

IMPORTANT PROPHETIC METAPHORS

SYMBOLS JESUS USED IN MATTHEW 23 AND 24

First – Understand “Jerusalem”

Between Christ’s bold denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees and the time the disciples questioned Jesus, came a plaintive cry. Jesus articulated His heart-wrenching response to His people’s rejection: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem” (cf. Matthew 21:43), personifying the city. This lament follows the rhythm of a funeral dirge.¹ He then described that city as His chosen people who were to represent Him. He talks of its children, “I have gathered thy children (cf. Deuteronomy 32:12, Psalm 91:4), “even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!”

Here, the city is seen as a special mother (cf. Isaiah 54, 62:1-4), a female symbol. God’s gathering together of them was for their protection. They were to be forever part of His family. But now, because of apostasy, He said, “your house is left unto you desolate,” announcing that there is no longer a place the mother and her children, the Jewish people, can call home. Something would destroy that “lady” symbol. Though that did not materialize until A.D. 70, this prophetic statement portrays its irrevocable doom! Though the Jewish people have now set up another “state,” it is fragmented geographically, occupancy is shared with others and it is controlled by secular interests. Jesus declared its favor with God at an end (cf. Isaiah 64:10-11). The word “Jerusalem” continued as a great metaphor for *God’s people* through all subsequent ages. A *woman* is symbolic of a church, His chosen, a remnant (e.g. Genesis 3:15). Again, the warning to *His people* (Matthew 24:15) relates to *when* they are surrounded by a militant false standard, preparing to force them to submit. *When* that occurs, He passionately said, “Flee!” A deeper study will show the issue relates to a false religious standard threatening His church. The Middle East related to its first literal and symbolic meaning. That, in turn, became a metaphor for the whole world at the last end. When the “gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world ... then shall the end come (Matthew 24:14).

The “Abomination” – Historical Background

In Matthew 24:15 the abomination that leads to desolation is a warning to *flee*, separate, come away from or, as in Revelation 18:4, “come out of.” If the armies are surrounding Jerusalem, how do you flee or “come out of?” “There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God [is] faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (I Corinthians 10:13). Its first “end-time” application helps us understand the final one. God made a way of escape.

In August of 66 A.D., a major Jewish revolt against Rome occurred. Twice-per-day required sacrifices honoring the Roman emperor (Nero) were stopped. They then assaulted and murdered the Roman garrison at Masada. Judah’s curator and king, Marcus Julius Agrippa II, sent a Roman contingency of 3000 cavalry into Jerusalem to quell the unrest. Most of those troops were killed or captured by the Jews. Agrippa and his sister/wife queen, Bernice, barely

¹ Keener, Craig S.; *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (William B. Eerdmans publishing company, Grand Rapids, MI), p. 557.

escaped. News of the Roman defeat went quickly up the chain of command to Cestius Gallus, Governor of the Roman province of Syria. He was asked by Rome to intervene. Cestius was slow and indecisive and had no battlefield experience. It took several months for the Twelfth Legion, under his leadership, to leave Antioch and attack Jerusalem. He had 33,000 troops; 5680 were killed, forcing him to retreat in defeat.

Roman General Vespasian was then asked to take charge of operations. His son, Titus, and Legio XV Apollinaris from Alexandria joined him with a total of 55,000 troops in the spring of 67 A.D. By March of 68 A.D. most of Palestine was taken, except for Jerusalem. Vespasian carefully avoided that city until the country was secured. Meanwhile, Jerusalem suffered an internal reign of terror. Jewish factions had been fighting each other. Many of their military leadership lay dead.

The Roman efforts were suddenly halted with the news that Nero had committed suicide. Several Roman emperors followed in quick succession. Vespasian decided to wait for the Roman leadership to be stabilized before marching on Jerusalem. In 69 A.D. Vespasian was unexpectedly named the Roman emperor. He immediately left for the city of Rome.

Titus assumed command and was sent in early 70 A.D. to capture Jerusalem. During the siege the Jews resisted with an outside surprise attack. Titus nearly lost his life. He temporarily withdrew the Roman forces.

The armies that had surrounded the city were now at a distance. The Christians interpreted the words of Jesus as referring to this moment. It was at this time that they escaped. Not one was killed. *BUT – how could those armies ever be interpreted as an “abomination,” a detestable standard standing in the Holy Place?*

Wherever the Roman armies went, they carried a Roman ensign of loyalty. This was a straight staff capped with a metallic eagle. Immediately under the eagle was an image of a man’s head, signifying the Roman emperor, who claimed to be divine.² The eagle was a Roman symbol representing its bearers as messengers of the gods. It portended death and destruction (Jeremiah 48:40-42, Hosea 8:1). It was a symbol of the power of the Roman Empire (cf. Ezra 11:1–12:30). In the Apocalypse it was further a harbinger of expected judgment.³ The man’s head showed that they were loyal to a man – the leader of Rome.

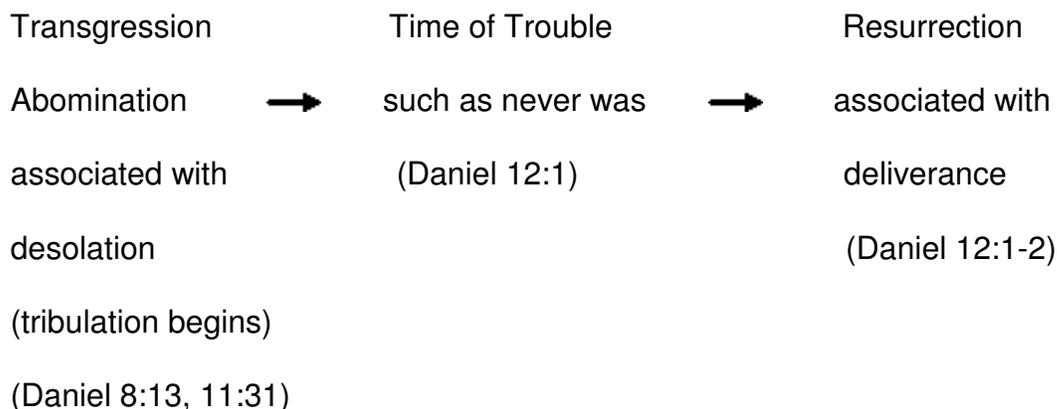
In the four living creatures (Revelation 4:7), the fourth had the head of an eagle. It was this creature that asked John to “come and see” the pale horse of the fourth Seal. That pale horse symbolized death. The eagle was also a symbol of the tribe of Dan. His tribe was an abomination to God. Later, that tribe was represented by a serpent. Dan is not found in the “twelve tribes” making up the 144,000 (Revelation 7). He is a great end-time symbol for an evil power who wants to be like God. He was positioned north of the sanctuary and is a fit symbol for the antichrist – a bird and a man on the Roman staff, a beast and its head, a Roman power situated within seven hills that calls herself “mother.” In God’s plan, Jerusalem was to be a mother and, in the apocalypse, the bride. Rome tries to usurp that.

The armies were obviously an abomination. But what or who they represented are key to the deeper issue Jesus wants us to see. As Titus surrounded Jerusalem, so were the Christians

² Carroll, B. H.; *An Introduction of the English Bible* (1947) (<http://www.preterism.us/abomination.htm>).

³ Osborne, Grant R.; *Revelation* (Baker Book House; Grand Rapids, MI), p. 360.

surrounded with symbols that were abominable to God. It all related to worship. Those symbols elevated honor to man, not God. They also bore allegiance to gods other than God. The retreat of *what mocked God* was the Christians' signal. They knew Providence was at work and they fled.⁴ The Qumranites also viewed those Roman standards as the epitome of idolatry (1QpHab6.3-4). Many felt it would be better to die than to permit these "standards" to enter the temple's precincts. To where did those precincts extend? Several furlongs outside the city walls. That's why it was called a holy city. That's why, when the armies surrounded it, they were standing in a place they did not belong.



This is a great metaphor for the final and ultimate threat, which will be to God's church the temple. When standard(s) that honor man and not God stand in its sacred precincts, eschatological urgency comes. By May, Titus' attack was resumed, the city was finally taken and the temple burned. Desolation followed, just as Jesus predicted.

The "Abomination" – End-Time Application

There is a stunning contemporary application to Christ's prophecy. It is crucial to observe that He was referring to events future to the time He spoke! Yet, the majority of expositors who go back to Daniel's chapters (Jesus' request – Matthew 24:15), which describe that abomination and desolation issue, suddenly revert to the B.C. era, making a literal Medo-Persian and Grecian application. That is where the tragic Antiochus IV Epiphanes application comes into so many discourses. The fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 was future. The prophetic allusions to the abomination were also to be associated with His second coming. Twice He refers to it in this discourse (Matthew 24:27, 30)!

In Matthew the tribulation follows the abomination and concludes with Jesus' return. This eschatological re-application ties directly to the tribulation messages noted in Daniel 8 and 11 through 12:2.

How can we define more clearly the abomination associated with the desolation related to the second coming? If we were limited to Roman history in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21, it would be fodder for endless speculation. In a breathtaking warning, bound only to a simple phrase, Jesus indicated that a deeper understanding of the end of time is found where "the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet" is (Matthew 24:15). It is as if He were saying: "Look, the scribes and Pharisees didn't know of My coming because they didn't

⁴ Schaff, Philip; *Creeeds of Christendom*, with a History and Critical notes (Baker Contemporary Publishers – Vendor), vol. 1, pp. 397-398.

study Daniel. Anyone can now learn about My second coming if they also go to Daniel. Where? Where it talks about the abomination of desolation!” Amazing! Those exciting prophecies are then the preface to the book of Revelation. They are apocalyptic. They are filled with incredible details of earth’s final months. Way beyond that, they clarify who that “man” will be and tell of the struggles of God’s people right to the end. They also describe the final victory when God’s people will be delivered.

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