

Visions of the End
Revelation 11
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The 11th chapter of Revelation begins against the backdrop of the first 10. John has addressed the churches encouraging them to repent and exhorting them to be faithful until the end. The seven seals have been opened resulting in the first six of seven trumpets to sound. With each trumpet, God has again called men to repentance and offered the kingdom. Chapter 10 presented one of two visions revealing the preparations necessary after the sixth trumpet in preparation for the sounding of the seventh. The first vision alerts the readers to understand the coming judgments are written in a book which is now open. In addition, the posture of the angel with one foot on the sea and one foot on the dry ground is a warning that the coming judgments of God will encompass all the earth and all her inhabitants. The crucial warning is given that all delays have now passed and nothing will interfere with the coming judgments of God.

While chapter 10 introduced the little book, chapter 11 introduces the two witnesses and the beast. This is first mention of a beast, yet in the remaining 11 chapters, there will be an additional 40 references. Bible scholars make various interpretations of this chapter but seem to agree unanimously that this is one of if not the most difficult of the entire book to interpret. This fact alone places a demand on Bible students to respect divergent interpretations in the midst of disagreement.

The Second Vision of the Interlude Verses 1-14

The first 14 verses of the chapter record the vision and conclude with a warning. The remaining verses of the chapter overviews the sounding of the seventh trumpet with a scene in heaven accompanied by a scene on the earth. Common interpretations by dispensationalists differ sharply from those who hold to the historical premillennial approach.

The Dispensational View

In his commentary on Revelation, Warren Wiersbe begins this section by placing the beginning of this chapter geographically in Jerusalem and chronologically in the first half of the tribulation. This interpretation requires that the temple has already been rebuilt with worship restored under the protection of a world ruler known as the Antichrist. He views the measuring of the temple as figurative claiming ownership. Background passages for this view include Ezekiel 40-41 and Zechariah 2:1-3. For Ezekiel, the vision and measuring of the city of Jerusalem was a revelation of the return of the exiles to once again live in the city. Zechariah is a contemporary of Ezekiel and is also prophesying during the exile period concerning the return of Israel to Jerusalem.

The command not to measure the outer court is particularly significant since this interpretation assumes that worship is protected during the first half of tribulation by the Antichrist who will break his agreement with Israel and use the temple for his own purposes. Under this framework of interpretation, the gentiles will trample on the city for forty two months during which time they will overrun the two witnesses introduced in the following verse.

For some 1260 months two witnesses will prophesy on the earth. Their task is to prophesy and they carry the authority of heaven. Their attire will be of sackcloth denoting humility and a call to repentance. It is worthy to note the significance of the term witness which is the forerunner to our English word martyr. The Old Testament parallels to these witnesses are found in the powers of Elijah and Moses. The angel however connected their ministry to that of Joshua and Zerubbabel of Zechariah 4. Joshua was the high priest conducting worship and Zerubbabel was the appointed governor. The imagery of lampstands and olive trees is vivid in this passage. Here the spiritual ruler and the governmental authority are pictured carrying out the will of God in a spiritual and royal fashion.

The powers given to these witnesses were similar to those of Elijah and Moses. Some scholars of this interpretation identify the witnesses as a return of Elijah and Moses. The last verses of the Old Testament indicate a return of Elijah. Jesus associated this return with John the Baptist and both were in attendance on the mount of transfiguration. One could easily conclude this description of the witnesses to mean that God has sent and will send messengers on the order of Elijah's to call his people to repentance. Even so, during the time of their prophecies, no one will be able to kill them and they will have great power for protection and proclamation.

Once these witnesses have completed the testimony, they will be killed at the will of the beast that appears from the abyss. This is the time when he takes over the temple. They are not allowed a burial but put on display in front of the world for three days. The view by the whole world is easily accomplished through current channels of media. You can imagine the discussions that would take place on news shows and talk shows twenty four hours each day. It is even likely such an event would cause a continual surveillance by TV cameras for the entire three and one half days. This marks a turning point for the beast and his relationship with Israel. His true nature is manifest and he begins a great persecution of Jews.

The place of their display is said to be in the great city and it is identified with three distinct cities, Sodom, Egypt, and Jerusalem. From a worldly standpoint Jerusalem is considered to be a great city, but from the spiritual evaluation of the Lord, it is as polluted and worldly as Sodom and Egypt. The disgust of the world against these two witnesses is best understood by examining the response to their death. Parties break out on streets worldwide celebrating the death of these two special servants of God.

Can you imagine TV cameras tuned on the coffins of these two witnesses when God resurrects them from the dead and they ascend into heaven. It makes one wonder if the especially sensitive microphones will pick up the voice from heaven inviting them to come home. The entire world will bear testimony of their heavenly flight. At that moment, an earthquake will destroy one tenth of the city of Jerusalem killing 7,000 people. Now the time has come for the sound of the seventh trumpet.

The Historical Premillennial View

In contrast to the dispensational approach, HP sees a much higher level of symbolism among the elements of the 11th chapter. Mounce, on the other hand, sees this entire section to be symbolic

of the fate of the witnessing church during the final period of opposition and persecution. Those who follow this approach to interpretation site problems with the literal interpretations of the dispensationalists in the difficulties of relating chapter 10 to chapter 11 in the context of the seal interlude. With their belief of the church remaining during the tribulation period, it is a short step to see references to Israel as applying to the church rather than to the nation literally.

With the church remaining during this period, the temple represents the church and stands for the messianic community of both Jewish and Gentile believers. When the angel commands John to measure the city, he is establishing the sealing of the church for the tribulation that follows. John was not to seal the outer court which signifies the continuation of tribulation even with the limitations established by the sealing of the temple. Further, the time frame of 42 months strengthens the case for limitations placed around the church by the Lord.

HPs agree that two periods of time are represented in the first 42 months and the second 42 months. They see no need to take this as a literal 7 years but maintain its symbolism as definite periods of time without making specifics of length. They point out that this is consistent with John's use of numbers elsewhere including 2:10, 4:4, and 7:4.

Both dispensationalists and HPs agree the message of the witnesses is one of repentance and the impending judgments of God. HPs differ in their identification of the two witnesses. Recognizing the Old Testament precursors of Elijah, Moses, Joshua, and Zerubbabel, they recognize the witnesses and representatives of many individuals and connect them with the church. They represent the church who is called to bear prophetic witness during this period and Christian prophets who will be martyred by the beast.

The picture of war against the saints indicates more than just a mere two individuals. The viewing of their bodies worldwide is seen to suggest many bodies around the world seen by people in their own areas. The lampstands of chapters 1 and 2 are said to represent the church and are comprised of many individuals.

The introduction of the beast is the forerunner of much to come. The idea of a coming beast is found in Daniel 7 and in the Olivet discourse where Jesus spoke of the coming of an eschatological figure called the desolating sacrilege (Mark 13:14, Matt. 24:14). The beast is revealed as the Antichrist and is a central figure in Revelation. The destruction he will bring was foreshadowed in Israel in the Roman ruler Antiochus Epihanes in the second century BC. Scholars from both interpretive approaches find general agreement in the significance of the death of the witnesses given their differences in identifying who the witnesses represent. They also find agreement in the identification of the great city and the resurrection and ascension into heaven. Ezekiel 37 is seen as a background passage to their resurrection.

The earthquake is seen as a limited catastrophe and may answer the prophecies of Ezekiel 38:19-20. Zechariah also predicted an earthquake which would split the Mount of Olives in two from East to West when God returns to crush His enemies. Newport sees the worship of the Lord by those who survive the earthquake as evidence of their conversion. He says the phrase, "give glory to the God of heaven..." is an idiomatic phrase denoting repentance. The meaning is to pay the honor due to God by changing one's attitude and confessing, speaking, or doing, the truth as

the truth of God (compare 16:9, John 9:24, Josh. 7:19, Jer. 13:16). Others see this as an acknowledgement of God without repentance.

The Seventh Trumpet Verses 15-19

The vision section of Revelation 11 ends with an announcement of the coming third woe. Two have now passed and the stage has been set for the third to arrive. Verse 15 arrives with the blowing of the trumpet but surprisingly it is not the events on earth first revealed but the events in heaven. John hears loud voices in heaven and then explains the content. In this verse John writes the central theme of Revelation which is the coming kingdom of God. Although there is much devastation to come upon the earth, the elders announce the victory of God and His close reigning upon the earth. This is not to say He has not been reigning; it is to say His reign, since the ascension, has been in the spiritual realm. He has intervened during these last days, but in the final days spoken of in this passage, Jesus is now asserting His authority of earthly reign and He will use every resource on the earth to accomplish His purpose bringing everything under His reign so that the kingdoms of the world become the kingdoms of the Lord. Every rebellion will be rooted out during the coming days as Jesus brings everything into subjection to Him. In the praise offered by the elders, Weirsbe points out three special blessings, ... "that Christ reigns supremely (Rev. 11:17), that He judges righteously (Rev. 11:18), and that He rewards graciously (Rev. 11:18)."

Weirsbe also suggests that verse 18 is a table of contents for the remaining chapters of the book. There is first rebellion against the reign of Christ resulting in the atrocities of the following story line. This rebellion makes evident the justice of God against His enemies and as Newport points out, "God's kingdom can never be completely established so long as hostile nations are allowed to defy His rule and to oppress His people. The visitation of God's wrath is absolutely essential to the establishing of His gracious rule in the world." These thoughts guide understanding of the woe continuing as Christ reigns on the earth.

Verse 19 shifts the scene back to heaven. The pictures projected in this verse will not come to fruition until chapters 21-22. The elders have spoken about the future as though it is present throughout this section. Perhaps in their vision it is seen from beginning to end in one glance. Dispensationalists see the reality of verse 18 transpiring over a literal 3 ½ years. Once the judgments are complete, the glory of verse 19 comes in full. The temple of heaven is fully opened with the ark of His covenant in full view. Surely this is a signal that worship in heaven will be on a more grandeur scale than we have known it on earth. Fellowship with the Lord will be unhindered. In heaven lightening is flashing and thunder is rolling. On earth, hail is falling and the earth is trembling. As the trumpet has sounded, the final woe on the earth is set into motion.