

The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11

Ekkehardt Müller

Biblical Research Institute

Revelation 11:1–13 contains two scenes, the first one focusing on an act of measuring and the second one dealing with two witnesses. The latter scene, one of the most difficult passages in Revelation, has been explained in a number of ways. The two witnesses have been understood as representing Enoch and Elijah, Moses and Elijah, Elijah and Jeremiah, eschatological prophets not directly identified with OT prophets, Peter and Paul, Stephen and James the Just, James and John, John the Baptist and Jesus, James the Just and James the son of Zebedee, the high priests Ananias and Joshua, the OT and the NT, the Law and the Prophets, the prophetic witness of the church, “the true spiritual value of the Israelite religion preserved intact in Christianity,” and the Word of God and the Testimony of Jesus Christ.¹

It is obvious that the passage Rev 11:3–13 is highly symbolical, as is true for the entire apocalyptic part of Revelation (chapters 4–22a). This leaves us with two main options. Either the two witnesses point to the church or the church and the synagogue, or the two witnesses represent the OT and the NT. Although many expositors identify the two witnesses with two historical persons, mainly from the OT, nevertheless they oftentimes regard them as representatives of the church. Much can be said about the passage under review, but we will mainly focus on whether the two witnesses represent the church or Scriptures.

I. Context

1. The Trumpet Vision. Revelation 11:1–13 is part of one of the septenaries of Revelation, namely the trumpet septet. In this vision an introductory temple scene (8:2–6) is followed by the sounding of six trumpets (8:7–9:21). Before the last trumpet is blown, a kind of interlude is found, comprising Rev

¹ For more details, see David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, Word Biblical Commentary 52 B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 598–603. Cf. also, Leon Morris, *The Book of Revelation*, Tynedale New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 143.

MÜLLER: THE TWO WITNESSES OF REVELATION 11

10:1–11:14. It ends with the description of the activity of the two witnesses. We would prefer to call this section an expansion of the sixth trumpet—also referred to as the second woe—and indeed 11:14 contains a summary statement pointing to the end of the second woe and the beginning of the third woe, the seventh trumpet. Whereas the seventh trumpet depicts the coming of the kingdom of God and refers to the final judgment, Rev 10–11a focuses on the time prior to the final events of world history.

2. Rev 9–11. Revelation 10 and 11 are connected in a number of ways, especially through the concept of prophecy.² In Rev 10, John receives the command to prophesy. In Rev 11a, the two witnesses function as prophets.³ Their ministry and fate are described, as are the effects on humankind.

Not only are Rev 10 and Rev 11 connected, but also Rev 9 and Rev 10–11a. The phrase *ἐκ τῶν στομάτων αὐτῶν ἐκπορεύεται πῦρ* (“fire came out of their mouths”) in 9:17 is also found in 11:5, though in an inverted order and with *στόμα* (“mouth”) in the singular. It is not found elsewhere. The two witnesses have at least one of the same abilities that the strange horses have. Negative and positive powers are contrasted.

The sixth trumpet is negative. The survivors do not even repent of their works. Yet, Rev 10–11a adds a positive note. There is John the prophet. There are the two witnesses or prophets. Though killed, they are raised and taken to heaven. And interestingly enough, there are finally people who glorify God.⁴ Not everything is pitch-black. As with the two prophets, so also with John: his

² For a discussion on the interrelatedness of the different parts of the trumpet vision, see Ekkehardt Müller, *Microstructural Analysis of Revelation 4–11*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, Volume 21 (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1996), 377–382.

³ The word group *προφητεία/προφητεύω/προφήτης* is found twice in Rev 10 and three times in Rev 11a. On prophecy, see, for example, Gerhard A. Krodell, *Revelation*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 212; S. Minear, *I Saw a New Earth: An Introduction to the Visions of the Apocalypse* (Washington: Corpus, 1968), 96; Pierre Prigent, *L'Apocalypse de Saint Jean*, 2d rev. ed., Commentaire du Nouveau Testament, 2d series, vol. 14 (Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1981), 149–150. Jürgen Roloff, *The Revelation of John: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 122, maintains: “A key for the entire thematic focus of this section is found in the observation that allusions to prophets and prophetic speech run through it like a scarlet thread (10:7, 11; 11:3, 11; cf. also 11:18).” Similarly, Kenneth A. Strand, in “The ‘Spotlight-On-Last-Events’ Sections in the Book of Revelation,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 27 (1989): 208–209, views the interlude as twofold. He declares: “The theme of prophetic proclamation which is so basic and central to chapter 10 continues, under different imagery, in chapter 11: namely, the imagery of a temple setting. Here we find . . . a temple-measuring scene . . . followed by the pericope concerning two prophetic witnesses (vv. 3–13) who are introduced in terms of the temple imagery of two olive trees that are also two lampstands (vv. 3–4)” (208).

⁴ U. B. Müller, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, Ökumenischer Taschenbuchkommentar zum Neuen Testament, vol. 19 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1984), 215–216, has a point when he states that the structure of Rev 11:13 corresponds with that of Rev 9:14–21: (1) description of a plague (9:14–17 and 11:13ab), (2) number of killed persons (9:18 and 11:13c), and (3) reaction of the rest (9:20–21 and 11:13d).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

ministry will not be in vain and not without a positive effect. Some people will repent.

3. Rev 11a. The main figures of Rev 11:1–14 are John, the two witnesses, a beast, the earth dwellers, and a voice from heaven. The lack of a vision/audition element at the beginning of Rev 11 might point to the fact that Rev 11 should not be separated from Rev 10.⁵ Vision, audition, and action are going on, even when new scenes emerge.⁶

Revelation 10 ends with the command to prophesy, which is directed to John. Revelation 11 starts with John. It is the second symbolic action that he has to perform after having eaten the scroll. He receives a measuring rod and—in direct speech—the task to measure the temple.⁷

A shift takes place with Rev 11:3. Though the direct speech continues, it is no longer John who receives orders. Instead, one finds a report on two witnesses. The two sections are linked by the same time element, the forty-two months and the 1260 days,⁸ the verb “to give,”⁹ and the concept of a city.¹⁰ Thus, the entire expansion of the sixth trumpet must be seen as a larger unit. Nevertheless, we are justified in looking at an individual scene only—such as the one dealing with the two witnesses—so long as we do not neglect the connections to the preceding material.

II. Observations on Rev 11:3–13

The two witnesses have the function of prophesying (11:3, 6) and are called the two olive trees, the two lampstands (11:4), and the two prophets (11:10). With this prophecy an important concept of Rev 11 has emerged.

⁵ The term ἤκουσαν (“they heard”) in Rev 11:12 refers to the two witnesses and does not have a structuring function.

⁶ See Richard C. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963), 326.

⁷ Krodel, 217–218, states that Rev 11 is a continuation of Rev 10. “The symbolic action of eating the little scroll, A (10:8–10), is followed by the commission, B (10:11), and by the new prophetic action of measuring the temple, A’ (11:1–2).”

⁸ Both expressions denote the same period, for forty-two months of thirty days each are 1260 days.

⁹ In the beginning and toward the end of the first paragraph, ἐδόθη is used. See also James Moffat, “The Revelation of St. John the Divine,” in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 5:414, who argues for the unity of Rev 11:1–2 and Rev 11:3–13 and—in support of his view—mentions (1) the same time span, (2) the “strange *δίδωμι*-construction . . . and (3) the inversion of object and verb” that is common to both sections (11:2, 5, 6, 9, 10). The prophetic mission finds its counterpart in the punishment. In Rev 11:3, the future tense of the same verb is employed. J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation*, Westminster Pelican Commentaries (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 184, mentions that the phrases “I will give to my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy 1260 days” and “it was given to the nations, and they shall trample the holy city forty-two months” (11:2) is an intentional parallelism describing what God allows and what he commissions, “two sides of one coin.”

¹⁰ In v. 2 the holy city is mentioned. In v. 8, a great city appears. A city is again found in 11:13, referring back to the great city.

MÜLLER: THE TWO WITNESSES OF REVELATION 11

Revelation 11:3–13 seems to be structured by time elements. The ministry of the two witnesses is introduced, and the 1260 days of their activity are portrayed. A shift occurs in Rev 11:7, for it describes the time toward the end of or after they have finished their ministry. Yet another time element is introduced in Rev 11:9, the three and a half days of their death. A shift occurs again: *καὶ μετὰ τὰς τρεῖς ἡμέρας καὶ ἥμισυ*, (“after the three and a half days,” 11:11), and the resurrection and ascension of the witnesses are reported (Rev 11:11–12). The description of their resurrection and ascension also includes a report on the effects of these events and the reaction of their enemies. The phrase *καὶ ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ὥρᾳ* (“and at that hour”) in Rev 11:13 connects this verse with the preceding verse, describing the ascension of the two witnesses.

Now we can outline Rev 11:1–13:

The Two Witnesses (3–13)

- (1) The activity of the two witnesses (3–6)
 - (a) Prophesying for 1260 days (3)
 - (b) Standing before the Lord as olive trees and lampstands (4)
 - (c) Their authority and power (5–6)
- (2) The end of their witness (7–10)
 - (a) The beast—3 statements (7)
 - (b) The dead bodies—3 1/2 days (8–9)
 - (c) Those who dwell on earth—3 statements (10)
- (3) After the 3 1/2 days (11–13)
 - (a) Resurrection and effect on those seeing it (11)
 - (b) Ascension, seen by enemies (12)
 - (c) Earthquake destroying the city, killing people, and causing others to glorify God (13)

III. Characteristics of the Two Witnesses

Although some characteristics of the two witnesses have already been mentioned, it is necessary to elaborate on them in order to gain a clearer picture of what the passage is all about.

1. They Are Called Two Witnesses. The word family *μαρτ-* is important in Revelation. It comes in two nouns, namely the “witness” as a person (*μάρτυς*) and the “witness” or “testimony” as the message proclaimed by a witness (*μαρτυρία*), and one verb, namely “to witness” (*μαρτυρέω*). The two nouns are used with the two witnesses (11:3), who finish their witness (11:7).

The noun *μάρτυς* is found five times in Revelation. Jesus (1:5; 3:14) and his followers (2:13; 17:6) as well as the two entities mentioned in our passage (11:3) are witnesses.

Those who bear witness (*μαρτυρέω*) are John (1:2), the angel sent by Jesus (22:16), and Jesus himself (22:18, 20). What is their witness all about? John, having received the Revelation of Jesus Christ through an angel, “gives witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ by reporting what he saw” (1:2). The same idea is found at the end of Revelation. “I, Jesus, sent my

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

angel to give you this *testimony/witness* for the churches” (22:16), referring to the NT book of Revelation. Jesus himself also calls attention to Scripture as embodied in the Book of Revelation. “I give witness to everyone who hears the prophetic words in this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words in this prophetic book, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city described in this book. The one who gives this *testimony/witness* says, Yes, I am coming soon.” (22:18–20).

Most often the term *μαρτυρία* is used.¹¹ Once it is employed to designate the heavenly sanctuary, “the tent of testimony.” In 12:11 the people of God conquered Satan “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.” Here we already encounter two elements. Another set of two is found in 12:17 when we hear about the commandments of Jesus and the testimony/witness of Jesus, which in 19:10 is identified as the Spirit of prophecy. However, most common is the combination “the word of God and the testimony/witness (of Jesus)” (1:2, 9; 6:9; 20:4).¹² In 11:7 the two witnesses finish their testimony/witness.

We notice that in Revelation the most important term of the word family *μαρτ-* is the term *μαρτυρία*. Again and again it appears in connection with another expression, predominantly the “word of God.” The *μαρτυρία* is not so much what believers proclaim but what they have. *Μαρτυρία* has to do with prophecy. And indeed, the parallel text to 19:10 replaces the phrase “testimony of Jesus” with the “prophets” (22:9). The verb (*μαρτυρέω*) is used to point to Scripture, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, the latter being reflected in the Book of Revelation. Thus, the word family *μαρτ-* in Revelation has a strong affinity to Scripture.

Why two witnesses? The number two is important because according to OT law two or three witnesses were required to build a case in court (Deut 19:15).¹³ This principle is also used in the NT. Jesus applied it to himself repeatedly.¹⁴

2. They Are Two Olive Trees. Whereas the word family *μαρτ-* occurs quite often, the phrase “the two olive trees” is found only once in Revelation. However, its OT background is clearly Zech 4:1–10. There we find a lampstand and next to it two olive trees which furnish oil for the lampstand. Kenneth Strand has shown that the common interpretation of the passage is flawed.

Perhaps the most common interpretation of the Zechariah passage, as represented in the commentaries, is that the two olive trees represent two leaders among the returned Hebrew exiles after the Babylonian

¹¹ It is found ten times in nine verses.

¹² In 6:9 the direct reference to Jesus is missing. The souls had been killed because of the word of God and “the testimony/witness that they had.” In 20:4 the word of God and the testimony of Jesus come in reversed order.

¹³ Cf., Beale, 581; Morris, 143.

¹⁴ See, for instance, John 8:17–18. Cf., Beale, 575.

MÜLLER: THE TWO WITNESSES OF REVELATION 11

captivity—usually considered to be Joshua and Zerubbabel. What is generally overlooked in this interpretation of the symbolism of chap. 4 is that *contextually* that chapter deals with *only the one* leader, Zerubbabel, just as chap. 3 deals with *only the other* leader, Joshua.¹⁵

However, the text clearly connects the two olive trees with the work of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ The lampstand represents Zerubbabel. Whereas the number of the lampstands in Revelation has been increased from one to two, there are two olive trees both in Zechariah and in Revelation. Strand has argued that because of this continuity of the olive trees, their meaning should remain constant in both biblical books, “referring to the Spirit’s work,” that is, “the Holy Spirit’s role in providing the word of God, in both the OT and NT aspects.”¹⁷

3. They Are Two Lampstands. Lampstands are mentioned seven times in Revelation. Six of these occurrences are found in the letter frame of Revelation, in this case in Rev 1 and 2.¹⁸ They depict the seven golden lampstands and are identified with seven churches (1:20). The only other place where lampstands occur is 11:4. Scholars have argued that the two witnesses of Rev 11 must refer to the church, since the seven lampstands are clearly identified as churches. A consistent usage of terms in Revelation has been suggested and called for. Some have proposed that the two flawless churches of Rev 2–3, Smyrna and Philadelphia, are the two witnesses of Rev 11.¹⁹

Although words are normally used with the same meaning throughout the Book of Revelation, there are exceptions. The seven angels of the seven churches (Rev 1–3) are different from the four angels in Rev 7 and also from the seven angels blowing the seven trumpets in Rev 8–11. Sometimes in Revelation they represent human beings, in other instances heavenly creatures. A term related to the lampstands (*λυχνίαι*) is the word “lamp” (*λύχνος*). Whereas in 22:5 we hear about the light of the lamp and the light of the sun, in 21:23 Jesus the Lamb is the lamp. A change of meaning may occur also with the lampstands. In Rev 11 they are identified with the two olive trees, the two witnesses, and the two prophets. There is also a difference with regard to location. Whereas Jesus Christ walks among the seven lampstands on earth (2:1), the two lampstands of Rev 11 are standing before the Lord of the earth, possibly being connected to his heavenly sanctuary.²⁰

John uses expressions and OT allusions creatively. He also blends different scenes and texts. This phenomenon must be taken into account when interpreting the Apocalypse. “The one lampstand [of Zech 4] becomes two, and these in

¹⁵ Kenneth A. Strand, “The Two Olive Trees of Zechariah 4 and Revelation 11,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 20 (1982): 257.

¹⁶ Cf., Beale, 577–578; Morris, 144.

¹⁷ Strand, “The Two Olive Trees,” 260.

¹⁸ The texts are 1:12, 13, 20 (twice); 2:1, 5.

¹⁹ Cf., Beale, 577.

²⁰ Aune, 613.

turn are said to be synonymous with the two olive trees.”²¹ It must also be kept in mind that the motif of the lampstands is not the predominant one in Rev 11. More important are the motifs of witness and prophecy. Again the work of the Holy Spirit is emphasized. Indeed, God’s word is called a lamp in Ps 119:105.

4. They Are Two Prophets and Prophecy. The two witnesses prophecy (11:3), they are two prophets (11:10), and prophecy is ascribed to them (11:6). The word family *προφητ-* is very prominent in Revelation, especially in chapter 11. It consists of the verb “to prophesy” (*προφητεύω*), the noun “prophecy” (*προφητεία*), the noun “prophet” (*προφήτης*), the noun “prophetess” (*προφήτις*), and the noun “false prophet” (*ψευδοπροφήτης*). The last two are not relevant for our investigation.²²

“To prophesy” is used only in 10:11 and 11:3, which is the same larger context. John the apostle must prophesy, as must the two witnesses.

The term “prophet” in Revelation describes only genuine prophets and the two witnesses.²³ The prophets are called servants of God (10:7; 11:18) and are distinguished from other believers called saints (16:6) and apostles (18:10). It seems that this term describes only persons who have the specific gift of prophecy, as distinct from other believers. The term is not used loosely in the sense of what we today call the “prophetic ministry of a pastor or the church.”

The word “prophecy” is found seven times in Revelation. In 19:10 we hear about the Spirit of prophecy. The two witnesses are active during “the days of their prophecy.” All the other texts refer to the book of Revelation. A beatitude is pronounced for those who read and hear “the words of the prophecy and keep what is written in it” (1:3). This is repeated in 22:7: “Blessed is the one who keeps *the words of the prophecy of this book.*” The very same formulation is found in 22:10, 18 and in a reversed order in 22:19, “the words of the book of the prophecy.”

Thus the word family *προφητ-* focuses on genuine prophecy in the narrow sense and on the product of this prophecy as found in the Book of Revelation and thereby in Scripture. It is remarkable that in the context of the two witnesses all three crucial terms of the word family *προφητ-* are used. Actually, the two witnesses are the only entity that is described with all three major words of this word family. It follows that prophecy is the most prominent characteristic of the two witnesses. The close connection of this word family to the genuine gift of prophecy and to Scripture points toward a specific understanding of the two witnesses.

5. They Are Related to the Lord. The two witnesses are in close relationship to the Lord. They stand before the Lord of the earth (11:4). They belong to the Lord, serve him, and are protected and empowered by the Lord. The phrase

²¹ Mounce, 218.

²² A false prophetess is found in 2:20. Jezebel calls herself a prophetess. A false prophet occurs in 16:13; 19:20; 20:10.

²³ Rev 10:7; 11:10, 18; 16:6; 18:10, 24; 22:6, 9.

MÜLLER: THE TWO WITNESSES OF REVELATION 11

may point to their “heavenly origin.”²⁴ “To stand before” is used four times in Revelation. In 7:9 the great multitude “stood before the throne and before the Lamb.” In 8:2 seven angels with seven trumpets “stood before God.” In 11:4 the two lampstands are “standing before the Lord of the earth.” In all these cases a group that is close to and in harmony with God is portrayed. It enjoys a special relationship with and nearness to God. However, in 20:12, after the Millennium, the unsaved dead stand before the throne and are judged. This group is clearly negative. Whereas those who belong to God are blessed in the presence of God, his enemies cannot stand his presence. Beale states:

The legal nature of the testimony is intensified by the position of the witnesses as they bear their testimony in an unseen courtroom, ‘standing before the Lord of the earth.’ The Lord is the earth’s omniscient judge because ‘his eyes . . . range to and fro throughout the earth’ (cf. Zech. 4:10, 14; Rev 5:7). This proximity to the Lord also emphasizes the witnesses’ direct divine inspiration and commission. Though they live in a world of danger, they are never far from their Lord’s sovereign presence. Nothing can separate them from their secure relationship with him.²⁵

Obviously the two witnesses share the fate of their Lord. In 11:8 we find their corpses. They participate in the death of their Lord, who had been crucified.²⁶ But after three and a half days they also share in his resurrection and ascension.

6. They Have to Encounter Difficulties and Must Face Enemies and Temporary Defeat. The two witnesses prophesy 1260 days wearing sackcloth. Occasionally, sackcloth was the attire of prophets (Zech 13:4). It also pointed to mourning (Jer 4:8) and penitence (Matt 11:21).²⁷ Whereas the prophetic ministry is not always easy and may cause hostility and rejection by those who do not repent, the garment of sackcloth may be a pointer to the nature of the message that the witnesses promulgate. The proclamation of the gospel also contains an element of judgment.

The two witnesses have to face a number of evil powers: “men from the peoples and tribes and tongues and nations” (11:9), those who dwell on earth (11:10), and especially the beast from the abyss (11:7). The expression “inhabitants of the earth” is a negative term throughout Revelation, designating the enemies of God and his people on earth. They have experienced psychological torment due to their consciences being aroused by the message of the two witnesses, but they have not decided to repent. After the death of the two witnesses they rejoice, only to feel great terror when the two witnesses come to life again.

²⁴ Aune, 613.

²⁵ Beale, 576.

²⁶ Cf., Aune, 587.

²⁷ Cf., Aune, 611; Mounce, 217.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

The beast from the abyss seems to be Satan working through a secular power. The term “abyss” is found seven times in Revelation. The star fallen from heaven (9:1–2), who has the key to the abyss and actually opens the abyss, is Satan. He brings disaster on humanity. The king of the locusts in 9:11, also called the angel of the abyss, Apollyon, and Abaddon, the destroyer, seems to be the fallen star, Satan. His demonic army floods the earth. However, in 20:1–3 a reversal occurs. Satan’s power is taken from him. He is bound in the abyss for 1000 years. This may be alluded to in 17:8, where a beast carries a harlot. This beast has been, is not, comes again out of the abyss, and goes to destruction. The beast in our text (11:7) makes war against, conquers, and kills the two witnesses. The being associated in Revelation with the abyss seems to be Satan, oftentimes working through political powers.²⁸

The phrase “to make war against” is found several times in Revelation. A similar phrase is employed in 12:17 and 13:7. In these two texts it is identical, the only exception being that the group against which the war is waged is once called the remnant and once the saints.²⁹ Another similar phrase is found in 19:19. However, in this case the war is not directed against entities on earth, but against Jesus, the rider on the white horse, and against his army.³⁰ The word order differs slightly in 11:7. The verb is not used as an infinitive, and the group affected, namely the two witnesses, is just called “them.”³¹ Obviously the same concept is used in order to point to a war between Satan and groups that belong to God. However, the difference in wording may indicate that the two witnesses cannot be identified with the remnant or the saints. Indeed, in 11:13 a remnant is found that reacts to the experience of the two witnesses.

After the two witnesses are killed, they are denied burial. “Their corpses lie in the street of the great city which is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified.” “From the Eastern point of view, to be deprived of burial was an act of great indignity.”³²

The term “great city” is found eight times in Revelation.³³ Because in all the other texts it is clearly referring to Babylon, 11:8 also seems to describe Babylon. Some expositors understand 11:8 to be alluding to ancient Jerusalem.³⁴

²⁸ The other beasts come out of the sea or the earth.

²⁹ The phrase is *ποιῆσαι πόλεμον μετὰ τῶν λοιπῶν* in 12:17 and *ποιῆσαι πόλεμον μετὰ τῶν ἁγίων* in 13:7. See, Ekkehardt Mueller, “The 144,000 and the Great Multitude” (unpublished manuscript). The OT background is Dan 7:21. Cf., Beale, 588.

³⁰ *ποιῆσαι τὸν πόλεμον μετὰ τοῦ καθημένου ἐπὶ τοῦ ἵππου* (19:19).

³¹ The phrase in 11:7 is *ποιήσει μετ’ αὐτῶν πόλεμον*.

³² Mounce, 220.

³³ Rev 11:8; 16:19; 17:18; 18:10, 16, 18, 19, 21.

³⁴ Cf., Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction Notes and Indices* (London: Macmillan, 1917), 137–138. However, Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 127–128, disagrees, stressing that Jesus was crucified outside of Jerusalem and not in the main street. Therefore, Jerusalem is not referred to. Cf. also, Morris, 146.

MÜLLER: THE TWO WITNESSES OF REVELATION 11

However, it must be kept in mind that Revelation knows by name only the New Jerusalem. If this latter interpretation is chosen, the verse might express that by crucifying Jesus the Jerusalem of old has become Babylon.³⁵ Another possibility would be that the first century Babylon, Rome, was responsible for Jesus' death. Likewise, the later Babylon would be responsible for the death of the two witnesses. "The inclusion of a reference to the crucifixion is not to identify a geographical location but to illustrate the response of paganism to righteousness . . . Sodom refers to the depths of moral degradation (cf. Gen 19:4–11), and Egypt is a symbol of oppression and slavery."³⁶ The city of 11:13, whose tenth part collapsed, seems to refer back to 11:8 and also stand for Babylon. A contrast is given with 11:2, where the holy city is mentioned. This holy city, the people of God and the predecessor of the holy city, the New Jerusalem of Rev 21, will be trampled for 42 months. During the same time span the two witnesses prophesy until they are killed. The great city is the place where the murder takes place. The holy city is trodden under foot.³⁷

7. They Have Power. The two witnesses are powerful. Fire comes out of their mouth and devours the enemies. They are able to kill (11:5). Many scholars suggest Elijah as the OT background.³⁸ In 9:17–18 fire proceeds out of the mouths of the strange horses, a demonic army. Rev 11 provides the victorious counterpart. The two witnesses are also able to let fire come out of their mouth (singular in the Greek) and kill their enemies.

Furthermore, the two witnesses have the power to close the sky so that it does not rain and have the power to turn water into blood and bring about different kinds of plagues. This may remind us of Elijah in 1 Kings 17 and of Moses bringing the third plague on Egypt (Exod 7:17–19). The plagues in 9:18, 20 have a counterpart in 11:6. Thus, the two witnesses are very active during the 1260 days. The period must be understood according to the year-day principle.

The power of the two witnesses is not only evident prior to their deaths, but also in the context of their resurrection. The effects of their ascension are tremendous, ranging from fear to death.

IV. Church or Scriptures?

At first glance it seems that this highly symbolic passage on the two witnesses can be understood in both ways, as representing the church or as depicting Holy Scriptures. As mentioned above, the majority of scholars would prefer the church. Yet, when taking a closer look, a number of features seem to militate against that view.

³⁵ Cf., Beale, 591.

³⁶ Mounce, 221.

³⁷ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 127, writes: "The holy city trampled by the Gentiles is wherever the witnesses lie dead in the street of the great city (11:8)."

³⁸ Cf., for instance, Mounce, 218–219. He suggests 2 Kings 1 as OT background.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Kenneth Strand has argued in favor of the OT message and the NT witness. “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.”³⁹ He arrived at that conclusion by noticing (1) that the two witnesses “do not function as two individual entities, but only as *one entity*—always in unity and in absolute union”;⁴⁰ (2) that “the two witnesses constitute a symbolism drawn from *several prophetic backgrounds* beyond the obvious allusions to Moses and Elijah, just as in 11:8 ‘the great city’ also embraces a *blend* of symbolic references . . .”;⁴¹ and (3) that Revelation contains an extensive two-witness theology.⁴²

We now turn to some arguments favoring the identification of the two witnesses with Scripture.

1. The Unity of the Two Witnesses. Strand’s observation that the two witnesses function as one entity is correct. Whatever they do and whatever happens to them, they are inseparable. But in addition to their common action and destiny, the text furnishes another interesting and important detail. Nouns that are employed in connection with the two witnesses oftentimes come in the singular instead of the plural. This change from plural to singular emphasizes that the two witnesses always go together.

(1) Whereas in 9:18, 20 fire comes out of the mouths—plural—of the strange horses, in 11:5 fire comes out of the mouth—singular—of the two witnesses. Although there are two witnesses, they have only one mouth.

(2) Although they are two, they have one prophecy (11:6) and one testimony/witness (11:7).

(3) The word “corpse/body” is found three times in 11:3–13. Their body—singular—lies in the street of the great city (11:8).⁴³ People see their body—singular—three and a half days (11:9), and their bodies—plural—are not buried (11:9).

(4) A tomb—singular—is not accessible to them (11:9).

It seems that the change to the singular was done intentionally in order to stress the unity of the two witnesses. The usage of both singular and plural within the very same verse may point to the unity in duality. This feature fits best the interpretation of the two witnesses as Scriptures.

2. Fire Coming Out of Their Mouth. Although fire reminds us of Elijah, the idea of fire coming out of a mouth is not found in connection with him. This fact is recognized by David Aune. “The motif of fire emanating from a person’s

³⁹ Kenneth A. Strand, “The Two Witnesses of Rev 11:3–12,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 19 (1981): 134.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Cf., *ibid.*, 131–134; and *idem*, “The Two Olive Trees,” 259–260.

⁴³ Morris, 145, observes: “*Bodies* is actually singular, ‘body’, which may point to a close unity between the two.”

MÜLLER: THE TWO WITNESSES OF REVELATION 11

mouth was used as a metaphor for speaking forth the word of God, usually in situations of rebuke and condemnation . . . ”⁴⁴ In 2 Sam 22:9 fire comes from the mouth of Yahweh. Jeremiah 5:14 may be the major background for 11:5. God’s word becomes a fire in Jeremiah’s mouth: “Behold, I am making my words in your mouth fire and this people wood, and it will consume them.” The emphasis is on the Word of God which comes to Jeremiah and is proclaimed by him. This word is reliable and is different from the word of the false prophets. “The power of the word of God is expressed in a variety of ways also, such as the rain that causes seed to germinate (Isa 55:11) and other metaphors (Isa 9:8; 11:4).”⁴⁵ The two witnesses are linked with Scripture.

3. Prophecy. We have already investigated prophecy in Revelation and seen its important role not only in the Apocalypse as a whole but especially in the trumpet vision. Charles H. Giblin states:

In the wider context of the three woes, Rev.11.1–13 must be judged to form an integral part of the second woe . . . it provides solid insight concerning a theme central to Rev. as a whole: prophetic ministry as essentially concerned with the message of judgment, salvation, and need for repentance.⁴⁶

Obviously, prophecy in Revelation is not used in a wider sense. Prophets are real prophets. Prophecy is also linked to Scripture.⁴⁷ Therefore, it is better to understand the two witnesses, who are called the two prophets, as Scripture rather than as the church. They follow the fate of Jesus and the OT prophets and symbolically die in the city where their Lord was crucified, namely in a Jerusalem that has become Babylon, “for it is impossible that a prophet should die outside of Jerusalem” (Luke 13:33).

4. The Witness. What has been said about prophecy is also true for the witness/testimony. “The noun ‘witness’ is used here as an equivalent to the verb ‘to prophesy’ in v. 3 and the noun ‘prophecy’ in v. 6.”⁴⁸ The word family *μαρτ-* is linked to Scripture. Most frequently the noun “testimony/witness” comes in a form that Strand would call the two-witness theology. He holds that the two

⁴⁴ Aune, 61

⁴⁵ Aune, 614. Might the rain mentioned in 11:6 also be an allusion to the word of God? Isa 55:10–11 uses this metaphor and in addition speaks about God’s mouth: “For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to him who sows and bread to him who eats, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth. It shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it.” The difference between Isaiah and Rev 11 is that Isaiah is positive, although calling people to return to the Lord (Isa 55:7), whereas in Rev 11 we find a judgment context with the intention to bring about repentance (Rev 9:21; 11:13).

⁴⁶ Charles Homer Giblin, “Revelation 11.1–13: Its Form, Function, and Contextual Integration,” *New Testament Studies* 30 (1984): 454.

⁴⁷ See the discussion above.

⁴⁸ Aune, 616.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

witnesses correspond to the so-called two-witness theology, for instance, “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:2, 9; 20:4).⁴⁹ This theology is found also outside Revelation.⁵⁰ Strand summarizes his findings:

. . . 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.’ . . . 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.”⁵¹

5. The Concept of the City. Babylon the great city is found in 11:8. Babylon is portrayed as a woman, as a harlot, and as a city.⁵² She has a counterpart in history, the woman of Rev 12 that gives birth to the Messiah and represents God’s true church. She also has an eschatological counterpart portrayed as a woman and a city, namely, the New Jerusalem, the holy and beloved city, the bride of the lamb.⁵³

Whereas Babylon seems to be depicted in Rev 11:8 and 13, Rev 11:2 mentions the holy city. She is trampled for 42 months. This is the same time span when the woman of Rev 12 is in the desert. In other words, the holy city of 11:2 and the woman of Rev 12 seem to be the same entity, the true church through the centuries, going through difficult times. The church is the holy city. So is the

⁴⁹ For a discussion of the term “testimony of Jesus” see Gerhard Pfandl, “The Remnant Church and the Spirit of Prophecy,” in *Symposium on Revelation—Book II*, Daniel & Revelation Committee Series, Volume 7, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 295–333. On pages 321–322 he summarizes important results:

- (1) In the New Testament the term *μαρτυρία* (testimony) is mainly used by John.
- (2) Outside of the Book of Revelation *μαρτυρία* used in a genitive construction is always a genitivus subjectivus.
- (3) In the Apocalypse all references to *μαρτυρία* can be interpreted as a genitivus subjectivus.
- (4) The parallelism in 1:2, 9 and 20:4 between the “word of God” and the “testimony of Jesus” makes it evident that the “testimony of Jesus” is the testimony that Jesus Himself gives, just as the “word of God” is the word that God speaks. This applies also to the parallelism in 12:17 between the “commandments of God” and the “testimony of Jesus.”
- (5) In 12:17 the remnant “have” the “testimony of Jesus.” This does not fit to the idea of giving testimony about Jesus.
- (6) The context of the New Testament makes it necessary to view the content of the “testimony of Jesus” as Jesus Himself. The testimony of Jesus is Christ’s self-revelation through the prophets. It is His testimony, not the believer’s testimony about Him.
- (7) The parallelism between 19:10 and 22:8–9 indicates that the one who has the “testimony of Jesus” has the gift of prophecy. The “testimony of Jesus” is the Holy Spirit, who inspires the prophets.

⁵⁰ Strand, “The Two Witnesses,” 132, refers, e.g., to 1 Pet 1:10–12, Luke 24:27, and John 5:46.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁵² See Rev 17 and 18.

⁵³ See Rev 21 and 22, especially 20:9 and 21:9–10.

MÜLLER: THE TWO WITNESSES OF REVELATION 11

New Jerusalem, which will come down from heaven and has a predecessor and an opponent in the present time. The predecessor is the holy city in 11:2 and in Rev 12. The opponent is the harlot Babylon.

Obviously, these two cities found in 11:1–13 are contrasted. But if the holy city indeed represents the church, then it is not very likely that the two witnesses point to her again. It is better to understand the two witnesses as the Holy Scriptures.

6. The Time Span. The 1260 days/years occur in Revelation in different forms, namely as 1260 days, 42 months, and as three and a half times. This time span is found twice in Daniel and five times in Revelation. Normally it refers to the time of distress through which God's church has to go. Although the same period is used with regard to the two witnesses, the emphasis seems to be slightly different. Whereas Dan 7:25; 12:7 as well as Rev 11:2; 12:6, 14; 13:5 seem to focus on the time period as a whole, Rev 11:3–13 apparently is concerned with the end of the time span. Whereas the church is liberated at the end of the 1260 years, the two witnesses are killed. Therefore, the two witnesses need not represent the church.

7. The Lampstands. The seven lampstands of Rev 1–2 and the two lampstands of Rev 11:4 may not be identical. They are found in different locations. Although both groups stand in a certain relationship to the Lord, the fact that the two lampstands stand before the Lord of the earth singles them out and gives them special attention. Whereas five of the seven lampstands of Rev 2–3 are rebuked, and two of them do not receive any praise, no negative statements are made about the two lampstands in Rev 11. One might argue that the two positive lampstands of Rev 2–3 are found in the two lampstands of Rev 11. However, the lampstands of Smyrna and Philadelphia are locally restricted, but the two lampstands of Rev 11 are obviously not. Smyrna and Philadelphia are also restricted in time, if one takes them as time periods of church history, whereas the lampstands of Rev 12 cover the full range of the 1260 years and more. Thus, we are not forced to understand the lampstands of Rev 11 as the church or as similar entities.

8. The Judgment Motif. Beale claims: "The two prophets preached not only that salvation is in Christ but also that rejection of Christ amounts to idolatry and will be punished by judgment . . ." ⁵⁴ This may be indicated by the garments of sackcloth. ⁵⁵ Judgment seems to play a crucial part of the ministry of the two witnesses. Fire from the mouth of the witnesses that devours and kills enemies, lack of rain, turning the waters into blood, and bringing about all kinds of plagues is strong language. Although this is a symbolic description, the idea of judgment is quite clearly employed. Judgment continues even after the resurrection of the witnesses. The inhabitants of the earth are horrified and probably

⁵⁴ Beale, 596.

⁵⁵ Cf. Amos 8:10.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

again tormented. An earthquake destroys a tenth of the city and kills 7000 persons. This is not the eschatological earthquake described in 6:14 and 16:18–20, but it is judgment anyway. Yet repentance is still possible.

Rev 13:3–13 fits the overall context of the trumpets as judgments intended to lead humanity to repentance. Again Beale:

The nature of the plagues and torment is likely the same as that experienced by the ungodly from the first six trumpets, especially the first two woes . . . This is pointed to by the following lexical and conceptual parallels: (1) Both are referred to as ‘plagues’ (. . . 8:12; 9:20; 11:6) (2) directed against ‘earth-dwellers’ (. . . 8:13; 11:10) (3) by beings whose mouths have been ‘authorized’ to judge (. . . 9:3, 10, 19; 11:6). (4) The plagues include famine conditions (cf. 8:8–9; locusts in 9:7–10; 11:6a), (5) ‘killing’ (. . . 9:15; 18, 20; 11:5), and (6) ‘harming’ (. . . 9:10, 19; 11:5) (7) ‘fire proceeding out of the mouth’ of executioners (. . . 9:17–18; 11:5; cf. 16:8–9), (8) water becoming ‘blood’ (. . . 8:8; 11:6), and (9) effects in and from ‘heaven’ (8:10; 9:1; 11:6; cf. 8:12). (10) The plagues also have the effect of ‘tormenting’ the minds of unbelievers by reminding them of their hopeless spiritual plight, which results in forms of depression (. . . 9:5–6; 11:10). (11) The narratives of the first six trumpets and of the witnesses both conclude with a specific percentage of unbelievers being killed . . .⁵⁶

Remnant/survivors are found in 9:20 and 11:13. Whereas the trumpets proper involve evil powers, the judgment through the two witnesses points to another side and may emphasize more clearly God’s direct involvement.

Coming back to our question of whether the two witnesses present the church or Scripture, we notice that the language—though symbolic—points to active involvement in judgment on the part of the two witnesses. According to Scripture, the church proclaims the Gospel message but does not execute judgment. But according to Heb 4:12, Scripture has such a function: “Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart.” Therefore, it may be better to take the two witnesses as the Scripture of the OT and the NT.

9. Structural Deliberations. The Book of Revelation contains three major interludes or expansions, Rev 7, Rev 10–11a, and Rev 14a. Rev 7 deals with an aspect of the church, the 144,000, and the great multitude. Rev 14a emphasizes the 144,000, but also the message that must be proclaimed. In Rev 10 John as a representative of the church goes through a sweet and bitter experience by eating a scroll, part of the Word of God. Thus, Rev 10 contains both the church and Scripture. In Rev 11 the same pattern may be present. The church is the holy city. The two witnesses represent Scripture.

⁵⁶ Beale, 585–586.

MÜLLER: THE TWO WITNESSES OF REVELATION 11

Conclusion

Our investigation has pointed us in the direction of understanding the two witnesses as the Scriptures of the OT and the NT. Ellen G. White in commenting on this passage made the statement: “The two witnesses represent the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament.”⁵⁷ We have found a number of references to the Scriptures, especially the terms prophecy, witness, fire, the use of the singular for both witnesses, dual statements referring to the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus, and others. They confirm our suggestion that the two witnesses form Scripture as it comes to us in the OT and NT. Further research on this difficult passage may be beneficial.

Ekkehardt Mueller is an Associate Director of the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. 104474.1476@compuserve.com

⁵⁷ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, [1911] 1950), 267.