

# The Two Witnesses of Apocalypse 11

## Summary

The account of the two witnesses in Rev 11,3-13 is one of the most problematic passages in the Apocalypse, and the identity and mission of these two prophets are issues that remain unresolved. In this article 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 proposes the plain meaning of the text. Passages from the text itself, taken in order, are then used as the basis for developing and arguing 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 Apocalypse<sup>1</sup> is the identity and mission of the two witnesses, or prophets, described in the central part of the text (Rev 11,3-13). 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*

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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. 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.

into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they wish” (Rev 11,3-6).

Thus the public life of the two witnesses is described in a way that recalls the missions of Moses and Elijah. The events surrounding their death are then 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 corpses lie 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 corpses 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, the Spirit of 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 11,7-11).

Then follows the brief report of a final series of judgments on the world (the third woe; 11,14), the seventh and last trumpet blast, and finally the announcement of the complete fulfilment of God’s kingdom on earth (Rev 11,15-19).

According to its plain meaning and context, then, the account of the two witnesses is a prophecy that anticipates the prophetic mission of two individuals, who are endowed with divine powers in order to perform a high-profile mission on earth, during the period leading up to the eschatological fulfilment of God’s plan of salvation. Before examining the aspects of their mission that are described in the text, it is advisable to scrutinize the main scholarly interpretations of their identity, as these often prevent a full and clear enquiry of their mission.

## **Current interpretations**

### **a) Symbolical interpretations**

By far the majority of commentators explain the two witnesses as ‘symbols’. Some suggest they are symbols of the 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>3</sup> Since a symbol is a thing that represents something other than itself,<sup>4</sup> the claim that the two witnesses are ‘symbols’ implies that they cannot be themselves, that is to say, literal historical human

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<sup>3</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>4</sup> This is the basic dictionary definition, e.g. ‘thing standing for or representing something else’ *Oxford Illustrated Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1962. 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.

beings endowed with a special mission by God. This wholly symbolical approach runs up against compelling objections:

1. Against interpretations that are wholly symbolical, it is worth recalling C.S.Lewis' argument, which he summarizes as follows: "You cannot know that everything in the representation of a thing is symbolical unless you have independent access to the thing and can compare it with the representation".<sup>5</sup> If 'independent access' includes other Jewish and Christian traditions regarding the mission of the eschatological prophet(s), then one should certainly not exclude a literal interpretation of this passage.<sup>6</sup>
2. The text states that the two witnesses are symbolized by "the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth" (11,4). If the two witnesses were themselves symbols, then the "the two olive trees and the two lampstands" would be symbols of symbols, a proposal that is as confusing as it is unheard of in prophetic literature. 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.
3. It is argued that, for the sake of coherence, this 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, and again in the account of the two witnesses (Rev 11,4). This link 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 say that everything should be interpreted symbolically is again to confuse the symbol with what is symbolized, and thoroughly obscure the significance of the passage.

The most common interpretation of this kind entirely excludes a literal fulfilment of the account of two witnesses. It explains them as symbols of the Church, and the account of their mission (Rev 11,3-13) as an allegory,<sup>8</sup> or parable,<sup>9</sup> that idealizes the witness of the Church in the last days. The arguments usually proposed in support of this 'collective' interpretation of the two witnesses,<sup>10</sup> must also be confronted 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.

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<sup>5</sup> 'Fern-seed and Elephants', in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper, London: Fount, 1981; 206-207.

<sup>6</sup> In the Jewish tradition a literal fulfilment of the prophecy for the return of Elijah is still awaited (Mal 3,1.22-24) and in the most widely held Christian tradition, Enoch and Elijah, who are said to have been taken up to heaven without dying, are expected to return literally at the End of Time.

<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> E.g. J.S.Considine, "The Two Witnesses: Apoc. 11.3-13" *CBQ* 8 (1946), 377-92, esp. 391-2.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Bauckham, *Climax*, 273-4. 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.

<sup>10</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.

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>11</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>12</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>13</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 arm themselves 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 together all these four separate acts, and indicate that they are all to be interpreted as various stages in the same final war of evil against good.

3. It is argued that the two witnesses are 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>14</sup>

4. It is 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>15</sup> In fact, far from disproving the two witnesses are two individuals, these assertions only 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.<sup>16</sup>

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 an allegory, cannot be accepted as correct,

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<sup>11</sup> Kiddle, *Revelation*, 181.

<sup>12</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>13</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>14</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 574 n.3.

<sup>15</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 575 n.6.

<sup>16</sup> See later: section III, final paragraph.

and so it is surprising to find it supported by so many modern scholars.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, those asserting this passage is an allegory, when in truth it is not, are open to the charge of allegorization – an approach that is known to deviate from the author’s intention and is rightly 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 AD, in particular the apostles Peter and Paul.<sup>19</sup> This interpretation is especially popular in the Roman Catholic Church,<sup>20</sup> most probably 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 and 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>

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>

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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*, 165-171.

<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 St 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.

<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.

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. 1En 90:31) with the account of the two witnesses in the Apocalypse. The resulting composition then underwent further elaboration during the fourth century AD.<sup>26</sup>

Closer to the text of the Apocalypse 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, 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 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.

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<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, *Ant.* 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.* X1.3

## The identity of the two witnesses

Omitted from the review so far is 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 past Christian apostles, martyrs, or saints. Relatively few modern scholars support this approach.<sup>30</sup> 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 in word and action of the imminent judgment, are messianic forerunners who have not yet appeared.”<sup>31</sup> The main objections to this interpretation come from supporters of the exclusively symbolical approach, which claims that the two witnesses are ‘symbols’ representing the prophetic witness of the Church.<sup>32</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 called and empowered for a specific mission.

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...*”(11,3a), 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>33</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

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<sup>30</sup> E.g. Zahn, Beckwith, Wikenhauser, Lohse, Ladd, Walvoord, Siew.

<sup>31</sup> Leivestad, *Christ the Conqueror*, 230.

<sup>32</sup> See the refutation above, in section IIa. 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.

<sup>33</sup> This would lead to the situation in which the Church is called upon to discern their vocation, before the start of their mission.

witnesses form an unbreakable partnership of two, inseparable in life and death.<sup>34</sup> Giblin rightly describes them as “theologically identical twins”<sup>35</sup> and one wonders what circumstances would allow two individual Christian witnesses to live and act in such a close partnership.<sup>36</sup> There can be little objection to the suggestion that these two are a married couple.<sup>37</sup>

### **The nature and content of their mission**

“*And I will give to my two witnesses and they will prophesy...*” (Rev 11,3). 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). Their witness and their prophecy are one and the same.<sup>38</sup> They are the only prophets mentioned in the Apocalypse, who actively prophesy. Their mission forms the continuation of the author’s commission to ‘prophesy again’ (10,8-11), which implies that the two witnesses are the public announcers of his prophecy. In the words of one commentator “they come forward in response to the prophetic calling addressed to the seer”.<sup>39</sup> Acknowledging the two witnesses as the announcers of the author’s prophecy, it only remains to identify this prophecy in the text, in order to determine quite precisely the nature and content of the prophecy they announce. As this can be done without great difficulty, there is no place for comments to the effect that the text “does not make explicit the nature and content of their message or prophecy”.<sup>40</sup>

Just before the author’s call to ‘prophesy again’ (10,8-11), it is announced that “*in the days of the blowing 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*” (Rev 10,7). So the author’s preparation to ‘prophesy again’ by swallowing the little scroll (10,8-11) is clearly

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<sup>34</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>35</sup> C.H.Giblin, *The Book of Revelation: The Open Book of Prophecy*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press 1991, 114.

<sup>36</sup> Some have even cited their closeness as an objection to understanding them as two individuals, e.g. Beale, *Revelation*, 575 n.6.

<sup>37</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>38</sup> This should recall the opening lines of Apocalypse, 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>39</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 chapt. 10: the space required for prophecy in the plan of salvation” *Apocalypse*, 337-8.

<sup>40</sup> Antoninus King Wai Siew, *The War Between the Two Beasts and the Two Witnesses: A Chiastic Reading of Revelation 11.1-14.5*, London: T & T Clark, 2005, 248. Aune goes even further 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.



related to the time immediately preceding the eschatological fulfilment of God's mysterious plan for mankind - a time that is signified in the text by the blowing of the seventh and last trumpet. It follows that the prophecy that John receives by eating the little scroll concerns the final, or eschatological, period of history.

Just after his preparation to 'prophesy again', the author was given 'a reed similar to a rod' in order to perform the following command: "*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 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 is followed by the account of the prophetic mission of the two witnesses.

Several significant observations can be made regarding this command:

1. In its entirely prophetic context, the command to 'measure the Sanctuary of God, the altar and those worshipping in it' can best be understood as the order 'to prophesy again' expressed in a metaphorical way.<sup>41</sup>
2. Furthermore, since this metaphorical expression is pronounced by a divine and spiritual spokesman, it is reasonable to suppose that it conveys the spiritual significance of the prophetic activity that the author is being commanded to perform. In other words, the metaphorical act of measuring the temple spiritually corresponds to the act of witnessing the prophecy.
3. Lastly, since the order to prophesy is usually followed by the prophecy itself,<sup>42</sup> the prophecy given to the author should be identified with the text that immediately follows.

The content of this prophecy is therefore given by the ensuing text, which begins with the account of the two witnesses (11,3-13). In a way that could not be made more explicit, the content of the prophecy can be identified with the text in this central part of the Apocalypse. The two witnesses not only appear in the first part of this prophecy given to John, but, as noted above, they are also the public announcers of this very prophecy.<sup>43</sup>

The spiritual significance of this prophecy emerges from the observation that the metaphorical act of 'measuring the temple' corresponds to the actual act of witnessing the prophecy. Interpreting each 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>44</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, it is clear that this temple is not a literal building made of concrete and stones, but a

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<sup>41</sup> Attempts to interpret it literally either as a pre-70 A.D. 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 Apocalypse. 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>42</sup> Cf. Ezek 3,4-11; Jer 1.

<sup>43</sup> This has an important implication: acceptance of the two witnesses implies acceptance of the prophecy, and rejection of the two witnesses implies rejection of the prophecy. The import of accepting or rejecting the prophecy will be examined below, in the next paragraph.

<sup>44</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 Apocalypse brings Ezekiel's prophecy to fulfilment. For detailed 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.

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.<sup>45</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 (11,1).<sup>46</sup> By the same reasoning, those people who reject the prophecy correspond to the 'outer court' that the author is told to reject and not to measure (11,2). They cease to be members of God's people.<sup>47</sup> Evidently, the witnessing of this prophecy causes a process of judgment within the Church – one which determines precisely who will be a member of God's people, and who will not. It performs a role that corresponds to the authentic function of a 'canon',<sup>48</sup> and therefore has profound ecumenical implications.<sup>49</sup>

John began his task of 'measuring the temple', or witnessing his prophecy, when he wrote what he saw (1,2) and sent it to the churches (1,11),<sup>50</sup> but his task will not be completed until the prophecy itself is fulfilled, because 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 indicates 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 total consecration of the new temple of God

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<sup>45</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* (CCC), London: Geoffrey Chapman 1994, n. 756.

<sup>46</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>47</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>48</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 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 Apocalypse parallels the role of the Torah (the Pentateuch) within the Canon of the OT, and indicates its status as a 'new Torah'.

<sup>49</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 Time. All those who refuse to accept it, whatever their social status, qualifications or experience, will find themselves totally excluded.

<sup>50</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 Apocalypse 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 Apocalypse, with the same beloved disciple.

therefore marks the conclusion of the prophecy, whose spiritual purpose is to ‘measure the new temple’ and bring it to completion.

The nature and content of the prophecy given to the author to ‘measure the temple’, and announced publicly in its time by the two witnesses, can now be summarized as follows: 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), and the completion/consecration of the new temple, which is the Church (15,5-8, cf. 11,19). Acceptance of this prophecy not only defines the true people of God but also instructs them 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.

Thus the Church will not reach this perfection until the prophecy, which John received by eating the little scroll, has been fulfilled.<sup>51</sup> Since the prophecy begins with the account of the mission of the two witnesses (11,3-13), then it is the appearance of these two witnesses that signals the start of the process of fulfilment. And as the two witnesses are the announcers of the prophecy given to the author,<sup>52</sup> it is true to say that the fulfilment of John’s prophecy begins with its public announcement by the two witnesses. The two witnesses therefore have a vital role in bringing to fulfilment the prophecy given to the author as the central message of the Apocalypse – a prophecy whose spiritual purpose is the eschatological completion of the Church.

### **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

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<sup>51</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. Deut 18,21-22). Given that the Apocalypse enters fully into this tradition, it is clear that the plain fulfilment of its prophecy is the main evidence for its authenticity. Furthermore, since the authenticity of the Apocalypse is closely tied to the conviction that Jesus is the true messiah, literal fulfilment of this prophecy should be considered integral to the faith in Jesus Christ.

<sup>52</sup> This is not only implied from the text and context (see above at note 39), 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. Exod 7-12; the column of fire and the voice of thunders: 10,1-4, cf. Exod 19,16-21; followed by the task of constructing a dwelling for God: Rev 11,2, cf. Exod 25,8) then “the reed similar to a rod” can be compared with the rod with which Moses performed his miracles (Exod 4,17.20). The fact that the miracles of Moses are evoked by the two witnesses (11,6) suggests that the prophetic powers of the two witnesses are attributable, in a way analogous to those of Moses, to the “reed 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 confirms that these two witnesses are the announcers of the prophecy given to John in order to ‘prophesy again’. The same arguments show that the prophecy is a ‘new Torah’ (see also note 48) and the prophet who received it is a ‘new Moses’. For further discussion on these aspects, see Ben-Daniel, *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple*, 91-95.

abyss'(11,7).<sup>53</sup> 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 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 refers to a final period of extreme distress, which precedes the Parousia and is a fixed part of the Christian eschatological tradition.<sup>54</sup> What is less well established is the relation of this final 42-month period of distress to the 1260-day mission of the two witnesses. The overwhelming majority of scholars assume without question that, since 1260 days and 42 months are more or less equal in length, then these two periods must refer to the same period of time (i.e. they are 'synchronous'). They therefore conclude 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 1260 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>55</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 1260-day mission (11,7); the 42-month reign of the beast is terminated by the Lord and his armies at the Parousia (19,19-20), and not by the two witnesses.

In the light of this and other objections,<sup>56</sup> it is a mistake to assume that the periods of 1260 days and 42 months are the same and synchronous, as do the great majority of

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<sup>53</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 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 Apocalypse.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Mk 13,14-23; Mt 24,15-28; 2Thess 2,3-12; CCC 677.

<sup>55</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 1260-day mission (11,7).

<sup>56</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 Parousia at the End of Time. This is problematic since, at the same time 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 Parousia at the End of Time, 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 Time, 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

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 1260 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>57</sup> St. Augustine also seems to have adopted this view, although he speaks of only one witness instead of two.<sup>58</sup> In the modern period, this interpretation has been revived by a very small number of scholars,<sup>59</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 Apocalypse describes a final seven-year period, the first half of which is described as the period of 1260 days, and the second as the period of 42 months. The 1260-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 return, or Parousia, at the end of history.

These conclusions have significant implications for the interpretation of the central part of the Apocalypse.<sup>60</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 1260 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>61</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) and the trampling of the Holy City (11,2). The final period is brought to an end by Christ's Parousia at the final battle described in the text (19,11-21). The temporal structure of a final 'week of years' outlined above provides the necessary framework for understanding the central prophecy of the Apocalypse, whose fulfilment begins with its announcement by the two witnesses.

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the beast' (13,8; 20,15). So for the conversion of souls at the ascension of the 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 1 month as 30 days, and so the period of 42 months would be exactly equivalent in duration to 1260 days. However, it is more correct to assume that, being familiar with the Hebrew calendar, the author knew that the months were alternately 30 days and 29 days, and that 1260 days and 42 months were not exactly the same (42 months is about 20 days less than 1260 days). His use of these two different expressions therefore implies that here he is referring to two slightly different periods of time.

<sup>57</sup> Hippolytus, *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*, paragraphs 43-47, and Victorinus, *Comm. in Apoc.* XI.3.

<sup>58</sup> St. 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"(quoted from <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120120.htm> ).

<sup>59</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>60</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" Siew, *The War*, 3.

<sup>61</sup> For the reasoning behind this interpretation, and the identification of these people, see Ben-Daniel, *Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple*, 138-45.

## 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>62</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>63</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 signify 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 the each soul. Their use of sackcloth perfectly reflects this function, since their message is one of dire warning combined with a final appeal for repentance.

The imminence of eternal judgment and its relevance to the mission of the two witnesses is further confirmed by the origin and nature of the little open scroll, which was swallowed by the author as a preparation to ‘prophesy again’. It is this renewal of the author’s prophecy that forms the basis of the mission of the two witnesses.<sup>64</sup> Christ the Lamb ascends to heaven, receives a sealed Scroll from God (5,6-7), and when he has broken all its seals (8,1) he sends his angel with a little open scroll to John (10,1-2) and invites him to swallow it (10,8). Although it is not stated explicitly, it is implied that there is a close relation between the sealed Scroll received by Christ from God and the little scroll swallowed by John.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 611.

<sup>63</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).

<sup>64</sup> See above, section IV.

<sup>65</sup> This sequence is summed up in the opening two verses of text: “This is the Revelation of Jesus Christ that God gave him to show his servants what must happen soon, and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John who bears witness to the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus, to all that he saw” (1,1-2). The implication is that what follows is, in a special way, the ‘Word of God and the Witness of Jesus’.

However, we should not rush to conclude, as some commentators do, that the sealed Scroll received and opened by Christ is the exactly the same as the little open scroll given to John.<sup>66</sup> The text describes the Scroll given to Christ as ‘the Scroll of Life from the foundation of the world’ (13,8; 17,8), which is opened at the final judgment (20,12) and contains the names of those who will then be able to enter the Holy City (21,27). Those whose names are missing from this Scroll can expect to suffer eternal condemnation (20,15). If this Scroll were the same as the little open scroll that was eaten by John, it would clearly not be available to fulfil its vital role at the final judgment.

Elsewhere in the text it is indicated that, before the final judgment, Christ has the authority to erase, and therefore remove, names from this Scroll (3,5), but he is clearly not able to do this until he has broken all its seals and opened it. Since the breaking of the last of its seals (8,1) is closely followed by the transmission of the little open scroll to the author of the Apocalypse (10,1-10), it is quite probable that there is a connection between these two actions: the opening of the Scroll of Life by Jesus Christ (thus allowing the removal of names) and the sending of the little open scroll to John. Unfortunately, there is nothing in the Christian tradition that helps to interpret this connection, and this may explain why the significance of the little scroll has never been clearly explained.

However, the ancient Jewish New Year tradition does help in the interpretation of this passage. According to this tradition, every New Year’s Day is a time of judgment when scrolls are opened and trumpets are sounded. On this day, all living beings pass before the eyes of the Lord, and judgment for the few very good or very bad people is performed without delay. For the majority of ordinary people, however, judgment is suspended for a period of ten days, until the annual Day of Atonement has ended. Their judgment for the New Year – whether they will live or die – depends on their conduct during this ten-day period of penitence.<sup>67</sup>

The same basic pattern of judgment can be discerned in the eschatological context of John’s vision: Christ the Lamb breaks the seventh and last seal of ‘the Scroll of Life from the foundation of the world’ and there follows a silence in heaven while the prayers of the saints are heard (8,1). The Scroll of Life contains the names of all those who have ever lived, ‘from the foundation of the world’. After breaking the final seal, Christ is able to open this scroll and perform judgment by erasing names from it (3,5). Trumpets are sounded and it is a time of repentance (9,20-21), as in the Jewish New Year tradition. Every living creature passes before the eyes of the Lord and Judge, who examines the conduct of all the living with a view to reaching a final decision. It is a testing time (3,10), and “if anyone was not found written in the Scroll of Life, he will be thrown into the lake of fire” (20,15).

This is precisely the context in which John swallows the little open scroll as a preparation for writing the eschatological prophecy that will be publicly announced, in its time, by the two witnesses. The little scroll, then, concerns events in the period between the opening of the Scroll of Life in heaven (8,1) and the pronouncement of its contents at the final judgment (20,12), the time – analogous to the period of ten days in the Jewish tradition – when Christ is able to remove names from the scroll (3,5).

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<sup>66</sup> Against Bauckham, *Climax*, 243-57, for example.

<sup>67</sup> The sources for this ancient tradition are: *Mishnah* Rosh Hashanah 1:2, *Babylonian Talmud* Rosh Hashanah 16a and 16b. The tradition is said to have originated with the annual New Year festivities that were held in the ancient kingdom of Babylonia (see Hayyim Schauss, *The Jewish Festivals: History and Observance*, New York: Schocken Books 1962, 156-58).

With this in mind, the connection between the two scrolls becomes evident. The little scroll given to John describes, in the form of prophecy, the conditions under which the response of every living person will be judged, while the Scroll of Life will record the result of this judgment. The little scroll concerns the external form that the final judgment will take, whereas the Scroll of Life deals with its inner content. The connection between the two scrolls is therefore represented by the relationship of outside to inside, and for this reason it is reasonable to suggest that the little scroll represents the writing on the back of the Lamb's Scroll in heaven (cf. 5,1), whilst on the inside of that same Scroll are recorded the names of all who have lived since the foundation of the world.

In summary, the little scroll that is given to John represents the outer portion of Christ's Scroll of Life. After swallowing this little scroll John writes a prophecy that forms the central part of the Apocalypse and will be announced in its time by the two witnesses. It describes the way eternal judgment will take place during the final period of history – the time when the decision will be taken as to who will live eternally, and who will die.

### **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 its similarity to a vision in Zechariah 4, of two olive trees standing on either side of a single lampstand (Zech 4,1-14), and especially from its association with the completion of the second temple. At that time, the post-exilic rebuilding of the second temple had encountered some local opposition and disappointment, and this vision offers 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 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 Apocalypse: 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 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 ‘prophesy 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 announcement by the two witnesses.<sup>68</sup>

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

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<sup>68</sup> See above, at the end of section IV.



community. Taking the oil to represent the spirit,<sup>69</sup> the olive branches may be understood as types of 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 Apocalypse. 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 Apocalypse the same elements are combined to denote two witnessing individuals (the lampstands),<sup>70</sup> who embody the witness of the Law and the Prophets to the Lord of all the earth (the olive trees).<sup>71</sup> These two individuals no longer represent God's indirect leadership of the 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 they 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).<sup>72</sup> 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>73</sup> This finds some confirmation

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. Zech 4,6: "'Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit' says the Lord of Hosts".

<sup>70</sup> It has already been explained why the two witnesses must be two individuals, despite arguments to the contrary. See especially II a (2) above.

<sup>71</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 Apocalypse most strongly reflects the witness of the OT 'Law and the Prophets' to the risen Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Beale, *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>72</sup> For the identification of the two beasts as false messianic leaders, see note 53.

<sup>73</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

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 (Lev 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>74</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>75</sup>

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).

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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>74</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>75</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 AD, 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 there is only one religion into which the religious activity described in this passage fits, and that is Judaism, especially those branches of orthodox Judaism that await the rebuilding of their temple in its former place. In the Halacha defined by Maimonides, in fact, 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 [Mishneh Torah]*, Book 14: Judges; Treatise 5: Kings and Wars, chs. 11-12, 238-42). In this it differs fundamentally from the Christian view, as represented in the Apocalypse, which sees this act as diabolical, and its instigator as the Antichrist.

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 (2 Kings 1,1-14) <sup>76</sup>
11,6a – they have authority to shut the sky	Elijah (1 Kings 17,1) <sup>77</sup>
11,6b – authority to turn the waters into blood	Moses (Exod 7,14-21)
11,6c – and strike the earth with every kind of plague	Moses (Exod 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>78</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) identifies Elijah with John the Baptist (Mk 9,12; Mt 11,7-15; 17,11-13). 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). The fact is that the religious leadership of the Jewish people at the time, and up to this day, 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>79</sup>

So, evoking the powers of Moses and Elijah,<sup>80</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.

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<sup>76</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>77</sup> It is of interest to note that in NT 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 (1260 days; 11,3).

<sup>78</sup> Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 353; Siew, *The War*, 235; cf. Exod 7,20; 8,5; 9,2; 16,20-21.

<sup>79</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>80</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).

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>81</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>82</sup> these findings complement those of the previous section, especially the warning of the two witnesses' about the 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 conclusion 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>83</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>84</sup>

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<sup>81</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 St. Peter's Apostolic indignation in Acts 5,1-11.

<sup>82</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 [Mishneh Torah]*, Book 14: Judges; Treatise 5: Kings and Wars, cc. 11-12, 238-42).

<sup>83</sup> Siew, *The War*, 234.

<sup>84</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').

## 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 corpses lie 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 Apocalypse”, in the words of one commentator.<sup>85</sup> But because of the pervasive allegorizing tendency among scholars,<sup>86</sup> this very literal reference to the historical city of Jerusalem has been lost to all but a few modern interpreters of the Word.<sup>87</sup> In fact, the designation of Jerusalem as the place where the two witnesses are 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 1260-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).<sup>88</sup> 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 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>89</sup> But this motive does not really explain why crowds of people from all over the world look at

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<sup>85</sup> Bauckham, *Climax*, 171.

<sup>86</sup> The usual objection to understanding this description as a reference to historical Jerusalem is that elsewhere in the Apocalypse 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 (see above in section IIa for the refutation of this view).

<sup>87</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, 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>88</sup> The argument for this is presented above in section V.

<sup>89</sup> As in Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 355, Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 186, R.H.Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, Revised Edition, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998, 220.

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 especially 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>90</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 St. 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 is by now established in Jerusalem.<sup>91</sup>

## Conclusions

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 St. John's Apocalypse. The primary concern of this message is the global reign of the ultimate antagonist of Christ – a false messiah also known 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>92</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 Church (the new temple). Those who accept it and

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<sup>90</sup> Note, the conversion of many, but not all, unbelievers. For further discussion on the true outcome of this miracle and the subsequent earthquake, see the section "The City in 11,13" in the article "Historical Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation" at <http://www.newtorah.org/Historical%20Jerusalem.html>.

<sup>91</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 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>92</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).

amend their lives accordingly from 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 of the way in which Christ will judge the world. 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) 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>93</sup>

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<sup>93</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.