

# A Psychoanalytic Perspective on the Idea of *Katechon* in the *Second Epistle to the Thessalonians*

Marius DUMITRESCU<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, Romania, e-mail:

[dumitrescu.marius66@yahoo.com](mailto:dumitrescu.marius66@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:** *In this paper we aim to analyze the meanings of the concept of Katechon that appears in The Second Epistle to the Thessalonians, attributed to Paul the Apostle. The concept of Katechon is related to Chapter 2, v. 7, where the steps of the parousia are presented. The Apostle reminds us that the coming of the Antichrist is delayed until his time will come, and the "mystery of lawlessness" will no longer be prevented by "the one who now holds it back" (Katechon) (2 Thess 2:7, 2001c, p. 1566).*

*Katechon represents a force that obstructs the full manifestation of Evil. The aim of our paper is to analyse an important archetype, such as that of the Self, in order to decipher, in a psychoanalytic key, the enigma of who or what the Katechon in The Second Epistle could be.*

*Approaching a concept that has religious connotations brings us closer to the analyses made by C.G. Jung on the concept of Self. The idea of the Antichrist reflects precisely a disruption of the archetype of the Self as a harmonious unity between consciousness and the unconscious, due to the lack of a "hinderer", of a Katechon, in the face of the illicit drive forces of the unconscious.*

*In the absence of Katechon, consciousness puts itself at the service of the most terrifying forces of the unconscious, trying to justify violence, aberrant sexuality, vanity, immeasurable pride, or, in other words, selfishness and all the complexes that turn man into a veritable monster, bearing the face and likeness of Satan, respectively of the very darkest illicit, destructive drives, which are ruinous to any effort of human achievement.*

**Keywords:** *Katechon; parousia; Self; conscious; unconscious.*

**How to cite:** Dumitrescu, M. (2023). A Psychoanalytic Perspective on the Idea of *Katechon* in the *Second Epistle to the Thessalonians*. *Revista Românească pentru Educație Multidimensională*, 15(3), 72-82. <https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/15.3/754>

## 1. Introduction

One of the most controversial texts in the *New Testament* of the *Christian Bible* is that of *The Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* (2001b, 2001c), attributed to Paul the Apostle. This letter had a specific purpose, namely to temper the excitement of the Thessalonians about the Second Coming of Jesus, which they were expecting to happen in any moment.

In Chapter 5 of his *First Epistle to the Thessalonians*, Paul the Apostle have had somewhat encouraged the idea of the imminent coming of Jesus for the Great Judgment. He used metaphoric expressions such as "*you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night*" or "*as labor pains on a pregnant woman*" (1 Thess 5:2-3, 2001b, p. 1563) for describing this event that shall come one day.

In the *Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* we see how, after the departure of the Apostle from the city of Thessalonica, his words had an opposite effect as the enthusiasm of the believers was increasing. At the same time, there was also a collective panic caused by certain agitators, who often spoke in the name of Paul the Apostle, even invoking his own letters announcing the imminent coming of the *parousia* (the Last Judgment).

*The Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* intended precisely to temper this somewhat dangerous enthusiasm for the early Christian communities awaiting the imminence of the Second Coming. Cristian Bădiliță believes that "*given the delay of the parousia for an indefinite time, Christians are urged by the Apostle to continue to lead a natural and peaceful life, not to abandon their social occupations. The author's intention is to prevent any risk of political anarchy within the community of Thessalonica*" (Bădiliță, 2017, p. 65).

*The Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* indicates precisely that the *parousia* is not an immediate matter, but one that awaits an eschatological time well determined by the necessary sequence of events that cannot be avoided. Perhaps inspired by the activity of some preachers, who considered themselves the true Messiahs and announced the *parousia* through false letters, Saint Paul builds a much larger scenario on the history of mankind in anticipation of the *Great Judgment*. The Apostle condenses the image of these exalted ones into the idea of an evil character whose presence will accompany the last days of a corrupt humanity, a character, opposed to Jesus, called by Saint Paul with so many names such as: "*man of lawlessness*" "*the man doomed to destruction*", a man who "*will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped*", a man who "*sets himself up in God's temple*", "*proclaiming himself to be God*" (2 Thess 2:3-4, 2001c, pp. 1565-1566),

whose role will be to crown an era in which people will lose their true faith, and whom we now called him *Antichrist*.

## 2. How the idea of the Antichrist was inserted into the minds of the first Christians

Interestingly, Paul insists that he discussed these things with his followers when he was in Thessalonica. In other words, the Apostle warned them that many would come, who would try to destroy the unity of the believers through all kinds of provocations designed to create disappointment and doubt in their souls. And what could create more doubt in their souls than the fact that Jesus was delaying his return, although even St. Paul himself had hinted on other occasions that His coming was imminent and that *even the living will catch it alongside those who will rise from the dead* (1 Cor 15:52, 2001a, p.1523; 1 Thess 4:16-17, 2001b, p. 1563).

These matters are clarified in *The Second Epistle to the Thessalonians*, where it is made very clear that, before the Second Coming of Jesus, a character opposed to the law, "*the man of lawlessness*", must appear. This man, however, is restrained from showing himself immediately, but only in his own time, marked by "*apostasy*". Another important element of the end of the ages is linked to the universal character of the *Holy Scripture*. Once this holy teaching will be known to all nations, only then can the "counter-empire of apostasy" come, thus bringing this "son of perdition", namely the Antichrist.

Next, Paul the Apostle reveals the steps or stages of the *parousia* related to the fact that the coming of the Antichrist is delayed until his time will come, and that "*mystery of lawlessness*" will no longer be restrained by "*the one who now holds it back*" (*Katechon*) from manifesting itself (2 Thess 2:7, 2001c, p. 1566). *Katechon* (the hinderer) represents a force that dominates and restrains the full manifestation of evil.

*The Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* thus opens up some aspects that deserve special attention, especially due to their philosophical implications, which can be revealed by means of a psychoanalytical approach.

Firstly, this character opposed to Jesus (2 Thess 2:4, 2001c, p. 1566), who must precede His Second Coming, must be analyzed. Secondly, another aspect that deserves special attention consists in the analysis of what is called: "*the secret power of lawlessness is already at work*" (2 Thess 2:7, 2001c, p. 1566) in the world with God's consent. Thirdly, we must consider who or what it may be "*the hinderer*", who delays for a time this *secret power of lawlessness* from being manifested in the world. Paul the Apostle told the Thessalonians that only after the hinderer (*Katechon*) of lawlessness would be "*taken out of the*

way" (2 *Thess* 2:7, 2001c, p. 1566), then the time would be fulfilled and cause this adversary, this "*man of lawlessness*", to take his temporary place in the Temple of God and to claim himself as God. In other words, the time of the Antichrist will come.

### ***2.1. Psychoanalysis of the character that precedes the Second Coming of Lord Jesus Christ***

Jesus represents the essence of humanity, manifested by values such as charity, solidarity, truth, trust, life, i.e. everything that pertains to the law and the possibility of it being compatible with human action. Jesus is a Teacher of the good way, who fulfils our essence regardless of its complexity, supposing a harmonization of consciousness with the unconscious in the human self (Jung, 2005, pp. 86-87). Thus, the consciousness, which leads us to the compliance with the law, can accept the very different universe of the unconscious, which opens us, in the exact opposite way, to the irrational elements of the human being, characterized both by drives that present themselves as illicit at the level of consciousness and consist of vanity, sexual-aggressive nature, megalomania and narcissism, as well as by universe of complexes, which can be of inferiority, parental (Oedipus/Electra complex), or of Cassandra type. Lord Jesus Christ shows us what it means to be human and what this condition actually means.

The Antichrist represents the exact opposite of the law; he is *the man of sin*, the one who ruins the conscience, outbidding the unconscious drives. He is a magician, a man of wild Eros, who is able to read the deepest repressed drives of the unconscious and release them in collective orgies of fantasy consumption. He is the liberator of all illicit fantasies. He is, as St. Paul calls him, "*the lawless one*", because the law does not mean much to him, since the Antichrist's happiness consists only in the release of the drive.

Inevitably, this man of the unconscious freed from any kind of censorship of consciousness, who seeks his happiness only in the moment, only in the limitless experimentation of subjective power, will be *a son of perdition*, of conflict, of war, as peace will be for him only a form of weakness. This man is a wild beast, worse than Cain, because in his soul no regrets will ever arise.

In Saint Paul's time, the emperor Nero, by the terror he sowed among the Christians, could be identified with the Antichrist, but the author of *The Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* clearly states that this son of perdition, "*the man doomed to destruction*", this "*lawless one*", will sit as God in the Temple in Jerusalem.

In fact, no Roman Emperor gave importance to the rebuilding of the Temple of God in Jerusalem. Thus, the time of the appearance of this evil one is moved to an undefined time, in a future that depends on many elements, such as the knowledge of *Holy Scripture* by all people living on earth and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, the only Temple of God, where this impostor, this false Messiah, would come. Thus, St. Paul established as a program for all Christian churches two main tasks: the evangelization of the pagans and, finally, the restoration of God's temple.

## **2.2. The significance of "the secret power of lawlessness"**

As we have already indicated, the second important element mentioned in *The Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* refers to a certain "secret power of lawlessness" that works in the world, but which is nevertheless stopped from manifesting itself in all its destructive grandeur, by the one who hinders it, that *Katechon*. Antichrist will appear when the restrainer of lawlessness, the *Katechon*, will be "taken out of the way" (2 *Thess* 2:7, 2001c, p. 1566).

Nevertheless, what can "the secret power of the lawlessness" mean for St. Paul? If we are to analyze the term as such, it can be about something that eludes the law, reason, conscience, the human in the last instance. The lack of law, therefore of consciousness, means the total freedom of the unconscious, madness, evil, hubris, and of conflict. This fact determines the appearance of the state of mistrust, thus leading to that "*Warre of every one against every one*" (Hobbes, 2009, p. 72), which, from a hypothetical state, as Hobbes suggested in the *Leviathan*, may become, unfortunately for humanity or what is left of it, a real experience of life.

This must be the deplorable condition of the last mankind, one in which the forces of the unconscious, of the telluric, are willingly allowed to come to light.

## **2.3. About the essence of *Katechon***

However, who can be "the one who now holds it back" (*Katechon*), who prevents lawlessness from manifesting itself and deliberately delays the coming of the Antichrist? Obviously, *the Hinderer* (*Katechon*) is something that represents a terrestrial, historical force that hosts a certain imperfect form of manifestation of the law.

Some of the Church Fathers identified this *Katechon* as being the Roman Empire of those times (Boulnois, 2022), whose imperfect, selfish, cunning pagan reason, lacking the Christian dimension of compassion and loving the neighbour, offered only a delay of chaos, of apocalyptic hubris. In

fact, non-Christian reason only served to delay the catastrophe, just as Odysseus made each of his victories inevitably throw him into a war, into an even greater conflict. It is a situation similar to that in which the Jewish zealots or Romans, amplifying the hatred and the war based on the law of revenge, only delayed, temporarily stopped, the appearance of that *bellum omnium contra omnes* (Hobbes, 1657, p. 17), of that state of absurd belligerence in which the secret power of lawlessness become known to a humanity that has strayed from its essence, which was revealed through Jesus. At this precise moment of the triumph of lawlessness, of unconscious forces, this son of evil, called *the man of lawlessness*, will appear.

Other interpreters, such as the theologian Tyconius (370–390 AD), thought the presence of the *Katechon* on a much wider historical scale by identifying it with the Church. As a structure, as a historical institution, present in the sensible world, the Church is primarily a construction based on reason. The question is to what extent this rationale of the church is a good, Christian one, or is it a cunning one, subordinated to the will of selfish power. In other words, to what extent hierarchies and church obedience have a character put at the service of law, life and good or do they become instruments of torture and domination through the darkest form of power that can be manifested on earth?

All these were problems that equally troubled Paul the Apostle, long before he wrote his *Second Epistle to the Thessalonians*, but also Dostoevsky, who gave us that impressive story of the Great Inquisitor (Dostoyevsky, 1922), who can be seen as a possible exponent of this pre-apocalyptic deviation of the church. In this sense, Giorgio Agamben (2013, p. 17) captures the fact that the church has always had a double character: economic and eschatological. Whether it is the state as such or whether it is the church that has become a more special kind of state, but clearly with more earthly than spiritual authority, each epoch in history has had its own *Katechon*, for otherwise we would not still be here (Boulnois, 2022, p. 227).

If we have found out who can be a candidate for *Katechon*, the more complicated problem would be to see what this *Katechon* is? He is the non-Christian reason or law, devoid of the meaning of salvation. It is that reason that refers only to adaptation to the sensible, a reason just like that of other living things, but much more efficient; it is the reason that has made us survive as a species in competition with other species, but it is not the reason that captures the human essence, which is far beyond the adaptive reasons of the sensible world.

Lucian Blaga (1991) well understood this transcendent essence of the human through the theme of the mystery, for the revelation of which earthly

life can become, in certain situations, insignificant. The Romanian philosopher thus wondered about the nature of the most profound and significant human act, namely *the sacrifice*: who is that instance asking for it, who requests it or imposes it in certain contexts? Sacrifice cannot come from God because the Creator cannot demand someone's death, as this fact will contradict the very essence of Creation. Even the devil, as the prince of non-being, a symbol of destruction, of death, cannot ask or impose it on someone, because the sacrifice brings man closer to God, opens him to the sacred, religious dimension, which is precisely what Satan, with all his power and work, is trying to destroy. And then who remains to assume the sacrifice, if not man? This is the great lesson of Jesus who sacrificed himself in the name of the law as man and not as God. The law, the spirit of the Creator, to which man – alone among living things – has access, is his own essence, which is enigmatic and unfathomable as a mystery (Blaga, 1991, p. 329).

*Katechon* is, therefore, that "cunning" reason of Ulysses that Dante condemns in the eighth circle of Hell. It is the reason that always deceives, ending up deceiving itself. It is the reason that takes the guise of well-led armies, of the state, of the church, and of every organization intended for an earthly purpose.

### **3. The anthropological dimension of the Pauline epistolary or about Paul the Apostle as a Christian philosopher**

The end of ages, when the *Katechon* will be "taken out of the way" (2 Thess 2:7, 2001c, p. 1566), will coincide with a dissolution of the state, but also of the church as a terrestrial institution. As a result, there will be no more telluric, rational, organizing power, not even a cunning reason will survive this unleashing of the "*secret power of lawlessness*". Only then will the *lawless one* will be revealed and his coming "*will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing*" (2 Thess 2:8-10, 2001c, p. 1566). At the end of ages, Satan will be a projection of the untied unconscious, unleashed in the world of consciousness through missed acts, through humour carried into the area of bullying and through all kinds of nightmares materialized in everyday life. Thus, at the level of consciousness, there will no longer be those firm benchmarks that allow a clear distinction between licit and illicit desires.

However, new questions arise: Why does God allow this testing of humanity by releasing the *secret power of lawlessness* into the world? Why is the coming of the Antichrist allowed by God's will?

The passage that has upset most readers of the epistle is related to this authorization or permission of God for the full manifestation of evil in the world: "*God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believe the truth but have delighted in wickedness*" (2 *Thess* 2:11-12, 2001c, p. 1566).

If we were to unravel what is not to be unravelled, we can consider that only in this way God can make people understand the value of the Law. A paradox arises here because such a world, which denies itself any kind of rational coherence by being lawless, could not stand without the intervention of an ordering principle outside itself.

Without the intervention of God, who "*sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie*" (2 *Thess* 2:11-12, 2001c, p. 1566), such an empire of lawlessness, ruled by *a man of lawlessness*, a son of perdition, who considers himself God and who stands in the very Temple of God, would be unthinkable.

Descartes himself, in *Meditations On First Philosophy*, brings up this theme of God who can do everything, including deceiving: "*However, I have long had in my mind a certain opinion, that there is a God who can do all things, and by whom I was created and produced as I am*". But the French philosopher then asks himself and his readers at the same time: "*Now who can have assured me that this God did not cause there to be no earth, no sky, no extended body, no figure, no grandeur, no place, and that nevertheless I have the feelings of all these things, and that all this does not seem to me to exist otherwise than I see it?*" (Descartes, 1979, pp. 63-65).

The empire of lawlessness, however, built by *a god who can be deceptive*, is devoid of any reason and will simply be *beyond good and evil*, a veritable trap for souls who have chosen to lean towards unconscious drives, towards the death of law and the triumph of all injustices.

Then and only then, Saint Paul tells us, will be the great test, or the separation of the weeds from the wheat; only then will the Lord command: "*First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn*" (*Matthew* 13:30, 2001d, p. 1302).

Translated into the language of psychoanalysis this could mean that then and only then it will be seen the power of the logos, of conscience, over the unconscious drives, represented by the man of lawlessness, for "*the Lord Jesus will overthrow [Antichrist] with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming*" (2 *Thess* 2:8, 2001c, p. 1566). Jesus Christ can be considered here as the expression of reason, of the triumphant victory of the consciousness over the instinctual universe which at the end of the ages will have exhausted all its forms of illicit manifestation in the universe of culture.



The truth of good conscience, of reason that has become Christian, assimilating the *Self* and its creative powers, will then counterbalance all the chaotic power of the unconscious, of some drives that will prove truly illicit and destructive, even thanatic.

Christianity, as Carl Gustav Jung very correctly noticed, marks this higher understanding of the human through the idea of the archetype of the Self, which lies behind the Christian manifestations, in which the consciousness is able to select from the unconscious those good impulses, capable of assuming the act of repentance and to penetrate to the light of consciousness. In establishing this conception, Jung was greatly influenced by Origen's vision of the understanding of the nature of Jesus. The Christian scholar considered that through the incarnation, the Logos, the Law, does not take a human body, but a real body (soul and body), the soul having the intermediary role (mediator), because God could not unite directly with matter (Corduneanu, 2006, p. 91). Thereby, Jesus marked that privileged model through which man could find that divine way of atonement for the moral evil and the physical evil that appeared because of the sin that precisely marked the original man's departure from the Law established by the Creator. As a spiritual guide, Jesus makes the man who gives himself to faith able to penetrate the authentic message of the Law, which he will no longer accept as hostile, different from his nature and especially impossible to follow, but, on the contrary, he will realize that the Law is his very inner truth, inseparable from his authentic being.

The Antichrist represents precisely that infernal yielding of reason, of conscience, which puts itself at the service of the most terrible and thanatic forces of the unconscious. He tries to justify violence, aberrant sexuality, megalomaniacal tendencies, vanity, immeasurable pride, or, in other words, selfishness and all the complexes that turn man into a veritable monster bearing the image and likeness of Satan, of the darkest illicit and destructive drives, which are ruinous to any effort of human achievement.

The lack of *Katechon* manifests itself first at the level of the individual consciousness that puts itself at the service of the most terrifying and thanatic forces of the unconscious. In a second stage, there is a transfer of illicit elements from individuals to larger human groups that succumb to unconscious drives, but this loss of *virtus estimativa*, of reason, can, at a given moment, become global – as a direct projection of those illicit drives, thus realizing the empire of Antichrist.

#### 4. Conclusion

To what extent can we speak of a Pauline philosophy or is it only an eschatological mysticism is a question that, personally, I think it remains open. *The Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* is perhaps the most important text from this point of view because it presents us an Apostle who comes to save the church precisely from the excesses of irrational mystical exaltations, which would certainly have brought its ruin.

Saint Paul's perspective on the *Katechon* comes precisely to rationalize the mission of the Christian church, to give it a meaning and a program to follow. In this program, the external visible world and the inner world of the believer build their own determinism. On the one hand, the authentic religious experience remains, connecting the individual to his salvation, and, on the other hand, the Church assumes a rational program, which aims at its earthly organization in view of the *parousia*.

---

#### References

---

- Agamben, G. (2013). *Il mistero del male*. Laterza.
- Bădiliță, C. (2015). *Metamorfozele anticristului* [The metamorphoses of the antichrist] (Trans. Teodora Ioniță). Nemira.
- Blaa, L. (1991). *Opere 4. Meșterul Manole* [Works 4. Craftsman Manole]. Minerva.
- Boulnois, O. (2022). *Saint Paul et la Philosophie – Une introduction à l'essence du christianisme*. PUF.
- Corduneanu, I. (2006). *Creație și întrupare. Teoria Logosului de la Ioan Teologul la Atanasie cel Mare*. Lumen.
- Descartes, R. (1979). *Méditations métaphysiques. Objections et réponses suivies de quatre lettres*. GF-Flammarion.
- Dostoyevsky, F. (1922). *The Brothers Karamazov: A Novel in Four Parts and an Epilogue* (trans. Constance Garnett). Macmillan.
- Hobbes, T. (1657). *Elementa Philosophica de Cive. Præfatio ad Lectores*. Ludovicum & Danielem Elzevirios.
- Hobbes, T. (2009). *Leviathan*. Cosimo.
- Jung, C. G. (2005). *Opere complete 9/2. Aion. Contribuții la simbolistica Sinelui* (trans. Daniela Ștefănescu). Trei Publishing House.
- The Holy Bible New International Version. 1 Corinthians*. (2001a). Zondervan NIV Wide Margin Bible, Grand Rapids.
- The Holy Bible New International Version. 1 Thessalonians* (2001b). Zondervan NIV Wide Margin Bible, Grand Rapids.

*The Holy Bible New International Version. 2 Thessalonians.* (2001c). Zondervan NIV Wide Margin Bible, Grand Rapids.

*The Holy Bible New International Version. Matthew.* (2001d). Zondervan NIV Wide Margin Bible, Grand Rapids.