

A CRITIQUE OF IDEALIST AND HISTORICIST VIEWS OF THE TWO WITNESSES IN REVELATION 11

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THE FIRST TWO ARTICLES IN THIS SERIES critiqued three preterist views on the identity of the two witnesses in Revelation 11, finding each view to be problematic and unsustainable. The present article addresses idealist and historicist views of the two witnesses.

THE IDEALIST APPROACH TO THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The idealist view of Revelation does not attempt to identify specific fulfillments of prophecies. Instead advocates of this view believe that “only . . . spiritual lessons and principles (which may find recurrent expression in history) are depicted symbolically in the visions.”¹ Idealist William Milligan declares that “we are not to look in the Apocalypse for special events, but for an exhibition of the principles which govern the history both of the world and the Church.”² This approach “leans heavily on the conclusion that Revelation is basically apocalyptic in style, and continues the allegori-

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¹ Steve Gregg, ed., *Revelation: Four Views* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 43. For example see Sam Hamstra Jr., “An Idealist View of Revelation,” in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 95–98.

² William Milligan, *The Revelation of St. John* (London: Macmillan, 1886), 154–55.

cal approach to the book so characteristic of the middle ages of the Christian era.”³

This approach began in the Alexandrian School of theology, whose leaders influenced others and helped turn the early church from its chiliastic position.⁴ Its modern emergence has been attributed to the influence of William Milligan.⁵ Its major weakness is that Revelation itself claims to be predicting events “which must soon take place” (1:1), giving the impression that specific occurrences in particular historical settings are intended.⁶ Tenney observes that idealism “allows no concrete significance whatever to the figures that it employs,” so that “in interpretation the Apocalypse may thus mean anything or nothing according to the whim of the interpreter.”⁷

THE IDEALIST VIEW OF THE TWO WITNESSES IN REVELATION 11

In the idealist view the two witnesses symbolize the church throughout the church age.⁸ Leading advocates of this view are Hendriksen, Lenski, and Wilcock.⁹

³ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 31.

⁴ John E. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ: A Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 16. Historian LeRoy Edwin Eroom observes that “Origen’s third-century spiritualization of the resurrection, blended with his allegorization of the prophetic Scriptures, constituted the first in a series of three fatal steps taken by the dominant church in departure from the earlier advent faith. These each occurred about a century apart, under Origen, Eusebius, and Augustine respectively” (*The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation*, 4 vols. [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946–54], 1:349). For further discussion of these events see *ibid.*, 135–400.

⁵ Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views*, 43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁷ Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 146.

⁸ Variations of this idea exist. For instance E. W. Hengstenberg understands the Revelation 11 temple as symbolizing the church, and the two witnesses as symbols of witnessing (*The Revelation of St. John: Expounded for Those Who Search the Scriptures*, trans. Patrick Fairbairn [Edinburgh: Clark, 1851], 1:394–98). P. Prigent sees the witnesses as depicting the church’s prophetic mission (“L’Apocalypse,” in *Les écrits de S. Jean et L’Épître aux Hébreux*, ed. E. Cothenet et al. [Paris: Desclée, 1984], 241–45). Hanns Lilje identifies the witnesses as both actual figures returning in the end times and symbols of witnessing believers (*The Last Book of the Bible: The Meaning of the Revelation of St. John*, trans. Olive Wyon [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957], 161–63).

⁹ William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of*

A brief sketch of the idealist understanding of Revelation 11:1–2 is here provided. The temple (*ναός*) “symbolizes the true Church, that is, all those in whose hearts Christ dwells in the Spirit.”¹⁰ The measuring rod “symbolize[s] the Word or gospel in its function of determining who is in the church and who is outside of its bounds.”¹¹ Measuring the *ναός* shows protection against eternal doom.¹² The vision of the heathen trampling on Jerusalem and the outside court depicts “the world tramp[ing] upon the outside court of merely nominal Christendom.”¹³

As stated earlier, idealists understand the two witnesses as symbols of the true church.¹⁴ That there are *two* witnesses emphasizes the truthfulness of the church’s testimony (cf. Deut. 17:6; John 5:31; 8:17; Acts 1:8). In that Jesus sent out His disciples in pairs (Luke 10:1), the two also suggest the missionary duties of the church.¹⁵ Their sackcloth attire (Rev. 11:3), a symbol of repentance, shows the emphasis of their message.¹⁶

Their ministry duration of 1,260 days (v. 3) symbolizes the present gospel age, and it is concurrent with the forty-two months (v. 2) and “time and times and half a time” (12:14).¹⁷ Lenski ex-

Revelation (London: Tyndale, 1940); R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963); and Michael Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened: The Message of Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975).

¹⁰ Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 127.

¹¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation*, 327.

¹² Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 127.

¹³ *Ibid.*; and Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation*, 330–31.

¹⁴ According to Hendriksen, “These witnesses symbolize the Church militant bearing testimony through its ministers and missionaries throughout the present dispensation” (*More Than Conquerors*, 129). Wilcock says, “The witnesses, declaring God’s truth to the inhabitants of the earth, are the church in the world, God’s people among the heathen nations, . . . the sanctuary which remains God’s own when not only the city but even the outer temple is profaned” (*I Saw Heaven Opened*, 104–5). Lenski writes, “*The true church, as being separate from all those outside (11:1), shall witness and prophesy by means of the little book (the inspired gospel) in its public ministry to the whole obdurate and hostile world in order to reveal its full guilt!*” (*The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation*, 338–39, italics his).

¹⁵ Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 129; Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation*, 334–35; and Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened*, 105.

¹⁶ Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 129; and Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation*, 335.

¹⁷ Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 129; Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation*, 335–36; and Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened*, 105–6. Gregg explains, “A common assumption among those who espouse a spiritual [i.e., idealist] interpretation is to see the forty-two months as symbolic of a period of indefinite

plains that “the time is here expressed in ‘days’ rather than in ‘months’ or in ‘seasons’ because the testimony is to be ceaseless, sounding forth every day until it is at last silenced just before the end.”¹⁸

The allusion in 11:4 to the vision in Zechariah 4 is understood in various ways: the witnesses’ (i.e., the church’s) filling by the Spirit,¹⁹ their unquenchability,²⁰ their royal and priestly prerogatives,²¹ or their offices.²² The witnesses’ miraculous powers (Rev. 11:5–6) depict the church’s spiritual authority and power.²³

The deaths of the two witnesses (vv. 7–8) symbolize when “the Church itself, as a mighty organization for the dissemination of the gospel and regular ministry of the Word, will be destroyed,” though the beast will not kill every believer, since there will be a few on earth when Christ comes again (Luke 18:8).²⁴ The completion of the witnesses’ testimony (Rev. 11:7) is taken to refer to “the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom in the whole inhabited world for a testimony to all the nations after which the end shall come” (Matt. 24:14).²⁵ The beast from the abyss (Rev. 11:7) is the “entire antichristian power that dominates the nations.”²⁶ The city where the corpses lie (v. 8) is Jerusalem, taken symbolically “as the headquarters of all anti-Christianity.”²⁷ It is called by the names Sodom and Egypt “that in reality state what it is in God’s eyes,” as “both represent the extreme abomination.”²⁸ The three-and-a-half-day period of the witnesses’ deaths (v. 9) is a “very brief time”

length, the whole period of the suffering of the people of God in this dispensation, corresponding to the entire church age” (*Revelation: Four Views*, 219).

¹⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation*, 335–36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 336.

²⁰ Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened*, 105.

²¹ Geoffrey B. Wilson, *Revelation* (Welwyn, Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical, 1985), 96.

²² Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 129.

²³ *Ibid.*, 130; and Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened*, 105.

²⁴ Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 130.

²⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation*, 341.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 342–43. See also Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 130.

²⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation*, 344; Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 130–31; and Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened*, 106.

²⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation*, 344–45.

(Matt. 24:22; cf. Rev. 20:7–9).²⁹ Wilcock writes, “It may not be altogether fanciful to see in the church’s experience a reflection of Christ’s experience, in his three days of death following three years of ministry, since his place of suffering is explicitly identified with hers (verse 8).”³⁰ Idealists attempt to buttress this ecclesiological interpretation of the witnesses’ deaths with other references.³¹

The merriment over the witnesses’ deaths (vv. 9–10) is seen as “the rejoicing of those who dwell on the earth . . . at the apparent triumph of evil over the church, which has so long confronted them with the claims of Christ.”³² The witnesses’ resurrection and ascension (vv. 11–12) is understood in various ways. To Hendriksen they refer to the church’s restoration to life, power, and influence at Christ’s second coming. Lenski believes the witnesses’ ascension refers to the withdrawal of the Word of God, when its task is done.³³ Regarding the subsequent catastrophic events of verse 13 (an earthquake resulting in the death of seven thousand people), Hendriksen notes, “This is probably simply a symbolic representation of the alarming happenings on the very eve of the final judgment.”³⁴

A CRITIQUE OF THE IDEALIST VIEW THAT THE TWO WITNESSES SYMBOLIZE THE CHURCH

The corporate understanding (i.e., more than two actual persons are indicated)³⁵ has previously been refuted.³⁶ That the immediate

²⁹ Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 131.

³⁰ Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened*, 106.

³¹ Hendriksen writes, “This gospel age is, however, going to come to an end (cf. Mt. 24:14)” (*More Than Conquerors*, 130). Wilcock says, “For Scripture does seem to envisage a time (this is the first clear indication of it in Revelation) when at the very end of history an unexampled onslaught will be mounted against the church, and she will to all appearances ‘go under’ (2 Thess 2:3; Matt 24:11f, 24; Rev 20). . . . But it will be brief; and at the end of it the church will rise again to meet its Lord, and the world in confusion will at last give worship to its Maker, not the willing worship of love but the grudging worship of compulsion” (*I Saw Heaven Opened*, 106).

³² Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views*, 239.

³³ See Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 131; and Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation*, 347–48.

³⁴ Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 131.

³⁵ Tyconius (fourth century AD) said the witnesses represent the pure church, and medieval commentators continued this perspective (Rodney L. Petersen, *Preaching in the Last Days* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993], 14).

context of the two-witnesses prophecy (Rev. 11:1–2) supports the idea that this chapter’s events occur during a period when God is especially dealing with Israel (and not the church) has been addressed elsewhere.³⁷ The following discusses additional problems with the idealist identification of the two witnesses.

The duration of the witnesses’ ministry—1,260 days (Rev. 11:3)—corresponds to half of the seven-year tribulation period (Dan. 9:24–27), when God will deal especially with His chosen people Israel (not the church).³⁸ According to the guidelines of literal (or normal) hermeneutics, “When the immediate context does not give a clear meaning to a symbol, the interpreter should examine similar or analogous symbols used elsewhere in prophecy.”³⁹ So “a thousand two hundred and threescore days” (Rev. 11:3; 12:6) and “forty and two months” (Rev. 11:2; 13:5) must be compared with “time and times and half a time” (Rev. 12:14; Dan. 7:25; 12:7) and Daniel’s prophecy of the seventieth “seven” (Dan. 9:26–27).⁴⁰ This

³⁶ Christine Joy Tan, “A Critique of Preterist Views of the Two Witnesses in Revelation 11,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 171 (April–June 2014), 214.

³⁷ Christine Joy Tan, “The Identity of the Two Witnesses in Revelation 11” (ThM thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, TX, 2002), 17–22. See also Hitchcock, “A Critique of the Preterist View of the Temple in Revelation 11:1–2,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164 (April–June): 220–21; and idem, “A Defense of the Domitianic Date of Revelation” (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, TX, 2005), 107–8, 122–34.

³⁸ See Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 85–86; and Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 178. In Daniel 9:24 the angel Gabriel explained to Daniel that the seventy-sevens prophecy is “for your people and your holy city” (italics added). Stephen R. Miller points out that “the identification of the people and the city are clear from the context. Daniel’s people were the Jews, and his holy city was Jerusalem” (*Daniel: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994], 258). Two considerations support these identifications: (1) Daniel 9:24–27 refers specifically to the city of Jerusalem and the temple, and (2) this prophecy was in answer to Daniel’s prayer, which related to the Jews (Dan. 9:2–19 and Miller, *Daniel*, 259).

³⁹ Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Dallas: Bible Communications, 1974), 163.

⁴⁰ Ibid. Referring to the 1,260 days of Revelation 11:3, Walvoord comments, “This is exactly three and one-half years or forty-two months of thirty days each, and is unquestionably related to either the first three and one-half years or the latter three and one-half years of the seven years of Daniel 9:27” (*The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 178). David E. Aune acknowledges the connection of the 1,260 days (Rev. 11:3) with Daniel’s seventy-sevens prophecy (cf. Dan. 9:24–27), although he takes the entire prophecy as a symbol (*Revelation 6–16*, Word Biblical Commentary [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998], 603, 611). Similarly R. H. Charles maintains that the forty-two months and 1,260 days of Revelation 11:2–3 are derived from Daniel 7:25 and 12:7, which “defines the duration of the reign of the Antichrist” (*A Critical*

suggests that the seventieth “seven” (i.e., the seven-year tribulation period) will be a literal seven years, and half of that (i.e., 1,260 days) is not an indefinite period, as idealists hold. Moreover, the entire body of Christ (i.e., the church) will be raptured before any part of Daniel’s seventieth week begins.⁴¹

Some idealists assert that the lampstands mentioned in Revelation 11:4 are symbols of local churches, as in 1:20.⁴² However, 1:20 explicitly states that the seven lampstands refer to seven churches. This is not the case in 11:4, where the referent is clearly to the vision in Zechariah 4.⁴³

To identify the witnesses as the church, idealists are forced to spiritualize the miraculous powers described in Revelation 11:5–6.⁴⁴ This is textually unwarranted, and this optimistic view does not match the realities of the persecuted church in the current church-age dispensation.⁴⁵

The spirit and methods of the two witnesses differ from what is commanded of believers in the present dispensation.⁴⁶ Now

and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John, International Critical Commentary [Edinburgh: Clark, 1929; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006], 2:279, 282).

⁴¹ Pentecost gives several supports for the church’s pretribulation rapture: (a) the literal method of interpretation, the nature of Daniel’s seventieth week (e.g., wrath, cf. Rev. 6:16–17; 11:18; 1 Thess. 1:9–10; judgment, cf. Rev. 14:7; 15:4; indignation, cf. Isa. 26:20–21; punishment, cf. Isa. 24:20–21), (b) the seventieth week has special reference to the Israelites and to Jerusalem (cf. Dan. 9:24), (c) the unity of the seventieth week, (d) the nature of the church, (e) the church as a mystery, (f) the distinctions between Israel and the church, (g) the restrainer’s work (cf. 2 Thess. 2), (h) distinctions between the rapture and second advent, (i) promises to the true church (e.g., Rev. 3:10; 1 Thess. 5:9; 1:9–10) (J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958], 193–218). See also Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept from the Hour: Biblical Evidence for the Pretribulation Return of Christ*, 4th ed. (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle, 1991).

⁴² See Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 127; and Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 148.

⁴³ Tan, “The Identity of the Two Witnesses in Revelation 11,” 14. Commentators of varied backgrounds concur that Revelation 11:4 alludes to the Zechariah 4 vision.

⁴⁴ For example Hendriksen declares, “Indeed, in a most real sense, the Church still smites the earth with every plague! The wicked world should be careful, for if anyone is fully determined to harm the Church, fire proceeds out of the mouth of God’s witnesses. But even if anyone would like to harm the true ministers and missionaries, he will be destroyed similarly (v. 5)” (*More Than Conquerors*, 130).

⁴⁵ See Thomas, *Revelation 8–22*, 90; and Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 180.

⁴⁶ J. A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse: The Prophecies of the Revelation* (London: Charles C. Cook, 1900; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1950), 255–56.

Christians are commanded not to return evil for evil, but instead to render blessings, to love their enemies, to pray for their persecutors, and to be harmless as doves (Matt. 5:44; 10:16; Luke 6:27, 35; Rom. 12:17; 1 Thess. 5:15; 1 Pet. 3:9).⁴⁷ Many believers have faced persecution.⁴⁸ By contrast, the two witnesses kill their enemies, prevent rain from falling, turn water into blood, and strike the earth with plagues (Rev. 11:5–6). The nature of their ministry shows that the events of Revelation 11 do not occur in the present church age and that these two witnesses do not represent the church.⁴⁹

The city where the witnesses' corpses will lie (v. 8) is Jerusalem and not (as idealists hold) the headquarters of all anti-Christianity. This is substantiated by four facts. (1) In the Old Testament Jerusalem is called the "great" city (Neh. 7:4; Jer. 22:8; Lam. 1:1), just as it is in Revelation 11:8.⁵⁰ (2) Revelation 11:8 "does not say it is *spiritually* the great city as [the idealist] explanation would require."⁵¹ Instead this city "spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt" (v. 8, KJV). This is an example of metonymy, the use of one name for another related name.⁵² The word πνευματικῶς ("spiritually") indicates this is the language of allegory or metaphor, and that the city's actual name is neither Sodom nor Egypt.⁵³ (3) As Thomas points out, "reference in the last part of v. 8 is unquestionably to Christ's crucifixion. The prophets will die in the same place—note the καὶ—as their Lord did."⁵⁴ (4) Jerusalem has been in view since verse 1.⁵⁵

⁴⁷ Ibid., 256. James exhorted believers to faithfully endure trials, temptations, and sufferings, anticipating Christ's coming when their suffering will be ended (cf. 1:2–4, 12–15; 5:7–11) (Buist M. Fanning, "A Theology of James," in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck [Chicago: Moody, 1994], 418–20).

⁴⁸ Stephen was stoned, James was beheaded, Paul and Silas were imprisoned, Peter was crucified (Seiss, *The Apocalypse*, 256).

⁴⁹ Tan, "The Identity of the Two Witnesses in Revelation 11," 15.

⁵⁰ J. B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1961), 172.

⁵¹ Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 94.

⁵² Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, 140.

⁵³ Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 93. The references to these cities suggest utter moral perversion and hostility toward God and His people.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 94.

⁵⁵ Ibid. The "holy city" of Revelation 11:2 is Jerusalem. No other earthly city is so described in Scripture (cf. Neh. 11:1, 18; Isa. 48:2; 52:1; Dan. 9:24; Matt. 4:5; 27:53).

The two witnesses' ascension is gradual enough for their enemies to observe them (11:12). This contrasts with the rapture of the church, which will happen "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor. 15:52).⁵⁶ Instead, "the parallel . . . is to the ascension of Christ on the Mount of Olives, when the disciples beheld Him ascending into heaven, and, like the two witnesses, He was received by a cloud."⁵⁷

Although the term ἐκκλησία appears nineteen times in Revelation 1–3, it is absent in chapters 4–19 and does not reappear until 22:16 at the book's conclusion.⁵⁸ Although this is an argument from silence, it does have some significance.

It is inconsistent for idealists to see both the temple (11:1–2) and the two witnesses (vv. 3–13) as the church. Thus the idealist view of the two witnesses as symbolizing the church throughout the church age has serious problems.

THE HISTORICIST APPROACH TO THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The historicist approach "contends that Revelation is a symbolic presentation of the entire course of the history of the church from the close of the first century to the end of time."⁵⁹ Fulfillment of biblical prophecy is thus considered to be in progress for these past two thousand years.⁶⁰ The historicist approach equates the present church age with the tribulation,⁶¹ and historicists "have generally identified the beast with Rome, political and ecclesiastical, and the

The only other "holy city" in the Bible is the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2; 22:19), but that will never be trampled by the Gentiles (Rev. 21:27) (Seiss, *The Apocalypse*, 236–37).

⁵⁶ Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 97–98; see also Stanton, *Kept from the Hour*.

⁵⁷ Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 182.

⁵⁸ Andrew M. Woods, "A Case for the Futurist Interpretation of the Book of Revelation," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 13 (Spring 2008): 12. After examining the details of Revelation 4–19, Robert Gromacki concludes that "the church is pictured in heaven with Christ, having been raptured before the Tribulation began" ("Where Is 'the Church' in Revelation 4–19?" in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy [Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995], 353. See also *ibid.*, 353–66).

⁵⁹ Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, 137. See Albert Barnes, *Notes, Explanatory and Practical, on the Book of Revelation* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1859), xxxii–xxxvii.

⁶⁰ Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views*, 2.

⁶¹ Ron J. Bigalke Jr., "The Revival of Futurist Interpretation Following the Reformation," *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 13 (April 2009): 45.

harlot Babylon with the apostate church.”⁶² Historicism is built on the “year-for-a-day” principle. Appealing to Ezekiel 4:4–6, historicists believe that God cast literal time periods into a symbolism in which a day represents a year.⁶³ So the 1,260 days (Rev. 11:3) symbolize 1,260 years in which the Antichrist dominates the church.⁶⁴

Historicism has been represented throughout church history.⁶⁵ The Protestant Reformers were attracted to this approach, which equated the papacy with Antichrist.⁶⁶ However, “shortly after reaching its height of popularity in the early 1800s, historicism began a decline from which it has never recovered.”⁶⁷ The main group of historicists today is the Seventh-day Adventists.⁶⁸

This approach has four major weaknesses: multiple interpretations, unnecessary allegorization, limited perspective, and erroneous results. (1) Multiple interpretations. Adherents disagree on the specific fulfillments of prophecies.⁶⁹ As Walvoord observes, “the very multiplicity of such interpretations and identifications of the personnel of Revelation with a variety of historical characters is its own refutation.”⁷⁰

⁶² Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, 138.

⁶³ Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views*, 34.

⁶⁴ Thomas D. Ice, “What Is Preterism?” in *The End Times Controversy*, ed. Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2003), 18–19.

⁶⁵ See Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, 20–23, 44–65, 266–442, 683–716; Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views*, 34; Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 18; and Bigalke, “The Revival of Futurist Interpretation Following the Reformation,” 45.

⁶⁶ Thomas D. Ice, “Revelation, Interpretive Views of,” in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 369. See Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, 20–23, 266–442. Martin Luther was a proponent of the literal interpretation of the Bible, rejecting allegorization and the scholastic fourfold sense of the Scriptures (Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics for Conservative Protestants* [Boston: W. A. Wilde, 1950], 31); and Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1991; reprint, Colorado Springs: Cook, 1996), 40–44. However, while the Reformers “stressed the literal meanings in arriving at their view of salvation by faith alone and the inspiration and sole authority of the Bible,” “they did not apply those principles to their interpretation of *all* unfulfilled prophecy” (Lightner, *Last Days Handbook* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990], 149, italics his). So “the whole of Protestantism went the way of Roman Catholic amillennialism by default” (Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, 54).

⁶⁷ Ice, “Revelation, Interpretive Views of,” 369.

⁶⁸ Bigalke, “The Revival of Futurist Interpretation Following the Reformation,” 46.

⁶⁹ Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views*, 36.

⁷⁰ Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 19.

(2) Unnecessary allegorization. Tenney explains that “the historicist is constantly confronted with the dilemma of a far-fetched spiritualization in order to maintain the chain of historical events, or else if he makes the events literal in accordance with the language of the text he is compelled to acknowledge that no comparable events in history have happened.”⁷¹

(3) Limited perspective. Tenney observes that historicism, “which attempts to interpret the Apocalypse by the development of the church in the last nineteen centuries, seldom if ever takes cognizance of the church outside of Europe. It is concerned mainly with the period of the Middle Ages and the Reformation and has relatively little to say of developments after A.D. 1500.”⁷²

(4) Erroneous results. Historicist calculations using the “year-for-a-day” principle have “done a great deal of harm in arousing expectations that were not fulfilled, and in furnishing occasion for the rise of fanatical movements.”⁷³

AN EXAMINATION OF THE HISTORICIST VIEW OF THE TWO WITNESSES IN REVELATION 11

Historicist views of the two witnesses are extensively varied.⁷⁴ This section describes the prevalent historicist understanding of the two witnesses as the lines of witnesses for Christ during the 1,260 years of papal domination before the Reformation (as expounded by

⁷¹ Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, 138; see also Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 30–31.

⁷² Merrill C. Tenney, “Revelation, Book of the,” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 5:96. See also Klaus Koschorke, Frieder Ludwig, and Mariano Delgado, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, 1450–1990* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

⁷³ Albertus Pieters, *The Lamb, the Woman and the Dragon: An Exposition of the Revelation of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1937), 54.

⁷⁴ For instance, Fred P. Miller understands the witnesses as the Old and New Testaments, with the Revelation 11 prophecy “fulfilled in the French Revolution, when the Bible was actually outlawed by the constituted government in Paris” (*Revelation: A Panorama of the Gospel Age* [Clermont, FL: Moellerhaus Books, 1993], 104). Robert Caringola takes the witnesses as the Word of God and the true Church, slain in 1514 and resurrected on October 31, 1517 (*The Present Reign of Jesus Christ: A Historical Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* [Springfield, MO: Abundant Life Ministries, 1995], 153, 168). Augusta Cook sees the witnesses as believers martyred during Queen Mary’s reign in England—from John Rogers (burned on February 4, 1555) to martyrs burned at Canterbury on November 10, 1558 (*Light from Patmos* [London: Marshall, 1934], 84–85).

Elliott and Barnes).⁷⁵

The ναός (“temple”) in Revelation 11:1 symbolizes the true church,⁷⁶ and the outer court (v. 2) symbolizes nominal believers (Barnes) or apostate Christians (Elliott).⁷⁷ The measuring of the temple refers to ascertaining the true church in the midst of the papacy at the time of the Reformation.⁷⁸ The “holy city” also symbolizes the church⁷⁹ and its treading underfoot speaks of the papacy’s domination of it.⁸⁰ The forty-two months refer to 1,260 years, because of the day-for-a-year principle.⁸¹ “Though the ‘holy city’—the church—would *seem* to be wholly trodden down, yet there would be a few at least who would assert the great doctrines of true godliness [i.e., the two witnesses].”⁸²

Elliott and Barnes believe the two witnesses represent a “long line of witnesses for Christ during the 1260 years of the papacy prior to the Reformation.”⁸³ According to Barnes the two were “faithful witnesses for the truth, who, though they were few in number, would be sufficient to keep up the knowledge of the truth on the earth, and to bear testimony against the prevailing errors and abominations” during “the ascendancy of the Papacy . . . that long period of apostasy, darkness, corruption, and sin.”⁸⁴ Elliott gives a lengthy tracing of the alleged apocalyptic witnesses in history.⁸⁵ Barnes appends several more names to Elliott’s list.⁸⁶

⁷⁵ E. B. Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ; or, A Commentary on the Apocalypse, Critical and Historical*, 3rd ed. (London: Seeley, Burnside, and Seeley, 1847), vol. 2; and Barnes, *Notes on Revelation*. Froom says that Elliott’s *Horæ Apocalypticæ* is “doubtless the most elaborate work ever produced on the Apocalypse. . . . its 2,500 pages of often involved and overloaded text are buttressed by some 10,000 invaluable references to ancient and modern works bearing on the topics under discussion” (*The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, 3:716).

⁷⁶ Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 180–81; and Barnes, *Notes on Revelation*, 300–1.

⁷⁷ Barnes, *Notes on Revelation*, 302; Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 181–82.

⁷⁸ Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views*, 217; Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 183–84, 187–88; and Barnes, *Notes on Revelation*, 316.

⁷⁹ See Barnes, *Notes on Revelation*, 302.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 305–6.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 307 (*italics his*).

⁸³ Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views*, 226. See Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 193–438; and Barnes, *Notes on Revelation*, 306–28.

⁸⁴ Barnes, *Notes on Revelation*, 316–17.

⁸⁵ See Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 206–364. Elliott includes the following witness-

Historicists say the 1,260-day period of the witnesses' ministry (v. 3) symbolizes 1,260 years.⁸⁷ However, there seems to be no consensus regarding the *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem* of this period.⁸⁸ Barnes sees the 1,260 years as “embrac[ing] the whole period of the ascendancy and prevalence of the Papacy; or the whole time of the continuance of that corrupt domination in which Christendom was to be trodden down and corrupted by it,” but he does not give specific dates.⁸⁹

That the witnesses are described as “two” is taken to refer to the fact that “there would be *a competent number* of witnesses in the case.”⁹⁰ The witnesses' sackcloth attire is seen as their “state of sadness and grief; and they would be exposed to trouble and persecution.”⁹¹ With regard to verse 4, the allusion to the Zechariah 4 vision is acknowledged, and it is pointed out that lampstands symbolize churches in Revelation 1:20.⁹² But historicists vary about how the reference to the two olive trees and the two lampstands relates to the two witnesses.⁹³

es: Serenus, bishop of Marseilles; bishop participants of the Council of Frankfurt (794); Paulinus of Aquileia (b. ca. 726); Agobard, archbishop of Lyons (810–841); Claude, bishop of Turin; the Paulikian sect (founded 653); those professing Christ who were condemned for heresy at various councils (Orleans, 1022; Arras, 1025; Thoulouse, 1119; Oxford, 1160; Lombers, 1165); and Peter Waldo and the Waldensians.

⁸⁶ Barnes writes that “to the ‘testimony’ thus briefly referred to [Elliott’s work], we add that of such men as Wiclif, John Huss, and Jerome of Prague; and then that of the Reformers, Luther, Calvin, Zuingle, Melancthon, and their fellow-laborers” (*Notes on Revelation*, 319).

⁸⁷ Using the “year-for-a-day” principle from Ezekiel 4:6, historicists recalculate “forty-two months” and “a time, and times, and half a time” as 1,260 days, which are then interpreted as years. See Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views*, 218; Barnes, *Notes on Revelation*, 307; and Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 204.

⁸⁸ See Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views*, 218–19.

⁸⁹ Barnes, *Notes on Revelation*, 306.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 306–7. Elliott draws a similar conclusion because symbolism is used “uniformly elsewhere in the Apocalypse,” and also because “two . . . witnesses were required in the Mosaic law to constitute a conclusive testimony” (*Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 202).

⁹¹ Barnes, *Notes on Revelation*, 320. Elliott agrees, but he also observes that the attire of the Waldensians was “*rough sheep or goat-skin . . . [which was] sackcloth-like in its appearance*” (*Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 203, 361, italics his).

⁹² Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 200–1; Barnes, *Notes on Revelation*, 308.

⁹³ “From the *union* of the two symbols, of *lamps* and *olive-trees*, we are to understand that both the *ministers* or *gospel-preachers*, and the *churches* or *communities* taught by them, were alike included in the Apocalyptic Witness” (Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 201, italics his). Barnes notes that this emblem “denote[s] that these

Historicists view symbolically the miraculous powers attributed to the two witnesses (vv. 5–6).⁹⁴ Barnes sees the fire issuing out of the witnesses' mouths as "denunciations which they would utter . . . which would have the same effect on their enemies as if they breathed forth fire and flame." Elliott, however, says the fire refers to "God's fiery judgments destroying the apostates *nationally* that might have persecuted them."⁹⁵ Both relate verse 5 to Jeremiah 5:14.⁹⁶ The witnesses' power to withhold rain (Rev. 11:6) is understood as the power to cause a spiritual drought.⁹⁷ The witnesses' ability to turn water into blood is seen as "the bloodshed of wars, inflicted in God's Providence on the enemies of the Witnesses."⁹⁸

The witnesses' enemy—the beast from the abyss (v. 7)—is identified as the papacy.⁹⁹ According to Barnes the phrase "when they have finished their testimony" (v. 7) "must not be understood as referring to the time of the *completion* of the twelve hundred and sixty years, but to any time *during* that period when it could be said that they had borne a full and ample testimony for the truths of the gospel."¹⁰⁰ Elliott says that the commencement of the

two 'witnesses,' which might be compared with the two olive-trees, would be the means of supplying grace to the church" (*Notes on Revelation*, 308).

⁹⁴ Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 204–5, 362–64; and Barnes, *Notes on Revelation*, 308–10, 320–21.

⁹⁵ Barnes, *Notes on Revelation*, 309; and Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 204.

⁹⁶ Barnes, *Notes on Revelation*, 309; and Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 204 (italics his).

⁹⁷ Elliott sees a spiritual drought intended in Revelation 11:6, dismissing the idea that "for 1260 years there should be no *natural* rain" and referring to Isaiah 5:6 and Amos 8:11–12 (*Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 204–5). Likewise Barnes views the drought as a withholding of spiritual blessings, based on Deuteronomy 32:2; Psalm 72:6; Isaiah 55:10, 11; and Micah 5:7. As for fulfillment, he writes that "during the ages of their ministry, there was neither dew nor rain of a Spiritual kind upon the earth, but at the word of the witnesses. There was no knowledge of salvation but by their preaching—no descent of the Spirit but in answer to their prayers; and, as the witnesses were shut out from Christendom generally, a universal famine ensued" (*Notes on Revelation*, 321).

⁹⁸ Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 204. Similarly Barnes says Revelation 11:6 refers to "calamities [which] would *seem* to have been called down from heaven in answer to their prayers, and in order to avenge their wrongs. And can any one be ignorant that wars, commotions, troubles, disasters have followed the attempts to destroy those who have borne a faithful testimony for Christ, in the dark period of the world here referred to?" (*Notes on Revelation*, 321, italics his).

⁹⁹ Barnes, *Notes on Revelation*, 323. Elliott declares that "the *Wild Beast from the abyss* symbolized the ten kingdoms of Papal Christendom, or the Popes heading them" (*Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 366, italics his).

¹⁰⁰ Barnes, *Notes on Revelation*, 322 (italics his).

beast's war against the witnesses was in the Third Lateran General Council of 1179, in which the papacy declared war against the "heretics."¹⁰¹ He sees the defeat of the two witnesses as the papacy's persecution of the Waldensians and others who were inspired with the same witnessing spirit for Christ (e.g., John Wycliffe and his followers, Jan Huss and the Hussites) during the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries.¹⁰²

The deaths of the two witnesses are symbolically understood to refer to the period when "the voice of anti-papal testimony was most effectually silenced throughout Europe," which was the "opening of the [16th] century, just before the Reformation."¹⁰³ Elliott identifies the "*precise commencing date* of the predicted three and a half years, during which Christ's witnesses were to appear as mere dead corpses in the face of Christendom . . . [as] May 5, 1514."¹⁰⁴ This was when, during the Lateran Council, the "the orator of the Session ascended the pulpit; and . . . uttered that memorable exclamation of triumph . . . '*Jam nemo reclamat, nullus obsistit!*' 'There is an end of resistance to the Papal rule and religion: opposers there exist no more:' and again; 'The whole body of Christendom is now seen to be subjected to its *Head*, i.e., to *Thee*.'"¹⁰⁵

Historicists identify the "great city" in verse 8 as Rome.¹⁰⁶ The refusal to bury the two witnesses is fulfilled in the papacy's refusal to bury so-called heretics.¹⁰⁷ Again using the "year-for-a-day" principle, the three and a half days of the witnesses' deaths (v. 11) symbolize three and a half years. Elliott writes of the historical fulfillment, "The day of the 9th Session [of the Lateran Council]

¹⁰¹ Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 374–75.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 380–81.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 381–82. Barnes concurs (*Notes on Revelation*, 323).

¹⁰⁴ Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 397 (italics his).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 396–97 (italics his).

¹⁰⁶ Objecting to its identification with the actual city of Jerusalem (because the latter was never called a "great city" and "Egypt"), Elliott equates the "great city" of Revelation 11:8 with the city that reigned over the kings of the earth (Rev. 17), which he says was Rome (*Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 385, 387). Barnes defends his identification of the city of verse 8 with Rome by referring to passages in the writings of Reformers (and even of Romanists), "in which the abominations that prevailed in Rome are compared with those in [Egypt and] Sodom" (*Notes on Revelation*, 324).

¹⁰⁷ Barnes cites the following as denying Christian burial to heretics: the Third Lateran Council (1179), the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), the decree of Gregory IX (1227), the decree of Pope Martin (1422), and the Council of Constance (1422) (*Notes on Revelation*, 324).

was . . . May 5, 1514; the day of Luther's posting up his Theses at Wittenberg [was] . . . Oct. 31, 1517. . . . So that the whole interval is *precisely, to a day*, three and a half years."¹⁰⁸

The witnesses' resurrection was fulfilled, according to Elliott and Barnes, in the persons of Martin Luther and the other Reformers.¹⁰⁹ The witnesses' ascension (v. 12) is understood in varying ways. Elliott saw it as referring to the "political ascendancy and power" of the Reformers, but Barnes said it was "fulfilled in the various influences that served to establish and confirm the Reformation, and to introduce the great principles of religious freedom, giving to that work ultimate triumph, and showing that it had the favor of God."¹¹⁰ Ideas vary as to how the catastrophic events described in verse 13 were fulfilled.¹¹¹

A CRITIQUE OF THE HISTORICIST VIEW THAT THE TWO WITNESSES WERE ANTI-PAPAL CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

A critique of the historicist view—that the two witnesses were the lines of witnesses for Christ during the 1,260 years of papal domi-

¹⁰⁸ Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 402–3 (italics his). Barnes concurs, but "without insisting on this very minute accuracy" (*Notes on Revelation*, 326, italics his).

¹⁰⁹ Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 403–4. Barnes quotes Pope Hadrian as saying in 1523, "The heretics Huss and Jerome are now *alive again*, in the person of Martin Luther" (*Notes on Revelation*, 326–27).

¹¹⁰ See Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 410–15; and Barnes, *Notes on Revelation*, 327.

¹¹¹ Barnes says the "great earthquake" of Revelation 11:13 refers to "the *shock* produced throughout Europe by the boldness of Luther and his fellow-laborers in the Reformation" (Barnes, *Notes on Revelation*, 327, italics his). Elliott, however, takes it as "a mighty schism . . . of those countries from the Papacy in which Protestantism had been established as the State religion;—viz. of Saxony, Prussia, Sweden, Denmark" (*Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 415, italics his).

The falling of a tenth part of the city was fulfilled, according to Elliott, when "*Papal supremacy* was renounced in England, and the king [Henry VIII] was declared head . . . of the church" (*Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 416–17). Barnes, on the other hand, has a broader view. "This would well represent what occurred in the Reformation, when so considerable a portion of the colossal Papal power suddenly fell away, and the immediate effect on the portions of Europe where the Reformation prevailed, as compared with the whole of that power, might well be represented by the fall of a *tenth* part of a city" (*Notes on Revelation*, 327–28, italics his).

The seven-thousand persons killed in the earthquake are seen by Barnes as "referring to the number of persons that perished in Papal Europe in the wars that were consequent on the Reformation" (*Notes on Revelation*, 328). Elliott argues for a different understanding of *χιλιás* as "septenary of subdivisions" and says this was fulfilled "during the English Queen Elizabeth's reign, [when] the *seven Dutch United Provinces* were emancipated from the Spanish yoke, and at the same time the Papal rule and religion destroyed in them" (*Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 418–21, italics his).

nation before the Reformation—follows. This prophecy’s immediate context (Rev. 11:1–2) supports the idea that this chapter’s events will occur during a period when God will be dealing with Israel (and not the church).¹¹²

The historicist view has several weaknesses.¹¹³ First, the historical tracing of the lines of witnesses lacks adequate specificity and has significant time gaps.¹¹⁴ Strange points out these deficiencies in Elliott’s historical tracing: (1) No specific names are mentioned until the opening of the seventh century, and then only one—Serenus—is given. (2) The Anglo-Saxon churches are mentioned, but without specifying when their testimony began and ended. (3) The Paulikians (the Eastern line of witnesses, founded in AD 653) initially affected the Greek church—not the papacy (with whom this historicist view equates the beast of 11:7). Not until the beginning of the eleventh century did the Paulikians (who migrated to the West) attract the notice of Western Europe. (4) At least two major time gaps exist in Elliott’s tracing, for which little or no evidence of witnesses is given: some 200 years from Serenus (and the Anglo-Saxon churches) to the Council of Frankfurt (AD 794), and some 100 years from the close of the ninth century.¹¹⁵

Historicists understand that the temple, the holy city, and the two witnesses all refer to the church, but this is inconsistent.¹¹⁶ In Revelation 11 the temple is measured and not under the domina-

¹¹² See Tan, “Identity of the Two Witnesses,” 17–22. See also Hitchcock, “A Critique of the Preterist View of the Temple in Revelation 11:1–2,” 220–21; and idem, “A Defense of the Domitianic Date of Revelation,” 107–8, 122–34.

¹¹³ Govett and Strange point up many of the weaknesses of this historicist view of the two witnesses (Robert Govett, *The Locusts, the Euphratean Horsemen and the Two Witnesses* [London: James Nisbet, 1852; reprint, Miami Springs, FL: Conley and Schoettle, 1985], 77–145; and Thomas Lumisden Strange, *Observations on Mr. Elliott’s Horæ Apocalyptice: Offered towards Regulation of the Historical System of Interpreting the Apocalypse*, 2nd ed. [London: J. K. Campbell, High Holborn, 1852], 103–22).

¹¹⁴ Underscoring the importance of historical corroboration to this historicist view of the witnesses, Strange observes that if (as historicists allege) the two-witnesses prophecy has already been fulfilled, then he would expect historical records to substantiate every detail of such fulfillment (*Observations on Elliott’s Horæ Apocalyptice*, 104). However, “Mr. Elliott’s interpretation . . . will be found . . . unsupplied with the required historical facts necessary to its establishment, and hence, on this ground alone, the correctness of the interpretation is to be disputed; for the Spirit, it must be judged, cannot have offered a prophetic incident to our contemplation, and one of so precise a nature as to involve a chronological period for its duration, and yet have left us absolutely without the means of ascertaining all needful to make up its realization” (ibid., 104).

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 104–6.

¹¹⁶ See Elliott, *Horæ Apocalyptice*, 201.

tion of the Gentiles, whom historicists see as the papacy (the image thus representing protection from the papacy), while the holy city is trodden down by the Gentiles for forty-two months (signifying oppression by the papacy), and the two witnesses defend themselves by miraculous powers during the same period (1,260 days) from the beast (representing protection from the papacy).¹¹⁷

Elliott and Barnes state that in Revelation 10:8–11 the apostle John presents Luther and the Reformers receiving God's Word. Elliott and Barnes also teach that the prophecy of the two witnesses (chap. 11) was fulfilled prior to the Reformation. However, the future tenses of δώσω ("I will give," 11:3) and προφητεύουσιν ("they will prophesy") make this inherently contradictory and textually indefensible.¹¹⁸

Regarding the 1,260-day period of the witnesses' ministry (11:3), which historicists take to symbolize 1,260 years,¹¹⁹ "there is

¹¹⁷ Govett, *Locusts, Euphratean Horsemen and Two Witnesses*, 82–83. Continuing this line of reasoning, Govett shows the contradictions inherent in this historicist view. "Even if 'the paganized christians of the apostacy' were cast out of the temple and confined to the outer court by the measuring and the reverse, this view would not be sound. For their casting out of the temple and confining to its exterior court took place at the Reformation. Then the treading down of the holy city was to commence thereupon, and continue for 1260 years after it" (ibid., 83–84). Govett then challenges this assumption with historical facts. "Now the treading down of the holy city means the political oppression of Christ's faithful servants. Therefore for 1260 years after the Reformation true Protestants ought to be throughout Christendom politically oppressed. But this agrees neither with fact, nor with Mr. [Elliott's] own representations of the ascent of the Witnesses" (ibid., 84). Govett adds, "Again, Mr. [Elliott] assumes what is contrary to the text, that the treading down was not to begin to happen after the leaving out the exterior court, but that it had begun and been partly fulfilled some centuries before. Let us grant even this, and still the untenableness of his theory will appear" (ibid.). Then Govett focuses on further contradictions in the historicist understanding, "For the 1260 years of the city's oppression are also the 1260 years of the Witnesses' testimony. Then from A.D. 425, when the paganized christians began to oppress, to the end of 1260 years, or A.D. 1685, the faithful in christendom were to be politically oppressed. But, during a portion of that time, they, as the Two Witnesses, ascended into the heaven of political power above the reach of their enemies" (ibid.). He concludes, "Here is no escape. So long as the holy city and the Two Witnesses are made to signify the same or similar things, this inconsistency will abide with load of lead about the neck of the theory" (ibid.).

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 77–82. See also Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 90–121; Barnes, *Notes on Revelation*, 297–98.

¹¹⁹ Albertus Pieters examines the three passages offered in support of the "day-for-a-year" principle and concludes that the view's scriptural basis is inadequate. Regarding the first passage (Num. 14:34), he observes that this is "in the story of the spies, [and] the Israelites are condemned to spend a year in the desert for every day in the journey of the spies. What possible bearing has this on the interpretation of prophecy?" Regarding the second passage (Ezek. 4:4–6), he observes that this is "where the prophet is commanded to lie on his side for a certain number of days,

no consensus whatever [among historicist commentators] regarding the beginning and ending of the period thus designated.”¹²⁰ Walvoord comments, “The very multiplicity of such interpretations and identifications of the personnel of Revelation with a variety of historical characters is its own refutation.”¹²¹

Historicists, like idealists, refer to 1:20 to support identifying the two witnesses as the church. However, that verse states that the seven lampstands represent seven named churches. The lampstands in chapter 11 refer to the vision in Zechariah 4.¹²²

To see the witnesses’ miraculous powers (Rev. 11:5–6) as symbols faces at least six problems. (1) Although Elliott acknowledges literal parallels to these miracles, he assumes that these are figuratively understood.¹²³ (2) Elliott’s refusal to take verse 6 as referring to an actual drought because of the improbability of there

and he is told that these correspond to years. This rule, in that passage, does not go beyond the special act of the prophet.” Regarding the third passage Pieters writes, “[This] seems at first sight more pertinent. It is in Daniel 9:25 and following verses, where we have the prophecy of the ‘seventy weeks.’ All expositors are agreed that this deals with a period of 490 years, and if the ‘weeks’ are taken as periods of seven days each, then we do have here a prophecy in which a day stands for a year.” However, he notes that “the word does not properly mean a ‘week’ as we now use that term. It means a ‘seven,’ a ‘heptad,’ a group of seven units, without saying what kind of units. So understood, it has no relation to days at all. Even if in this case it is true that a day stands for a year, it does not follow that this is a general rule for prophecy.” Then Pieters refers to other prophetic passages in which a year stands for a year, “When Isaiah said that Ephraim should be broken within sixty-five years (7:8), or that within three years the glory of Moab should be brought into contempt (16:14), or that Tyre should be forgotten seventy years (23:15), he spoke of ordinary years. So did Jeremiah, in prophesying that Judah should be subject to Babylon for seventy years (29:10). When Daniel ‘understood by the books’ (9:2) that the seventy years of the captivity were almost accomplished, he did not reckon a day for a year! When our Lord Jesus Christ forewarned His disciples that He should be crucified and rise again ‘the third day,’ (Matt. 20:19) He did not mean that He was to lie in the grave three years” (*The Lamb, the Woman and the Dragon* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1937], 52–53). For further refutation of the historicist “day-for-a-year” principle, see Strange, *Observations on Elliott’s Horae Apocalypticæ*, 4–11; and Ray Summers, *Worthy Is the Lamb* (Nashville: Broadman, 1951), 39–41.

¹²⁰ Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views*, 219.

¹²¹ Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 19.

¹²² Tan, “The Identity of the Two Witnesses in Revelation 11,” 14. Commentators of varied backgrounds agree that Revelation 11:4 is alluding to the vision of Zechariah 4 (e.g., Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 89; Alan Johnson, “Revelation,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 505; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 420; George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 154; and Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 612.

¹²³ See Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, 204.

not being rain for 1,260 years illustrates the problem of the historicist year-day theory.¹²⁴ (3) Elliott and Barnes teach that a spiritual, not a literal, drought is intended in verse 6 because “protestant gospel ministers neither have the power nor the inclination to prevent the fall of the rain of grace. Rather they pray that it may descend. And in point of *fact*, it *does*.”¹²⁵ The Reformers and their predecessors “were those who were acting in obedience to the injunction to ‘preach the gospel to every creature’ [Mark 16:15], and at a time of which Jesus had said, ‘If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink’ [John 7:37].”¹²⁶ However, this makes verse 6 say something it does not affirm.

(4) A literal fire is emphasized by the double announcement in Revelation 11:5 and is consistent with the literal drought and plagues described in verse 6.¹²⁷ Another point that supports the genuineness of the witnesses’ miracles is that other miracles involving fire are described in similar ways (13:13; 20:9). Also John in his gospel used the words ποιέω σημεῖον (“performs great signs”) in reference to Christ’s miracles, which he also used in Revelation 13:13.¹²⁸ Additional support for the view that these were actual miracles is found in 2 Kings 1:9–12, in which Elijah called down fire from heaven, which consumed two companies of soldiers, and in Numbers 16:35, which records the incident when fire consumed the 250 men who rebelled against Moses and Aaron’s authority.¹²⁹

(5) Historicists cite Jeremiah 5:14 in suggesting that Revelation 11:5 refers to a metaphorical fire. But this is untenable because comparing God’s words in Jeremiah’s mouth with fire is an obvious metaphor, emphasized by the further comparison of the people with wood, which the fire will devour.¹³⁰ As Govett notes, “Why

¹²⁴ Govett, *Locusts, Euphratean Horsemen and Two Witnesses*, 89.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹²⁶ Strange, *Observations on Elliott’s Horae Apocalypticae*, 112.

¹²⁷ Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 90.

¹²⁸ Woods, “Revelation 13 and the First Beast,” 249; and Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 175.

¹²⁹ Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 180.

¹³⁰ Charles H. Dyer explains regarding Jeremiah 5:13–14, “The prophets—Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and others who were predicting doom—were, the [unbelieving] people said, just full of wind. God therefore told Jeremiah that His words would be fire that would consume the people” (“Jeremiah,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985; reprint, Colorado Springs: Cook, 1996], 1137). In contrast, the idea of a metaphor is not present in Revelation 11:5. Furthermore the subsequent verses

appeal to [Jer. 5:14], when the destruction by fire in the case of Elijah and the captains of fifty [in 2 Kings 1:9–12], was immediate? [and Rev 11:5] . . . proves the immediateness and the individuality of the destruction.”¹³¹ (6) History does not record that Luther, Wycliffe, Huss, and other witnesses had the power to cause wars and bloodshed (as taught by the historicist view).¹³² Thus since they did not have these miraculous powers, they could not have been the two witnesses.

The spirit and methods of the two witnesses are altogether different from what is commanded of (and experienced by) ministers of the gospel in this present church-age dispensation (cf. Matt. 5:44; 10:16; Luke 6:27, 35; Rom. 12:17; 1 Thess. 5:15; 1 Pet. 3:9).¹³³ Govett asks, “Was the church after the Reformation or before it to act differently from the churches in [the] apostles’ day? Smyrna and Permagos are under persecution . . . yet they are instructed to suffer patiently [Rev. 2:10, 13], and neither possess nor exercise the destructive agencies here exhibited.”¹³⁴

Historicists say that the witnesses’ deaths (11:7) mean the silencing of anti-papal testimony throughout Europe.¹³⁵ But this is inconsistent with their view of death in verse 5 (i.e., as political death),¹³⁶ and this view does not cohere with Elliott’s and Barnes’s references to Christian martyrdoms and the papacy’s refusal of burial for so-called heretics during this period.¹³⁷

The historicist notion that May 5, 1514, was the date of the witnesses’ deaths is incorrect, because “there were Lollards in England, Waldenses in Piedmont and Dauphiny, Calixtines, Picards, and Taborites in Bohemia . . . All then that is proved is that they came not to Rome. But their silence *there*, is no proof that they

(Jer. 5:15–17) elaborate on *how* the people will be devoured, that is, by an invading enemy. In contrast, there is no intermediate instrument of destruction mentioned in Revelation 11:5, but rather the immediate effect of death to the enemies, after fire proceeds from the mouths of the two witnesses (see Charles Lee Feinberg, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982], 58–59).

¹³¹ Govett, *Locusts, Euphratean Horsemen and Two Witnesses*, 94.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 95.

¹³³ Seiss, *The Apocalypse*, 255–56.

¹³⁴ Govett, *Locusts, Euphratean Horsemen and Two Witnesses*, 96–97.

¹³⁵ Strange points out several problems associated with identifying the beast of Revelation 11:7 (and chap. 13) with the papacy (*Observations on Elliott’s Horae Apocalypticae*, 129–36).

¹³⁶ Govett, *Locusts, Euphratean Horsemen and Two Witnesses*, 103.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

were not holding up the torch of testimony in their native lands.”¹³⁸ Moreover, with regard to the alleged three and a half years during which the witnesses remained dead (vv. 9, 11), Elliott is inconsistent, for he counts the three years of 365 days each and the half year of 360 days.¹³⁹

According to historicists, the city where the witnesses’ corpses lie (v. 8) is Rome. But the following three points show that the city is Jerusalem, not Rome. (1) Jerusalem has previously been described as the “great” city (Neh. 7:4 [“large and spacious”]; Jer. 22:8; Lam. 1:1).¹⁴⁰ (2) This city “spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt” (Rev. 11:8, KJV). The word πνευματικῶς (“spiritually”) indicates that the city’s actual name is not Sodom or Egypt.¹⁴¹ These names suggest moral perversion and hostility toward God and His people.¹⁴² (3) As Thomas points out, “Reference in the last part of Rev. 11:8 is unquestionably to Christ’s crucifixion. The prophets will die in the same place—note the καὶ—as their Lord did.”¹⁴³ Since the Reformers and their predecessors did not die in Jerusalem, they could not have been the two witnesses.

Historicists affirm that the three and a half days (equaling years, in their view) of the witnesses’ deaths (vv. 9, 11) extended from May 5, 1514, to October 31, 1517 (when Luther posted his ninety-five theses at Wittenberg). And historicists hold that the witnesses’ resurrection (v. 11) was fulfilled in Martin Luther and the other Reformers. But this view has three weaknesses. (1) The period between the martyrdoms of John Wycliffe (d. AD 1384), John Huss (d. AD 1415), and Jerome of Prague (d. AD 1416), and the rise of Luther (AD 1517) was more than a hundred years, not three and a half years. (2) As Govett points out, “Luther . . . was witnessing for God eight years before the time needed by the [historicists’] theory: nor was he silenced at the time asserted to be the

¹³⁸ Ibid., 105 (italics his).

¹³⁹ Strange, *Observations on Elliott’s Horae Apocalypticae*, 115.

¹⁴⁰ Smith, *Revelation*, 172.

¹⁴¹ Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 93.

¹⁴² Ibid. Stewart Custer writes, “Jerusalem under the heel of the Antichrist will be so depraved that it can be called symbolically *Sodom* (the most morally wicked single city in the OT, Gen. 19) and *Egypt* (the nation that enslaved God’s people, Exod. 1)” (*From Patmos to Paradise: A Commentary on Revelation* [Greenville, SC: Bob Jones, 2004], 126, italics his).

¹⁴³ Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 94.

era of the death of all the witnesses of Christ!”¹⁴⁴ (3) Acknowledgement of the witnesses’ resurrection comes rather late in the historicist scheme. The date of Pope Adrian’s words (“The heretics Huss and Jerome now alive again, in the person of Martin Luther”) is 1523—six years after Luther posted his ninety-five theses in 1517.¹⁴⁵ Tenney points out that “if the [historicist] method is valid, its predictions would have been sufficiently plain at the outset to give the reader some inkling of what they meant. . . . [John] was commanded not to seal the words of the prophecy, because the time was at hand (22:10). Evidently the prophecies were intended to be sufficiently plain for the average Christian to understand at least a part of them, and to apply them to his thinking.”¹⁴⁶

In verse 10 “globe-spanning interest in these two [witnesses’] deaths is anticipated.”¹⁴⁷ However, the deaths of the Reformers (and their predecessors) seem to have sparked only local or (at most) national interest.¹⁴⁸

Seiss’ analysis of historicist identifications of the two witnesses of Revelation 11—that these interpretations violate both the biblical text and history—is certainly applicable to this historicist identification of the Revelation witnesses as anti-papal Christian witnesses during the 1,260 years prior to the Reformation. He writes, “Modern writers [say] they have found [the two witnesses of Rev 11 in] successions of people scattered through the middle ages, . . . but they . . . purchase their conclusions at the expense of explaining away every distinct feature of the record, doing violence to the facts of history, and super-exalting almost every species of obscure and even heretical sects and sectarists as God’s only acknowledged prophets.”¹⁴⁹

CONCLUSION

After a brief sketch of idealist and historicist approaches to the book of Revelation, the predominant view (of the two witnesses) in

¹⁴⁴ Govett, *Locusts, Euphratean Horsemen and Two Witnesses*, 125.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁴⁶ Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, 139.

¹⁴⁷ Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 96.

¹⁴⁸ John Foxe, *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, ed. William Byron Forbush (Philadelphia: Universal Book and Bible House, 1926), 135–84.

¹⁴⁹ Seiss, *The Apocalypse*, 243.

both approaches was briefly described. The principal idealist view of the witnesses in chapter 11 is that they symbolize the church throughout the church age. A prevalent historicist view of the two witnesses is that they represent a long line of Christian witnesses during the 1,260 years of papal domination prior to the Reformation. This article critiqued these idealist and historicist views of the two witnesses, finding each to be problematic and unsustainable. Article 4 in this series defends a futurist view of the two witnesses in Revelation 11:3–13.