

# The Two Witnesses in the Book of Revelation

## Summary

The account of the two witnesses in Rev 11,3-13 is one of the most problematic passages in the Book of Revelation, and there is no consensus on the identity and mission of these two prophets. In this study the main contemporary interpretations are presented and evaluated in three groups: symbolical, historical, and eschatological. Serious objections are raised to each of these approaches. The only interpretation that escapes these objections is the one that arises out of an understanding of the prior context. Passages from the text itself, taken in order, are then used as the basis for developing this interpretation. The picture that emerges is of a high-profile eschatological ministry of two people, which has a local expression but a global impact. The text allows us to outline the content of their prophecy and define its impact in three particular areas: on the Church, on the world at large, and on the Jewish people.

## Introduction

One of the most enduring mysteries of the Book of Revelation is the identity and mission of the two witnesses, or prophets, described in the central part of the text (Rev 11,3-13).<sup>1</sup> Following the commission to prophesy again to “many races and nations and tongues and rulers” (10,11), the author receives a short metaphorical command (11,1-2), which is followed by the unusually detailed account of the mission of two witnesses or prophets (11,3-13). In contrast to other parts of the text, this account is not presented as a vision, but as a narrative prophecy:<sup>2</sup>

*“And I will give to my two witnesses and they will prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days dressed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the Lord of the earth. And if anyone wishes to harm them, fire comes out of their mouth and consumes their enemies; and if anyone should wish to harm them, he is bound to be killed in this way. These have the authority to shut the sky, so that no rain may fall during the days of their prophecy, and they have authority over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they wish” (Rev 11,3-6).*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “The origin and identification of the two Witnesses are problems of great difficulty”, R.H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, 2 Vols, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1920, Vol. I, 281; “We come now to Revelation 11, which has been described as ‘one of the most mysterious sections, which resists all attempts at an explanation from contemporary events’”, R. Leivestad, *Christ the Conqueror: The Idea of Conflict and Victory in the New Testament*, London: SPCK 1954, 228; “The identity of these witnesses has been sought with passion throughout the centuries...the text itself (...) seems to invite this quest”, Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, English trans. by Wendy Pragels, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2001, 349; “Il brano è tra i più discussi di tutta l’Apocalisse e presenta notevole difficoltà esegetiche, come mostra l’abbondante bibliografia che lo riguarda”, Ugo Vanni, *L’Apocalisse: Ermeneutica, Egesesi, Teologia*, Bologna: Centro Editoriale Dehoniane 1988, 366 n. 27.

<sup>2</sup> “The passage which follows (11:3-13) is also very distinctive, within the whole book, in that it is not a vision or even an interpretation of a vision (as in 17:7-18), but a narrative prophecy (...)”, Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1993, 267.

<sup>3</sup> All the quotations from the Book of Revelation in this study are translated by the author from the *Novum Testamentum Graece* of Nestle-Aland, 28<sup>th</sup> Revised Edition, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012.

Just as the public life of the two witnesses recalls the missions of Moses and Elijah, the events surrounding their death are related, in even greater detail, in terms reminiscent of the death, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ:

*“And whenever they finish their witnessing, the beast that is coming up out of the abyss will make war against them and overcome them and kill them. And their corpse lies on the street of the great city which is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt, where indeed their Lord was crucified. And people from many races and tribes and tongues and nations look at their corpse for three days and a half, and they do not allow their corpses to be placed in a tomb. And the inhabitants of the earth rejoice over them and are glad, and they send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented the inhabitants of the earth. And after the three days and a half, a Spirit of Life from God entered into them and they stood on their feet, and great fear fell on those watching them. And they heard a great voice from heaven saying to them: Come up here. And they went up to heaven in the cloud, and their enemies watched them. And in that hour a great earthquake occurred, and a tenth of the city fell and seven thousand names of men were killed in the earthquake, and the rest became terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven” (Rev 11,7-13).*

Then follows the warning for a final series of judgments on the world (the ‘third woe’), the seventh and last trumpet blast is sounded, and finally the complete fulfilment of God’s kingdom on earth is announced (Rev 11,14-19).

According to its plain meaning and immediate context, the account of the two witnesses is a narrative prophecy that describes two individual prophets, who are endowed with divine powers to perform a high-profile mission during the period leading up to the eschatological fulfilment of God’s plan of salvation. Before expounding some aspects of their mission, as described in the text, we propose a critical review of the main scholarly interpretations of their identity, as these often prevent a full and clear enquiry of their mission.<sup>4</sup>

## **Current Interpretations**

### *a) Symbolical interpretations*

By far the majority of commentators explain the two witnesses as ‘symbols’. Some suggest they are symbols of the Old and New Testaments (OT and NT), others the Law and the Prophets, or the Law and the Gospel, but most consider them to be symbols of part, or all, of the Church.<sup>5</sup> Since a symbol is a thing that represents something other than itself,<sup>6</sup> the

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<sup>4</sup> Please jump to the next section, ‘John’s Commission to Prophecy Again’, if you wish to go straight to the heart of the matter.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., “These two men who come forward in response to the prophetic calling addressed to the seer...cannot be other than symbolic figures, collective personalities, and the very image of the prophetic mission of Christians”, Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 349-50.

<sup>6</sup> This is the basic dictionary definition, e.g., “thing standing for or representing something else”, *Oxford Illustrated Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1962; “something representing something else”, *Oxford English Minidictionary*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, Oxford: OUP, 1999; also “Since symbols need not imitate what they represent, and since they usually refer to something that is in a different and higher category, they are ideally suited for expressing not only abstract notions and mental operations but also spiritual and religious truths—none of which can be pictured in any literal way”, from ‘Symbol’ in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Vol.13, Farmington Hills, MI: Gale 2002; 661.

claim that the two witnesses are ‘symbols’ implies that they cannot be themselves, that is to say, literal human beings empowered for a special mission by God. The ‘reality’ they are usually said to symbolize is the faithful Christian community, the Church.

At this point, we should distinguish clearly between ‘simple’ representation and ‘symbolical’ representation. It is self-evident that two individual human beings can represent the Church, or some function of the Church in our society, without being identified as ‘symbols’.

Furthermore, the text itself refutes the suggestion that these two human beings are ‘symbols’, when it states the two witnesses are symbolized by “the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth” (11,4, cf. Zech 4,1-14). This does not mean that the two witnesses are symbols, but that they perform a role that is symbolized by ‘the two olive trees and two lampstands’, whose significance will be explored later. In the meantime, it is sufficient to say that if the two witnesses were symbols themselves, then the ‘the two olive trees and the two lampstands’ would be symbols of symbols—an extravagance relished by the literati, but not by ancient prophets. Clearly, in the context of this passage, the two witnesses are the symbolized and not the symbol. To say they are symbols is to confuse the symbol with what is symbolized and confound any attempt at discovering the genuine meaning of the symbolism in this passage.

So, rather than identifying and defining the temple symbolism in this text, it is argued that, for the sake of coherence, the entire passage should be interpreted symbolically since the ‘Sanctuary’ in the previous passage (Rev 11,1-2) is understood symbolically: “It is illogical to admit that John is speaking symbolically, figuratively, eschatologically in his reference to the temple, and to deny that he is doing so in his account of the two witnesses. To regard them as individuals is to throw his message into meaningless confusion”.<sup>7</sup>

In response, it should be said that temple symbolism is indeed used in the previous passage,<sup>8</sup> and again in the account of the two witnesses (Rev 11,4). This cultic imagery is highly significant, and its implications will be discussed later, but it is essential to note that not everything in these passages is symbolical. Temple symbolism is restricted to verses 1-2 and 4; all other verses refer to the people and actions represented by that symbolism. To generalize by claiming everything should be interpreted symbolically lazily confuses the symbol with what is symbolized and blurs the meaning of the passage.

Nevertheless, this kind of confusion persists, with the result that the most common ‘symbolical’ interpretation excludes the interpretation of the two witnesses as two individual human beings. It explains them as ‘symbols’ of the Church, and the account of their mission (Rev 11,3-13) as an allegory,<sup>9</sup> or parable,<sup>10</sup> that idealizes the witness of the Church in the last

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, London: Hodder and Stoughton 1940, 180; see also Leon Morris: “It is important we take this whole section (vv. 1-13) symbolically. It is plain enough that the Sanctuary of verse 1 is symbolical, but most expositors take the witnesses and the holy city literally. Then difficulties multiply. They are fewer and a coherent pattern emerges when we see it all as symbolic”, *Revelation*, Revised Edition, Leicester: IVP; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990, 140.

<sup>8</sup> And in many other parts of the text and in the New Testament. In fact, temple and liturgical symbolism can be identified as the dominant imagery and organizing principle in the Book of Revelation, with important hermeneutical implications, see *St. John and the Book of Revelation: From Essenes to End-Times*, John and Gloria Ben-Daniel, Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan, 2019, 206-55 (ch. 6), also at

[https://www.academia.edu/44968014/ch\\_6\\_Imagery\\_in\\_the\\_Book\\_of\\_Revelation\\_and\\_its\\_Dominant\\_Theme](https://www.academia.edu/44968014/ch_6_Imagery_in_the_Book_of_Revelation_and_its_Dominant_Theme)

<sup>9</sup> E.g., J.S. Conside, “The Two Witnesses: Apoc. 11.3-13”, *CBQ* 8 (1946), 377-92, esp. 391-2.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., Bauckham, *Climax*, 273-74. This interpretation appears to differ very little from the allegorical, which is not surprising in view of the fact that “Parable and allegory, then, are partial synonyms”, G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, Pennsylvania: Westminster Press, 1980, 167.

days. As this 'collective' interpretation relies on other arguments against an interpretation of the two witnesses as two individuals,<sup>11</sup> these arguments should also be exposed and rejected:

1. Since the two witnesses are called "two lampstands" (11,4), and the lampstands in Rev 1,9-20 are identified with churches (1,20), it is held that the two witnesses must also be churches. One commentator goes so far as to say it would be "a defiance of common sense to use the same distinctive symbol for two different ideas, within the compass of one book".<sup>12</sup> However, the symbol of the lampstand bearing the light of the Lord does not specifically represent the idea of a church community as such, but rather its role in bearing witness to the Lord. Since this symbol primarily represents the idea of 'witness', it can therefore be applied without contradiction or inconsistency to represent a nation (Zech 4,1-14), a church (Rev 1,9-20), an individual (Rev 11,4; Jn 5,35; Ps 132,17; Sir 48,1), or even the Old Testament prophetic message (1Pet 1,19).<sup>13</sup>

2. Since the text states that the beast 'will make war with' two witnesses (Rev 11,7), it is claimed that this language would be more appropriate for a nation or a community, rather than two individuals.<sup>14</sup> However, the same expression ('to make war with') is used later to describe the beast's persecution of the saints (13,7), even though the saints are exhorted not to take up arms and fight back (13,9-10). With the beast as the only aggressor in this conflict, it is just as inappropriate to describe his persecution of this community as a 'war' as it is to describe the beast's attack on the two witnesses in this way. The same expression is used in 12,17 and at 19,19 in a more appropriate way, in reference to the beginning and ending of the cosmic war waged by the devil and his followers against Christ and his followers. So, it is quite probable that the use of the same expression in 11,7 and 13,7 is designed to link these separate conflicts together and indicate that they are all aspects of the same final war of evil against good.

3. It is argued that the two witnesses must be a large community of people, since people throughout the world see their deaths (11,10) and this would be impossible if they were only two people. Beale is right to point out that since the invention of television this argument no longer has any force.<sup>15</sup>

4. It is also said that the two witnesses must be a community since they do everything together, and this would be impossible for two people. Similarly, "a final hint that these prophets are not two individuals comes from observing that the powers of both Moses and Elijah are attributed to *both* the two witnesses equally, and not divided among them".<sup>16</sup> In fact, far from disproving the two witnesses are two individuals, these assertions only

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<sup>11</sup> These are listed in G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999, 574-5; Alan Johnson, 'Revelation' in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Gæbelein, Vol. 12, Grand Rapids: 1981, 504.

<sup>12</sup> Kiddle, *Revelation*, 181.

<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, in response to Caird's insistence that the two lampstands represent the proportion of the Church to suffer martyrdom, John M. Court remarks: "but it is a weakness of this theory that no satisfactory account can be given of why precisely two-sevenths is the selected fraction. When the seven-branched lampstand (or seven lampstands) is such a potent representative symbol of the unity and diversity of the churches, the force of the imagery here seems to be limited so arbitrarily merely to bring it into line with the pairs of witnesses and trees. If the imagery were to represent an aspect of the Universal Church, one feels that the picture could have been drawn to include seven lamps", *Myth and History in the Book of Revelation*, London: SPCK, 1979, 93.

<sup>14</sup> It is important also to point out that this 'war' will only take place "when they have finished their witnessing" (11,7), an observation that is very inappropriate for the Church, whose witnessing will never end for as long as she exists.

<sup>15</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 574 n.3.

<sup>16</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 575 n.6.

challenge the assumption that they are two *separate* individuals. In certain circumstances two individual Christian witnesses could indeed live and act in a close partnership, as a pair (see later).

It can be seen above that the arguments for a wholly symbolical, collective interpretation of the mission of the two witnesses do not stand up to scrutiny. The claim that the two witnesses are symbols, and their mission is an allegory, is untenable, so it is disturbing to find it is supported by a majority of modern scholars and churchmen.<sup>17</sup> As a classical example of ‘allegorization’, it is an approach that deviates from the author’s intention and was long ago censured for its abandonment of the literal sense.<sup>18</sup>

#### b) *Historical interpretations*

Some scholars interpret the two witnesses as historical personages who suffered martyrdom in the first century CE, in particular the apostles Peter and Paul.<sup>19</sup> This interpretation is especially popular in the Roman Catholic Church,<sup>20</sup> because it identifies the spectacular conclusion of the two witness’ mission (11,7-13) with the apostles’ martyrdom at the historical centre of this Church in Rome. There are, however, several insurmountable objections to this interpretation, not least among which is the need to explain the place of the two witness’ martyrdom—the city ‘where indeed their Lord was crucified’ (11,8)—as Rome. Other objections are that there is no corpse exposure, resurrection or ascension in the traditions regarding the martyrdom of Peter and Paul. The miracles they performed are quite different from those of the two witnesses,<sup>21</sup> and they conducted their missions separately, and not hand in hand as described of the two witnesses.

Some or all of these arguments can be used against the other historical figures that have been proposed at various times, including: James and John (the sons of Zebedee);<sup>22</sup> John the Baptist and Jesus Christ; James the Just and James the son of Zebedee, the high priest Ananus and Joshua.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In a survey of 27 of the most available commentaries, 22 give this interpretation, but note Schüssler Fiorenza’s evident dissatisfaction with this approach: “Attempts to puzzle out each statement of 11:7-12 in an allegorical fashion have produced exegetical confusion with respect to the meaning of the text: however the basic outline of Revelation’s rhetorical symbolization is clear: The eschatological fate of Christian prophets and witnesses is very much like that of their Lord”, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1991, 78.

<sup>18</sup> Allegorization (allegorical embellishment or interpretation) should be distinguished from allegory: “To allegorize is to impose on a story hidden meanings which the original author neither intended nor envisaged; it is to treat as allegory that which was not intended as allegory”, Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 165-71.

<sup>19</sup> First proposed in 1619, and most recently advanced by J. Munck, *Petrus und Paulus in der Offenbarung Johannes*, Copenhagen: Rosenskilde og Bagger, 1950; John Court re-presents this hypothesis in *Myth and History*, 98-104.

<sup>20</sup> E.g., Kiko Argüello, founder of the Neocatechumenal Way, at the Papal Vigil for Pentecost 2006: “Jerusalem and above all its temple was rebuilt by Zorobabel and Joshua, a layman and a priest. Before them, Moses and Aaron did so, then Peter and Paul, who are the two witnesses of whom Revelation speaks” (quoted from the <http://www.zenit.org/english/> entry for 06/04/2006).

<sup>21</sup> Except possibly the Apostle Peter’s treatment of Ananias and Saphira in Acts 5,1-11, which could be proposed as a New Testament model for the fatal fire that comes out the mouths of the two witnesses (Rev 11,5).

<sup>22</sup> “This is partly argued on the assumption that Mark 10:35-40 and Matt 20:20-28 reflect the martyrdom of the sons of Zebedee”, David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson 1998, 601(c); read here for further details on this proposal.

<sup>23</sup> See Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 601-602, 3(d), (e) and (f) for details of these and other historical proposals.

The historical approach to the identity of the two witnesses has thus been aptly summarized by Beagley: “We therefore find ourselves unable to identify with any certainty the actual historical events (if any) on which the Seer has based his account”.<sup>24</sup>

c) *Eschatological interpretations*

These interpretations are among the most ancient expositions of this passage and are held in esteem nowadays, especially by faith communities, because of their almost unanimous acceptance by the Church Fathers. The original version identifies the two witnesses with Enoch and Elijah, who, having been assumed to heaven without dying, return to the earth at the end of time to preach against the Antichrist.<sup>25</sup> Various forms of the tradition survive in early Church writings, but they only partly agree with the account in Rev 11,3-13. It is quite probable that they represent the fusion of an apocryphal Jewish tradition concerning the return of Enoch and Elijah (cf. *IEn* 90:31) with the account of the two witnesses in the Book of Revelation. The resulting composition then underwent further elaboration during the fourth century CE.<sup>26</sup>

Closer to the text of the Revelation is the proposal that the two witnesses are Moses and Elijah revived. This receives support from a rare but ancient Jewish tradition that, like Elijah, Moses did not die,<sup>27</sup> and will return with Elijah at the end of days.<sup>28</sup> A third interpretation holds that the two witnesses are Elijah and Jeremiah, since Jeremiah did not die, but was translated to heaven.<sup>29</sup>

All of these interpretations are based on the belief that a person can be miraculously taken up to heaven without dying, and at some later time physically return from there. For or against such a belief, there is no rational argument. However, since Elijah is identified with one of the witnesses in each of the interpretations mentioned above, it can be soundly argued from Scripture that we should not expect his physical return at any time in the future: in several passages of the NT, Jesus Christ himself acknowledges the fulfilment of the prophecy of Elijah’s coming (Mal 3,1.22-24) by John the Baptist (Mk 9,12; Mt 11,7-15; 17,11-13). Elijah did not return in the flesh, but in the Spirit and power granted to John the Baptist (Lk 1, 13-17; cf. Mk 1,2-8; Mt 3,4). With Christ’s assurance that John the Baptist has authentically fulfilled the prophecy of Elijah’s return, there is no need for the faithful (i.e. ‘those who are willing to accept it’ in Mt 11,14) to expect another fulfilment of this prophecy. So, when, through the mission of the two witnesses in Rev 11, Christ offers a final chance of repentance to those who did not accept the ministry of the Baptist, he will certainly not permit this to take place in a way that shows the Baptist’s ministry to be a false fulfilment

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<sup>24</sup> Alan James Beagley, *The ‘Sitz im Leben’ of the Apocalypse: With Particular Reference to the Role of the Church’s Enemies*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1987, 66.

<sup>25</sup> See Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 599, 2(a), for the sources and possible origins of this interpretation.

<sup>26</sup> See Richard Bauckham, “The Martyrdom of Enoch and Elijah: Jewish or Christian?” *JBL* 95/3 [1976] 447-58. This tradition differs from Rev 11 in having the two witnesses active at the same time as the Antichrist figure (the beast): “The point of most consistent divergence is the purpose of the mission of Enoch and Elijah. The two witnesses in Rev 11:3-13 are preachers of repentance; they are not represented as preaching against Antichrist specifically; they encounter Antichrist only when their witness is completed. In the Enoch and Elijah tradition, almost without exception, the two prophets are sent against Antichrist, after his reign has begun. This may mean that they are the instruments of his destruction (...) but it most commonly means that they expose him as an imposter” (ibid. 453).

<sup>27</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.326; see Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 600, 2(b) for other references to this tradition.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Deut. Rabbah 3.17, which gives Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai’s quotation of God’s promise to Moses: “when I bring Elijah the prophet unto them the two of you shall come together”.

<sup>29</sup> Victorinus, *Comm. in Apoc.* XI.3.

of Elijah's return. The Baptist's mission would indeed appear like a false fulfilment of Elijah's return, if Elijah himself were finally to return physically. We can therefore be sure that Christ would not wish Elijah to reappear physically as one of the two witnesses prophesied in Revelation. And if Elijah is not returning *in persona*, then none of the interpretive possibilities outlined above are credible.

### **John's Commission to Prophecy Again**

Having dealt with the more prevalent misunderstandings of this passage, further progress can be made by considering its wider context, which consists of the series of seven plagues, each introduced by the sound of a trumpet (Rev 8–11). After the description of the plague announced by the sixth trumpet (9,13-21), and before the sound of the seventh trumpet (11,15), there is a long interruption in the trumpet-plague narrative (Rev 10,1–11,14), which begins with the encounter between a mighty angel and the author, John, now on earth again following his mystical elevation to heaven (Rev 4–9). The angel is carrying a little open scroll, which he gives to John and asks him to devour it. After John has ingested the little scroll, the angel tells him that he must "*prophecy again about many races and nations and tongues and rulers*" (10,8-11). The theme of the interruption evidently concerns the renewal of John's prophetic vocation, described in a way that evokes the call of the exilic prophet, Ezekiel (Ez 2,8–3,3). However, whereas Ezekiel was only commanded to prophesy to the House of Israel, John is told he will have to prophesy about many rulers, peoples and nations. Not only is John's prophecy of universal concern, but several features in the description of his experience stand out for the significance they convey:

1. The mighty angel can be identified with the Lord's angel in the introductory vision (1,10-20) by the appearance of his face and his feet (10,1-2). Other features, such as the cloud covering and pillars of fire, are familiar from theophanies and angelophanies in other parts of Scripture, especially those narrating the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt (e.g., Ex 13,21-22; 14,19.24; 16,10; 19,9.18; 24,16-17; 33,9; 40,34-38). The Exodus theme is present in other aspects as well, such as the prior series of plagues (Rev 8–9), which evoke the plagues of Moses (Ex 7–12) and the little scroll given to John, which recalls the Tablets of the Law given to Moses (Ex 31,18). The Exodus typology in this passage is sufficiently prominent to allow us to identify the little scroll as a new Torah, and John as the new Moses.
2. The transfer of the little scroll (βιβλαρίδιον) to John, from the hand of the mighty angel, not only echoes the giving of the Torah to Moses, but also the opening verses of the Book of Revelation, where the contents are summarized as follows: "*The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him to show his servants what soon take place and which he made known by sending his angel to his servant John who bears witness to the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus Christ, of all that he saw*" (Rev 1,1-2). Comparing this opening summary of the Book of Revelation with the encounter in Rev 10, we can identify the mighty angel with the Lord's angel, and the little scroll with 'The Revelation of Jesus Christ', or 'Word of God and the Witness of Jesus', which are technical terms that stress its divine origin and authenticity, as well as placing it firmly within the prophetic tradition. Also, since the stated purpose of this chain of transmission is '*to show his servants what soon take place*', we can analogously infer that the purpose of giving the little scroll to John is '*to show God's servants what must happen soon*', and that the prophecy that issues from this experience is the central message of the Book of Revelation.

3. Another important part of the context is the solemn oath which the mighty angel swears, just before the little scroll is taken and devoured by John. The angel swears that “*there shall be no more delay, but in the days of the sound of the seventh angel, whenever he is going to blow, also will have been fulfilled the mystery of God, as he announced to his servants the prophets*” (10,6-7). Following the sound of the seventh trumpet (11,15), various aspects of the fulfilment of God’s mysterious plan are identified (11,15-18), and among them is “the time for the dead to be judged... and to destroy those who are destroying the earth” (11,18). It follows that the prophecy that John must make known, after he has ingested the little scroll, concerns the events leading up to the final judgment at the end of history.
4. It was also a ‘mighty angel’ who identified Christ the Lamb as the worthy recipient of the larger, sealed Scroll (βίβλος, βιβλίον), written on the inside and outside, and placed on the right of the one sitting on the throne in heaven (Rev 5). Not long after the Lamb had broken all the seals of the larger Scroll and could open it (8,1), the reappearance of the mighty angel in this passage, taking the little open scroll (βιβλαρίδιον) to John, alerts the reader to a connection between the two scrolls. Since Christ the Lamb is the only one found worthy to open the sealed Scroll, and is subsequently worshipped for this (5,6), it is fitting to identify that scroll with the ‘Scroll of Life of the Lamb that was slain’ (13,8; 17,8), which contains the names of those who will be judged worthy of eternal life at the final judgment (20,11-15). Conversely, it is not fitting to identify this Scroll of Life with the little scroll that was given to John to eat, for it would then be of no use as a record of names at the final judgment.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, as noted above, the little scroll represents the prophecy of the events leading up to, and setting the conditions for, the final judgment. Whereas the larger Scroll records the *inner* substance of the final judgment, in its list of names from the foundation of the world, the little scroll is a prophecy of its *outer* process. The two scrolls are therefore complementary. The fact that their relationship can be expressed in terms of *inside* and *outside* suggests that the little scroll sent to John represents the writing on the *outside* of the larger Scroll (5,1). The little scroll is indeed a part of the Lamb’s Scroll of Life—the part that is given to the Church to know how the final judgment will take place.<sup>31</sup> Its role can therefore be identified with that of the Scroll (or Tablets) of Destiny, known to ancient tradition.

In summary, the prophecy that John is about to transmit forms the central message of the Book of Revelation. Presented as a new Torah, it issues from the author’s assimilation of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, which is a part of the Scroll of Life given to Christ by Almighty God and concerns the events leading up to the final judgment and the consummation of God’s plan for humankind. For the faithful, there could scarcely be a more important document in print.

### **The Purpose and Content of John’s Prophecy**

Just after his preparation and commission to ‘prophesy again’, the author was given ‘a cane similar to a rod’ and was commanded to “*Get up and measure the Sanctuary of God, the altar, and those worshipping in it. And reject the court which is outside the Sanctuary and do*

<sup>30</sup> Against Bauckham, *Climax*, 243-57, for example.

<sup>31</sup> For a full treatment of the subject, including a description of which part, please see this author’s study on the Final Judgment at [https://www.academia.edu/80634814/The\\_Final\\_Judgment\\_in\\_the\\_Book\\_of\\_Revelation](https://www.academia.edu/80634814/The_Final_Judgment_in_the_Book_of_Revelation) .



not measure it, because it was given to the nations, and they will trample the Holy City for 42 months” (Rev 11,1-2). This command is immediately followed by the account of the prophetic mission of the two witnesses.

In its entirely prophetic context, the command to ‘measure the Sanctuary of God, the altar and those worshipping in it’ presents itself as the divine order ‘to prophesy again’ expressed in a metaphorical form.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, since this metaphorical instruction is pronounced by a divine and spiritual intermediary, it would be fair to assume it conveys the spiritual significance of the prophetic activity that the author is here being commanded to perform. In other words, ‘measuring the Temple’ expresses the spiritual meaning of ‘witnessing the prophecy’.

The interpretation of the whole command unfolds from this correspondence between the metaphorical act of ‘measuring the temple’ and the actual act of witnessing the prophecy. Interpreting the first term according to this principle, the measuring-rod is a metaphor for the prophecy itself, and the ‘Sanctuary of God, the altar and those worshipping there’ are the components of the inner court of God’s new Temple, which is in the process of construction.<sup>33</sup> The prophecy acts as a ‘rule’, according to which the components of the ‘inner court’ are shaped and assembled. In the metaphorical context of the instruction, though, this Temple is not a literal building made of concrete and stones, but a dwelling for God formed of those people who are influenced by the words of John’s prophecy. The new Temple is a metaphor for God’s people, the Church (cf. Rev 3,12; Eph 2,19-22; 1Pet 2,4-10; Heb 12,22-24).<sup>34</sup> The components of the ‘inner court’ of this new Temple refer to those who accept the prophecy given to John as a ‘rule of faith’, and adjust their lives according to this prophecy (Rev 11,1).<sup>35</sup> By the same reasoning, those people who reject the prophecy correspond to the ‘outer court’ which the author is told to reject and not to measure (11,2). They cease to be members of God’s people.<sup>36</sup> Evidently, the witnessing of this prophecy causes a process of judgment within the Church—one which determines precisely who is a member of God’s people, and who is not. In this way, it performs the authentic function of a ‘canon’<sup>37</sup> and therefore has profound ecumenical implications.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Attempts to interpret it literally either as a pre-70 CE prophecy, or as a symbolic prophetic action, are not plausible in this context, since the Temple had long been destroyed by the time John wrote the Book of Revelation. Furthermore, earlier in the text, the risen Christ promises that he will make the conqueror a pillar in the Sanctuary of his God (3,12), indicating that the divine Sanctuary is to be understood spiritually, and not physically. This entirely agrees with Christian attitudes to the temple elsewhere in the NT (e.g., Eph 2,19-22; 1Pet 2,4-10; Heb 12,22-24).

<sup>33</sup> The background here is Ezek 40-43, but instead of the prophet recording the details of a heavenly vision, here the prophet is actually participating in the construction of the temple, with the prophecy given to him. By means of this prophecy, the author of Book of Revelation brings Ezekiel’s prophecy to fulfilment. For more evidence of this, see John and Gloria Ben-Daniel, *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple—A New Approach to the Book of Revelation*, Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan 2003, 102, n.115.

<sup>34</sup> This is also the view of the majority of scholars. The Church also identifies herself as the new Temple, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, London: Geoffrey Chapman 1994, para. 756, henceforth CCC.

<sup>35</sup> In particular, it prepares them for the severe persecution and martyrdom that characterize the reign of the beast (‘the great tribulation’ of 7,14; 13,7-17; 15,2). In the Catechism, this is called the ‘final Passover’ of the Church, “when she will follow her Lord in his death and Resurrection” (CCC 677).

<sup>36</sup> This corresponds to the ‘great apostasy’ mentioned in other parts of the NT, which therefore forms a fixed element in the eschatological tradition of the Church (cf. 2Thess 2,3; Mt 24,10).

<sup>37</sup> This is independently confirmed by the symbolism of the measuring ‘reed’ given to the author and representing the prophecy (Rev 11,1). The Hebrew word for this object is ‘kaneh’, from which the Greek and English word ‘canon’ is derived. ‘Canon’ originally referred to the ‘rule of faith’ that the faithful should follow to be of one mind (cf. Phil 3,16 *Textus Receptus*). Only after the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, did this word come to mean the

Since the prophet, as a good and faithful servant, would not delay in obeying the divine command,<sup>39</sup> and the command to prophesy is typically followed by the prophecy itself,<sup>40</sup> the prophecy that John was instructed to witness can be identified with the text that immediately follows the command. John began his task of ‘measuring the temple’, which is to say, ‘witnessing his prophecy’, when he wrote what follows in the text and sent it to the churches (1,11).<sup>41</sup> However, this task will not be completed until the prophecy itself is fulfilled, for only with the fulfilment of the prophecy will there be no further need to witness it. So, the fulfilment of the prophecy implies the completion of the author’s task of measuring, which in turn involves the eschatological completion of God’s new Temple.

It is no coincidence, then, that the completion of the Temple is described in the prophecy itself, in a way that recalls the completion and consecration of the tent of witness erected by Moses in the desert (cf. Exod 40,34-35): “*And after this I looked, and the Sanctuary of the Tent of Witness in heaven was opened, and out of the Sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues... And the Sanctuary was filled with the smoke of the glory of God and of his power, and no one was able to enter the Sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished*” (Rev 15,5-8, cf. 11,19). This prophetic reference to the completion and consecration of the new Temple of God therefore marks the conclusion of the prophecy, whose spiritual purpose is to ‘measure the new Temple’ and bring it to completion.

The content of the prophecy given to the author, to ‘measure the temple’, can now be summarized: it is a prophecy for the eschatological completion of the Church, which forms the central message of the text. It starts at 11,3, ends at 15,8, and includes the account of the two witnesses (11,3-13), the ‘exodus’ of the woman to the desert (Rev 12), the description of the reign of the beast and his persecution of the saints (Rev 13), the visions of the assembly of the 144,000 on Mt. Zion (14,1-5), the angelic announcements (14,6-11), the eschatological harvest (14,14-20), the completion/consecration of the new Temple, which is the Church (15,5-8), the sound of the seventh trumpet and the fulfilment of God’s mysterious plan for humanity (11,14-19). Acceptance of this prophecy not only defines the true people of God

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collection of books chosen by the Church, in which this rule of faith is clearly expressed. In its function as a ‘canon’ within the Canon of the NT, the Book of Revelation parallels the role of the Torah (the Pentateuch) within the Canon of the OT, and accords with its status as a ‘new Torah’.

<sup>38</sup> I.e., all those people who agree to be guided by the divine Word expressed in this prophecy, from whatever religio-socio-cultural background, will come to be included in the messianic Temple in its final form, that is to say, the perfected Church at the end of history. All those who refuse to accept it, whatever their social status, qualifications or experience, will find themselves totally excluded.

<sup>39</sup> Several times in the Book of Revelation, the prophets are also called servants (Rev 1,1; 10,7; 11,18), as indeed are the angels (19,10; 22,9). Among the OT sources, Amos 3,7-8, is probably the most important in this context: “Indeed, the Lord God does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets. The lion roars—who will not be afraid! The Lord God speaks—who will not prophesy!” (cf. Rev 10,3,7). Jonah is the classic exception.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Ezek 3,4-11; Jer 1.

<sup>41</sup> Every time the prophecy is witnessed in the Church, and by its members, John is carrying out the task entrusted to him. In this way, John continues to have an effective and enduring presence in the Church, even though he died long ago. This real, but invisible, presence of the author of the Book of Revelation recalls a particularly enigmatic passage in the Gospel of John, concerning the future of the beloved disciple: “*When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus: Lord what about this man? Jesus said to him: If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me! The saying spread abroad among the brethren that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but: If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?*” (Jn 21,21-23). The author’s enduring presence not only fulfils Jesus’ prediction about the beloved disciple, but also identifies John, the author of the Book of Revelation, with the same beloved disciple.

but also instructs them on how to participate in the eschatological perfection of his Church. At the same time, rejection of the prophecy leads to exclusion from God's people. The prophecy effects a process of judgment and edification within the Church that continues until she reaches her final perfection. Conversely, the Church will not reach this perfection until the prophecy, which John received by eating the little scroll, has been fulfilled.

### **The Role of the Two Witnesses**

The observation, stated above, that the command to prophesy is instantly obeyed, and that the prophecy itself follows directly, has allowed us to identify the start of John's prophecy with the text that immediately follows the command, which is to say, with the text that starts at 11,3 and goes on to describe the mission of the two witnesses. We cannot fail to notice, then, that the mission of the two witnesses is the first event to be prophesied in John's prophecy. Their appearance, therefore, signals the start of the realization of the events that John prophesies, inviting the faithful people of God to be prepared and all 'on the same page'. In summary, the two witnesses have a prominent role in initiating the realization of the prophecy given to the author as the central message of the Book of Revelation—a prophecy whose spiritual purpose is the eschatological completion of the new Temple, which is the Church.

The foregoing observations clarify another important aspect of their role. The two witnesses prophesy and are called prophets (11,3.10). The period of their witnessing (11,7) is also termed 'the days of their prophesying' (11,6). Like the author, John, they also bear witness to a prophecy.<sup>42</sup> Their mission forms the continuation of John's commission to 'prophesy again' (10,8-11) and of his task to metaphorically 'measure the Temple' with the prophecy that he writes and sends to the churches (11,1-2). Their recognition as prophets derives from the prophecy transmitted by John and outlined above. So, although not stated explicitly in the text, the inaugural role of the two witnesses, in the prophecy transmitted by John, implicitly identifies John's prophecy as the one they publicly announce.<sup>43</sup> The two witnesses do not need to innovate their own prophecy, for the prophecy transmitted by John provides the framework and content of their mission. There is, therefore, no place for comments to the effect that, in the text, "nothing whatever is said about the content of their prophetic testimony",<sup>44</sup> precisely because, in the words of another commentator, "they come

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<sup>42</sup> This should recall the opening lines of the Book of Revelation, where the author, John, "bears witness to the Word of God and The Witness of Jesus Christ" (Rev 1,2), which are then described as 'words of prophecy' (1,3; cf. also 22,10). As with the two witnesses, here the author's witness and prophecy are one and the same, and identified as 'the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus Christ'.

<sup>43</sup> This is not only implied from the text and context, but can also be argued from the symbolism of the "reed similar to a rod" given to the author and representing the prophecy itself (11,1-2). Since several aspects of the John's commission to 'prophesy again' are analogous to the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mt Sinai (the background of plagues: Rev 8-9; cf. Ex 7-12; the column of fire and the voice of thunders: 10,1-4; cf. Ex 19,16-21; followed by the task of constructing a dwelling for God: Rev 11,2; cf. Ex 25,8) then "the cane similar to a rod" can be compared with the rod with which Moses performed his miracles (Ex 4,17.20). The fact that the miracles of Moses are evoked by the two witnesses (Rev 11,6) suggests that the prophetic powers of the two witnesses are attributable, in a way analogous to those of Moses, to the "cane similar to a rod" that represents the prophecy given to John in order that he could 'prophesy again'. This link between the prophetic mission of the two witnesses and the author's prophetic vocation is further evidence that these two witnesses are the announcers of the prophecy given to John in order to 'prophesy again'.

<sup>44</sup> E.g., Aune, when he writes: "In fact, the garments of the two witnesses provide the only clue to the nature of their message, for nothing whatever is said about the content of their prophetic testimony", *Revelation 6-16*, 611. Also Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 354.

forward in response to the prophetic calling addressed to the seer”.<sup>45</sup> The two witnesses are not only the first event described in the prophecy transmitted by John, but they are also the authentic interpreters and public announcers of that prophecy.

### **The Identity of the Two Witnesses**

Being active participants in the prophecy they publicly announce, the two witnesses come to embody it in such a profound way that acceptance of the two witnesses implies acceptance of the prophecy, and rejection of the two witnesses implies rejection of the prophecy. The personal involvement of these two witnesses in the fulfilment of the prophecy inevitably leads us to inquire about their identity.

Informed by the preceding context, and carefully discerning its temple symbolism, we have arrived at an intrinsically ‘personal’ understanding of the two witnesses. Only two chosen individuals could perform this prophetic mission in such a way as to leave no doubt that it is in the process of fulfilment. In this situation, fidelity to the text and literal fulfilment are crucial. No collective organization, group, or church community, no matter how well coordinated, could demonstrate convincingly to the world that this prophetic mission is being fulfilled as written by John. And since the fulfilment of the prophecy is essential for the perfection of the Church and the consummation of God’s mysterious plan, it is mistaken to claim that this mission can be fulfilled, in some collective way, by the Church herself.<sup>46</sup>

As we have seen above, the main support for a collective interpretation of the two witnesses derives from the exclusively symbolical approach, which claims that they are ‘symbols’ representing the prophetic witness of the Church.<sup>47</sup> But this is based on a false opposition. These two prophets may indeed represent the Church, not as ‘symbols’ or ‘collective figures’, but as two individuals who have been divinely called and empowered for a specific mission.

So, for these reasons, we embrace the interpretation of the two witnesses according to the plain meaning of the text, as two eschatological prophets who accomplish what is described in 11,3-13, without any personal identification with ancient Israelite prophets or Christian apostles, martyrs, or saints from the past. Relatively few modern scholars support this approach. As there is no record of a mission of this kind in the past, its future realization is understood: “In my opinion the only plausible solution is that 11.1-13 deals with events which the author expected to take place in the future. The two witnesses who are to prophecy

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<sup>45</sup> Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 349. Elsewhere Prigent explains this conclusion in greater detail as follows: “Better still, the call to prophesy about nations, peoples tongues and kings (10:11) clearly seems to find an echo in the list of those who will be tormented by the preaching and the action of the two witnesses (11:9: peoples, tribes, tongues and nations). We therefore have in this chapter the illustration and the accomplishment of that which was announced in chap. 10: the space required for prophecy in the plan of salvation”, *Apocalypse*, 337-8.

<sup>46</sup> Without a literal fulfilment of the prophecy, the Church will not be able to reach her perfect fulfilment. Literal fulfilment is also a basic principle of the biblical tradition, being the main guarantee of its divine origin and authenticity (cf. Dt 18,21-22). Given that the Book of Revelation enters fully into this tradition, it is clear that the plain fulfilment of its prophecy is the main evidence for its authenticity.

<sup>47</sup> See the refutation above, in “Current Interpretations”. Support for the collective/symbolic interpretation is heavily based on a denial of this literal interpretation: it appears to be driven by a presupposition that the two witnesses ‘cannot’ be real individuals, and so they ‘must’ be understood as symbols (cf. Beale, *Revelation*, 574-5). It is quite possible, even understandable, that supporters of the symbolic approach have a problem accepting the ‘literality’ of the account of the two witnesses. Since their powers are described as divine and supernatural, a biblical belief in the reality of supernatural power is a precondition for understanding them literally, and this is uniquely characteristic of the interpretation of faith.

in word and action of the imminent judgment, are messianic forerunners who have not yet appeared”.<sup>48</sup>

Before proceeding to examine the nature of their extraordinary mission, it is worthwhile noting aspects of the description of these two witnesses that give information about their personal status. The first observation is almost self-evident: the two witnesses must be Christians, since they are put to death in the city “*where indeed their Lord was crucified*” (11,8). Similarly, the part of their mission that is given greatest attention in the text is precisely the part in which they witness to the death, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ (11,7-13).

Secondly, since it is written “*And I will give to my two witnesses and they will prophesy...*” (11,3), it can be inferred that the divine speaker has already chosen his two witnesses before he grants them the supernatural powers they need in order to fulfill their prophetic mission. Their calling precedes their empowerment.<sup>49</sup>

The third observation concerns their identity as a pair, and not as two separate individuals. The two witnesses are both dressed in sackcloth. They both stand before the Lord of the earth. The powers granted to them resemble those given separately to Moses and Elijah, but in the two witnesses these powers are completely equal and shared. They finish their witnessing and are killed at the same time. Their bodies lie exposed on the street together, before rising and ascending simultaneously to heaven. On three occasions, they are even treated grammatically as one person, as when “fire comes out of their mouth” (11,5) or when “their corpse lies on the street” (11,8) and “people from many races and tribes and tongues and nations look at their corpse” (11,9). Several scholars have noted that the two witnesses form an unbreakable partnership of two, inseparable in life and death.<sup>50</sup> Giblin rightly describes them as “theologically identical twins”,<sup>51</sup> and one wonders what circumstances would allow two individual Christian witnesses to live and act in such a close partnership.<sup>52</sup> There can be little objection to the suggestion that these two are a married couple.<sup>53</sup>

### **The Timing of Their Mission**

The two witnesses “*will prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days...*” (Rev 11,3), before being put to death by the ‘beast that comes up from the abyss’ (11,7).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Leivestad, *Christ the Conqueror*, 230.

<sup>49</sup> This would lead to the situation in which the Church is called upon to discern their vocation, before the start of their mission.

<sup>50</sup> Paul S. Minear writes: “John makes no statement which applies solely to either of the two figures separately. Whatever is done, they do together; whatever is suffered, they suffer together. The time of their prophecy is a single time, beginning and ending simultaneously and having the same duration”, *I Saw A New Earth*, Washington, Cleveland: Corpus Books 1968, 101-102.

<sup>51</sup> C.H. Giblin, *The Book of Revelation: The Open Book of Prophecy*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press 1991, 114.

<sup>52</sup> Some have even cited their closeness as an objection to understanding them as two individuals, e.g., Beale, *Revelation*, 575 n. 6.

<sup>53</sup> This, then, can be added to the list of suggestions explaining why they are two, no more and no less. This is the number that: (1) satisfies the legal regulation concerning the minimum number of witnesses required for a legal prosecution (Num 35,30; Deut 17,6; 19,15; cf. Mt 18,16; Jn 8,17; 2Cor 13,1; 1Tim 5,19; Heb 10,28); (2) matches the sending of the apostles two by two in the gospels (Lk 10,1); (3) corresponds to the two witnesses, Moses and Elijah, one on either side of Jesus at the Transfiguration (Mk 9,2-8; Mt 17,1-8; Lk 9,28-36); (4) fills the places on either side of Christ in heaven (Mk 10,35-45; Mt 20,20-28).

<sup>54</sup> The ‘beast that comes up from the abyss’ (11,7) is the same as the ‘beast that comes up from the sea’ (13,1-2) and represents a world power that combines features of all four successive kingdoms symbolized by animals in

This beast reigns over the whole world for 42 months and is given authority to persecute the saints (13,5.7). During the same 42-month period, the nations will trample the holy city (11,2), and at the end of this period the beast and his armies will be defeated at the Parousia, or Second Coming of Christ (19,11-19).

With its origin in the book of Daniel (Dan 7,23-25; 9,27; 12,1.7.11), there is widespread agreement that the 42-month period, also termed “a time, times and half-a-time” (Rev 12,14), refers to a final period of extreme distress, which precedes the Second Coming and is a fixed part of the Christian eschatological tradition.<sup>55</sup> What is less well established is the relation of this final 42-month period of distress to the 1,260-day mission of the two witnesses. The overwhelming majority of scholars assume without question that, since 1,260 days and 42 months are more or less equal in length, these two periods must refer to the same period of time (i.e., they are ‘synchronous’). They conclude, therefore, that the public ministry of the two witnesses takes place during the reign of the beast.

However, when the details of the described events are considered carefully, it becomes clear that the prophetic mission of the two witnesses for 1,260 days (Rev 11,3-13) and the reign of the ‘beast from the sea’ for 42 months (13,1-8) are mutually exclusive. From the description given in the text, the powers of the two witnesses and those of the beast cannot both be manifested at the same time. Either the two witnesses have the power to end the life of anyone wishing to harm them (11,5), including the beast, or the beast has the authority to put the people of God to death (13,5.7), including the two witnesses.<sup>56</sup> If the two witnesses and the beast were active at the same time, they would each have the motive and the power to destroy the other, but a fateful contest of this kind is not what is described. The beast does not make war against the two witnesses and kill them until they have completed their 1,260-day mission (11,7); the 42-month reign of the beast is terminated by the Lord and his armies at the Second Coming (19,19-20), and not by the two witnesses.

In the light of this and other objections,<sup>57</sup> it is a mistake to assume that the periods of 1,260 days and 42 months are the same and synchronous, as do the great majority of

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Dan 7,2-8. Rising from the sea, or abyss, to reign for 42-months at the end of history, this beast reveals itself fully as a leader (17,9), who survives a fatal wounding (13,3) to become an international ruler with astonishing power (13,4-8). In this form he can be recognized as a false messiah (the Antichrist in Christian tradition) by the fact that he is promoted by a false prophet (‘the beast from the land’: 13, 11-17, 16,13; 19,20; 20,10), worshipped and admired like God (13,8.15) and finally presented as the ultimate antagonist of the risen Christ (17,4; 19,19-20). Furthermore, in conjunction with Satan, the beast and his false prophet are portrayed as false counterparts of God, his Messiah (the risen Christ), and their prophet, John, the author of the Book of Revelation.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Mk 13,14-23; Mt 24,15-28; 2Thess 2,3-12; CCC 677.

<sup>56</sup> It is particularly difficult to explain why the beast might permit the two witnesses to continue prophesying against him, while at the same time authorizing the massacre of countless, less threatening, fellow witnesses (Rev 13,5.7). The argument that the two witnesses continuously manage to elude or frustrate the beast’s efforts to put them to death cannot be supported, because the text specifically states that the beast “will make war against them and overcome them and kill them” only after they have finished their 1,260-day mission (11,7).

<sup>57</sup> There are numerous other objections: (1) If the time periods were equal, the mission of the two witnesses and the reign of the beast would finish simultaneously with the Second Coming at the end of history. This is problematic since, at the same time that the beast is supposed to be killing the two witnesses and celebrating their deaths (11,7-10), he would also be meeting his own fate at Armageddon, where he is captured and then condemned eternally to the lake of fire (19,20). (2) If the mission of the two witnesses were to conclude with the Second Coming at the end of history, then the resurrection and ascension of the two witnesses would take place three and a half days later (11,13). This would be after the end of history, in an unscriptural ‘overtime’. However, by this time the eternal destiny of every soul would already have been decided on the basis of whether or not he or she had ‘worshipped the beast’ (13,8; 20,15). So, for the conversion of souls at the ascension of the

commentators. To be consistent with the details in the text, the mission of the two witnesses must precede the reign of the beast, which is to say that the two time periods should be considered as consecutive, with the period of 1,260 days preceding that of the 42 months.

In fact, this interpretation was originally proposed by both Hippolytus and Victorinus in their comments on the Book of Revelation.<sup>58</sup> Augustine also seems to have adopted this view, although he speaks of only one witness instead of two.<sup>59</sup> In the modern period, this interpretation has been revived by a very small number of scholars,<sup>60</sup> on the basis that the prophecy in the book of Daniel mentions a final seven-year period, in which only the last half is dominated by the tyrannical oppressor of God's people. In the first half of this final 'week of years', the tyrant makes a covenant with many (Dan 9,27). In an analogous way, the Book of Revelation describes a final seven-year period, the first half of which is described as the period of 1,260 days, and the second half as the period of 42 months. The 1,260-day mission of the two witnesses is brought to an end by the beast, at the start of his 42-month reign. At the end of his 42-month reign, the beast is removed from power by Christ's Second Coming, or Parousia, at the end of history.

These conclusions have significant implications for the interpretation of the central part of the Book of Revelation.<sup>61</sup> The two consecutive time periods give a temporal structure to all the events described in chapters 11–13, in such a way that they can be understood as a narrative prophecy: during the first period of 1,260 days the two witnesses conduct their prophetic mission (Rev 11,3) at the same time as those, represented by the heavenly woman, flee to their place in the desert (12,6).<sup>62</sup> This first period is followed immediately by the final period, which lasts 42 months and is characterized by the reign of the beast (13,5), the persecution of the people of God (13,7), and the trampling of the Holy City (11,2). The final period is brought to an end by Christ's Second Coming at the final battle described in the text (19,11-21). The temporal structure of a final 'week of years' outlined above provides the

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two witnesses to be real and effective (11,13), it must happen before the destiny of each soul has been determined during the reign of the beast. (3) It is usually assumed that the author took one month as 30 days, and so the period of 42 months would be exactly equivalent in duration to 1,260 days. However, it is more correct to assume that, being familiar with the Hebrew luni-solar calendar, the author knew that the months were alternately 30 days and 29 days, and that 1,260 days and 42 months were not exactly the same (42 months is 21 days less than 1,260 days). His use of these two different expressions therefore implies that here he is referring to two different periods of time.

<sup>58</sup> Hippolytus, *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*, paragraphs 43-47, and Victorinus, *Comm. in Apoc.* XI.3.

<sup>59</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, 20:30: "And at or in connection with that judgment the following events shall come to pass, as we have learned: Elias the Tishbite shall come; the Jews shall believe; Antichrist shall persecute; Christ shall judge; the dead shall rise; the good and the wicked shall be separated; the world shall be burned and renewed. All these things, we believe, shall come to pass; but how, or in what order, human understanding cannot perfectly teach us, but only the experience of the events themselves. My opinion, however, is, that they will happen in the order in which I have related them", from <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120120.htm>.

<sup>60</sup> T.F. Glasson, *The Revelation of John*, Cambridge 1965, 67-70, and Alan Johnson, 'Revelation' in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Gæbelein, Vol. 12, Grand Rapids: 1981, 502-504.

<sup>61</sup> As the author of one recent monograph wrote "this chronological marker is the interpretive key to this middle section of Revelation... understanding how this 42 months/1260 days/ 'a time, times and half a time' period is used by John to bind together the events found in Rev. 11-13 will be vital to understanding John's central message", Antoninus King Wai Siew, *The War Between the Two Beasts and the Two Witnesses: A Chiasmic Reading of Revelation 11.1–14.5*, London: T&T Clark, 2005, 3.

<sup>62</sup> For the reasoning behind this interpretation, and the identification of these people, see John Ben-Daniel, "Towards the mystical interpretation of Revelation 12", *Revue Biblique*, Vol 114-4 (2007), 594-614; also at: [https://www.academia.edu/66117811/Towards\\_the\\_mystical\\_interpretation\\_of\\_Revelation\\_12](https://www.academia.edu/66117811/Towards_the_mystical_interpretation_of_Revelation_12).

necessary framework for understanding the central prophecy of the Book of Revelation, whose fulfilment begins with its announcement by the two witnesses.

### **The Character of their Mission**

The two witnesses “*will prophesy...dressed in sackcloth*” (Rev 11,3). The appearance of the two witnesses in sackcloth reveals something of the character of their mission. David Aune summarizes the various reasons for which sackcloth was worn in ancient Israelite society: (1) as a sign of individual mourning or national distress, (2) as an indication of submission when supplicating people or offering prayers to God, (3) as a penitential practice, and (4) as the garb appropriate for prophets.<sup>63</sup> Although it was by no means the uniform typical of prophets, sackcloth was often used by them in ancient times to evoke mourning and contrition for sin, and combine this with an appeal for repentance, an attitude of humility before God and supplication for forgiveness. The employment of sackcloth by the prophets thus brings together its whole range of uses in ancient Israelite society, and a similar significance can be ascribed to its use by the two witnesses.<sup>64</sup> With its emphasis on repentance, the mission of the two witnesses reproduces the ‘sign of Jonah’, which was the only sign that Jesus promised to give the Scribes and Pharisees, when they asked for one (Mt 12,38-42; 16,1-4; Lk 11,29-32).

The use of sackcloth by the two witnesses, to amplify their appeal for repentance, agrees fully with the conclusion stated above, that their prophetic mission takes place just before the 42-month period of distress caused by the beast. The text makes it clear that this period, immediately preceding the end of history, will be one of uncompromising severity: on the one hand the beast will persecute and kill Christ’s followers for not worshipping his image or receiving his mark, and the martyred saints will be received immediately into heaven (Rev 7,7-17; 15,2); on the other hand the beast and his followers will receive eternal condemnation (14,9-11; 19,20). Those who are alive during this final period will be forced to decide between Christ and the beast, the true and the false messiah. Their decision will determine their eternal destiny and there will be no possibility for further repentance. It is clearly a time of ‘eternal judgment’. As precursors of this final judgment, the two witnesses alert the earth’s inhabitants to the coming reign of the beast, and to its grave importance for the eternal destiny of each soul. Their use of sackcloth reflects this function, since their message is one of dire warning combined with a final appeal for repentance.

### **The Two Olive Trees and the Two Lampstands**

The two witnesses are then described as “*the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the Lord of the earth*” (Rev 11,3). The significance of this symbolical description derives from a vision in Zechariah 4, of two olive trees standing on either side of a single lampstand (Zech 4,1-14) and from the association of this vision with the building of the Second Temple around 520 BCE. At that time, the post-exilic rebuilding of the Second Temple had encountered some local opposition and disappointment, and this vision offered divine assurance that it would be completed through the leadership of the two ‘sons of oil’, signified by two olive branches (or tufts), one on each of the two olive trees. These olive

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<sup>63</sup> Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 611.

<sup>64</sup> Against Siew, *The War*, 216-19, who argues that the sackcloth signifies mourning as against repentance, for reasons that appear to arise from his desire to place the ministry of the two witnesses during, and not immediately before, the 42-month reign of the beast (13,5) and the trampling of the Holy City (11,2).



branches provide oil through a system of golden pipes to seven lights on the lampstand, which denote God's Presence among the community of Israel. The two leaders are understood to be Zerubbabel, the governor of the community at that time, and Joshua, the high priest. Through their service and cooperation, these two leaders would establish and maintain the divine presence among the community, by successfully rebuilding the Temple institution.

A similar significance extends to the two witnesses in the Book of Revelation: through their prophetic mission they will help to bring to completion the true temple of God, the Church, in whose construction the author has been participating by measuring its innermost parts (Rev 11,1-2). This agrees with what was noted previously, that the mission of the two witnesses initiates the fulfilment of the prophecy given to the author to 'prophecy again'—a prophecy which includes an allusion to the completion and consecration of the true temple (cf. 15,5-8; 11,19). The true Temple of God, the Church, cannot be completed without the fulfilment of the author's prophecy, which begins with its public announcement by the two witnesses.

Looking more closely at the symbolism of these visions, questions remain as to their precise meaning. In Zechariah's vision, for example, although the lampstand undoubtedly refers to the community of Israel, the significance of the olive trees is far from clear. It may, nevertheless, be deduced from the fact that the olive tree is the framework that supports the oil-producing branch, which in turn represents a 'son of oil', or anointed leader of the community. Taking the oil to represent the prophetic spirit,<sup>65</sup> the olive branches may be understood as symbols for other anointed leaders who have given their spirit to establish and maintain the Presence of God among the Israelites. The olive tree is therefore the living heritage of those who first performed this role: Moses, who as recipient of the Law, was the first to offer his spirit for this purpose (cf. Num 11,17.24-30), and Elijah, one of the greatest of the prophets (cf. 2Kgs 2,9-12). In Zechariah's vision, then, the two olive trees represent the two traditional structures, called the Law and the Prophets, which were founded upon Moses and Elijah and continue the work initiated by them. Zechariah's vision, then, symbolizes two living leaders, supported by the ancient religious traditions of the Law and the Prophets, maintaining the Presence of God among the Israelites, through the re-establishment of the Temple service.

So, despite evident similarities, there are also significant differences between Zechariah's vision of two olive trees providing oil, from a branch on each tree, through golden pipes to a lampstand with seven lights, and the two olive trees and two lampstands of the Book of Revelation. There has been a considerable simplification: each witness is symbolized by an olive tree and a lampstand standing before the Lord of the earth. Here there are two lampstands instead of one, and the branches and the pipes have disappeared. Whereas the vision of Zechariah portrayed the witness of the community maintained by two divinely appointed leaders, supported by the traditions of the Law and the Prophets, in the Book of Revelation the same elements are combined to denote two witnessing individuals (the lampstands), who embody the witness of the Law and the Prophets to the Lord of all the earth (the olive trees).<sup>66</sup> These two individuals no longer represent God's indirect leadership of the

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. Zech 4,6: "'Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit' says the Lord of Hosts".

<sup>66</sup> The importance of this witness is reflected in many other parts of the NT (e.g., Jn 1,45; 5,39; Rom 3,21-22). It appears also in the synoptic accounts of the Transfiguration (Mk 9,2-8; Mt 17,1-13; Lk 9,28-36) where Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets. Of all the writings in the NT, the Book of Revelation most strongly reflects the witness of the OT 'Law and the Prophets' to the risen Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Beale,

divinely chosen people, as in Zechariah; rather they witness to the direct leadership of all the earth by the only true leader, Jesus Christ. It is in this way, and not as leaders themselves, that the two witnesses represent the fulfilment of Zechariah's vision regarding the Presence of God on earth.

The fulfilment of Zechariah's vision by the two witnesses 'standing beside the Lord of all the earth' implies that no other claims for the fulfilment of this vision should be given credence. This is especially relevant to the main subject of their prophecy: the brief reign of the two false messianic leaders, the 'beast from the sea' and the 'beast from the land' (Rev 13), which immediately follows their mission (11,7). Rejecting Jesus Christ as the true fulfilment of the messianic expectation, these two false messianic leaders are liable to be identified with the two olive branches (tufts) in Zechariah's vision, which represent two anointed leaders, or messiahs, of the community of Israel.<sup>67</sup> This finds some confirmation from the fact that, just like the two leaders in Zechariah's vision, so also the false messianic leaders will be instrumental in the establishment of a temple cult. This is very subtly indicated in the prophecy given to John and announced by the two witnesses: "*And he [the false prophet] performs great signs such that he even makes fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of men*" (Rev 13,13).

In the history of the ancient Israelite cult, this sign frequently appeared at the consecration of a new altar, indicating divine confirmation (Lv 9,24; 1Chr 21,26; 2Chr 7,1; 2Macc 1,18-36). Its imitation by the false prophet implies his participation in the dedication of a new altar connected to the ancient Israelite cult.<sup>68</sup> In view of the central importance of the Temple in Jerusalem for the performance of the ancient cult, the dedication of a new altar by the false prophet, in this impressive but inauthentic way, certainly implies the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Furthermore, it is clear from the text that the renewed cult is not directed to the worship of God, but rather to the false messiah and his patron, the devil (Rev 13,2-3.8.15). Even though it is based on the site of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem (cf. 2Thess 2,4; Mt 24,15; Mk 13,14), the false religion deceitfully established and enforced by the false prophet is an idolatrous form of the ancient Israelite cult, which is directed towards the worship of a false messiah and the source of his authority, the devil.<sup>69</sup>

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*Revelation*, 76-79). The identification of the two witnesses with the two olive trees, which represent the witness of the Law and the Prophets, is therefore entirely consistent with the fact that they are the announcers of the prophecy of this Book.

<sup>67</sup> As noted above, it is generally agreed that the two olive branches refer to two anointed leaders (or 'messiahs') of the postexilic Jewish community, namely Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest. However, the fact that Zerubbabel was never anointed and that the restored community did not become a Sovereign State, but remained under foreign domination, gave rise to the suspicion that Zechariah's vision was not fulfilled by contemporary events. This is somewhat confirmed by the reappearance of the basic elements of the vision (the lampstand and the two olive branches without the trees) as the insignia of the modern State of Israel, and symbol of the ideal Jewish community.

<sup>68</sup> The imitation of this sign by the false prophet also suggests that he wishes to identify himself with Elijah, since it recalls the divine powers given to this prophet (cf. 2Kgs 1,9-14; 1Kgs 18,30-40).

<sup>69</sup> Modern interpretations of the religious activity described in this passage identify it with the imperial cult—a form of pagan idolatry practiced in the first century CE, which made the image of the emperor an object of worship. Very few commentators seem to notice the messianic overtones in this passage, or the allusion to ancient Israelite prophetic and ceremonial traditions. Those scholars who have noticed these allusions (e.g. Beale, *Revelation*, 710-15) do not seem to be aware of their incompatibility with first-century pagan practices. In fact, the religious activity described in this passage best fits Judaism, especially those branches of Orthodox Judaism that await the rebuilding of their Temple in its former place. In the Halacha (i.e., the religious law) defined by Maimonides, the rebuilding of the Temple in its place is the act that definitively identifies Judaism's messiah and the inauguration of its messianic age (*The Code of Maimonides [Mishneh Torah], Book 14: The*

In the context of the imminent appearance of these two false messianic leaders, and their idolatrous manipulation of the ancient Israelite cult, the mission of the two witnesses has a specific significance and purpose: they not only witness to the true fulfilment of Zechariah's vision by Jesus Christ, but also warn about its false fulfilment by those two leaders who, at the appointed time, will restore the Temple in Jerusalem and claim to be the two olive branches or 'sons of oil' in Zechariah's vision.

### The Signs of the Two Witnesses

*“And if anyone wishes to harm them, fire comes out of their mouth and consumes their enemies; and if anyone should wish to harm them, he is bound to be killed in this way. These have authority to shut the sky, so that no rain may fall during the days of their prophecy, and they have authority over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they wish”* (Rev 11,5-6).

There is unanimous agreement among scholars that the signs that the two witnesses perform evoke those of Moses and Elijah:

11,5 – fire out of their mouth consumes their enemies	Elijah (2Kgs 1,1-14) <sup>70</sup>
11,6a – they have authority to shut the sky	Elijah (1Kgs 17,1) <sup>71</sup>
11,6b – authority to turn the waters into blood	Moses (Ex 7,14-21)
11,6c – and strike the earth with every kind of plague	Moses (Ex 9,13-14)

At the same time there are important differences that distinguish these two witnesses from Moses and Elijah. The separate powers granted to Moses and Elijah are combined in the two witnesses, such that they are entirely equal to each other in authority and function. Furthermore, in their ability to call down every kind of plague whenever they wish (Rev 11,6), the authority of the two witnesses appears to exceed that of the ancient prophets, whose actions were generally performed under a direct command from God.<sup>72</sup> These differences disprove the claim that the two witnesses are Moses and Elijah *redivivi*, but nevertheless indicate the author's wish that the mission of the two witnesses be understood in the light of the traditions of Moses and Elijah.

At this point scholarly research becomes preoccupied with a discussion of literary origins, rather than investigating the kind of context in which the mission of two prophets with these powers can best be understood.

It is well known that, according to OT prophecy, Elijah was expected to return as a forerunner to the Messiah, to restore all things and turn the hearts of the fathers to their sons (Mal 3,1.22-24). Jesus makes clear reference to this expectation and “for those willing to accept it” (Mt 11,14), he identifies Elijah with John the Baptist (Mk 9,12; Mt 11,7-15; 17,11-

*Book of Judges*; eds. Oberman, Ginzberg, Wolfson, trans. Hershman, Yale Judaica Series, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1949; Treatise 5: Kings and Wars, chs. 11-12, 238-42). In this it differs fundamentally from the Christian view, as represented in the Book of Revelation, which sees this act as diabolical, and its instigator as the Antichrist.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Sir 48,1; and esp. Jer 5,14: “Because you speak this word, behold, I will make my words fire in your mouth, and this people wood, and it shall consume them”.

<sup>71</sup> It is of interest to note that in New Testament times the tradition was already well established that Elijah's miracle of withholding the rain had continued for three and a half years (Lk 4,25; Jas 5,17), exactly the same time as the ministry of the two witnesses (1,260 days; 11,3).

<sup>72</sup> Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 353; Siew, *The War*, 235; cf. Ex 7,20; 8,5; 9,2; 16,20-21.

13). Elsewhere, the gospels describe the Baptist as a prophet acting in the spirit and power of Elijah (Lk 1,13-17; cf. Mk 1,2-8; Mt 3,4), although identification on a personal level is denied (Jn 1,27). It remains true up to this day that the religious leadership of the Jewish people was unwilling to accept the fulfilment of Elijah's return by John the Baptist. This rejection of the Elijah-like mission of the Baptist also contributed to their rejection of Jesus as their Messiah, since the two expectations were inextricably linked. As a result, the Jews are still awaiting a forerunner like Elijah, and a Messiah like Moses, who will usher in the messianic age they have been awaiting for so long.<sup>73</sup>

So, evoking the powers of Moses and Elijah,<sup>74</sup> the mission of the two witnesses inserts itself fittingly into the context of the still unfulfilled messianic expectation of the Jews. However, although the mission of the two witnesses is clearly adapted to this expectation, it should be stressed that they themselves do not claim to be its fulfilment. Instead, the powerful signs they perform simply confirm the prophecy announced by them, and endorse its testimony to the divinity and sovereignty of Jesus Christ.

This does not explain, however, why the powers granted to the two witnesses are different from those normally granted to Christian witnesses.<sup>75</sup> Although they may appear to contradict the evangelical mission of the Church, the severity of these powers can readily be explained as follows:

- 1) As a specific means of communicating the sovereignty of Jesus Christ to those who, for certain reasons, had previously rejected this, and therefore still find themselves awaiting the imminent appearance of two national redemptive figures, one like Elijah and the other like Moses.
- 2) As a necessary force for challenging attitudes that are intensely resistant and hostile to the proclamation of the Christian message, and in these circumstances to deter physical attacks against the two witnesses (Rev 11,5).
- 3) As a way of combating complacency and disbelief and inspiring the fear of God (cf. 14,7).
- 4) As a reflection of the urgency and gravity of the message of the two witnesses.

The character of the supernatural signs of the two prophets indicates that their witness to the sovereignty of Christ is directed especially to the Jewish people, in the context of the imminent but false fulfilment of their long-awaited messianic expectation. Since this is closely linked to the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem,<sup>76</sup> these conclusions complement those of the previous section, which explains the warning of the two witnesses' about the

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<sup>73</sup> See, for example, Joseph Klausner, *Messianic Idea in Israel*, New York: Macmillan 1955, 13-25, 451-57; Menachem M. Brod, *Days of Moshiach: The Redemption and the Coming of the Moschiach in Jewish Sources*, Kfar Chabad: Chabad Youth Organization 1993, 109-10; 175-78; 126-27.

<sup>74</sup> It should be added that not only in the signs they perform, but also in the content of their prophecy do the two witnesses recall Moses and Elijah: their prophecy (Rev 12-13) concerns the exodus of the mother of the male child to the desert for 1260 days (Moses), where she will be protected from the persecutions of a false and idolatrous religion during the period of 42 months (Elijah).

<sup>75</sup> "Killing opponents who resist the gospel is hardly the conduct of evangelists who are trying to win the world" (G.R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, London: Oliphants 1978, 179), but in this context one should not forget the effect of Peter's apostolic indignation in Acts 5,1-11.

<sup>76</sup> The linkage is enshrined in the Halacha defined by Maimonides: the rebuilding of the temple in its place is the act that definitively identifies Judaism's messiah and the inauguration of its messianic age (*The Code of Maimonides [Mishneh Torah]*, Book 14: Judges; Treatise 5: Kings and Wars, chs. 11-12, 238-42).

restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem by two false messianic leaders who claim to be the two olive branches or ‘sons of oil’ in Zechariah’s vision.

One implication of this interpretation is that the signs of the two witnesses should be considered as local manifestations affecting the surroundings of the target population. They are not necessarily global phenomena. As Siew writes, on the basis of biblical precedents: “It is not necessary to think that the drought enforced by the two witnesses is worldwide. It is more likely to be local.... The power of Elijah to stop rain has been compared with Amos 4.7-8 where God selectively gives and withholds rain between one city and another”.<sup>77</sup> So although the mission of the two witnesses may have a global impact, its expression is localized to the Jewish people and their immediate surroundings. The author of this mission therefore appears to have anticipated an eschatological return of the Jews to their homeland, which would then be the arena for the prophetic activity of the two witnesses.<sup>78</sup>

### **Witnesses to the Resurrection**

*“And whenever they finish their witnessing, the beast that is coming up out of the abyss will make war against them and overcome them and kill them. And their corpse lies on the street of the great city which is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt, where indeed their Lord was crucified” (Rev 11,7-8).*

There is general agreement among scholars that the death, resurrection and ascension of the two witnesses recall the death, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus to heaven. However, the complete significance of this event is rarely appreciated because the literal details are denied or overlooked. This is most evident in the treatment of the expression “where indeed their Lord was crucified” (11,8). This literal reference to Jerusalem is not easily missed or dismissed, especially since this is a “strikingly, matter of fact, historically specific statement, quite uncharacteristic of the Book of Revelation”, in the words of one commentator.<sup>79</sup> But because of the pervasive allegorizing tendency among scholars,<sup>80</sup> this very literal reference to the historical city of Jerusalem has been lost to all but a few modern interpreters.<sup>81</sup> In fact, the designation of Jerusalem as the place where the two witnesses are

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<sup>77</sup> Siew, *The War*, 234.

<sup>78</sup> I.e., the nature and content of the mission of the two witnesses seems to presuppose the gathering of the Jews into the land and city of their forefathers, thus showing new-testament foreknowledge of, if not actually support for, this hotly disputed phenomenon of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (‘Zionism’).

<sup>79</sup> Bauckham, *Climax*, 171.

<sup>80</sup> The usual objection to understanding this description as a reference to historical Jerusalem is that elsewhere in the Book of Revelation the title ‘great city’ is associated with Babylon, the wealthy and powerful city that is finally destroyed by the beast (Rev 14,8; 16,19; 17,18; 18,10). Instead of explaining why the city of Jerusalem finally comes to merit this title, most commentators vainly attempt to explain how Rome, or any other sinful worldly city of the same character, comes to be the place where Christ was crucified. They compound this confusion with a loose reading of the expression ‘spiritually called Sodom and Egypt’. Rather than explain why Jerusalem, ‘the great city’ is no longer spiritually called ‘Zion’, but ‘Sodom and Egypt’, modern scholarship sees this as confirmation that the ‘great city’ is to be understood ‘spiritually’, as opposed to literally. This allegorization is characteristic of the wholly symbolical approach. Indeed, all those commentators who fail to see, here, a literal reference to Jerusalem have also completely excluded a literal interpretation of the two witnesses, understanding them entirely as symbols, and their mission as an allegory of Christian witness in general.

<sup>81</sup> E.g., Aune “This phrase clearly identifies “the great city” as Jerusalem, yet in all other references to “the great city” in Revelation, Rome is meant” *Revelation 6-16*, 620; Beagley: “Rome had no monopoly on the term “the great city” *Sitz im Leben*, 67; also Bousset, Charles, Lohmeyer, Swete, Allo, Feuillet, Bonsirven, Lohse,

killed simply reflects the biblical view that “it is impossible that a prophet should die outside of Jerusalem” (Lk 13,33).

So, at the end of their 1,260-day mission, the two witnesses are put to death at the command of the false messiah, who is called the ‘beast from the sea’, and their bodies are left exposed on a wide street in the historical city of Jerusalem. As argued above, this event marks the start of beast’s blasphemous 42-month reign (Rev 11,7). From the length of the description of this event in the text, it is evidently to be understood as the most important part of their mission and the climax of their witness to Jesus Christ. Many of those who experience this event are converted and give glory to the God of heaven (11,13).

According to the text, their bodies are left exposed in a public place in Jerusalem for three-and-a-half days, before rising from the dead and ascending into heaven in front of the assembled crowds. Denial of burial, and the exposure of their corpses for three-and-a-half days, are usually explained as a public display of shaming and insulting the two witnesses.<sup>82</sup> But this motive does not really explain why crowds of people from all over the world look at their corpses for the entire period of three-and-a-half days (11,9). Taking such an interest in the corpses of the two witnesses is not the reaction one would expect from those who simply wished to insult and shame them. Instead, this display can readily be interpreted as an attempt to challenge and discredit Christian faith in the Resurrection of Jesus, and specifically the witness of the two prophets to that faith (cf. Mt 28,11-15). The false messiah gives orders for the corpses of the two witnesses to be left on the street, under guard and exposed to view, for a short while longer than Jesus lay in the tomb.

However, instead of discrediting the Faith, the beast’s challenge results in the resurrection and ascension of the two prophets and the conversion of many unbelievers in the city (Rev 11,11-13).<sup>83</sup> This is described in a way that evokes Ezekiel’s vision of the valley strewn with dry bones (Ezek 37,1-14)—a vision that prophesies the resurrection of the people of Israel. So, this allusion correlates the conversion of the unbelieving spectators with the eschatological resurrection of the people of Israel. Not only does this indicate the realization of the Apostle Paul’s hope for the salvation of his people at the end of history (Rom 11,25-27), but it also confirms that the final and most important part of the two witness’ mission is directed specifically towards the Jewish nation, whose centre, by now, is established in Jerusalem.<sup>84</sup>

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Wikenhauser, Glasson, Ford, Walvoord, Ladd, Witherington, Reddish, Siew. Cf. Jer 22,8 for biblical use of ‘great city’ epithet for Jerusalem, and Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 619 for its classical uses.

<sup>82</sup> As in Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 355, Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 186, R.H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, Revised Edition, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998, 220.

<sup>83</sup> Note, the conversion of many, but not all, unbelievers. For further discussion on the outcome of this miracle and the subsequent earthquake, see ‘The City in 11,13’, in this author’s “Historical Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation” at [https://www.academia.edu/82220592/Historical\\_Jerusalem\\_in\\_the\\_Book\\_of\\_Revelation](https://www.academia.edu/82220592/Historical_Jerusalem_in_the_Book_of_Revelation).

<sup>84</sup> Ezekiel’s vision is clearly being recalled and evoked in the resurrection of the two witnesses and the subsequent conversion of many of those witnessing it. However, the resurrection of the two witnesses primarily recalls the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the Church’s resurrection in Christ. The implication is that, through their resurrection, the two witnesses link Ezekiel’s vision of the restoration of the House of Israel as a faithful nation, to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the Church’s living faith in this. This interpretation is clearly consistent with the view that the mission of the two witnesses is directed principally to the Jews, in the context of their national restoration at the end of history. The restoration has taken place in stages, as depicted in Ezekiel’s vision: first the bones coming together, then the flesh, then the skin, and finally the breath of life and the return to being living witnesses of God in their own land (Ezek 37,14). The two witnesses, with their eschatological witness to Christ’s resurrection, bring this process of national restoration to completion with the conversion of their enemies to true faith in God (Rev 11,13). This indeed accords with fulfilment of Paul’s wish

## Conclusion

The two witnesses, or prophets, are a Christian couple who, shortly before the end of history, are called and then divinely empowered to announce the central message of the Apostle John's Book of Revelation. The primary concern of this message is the global reign of the ultimate antagonist of Jesus Christ—a false messiah often referred to as the Antichrist. The conclusion of their mission coincides with the start of this brief reign, which will include the inauguration of the third Temple and the widespread persecution of Christ's followers.<sup>85</sup> Although their mission is centred on historical Jerusalem, it has a wide-ranging impact that can be summarized as follows:

1. On the Church—the prophecy announced by the two witnesses acts as a rule for the eschatological completion of the new Temple, which is the Church. Those who accept it and amend their lives accordingly form the true Church. Those who reject it are rejected from the true Church. The Church cannot reach her perfection until this prophecy is fulfilled.
2. On the world—the prophecy announced by the two witnesses warns how the world will be judged by God and Christ. Those who do not pay heed to this warning will find themselves worshipping the false messiah, blaspheming God and fighting against his people. They will be liable to eternal condemnation.
3. On the Jews—the prophecy announced by the two witnesses is particularly relevant to the messianic expectation of the Jews, since the reign of the Antichrist (the beast from the sea) is a false fulfillment of this longing. Not only their prophetic ministry, but also their death and resurrection, testify to the true fulfilment of this expectation by Jesus Christ.<sup>86</sup>

John Ben-Daniel  
Old City, Jerusalem  
Feast of the Transfiguration, 2022

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for the conversion of his fellow countrymen “For if the rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?” (Rom 11,15).

<sup>85</sup> Although not considered here, it also includes the execution of God's judgment on the city called Babylon (Rev 16,19; 17,16-17; 19,2).

<sup>86</sup> One might add here the impact of their mission on Islam. On the one hand Islam accepts Jesus Christ as a prophet and is therefore bound, in theory, to accept the prophecy announced by the two witnesses, because it derives from him (cf. 1,1-2). In practice, however, this will be difficult for Muslims, because they accuse the Christians of falsifying their Scriptures and have elevated the Koran above the Bible, claiming it is the unmediated Word of God. In a similar way, they have elevated Mohammed above Jesus calling him the seal of the prophets. Clearly the mission of the two witnesses, and the fulfilment of the prophecy they announce, will seriously undermine their claims for the superior authority of Mohammed, the Koran and the religion of Islam.