

THE TWO WITNESSES OF REV 11:3-12

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The two witnesses of Rev 11:3-12, also designated in vs. 4 as "the two olive trees" and "the two lampstands," have most frequently been interpreted as representing two personages—Moses and Elijah, James and John, Peter and Paul, or others.¹ The identification with Moses and Elijah (or with their eschatological counterparts) has been especially tempting because of the mention in vs. 6 of the witnesses' power to turn the waters to blood and to smite the earth with every plague (reminiscent of Moses) and to bring drought (reminiscent of Elijah), coupled with the Jewish belief in an eschatological return of those two prophets (see John 1:21; 6:14; 7:40; Matt 11:14; Mark 9:11; and also Deut 18:15-18 and Mal 4:5).²

Another fairly common approach among recent exegetes is to see the two witnesses as somehow representing the Christian church, or at least some segment or aspect of it and its mission. This might be the prophetic vocation of the church, the Jewish and Gentile segments of the early Christian community, the faithful Smyrna and Philadelphia churches, the martyrs within the whole Christian community, the preaching and teaching ministry of the universal church, etc.³

¹For a partial listing of candidates, see J. M. Ford in *Revelation*, AB 38 (New York, 1975), pp. 177-178.

²Also we are reminded of the appearance of Elijah and Moses in the transfiguration experience (Mark 9:4), plus the fact that in our text in Rev 11:12 the ascension of the witnesses to heaven may be reminiscent not only of Christ's ascension but of Elijah's (2 Kgs 2:11) and also of the tradition regarding Moses as reflected in the *Assumption of Moses* (cf. Jude 9).

³The variety of interpretations along this line is great. Regarding the concept of "the witness of both the Jewish and the Gentile Christians," see Vernard Eller, *The Most Revealing Book of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1974), p. 116. For aspects of the prophetic vocation or preaching and teaching ministry, see Paul S. Minear, *I Saw a New Earth* (Washington, D.C., 1968), pp. 99-103; Thomas S. Kepler, *The Book of Revelation* (New York, 1957), p. 120; J. S. Considine, "The Two Witnesses: Apoc. 11:3-13," *CBQ* 8 (1946): 392. For other variations within this broad approach, see, e.g., G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (London, 1974), p. 184; G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York, 1966), pp. 134-135; Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John* (London, 1940), p. 183; Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1969), p. 148; and Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1977), p. 223.

Generally overlooked by interpreters in both of the foregoing schools of interpretation is one or more of three essential considerations that will be treated briefly in the following discussion: (1) the broad contextual setting for the two-witnesses pericope, (2) the dynamics of the basic symbolism used in the pericope, and (3) the theological or thematic background that informs the concept of two witnesses in the book of Revelation.

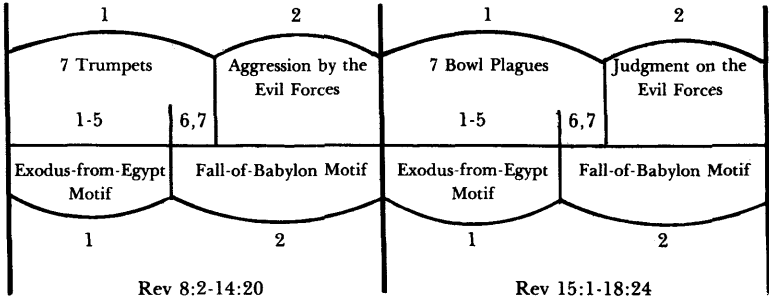
1. *The Contextual Setting*

The two-witnesses pericope is a portion of an "interlude" that falls between the sixth and seventh trumpets within the seven-trumpets section of the book of Revelation. The seven trumpets themselves are, in turn, an integral part of a larger section that carries what might well be called the "Exodus-from-Egypt"/"Fall-of-Babylon" motif.⁴ In fact, this "Exodus-from-Egypt"/"Fall-of-Babylon" motif underlies two parallel sections of the Revelation, sections that are chiasmic counterparts to each other—Rev 8:2-14:20 and Rev 15:1-18:24.⁵

Moreover, both of these two broader sections are *doublets*. In the first section, a septet of seven trumpets is followed by a description of aggression by evil powers; and in the second section, a septet of seven bowls of wrath is followed by a description of judgment on evil powers. However, in both cases there is a "doublet" effect in another way as well: Each section begins with five elements that are patterned after the plagues on ancient *Egypt* at the time of the Israelite Exodus (the first five trumpets and the first five bowls), and then each septet shifts the scene to the *Babylon* motif by introducing "the great river Euphrates" in the sixth trumpet and in the sixth bowl plague (9:14 and 16:12). The Babylon motif is thereafter continued throughout the section and is highlighted in the proclamation of Babylon's fall (14:8 and 18:2). Diagrammatically, this twofold "doublet" structure may be set forth as follows:

⁴This motif has been briefly treated earlier in my "Chiastic Structure and Some Motifs in the Book of Revelation," *AUSS* 16 (1978): 403-404, and *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, 2d ed. (Naples, Florida, 1979), p. 46.

⁵The overall chiasmic structure of the book has been dealt with in the sources mentioned in n. 4, above. See especially *Interpreting*, chap. 5.



Falling within the trumpets portion of the first of these sections, the two-witnesses presentation in Rev 11 must have a direct relationship to the meaning of both of these broader contextual items—the trumpets themselves and the “Exodus-from-Egypt”/“Fall-of-Babylon” motif.

In a sense, these two aspects of the contextual setting merge, for the basic significance of the trumpet symbolism is *warning*, and indeed warning was present for both Egypt and Babylon in the historical experiences here utilized as symbolic backgrounds or prototypes. The plagues on Egypt spelled warning for Pharaoh and the Egyptians (and held forth hope for the Israelites), and the prophetic warnings to Babylon had similar significance prior to Israel’s release from the Babylonian captivity.⁶ Now, in the Christian context of Rev 11, the two witnesses are also a source of warning—to a “new Egypt”/“new Babylon” that is oppressing God’s people.

2. Symbol Usage in Rev 11

As we analyze next the symbolism utilized in the two-witnesses pericope of Rev 11, it is important to notice only the dynamics involved, rather than to discuss in detail each individual symbol. As we look broadly at the symbolism in order to ascertain these dynamics, two basic

⁶Regarding Egypt, see Exodus chaps. 7ff.; and regarding Babylon, see especially Jeremiah chaps. 50 and 51. Of interest are the references to “we would have healed Babylon” (Jer 51:9) and “flee from the midst of Babylon” (Jer 50:8; 51:6). It should be noted that in Revelation the paralleling section with the “Exodus-from-Egypt”/“Fall-of-Babylon” motif (Rev 15:1-18:24) is a section where judgment is poured out on the aggressor forces. Thus, the symbolisms of Revelation utilize the prophetic messages regarding ancient Egypt and ancient Babylon in a twofold way: First, as *warnings* (in the earlier section, Rev 8:2-14:20), and then as pronouncements of *doom* (in this later section). Our interest herein is, of course, in the earlier section.

considerations come to attention immediately:

(1) As for the two witnesses themselves, they do not function as two individual entities, but only as *one entity*—always in unity and in absolute union. Paul Minear has aptly pointed out that “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,” etc.⁷

(2) The two witnesses constitute a symbolism drawn from *several prophetic backgrounds* beyond the obvious allusions to Moses and Elijah, just as in Rev 11:8 “the great city” also embraces a *blend* of symbolic references (“Sodom,” “Egypt,” “where their Lord was crucified”).⁸ It will be well to review this second dynamic a bit further:

The reference in Rev 11:5 to fire proceeding from the witnesses’ mouths—which reference is frequently looked upon by commentators as related to, or derived from, Elijah’s experience in calling fire from heaven (2 Kgs 1:10, 12)—actually has a much closer parallel with Jeremiah. The latter was told by the Lord, “I make my words a fire in your mouth, and this people wood, and the fire shall devour them” (Jer 5:14).⁹ Moreover, the reference to the two olive trees (Rev 11:4) is reminiscent of the prophetic message through Zechariah at the time of Zerubbabel (Zech 4). And still further, the reference earlier in the “interlude” to John’s eating the scroll (Rev 10:8-10) recalls a similar experience of the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek 3:1-3). Thus, several biblical personages beyond Moses and Elijah are reflected by the symbolisms used in the two-witnesses pericope and in the interlude in which that pericope occurs.

In fact, we might well expand our list even further by a consideration of the whole contextual setting of the trumpets with their “Exodus-from-Egypt”/“Fall-of-Babylon” motif. These trumpet

⁷Minear, pp. 101-102.

⁸With regard to Rev 11:8, Minear, p. 102, observes that the “great city” had become “in prophetic terms all cities—Sodom, Tyre, Egypt, Babylon, Nineveh, Rome. . . .” Although this listing goes beyond the text itself in its mention of specific places, Minear’s concept of the merging of symbolism is undoubtedly correct. In the symbolisms, there is a sort of transcendental model that focuses on the nature and activity of “the great city.” “The great city” is, of course, elsewhere in the Revelation identified as “Babylon” (see 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 16, 18, 19, 21).

⁹The fact that commentators tend to overlook or ignore this *very close* parallel to Rev 11:5 and call attention instead to the fire from heaven on King Ahaziah’s messengers is indeed puzzling. At least a somewhat closer parallel than this concerning Elijah (though not a parallel as close as the one pertaining to Jeremiah) appears in Sir 48:1: Elijah “rose up like fire, and his word burned like a lamp.”

messages would undoubtedly have brought to the minds of the ancient readers and hearers the prophetic role of Moses and Aaron in their appearances before Pharaoh, and also the prophetic roles of various of the prophets who proclaimed warnings relating to Babylon.

In short, the conclusion to be drawn from the foregoing discussion is that an interpretation of the two witnesses of Rev 11 must do justice to the facts (1) that these two witnesses are a unit, functioning and experiencing everything together (whether it is their testimony itself, their calling forth of plagues, their suffering of persecution, their temporary death, or their resurrection and ascension); and (2) that the symbolic backgrounds for these two witnesses are broader than simply the two prophets Moses and Elijah.

Moreover, it should not be overlooked that the unifying element which drew together the various prophetic personages used as a basis for the two-witnesses symbolism was their proclamation of *God's word of warning*. It would seem reasonable to expect, therefore, that God's word of warning would have a centrality also within a section of the book of Revelation devoted to trumpet warnings and setting forth this two-witnesses symbolism with the dynamics described above.

3. *The Thematic Background*

We next consider the theological or thematic background for the two-witnesses pericope of Rev 11:3-12. Is there any significant two-witnesses theology that manifests itself elsewhere in the book of Revelation and that embraces the type of prophetic warning theme which we have encountered? I would suggest that there is indeed such a theological concept—one which is a prominent emphasis of the entire book of Revelation and which is clearly evident elsewhere in the NT as well.

The introductory remarks to the Revelation make evident that in writing this book John bears witness "to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ" (1:2). In fact, his very exile on Patmos is also because of these two entities—"the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). The Christian community faced martyrdom, too, because of the same "word of God" and "testimony of Jesus" (see Rev 20:4, and cf. 6:9). Although in certain other passages the language varies somewhat, a similar concept of faithfulness to two expressions of the divine message is set forth—keeping the "commandments of God and

the testimony of Jesus Christ" (12:17) and having "the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (14:12).

The foregoing makes clear that the "word of God" and "testimony of Jesus" provide a concept or theme that permeates, undergirds, and underlies the book of Revelation, the Revelation itself being said to proclaim this twofold divine message (1:2). And it is of more than passing interest that in the very interlude in which the two-witnesses passage occurs, the concept of "word of God" and "testimony of Jesus" is specifically brought to view: The proclamation of the "mighty angel" of Rev 10 includes the statement that "in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God should be fulfilled, as announced by his servants the prophets" (10:7). Attention is thus drawn to *prophetic pre-verification* of the *Christian announcement*.

This sort of OT prophetic confirmation or pre-verification of the NT message is, of course, a familiar theme elsewhere in the NT. It is enunciated, e.g., in 1 Pet 1:10-12: "The prophets . . . searched and inquired about this salvation"; they predicted "the sufferings of Christ and the glory to follow"; they ministered "not to themselves, but to you, in the things now proclaimed to you by those who preached the gospel to you through the Holy Spirit sent from heaven." Appeal to the prophetic pre-verification was a prominent element in the apostolic preaching (see, e.g., Acts 2:29-32, 3:18, etc.), and is brought to attention, too, in such Gospel references as Luke 24:27 ("he [Christ] interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself") and John 5:46 ("if you had believed Moses, you would believe me [Christ], for he wrote of me").¹⁰

Perhaps even more significant for the present discussion, however, is the fact that this "two-witness" theology is prominent and receives thorough-going emphasis in the Gospel of John, a work with which the Revelation shows other close thematic affinities (such as the themes of judgment, discipleship, the Holy Spirit, etc.). The Fourth Gospel

¹⁰Some exegetes (such as Caird, p. 129) would see the statement in Rev 10:7 as referring to Christian martyrs, to the Christian gospel, or to NT prophets, rather than to the OT prophets. The validity of this sort of interpretation may be questioned, however, in view of the general NT emphasis on OT prophetic "pre-verification" of the gospel mission and message, as well as on the basis of the tenor of the Apocalypse itself, which draws so heavily on OT source materials. It is of interest to note, too, that in a work written not much later than the Apocalypse and having the same provenience, a further specific reference is made to *OT prophets looking forward to Christ* (Ign. *Magn.* 9); and there is rather frequent use of the same concept by the early Christian apologists.

repeatedly emphasizes that Jesus' testimony and that of the Father were in harmony. Indeed, when challenged by his detractors to the effect that his testimony was invalid since he testified of himself, Jesus called attention to the law of witness in Deut 19:15, indicating that his witness was not alone. There were *two* witnesses—himself and the Father—and moreover, these two witnesses were *one* (see especially John 8: 13-18, 28, 38; 14:24).

Additional theological concepts that surround or are joined with this two-witness theology in the Gospel of John—such as the Holy Spirit's role in bringing Christ's words to the disciples (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:14),¹¹ the matter of the disciples' faithfulness to the word (John 17:8, 14), etc.—enhance the significance of the parallel with the book of Revelation. In fact, the "word-of-God"/"word-of-Christ" entity in relationship to the disciples is set forth in striking fashion in John 17:8: "I [Christ] have given them the words which thou [God the Father] gavest me." Furthermore, the experience of the disciples, as set forth in John 15:20, would be that "if they persecuted me [Christ], they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also." The entire book of Revelation would seem to be, in a certain sense, a commentary on such statements in the Fourth Gospel. In the book of Revelation, faithfulness to the "word of God" and to the "testimony of Jesus Christ" separates the faithful from the faithless, and it brings about persecution that includes John's own exile and the martyrdom of other believers (see again Rev 1:9; 6:9; 12:17; 20:4; etc.).¹²

Moreover, it should not be overlooked that this "word-of-God"/"testimony-of-Jesus" carries judgmental aspects in John 12:48, and that such judgmental aspects find a parallel in the judgment-rendering

¹¹Almost as if it were a commentary on this concept, the book of Revelation refers repetitively to Jesus' testimony to the seven churches as being "what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Also, in Rev 19:10 the "testimony of Jesus" is explicitly defined as "the Spirit of prophecy."

¹²That an atmosphere of faithful witness in the midst of suffering permeates the Apocalypse has been generally recognized. However, an intriguing new dimension regarding the suffering Johannine community has recently been brought to light in an instructive article by Herold Weiss, "Foot Washing in the Johannine Community," *NovT* 21 (1979): 298-325. Weiss's thesis is that "the Johannine community performed the act [of foot washing] as preparation for the martyrdom their members were willing to face" (p. 300). Of particular interest to the present study is the relationship which Weiss sees (pp. 319-320) in the Gospel of John among cleanliness accomplished by the word of God in 15:3, fruit-bearing in 15:7-8 (with a reference in vs. 8 to "my [Christ's] words" abiding "in you"), "the instrument used for cleansing" in 13:10, and the beatitude of 13:17. The key role of the "word" should not be overlooked, nor should the fact that these elements indicate a martyrological/eschatological rather than missionary or liturgical concern.

power of the two witnesses of Rev 11. Also, the olive-trees/lampstands imagery in Rev 11:4 brings to mind the Holy Spirit's activities and the concept of light that are connected with the word of God and testimony of Jesus as depicted in the Fourth Gospel and elsewhere in Scripture (see, e.g., John 8:12; 12:46; 14:16-16:15; Ps 119:105; Zech 4:6).¹⁹

In summary, the book of Revelation places a pervasive emphasis on "two witnesses" that constitute a unity in their divine activity—namely, "the word of God" and "the testimony of Jesus Christ." This two-witnesses concept is also expressed elsewhere in the NT, being especially prominent in the Gospel of John, a work that manifests a number of other close theological parallels with the book of Revelation. Moreover, in the very "interlude" in Revelation that contains the two-witnesses presentation, there is set forth (in Rev 10:7) the same concept of united witness by the OT prophets and the NT message.

4. Conclusion

We have now surveyed the contextual setting for the two-witnesses pericope of Rev 11, finding it to be positioned within a trumpet-warnings section of the book which embraces the symbolism of an "Exodus-from-Egypt"/"Fall-of-Babylon" motif. We have also observed that the symbolism of two witnesses draws from the prophetic roles of several prophets (not just two prophets) who had set forth the word of God in prophetic warning; but it places these roles into the context of *one* unified testimony and experience, rather than in the context of two individual witnesses working separately. Finally, we have noted that in the very book of Revelation itself, there are brought prominently to view two such witnesses of united and unified prophetic warning, and that these same two witnesses are integral also to NT theology depicted elsewhere. These two witnesses are, namely, "the word of God" and "the testimony of Jesus Christ," or what we today would call the OT prophetic message and the NT apostolic witness.

In view of all of this, is it not logical to conclude that the *primary* point of reference or application of the two-witnesses symbolism in

¹⁹Regarding the Holy Spirit's role, cf. n. 11 above. It may be well to mention that in patristic usage, the term "Spirit of prophecy" or "prophetic Spirit" appears quite frequently as a synonym for "Holy Spirit"—especially in Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 6 (reference is made to Father, Son, and "the prophetic Spirit"), 31, 33, 39, 40, 41, 44 (reference is made to "the holy Spirit of prophecy" speaking through Moses), etc. Also cf. Athenagoras, *Plea* 10 and 18.

Rev 11:3-12 is indeed this twofold testimony called “the word of God” and “the testimony of Jesus”—even though *secondarily* there could be reference, as well, to the church in a derivative sense as the proclaimer of this divine message?¹⁴

¹⁴Another line of evidence (beyond the scope of this article) which may lend further support to the conclusion reached herein has been probed extensively by a colleague, S. Douglas Waterhouse: namely, the significance of ancient Jewish synagogue and temple practice for the two-witnesses symbolism. Unfortunately, his results have not yet been published. In brief, Waterhouse sees a background to Rev 11:3-12 from the practice in Judaism of reading “law” and “prophets” lections from “the seat of Moses” and “the seat of Elijah” to either side of the apse in the synagogue, and he compares also the significance of the temple pillars Jachin and Boaz.

The question to be asked with regard to relevance for the symbolism in the book of Revelation is: How did Christians approach the public reading of Scripture at this time (toward the end of the first century)? It would indeed seem that the common practice in this regard must have been similar to the use which we have already noted in apostolic writing and preaching—namely, appeal to *both* the *apostolic testimony* (including the book of Revelation itself, which according to its introduction was to be read publicly) and the *OT pre-verification* of the Christian message.