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# THE UNITY OF GOD'S PEOPLE

## THE TWO WITNESSES IN REVELATION 11.3-14

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### **Abstract**

The Book of Revelation places a strong emphasis on Theology and Christology and places first and foremost the images of God and of the Lamb. But John describes not only God and the Lamb; he also makes a description of God's assembly. Among the several ecclesiological images spread throughout the book, there is the image of the people of God used by John to underline the idea of community and relationship.

For many scholars, the two witnesses from Revelation 11 symbolize the people of God. John describes it using elements from the Old and New Testament. They are prophets like Moses and Elijah, but at the same time they are joined in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This description of the two witnesses made using only one Scripture emphasizes the historical and eschatological people of God.

This study focuses on the image of the Two Witnesses described in Revelation 11.1-12. The analysis of the text aims to identify and emphasize, in broad lines, the combination of elements from the Old and the New Testament in order to describe the only one people of God.

*Keywords:* people of God, Old Testament, New Testament, Revelation, ecclesiology

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### **1. Introduction**

The Revelation of Saint John abounds in ecclesiological images. The author speaks to the spiritual community and is concerned with rousing its members' faith in Christ, the Lamb, and the worship towards the only God who reigns on the throne of His glory. The constant reference to the Lamb (Christology) and to God (Theology) is the item most peculiar to John's ecclesiology.

One of the most widespread ecclesiological images is that of the people of God, either the concrete and the real one in the seven local churches of Asia Minor (Revelation 1-3) or the universal and the ideal one, described in the second part of the Book of Revelation (chapters 4-22). This people are symbolized by the group of those 144.000 people who were chosen and sealed,

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by the Two Witnesses, by the woman with a crown of twelve stars on her head, by the conquerors who sing the song of Moses and that of the Lamb [1].

In the following pages we will look into several verses of the Book of Revelation 11, one of the most studied chapters in the Revelation, but at the same time, one of the most difficult to interpret. The aim is to explore how exactly is the description of the Two Witnesses a symbol of the people of God in order to demonstrate the unity of the God's assembly; the people of the old and new alliance.

## **2. Revelation 11.3-13 - the Two Witnesses of Christ, new Elias and Moses**

The episode of the Two Witnesses is part of the context of Revelation 10.1-11.14, a larger section whose topic would be the prophecy. Revelation 11 describes not only the prophetic mission of the people of God, but has the motif of exodus as background. In fact, Revelation 11 focuses on the intervention of God the Saviour in favour of the chosen ones. In this way, Revelation 11 can show a part of its ecclesiological dimension. The image of the people of God can also be seen in the symbol of the Temple, of the sanctuary and venerators (Revelation 11.1-2).

### **2.1. *The Two Witnesses, new Elias and Moses (Revelation 11.3-6)***

In Revelation 11.3-6, the author describes the mission and the powers of the Two Witnesses by means of various images from the Old Testament [2]. The description of the witnesses begins in the third verse with entrusting the prophetic mission. Even from the beginning, the witnesses are identified with the prophets in the line of the prophecy from the Old Testament. They are the messengers of God in whose mission is to call and urge the people to convert and to make known the divine judgement and the salvation.

The definite article that accompanies the word 'witnesses' could indicate that the images of the two people are known, but the author does not say anything about their name. This is why the identification of the Two Witnesses is difficult. However, some elements, which are useful in establishing their identity, can be extracted from different references to the Old Testament.

The main element to identify the Two Witnesses is nonetheless the reference to the Elijah and Moses' miraculous powers. The Two Witnesses seem to be a new Elijah and a new Moses because they have the powers of these two characters that belong to the Old Testament.

Like Elijah, they can shut the heavens so that rain may not fall (1 Kings 17.1). Unlike 1 Kings 17.1, this sign can be achieved not only in an isolated way, but during the whole prophetic ministry of 1.260 days, a period that is equal to the three intervals and a half of the persecution (in Luke 4.25, the duration of the drought is three years and a half).

Also, like Moses, the witnesses can turn water into blood, just like in the first plague from Exodus (Exodus 7.14-21) and as it is described in Revelation 8.8 (the second trumpet). They also have the power to smite the Earth with other plagues. This is similar to the situation in the Old Testament where these punishments were used against the idolaters who persecuted the people and did not obey God.

Moreover, there are other references to Elijah and Moses in Revelation 11. The ascension to Heaven of the witnesses could be inspired from the traditions concerning Moses (Deuteronomy 34.1-12) and Elijah' (2 Kings 2.11) ascension to heaven. In the biblical tradition, there were also stories about Elijah (Mark 9.12) and Moses' return at the end of time. Elijah and Moses' presence alongside Jesus at the moment of the transfiguration (Mark 9.4) is not random.

Finally, some traditions concerned only Elijah. The fire invoked from heaven in order to send the messengers of king Ahaz in 2 Kings 1.17 can be related to the fire that destroys the enemies in Revelation 11:6. On the other hand, the lamp that is compared to Elijah in Sirach 48.1 could be then associated with the fire that comes out of the witnesses' mouth. In this case, the fire could represent the power of the word proclaimed by the prophet (Jeremiah 5.14).

The choice of Moses and Elijah as a typology for the witnesses in Revelation 11 is better understood if we start with the rhetorical intentions of John of Patmos. Either Elijah or Moses faced the heathen kings and idolatry during their prophetic mission and proclaimed the worship of the one true God [3].

The purpose of the author of the Book of Revelation is to present the Two Witnesses as being the new witnesses Elijah and Moses [4]. Deuteronomy 18.15 already talked about a new Moses and the text in Malachi 4:5-6 hinted to a new Elijah. In Mark 6.15, Jesus himself is mistaken for Elijah and in John 1.21, John the Baptist is likened to Elijah. The mission of the new Elijah and Moses is mainly to prepare the people for judgement, inviting to penitence while always keeping conversion in view.

As it occurs in the last book of the Bible, John recomposes the images in the Old Testament. In Revelation 11, the re-interpretation resides in modifying and enriching the characters of Elijah and Moses. In this way, the fire does not descend from heaven as it was illustrated in 2 Kings 1.10-17, but proceeds out of the witnesses' mouths. Also, unlike the two characters in the Old Testament, the witnesses show signs over the whole period of their prophecy, act throughout the whole world, and have the power to cast upon the world any type of plagues.

Finally, they are unattainable and no one can harm them. The last element of difference is the end of the witnesses' life, namely martyrdom that was unknown to Moses and Elijah. With all these characteristics added by John, the Two Witnesses seem to be superior to Moses and Elijah.

Together with Elijah and Moses' attributes, the Two Witnesses have other characteristics taken from various images in the Old Testament. The first aspect is the sackcloth (Revelation 11.3), which is seen as a mantle made of goat hair that could lend its owner the force to overcome the difficulties of persecution [1,

p. 219]. In the Old Testament, to be dressed in sackcloth is first of all a reference to sorrow and mourn (Genesis 37.34). The sackcloth is also an invitation to penitence (Jonah 3.5-8). In our text there could be an invitation to penitence and conversion, encouraged by the announcement about God's judgement.

Another image used to describe the Two Witnesses is: the two olive trees and of the two candlesticks standing before God. The presence before God is the confirmation of divine protection, already announced in the beginning of the chapter 11. Standing before the Lord of the earth expresses at the same time closeness to God, which inspires and mandates the prophetic message. The announcement and the testimony must spread across the whole world, an idea confirmed by the apposition 'of the Earth' referring to the Lord [4, p. 277].

The image of the olive trees is taken from Zechariah 4.2-14, where it referred to the two consecrated people, Zerubbabel, the political leader, and Joshua, the High Priest. In this case we could talk about the mission of the martyrs in the civic and sacerdotal field. However, the reference in Revelation 11.5-6 seems not to be to Zerubbabel and Joshua, but to Moses and Elijah, the light bearers in Law and Prophets [5]. Despite all changes, even if the concept of anointing [6] remains, John switches from the royal and priestly images in Zechariah 4 to a prophetic context. The two olive trees are the witnesses anointed with the oil of the Spirit, prophets through whom God nourishes the God's people and upholds their testimony.

The lamps had been already mentioned in Revelation 1.12-20 as a symbol of the churches. The number two makes reference to the candlesticks and points out once again the validity of the testimony of God's people. Hence, the two candlesticks could represent the people of God and their faithful testimony. (According to R. Bauckham, [3, p. 274], if the candlesticks are a symbol of the people of God in Revelation 1.9-20, it should be the same in Revelation 11. The two candlesticks would symbolize the Church's testimony. However, G.B. Caird maintains that the two candlesticks, taken from a total of seven candlesticks in Revelation 2-3 would reflect the martyrdom to which a part of the Church is exposed [7].)

## ***2.2. The mission of the new Elijah and Moses and our society***

In Revelation 11.3-6, the Two Witnesses are an image of God's people, which is described in terms drawn from the Old Testament. These people, protected by God, accomplish their prophetic testimony according to the model of Moses and Elijah. The emphasis is especially on the inviolable character of the Two Witnesses, a sign of divine protection. On the other hand, the various powers that Elijah and Moses possess and their activities during the whole prophetic mission emphasize the importance of the witness to which the people of God is called.

The lives of the Two Witnesses can be an example for today society. That is truth when we keep in mind the exhortatory intentions of John. They are two main elements in the ministry of the new Elijah and Moses: the prophecy and the

witness. So the question goes: what kind of prophecy is it for us today? The world needs new prophets who able to call and urge people to repent and to spread around the divine judgement and salvation. Today's world needs prophets who have a good connection with God. As a matter of fact, this strong connection and obedience to God are the sources of power.

Another question would be: what kind of testimony should be in nowadays? Like for the two persons from the Old Testament, the witness must be strong and perseverant. The faith of a witness comes in opposition to the idolatry. Just like Elijah and Moses, the Christians have to be able to resist the new forms of idolatry.

### ***2.3. The Two Witnesses and the relationship with Christ (Revelation 11.7-13)***

In Revelation 11.7-13, the witnesses are also described with aspects from the New Testament. The references from the Old Testament are abandoned and replaced by another context. This replacement starts with the appearance of the surprising Beast, which rises from the abyss, the place of evil. The reaction of the evil forces at the prophets' message appears after the testimony of the two witnesses. (The process of passing over in silence different actions is also encountered in other places, for example in Revelation 7.1-4 when reference is made to the marking with the seal. An explanation could be the concentration of the interest on other aspects.)

The untouchable witnesses fight the beast which overpowers them and kills them, without them putting up any resistance. The authenticity of the witnesses and the powers they wielded are of no use since they will be killed. This fact shows how God on one hand defends his chosen ones who testify, while on the other, the witnesses face suffering and death. Furthermore, the denial of any thought of revenge is highlighted [8]. The righteous must trust in God in his suffering and leave his cause into His hands, because He is the one who metes out justice.

Once defeated by the Beast, their bodies will be exposed in the public square, without burial, a sign of punishment and despise (1 Kings 13.22). (D.E. Aune finds a parallel with *The Revelation of Elijah* (4.13-14) where the eschatological enemy fights Elijah and Enoch, defeats them, and the bodies of the defeated remain for three days and a half in the square of the great city [9].) The fact that they do not have a burial needs to be interpreted symbolically. Maybe, first of all, the emphasis is put on the shortening of the negative element of mockery (three days and a half) as compared to the length of the ministry (three years and a half). We can add to this, on the other hand, the idea of a negative period of trial symbolized by the half of the number seven.

The death of the Two Witnesses becomes a reason of joy and celebration for the 'Earth inhabitants' – words that reflect the entire world. In Revelation, the view of the earth's inhabitants is negative and this can be seen in the complete rejection of the prophets' testimony. (G.K. Beale notices how six -

Revelation 1.9; 6.9; 11.7; 12.11-17; 20.4 - of the nine occurrences of the word 'testimony' in Revelation are related to the rejection of the people [10].)

The first aspect related to the New Testament, more precisely in Revelation 11, is revealed in the Lord's crucifixion. Yet, the relationship of the believers with Christ can be seen from the very beginning. In Revelation 11.3, Christ takes the floor and offers the task of prophesying (this fact is highlighted by the possessive pronoun 'mine'). The relationship of the Two Witnesses with Christ is also confirmed afterwards by the testimony 'of Jesus' before the world (Revelation 1.2, 9; 12.17; 19.10; 20.4).

The two new prophets, Elijah and Moses, continue to testify about the same death of the Saviour. Revelation 11.8 states explicitly that the witnesses have the same destiny like Christ, being killed violently in "the great city, where their Lord had been crucified".

The interpreting of the mystery of the city in Revelation 11 has consistently been the subject of a great many debates among critics. The city could be Rome [11] since the seven occurrences of the word "the big city" refers to Babylon, which is Rome (Revelation 14.8; 16.19; 17.18; 18.10, 16, 18, 19, 21). This argument could be contradicted by the distinction between the great Babylon and Jerusalem, the holy city.

Nevertheless, the city that John of Patmos has in mind could be Jerusalem. The thesis is backed up by the description of the crucifixion of the Lord, which took place in Jerusalem, and by the reference to the temple in the beginning of chapter 11. The author neither talks about the historical Jerusalem, which was destroyed in AD 70, nor about a real martyrdom since we don't have any historical memory of the crucified martyrs in Jerusalem in the first decades of Christianity. Therefore, the city in Revelation 11 is not the old Jerusalem, but could be that type of 'Jerusalem' which kills the prophets and crucified the Messiah.

It is difficult to identify the divine city since it is spiritually associated with Sodom (the symbol of perversion) and Egypt (the symbol of oppression). (The term 'pneumatikos' appears only here - Revelation 11.8 - and in 1 Corinthians 2.14 in the whole New Testament. According to L.A. Vos, John performs the action of symbolizing or spiritualizing the persons and the places taken from the Old Testament [12].) The combination of the two realities already appeared in Amos 4.10-11. In Revelation 11, Sodom and Egypt need to be understood symbolically as a model for any city or space where testimonies are given, but also a place of rejection. The rejection of the prophets from a spiritual point of view means idolatry (Sodom) and slavery (Egypt).

The combination of the three realities, Sodom, Egypt and Jerusalem, in a single city is done on purpose, first of all to motivate the testimony even in persecutions. Even if there is rejection (Sodom), oppression and death (Egypt), the authenticity of the testimony needs to remain constant.

From the previous reports we conclude that author did indeed intent to change the symbol of Jerusalem. Indeed, he adds some details (Hellenistic and universalistic) like the market, the inhabitants of the Earth and the people from

any tribe and nation. These universal elements, along with the invitation to interpret the city in a spiritual way, lead to the idea of an entire world seen as a symbol. The big city is the whole people of God, desecrated and soiled by his enemies (the comparison with Sodom and Egypt), but at the same time it is also the holy place of worship and testimony for the Lord. This big city is the symbol of every corner of the earth, the scene of confrontation between the messianic and the non-messianic forces and a place where the Gospel is spread to all nations.

The second element from the New Testament makes reference to the three days (and a half) of the (non) burial, of the resurrection and ascension. (According to P. Prigent the three days and a half represent the period of the Church's testimony towards the exterior, in parallel with the period of three years and a half [13].) After three days and a half of silence and apparent defeat, the testifiers come to life. The image of the resurrection of the witnesses could be seen in Ezekiel 37.1-14, where the dried bones come back to life, symbol of the ending of exile and the return to the Promised Land. Likewise, in Revelation the witnesses are resurrected in order to continue their mission on earth so that the Church could spread the mystery till the end. Yet, the symbol of the three days when the witnesses lie in death refers rather to Christ, the one who was risen by God after three days.

The ascension to heaven could recall the traditions of Elijah (2 Kings 2.11) and Enoch (Sirach 44.16), but the meaning of the ascension receives a new connotation when referred to the ascension of Christ, to whom the Two Witnesses are associated.

In our text, the Two Witnesses receive features that are similar to Jesus [14], and all their life and mission seem to be modelled after that of Christ so that Christ the crucified can be called their 'Lord'. At the same time, their death is a reminder of the death of Jesus. By imitating Christ in everything, the Two Witnesses share in the same resurrection and ascension: "Neither Stephen (Acts 6-7), nor Francis of Assisi, who was alike Christ due to the received stigmata, partook of such a configuration with Christ" [1, p. 230].

The characteristics of the witnesses in Revelation 11 do not fully clarify their identity. They cannot be interpreted individually, i.e., two characters from the Old and the New Testament. The two characters were identified one by one with: a. Elijah (2 Kings 2.11) and Enoch (Genesis 5.24), because of their ascension to heaven without having tasted death and because of their return (Malachi 3.23-24); b. Elijah and Jeremiah; c. Peter and Paul; d. James the apostle and James the Lord's brother, or James and John.

On the other hand, no allegoric interpretation is possible, even if we could see in the Two Witnesses the law and the prophets (Moses and Elijah). Other proposals following this train of thought are: The Law and the Gospel; Israel and the Church or the Jews and the gentiles in the Church [3, p. 286]; the Old Testament (the Word of God) and the New Testament (the testimony of Christ) [10].

The most relevant interpretation resides in seeing in the Two Witnesses not two different entities, but all prophets and the Christian witnesses or the calling and the prophetic testimony of the people of God. The following arguments can be listed among those in favour of this thesis: a) the lamps, either in Zechariah 4.2-3 or in Revelation 1.20, are a symbol of the people of God; b) the Beast, which in Daniel 7.21 persecuted Israel could also fight all the people of God in Revelation 11.7; c) in other fragments of the Revelation, Jesus's witnesses are the community of believers (Revelation 6.9; 12.11, 17; 19.10; 20.4); d) the persecution that lasts for the same period of time as the testimony is carried out against the community (Revelation 12.6, 14; 13.6) and determines us to think of a collective testimony. FA. Feuillet talks about Israel who will finally be converted [15].

#### ***2.4. The testimony of the Two Martyrs of Christ today***

As I mentioned previously, it follows that the Two Witnesses are thus the symbol of God's people that gives their prophetic testimony, fights the evil forces and calls to repentance. (For Bauckham the Two Witnesses are a symbol of the Church's prophetic testimony, inspired by the seven spirits with a view to inspire the world to worship God [4, p. 138].)

A first consideration refers to the fight against the evil forces for people today. Like the witnesses, the righteous must trust God in his suffering and humble himself under the mighty hand of God, because He is the one who sheds justice. This fact is connected with the reality of persecution. One of the ways to resist it is to be conscious of the divine protection. But, in according to Revelation 11 the real way to testify is to imitate Jesus Christ. A Christian follows his Saviour in everything He says, everything He does and by taking up his cross every day. This faithfulness of testifying will be rewarded by and with Christ in heaven.

A second consideration is about the 'big Holy city'. All the testimony has its place in the 'big city', that is means the whole world. That is the scene of the witness and resistance in front of the persecutors. Our world seems Moses' Egypt when there was the oppression. It is a world that can be compared with the city of Sodom because of the many forms of sins around us surrounding. Finally, we can consider the world another city where Jesus Christ is constantly crucified. To offer a more positive point of view, we have to consider this big city not only the battlefield of confrontation between the messianic and non-messianic forces, but the land of evangelisation, the space where the Good News is spread.

### **3. The unique people of God in Revelation**

In Revelation 11, the author presents the image of the Two Witnesses by means of the same procedure, combining aspects from the Old and the New Testament in order to create the unitary image of the people of God. The original



use of the Scripture and the creation of complex images are two peculiar aspects of the Book of Revelation. More interesting are the creative pictures of the author. An example is the image of the Two Witnesses: they have many and various elements drawn from the Scripture. By creating these compositions the book of Revelations shows its fascinating character.

However, by using the technique to describe the people of God by means of elements from the Old and the New Testament, John intends to demonstrate the idea of a unique people.

Generally speaking, the first component mentioned is drawn from The Old Testament. Then, the old testamentary elements are often associated with what is heard, such as the voice from Revelation 11.1-3. Afterwards, the aspect from The Old Testament is many times related with God: the Divine protection reserved for the Two Witnesses. The description of the people of God with texts and quotes from The Old Testament is carried out from the perspective of the historical road to the cross, where the protection of God is required in the fight against the evil forces.

The pre-messianic component is specifically identifiable in the image of the witnesses standing before the Lord of the earth, who inherit the prophetic vocation of Elijah, Moses and Jeremiah and the royal and sacerdotal function of Zerubbabel and respectively, Joshua [16]. Consequently, like the prophets, the Two Witnesses have the power to perform miracles, preach the Word and invite to repentance and conversion.

The neo testamentary component is mentioned immediately after that from the Old Testament, without any explanation from the author: death, resurrection and witnesses ascending with Christ to Heaven. For symmetry, the specific aspect of the New Testament is often associated with what the author sees: the vision of those 144.000 in Revelation 14.1-5, the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21.9-22.5, etc.

Then, the neo testamentary attributes are often related to Christ the Lamb. Like Christ, the Two Witnesses face the rejection of the world, are persecuted and not understood, and towards the end of their mission, they are sentenced to death. The apparent defeat in death is in fact a victory together with Christ, and the resurrection and ascension to heaven confirms the novelty of the Christian testimony.

The Two Witnesses, by always being portrayed together, represent a united and unitary people of God. The Witnesses are like a single entity, always united in action, in the proclamation of the Word of God, in suffering and in the destiny of death and resurrection. Thus, it can be said that between the people of The Old Covenant and that of the New Covenant must be the same unity without any fractures.

Another element that lends support to the unity of the people is the hint to more cities in Revelation 11.8. On one hand, there are mentions of cities from The Old Testament such as Sodom. On the other hand the citadel where their Lord was crucified refers to an event from The New Testament, i.e., the death of

Christ. All these cities are put together in order to create the unitary symbol of the entire world, where the Christian's testimony is brought forth.

The Two Witnesses are therefore a symbol of the unique people of God that fulfils the testimony in the same way as Moses and Elijah (pre-Messianic component), but in a total configuration with Christ (Messianic component). The two components, old and neo testamentary, are combined in order to create the unique image of the people of God. This only one people of God are in continuity with Israel of the past and receive its originality from Christ Messiah.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In the history of exegesis the text from Revelation 11 was often interpreted from the perspective of testimony offered for God, up to the point of sacrifice own life. However, there is the possibility that with the Two Witnesses the symbol of the people of God looms. These people are seen from the perspective of their path in history and are described by means of biblical pictures.

The first conclusion is ecclesiological. What kind of Church did John have in mind? The example of the Two Witnesses leads us to consider the prophetic and testimonial aspects of God's people. Just like the witnesses, Christians are called to be prophets, to witness and to imitate Christ in suffering.

The second conclusion is biblical. The witnesses' description using elements from The Old and New Testament, without any distinction, is a sign of envisioning a unique Scripture. John quoted from the books of Hebrew Scripture and completes his quotes by hinting allusions to the books of The New Testament. He cannot conceive any distinction between Old Testament and New Testament. The same importance and equality must be in our biblical vision, too. We cannot underestimate the books of the Old Testament. Actually, all the Scripture and all its books are holy and have the same note of divine inspiration.

Another mention regards the abundant quotations from the Bible as we seen in Revelation 11. John's language and thoughts are bathed in biblical ideas. John shows us the importance of the Holy Scripture, in everyday life. Furthermore, the author of Revelation doesn't indicate the sources of his biblical references. It seems that he knew the Bible by heart. He studied and deeply considered the Holy Scripture. In the same time, John suggests a way to read and reflect upon the Scripture.

The last conclusion refers to the uniqueness dimension. Beyond the unity of the sacred Scriptures, John's intention is to portray a unique people, the community of the old alliance united with that of the new alliance, belonging to the Risen Lamb. In God's unique plan of redemption, in the history of unitary and unique redemption, the unique people of God move towards the eschatological fulfilment.

The idea of unity as connatural to the people of God could be seen as a starting point in order to stimulate the dialogue with the Jewish religion and other Christian communities.

This vision of a unitary God's people without any distinction between the two alliances, lead us to promote a more intensive dialogue with the Hebrews. The community of the Old Covenant is the first people called by God. The Hebrew and the Christians have the same roots and the same traditions.

The unitary image of the people can be a good starting point for the ecumenical dialogue. The author of the book of Revelation had in mind a unitary people and is disappointed that false prophets divided the members of a unique community.

The unity is not only an external dimension, but an internal component, too. John insists on the unitary dimension in the midst of the community, that is a sign of faithfulness towards the only one God. The ideal of unity is a desideratum and can be realized at every level of the life of God's people.

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