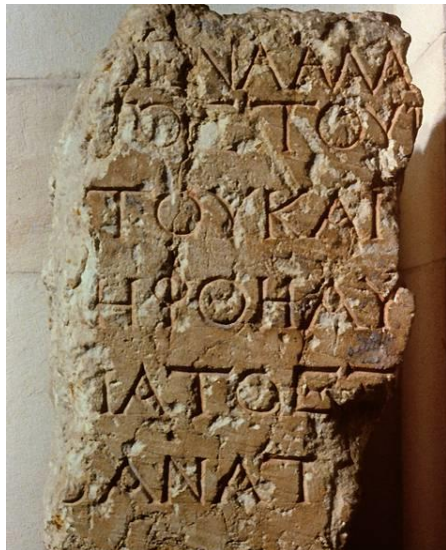


WRESTLING WITH REVELATION

THE VISION OF THE TWO WITNESSES (11:1-14)

This next section of the Apocalypse has yielded about as wide a range of views as any other part of the book. Without pausing to review them all, the interpretation followed here is that the vision picks up the repeating theme of the reversal of Jewish and Gentile categories. To adequately understand the passage, one must take careful note that there is a geographical motif which underlies the entire symbolic picture, a motif grounded in the Old Testament imagery of Jerusalem and Zion as the center of the earth (cf. Eze. 5:5; 38:12)



This excavated fragment is one of the several “keep out” inscriptions surrounding the inner court of the 2nd temple. The penalty for violation was death, and the Greek word “death” can be made out in the fragmented final line: [Θ]ΑΝΑΤ[ΟΣ].

and of the temple as the residence of God (Psa. 46:1-7; 125:1-2; 133:3; 146:10).

THE NAVEL OF THE EARTH

By the 2nd Century BC, the metaphor of Jerusalem as the navel (טבור) of the earth (Jg. 9:37; Eze. 38:12) captured the imagination of the Jewish writer of the Book of Jubilees, where he speaks of Mt. Zion as the “center of the navel of the earth.” Metaphorically, Jews considered Jerusalem as the place through which the lifeblood and nourishment of God flows from heaven to the world. In some early Christian traditions, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem was believed to be the exact center, probably on the mistaken assumption that the earth was a flat disk.

The temple area was conceived as a series of concentric circles of holiness, each space more holy than the one outside it as one came nearer and nearer to the Most Holy Place. In Jewish thought, the inner court of the temple was exclusively for Jewish worshipers, while the court of the Gentiles, which was open for foreigners, was posted with an inscription, warning foreigners to go no further at the risk of death. Beyond the temple was the city of Jerusalem itself, the Old Testament city of God, and beyond Jerusalem was the world of pagans. In Jewish thought, the temple and the city of Jerusalem were sacrosanct areas that rightly belonged only to them as the people of God. Whenever foreigners invaded these precincts, the Gentile presence was regarded as a sacrilege.

In the Apocalypse, however, the temple sanctuary is no longer the exclusive domain of the Jews; rather, the temple sanctuary becomes a symbol representing Christian worship by Gentile believers (3:12; 7:15). The priesthood is now the church made

up of believers from among the nations (1:6). The golden candelabra, which once represented the nation Israel, now represents the seven churches. The altar, once reserved for only the Jewish priesthood, is now the resting place of the Christian martyrs (5:9). The claim that true Jewishness is based on bloodlines is a false claim (2:9; 3:9).

Here, the temple and its worshipers bear much the same meaning. The worshipers in the temple represent the Christian community. As for the outer court of the Gentiles, it is now associated with

the city of Jerusalem which is trampled under Gentile power, especially after the Roman army destroyed the city and temple in AD 70 (cf. Lk. 21:20-24). A complete reversal of Jewish and Gentile categories has occurred. The Jewish community can no longer claim an exclusive relationship to God inasmuch as the true Israel is the Israel of faith, regardless of nationality. Instead, the Jewish community, which in large part has rejected Christ, is represented as a city under judgment, trampled by pagans (11:2). Instead of being the residence of God, earthly Jerusalem, representing the unbelieving Jewish and pagan community, has become Sodom and Egypt (11:8). The heritage of Moses and Elijah and the promises to the remnant community, once belonging exclusively to Israel, now belong to the church (11:3-6). It is only as the Jewish community recognizes that their system is under judgment that a remnant will be saved (11:13).

The above interpretation would have had much relevance for the early Christian community which had seen the destruction of Jerusalem and the 2nd Temple, and by this time, had been expelled from the synagogues.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF JEWS TO THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Considerable theological variations exist among Christians over the relationship of Jews to the Christian Church. During much of the Medieval Period, the antagonism between the two was quite sharp, and the Crusades saw many Jews killed as the “enemies” of Christ. The Reformers adopted what has come to be called Replacement Theology or Supersessionism, which is to say, the Christian Church has replaced Israel as the people of God. Dispensationalists, on the other hand, argue for two completely distinct peoples of God, Israel and the Church, and they keep them separate so that, so to speak, “never the twain shall meet.” Contemporary scholars, like N. T. Wright and James Dunn, contend that God’s ancient covenant promises are such that the circle of “Jewishness” has simply been expanded to include Gentiles. Some would even suggest that Jewish evangelism is misdirected and inappropriate.

The End of the Jewish System

The trampling of the holy city alludes to a motif of Gentile domination over Jewry that is first described in the Book of Daniel. The sacrilege of Antiochus Epiphanes (168 BC) was described by Daniel as a “trampling under foot” of the Jews (Dan. 8:12-13). Later, Jesus used the same phraseology, but this time it was applied to the Jewish dispersion after the wars in AD 70 (Lk. 21:20-24). In the Apocalypse, the same language is once more employed, but this time the reference is to the final period of Daniel’s 70th week. The vision indicates that the desolation of the Jewish system will extend even until the end of the age. The “holy city,” then, refers not merely to Jerusalem, but symbolically to the Jewish system as it adopts the unbelieving stance of the pagan world in its rejection of Jesus Christ.

The Closing Period of the Age

In 11:2-3 the reader encounters a reference to a three-and-a-half-year period of time (based on the lunar year). It is alternately described as 42 months, 1260 days, and “times, time and half a time” (12:6, 14; 13:5). Interpreters generally agree that this period is likely derived from the last half of Daniel’s 70th week (Da. 9:25-27), the period of unrestrained evil

which Jesus seemed to associate with the end of the age (Mt. 24:15; Mk. 13:14). As such, the two witnesses shall perform their ministries during this lawless era.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *Do you think that the primary purpose of these visions is so we can predict the future? If not,*

then what?

- *Can you think of other parts of the New Testament where Jewish terms are applied in a wider range than was traditional?*
- *During the 3 ½ years in Daniel's vision, he speaks of a time of "desolation" linked to the temple (Da. 9:27b). Later, Daniel associates this desolation with Antiochus IV Epiphanes' invasion of Jerusalem in the 160s BC (Da. 11:31). Why, then, did Jesus speak of an abomination of desolation yet to come (Mk. 13:14)? How might what Jesus said relate to the affliction of 3 ½ years described by John in the Revelation?*

The Two Witnesses

The primary interpretive issue with regard to the two witnesses is whether they are to be understood as two individuals (as in dispensationalism) or symbols of two groups (as in most other interpretations). While both views have supporters, here we lean toward the idea that they represent two groups, the witnesses of faithful Israel and New Testament Christians. The idea of the one representing the many is certainly common enough in the Bible (Jacob represents Israel; the Servant of the Lord represents Israel; etc.).

The two witnesses are obviously patterned after Moses and Elijah, given the kinds of powers that they are said to possess (11:5-6). They are obviously not to be taken as Moses and Elijah *redivivus*, however, since they are also identified with the two olive trees and the two lampstands, a clear allusion to the vision of Zechariah in which the figures represent Zerubbabel and Joshua in the post-exilic community (Zec. 4:2-14). Already John has already taken the imagery of the lampstands from Zechariah and transferred it over to the church (1:20). In keeping with his consistent practice of transferring the symbols of the Old Israel over to the New Israel, John seems to be describing the witness of the church in the final period of the great affliction, a church made up of both believing Jews and believing Gentiles. The imagery of Moses and Elijah as well as that of Zerubbabel and Joshua properly belong to the church, for it is the church that inherits the law and the prophets, and it is the church that exists as the true remnant community. The symbolism of the "two" witnesses indicates that the testimony of the church is valid (Dt. 19:15).

Though the reader has not yet been introduced to the beast, he is given a foretaste of what will be described in detail later. The two witnesses, representing the people of God, will be attacked and martyred by the beast from the Abyss (cf. 13:5-7, 15). Old Jerusalem, which once represented Israel as the people of God, now represents the world system against God. John has created a play on the prophecies of Isaiah and Ezekiel, who described Jerusalem and Israel as Sodom, the ancient epitome of pagan culture (Isa. 1:10; Eze. 16:44-48). In identifying Israel as Egypt, John offers the bitterest of ironies. The nation that once was delivered from Egypt has become Egypt itself!

Resurrection and Ascension

Although the beast shall slay the two witnesses that represent the people of God, and although the powers of evil shall rejoice, their evil satisfaction will be short-lived. The people of God shall be resurrected and caught up to him (cf. 1 Co. 15:51-57; 1 Th. 4:13-18). Jerusalem, now no longer representing God's people but the Jewish and worldly system allied in their rejection of Jesus Christ, will face the judgment of God. The effect of this awesome display of justice will cause many to repent and glorify God.

The Seventh Trumpet (11:15-19)

When John finishes this second of his interludes (chap. 7), he resumes his description of the series of trumpet judgments. Only the seventh, also called the third woe, remains.

When the seventh angel sounds, no immediate woe is described. This is not surprising if the seventh trumpet actually consists of the bowl-cups of wrath to be described later. At the sounding of the seventh trumpet, great voices are heard which declare that the period of the end has arrived.

The Reign of God

The kingdom or reign of God began in the earthly life of Jesus (Mk. 1:14-15; 10:14-15; Mt. 12:28; 13:18-23; Lk. 10:9; 17:20-21), but while it was a present reality inaugurated in the ministry of the Lord, it was only present in a hidden and partial way (Mk. 4:26-29; Mt. 13). A consummation of the kingdom of God was anticipated at the end of the age (Mt. 6:10; 25:1-13, 34; Lk. 13:28-30; 19:11-27; 1 Co. 15:24-26). John announces the time of this consummation at the seventh trumpet. He had personally suffered in behalf of the kingdom of God (1:9), and now the triumph of God's kingdom will be completed.

The consummation of the kingdom of God is, by its very nature, associated with the great judgment at the end of the age. The language in 11:15, 18 is drawn from Ps. 2:1-2. There is an important difference between the description of God Almighty in 11:17 than previously. Earlier, God was described as "the one who is, and who was, and who is coming" (1:4), and now he is pictured as only "the one who is and who was." The subtle point, of course, is that he has now come! At his coming, the dead will be resurrected for judgment (Jn. 5:28-29; Ac. 10:42; 2 Ti. 4:1; 1 Pe. 4:5). Reward and punishment will be meted out.

The Ark of God¹

The scene closes with an announcement that the temple was opened. This passage is probably a deliberate parallel to the rending of the temple veil at the death of Jesus (Mt. 27:51; Mk. 15:38; Lk. 23:45), which symbolized that the way into God's presence was made open for all (cf. He. 10:19-22). Here, not only spiritual access to God but immediate access to God through resurrection is described. However, it may be noted that the ark of God is not only the symbol of God's presence, it is also an emblem of war (Nu. 10:33-36). As such, the pyrotechnics associated with the ark point toward God's power to defeat his enemies.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *Inasmuch as Jerusalem was under Gentile domination from AD 70 until the mid-20th century, do you see why the return of the Jews to Palestine, and especially Jerusalem, was cause for great excitement among Bible readers?*
- *In spite of the excitement, would you offer any cautions about linking such modern events with ancient prophecy?*

¹ The history of the original Ark of God presumably came to an end in 586 BC, when the Babylonians burned the first temple (2 Kg. 25:9; Je. 3:16) if it had not already been removed earlier by Shishak to Egypt (1 Kg. 14:25-26) or to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kg. 24:13). A Jewish tradition asserts that it was moved and hidden, along with the original Tent of Meeting and the Altar of Incense, in a cave on Mt. Sinai by Jeremiah (2 Mac. 2:4-8), though this account is probably legendary.