

Does Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 Refer to a ‘Physical Departure’ (i.e. the Rapture)?

September 11, 2015 by [Dr. Alan Kurschner](#)

“Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless [the rebellion](#) (apostasia) comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction” – 2 Thessalonians 2:3
ESV

(some versions render “rebellion” as “apostasy” or “falling away”)

Second Thessalonians chapter two has been the nemesis for pretribulationism. Or what I refer to as the 800-pound gorilla in the Bible of the pretribulationist. This biblical passage has convinced more ex-pretribulationists that their pretrib theology is wrong than any other Bible passage. The reason for this is straightforward: The fundamental premise of pretribulationism is that there cannot be any prophesied events that will take place before the rapture, and consequently they believe in the novel idea of what has come to be called the “any moment” rapture (a.k.a. imminence).

Paul, however, gives an unambiguous statement in v. 3 that has lead many to reject imminence and thereby understand that there will be in fact at least a couple of key monumental events that will happen *before* the rapture. Several pretrib teachers have attempted to get around the plain meaning of this Biblical text, but there has been one in particular that is indeed the most strained.

A few years back at a Bible prophecy Conference I gave a series of lectures on Thessalonians. One of them was focused particularly on the pretrib argument that the Greek word behind “rebellion” (*apostasia*, ἀποστασία) can carry the meaning of a “physical and spatial departure,” thereby suggesting that Paul has the rapture in mind when he uses this word in this verse. What follows are my notes from the lecture. I have adapted them and given some transitions between points since they were originally given via PowerPoint slides. In addition, I will have a whole chapter devoted to this issue in my forthcoming *Prewrath Answering Pretribulationism* (Eschatos Publishing, 2016).

Some pretribulationists, such as Thomas Ice, argue that the word “rebellion” (*apostasia*, ἀποστασία) means “physical departure” and not a “religious departure,” thus denoting the rapture.

This view was first introduced in 1895 by J. S. Mabie and popularized by E. Schuyler English in 1949

In their first appeal they try to support this argument by noting earlier versions

Pretrib proponents have pointed out that early English Bibles such as Tyndale, Coverdale, and Geneva have rendered rebellion in v. 3 as “departing.”

The implication of the English word “depart” is suppose to suggest a “*physical* departing” and thus the concept of the rapture was in the mind of these English translators.

But this is not correct for a couple of reasons:

Appealing to sixteenth-century English versions to understand the meaning of a Greek word is naïve at best and only pushes the question back a step further: What did the sixteenth-century English word “*departing*” mean? Since the English word can be spatial or non-spatial in meaning.

These same early English versions use “departing” at Hebrews 3:12. For example the KJV reads, “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.” In this instance, “departing” is clearly non-spatial, which demonstrates that the translators did not use the English word “departing” as having a single technical meaning.

Further, there is no evidence that these translators on this verse understood *apostasia* as a “spatial departure.”

A second appeal is to lexical evidence. But which side is the lexical evidence on?

Here is where the rubber meets the road.

Is there any lexical evidence that would prove that *apostasia* can carry the meaning of “physical departing,” let alone in 2 Thessalonians 2:3?

Word studies always begin with proximity and works its way outward:

Author -> NT -> Septuagint -> Koine (Pseudepigrapha Josephus, Philo) -> Classical Greek -> Patristic

New Testament:

The term is used only one other time in the New Testament, which means a religious departure:

and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake [religious apostasy] Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. –Acts 21:21

Septuagint:

Four Times: Joshua 22:22; 2 Chronicles 29:19; 1 Maccabees 2:15; Jeremiah 2:19.

Every time it means apostasy or rebellion in a religious or political sense—never used as a spatial or physical sense.

Koine Greek Literature:

In Moulton and Milligan's, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources*, it is demonstrated that this term is *only* used in the political or religious defection sense—again, never used in a spatial departure sense (pp. 68–9).

Further, even pretribulationist scholar Paul Feinberg admits, “If one searches for the uses of the noun “apostasy” in the 355 occurrences over the 300-year period between the second century B.C. and the first century A.D., one will not find a single instance where this word refers to a physical departure.”

He is correct.

Classical Greek:

The classical Greek Liddell and Scott lexicon lists the primary meaning of *apostasia* as “defection, revolt”; and “departure, disappearance” as a secondary meaning.

The only example of this secondary meaning of spatial departure is found five centuries later after the New Testament. It is sloppy and simply fallacious to read back, not only an obscure meaning but one that is five centuries after the New Testament!

Patristic Greek:

The standard Greek lexicon for Patristic Greek Lampe has the primary meaning of *apostasia* as “revolt, defection” and gives only one example of a spatial departure.

This one instance is found in a NT apocryphal work on the tradition of the Assumption of Mary. Again, outside of the Koine period dated to the later 5th century A.D.

So what do we make of all this lexical evidence?

Here are the documented lexical facts:

There were five Greek sources examined. The most weighty and important sources are in the Koine period, the New Testament and the Septuagint—not a single instance does *apostasia* carry the meaning of “*physical* departure.” Instead, every instance has the meaning of religious or political departure.

The last two sources—Classical and Patristic Greek—are the least weighty and important because they are the furthest removed from the New Testament.

There were only two instances from these sources that have a physical departure meaning—and both of these examples are dated late well into the 5th-6th century.

This is why one will not find the “physical” (i.e. spatial) meaning in standard New Testament lexicons.

BDAG defines this word as “defiance of established system or authority, rebellion, abandonment, breach of faith”

BDAG's predecessor *Thayer*

Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Kittel)

The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (Brown)

Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament (Balz)

A third appeal to the cognate verb

So how does the pretribber respond to these lexical facts? This is where the desperate leap takes place.

We have done a responsible thorough examination of the noun *apostasia* demonstrating that the term does not carry a “physical-spatial” meaning in the Koine period.

The pretribber will make the leap by pointing to the **cognate verb form of *apostasia*, which is *aphistemi***, which means “to withdraw, remove, depart, leave.” It is used 14 times in the NT and is used both in a spatial and non-spatial sense. This is where the leap happens by assuming that the verb meaning carries over to the noun meaning.

E. S. English succinctly states the pretrib reasoning: “since a noun takes its meaning from the verb, the noun, too, may have such a broad connotation.”

Davey goes further saying, “Since the root verb has this meaning of ‘departure’ from a person or place in a geographical sense, would not its derivatives have the same foundational word meaning.”

Enter the cognate and root fallacy.

Cognates and roots is not the way any responsible exegete determines word meanings (Imagine reading the newspaper this way. Or love letters!)

Instead, word meanings are determined by semantic range and its usage in context.

Even Feinberg rejects this naïve method when he comments on this specific word: “the meaning of derivative nouns must be established through *their usage*.” (emphasis his)

Perfect case in point: *aphistemi* (verb)

Apostasion is a cognate noun to this verb, which only means “divorce or some other legal act of separation.”

Apostater another cognate noun which means “one who has power to dissolve an assembly” or “to decide a question.”

Since these derivative nouns do not contain the meaning of a spatial or physical departure (as the pretribber will not argue), there is absolutely no basis to assume that our target noun *apostasia* does as well. In other words, the pretrib cannot have their lexical cake and eat it too. It is first rank special pleading.

The fourth appeal: context

Since the semantic range does not include “physical or spatial departure” it is moot to even evaluate context—unless someone wants to argue that this is the only instance within 500 years that the term means a “physical departure”!

Nevertheless, let’s argue context.

To interpret the word “rebellion” in v. 3 as the “rapture” does not comport with the context, and as we will see it makes Paul unintelligible, even humorous.

First, Paul is making a contrast of what precedes and what follows. The “gathering” (rapture) and parousia/day of the Lord is what follows (“For that day will not come unless”) the rebellion and revelation of the man of lawlessness. The pretrib view would have Paul in essence saying, “The rapture cannot happen until the rapture happens” But Paul is clearly marking certain events as signs or conditions that must take place before Christ’s return.

Second, Paul does not simply mention “rebellion” (apostasy) and leave it at that. But the verse *begins* with Paul’s exhortation, “Let no one deceive you in any way.” This is followed by “For,” which in this case is called an “explanatory *hoti* (ὅτι).” That is to say, Paul is connecting the exhortation not to be deceived with the fact of rebellion and the man of lawlessness being revealed.

In addition, some pretrib teachers have attempted to argue that since there is an article “the” before “rebellion” it indicates that the Thessalonians were familiar with some previous teaching by Paul. This is baseless, since they have to *assume* that it refers to the rapture. It is classic begging the question.

But what does the context show us?

Since this word in the Koine period always meant a “religious or political departure” should we then not be surprised that Paul makes references in this very context to “the truth” and “the Christian faith”?

Indeed, he does:

v. 2 “not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed”

v. 3 “Let no one deceive you in any way”

v. 10 “they refused to love the truth”

v. 11 “Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false”

v. 13 “through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth”

v. 15 “stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.”

In addition, the rebellion and the revealing of the man of lawlessness are not two disconnected or unrelated events, but should be seen as a two-fold unifying event: “first” refers to both of the events that must happen before the day of the Lord.

And what is the connection between Antichrist and the apostasy/rebellion?

“The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false.” 2 Thessalonians 2:9–11.

I recognize that there are other viewpoints of who actually apostatizes:

- (1) A conspicuous increase in godlessness (or rebellion) within the world? (but the definite article before “rebellion” would suggest a more specific discernible event)
- (2) A significant apostasy within the *professing* church?
- (3) True believers lose their salvation? (but see 2 Thess 2:13).
- (4) Jewish in scope? (but the context here includes Gentiles)

My own position is #2 because I believe the immediate context in chapter 2 of the Antichrist’s activity informs us of the identity of the rebellion. Nevertheless, this is not particularly essential to my point in this article.

Here is the big picture: The pretribulational “Physical Departure” argument fails on all four levels:

It fails on appealing to early English versions
It fails on appealing to five bodies of Greek literature
It fails on appealing to its verbal cognate form
It fails on appealing to context.

Even the most noted pretribulational scholar John F. Walvoord did not take this “physical departure” interpretation:

In the first edition of his popular book *The Rapture Question* (1957) he defended the “Physical Departure” argument. But after considering some of these arguments put forth by Robert H. Gundry, Walvoord rejected this common pretrib argument which he notes in his second edition of *The Rapture Question* (1979).

Also, noted pretrib scholar Paul Feinberg writes, “there is no reason to understand Paul’s use of *apostasia* as a reference to the rapture” (*When the Trumpet Sounds*, 311).

Bibliography

“Is *Apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 a Reference to the Rapture?” by William W. Combs

The Church and the Tribulation by Robert H. Gundry

See above for the Greek sources/Lexica cited in this article

Addendum

In my public debate in the cross-examination period with Thomas Ice I honed in on the Greek noun *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. I finally got him to admit in our cross-examination that he was incapable of producing a single document in all of Koine literature where *apostasia* means a “spatial departure.” (See the video below that starts our discussion on this point and the timestamp at 13:05 where Thomas Ice finally admitted that he could not cite a single instance for the debate).

Thomas Ice relies on H. Wayne House’s chapter “Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3: Apostasy or Rapture” in the book *When the Trumpet Sounds* edited by Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy.

In the cross-examination, Ice refers to House’s citations of “papyri,” which are on pages 294–295. When one turns there all they find is two instances of the noun *apostasia*, both of which are translated as “rebels”! So Ice completely blundered by referring to a source that he was ignorant about—which is why he could not actually cite them in the debate. But worse, Wayne House, Ice’s source, completely blundered by using them in his chapter because they actually support my position that the noun means a political or religious departure.

Moreover, the problem with citing House’s chapter is that in all of his 35 pages of the chapter *not once* does he ever cite a single instance in Koine literature of the noun *apostasia* meaning a “spatial departure.” Much of his chapter is filler that is not relevant to the issue. House spends a good time digging himself into the cognate fallacy, a fallacy where you assume a noun’s meaning based on the verb’s form or vice versa. He focuses on the verb forms of *apostasia*, committing the cognate fallacy.

The 800-pound gorilla remains in the room. *Where does the noun apostasia mean a “spatial departure” in Koine literature?* It reminds me of the frequent claim by pretribulationists that the early church taught a pretrib rapture. They have never been able to produce *a single* document that indicates a rapture event occurring *before* the arrival of the Antichrist.