translation of the Hebrew *קָיַל* (*pi’el*). We will see afterwards that the verb *קָיַל* is used also in a very important text such as Hab. 2:3.²²

The first interpretation of τὸ κατέχον I mentioned above was that it would refer to the Roman Empire. This interpretation has already been defended by Hippolytus, Tertullianus and Chrysostomus.²³ It is founded on the identification of the fourth kingdom, spoken of in Dan. 2:7, with the Roman Empire. Consequently the participle ὁ κατέχων must refer to the Roman Emperor. Nowadays this interpretation is still defended; see for example Bruce.²⁴ This means

¹⁶ E.J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Colledgeville 1995, 330.

¹⁷ R. Schippers, *Mythologie en eschatologie in 2 Thessalonicenzen 2:1-17*, Assen 1961, 17-18.

¹⁸ See page 36.

¹⁹ Eighteen times if John 5:4 is included.

²⁰ See H. Hanse in: G. Kittel (ed.), *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament II*, Stuttgart 1935, 828-830.

²¹ W. Trilling, *Der zweite Brief an die Thessalonicher*, Zürich, Einsiedeln, Köln 1980, 89; M.J.J. Menken, *2 Thessalonians*, London, New York 1994, 108-109; E.J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Colledgeville 1995, 330.

²² In the Septuagint it is translated there with *χρονίζω*, to last, to take time.

²³ See for this and other interpretations by the Church Fathers, J.L. Galanis, *The Second Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Thessalonians*, Thessaloniki 1989, 183-206 (in Greek).

²⁴ See F.F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Waco 1982, 171-172.

that the Thessalonians think that the Roman Empire unconsciously would cooperate with God in order to restrain the lawless one from being revealed. I disagree.²⁵ There is no indication in this epistle that the Roman Empire or the Roman Emperor would be a cooperator of God's to guarantee that the lawless one will not be revealed before his time. The Roman Empire with its imperial cult is not a positive power in the opinion of the Christians. On the contrary, in the New Testament the Roman Empire is very often a real threat to the young church. If not caused by the Romans themselves, the persecutions and afflictions of the Christian community, mentioned in the New Testament writings, happened without the Romans preventing it.

These objections apply to the opinion of the South-African scholar Van Aarde as well. He argues that 2 Thessalonians should be read as "an anti-Sadducean polemic". In his opinion the lawless one symbolizes "the Sadducean temple authorities" and the Roman government should be seen as the "restrainer" of these Sadduceans.²⁶ However, it is highly questionable whether the Sadduceans still played any role at the time that 2 Thessalonians was written. Moreover the designation 'lawless one' does not suit the Sadduceans very well.

The interpretation of the restraining factor as 'an evil spirit'²⁷ is also untenable. The restraining factor cannot be found in the party of the lawless one, since they are definitely opposed, but it must be something within God's realm.²⁸

The interpretation of ὁ κατέχων as an angel or archangel is not impossible, but we do not have any arguments to substantiate this explanation.

The last interpretation I mentioned was that τὸ κατέχον would be the scheme of God according to which all things happen at a fixed time. In my opinion we do have arguments for this interpretation. I would propose the following reasoning.

It is clear that the power of God's opponent will somehow be restricted in the time before the coming of the Lord. This idea is discussed many times; see for example 1 En. 18:15-19:2; 21:1-6; Jub. 48:15-16; T. Levi 18:12.²⁹ But just before the coming of the Lord the opponent will have the opportunity to exercise all his power. Consequently the coming of the Lord will be delayed as long as the power of the opponent is restricted.

This delay of the coming (of the Day) of the Lord is a problem which is often debated in the last centuries B.C. and in the first centuries A.D. The discussion about the famous words of Hab. 2:3 must be mentioned here. In Hab. 2:3 it is said:

כי עוד חזון למועד ויפח לקץ ולא יכזב אסיתמהמה חכהלו כרבה יבא לא יאחר:

For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end and it will not lie.

²⁵ See E. Verhoef, *De brieven aan de Tessalonicenzen*, Kampen 1998, 265; W. Trilling, *Der zweite Brief an die Thessalonicher*, Zürich, Einsiedeln, Köln, 1980, 95-101.

²⁶ See A. van Aarde, The Second Letter to the Thessalonians Re-read as Pseudepigraph, *The Journal of Higher Criticism* 3 (1996), 237-266; especially 259.263.265.

²⁷ Cf. E. Best, *A Commentary on The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, London 1972, 301.

²⁸ For this reason Giblin's opinion must also be repudiated. Giblin thinks τὸ κατέχον to be a "pseudoprophetic force". See C.H. Giblin, *The Threat to Faith*, Rome 1967, 246.

²⁹ Regarding this last text see the comment in: H.W. Hollander, M. de Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. A Commentary*, Leiden 1985, 182: "Often one finds the idea that the power(s) of evil will be bound in prison [...] awaiting the final judgment."

If it is delayed, wait for it; it will certainly come, it will not linger.³⁰

This text is interpreted in the intertestamental period as concerning the last days.³¹ The explanation of this text, found in Qumran, is well-known. The phrase 'For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end and it will not lie' is explained in 1QpHab VII,7 as follows:

פֶּשֶׁר אֲשֶׁר יֵאָרֹךְ הַקֶּץ הָאֲחֵרִים

These words must be explained referring to the end which remains forthcoming.

Clearly the author of 1QpHab expresses his ignorance regarding the exact time of the coming of the Day of the Lord. In VII,13 it is said that "all the times of God will come according to their assignment." It is interesting to see that in the Targum the words, לֹא יֵאָחַר, it will not linger, are rendered with וְלֹא יִתְעַכֵּב, and it will not tarry.³² This verb עִכַּב is used many times by the rabbis in their discussions about the delay of the coming of the Lord. See for example bSanh 97b:

וְכִי מֵאַחַר שֶׁאֵין מַחֲכִים וְהוּא מַחֲכֵם מִי מַעֲכֵב. מֵדַת הַדִּין מַעֲכֵב.

Since we are waiting and he (God) is waiting, who does restrain?

The measure of justice is restraining.

In the same passage it is said that 'damned are those who calculate the end.' It is also argued there that salvation is dependent on conversion. The postponement of the conversion is seen as the factor which restrains salvation at the Day of the Lord. Though the spokesman of these words lived in a later time, we can safely assume that the discussion about the delay of the coming of the Messiah is much older.

We find another example in Midr. Teh. 14 (57b-58a). A prince and a princess have determined the date for their wedding, which they are longing for very much. Then we read:

וּמִי מַעֲכֵב. הוּא אֹמֵר פְּרוֹסְטִגְמִיָּא מַעֲכֵב.

and who restrains (that day from happening)? It is said: the ordinance³³ restrains.

After these words it is said that God is longing to give salvation to Israel in the same way and 'who restrains? The fixed time' (מִי מַעֲכֵב. פְּרוֹסְטִגְמִיָּא).³⁴

All these texts should be read against the background that people do not know when the Lord will come. So Rabbi Zeira taught in bSanh 97a: three things come when people do not expect them:

אֵלֹהִים הֵן: מְשִׁיחַ מְצִיָּאָה וְעֵקֶרֶב

³⁰ See for this text for example W. Rudolph, *Micha - Nahum - Habakuk - Zephania*, Gütersloh 1975, 215-216.

³¹ E. Otto, *Habakuk/Habakukbuch, Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 14, 304: "2,3 wurde spätnachexilisch zum locus classicus theologischer Bearbeitung des Verzögerungsproblems eschatologischer Heilserwartung [...]".

³² See A. Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic III, Targum Jonathan*, Leiden 1962, 461.

³³ A transcription of the Greek πρόσταγμα.

³⁴ Some authors read פְּרוֹסְטִגְמִיָּא, what must precede the wedding, as the factor which prevents the wedding from taking place now. See also the use of the verb עִכַּב in bBer 17a: people do want to do God's will, but something restrains them to do so.

these are: the Messiah, a treasure and a scorpion.

In the New Testament the question when the Day of the Lord will come is discussed several times, though not always in the same words. Shortly after the Resurrection the apostles asked Jesus when the restoration of the kingdom of Israel would take place. In his answer Jesus declares that only God determines and knows the time for these things; see Acts 1:6-7 and cf. 1 Thess. 5:1-6. In 2 Peter 3:8-9 we read about the delay of the coming of the Lord. The explanation for the delay of the fulfilment of God's promises is that God is merciful toward the people. He wants to give them the opportunity to hear the gospel and to be converted to Christianity.³⁵

Another important pericope is Mat. 24. Many authors have already pointed out that we can find surprising similarities between Mat. 24 and 2 Thess. 2.³⁶ Both sections discuss the last time before the Final Judgment of God. In Mat. 24 it is stressed that nobody knows the time and the hour that the end will come, only the Father knows; Mat. 24:36. In the same chapter it is said that first of all the gospel has to be preached to all people, after which the end will come; Mat. 24:14 and compare Marc 13:10. It is evident that according to Mat. 24 it is God who rules all history and he decides when the Day of the Lord will come.

The last example of the New Testament I would like to mention is Rev. 20. It describes a period of thousand years in which the devil will be bound in a bottomless pit, after which he will be loosed for a short time. It is significant that in this well-known chapter as in 2 Thess. 2:6-7 a period is predicted in which the devil cannot wield his power. In Rev. 20 as well it is God who is the ruler of all things.

Summarizing we have many examples of texts which speak of the end. Sometimes it is asked when the Day of the Lord will come and sometimes the delay of the coming of the Lord is discussed. In all the given examples it is stated or at least suggested that it is God who takes the definitive decisions. He restrains the power of the devil and he decides the time for him to be revealed.

In my opinion the Thessalonian community must have been familiar with the theological issue of the delay of the coming of the Lord. In 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11 the coming of the Lord is discussed. I am certain that Paul taught about these things during his stay in Thessalonica. The Thessalonian Christians were in trouble as they observed that some members of their community died before the coming of the Lord. Paul answers that these deceased members of their congregation will certainly share in the salvation given by the Lord. After that he argues that nobody knows when the Day of the Lord will come because it will come as a thief in the night, but certainly it will come soon. So they should always be prepared.

In 2 Thess. 2:1-2 there is a statement that the Day of the Lord has not yet come. After this statement the author wishes to explain in the probatio (2,3-17) why people must wait such a long time for the Day of the Lord. The reason for this delay has to do with what he calls τὸ κατέχον, that which is restraining, and ὁ κατέχων, he who is restraining (2,6-7). These two, τὸ κατέχον and ὁ κατέχων restrain the lawless one from being revealed. As was said above

³⁵ Theodoretus of Cyrrhus (5th century) argued this way as well. O. Cullmann, *Christus und die Zeit*, Zürich² 1948, 145 even argued that ὁ κατέχων would be a self-designation of Paul as the one who had to finish his missionary work before the lawless one would be revealed.

³⁶ See B. Rigaux, *Les Épitres aux Thessaloniens*, Paris 1956, 95-105; F. Bassin, *Les Épitres de Paul aux Thessaloniens*, Vaux-sur-Seine 1991, 26-28, 244.

they must be on God's side. It is unthinkable that these two factors would not be a part of God's plan. God is seen as the one who rules history and who ultimately decides when it is the right moment for the coming of the Lord; see 2 Thess. 1:7-8; 2:11-12. The idea is that all things in this world must happen in a certain order and in my opinion the author of 2 Thessalonians thinks the restraining factors to be a part of this cosmic order, or even better: this order itself is τὸ κατέχων.

A similar interpretation was already given by Theodorus of Mopsuestia, living about 400 A.D. He writes in his commentary on 2 Thessalonians that τὸ κατέχων is the limit fixed by God himself (ὁ ὄρος τοῦ θεοῦ) until the lawless one is permitted to be revealed.³⁷

With this interpretation we may have an explanation for the masculine participle as well. 'Ὁ κατέχων must be the one who executes God's plan including the delay of the coming of the Lord and including the fixed time for the lawless one to be revealed.³⁸ He may be an angel. Also in Rev. 20 it is an angel who binds God's opponent, the devil. He may be God himself who as the ruler of history controls everything which happens. Theodorus of Mopsuestia said: τοῦ θεοῦ δὲ κατέχοντος αὐτὸν, while God is restraining him.³⁹ Also the passive form ἀποκαλυφθῆναι in the phrase εἰς τὸ ἀποκαλυφθῆναι αὐτὸν (verse 6), so that he may be revealed, could be used as an argument for this interpretation. For it can be explained as a 'passivum divinum' though it seems a little bit strange that God himself would reveal the lawless one. Some authors argue that ὁ κατέχων cannot point to God because of the 'negative' words ἕως ἐκ μέσου γένηται, until he is out of the way. But this argument is not valid; see the use of similar words in Ez. 11:23, ἀνέβη δόξα κυρίου ἐκ μέσης πόλεως, the glory of the Lord went from the midst of the city. We can find other examples of these words in for example Col. 2:14; Epictetus III,3,15 and Herodotus 3,83; 8,22. Though it is not certain, it is possible that ὁ κατέχων refers to God in his function as the one who restrains and controls.⁴⁰

We still have the question, like many authors state it: why does the author use these difficult words? But does he really use such difficult words? It is very regrettable that this letter is too short to form a clear picture of the author. But we can safely assume that he was acquainted with the theological issue of the delay of the coming of the Lord. He knew the discussions about this delay similar to the discussions I mentioned above. He was interested in this subject, he had thought about this problem and he had got an own opinion. His opinion is that it will take some more time before the Day of the Lord will be there and that it is God himself who decides when it is the right moment for both the revelation of the lawless one and for the coming of the Lord.⁴¹ The verb κατέχω is an accurate translation of the verbs עָכַב or רָחַמ. Presumably κατέχω was not difficult at all for readers or listeners acquainted with the discussions about this topic.

³⁷ See Theodorus of Mopsuestia in J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, Tomus LXVI, Paris 1859, 933-936.

³⁸ G.S. Holland, *The Tradition that You Received from Us: 2 Thessalonians in the Pauline Tradition*, Tübingen 1988, 112 speaks regarding to ὁ κατέχων from "the agent of God's will".

³⁹ See A. Strobel, *Untersuchungen zum eschatologischen Verzögerungsproblem*, Leiden/Köln 1961, 107: "Genau genommen ist der κατέχων Gott selbst."

⁴⁰ Cf. also the words ἐκ μέσου in Jud. 3:19.

⁴¹ In Marc. 13:20 it is said that God has shortened the days of tribulation. In this text as well it is argued that ultimately it is God who controls everything to happen.

We conclude that the problem of the delay of the coming of the Lord was already spoken about several times before the Common Era. In the reports of the rabbinic discussions on this topic and in the New Testament writings it is said very clearly that ultimately it is God who determines the fixed times for all things to happen. I conclude that the 'puzzling' words τὸ κατέχων and ὁ κατέχων must be interpreted against this background.⁴² It is God's control of history which prevents the lawless one from being revealed and it is one of his ministers or perhaps even God himself who executes his plans.

⁴² P. Müller, *Anfänge der Paulusschule*, Zürich 1988, 50: "Der Grundgedanke [...] ist, daß Gott die Zeiten festgelegt hat und daß deshalb auch eine Verzögerung nicht ohne Gottes Willen eintritt."