



WHO ARE THE TWO WITNESSES OF REVELATION?

"And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies" (Revelation 11:3–5).

Revelation is an apocalypse. Not just in the sense of recording an unveiling but also in terms of its composition in what might best be described as a language system or matrix deeply embedded in the Old Testament. As such, to rightly interpret Revelation in general and identify the two witnesses of Revelation 11 in particular, it is crucial to have the background music of the Old Testament coursing through our minds. We must neither attempt to draw exact parallels between the apocalyptic imagery and their Old Testament referents nor attempt to press the language system of Revelation into a literalistic labyrinth such that the two witnesses literally turn their mouths into blowtorches.

First, the two witnesses are a metaphorical reference to Moses and Elijah. Old Testament jurisprudence mandated at least two witnesses to convict of a crime (Deuteronomy 19:15), and in this case the two witnesses accuse Israel of apostasy. The imagery also harkens back to a familiar Old Tes-

tament passage in which Zechariah sees two olive trees on the right and the left of a lampstand which symbolize “the two who are anointed to serve the Lord of all the earth” (Zechariah 4:14). The two witnesses in Zechariah were identified as Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, who returned to Jerusalem to lay the foundation of a second temple, and Joshua, the high priest commissioned to preside over its altar.

In Revelation, this imagery is invested in two witnesses who preside over the judgment and destruction of Jerusalem and the second temple. Like Moses, the witnesses have power to turn water into blood (Exodus 7). And like Elijah, they have power to call down fire from heaven to consume their enemies and to shut up the sky so that it will not rain for three and a half years (1 Kings 17:18; Luke 4:25; James 5:17; Revelation 11:6).

Furthermore, the mission of the two witnesses can rightly be identified with the person and work of Jesus Christ. Like Jesus, they are sacrificial lambs. Indeed, their corpses unceremoniously litter the streets of Jerusalem—the very city in which their Lord was crucified (Revelation 11:8). The city is figuratively called Sodom in that it epitomizes human wickedness and heavenly wrath, and Egypt in that it is emblematic of the slavery from which only Jesus Christ can emancipate. Their resurrection

after three-and-a-half days parallels the resurrection of Christ in much the same way that their three-and-a-half-year ministry mirrors that of the Messiah.

Finally, the description of these witnesses as “clothed in sackcloth” (Revelation 11:3) identifies them with the tradition of Hebrew prophets from Elijah to John the Baptist who wore sackcloth in mourning over Israel’s apostasy (e.g., 2 Kings 1:8; Isaiah 20:2; Matthew 3:4). In light of biblical imagery, then, the two witnesses are revealed not as two literal people, such as a future reincarnation of Moses and Elijah, but rather they are literary characters in John’s apocalyptic narrative representing the entire line of Hebrew prophets in testifying against Israel and warning of soon-coming judgment of God on Jerusalem.

Ultimately, the two witnesses form a composite image of the Law and the Prophets culminating in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of a Prophet and Priest who is the earnest of all who are his witnesses and who will reign with him in a New Jerusalem wherein dwells righteousness. □

Adapted from Hank Hanegraaff, The Bible Answer Book, Volume 2 (Nashville, J. Countryman, 2006). For further study, see Hank Hanegraaff, The Apocalypse Code (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2007); see also David Chilton, The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation (Ft. Worth, Texas: Dominion Press, 1987): 276–8.

Hank Hanegraaff is president of the Christian Research Institute International and host of the Bible Answer Man radio broadcast.

We must neither attempt to draw exact parallels between the apocalyptic imagery and their Old Testament referents nor attempt to press the language system of Revelation into a literalistic labyrinth such that the two witnesses literally turn their mouths into blowtorches.