

The Two Witnesses

Introduction

The significance and identification of the Two Witnesses of Revelation 11 has long been a source of speculation and varied interpretation. Years ago I attended a study on Revelation in which the speaker stated the two witnesses were the Church.¹ He provided little explanation for his interpretation or why the two witnesses were not two individual men—the straightforward reading of the text. He only stated that since Revelation was a highly symbolic book it needed to be interpreted symbolically. This is interpretative legerdemain. Such conjuring would as readily accommodate a view that the two witnesses will be the New York Yankees and the Alabama Crimson Tide. The hermeneutic has no *rigor*. Examination of commentaries by non-futurists, who interpret the book figuratively, have one thing in common: none agree. They are exegetical horrors. God is not the author of confusion (1 Corinthians 14.33) and the reason God gave us the book of Revelation—and all prophecy—is to reveal, not obfuscate.

Hermeneutics of Revelation

Everyone recognizes Revelation is a highly symbolic book. Symbolism is found throughout Jewish literature, especially in the prophetic writings, which Revelation is. John's revelation is an extension of the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, etc. If one understands the prophets, one will have little trouble understanding Revelation.

The Jewish prophets addressed Israel and their focus was the future of their nation. The same is true of Revelation. John wrote to Jews. The prophets knew nothing of the Church, the body of Christ. Consequently, the Church is nowhere present in Revelation. Revelation was written to Jews and it complements the writings of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc. It could well

have followed Malachi in the canon.² As the prophets used figures, John used them in Revelation. The symbolic language of the prophets pointed to concrete, literal truth. For example, Isaiah wrote, “all flesh is grass” (Isaiah 40.6). He did not mean flesh was fescue, zoysia, or bermuda grass. He employed the metaphor to teach that all men are mortal—a literal truth. Such is the language of Revelation.

Non-futurists—preterists, historicists, and idealists—do not interpret Revelation literally for one simple reason: they do not interpret the prophets literally. They are spellbound, entranced by the medieval church, which interpreted the Bible through an allegorical hermeneutic. For them, the great themes of the Old Testament—the wrath of God and the kingdom of God—are symbolic or typologic. They do not believe God will exercise His wrath or establish His kingdom on earth. They pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done” but do not believe the Lord who said, “on earth, as it is in heaven.” This is more than methodological error. At its heart is a deadly malady: unbelief.

The greatest of the Reformers, William Tyndale, rejected the allegorical hermeneutic begun by Origen, adopted by Augustine, and continued by the medieval church. He wrote, “Scripture speaketh after the most grossest maner: be diligent therefore that thou be not deceaued with curiosnes” (*Parable of the Wicked Mammon*) and “God is a spirit and all his words are spirituall. His literal sense is spirituall” (*The Obedience of a Christian Man*). Heed Tyndale and one will have little trouble interpreting prophecy.

Introduction to the Two Witnesses: Revelation 11

The Two Witnesses end the second of three “woes” in the book. The second woe extends from Revelation 9.13-11.14. Below is a breakdown of Revelation 11 with brief comments.

Passage	Comment
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Revelation 11.1-2	John was told to “measure” the Temple, the altar, those worshiping, and exclude the Court of the Gentiles. The focus is Jewish. John was told the city will be trampled 42 months ($3^{1/2}$ years).
Revelation 11.3-4	God endows with power two witnesses, described as olive trees and candlesticks, and clothed in sackcloth to prophesy 1260 days ($3^{1/2}$ years).
Revelation 11.5-6	The witnesses have perfect defense: if one attacks them fire proceeds from their mouth. ³ They can withhold rain, turn water to blood, and inflict plagues upon the earth.
Revelation 11.7-10	At the end of their ministry, the Beast (Antichrist) will kill them. Their bodies will lie in a Jerusalem street $3^{1/2}$ days. The world will celebrate their deaths.
Revelation 11.11-13	After $3^{1/2}$ days those in Jerusalem will hear a voice from heaven telling them to come up: they are resurrected. The world will tremble and watch. A great earthquake occurs, and $^{1/10}$ of the city will fall and 7,000 die. The remnant glorify God.

The Significance of the Ministry of the Two Witnesses

In verses 1-2, we read of the Temple, the altar, and the court of the Gentiles. This accounting should relieve anyone of associating the passage with the Church. The Church has no Temple, Altar, or Court. These belong to Judaism. John was given a measuring rod ([κάλαμος](#)) and told to measure ([μετρέω](#)) the “temple ([ναός](#)), the altar, and those who worship in it.” Excluded from measurement was the “court of the Gentiles” for Gentiles will trample Jerusalem for $3^{1/2}$ years.⁴ This measurement most likely does not mean a measure of dimensions but a measure according to a standard ([κάλαμος](#)). The command

to measure “those who worship in it” provides this clue. “Measurement” of people involves their attitude. The standard is repentance. The gospel of the kingdom, “repent for the kingdom of God is near,” will be proclaimed as Jesus said (Matthew 4.17, 24.13-14). How Jews respond to the ministry of the Two Witnesses is the standard: will they repent and worship God or will they worship the pretender, the Beast, the Antichrist, and lose eternal life (Revelation 2-3).

The world will celebrate the Beast’s killing of the Two Witnesses and will believe he is God (Revelation 13.3-4). Team Satan will be winning at half-time. But who is ahead at half-time is not what matters. God provides doubt of Satan’s victory by raising His witnesses from the dead. A game is not won till the end and the true God, our God, is the God of the beginning and the end (Revelation 1.17). As the final seconds of Daniel’s 70th week tick down, the true King, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, will return to defeat the pretender (Revelation 19.11-21).



The Two Witnesses

How anyone who values the Scriptures can interpret the Two Witnesses as the Church or the Old Testament and New Testament is difficult to comprehend. The text is symbolic but straightforward. The witnesses are described as “olive trees”

candlestick are called the two ████████████████████ “anointed ones,” literally, “sons of oil” (Zechariah 4.14). Thus, Zechariah prophesied about two men identified as “olive trees”—prophets of Israel. Men—not trees, candles, lamps—and certainly not the Church—are clothed in sackcloth. Sackcloth is the attire of repentance. The Church is never described wearing such clothing. The two witnesses are individuals who will appear in Jerusalem to prophesy and call the nation to repent a.k.a. “the gospel of the kingdom” (Revelation 11.3; Matthew 24.14). Paul described the olive tree as the place of blessing. He wrote that God had broken off the natural branches (the nation of Israel) but that God would regraft them into the tree, the place of blessing. As a result, all

Jewish Prophetic Theology

Jewish theology is simple in its basic construct. The Jewish prophets revealed two great theological themes. One was the wrath of God. God revealed to David that He would judge the earth and execute His wrath upon Israel and the nations (Psalm 2.4-5, 9, 12). The second theme was the kingdom of God on earth (Psalm 2.6-8).⁶ God stated He would establish His kingdom on earth and the Lord instructed the Twelve to pray for it (Matthew 6.10). The prophets wrote hundreds of verses expounding on these themes. At the heart of each was the Messiah. The prophets revealed His suffering (Isaiah 53), His wrath (Psalm 2.4-5, 9, 12, Zephaniah 1), and His rule (Jeremiah 23.5; Zechariah 14.9).

God caused prophecy to cease for 400 years—from the time of Malachi until the announcement of the birth of John the

Baptist. Malachi ended his prophecy with the words that before the Messiah came, Elijah would appear. Thus:

Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. "He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse (Malachi 4.5-6).

As the Gospels begin, we read that John the Baptist came in the "spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1.17). Jesus stated John the Baptist was Elijah *if* the nation of Israel had responded to his message of repentance (Matthew 11.14). Thus, the Scriptures snap in place (Malachi and Gospels) as neatly as two legos. Since Malachi's prophecy was not fulfilled, He declared Elijah would come again (Matthew 17.10-12; Mark 9.11-13). On this basis, John declared he was *not* Elijah (John 1.21). [7](#)

Timing of the Two Witnesses or When Will The Two Witnesses Appear?

According to Daniel 9.27, the Tribulation will extend one "week," i.e., 7 years. This period is divided in halves and each half is described as 42 months (Revelation 11.2, 13.5), 1260 days (Revelation 11.3, 12.6), or as "time, times, and half a time" (Revelation 12.14; Daniel 7.25, 12.7). The logical time for the Two Witnesses to appear is at the beginning of the Tribulation when the Antichrist assumes power. It makes no sense for their ministry to begin at the midpoint since their bodies lie in the street $3^{1/2}$ days after the 1260 days. That would mean their bodies would lie in the street and be resurrected $3^{1/2}$ days *after* the Lord returns.

Thus, they appear at the beginning of the Beast's power and minister 1260 days. During this time they will be invulnerable. The Antichrist will be incapable of killing

them. At the midpoint of the Tribulation, the Beast will make a supernatural recovery from a deadly wound. It will be miraculous for he will have been declared dead (Revelation 13.3). The Beast's resurrection will imitate the Lord's own resurrection and convince the world he is God (Revelation 13.4). This will occur because Satan, having been cast from heaven to the earth (Revelation 12.7-9), will enter and empower the Antichrist. This is the explanation for the 7th king being the 8th king in Revelation 17.8, 10-11. The 8th king is the 7th king (the same man). In this new "incarnation" he will be indwelt by Satan. After his resurrection, he will go to the Temple, break his treaty, stop the daily animal sacrifice, seat himself in the Temple (upon the mercy seat of the ark in the Holy of Holies?), and announce to the world that he is God (Daniel 9.27, 11.31, 12.11; 2 Thessalonians 2.4; Isaiah 14.14). After the Beast is resurrected, being indwelt and empowered by Satan, he will be able to kill the Two Witnesses.

Midpoint Events in the 7 Year Tribulation	
Satan cast from heaven	Revelation 12.7-9, 12
The Beast (Antichrist) will recover from his mortal wound through Satan's indwelling power (Satanic resurrection)	Revelation 13.3, 17.10-11
The Beast will break his treaty, enter the Temple, and declare he is God (The Abomination of Desolation)	Daniel 9.27; 2 Thessalonians 2.4; Matthew 24.15
The Beast, empowered by Satan, will kill the Two Witnesses	Revelation 11.7
The False Prophet will imitate the miracles of the Two Witnesses and will give life to the image of the Beast	Revelation 13.13, 14-15

Jews will flee to the mountains for protection	Revelation 12.6, 13-17; Matthew 24.15-21
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Identification of the Two Witnesses

The attributes associated with the Two Witnesses—judgment by fire, shutting the heavens from rain, turning water to blood, and afflicting the earth with plagues are powers two key men exercised in the Old Testament: Moses and Elijah.

Prophet	Action	Passage
Elijah	Brought fire from heaven to consume his enemies	2 Kings 1.1-14
	Shut the sky for 3 ^{1/2} years so it did not rain	1 Kings 17.1; Luke 4.25
Moses	Turned all the rivers and streams of Egypt to blood	Exodus 7.14-21
	Stuck Egypt with plagues	Exodus 7.14-12.36



Taken by God, Elijah
Left Elisha His
Mantle

The Lord took Elijah in a chariot of fire to heaven (2 Kings

2.11-12). According to Malachi, Elijah must return before the Day of the Lord (Malachi 4.4-5).⁸ His ministry will be a ministry of repentance. The Lord declared John the Baptist could have been “Elijah” and fulfilled his ministry *if* Israel had repented. But the nation refused. Therefore, Elijah must return to present the Lord to the nation and fulfill Malachi’s prophecy. It is noteworthy that Malachi finished his book by mentioning not only Elijah but Moses (Malachi 4.4). Moses was Israel’s lawgiver. When the Two Witnesses minister, Israel will be again under the Mosaic Law and will have their Temple to offer animal sacrifices. The Lord revealed this to his disciples and told them to pray the abomination of desolation not occur on the Sabbath since the Jews will have to flee and travel is restricted severely on the Sabbath (Matthew 24.15-20; cf. Exodus 16.29; Joshua 3.4-5).



Moses: God’s Agent of Judgment by Plagues

Moses’ death is shrouded in mystery. Because he disobeyed God and struck the rock twice instead of speaking to it as the Lord commanded (Numbers 20.8-12), God did not allow him to enter the promised land. Instead, he could only view it (Deuteronomy 34.4). Even though Moses was 120, he died prematurely (Deuteronomy 34.7) and was buried in Moab. But no one knew the location of his grave. The obvious question is, “Why not?” How could the burial site of the greatest man in Israel not be known? What about those who buried him? Would

they not know? The text reveals the answer: the Lord Himself buried Moses (Deuteronomy 34.5-6). The reason no one knew the location of Moses' gravesite was because the Lord hid it. But that is not all. Something is up with Moses' body. Jude wrote that Michael the archangel argued with Satan over Moses' body (Jude 1.9). Why would Satan be interested in Moses' body unless he somehow knew it was going to play a strategic role in the future? This evidence leads unmistakably to the conclusion that the Two Witnesses will be Moses and Elijah. But there's more.

Jesus' Transfiguration

Jesus' transfiguration is recorded in each of the synoptic gospels (Matthew 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36; cf. 2 Peter 1:16-18). Mark's account is the shortest and Luke's the longest. Jesus told his disciples that *some* of them would not die until they had witnessed the kingdom of God (Matthew 16.28; Mark 9.1; Luke 9.27). The essence of the kingdom of God is the glorified Lord reigning as King in Jerusalem (Psalm 2.6; Isaiah 6.3, 60.2; Habakkuk 2.14). Shortly afterward, Peter, James, and John accompanied Him to the mountain where He was transfigured and His glory revealed. Thus, Jesus' words were fulfilled. Moses and Elijah were present in each account. But in Luke alone, we find a stunning sentence—one I doubt few know is in their Bible. Luke recorded,

And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem (Luke 9.30-31).

What was this conversation between the Lord, Moses, and Elijah? The text reveals the topic was "His departure ([ἔξοδος](#)—"exodus") which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." Earlier, Jesus had revealed to His disciples that He was going to suffer, be killed by the Jewish authorities,

and raised the third day (Luke 9.22).⁸ That was the substance of their conversation.

The Lord discussed with Moses and Elijah how He would be rejected and killed by the nation. As a result, John the Baptist could not fulfill the prophecy of Malachi of Elijah's coming before the Day of the Lord. Therefore, Elijah himself would have to come. He most likely told Moses that this was why He had buried him and discussed the nature of the controversy over his body between Michael and Satan. Moses and Elijah would again appear before Israel preaching repentance and faithfulness to the Lord.

The great salvific theme of the book of Revelation is who is God. Satan, through the Beast, will assert he is God and demand worship. He will have his worship. Billions will acknowledge him as God. But Satan's victory is short-lived. All who take his mark and worship him are condemned and lose eternal life (Revelation 13.8, 14.9-11). Satan's fate, along with his cohorts, the Beast and the False Prophet, is the Lake of Fire (Revelation 19.20, 20.10). On the other side, God will have his witnesses, e.g., the Two Witnesses, the 144,000, etc., who will proclaim the gospel of the kingdom (Matthew 24.14). The focus of this gospel during Jesus' earthly ministry was who He was (Matthew 16.15-16; John 11.25-27).¹⁰ This gospel will recur. Those who will believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and do not take the Beast's mark or worship him will be saved. Many will lose their lives but will gain eternal life. This is the message of the Lord to the 7 Jewish assemblies in Revelation 2-3. At the end of it all, Israel will repent (Matthew 23.37-39), the Lord will return, and as Paul wrote, "all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11.26).

Conclusion

The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11 will be Moses and Elijah. The evidence is substantial. Moses and Elijah will

recapitulate their ministries as God's witnesses to bring Israel to repentance and to reveal to the world that the true God, the God of the nations, is Israel's God. Their ministry will be to Jews but the Gentile world will see God's witness just as Nebuchadnezzar saw it long ago (Daniel 3.28-29, 4.1-3, 34-37).

¹ The interpretation that the two witnesses are the Church is impossible. The Church is nowhere present in Revelation. The 7 "churches" of Revelation 2-3 the Lord addressed are not body of Christ, Christian churches, but Jewish "assemblies" ([ἐκκλησία](#)). The language He used towards them is wholly different from Paul's language of grace, peace, faith, hope, love, etc. The Lord's message is one of repentance and faithfulness.

² Peter expected all Joel's prophecies to come to pass shortly based on his sermon on at Pentecost. His quotation of Joel (Acts 2.16-21) revealed he expected the signs of the Day of the Lord which John related in Revelation to follow the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

³ Literal fire proceeding from the mouths of the Two Witnesses as if they were human flamethrowers is unlikely. The sense here is that their speech initiates judgment. Throughout the Bible fire is a symbol of judgment and these men have power to execute judgment, which could be literal fire (cf. 2 Kings 1.10; Jeremiah 5.14, 23.29). They are effectively invulnerable. Any who attempt to harm them are destroyed.

⁴ The Temple building itself is not indicated. The word ναός referred to the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. If the Temple building were meant, John would have used the word [ἱερόν](#).

⁵ See the article, The Olive Tree (Romans 11).

⁶ Psalm 2 sums God's prophetic program. Everything else is detail.

⁷ Elijah is noted 29x in the New Testament: Matthew 11.14,

16.14, 17.3-4, 10-12, 27.47, 49; Mark 6.15, 8.28, 9.4-5, 11-13, 15.35-36; Luke 1.17, 4.25-26, 9.8, 19, 30, 33; John 1.21, 25; Romans 11.2; James 5.17.

⁸ The Day of the Lord extends from God's wrath upon the earth, His kingdom, and His creation of the New Heavens and New Earth. The specific part of the Day of the Lord must be determined by context. In this case, the return of the Lord is meant.

⁹ The disciples heard Jesus' words but did not comprehend them (Luke 9.22, 44-45, 18.31-34). In John's Gospel, we read they did not understand or believe in His resurrection until after it occurred (John 20.8-9).

¹⁰ The "gospel of the kingdom" is different from Paul's "gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20.24). The "gospel of the kingdom" focuses on the *identity* of Christ. Paul's gospel focuses upon the *work* of Christ—that He died for our sins and rose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). These are two different gospels but equally valid depending on the timeframe. The kingdom gospel was valid from the time of John the Baptist until the Council of Jerusalem in 51 A.D. Paul's gospel was valid from the time of Paul's salvation (after he received it from the Lord in Arabia) until the Rapture. After the Rapture, the kingdom gospel will return and be in effect during the 7 years of the Tribulation. Both gospels were valid from Paul's salvation to the Council in Jerusalem. See the author's [The Great Hinge](#) for more information on this topic.

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