

GOD'S PLAN AND GOD'S POWER: ISAIAH 66 AND THE RESTRAINING FACTORS OF 2 THESS 2:6-7

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ONE of the most puzzling problems in the NT, even before the advent of modern critical study of the bible, has been the interpretation of the phrases τὸ κατέχων and ὁ κατέχων in 2 Thess 2:6-7. Throughout the centuries the most varied suggestions as to the meaning of the expressions have been made, including the favorite view of the Roman state and the Roman emperor, as well as the binding of Satan or evil by an angel or God.¹ More recently scholars have thought of the preaching of the gospel to the heathen, and Paul;² God's own will and plan for both expressions;³ a "seizing force," and an (unknown) individual incorporating this force;⁴ the "mystery of

¹For a good survey of recent and previous research, cf. the most recent commentary on Thessalonians, that of E. Best: *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Black's; London: Black, 1972) 295-301. For older research the survey found in W. Bornemann, *Die Thessalonicher* (Meyer 10; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1894) 400-459, is invaluable.

²Cf. O. Cullmann, "Der eschatologische Charakter des Missionsauftrages und des apostolischen Selbstbewusstseins bei Paulus. Untersuchung zum Begriff des κατέσχω (κατέχων) in 2 Thess. 2,6-7" (German translation of French original, in *RHPR* 16 [1936] 210-45) in *Vorträge und Aufsätze. 1925-1962* (Tübingen: Mohr; Zurich: Zwingli, 1966) 305-36. Cullmann maintains (317) that the term κατέχειν is the "exact rendering of the Aramaic ענב." His basic theses were taken over and adapted by J. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (Richmond: John Knox, 1959), see especially pp. 36-68.

³Cf. "Die theozentrische Katechon-Argumentation 2. Thess 2,1-12," especially p. 103, in A. Strobel's *Untersuchungen zum eschatologischen Verzögerungsproblem* (NovTSup 2; Leiden/Köln: Brill, 1961). Strobel correctly sees that τὸ κατέχων is God's will or plan, and ὁ κατέχων, more narrowly defined, is God himself in 2 Thess 2:6-7 (107). He maintains that the ארר of Hab 2:3 is the background of the two κατέχειν phrases (101-2, 110; ארר in the form of ענב, 104-5). He has the methodological difficulty that he assumes Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians from the outset.

⁴See the monograph of C. H. Gibling, *The Threat to Faith: An Exegetical and Theological Re-examination of 2 Thessalonians 2* (AnBib 31; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967) 246. Like Strobel, Gibling assumes the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians. He was not aware of Strobel's study, nor does he once mention the ancient church's interpretation (see below) of τὸ κατέχων as the gospel first being preached to all the nations before the end comes, and ὁ κατέχων as God. He considers ארר to be the most probable Hebrew background for κατέχειν (183).

lawlessness" and the "man of lawlessness";⁵ and the idea of restraining and its function, in and of themselves.⁶ A Hebrew verbal parallel from Qumran has also been thought to be of aid here.⁷ Because of the great number of interpretation possibilities in the text of 2 Thessalonians 2, most commentators simply present the major alternative solutions and let the reader choose between them, presuming that no probable answers can be reached.⁸

The use of definite passages from the OT in the first chapter of 2 Thessalonians, however, offers the possibility that the author⁹ has used one of these same passages for part of the background of his thought on the *κατέχου/κατέχων* complex several verses later.¹⁰ First, it is probable that Psalm 88(89) is employed both in 2 Thess 1:10 and in 2:3.¹¹ Secondly, I have elsewhere proposed that the last chapter of Isaiah (66), describing the final theophany of the Lord, has influenced the presentation of Jesus' final appearance in 2 Thessalonians 1 in a major way.¹² This essay will now point

⁵Cf. J. Coppens, "Les deux Obstacles au Retour glorieux du Sauveur (II Thess., II, 6-7)," *ETL* 46 (1970) 383-89.

⁶Cf. W. Trilling, *Untersuchungen zum zweiten Thessalonicherbrief* (Erfurter theologische Studien, 27; Leipzig: St. Benno, 1972) 85. In contrast to Gibling and in accordance with Strobel's interpretation, Trilling maintains that the function of *κατέχειν* in 2 Thess 2:6-7 is definitely that of "delaying"; it is positive; and it proceeds from and is produced by God (83-84).

⁷Cf. O. Betz, "Der Katechon," in *NTS* 9 (1962/63) 276-91, who points to the מוסרים of the Book of Mysteries, 1Q27, 1.7.

⁸Although B. Rigaux had written a major work on the traditions of the Antichrist, he could not, for example, use his insights to clarify in a major way the interpretation of the *κατέχειν* problem. Cf. his statement in *Les Epîtres aux Thessaloniens* (Etudes bibliques; Paris: Lecoffre; Gembloux: Duculot, 1956) 279: "Nous nous avouons incapable de découvrir en quoi elle [the reality which restrains the satanic activity] consiste."

⁹The question of Pauline authorship is left open here. However, the author is definitely a member of the Pauline "school" and wishes his writing to be viewed as if from Paul. It is intended as a correction and/or supplementation of 1 Thessalonians.

¹⁰Bornemann (*Die Thessalonicher*, 357) laid down five principles according to which one must interpret 2 Thessalonians 2. The first is most important: the OT must be understood in a Christian sense, and Jewish or Christian apocalyptic writings should be consulted as the author's source for his teaching regarding the last things.

¹¹In 2 Thess 1:10, Ps LXX 88:8 is alluded to in the phrase *δταν ἔλθῃ ἐνδοξασθῆναι ἐν τοῖς ἀγίοις αὐτοῦ*. Of the thirteen occurrences of *ἐνδοξάζω* in the LXX, only in Psalm 88 does the verb occur with *οἱ ἄγιοι*, as in 2 Thess 1:10. For a detailed discussion, including the use of Ps LXX 67:36 here, see my Yale dissertation, *Comfort in Judgment: The Use of Day of the Lord and Theophany Traditions in Second Thessalonians 1* (New Haven, 1971) 97-99.

Ps LXX 88:23 speaks of God's servant David: "The enemy shall not outwit him, the wicked shall not humble him" (translation is from *RSV*, which is also employed elsewhere unless stated otherwise). "The wicked," singular, is *ὁ υἱὸς ἀνομίας* in the Greek. This phrase forms part of the background of the expressions *ὁ ἀνθρώπος τῆς ἀνομίας*, *ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας* in 2 Thess 2:3, who are the same figure. In *Pesiq. R.* 36/1 (W. G. Braude, *Pesikta Rabbati* [Yale Judaica Series, 18; New Haven/London: Yale University, 1968] 678) the "him" of Ps 89:23 is also God's "true Messiah." To my knowledge it was Bornemann (*Die Thessalonicher*, 356) who first called attention to the allusion to Psalm 88(89) in 2:3.

¹²Cf. "The Relevance of Isaiah 66:7 to Revelation 12 and 2 Thessalonians 1" in *ZNW* 67 (1976) 252-68, and earlier in *Comfort in Judgment*. Space does not allow a repetition of those arguments here. See, however, the Table appended to this essay.

out how other verses in Isaiah 66 help to explain what and who are “holding up”¹³ the coming of the Day of the Lord, his return in glory, in 2 Thess 2:6–7. Part I discusses reflections of Isaiah 66 in 2 Thessalonians 2, excluding *ὁ κατέχων* in v 7. Then evidence will be presented that the author of 2 Thessalonians independently translated various Hebrew OT expressions into Greek, or was aware of them, in chapter two (Part II). This leads to the proposal that the Hebrew verb עָצַר found in Isa 66:9 forms the background of the phrase *ὁ κατέχων* in 2 Thess 2:7 (Part III). The above findings are then applied to the context of 2 Thess 2:6–7 (Part IV). A table is appended summarizing the employment of various verses from Isaiah 66 in 2 Thessalonians 1–2.

I

(1) 2 Thess 2:4 states that the man of lawlessness, the son of perdition, “opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.” The Greek for “opposes” is the participle *ὁ ἀντικείμενος*. This is most probably borrowed from the phrase *τοῖς ἀντικειμένοις* of Isa 66:6, referring to the “enemies” of God, those “opposed” to him. As in 2 Thess 2:4, in Isaiah the opponents are also associated with the (Jerusalem) temple.¹⁴

(2) The “temple” in 2 Thess 2:4, *ναὸν*, in all probability derives from the *ναός* of Isa 66:6. As will be proposed below, *ναὸν* has been inserted into an allusion to Ezek 28:2 in 2 Thess 2:4 to fit the author’s needs here. The Ezekiel text speaks of the seat of the gods as being in the heart of the seas, not in the Jerusalem *temple*. It would be logical for the author to continue his borrowing from the same Isaianic verse, 66:6, and to employ its *ναός*, not a different Greek expression such as *ἄγιον* or *ιερόν*. Also, he derived the motif and some of the phraseology of *δίκαιον . . . θλίψιν* in 1:6 from Isa 66:6.¹⁵ He thus easily could have the same Isaiah verse in mind several verses later in the expressions *ὁ ἀντικείμενος* and *ναὸν*. Finally, if the “son” of Isa 66:7, interpreted in the targum as the “king,” is for the author of 2 Thessalonians the messianic King, as is the case in several Jewish and Jewish-Christian sources,¹⁶ the author may have employed phrases from the adjacent verse (66:6) partially because of their propinquity to this term.¹⁷

¹³Since the first meaning of *κατέχειν* given in LSJ 926, is “hold back,” “restrain,” I assume this basic meaning from the outset. It is accepted by the great majority of the commentators and is corroborated by the results of this essay.

¹⁴Strobel (*Untersuchungen*, 104) maintains that the closest parallel to *ὁ ἀντικείμενος* in 2 Thess 2:4 is the *ἀντικείσθαι* phrase of Zech 3:1 LXX, connected with Satan. Yet the man of lawlessness, described as *ὁ ἀντικείμενος*, cannot be Satan, as 2 Thess 2:9 shows.

¹⁵See “The Relevance,” 266, which also suggests that in 2 Thess 1:8 (*τοῖς μὴ ὑπακούουσιν*) the author had borrowed from Isa 66:4, and in 1:12 (*ὅπως ἐνδοξασθῆ τὸ ὄνομα . . . ἐν ὑμῖν*) from Isa 66:5. This borrowing from neighboring verses makes the use of expressions from Isa 66:6 in 2:4 all the more probable.

¹⁶See “The Relevance,” 253–60.

¹⁷This whole argument deals in probabilities and is cumulative.

(3) After the eschatological judgment theophany of Isa 66:15–16, which is employed in the judgment theophany of 2 Thess 1:7–10, and which emphasizes the fact that the Lord will execute judgment upon “all flesh” (cf. 66:23), the author of the latter chapters of Isaiah describes in 66:18–21 how the Lord will come to gather all nations and tongues. The latter will come to Jerusalem and see his glory. From the nations which have come to Jerusalem, and which apparently have participated in the judgment of v 16, the Lord will send survivors to the nations (Tarshish, Put, Lud, Tubal, Javan and the coastlands) “that have not heard my fame or seen my glory” (v 19). After declaring God’s glory among the nations, these survivors will bring all the Jewish people from all the nations to Jerusalem as an offering to the Lord (v 20). Some of these pagans the Lord will even take as priests and Levites. In fact (v 23), “all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord.”

The LXX reads in Isa 66:19: *ἐξαποστελῶ ἐξ αὐτῶν σεσωσμένους εἰς τὰ ἔθνη* (“From them I will send [those who are] saved to the nations”). For the Christian reading this Isaiah text, the “saved” would be those who believed in the redemption found in Jesus the Messiah. This is shown, for example, in Paul’s use of this same expression in 1 Cor 1:18 and 2 Cor 2:15. The “saved” or “redeemed” would then be Christian missionaries whom God sends to the nations.¹⁸ As the Gentile survivors were to bring the Jews of the diaspora back to Jerusalem, so it will be the Christian missionaries sent out to the coastlands, to the islands afar off, who will bring representatives from all the nations to Jerusalem as an offering to the Lord.¹⁹

Isaiah 66, an OT text employed extensively in 2 Thessalonians 1, thus may offer a solution to the meaning of the puzzling phrase *τὸ κατέχον* (“that which is restraining”) in 2 Thess 2:6. It is the mission to the Gentiles, to the coastlands and islands afar off, which could be the (neuter) restraining factor of the author of 2 Thessalonians. It is *God’s will or plan* that the gospel first be carried to all men before the Day of the Lord arrives. Passages from Paul, other parts of the NT, and the church fathers strengthen the probability of this view and have been dealt with extensively elsewhere.²⁰

¹⁸Cf. the statement of C. Westermann on the survivors of the nations going to the far isles as missionaries in Isa 66:19 in *Das Buch Jesaja, Kapitel 40–66* (ATD 19; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966) 377: “Hier ist zum erstenmal ganz eindeutig von Mission in unserem Sinne die Rede: Sendung einzelner Menschen zu den fernen Völkern, um dort die Herrlichkeit Gottes zu verkündigen. Es entspricht genau der apostolischen Mission am Anfang der christlichen Kirche.” G. Fohrer in *Das Buch Jesaja* (Zürcher Bibelkommentare; Zurich/Stuttgart: Zwingli, 1964) 3.284 also emphasizes the missionary aspect of the survivors of the nations here.

¹⁹In another article I shall elaborate how this motif is related to Paul’s basic understanding of his mission, particularly the collection enterprise, which in part consisted of bringing representatives from each missionized area as an “offering” to Jerusalem.

²⁰Cf. especially Rom 15:22; Mark 13:10; Matt 24:14; 28:19; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8; 3:21; 1 Cor 15:24–25; 2 Pet 3:9; Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 45 (with *κατέχειν*); Theodore of Mopsuestia in Migne’s *PG* 66.936; and Theodoret of Cyrus in *PG* 82.665. The latter church father directly identifies the *τὸ κατέχον* of 2 Thess 2:6 with the mission to the Gentiles, necessary before the end comes. Many of these passages are discussed by O. Cullmann, “Der eschatologische Charakter,” 311; “Wann kommt das Reich Gottes? Zur Enderwartung der christlichen Schriftsteller des

(4) The phrase *ὁ ἀνομος*, “the lawless one,” in 2 Thess 2:8 may derive from the same Greek phrase in Isa 66:3, *ὁ δὲ ἀνομος*, used to describe him “who slaughters an ox,” in the LXX but not in the MT compared to “him who kills a man.” This is all the more probable since such people are among those who will be put to shame (v 5); they are the “opponents” of the Lord unto whom he will render recompense (v 6). The Greek for “opponents,” as noted above, is most probably used to describe the “man of lawlessness” in 2 Thess 2:4 (*ὁ ἀντικείμενος*), who in turn is the same figure as *ὁ ἀνομος* in 2:8.²¹

These four reflections of Isaiah 66 in 2 Thessalonians 2 individually cannot be made certain. Cumulatively, however, they strengthen the proposal to be made below that another verse from Isaiah 66 provides the background of the *κατέχειν* factors in 2 Thess 2:6–7.

II

There are a number of expressions in 2 Thessalonians 2 which indicate that the author was not only aware of the Greek text of the OT, but also of the Hebrew. At several points he made independent translations of the Hebrew into Greek or was dependent on the Hebrew text.²²

(1) 2 Thess 2:4 speaks of the man of lawlessness, who “opposes and *exalts himself against every so-called god* or object of worship.” The commentators correctly call attention to the allusion to Dan 11:36 here: “And the king shall do according to his will; he shall exalt himself and *magnify himself above every god*, and shall speak astonishing things against the God of gods.” The phrase *ἐπὶ πάντα (λεγόμενον) θεόν* in 2 Thess 2:4 is taken directly from the Greek of Dan 11:36: *ἐπὶ πάντα θεόν*. J. Frame correctly notes that the author of 2 Thessalonians “inserts *λεγόμενον* to prevent the possibility of putting the would-be gods on a level with the true God.”²³ Thinking of the Hebrew text here, he translates the *לְכָל־אֱלֹהִים* of Dan 11:36, directly before the phrase “above every god,” not with the *ὑψωθήσεται* of the LXX or the *μεγαλυνθήσεται* of Theodotion, but with *ὑπεραιρόμενος*, meaning “to lift oneself above,” “to exalt oneself above,” a good Greek translation of the Hebrew in this context.

(2) In the same verse, 2 Thess 2:4, another independent translation of the Hebrew OT into Greek occurs. Virtually the same nations as mentioned in Isa 66:19, a text emphasized above as important in regard to *τὸ κατέχον* in 2 Thess 2:6, are found in Ezek 27:10–25, upon which Isa 66:19 is probably dependent, as the commentators state. This Ezekiel passage is a lamentation concerning Tyre, “merchant of the peoples on many coastlands” (27:3). It is

zweiten Jahrhunderts” (German translation of French original in *RHPR* 18 [1938] 174–86) in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 541; and by J. Munck, *Paul*, 39–40.

²¹There is no reason for Nestle to italicize *ὁ ἀνομος* in his edition of the Greek NT since the phrase is found in neither of the passages noted by him in the margin, Job 4:9 and Isa 11:4.

²²Cf. also “The Liturgical Background of the Necessity and Propriety of Giving Thanks According to 2 Thes 1:3,” *JBL* 92 (1973) 436–37 for the Hebrew background of *εὐχαριστεῖν ὀφείλομεν . . . καθὼς ἄξιόν ἐστιν* in 2 Thess 1:3.

²³Cf. *The Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* (ICC; New York: Scribner’s, 1912) 255.

this Tyre to whom the Lord shortly thereafter says (28:23): "because your heart is proud, and you have said, 'I am a god, I sit in the seat of the gods,' and yet you are a man, and no god, though you consider yourself as wise as a god—you are indeed wiser than Daniel. . . ." Tyre's heart has become proud because of its wealth; it considers itself as wise as a god; it states that it is a god; it is proud of its beauty (28:5, 6, 9, 17).

Because of the mention of the same nations as in Isa 66:19, the motif of hubris, the *Stichwort* "Daniel" in the adjacent verse, and the fact that the rabbis employed Ezek 28:2 as a proof text for Hiram of Tyre's calling himself "god,"²⁴ Ezek 28:2 forms the background of most of the author's phrases in 2 Thess 2:4: "he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God," as almost all the commentators agree. The author of 2 Thessalonians translates the ישבתי of Ezek 28:2 not with the *κατώκηκα* of the LXX, meaning "dwelt," but with the simpler *καθίσαι*, "to sit," "to take a seat," which is closer to the Hebrew. In the modification of the Ezek 28:2 allusion to fit the author's needs, the apocalyptic motif of the final enemy's establishing himself in the "temple" (*ναός*) is inserted, the word borrowed from Isa 66:6, as suggested above, since the Ezekiel text speaks of the seat of the gods as being in the heart of the seas, not in the Jerusalem temple.

(3) One of the most puzzling expressions in 2 Thessalonians 2 is found in v 7: *ἕως ἐκ μέσου γένηται*. As has often been noted, the term *ἐκ μέσου* corresponds to the Hebrew מִתּוֹךְ. Secondly, since the account in Daniel of the desecration of the temple by Antiochus IV Epiphanes forms the background of much of the author's thought in 2 Thessalonians 2, as will be indicated below, it was only natural for him to employ a Hebraism deriving from this account. In Dan 11:31,²⁵ forces from Antiochus "appear and profane the temple and fortress, and shall take away the continual burnt offering." The Hebrew for "take away" is the Hiph. form הִסִּירָהוּ, from סָוֵר, "to turn aside," "to depart (from the way)," "to come to an end"; Hiph. "to remove"; Hoph. "to be taken away," "to be removed."²⁶ The same verb occurs in Dan 12:11 in connection with the same object: "And from the time that the continual burnt offering is taken away, and the abomination that makes desolate is set up, there shall be a thousand two hundred and ninety days." The Hoph. of the above verb occurs here: הִסִּירָהוּ.²⁷ It is an attempt to render this latter expression, connected with the desecration of the temple, and found in a favorite OT text used by the rabbis to calculate the coming of the "end" or the second coming

²⁴Cf. *Gen. Rab.* 96/5; *Exod. Rab.* 8/2; *Mek. Exod.* 15/11; *Tanḥuma B* וִיִּרְאֵהוּ §7ff. (translated in Str-B, 2.463), as well as Schatzhöhle, 35:27.

²⁵Cf. the allusion to the nearby verse, Dan 11:36, in 2 Thess 2:4 surveyed above in section II/1.

²⁶Cf. BDB, 693.

²⁷For "is taken away," the LXX reads *ἀποσταθῆ*; Theodotion has the noun *παρᾶλλαξις*, "change of position." E. von Dobschütz notes that if one considers the book of Daniel as providing part of the background for 2 Thessalonians 2, it would be tempting to derive the *ἀποστασία* of 2 Thess 2:3 from Dan 9:26 or 12:11. The noun would then mean the cessation of the legitimate temple worship. See *Die Thessalonicher-Briefe* (Meyer 10; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1909) 270 n. 3.

of the Messiah,²⁸ which results in the un-greek Greek phrase: *ἔως ἐκ μέσου γένηται*, for which no convincing Greek parallel relevant to 2 Thess 2:7 has yet been found.²⁹ Thinking of the Hebrew text of Dan 12:11, the author has given an *ad hoc* Greek rendering of the Hebrew expression *הִיָּסַר*. The fact that *הִיָּסַר* is connected with *מִתּוֹךְ* twice in 1 Sam 15:6 also may have influenced the author's choice of words here. Both of the latter occurrences are translated in the LXX by *ἐκ μέσου*.

The general meaning of *ἔως ἐκ μέσου γένηται* as "being removed" or "disappearing" is probable because of the origin of the phrase in *הִיָּסַר*. The exact meaning is nevertheless unclear and can only be determined from the context, to be discussed below.

(4) 2 Thess 2:8, directly following the Hebraism discussed above, states: "And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord [Jesus] *will slay him with the breath of his mouth* and destroy him by his appearing and coming." The italicized passage, as noted in the Nestle Greek text and many of the commentaries, is an allusion to Isa 11:4.³⁰ The author of 2 Thessalonians chose this verse from Isaiah for his description of the destruction of the "lawless one" for two reasons. First, it was frequently employed in connection with the Messiah in Jewish writings and was thus suitable to describe the activity of the Messiah, the Lord, in 2 Thess 2:8.³¹ Secondly, the author of 2 Thessalonians was still modelling his description of the final battle between the Lord Jesus and the lawless one on the figure of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the book of Daniel, which states that a king of bold countenance will arise at the end of the rule of the four kingdoms, and his "destruction" will be great (8:23–24).³² By his cunning he shall make deceit prosper (8:25),³³ and in his own mind he shall magnify himself, even rising up against God (8:25).³⁴ Nevertheless, states the Hebrew, "by no human hand, he shall be broken"

²⁸For the importance of Dan 12:11–12 in calculating the end, cf. the explanation of these verses in Str-B, 4.999–1000. According to rabbinic tradition, between the first and second appearances of the Messiah there were to be forty-five days, based on Dan 12:11–12. See, for example, *Pesiq. R.* 15/10 on Cant 2:9 (Braude, *Pesikta Rabbati*, 319–20) as well as the parallels cited in Str-B, 1.87.

²⁹Cf. the commentators as well as the three non-biblical examples noted in BAG, 159 on *γίνομαι*, I.4.C.β. To these should be added the following from LSJ, 349: "γ. ἐξ ὀφθαλμῶν τινι το be out of sight, Hdt. 5.24; ἐξ ἀνθρώπων γ. disappear from . . . , Paus. 4.26.6." Bauer also cites a Latin expression, *e medio tolli*, hardly relevant in this context. For my proposal concerning this Greek expression, see also the translation of *ἐκ μέσου γένηται* as *הִיָּסַר מִתּוֹךְ* in F. Delitzsch, *הַסְרָה הַחַדְשָׁה* (London: The British and Foreign Bible Society, 1958) 385.

³⁰The Greek text of 2 Thess 2:8 reads *ὁ ἀνομος, ὃν ὁ κύριος [Ἰησοῦς] ἀνελεῖ τῷ πνεύματι τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ*, and should be compared with the LXX of Isa 11:4: *καὶ πατάξει γῆν τῷ λόγῳ τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐν πνεύματι διὰ χειλέων ἀνελεῖ ἀσεβῆ*. The allusion is most probably from memory.

³¹Cf., for example, the Jewish references to Isa 11:4 in the scripture index of Str-B, 4.1297.

³²Cf. the *ἀπώλεια* of the LXX and Theodotion here with the title *ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας* in 2 Thess 2:3.

³³Cf. the *ψεύδος* of the LXX here with the *τέρασιν ψεύδους* of the coming of the lawless one in 2 Thess 2:9, as well as *τῷ ψεύδει* in 2:11.

³⁴Cf. 2 Thess 2:4.

(8:25).³⁵ Since the LXX and Theodotion offer no direct translation of the latter phrase, the author of 2 Thessalonians thought of an OT verse, Isa 11:4, which employs the same motif of the enemy of the Lord being supernaturally destroyed, here in Isa 11:4 by the messianic King.³⁶

III

If it is correct that Isaiah 66 is employed not only as part of the background of 2 Thessalonians 1, but also of chapter two, and that the author of 2 Thessalonians shows knowledge of the Hebrew OT in 2:4 (twice), 7 and 8, it should not be surprising that he employed another expression from the Hebrew text of Isaiah 66 to describe the masculine restraining factor δ κατέχων in 2 Thess 2:7.

(1) *The עצר of Isa 66:9.* Isa 66:7-9 reads in the RSV:

- 7 Before she was in labor she gave birth;
before her pain came upon her she was delivered of a son.
- 8 Who has heard such a thing?
Who has seen such things?
Shall a land be born in one day?
Shall a nation be brought forth in one moment?
For as soon as Zion was in labor she brought forth her sons.
- 9 Shall I bring to the birth and not cause to bring forth? says the Lord;
shall I, who cause to bring forth, shut the womb? says your God.

The Hebrew for “shut” in “shut the womb” of v 9 is עָצַרְתִּי, “to restrain,” “to retain,” “to hinder,” “to stop,” “to shut up,” “to keep away,” “to detain,” “to rule over.”³⁷ In the context it means “to shut up” Zion’s womb so that it will not bear the “son” of v 7, who in the MT is equated with the “sons” of v 8. In the MT they are the Jewish “land” or “nation” (v 8). The Hebrew says that just as ineluctably as a woman in her birthpangs³⁸ must bear her child, so certain³⁹

³⁵Cf. also Dan 2:34, 45.

³⁶It should also be noted that Isaiah 10, directly before 11:4, deals with the Lord’s punishing the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty pride (10:12). The Assyrians *smite* with the *rod* and lift their staff against Israel (10:24), yet the Lord will lift his own *rod* against the Assyrians (10:26). Cf. the arrogant pride of the man of lawlessness in 2 Thess 2:4, as well as the Messiah’s *smiting* with the *rod* of his mouth in Isa 11:4.

³⁷Cf. BDB, 783. For a detailed study of this Hebrew verb, see E. Kutsch, “Die Wurzel עצר im Hebräischen,” *VT* 2 (1952) 57-69. My attention was called to this article by W. Harnisch, *Eschatologische Existenz. Ein exegetischer Beitrag zum Sachanliegen von 1. Thessalonicher 4,13-5,11* (FRLANT 110; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973) 67. For עצר in the sense of “restrain” or “hinder” in a translation of the NT into Hebrew, cf. for example Rom 15:22; 1 Cor 9:12; 1 Thess 2:18; and Acts 14:18 in F. Delitzsch, ספרי הברית החדשה. For a good example of rabbinic usage of this verb in the same sense of “restrain,” cf. for example *Sifre Num.* §151 on Num 29:35 in *Sifre zu Numeri*, tr. K. G. Kuhn (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1959) 606-7.

³⁸For the pregnant woman as one of the four scriptural/rabbinic metaphors for redemption (besides grape-gathering, harvest and spices), see *Midr. Ps 8/1*, tr. W. G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms* (Yale Judaica Series 13; New Haven: Yale University, 1959) 1.119.

³⁹J. Muilenburg (“The Book of Isaiah,” *IDB*, 5.766) describes this certainty well: “The solemnity of [the Lord’s] assurance is marked by the repetition of vs. 9b, 9d, the twofold emphatic

is it that God will restore Jerusalem, who will then suckle and console her people.⁴⁰

It is important to note here, first, that it is *God* who is the subject of the verb "restrain" (v 9). Secondly, he will definitely not restrain the birth of the son (the restoration of Jerusalem) by shutting up the womb.⁴¹ The ineluctability of the event is emphasized; it cannot be held back.⁴² Thirdly, since it is probable that the interpretation of the "son" of v 7 as the King (Messiah) was already current at the time of the writing of 2 Thessalonians, the restraining factor of the adjacent v 9 could easily have been appropriated by a Jewish-Christian author to describe why, in a situation of intense persecution interpreted as the messianic birth pangs (part of the coming of the Day of the Lord), the messianic King's coming had not yet occurred. Since the author of 2 Thessalonians knew that the Day of the Lord had not yet (started to) come, he quenched the aroused messianic fervor of his addressees by saying that first certain things must happen. These are enumerated in 2 Thess 2:3–12. Nevertheless, he says, the Lord Jesus definitely will come, granting consolation to the persecuted addressees and vengeance to their persecutors (1:7–10). To portray this judgment theophany, the author makes abundant use of Isaiah 66, as I have indicated elsewhere.⁴³

It has often been maintained that there is no traceable OT or Jewish background to the *κατέχειν* motif in 2 Thess 2:6–7.⁴⁴ Scholars have been led to this conclusion by an inability to find the appropriate Hebrew or Aramaic

I, and the direct questions." Cf. also J. Smart, *History and Theology in Second Isaiah. A Commentary on Isaiah 35, 40–66* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965) on Isa 66:7–9, who says (290) that the believer's "faith does not depend on the new nation being born tomorrow, but rather, is so rooted and grounded in the promise of God that it remains unshaken no matter how long the day of redemption is delayed."

⁴⁰It should be noted that making Jerusalem fertile, i.e. placing her in a status whereby she will bear a son = sons (her exiles will return to her), is the fulfillment of the Lord's promise to barren Jerusalem in Isa 54:1: "the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her that is married, says the Lord." Paul employs the latter Isaianic verse in Gal 4:27 for the Jerusalem "above."

⁴¹A later writer, of course, is free to select those motifs from a biblical passage which are of most importance to his own situation. If the author of 2 Thessalonians says that God is he who *does* restrain in 2:7, he has intentionally modified the meaning of Isa 66:9 to emphasize the delay needed for the spread of the gospel (*τὸ κατέχειν*). For him, while God now delays the end, he definitely will later cause the son of v 7 to be born.

⁴²In 1 Thess 5:3 the metaphor of the woman in travail is also associated with the Day of the Lord. While the Day's sudden arrival is primarily emphasized, the following phrase, "and they will not escape," brings out the *ineluctability* of the destruction spoken of, compared to a woman in travail. Cf., for example, the commentaries on Thessalonians of Morris, Rigaux and Best on this passage for a similar interpretation. It should also be noted that *Tg. Isa* 60:8 (cf. the text in J. F. Stenning, *The Targum of Isaiah* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1949] 200–201) adds to the Hebrew text that the exiles of Israel gather together and come to their land; they "cannot be held back" (עבכ). This is exactly the same motif as in Isa 66:9, where God will not "hold back" the birth of the nation, the return of the exiles.

⁴³Cf. "The Relevance," 266–68.

⁴⁴Cf., for example, E. von Dobschütz, *Die Thessalonicher-Briefe*, 283.

verb.⁴⁵ No one has thought of the Hebrew verb עצר in Isa 66:9 as the background of κατέχειν before, for example, because the LXX does not employ κατέχειν here but rather paraphrases the Hebrew expression for shutting the womb. It reads: ἐγὼ δὲ ἔδωκα τὴν προσδοκίαν ταύτην, καὶ οὐκ ἐμνήσθης μου, εἶπεν κύριος. οὐκ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ γεννώσαν καὶ στείρην ἐποίησα; εἶπεν ὁ θεός. The Hebrew עצרתִי, “Have I restrained?” (meant here as “Shall I restrain?”), is translated in the LXX by the paraphrase στείρην ἐποίησα; “Have I made barren?” (also probably meant here as “Shall I make barren?”).

There are indications in the OT that עצר and κατέχειν are closely related and in places identical. Of the various Greek verbs used to translate עצר in the LXX, κατέχειν appears in Judg 13:15 and 16 Vaticanus. It is also connected with the birth woes in Jer 6:24 (θλίψις κατέσχευ ἡμᾶς, ὠδίνες ὡς τικτούσης); 13:21; 37(30):6 (a Day of the Lord context); and Ps 47(48):7 Symmachus (the final battle of the heathen against Jerusalem).

The author of 2 Thessalonians used Isaiah 66 as the main background for his portrayal of Jesus’ final coming in 2 Thessalonians 1, and also in 2:4. He then employed the term κατέχειν in 2:6–7 because it was a direct translation, not a paraphrase (the LXX’s “to make barren”), of the verb עצר, meaning “to restrain,” a term he knew from Isa 66:9 and needed for his explanation of the delay of Jesus’ return.⁴⁶ It also fit the setting of his letter eminently, for it too was associated in the Greek bible with birth pangs, tribulation and the Day of the Lord. Finally, there even was LXX precedent for God as ὁ κατέχων.⁴⁷

(2) *Other OT Usage.* In other passages of the OT it is always God who closes a woman’s womb. Gen 20:18 may serve as an example: “For the Lord had closed [עצר עצר] all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife.”⁴⁸ As it is only the Lord who closes wombs, so also it is only he who can open them again.⁴⁹ Everything lies in his power. This is also true for Isa 66:9. “Shall I, who cause to bring forth, shut the womb? says your God.” God alone determines the course of events.⁵⁰

⁴⁵As in Greek, there are a number of Hebrew verbs which, in various forms, can convey the meaning “restrain.” The following, with the exception of עכב found in the MT, are listed alphabetically: אחר; ארך; בוש; חשם; חשך; כלא; מנע; מלך; עכב; עצר; שוב; שמר.

⁴⁶Cf. again the other examples in Part II of the author’s practice of independently translating expressions from the Hebrew OT into Greek in 2:4 and 6.

⁴⁷Cf. Isa 40:22, where it is God who “covers the circle of the earth.”

⁴⁸Cf. also Gen 16:2 and 1 Sam 1:5–6 (מגר).

⁴⁹Cf., for example, Gen 29:31 and 30:22, where God opens (פתח) the wombs of Leah and Rachel, respectively. A widely attested rabbinic tradition maintains that there are three (later four) keys which God retains for himself alone. One of these is to the womb, for which Gen 29:31 and 30:22 are cited as scriptural proofs. Cf. the many sources noted in Str-B, 1.437, 523. See also Pseudo-Philo, *Book of Biblical Antiquities*, 23:7; 42:3; and 50:4 for God alone who opens the womb of a woman.

⁵⁰It was a major tenet of the rabbis that *God alone* will determine the time of the redemption, the “day of comfort.” They often buttressed this by citing Isa 60:22 in the translation, “I the Lord will hasten it in its time.” Cf. *Cant. Rab.* 8/14 §1 (in the edition of *Midrash Rabbah* [London: Soncino, 1961] 9.327); the early tradition recorded in *Pal. Ta’anith* 1/1 (Str-B, 1.163); *Gen. Rab. Toledoth* 65/12 (Soncino 1.588); and *Eccl. Rab.* 11/5 (Soncino 8.293–94), as well as Matt 24:36 and Acts 1:7.

(3) *Isa 66:9 in Rabbinic Literature.* The only occurrence of Isa 66:9 in rabbinic literature to my knowledge is in Aggadat Bereshit 29.⁵¹ Here, in a discussion of barrenness in which various relevant OT texts are cited, Isa 66:9 also occurs. Again, it is the Lord who controls the fruit of the womb here. Since the passage contains no mention of the Messiah, it seems fair to assume that Isa 66:9 was probably not interpreted messianically by the rabbis, nor was it given any special significance by them as a delaying factor.⁵² This fact supports the view that the author of 2 Thessalonians is working independently here, modifying the context of what was probably a known Jewish messianic passage, Isa 66:7, for his own purposes.⁵³

(4) *The Woman in Travail in 2 Esdras.* A passage from Jewish apocalyptic literature also describes the delay of the end in terms of a woman in travail, as does Isa 66:9. In 2 Esdras the angel Uriel relates to the seer Ezra how the age is hastening swiftly to its end, the time of threshing or judgment is coming. Ezra asks him whether the time of threshing is perhaps “delayed” for the sake of the righteous (4:39), to which the angel replies:

40 “Go and ask a woman who is with child if, when her nine months have been completed, her womb can keep the child within her any longer.”

41 And I said, “No, lord, it cannot.”

And he said to me, “In Hades the chambers of the souls are like the womb. 42 For just as a woman who is in travail makes haste to escape the pangs of birth, so also do these places hasten to give back those things that were committed to them from the beginning. 43 Then the things that you desire to see will be disclosed to you.”⁵⁴

Here comfort is given to the troubled seer by the author’s emphasizing that the “Highest,” God, “hastens on behalf of many” (v 34).⁵⁵ He is in control of the scheme of things and is steering the course of history. No definite sign of the approaching end is given to Ezra. The angel does not tell him when the

⁵¹Cf. the text in אנגרת בראשית, ed. S. Buber (New York: Menora, 1959; reprint of the 1903 Cracow edition) 59.

⁵²A favorite OT text used as a delaying factor by the rabbis was, for example, Hab 2:3 (אחר). Cf. Strobel, *Untersuchungen*, 23–27.

⁵³His spontaneity is attested not only by his independent translations of expressions from the Hebrew into the Greek, but also by the anacolutha between 1:5–6 and 2:4–5.

⁵⁴It is impossible to reconstruct the Hebrew original or the Greek translation(s) of the Hebrew on the basis of the extant Latin, Syriac, Ethiopic, Arabic and Armenian translations. The Latin term for “delay” in v 39 is *prohibeatur*, for “keep” in v 40 *retinere*. Cf. B. Violet, *Die Esra-Apocalypse* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1910) 44. That עצר is ultimately behind what is found in the extant translations is probable since the imagery of the passage seems directly dependent on Isa 66:7–9, the only OT passage dealing with both birth and delay, and because עצר is the most frequent Hebrew verb used for restraining or shutting the womb. For the certainty of a Hebrew original to 2 Esdras, see Violet, XIII.

A passage very similar in content to 2 Esdras 4:33–43 is 16:37–39, which compares the non-delay of the “calamities,” when they draw near, to the birth of a child by a woman in her ninth month. For the Latin, cf. R. Bensly, *The Fourth Book of Ezra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1895) 80 and 91.

⁵⁵That God hastens “on behalf of many” here probably means that more people be given the possibility of repenting. This motif is parallel to that ascertained above in the Christian understanding of Isa 66:18–21, that the gospel first be offered to all men before the end comes.

number of souls will be "completed" or "fulfilled" (4:36–37), or how many souls there are.⁵⁶ What is imparted to him, however, is that God is in control of the course of events, and the world is irresistably hastening towards its completion, just as a pregnant woman about to bear cannot retain her child in the womb.⁵⁷

These are exactly the same motifs stressed in Isa 66:9, that God, associated with the verb "restrain," is in charge of the scheme of things, and that a redemptive event (for Isaiah the restoration of Jerusalem), associated with birth pangs, will ineluctably take place. 2 Esdras 4 shows that a later Jewish or Jewish-Christian writer, such as the author of 2 Thessalonians, could well employ the imagery of Isa 66:9 in a description of the delay of the end.⁵⁸

While other passages from the pseudepigrapha, the NT, patristic and rabbinic writings also point to God as he who "restrains" or "keeps" the primeval monsters or the Messiah until the end time, the latter a motif quite similar to that found in 2 Thess 2:7, they have for the most part been dealt with in detail elsewhere and need not be surveyed here.⁵⁹ It should also be noted that the patristic writers Theodore of Mopsuestia and Theodoret of Cyrus expressly state or assume that God is "he who restrains" in 2 Thess 2:7.⁶⁰ These passages, especially those which speak of God's "keeping" the Messiah until the appointed time, supplement the probability given in the above interpretation of Isa 66:9 that the *ὁ κατέχων* phrase in 2 Thess 2:7 should be interpreted theocentrically.

IV

There is an anacoluthon at the end of 2 Thess 2:4. The writer, ostensibly dictating (cf. 3:13), has not completed the thought he began in v 3b.⁶¹ Before he continues his description of the destruction of the man of lawlessness in v 8, he parenthetically inserts remarks in vv 5–7 on why the latter has not yet been destroyed.⁶² He writes in v 5: "Do you not remember that when I was still with

⁵⁶Cf. the similar expression in Rom 11:25: "until the full number of the Gentiles come in."

⁵⁷Womb and travail imagery occur frequently in 2 Esdras. Cf. also 5:37, 46–55; 8:8–11 (v 9 reads: "But that which keeps and that which is kept shall both be kept by thy [God's] keeping"); 10:12; 16:37–39.

⁵⁸In his analysis of the pregnant woman in the OT and intertestamental literature, Harnisch also surveys 2 Esdras 4:40–42 in connection with Isa 66:7–9, as had C. M. Edsman before him (*Eschatologische Existenz*, 69–70). Harnisch also emphasizes the motif of "Unaufhaltsamkeit" or "Zwangsläufigkeit" in the passage. However, he uses this passage to illuminate 1 Thess 5:3, and does not perceive its relevance to 2 Thess 2:6–7.

⁵⁹Cf. 2 *Apoc. Bar.* 29:3–4; 2 Esdras 12:32; 13:26; 1 *Enoch* 62:7; *Pesiq. R.* 34/2 and 36/1; Revelation 20; and Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 45, a discussion of which is for the most part found under the relevant subject headings in Strobel, *Untersuchungen*.

⁶⁰Cf. Migne's *PG* 66.933–36 and 82.663–66, respectively.

⁶¹Cf., again, the anacoluthon between 1:5–6.

⁶²The "revelation" of the lawless one in v 8 takes up again the "revelation" of the man of lawlessness in v 3.

you I told you this?"⁶³ V 6: "Now you know⁶⁴ what is restraining [it], so that he may be revealed in his time."⁶⁵ According to the proposal made above, τὸ κατέχων, "what is restraining," derives from the motif found in Isa 66:18–21, and signifies here God's will or plan that the gospel first be preached to all nations before the end, the Day of the Lord, comes.

If this is correct, the question must be raised whether τὸ κατέχων in 2 Thess 2:6 has an implied object, as most of the modern translations suggest. The RSV, for example, supplies "him," meaning the man of lawlessness, described in the preceding verses, 3–4. It is he who shall be revealed "in his time" in v 6b. Nevertheless, if "that which restrains" is the will or plan of God that salvation first be preached to all the nations, it is more logical to consider the coming or Day of the Lord in vv 1–3, in other words salvation or the end, as that which is being held up, as in the synoptic apocalypse (Mark 13:10; Matt 24:14) and 2 Pet 3:9, since the Day of the Lord will only come when the gospel has been preached everywhere.⁶⁶

2 Thess 2:7 continues: "For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains [it will do so/let him do so]⁶⁷ until it [the mystery] is removed/disappears." Also according to the proposal made above, ὁ κατέχων, "he who restrains," derives from Isa 66:9 and is God here. This means that τὸ κατέχων and ὁ κατέχων are integrally related: "that which restrains" is the will or plan of God that the gospel be proclaimed to all men, and "he who restrains" is God himself.

The author of 2 Thessalonians, whether Paul or a member of his "school," writes in 2:5 that the addressees *know* what is restraining Jesus' return, his Day. Even if they had not been instructed as to the exact identity of ὁ κατέχων, they could have understood it in the Greek text by reasoning that if they are already acquainted with the neuter τὸ κατέχων, God's plan that all men be saved, the masculine form ὁ κατέχων would be directly related to this, that is, the restrainer is God.⁶⁸

⁶³The imperfect of the verb "told" (ἔλεγον) implies that the writer had done this repeatedly.

⁶⁴This knowledge (οἶδατε) is not experiential (against Gibling, *Threat to Faith*, 166), but conceptual. Cf. 1 Thess 5:2.

⁶⁵My translation.

⁶⁶This does not prevent one's taking the αὐτὸν of v 6b as referring to the man of lawlessness. If one prefers to consider the man of lawlessness as the supplied object of τὸ κατέχων, the meaning of the phrase τὸ κατέχων can nevertheless be: "that which is restraining" is the will or plan of God.

⁶⁷Here lat, Tert, Aug and Ambrst have correctly interpreted the text by adding *teneat*, which in Greek would be κατεχέτω (third person singular, present imperative), as noted by Nestle. For these MS witnesses the activity of ὁ κατέχων may be thought of as beneficial: "let him continue restraining." See also the translation of the RSV, "will do so," as well as Rigaux's statement (*Les Épîtres aux Thessaloniens*, 275) that ὁ κατέχων is "une force bienfaisante. Elle s'exerce contre le mystère d'iniquité." Cf. the critical apparatus of Nestle and other texts cited by von Dobschütz, *Die Thessalonicher-Briefe*, 281.

⁶⁸If Paul is the author, it is probable that he explained the content of both τὸ κατέχων and ὁ κατέχων to the Thessalonians while he was with them. This would explain the author's assuming their identity as known in 2:6–7, he not having to elaborate on them there. It is difficult to understand why a pseudonymous writer, composing carefully, would deliberately choose

A final reason from the context for interpreting *ὁ κατέχων* in 2 Thess 2:7 as God is the further development of the author's argument in this section of the chapter.⁶⁹ The text states that "those who are to perish"⁷⁰ will be deceived at and/or through the *parousia* of the lawless one (2:10). Because of this, their refusal to love the truth and thus be saved, "God sends upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false, so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2:11–12). Here, too, 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. The next verses also testify to God's being in control of things. In contrast to those who are to perish, the addressees have been chosen by God as the firstfruits⁷¹ to be saved "through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth" (2:13). God ("he") has called them to this through the writer's gospel (2:14).⁷²

The main exegetical problem in 2 Thessalonians 2, beyond the meaning of the two *κατέχειν* phrases, now appears. What does *ἕως ἐκ μέσου γένηται* mean, and how is it to be understood in the context? As 2 Thess 2:7b now stands, the present reader of the Greek text would most naturally assume that *ὁ κατέχων* is the subject of *γένηται*. Many commentators translate *ἐκ μέσου γένηται* as "to be removed," which was also ascertained above as the basic meaning of the phrase. This would rule out God as the subject of *γένηται* since God is not "removed," he does not "disappear from the scene" (*NEB*) or become "out of the way" (*RSV*). According to the suggestion made above, *ἐκ μέσου γένηται* is an *ad hoc* translation into Greek of the Hebrew *חִסְדָּן* of Dan 12:11. There it is the continual burnt offering of the temple which is spatially "removed" or "taken away" by the forces of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, after whom the figure of the "lawless one" in 2 Thessalonians 2 is in part modelled, as also proposed above. The expression *ἕως ἐκ μέσου γένηται* in 2 Thess 2:7 would then most probably mean "until it/he is removed." Yet what is the subject of *γένηται*? God as *ὁ κατέχων* is one possibility; the second is the man of lawlessness of v 3, described with

expressions which his addressees could not immediately comprehend. He would also pay more attention to his grammar so that anacolutha would not arise, and the subjects of his verbs would also be clear to the normal Greek reader, even today.

⁶⁹For the following remarks, cf. also the discussion in Strobel, *Untersuchungen*, 107–9.

⁷⁰The phrase (*τοὺς ἀπολλυμένους*) is typical of apocalyptic thinking, where everything is a part of God's plan.

⁷¹While "from the beginning" would emphasize the aspect of being called, the better attested reading here is *ἀπαρχὴν* (cf. the Nestle text). It reflects eschatological terminology: God has chosen the addressees of 2 Thessalonians as the "first fruits" (converts) to be saved in that region. See Rom 16:5 and 1 Cor 16:15 for a similar use of the term. Other reasons for preferring the reading *ἀπαρχὴν* in 2 Thess 2:13 are given in B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London/New York: United Bible Societies, 1971) 636–37.

⁷²The expression "to be revealed in his time," used of the man of lawlessness in 2:6, also shows that it is God who determines the time of the lawless one's revelation. Although evil is already present and active (2:7), it is clear that God is in control of everything.

participles in v 4 and meant again by the *αὐτὸν* of v 6; and the third is the mystery of lawlessness in v 7a.⁷³

If the identity of *ὁ κατέχων* is God, he cannot be the subject of *γένηται* since God, as stated above, cannot be "removed," he does not "disappear." Nor can the man of lawlessness be the subject of *γένηται* because if he is "removed" or "disappears" in v 7b, the following remarks in the text, v 8, concerning his appearance and destruction would be out of place: "And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord [Jesus] will slay him. . . ."

The third possibility is thus to be preferred, that the mystery of lawlessness in v 7a is the subject of *γένηται* in v 7b. The writer admittedly should have been more careful with his grammar, yet his excited mood causes him to make this slip,⁷⁴ as he is careless elsewhere in this section.⁷⁵ The mystery of lawlessness is to be active until its mysterious aspect is removed or disappears. That is, evil or lawlessness has not yet reached its peak. Only then, when it is most intense and apparent to all, will God cease his restraining, the Messiah will come, and the decisive battle between the lawless one and the Lord Jesus will take place.⁷⁶ This accords with the suggestion that the addressees of 2 Thessalonians conceive of their intense sufferings as the messianic woes, part of the coming of the Day of the Lord. The author, however, states that first certain things must happen before the Day of the Lord will arrive (2:2). Evil and suffering will become even more intense (2:3-7). Only then will the final time have come.

Another apocalyptic writing, Revelation, aids in determining the meaning of the mystery of lawlessness as being removed or disappearing in 2 Thess 2:7. "Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth's abominations," is the name, a "mystery," written on the head of Rome, which now persecutes the addressees of Revelation (17:5,7). The latter's comfort is not that their persecutions will cease, but that an angel discloses to the seer that all evil forces, including Rome, are to be delivered to perdition (17:8); the Lamb Jesus

⁷³Cullmann maintains that Paul himself is the subject of *γένηται*, Paul's death enabling the final events to begin (cf. "Der eschatologische Charakter," 314, 333-34). Yet this is improbable because the phrase in its origin does not mean "to die," but "to be removed," "to disappear." Secondly, Paul himself expected to participate in the final events during his own lifetime (see 1 Thess 4:15, 17). Cullmann's thesis has not been generally accepted.

⁷⁴Bilingual myself, I am well aware of the psychological phenomenon of expressing oneself somewhat indistinctly while in an excited mood because of one's having thought in another language of something of relevance to a topic of discussion.

⁷⁵Cf. again the anacoluthon between 2:4-5; the long interval between the *αὐτὸν* of v 6 and its antecedent in vv 3-4; and the indistinct antecedent of *οὗ* in v 9, only intelligible by the reader's own logic as referring back to *ὁ ἀνομος* in v 8. For a somewhat similar analysis, see Strobel, *Untersuchungen*, 108, who, however, conceives *μόνον ὁ κατέχων ἄρτι* as parenthetical. Yet *ἕως ἐκ μέσου γένηται* clearly limits the participle *κατέχων* temporally, not the verb *ἐνεργεῖται*. Trilling (*Untersuchungen*, 85) correctly criticizes Strobel on this point. M. Dibelius (*An die Thessalonicher, an die Philipper* [HNT; 3rd ed.; Tübingen: Mohr, 1937] 49) also considered the mystery of lawlessness as the subject of *γένηται*, understanding it as the "hardening of the Jews," their unwillingness to believe in Jesus as the Messiah.

⁷⁶Cf. the references to Jewish writings in "The Relevance," 262 n. 43, as well as the rabbinic material cited in Str-B, 4.983, o.

will definitely conquer them (17:14). Assurance of final victory is thus given, enabling the addressees to bear their present afflictions. In chapter twenty the author tells them that even though evil in the final period will be restrained for a length of time by an angel, it again will be loosed “for a little while” to deceive the entire world and wage the eschatological battle. The evil forces will then be consumed supernaturally.⁷⁷ There are close parallels to 2 Thessalonians here. At present it is an angel of *God* who restrains evil.⁷⁸ Only when this evil reaches worldwide proportions, i.e. its peak, will it be destroyed by God supernaturally. Only then, so to speak, will the mystery of evil be lifted; the latter will become most intense, and a full-scale battle will be waged against the forces of good.

TABLE

(showing the employment of various verses from Isaiah 66
in 2 Thessalonians 1–2)

(1)	Isa 66:3	in 2 Thess 2:8	: ὁ ἄνομος
(2)	66:4	1:8	: τοῖς μὴ ὑπακούουσιν
(3)	66:5	1:12	: ὅπως ἐνδοξασθῆ τὸ ὄνομα . . . ἐν ὑμῖν
(4)	66:6	1:6	: The motif and some of the phraseology of δίκαιον . . . θλίψιν
(5)	66:6	2:4	: ἀντικείμενος and ναὸν
(6)	66:7	1–2	: The “son” is assumed to be the Messiah, whom God definitely will not “hold back”
(7)	66:9	2:7	: ὁ κατέχων (and thus also the Greek term for “that which is restraining,” τὸ κατέχον, in 2:6)
(8)	66:15	1:8	: ἐν πυρὶ φλογός and διδόντος ἐκδίκησιν
(9)	66:18–21	2:6	: The motif background of τὸ κατέχον

For a detailed exposition of the employment of Isa 66:4, 5, 6 and 15, cf. “The Relevance,” 266–67, cited in n. 12.

⁷⁷Cf. Rev 20:2–3, 7–10. On the remarks made here, see also the comments of G. Bornkamm in *TDNT*, 4.823–24.

⁷⁸It should be noted that R. H. Charles (*The Revelation of St. John* [ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1920] 2.143) on Rev 20:3 emphasizes that when the beast and the false prophet are cast into the lake of fire and Satan is bound in the abyss, “the time for the Millennial reign has arrived and for the evangelization of the surviving heathen nations. . . .” This motif of evangelization is very similar to the explanation of τὸ κατέχον in 2 Thess 2:6 given above.

The above interpretation of the *κατέχειν* motif in 2 Thess 2:6–7 does not solve all the difficulties inherent in the text. There are too many variables in these verses to attain any absolute certainty. Nevertheless, the solution offered above has two major arguments in its favor. First, it means that *τὸ κατέχον* and *ὁ κατέχων* are intimately related. God, he who now restrains the Day of the Messiah, does so because of his plan or will that the gospel first be brought to all men. Secondly, it is based on an OT text, Isaiah 66, which is employed elsewhere in 2 Thessalonians. The author then employed imagery from the same OT chapter for his description of the restraining factors in 2:6–7.



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