Revelation 11: Temple and Two Witnesses

In Revelation 11 we said there are two different images that the author utilizes. The question is what those images portray and what they refer to and also the relationship between the two images. The first one that we introduced was the image of a temple that John was told to measure in the first two verses of chapter 11 and the rest of chapter 11 is dominated by an account of two witnesses who go out and witness and at the end of the day a beast rises out of the Abyss, puts them to death, and after that they are raised up and vindicated. Chapter 11 ends with the seventh trumpet finally being blown. That was broken off from the sixth trumpet back in chapter 9.

Temple Imagery: Old Testament Parallels

Now what I want to do is look at those two images in a little bit more detail. In Revelation 11:1-2, we are introduced to the first image, which is the image or symbol of a temple. Again the first question to think about is: What this might signify? This is not a question but the first principle to realize but the starting point, to realize that this is probably symbolic of something as we see over and over again is the case of the book of Revelation. So the question is: What does the temple symbolize? What is it indicating? Is it referring to an actual temple or some kind of physical structure or what? There have been a number of options for understanding this, and the starting point from this is that John is probably drawing on Old Testament background in the image of measuring a temple. For example, in Ezekiel 40-48 which is an important text that will influence John’s own vision later in Revelation 21 and 22 where John has a vision of the new Jerusalem/temple. The temple imagery gets applied to the city Jerusalem, as we will see. That city is measured and gets its influence from Ezekiel 43-48 where the author/seer Ezekiel is taken on a tour where he measured a temple. That would fit John now where he is given a reed and he is told to measure the temple of God.
The other text that probably influences what goes on here is Zechariah 2:1-5 where Zechariah also is given a measuring reed and he is told to measure Jerusalem. So John’s vision draws on the apocalyptic visionary type of material from Ezekiel and Zechariah too, and now John is told to measure this temple. So the question becomes what is this temple?

Temple Imagery: Three Approaches

There have been a number of suggestions but with different issues and interpretations interpreting Revelation and I don’t want to survey all of them. But first of all, one common option has that it is a reference to a literal rebuilt end-time temple often associated with that view of Revelation that sees chapter 4-22 and the entirety of it all still future, referring to a future end-time scenario that will take place leading up to, at the very end history including the information of the second coming of Jesus Christ. So part of that would to be to read chapter 11 as predicting an actual rebuilt temple as in the example of Ezekiel 43-48.

Another common understanding of this is that this refers to the temple, the literal first temple in the first century that was later on destroyed in 70AD. So this view is associated with Revelation where almost all of Revelation in chapter 4-22, all of the events are describing what was already going on in solely the first century. It is a view that is called the Preterit view, a view that we talked about earlier. So the temple is being described as the actual, literal, physical temple standing in the first century AD before it was destroyed in 70 AD. That view of Revelation was actually written back in the late 60’s AD.

Another view of the temple is to take it more figuratively, that is the temple symbolizes the temple of God, which is in reference to a future people of God and taking the temple of God figuratively or symbolically referring to the people of God themselves.

Another view that I would subscribe to here is that the temple is the church of God, but probably not referring only to the first century AD, not exclusively referring to a future temple, but probably refers to the church in its existence
starting in the first century AD, but the church extending until the second coming of Christ that is going to consummate history, which is what happens at the seventh seal later in chapter 11. I take the temple here to be metaphorical of the people of God, or throughout Revelation that would be the new people of God, the church, consisting of both Jew and Gentile.

In other words, we have seen often times John using Old Testament imagery often referring to Israel, the new people of God, and the church. We have seen the New Testament authors have been able to take the Old Testament imagery of the Temple and now apply it to the people of God. So now Paul can say addressing his readers and 1 Corinthians 3, “as you are the Temple, do you not know you are the Temple of God.” In Ephesians 2:20-22 he describes the church built as a temple based upon the apostles and prophets, Jesus being the cornerstone of the temple and the temple is becoming a holy dwelling where God lives by his Holy Spirit using Old Testament temple language. Even back in chapter 3:12 of Revelation John promises if they overcome they will become a pillar in the temple of God.

So already in the New Testament, in Revelation, John has taken physical temple imagery from the Old Testament and now finds it fulfilled in the church or in the people of God themselves. So I take it that the Temple here in chapter 11:1-2 is not referring to a literal temple in the first century, a temple that would have been standing, or referring to some literal rebuilt temple in the future, but instead is to be understood symbolically as a reference to the people of God, as the temple, as the dwelling place of God. Here it probably refers to the temple and the people of God starting in the first century, referring to John’s own readers, but also the entire time leading up to the second coming of Christ whenever he comes to consummate history.

Temple Anticipation at Qumran

Interestingly, this is not new for John. For example, the Qumran community of the Dead Sea Scrolls often took Old Testament Temple imagery and
applied it to their own community. They saw their own community as the Temple of God. They saw their own individual members as the building stones of the temple. Yet, the main difference was the Qumran community seemed to see themselves, the community by the Dead Sea as the temple of God because they thought the Jerusalem temple was apostate, was evil, and was not the real temple. But even the Qumran community still anticipated a future rebuilding of the temple someday.

Where John seems to think or suggest that the reason the community thinks the temple is God is because Jesus Christ himself is the true temple, Jesus Christ is the true fulfillment of the temple of God and therefore those who belong to Christ also constitute the temple. And so we’ll see when we get to chapter 21, John does not see a temple, not because he thought the original one was evil, but John does not see a physical temple in the new Jerusalem because the Lamb itself was the temple and the entire people of God themselves are also the temple.

Trampling of the Temple by the Gentiles

So now John sees the people of God as a temple and he is told to measure them. Except, interestingly, here he is told only to measure part of the temple. The part he calls the outer court is not to be measured and instead is to be given over to the Gentiles to be trampled for a period of 42 months. The question is what is this measuring about, and why is he told to measure the temple? Then second, why is part of the temple not measured and thrown out to the Gentiles to be trampled on for 42 months?

First of all, the act of measuring here seems to suggest and imply ownership and protection. So the fact much like what one finds in Zechariah chapter 2, for example, the act of measuring. So the measuring of the temple, the temple symbolizing the people of God suggests the protection and the preservation of God’s people. While all that is taking place with these seals and these trumpets, now God’s people are protected and they are preserved. Note that he also measures not only the temple but the altar and those worshiping in it. Probably we
should not take this too literally as if there are three different things. That there’s a temple, and then there’s an altar and then people worshiping in it or that these are three different types of believers or people within the church. But again, the author is simply using detailed descriptions of the temple and the altar and those worshipping in it and altogether this is meant to not portray distinct elements within in the temple but altogether it symbolized the people of God as a temple. They now are measured signifying their preservation and their protection.

Now the question is why is the outer court of the temple excluded? It’s not measured and protected apparently but now it is thrown out and subject to the nations to be trampled upon. There are two possible explanations. One of them is that the outer court that is not measured because it is meant to symbolize unfaithful members of the church. Remember back in chapters two and three, only two of the churches were faithful and suffering persecution because of that. Most of the churches were intent on compromising and one church was so complacent that many of them received a very negative evaluation. A couple of the churches had some who were faithful but others were not and were tolerating teachers who were saying it was okay to compromise. So, one possibility is the part of the temple that is measured and protected would be the faithful churches from chapter 2 and the faithful members of the churches from chapters 2 and 3. The part of the temple that is thrown outside then would represent the unfaithful, the compromising members of the churches.

One other possibility that I think may fit a little bit better with what we see in the rest of chapter 11 and what we’ve seen so far, is that this measuring of part of the temple but excluding the outer court would suggest that this is the church seen from two different perspectives. That is, the measuring of the temple, the heart of the temple, the holy of holies, the dwelling place of God where the altar is. This indicates the church as protected spiritually, as kept and preserved by God while still subject to persecution at the hands of the nations and at the hands of the Roman Empire. So the fact that part of the temple is preserved and protected
indicates the church as it is preserved and spiritually protected by God. But the fact that part of it is thrown out to be trampled would be looking at the church from the perspective that it will still be persecuted, it will still be subject to suffering, and the persecution at the hands of the nation, and at the hands of the Roman Empire some of them even to the point of death. Again in my mind this makes sense in light of the rest of Revelation where the saints are portrayed for example, back in chapter 7 as sealed and protected by God yet they are still persecuted. In chapter 12 and 13 that comes next. We will see the same imagery of the church being protected yet still subject to persecution at the hands of Satan, at the hands of the beast, at the hands of the Roman Empire.

Time of the Temple Trampling

Now, the amount of time in which the church is permitted to suffer persecution is symbolized again perhaps by the outer court not being measured and being subject to trampling by the nations over a period of 42 months. If you do the math, you realize that the 42 months is another way of saying three and a half years that time, times, and half of time that comes out of the book of Daniel that you found in Revelation chapter 12 and verse 14. You find that language of time, times, and half of time in Daniel.

For example, chapter 7 in verse 25, chapter 9 in verse 27 and chapter 12 in verse 7 of Daniel, and you can look those texts up on our own. That’s probably where John gets the notion of the three and a half years or literally time, times, and then half of time, three and a half years. Hopefully by now, you have figured out that this 42 months like the other numbers we have seen in Revelation and the other temporal designations should not be taken with strict literalness. It’s not a literal period time that is meant to be counted on a calendar so you can mark off each day until you get exactly 42 months. Like we said, 42 months equals roughly three and a half years. Instead, the author’s use of the number 42 is not so much meant to be literal as to indicate and interpret the character and the meaning of the time during which the church will suffer persecution. I suggest to you that we’ll
see in just a moment that probably the 42 months is meant to span the entire existence of the church. So already in the first century, the churches were to understand themselves as in this 42-month period. But the idea is not that after 42 months then they’re done, but the 42 is not literal but symbolic like the other numbers is meant to interpret and to explain and describe the character of the churches existence until Christ comes back.

Now where did John get the number 40? The number 40 plays a key role in the Old Testament, for example, Elijah’s ministry. Later on we’ll see that in the rest of chapter 11, Elijah appears to play a role as the identity of one of the two witnesses. So, for example, Elijah’s ministry in 1 Kings 17 and 18 especially later on in the New Testament, read James 5:17, where Elijah’s ministry is seen to be one of three and a half years. But also in Numbers 33 we find that Israel’s wandering in the wilderness took place in 40 encampments in Numbers 33. That would suggest then that 40 would indicate the idea of both judgment and testing. So 42 months then would indicate the church now is being tested, it is in a time of testing.

But in chapter 12 verse 14 of Revelation, we will also see that the number 40 suggests preservation as well. So what the number 42 is saying is by recalling Old Testament texts especially, and the way Revelation uses it is 42 then instead of being a designation of a literal period of time is meant to interpret the character of the church’s existence as one of preservation, yet one of testing even judgment on the people of God. So John has told us by this image of measuring the temple something about the nature of the church’s existence as the temple of God, as the dwelling of God, as the place where God dwells with his people, and as a temple in the world. The church will be preserved yet at the same time it will suffer at the hands of Rome. At the hands of the world through persecution at the character of the church’s existence is a time of preservation. Yet it is also one of testing and suffering.
Two Witnesses

The next imagery starts in verse 3. The next image that John draws upon then is two witnesses. We want to again ask the question: who are these two witnesses? What is it that they do and when do they do this? First of all, in verse 3, we’re told that they witness for 1260 days. This is probably based on or a version of Daniel’s 1290 days in chapter 12, verse 11 of Daniel. John’s number 1260 may reflect a more general rendering of 30-day months, but 1260 days again is roughly equivalent then to 42 months or three and a half years. So John uses these numbers I think interchangeably, three and a half years, 42 months, or 1260 days depending on what he wants to say or depending on how he wants to characterize the period of the church’s existence. In other words, I think the 1260 days, the 42 months, the three and a half years are all symbolic ways of referring to the exact same period of time the church’s existence starting in the first century and leading up until the second coming of Christ. Of course, John had no inkling that it would go on for 2000 years, he simply understands the church’s existence being one of testing and preservation until Christ comes back.

Now, in my opinion, too there is no indication that John intends us to add any of these numbers up to come up with a period of seven years of tribulation in some theological constructions of the book of Revelation. In some theological corners Revelation is read as portraying a seven year period of tribulation and that is arrived at, number one, by connection with Daniel back to his 70 weeks. I don’t want to go into all that. Daniel’s discussion of 70 weeks in chapter 9 I believe but also by adding up two of these periods of three and a half years or 42 months or 1260 days one arrives at seven years or a seven year tribulation. But again, I see no evidence anywhere that John intends us to add any of these time periods up to arrive at a period of seven years. Instead, John simply uses different time periods or goes back and forth between 42 months, three and a half years, 1260 days in order to describe the same period of time. In other words, we said the period of time is the church’s existence beginning in the first century and continuing until
the return of Jesus Christ to bring it to an end which we will find in seal number 7. But depending on what John wants to say, how he wants to portray the church’s struggle and its existence, John can use these different numbers.

So, for example, all of them are to be taken symbolically so the question is what is the meaning portrayed by using these symbols so John can describe the period of the church’s existence with three and a half years. Three and a half years suggests something that is intense, something that indicates the persecution and the suffering of the church but it won’t last. Three and a half years is half of seven, seven being the number of perfection and completeness. Three and a half falls far short of that so three and a half years would suggest the church is in for a bumpy ride so to speak. It’s a time of trial, it is intense persecution but it will be cut off, it won’t last. And if you think about it, the idea of time, times, and half of time, time and then it increases to times but just as things get rolling, then only half a time, the time gets cut off. So the idea is that the church’s existence will be one of intense persecution but it won’t last. It will be cut off and it falls short of the complete perfect number seven. By using the term 42 months, then John can portray the church’s existence in light of the Old Testament background as a time of testing but also a time of protection as it was for Israel in the wilderness. By using 1260 days, the author can recall the period of testing that Daniel himself anticipated and now is suggesting that the church has entered that period. The church again is fulfilling what it was that Daniel was prophesying.

So when does this event occur? Or when is this period of 42 months, or 1260 days or three and a half years? Those are simply different ways symbolically of describing the character of the church’s entire period. Again, from our perspective, we look at it 2000 years later but John was more interested in describing the character of the church’s struggle and it’s existence that would lead up to the second coming of Christ whenever that would take place. When we look at Revelation though, I think we’re going to see that John suggests that this period of tribulation, this three and a half year, 42 months, 1260 day period begins with
the death of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ’s own suffering and his own faithful witness to the point of death was the beginning of this period of tribulation. Now the church, now his followers participate in the same faithful witness in the face of suffering and death. In fact, to move beyond this if one wants to be convinced that this characterizes the rest of church history, one only needs to pick up something such as say *The Foxes Book of Martyrs* and a number of other descriptions of what happens in the church to third world countries to see the extent to which Christians continue to suffer and even be persecuted for their faith. That is something that is eye opening for those of us who live in places where we still enjoy a considerable amount of religious freedom without having to sacrifice our lives for that.

**Two Witnesses: Invincible to Vulnerable**

Now, in chapter 11, beginning with verse 3, this period of 42 months or 1260 days or three and a half years is meant to describe the time of these two witnesses. In the rest of chapter 2 we said that the two witnesses careers sort of speak of this period of time has two phases. The first part of it is the two witnesses go out and engage in witnessing in the world and they seem to do so with a considerable amount of success. By that I mean, they do so without seeming to experience any harm or opposition. In fact, the text says anyone who tries to harm them will suffer serious consequences. So apparently, these two witnesses are allowed to perform their witness, yet at the end of the day we’ll see it starting with verse 7, it says now when they have finished their witness, a beast is allowed to come out of the Abyss and put them to death. So in verses 3 through 6 they appear to be invincible and starting in verse 7 all of a sudden they appear to be vulnerable. A beast comes out of the Abyss, puts them to death, and all of the world basically throws a party because they’re happy that these two witnesses have been put to death.

So I want to ask then how do we explain what seems to be going on in chapter 11 with the apparent invincibility but then the vulnerability of these two witnesses? Again who are these two witnesses?
Identity of the Two Witnesses

What I want to start with is the identity of these two witnesses. Who are they? Now the starting point is to realize that whatever or whoever these witnesses are, they should be taken symbolically as we’ve seen with all the other images that the two witnesses although they could refer to two actual individuals they don’t necessarily have to refer to two witnesses. They could refer to much more. Much in the same way that in our political cartoons Uncle Sam, for example and this may not be the best example, but Uncle Sam represents the entire government. He represents an entire group of people not one solitary person. In the same way, these two witnesses could represent more than just two persons. The two witnesses most likely have their background in the Old Testament figures of Moses and Elijah and in much Jewish apocalyptic there is some expectation of Moses and Enoch. For example, there is expectation of Moses and Elijah returning. The expectation of the return of Elijah seems to lie behind not only a couple Old Testament texts but also the understanding of John the Baptist in the Gospels. So the expectation of a prophet like Moses is to raise the expectation of the coming of Elijah. It’s interesting in the Old Testament that both of them appear to be removed from this earth in very unusual ways. In verse 6 of chapter 11 notice it says these men, these two witnesses, have power to shut up the sky so it will not rain during the time they were prophesying causing it not to rain or shutting up the sky so it does not rain. This was one of the miracles performed by Elijah. But then, notice next it says and they have the power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want. This is exactly what Moses did in the book of Exodus recalling the exodus plagues. So the primary model for this, these two witnesses, is probably the Old Testament figures of Moses and Elijah.

But interestingly, note that it’s not that one of them does the miracles of Elijah and the other does the miracles of Moses, both of them are Elijah and Moses. So John is not interested in saying one of them is Moses and one is Elijah.
They both perform the miracle of shutting the sky up so it doesn’t rain and they are both able to turn the water into blood and to strike the earth with plagues. So, both of them perform the works of Moses and Elijah. Not one or the other. It’s interesting too that by calling them prophets both Elijah and Moses had prophetic functions and prophetic ministries in the Old Testament as these two witnesses do here.

Identifying the Two Witnesses

Now once again, we need to ask who are these witnesses? Some people have been convinced that this is actually Moses and Elijah come back to life during this time. Often this is associated with the time and the future right before the coming of Christ during this final period of tribulation. So some think it might be Moses and Elijah actually coming back to life on the earth for that period of time. Some have actually tried to associate the two witnesses with historical figures in the first century. A common one being that one was Paul and the other was Peter and this is describing their ministry. That’s possible, but once again I think we should perhaps look at the two individuals as symbolic. Maybe not symbolic of two precise individuals or to be identified as two exact individuals but following a number of commentaries I would agree that the two individuals are symbolic of the entire witnessing church. Looking at the entire church during this period of time beginning in the first century until Christ comes back, we will see at the end of chapter 11 with the seventh seal in chapter 11, as well that until Christ comes back, this is a symbolic image of the church in its faithful witness and its prophetic role in the world.

Some have suggested these two witnesses are part of the church. Probably the two witnesses symbolize the entire church in its prophetic function as it is meant to perform its faithful witness in the world in the face of persecution and opposition.

Now there are a couple of the reasons for concluding this, first of all by being called God’s witnesses in verse 3, by going out into the world and
witnessing, this is the exact same task that the church was expected to do back in chapters 2 and 3. So one of the issues back in chapters 2 and 3 was that the church, at least some of the churches, were compromising their faithful witness by compromising with pagan Roman rule. The two churches that were faithful were actually suffering because of their faithful witness because of their refusal to compromise. So the notion of witness is one that we were introduced to all the way back in chapter 1. That’s what Jesus did. Jesus was “the faithful witness.”

Antipas was a faithful witness in chapter 3 who died for his faith. John is now witnessing to these things he saw and the church is in chapters 2 and 3 are meant to carry out a faithful witness for Jesus Christ and the world in the face of opposition and persecution. But the problem was so many of the churches in chapters 2 and 3 had so compromised with the pagan world that they were in danger of completely losing their witness if they hadn’t already.

The second thing to note is that these two witnesses in this text are identified in verse 4 as the two lampstands. The author is actually using the language from Zechariah chapter 4 by identifying them as two olive trees. But they’re also identified with the two the lampstands from Zechariah 4 and from the temple. Here is another indication of using temple imagery to apply to the church so there are two lampstands. But by indentifying them with two lampstands, one of the keys to understanding this is to go back to chapter 1 and verse 20 where the lampstands that Christ walked in the midst the golden lampstands, were identified as the seven churches. So by identifying these two witnesses and we’ll ask why two in just a moment, but by identifying these two witnesses as two lampstands given what we’ve seen so far all the way back in chapter 1 in verse 20 and the identification in chapters 2 and 3 of the churches as lampstands, we should then understand these two witnesses as symbolizing the entire church in its prophetic ministry but in its witness as well.

So the theme of witness as well as the fact that John has already identified the lampstands as churches back in chapter 1, I think leads us to the conclusion
that these two witnesses symbolize the entire witnessing church. And again, when they do this, this is not referring to some period only in the future but is referring, I take it to John’s understanding of what the church should be doing starting in his own day and until Christ comes back to consummate history and reward and vindicate his people. In the midst of that the church should function as a faithful witness even in the facing hostility and persecution.

Now if this is the case, the next question is why the number 2. Why only two witnesses? If John doesn’t intend to be literal why not 7 or 10 or some number like that. There are at least two possibilities and they might not be exclusive. First of all, go back to the Old Testament according to the book of Deuteronomy in order for a case to stick in order for a testimony to stick in court, according to the book of Deuteronomy it required two or three witnesses. So, that would fit perfectly, the theme of the church being a witness. John goes back to the Old Testament and draws on this concept back in Deuteronomy. Now he envisions two witnesses based on the stipulation in Deuteronomy that there must be two or three witnesses. A second possibility is when you go back to chapters 2 and 3, only two churches were faithful in their witness. And we saw the other five were compromising to some extent only two of the churches, Smyrna and Philadelphia were commended for their faithful witness in the face of suffering. So, that may also provide the model for John. In other words, those two churches were the model for what the church was to be an uncompromising faithful witness in the world. So, both of those together probably provide the reason for John portraying the witnesses as only two.

Furthermore, when we ask the question of what’s the relationship between the two witnesses and the temple back in chapter 11 verses 1 and 2 with the temple that was measured? Probably as we’ve seen John do several times these are simply two different perspectives or two different ways of looking at the same thing. That is, the church as preserved but subject to persecution. The church as a temple is preserved by God as where God dwells but also subject to persecution.
Now, looking at the church from a different perspective, from the standpoint of its faithful witness, notice the other connection too, there is also a connection with a relationship to the temple. In verses 1 and 2 the church is clearly symbolized by a temple, but the fact that it’s identified with a lampstand from Zechariah 4 which is a vision of God’s temple. Zechariah 4 is one of the Old Testament passages that lie behind Revelation chapter 11. The two witnesses identifying them with olive trees and the two lampstands suggest a connection in terms of the temple. So temple imagery does not finish at verse 2 it continues into the description of the two witnesses by the use of the lampstand from Zechariah chapter 4.

Clothed in Sackcloth

So in verses 1 and 2, they are seen from the perspective of the temple of the churches. Now they’re seen in verses 3 and following from the perspective of a faithful witnessing church. One indication of what they do is found in verse 3 already and before they ever do anything, John describes them as clothed in sackcloth. This could suggest the notion of repentance but could also suggest the idea of mourning because of judgment. Therefore, already indicating what it is and what the primary role, at least in chapter 11, that the two witnesses are going to undertake and that will be a message or a ministry that actually results in judgment. In fact, that’s what one finds in verses 4 and 6. The two witnesses symbolizing the church then begins its ministry or is described as witnessing and intriguingly what happens in verses 5 and 6 is they don’t appear to have success as far as evangelism. It’s not that they don’t but it’s just not John’s point. John’s point is to demonstrate, as we have said, how does the church relate to or what is the theological underpinning. How does the church and its suffering witnessing relate what takes place in chapter 8 and 9 and the trump of judgments? These chapters describe that in more detail. So now the trumpet judgments in chapters 8 and 9 are related to the churches suffering witness that is the reason why God pours out his judgment on humanity in chapters 8 and 9 is because of their
rejection of the faithful witnessing church and even their persecution of it.

They even put to death the faithful church. So note in verse 5 if anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouth and devours their enemies. Verse 6 as we’ve already looked at these men have the power to shut up the sky so it won’t rain and they have the power to turn the water into the blood and strike the earth with any plague they want which seems to go back to chapters 8 and 9. So the idea here is not so much that we should interpret these literally and that there is going to be a period of time when there is no rain, but again the author is recalling Old Testament texts. He wants us to recall the ministry of Elijah and Moses and now see that the witnessing church in chapter 11 is now performing a similar function. So the judgment of chapters 8 and 9 is clearly a response to the rejection of the faithful witness of these two witnesses in verses 5 and 6 of chapter 11.

Witnesses Opposed by the Beast

Now, we said that apparently in verses 4 and 6 the witnesses are unhindered and unopposed in their witness. It says anyone who tries to harm them will actually be subject to the plagues of chapters 8 and 9. Yet, starting with verse 7, the scene abruptly changes. In verse 7 the witness appears to be over and a beast comes out of the Abyss and is able to oppose them and put them to death. Now there are a couple of things about this beast. We’ll see that this scene of a beast coming out of the Abyss and putting them to death, this brief mention of the beast doing this will get unpacked in more detail in Revelation 12 and 13 where a beast comes out of the sea to persecute and harm the people of God. So chapter 12 and 13 will expand in more detail on verse 7.

A couple of things about the beast and the Abyss that we’ll look at more detail in chapters 12 and 13, the Abyss, or starting with the beast, the beast actually has a long history in Jewish apocalyptic literature but in the Old Testament itself the beast is a demonic figure, an evil figure often associated with oppression in the Old Testament and used to refer to oppressive rulers or oppressive nations that opposed God and are idolatrous and oppress and harm
God’s people. So God’s use of this image of a beast is one that already comes to John with a history of use and interpretation and identification with evil rulers, and evil empires that oppress and harm God’s people. Now John uses the beast again probably to refer to another oppressive godless idolatrous empire. For his day that would have been the Roman Empire.

The Abyss as well we’ve already been introduced to back in chapter 9 where these locust figures come out of the Abyss. The Abyss also has a history of meaning and use that it carries with it into the usage John gives it. That is, the Abyss was seen as the home or the prison of evil demonic beings. So by reading of a beast that comes out of the Abyss, the readers now recognize the true source of their persecution and that is it’s nothing less then the same spirit, the same anti-God spirit, the same oppressive evil demonic spirit that inspired other governments and nations and people and rulers to harm God’s people. To oppose God’s people is now acting again to oppose Gods’ people in the first century church in the form of the first century at least as the Roman Empire. We’ll return to that in chapters 12 and 13, but intriguingly, then apparently the beast wins a victory in verses 4 and 6. The two witnesses appear to be invincible but the beast seems to win the victory; so the two witnesses seem to be vulnerable. The way to look at this I think is it’s tempting to read this as a chronological account or a sequence story of these two witnesses that is first of all there will be a period of time when they will have success and they are invincible. Then there will be a period of time, a brief period of time where they are actually vulnerable. Instead, I think we should not take this with quite that strict literalness as far as a sequence of events or a temporal progression.

Instead, I like what Richard Bauckham said about this, a British scholar said that probably the best way to take chapter 11 is to see it as not as predicting a series of events in the life of the church but more to read it as a parable about what the church is supposed to be doing. That is, instead of saying the church is having a period of success and then being vulnerable rather to read this as once again
seeing the church from two different perceptions. On the one hand, the church will be protected and even invincible, but on the other hand, it will be subject to persecution at the hands of the world. On the one hand, it will be protected and invisible, on the other hand it is still vulnerable to the attack and persecution by the Roman Empire and by other ungodly nations. So I think Bauckham might be right. This functions like a parable of what is true of the church. How does the church maintain its faithful witnesses, how does it carry out its witnesses in the world? It will be both invincible, it will carry out its witnesses and at the same time it will also be vulnerable to persecution and death.

Response to the Two Witnesses

The response to the two witnesses then that get put to death is two fold. First of all, the text tells us they leave their bodies unburied. In the first century, this would have been a sign of extreme dishonor or shame to not bury the body so this is just kind of heaping up insult upon insult. So this would have been a great insult to leave their bodies out in the streets. Not so much a grotesque thing again as much as an insult.

The city in which they are left exposed and then buried is called “The Great City.” Actually, it’s called a number of things. First of all, it’s called “The Great City,” a term that elsewhere is applied to Babylon which when we get to that term elsewhere especially chapter 17 and 18 we will demonstrate that it is Babylon although in this case was probably a code for the city of Rome. But in chapter 16 verse 19 of Revelation in chapter 17, verse 18, in chapter 18, verses 10, 16, 18, 19, 20 and 21, we find the references to The Great City in reference to Babylon which probably is to be equated with Rome. However, the city here also appears to be the city of Jerusalem. Since in verse 8, it’s described as the place where our Lord was crucified. Furthermore, it’s identified as Sodom and Egypt. So what appears to be going on it’s as if the author is combining all of these cities into one great city in opposition to God and who opposes and oppresses God’s people. So that you almost have a trans-temporal city. One that now is embodied in Rome but was
embodied in other great cities such, as Egypt and Sodom. We know the story of Egypt as an oppressive godless idolatrous empire, Sodom being a city equivalent to evil and even Jerusalem, the place where Jesus Christ was put to death and was crucified for his faithful witness. So that now all of those are embodied and wrapped up in Rome. But this also allows it to apply to beyond Rome to any other city that exists until the second coming. Any other city that cares to embody rebellion and evil and idolatry and oppress God’s people fits exactly what we find here. But now it is a symbol that finds its fulfillment particularly in Rome but wherever there is a rebellious idolatrous city that rejects God’s people and rejects God and persecutes his people. One commentary labeled this “a world city.” So the first is that in this city that has persecuted and put to death God’s people, they leave the bodies unburied, a sign of insult and dishonor, a sign of shame.

Celebration at the Death of the Witnesses

The second thing they do is celebrate, they throw a party and rejoice because these two individuals have caused them torment and harm. The reference to the three and a half days that they lie dead before finally in verses 11 and 12 they are raised probably is meant to recall the three and a half years but probably as well roughly the period of time that Jesus Christ himself lay in the grave until his resurrection.

Two Witnesses Vindicated

Now these two witnesses lie dead in the street for three and a half days leading up then to verses 11 and 12 where they are raised up before the entire world and for everyone to see. The notion of resurrection here is one of vindication. So now in verses 11 and 12 this is where the saints are vindicated for their suffering witness. The world’s evaluation of them in the previous verses in chapter 11 is one of rejection, one of persecution, putting to death, rejoicing because of their death, and now the verdict is reversed. These two witnesses are raised and they are vindicated before the eyes of the watching world. They are given the apocalyptic and symbolic nature of the symbolism here, there is no need
to invent modern ways of how the whole world could see these three witnesses such as satellite TV or a webcam or something like that. All of these have been suggested but again the author is working with apocalyptic symbolism and we have to remind ourselves what would the first readers have understood when they read this and they would have no notion of some of our modern day technology. So the whole point is simply meant to represent their vindication. And in fact, the text that lies behind this, when it says for three and a half days they lay in the streets and people gazed on them and they threw a party.

Resurrection of the Two Witnesses and Ezekiel 37

Then in verse 11, after three and a half days, a breath of life from God entered them and they stood on their feet. This almost verbatim much of this verse comes right out of Ezekiel chapter 37 and verse 10 where Israel experienced death because of exile and God now promises a day when his breath will enter into them and they will stand up and the picture of the dry bones that all comes together and it stands up on its feet now. That language is utilized to apply to the witnesses who now are vindicated. The beast put them to death, the world gloated over them, the world’s verdict was that now they have been defeated and their witness appeared to be in vain. Now God vindicates them by raising them up and giving them life showing that their faithful witness indeed was not in vain. Actually, I’ll demonstrate later on that this text gets developed in more detail in Revelation 20:4-6 in the well-known millennial, the kingdom passage.

After they ascend to heaven in verse 13, we find verses 13 and 14, especially in verse 13 we find this interesting scene where following the resurrection there is an earthquake. A tenth of this great city collapses and intriguingly the response is that although a tenth of the city collapses and seven thousand people living in the city die from this earthquake, the rest of them are terrified or they fear and they give glory to God in heaven. Now there’s been a lot of debate, exactly how are we to understand this response? Elsewhere this language is sometimes used in the context of a response of conversion. Someone
has suggested those who were not put to death were actually converted and they
give God glory and that is the very thing that people refuse to do earlier in
response in chapters 8 and 9. In response, for example to the trumpet judgments,
they refuse to repent; they refuse to give God glory. Now some do give God
 glory.

Others understand it as simply a forced acknowledgment of God’s
sovereignty such as one finds in Philippians 2:9-11, for example, where every
knee will be forced to bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. Some of
them onto salvation but many understand that text as a forced homage. So, some
would take this as simply an acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty that is not a
true repentance necessarily and a true turning.

Perhaps we should understand this though as both and that some of the
response will be forced acknowledgment but that the some of these are to be
understood as giving God glory in terms of actually repenting. Now Richard
Bauckham has understood this that these individuals actually repent the giving
God glory is actually an act of repentance but they do so in response to the faithful
suffering witness of the church.

Richard Bauckham says chapters 8 and 9 did not bring about repentance.
In other words, judgment does not bring about repentance what does, it’s the
faithful witnessing of the church that will finally bring about the repentance of the
nations. The only difficulty here is that the response of giving God glory comes
not in response to the faithful witness but it comes in response to the earthquake
and the final judgment. So primarily what we have at the end here, is that even in
the midst of God’s judgment, some end up still responding in repentance.

Now what I want to look at next then is in beginning with verse 15 the final
trumpet is finally going to be blown, and we’ll begin the next section by looking at
the seventh trumpet.

Transcribed by Amanda Farinacci and Heather Fry
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt