

A Review of Dr. Thomas Ice's Article: The Rapture in 2 Thessalonians 2:3

Introduction

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction... (2 Thess 2:1-3; NASU)

In an article entitled “The Rapture in 2 Thessalonians 2:3,”¹ Dr. Thomas Ice seeks to prove that the Pre-Tribulation rapture doctrine is supported by the words of Paul. He claims that the Greek word *apostasia* should be translated *departure* (which he understands to mean *physical departure*) rather than *apostasy* or *falling away* in the sense of religious or political “rebellion.” This article will examine the methodology Dr. Ice employs to establish the foundation of his case. The Pre-Tribulation rapture doctrine itself will only be addressed in a secondary sense. Our main focus will be on his methodology.

It is our position that Dr. Ice builds his case on an erroneous understanding at the word level. Subsequent assumptions are made which simply add to the problem. We will examine a few of the key components of his presentation including core meaning, etymology, lexicography, etc. We hope to keep the baggage from each preceding argument to a minimum in an effort to make this paper relatively painless to read.

Dr. Ice's Position

It seems best to allow Dr. Ice to state his case in his own words. That being said, we encourage the reader to first refer to his article in its entirety at the web address provided in footnote number 1. (I apologize in advance for the lengthy quotations.)

Dr. Ice writes:

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

After these opening remarks, Dr. Ice continues by examining the Greek word in question;

¹ Ice, Thomas. The Rapture in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 (<http://www.pre-trib.org/article-view.php?id=165>)

² Ibid.

apostasia.

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

Core Meaning Defined

First, we wish to address Dr. Ice’s use of the term “core meaning” and then examine how his understanding of this term impacts his definition of *apostasia*. An article entitled “Core Meanings - Theoretical Considerations” supplies us with a somewhat technical definition of *core meaning*. We’ll try to make sense of it afterwards.³

The core meaning is not an objectively observable linguistic unit. Rather, it is a psychological unit, a basic notion of a character’s meaning that conveys, in the famous linguist Edward Sapir’s words, its “conceptual kernel.” Linguistically, it is not normally possible to isolate any sense of a word or character that will, by a process of logical deduction, make it possible to derive all its other senses. Often, it is not even possible to trace the origin of each sense historically and show how the individual senses relate to the character’s original meaning. The core meaning is thus not necessarily the original meaning of the character, though it often is.

The core meaning is often the direct, psychologically most dominant, meaning -- the meaning that might occur to a native speaker if presented with the character in isolation.⁴

If that was a bit confusing, reread the last paragraph as it is the most relevant to our discussion. So what can we glean from this linguistic jargon? The rather succinct definition in the last paragraph is helpful. A core meaning is psychologically the most dominant meaning. It’s the first thing that pops into one’s head upon hearing the term. For example, the word “poodle” may have a core meaning of “dog.” The term “Super Bowl” would hardly mean “kitchenware of outstanding quality” to most people. In 1800’s, the term “bricktop” would have a core meaning of “a person with reddish-brown hair” (like myself) and not “an apex composed of sun-dried clay.”

From this brief discussion, it should fairly clear that “core meaning” is determined by use in context, or *semantics*, and not *form*. It is possible that form *reflects* the meaning but form does

³ This article focuses on English and Japanese. However, the source and receptor languages do not concern us as such. The linguistic principle is applicable whether we are dealing with English, Japanese, or Greek.

⁴ Halpern, Jack. *New Japanese-English Character Dictionary*. (McGraw-Hill Companies, 1994) Section 2.2.2

not determine meaning.

Dr. Ice's Understanding of Core Meaning

How does core meaning relate to Dr. Ice's treatment of *apostasia*? If one refers back to his second paragraph, it will be seen that he has determined a core meaning based on *observable linguistic units* (i.e. component parts) and not a *psychological unit* (i.e. the meaning that might occur to a native speaker if presented with the word in isolation). Simply stated, he has *redefined* core meaning. He argued that the meaning of *apostasia* is determined by the sum of its parts. In other words, meaning is embedded in etymology.⁵ Dr. Ice's understanding of core meaning is vastly different than ours. If *form* determines core meaning, as Dr. Ice asserts in the case of *apostasia*, are we to assume that the Pre-Tribulation rapture doctrine is somehow embedded in *apostasia* at the root level? Is this the first concept that would pop into a native speaker's head? If Joe 1st Century heard the word *apostasia* in isolation, would he think of religious and political rebellion or physical departure from planet earth? If Dr. Ice wishes to assign a core meaning of *physical departure* to *apostasia* he *must* be able provide clear examples which establish *physical departure*⁶ as the dominant usage. This is the core meaning of core meaning!

Root Fallacy

As we have noted, Dr. Ice assumes that the root words forming *apostasia* determine its meaning. This is called the *root fallacy*. D.A. Carson covers this phenomenon in his little book entitled "Exegetical Fallacies." Anyone interested in studying language, particularly the Greek of the New Testament, should read and reread this book.

Carson writes:

One of the most enduring errors, the root fallacy presupposes that every word actually *has* a meaning bound up with its shape or 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 *apostolos* (apostle) is *apostello* (I send), the root meaning of 'apostle' is 'one who is sent'?⁷

After citing two more examples, Carson sums up this kind of reasoning as "linguistic nonsense." He goes on to clarify:

Normally we observe that any individual word has a certain limited semantic range, and the context may therefore modify or shape the meaning of a word only

⁵ It should also be noted that the notion of *standing* seems to have disappeared in Dr. Ice's etymology.

⁶ Actually, Dr. Ice is not arguing for *physical departure* in a general sense. He said, "this passage would be saying that the day of the Lord will not come until *the rapture* (emphasis ours) comes before it." Dr. Ice really wants *apostasia* to mean *rapture*.

⁷ Carson, D.A. Exegetical Fallacies. 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996). Pg. 28

within certain boundaries. The total semantic range is not permanently fixed, of course; with time and novel usage, it may shift considerably. Even so, I am not suggesting that words are infinitely plastic. I am simply saying that the meaning of a word cannot be reliably determined by etymology, or that a root, once discovered, always projects a certain semantic load onto any word that incorporates that root. Linguistically, meaning is not an intrinsic possession of a word; rather, “it is a set of relations for which a verbal symbol is a sign.” ...we cannot responsibly assume that etymology is related to meaning. We can only test the point by discovering the meaning of a word inductively.⁸

J.P. Louw states it this way:

It is a basic principle of modern semantic theory that we cannot progress from the form of a word to its meaning. Form and meaning are not directly correlated. Just as we cannot explain the English term ‘understand’ as meaning ‘under’ + ‘stand,’ so we cannot explain *diaxeirzo* in Acts 5:30 as ‘to lay hand upon vehemently.’ The word only means ‘to kill.’ How it was done is a matter of context, not lexicography.⁹

According to Carson and Louw, *form* does not determine *meaning*. Meaning is determined by usage, or *semantically*, regardless of whether or not it agrees with the supposed root meanings of its component parts. One cannot progress from *form* to *meaning* yet this is precisely what Dr. Ice has done. You will recall he said, “The word is a Greek compound of *apo* ‘from’ and *istemi* ‘stand’ Thus, it has the core meaning of ‘away from’ or ‘departure.’” His conclusion is based solely on etymology¹⁰ which, as hopefully the reader can see by now, is not even a safe guideline.

If Dr. Ice’s proposition were true, we should be able to apply this etymological formula to any word. For example, the word “butterfly” is an English compound of ‘butter’ and ‘fly.’ Thus, ‘butterfly’ has a core meaning of “airborne milk fat.” As one can readily see, this is patently false. (Try to explain “overhang” and “hangover” with this kind of reasoning!) How does one determine the core meaning of “butterfly” if not by etymology? Usage not form! How does one determine the core meaning of *apostasia*? Usage not form! Dr. Ice did not apply this simple rule when defining *apostasia*. The *real* core meaning, or dominant meaning, of *apostasia* contradicts his view. His position demands that *apostasia* mean *physical departure* from planet earth. However, this meaning cannot be squeezed out of *apostasia* in any context; much less the root

⁸ Ibid. Pg. 32-33

⁹ Louw, J.P. *Semantics of New Testament Greek*. (Atlanta: Scholar’s Press, 1982). Pg. 29

¹⁰ It should be noted that the notion of *standing* has disappeared from Dr. Ice’s etymology. Which root contains departure or disappearance?

level.¹¹

Lexical Problems

The last point we wish to make is regarding a statement made in Dr. Ice's second paragraph above. He said, "The Liddell and Scott Greek Lexicon defines *apostasia* first as 'defection, revolt;' then secondly as 'departure, disappearance.'"

It seems that Dr. Ice may have confused his reference. Liddell and Scott define *apostasia* as, "late form of *apostasis*, defection."¹² *Apostasia*, according to Liddell and Scott, has nothing to do with *physical departure* much less *disappearance*.¹³ They offer no secondary definition. However, if one turns to *apostasis*, of which *apostasia* is a later form, we find an entry similar to the one suggested by Dr. Ice.

Apostasis (afistamai) *a standing away from*, and so,

1. Defection, revolt *apo tinos* or *tinis* Herodotus, Thucydides; *pros tina* Thucy.
2. Departure, *Biou* Euripides
3. Distance, interval, Plato

Several things need to be pointed out here. First, Dr. Ice has referred to the wrong word. *Apostasia* is a later form of *apostasis*. We'll get back to this point in a bit. Second, the earlier form, the basis for his definition of *apostasia* in 2TH 2:3, does not appear in the New Testament at all. Third, the earlier form, *apostasis*, appears three times in the Septuagint¹⁴ where it is used for *rebellion* or *religious defection*. In our literature, *apostasis* (early) does not mean *physical departure* much less *disappearance*. Fourth, since we have no examples of *apostasis* (early) or *apostasia* (late) meaning *physical departure*, it hardly seems appropriate to assign dominant meaning status to this nonexistent usage. Fifth, the very fact that *departure* is listed *second* in the lexicon seems to indicate that it is *not* the dominant meaning! Therefore, it is not the core meaning in either period. Sixth, Dr. Ice's definition of *departure* is contrary to the lexical example to which he appeals. Definition no. 2 for *apostasis* (early) cites the Greek playwright Euripides and line 277 of his work *Hippolytus*. In this reference, *apostasin biou* means the "end

¹¹ We should also note that Dr. Ice tries to strengthen his position by appealing to verbal cognates of *apostasia*. This is a tenuous argument. For example, the meaning of *to draw*, as in *to draw a picture*, has no influence on the meaning of a *draw*; *a contest that ends in a tie*. Can cognates overlap in meaning? Certainly. In the case of *apostasia*, we would need evidence proving that the meaning of *apostasia* was impacted by a verbal cognate in the way that Dr. Ice claims. Simply stating *a verbal cognate form means such-and-such, therefore, this substantival form must carry the same meaning* is unsound - especially when clear examples of such a meaning are wanting.

¹² Liddell and Scott. *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*. 7th Ed. (Cedar Rapids: Parsons Technologies, Inc., 1998)

¹³ Dr. Ice is using an earlier edition of Liddell and Scott based on his footnotes. *Disappearance* seems to have disappeared from my revised copy of Liddell and Scott.

¹⁴ Cf. 2 Ch 28:19, 33:19; Ezra 4:19

of life.” (i.e. death)¹⁵ Though this citation seems to be the basis for his *departure* definition, we do not believe this is the type of departure Dr. Ice has in mind. *Physical departure from point A to point B* cannot be read into Euripides’ words. Even if this example helped his case, Hippolytus was written in 428 BC! How can one argue for a core meaning in a later period which is based on an earlier secondary meaning that is unrepresented in the later period and contrary to examples of both periods? Don’t move on... read that again! Seventh, of the 220+ instances of *apostasis* (early) we found, Euripides was the only writer to apply the term in such a way. As we have shown, *physical departure* was not in view.

Semantic Obsolescence

Supposing Dr. Ice could locate an example of *apostasis* (early) which in context meant *physical departure*, this still would not establish his case. Assuming archaic meanings are still valid in later periods is discussed under the fallacy of *semantic obsolescence*. D.A. Carson states:

Here the interpreter assigns to a word in his text a meaning that the word in question used to have in earlier times, but that is no longer found within the live, semantic range of the word. That meaning, in other words, is semantically obsolete.¹⁶

Let’s assume for a moment that Dr. Ice is correct and *apostasis* (early) meant *physical departure* back in 428 BC. How could *physical departure* be the core meaning of *apostasia* (late) if this usage is *semantically obsolete* in the later period? Liddell and Scott define *apostasia* (late) as *defection...* that’s it. There is no mention of *physical departure* or *disappearance*. Dr. Ice must turn to an archaic form to seek out this meaning; albeit unsuccessfully. In any case, if the dominant meaning of *apostasia* (late) is *physical departure*, we should hope to find at least one example of this usage in either the early or late period. However, we have already noted that Dr. Ice’s definition is contrary to early usage. Examples seem to be wanting in the later period as well. As far as we can tell, Dr. Ice’s definition does not exist in either period.

Closing Remarks

In conclusion, Dr. Ice’s definition does not hold true based on his arguments. His core meaning is derived from *component parts* rather than *dominant meaning*. The resultant core meaning is an anomaly rather than the most dominant meaning. Therefore, by definition, it is *not* the core

¹⁵ The line is: “Tis death she courts; such fasting aims at ending life.” Would her physical body *disappear* or *migrate* at death? See also Demosthenes, On the Embassy 19.146, where *apostasis* means *dispossession of property*. In the interest of being thorough, we tracked down approximately 220+ occurrences of *apostasis* in (continued) various genres (e.g. prose, poetry and plain ol’ history). We surveyed Aeschines, Andocides, Antiphon, Apollodorus, Appian, Aristotle, Demades, Demosthenes, Dinarchus, Diodorus Siculus, Euclid, Epictetus, Herodotus, Hyperides, Isaeus, Isocrates, Flavius Josephus, Lycurgus, Lysias, Old Oligarch, Pausanias, Plato, Plutach, Polybius, Strabo, Theophrastus, Thucydides, and Xenophon. The word consistently means: rebellion, revolt, defection, secede, desertion, mutiny and the like. *Physical departure* and *disappearance* were nowhere to be found.

¹⁶ Carson, D.A. Exegetical Fallacies. 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996). Pg. 35

meaning. He committed the “root fallacy” by asserting that the meaning of *apostasia* is based on component parts without corroborating evidence. In fact, every example of *apostasia* in biblical literature is contrary to his case. He appealed to a secondary definition of an earlier form though the later form did not carry this secondary meaning; semantic obsolescence. The secondary definition, as seen in Euripides, did not mean *departure* as Dr. Ice defines it. Even if Dr. Ice had referred to the correct word, in the correct period, with an accurate understanding of its usage, the fact that he appeals to a secondary definition reveals that it would not be the core meaning. If the Pre-Tribulation rapture doctrine is in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, it will not be established by this kind of reasoning despite Dr. Ice’s assurance: “The fact that *apostasia* most likely has the meaning of physical departure is a clear support for pretribulationism.”¹⁷

This meaning is nowhere to be found. It cannot be established contextually nor is it buried within the roots of the term as we have clearly shown. BAGD define *apostasia* as “rebellion, abandonment in a religious sense, apostasy”¹⁸ Liddell and Scott say, “defection.” Louw and Nida list *apostasia* under one semantic domain - *rebellion*.¹⁹ Dr. Ice’s definitions, *physical departure* and *disappearance*, are conspicuously absent. So what meaning would be the core meaning or the most dominant meaning? What would be the first thing to pop into Joe 1st Century’s head? Rebellion or religious abandonment.²⁰ In short, we concur with D.A. Carson, “...we cannot responsibly assume that etymology is related to meaning. We can only test the point by discovering the meaning of a word inductively.” The latter Dr. Ice did not do. His definitions could not be found in biblical literature or the 220+ instances of *apostasis* we found in secular writings. We may have missed these examples, but not for lack of effort.

¹⁷ Ice, Thomas. The Rapture in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 (<http://www.pre-trib.org/article-view.php?id=165>)

¹⁸ Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker. A Greek Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. 4th Ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). Pg. 98

¹⁹ Louw & Nida. Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains. 2nd Ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989) §39.34

²⁰ Cf. Acts 21:21, Ezra 4:12, 15, 19; Neh. 2:19, 6:6; Josh. 22:22; 2 Chron. 29:19, 33:19; Jer. 2:19 (*apostasis* and *apostasia* are represented here.) As we noted in footnote 15, in 220+ instances we surveyed in secular literature, *apostasis* consistently means: rebellion, revolt, defection, secede, desertion, mutiny and the like.