

Abomination of Desolation

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The phrase “abomination of desolation” or “desolating abomination” / “abomination that makes desolate” translating the Hebrew Old Testament term *shiqqutz(im) m^eshomem* and the Greek New Testament term *bdelugma tes eremoseos*, appears in prophetic contexts dealing with the desecration and defilement of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.

In the Old Testament the phrase occurs in only in Daniel (9:27; 11:31; 12:11). In these texts the form of the Hebrew term for “desolation” appears as the *Pol’el* participle *shomem* or *m^eshomem* which has a range of verbal meanings: “devastate, desolate, desert, appall, with nominal derivatives: waste, horror, devastation, appallment. It has been used to describe an attitude of appalling horror due to criminal and barbaric acts of idolatry. Therefore, the basic idea of the root is the desolation caused by some great disaster, usually as a result of divine judgment. The *Pol’el* stem here has a causative (or better, factitive) force similar to the use of the *Hiphil*, except that the *Hiphil* generally involves a physical devastation, while the *Pol’el* seems to put more stress on the fact that someone has actively caused desecration. In the case of the Temple such an act would render it ritually unfit for the worship and service of God. In Daniel, two nuances of the term: “desolation due to war” and “desolation due to idolatry,” are combined in Daniel 8:13, which describes the condition of Jerusalem under foreign domination: “How long will be the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, and the transgression that causes desolation so as to permit both the Sanctuary and its vessels to be trampled?” This is very similar to the description of Jerusalem in Daniel 12:11 where a foreign invader has both abolished the regular sacrifice and substituted “an abomination that causes desolation.” When combined with the Hebrew term for “abomination” (*shiqqutz*) the idea of the forcible intrusion of idolatry into a place of sanctity in order to cause defilement is significantly intensified.

In the New Testament, the phrase appears only in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14) as a partial citation from Daniel (explicitly stated as such in Matthew 24:15). While the term *eremos* (“desolation”) appears in Luke 21:20, it does not have reference to the technical phrase and is used to describe the general condition of Jerusalem (not specifically the Temple). This usage is in harmony with Jesus’ previous pronouncement on the city in Matthew 23:38 (where the same term is used) and Luke 19:43-44. While the Second Temple is in view in the pronouncement, the focus is upon its destruction (rather than desecration) as evidence that divine judgment has occurred. This is quite distinct from the desecration caused by the “abomination of desolation,” an act which results not in divine judgment upon the Temple, but upon the one who desecrates it (see Daniel 9:27c). In addition, the use of the phrase in Daniel and the Olivet Discourse clearly influenced allusions in other prophetic contexts (1 Corinthians 3:17; 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4; Revelation 11:1-2).

The first part of this phrase, the word *bdelugma* (“abomination”), is used by the New Testament four times (Luke 16:15; Revelation 7:4, 5; 21:27), and by the Septuagint (Greek

translation of the Old Testament) seventeen times, to translate the Hebrew *shiqqutz*. The term *bdelugma* ("abomination") comes from a root with meanings "to make foul" and "to stink." Thus it has the basic idea of something makes one feel nauseous, and by transference, psychologically or morally abhorrent and detestable. As with the Hebrew meaning in Old Testament, the New Testament Greek term is applied particularly to idols or associated with idolatrous practices. In this regard *bdelugma* appears as an expression of antithesis between the divine and human wills, as well as denoting the repugnance of the ungodly to the will of God¹ and is used in Luke 16:15 of the repugnance of God to human pride (i.e., to things highly esteemed by men, which is tantamount to idolatry).² The second member of our expression "desolation" (Greek, *eremoseos*) is the genitive feminine singular of a root which signifies "to lay waste, make desolate, bring to ruin" (see Matthew 12:25; Luke 11:17; Revelation 17:16; 18:17, 19). It is used most commonly in the Septuagint for *m^eshomem* or its cognates (cf. Leviticus 26:34, 35; Psalm 73:19; 2 Chronicles 30:7; 36:21; Jeremiah 4:7), generally of the condition of desolation of the Land as a result of desecration and exile (the sense agreeing with the background of Daniel 9:27).

The form of the expression (both in Hebrew and Greek) has been considered an anomalous construction in grammatical terms. A number of theories have been offered to explain this, however, the literary and theological linkage of both the terms *shiqqutz* ("abomination") and *m^eshomem* ("desolation") in the prophetic writings of Jeremiah and Ezekiel appear to provide the best explanation. These texts, especially with their promise of a resolution of the dilemma for the Temple, which in part governed Daniel's concern (Jeremiah 25:11-12; Daniel 9:2), may well have influenced this. In these books, which treat extensively the desecration and defilement of the Temple, frequent mention is made in pertinent contexts of pagan profanation of the Sanctuary of both "abominations" and "desolations" (Jeremiah 4:1, 27; 7:10; 44:22; Ezekiel 5:11, 14-15; 7:20)³ and of idolatry that having desecrated the Holy Place, will call forth foreign invaders who will further desecrate and destroy the Temple (cf. Jeremiah 4:6-8; Ezekiel 6:11; 7:20-23). Jeremiah 44:22 in particular states that Israel's "abominations" have caused the desolation of the Land and made it "an object of horror" (compare Ezekiel 5:11, 15; 7:20-24; 36:19-21).

From this brief survey of the terms that comprise the phrase it can be seen that acts of ritual impurity and especially the threat of foreign invasion of the Temple, were viewed by the Israelites as ultimate violations of sanctity and as a sign of judgment. For this reason, they were extremely careful to prevent such acts, and in the time of the Second Temple had erected a boundary fence, the *Soreg*, with a warning inscription promising death to any non-Israelite who passed beyond it into the court of the Israelites. The New Testament (Acts 21:27-28) records the violent opposition of the Jewish crowd in this area to Paul when it was mistakenly

¹See LXX Proverbs 29:27; Ecclesiasticus 1:25; 13:20.

²J. Zmijewski, "bdevlguma," *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*. Edited by Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978-1980 1: 210).

³I have restricted my examples to those passages employing only the term *shiqqutz*, however, the number of references could be doubled if we included those containing the synonym *to'evah*.

believed that he had taken a Gentile proselyte (Titus) into the Temple to offer sacrifice. The specific accusation against Paul is that of “defiling the holy place” (the Temple), verse 28. With this background it is possible to understand why the future act of desecration by the “abomination of desolation” appears as the climatic event of Daniel’s seventieth week and as the signal event bringing the intensification of God’s wrath in the second half of the Tribulation (Matthew 24:15-21; Mark 13:14-19).

The historical background of the phrase is drawn from the period of the first phase of the Second Temple during which a host of actual and would-be desecrators of the Temple invaded Jerusalem. However, the specific background in Daniel appears to be the invasion of the Syrian-Greek ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 B.C.) who erected an idol in the area of the Temple near the Brazen Altar. In Daniel 11:31 we read: “And forces from him will arise, desecrate the sanctuary fortress (Temple compound), and do away with the regular sacrifice. And they will set up the abomination of desolation.” This occurred on the 25 Kislev (December), 167 B.C., and led to the military overthrow of Antiochus’ forces by the Jews of Jerusalem instigated by a priestly revolt and the rededication (Hebrew *chanukkah*) of the Temple (an event commemorated by Jesus in John 10:22-23). Most critical scholars have dismissed an eschatological interpretation of the “abomination of desolation” in Daniel, assuming all references must refer to the Antiochus desecration, since they view the writing of Daniel having occurred *after* this event (*vaticinium ex eventu*, “prophecy after the event”). However, while Daniel 11 may have used the phrase “abomination of desolation” with reference to Antiochus’ desecration, Jesus understood the historical application of the phrase to Antiochus’ desecration only as a pattern of the ultimate (eschatological) event. Citing Daniel’s prophecy (some 200 years after the Antiochus’ desecration) with reference to the still future “abomination of desolation” (Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14), Jesus affirmed both His and Daniel’s awareness of the eschatological application of the phrase.

Jesus saw his message as a continuation of the biblical prophets, and His frequent citations from Jeremiah and Zechariah make it certain that Jesus and the disciples were evaluating their generation in light of these prophecies. Therefore, just as Jesus interpreted the events affecting the near judgment of the city of Jerusalem (including the Temple) in A.D. 70 against the background of these prophecies, He also spoke of the far (end time) events that would affect the city in these terms. This can be demonstrated from Jesus’ “cleansing of the Temple” which concerned the threat of ritual defilement to the Temple following Jeremiah’s Temple sermon (Jeremiah 7) and cited eschatological texts in Isaiah and Zechariah with respect to the Temple’s future state which lay beyond such an act (the divine ideal).

This is in harmony with Jesus’ Olivet Discourse which also sets the Temple in an eschatological context. When the disciples heard Jesus’ prediction of the Second Temple’s destruction (Matthew 24:1-2; Mark 13:1-2; Luke 21:5-6) they apparently connected such an event with the messianic advent at the end of the age and asked what *sign* would mark this for the Jewish nation (Matthew 24:3; Mark 13:4; Luke 21:7; cf. 1 Corinthians 1:22). The “sign” He gave them was that of Daniel’s “abomination of desolation” (Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14). This,

then, was the signal event that would indicate that the Jewish nation was nearing the time of messianic deliverance and restoration, since the desecration of the Temple would begin the persecution of the Jewish people (i.e., "great Tribulation," Matthew 24:16-22; Mark 13:14b-20) that would demand the Messiah's coming to bring them redemption from their enemies (Matthew 24:30-31; Mark 13:26-27; Luke 21:28). Luke's account does not include the "abomination of desolation" in the Temple because this is an eschatological event and he has selectively focused on the immediate concern of the disciples (note "about to take place," Luke 21:7) concerning *when* the predicted destruction of the Temple (and Jerusalem) would occur. For this reason he also omits the end time persecution of the "[great] Tribulation" (Greek *thlipsis*) which is connected with this event, substituting the term "[great] distress" (Greek *anagke*) which better describes the local invasion and trampling of the city (Luke 21:23-24), which was fulfilled in the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The intent of the sign of Daniel's "abomination of desolation" in Matthew and Mark is to also place the context of the event and what follows in Daniel's seventieth week, the time of "the end that shall come" (Matthew 24:14), separating the period of "tribulations" or "birth pangs" (Matthew 24:6-12; Mark 13:7-9) from the "Tribulation" period (Matthew 24:21; Mark 13:19). Luke does this in Luke 21:24 by separating the event of Jerusalem's desolation (A.D. 70) and the times of the Gentiles (present age) from the time when "the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (end time). This event also divides Daniel's seventieth week into two divisions of lesser and greater intensity following the pattern of the "midpoint" in Daniel 9:27 and its application in Revelation 11:1-2, a time text which employs the "42 months" = 3 1/2 years or 1,260 days (cf. Daniel 12:11).

Preterists interpret the "abomination of desolation" (as they do most prophetic events) in Daniel and the Olivet Discourse as having its ultimate fulfillment in the events surrounding the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. However, the events deduced by Preterists from the events of the First Revolt that culminated with the destruction of A.D. 70, do not match the details in the "abomination of desolation" texts, which are required for fulfillment. None of the incursions by Roman officials during this time could be regarded as "abominations that caused desolation" since the sacrificial system was not affected. Foreigners in the Temple may bring about only desecration, but not defilement, and for this reason the Second Temple was rebuilt after its desecration and destruction by the Babylonians without the need of a purification ceremony (Ezra 3:2-13). Further, the entrance of the Roman general Titus (who destroyed the Temple) occurred only *after* the Sanctuary was already in flames and had been largely ruined and *after* the Jewish sacrifices had ceased. This is important to note since the "abomination of desolation" of which Daniel speaks and to which Jesus alludes, speak only of the cessation of sacrifice in the Temple, not of its destruction.

With any interpretation except the eschatological, we are left with unresolved details that either must be harmonized by reading the text in other than a literal, historical, manner, or by dismissing details altogether. The eschatological view also has the precedence of types that await their anti-type to ultimately fulfill them. Moreover, Daniel's seventieth week, and especially its signal event of the "abomination of desolation," appears to have influenced the

literary structure of the Olivet Discourse in the Synoptic gospels and the judgment section of the Book of Revelation (chapters 6-19). Jesus' interpretation of the order of the events of the seventieth week in the context of prophetic history appears to confirm an eschatological interpretation for Daniel 9:27. In Matthew 24:7-14 it is predicted that persecution, suffering, and wars would continue to the end of the age, climaxing in a time of unparalleled distress, verses 21-22 (i.e., "the time of Jacob's distress," cf. Daniel 12:1; Jeremiah 30:7). Only *after* these events does Jesus make reference to Daniel 9:27 (verse 15) concerning the signal event of this time of Tribulation, "the desolating abomination." If the seventy weeks were to run sequentially, without interruption, then why does Jesus place this intervening period *before* the fulfillment of the events of the seventieth week? The text of Matthew in particular reveals that Jesus' preview of the future was to answer His disciple's questions concerning His [second] coming, and the end of the age (Matthew 24:3). Jesus' here explains why His coming is necessary (for divine intervention and national repentance, verses 27-31; cf. Zechariah 12:9-10) and when it will occur ("after the Tribulation of those days", verse 29). According to Matthew,⁴ the events described in this period prior to the Messianic advent could *not* have been fulfilled in A.D. 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem, since these events usher in and terminate with the coming of Messiah.

Although the phrase "abomination of desolation" does not appear in Paul's description of the end time desecration of the Temple in 2 Thessalonians 2:4, both context and allusions within the text evidently have this event in view. For example, some uses of *bdelugma* ("abomination") in the Septuagint (in the Prophets) are paralleled by the word *anomia* ("lawlessness") with reference to idolatrous practices. Such usage in the Old Testament supports the allusion to the "abomination of desolation" in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 where the figure who magnifies himself above every idol to "idolize" himself ("display himself as god," verse 4c) in the Temple is described as "the man of lawlessness." In fact, Paul's explanation of this event serves as a commentary on both Daniel's "abomination of desolation" texts (particularly Daniel 9:27) and Jesus' statement of it as a "sign" in the Olivet Discourse. Moreover, Paul's use of the event to answer the same time-related question of the end time asked by Jesus' disciples further affirms the eschatological interpretation of the "abomination of desolation." Paul's eschatological context is revealed by his occasion for writing the Thessalonian church. It was to admonish Christians who had abandoned the normal affairs of life in view of the imminency doctrine that Paul had previously espoused (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). The erroneous understanding concerning preparation for the events of the Last Days exposed a specific prophetic confusion (which Paul calls a "deception," verse 3a) concerning this doctrine. To correct the notion that end time events were already set in motion (verse 2), Paul explained that before the "appearance" of the Messiah, there must first come the "appearance" of the Anti-Messiah (verses 3-9). The signal event that will manifest the Anti-Messiah (or Antichrist), referred to variously in this text as "the man of lawlessness," "the son of destruction" (verse 3b), and "that lawless one" (verse 8), is the usurpation of the place of

⁴Luke's omission of this signal event is one of the reasons it is believed that at this point in his narrative he is presenting the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. rather than the eschatological end of the age.

God's Presence in the Temple (verse 4; cf. Exodus 25:8). The result of this act will not only make manifest the figure of the Antichrist, but also "the lie" (deification of the Antichrist, Revelation 13:4-6, 15) that will mark his followers (Revelation 13:16-18) and confirm them in the eschatological judgment that will attend the coming of the Lord (2 Thessalonians 2:8-12).

The act of Temple desecration is introduced in verse 4 by the use of the middle voice with its reflexive nuance to emphasize the autonomy of action: "exalts himself." The sphere of his self-elevation is specified as "over every so-called god or object of worship." While this might indicate a superlative blasphemy of God such as in Revelation 13:6, the immediate setting is the future [rebuilt] Jerusalem Temple, and so its sacred vessels ("objects of worship") are more in view (cf. 2 Chronicles 5:5-7; Hebrews 9:2-5). This would lend some support to the place of the "desolation" being within the innermost sacred part of the Temple (Holy of Holies) where God's Presence was previously manifested (Exodus 25:22; 30:6; cf. Ezek. 43:1-7). The "abomination," however, is the Antichrist's act of enthroning himself in the place of deity to "display himself" (Greek, *apodeiknunta*) as God (literally, "that he is God"). This blasphemous act fulfills Daniel's prediction that the Antichrist that "will exalt and magnify himself above every god, and speak monstrous things against the God of gods" (Daniel 11:36) and with the Satanic background of Revelation 12:9, 12-17; 13:4-10) has allusions to Isaiah 14:13-14 and Ezekiel 28:2-9 where the usurping figures addressed have sought to "raise [their] throne above the stars of God," "make [themselves] like the Most High," and declared "I am a god; I sit in the seat of the gods."

Despite the precedent of literal interpretation in Daniel and the Olivet Discourse, which is clearly desecration of the historic Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, historicists interpret 2 Thessalonians 2:4 in a non-literal manner, taking "the Temple of God" metaphorically as a reference to "the Church," and the act of desecration by the "man of lawlessness" as apostasy in the Church (based in part on their interpretation of the rare Greek term *apostasia* in verse 3 as "spiritual apostasy"). However, writing to a first-century audience at a time when the Temple was still standing, Paul's reference to "the Temple of God" could only mean one place, the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Even so, there are additional reasons for rejecting the symbolic interpretation and accepting a literal Temple (and therefore a literal "abomination of desolation") in this verse: (1) in the few places where Paul used the Greek word *naos* ("Temple") to mean something other than the actual Holy Place within the Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21), he always explained his special meaning so that his readers would understand his metaphorical usage (which still had reference to the Jerusalem Temple), (2) the word "Temple" has the definite article ("*the* Temple") in contrast to Paul's metaphorical usage where "Temple" is usually anarthrous ("a temple)," and (3) "the Temple of God" is the direct object of the verb "sits down" (Greek, *kathisai*), a verb suggesting a definite locality, not an institution (such as the church). If apostasy in the church in a symbolic sense were intended, Paul would better have expressed this with a verb for "enthronement" or "usurpation," rather than a verb that referred to the literal act of "taking a seat."

Interpretations of this passage in the ante-Nicene Church fathers affirm the literal understanding against the allegorical. For example Irenaeus wrote: "But when this Antichrist shall have devastated all things in this world, he will reign for three years and six months, and sit in the Temple at Jerusalem; and then the Lord will come from heaven in the clouds, in the glory of the Father, sending this man and those who follow him into the lake of fire; but bringing in for the righteous the times of the kingdom." Irenaeus' literal interpretation of the Temple's desecration, dated to about A.D. 185, is both eschatological and premillennial. By contrast, the symbolic or "spiritual" use of the Temple for the Church does not appear in developed form until the third-century A.D. with Origen, who was influenced by the allegorical interpretations of the Hellenistic idealist school of Philo. Consequently, the eschatological interpretation of the "abomination of desolation" has both textual support and the witness of early Church apologists and continues to warn of the future day of deception and desolation at the midpoint of Daniel's seventieth week which will call for divine judgment climaxing in the return of the Lord.

Bibliography

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