

## The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11, the Three and a Half Years, and the Holy City

Who are the two witnesses? What is the holy city? What is the meaning of the 3 ½ years?

As near as I can tell, in Revelation the two witnesses are a picture of the whole church, the 3½ years depict the whole time between Christ's first and second comings as a time of trouble for God's people, and the holy city is another symbol for the whole church, the bride of Christ.

**The Two Witnesses represent the Whole Church, which Worships God and the Lamb before the watching world.** The two witnesses are portrayed as Moses and Elijah in the vision. This means the church's presence in the world is similar to them. Rev 11:1-13, the vision of the two witnesses, is an added encouragement. It is inserted between the sixth and seventh trumpet judgements to tell us about the saints during the trumpet judgements. (In the same way, the marking of the 144,000 was an added encouragement inserted between the sixth and seventh seals to tell us about the saints during the seal judgements.)

Here are six reasons to take the two witnesses as a picture of the whole church.

1. The biggest reason: they are the lampstands which stand before the Lord of the earth (11:4). We know from Rev 1:20-2:1 that the lampstands are churches in the presence of Christ. So the default understanding must be to take these two lampstands as churches. The whole church is pictured as *two* not *seven* because, since Moses, two is the minimum number of *witnesses* necessary to judge someone. Jesus always sent his followers out in pairs.
2. The two olive trees, according to Zechariah 4:1-6, represent the Spirit of God. The whole church has the Holy Spirit, not just two special people.
3. In 11:7, when their witness is complete, the beast makes war with the two witnesses and overcomes them and conquers them and kills them. In 13:7 we find the same language of all God's people, not only two prominent ones. Rev 11:7 and 13:7 come from Daniel 7:21, and there also the evil ruler attacks and defeats the saints as a group, not just two special people.
4. In Revelation, all believers are called to be *witnesses*, loyal to Jesus when under pressure, not witness in the sense of evangelism, but simply being faithful to Jesus the Lord and worshipping him and no one else in a hostile environment. We are all witnesses.

Rev 11:3 says the two witnesses will *prophesy* (also 11:6). In Revelation, witnessing and prophesying are not far apart. In 19:10 the angel tells John, "The *witness* of Jesus is the spirit of *prophecy*." Witnessing to Jesus and a prophetic role are hardly separable in 19:10. Not everyone in the church has the gift or office of prophet, but the whole church in a hostile world has a prophetic *role*, simply by worshipping Christ under pressure. If the witness of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (19:10), the whole church has this prophetic role.\*

5. The two witnesses bring fire and plagues on the world, and these closely parallel the fiery trumpet judgements in Rev 8-9. The trumpet judgements result directly from the prayers of all the saints (8:2-6). All the saints together bring these judgements into the world by their prayers. Thus the judgements come from the mouths of the saints, as symbolized by the two prophets.

6. We should be looking for a way to take the two witnesses that makes sense to the first century churches entering severe persecution. Two remarkable prophets in more than 2000 years is not much help, but those churches picturing themselves this way would certainly encourage.

### **The Three and a Half Years are the whole time between Christ's Two Comings.**

In Rev 12, the dragon stands in front of the woman to devour her child as soon as it is born. But the child (Christ) is taken up to heaven. And the dragon is thrown down. The woman flees to the wilderness, to a place prepared by God, to be sustained for 1,260 days (= 3 1/2 years, Rev 12:6, 14). That is, in Revelation 12, the 3 1/2 years begins quickly after Christ ascends. John's seven persecuted churches could hardly not see themselves as in the 3 1/2 years.

We find 3 1/2 years in Daniel 7:25; 12:7,11. There it refers to a time of trouble for all God's people. Daniel's prophecy was fulfilled in 167-164 BC, under the Jewish persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes, a Greek ruler. Jesus used the same language to describe the Roman war on the Jews ending with the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. That war also took approximately three and a half years. So 3 1/2 years (sometimes in months or days, not sure why) means a time of trouble for all God's people. Given its use in Rev 12, it is pretty clear that it refers to the whole time between the two comings of Christ, including first century persecution.

### **The Holy City = the Bride of Christ = the Saints**

Rev 21:2 says, *I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.* That is: "the Holy City" is "the New Jerusalem," which is also "the bride of Christ."

In 20:9 we find the holy city this way: *They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints, the beloved city.* The camp of the saints = the beloved city = the holy city = the bride of Christ.

In 3:12: *I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God.*

All of these refer to the whole people of God: "the holy city," "the new Jerusalem," "the bride," "the camp of the saints," "the beloved city," and "the city of my God."

Jesus told his disciples that the gates of hell would not overcome the church (Matthew 16), but there would be persecution. In the same way, in Rev 12 the woman (the church) is taken to the

wilderness to be protected from the dragon, so he makes war against her (individual) children. The church (the woman) cannot be wiped out, but individual believers (her children) can be attacked and killed.

In the same way, the vision of the two witnesses opens in Rev 11 with the temple and the altar being protected, but the outer courtyard and the holy city being trampled by the gentiles. “The temple and the [incense] altar” are the essence of the church, like “the woman,” like the church that Jesus said would not be overcome. But “courtyard and the holy city” here are individual people of God out in the world, and they can be attacked. The woman being safe in Rev 12, but her children being attacked, conveys the same thing as the temple and altar being protected in Rev 11, but the courtyard and holy city being trampled. The church cannot be destroyed, but there can be severe persecution on individuals.

Present day Jerusalem? The New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven at the End (3:12; 21:2). If there is a New Jerusalem, there must be an old Jerusalem. I do not see that Revelation cares about the old Jerusalem, the present day Jerusalem in Israel. The only clear reference to old Jerusalem is in 11:8, the city where Christ was crucified. The bodies of the two witnesses *will lie in the public square of the great city—which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt—where also their Lord was crucified*. This is the evil city, people cooperating in their rebellion against God (16:19; 17:18; 18:10, 16, 18, etc.). As the bride of Christ is the holy city (21:2), so the prostitute is the great city (17:18). In this verse, geographical Jerusalem is more like Babylon than like the Holy City, more like Sodom which was judged by fire, and Egypt which was judged by plagues. God may have excellent plans for geographical Jerusalem, but Revelation does not speak of that.

\* There are some curious references to prophets or prophecy in Revelation that make Gregory Beale and some others (and me) think that Revelation views all believers as having a prophetic role. The clearest is 19:10, where the angel says: *I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who have the witness of Jesus. Worship God. For the witness of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy*. In this verse, John’s brothers and sisters are servants of God who witness to Jesus, and that witness is the spirit (essence) of prophecy. In the parallel setting in 22:9, the same angel says *I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets and those keeping the words of this book. Worship God*. Are John’s brothers the prophets a different group than his brothers who keep the words of this book? Are his brothers the prophets different than his brothers who witness to Jesus? That seems a stretch. It seems more likely that the angel is using “prophecy” and “witness” and “keep the words of this book” interchangeably, especially since *the witness of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy*. In Rev 1:9 it’s clear that all believers are John’s brothers and sisters.

Consider prophets, saints, and those fearing God’s name in 11:18: the 24 elders praise God because the time has come to reward *your servants the prophets and the saints and the ones fearing your name, both small and great*. The saints and those fearing God’s name clearly refer to the same group, all believers. All three are God’s servants: prophets, saints, and those fearing God’s name. It is possible that “the prophets” are separate people from “the saints” and “those fearing your name,” a distinct class of believers. It is awkward that prophets would be singled out in this elite way, but not impossible. But given that *the witness of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy*, it seems best to see all witnesses as having a prophetic role, all God’s servants equally prophets and saints and fearing God’s name. The two witnesses vision confirms this: “witness/testify” and “prophecy” are used interchangeably (11:3, 6, 7, 10).

Ed Neufeld, March 2019