

Augustine on the *Katechon*: A Lesson from *De Civitate Dei*

Agustín sobre el *Katechon*: una lección de *De Civitate Dei*

PATRICIO DOMÍNGUEZ / ERIK ELLIS *

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Resumen: Este artículo presenta la exégesis de Agustín del controversial pasaje escatológico de II Tesalonicenses 7 mediante el análisis de la virtud romana en el contexto de la discusión sobre el papel providencial del Imperio Romano. En contraste con muchos Padres griegos y latinos, la evaluación que hace Agustín del papel providencial

* *Patricio Domínguez es Doctor en Filosofía y profesor asistente en el Instituto de Filosofía de la Universidad de los Andes, Chile.*

jpdominguez@miuandes.cl

Erik Ellis es Doctor en Estudios Medievales, investigador post-doctoral y profesor de literatura griega en la Facultad de Filosofía y Humanidades de la Universidad de los Andes, Chile.

ellis@miuandes.cl

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de Roma es primariamente negativa: el imperio romano y la virtus en la que se apoya es un mal pero que contiene (de ahí katechon) males aún peores. Esta interpretación, presente en la Ciudad de Dios, diferencia a Agustín de la visión de sus predecesores lo sitúa como un pensador sui generis en lo que a esta cuestión se refiere.

Palabras clave: Agustín de Hipona, katechon, Imperio romano, virtud romana, providencia.

Abstract: This article presents Augustine's exegesis of the controversial eschatological passage of 2 Thessalonians 7 through analysis of Roman virtue in the context of the role of the Roman Empire in divine providence. In contrast to many of the Greek and Latin fathers, Augustine's evaluation of Rome's providential role is primarily negative: he says the Roman empire and the virtus upon which it rests are sinful but that the evils of Roman power restrain (hence katechon) worse evils. This interpretation, most clearly expressed in his City of God, differentiates Augustine from his contemporaries' view of Rome and makes him a sui generis thinker in this regard.

Keywords: Augustine of Hippo, katechon, Roman Empire, Roman virtue, providence.

1. Introduction

In his bestselling work *The Kingdom* (2014), Emanuel Carrère takes a middle way between fiction, autobiography, and academic prose as he spins a tale about the historical origins of Christianity. In his story, Carrère depicts St. Paul as a harbinger of imminent apocalypse, a preacher who warns the Thessalonians that, "What I proclaim to you (i.e., the *Parousia*), you will see very soon, and you all *will* see it. No

one of you will die without having seen it”¹. The informed reader might cite in response to Carrère’s narrative Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians, which says exactly the opposite: that the *Parousia* is *not* imminent.² For literary rather than theological effect, Carrère prefers the exegetical theory that excludes this second letter from the Pauline corpus, leaving St. Paul as the herald of an apocalypse that could not be postponed.³ Be that as it may, Carrère is certainly right in his characterization of the spirit of the community at Thessalonica—which was indeed prey to anguish about the end of time—their anxiety based on what was preached to them or on a dubiously Pauline letter that assured them that the second coming of Christ and the end of the world was imminent. Saint Paul took pains to dispel this affliction from the community at Thessalonica, reminding them of a doctrine he had previously communicated to them personally,⁴ that before the second coming of Christ must come apostasy and that there must first come also the “man of sin, the son of perdition”,⁵ the one identified from the earliest days of the Church as the Antichrist.⁶ Furthermore, Paul adds:

And now you know what withholdeth, that he may be
revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity already

¹ E. Carrère, *The Kingdom* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 136.

² 2 *Thess.* 2:2.

³ Carrère, *The Kingdom*, 156.

⁴ 2 *Thess.* 2:5.

⁵ 2 *Thess.* 2:3.

⁶ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses* 15.12 (PG 33.885). John Chrysostom, *Homiliae in Epistulam II ad Thessalonicenses* 3 (PG 62.482). Citations of ancient authors refer to the relevant volume of Migne’s *Patrologia Latina* (PL), *Patrologia Graeca* (PG), Brepols’ *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* (CCSL) and *Series Graeca* (CCSG), and to *Sources Chrétiennes* (SCh), published by *Éditions du Cerf*. References to PL and PG give the column number. For the other series, we refer the reader to book and chapter.

worketh; only that he who now holdeth, do hold, until
he be taken out of the way. (2 *Thess.* 2: 6-7).⁷

This enigmatic passage has been subject to various interpretations since the earliest centuries of Christian thought. One interpretation current among the Fathers of the Church identified “that which holds back” (*to katechon*) and “he who holds back” (*ho katechôn*) as the preaching of the Gospel and that of Saint Paul, respectively. According to this reading, which was shared by St. Justin, Theodore of Antioch, and Theodoret of Cyrhus,⁸ the Gospel would hinder the unfolding of evil, and its absence would unleash the final persecution and the advent of the Antichrist. Another interpretation, favored by Tertullian and Hippolytus of Rome, among others, and which prevailed as the common interpretation in medieval and modern times, identifies *to katechon* and *ho katechôn* as the Roman Empire and its emperor, respectively.⁹

⁷ This is a literal translation of the Latin text that Augustine would have had before him—whether that text was the Vulgate or the so-called *Vetus Latina*—and as he quotes in *civ.* 20.19: *Et nunc quid detineat scitis, ut reveleetur in suo tempore. Iam enim mysterium iniquitatis operatur. Tantum qui modo tenet teneat, donec de medio fiat; et nunc revelabitur iniquus, quem Dominus Iesus interficiet spiritu oris sui.* It should be noted that the reading in the modern critical edition of the Vulgate, in contrast with the text preserved by a considerable group of manuscripts, prints this text as: *tantum ut qui tenet nunc donec de medio fiat.* Weber and Gryson, eds., *Sacra Biblia Vulgata*, 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7, hereafter *Sacra Biblia Vulgata*. References to the *Vetus Latina* are to Frede’s 1978 edition. Throughout the present work, citations of Augustine’s works will be to the most recent editions and will conform to the abbreviations used in the *Augustinus-Lexikon*, which, for the sake of the present article include the following: *civ.* (*De Civitate Dei*), *c. Iul.* (*Contra Iulianum*) *en. Ps.* (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*) *ep.* (*epistulae*), *Io. ev. tr.* (*In Iohannis Evangelium tractatus*), *s.* (*Sermones*).

⁸ See J. A. D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 571.

⁹ Tertullian, *De resurrectione carnis liber*, 24.18, p. 68; Hippolytus of Rome, *In Daniele* 4.21 (*PG* 10.675). For this interpretation, consider the definitive catalogue of authors given in the seventeenth century by Maluenda: *Atqui Romanum Imperium prius destruendum & abolendum, quam veniat Antichristus: atque eo Imperio evertio, mox venturum Antichristum, posteriores*

According to the second interpretation, the fall of the Roman Empire, the being “taken out of the way”, would be the certain sign of the coming of the Antichrist and ultimately of the approach of the final judgement.¹⁰ Tertullian, for example, considers that Christians ought to pray “for the emperors, also for the entire imperial state, and for the fortunes of Rome (*pro imperatoribus, etiam pro omni statu imperii rebusque Romanis*), since the continued existence of Rome guarantees the postponement of the catastrophic end of the world.¹¹ St. John Chrysostom, for his part, also adheres to this interpretation and excuses St. Paul’s hesitancy to refer openly to the Roman empire. St. Paul acted as he did, reasons Chrysostom, out of caution, hoping to avoid further problems for a church then persecuted by Nero, whom St. John Chrysostom identifies as the prototype for the “mystery of iniquity”.¹²

Augustine treats this difficult text in book twenty of *De civitate Dei* (civ. 20.19) and in his letter 199, to Hesychius (*ep.* 199.3.10-11);¹³ in both texts, the bishop of Hippo shows himself reticent to offer an interpretation of *to katechon*. In the letter, Augustine limits himself to

*fere omnes summo consensu docuerunt. Otho Frisingensis lib. 8 Chronici, cap. 2 Engelbertus Abbas Admonentis lib. de Ortu & Fine Romani Imperii, cap. 8 Augustinus Triumphus de Potestate Ecclesiae quaest. 23 articulo 4 Hugo Etherianus lib. de Regressu Animarum ab inferis, cap. 23, S. Thomas, Lyranus, Erasmus, Caietanus, Isidorus Clarius, Arboreus, Guillaudus, Titelmanus, Treius, Zaggerus, Scainus, Sà, Iustinianus, Cornelius a Lapide, omnes isti in 2. Thessalonicens. T. Maluenda, De Antichristo (Lyons: Societatis Bibliopolarum, 1647), 397. The teleological concept of *katechon* came back into play in the twentieth century with the political philosophy of C. Schmitt and recently has been taken up by G. Agamben. See, among other places, C. Schmitt, *Land und Meer: eine weltgeschichtliche Betrachtung* (Cologne: Hohenheim, 1981); G. Agamben, *Il regno e la gloria: per una genealogia teologica dell'economia e del governo* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2007).*

¹⁰ 2 Thess 2:7.

¹¹ Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 32.1 (CCSL 1.142-143).

¹² See John Chrysostom, *Homiliae* 4 (PG 62.485).

¹³ For the identity of Hesychius, see F. Morgenstern, *Die Briefpartner des Augustinus von Hippo: prosopographische, sozial-und ideologiegeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Bochum: N. Brockmeyer, 1993), 48-49.

noting that the passage in question seems insoluble,¹⁴ while in the *City of God* he says explicitly that, “I confess that I am totally ignorant of what this means”.¹⁵ To let the question stand there would, however, be a bit hasty for us. Keeping always in mind that Augustine is extremely cautious about interpreting eschatological passages in the scriptures and that he is no friend of apocalyptic speculation,¹⁶ there remain good reasons to think that Augustine indeed felt inclined to identify the Roman empire with *to katechon* of 2 *Thessalonians*. The reasons for this can be divided into two types: those built on textual arguments and those of a more technical nature.

(1) In *civ.* 20.19, the bishop of Hippo affirms that of the explanations he has heard, the interpretation that interprets *katechon* as the Roman empire does not in his view seem absurd (*non absurde de ipso Romano imperio creditur dictum*).¹⁷ In this reading, the verb *retinere* (to hold) means *imperare* (to reign over). If *imperare* took the place of the verb *tenere*, the phrase would read as follows: “Only he should reign who reigns now, until he be replaced” (*tantum qui modo imperat imperet, donec de medio fiat*).¹⁸ The Latin text of 2 Thess. 7 that Augustine used, whether that be the Vulgate or the so-called *Vetus Latina*,¹⁹ doubtless much aids this interpretation, since those versions double the verb *retinere*—present only once in the original Greek, as a participle—introducing it as a jussive subjunctive (*teneat*), and in this way making

¹⁴ *ep.* 199.3.10-11: sed post quantum temporis istud erit, nec saltem obscure locutus est. Quisnam sit enim qui modo tenet, vel quid teneat, vel quid sibi velit quod ait, de medio fiat, potest quisque se coarctare ut intellegat, vel aliquatenus suspicetur, quoniam quoquo modo scriptum legit: quamdiu autem teneat, et post quanta temporum spatia de medio fiat, hic omnino tacetur.

¹⁵ *civ.* 20.19.

¹⁶ Cfr. *ep.* 197.1-4.

¹⁷ *civ.* 20.19.

¹⁸ *civ.* 20.19.

¹⁹ Cfr. *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*, ed. Weber-Gryson (Stuttgart: 2007) ad loc.; *Vetus Latina*, ed. Frede, Herder, vol. 25, fasc. 5 (1978).

St. Paul say something like “may he reign” (or, “may he continue to reign”), “the emperor who reigns now”.

(2) In *civ.* 20.23, Augustine confronts another classic eschatological text: Daniel’s prophecy regarding the four kings who are to come before the arrival of the “time of tribulation”.²⁰ Augustine mentions St. Jerome’s interpretation of this text, according to which the *regna* correspond to the Assyrian, Persian, Macedonian, and Roman empires.²¹ Augustine remains cautious and does not adhere explicitly to this interpretation, although he mentions that St. Jerome’s commentary is “written very learnedly and diligently” (*satis erudite diligenterque conscriptum*), which one might read as evidence of sympathy with, or at least consideration of, Jerome’s reading.

As suggested above, there are other arguments, not only textual ones but rather of a more systematic type, that serve to defend the claim that Augustine assigned to Rome the role of *to katechon* in *De civitate Dei*. The rest of this article will focus on arguments to show how the analogy of the Roman empire and the typical virtue of its citizens (i.e., the *virtus romana*), which Augustine traces in *civ.* 5.12ff., situates the Roman empire as a structure that, *despite the fact that it is not good in itself*, serves to restrain, bring order to, and frustrate vices, that is to say, to act as *to katechon*. This argument, although necessarily speculative as Augustine consistently remains hesitant to engage the eschatological passages of the Bible, presents a new and convincing hypothesis built on a two-pronged approach to Augustine’s thought. The first makes mention of certain elements internal and external to Augustine’s work regarding the question of the providential role of the Roman empire. The second examines Augustine’s analysis of Roman virtue and attempts to show how this concept of *virtue* is consistent with his interpretation of the Roman empire.

²⁰ Dan. 7:15ff.

²¹ Cfr. Jerome, *Commentariorum in Daniele Libri 3.6* (CCSL 75A).

2. The Greatness of Rome in the Divine Plan

One of the questions that animates *De civitate Dei contra paganos* is why God decided to help the Roman empire and made it prosper beyond all other nations,²² or, said another way, what is the role that divine providence assigned to the Roman empire in the history of the world. This question is not original to Augustine; on the contrary, it has a long history in Christian thought. Origen, for example, states in the *Contra Celsum* that the pacification and unification of the world thanks to the Roman empire made possible the spread of the message of Christ. How could the preaching to all the nations, as Christ commanded (*Mt.* 28:19), have been possible, if the world had been divided into many kingdoms (*basileiai*) embroiled in wars, one against the other?²³ Eusebius of Caesarea takes up Origen's interpretation and remarks that the unification of all peoples under one empire is an instrument of Providence for the spreading of the Gospel.²⁴ With the *pax augusta* was fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "And he shall judge the Gentiles, and rebuke many people: and they shall turn their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into sickles: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they be exercised any more to war" (*Is.* 2:4). The subjugation of many peoples under Augustus—so Eusebius seems to contend—is the secular counterpart to the subjugation of many demons under the power of one single God.²⁵ Thus there exists a divinely willed symmetry between monotheism and imperial rule. This "teleological" theory of the Roman empire would have a long history in the medieval period and beyond.²⁶ For Tertullian, on the contrary, the existence of the Roman empire, whose expansion had been achieved through sacrilege

²² *civ.* I, 36; IV, 2; V, praefatio.

²³ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.30 (*SCh* 1.360-362).

²⁴ Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 3.7.30-35.

²⁵ Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 1.4, 2-4 (*SCh* 206.119-123).

²⁶ H. Inglebert, "Les causes de l'existence de l'Empire romain selon les auteurs chrétiens des IIIe - Ve siècles", *Latomus* 54, no. 1 (1995): 18-50. Inglebert describes his interpretation as "une théorie finaliste de l'existence de l'Empire romain".

and horrible crimes,²⁷ is a fact certainly willed by *Providence* whose reason is not accessible to us: Rome is only one empire in a series of *regna* ordained by Providence, be they Babylonian, Persian, Egyptian, Assyrian, or Amazonian.²⁸ Christ was born under Roman imperial rule because “the luck of those times wished it” (*sors temporum ita voluit*).²⁹

Although Augustine views the existence of the Roman empire as *providential*, this fact does not necessarily suggest relevance for a systematic political theology in the thought of the bishop of Hippo. The existence of Rome—and of all empires—is providential for the simple reason that, like his Neoplatonic and Stoic teachers, Augustine thinks that *all* beings and *all* events are governed by Providence.³⁰ But while the Neoplatonists explain Providence’s cyclical governance of nature and human affairs, Augustine insists, as a Christian apologist, on the existence of a linear history, one in which Christ is born, dies, and rises again.³¹ Not without success has it been argued that Augustine, for distancing himself from the cyclical vision of history and emphasizing the uniqueness and unrepeatability of salvation history, is one of the remote founders of the modern conception of linear history.³² In fact, one of the ideas most repeated by Augustine in the *City of God* is that historical events fall under the *suavis dispositio providentiae* and that God uses even the horrible calamities brought on by men to chasten them and to direct them towards salvation.³³ Providence rules

²⁷ Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 25.15 (CCSL 1.137).

²⁸ Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 26.1-2 (CCSL 1.138).

²⁹ Tertullian, *Ad nationes* 2.18-19. Cfr. also the anonymous treatise *Quod idola non dii sint*, 5. For a panoramic vision of pre-Augustinian interpretations, see Inglebert, “Les causes”, 29.

³⁰ Cfr. Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.2-3, *passim*. For a comparison of Augustine and Plotinus, see Ch. Parma, *Pronoia und Providentia: der Vorsehungsbegriff Plotins und Augustins* (Leiden: Brill, 1971).

³¹ *civ.* 10.12-14.

³² See K. Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 3-4, 160ff. For Augustine’s engagement with and rejection of Neoplatonic political theory, see D. O’Meara, *Platonopolis: Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 151-158.

³³ *civ.* 1.29.

everything, and this holds true also for political history: *prorsus divina providentia regna constituuntur humana*.³⁴ Nevertheless, from the fact that everything is providential—including the rise and fall of kingdoms in human history—it does not follow the idea that we can account for the individual components of this divine plan; we are left, rather, weighing the “unfathomable judgements of God”,³⁵ and our access to *Providence* in this opaque world of which we are a part comes through faith.³⁶ In any case, Augustine believes that it is indeed possible to analyze the *end* of the Roman empire, *i.e.*, the reason for its growth and power. The response to this question—already taken up in book one and revisited in books four and five, as discussed above—forms part of the essential core of the *City of God*.

Before responding directly to this question in book five, Augustine works to dismiss certain general objections to his doctrine of Providence. These objections center on the belief in astrology (*civ.* 5.1-7), the belief in Fate (*civ.* 5.7), the Ciceronian dichotomy between free will and prescience (*civ.* 5.8-9), and the belief in *necessitas* (*civ.* 5.10). After confronting these objections, Augustine ends with a powerful, hierarchical description of the universe, in which every being, from the basest to the most sublime, depends on the Creator by participation and in which every human being remains subject to His providence (*civ.* 5.11).

Having established the metaphysical bases, so to say, of the subjection of the *regna hominum* to divine providence, Augustine seems to come close in *civ.* 5.12 to a definitive response to Rome’s providential role in history, even affirming that he wrote book IV (a collage of critiques

³⁴ *civ.* 5.1. cf. *civ.* 5.19: *Etiam talibus tamen dominandi potestas non datur nisi summi Dei providentia, quando res humanas iudicat talibus dominis dignas. Aperta de hac re vox divina est loquente Dei sapientia: Per me reges regnant et tyranni per me tenent terram.*

³⁵ *civ.* 1.28; *civ.* 20.2.

³⁶ *civ.* 12.14.

against the pagan world) for the sake of that answer.³⁷ The reader, however, eager for an immediate response comes face to face with the surprising fact that Augustine takes up again one of the lines of argument from book IV (the same that he supposed would be a prologue) about the moral component of a *societas* and about true virtue.³⁸ All in all, if we tighten the focus, we see that for the bishop of Hippo the question of the role of Rome in divine providence is united systematically to the question of the nature of virtue. To put it another way: his “theology of history” is inseparable from his “ethics,” in the sense that an inquiry into the nature of *virtus* is the background that allows us to understand the role of Rome in the providential plan of God. With this idea in mind one can understand in retrospect why Augustine lays out the program of book V of the *City of God* as moving between these two questions: “next we shall see what the Roman *mores* were and why the true God, in whose power are all earthly kingdoms, saw fit to help that empire to expand”.³⁹

3. Virtus Romana

Book V of the *City of God* tends to leave the modern reader perplexed. Augustine picks apart and criticizes Roman culture so harshly that he seems to conclude, without leaving a room for nuance, that the virtues or excellencies of its character, including the heroic ones, which we are accustomed to attribute to certain persons of Roman history (real or fictitious), were in point of fact vices. According to the bishop of Hippo, the purity (*pudicitia*) of Lucretia—who killed herself after being violated, unable to bear that affront to her virtue—or the sobriety of Cato—who harshly censured the civic immorality of the Republic—were not true virtues but rather vices with the appearance of virtue. The

³⁷ *civ.* 5.12: *Quod ut absolutius disserer possemus, ad hoc pertinentem et superiorem librum conscripsimus, quod in hac re potestas nulla sit eorum deorum.*

³⁸ *Cfr. civ.* 4.3-4.

³⁹ *civ.* 5.12: *proinde videamus, quos Romanorum mores et quam ob causam Deus verus ad augendum imperium adiuuare dignatus est, in cuius potestate sunt etiam regna terrena. Cfr. civ.* I 36.

materia of such actions, argues Augustine, is virtuous, but their ultimate end is vicious, and so the whole cannot be virtuous. That which moved those models of Roman virtue and their heroes, characterized by their industriousness and justice, was nothing but the desire for glory and praise (*amor gloriae; amor laudis*).⁴⁰ The eagerness for glory is, according to Augustine, the true ordering *telos* of Roman discourse:⁴¹ “they loved [glory] most ardently, for it they desired to live, and for it they did not hesitate to die; their other desires they subordinated to this one great desire”.⁴² From this desire comes the desire for liberty—for being free is more glorious than being subdued—and, from this, the thirst for dominion (*libido dominandi*). Lucretia put an end to her days motivated by the desire for praise,⁴³ and the courage and integrity of Rome’s heroes are not more than the apparently virtuous shell of a superstructure that contaminates it all: the *libido dominandi*.⁴⁴ The virtue of the Romans, in sum, is no virtue but a vice that restrains other vices.⁴⁵ A common example of this ethical pseudo-virtue is that of one who gives alms in order to be seen. To give alms to a poor man—as a moral object—is good, but the end intended—in this case, vainglory—prevents the act from perfecting the character of the one who performs it; rather it debases him.⁴⁶ Augustine makes use of this distinction when he maintains that a morally good act ought not consist only of a good

⁴⁰ *civ.* 5.11.

⁴¹ Augustine does not pretend to be original in this sense but rather limits himself to explaining Roman thought “from within.” Augustine draws the leading role of glory from Sallust, *De Catilinae Coniuratione* 7.6.

⁴² *civ.* 5.12: *hanc ardentissime dilexerunt, propter hanc vivere voluerunt, pro hac emori non dubitaverunt; ceteras cupiditates huius unius ingenti cupiditate presserunt.*

⁴³ *civ.* 1.19.

⁴⁴ *civ.* 1. *praef*; 1.30; 14.28.

⁴⁵ Cfr. *civ.* 5.13: *pro isto uno vitio, id est amore laudis, pecuniae cupiditatem et multa alia vitia comprimentes.*

⁴⁶ *c. Iul.* 4.3.22.

action (*officium*) but also of a good end (*finis*).⁴⁷ As the *finis* of the deeds of the pagans is an inferior good, in comparison with the supreme good, their actions, then, formed by this idolatrous superstructure, are vicious. “True virtue” (*vera virtus*), on the other hand, is a good action that is oriented toward the highest good of man, God.⁴⁸ And since only Christians, thanks to faith, know God, only they can hold that right intention that makes a work good: *bonum opus intentio facit, intentionem dirigit fides*.⁴⁹ In sum, in the absence of *vera religio*, there is no *vera virtus*.⁵⁰

Does this mean that Augustine rejects all pagan virtue and equates it with vice or sin? This question has had enormous repercussions for intellectual history.⁵¹ Some, basing their arguments on certain of Augustine’s texts, above all extracts from his anti-pelagian works,⁵² have affirmed that every work that does not come from faith—for example, an act of courage or of mercy performed by an unbaptized person—is a sin. Among these would be, for example, John Hus, Baius, and Jansen.⁵³ This thesis, an early point of controversy between Catholics and Protestants,⁵⁴ may be extracted from a technically correct

⁴⁷ *c. Iul.* 4.3.21. The translation of *officium* as *action* follows that of T.-H., Irwin, “Splendid Vices? Augustine For and Against Pagan Virtues”, *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 8, no. 2 (1999): 108.

⁴⁸ Another example of *falsa virtus* can be found in *conf.* 5.12.22, where Augustine expresses his distaste for students who committed crimes against their teachers of rhetoric. His desire for justice against them was animated neither by a love of justice in general nor by love of God but by self-love.

⁴⁹ *en. Ps.* 31.4.

⁵⁰ *civ.* 19.25.

⁵¹ For this, see Moriarty, *Disguised Vices*; Marenbon, *Pagans and Philosophers*.

⁵² Cfr., for example, *c. Iul.* 4.3.23ff.

⁵³ Irwin, “Splendid Vices?,” 106-107.

⁵⁴ Cfr. *Council of Trent*, Sessio VI, Canon 7.7: “Si quis dixerit, opera omnia, quae ante iustificationem fiunt, quacumque ratione facta sint, vere esse peccata vel odium Dei mereri, aut quando vehementius quis nititur, se disponere ad gratiam, tanto eum gravius peccare: a.s. De iustificatione”. In Alberigo, ed., *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, 655.

but unilateral reading of Augustine's writings. For Augustine also leaves space, even in the *City of God* itself, for recognizing the merit of certain pagans who seek virtue for the sake of virtue (*ipsa virtute*).⁵⁵ He shows, too, admiration for their moral qualities,⁵⁶ exhorting Christians to imitate and surpass them.⁵⁷ This has led T. Irwin to assert that Augustine has to be viewed through a conceptual frame that allows one to distinguish, as did Aquinas, not only between virtue and vice—or true and false virtue—but between grades of perfection in the virtues.⁵⁸ Be that as it may, that which is relevant here is that pagan virtue, or at least the cases relevant to the cultural-political analysis undertaken by Augustine, are presented as vices (*vitia*) with the appearance of virtue, vices whose function consists in restraining and containing vices more vicious still.⁵⁹

With that said, the question of the providential role of Rome in human history is all but answered. Just as Roman virtue is in reality a structure in itself vicious—since it tends in a disorderly fashion towards a good—but one that serves to restrain, contain, and moderate worse vices, so too the *imperium romanum* has fulfilled its role as harsh repressor and moderator of the peoples that surround it: “God desired that a kingdom would later in time than the eastern kingdoms emerge in the west, but more illustrious in size and greatness [...] *ad domanda gravia mala multarum gentium*”.⁶⁰ Faced with this phrase translators choose different paths. Dyson's translation reads thus: “In order that it might overcome the great evils which had afflicted many other nations”. The recent Spanish translation by Rosa María Sáez goes in the same

⁵⁵ Cfr. *civ.* 5.12.

⁵⁶ Cfr. *civ.* 1.14.

⁵⁷ Cfr. *civ.* 5.19.

⁵⁸ Irwin, “Splendid Vices?,” 199.

⁵⁹ *civ.* 5.13; *civ.* 19.25.

⁶⁰ *civ.* 5.13. *Quam ob rem cum diu fuissent regna Orientis inlustria, uoluit Deus et Occidentale fieri, quod tempore esset posterius, sed imperii latitudine et magnitudine inlustrius, idque talibus potissimum concessit hominibus ad domanda grauia mala multarum gentium.*

direction, and so did the translation of Santamarta del Río et al. (BAC).⁶¹

According to this interpretation, the role of Rome is to free its neighboring peoples from their suffering. The phrase *gravia mala multarum gentium* is taken as the grave evils that are suffered by many peoples. Other translators opt to retain the ambiguity of the Latin text and translate *gravia mala multarum gentium* as “the grave evils of many nations”, leaving it to the reader to decide if the genitive is subjective or objective.⁶² Other translators, like Babcock, Thimme, and Combès, have opted for a third alternative that makes use of the primary meaning of the verb *domare* (tame, conquer, subjugate), translating the phrase as “to repress the grave vices of many nations”.⁶³ Gentili’s Italian translation, tending in the same direction, is even more explicit: *per punire la grave immoralità di molti popoli*.⁶⁴ We believe that the third alternative does most justice to the text and to Augustinian thought in the *City of God*. That Augustine frequently uses the verb *domare* in an ethical-ascetic context (in the sense of *subjugating* the passions, the vices, or the body itself),⁶⁵ makes this interpretation coherent with the Augustinian theory

⁶¹ R. W. Dyson, trans, *The City of God against the Pagans*, (Cambridge University Press, 1998); S. Santamarta del Río and M. Fuertes Lanero, *La ciudad de Dios* (Madrid: BAC, 2007): “De atajar los graves males que padecían muchas naciones”.

⁶² See for example H. Bettenson, trans., *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* (London: Penguin Books, 2003): “To suppress the grievous evils of many nations”; L. Jerphagnon et al., *Oeuvres. II, la Cité de Dieu* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000): “pour réduire le mal acclaband de nombreux peuples;” Morán, 1958: “para amansar los graves males de muchas naciones”.

⁶³ G. Combes et al., trans, *La cité de Dieu. Nouvelle bibliothèque augustinienne* 3 (Paris: Institut d’études augustiniennes, 1993): “et pour réprimer les graves vices de maintes nations”; W. S. Babcock, trans., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*. Part 1, Vol. 7 (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2013): “in order to counteract the terrible evils of many other peoples”; W. Thimme, *Vom Gottesstaat* (Munich: dtv Verlagsgesellschaft, 1997): “um in vielen Völkern schwere Übelstände zu unterdrücken”.

⁶⁴ D. Gentili, trans., *La città di Dio* (Roma: Città Nuova, 2000).

⁶⁵ Cfr. s. 8, 8: *Appetitum quemdam carnis in se domare non vult, qui est nobis pecoribusque communis*; ep. 177, 1: *domare et extinguere omnes cupiditates*; *Io. ev. tr. I*, 15 : *populum Pharaonis superbum potuit Deus domare de ursis, de*

of the passions in the context of the first five books of *De civitate dei*.⁶⁶ In these books, Rome appears not as meek liberator of oppressed peoples—its dominion is not the alleviation of evils suffered by the nations—but as a cruel conqueror drunk with *libido dominandi*, who subjugates peoples full of vices. Augustine does not treat, therefore, of two groups, one innocent and one evil-minded. Indeed, the invasions suffered by a people might well be a punishment for their vices, their devastation a just judgement of Providence.⁶⁷ The expansion of Rome is not achieved through the peaceful imposition of the rule of law, but through the destruction of cities (*eversio*) and their sacred temples,⁶⁸ the oppression of peoples trampled down and worn out,⁶⁹ its continual expansion preserved only through constant warfare.⁷⁰ Rome is a “second Babylon” used by God to bring peace to the world and order the nations under a single law.⁷¹ The *pax romana*, also called the *pax temporalis* as opposed to the *pax aeterna*,⁷² serves only the Romans: the rest of the world has to suffer it.

leonibus, de serpentibus; muscas et ranas illis immisit; c. Iul II 8, 24: Ergo princeps et domina carnis naturaliter anima est, quae domare carnem debet et regere. Cfr. examples of the usage of classical Latin authors in P.G.W. Glare (ed.), Oxford Latin Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 571, s.v.

⁶⁶ Cfr. J. Brachtendorf, “Cicero and Augustine on the Passions”, *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 43, no. 2 (1997): 289-308.

⁶⁷ *civ.* 5.22. Augustine maintains that an inherently evil act may be used by Providence as just castigation. For example, the anger of a teacher towards a student for not learning causes unworthy of being learned—Virgilian fables, say—might be a deserved punishment for the lazy student. Cfr. *conf.* 1.12.19: *errore omnium qui mihi instabant ut discerem utebaris ad utilitatem meam, meo autem, qui discere nolebam, utebaris ad poenam meam, qua plecti non eram indignus.*

⁶⁸ *civ.* 1.6.

⁶⁹ *civ.* 1.30.

⁷⁰ *civ.* 3.10.

⁷¹ *civ.* 18.22.

⁷² *en. Ps.* 136.1.

What, then, are the vices of the neighboring peoples that the *pax romana* subjugates? Augustine does not say. As G. Clark points out, there is unfortunately no reflection on the barbarians and their customs articulated in Augustine's works.⁷³ In the end, if we examine what a cultured inhabitant of the late Roman empire thought of the barbarians, perhaps it might be supposed that Augustine refers to practices like incest, cannibalism, the leaving of corpses to be devoured by animals, necrophagia, and other bloody funeral rites.⁷⁴ All these vices are clearly worse than the *concupiscentia gloriae*, and therefore their restraint is something worthwhile, that is to say, is something *relatively* good and meritorious. In sum, Augustine believes that God has valued the Roman virtues, as zeal for justice and the constant orientation towards the common good (*pro re communi*), with the glory and power of its *imperium*.⁷⁵ The splendor and glory of the Roman empire are a divine reward for the virtues displayed by its citizens; a mundane reward — suited to mundane virtue— but a reward all the same.

4. Conclusion

The argument stated above demonstrates a new interpretation of Augustine's view of the role of the Roman empire in divine providence. For Augustine, Providence has assigned to Rome the role of *to katechon*, that is to say, of being a structure that, although in itself vicious, fulfills a positive function: that of restraining vices worse still. A more optimistic vision of the Roman empire cannot be found in Augustine. The fact is that Augustine considers the ideal political state to be the peaceful co-existence of many small kingdoms, not the unification of

⁷³ G. Clark, "Augustine and the Merciful Barbarians", in *Romans, Barbarians, and the Transformation of the Roman World: Cultural Interaction and the Creation of Identity in Late Antiquity*, edited by Ralph W. Mathisen and Danuta Shanzer (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 42. For Augustine's remarks on the barbarians, see Blönnigen, "Barbarus" in *Augustinus Lexikon*, col 1, fasc. 4, 606-607.

⁷⁴ Cfr. Origen, *Contra Celsum* 5.27; Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 1.4.2-4; Minutius Felix, *Octavius* 30.3-6; 31.1.

⁷⁵ *civ.* 5.19.

them all under a single *imperium*.⁷⁶ In contrast to many of his contemporaries, Augustine rejects the idea that the *pax romana* (eloquently absent, as Markus observes, in the *City of God*),⁷⁷ represents a *praeparatio evangelica*, much less that it constitutes something like the final stage of peace in history predicted in the Psalms.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, Augustine does not reject a positive vision of the Christianization of the empire;⁷⁹ it is only that he does not think it necessarily definitive or assign it a key theological meaning.⁸⁰ For a Christian it is enough to know that all power comes from God and that, just as He gave it to the Christian Constantine, He too can give it to Julian, *persecutor* of the Church.⁸¹ The Christian values the legal order of the *imperium* and takes advantage of the relative earthly peace that it offers in the same manner that a pilgrim uses the goods he finds along the way,⁸² knowing that the role of *katechon* has been assigned to Rome by God and may just as easily be taken away. The pilgrim also knows that the cessation of this function prior to the advent of the Antichrist will also be part of the inscrutable designs of Providence.

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⁷⁶ Cfr. *civ.* 4.15: *ac si felicioribus rebus humanis omnia regna parva essent concordi unitate laetantia et ita essent in mundo regna plurima gentium, ut sunt in urbe domus plurimae civium.*

⁷⁷ R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: University Press, 1970), 52.

⁷⁸ Cfr. *en. Ps.* 45.13; 71.10-11.

⁷⁹ Cfr. *civ.* 5.26.

⁸⁰ Markus, *Saeculum*, 55.

⁸¹ *civ.* 5.21.

⁸² *civ.* 19.26.

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