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IS THE RAPTURE IN 2 THESSALONIANS 2:3?

Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,
—2 Thessalonians 2:3

I believe that there is a strong possibility that 2 Thessalonians 2:3 is speaking of the rapture. What do I mean? Some pretribulationists, like myself, think that the Greek noun *apostasia*, usually translated “apostasy,” is a reference to the rapture and should be translated “departure.” Thus, this passage would be saying that the day of the Lord will not come until the rapture comes before it. If *apostasia* is a reference to a physical departure, then 2 Thessalonians 2:3 is strong evidence for pretribulationism.

THE MEANING OF APOSTASIA

The Greek noun *apostasia* is only used twice in the New Testament. In addition to 2 Thessalonians 2:3, it occurs in Acts 21:21 where, speaking of Paul, it is said, “that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to **forsake** (*apostasia*) Moses.” The word is a Greek compound of *apo* “from” and *istemi* “stand.” Thus, it has the core meaning of “away from” or “departure.” The Liddell and Scott Greek Lexicon defines *apostasia* first as “defection, revolt;” then secondly as “departure, disappearance.”¹ Gordon Lewis explains how the verb from which the noun *apostasia* is derived supports the basic meaning of departure in the following:

The verb may mean to remove spatially. There is little reason then to deny that the noun can mean such a spatial removal or departure. Since the noun is used only one other time in the New Testament of apostasy from Moses (Acts 21:21), we can hardly conclude that its Biblical meaning is necessarily determined. The verb is used fifteen times in the New Testament. Of these fifteen, only three have anything to do with a departure from the faith (Luke 8:13; 1 Tim. 4:1; Heb 3:12). The word is used for departing from iniquity (2 Tim. 2:19), from ungodly men (1 Tim. 6:5), from the temple (Luke 2:27), from the body (2 Cor. 12:8), and from persons (Acts 12:10; Luke 4:13).²

“It is with full assurance of proper exegetical study and with complete confidence in the original languages,” concludes Daniel Davey, “that the word meaning of *apostasia* is defined as departure.”³ Paul Lee Tan adds the following:

What precisely does Paul mean when he says that “the falling away” (2:3) must come before the tribulation? The definite article “the” denotes that this will be a definite event, an event distinct from the appearance of the Man of Sin. The Greek word for “falling away”, taken by itself, does not mean religious apostasy or defection. Neither does the word mean “to fall,” as the Greeks have another word for that. [*pipto*, I fall; TDI] The best translation of the word is “to depart.” The apostle Paul refers here to a definite event which he calls “the departure,” and which will occur just before the start of the tribulation. This is the rapture of the church.⁴

So the word has the core meaning of departure and it depends upon the context to determine whether it is used to mean physical departure or an abstract departure such as departure from the faith.

TRANSLATION HISTORY

The first seven English translations of *apostasia* all rendered the noun as either “departure” or “departing.” They are as follows: Wycliffe Bible (1384); Tyndale Bible (1526); Coverdale Bible (1535); Cranmer Bible (1539); Breeches Bible (1576); Beza Bible (1583); Geneva Bible (1608).⁵ This supports the notion that the word truly means “departure.” In fact, Jerome’s Latin translation known as the Vulgate from around the time of A.D. 400 renders *apostasia* with the “word *discessio*, meaning ‘departure.’”⁶ Why was the King James Version the first to depart from the established translation of “departure”?

Theodore Beza, the Swiss reformer was the first to transliterate *apostasia* and create a new word, rather than translate it as others had done. The translators of the King James Version were the first to introduce the new rendering of *apostasia* as “falling away.” Most English translators have followed the KJV and Beza in departing from translating *apostasia* as “departure.” No good reason was ever given.

THE USE OF THE ARTICLE

It is important to note that Paul uses a definite article with the noun *apostasia*. What does this mean? Davey notes the following:

Since the Greek language does not need an article to make the noun definite, it becomes clear that with the usage of the article reference is being made to something in particular. In II Thessalonians 2:3 the word *apostasia* is prefaced by the definite article which means that Paul is pointing to a particular type of departure clearly known to the Thessalonian church.⁷

Dr. Lewis provides a likely answer when he notes that the definite article serves to make a word distinct and draw attention to it. In this instance he believes that its purpose is “to denote a previous reference.” “The departure Paul previously referred to was ‘our being gathered to him’ (v. 1) and our being ‘caught up’ with the Lord and the raptured dead in the clouds (1 Thess. 4:17),” notes Dr. Lewis.⁸ The “departure” was something that Paul and his readers clearly had a mutual understanding about. Paul says in verse 5, “Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?”

The use of the definite article would also support the notion that Paul spoke of a clear, discernable event. A physical departure, like the rapture would fit just such a notion. However, the New Testament teaches that apostasy had already arrived in the first century (cf. Acts 20:27–32; 1 Tim. 4:1–5; 2 Tim. 3:1–9; 2 Pet. 2:1–3; Jude 3–4, 17–21) and thus, such a process would not denote a clear event as demanded by the language of this passage. Understanding departure as the rapture would satisfy the nuance of this text. E. Schuyler English explains as follows:

Again, how would the Thessalonians, or Christians in any century since, be qualified to recognize the apostasy when it should come, assuming, simply for the sake of this inquiry, that the Church might be on earth when it does come? There has been apostasy from God, rebellion against Him, since time

began.⁹

Whatever Paul is referring to in his reference to “the departure,” was something that both the Thessalonian believers and he had discussed in-depth previously. When we examine Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, he never mentions the doctrine of apostasy, however, virtually every chapter in that epistle speaks of the rapture (cf. 1:9–10; 2:19; probably 3:13; 4:13–17; 5:1–11). In these passages, Paul has used a variety of Greek terms to describe the rapture. It should not be surprising that he uses another term to reference the rapture in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. Dr. House tells us:

Remember, the Thessalonians had been led astray by the false teaching (2:2–3) that the Day of the Lord had already come. This was confusing because Paul offered great hope, in the first letter, of a departure to be with Christ and a rescue from god’s wrath. Now a letter purporting to be from Paul seems to say that they would first have to go through the Day of the Lord. Paul then clarified his prior teaching by emphasizing that they had no need to worry. They could again be comforted because the departure he had discussed in his first letter, and in his teaching while with them, was still the truth. The departure of Christians to be with Christ, and the subsequent revelation of the lawless one, Paul argues, is proof that the Day of the Lord had not begun as they had thought. This understanding of *apostasia* makes much more sense than the view that they are to be comforted (v. 2) because a defection from the faith must precede the Day of the Lord. The entire second chapter (as well as 1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:11) serves to comfort (see vv. 2, 3, 17), supplied by a reassurance of Christ’s coming as taught in his first letter.¹⁰

DEPARTURE AND THE RESTRAINER

Since pretribulationists believe that the restrainer mentioned in verses 6 and 7 is the Holy Spirit and teaches a pre-trib rapture, then it should not be surprising to see that there is a similar progression of thought in the progression of verse 3. Allan MacRae, president of Faith Theological Seminary in a letter to Schuyler English has said the following concerning this matter:

I wonder if you have noticed the striking parallel between this verse and verses 7–8, a little further down. According to your suggestion verse 3 mentions the departure of the church as coming first, and then tells of the revealing of the man of sin. In verses 7 and 8 we find the identical sequence. Verse 7 tells of the removal of the Church; verse 8 says: “And then shall that Wicked be revealed.” Thus close examination of the passage shows an inner unity and coherence, if we take the word *apostasia* in its general sense of “departure,” while a superficial examination would easily lead to an erroneous interpretation as “falling away” because of the proximity of the mention of the man of sin.¹¹

Kenneth Wuest, a Greek scholar from Moody Bible Institute added the following contextual support to taking *apostasia* as a physical departure:

But then *hee apostasia* of which Paul is speaking, precedes the revelation of Antichrist in his true identity, and is to *katechon* that which holds back his

revelation (2:6). The *hee apostasia*, therefore, cannot be either a general apostasy in Christendom which does precede the coming of Antichrist, nor can it be the particular apostasy which is the result of his activities in making himself the alone object of worship. Furthermore, that which holds back his revelation (vs. 3) is vitally connected with *hoo katechoon* (vs. 7), He who holds back the same event. The latter is, in my opinion, the Holy Spirit and His activities in the Church. All of which means that I am driven to the inescapable conclusion that the *hee apostasia* (vs. 3) refers to the Rapture of the Church which precedes the Day of the Lord, and holds back the revelation of the Man of Sin who ushers in the world-aspect of that period.¹²

CONCLUSION

The fact that *apostasia* most likely has the meaning of physical departure is a clear support for pretribulationism. If this is true, (Dr. Tim LaHaye and I believe that it is), then it means that a clear prophetic sequence is laid out by Paul early in his Apostolic ministry. Paul teaches in 2 Thessalonians 2 that the rapture will occur first, before the Day of the Lord commences. It is not until after the beginning of the Day of the Lord that the Antichrist is released, resulting in the events described by him in chapter 2 of 2 Thessalonians. This is the only interpretation that provides hope for a discomfited people. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Henry George Liddell and Henry Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Revised with a Supplement [1968] by Sir Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 218.

² Gordon R. Lewis, "Biblical Evidence for Pretribulationism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (vol. 125, no. 499; July 1968), p. 218.

³ Daniel K. Davey, "The 'Apostesia' of II Thessalonians 2:3," Th.M. thesis, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, May 1982, p. 27.

⁴ Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Winona Lake, IN: Assurance Publishers, 1974), p. 341.

⁵ H. Wayne House, "Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3: Apostasy or Rapture?" in Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, eds., *When the Trumpet Sounds: Today's Foremost Authorities Speak Out on End-Time Controversies* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), p. 270.

⁶ House, "Apostesia", p. 270.

⁷ Davey, "Apostesia", p. 47.

⁸ Gordon R. Lewis & Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* 3 vols in 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), vol. 3, p. 420.

⁹ E. Schuyler English, *Re-Thinking the Rapture* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1954), p. 70.

¹⁰ House, "Apostesia", pp. 275-76.

¹¹ Allan A. MacRae, Letter to E. Schuyler English, published in "Let the Prophets Speak," *Our Hope*, (vol. LVI, num. 12; June 1950), p. 725.

¹² Kenneth S. Wuest, Letter to E. Schuyler English, published in "Let the Prophets Speak," *Our Hope*, (vol. LVI, num. 12; June 1950), p. 731.