

God's Two Witnesses

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Over the past year, certain groups among the churches of God have brought the subject of the Two Witnesses to the fore once again. One minister is proclaiming that he and his wife are the pair of prophets that Revelation 11 foretells will appear in the last days to testify in God's behalf for the final time before Christ's return. Another minister has said that, no, he is not one of the Two Witnesses, but they will arise under his auspices. No doubt, many church members, seeing the worsening conditions around the globe, have privately speculated about who the Two Witnesses will be.

For years, the Worldwide Church of God had to fend off multiple claimants of this prophetic role. Funny stories circulated around the Ambassador College campus about the loony man who proclaimed himself as the Two Witnesses—evidently, he had at least two personalities. And, of course, not to be outdone, there were rumors about the group of *three* who said they were the Two Witnesses!

All ridicule aside, there is a general expectation among God's people that the Two Witnesses will begin to prophesy soon, if only because we anticipate Christ's return in the near future. Obviously, the two events are linked in the flow of prophecy. Revelation 11:3 plainly states that the Two Witnesses' ministry of testimony is confined to the "one thousand two hundred and sixty days"—three and a half years—of the Great Tribulation. They are martyred by the Beast three and a half days before the first resurrection, when they are raised to join Him in the air with the other firstfruits of God's Kingdom (Revelation 11:11-12; I Thessalonians 4:15-17).

If this is so, then the timing of their work for God is set and known. No two people will officially be "the Two Witnesses" before this time. Therefore, if the Great Tribulation has not begun—if the holy city has not come under the dominion of the Gentiles (Revelation 11:2)—then the Two Witnesses have not officially begun to prophesy. Until then, according to the silence of the Scriptures, they will be essentially anonymous servants of God.

Yet, this does not mean that the Bible fails to provide any clues about what *kind* of people the Two Witnesses will be. What few hints that can be gleaned from Scripture give us a thumbnail sketch of the general character of these two enigmatic, yet pivotal, end-time personalities.

Wheat from Chaff

To begin our investigation, we can quickly dispense with who and what the Two Witnesses are *not*, an exercise that will considerably narrow the field of likely candidates. Like the ancient process of gleaning, we can toss the whole mess up into the air, and the insubstantial chaff will float away in the breeze. What remains is the grain.

The primary texts on the Two Witnesses are Revelation 11 and Zechariah 4. What does not fit the facts and implications of these two prophetic passages we can discard as highly speculative and not worth serious consideration except in dismissal. Some people have asserted truly wild ideas about these two prophets, but we will see that they derive from their own imaginations rather than from the Bible.

First, the Two Witnesses will not be crazed, unstable individuals. Nothing in the Bible—much less these two passages—suggests that God ever uses people of unsound minds to accomplish a major work for Him. The apostle Paul tells us that God's Spirit in us is not "of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (II Timothy 1:7). While some of God's prophets had personal problems and were commanded to do some strange things to get God's point across in symbolic ways—Ezekiel comes to mind—they were far from being lunatics. They were *different* from the world around them because they believed God and did His will, but they were quite sane and rational.

Second, they will not be anything other than men. We can take this on two levels. Some have suggested that the Two Witnesses are entities like the Old and New Testaments, Israel and the church, the Jews and the Gentiles, or even the Philadelphia and Laodicean eras of the church! However, Revelation 11 is quite clear that the Two Witnesses are "prophets" (Revelation 11:10), that they can be killed (Revelation 11:7), that they have bodies (Revelation 11:8-9), and that the breath of life enters them upon resurrection (Revelation 11:11). The literal meaning of these details is the best interpretation, leading to the conclusion that they are people, not things.

The other level is gender, a touchy subject in these inclusive times. Many have tried to hold the door open for a woman to fill the role of one of the Two Witnesses, but the language in the primary passages is overwhelmingly masculine (except where the natural gender of the languages demands it). Additionally, the pronouns are consistently masculine plural, as is the word "prophets" in Revelation 11:10.

Although it can be argued that the masculine is the Greek default gender for groups of mixed gender, the biblical pattern reveals that it is far more likely that God would choose two men to shoulder the burden of this final work. In addition, the allusions to types within the two primary passages are to men: Moses, Elijah, Joshua, and Zerubbabel. This is not to say that a woman could not do this work, but that the preponderance of Scripture argues against God choosing a woman to do it.

Third, the Two Witnesses will not be resurrected saints from the past, such as the aforementioned Moses and Elijah or perhaps Enoch. These three are often cited as candidates because the Bible describes their deaths so mysteriously, as if they are not really dead but in heaven waiting for God to send them back as His witnesses in the end time. There is no indication in the primary passages even to suggest this. So much time has passed since their lifetimes that it is ridiculous to think that anyone on earth today would even know who they are!

Besides, Hebrews 9:27 and the rest of New Testament theology, as well as God's consistent patterns, challenge this view. Except for Jesus, all the dead await the resurrection. In addition, God has never used a servant in two separate times. Jesus Himself tells us, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets [in Scripture], neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead" (Luke 16:31).

Fourth, and finally, they will be neither unconverted nor recently converted people. In other words, they will be baptized members of God's church and probably ordained ministers. Again, God's pattern in working to bring His plan to fruition reveals that the Two Witnesses will come from among His people, just as the prophets came from Israel and the apostles were chosen from among His disciples. The apostle Paul may seem to be a glaring exception to this rule, but even he was required to undergo a three-year period of instruction before he was sent out to fulfill his expansive calling (see Galatians 1:16-18). Due to their mission's magnitude, the Two Witnesses will likewise be prepared for it over an extended period beforehand.

These four points have eliminated great portions of humanity from the search for a sketch of the Two Witnesses. Now we need to decipher the Bible's hints about them.

Olive Trees and Lampstands

It is no wonder that these two are so enigmatic, for the Bible says little about them as persons. It says what God will do for them and what they will do for God during their time of testimony, but for the most part, the individuals themselves are cloaked and hooded. A shallow study of the primary passages might suggest that they are faceless, anonymous everymen.

However, this would be a hasty and mistaken conclusion. Revelation is a book of types and symbols that are designed, like Jesus' parables, to hide the truth from the uninitiated, yet to reveal it to whom "it has been given . . . to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 13:11). The book's very name demands that it be a disclosure of truth, not a concealment of it.

Jesus, through the angel speaking to the apostle John, identifies who the Two Witnesses are: "These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the God of the earth" (Revelation 11:4). To the unenlightened, this sounds like little more than further symbolic claptrap. However, to those who use God's Spirit, which imparts the mind of Christ to His disciples (I Corinthians 2:16), it is a lighted, flashing arrow pointing back to the prophecy found in Zechariah 4.

Zechariah 4:14, in summing up the prophecy, parallels Revelation 11:4: "So [the angel] said, 'These [olive trees] are the two anointed ones, who stand beside the Lord of the whole earth.'" Clearly, the Two Witnesses and their work are revealed in the two olive trees, but understanding this heavily symbolic description takes some effort.

In Zechariah 4:2, the angel describes a strange golden lampstand, somewhat like a menorah—a seven-branched candelabra—but with a large bowl on top. This lampstand features a central pole, on top of which is the bowl, and from it, perhaps in seven different directions, extend seven arms or branches, each ending in a lamp. Further, seven pipes or tubes run to each of the seven lamps from the large bowl on top. Verse 3 informs us that the two olive trees stand to the right and left of the bowl.

A similar vision is given to the apostle John in Revelation 1:12-13. In it, the resurrected Jesus Christ replaces the central pole, and the seven lampstands are arrayed around Him, much like the seven lamps. Christ Himself interprets the vision, saying that the seven lampstands are the seven churches (verse 20). However, in this vision, the olive trees are not to be found—they appear separately in Revelation 11. Here, the bowl, too, is missing.

Zechariah has no idea what he is seeing, so he asks for clarification. Through the angel, God gives His answer: "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the Lord of hosts" (Zechariah 4:6). Zerubbabel, a type of Christ, had been given the work of building the Temple after the Jews returned from exile in Babylon. God's answer to Zechariah is that His work is done through His Spirit.

Applying this to the vision, we are to see that the oil that drains from the bowl into the seven lamps represents God's Spirit manifested in works (I Corinthians 12:7-11). We never see the Holy Spirit, since it is invisible to the eye, but we see the works done through it (John 3:8).

On this aspect of the prophecy of Zechariah 4, the Kiel and Delitzsch commentary asserts: "Oil . . . is used in the Scriptures as a symbol of the Spirit of God, not in its transcendent essence, but so far as it works in the world, and is indwelling in the church." Simply put, oil signifies God's Spirit in its visible works rather than in its pure form.

Jesus declares an important principle in John 6:63, "The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life." One of the primary vehicles of the work of God's Spirit is words—spoken or written. The Bible is inspired by God's Spirit (II Timothy 3:16; II Peter 1:21), and it is a composition of words—God's words, prophets' words, and apostles' words. In the same way, the primary job of an anointed servant of God is to speak or write words to convict people of God's truth. In the speaking or writing of words, he witnesses for God and accomplishes a work.

In the case of the Two Witnesses, the two anointed ones, this connection becomes critical. Zechariah 4:12 literally reads, "What are the two olive clusters which through the two golden pipes empty out of themselves the golden oil?" It is an illustration of the olive trees emptying oil *into* the bowl! How can these two men—prophets though they are—supply the seven churches with oil? Because the oil is not God's Spirit in pure form but Spirit-inspired works, probably in the form of words—teaching, instruction.

If this is so, the Two Witnesses provide a massive amount of spiritual instruction to the seven churches just before the end.

"My Two Witnesses"

Another clue to the character of these two prophets appears in God's introduction of them in Revelation 11:3: "And I will give power to *my two witnesses*. . . ." The angel is obviously speaking for God—they are not the angel's witnesses but God's! We should note the use of the English possessive "My," which suggests both personal ownership and affiliation.

However, the Greek reads more literally, ". . . the two witnesses of me." While this rendering also imparts the idea of possession, it adds a vital element: that the Two Witnesses testify about God Himself. They are God's direct representatives in the crucial last years of man's civilization. And they represent Him, not just in words, but in everything they do during their prophetic ministry.

In other words, these two men are not run-of-the-mill Christians by any means! Not a single word of censure is aimed at them in either Revelation 11 or Zechariah 4. They will be model Christians, followers of Christ and His righteousness to such a degree that when the people of this world observe them, they will see human reproductions of the life of Christ. In much the same way as Jesus represented the Father during His physical life, so will the witnesses represent Jesus during the Great Tribulation and the Day of the Lord (see John 14:9). While they will not be perfect, they will be men of godly character and virtue.

It is no wonder, then, that they attract the wrath of Satan and the Beast, as well as the hatred of the whole world! Just as Jesus was opposed, mocked, persecuted, and finally killed, so will these men draw the fire of the anti-Christ, end-time population of earth. Thus, Christ endues His two prophets with power to preach, to plague, and to defend themselves against harm (Revelation 11:5). In order to survive their mission during a time of Noachian-type violence, God will give them the tools and protection to reveal Him for a final time as a witness before Christ intervenes in world affairs.

Therefore, we should not be looking necessarily for great signs and wonders being done by two prophets, as that activity will likely be confined to the final three and a half years. By that point, it will be obvious to the enlightened who they are. As Revelation 11:9-10 suggests, by the time they are finished with their work, the whole world will know who they are.

Instead, at this time we need to be looking for Christ-like servants who are fulfilling the type of the two olive trees—feeding the churches through their Holy Spirit-inspired works—and who are focused on "measur[ing] the temple of God, the altar, and those who worship there" (Revelation 11:1). They will be intensely laboring to achieve the equipping of the saints (Ephesians 4:12) for the terrifying days to come and the return of Christ.

Who the Two Witnesses are has not yet been revealed, and how long we have to go before the time of their appearance no one knows. However, in looking for them, we need to concentrate on what Scripture reveals so that we might properly identify them. Ecclesiastes 3:11 in the Moffatt version declares how God works in these matters: "He assigned each [thing] to its proper time, but for the mind of man he has appointed mystery, that man may never fathom God's own purpose from beginning to end." God will make them known when their time has come. So, wait and watch!