

A Defense of the Rapture in 2 Thessalonians 2:3

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Is the Rapture Found in

2 Thessalonians 2:3?

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The letters of Paul to the Thessalonian church were written early in his ministry (ca A.D. 51-52) to the new believers of Macedonia. These Christians eagerly accepted the teaching that Paul gave to them in the short time he was with them, but no sooner had Paul left than persons came into their midst who perverted the apostles teaching. In regards to the coming of Christ for Christians, Paul apparently taught that they should be diligent in looking for Christ to come (1 Thess 4-5). Unfortunately, however, someone argued that Jesus had already returned. This puzzled the believers due to the fact that they had not been taken in the rapture (1 Thess 4:13). Now Paul wanted to provide additional evidence to assure them that Jesus had not returned and proof that this was so.

I. How Biblical Scholars Have Understood Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3

Biblical scholars have understood the word Greek word *apostasia* (translated falling away in the KJV) in four different ways. How one understands this Greek word may impact how one sees the return of Jesus. Let us examine the different interpretations below.

***Apostasia* Refers to the Man of Sin**

This interpretation says that the word *apostasy* refers to the man of sin in verse three (what scholars call apposition). This was a common understanding in the first few centuries of the church, but few hold it today. The church father Augustine said, No one can doubt that he [Paul] wrote this of Antichrist and of the day of judgment, which he here calls the day of the Lord, nor that he declared that this day should not come unless he first came who is called the apostate —apostate, to wit, from the Lord God.

***Apostasia* Refers to Falling Away from the Faith**

A second view is that adopted by the King James Version (Authorized Version) of the Bible, namely, falling away. Under this view, *apostasy* speaks of a falling away or defection from the faith. When this occurs, the Antichrist (man of sin) will arise, showing signs and wonders. This view seems to originate with the translation of the King James

Version in 1611, but it is popular today. However, there is not a consistency regarding who will actually fall away. Does it refer to the church, to Jews during the Tribulation, or to non-Christians? Let us look at examples of those who hold to each view.

Professing Church

Theologian Charles Ryrie believes that the apostasy in 2 Thess 2:3 speaks of a future falling away of those within the professing church who never truly believed in Jesus, and believes that this view is found in Rev 17 and 2 Tim 3:1.

Jews during the Tribulation

The second interpretation asserts that Jews who reject God during the tribulation are in view in the passage. Martin Rosenthal has argued that even as the word is used in the New Testament when Paul was opposed by Jews (e.g. Acts 21:21), so this will be how Jews will act during the tribulation. He says that they will totally abandon the God of their fathers and their messianic hope in favor of a false religion (humanism) and a false messiah (the Antichrist, 2 Thess. 2:2-12).

Non-Christians

Some have also viewed the falling away as referring to non-Christians as a whole. Hogg and Vine, as well as Chafer, believed that the term referred to the way in which unsaved humanity failed to embrace the truth of God found in the Gospel after the Church has been removed from the earth.

Apostasia Refers to a Revolt or Rebellion Against God

Understanding apostasia as revolt or rebellion stands in strong contrast to the former falling away. The latter implies a defection from the faith or from God, while the former speaks of a forceful or violent rejection of God.

A. L. Moore explains this view:

[T]he rebellion comes first: here Paul uses imagery drawn probably from Daniel 11:36 (and cf. Isa. 14:13ff; Ezek. 28:2). Rebellion, *apostasia*, could refer to political apostasy or military revolt in classical Greek, but in the LXX [Greek OT] it denotes religious rebellion against God (cf. Jos. 22:22; Jer. 2:19). . . . The thought is, we suggest, that when the moment comes for Christ to appear in glory and for all that rebels against God to be unmasked and cast out, the forces of evil will arise as never before in a last desperate effort against God.

Rather than a defection from the faith, or failure to embrace the Gospel, the majority of scholars probably hold to this option, believing the word expresses deliberate opposition against God and/or His people, and even may be a revolt against public order or government. This disorder would set the stage for the rise of a person who would bring back order, known as the Antichrist.

Apostasia as the Rapture

The final view is certainly held by a minority today but that *apostasy* may refer to the departure of the church has been embraced by a number of scholars, including E. Schuyler English, Stanley Ellisen, Gordon Lewis, and Kenneth Wuest. Since the view is rarely considered an option by commentators, it becomes incumbent upon those who hold such a view to make a vigorous defense. Whether or not *apostasia* may mean rapture does not rely only upon the meaning of the term in Greek, but whether the idea of defection or revolt in the end times is found as an event in Paul's teaching, as well as the likely meaning of the word in the immediate context of the letter to the Thessalonians.

Regarding this first consideration, the nature of the idea of defection or revolt in Paul's teaching, Ellisen captures the likely scenario:

At the risk of being out of step with most commentaries on the subject, may we suggest the greater acceptability of an alternate view: the evidence for a great singular defection from the faith, occurring just prior to the rapture or to the day of the Lord, is really based on questionable ground. In the first reference generally appealed to (1 Tim. 4), Paul does speak of an apostasy from the faith, but not as a unique end-time event. Rather, he described it as a trend or movement that was already present. This he characterized as erroneous doctrine, hypocritical living, and improper legalism. In using the term here, he qualified it with the phrase from the faith. By itself it meant simply departure.

In the second reference to defection, 2 Timothy 3:1ff., Paul does not use the term apostasy, but merely speaks of evil men in general in the latter times. His point here is that evil men will become more and more depraved as the age wears on (2 Timothy 3:13). Thus this passage has no real relation to apostasy from the faith and certainly does not warn of some specific final defection that will precede the rapture or introduce the day of the Lord.

The remainder of the chapter will be given to the meaning of the technical term *apostasy* and what best meaning fits its usage in 2 Thessalonians 2:3.

II. How *Apostasia* Has Been Translated

Jerome translated the Greek New Testament into Latin in the 4th century (the Vulgate). He used the Latin word *discessio*, meaning departure, for the Greek word *apostasia*. This meaning was continued in the earliest English translations such as the Wycliff Bible (1384), Tyndale Bible (1526), Coverdale Bible (1535), Cranmer Bible (1539), Breeches Bible (1576), Beza Bible (1583), and Geneva Bible (1608). The King James Version deviated from this translation, translating *apostasia* as *falling away*. No explanation was given for doing this. Moreover, Theodore Beza transliterated *apostasia* as *apostasy*, rather than translating it. Since the 17th century, the consistent understanding of *apostasia* in modern translations has been rebellion (NIV, NRSV, Goodspeed, RSV, Moffatt, Phillips, Jerusalem Bible, Williams), or falling away (Berkeley, ASV, NKJV).

III. Arguments that Favor *Apostasia* as the Rapture

The Sense of Departure in Classical and Biblical Sources

The word *apostasia* is regularly translated rebellion or defection in Greek literature before the time of the writing of the New Testament. In a few cases, however, it does have the sense of departure. The reason for this difference is the context of the passages. At times, the word does not occur in a context in which the matter of rebellion against authority, or defection from a person, ideology, or religious faith is in view. Rather the noun adheres more closely to the verbal meaning of depart or some other spatial sense. The predominant meaning of rebellion and, at times, defection is also found in the Greek Old Testament. One must be careful when deviating from the established meanings in classical and biblical (LXX) writings, yet one must also not be afraid to take the minority meaning with spatial connotation when context warrants. Such may be the case in 2 Thessalonians 2:3.

The Use of the Definite Article with apostasia

One finds the use of the Greek article with *apostasia* in 2 Thess 2:3. Another example of this in 1 Macc 2:15, where defection from the Old Testament faith is generally viewed to be the proper translation of *he apostasia*. "And those who came from the king were compelling the defection in the city of Modein, in order to sacrifice." (1 Macc 2:15). What is the significance of these two instances? Similar to this passage in 1 Maccabees, 2 Thess 2:3 has the article and no qualifiers, such as defection from God, so the context is determinative for the meaning of *apostasia*. In the first two chapters of 1 Maccabees there is a description of the Greek victory of Israel by Alexander the Greek until the time of Antiochus Epiphanes, with the latter king invading Judah and enforcing a desecration of the temple. When one studies the context of 2 Thess 2:13 in the same way, the context speaks of the coming of Christ for the church and the coming man of sin after the restrainer is removed.

Idea of Second Coming throughout 1 & 2 Thessalonians

Paul is deeply concerned with the coming of Christ for believers. This is clear in that in each chapter of 1 Thessalonians he speaks of Jesus coming for His people. The apostle in 1 Thess 1:9-10a speaks of the rescue from the coming wrath that God's Son would provide for believers. Paul says the Thessalonians give him hope and joy at the coming of Christ (2:19). The pivotal passage on the rapture is in 1 Thess 4:13-17, in which the apostle reveals that the dead would be caught up (from which we get the word rapture) together with living saints to be with Christ. Chapter 5:1-11 he continues his discussion found in chapter 4. He said that believers, unlike those in the world, would not be caught unready for Christ's coming.

One also finds discussion of the coming of Jesus in 2 Thessalonians. In chapter 2, addressing the false teaching since he left Thessalonica that Christ had already come, he tells the Christians that they need have no anxiety over this teaching.

Contextual Reasons for apostasia to be the Rapture

What in the context of 2 Thessalonians 2 would lead one to accept that the rapture, rather than defection or rebellion is in view? Let us look at the immediately preceding verses to the reference of an *apostasia*. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 reads,

1 Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, 2 that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. (2 Th 2:1-2 NAS95)

The purpose of Paul's teaching on the coming of Christ was to comfort the church. Each text in 1 and 2 Thessalonians emphasizes this truth. If *apostasia* carries the sense of departure, following his words in 2:1, this would add to the comfort and assurance. Moreover, he sought through verse 3 to assuage them of the false notion taught by those false teachers who came to them, that the Day of the Lord had already come. Contrary to this false teaching, the Day of the Lord (a time of judgment) would not come until two events occurred. One is the *apostasia* and the other the rise of the man of sin. Since neither of these two had taken place, they should not believe that the time for God's judgment had arrived.

What makes the most sense in the context, that the Day of the Lord had not come because a rebellion against government or a defection from the faith had not occurred, or that the departure to be with Christ had not occurred? Remember, in 1 Thessalonians 1, the encouragement was that the coming of Christ would rescue believers from the coming wrath. In addition to this, there are at least three more arguments that favor a departure rather than a rebellion/defection in the passage.

First, in passages where a rebellion or defection is in view, the context speaks of the rebellion or defection, but such is not in few in preceding verses in 2 Thessalonians. Rather, as we have seen in a brief review of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, the coming of Christ is in view: Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, (2 Th 2:1 NAS95). Since the subject of the passage, then, is the coming of Christ, and nothing in this passage, or any other to my knowledge, has discussion of a rebellion against government or defection from Christianity as being a prerequisite for Christ's coming, the most natural understanding of *apostasia* would be a spatial departure in concert with 1 Thess 4. Certainly Matthew 24 speaks of many being led to follow the Antichrist (Mt 24:5), but there is nothing about true believers following false Christs as an indication of Christ's coming. Moreover, the events of Matthew 24 refer to the coming of Christ in judgment, not salvation, and relate to the time of the Tribulation and afterwards. A statement of false teachers in the church is given in Acts 20, but again, these do not concern the man of sin.

Second, the word *apostasia* has the unusual article occurring with it, signifying that a specific event is in view, and one that is known to the readers. The only event that fits with this special sense would seem to be in 2 Thess 2:1 and the former teaching of Paul in 1 Thessalonians, particular chaps 4-5. This would favor also a rapture perspective.

Last of all, is the use of "restrainer" in verses 6-7. What is Paul speaking of when he

mentions a restrainer that keeps the man of sin from arising (note that the restrainer does not impact the *apostasia*)? The term *apostasia* and the rise of the man of sin are probably not the same event in verse 3, and the contrast of the restrainer and the man of sin lend support to *apostasia* being a departure. Verses 6 and 7 seem to be parallel of *apostasia* and man of sin. Generally the restrainer in verses 6 and 7 has been taken to be a reference to the Holy Spirit or to the church (though some have seen this a reference to government). What is interesting is that the idea of restrainer is expressed in both a personal and impersonal sense. The text reads, 6 And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. 7 For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. (2 Th 2:6–7 NAS95). So there is a what that restrains and a who that restrains. *What* is it that keeps the man of sin from arising, and *who* keeps him from arising. I believe it is reasonable to conclude that the presence of the church restrains him and the presence of the work of the Holy Spirit in the church restrains him. When the antichrist comes to power, Gods redeemed will no longer be present, and as the Holy Spirit came upon the church in Acts 2, He leaves with the church in 2 Thessalonians 2.

IV. Interaction With Those Who Reject the Rapture View

The claim is made that *apostasia* never speaks of a departure in Greek literature, specifically the New Testament. I have already dealt with this earlier in the chapter, and in much more depth elsewhere. A person who has probably an important critique against *apostasia* being the rapture is Robert Gundry. His arguments have even convinced a stalwart pre-tribulationist such as John Walvoord.

Gundry recognizes that Schuyler English, an early proponent of the rapture view, did discover *apostasia* as meaning departure in the classical period, but considered this discovery to be unimportant for the word in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. Gundry says that the four sources for determining the meaning are found in the New Testament, the Greek Old Testament (LXX), the *koine* (common Greek in time of NT), and classical Greek. He is unconvinced that the word *apostasia* carries this minority meaning in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. Since the predominant meaning of *apostasia* is revolt and religious defection, he believes that this would govern its use in 2 Thessalonians 2:3.

The only other instance of *apostasia* in the New Testament is Acts 21:21, when Paul is challenged as teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses (Acts 21:21 NAS95). The meaning is clear, religious defection. Gundry believes that the two instances in the New Testament (Acts 21:21 and 2 Thess 2:3) would convey the idea of defection from the faith, despite no such reference in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 because even without defection being in the context, the word *apostasia* had inherently come to mean defection. Such is not the case. Context must always be considered in deciding the meaning of words. Yet in the passages that *apostasia* is translated revolt or defection, the context naturally leads one to the translation. This is not true in 2 Thessalonians. The context does not address these negative ideas but the focus is the coming of Christ and what must precede the Day of the Lord (judgment). Consequently, the sense of spatial departure is not outside the possible meaning.

V. Conclusion

In this short presentation, I have attempted to present evidence that the departure of the church from the earth very well may be discussed in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. This meaning agrees with examples in the Greek world, is consistent with the context of 2 Thessalonians 2, and the emphasis of the apostle Paul in the Thessalonian epistles to provide comfort to these early believers. This interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:3 may also provide hope for us today.