

Title: Write a 2,500 word exegetical paper on Revelation 11:1-13 (50%)

Course: NT Exegesis – Revelation

Lecturer: Dr. Allen McClymont

Student: Scott Thong Yu Yuen

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DECLARATION

I certify that this ASSIGNMENT is my own work. I have acknowledged all material and sources used in it, and that I have not plagiarised in part or whole the work of others without stating the references.

Introduction

Much ink has been spilled (and many a heated discussion held!) about the details contained within the Book of Revelation – and the comparatively brief pericope of Revelation 11:1-13 is no exception. Who are these two witnesses? When will they appear in history? And how will they interact with the worldly opposition to God? Do these words hold any application for us as the wider body of believers?

In this essay, I will attempt to exegete the message which John intended to convey through this brief passage.

Back to the Future (Again)

The passage in question comes roughly in the middle of the Book of Revelation – by modern reckoning, Chapter 13 out of the total 22. John began his letter by describing it as a message from Jesus Christ forewarning believers of future events (Revelation 1:1-3&19), and it is reasonable to assume that this continues throughout the rest of the letter.

The purpose of the visions as a forewarning of what is to come is reiterated several times (4:1, 10:1), including and especially immediately preceding the section in question (‘*you must again prophesy*’ in 10:11). That the specific events of Revelation 11:1-13 are future to John’s own time also seem to be indicated by the repeated use of future tenses¹, but on this interpretation there is some disagreement among scholars especially due to the mixing of different tenses in the narrative.²

On the one hand, it can seem rather straightforward to place the events of the pericope on a timeline. The period of 1260 days (11:3) corresponds to forty-two months (13:5) and ‘*a time, times, and half a time*’ (Daniel 7:25, 12:7 whereby ‘time’ equals a year³).⁴ If so, then this would indicate that the two witnesses minister during the end times reign of the great enemy opposed to God’s people.⁵

¹ Ian R. Brown, “The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11:1-13: Arguments, Issues of Interpretation, and a Way Forward,” *Dissertations (2016)*: 80-81, 110, 145, 245, 349. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/dissertations/1616>

² Brown, “The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11:1-13,” 46, 263-264, 349.

³ Michael S. Heiser, “Naked Bible 381: Revelation 11,” *The Naked Bible Podcast* (accessed 10-Apr-2023): <https://nakedbiblepodcast.com/podcast/naked-bible-381-revelation-11/> [pp.6-7 of transcript]

On the other hand, the matter of Revelation 11's timing is complicated by the interlude which follows in chapter 12 – a 'flashback' of sorts to the birth of Christ (12:1-6) which possibly falls on 11 September 3 B.C.^{6 7} and which also mentions 1260 days (v6). John is no stranger to placing intermissions between sections of his visions however (e.g. Chapter 7), hence a brief recap of past history does not derail the preceding paragraph's interpretation on timing.

The message of Revelation 11:1-13 continues John's overall theme of forewarning about tribulation, together with a promised hope for the faithful. The two witnesses are obviously believers loyal to YHWH (explored later in this essay), yet they are permitted to experience death – before ultimately receiving new life and their persecutors punished. So too is the repeated message of Revelation – tribulation will come, but YHWH's faithful must hold on '*a little longer*' (6:11) for their final vindication (Chapters 20-21).

As with the rest of the book, the pericope in question uses plenty of visionary symbolism echoing the prophetic books of the Old Testament⁸. Although the contents of this scene are much less fantastical than some other portions, the reader would do well to remember that pure literalism is seldom the best interpretative method when it comes to dreams and visions. That having been said, how non-literal is too non-literal? Are there even really two witnesses being foretold, or is this purely metaphor?

The Meaning of the Message

John's prophetic vision '*about many peoples and nations and languages and kings*' (Revelation 10:11) seems to take place in Jerusalem. This is indicated by the mentions of: '*the temple of God and the altar*' (11:1); '*the court outside the temple*' that '*is given over to the nations*' (v2,

⁴ G. K. Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (Sheffield/UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 99.

⁵ Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (Sheffield/UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 263.

⁶ Michael S. Heiser, "What Do The Magi and The Dead Sea Scrolls Have In Common?," *Dr. Michael S. Heiser* (accessed 10-Apr-2023): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52hVgs5ykFc> [6:26 to 10:16]

⁷ Michael S. Heiser, "Was Jesus Actually Born on December 25? (Dr. Michael Heiser)," *Capturing Christianity* (accessed 10-Apr-2023): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SS7r3_fxzUc [14:00 to 16:24]

⁸ Richard Bauckham, *The theology of the Book of Revelation (New Testament Theology)* (Cambridge/UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4-5, 11.

recalling the Outer Court of the Gentiles)^{9 10}; *'the holy city'* (v2); and *'where their Lord was crucified'* (v8). However, the spiritually wayward condition of the place is conveyed by the strongly negative descriptions appended to it: *'the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt'* (v8).

vv1-2 begin with John given a measuring rod to use on the temple, altar and people – which echoes the measuring instrument of Ezekiel 40:3-5.¹¹ If taken at face value, it seems odd to measure people – hence a figurative meaning of 'measuring' should be applied, being a metaphor for 'preserving'.¹² Hence, whatever is about to happen following verses, Christ promises to preserve His remnant for His own name's sake – again, repeating the overarching theme of Revelation. This is reinforced by the command *'do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months'* – those transgressors who are not part of God's faithful are not granted His protection.

v3 introduces the protagonists of the pericope as the *'two witnesses'* who are clearly depicted as faithful followers of YHWH: *'I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy'* indicates that they belong to – and are granted their powers – by YHWH. They follow Jesus Christ as is clear from *'their Lord was crucified'* (v8) and are called *'prophets'* (v10). At the last, they are resurrected by God and carried up to heaven (vv11-12).

That there are *'two witnesses'* is likely a reference to the legal requirement for at least two independent corroborations to an offense (Deuteronomy 19:15) – especially capital crimes (Deuteronomy 17:6, Numbers 35:30).¹³ They prophesy while *'clothed in sackcloth'* (v3) which is a sign of mourning, humility and repentance (e.g. 2 Kings 19:1-2, Nehemiah 9:1, Jonah 3:6). That they *'stand before the Lord of the earth'* (v4) continues the theme of court attendance before the heavenly judge (1 Kings 22:19, Job 1:6 & 2:1, Psalm 82:1, Daniel 7:10, Zechariah 3:1-5). Hence, Revelation 11's two witnesses have arrived in Jerusalem to both mourn and condemn the evil acts of its inhabitants, with the goal of prosecuting their case before the judge of the whole earth.

⁹ Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey* (MI/USA: Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 79, 293.

¹⁰ Heiser, "Naked Bible 381: Revelation 11," p.6 of transcript.

¹¹ Heiser, "Naked Bible 381: Revelation 11," pp.3-5 of transcript.

¹² Heiser, "Naked Bible 381: Revelation 11," pp.3-4 of transcript.

¹³ Brown, "The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11:1-13," 234.

v4 provides them this key description, *'These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands who stand before the Lord of the earth'*, recalling Zechariah 4 which speaks of a golden lampstand with two golden pipes (vv2, 11-12) and two olive trees (vv3, 11-12). This would clearly identify the two witnesses of Revelation with the two of Zechariah: *'These are the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth'* (v14).¹⁴

vv5-6 ascribes the two witnesses with miraculous powers echoing great Biblical miracles. *'Fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes'* is reminiscent of Elijah calling down fire from heaven (1 Kings 18:38, 2 Kings 1:9-14). *'They have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall'* further recalls Elijah's stopping the rain (1 Kings 1:17). Meanwhile, *'they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague'* surely brings to mind Moses's ten plagues on Egypt (Exodus 7-12) – particularly the first curse which turned the Nile into blood (Exodus 7:20). Similarly to the two witnesses, both these Old Testament figures also brought about these miraculous judgments as a testimony¹⁵ to who the true God really is (Exodus 7:17, 1 Kings 17:1) – YHWH defeating divine pretenders on their own turf¹⁶ ¹⁷. These parallels lead many interpreters to identify the two witnesses and the very same Moses and Elijah, returned in the flesh.

vv7-10 foretells that when their testimony is completed, they will be killed by the beast and their corpses displayed to the gloating onlookers *'from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations'* (a slight variation on the terms used in 10:11) whose consciences had been seared by the two witnesses. As mentioned earlier in this essay, the period of 1260 days (11:3) corresponds to forty-two months (13:5) which indicates that *'the beast that rises from the abyss'* (11:7) to kill them is the same *'a beast rising out of the sea'* (13:1) who conquers saints and nations. It should be noted that the abyss in Jewish thought lay at the bottom of the sea¹⁸ ¹⁹ – compare the fear/fate of the demons in Luke

¹⁴ Bauckham, *The theology of the Book of Revelation*, 111-113.

¹⁵ Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, 99.

¹⁶ John D. Currid, *Against the Gods: The Polemical Theology of the Old Testament* (IL/USA: Crossway Books, 2013) Perlego Edition, Chapter 9.

¹⁷ James S. Anderson, *Monotheism and Yahweh's Appropriation of Baal* (Edinburgh/UK: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2018), 63-97.

¹⁸ David Noel Freedman, *Eerdmans's Dictionary of the Bible* (Eerdmans, 2019), Perlego Edition, ABYSS.

8:31/Matthew 8:32). Daniel 7's beasts whose descriptions John amalgamates also arise from the sea, and the demonic locusts of Revelation 9 also escape from the abyss. This view of the forces of evil imprisoned beneath the deepest depths arises from the non-canonical (but widely known among Second Temple Jews) 1 Enoch.²⁰

vv11-13 closes out the pericope with the vindication of the two witnesses – they are raised back to life by God (with the wording *'they stood up on their feet'* echoing the resurrecting of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37:10²¹), summoned by a heavenly voice up to heaven in a cloud (just as how their risen Lord left the earth in Acts 1:9), and one tenth of the city that mocked them is levelled by an earthquake that also kills 7000 people.

From this short passage, a whole slew of interpretations arises over the exact identity of these two witnesses. As mentioned prior, the familiar powers shown by the two witnesses and their title of *'prophets'* (v10) lead some commentators to identify them as Moses and Elijah. This view is taken by the author of the apocryphal 4th- or 5th-century Gospel of Nicodemus²² in an attempt to elevate the interpretation to the level of inspired truth. These two greatest prophets of old represent the Law and the Prophets²³, and had already made a prior appearance at the Transfiguration of Jesus (Luke 9:29-36) – and so would make suitable testifiers for their Lord, to whom all the Scriptures point toward (Luke 24:25-27&44-47). Additionally, the mention of 7000 unrighteous victims (Revelation 11:3) could be an inversion of the 7000 righteous remnant during the time of Elijah (1 Kings 19:18)²⁴.

A related but less prevalent interpretation is that rather than the actual two great figures merely *representing* the Law and the Prophets, the two witnesses *are* the Law and the Prophets!²⁵ Another rather niche view holds that the two witnesses are Peter and Paul²⁶. This idea turns on the

¹⁹ Michael S. Heiser, "Naked Bible 377: Revelation 9," *The Naked Bible Podcast* (accessed 12-Apr-2023): <https://nakedbiblepodcast.com/podcast/naked-bible-377-revelation-9/> [p.12 of transcript]

²⁰ Heiser, "Naked Bible 377: Revelation 9," [pp.7-15 of transcript]

²¹ Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, 72-73, 385.

²² Grynæus, "The GOSPEL of NICODEMUS, formerly called the ACTS of PONTIUS PILATE.," *Sacred Texts* (accessed 13-Apr-2023): <https://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/lbob/lbob10.htm> [CHAP. XX, vv2-3]

²³ Brown, "The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11:1-13," 227 (footnote 121).

²⁴ Bauckham, *The theology of the Book of Revelation*, 87.

²⁵ Brown, "The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11:1-13," 206, 409-410.

²⁶ Brown, "The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11:1-13," 160-181.

assumed fact of their martyrdom in Rome, with the beast of Revelation 11:7 being identified with that city.

Yet another interpretation has the two witnesses as the returned Enoch and Elijah²⁷, a view mainly prevalent from the time of the early church up to the Reformation²⁸ but with much less support from within Revelation 11 itself²⁹. There is a poeticness in ascribing this identification, as it is commonly held that both Enoch (Genesis 5:24, Hebrews 11:5) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11-12) did not physically die but were translated to heaven – hence their future deaths in Revelation 11:7 will complete that natural cycle that all humans experience³⁰. On this note however, the fate of these Old Testament figures is by no means unanimously agreed upon – which would torpedo the presumed poetry. For example, some commentators³¹ believe Elijah was caught up in the air and set back down elsewhere (similar to Phillip in Acts 8:39-40), since 2 Chronicles 21:12 mentions a letter from Elijah arriving long after the chariot incident in 2 Kings 2:1-12 (2 Chronicles 21:1-7 being parallel of 2 Kings 8:16-19).

On this thorny matter of identification, I personally do not favour the interpretation of the two witnesses being the literal return of past Biblical personalities. To begin with, the most straightforward way to firmly identify these two witnesses would be for John to have stated their names – which he declines to³². This is in contrast to the aforementioned example of the Transfiguration, where Moses and Elijah are specifically named. That being said, admittedly at other times John does indirectly identify characters such as Jesus Christ or God – preferring instead to use titles or descriptions drawn from the Old Testament.³³

As elaborated upon earlier, the basis for identifying the two witnesses as Elijah and Moses is due to the kind of miraculous powers they demonstrate. However, there are other peculiar

²⁷ Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament, Fifth Edition* (MI/USA: Zondervan, 2012), 564.

²⁸ Brown, “The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11:1-13,” 55-59.

²⁹ Brown, “The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11:1-13,” 328-329.

³⁰ Ambrose Andreano, “The Problem of Enoch and Elijah,” *Black Lion Academy* (2020), 7. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/44739542/The_Problem_of_Enoch_and_Elijah

³¹ Ken Burkett, “Why Elijah Did Not Go to Heaven in the Whirlwind,” *BJU Seminary* (accessed 11-Apr-2023): <https://seminary.bju.edu/viewpoint/why-elijah-did-not-go-to-heaven-in-the-whirlwind/>

³² Brown, “The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11:1-13,” 349-350.

³³ See the companion essay submitted to Dr. Allen McClymont: ‘In the book of Revelation what does it tell us about Jesus Christ, what does it tell us about the people of God, and what does it tell us about the future?’ under the section ‘Jesus Christ – The First and the Last’.

characteristics that could have been easily referenced to make clear the identity of the two witnesses (if this had been John's actual aim). For example, John the Baptist is portrayed as a latter-day Elijah by the description 'Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist' (Matthew 3:4) which calls to mind Elijah's garb in 2 Kings 1:8. If John had wanted to indicate that one of the two witnesses is literally the returned Elijah, a similar description could have been repeated.

One must always bear in mind when attempting interpretation of the Bible that "While God's word was written *for* us, it wasn't written *to* us."³⁴ The original audience of the Book of Revelation is clear: 'The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants' (Revelation 1:1) and 'John to the seven churches that are in Asia' (1:4). As Bauckham cautions: "John writes for the Christians of his own time"³⁵ and "many misreadings of Revelation, especially those which assume that much of the book was not addressed to its first-century readers and could only be understood by later generations, have resulted from neglecting the fact that it is a letter."³⁶ Hence, what John intended to convey through his words would best interpreted according to how his contemporary readers – with "the strongly Jewish character of most of these churches"³⁷ – would have interpreted them.

I therefore find that the mixing together of many different Old Testament references – especially the unnamed two witnesses of Zechariah 4 – is intended by John to indicate typology more than precise identity, most probably a representation of the *ecclesia* of Christ entire: 'the seven lampstands are the seven churches' (Revelation 1:20)^{38 39 40 41}. As such, I concur that "Rev. 11.1-13 confirms that the lamp stands represent the church as the true temple and the totality of the people of God witnessing between the period of Christ's resurrection and His final coming."⁴²

³⁴ Michael S. Heiser, *I Dare You Not to Bore Me with The Bible* (Lexham Press: 2015), Perlego Edition, Introduction

³⁵ Bauckham, *The theology of the Book of Revelation*, 553.

³⁶ Bauckham, *The theology of the Book of Revelation*, 553.

³⁷ Bauckham, *The theology of the Book of Revelation*, 18.

³⁸ Brown, "The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11:1-13," 214-242.

³⁹ Bauckham, *The theology of the Book of Revelation*, 84-88.

⁴⁰ Heiser, "Naked Bible 381: Revelation 11," pp.15-16 of transcript.

⁴¹ Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament, Fifth Edition*, 564.

⁴² Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, 107.

In line with the repeated message of the rest of Revelation, the tale of the two witnesses is meant as a forewarning – and an encouragement – to all followers whose ‘*Lord was crucified*’ (11:8). Persecution from the enemies of God will come – whatever they might do to just two of Christ’s faithful (11:7), they would also have no qualms about carrying out against any number of the ecclesia who stand against the rising tide of wickedness in the world.

Yet even if we are overtaken by that final enemy, even death will be defeated (20:14, 21:4). As the two witnesses are summoned from the depths of hades up to the heights of heaven (11:11-12), so too will be summoned by He who is the resurrection and the life (20:11-14, once more echoing the Old Testament in Daniel 12:2-3).

Conclusion

The Book of Revelation makes no bones about warning the faithful that in the last days they will suffer tribulation for Christ’s name’s sake (e.g. 6:9, 12:17, 13:7&10, 16:6, 19:2, 20:4). Indeed, this has been the pattern God’s chosen are called to follow whether preceding or following after the Crucifixion of our Lord.

John therefore writes Revelation 11:1-13 to again reassure his readers – whether contemporary to his time, or to us in our present struggles, or to those living in the very time of the great tribulation which he sees in the future – that they are continuing the noble calling of great men of God like Moses and Elijah. In reading John’s words in our own time, we too are reminded to hold firm to the faith – for God always preserves His remnant for ultimate glory (11:1&11-12, 14:13, 19:6-9, 20:4-6).

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