

## THE EVIL RESTRAINT IN 2 THESS 2:6

PAUL S. DIXON\*

The debate over the interpretation of *to katechon* ("what restrains") in 2 Thess 2:6 can be reduced to a single consideration. The moral nature of the *katechon* is either good or evil. Traditionally the quest for the identification has been carried out under the presumption that the *katechon* is good, whether the Holy Spirit, the Church, Paul, the preaching of the gospel, Elijah, an angel, the Roman empire, the Jewish state, or the providences of God. In recent years, however, this premise has been seriously challenged.<sup>1</sup> Ernest Best, for example, suggests that the *katechon* be taken in a hostile sense inasmuch as "it then falls into line with the other forces referred to in the passage and its meaning does not have to be forced."<sup>2</sup>

We propose on the basis of four exegetical considerations that the nature of the *katechon* is evil. A subsequent corollary views the text as revealing the identity of *to katechon* as the "mystery of lawlessness . . . already at work" (v. 7) and *ho katechōn* ("he who restrains," v. 7b) as Satan himself (v. 9).

### I. THE BASIS FOR A GOOD-RESTRAINER VIEW

If the interpretation of v. 6 were drawn on the basis of most modern translations, a good-restrainer view would certainly result. The *NASB* translation, "and you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he may be revealed," is typical. Two interpretive conclusions are evident: (1) that *auton* ("him") should be supplied by ellipsis (notice that the *NASB* violates its own principle of translation by not italicizing "him"), referring to Satan or to the man of lawlessness; (2) that the purpose or telic clause "so that he may be revealed in his own time" depends not on the nearer *oidate* ("you know") but on the more remote *to katechon* ("what restrains").

This is the apparent basis for a good-restrainer position. Those who hold this view usually assume one or the other or both. I. Howard Marshall,

\* Paul Dixon is a doctoral student at Western Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary in Portland, Oregon.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. L. Sirard, "La Parousia de l'Antechrist, 2 Thess. ii 3-9," *AnBib* 17 (1963) 89-100; D. W. Robinson, "II Thess. 2:6: 'That which restrains' or 'That which holds sway'?", *SE II* (TU 87 [1964]) 635-638; C. H. Giblin, "The Threat to Faith: An Exegetical and Theological Re-Examination of 2 Thessalonians 2," *AnBib* 31 (1967) 206 ff.; E. Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (New York: Harper, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> Best, *Thessalonians* 301.

for example, assumes that an ellipted *auton* ("him") is evil in nature and therefore that the opposing force is good:

The view that the restraining or occupying power is good rather than evil in character seems essential in making sense of the passage. A contest between two opposing evil forces is most improbable.<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, if the purpose clause depends on *to katechon*, then the purpose of the restraint is viewed as the keeping of the man of lawlessness from being revealed before his time. Lewis Sperry Chafer explains:

The central truth of the passage under discussion is that, though Satan would long ago have consummated his evil program for his *cosmos* world, and have brought forward its last human ruler, there is a Restrainer who restrains to the end that Satan's program shall be developed and completed only at God's appointed time.<sup>4</sup>

## II. AN EVIL RESTRAINER VERSUS A GOOD RESTRAINER

The question of the ellipsis of *auton* is not critical. What is important, however, is the contention that it refers to the man of lawlessness or to Satan. The relationship between vv. 4 and 6 suggests rather the opposite. In v. 4 the man of lawlessness is seen as the one "who opposes . . . all that is called God." To see the man of lawlessness as the object of restraint in v. 6 implies a change in perspective. If such were the case, then we should expect an adversative connective, *de* ("but"), for example, or some other textual indication of such a change. Rather, the connective *kai* ("and") is smooth and denotes a continuity of thought ("he who opposes . . . all that is called God . . . and now what restrains"). Also, if the perspective is continued, then the vagueness of *to katechon* is both natural and expected. Its preceding buildup (vv. 4-5) and following explanation (v. 7) leave its identity fully established. *To katechon* is "the mystery of lawlessness already at work," which like the man of lawlessness "opposes . . . all that is called God."

Thus the continued perspective from v. 4 to vv. 6 and 7 suggests that we understand *to katechon* as being in the same evil camp as "he who opposes . . . God" and "the mystery of lawlessness already at work." So then, even if a direct object were supplied, its moral nature would be good, not evil, and its reference would be to God or to that which is in God's camp (e.g. truth, v. 12; cf. Rom 1:18).

Second, the assumption that the purpose clause depends on *to katechon* has serious difficulties. No Pauline precedent exists for relating a similar construction (*eis to* ["so that"] plus the infinitive) to a substantive such as the substantival participle *to katechon*.<sup>5</sup> C. H. Gibling has shown, on the

<sup>3</sup> I. H. Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 199.

<sup>4</sup> L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1948), 4. 372.

<sup>5</sup> Phil 1:23 (*tēn epithymian echōn eis to analysai kai . . .*) must not be construed as a purpose construction. E. Burton points out that this is a case where "*eis* with the Infinitive is . . . used,

other hand, that whenever Paul uses such a construction elsewhere it depends on the nearest verb.<sup>6</sup> This is quickly verified by observing the similar constructions in 2 Thess 1:4-5; 2:1; 2:10; 2:11; 3:9.

In 2:6 the nearest verb is the immediately preceding *oidate* ("you know"). If the purpose clause depends on it, then the translation would become something like "and now what restrains you know, so that he may be revealed in his own time." What, then, is the meaning?

It is difficult to distinguish between purpose and result here. Perhaps both are present. The divine purpose behind their present knowledge of the restraining mystery of lawlessness already at work (v. 7) was the setting of the stage for the revelation of the man of lawlessness so that when his time came to be revealed they would know and recognize him. If they then knew the lesser (mysterious) evil already at work, the necessary result is their recognition of the greater evil, the man of lawlessness, when his time comes to be revealed.

The point of the verse and of the whole passage, then, is to assure them that the day of the Lord had not come because its coming is preceded by the revelation of the man of lawlessness. He had not yet been revealed, because if he had they would certainly have known it. That assurance is based not only upon their remembrance of past Pauline instruction concerning the details of the revelation—the man of lawlessness would be revealed by his characteristic opposition to all that is called God (vv. 4-5)—but also upon an *a fortiori* argument based upon their present knowledge of the lesser lawlessness. Because they knew and understood the present working of lawlessness they would certainly recognize the epitome of lawlessness itself when he is revealed by his abominable deeds (v. 4) and Satanic activity "with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness" (vv. 9-10).

Third, the NT use of *katechon* favors an evil restrainer over a good restrainer. In at least twelve occurrences of the word in the NT the object of *katechein* ("to restrain") is good (e.g. the Word, traditions of Paul, confession of faith, teachings, truth, etc.). While the nuance of the word is usually "hold fast," in two occurrences where the meaning is "restrain, suppress" the object restrained is good. In Luke 4:42 the multitudes *kateichon* ("were restraining") Christ.

The most striking parallel, however, is found in Rom 1:18 where evil men are seen suppressing or restraining (*katechontōn*) the truth in unrighteousness. Biblically, therefore, evil does restrain or suppress good (if not efficaciously or permanently, at least temporally or tendentially).

Fourth, the relationship between v. 6 and vv. 7-8a argues for an evil *katechon* view and for an identification of *to katechon* as "the mystery of lawlessness already at work." The connecting *gar* ("for") introduces an

---

like the simple Infinitive, to limit an adjective, as in Jas. 1:19, or a noun, as in Phil. 1:23" (*Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* [T. and T. Clark: Edinburgh, 1898] 162).

<sup>6</sup> Giblin, "Threat" 206 ff.

explanation of v. 6. The question, however, is the explanatory parallel of *to katechon*. Is it *to mystērion . . . tēs anomias* ("the mystery . . . of lawlessness") or *ho katechōn* ("he who restrains")? If it is the former, then the identity of *to katechon* is established; if the latter, then *to katechon* is undefined.

For at least two reasons we are compelled to accept the former: (1) The similarity in gender between *to katechon* and *to mystērion* favors the identification of the latter with the former; (2) if *to mystērion* does not parallel and explain *to katechon*, then to what does it refer? The difference in gender implies that it does not refer to an understood *auton* of v. 6a or *auton* of v. 6b. On the other hand, if "the mystery of lawlessness" is the object of *ho katechōn*, then should we not expect *auto* ("it") in v. 7b? Thus unless "the mystery of lawlessness already at work" parallels and explains *to katechon*, the clause remains syntactically unrelated to anything in the text.

### III. OBJECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

One consideration remains. Some scholars argue that v. 7, "he is taken out of the way," precludes an evil-*katechon* view. J. Dwight Pentecost explains that the restrainer could not be Satan because "the removal of this restrainer does not free the world from Satanic activity, as would be the case if Satan were the restrainer, but thrusts him into the world with unleashed fury (Rev. 12:12)."<sup>7</sup>

This argument, however, has merit only on the assumption that "out of the way" refers to a removal from an earthly locale (vv. 7-12). J. E. Frame explains the interpretation:

It is just possible that Paul is alluding to the war in heaven (Rev. 12:7 ff), the religious revolt led by Satan, which is the signal for the sudden apostasy on earth. In this case, *ek mesou* refers to Satan's expulsion from heaven to earth. Though he is removed, he makes use of his place of concealment, and gives him all his power, his throne, and great authority. Equipped with this power, the *Anomos*, whose advent is for the doomed alone, gathers his forces for war against Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24 ff), attempts the assault on the throne of God in his holy temple . . . but is slain in the attempt by the Lord Jesus with the breath of his mouth and is destroyed with the manifestation of his advent.<sup>8</sup>

If it be objected "that *ek mesou* . . . does not at first blush suggest an *ekballesthai eis tēn gēn* (Rev. 12:9),"<sup>9</sup> then let us note that neither does the text necessarily suggest any other particular removal. Paul is silent regarding the details of the removal since that would not serve his purpose, and we are left to comparing Scripture with Scripture.

<sup>7</sup> J. D. Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958) 261.

<sup>8</sup> J. E. Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* (ICC; New York: Scribner, 1912) 261.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 262.

Paul's purpose, rather, was to allay their doubts and fears caused by a misunderstanding about the day of the Lord. They had been led to believe that the day of the Lord had come (or was at hand). If that were so, then they were about to experience the dreadful judgment and wrath associated with that day. This was indeed cause for alarm. Paul quells their fears by correcting the error. In vv. 1-3 he summarizes his argument and in chiasmic fashion develops each point in vv. 4-14. Verses 15-17 draw the conclusion.

First, simultaneous with the coming of the day of the Lord (v. 2b) is the coming of the Lord and our gathering together unto him (v. 1). This is developed and explained in vv. 8b-14 as meaning that the coming of the Lord brings judgment and destruction to the Lord's enemies (vv. 8b-12), but to those who are beloved of the Lord and chosen by God it brings salvation and glory (vv. 13-14; cf. Paul's teaching on this in 1 Thess 5:2-3). Therefore, the arrival of the day of the Lord should not stir fear and turmoil in the hearts of believers. Rather, it should be the motivator of inner peace and the object of great hope (vv. 15-18).

Second, Paul categorically disproves that the day of the Lord had come (or was at hand) because that day would not come except the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness be revealed (v. 3). This is developed in vv. 4-8a. That man of lawlessness will be revealed by his characteristic behavior. He opposes all that is called God and will be manifested ultimately by his rebellion, opposition to God, self-deification and lawlessness (vv. 2-4), as they well knew from past Pauline instruction (v. 5).

Then in vv. 6-8a Paul's argument assures them of their recognition and knowledge of the man of lawlessness when his time comes to be revealed. That guarantee is based upon their present knowledge of the mystery of lawlessness already at work. Present knowledge of the more obscure evil, the mystery of lawlessness, sets the stage for the revelation of and implies certain recognition and knowledge of the greater evil, the man of lawlessness himself when his time comes to be revealed. They knew and understood the mystery of lawlessness. They knew who was behind it. He would continue his restraining work until he was taken out the way (out of heaven), and then his messenger, the lawless one, would be revealed. But rest assured: The Lord will destroy him and all those who disobeyed the truth.

We conclude, therefore, that the *katechon* is evil, that the text identifies *to katechon* as the mystery of lawlessness already at work, and that *ho katechōn* refers to Satan (v. 8).