

A tropical landscape featuring several palm trees on the left and a low stone wall in the foreground. The background shows a sandy area and a hillside under a clear sky. The text is overlaid on the image in a large, white, sans-serif font.

**THE FIRST TWO
WITNESSES
OF THE
RESURRECTION**

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The First Two Witnesses of the Resurrection

by

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Printed in the United States of America

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THE FIRST TWO WITNESSES OF THE RESURRECTION

Two Men at the Tomb

It is surprising to learn that the first ones to see and bear witness to the resurrected Christ were neither Mary Magdalene nor Peter nor any of the other disciples or other women who came on that early morning to His empty tomb almost two thousand years ago.

Rather, it was two mysterious visitors whose names are not given. Here is Dr. Luke's account. Speaking first of the women he wrote.

And they entered in, and found not the body of the Lord Jesus.

And it came to pass, as they were much perplexed thereabout, behold, two men stood by them in shining garments: And . . . they said unto them, Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen (Luke 24:3-6).

Who *were* these two mysterious men?

Oh, that's easy, some would say. They were two angels sent by God who just *looked* like men.

But then, why would Luke call them “men”? The Greek word he used was *aner*, the word for *men*, which he never used elsewhere to refer to angels (that Greek word is *aggelos*, used by Luke over 40 times in his two books (Luke and Acts), always clearly meaning angels. He certainly knew the difference; he didn't hesitate to use the word for “angels” when he reported the conversation of the two disciples as they headed home to Emmaus and were discussing the report of the women who had encountered them and *thought* they were angels (Luke 24:23).

Luke was a very careful researcher and writer (note Luke 1:3), as well as divinely inspired in writing his two books, and he said there were two *men* at the tomb. Further, he reported that these same two men apparently were there when Christ ascended back to heaven forty days later, again giving their witness concerning *that* amazing event.

And when He had spoken these things, while they beheld, He was taken up: and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, Why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven (Acts 1:9-11).

Note the interesting use of the same phrase in these two records.

behold, two men stood by them in shining garments (Luke 24:4).

behold, two men stood by them in white apparel
(Acts 1:10).

In neither case, does Luke tell us where these two men came from or where they went, or what they were doing in the forty days between their two appearances. This his research apparently could not uncover, nor did the Holy Spirit reveal it to him. Probably the best guess is that they also returned to heaven in between their two appearances (and wonderful assurances!) to those other humans who had loved and followed the Lord Jesus.

But they were said by Luke to be *men!* On the other hand, Mary Magdalene had seen “*two angels in white*” sitting where Jesus' body had lain (John 20:12). Also, Matthew wrote that “*the angel of the LORD descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door*” and that it was he who had spoken to the women telling them that “*He is not here: for He is risen.*” Matthew mentioned only one angel not two men. Mark's account also reported only one witness, but he called him “*a young man . . . clothed in a long white garment*” (Mark 16:5).

Possible Contradictions

Now all these accounts seem superficially to contradict each other, and some skeptics have used this as an argument for rejecting the resurrection itself. Christians have long since learned, however, that superficial contradictions can turn out to be a strong argument for the reality of an event. They obviously disprove any collusion on the part of the four gospel writers. Each is simply reporting the event as he either saw it himself or heard about it from those who did.

They definitely did not get together and agree on what they would say, or they would have given the same story. But there are several incidental observations that do agree, indicating the event really took place, in spite of the seemingly contradictory reports. For example, they all report that the witness or witnesses wore white garments. And all agree, of course, that the heavy stone had been rolled away, the tomb was empty, Christ had been raised and one or more messengers from heaven had been sent to tell them so.

As to who these heavenly messengers might be, most expositors simply assume they were angels who had assumed the form of men. That this is possible is evident from other Biblical narratives—especially the account of Lot and the two men/angels that called for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah back in the days of Abraham (Genesis 19).

However, as noted above, Luke was careful to call them men rather than angels, both at the resurrection and the ascension, so this fact seems worthy of study. All scholars agree that Luke was clearly a careful scientist and able historian, and he may have had a definite reason for saying they were men. Mark also, of course, had spoken of a “*young man*” at the sepulcher.

It is also worth noting that, although the Greek words translated “man” or “men” are never used for “angels,” the regular word for “angel” *can* occasionally be used for men. Its basic meaning is “messenger,” and there are at least six occurrences in the New Testament where it is clearly referring to human messengers rather than angels, and is actually translated “messenger.”

These are exceptions, however. If we assume, for the sake of argument, that these messengers from heaven at the tomb were actually real human men, it would be understandable—even natural and proper—for Mary Magdalene and the other women to call them angels.

We could also ask why would God send two angels back to earth for this particular duty. He had only sent one angel—Gabriel, to announce the coming virgin birth of Jesus to Mary and to Joseph, as well as the birth of John the Baptist to his father Zacharias. On the other hand, a great host of angels had heralded the actual birth of the Savior to the shepherds. So why specifically *two* angels at the resurrection and the ascension? Or, why two men, for that matter?

There is certainly a difficulty in trying to account for these men at the tomb, if they were men. It is easier to assume they were angels in the form of men, and this is what most commentators do.

Up until the time Christ rose from the dead, the men from all previous generations had been confined in *Hades* (called *Sheol* in the Old Testament), the great pit in the center of the earth where the souls of dead men and women descended when they died. According to the description given by Christ, Hades was divided into at least two compartments. One was called “*Abraham's bosom*” (Luke 16:22), apparently because all the souls who had died having faith in God's promises (as had Abraham—Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:16) are considered spiritual children of Abraham (Galatians 3:7). They all shared God's sheltering watchcare under “*Father Abraham*” (Luke 16:30) until Christ could come to pay the price for their redemption and release. When Christ finally came and paid that price He did

secure their release and then “*led captivity captive*” with Him back to Heaven (Ephesians 4:8).

All those who died without such faith, however, had no access to Abraham, although their souls also had gone down to *Hades* (or *Sheol*). Instead, they were “*tormented in this flame*” (Luke 16:24). The exact nature of “*this flame*” is enigmatic, since it was only tormenting their souls or spiritual bodies. Their physical bodies were dead and buried in graves, and thus were never in *Hades* (translated “*hell*” in most Bibles). In any case, the flame was capable of inflicting “*torments*” (Luke 16:23) on whatever ethereal bodies these departed souls had been given.

It does not seem reasonable that God would resurrect two of these dead souls from Hades, transport them to Heaven, and then send them back to earth to observe Christ rise from the dead and tell His disciples about it. It does seem easier to assume these were angels sent from Heaven for this purpose, though it is not clear why there were two of them.

Yet it is still hard to explain why such a careful researcher as Luke would deliberately call them “men” when he always used the common word for “angels” otherwise, even in cases where they, the angels, looked like men.

The Two Witnesses in the Last Days

There is one intriguing possibility. There are two human witnesses mentioned as coming to earth near the end of the age, and Christ specifically calls them “*my two witnesses.*”

And I will give power unto my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy a thousand two hundred and

threescore days, clothed in sackcloth
(Revelation 11:3).

The question can at least be raised as to whether these two witnesses could just possibly be the same as the “two men” who were at the empty tomb. Note that Christ will be calling them *my* two witnesses!

There is no question about these two witnesses being men. Although they will seem invulnerable for over three years, as they are prophesying against the world's ungodliness, eventually the terrible world dictator “*shall overcome them, and kill them*” (Revelation 11:7).

So they are men, but not ordinary men, for they will already have been alive for thousands of years, with miracle-working power. “*These are the two olive trees, and the two candlesticks standing before the God of the earth*” (Revelation 11:4). This is a reference to a strange prophecy of Zechariah, given during the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah over four hundred years before the first coming of Christ.

This prophecy was pronounced through Zechariah as he and the prophet Haggai were both trying to urge the Israelites returning from their Babylonian captivity to work diligently on the rebuilding of the temple that had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. At the time, the two human leaders of this project were the governor Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua.

The vision of Zechariah, shown him by an angel, was of a golden candlestick, or lampstand, flanked by two olive trees. Their golden oil was being supplied to the lampstand

through two golden branches or pipes and a bowl placed atop the lampstand to collect and distribute the oil (see Zechariah 4:1-3, 11-14). The two main branches, or pipes, apparently emptied their oil into the bowl, which then distributed the oil through seven pipes to seven lamps on top of the candlestick.

Modern commentators generally have interpreted the two olive trees, with their two chief branches supplying the seven lamps as representing symbolically Zerubbabel and Joshua, in their kingly and priestly functions encouraging the people in their temple building project.

However, when Zechariah asked the angel for *his* interpretation, he answered simply: “*These are the two anointed ones, that stand by the LORD of the whole earth*” (Zechariah 4:14).

If one takes these passages in Zechariah 4 and Revelation 11 literally, then the two witnesses (who are men) in the coming days of great tribulation on earth had also been “anointed ones” way back in Zechariah's time, and they had been “standing by” the Lord all that time.

Who had anointed these “*anointed ones*” with the assignment just to “*stand by the LORD*” for thousands of years. Their anointing could not have been to serve as kings or priests (Joshua was a priest, but Zerubbabel was neither king nor priest). Furthermore, the Hebrew word translated “anointed ones” is so translated only this one time in Scripture, being normally rendered simply as “oil,” usually as associated with other farm products (that is, with corn, wine, and oil commonly listed together). The *usual* word for “anointed one,” on the other hand, is essentially the same as *Messiah*, the Hebrew equivalent of “Christ.”

Evidently these “oiled ones” had been “anointed” in some unique way for a unique ministry altogether different from that involved in the standard anointing of kings and priests, such as when Samuel (as a priest) anointed Saul, and then David, to be Israel's king.

The office of prophet apparently also required anointing, but by some senior prophet, as when Elijah was told by God to anoint Elisha to take his place as “*prophet in thy room*” (I Kings 19:16).

Elijah himself had apparently been anointed directly by God in some unknown way never described in the Bible. The “oil” with which he was anointed had presumably been administered by the Lord Himself, and he thus became in a special sense “my witness” to the Lord. The first recorded miracle after his prophecy of a three-year drought in Israel was when the Lord sent food to him by ravens. Then the Lord used him to accomplish the first “resurrection” in the Bible, when he prayed for God to restore life to a dead child, the son of a Sidonian woman (not even an Israelite). See I Kings 17 for these accounts. This restoration of the dead son was not really a resurrection, of course, since he eventually died again, but it was a wonderful *type* of the future resurrection of Christ.

Then, not too many years later occurred one of the most amazing events of all time. Elijah never died at all, but “*went up by a whirlwind into heaven*” (II Kings 2:11).

And there he has been ever since! However, he has evidently not yet fulfilled all the ministry for which God had anointed him. In the very last words of the Old Testament, the last prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi,

quoting the words God had give him, said: *“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse”* (Malachi 4:5-6).

Now, in order for God to “send” Elijah to earth, he must be in Heaven. Although some interpreters have thought this prophecy was fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist, it clearly was not. Instead of ushering in the great and dreadful day of the Lord, climaxing with a “curse” (a Hebrew word implying utter destruction), John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus Christ, ushering in the wonderful day of God's grace.

Furthermore, even after the martyrdom of John, Jesus said, *“Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things”* (Matthew 17:11). Since Elijah had not yet come in Jesus' time on earth and still has not come, it is almost necessary to conclude that he must be one of the two whom Christ calls “my witnesses” who will come prophesying in the last days of this present age, as described in Revelation 11:3-11). This interpretation becomes particularly persuasive when the two witnesses are equated with the two olive trees providing oil through the two golden pipes to the golden candlestick, noting also that they have been *“standing before the God of the earth”* (Revelation 11:4; Zechariah 4:14) all that time, apparently just waiting for this special ministry. Finally the time will come for Elijah to fulfill his great mission to Israel, which had been suddenly interrupted long ago by his translation to the presence of God.

Another indication of common identity is that Elijah's predicted drought had lasted three and one-half years (James 5:17), and so will the ministry of the two witnesses, who will also produce a three and one-half year drought—not just in Israel, but this time in the whole world (Revelation 11:3,6).

But if Elijah is one of the two witnesses, who will the other be? He also is a man, for both will eventually be killed. At this point we need to recall that in Elijah's earlier time on earth, the souls of all who died in faith descended into Sheol, and this situation continued until Christ finally came to pay the price for their release and take them back to Heaven with Him.

Thus, during that period of many centuries, there was no human being in Heaven except Elijah and presumably the second witness. All of the saved ones are there now, of course, but they have all died already, yet the two witnesses are going to die on earth sometime in the future.

Moses, like Elijah, was a great prophet specially chosen and presumably anointed by God, but he also had died and was buried (in his case, buried directly by God—Deuteronomy 34:6,10). In spite of this, most commentators have assumed that Moses will be the second witness. The reason usually given is that Moses appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration with Elijah (Matthew 17:1-3). However, they were not there in the flesh, for their appearance was said specifically to be a “vision” (Matthew 17:9).

It is significant that when the two witnesses come as described in Revelation 11, Moses, like all the saints, will already have been resurrected. His body will—like all the rest—then be a glorified body like that of the resurrected Christ.

This is on the assumption that the rapture and resurrection of all Christian believers will have taken place *before* the onset of “*the great and dreadful day of the Lord*” (Malachi 4:5), which will begin just after the prophesied second coming of Elijah. Admittedly, this is a controversial subject, but then there is also the statement that, at the time of Christ's resurrection, “*the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, And came out of the graves after His resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many*” (Matthew 27:52-53). It would appear from this that the resurrection and rapture of Old Testament believers took place at the time when Christ, through His own sacrificial *death* and resurrection, had delivered their souls from their temporary abode with Abraham in Hades, taking them all body, soul, and spirit—with Him to Paradise in Heaven.

Thus Moses, one way or another, would already have received his resurrection body, and it seems unthinkable that he could die again—especially in *that* body. Elijah surely will be one of the two witnesses in the last days—otherwise, there is no other time revealed in Scripture as to when His promised sending to earth will take place. But the other is almost certainly not Moses, regardless of the majority opinion of expositors of the book of Revelation.

The ancient patriarch Enoch is the man who almost certainly *must be* the other witness. He—just like Elijah—had been carried into heaven without dying and has also—like Elijah—been there ever since.

Unlike the other antediluvian patriarchs who lived around nine hundred years before they died, Enoch was on earth

only 365 years (Genesis 5:23). He did not die, but was a godly prophet who “*walked with God: and he was not; for God took him*” (Genesis 5:24). That is, he suddenly “*was not*” here on earth with other living men and women, “*for God took him*” with Him to Heaven—just like He did with Elijah three thousand years later. If there is any doubt that this was the meaning, the New Testament confirms it: “*By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God*” (Hebrews 11:5).

That Enoch, like Elijah, was a prophet, preaching against the ungodliness of the world in his own day, has been revealed in the one chapter epistle of Jude in the New Testament.

And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of His saints, To execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him (Jude 14-15).

Enoch's prophetic ministry, like that of Elijah long after him, had been interrupted before it was finished and certainly before it was no longer needed. Why would God do this? He is not a capricious God and surely must have had a good reason for this seemingly strange action. And why

just take these two men, out of all the godly men of Biblical and post-Biblical history who surely must have “pleased” Him, just as Enoch had.

One possible clue appears when we realize that Enoch prophesied to the people of all the world, at just about the midpoint of the time from Adam to Abraham, whereas Elijah had prophesied specifically to the people, of the chosen nation Israel, at just about the midpoint of the time from Abraham to Christ. Enoch was thus a representative prophet to the Gentiles, Elijah a representative prophet to the people of Israel.

From the time of Christ to the present, God is making no distinction between Jew and Gentile. And especially as the end of *this* age approaches, ungodliness is rampant everywhere. The preaching of judgment to come is urgently needed in all nations.

Thus it seems probable that these two ancient prophets have been “standing by” God awaiting the time when He would send them back to earth to complete their interrupted ministry, preaching judgment and offering salvation to both Jew and Gentile all over the world. God in Christ calls them “*my two witnesses*,” for they have been waiting there at His throne all this time to complete their testimony for Him here on earth.

Then, Enoch and Elijah, who have been preserved alive in their natural human bodies without dying, will finally have the privilege of dying as martyrs for the Christ whom they have been “*standing by*” patiently for all these many years.

And when they shall have finished their testimony, the beast that ascendeth out of the

*bottomless pit shall make war against them,
and shall overcome them, and kill them*
(Revelation 11:7).

But that is not quite the end of their testimony. As their bodies are being giddily viewed with rejoicing for three and one-half days, by people everywhere seen (via satellite television and the internet presumably) then suddenly, *“the spirit of life from God entered into them, and they stood upon their feet; and great fear fell upon them which saw them. And they heard a great voice from heaven saying unto them, Come up hither. And [Enoch and Elijah once again] ascended up to heaven in a cloud; and their enemies beheld them”* (Revelation 11:11-12). But some *“gave glory to the God of heaven”* (v. 13).

The Witnesses at the Tomb

But now there is the intriguing possibility that God had one other assignment for them during that long wait in Heaven. We have wondered why there were just two heavenly messengers at Christ's tomb instead of just one or else a multitude—as at the first announcement of the coming Savior and then at the birth itself. Also, we have noted the good possibility that these two were men rather than angels.

So why not Enoch and Elijah? Surely, no one in all the human family of the redeemed could have been awaiting this great event with keener interest and anticipation than they.

The long-promised incarnation of God in human flesh, with His amazing substitutionary death and then the sure

defeat of all sin and death by His victorious resurrection would undoubtedly comprise the greatest event in all history since the creation of the universe. We know that the angelic hosts of Heaven have been intensely interested throughout the ages in the developing plan of salvation, because the Bible tells us so. *“Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow. . . . which things the angels desire to look into”* (1 Peter 1:10-12).

Now if the angels in Heaven and the prophets on earth were so diligently interested in God's wonderful plan of salvation as it was developing, think of how intensely concerned must have been Christ's two prophets standing by Him there in Heaven. Surely they were being kept informed about them by their gracious Lord, *“Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but He revealeth His secret unto His servants the prophets”* (Amos 3:7).

They had been great prophetic preachers against the wickedness of men (Enoch) and the demonic-inspired idolaters (Elijah) on earth and undoubtedly knew they were being prepared for their climactic prophetic and miraculous ministry in the coming end-times. But they were both well aware that the true effectiveness of their ministries depended wholly on the promised defeat of Satan by the Lord at His coming incarnation, death, and resurrection. No one in all the universe could have been more vitally anticipating this great series of events than Christ's two witnesses standing by Him

there in Heaven.

It would certainly have been gloriously appropriate for the Lord to allow His two faithful prophets to come and greet Him as His Spirit returned and reentered His body resting there in Joseph's tomb, and then also to inform His few loyal followers about the wonderful victory as they came to the tomb, possibly just a few minutes later, early that morning of the first day of the first week after His death and burial and resurrection. Then presumably the two witnesses returned to Heaven, along with all the faithful believers who had just been released by Christ from their own waiting place at Abraham's bosom in Hades.

Now then, they will be awaiting their future ministry on earth with greater confidence and anticipation than ever, knowing that God's purposes in His works of creation and redemption are more certain of fulfillment than ever. Satan is still very active, but his doom is sure, and they are destined to have a vital part in accomplishing it.

Reflections

Nowhere in the Bible are we told explicitly that Enoch and Elijah were those first two witnesses at the empty tomb, nor even that they are the two future witnesses discussed in Revelation 11, so this exposition must not be understood in any dogmatic sense. Nevertheless, the circumstantial case does appear to be strong, with no certainty of any alternative explanation. Furthermore, this heavenly drama, to this writer at least, brings a very real spiritual blessing. In any case, Enoch and Elijah are real people just like us, and we shall be with both of them when, as Enoch has said, *“Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands*

of His saints, To execute judgment upon all, . . .” (Jude 14-15), and then we can ask them in person!

One thing is sure. The Lord showed Himself to *many* other witnesses “*alive after His passion by many infallible proofs . . .*” (Acts 1:3), and He has promised to come again, to take us also to His presence in Paradise. In the meantime He said, “*. . . ye shall be witnesses unto me . . . unto the uttermost part of the earth*” (Acts 1:8).

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