

Another Look at *Apostasia*: “Falling Away” or “Departure?”

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“Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the **apostasy** comes first” (2 Thess. 2:3).¹

What does *apostasia* (“apostasy”) in 2 Thess.2:3 mean? The key passages in the Thessalonian letters are eschatological, related to events of the last days, such as the Rapture of the church and the Day of the Lord. I have thoroughly explored these inspired documents to learn about eschatological issues, particularly about the rapture. Some words and phrases in 2 Thess.2 have always captured my attention and I have periodically refined and modified my understanding of these words, especially the word *apostasia*. Scholars still debate about the most accurate translation of this enigmatic word. Recent studies compel us to reconsider the proposal that “departure” (and not “falling away” or “rebellion”) is the most accurate translation of the Greek word *apostasia* in 2 Thessa.2:3. **The “departure” of the church in the Rapture** may be the proper understanding of the word *apostasia* in the context of the passage.

***Apostasia* And Bible Translations**

The exact meaning of *apostasia* (2 Thess.2:3) was known to Paul’s readers. Paul was referencing information he had given to the Thessalonian believers. “Do you not remember that while I was with you, I was telling you these things” (2 Thess.2:5). The imperfect tense indicates that more than once Paul had discussed these matters with them (NIV: “I used to tell you”).² The Thessalonians knew exactly what Paul meant by *apostasia*. But scholars still debate over the best possible translation of the word *apostasia*, whether it should be “falling away” (KJV, NKJV), “apostasy” (NASB, Darby, HCSB), “rebellion” (NIV, ESV, NET, RSV, Moffatt), or “great revolt” (Jerusalem Bible, Williams).

It is noteworthy that the earliest Bible translations rendered the Greek term *apostasia* as “**departure**” rather than “falling away” or “rebellion.” Jerome in the 4th century used the Latin word *discessio*, meaning “departure”, for the Greek word *apostasia*. It is highly significant that all the major English translations before the KJV rendered the noun *apostasia* as either “departure” or “departing.” This includes the Wycliffe Bible, The Tyndale Bible, the Coverdale Bible, the Cranmer Bible, and the Geneva Bible. Historically, the Greek word *apostasia* has been translated as “**departing**” in all the English Bibles since Wycliffe. Why did the KJV translators chose to change it to “falling away” remains a mystery though some theories have been formulated which have no lexicographical value or merit. Translations since the KJV (1611) have opted the meaning of *apostasia* as “falling away”, “rebellion”, or “revolt.” It seems to me that those living prior to the KJV Version (1611) would have understood the *apostasia* in 2

¹ Emphasis added. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the NASB.

² More than a single action. “So emphatically and repeatedly, my habit was to tell you these things” (Biblehub.com, 2 Thessalonians 2:5; *Ellicott Commentary for English Readers*).

Thess.2:3 as the **physical departure than the spiritual departure** (falling away from the faith). KJV translation seems to have embraced a theological interpretation of *apostasia*. Is it possible that KJV in the spirit of Protestant Reformation applied the verse to the “falling away” of the Roman Catholic Church from the truth?

Prominent evangelical Bible scholars of the last century, E. Schuyler English and Kenneth Wuest, have proposed that *apostasia* should be rendered “the departure” meaning, the rapture of the church; a physical or spatial departure, and thus a reference to the pre-trib rapture. Prophecy scholar J. Dwight Pentecost was also an ardent supporter of the physical departure (Rapture) interpretation. But this interpretation was rejected by most pre-tribulationists. In recent times prophecy scholars Andy woods, Thomas Ice, Theologians and Greek scholars H. Wayne House and Gordon Lewis have ably defended the position that “departure,” and not “falling away” is the correct rendering of *apostasia*. Their conclusion based on definitive studies with in-depth lexical research cannot be easily dismissed or ignored.³

The major question is whether it is a moral/spiritual departure or a spatial/physical departure. **If it really means a spatial departure, then 2 Thess.2:3 is an air-tight verse for the pre-tribulation rapture.** The context is the key in deciding whether the departure is spiritual or spatial. As far as the word itself is concerned, it could refer to a spiritual departure (“falling away”) or it could refer to a physical removal/departure (Rapture).

Can *Apostasia* Mean Departure?⁴

The only other time the noun *apostasia* is used in the New Testament is in Acts 21:21. Paul was accused of “teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses....” Here the Greek noun *apostasia* is translated as “**forsake.**” The accusation against Paul is that he is leading *a spiritual apostasy or departure from the law of Moses*. An apostasy from Moses can be an abandonment of the Mosaic Law; a departure from it. Pre-trib commentator Edmond Hiebert though not a proponent of the view that *apostasia* means “departure”, still admits that *apostasia* carries the secondary meaning “departure.”⁵ Since the noun is used only one other time in the New Testament, we can hardly conclude that its biblical meaning is necessarily determined. As Lewis argues, “One other use of the noun in the New Testament does not provide sufficient data for a dogmatic conclusion to a word study.”⁶

³ Andy Woods, *The Falling Away – Spiritual Departure or Physical Rapture?* Thomas Ice, “The “Departure” in 2 Thessalonians 2:3”, Pre-Trib.org; H. Wayne House, “Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3: Apostasy or Rapture?” in Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, eds., *When The Trumpet Sounds*; Gordon R Lewis & Bruce A Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, Vol.3,419-421. Along with his elaborate research and insight, Wayne House makes thorough rebuttal of the opposing views.

⁴ For the lexicographical discussion here, I am largely following the conclusions of H. Wayne House, Andy Woods and Gordon Lewis.

⁵ *The Thessalonian Epistles*, 306. Hiebert’s expositional commentary with good exegetical insights is one of my favorite commentaries on the Thessalonian Epistles.

⁶ *Integrative Theology*, 420.

Liddell & Scott in their well-known *Greek Lexicon* and G. W. H. Lampe's *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* uses the following terms to define *apostasia*: "rebellion, apostasy, departure, disappearance, distance, revolt, defection, divorce, standing aloof etc.⁷ The secondary meaning of *apostasia* as "departure" cannot be ignored in interpreting Bible passages where it occurs. House makes this profound observation:

"If one says that this is not important because this meaning is only classical or ancient and thus lost its meaning by the time of the New Testament period, then I may turn to this same root meaning for *apostasia* in the patristic era immediately following the New Testament period, as indicated in definitions for the noun form in Lampe's *Patristic Greek Lexicon*. Although the noun used in the sense of a spatial departure is not the normal meaning (though it is true for the verb) during New Testament times, the word is found with this meaning in time periods before and after the New Testament era, and it is likely to have been understood this way at least sometimes. It was also understood to have this meaning in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 by the fourth - century translator Jerome, where in his text he translates *he apostasia* as the Latin *discessio*, meaning "departure."⁸

The verb form of *apostasia*, *aphistemi* is used fifteen times in the New Testament. Four refer to a figurative *departure* morally or spiritually (Luke 8:13; 1 Tim.4:1; 2 Tim.2:19; Heb. 3:12). Other uses of the verb convey *departing* from iniquity (2 Tim.2:19), ungodly men (1 Tim.6:5), the temple (Luke 2:37), the body (2 Cor.12:8), and from persons (Acts 12:10; Luke 4:13). Paul prayed that his thorn in the flesh might *depart* from him (2 Cor.12:8). These New Testament uses make it clear that **to apostatize most often means "to depart" or "to go away from."** Only in specialized instances does it mean to depart from the faith.⁹

Those who reject the "departure" view points out that the verb form *aphistemi* is clearly used of physical departure in both Testaments, but not the noun *apostasia*. Words mean things based upon their unique context. *Apostasia* does not inherently mean either doctrinal departure or physical departure. Though the word usually denotes either political rebellion or religious defection, it can in some contexts refer to a physical departure if the context demands it. **The context becomes the critical factor in determining what the "departure" is from.**

The Context of 2 Thess.2:3

The following observations clarify the context:

1. The Thessalonian believers received erroneous teaching that they were already in the Day of the Lord (the day of wrath, Tribulation, and judgment). As a result, these believers were troubled, worried, and shaken in mind at the prospect that the Day of the Lord had already begun (2 Thess.2:2). If Paul taught a post-tribulation rapture, why

⁷ Cited by Wayne House, *When The Trumpet Sounds*, 273; Andy Woods, *The Falling Away*, 19-20.

⁸ House, 273.

⁹ Lewis, 420.

would they be troubled and shaken in mind by reports that the Day of the Lord had already arrived? They ought to have rejoiced since the arrival of the Day of the Lord would bring deliverance to believers. But rather than rejoicing, they are troubled and shaken in mind.

2. Paul reassures them that the Day of the Lord could not have started because it cannot begin unless **two events** first take place (2 Thess.2:3). Two events must precede the Day of the Lord - **the *apostasia* and the revelation of the man of lawlessness** (the Antichrist). So, Paul was basically telling the Thessalonians, “The fact that you haven’t seen these two events is conclusive proof that the Day of the Lord had not begun.”
3. **There is a pattern that must be observed** in 2 Thess.2:3 and 2:7-8. Two events must occur before the Day of the Lord can begin: the *apostasia* and the revelation of the Antichrist (2:3). Then in verses 7-8 Paul again lists two events that must take place before the Day of the Lord: removal of the restrainer (the Holy Spirit) and the revelation of the Antichrist.
4. Paul’s argument can be summarized in this way: **The Day of the Lord will not begin until the *apostasia* happens first and the Antichrist is revealed.** The Antichrist cannot begin to act until the Restrainer is removed. Since these events have not yet happened the Thessalonians could be certain that the Day of the Lord had not yet begun.
5. **The extended context** of the eschatological issues dealt within the Thessalonian letters favor the departure/Rapture view. In First Thessalonians every single chapter ends with a reference to the return of Christ. The most detailed treatment of the *Rapture* that we have in the entire Bible is found in 1 Thess.4:13-18. In 1 Thess.5:1-11, the apostle says the believers obtain *salvation*, referring back to the same ideas developed in the previous chapter (4:13-18). The Thessalonian believers were waiting for God’s Son to come from heaven and *rescue* them from the coming wrath of Tribulation/Day of the Lord (1Thess.1:9-10a). **The rapture, rescue, salvation** explained in 1 Thessalonians is the same event referred to in 2 Thess.2:1 as “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him.” The coming of the Lord in which His people will be gathered together with Him is the Rapture.
6. **The immediate context of the passage** strongly favors the Rapture view – “coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him” (2 Thess.2:1). The rest of the chapter deals with the rapture which is already introduced in verse 1 – the Lord coming to gather His church at the rapture. The Day of the Lord” (v.2) - the day of Tribulation, wrath and judgment, that day will not come (v.3) except something else comes first, the *apostasia*. Before the Tribulation can begin, there must be an *apostasia*. **The topic of the rapture introduced in verse 1 is carried through verse 3, the departing, Rapture**

comes first. The rapture being the context stated in the first verse, you would expect to reference the rapture in a subsequent sentence. Otherwise, there is no continuity in the passage.

- 7. 2 Thess.2:6-7 ties in well with the Rapture mentioned in verse 1.** There is something or someone withholding the revealing of the Antichrist, and therefore the starting of the Tribulation. The only entity strong enough to restrain evil on a global scale is the Holy Spirit who indwells the believers in this dispensation of grace. We are sealed with His presence awaiting the day of the Rapture (Eph.1:13-14). The Holy Spirit is active on earth through the church, the body of Christ. He currently restrains the revealing of the Antichrist and the beginning of the seven-year Tribulation period. At the rapture the Holy Spirit removes His restraining power and then the Antichrist will be revealed, beginning the Tribulation. At the Rapture, the Holy Spirit being taken out of the way is consistent with verse 1, “our gathering together to Him.” **Paul’s description of the physical departure of the church in the Rapture (verses 6-7) seems to be consistent with the departure (*apostasia*) in verse 3.** The Holy Spirit works in and through the church. When He leaves the earth so must also the instrument through which He now works, even the church. **We see the paralleling of “the departure” (2:3) with the departure of the restrainer (2:6-7).**

Andy woods expressed his conclusion in these words:

“In sum, the immediate context of the entire paragraph is the rapture of the church. Paul deals with this subject in both verse one as well as verses six and seven. If “context is king” and both the noun and the verb *apostasia* can refer to a physical departure, it is only natural and logical to supply a physical departure understanding to the word in Second Thessalonians 2:3a. Such an interpretation finds ample support in both the extended and immediate context. Why would I read into the word *apostasia* a doctrinal departure when the context is very clear that he is dealing with subjects related to a physical departure?”¹⁰

The Definite Article Before *Apostasia* (“The” Apostasy”)

The definite article before *apostasia* (*he apostasia*) draws attention to **the apostasy** in view (not “a” falling away as in KJV). It is **“the apostasy.”** The definite article before the noun *apostasia* definitely points to something specific and time bound. The definite article is found before “the man of lawlessness” (KJV: “the man of sin”). The coming of the man of sin and the *apostasia* (the departure/Rapture) will be **specific events at a specified point in time.** Paul’s reference is to a singular event, not a long process of events as falling away from the faith. Even from the first century people have been falling away from the faith (1 Tim.1:15). Doctrinal departures were normative throughout the Church Age. Though it can be one of the many signs

¹⁰ *The Falling Away – Spiritual Departure or Physical Rapture?* 32.

of the end of the age, it is difficult to see that, in and of itself being a definitive sign denoted by *the apostasia*.

The “falling away” interpretation of *apostasia* usually view the spiritual apostasy operating even now and gradually comes to a climatic point. But the events mentioned in 2 Thess.2:3 seem to be sudden, instantaneous, and not a process leading to a climatic event. The building up of something to a climax, after a gradual, long, elongated process is not in view here. Even most pre-trib commentaries and study Bibles interpret “the apostasy” (*he apostasia*) as a final revolt against God, and (or) a massive, and climatic abandonment of the Christian faith by many professing believers. At the same time some of these scholars acknowledge the possibility of *apostasia* referring to the Rapture.¹¹

A literal departure is indicated by the function of the definite article. According to Dana and Mantey’s, *A Manual Grammar of The Greek New Testament*, the definite article “the” serves “to point out an object or draw attention to it. Its use with a word makes the word stand out distinctly,” and one of its purposes is “to denote a previous reference.”¹² It is obvious from the text that the specific “departure” event Paul previously referred to was “our gathering together to Him” in the rapture. In this *apostasia* (“departure”) we will be raptured or “caught up” with the Lord (1 Thess.4:17).

Conclusion

I have studied and pondered over this passage for the last many years. I have always felt inclined to the departure/Rapture view of the *apostasia*. In recent days, I have become more convinced of this position. The overall theme of the Thessalonian Letters, the extended and immediate context of the passage, the possible meanings of the word *apostasia* (both the verb and the noun emanating from the same root), the definite article before *apostasia*, all favor the

¹¹ “An aggressive and climatic revolt against God” (*Ryrie Study Bible*, NASB, 1812) ; Taking into consideration the specificity of the event, MacArthur sees the “falling away” as the abomination of desolation that takes place at the midpoint of the Tribulation (*MacArthur Study Bible*, NKJV, 1854) ; Criswell interprets it as a specific apostasy; a marked falling away of professed believers” (*Criswell Study Bible*, 1409) ; *Holman Christian Standard Bible* prefers the meaning as defection or departure from true religion. But there seems to be some support to the alternate view of the “rapture” (2077). Similar position is taken by the *NKJV Study Bible* (1906). “The apostasy of the professing church,” (*Scofield Study Bible*, 1272). Probably a reference to “People turning from God’s truth to worship the Antichrist” (*Bible Knowledge Commentary*, NT Edition, 718); “We can only surmise that it refers to a wholesale abandonment of Christianity, a positive rejection of the Christian faith” (William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, 2053. But his footnote to “apostasy”, shows a leaning toward the rapture view, 2067). In his famous pre-trib commentary on the Thessalonian Epistles, Edmond Hiebert, rejects the rapture view. He interprets *apostasia* as “a deliberate abandonment of a formerly professed position or view, a defection, a rejection of a former allegiance” (305). Robert Thomas, another pre-trib scholar and commentator takes a similar view – “the apostasy” - i.e., the climax of the increasing apostate tendencies evident before the rapture of the church” (“2 Thessalonians”, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol.11, 322). T.W. Smith in *What The Bible Teaches*, “2 Thessalonians” (*Ritchie New Testament Commentaries*) notes the importance of the “falling away” as a marked, specific and unique event without precedent of any kind, as a reference to the Tribulation (104).

¹² 137,141.

understanding of *apostasia* as the departure of the church from earth to heaven in the **Rapture**. I believe all the cumulative evidence makes a powerful case for this interpretation. Though this is a minority position even among pretrib scholars and commentators, this view is held by many credible conservative Bible scholars both in the past and the present. **If this interpretation is true, then the debate of the timing of the rapture is settled.** The entire church will be raptured, caught up to be with the Lord before any part of the seven-year Tribulation begins.

Evangelicals agree on the essentials of God's plan for the future. And yet they differ on many of the specifics related to unfulfilled prophecy. I embrace a premillennial dispensational viewpoint regarding God's prophetic program. Even on differing issues related to prophecy we must manifest the fruit of the Spirit and every grace as we are dealing with the members of the body of Christ and fellow members of the household of faith. We are together in "Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13, KJV). "Come, Lord Jesus!"