

SECOND THESSALONIANS 2:3A – SPIRITUAL OR PHYSICAL DEPARTURE?

The Background

Perhaps one of the most enigmatic Bible verses in all the Scripture is found in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, which says, “Let no one deceive you by any means; for *that Day will not come* unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition” (NKJV). The Apostle Paul had on his second missionary journey planted the church in Thessalonica. Within less than a year, Paul was forced out of Thessalonica by the unbelieving Jews that were persecuting him. Consequently, he was driven ultimately into Berea, then Athens, and finally Corinth. When Paul wrote the two Thessalonian epistles, he was writing to the infant church that he had just planted about six months to a year earlier. Thus, his audience consisted primarily of new Christians, or what some might call today “baby Christians.”

These folks were confused, to say the least. Why were they confused? The immediately preceding verse (2 Thess. 2:2) says, “not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come.” Apparently, during Paul’s absence from Thessalonica a forged letter had begun to circulate in their midst, allegedly having come from Paul, telling the new Thessalonian believers that they were in the Tribulation period. When Paul was with them, about six months to a year later, he had taught them that they would be Raptured to heaven prior to the Tribulation period (1 Thess. 1:10; 4:13-18). Now, because of this forged letter that had come into their midst, the Thessalonian Christians thought that they were in the actual Tribulation period. This mindset was compounded by the fact that the unbelieving Jews that had persecuted Paul were now turning on Paul’s flock in his absence. Keep in mind that most of the New Testament had not even been written yet. Beyond that, the apostle that led them to Christ was now absent. Because they were new

Christians, with very little spiritual knowledge, they were shaken and confused because of the apparent inconsistency between Paul's initial teaching and his alleged letter to them.

Consequently, Paul responds in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12 by laying out five reasons why the Day of the Lord has not yet started. He explains that the Day of the Lord has not started yet because there is no apostasy (2:3a), advent of the lawless one or Antichrist (2:3a-4), removal of the restrainer (2:5-7), destruction of the lawless one (2:8-9), and destruction of the lawless one's followers (2:10-12). What we are focused on here is the first item that Paul mentions as to why his audience was not yet in the Day of the Lord, or the Tribulation period. Paul is clear that "first" must come the "apostasy" or the "falling away" (2:3a).

The English expression "apostasy" or "falling away" comes from the Greek noun *apostasia*. There are two major views on what is meant through the noun *apostasia*. The majority view is that it is speaking of a spiritual departure, such as the last days doctrinal departure of the church or the unbelieving world embracing the Antichrist. Most Christians today believe that this is what is meant and that is the sign that Paul gives here.

However, there is an entirely different view on this topic. According to the second view, the *apostasia* is not a spiritual departure but rather represents a physical or spatial departure. In other words, the *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a is not speaking of a departure from the Word but rather a departure from the world via the Rapture. Therefore, Paul's simple point is that the Thessalonians were not in the Day of the Lord because they had not yet departed via the Rapture. Thus, the Day of the Lord had not yet started since it represents a manifestation of divine wrath, which is something that the Thessalonian believers had been promised an exemption from (1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9). If this latter view is accurate, Paul's simple point to the Thessalonian believers is that they could not possibly be in the Tribulation period because your physical departure, or the pre-Tribulation Rapture that I have already taught you about, has not yet transpired.

What difference does it really make if 2 Thessalonians 2:3a is speaking of a spiritual departure or a physical departure? The reason it matters is because there has been for over at least the last century a vigorous debate amongst those who believe in a future Tribulation period and subsequent Kingdom, concerning the question, “When the Rapture will take place relative to the coming Tribulation period?” *Pre-Tribulationists* believe that the Rapture takes place before the Tribulation period begins. *Mid-Tribulationists* believe that the Rapture is going to take place in the middle of the Tribulation period. *Post-Tribulationists* believe that the Rapture will take place at the end of the Tribulation period. *Prewrath rapturists* contend that the Rapture will take place at some point in the second half of the Tribulation period. If verse 3a is talking about a physical departure and not a spiritual departure, then the debate concerning when the Rapture will transpire is all but over. Paul says, “...*that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first*” (2 Thess. 2:3a). The word translated “first” is the Greek adjective *prōton*, which means “first of all.” If a physical departure must first transpire before the Day of the Lord can even begin, then it becomes a decisive victory for *pre-Tribulationism*. Thus, how one interprets 2 Thessalonians 2:3a is of grave consequence to the longstanding debate concerning the timing of the Rapture.

It is important to understand that embracing the physical departure view does not *per se* make someone a pre-tribulationist. There are many pre-tribulationists that reject the physical departure perspective. Sometimes one gets the impression from non-pre-tribulationists that if the physical departure interpretation is refuted then pre-tribulationism collapses. Such thinking is fallacious since pre-tribulationism can be argued convincingly on other biblical grounds. However, as indicated earlier, if the physical departure interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:3a is accurate, then it represents the final nail in the coffin of non-pre-tribulation views. Notice Mark Hitchcock’s balancing statement:

Since the word *apostasia* means “departure,” some have understood the term “the apostasy” to be the physical departure of the church itself—that is, the Rapture, since the Rapture will be a physical departure of believers from the earth. If this view were correct, it would definitely place the Rapture before the Tribulation, which would be a slam dunk for the pre-Tribulation Rapture position.¹

With all of this being said, I believe that what is being spoken of here is not a spiritual departure but rather a physical departure, which would be a great source of evidence favoring the pre-Tribulation view. I will seek to back up this proposition by *first* noting some problems with the spiritual departure view. *Second*, I will present ten arguments favoring the physical departure interpretation. *Third*, I will briefly respond to the five arguments that are typically raised against the physical departure interpretation.

I do not consider this to be an issue that can be resolved with one hundred percent certitude. Even in a court of law an attorney representing a plaintiff does not have to convince the jury one hundred percent to win his case. In a civil case, he needs only to convince the jury by a preponderance of the evidence. In other words, he needs only tip the scales in his favor in the minds of the jurors. The standard is slightly higher in a criminal case calling for a finding beyond a reasonable doubt in the minds of the jurors for a prosecuting attorney to win his case. However, in neither circumstance is one hundred percent certainty the requirement. By way of analogy, I am not convinced with one hundred percent certainty that the physical departure view is correct. However, here, I attempt to convince the reader that when all the arguments are considered, the scales do tip in favor of the physical departure interpretation.

Problems with the Spiritual Departure Interpretation

Some have become so vociferous in arguing against the physical departure view that it becomes difficult to clearly discern what view they embrace instead. In other words, while we may know what they are against, we might ask what are they in favor

¹ Mark Hitchcock and Jeff Kinley, *The Coming Apostasy: Exposing the Sabatoge of Christianity from Within* (Carol Stream, Ill: Tyndale, 2017), 191.

of? Part of the impetus of the physical departure view is the lack of a satisfactory explanation that Paul is speaking of a spiritual departure in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a.

Apostasy of the Church (Pre-Rapture)

Some understand the *apostasias* as a last days doctrinal revolt within professing Christendom toward the end of the Church Age. Although I believe very strongly in the notion that the Bible predicts a last days Church Age apostasy, I hold to that belief from other sections of Scripture rather than 2 Thessalonians 2:3a. Certainly, as will be mentioned below, Paul anticipates a last days apostasy within the church (1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 4:3-4, etc.). However, in this early letter, the apostle seems to have something else in mind. Moreover, depending on how the descriptor “first” or *prōton* is handled in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a, a predicted and required apostasy coming first seems to wreak havoc on the doctrine of the imminency of the Rapture. Imminency holds that the Rapture is a signless event and is the next event on the prophetic horizon. Saying that the apostasy must happen “first” indicates that the Rapture cannot be “next.”

In addition, if the last days apostasy is in view here, we would have Paul uncharacteristically introducing a concept that he does not return to later in the context. Note the following explanation by C. Gordon Olson provided in his recent New Testament English translation:

“Let no one deceive you in anyway, for that day will not come unless the departure comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.” . . . The Greek *apostasias* means a departure, as does its verb *aphistēmi*. It can refer to a physical departure, a spiritual departure, or a rebellion. The Rapture of Christians would be a physical departure, which is supported by his announced subject in 2:1, “our gathering together unto him” (cf. 1 Th. 4:13-18). Otherwise, Paul never returned to his declared topic in a lapse of thought, which raises questions. Only two other versions so render it: GNV & WEB.²

² C. Gordon Olson, *The Resurrection New Testament* (Lynchburg, VA: Global Gospel Publishers, 2017), 261 n. B.

Apostasy of the World (Post-Rapture)

Others contend that the *apostasia* spoken of in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a refers to the apostasy of the world as they embrace the Antichrist during the Tribulation period. If one is pre-Tribulational in their Eschatology, then all the believers will have already been vacated from the planet via the Rapture. This means that those involved in the doctrinal apostasy are all unbelievers. Yet, if apostasy means a departure from known truth, how can unbelievers apostatize? What known truth can they depart from?

After all, unbelievers are already lost (Luke 19:10), perishing (John 3:16), condemned (John 3:18), lovers of darkness and evil (John 3:19-21), under divine wrath (John 3:36), without spiritual life (John 3:36), of their father the devil (John 8:44), dead (Eph. 2:1), demonically energized (Eph. 2:2), depraved (Eph. 2:3a), doomed (Eph. 2:3b), held captive (Col. 1:13; 2 Tim. 26; Acts 26:17-18), unable to receive truth (1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:3-4), under the control of Satan's world system (1 John 5:19), filled with all unrighteousness (Rom. 1:29-32), unable to seek God (Rom. 3:10-18), conceived in iniquity (Ps. 51:5), and desperately wicked (Jer. 17:9).³ How can those possessing such negative characteristics depart from known truth?

Apostasy of Israel (Dan. 9:27)

Others maintain that the *apostasia* spoken of in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a refers to the nation of Israel confirming the treaty with the Antichrist (Dan. 9:27a), which is the event that will inaugurate the Tribulation period subsequent to the Rapture of the Church. Others, such as Marvin Rosenthal, take a more general approach by connecting the *apostasia* of 2 Thessalonians 2:3a with the Christ-rejecting Jews during the Tribulation. He observes:

³ Robert P. Lightner, *Sin, the Savior, and Salvation: The Theology of Everlasting Life* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1991), 42-43.

Here [Acts 21:21], then, is one of the only two times that the word *apostasy* is used in the Bible. And it is used in the context of the apostle Paul being repudiated for supposedly asking Jews to renounce Moses, circumcision as the basis of the covenantal relationship, and Jewish customs. When Paul used the word *apostasy* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, he did so exactly in the same way as Dr. Luke. He was speaking of Jews, who, during the seventieth week of Daniel, will totally abandon the God of their father's and their messianic hope in favor of a false religion (humanism) and a false Messiah (the Antichrist, 2 Thessalonians 2:2-12).⁴

However, these views are plagued with the identical problem that damages the above-described apostasy of the world view. Israel is already an apostate nation. Because they committed the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:31-32) back in the first century by attributing Christ's miracles to Satan (Matt. 12:24), they have judicially given been over to spiritual hardening and blindness (Matt. 13:13-15; 2 Cor. 3:13-14; Rom. 11:7-10, 25). This tragic national condition will not be reversed until the end of the Tribulation period (Matt. 23:37-39; 24:31). Again, we ask, if apostasy means a departure from known truth, what truth can a spiritually blind and hardened nation depart from? Entering into a treaty with the Antichrist would involve the outworking of their current condition (John 5:43) rather than doctrinally departing from pre-existing truth. Indeed, the problematic nature of the various spiritual departure alternatives all play a role in pushing us in a different direction in our search for a more satisfying explanation as to the meaning of the *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a.

Arguments Favoring the Physical Departure View

Now that some of the inadequacies of the spiritual departure interpretation have been presented, what I would like to present are ten reasons why I believe that the

⁴ Marvin J. Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church: A New Understanding of the Tribulation, and the Second Coming* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 198.

physical or spatial understanding of *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a is the correct interpretation, and why the spiritual departure view is an inadequate interpretation.⁵

There Have Always Been Doctrinal Departures

Spiritual departures are not abnormal. In fact, spiritual departures regularly transpire in Scripture going all the way back to the Fall of man as recorded in Genesis 3. Even in our immediate context, Paul spoke of a spiritual departure that was already taking place when he said, “For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work...” (2 Thess. 2:7). Gordon Lewis observes:

Since the lawlessness and apostasy from the faith was already begun, the translation “apostasy” would not give the Thessalonians a useful sign that the day of vengeance had not come. Only the more general meaning of departure can make verse 4 accomplish its intended purpose of comforting these disturbed people.⁶

Similarly, although predicting a future antichrist, John also indicated “the spirit of the antichrist...now it is already in the world” (1 John 4:3). Paul himself was the victim of wide-scale spiritual defection. Even though “all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10) through Paul’s prolific ministry in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, a short time later in his final letter written just prior to his death Paul reported that “all who are in Asia turned away from me” (2 Tim. 1:15). The Apostle Paul in his day also predicted a spiritual departure after the passing away of the apostolic generation. In Acts 20:28-31, he warned:

²⁸ Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves’ men will

⁵ Much of this article was originally published in Andy Woods, "2 Thessalonians 2:3a: Apostasy of Rapture?," *The Prophecy Watcher* May 2017, 14-17, 34-35.

⁶ Gordon R. Lewis, "Biblical Evidence for Pretribulationism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125, no. 499 (1968): 218.

arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹
Therefore, be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.

Here, Paul predicted that after the apostolic generation left the scene there would be a wide-scale spiritual departure in the church. As one studies the last two thousand years of church history, we can see how Paul's prophecy came to pass. There are perpetual spiritual departures. For example, note the rules of Harvard University, which was founded in 1636:

Let every student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed to consider that the main end of his life and studies is, to know God and Jesus Christ, which is eternal life, John 17:3, and therefore to lay Christ in the bottom as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning. And seeing the Lord only giveth wisdom, let everyone seriously set himself to prayer in secret to seek it of Him, Proverbs 2 and 3. Everyone shall so exercise himself in reading the Scriptures twice a day, that he shall be ready to give such an account of his proficiency therein.⁷

I would say that Harvard University has spiritually departed from its founding standard, wouldn't you?

Henry Morris concurs when he says of 2 Thessalonians 2:3a:

...The entire context, before and after, fits this understanding of the text better than the idea of the apostasy from the faith. Over the 1950 years since Paul wrote these lines, there have been numerous great apostasies from the faith, and none of these introduced the day of the Lord, although the persecuted believers in each case might easily have so interpreted them.⁸

Jimmy DeYoung similarly notes: "If the word 'apostasia' was communicating that 'apostasy' was what it was talking about then the Rapture and the coming of the Antichrist would have happened during the writing of II Thessalonians. Apostasy had

⁷ David Barton, *Original Intent: The Courts, the Constitution, & Religion*, 3d ed. (Aledo, TX: Wall Builder Press, 2000), 81.

⁸ Henry M. Morris, *The Defender's Study Bible: King James Version* (Iowa Falls, IA: World Bible Publishers, 1995), 1338.

infiltrated the early church by the time Paul wrote this passage.”⁹ My point here is that if spiritual departures are normative throughout history, how could yet another a spiritual departure function as a definitive sign of the beginning of the Tribulation period? Thus, Paul must be using the noun *apostasia* to communicate something more than a mere spiritual departure in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a.

Second Thessalonians Was an Early Letter

Both 1 and 2 Thessalonians were among the earliest letters that Paul wrote. Here is a brief chronology of Paul’s letters. The first letter he wrote was the Book of Galatians, about A.D. 49. The next two letters he wrote around the same period and in very close proximity to one another are 1–2 Thessalonians around A.D. 51. Then later came the two Corinthian letters and Romans (A.D. 56–57). These letters were then followed by his “prison letters” (Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, Philippians) written from A.D. 60–62. Finally, late in his ministry, Paul wrote letters to pastors, such as 1 Timothy and Titus (A.D. 62) and 2 Timothy (A.D. 67). Thus, 1 and 2 Thessalonians were probably written during the same year, with perhaps six months to a year at most between these two letters. Moreover, there is a very small amount of time between Paul’s planting of the church in Thessalonica, which occurred during his second missionary journey, and when he wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

Why is this chronology relevant? Although Paul does deal with an immediate apostasy among his flock early on (Gal. 1:6-9), he does not start predicting and warning about a spiritual end time apostasy until much later in his ministry. End-time apostasy is not a topic on his mind early on. In fact, to my

⁹ Jimmy DeYoung, “2 Thessalonians 2:3,” online: <http://devotional.prophecytoday.com/2018/06/ii-thessalonians-23.html?m=0>, 16 June 2018, accessed 22 November 2024.

knowledge, the very first prediction that Paul gives concerning a coming spiritual departure is from the verses noted earlier at the end of his third missionary journey when he was speaking to the elders of Ephesus at Miletus (Acts 20:28-31). It is then in the Timothy letters that Paul really starts predicting an end-time spiritual departure. While Paul does it some in 1 Timothy (1 Tim. 4:1ff), it becomes a massive subject in 2 Timothy (2 Tim. 3:14-4:8). Although the Apostle Peter picks up this same theme in 2 Peter, keep in mind that this book was also not written until very late, around A.D. 64. Then, the Lord's half-brother, Jude, writes a one-chapter book, focusing intensely on the theme of an end-time spiritual apostasy in the Book of Jude (A.D. 68-70).

So, what is my point? My point is that the concept of an end-time spiritual departure is not something that Paul is focused on early in his ministry. Although it becomes a big topic later, it was not a dominant subject when the church first started. As already noted, 1 and 2 Thessalonians were written very early on in Paul's ministry. Thus, it would be somewhat of an oddity for Paul to focus upon the subject of an end-time spiritual departure in the very early Thessalonian epistles when this subject is not something that Paul emphasizes until much later in his life and ministry. In fact, as you study the Thessalonian books, outside of this single disputed verse (2 Thess. 2:3a), we do not find Paul using the word "apostasy" or even the concept. All of this to say that to "shoehorn" an end times spiritual departure interpretation into 2 Thessalonians 2:3a is to force Paul to answer a question he is not dealing with in the early Thessalonians letters. It is best to let Paul deal with the topics in his own order rather than according to an a-priori theological grid.

The Definite Article Before the Noun Apostasia

There is a definite article in front of the noun "apostasy." Second Thessalonians 2:3 says, "Let no one deceive you by any means; for *that Day will not*

come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition” (NKJV). Notice the definite article translated “the” in front of both “falling away” and “man of sin.” By providing these two definite articles, essentially Paul is indicating that the apostasy will be something that has specific, time bound qualities just like the man of sin’s coming has such qualities. In other words, just like the advent of the man of sin will be specific and an instantaneous event in future history, the coming *apostasias*, or departure, will similarly be specific and time bound.

The advent of the coming lawless one or Antichrist will take place at a specified point in time and instantaneously or concurrently with the opening of the first seal judgment (Rev. 6:1-2). Moreover, the Antichrist’s confirmation of the covenant with Israel (Dan. 9:27a), which inaugurates the seven-year Tribulation period, seems to be scripturally portrayed as an instantaneous event rather than the culmination of a prolonged process. The definite article also before the *apostasias* indicates that in the same way the *apostasias* will also take place instantaneously. Such an instantaneous manifestation does not fit well with the notion of a spiritual departure, which typically transpires gradually over an elongated process. Spiritual departures are not instantaneous events. After all, it took the church at Ephesus over three decades to spiritually depart from Christ by leaving its first love (Rev. 2:4-5).¹⁰

However, unlike gradual, spiritual departures, the Rapture of the church will be an instantaneous event that will take place “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor. 15:51). Interestingly, the word "moment" is a translation from the Greek adjective *atomos*. According to a leading lexicon, this word means: "...'uncut'...then of someth. that is viewed as such a unit that it cannot be cut, esp. because of smallness (e.g.

¹⁰ This reality becomes apparent by noting that the biblical letters written to the Ephesians in the 60’s (Ephesians, 1–2 Timothy) do not describe the spiritual problems of the Ephesians spoken of in Revelation 2:1-7, which was written in the A.D. 95. This comparison demonstrates that the apostasy dealt with in Revelation 2:4-5 took several decades to develop.

particle of matter, uncompounded word) indivisible...in a moment 1 Cor 15:52..."¹¹

Thus, *atomos* means something that is so small, tiny, or miniscule that it cannot be divided. From this Greek word *atomos* we get our English word atom. An atom is indivisible. It cannot be divided or else an atomic explosion will occur. Thus, through his use of *atomos*, Paul analogizes the speed to which the Rapture will occur to a particle that is so small that it cannot be divided. Both "the twinkling of an eye" and *atomos* represent descriptive linguistic tools skillfully used by the apostle in order to depict the Rapture's rapid velocity and rapidity. In sum, the use of the two definite articles in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 indicates that the *apostasia* will take place just as instantly as the coming forth of the lawless one. This understanding better harmonizes with interpreting "the *apostasia*" as the instantaneous removal of the church through the Rapture rather than a gradual doctrinal erosion.

Moreover, Paul's use of the definite article in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a is significant for another reason. By using the definite article, Paul is likely connecting "the departure" to something that he had mentioned previously. A. T. Robertson well observes, "...the use of the definite article (ἡ [hē]) seems to mean that Paul had spoken to the Thessalonians about it."¹² What major issue had Paul already spoken of to the Thessalonians? As recently as verse 1 of the same chapter he had mentioned the Rapture when he said, "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him." In addition, he had also spoken to them about the Rapture when he had written to them a short time earlier in his first letter (1 Thess. 1:10; 4:13-18). Thus, the definite article

¹¹ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 149.

¹² Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, rev. ed., vol. 4 (Nashville: Broadman, 1933; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004), 2 Th 2:3, Logos edition. This is not to say the Robertson was a proponent of the physical departure interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:3a since he embraces the spiritual departure view earlier in the above quoted sentence. However, he here at least embraces and articulates the notion that the use of the definite article indicates that Paul was referencing something that he had spoken of to them earlier.

before the noun *apostasia* indicates that Paul is speaking of both an instantaneous event as well as resurfacing something he had dealt with previously. Both of these factors strengthen the physical departure interpretation.

The Noun Apostasia Can Refer to a Physical Departure

The noun, *apostasia*, can refer to a physical departure. Those arguing for a doctrinal departure interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:3a typically contend that the only other time that noun *apostasia* is used in the entire Greek New Testament is in Acts 21:21. This verse says, “and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake [the law of] Moses.” The noun translated “forsake” here is also the Greek noun *apostasia*. In other words, Paul was accused in Acts 21:21, in a totally different context, of leading a spiritual apostasy or departure away from the Law of Moses. Spiritual departure advocates of Second Thessalonians 2:3a contend that since the noun *apostasia* clearly means a spiritual departure in Acts 21:21, which is the only other time the noun is ever used in the Greek New Testament, then that is what the noun also must mean in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a. Thus, Hiebert notes, “In Acts 21:21, the only other place where the noun occurs in the New Testament, it definitely asserts the apostasy from Moses.”¹³

However, such methodology represents a shallow way of determining a word’s meaning. Words mean things based upon their own unique context. When you travel to a removed, remote context in an entirely different book of the Bible that is the product of an entirely different human author to establish the meaning of a word, you are employing an inadequate method of interpretation since that remote context (Acts 21:21) most likely gives the same word *apostasia* an entirely different meaning than the one found in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a. The following chart shows the vastly different meanings

¹³ D. Edmond Hiebert, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, rev. ed. (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1996), 331.

and contexts when comparing and contrasting the use of the noun *apostasia* as used in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a and Acts 21:21.

<u>2 Thessalonians 2:3a</u>	<u>Acts 21:21</u>
Pauline Authorship	Lukan Authorship
Paul speaking	Paul not speaking (vs. 20)
Mosaic Law not mentioned	Departure from the Mosaic Law
Epistolary genre	Narrative genre
Definite article	No definite article

In fact, to follow such an interpretive practice represents a hermeneutical error known as “Illegitimate Totality Transfer.” Note D.A. Carson’s explanation:

“Unwarranted adoption of an expanded semantic field: The fallacy in this instance lies in the supposition that the meaning of a word in a specific context is much broader than the context itself allows and may bring with it the word’s entire semantic range. This step is sometimes called illegitimate totality transfer.”¹⁴ Although the Greek noun *apostasia* can refer to a doctrinal departure in Acts 21:21, this noun is not a technical word, meaning a word that always means the same thing everywhere it is used. Thus, the word does not always mean something that is inherently evil as in a doctrinal apostasy. Therefore, we find Hiebert to be in error when he says, “The biblical usage of the term points to something sinful.”¹⁵

¹⁴ D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 60-61. See also James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 217-18.

¹⁵ Hiebert, 331.

The Greek noun *apostasia* is a compound word, which means that it is a word that is created by combining two previously existing words. The first word is the Greek preposition *apo*, which means “away from.” The second word is the Greek verb *histēmi*, which means “to stand.” Thus, *apostasia* simply means to “to stand away from” or “to depart.” The question then becomes: depart from what? Only an examination of how this word is used in its immediate context will determine what the departure is from, whether it be a spiritual or physical departure. Thus, *apostasia* does not inherently mean doctrinal departure, although it can mean that if the context calls for it. Furthermore, *apostasia* does not inherently mean physical departure, although (as I argue later) it can also mean that if the context demands it. Context then becomes the critical factor in determining what the *apostasia* or departure is from.

In actuality, the Greek noun *apostasia* can in some contexts refer to a physical departure. We know this to be the case since Liddell and Scott, a well-known Greek lexicon, uses the following terms to define *apostasia*: “rebellion against God, apostasy, departure, disappearance, distance.”¹⁶ While the first two definitions favor a spiritual departure understanding, the latter three entries favor a physical or spatial departure view. Some seek to marginalize the contribution of the Liddell and Scott entry to this discussion on the grounds that the only reference it cites to support the noun *apostasia* being used in a physical or departure sense is that of evaporating water that is rising or ascending. While this certainly is not directly on point with a Rapture understanding, it at least helps us understand that there is more to the word *apostasia* than just a spiritual understanding since evaporating water physically, rather than doctrinally, rises. By contrast, physical departure adherent Gordon Lewis finds the reference quite compelling. He notes:

¹⁶ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 218.

The extension of the obvious meaning of the verb to the noun is justified not only by the common root, but by classical Greek usage. Liddel and Scott, in their authoritative lexicon of classical Greek, list as the second meaning of the noun, *departure* or *disappearance*. And they cite a commentary on Aristotle’s *Meteora* where the stiffening of a material is said to be caused by *apostasia* of water from it. One could hardly find a better analogy for the Rapture than evaporation.¹⁷

Similarly, Lampe’s *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* defines *apostasia* as “revolt, defection, apostasy (from paganism, Judaism, Christianity, orthodoxy), divorce, departure, standing aloof.”¹⁸ While the first three definitions favor a spiritual departure understanding, the latter three entries favor a physical or spatial departure view. Interestingly, I became aware of one text where *apostasia* is used for a physical departure between human beings from one who is actually a critic of the physical departure interpretation. However, because of the text’s late date and because it is speaking of a horizontal departure rather than a vertical one, he remains unconvinced that it has any bearing on the interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:3a. At any rate, these criticisms notwithstanding, I present the text below for the reader’s consideration.

The Assumption of the Virgin, 32-33 — 32

δεῦτε εἰσελθατε εἰς τὸν ἡγεμόνα εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ, ἡγνόει γὰρ ὁ χιλίαρχος τὴν τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ τῆς μητρὸς τοῦ κυρίου ἀποστασίαν τὴν εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ. λαβὼν οὖν ὁ χιλίαρχος τοὺς Βηθλεεμίτας εἰσηλθεν πρὸς τ —

“Come, go to the procurator at Jerusalem. For the tribune did not know of the departure of the apostles and the Lord’s mother to Jerusalem. The tribune, then, having taken the Bethlehemites, went in to the procurator, saying that he had found no one.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Lewis: 218.

¹⁸ G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 208.

¹⁹ Lee W. Brainard, *Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3: Rapture or Apostasy?* (Harvey, ND: Soothkeep Press, 2021), 303-05.

These late uses of *apostasia* notwithstanding, H. Wayne House notes the chronological significance of these two lexical sources and why they have a bearing on the meaning of the word *apostasia* during the New Testament period.

The noun form allows for *apostasia* as a simple departure in the classical period, proved by examples from Liddell and Scott...If one says that this is not important because the meaning is only classical or ancient and thus lost its meaning by the time of the New Testament, then I may turn to the same root meaning of *apostasia* in the patristic era immediately following the New Testament period, as indicated in the definitions for the noun form in Lampe's *Patristic Greek Lexicon*. Although the noun used in the sense of spatial departure is not the normal meaning...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.²⁰

As will be discussed later, one major objection to the physical removal of the Church interpretation is that the Greek noun *apostasia* was never used in said sense in Koine Greek, the language and era of the New Testament. It is found in both Classical and Patristic eras, but not in Koine. However, one such usage of the noun *apostasia* typically understood as conveying a spiritual departure may have been overlooked. In the LXX (Koine), *ta apostasia* is indeed used to refer to a physical removal. Note the use of the *ta apostasia* in the LXX (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) in 2 Chronicles 29:19 and how this verse is translated by various English translations:

LXX: καὶ πάντα τὰ σκεύη ἃ ἐμίανεν Αχαζ ὁ βασιλεὺς ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ ἀποστασίᾳ αὐτοῦ ἠτοιμάκαμεν καὶ ἠγνίκαμεν ἰδοὺ ἐστὶν ἐναντίον τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου κυρίου

KJV: “Moreover, all the vessels, which king Ahaz in his reign did cast away in his transgression, have we prepared and sanctified, and, behold, they are before the altar of

²⁰ H. Wayne House, "Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3: Apostasy or Rapture?," in *When the Trumpet Sounds: Today's Foremost Authorities Speak Out on End-Time Controversies*, ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), 273.

the LORD.”

NASB (1995): “Moreover, all the utensils which King Ahaz had discarded during his reign in his unfaithfulness, we have prepared and consecrated; and behold, they are before the altar of the LORD.”

NIV: “We have prepared and consecrated all the articles that King Ahaz removed in his unfaithfulness while he was king. They are now in front of the LORD’s altar.”

A few points are worth noting here. The various aforementioned English translations render Tā Apostasia as “cast away” (KJV), “discarded” (NASB95), and “removed” (NIV). In other words, Ahaz “cast away” the vessels. All of these refer to a physical removal. Note also the inclusion of the discarding of the articles, utensils, etc., alongside his unfaithfulness. These two are not one and the same. One of them, the discarding, is the effect while, the other, “unfaithfulness,” is the cause. Note also the below cross-reference in 2 Chronicles 28:24 where Ahaz “gathered” and “cut in pieces” the vessels prior to removing them.

LXX: καὶ ἀπέστησεν Ἀχάζ τὰ σκεύη οἴκου Κυρίου καὶ κατέκοψεν αὐτά, καὶ ἔκλεισεν τὰς θύρας οἴκου Κυρίου, καὶ ἐποίησεν ἐαυτῷ θυσιαστήρια ἐν πάσῃ γωνίᾳ,

KJV: “And Ahaz gathered together the vessels of the house of God, and cut in pieces the vessels of the house of God, and shut up the doors of the house of the LORD, and he made him altars in every corner of Jerusalem.”

NASB95: “Moreover, when Ahaz gathered together the utensils of the house of God, he cut the utensils of the use of God in pieces; and he closed the doors of the house of the LORD and made altars for himself in every corner of Jerusalem.”

NIV: “Ahaz gathered together the furnishings from the temple of God and cut them in pieces. He shut the doors of the LORD’s temple and set up altars at every street corner in Jerusalem.”

At this point, we might ask the simple question: if the gathering and cutting of the vessels are indeed physical in the cross reference, then why should their removal be taken as anything less than physical in 2 Chronicles 29:19? Although this seems to be more of a horizontal removal rather than a vertical removal as in case of the Rapture of the church, it at least shows that the Koine does in fact use the word *apostasia* with the definite article in a physical and spatial sense and Paul would have been familiar with this minority use.

It is also worth considering that while *apostasia* is used in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a, *apostasion* represents a nearly identical and highly related noun. Interestingly, the latter noun is used exclusively in the New Testament to describe the physical and spatial separation of a divorce (Matt. 5:31; 19:7; Mark 10:4). For example, Mark 10:4 says, “They said, ‘Moses permitted *a man* TO WRITE A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE [*apostasion*] AND SEND *her* AWAY.’” Therefore, cumulatively considering all the lexical evidence, the noun *apostasia* can, in some contexts, refer to a physical or spatial removal, and therefore, as previously noted, cannot be a technical word.

On a recent Bible lands trip, I asked our Greek speaking tour guide in Thessalonica if the noun *apostasia* is ever used in modern-day vernacular to describe a physical departure. She paused for a moment and then replied that it is sometimes used when people leave something behind, like one’s wallet or car keys. However, she then immediately clarified that this is a minority use of the noun. I contend that this is how the word also functioned in biblical times. It can be used in the sense of a physical or spatial departure although it remains a secondary use of the word.

The Verb Aphistēmi Can Refer to a Physical Departure

Words are ultimately derived from roots. From a common root one can develop both a noun form and a verbal form of a word. Sometimes in English we use

the same word for both a noun and a verb. For example, if I said, “Jane went on a run,” I would be using “run” as a noun. However, if I said, “see Jan run,” I would be using “run” as a verb. The verb form of the noun *apostasia* is the verb *aphistēmi*. Both the noun and verbal form emanate from the same root (*hístēmi* - to cause to stand, to set or place).

As previously mentioned, the noun *apostasia* is only mentioned twice in the Greek New Testament (Acts 21:21; 2 Thess. 2:3a). However, the verbal form *aphistēmi* is found 15 times in the New Testament. Examining these verbal uses of *aphistēmi* may give us a better understanding of the meaning of the rare use of the noun *apostasia*. Gordon Lewis observes, “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.”²¹ Interestingly, only three times does that verb *aphistēmi* mean a spiritual departure. For example, it is used of a spiritual departure in Luke 8:13 where it says, “Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away.” “Fall away” is the English translation of *aphistēmi*, which refers to a spiritual departure.

Similarly, 1 Timothy 4:1 says, “But the Spirit explicitly says that in latter times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons.” Again, “fall away” or *aphistēmi* refers to a spiritual departure here. However, note here the qualifying phrase “from the faith” that Paul employs to depict the “falling away” that he is speaking of. This qualification indicates that the

²¹ Lewis: 218.

verb *aphistēmi* is not a technical term. In other words, it does not mean the same thing everywhere it is employed. It can mean something physical or spiritual depending on the context in which it is used.

In addition, Hebrews 3:12 says, “Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.” Again, “fall away” or *aphistēmi* refers to a spiritual departure apostasy. Once again, as in the 1 Timothy 4:1 reference, the additional expression “from the living God” clarifies that that the verb here refers to a spiritual departure rather than a physical one. Such clarification is necessary given the non-technical nature of the verb *aphistēmi*.

However, the majority of times, or a full eighty percent of instances, where *aphistēmi* is used in the Greek New Testament it does *not* refer to a spiritual departure, but rather to a physical departure. Thus, while this verb is used 15 times, only three times does it mean a spiritual departure. The remaining twelve times it clearly means a physical departure. For example, Luke 2:37 says, “and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four, she never left the temple.” Here, *aphistēmi* is used to indicate that she never physically “left” the temple. Luke 4:13 also says, “When the devil had finished every temptation, he left Him until an opportune time.” Here, *aphistēmi* or “left” is used to indicate the physical removal or departure of Satan from Jesus. Similarly, in Luke 13:27, Jesus says, “DEPART FROM ME ye workers of iniquity.” Again, *aphistēmi* is used here in reference to their physical departure from Christ.

Acts 5:37 says, “After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census and drew away some people after him; he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered.” Those that Judas “drew away” is a translation of the verb *aphistēmi*. Here, it is again speaking of a physical withdrawing since the rest of the verse indicates that those who followed him were physically “scattered.” Acts

5:38 similarly records Gamaliel saying, “So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men.” In other words, *aphistēmi* is used to record Gamaliel’s exhortation for the unbelieving Jews to physically remove themselves from the apostles and the early church. Acts 12:10 also says, regarding Peter, “...the angel departed from him.” Again, *aphistēmi* is used to depict the angel’s physical departure from Peter. Moreover, Acts 15:38 says, “But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along with them who had deserted them....” Here, *aphistēmi* is used depicting Mark’s earlier decision to leave the missionary team (Acts 13:13). What did Mark do on that first missionary journey? He did not spiritually depart. Rather, the primary meaning is that he physically departed from them. Acts 19:9 similarly says, “But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them.” Again, *aphistēmi* translated “withdrew” is used about a physical departure. Acts 22:29 says, “Therefore those who were about to examine him immediately let go of him; and the commander also was afraid when he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had put him in chains.” “Let go of him” as used here is again a translation of the verb *aphistēmi*. Once again, in context, the verb is used of a physical withdrawal.

Second Corinthians 12:8, concerning Paul’s thorn in the flesh, also says, “Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.” “Leave” is translated from the Greek verb *aphistēmi* and it again is speaking of Paul’s desire for the Lord to remove this physical infirmity from him. Second Timothy 2:19 says, “Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, ‘The Lord knows those who are His,’ and ‘Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness.’” The word “abstain” or “turn away from” in some translations is a translation of the verb *aphistēmi*. This usage also seems to indicate a physical turning away since Paul uses the word “flee” in the same context (2 Tim. 2:22). Such imagery

is reminiscent of Joseph who physically distanced himself from the advances of Potiphar's wife so as to avoid sexual sin (Gen. 39:12-13). What all these usages demonstrate is that both the noun *apostasia* and the verb *aphistēmi* can both be used to depict either spiritual departures or physical departures.

Some claim that this hermeneutical practice of examining the verbal employment of the same root represents an exegetical fallacy known as the root or cognate fallacy. According to D. A. Carson:

One of the most enduring of errors, the root fallacy presupposes that every word actually has a meaning bound up with its shape or its components. In this view, meaning is determined by etymology; that is, by the root or roots of a word. How many times have we been told that because the verbal cognate of ἀπόστολος (apostle) is ἀποστέλλω (I send), the root meaning of 'apostle' is 'one who is sent'?²²

While representing an important hermeneutical ditch to stay out of, I am not entirely convinced that this exegetical error is applicable to the present situation. This error seems to apply to verbs used in dissimilar contexts. All of the contexts that I have cited that are favorable to my position also come from similar physical departure contexts. Beyond this, as indicated earlier, the noun *apostasia* only occurs twice in the entire Greek New Testament and in two totally unrelated contexts. Given this paucity of evidence, is not an examination of the verbal use of the same root employed throughout the New Testament justified and warranted? One would think that deliberately closing one's eyes to such evidence, in and of itself, would constitute hermeneutical malpractice. In fact, one wonders if hiding behind the root or cognate fallacy is just a flimsy excuse for preventing the audience from seeing the fact that eighty percent of the employments of the verb *aphistēmi* favor a physical departure interpretation.

²² Carson, 28.

In addition, it is difficult to deny the close connectivity between verbs and nouns. In fact, some of the best linguistic scholars that I have spoken to on this issue have told me that nouns ultimately come from verbs. It is generally understood that the action of a verb usually precedes the stative nature of a noun. Even in my own lifetime, I have seen several nouns develop into verbs (and vice-versa). Take for example the noun “Google,” which refers to a search engine. It is quite common today to hear people say, “google” such and such. In so doing, they just converted a noun into a verb. I recall when Supreme Court Justice nominee Robert Bork was denied confirmation to the Supreme Court of the United States. Not long after, when the other nominees were denied confirmation, they were said to be “Borked.” In so doing, a proper noun was converted into a verb. If such conversion is a linguistic phenomenon, then why deny its reality in New Testament Greek?

At any rate, the preceding discussion is enough to demonstrate that both the noun *apostasia* and the verb *aphistēmi* are non-technical and somewhat liquid terms. They can mean something spiritual as well as spatial. In this sense, the Greek noun *apostasia* is quite dissimilar from the English word “apostasy,” which seems to function as technical term always indicating a spiritual departure. Thus, the meanings of *apostasia* and *aphistēmi* must be derived completely and totally by the unique contexts in which they are employed.

The Extended Context Favors a Physical Departure Interpretation of Apostasia

Since these words can be used in either sense, what rules should be used to determine which meaning to supply? While the three rules of real estate are “location, location, location,” the three rules of Bible study interpretation are “context, context, context!” Context is king when determining the meanings of words. This is especially true since words frequently have multiple meanings.

Take the word “apple” as an example. Think how many meanings can be generated from the single word “apple.” It can refer to a computer, a piece of fruit, the pupil of one’s eye, and even New York City. So, when you see the word “apple” in a paragraph how do you know what meaning is in play? The context answers that question. If the word apple is found in a context dealing with computers, it would be invalid to substitute a fruit understanding into the word “apple.” As another example, note how many different meanings there are for the word “run?”

I **ran** out of ingredients for the salad, so I decided to make a quick **run** to the store. While at the store I left the car engine **running** while I made my purchase, thinking that I would be right out again. However, while I was in the store I **ran** into a good friend Edward who was **running** for county supervisor. This resulted in me having to endure a somewhat long-winded **rundown** on how his campaign was **running**. Finally fearing that the car would **run** out of gas I **ran** with great haste into the parking lot and returned home with the care surely **running** on fumes.²³

Notice how the word “run” can radically change just within one paragraph. So how do we determine the meanings of words? They are entirely context driven. Therefore, we must be careful to determine the meaning of a word from its immediate context. Since, as has been demonstrated, the verb *aphistēmi* and the noun *apostasia* can both refer to either a physical departure or a spiritual departure let us now examine both the immediate and extended context of 2 Thessalonians 2:3a to ascertain if a spiritual or physical departure is in view.

The extended context favors the meaning of physical departure. What do I mean by “extended context”? I am referring to both books, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, since both were written in close proximity to one another. Interestingly, in 1 Thessalonians every single chapter ends with a reference to the return of Jesus (1

²³ George A. Gunn, "Jesus and the Rapture: John 14," in *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism*, ed. John F. Hart (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 110.

Thess. 1:10; 2:19-20; 3:13; 4:13-18; 5:23-38). In fact, the most detailed treatment of the Rapture that we have in the entire Bible is found at the end of the fourth chapter of 1 Thessalonians (4:13-18). Since the “context is king” in determining the meaning of the *apostasia* and the larger context of the Thessalonian letters pertain to the return of Christ, interpreters should be open to a physical departure understanding of the word. Thus, the larger context of these two books does not favor spiritual departure interpretation of the *apostasia*, but rather it favors the physical departure view.

The Immediate Context Favors a Physical Departure Interpretation of Apostasia

The immediate context also favors physical departure. What I mean by the “immediate context” is what is happening in the very same chapter and paragraph where the disputed term is located. Notice 2 Thessalonians 2:1, which says, “Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him.” Here, Paul is speaking of our gathering to the Lord. In fact, this word translated “gathering” is *episynagōgē*, where we get the word synagogue. A synagogue is a Jewish gathering. Thus, verse one describes the context that will be dealt with in the rest of the chapter, which is the Lord coming to gather His church at the Rapture.

Verses 6 and 7 continue with the same context when they say, “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.” The Antichrist, Paul is saying, cannot come to power until the restrainer is first removed. Well then, who is the restrainer? Some say the restrainer is Rome. However, Rome is gone, and the restraint is still present since the Antichrist has not yet come forward. Others say the restrainer is Satan, but why would the devil fight the Antichrist who is on the devil’s side (2 Thess. 2:9)? Did not Jesus say a house divided against itself cannot stand (Matt. 12:25-26)? Still others contend that the restrainer is human government. However, as those living under tyrannical dictatorships will testify,

human government many times does not restrain evil but rather contributes to it. Still others claim that the restrainer is Michael, the archangel. However, Jude 9 indicates that Michael does not typically openly contest or even argue with Satan. Rather, he simply says the Lord rebuke you. [Jude 9, “But Michael the archangel, when he disputed with the devil and argued about the body of Moses, did not dare pronounce against him a railing judgment, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you!’”]

I believe that this restrainer is none other than the Holy Spirit, the third member of the Trinity. Several reasons lead me to this conclusion. *First*, the Holy Spirit is omnipotent deity (Acts 5:3-4). Only such omnipotent power could hold back the coming lawless one, who will be Satan’s man of the hour and directly empowered by him (2 Thess. 2:9). *Second*, in the Greek text there is a switch in gender in the participle “restrainer” from neuter in verse 6 to masculine in verse 7. Such a switch in gender well describes the Holy Spirit because the Greek noun for spirit is *pneuma*, which is a neuter noun. However, Jesus in the Upper Room also referred to the Spirit through the masculine pronoun “He” (John 14:16). For example, in John 16:13 Jesus of the Holy Spirit said, “But when *He*, the Spirit of truth, comes, *He* will guide you into all the truth; for *He* will not speak on *His* own initiative, but whatever *He* hears, *He* will speak; and *He* will disclose to you what is to come” (italics added).

Third, we know from other Scriptures that the Holy Spirit is very active in the world restraining evil the same way that the restrainer is depicted in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7. For example, the Holy Spirit was striving with man for one hundred and twenty years prior to the global Flood (Gen. 6:3). Moreover, it is the Holy Spirit that places men and women throughout the world under conviction in the present age to trust in Jesus Christ to receive personal salvation (John 16:7-11). Therefore, an understanding of the Holy Spirit as the restrainer fits very well with other verses describing the Spirit’s activity of restraining evil in the world.

Thus, the restrainer that is now holding back the Antichrist is the omnipotent Holy Spirit. Where does the Holy Spirit live? He lives inside the child of God (Rom. 8:9) and He lives within us forever (John 14:16). The Holy Spirit permanently indwells all Christians. Thus, all Spirit indwelt Christians must be removed before the Antichrist can come to power. Paul, in verses six and seven is describing the physical departure of the church, which must transpire before the Antichrist can arrive on the scene.

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 of *apostasia* can refer to a physical departure, it is only natural and logical to supply a physical departure understanding to this word in 2Thessalonians 2:3a. Such an interpretation finds ample support in both the extended and immediate context. Why would I read into this word *apostasia* a doctrinal departure when the context is very clear that he is dealing with subjects related to a physical departure?

Second Thessalonians 2:3a is Part of a Review Course

People sometimes ask, if the physical departure view is the correct interpretation of *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a, then why does not this verse not simply say *harpazō* or “Rapture”? The answer to this question relates to the fact that Paul employs numerous terms to describe the Rapture in his writings. Examples include *ryhomai* (1 Thess. 1:10), *parousia* (2 Thess. 2:1), *episynagōgē* (2 Thess. 2:1), *apokalypsis* (1 Cor. 1:7), *epiphaneia* (Titus 2:13), and *harpazō* (1 Thess. 4:17). If Paul does use a variety of terms to depict the Rapture, it should not be surprising to find him using another term like *apostasia* in Second Thess. 2:3a.

The answer to this question also relates to the fact that that Paul is giving a review type of course in 2 Thessalonians 2. The Apostle Paul had already taught the Thessalonian believers about the Rapture (1 Thess. 1:10; 4:13-18). Because Paul uses a

variety of terms earlier in 1 and 2 Thessalonians to describe the Rapture (rescues, caught up, gathering, etc...), it's not surprising that he would use yet another term here. In fact, in 2 Thessalonians 2:5, Paul unlocks the meaning of this entire passage. He says, "Do you not remember that while I was still with you I was telling you these things?" What Paul is doing in 2 Thessalonians 2 is he is reviewing ground that he has already covered. When you review prior ground, you do not lay the fundamentals down all over again, do you? You do not use the identical vocabulary that you used previously. I am a teacher in a college and when I review for the test, I do not re-teach all the material covered earlier in the semester. I use different words. What Paul is doing here is a review course, and that is why he does not use the identical language that he used to describe the Rapture in 1 Thessalonians.

It is also worth noting that that the mere absence of the word *harpazō* should not, in and of itself, disqualify a passage, like 2 Thessalonians 2:3a, from being a Rapture passage since many commonly accepted Rapture passages (John 14:1-3; 1 Thess. 1:10; 1 Cor. 15:50-58; Titus 2:13) also fail to employ the term *harpazō*. Moreover, many would also consider the catching up of the two witnesses during the Tribulation period as a type of a Rapture (Rev. 11:12), even though the verb *harpazō* is not employed there either. In sum, understanding that Paul is using stylistically different words when reviewing material explains why the Apostle does not use terms previously used to describe the Rapture such as "caught up" or *harpazō* (1 Thess. 4:17) and "rescues" or *ryhomai* (1 Thess. 1:10). Rather, Paul employs the stylistically different word *apostasia*, with the same meaning: physical departure.

Early Bible Translations Better Convey the Physical Departure View

Why are so many modern-day Christians unaware of the physical departure interpretation of the *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a? After all, some of the earliest English Bible translators translated "apostasy" (2 Thess. 2:3a) in a way that is harmonious

with the physical departure perspective. Interestingly, Jerome, going back to the fourth century, translated the New Testament from Greek into Latin in what is called the Latin Vulgate. It is called the Vulgate because Vulgate means common. Latin was the common language of the day. Jerome wanted the Bible readable in the common language of the day, which in the fourth century was Latin. From the word Vulgate, we get the word “vulgar,” as in common, earthy speech. When Jerome translated 2 Thessalonians 2:3a he used the Latin word *discessio*, which means departure.

In addition, many of the earliest English translations similarly translated the Greek noun *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a as “departure” or “departing.” The following early English Bible translations all translated *apostasia prōton* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a as “Departynge first”: the Wycliffe Bible (1384), the Tyndale Bible (1526), the Coverdale Bible (1535), and the Cranmer Bible (1539). Similarly, the following early English Bible translations all translated *apostasia prōton* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a as “Departing first”: the Breeches Bible (1576), the Beza Bible (1583), and the Geneva Bible (1608).²⁴ Thus, they all translated this noun, *apostasia*, harmoniously with a physical departure in verse 3a.

Some seek to mitigate this point by going to the notes of these various English translations and noting that they understood the word “departure” in a spiritual sense. However, such a response seems to miss the point concerning why this evidence is being presented. Our point here is not to prove that all of these English translations and Jerome were somehow rapturists or physical departure adherents. Rather, it is merely to offer an explanation as to why today’s Christian public largely finds the physical departure view foreign.

²⁴ House, 270.

How did a spiritual departure translation of *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a then enter the translation history of the English Bible versions? Thomas Ice offers the following explanation:

Most scholars say that no one knows the reason for the translation shift. However, a plausible theory has been put forth by Martin Butalla in his Master of Theology thesis produced at Dallas Theology Seminary in 1998. It appears that the Catholic translation into English from Jerome's Latin Vulgate known as the Rheims Bible (1576) was the first to break the translation trend. "Apostasia was revised from 'the departure' to 'the Protestant Revolt,'" explains Butalla. "Revolution is the terminology still in use today when Catholicism teaches the history of the Protestant Reformation. Under this guise, apostasia would refer to a departure of Protestants from the Catholic Church." The Catholic translators appear eager to engage in polemics against the Reformation by even allowing it to impact Bible translation.²⁵

If this analysis is correct, the shift from a physical to a spiritual understanding of *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a in the Roman Catholic Rheims Bible English translation appears to have been theologically rather than exegetically motivated.

Furthermore, in 1611 the King James translators translated *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a with the expression, "falling away." This is perhaps the second time that we begin to see a spiritual departure understanding of this verse enter an English translation. Why did the King James translators translate it more in harmony with a spiritual departure view when virtually everybody else, going back to Jerome, translated it as "departure"? The answer most likely lies in the fact the KJV translation was created in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. Consequently, the translators wanted to apply the verse to the Roman Catholic Church, which represented a "falling away" from the truth. Thus, the translators of both the Rheims Bible and the KJV errantly embraced the theological interpretation "falling way" in lieu of the longstanding exegetical interpretation "departing" that had been faithfully handed

²⁵ Thomas Ice, "The 'Departure' in 2 Thessalonians 2:3," online: www.pre-trib.org, accessed 7 May 2017, 2.

down to them.

Most modern translations follow the pattern established by the King James Version. The New King James, NIV, RSV, ASV, the Jerusalem Bible, and the New American Standard Bible do not say “departure.” Rather, they translate *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a as a doctrinal or spiritual departure by using such language as “apostasy, falling away, revolt, rejection, or rebellion.” Understanding this translation history helps explain why so many today have never heard of the physical departure view. The reason most today have never heard it before is because we are all today following modern English translations that follow the spiritual departure oriented translation found in the King James Version. However, the earliest English translations, and even the Latin translation of the Bible, going all the way back to the fourth century translated the *apostasia* not with words or phrases harmonious with a spiritual falling away, but rather with words in better harmony with physical removal. For those living prior to the advent of the King James Version of 1611, they arguably would have been more aware and open to the physical departure understanding of 2 Thessalonians 2:3a. Again, this evidence is offered as an answer to the question: why are so many modern-day Christians unaware of the physical departure interpretation of the *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a?

The Physical Departure View is Held by Credible Scholars

Although it remains a minority position today, the physical departure view is still held by many credible Bible scholars. Among them are the Greek scholar Kenneth Wuest²⁶ as well as others such as John R. Rice,²⁷ J.S. Mabie, E. Schuyler English,²⁸ J.

²⁶ Kenneth S. Wuest, *Prophetic Light in the Present Darkness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 38-41. See also E. Schuyler English, "Let the Prophets Speak: Is It the Apostasy or the Rapture That Is Referred to in 2 Thessalonians 2:3?," *Our Hope*, (June 1950): 730-31. For physical departure adherents cited in this article, their direct response is provided to an inquiry as sent out by E. Schuyler English, who is the author of this article.

Dwight Pentecost,²⁹ Stanley Ellison,³⁰ Allen McRae,³¹ Clarence Mason,³² Thomas Ice,³³ and Gordon Lewis.³⁴ At the popular level, Grant Jeffrey³⁵ and Gary Stearman³⁶ both hold to the physical departure interpretation as well. From personal interaction, I am aware of other well-known teachers who hold the physical departure view. Among them are Tim LaHaye, David Hocking, Don Stewart, and Bob Thieme. Lesser-known adherents to the physical departure view include John Lineberry,³⁷ Matin Butalla,³⁸ and Daniel Davey.³⁹

Because the physical departure view is frequently and unfairly maligned as unscholarly or even heretical, it is important to note the many other luminaries who either

²⁷ John R. Rice, *The Coming Kingdom of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Sword of the Lord, 1945), 188-91.

²⁸ E. Schuyler English, *Re-Thinking the Rapture: An Examination of What the Scriptures Teach as to the Time of the Translation of the Church in Relation to the Tribulation* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1954), 67-71.

²⁹ English, "Let the Prophets Speak: Is It the Apostasy or the Rapture That Is Referred to in 2 Thessalonians 2:3?," 727-29.

³⁰ Stanley A. Ellison, *A Biography of a Great Planet* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1975), 121.

³¹ English, "Let the Prophets Speak: Is It the Apostasy or the Rapture That Is Referred to in 2 Thessalonians 2:3?," 723-25.

³² *Ibid.*, 726-27.

³³ Ice, "The 'Departure' in 2 Thessalonians 2:3."

³⁴ Lewis: 217-18.

³⁵ Grant Jeffrey, "Timing of the Rapture," youtube.com: <https://youtu.be/IEIFUnDPF0s?si=AInYCmpuX87G-sB4>, accessed 22 November 2024. See from 10:30 to 11 minutes.

³⁶ Gary Stearman, "Andy Woods: The Apostasy Controversy," youtube.com: <https://youtu.be/nU-S22S5gTM?si=04F7zOzRv138Z8bf>, accessed 22 November 2024.

³⁷ John Lineberry, *Vital Word Studies in 2 Thessalonians: A Sound Presentation Based Upon the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 41-42.

³⁸ Matin W. Butalla, "The Departure of the Restraint in 2 Thessalonians 2:3" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1998).

³⁹ Daniel K. Davey, "The Apostasy of 2 Thessalonians 2:3" (Th.M. thesis, Detroit Theological Baptist Seminary, 1982).

hold to the view or at least acknowledge its viability. The existence of such interpreters, in itself, certainly does not prove the veracity of the view. However, it does show the credibility of the view and the fact that interpreters are upon a respected and well-trodden path when they embrace it. Here are a few block quotes showcasing these physical departure interpreters. Lengthy block quotes are used here enabling the reader to gain a better understanding of the sound thought process, logic, and exegesis involved in arriving at the physical departure perspective.

H. Wayne House

Upon conversing with Dr. House on the subject, he seems to keep his cards somewhat close to the vest in disclosing his own personal view. However, he at least argues that the physical departure view is credible and should be taken seriously.

The noun form allows for *apostasia* as a simple departure in the classical period, proved by examples from Liddell and Scott...If one says that this is not important because the meaning is only classical or ancient and thus lost its meaning by the time of the New Testament, then I may turn to the same root meaning of *apostasia* in the patristic era immediately following the New Testament period, as indicated in the definitions for the noun form in Lampe's *Patristic Greek Lexicon*. Although the noun used in the sense of spatial departure is not the normal meaning...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.”⁴⁰

Arnold Fruchtenbaum

I was delighted to learn that Dr. Fruchtenbaum, upon reading my little booklet on the subject entitled “The Falling Away,”⁴¹ had changed his position away from the spiritual departure view and instead had embraced a physical departure understanding of

⁴⁰ House, 273.

⁴¹ Andy Woods, *The Falling Away: Spiritual Departure or Physical Rapture?: A Second Look at 2 Thessalonians 2:3* (Taos, NM: Dispensational Publishing House, 2018).

the passage. He even revised his 2020 edition of *Footsteps of the Messiah* accordingly.

Here is what he had to say:

The 2020 revision primarily focuses on correcting some formatting and spelling inconsistencies of the 2003–edition of this work as well as the editing of the text to improve its readability. Furthermore, it includes a new topical index as well as my altered view of II Thessalonians 2:3, which I developed after additional research of new scholarly work, such as Dr. Andy Woods’ *The Falling Away – Spiritual Departure or Physical Rapture?*, published in 2018 by Dispensational Publishing House.⁴²

Elsewhere, Fruchtenbaum similarly notes:

In previous editions of this work, I presented a different viewpoint: that the term *apostasia* was referring to the apostasy of the church. The fact that in the last days, the church will depart from the faith is clearly taught in other passages, such as I Timothy 4:1-3. But is that true also of II Thessalonians 2:3? That was my assumption for many years, but at one point I began questioning this conclusion. One reason I held this position was based on viewing II Thessalonians 2:3 from the perspective of systematic theology where conclusions are drawn from all sources. My conclusions on the II Thessalonian passage were drawn from the I Timothy passage. The second reason was based on another fact. I already knew that the Greek term *apostasia* could refer to a physical departure as well as a moral, ethical, or spiritual departure. In the vast majority of appearances, the term is used in the latter sense. Hence, the vast majority of theologians, including me, interpret II Thessalonians 2:3 according to this meaning of the term. Rather than continuing to interpret the verse primarily from the viewpoint of systematic theology, I decided to research it from the perspective of biblical theology, which focuses more on a specific biblical writer and/or book. In this case, the focus was on both epistles to the Thessalonians before interpreting one verse in one of the epistles through a verse from a different book by the same author, but addressed to a different audience and written in a different context. Paul wrote I and II Thessalonians to the same church responding to questions they had written to him. In the first epistle, Paul dealt with the Rapture of the church (4:13-18) and the day of the Lord (5:1-11). He clearly taught that the day of the Lord will not overtake the believer, but only the unbeliever, since believers are not appointed to wrath (v. 9) and the antecedent to wrath is the day of the Lord (v. 2). The verses show a pre-tribulational Rapture. Between the two epistles, false teachers had come into the church announcing that the day of the Lord had begun. The news troubled the Thessalonians greatly, since it was the opposite of what Paul had taught them both in person and in writing (in the first epistle). So, Paul wrote

⁴² Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events*, rev. ed. (San Antonio, TX: Ariel, 2020), xviii.

them the second epistle to let them know that it was not possible for them to be in the day of the Lord since two things had to precede this time, the first of which was the *apostasia*. This fact raised a question in my mind: Is it possible that Paul mentioned the *apostasia* in II Thessalonians 2:3 in order to reaffirm what he had written in the first epistle, namely, that the believers would not enter the day of the Lord? What finally helped to convince me is Dr. Andy Woods' booklet *The Falling Away: Spiritual Departure or Physical Departure?*, published by Dispensational Publishing House in 2018. Among the points Woods makes are the following: 1. There have always been doctrinal departures, even in the first century (p. 6-8). 2. There is a definite article before the noun *apostasia*, just as there is a definite article before 'man of sin' in the same verse. Woods states: 'By providing these two definite articles essentially Paul is indicating that the apostasy will be something that has specific, time-bound qualities just like the man of sin's coming has such qualities.' 'In other words, just like the advent of the man of sin will be specific and an instantaneous event in future history, the coming *apostasia*, or departure, will similarly be specific and time bound . . . [It] will also take place instantaneously.' (p. 15-16). 3. The Greek noun *apostasia* can refer to a physical departure, and examples include Matthew 5:31, 19:7; and Mark 10:4 (p. 17-20). 4. The verbal form of *apostasia* is *aphistēmi*. Woods states: 'Only three times does the verb *aphistēmi* mean a spiritual departure [Lk. 8:13; I Tim. 4:1; Heb. 3:12] . . . However, the majority of times, or a full seventy-five percent of instances where *aphistēmi* is used in the Greek New Testament, it does not refer to a spiritual departure, but rather to a physical departure.' 'Thus, while this verb is used 15 times, only three times does it mean a spiritual departure. The remaining twelve times it clearly means a physical departure.' (p. 21). Woods made additional observations in his booklet, but these four were the main points that finally convinced me that II Thessalonians 2:3 is speaking of a physical departure, which will be the Rapture of the church. Hence, the verse provides additional evidence for a pre-tribulational Rapture.⁴³

C. Gordon Olson

As indicated earlier, New Testament scholar C. Gordon Olson, in his recent Greek-English translation, embraces the physical departure view. He writes:

'Let no one deceive you in anyway, for that day will not come unless the departure comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.' . . . The Greek Apostasy means a departure, as does its verb *aphistēmi*. It can refer to a physical departure, a spiritual departure, or a rebellion. The Rapture of Christians would be a physical departure, which is supported by his announced subject in 2:1, 'our gathering together unto him' (cf. 1 Th. 4:13-

⁴³ Ibid., 546-47.

18). Otherwise, Paul never returned to his declared topic in a lapse of thought, which raises questions. Only two other versions so render it: GNV & WEB.⁴⁴

Henry M. Morris

I was encouraged to discover that Henry M. Morris, the scientist and founder of the young earth creationist movement, was also an advocate of the physical departure perspective. In his Defender's Bible, he notes:

2:3 *falling away*. The 'falling away' (Greek *apostasia*) has commonly been translated as the apostasy (the definite article in the Greek indicates Paul had already told them about it), and then assumed to apply to the final, great religious apostasy at the end of the age. The context, however, as well as the etymology of the word itself, makes this interpretation unlikely. In this precise form, it is used nowhere else in the New Testament, so its meaning must be defined by its context here. It is derived from two Greek words, *apo* (meaning 'away from') and *stasis* (meaning 'standing'). It could properly be rendered 'standing away' instead of 'falling away.' In Paul's previous letter, he made no reference to a coming departure from the faith, but he had discussed, at length, a coming departure from the earth by all believers when Christ returns to meet them in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). This standing away from, in context, seems to refer to all the Raptured believers standing away from the earth, as they stand before their returning Lord when they meet Him in the heavens. Here, Paul is reminding them that the 'sudden destruction' that would come upon unbelievers when the day of the Lord begins could not happen until the Rapture - the standing away from the earth before Christ (Romans 14:10) - had taken place. The entire context, before and after, fits this understanding of the text better than the idea of the apostasy from the faith. Over the 1950 years since Paul wrote these lines, there have been numerous great apostasies from the faith, and none of these introduced the day of the Lord, although the persecuted believers in each case might easily have so interpreted them.⁴⁵

J. Carl Laney

Notice also the words of J. Carl Laney in his embracement of the physical departure view:

The Greek word *apostasia* it is derived from a verb meaning 'depart from' (*aphistēmi*). The most basic root meaning of *apostasia* is 'departure.' While the

⁴⁴ Olson, 261, n. B.

⁴⁵ Morris, 1337-38.

word can be used metaphorically of departure from doctrine (Acts 21:21), the context of the passage must ultimately determine its meaning. It is significant that in 2:1 Paul is writing about ‘the coming of our Lord Jesus’ and particularly about the aspect of the event, which relates to ‘our gathering to Him.’ A comparison of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 suggests that this is a clear reference to the Rapture. Two events, then, must precede the Day of the Lord—the Rapture of the church and the revelation of the Antichrist. Believers who have not experienced these events can be assumed that they are not suffering Tribulation judgments.⁴⁶

Gordon R. Lewis

Gordon R. Lewis also defends the physical departure interpretation in an article defending pretribulationism in general:

The Greek usage of *departure* (*apostasia*) is not limited to apostasy from the faith, but includes departure from a given place. Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* includes an entry for the verb and two related noun forms (*aphistemi*, *apostasia*, and *dichostasia*). The contributor, Heinrich Schlier from Marburg, concludes that the New Testament usage is limited to political and religious alienation from persons. But the root verb, he writes, means “ ‘to remove,’ either spatially, or from the context of a state or relationship, or from fellowship with a person.” 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 2:37), from the body (2 Cor. 12:8), and from a person (Acts 12:10; Luke 4:13). With Dr. Allan A. MacRae we conclude: “Thus the New Testament instances make it abundantly clear that the verb means *depart*, or *go away*, in a very wide sense, and is only in certain instances specialized to the idea of a departure from the faith.” The extension of the obvious meaning of the verb to the noun is justified not only by the common root, but by classical Greek usage. Liddel and Scott, in their authoritative lexicon of classical Greek, list as the second meaning of the noun, *departure* or *disappearance*. And they cite a commentary on Aristotle’s *Meteora* where the stiffening of a material is said to be caused by *apostasia* of water from it. One could hardly find a better analogy for the Rapture than evaporation. The translation of *he apostasia* in Tyndale’s and Cranmer’s versions was “a departure” as in the Coverdale and Geneva Bibles. Beza translated it

⁴⁶ J. Carl Laney, *Answers to Tough Questions: A Survey of Problem Passages and Issues from Every Book of the Bible* (Kregel: Grand Rapids, 1997), 289.

“departing.” Since the lawlessness and apostasy from the faith was already begun, the translation “apostasy” would not give the Thessalonians a useful sign that the day of vengeance had not come. Only the more general meaning of departure can make verse 4 accomplish its intended purpose of comforting these disturbed people.⁴⁷

Paul Lee Tan

Dr. Tan wrote an influential hermeneutics book on prophecy entitled “The Interpretation of Prophecy.” In this volume, he advocated for the physical departure interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:3a. He explained:

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 definitive 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. The best translation of the word is ‘to depart.’ The apostle Paul refers here to a definitive event, which he calls ‘the departure,’ and which will occur just before the start of the tribulation. This is the Rapture of the church. The apostle Paul uses this word in 1 Timothy 4:1, ‘some shall depart from the faith.’ The necessity for qualifying the word with the phrase ‘from the faith’ shows of the word taken by itself has no such connotation.⁴⁸

Myron Houghton

Note also the words of long-time systematic theologian Dr. Myron Houghton as he defends the physical departure view:

Reason # 1: The word which is translated “falling away” can refer to a physical departure. Note that this argument does not say that the word always or even normally has this meaning. “Departure, disappearance” is the second meaning given for this Greek word in A Greek-English Lexicon, by Liddell & Scott, I, 218. Part of the problem here is that this word is used only twice in the New Testament—here and also in Acts 21:21, where Paul is told that some accuse him of teaching a departure from Moses. In this latter passage, this word is used in the sense of a religious apostasy. In the LXX (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), this word or an older form is found in Joshua 22:22, 1 Kings 21:13, 2

⁴⁷ Lewis: 217-18.

⁴⁸ Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Dallas, TX: Paul Lee Tan Prophetic Ministries, 2015; reprint, Dallas, TX: Paul Lee Tan Prophetic Ministries, 2015), 341 n. 2.

Chronicles 29:19, 33:19, Isaiah 30:1, and Jeremiah 2:19. In these cases, the word also has the idea of religious departure. However, either the context or a descriptive phrase is used to indicate that a religious apostasy is meant. Therefore, it might be argued that the word itself was more general. In the New Testament, the verb form of this word is used fifteen times (Luke 2:27, 4:13, 8:13, 22:29; Acts 5:37,38, 12:10, 15:38, 19:9, 22:29; 2 Corinthians 12:8; 1 Timothy 4:1, 6:5; 2 Timothy 2:19; and Hebrews 3:12). Of the fifteen references, only three have reference to a religious departure, and these three are qualified by context (Luke 8:13) or by a descriptive phrase (1 Timothy 4:1—"from the faith" and Hebrews 3:12—"from the living God"). It is clear from some of the remaining references that a physical departure is meant (the angel who delivered Peter from prison departed from him—Acts 12:10, and Paul prayed that a thorn in the flesh might depart from him—2 Corinthians 12:8.) This word is translated *departynge* by William Tyndale (c. 1526), by Cranmer (1539), and by the Geneva Bible (1557). Beza (1565) translated it *departing*. Reason # 2: The use of the definite article ("the") lends support to the view that the falling away is the Rapture. The basic function of the article "is to point out an object or to draw attention to it. Its use with a word makes the word stand out distinctly," (Dana and Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 137). Paul is not speaking of A falling away but THE falling away. In all probability, Paul is referring to some subject he has previously discussed with the Thessalonians. Robertson agrees with this use of the article in this verse. He states: "And the use of the definite article (the) seems to mean that Paul had spoken to the Thessalonians about it." (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*, IV, 49). Now, if this is the use of the article in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, one would expect to find a place, either in 1 or 2 Thessalonians, where Paul previously referred to a departure from the faith. This writer knows of no such reference. However, there is previous reference to the Rapture of the church in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1.

Reason # 3: Paul's style of writing in this chapter also lends support to the idea that the "falling away" is the Rapture. In verse 3, Paul states that two events must occur before the day of the Lord can come, namely (1) the "falling away," and (2) the revealing of the man of sin. Paul's reference to this second event seems to be more fully described in verses 8–9. If, indeed, this is Paul's style, then verses 6 and 7, which describe the removal of the Holy Spirit and the church, would be a more detailed explanation of the first event in verse 3 (the "falling away").

Reason # 4: Paul's purpose in writing lends support to the view that the "falling away" is the Rapture. Remember the setting. The Thessalonian believers were being persecuted for their faith, and they thought they were in the Tribulation. Paul writes to tell them that they can't possibly be in the Tribulation because two things have to occur before the Tribulation can begin: the "falling away" and the revelation of the man of sin. If religious apostasy is a means by which Paul expects the Thessalonians to know whether or not they are in the Tribulation, then he has failed to prove his point because there has always been religious apostasy, even in the time of the apostle Paul, and the Thessalonians were not in a position to distinguish any present apostasy from "THE apostasy." However, if Paul was

referring to the Rapture of the church, then the Thessalonians could know with certainty that they could not yet be in the Tribulation.”⁴⁹

J. Vernon McGee

This respected Bible teacher seems to embrace the notion that both the spiritual and physical departure interpretation of the *apostasia* are mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a. He notes:

Paul says that before the Day of the Lord begins there must first come a removing. There are two kinds of removing that are going to take place. First, the organized church will depart from the faith—that is what we call apostasy. But there will be total apostasy when the Lord comes, and that cannot take place until the true church is removed. The Lord asked... “when the Son of man cometh [to the earth], shall He find faith...?” (Luke 18:8). When He says, “the faith,” He means that body of truth which He left here. The answer to His question is no, He will not find faith here when He returns. There will be total apostasy because of two things: (1) the organization of the church has separated from the faith—it has apostatized and (2) there has been another departure, the departure of the true church from the earth. The departure of the true church leads into the total apostatizing of the organized church. The Day of The Lord cannot begin—nor the Great Tribulation period—until the departure of the true church has taken place.⁵⁰

McGee’s dual approach is no doubt attractive to the postmodern mindset, which typically seeks to find common ground between two competing opposites. However, his approach also seems to run afoul of the well-accepted hermeneutical maxim that biblical texts can have only one meaning with many applications. Milton Terry explains, “A fundamental principle in grammatico-historical exposition is that the words and sentences can have but one significance in one and the same connection. The moment we neglect this principle we drift upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture.” Bernard Ramm similarly notes, “A fundamental principle in grammatico-historical

⁴⁹ Myron Houghton, “The Rapture in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-10,” online: <https://faithpulpit.faith.edu/posts/the-rapture-in-2-thessalonians-21-10>, April 2002, accessed 22 November 2024, 2.

⁵⁰ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 5 vols., vol. 5 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 5:413.

exposition is that the words and sentences can have but one significance in one and the same connection. The moment we neglect this principle we drift upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture.”⁵¹ McGee’s departure from single meaning here notwithstanding, his interpretive approach at least shows an openness to a physical departure interpretation of the passage.

David Olander

New Testament scholar David Olander, by espousing a similar interpretive approach as McGee, also demonstrates an openness to the physical departure understanding. He observes:

Apostasy has a basic root meaning of departure, departure from, or standing apart from. The question in Second Thessalonians is a departure from what? Context is the key for understanding many words in the text. Scripture uses the term apostasy in several ways...Paul had written to the Thessalonians about another departure of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18) and her gathering together unto Him (2 Thessalonians 2:1). This is the Rapture and a legitimate use of the word departure, stand apart, or apostasy. Historically the word can easily mean this. Once the church has departed. (been Raptured) there is not one believer left on the planet. This would be a total complete apostasy in several ways. In essence, one departure, or an apostasy causes the other and Paul could have easily used the word he did, referring to the secondary part (those left behind on the planet) in total.⁵²

Jimmy DeYoung

Long-time popular prophecy teacher Jimmy DeYoung also espoused the physical departure view.

Our key verse for this devotional, verse 3, has become somewhat controversial. There are those that believe that the Antichrist will come when the ‘falling away’ of the church, apostasy in the Church, has happened. This then seems to be saying

⁵¹ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 113.

⁵² David Olander, *The Greatness of the Rapture* (Fort Worth, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2015), 100-101.

that the church will be here when the Antichrist appears. This belief comes from a wrong understanding of the Greek word used in the passage and translated, ‘a falling away’...A close and careful word study of the Greek word apostasia will conclude that the true meaning of the word is found in the phrase, ‘departing from one place and going to another’, not a falling away from the doctrines of the church. If the word ‘apostasia’ was communicating that ‘apostasy’ was what it was talking about then the Rapture and the coming of the Antichrist would have happened during the writing of II Thessalonians. Apostasy had infiltrated the early church by the time Paul wrote this passage. What Paul is saying here is that the Antichrist, the ‘Son of Perdition’, would not come until the Church departs from one place and goes to another. That is what happens at the Rapture. The scenario for the future according to all prophetic passages is that the Rapture takes all Christians into Heaven and then the Antichrist appears on earth. Let me remind you that all preparations have been made for the temple to be built in Jerusalem. False teachers and deception presently are a part of our society today, which indicates that Antichrist is nearing his appearance on earth. Remember, before the appearance of Antichrist and the temple is built, the Rapture happens. Actually, the Rapture could happen at any moment. Be ready!⁵³

Chuck Smith

Chuck Smith, the spiritual father of the worldwide Calvary Chapel movement, also embraced the physical departure interpretation. He noted:

The "day" referred to here is the Day of Judgment. "Falling away" comes from the Greek word for "depart." This may refer to the Rapture of the Church, for the Day of Judgment will come after the Rapture. It may be a reference to people departing from the faith, for Paul spoke of another departure (1 Timothy 4:1) and used the same Greek word. However, in 1 Timothy Paul added the words "depart from the faith" instead of "depart" alone.⁵⁴

Jimmy Swaggart

Despite his infamy related to his involvement in well-publicized scandals going back to the 1980's, Jimmy Swaggart continues to have a large influence in the Charismatic-Pentecostal wing of evangelicalism in general and within the Assemblies of

⁵³ Jimmy DeYoung, “2 Thessalonians 2:3.”

⁵⁴ Chuck Smith, “Study Guide for 2 Thessalonians,” online: https://www.blueletterbible.org/comm/smith_chuck/studyguides_2thessalonians/2thessalonians.cfm, accessed 22 November 2024.

God Denomination in particular. Swaggart embraces the physical departure view in his Expositor's Bible. Such adherence demonstrates the trans-denominational status within Christendom that the physical departure view enjoys.

³ Let no man deceive you by any means (*in other words, don't listen to that which is Scripturally incorrect*) : for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first (*should have been translated, "for that day shall not come, except there come a departure first"*); *this speaks of the Rapture, which, in essence, says the Second Coming cannot take place until certain things happen*), and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition (*this speaks of the Antichrist, who must come upon the world scene before the Second Coming*);⁵⁵

Objections to the Physical Departure Interpretation

Now that the arguments have been made for the physical departure interpretation of the *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a, let us briefly respond to some of the typical objections that are offered by its detractors.

Greek from the Koine Period

Physical departure critics contend that there is no example from the Koine period, which was the time period of the New Testament, where the noun *apostasia* is used of a spatial departure that is on par with a departure as in a Rapture. Hiebert expresses this mindset when he says, "In view of the Old Testament usage of the term, any reader familiar with the Greek Old Testament, or the history of the Maccabees, would understand the word when thus used by itself to mean an apostasy from the faith."⁵⁶ Earlier some evidence was presented from the LXX translation from 2 Chronicles 29:19. If such evidence is rejected on the grounds that is not dealing with a vertical nor a human separation, then I think it is enough at this point simply to acknowledge that we do not know everything there is to know about the Koine period.

⁵⁵ Jimmy Swaggart, *The Expositor's New Testament, King James Version* (Pennsauken, NJ: BookBaby, 2011), 812.

⁵⁶ Hiebert, 332.

We possess but a small fraction of all activity and literary output from that era, or any historical era for that matter. Perhaps there remains something directly on point yet to be discovered. This sentiment should come as no great surprise to members of the Pre-Tribulation Study Group. When this group began thirty-three years ago, there were no known pre-Darby pre-Tribulation Rapture statements. However, today, close to forty such statements have been discovered. Is it too much to think that something similar could take place relative to a physical departure use of the *apostasia*?

Subtraction from the Last Days Being Characterized by Continual Apostasy?

Others have already included 2 Thessalonians 2:3a in their list of scriptural predictions as they highlight the last days apostasy of the church.⁵⁷ Perhaps such an inclusion comes with a concern that if 2 Thessalonians 2:3a is instead converted into a Rapture passage that the biblical case for the last days spiritual departure of the church is somehow weakened. However, I for one strongly believe that the Scripture predicts the doctrinal and spiritual decline of Christendom in the last days. Not only have I written on this subject, but I have warned of it in both my pulpit and conference ministries. However, I embrace that perspective from Paul's latter writings rather from the early Thessalonian letters, which are more focused on the theme of Christ's return. In other words, while my belief in the last days defection of Christianity remains intact, that belief does not come from 2 Thessalonians 2:3a but from other New Testament passages (1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 4:3-4, etc.). So, in my estimation, embracing the physical departure perspective in no way negates from the doctrine of the church's last days apostasy.

⁵⁷ Hitchcock and Kinley, 29-33.

Incongruence with Verse 1

Some suggest that *apostasia* is an unlikely term for the Rapture given the terms that Paul uses to describe the Rapture in the same context. For example, in verse 1, Paul describes the Rapture through his use of the terms *parousia* and *episynagōgē*. Why would Paul not use similar terminology just two verses later in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a but instead shift to the remote term *apostasia*? Along these lines, Hiebert asks, “Paul has just referred to the Rapture as ‘our gathering together unto him’ (v. 1); why then should he now use this unlikely term to mean the same thing?”⁵⁸ Some employ a similar argument by contending that if Paul wanted to convey the Rapture in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a, he would have used the word *harpazō*. After all, this is the word that Paul employed in a clear Rapture passage (1 Thess. 4:13-18) written just a short time earlier in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. As indicated previously, the answer to this question relates to the fact that Paul employs numerous terms to describe the Rapture in his writings. Examples include *ryhomai* (1 Thess. 1:10), *parousia* (2 Thess. 2:1), *episynagōgē* (2 Thess. 2:1), *apokalypsis* (1 Cor. 1:7), *epiphaneia* (Titus 2:13), and *harpazō* (1 Thess. 4:17). Paul’s linguistic description of the Rapture is quite sophisticated. If Paul does use a variety of terms to depict the Rapture, it should not be surprising to find him using yet another term like *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a.

Apostasy is Active and the Rapture is Passive

Some physical departure critics maintain that apostasy is something that man does and that this notion is incompatible with the Rapture, which places the onus completely on God. For example, Hiebert notes:

Within recent times certain evangelical Bible teachers have proposed that *hē apoastasia*, following a secondary meaning of the term, should be rendered “the departure,” meaning the Rapture of the church. But this interpretation is not in

⁵⁸ Hiebert, 331.

harmony with the nature of the Rapture. Nowhere else does the Scripture speak of the Rapture as “the departure.” A departure denotes an act on the part of the individual or company departing. But the Rapture is not an act of departure on the part of the saints. In the Rapture, the church is passive, not active. At the Rapture, the church is “caught up” or “snatched away,” an event wherein the Lord acts to transport believers from earth into His presence (1 Thess. 4:16–17). Everything that takes place with the believer at the Rapture is initiated by the Lord and done by Him. Paul has just referred to the Rapture as “our being gathered to him” (v. 1); why then should he now use this unlikely term to mean the same thing? But to apply the term to the apostasy is to give it its proper meaning, since the apostasy is the action of professed believers.⁵⁹

However, such an active meaning seems more compatible with a spiritual understanding of the word “departure” rather than a physical understanding. Even if true, there are actions in the Bible caused by God that seem to be narrated from both the active and passive point of view. Take as an example Christ’s Ascension. The energy for the Ascension seems to have been caused by God the Father (Acts 1:9; Eph. 1:20). Yet, when the Ascension itself is described, it seems frequently as if Jesus, or God the Son, is causing the action. In fact, both the active and passive seem to be in play in Luke 24:51, which says, “While He was blessing them, *He parted from them and was carried up* into heaven.”⁶⁰ Why cannot the Rapture not also be given this same full or complete description? Some verses could be describing the event from the divine perspective while other verses could be describing the identical event from the human perspective. Such a complete description of the glorious and majestic event concluding the Church Age, known as the Rapture, would be expected in God’s Word, which is characterized by verbal inspiration upon every word (Matt. 4:4) and even the smallest stroke of the pen (Matt. 5:18).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Italics added.

The Rapture Cannot Happen Until the Rapture Happens

Some reject the physical departure interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:3a on the grounds that Paul had already re-assured the Thessalonians that they had not missed the Rapture in verse 2. Therefore, it would be incomprehensible to read verse 3a as communicating the Rapture cannot happen unless the Rapture happens first. Those who use this argument typically rely on the King James Version, which uses the expression “the day of Christ” in verse 2 rather than “the day of the Lord.” “The day of Christ” is frequently used in the New Testament in reference to the Rapture (1 Cor. 1:7-8) or the heavenly events immediately following it, such as the Bema Judgment Seat of rewards (Philip. 2:16). They in turn believe that “the day” mentioned in verse 3 refers back to “the day of Christ” mentioned in verse 2. Therefore, to translate the *apostasia* in verse 3a as the Rapture would create an internal contradiction in the verse by making it say the Rapture (“day”) cannot happen unless the Rapture (*apostasia*) happens first. Because such an interpretation would be nonsensical, they reject the Rapture interpretation of the *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a. Here is the internal contradiction they believe is created in 2 Thessalonians 2:2-3 by the physical departure interpretation of the *apostasia*.

² not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ [Rapture] had come. ³ Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day [Rapture] shall not come, except there come a falling away [Rapture] first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition (NKJV).⁶¹

However, notice that the NASB in verse 2 does not use the expression “the day of Christ” but rather “the day of the Lord.” This latter expression “the day of the Lord” likely refers to the coming Tribulation period and beyond. The concept goes back to the first reference to the word “day” in the Bible (Gen. 1:5). Here, a day is characterized by having both “evening and morning.” Genesis 1:5 says, “God called the

⁶¹ Underlining and brackets added.

light day, and the darkness He called night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day [yôm].”⁶² The repetition of “the day” in 2 Thessalonians 2:2-3 would therefore refer to first the evening, or the wrath of God poured out on planet earth in the events of the Tribulation period. The evening would then be followed by the morning, or the breaking forth of the dawn during the glorious Kingdom age to commence after the Tribulation period’s conclusion.

This difference between these English versions relates to a textual critical issue between manuscripts. Most concur that the earlier manuscripts favor “the day of the Lord” reading. Also, Paul earlier refers to the Tribulation period as “the day of the Lord” (1 Thess. 5:2-3). If this latter reading is correct, here is how 2 Thessalonians 2:2-3 reads.

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 [the tribulation period] has come. ³ Let no one in any way deceive you, for it [the tribulation period] will not come unless the apostasy [Rapture] comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction.⁶³

Thus, with this preferred reading, the alleged contradiction involving the physical departure interpretation disappears. All these verses are saying is that the *apostasias* (Rapture) transpires “first” (*prōton*) before “the day of the Lord” (the Tribulation period) begins. In sum, this objection to the physical departure interpretation of the *apostasias* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a comes from a variant reading of Scripture that not all embrace.

Conclusion

What I am trying to get at is simply this: what Paul is saying in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a is first, before the man of sin comes and the Tribulation period begins, there will be a physical departure of the Church via the Rapture. What Paul is saying to the beleaguered and bewildered Thessalonians who were deceived by forged

⁶² Underlining and brackets added.

⁶³ Underlining and brackets added.

letters allegedly having emanated from Paul, indicating that the Day of the Lord had already begun, is that they could not possibly be in the Tribulation period because they are still physically present on planet earth. In other words, the Thessalonians are not in the Tribulation period because the Tribulation itself will not take place until there is first a physical removal of the church via the Rapture.

Ten reasons cause me to hold to this position. No singular point in and of itself “seals the deal.” However, when these ten points are considered cumulatively, a powerful case emerges that Paul is speaking of a physical departure through his use of the word *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a. Since doctrinal departures would have been considered normative throughout the Church Age, how could that, in and of itself, be a definitive sign of the end? Also, the Thessalonian letters are very early letters, where Paul does not get into the subject of an end-time doctrinal or spiritual departure. Moreover, the definite article in front of the noun *apostasia* lends support to the physical departure view by conveying its instantaneous rather than gradual nature. In addition, because both the noun and the verb emanating from the same root can be used very clearly to refer to physical departures, the extended context and the immediate context must be consulted to define the meaning of *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a. Also, both the extended context and the immediate context favor the physical departure rendering of *apostasia*. Moreover, Paul does not use the same word “Rapture” that he used earlier since 2 Thessalonians 2 is merely a review session. Also, early Bible translations did their translation work in a way that harmonized with the physical departure view. Finally, the physical departure view is held by credible scholars. Not only is this physical departure view more exegetically satisfying than its spiritual departure perspective counterparts, but most of the objections raised against the physical departure view seem answerable.

If what I have said is true, then it is time to stop debating the timing of the

Rapture. The debate is settled. The Rapture of the church will take place “first” before the Tribulation period begins. We can develop certainty in the return of Jesus Christ to take us out of the world physically before the events of the Tribulation period transpire. Titus 2:13 is indeed our firm blessed hope, which says, “looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.”

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