

Beulah Heights University

**Revelation 11 - A Futurist View of the Two Witnesses**

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by

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## Revelation 11 - A Futurist View of the Two Witnesses

A futurist approach to Revelation views chapters 4-22 as subject to future fulfillment.<sup>1</sup> This approach understands “eschatological passages as being fulfilled during a future time, primarily during the seventieth week of Daniel, at the second coming of Christ, and during the millennium.”<sup>2</sup> Futurists “insist that the principle of plain interpretation be followed consistently throughout the book,” while also acknowledging the presence of symbols and other figures of speech.

Support for the futurist approach to Revelation is found first in Revelation 1:1. “The book as a whole is concerned with ‘the things which must shortly come to pass,’ and which are thus identified as belonging to the future as far as the seer is concerned.” Second, verse 19 segments the book into three chronological divisions: “the things which you have seen,” “the things which are,” and “the things which will take place after these things.” Third, 4:1 identifies the visions of the future as starting from that point of time.<sup>3</sup> Historically the early church “held to a futurist, pre millennial interpretation of prophecy in a primitive and non-systematized form.” Researching the writings of early church fathers, Crutchfield explains that “from Justin and Irenaeus we learn that the doctrine of the pre millennial reign of Christ on earth was regarded as the orthodox faith of the early church. The evidence indicates that millennialism (or chiliasm as it was originally called) was the predominant belief of the church of the first three centuries.”

Some strengths of the futurist approach are these: First, it permits a more literal interpretation of the prophecies in the Apocalypse. Foe points out that “futurism is the only

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<sup>1</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Revelation*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 9; and John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ: A Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Ice, “What Is Preterism?” in *The End Times Controversy*, ed. Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2003), 21; Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 20-21.

<sup>3</sup> Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, 140.

approach that can consistently apply literal interpretation, that is, the historical, grammatical, contextual hermeneutic. Other approaches must supply key elements of their system from outside of the text of Scripture.<sup>4</sup> Second, literal interpretation recognizes that many events described in Revelation have never yet occurred. For instance one-fourth of the earth's inhabitants have not died (6:8), one-third of the earth's waters have not turned to blood (8:8), and one-third of the sun, moon, and stars have not been darkened (8:12). Third, literal interpretation takes into account the prophetic nature of the book (1:1, 19). Tenney notes that the futurist approach has "accepted the validity of predictive prophecy in Revelation. They futurists have taken seriously the order and character of the prophecies, and have attempted to connect them with the personal return of Christ."<sup>5</sup>

Some perceived weaknesses of the futurist approach may be noted. One criticism is that this approach makes much of Revelation irrelevant to Christians of any age. Walvoord replies, "It is strange that such an objection should be considered weighty. Much of the prophecy of the Bible deals with the distant future, including the Old Testament promises of the coming Messiah, the prophecies of Daniel concerning the future world empires, the body of truth relating to the coming kingdom on earth as well as countless other prophecies." He continues, "If the events of chapters 4 through 19 are future, even from our viewpoint today, they teach the blessed truth of the ultimate supremacy of God and the triumph of righteousness. The immediate application of distant events is familiar in Scripture, as for instance 2 Peter 3:10-12."<sup>6</sup>

Another criticism is that the validity of literal interpretation cannot be tested and verified from history. However, prophecies that have already come to pass lead to expectations for the future of other prophecies. Feinberg points out that "the only way to

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Ice, "Revelation, Interpretative Views of," in Dictionary of Premillennial Theology, 370.

<sup>5</sup> Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, 145.

<sup>6</sup> Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 21-22.

know how God will fulfill prophecy in the future is to ascertain how He has done it in the past.”<sup>7</sup>

Since chapters 4-22 are subject to future fulfillment, from the Apostle John’s point in time (cf. 1:19; 4:1), chapter 11, as part of that segment of Scripture, is also to be viewed as futuristic. The predominant futurist view of the two witnesses in Revelation 11:3-13 is that they will be two individuals in the yet-future Tribulation who will perform judgmental miracles and speak prophetically. Some futurists understand that the witnesses are “two men who lived previously and have been restored to the earth for this ministry.”!? The most widely held identifications are Elijah and Moses, and Elijah and Enoch. Others hold that the two witnesses cannot be identified today, for they “will be raised up from among those who turn to Christ in the time following the rapture.” Nevertheless, as Hitchcock points out, “the one consistent thread in all these futurist views is that the two witnesses will be two literal individuals who will prophesy in the end times.”<sup>8</sup>

The “temple of God” refers to an actual temple structure located in Jerusalem during the Tribulation. “The court which is outside the temple” refers to the court of the Gentiles. Suggestions vary regarding the significance of the instruction to measure the temple, the altar, and the worshippers and exclude the outer court from measurement. The “holy city” refers to Jerusalem. The forty-two month period when Jerusalem will be trodden underfoot by the nations is usually understood by futurists as the second half of Daniel’s seventieth week (Dan. 9:24, 27).<sup>9</sup>

Following is a brief description of the futurist understanding of the two witnesses

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<sup>7</sup> Charles L. Feinberg, *Premillennialism or Amillennialism?* (Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen, 1954), 18. See also Robert Anderson, *The Coming Prince* (1985 ; reprint. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1984), 147.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Hitchcock and Thomas Ice, *Breaking the Apocalypse Code* (Costa Mesa, CA: The Word for Today, 2007), 166.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 8-22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 84-86; Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 177; Whitcomb, “The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11,” 1; Ryrie, *Revelation*, 84; and Morris, *The Revelation Record*, 192, 198.

prophecy, which the subsequent sections will defend. The 1,260 day period of the two witnesses' ministry (Rev. 11:3) refers to half of Daniel's seventieth week (Dan. 9:24, 27). Futurists differ on whether the two witnesses will minister in the first half or the second half of the seven-year tribulation. The attire of the two witnesses is seen as actual "sackcloth" (Rev. 11:3), which denotes the character of their ministry. The description of the witnesses as two olive trees and two lamp stands (v. 4) is seen as a reference to Zechariah 4, especially the witnesses' empowerment by the Spirit. The power to perform judgmental miracles, attributed to the two witnesses (Rev. 11:5-6), is understood literally. Likewise, their deaths (vv. 7-8), resurrection, and ascension (vv. 11-12) are taken literally. The enemy of the two witnesses who causes their death - the beast from the abyss (v. 7) - is identified as the future Antichrist. The "great city" where the witnesses' corpses (v. 8) will lie is Jerusalem, with "Sodom and Egypt" referring to the city's spiritual state. The three and a half day period during which the two witnesses' corpses are denied burial (v. 9) is taken literally, as a period of half a week, and the subsequent merriment over the demise of the two witnesses (vv. 9-10) is seen as worldwide. The catastrophic events that occur in conjunction with the two witnesses' ascension (v. 13) are understood literally: A great earthquake will take place, as a result of which a tenth of the city of Jerusalem will fall, seven thousand persons will perish, and the survivors will give glory to God.<sup>10</sup>

Revelation 11:3-13 provides a brief exposition of the two witness's passage, showing how 11:3-13 fit the futurist view of Revelation. Daniel's seventieth week, the seven-year Tribulation period, will commence with the Antichrist confirming a seven-year treaty with the Jews (cf. Dan. 9:27a). The Tribulation (described in Rev.6—18) will involve three series of divine judgments—seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls (with the seventh seal

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<sup>10</sup> Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 175, 183; Thomas, *Revelation 8-22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 989-9; Seiss, *The Apocalypse*, 266; Morris, *The Revelation Record*, 204-5.

opening the trumpet judgments, and the seventh trumpet opening the howl judgments). After three and a half years the Antichrist will break the treaty and end the Levitical sacrificial system (Dan. 9:27). In its place he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, an image that the world will be required to worship (Dan. 9:27; Matt. 24:15; 2 Thess. 2:4; Rev. 13:14-15). The midpoint of Daniel's seventieth week, at which the Antichrist will set up the abomination of desolation, corresponds to the sixth seal judgment (Rev. 6:12).<sup>11</sup>

During this second half of the seven-year Tribulation the Antichrist will reveal his proud and blasphemous nature (13:5-6) and exercise worldwide domination (v. 7), encompassing even the global economy (vv. 16-18). He will continue to make war against believers and overcome them (v. 7; Dan. 8:24). The trumpet and bowl judgments, with their progressive severity, will be unleashed during this period. However, Israelites will find safety in the wilderness (Rev. 12:14) and experience divine protection (vv. 15-16). Armageddon, a "campaign that extends over the last half of the tribulation period," commences with the King of the North's invasion of the land (Ezek. 38-39) at the middle of Daniel's seventieth week.<sup>12</sup>

The Levitical sacrificial system functioning in Jerusalem's rebuilt temple will be discontinued by the Antichrist (Dan. 9:27b), who will place an abomination in the temple (Dan. 9:27c; Matt. 24:15; Rev. 13:14-15). Before this, John was commanded to measure the temple, its altar, and the worshippers (11:1), an action signifying God's ownership (Ezek. 40; Rev. 21). The temple's outer court was to be left unmeasured, for it will be controlled by Gentiles, who trample the city of Jerusalem for forty-two months (11:2) during the second half of the Tribulation. God will raise up two special witnesses who will perform judgmental miracles and speak prophetically. McLean argues persuasively that the two witnesses will

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<sup>11</sup> See McLean, "Revelation, Structure of," 374-75; idem, *The Seventieth Week of Daniel 9:27 as a Literary Key for Understanding the Structure of the Apocalypse of John* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Biblical, 1996) 187-92 ; and Jeffrey Louie, "Expositional Study of the 144,000 in the Book of the Revelation" (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas, 1991), 61-62.

<sup>12</sup> See Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 340-58. This correlation (of the closing events of Armageddon with the concluding events of the two witnesses' ministry) appears to be difficult but not impossible.

minister during the second half of the seven-year Tribulation, rebutting twelve arguments proposed in support of the view that these witnesses will appear in the first half. The sackcloth attire of the two witnesses (v. 3) will manifest outward evidence of their sorrow and the impending judgment. These witnesses will prophesy (v. 3), proclaiming God's messages and perhaps even predicting the future. Like Zechariah, the high priest, and Zerubbabel, the governor, they will minister in the power of the Holy Spirit (v. 4). God's two witnesses will be given special powers to do miracles, including incinerating their enemies (v. 5), preventing rain from falling, turning water into blood, and striking the earth with plagues (v. 6). These powers are reminiscent of the activities of Moses and Elijah, but the practice here will exceed them, for the two witnesses will exercise these powers at their discretion (v. 6d). These miracles will inflict divine judgment on unrepentant earth dwellers and will also protect the two witnesses.

### Conclusion

This article has sought to demonstrate that the Scriptures support the futurist view of the two witnesses in Revelation 11. They will be literal persons (not symbols), they will be two in number, their miraculous activities are to be understood literally, their ministry is prophetic in nature, and they will minister during the yet-future Tribulation period.

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