

## Timeline of theories on the two witnesses

by Douglas E. Cox

The word of God in prophecy is like mountains, and the theories, and opinions, and interpretations of men are like clouds in comparison. The prophet Joel spoke of the day of the Lord as “A day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness.” [Joel 2:2] Clouds are associated with darkness of a spiritual kind.

Peter described the false teachers as “clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever.” [2 Peter 2:17]

The invading armies of Gog and Magog are compared to a cloud, and a storm consisting of many clouds. “Thou shalt ascend and come like a storm, thou shalt be like a cloud to cover the land, thou, and all thy bands, and many people with thee.” [Ezekiel 38:9]

Mountains remain fixed, and unchanged generation after generation, but clouds are variable, transient, and subject to winds. Paul wrote of “winds of doctrine.” He encouraged the saints to be mature and to “come to the knowledge of the Son of God . . . That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every *wind of doctrine*, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive.” [Ephesians 4:14]

Below, the various theories about the two witnesses of Revelation 11:1-14 are reviewed. Like clouds they pass, while the truth underlying the prophecy is like a mountain that cannot be moved. In this case, I suggest, the two witnesses represent God’s word, and the Spirit of Christ.

**Joachim of Fiore** (1132-1202) was said to have regarded the two witnesses as two religious orders who fight the Antichrist. [Reeves, p. 282]

**Francis of Assisi** (1182-1226) founded the Franciscan Order.

**Thomas Aquinas** (c. 1225–1274) believed that during the time of Antichrist, God calls the two witnesses, Enoch and Elijah, from the terrestrial paradise. [Peterson, p. 38] Interpretations similar to this had a lengthy prior tradition in works such as Pseudo-Ephrem, the Syriac Apocalypse of Peter, Pseudo-Methodius, the Syriac Apocalypse of Ezra, Adso, the Pseudo-Johannine Apocalypse, and other works. Criticisms of Joachim’s views by Thomas were refuted by **Arnold of Vilanova** (c.1238–c.1310), a physician and alchemist. Arnold predicted that Antichrist’s reign would begin either in 1365 or in 1369 A.D.

**Peter Olivi** (1247–1298) a Franciscan reformer, was influenced by the writings of Joachim of Fiore. He spoke of Christ’s three advents: in the first century in the flesh, in the thirteenth in the spirit, and at the end in judgment. He thought of himself as standing at the transition point between the fifth and sixth periods of the New Testament era. He viewed the Apocalypse as a historical road-map laying out the course of church history. David Burr wrote:

The most recent study of Olivi's commentary on the Apocalypse argues that those who censured him did so because they understood what he was saying and considered it heretical. It undermined their basic notion of the church. They saw it as an institution which at its very inception had been given its basic organizational structure and the spiritual guidance to insure that the organizational structure would provide good leadership. Olivi saw it as an institution in process. He thought the organizational structure had developed in time and would evolve even more in the future as history entered a new age of the Holy Spirit. He saw the coming temptation of Antichrist as a total blitzkrieg of evil in which the powers of darkness would gain control of the papacy and a handful of embattled elect would defend the faith against their own leaders.

Olivi viewed Francis as "the Elijah of the sixth age ready to wage war on Antichrist." He identified the two witnesses with Enoch and Elijah, and also with the Franciscan and Dominican Orders. He wrote: [Petersen pp. 37-38]

According to Augustine, Gregory, and Richard, these two witnesses are literally Enoch and Elijah, and this is generally held. However, by them are also designated two orders of preachers, one of which will be more dedicated to exterior rule and suffering whence it is designated in John 21 by Peter to whom Christ said: feed my sheep, etc. and when you are old you will stretch out your hands, i.e., on a cross, and follow me, i.e., to the cross. Indeed, the other is given more to contemplation and peace whence it is designated by John of whom Christ said: I will that he remains this way till I come.

**Nicolaus Lyranus** (c. 1270-1349) considered the Apocalypse to be a prophetic history of the Church of Christ from its commencement to its close. He identified Pope Sylvester and Mena as the two witnesses.

**Prous Boneta** (d. 1325) was executed as a heretic for confessing that Olivi surpassed Francis in importance; that Francis was a latter-day Elijah, and Olivi a latter-day Enoch. [Petersen p. 39]

**John of Rupescissa** (d. 1362) was a Franciscan monk. He was the author of *Vademecum in Tribulatione* and other works, that were produced while he was in prison at Avignon. He predicted Antichrist would appear 1366 A.D., and his reign would be three and a half years, and the two prophets of Revelation 11 would preach in the same period. The dates were similar to those previously suggested by Arnold of Vilanova.

In his scheme, the destruction of Jerusalem was taken to be in 75 A.D., and by adding 1,290 years, based on his interpretation of Daniel 12:11, he obtained the date 1366 A.D. for the beginning of the millennial reign. He supposed another Antichrist rebellion, represented by Gog and Magog, would occur 700 years later.

**Walter Brute** was a Briton who was educated at Oxford. He noticed that his time seemed to fall into the period indicated by Daniel's 1,290 day prophecy, for if the day for a year principle was applied to the 1,290 days, which he supposed was the time remaining after that abomination of desolation was set up in the place previously occupied by the temple, and the dispersion of the Jews that followed, the prophecy seemed to point to his time. Perhaps the Jews would soon be gathered into the Christian sheepfold. He said, "For soone after the departure of the Apostles, the fayth was kept with the obseruation of the rites of the Gentiles, and not of the rites of Moses law,

nor of the law of the Gospell of Iesus Christ.” The following is an account of Brute’s interpretation of some of the time prophecies, from John Foxe’s Acts and Monuments.

But Luke 21. in hys Gospell speaketh more playnely hereof. When you therefore shall see Ierusalem to be compassed about with an army, then know ye that the desolation therof shall draw nigh. And afterward it foloweth: And they shall fall by the face of the sword, and shall be led away captiue to all nations, and Ierusalem shalbe troden vnder foote of the heathen, vntill the tymes of the nations be fulfilled. Now, in Daniell thus it is written of thys matter. And after 72. weekes, shall Christ be slayne, neyther shall that be his people, that will deny hym. And as for the Citie and sanctuary, shall a people (with his captayne that will come wyth them) destroy the sayd citie and sanctuary, and hys ende shalbe to be wasted vtterly, to it be brought to naught, and after the ende of the warre, shall come the desolation appointed. In one weeke shall he confirme the couenant to many, and within halfe a weeke shall the offering and sacrifice cease. And in the temple shall there be the abhomination of desolation, and euen vnto the ende shall the desolation continue. And els where in Daniell, thus it is writen: From the tyme that the continuall sacrifice shall be offered, and that the abhomination shall be placed in desolation, there shall be 1290. dayes. Now, if any man will beholde the Chronicles, he shall finde, that after the destruction of Ierusalem was accomplished, and after the strong hand of the holy people was fully dispersed, and after the placing of the abhomination, that is to say, the Idol of desolation of Ierusalem, within the holy place, where the temple of God was before, there had passed 1290. dayes taking a day for a yeare, as commonly it is taken in the Prophetes. And the tymes of the heathen people are fulfilled, after whose rites and customes God suffered the holy citie to be trampled vnder foote for 42. monethes. For although the Christian Church, which is the holy citie, continued in the fayth from the Ascention of Christ, euen till this time: yet hath it not obserued and kept the perfection of the fayth all thys whole season. For soone after the departure of the Apostles, the fayth was kept with the obseruation of the rites of the Gentiles, and not of the rites of Moses law, nor of the law of the Gospell of Iesus Christ. Wherefore seyng that this tyme of the error of the Gentiles is fulfilled: it is likely that Christ shall call the Gentiles from the rites of their gentilitie, to the perfection of the Gospell, as he called the Iewes from the lawe of Moyses to the same perfection, in hys first comyng: that there may be one shepefolde of the Iewes and Gentiles, vnder one shepeherd Christ. Seyng therefore that Antichrist is known which hath seduced the nations: then shall the elect after that they haue forsaken the errorrs of their Gentilitie come, through the light of gods word, to the perfection of the Gospell, and that same seducer shall be slayne with the sword of gods word. So that by these thyngs it doth partly appeare vnto me, why that at this tyme rather then at an other tyme, this matter of Antichrist is moued.

**Hans Hut** (d. 1527) was an Anabaptist preacher in Southern Germany and Austria. He was influenced by Thomas Müntzer (1488–1525), and he considered Müntzer and Heinrich Pfeiffer to be the two witnesses of Rev. 11.

Hut took part in the battle of Thuringia during the German Peasants’ War on 15 May 1525 at Bad Frankenhausen.

Hut expected the coming of the Kingdom of God at Pentecost 1528, and hoped to be included among the 144,000 elect. In Augsburg, Hut was arrested, and imprisoned, and tortured, and he died in a fire at the Augsburg prison in December 1527.

Many Lutherans viewed **Martin Luther** (1483–1546) as one of the two witnesses, but Luther himself never promoted this belief, but he applied the prophecy of Elijah's return to John the Baptist.

Petersen wrote: "the idea that Luther was either an Elijah of the last days, or one of the adventual witnesses of the Apocalypse, or at least a model prophet, is well attested." [p. 102]

Swiss reformer **Ulrich Zwingli** (1484–1531) and Philipp Melancthon (1497–1560) considered Luther to be a latter day Elijah.

**Ulrichus Velenus** (c. 1491–c. 1531) in 1520 said that "as Antichrist has been long in the world, so also have been his opponents, the two witnesses."

**Melchior Hoffman** (1495–1543) was the Reformer who carried the gospel to Baltic areas such as Estonia and Livonia, to Emden in Friesland, and to Amsterdam; he was viewed by his followers as a great prophet and an apostle, and as the prophet Elijah. He became associated with a fringe group of Anabaptists in Strasbourg in 1530. Hoffman was obsessed with eschatology, and he expected the return of Christ in 1533. He was put in prison, where he remained until his death. Peterson wrote:

Melchior Hoffman said himself, among other things: that he was in the hands of my lords (the council) but that he advised them against doing violence to his innocent blood. One should know that one had in him the legitimate Elijah who should come before the judgment day of Christ. God had sent him to us and we did not want to know him. He would be the last; God would send us no one else, etc.

Even as Hoffman held open this adventual role for himself, others were becoming identified, or were identifying themselves, as the second of the two adventual witnesses. In his confession, Obbe Philips recalled that, with Hoffman and others of his followers in prison or killed, many others arose with further visions. So it was prophesied that either Cornelius Poldermann or Kasper Schwenckfeld was Enoch, and that the 144,000 apostolic messengers would leave Strassburg to preach throughout the earth when Hoffman was released from prison. Philips related:

Thereafter Elijah and Enoch would stand upon the earth as two torches and olive trees. No one might harm or hinder them; and they should be dressed in sacks; and, if anyone should hinder them, fire would go from their mouths and devour their enemies.

In Munster, Germany, Annabaptist Jan Matthys set up a theocracy. He died violently in 1534. Another leader, Jan van Leyden was executed after the 1534–1535 Munster "kingdom."

**Menno Simons** (1496–1561) became a leader of the Anabaptist movement in the Netherlands, when it was in danger of losing its original identity under the influence of chiliastic and revolutionary leaders who succeeded in winning large followings. He maintained original peaceful Biblical Anabaptist concepts and won many who had been in danger of being swallowed up by the Münsterites. Simons commented on the prophecy about Elijah:

Therefore, one of two things must follow: either we are not going to have any Elijah any

more, since John was the Elijah who was to come; or if an Elijah should still come, he must propose and teach us nothing but the foundation and Word of Christ according to the Scriptures. For Christ is the man who sits upon David's throne and shall reign forever in the kingdom, house, and congregation of Jacob.

**Johann Funck** (1518–1566) understood the angel with the eternal gospel and the two adventual witnesses as referring to Luther.

On **Matthias Flacius** (1520–1575), Peterson wrote [p. 104]:

In his *Glossa Compendiaria*, Flacius speaks of our witnesses as prophets who testify to the truth and oppose error. They are not a literal Enoch and Elijah, an idea refuted by Jerome (in his letter to Marcella). Although it is difficult, he admits, to say much about when they will appear, the fact that the two witnesses are prophets, preachers, or pious doctors during the time of the greatest infamy of Antichrist is beyond doubt.

**Pope Sixtus V.** (1521-1590) applied Rev. 11:4 to Buonaventura and Aquinas, in his 1588 bull *Triumphantis Hierusalem*, saying, "For these 'are the two olive trees and two candlesticks' (Apoc. 11: 4) lighting the house of God, who both with the fat of charity and the light of science entirely illumine the whole Church."

**Robert Bellarmine** (1542-1621) was a Cardinal who thought that denying that Enoch and Elijah were the two witnesses was a *heresy*.

**Luis De Alcasar** (1554-1613) was a Spanish Jesuit theologian. He wrote a commentary called "Investigation of the Hidden Sense of the Apocalypse" in which the two witnesses were identified with "the great wisdom and sanctity of the primitive preachers."

**Hugo Grotius** (1583–1645) claimed that the two witnesses were Jewish and Gentile Christians in Aelia, the city built after the destruction of Jerusalem.

**Joseph Mede** (1586–1639) wrote in his *Key to the Apocalypse*: "These are the interpreters and assertors of Divine truth, who should deplore that foul and lamentable contamination of the Church of Christ, by continual complaints, and whom God would raise up as unceasing monitors to the Christian world, committing whoredom with the Gentiles, and as guides to his saints preserving the faith."

**Henry Hammond** (1605–1660) was an English churchman and scholar, and a friend of King Charles I. He was the King's chaplain, when the King became a captive in the hands of parliament, after the First Civil War (1642-1645). King Charles was tried for treason against England by using his power to pursue his personal interest rather than the good of England. He was found guilty and beheaded on 30 January 1649. Hammond claimed the bishops of the Jewish Church and the Gentile Church in Jerusalem during the period of the Jewish revolt led by Simon bar Kokhba in 132–136 A.D. were the two witnesses.

After Charles' death, **Edmund Hall** argued that "Charles I was not Antichrist, as 'tis commonly taught, but one of the Witnesses slain for the truth; after 3<sup>1/2</sup> years according to prophecy, he would rise again in the person of Charles II."

In England in 1636 two Colchester weavers, **Richard Farnham** (d. 1642) and **John Bull** (d. 1642), claimed to be the "two witnesses" of Revelation 11. They were arrested on a charge of heresy in

1636. In 1640 Farnham sickened of the plague, and both died in 1642. Bull died ten days after Farnham's death.

**John Reeve** (1608–1658) and his cousin **Lodowicke Muggleton** (1609–1698) were English tailors who claimed to have received visions from God, revealing that they were the two witnesses of Revelation 11. They preached the final three and a half years were to begin about 1655. Muggleton was arrested and imprisoned on charges of blasphemy in 1653. Both Reeve and Muggleton were sentenced to six months in Bridewell Prison in 1654 for cursing the Reverend Mr. Goffin who died very shortly after having been cursed. After Reeve's death in 1658, Muggleton revised some of Reeve's doctrines.

Muggleton was arrested and convicted of blasphemy in 1676, for which he was fined £500.00. The Muggletonians, a sect founded on their teachings, persisted until the 1970's.

**Hermann Witsius** (1636–1708) identified the two witnesses with the two tables of the law.

**Benjamin Keach** (1640–1704) was the author of "Antichrist Stormed," (1689) in which he claimed that the arrival of the Protestant William of Orange and Queen Mary in England marked the termination of the 1260 days of Revelation 11:3, and the ministry of the two witnesses. This event, he believed, ended the domination of the Roman Church in England.

Dutch Protestant theologian **Campegius Vitringa** (1669-1722) viewed the Book of Revelation as a structured chronological outline of the history of the Christian church. He suggested the two witnesses were John Huss and Jerome of Prague.

**John Wesley** (1703-1791) wrote in Explanatory Notes on the Whole Bible:

These seem to be two prophets; two select, eminent instruments. Some have supposed (though without foundation) that they are Moses and Elijah, whom they resemble in several respects. . . . Verse 4. These are the two olive trees – That is, as Zerubbabel and Joshua, the two olive trees spoken of by Zechariah, Zechariah 3:9; were then the two chosen instruments in God's hand, even so shall these be in their season. Being themselves full of the unction of the Holy One, they shall continually transmit the same to others also. And the two candlesticks – Burning and shining lights. Standing before the Lord of the earth – Always waiting on God, without the help of man, and asserting his right over the earth and all things therein. Verse 5. If any would kill them – As the Israelites would have done Moses and Aaron, Numbers 16:41. He must be killed thus – By that devouring fire. Verse 6. These have power – And they use that power. See verse 10. Revelation 11:10 To shut heaven, that it rain not in the days of their prophesying -During those "twelve hundred and sixty days." And have power over the waters – In and near Jerusalem. To turn them into blood – As Moses did those in Egypt. And to smite the earth with all plagues, as often as they will – This is not said of Moses or Elijah, or any mere man besides. And how is it possible to understand this otherwise than of two individual persons?

**Johann Gottfried Eichhorn** (1753-1827) was a German Protestant theologian. He claimed the two witnesses were the Jewish priests Ananus and Jesus in the period 64-67 A.D.

Baptist minister and theologian **Andrew Fuller** (1754-1815) identified the two witnesses as the Waldenses and Albigenses.

**Moses Stuart** (1780-1852), in his *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, interpreted the prophecy of the two witnesses as showing that “a competent number of divinely commissioned and faithful Christian witnesses, endowed with miraculous powers, should bear testimony against the corrupt Jews, during the last days of their Commonwealth, respecting their sins; that they should proclaim the truths of the Gospel.”

**Friedrich Bleek** (1793-1859) identified the two witnesses as Moses and Elijah, following ancient tradition. This was also the view of C. F. J. Züllig. [Bleek’s *Lectures on the Apocalypse*]

**John Cumming** (1807-1881) identified the two witnesses as the Eastern and Western churches.

**James Stuart Russell** (1816-1895) identified the two witnesses as James and the apostle Peter. He wrote in *The Parousia* :

They are endowed with miraculous powers, a characteristic which must not be explained away, and which will apply only to apostolic witnesses. They are to seal their testimony with their blood, and thus far we find St. James and St. Peter perfectly fulfil the conditions of the problem. We are sure that they were both martyrs of Christ, and that too in the last days of the Jewish commonwealth.

**E. W. Bullinger** (1837-1913) believed the two witnesses would be two men, based on the fact that Joshua and Zerubbabel in Zechariah’s prophecy were men. In his *Commentary on Revelation* he wrote:

The two Olive Trees in Zech. iv. are there explained as denoting ZERUBBABEL the prince, and JESHUA the high priest. And when it says here in Rev. xi. 4: “These (two Witnesses) ARE the two Olive Trees, the Figure is Metaphor, and the verb “are” means represents. “These represent the two Olive trees,” etc. This is the Spirit’s own explanation of these two Witnesses. Just as Zerubbabel and Jeshua were raised up, and gifted, and Divinely endowed, and protected against Satan’s assaults, so in the coming day of Israel’s acknowledgment by God, two other great Witnesses from God will be raised up, corresponding to them, occupying a similar position as the depositories of Heavenly power and wisdom, and exercising a similar ministry.

The two Olive Trees represented two individuals then; and they represent two individuals here in this Scripture. They will be the “two Olive Trees” for their day, as Zerubbabel and Jeshua were in a former day.

...

Expositors have exhausted their ingenuity in endeavouring to answer the question, which they all ask, “Who are the two witnesses?” We do not ask the question, and therefore we have nothing to answer. Why cannot we leave them alone? If God wished us to know He could have told us. The fact that He has not done so ought to stop our mouths. The wildest extravagances have been indulged in from the earliest times, and it would fill very many pages if we were merely to name them. They would require no refutation, for they are all mutually destructive of one another. Alford says: “No solution has ever been given of this portion of the prophecy.” He means, of course, no satisfactory solution, for the interpretations themselves are innumerable.

**Joseph F. Rutherford** (1869-1942) was a lawyer, and the second president of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, (Jehovah's Witnesses) who preached that 1914 was to be the date of Christ's invisible return.

Society members George H. Fisher and Clayton J. Woodworth were the authors of the book, *The Finished Mystery*, which was published by Rutherford in 1917 and serialized in the society's Watch Tower publication. Members of the society expected God's Kingdom to establish rule on earth and for the saints to be raised to heaven in 1918. Rutherford wrote in January of that year: "The Christian looks for the year to bring the full consummation of the church's hopes."

In 1918 the US Attorney General condemned *The Finished Mystery*. Wikipedia says: "Warrants were issued for the arrest of Rutherford and seven other Watch Tower directors, who were charged under the 1917 Espionage Act of attempting to cause insubordination, disloyalty, refusal of duty in the armed forces and obstructing the recruitment and enlistment service of the U.S. while it was at war."

On June 21, 1918 Rutherford and his associates were sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment.

Nine months after Rutherford and his associates were sentenced—and with the war past—on March 21, 1919, the appeals court ordered bail for all eight defendants, and on March 26, they were released in Brooklyn on bail of \$10,000 each. On May 14, 1919, the U.S. circuit court of appeals in New York ruled: "The defendants in this case did not have the temperate and impartial trial to which they were entitled, and for that reason the judgment is reversed."

The Department of Justice then decided to drop the charges. The Society interpreted the release of Rutherford and the other seven society members as the fulfillment of Revelation 11:7, thereby implying that Rutherford and others who spent time in jail were the two witnesses.

**Ronald Weinland** (b. 1949) was a minister in the Worldwide Church of God from 1981 to 1995. He left the organization after Pastor General Joseph Tkach Sr. began to change teachings that were established by the church's founder Herbert W. Armstrong. Weinland proclaimed himself one of the two witnesses in 2006, and in April 2008 he named his wife Laura as the other. On June 13, 2012 Weinland was convicted by a jury of tax evasion. In November 2012 he was sentenced to 42 months in prison, and he began serving his sentence on Feb 1, 2013.

## References

Friedrich Bleek, Theodor Hossbach, Samuel Davidson. Lectures on the Apocalypse. Williams and Norgate. London. (1875)

Wilhelm Bousset & Augustus Henry Keane. The Antichrist legend; a chapter in Christian and Jewish folklore, Englished from the German of W. Bousset, with a prologue on the Babylonian dragon myth (1896).

L. DeVun. Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time: John of Rupescissa in the Late Middle Ages (New York, 2009).

English dissenters: Muggletonians

Andrew Colin Gow. The Red Jews: Antisemitism in an Apocalyptic Age, 1200–1600. Brill, 1995. pp. 107–108.

C. Krahn and C. J. Dyck. (1990). Menno Simons (1496–1561). Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online.

Robert E. Lerner. John the Astonishing. *Oliviana*, 3, 2009.

Petrus Iohannis Olivi: Selections from the Apocalypse commentary

Rodney L. Petersen. *Preaching in the Last Days: The Theme of "Two Witnesses" in the 16th and 17th Centuries*. Oxford University Press, 1993.

Marjorie Reeves. *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism*. Oxford University Press, 1969.

John of Rupescissa. *Liber secretorum eventuum*

Moses Stuart. *A commentary on the Apocalypse*. 1851. Volume 2.

C. H. H. Wright. *Zechariah and his prophecies considered in relation to modern criticism*. E. P. Dutton & Co., N.Y., 1879.