THE IDENTITY OF THE TEMPLE AND THE TWO WITNESSES
IN REVELATION 11:1-13

A Paper
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements of the Course
NT6050 Synoptic Gospels and Johannine Literature

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November 24, 2010
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THE IDENTITY OF THE TEMPLE AND THE TWO WITNESSES
IN REVELATION 11:1-13

Introduction

Revelation 11:1-13 is one of the most debated and difficult passages in the entire
book.¹ There have been many interpretations about this narrative, in particular about the
identity of the temple and the two witnesses therein and the nature of the symbolism in the
passage. Some take the passage to be quite literal while others see it as highly figurative.²
Some scholars see this passage as an original, single unit while others see it as mostly
borrowed material from pre-existing sources.³ Still others believe that it is more important to
hear what John has to say than to reconstruct the original sources of his work.⁴ This essay will
explore both sides of these issues and attempt to make conclusions based on the
persuasiveness of the evidence.

This pericope is divided into two subunits: Revelation 11:1-2 and 11:3-13.⁵ The first
unit is about the measuring of the temple and the second unit revolves around the ministry,
death, and resurrection of the two witnesses. The two subunits are connected by the shared
themes of the number 3½ and the holy city.⁶ The second subunit can be divided further into

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² Mounce, Book of Revelation, 212.
⁴ Mounce, Book of Revelation, 212.
⁵ Osborne, Revelation, 417.
⁶ Aune, Revelation 6-16, 630; Osborne, Revelation, 417.
three smaller sections: the prophetic ministry of the two witnesses (11:3-6), the death or defeat of the witnesses (11:7-10), and their victory and resurrection (11:11-13). Verse 14 serves as a conclusion to the larger unit and as a transition from this unit to the next.

The identity of the speakers and the narrator are difficult to pinpoint and distinguish from one another. Verses 1 to 3 seem to be spoken by a single, unidentified speaker. However, if Revelation 10:9-10 is taken as the immediate context of this passage, then the angel who commanded John to eat the scroll may be the same angel who commands John to measure the temple.7 The speaker refers to God in the third person in v. 2 and in v. 3 the speaker uses the first person pronoun “I” in regard to the two witnesses, indicating that it is God Himself who is speaking in v. 3. The speaker changes yet again by v. 8 which contains the phrase “their Lord,” referring to God once again in the third person. The change in speaker likely takes place between v. 3 and v. 4, meaning that vv. 4 to 13 are probably spoken by John, the author and narrator of this prophecy.8

The Holy Temple

The context for this verse, which introduces the larger unit of vv. 1-13, comes from Revelation 10:9-10 where John eats the “little scroll” which tasted sweet but turned sour in his stomach. The events starting in v. 1 and following supply the content of the scroll.9 Here, John is given a rod and told to measure the temple, which is similar to Ezekiel chapters 40 to 42. The act of measuring something implies that the thing being measured is to be preserved;

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8 Aune, Revelation 6-16, 585-86.

9 Mounce, Book of Revelation, 212, 213.
another similar instance is found in Revelation 7:1-17 in which the 144,000 are counted in order to be preserved.10

The act of measuring can also be a symbol of coming destruction (2 Kings 21:13, Isa. 34:11; Lam. 2:8). But whether the temple was the earthly temple in Jerusalem, the spiritual temple in heaven, or something else is open to question. What is important is to maintain a balanced approach, not taking it too literally and thereby ignoring the symbolism in the language, and not taking it too symbolically and thus bordering on allegory.11

There are five possible interpretational schemes for Revelation 11:1-2. The first is the historical Jewish interpretation in which the temple is the physical temple in Jerusalem before it was destroyed in AD 70. It predicts that the temple would be attacked but not totally destroyed. This prediction was not fulfilled. The second interpretation is the dispensationalist interpretation which is also literal but set in the future. This view takes the events to be about the literal reconstruction of the temple and the conversion of the Jewish people.12

The third interpretation is that the altar and the worshipers in v. 1 refer to the preservation and salvation of the Jewish people in the future, while the outer court represents the unbelieving Jews.13 The fourth and fifth views are symbolic of the future church, the outer court representing nominal, compromising Christians or faithful, persecuted Christians respectively.14

10 George Eldon Ladd, A Commentary on the Revelation of John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 151; henceforth, Revelation of John. See also Mounce, Book of Revelation, 213; Aune, Revelation 6-16, 630.


12 Ladd, Revelation of John, 149-50.


14 Ladd, Revelation of John, 150; Beale, Book of Revelation, 558.
Whether John had the earthly Jerusalem temple in mind or not, the temple itself has symbolic significance that should not be discounted. The symbolism of the temple can be interpreted in three ways. First, the inner temple can refer to the faithful Jewish remnant while the outer courts represent Israel as a whole. In this interpretation, the pagans dominate over Israel (the outer courts) as punishment for Israel’s sins. The second interpretation regards the measuring of the temple as symbolic of the preservation of the church while the invasion of the outer courts and the holy city represent punishment upon unfaithful Jews.15

Third, the temple itself is seen as the Christian church, although the identity of the inner and outer courts can be seen in different ways. The association of the temple with the church has strong support in Scripture (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:5). The outer courts are interpreted by some to be the segment of the church that is exposed to suffering and persecution from the world, while others see them as representative of compromising or nominal Christians who are trampled by the world.16

Some scholars favor the view that John was writing primarily about the physical temple in Jerusalem. While they admit that the Greek word ναός (“temple”) is often used in the NT for the church as the dwelling place of God (1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21), they see no compelling reason to take the use of the word in Revelation 11:1 figuratively rather than literally. Because it is being measured and contrasted with the outer court, the physical nature of the temple is emphasized. It is also problematic to link a spiritual preservation of the church with a physical persecution of the outer court.17

Nevertheless, the evidence seems to support a symbolic (or at least partially symbolic) interpretation of the temple in vv. 1-2. A purely literal interpretation, while allowable within

15 Smalley, Revelation of John, 269-70.

16 Mounce, Book of Revelation, 213; Smalley, Revelation of John, 270; Beale, Book of Revelation, 558-59.

17 Ladd, Revelation of John, 152.
the limited scope of this pericope, fails to take into account the highly figurative nature of the language of this chapter and other supporting texts. In addition, the problem of linking spiritual preservation with physical persecution is not an either/or situation but a both/and situation; the problem disappears when one understands that there are two layers of meaning behind the temple that exist simultaneously, one physical and one spiritual.

The use of the word ἐκβαλε (from ἐκβάλλω meaning “to throw or cast out”) in v. 2 is highly suggestive of people rather than a structure. Although in most translations, ἐκβαλε is translated as “exclude,” the basic meaning of the word does not make sense when applied to the outer court, since a building cannot be cast outside and in the case of the outer court, the structure is already outside. Instead, ἐκβάλλω is usually used in terms of excommunication or social exclusion (Luke 4:29; 20:15; John 9:34-35; 12:31; 15:6; Acts 7:58; Rev. 22:14-15). Therefore, it is more likely that the outer court represents a group of people, not a building or structure. The group represented may be unbelieving Jews, apostate Christians, or faithful Christian martyrs.

There are many who support the idea that the outer court represents nominal, compromising, or apostate Christians who live in a worldly manner and are therefore condemned to divine discipline. They look to passages such as Revelation 2:14 and 2:20, which describe the followers of Balaam and Jezebel, as supporting texts. However, the overwhelming testimony of Revelation and the rest of Scripture is that it is the righteous who are persecuted by the world, not the worldly. The Apostle John’s own words seem to agree with this point; in John 15:18-19, he writes, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me [Christ] first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates

you.” Revelation 13:7, 16-17 also show that only the faithful—those who refuse the mark of the beast—are persecuted, not those who compromise.¹⁹

In light of this evidence, it would seem best to allow for the idea that John may have had the physical temple in Jerusalem in mind when he wrote this passage, but that the symbolic and theological significance of the temple far outweighs the literal interpretation of the text in importance. Also, the evidence shows that the temple, the altar, and the worshipers represent the church while the outer court represents the portion of believers who are to undergo persecution and martyrdom for a limited period of time (symbolized by forty-two months in v. 2).

The Two Witnesses

The identity of the two witnesses is the most debated aspect of this pericope. There have been numerous ideas proposed throughout history. Hippolytus, Tertullian, and most of their contemporaries believed the two witnesses to be Enoch and Elijah while Victorinus understood them to be Jeremiah and Elijah. Other proposals for the identity of the two witnesses include James and John, Peter and Paul, the two Christian prophets martyred by Titus, or two unknown prophets modeled after Joshua and Zerubbabel. Others propose that the two witnesses are not individuals but are symbolic of the church in some way, and still others believe that the two witnesses are literal individuals and symbolic representations at the same time.²⁰

The Jewish expectation was for there to be one eschatological prophet (Elijah) to precede the Messiah, not two; the presence of two witnesses may be based on Zechariah 3–4 in which there are two Messianic figures, Joshua, a priestly Messiah of Aaron (Zech. 3:1) and


Zerubbabel, a royal Messiah of David (Zech. 4:6-7). These are “the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth” (Zech. 4:14). There is evidence in the writings of the Qumran community that a third Messiah, a prophetic one, was also expected. The presence of two witnesses may also be a reflection of the call for the testimony of two witnesses in order for the testimony to be considered valid or reliable according to Jewish law (Num. 35:30; Deut. 19:15; John 8:13-18). What is clear is that the exact identity of the two witnesses is left out deliberately. However, the use of the possessive definite article μου (“my” or “of me”) in v. 3 suggests they were well-known to the original readers, whether as individuals or as a representative group.

If the two witnesses are to be interpreted as historical figures, then there are several possible options. The earliest attested interpretation is that of Enoch and Elijah, championed by early church fathers such as Irenaeus and Tertullian. This view is mostly based on the fact that Enoch and Elijah are depicted in Scripture as never having experienced earthly death but were taken up to heaven alive.

However, the modern consensus is that Moses and Elijah are the best models for the two witnesses. Revelation 11:5-6 depict the two witnesses as having powers that are directly associated with Moses and Elijah. The ability to burn their enemies with fire and prevent rain from falling on the earth is akin to Elijah’s abilities (2 Kings 1:10ff and 1 Kings 17:1). The power to turn water into blood and strike the earth with plagues comes directly from Moses’ miraculous acts in Exodus 7:14-18 and 8:12.

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21 Ladd, Revelation of John, 154; Aune, Revelation 6-16, 598-99.
22 Smalley, Revelation of John, 275.
23 Aune, Revelation 6-16, 631.
24 Aune, Revelation 6-16, 599.
25 Aune, Revelation 6-16, 599.
There was also the expectation in Jewish tradition of both prophets appearing before the coming of the Messiah. Malachi prophesied that Elijah would appear before the coming of the Lord in Malachi 4:5 (cf. Mark 9:11 and Matt. 11:14) while Deuteronomy 18:18 created a similar expectation of Moses’ return to earth. And the appearance of Elijah and Moses with Jesus during His transfiguration (Mark 9:4) only adds to the expectation of these two prophets appearing as eschatological figures in the Last Days.27

Another proposal for the identity of the two witnesses is that they were in fact Peter and Paul, who according to traditional sources were both martyred in Rome. Dionysius of Corinth, who lived in the mid-second century, is quoted by Eusebius as saying that Peter and Paul were martyred at the same time. However, the two major problems with this interpretation are that the two witnesses are clearly martyred in Jerusalem, not Rome, according to v. 8, and that the two witnesses are resurrected and ascend to heaven before the whole world. These things did not happen to Peter and Paul, even according to tradition.28

Some additional yet minor interpretations for the identity of the two witnesses include Stephen and James the Just, James and the John, the sons of Zebedee, and John the Baptist and Jesus. Each of these interpretations suffers from a lack of concrete evidence, Scriptural or otherwise, and relies primarily on the unique opinions of solitary scholars. They also fail to explain certain circumstantial problems, such as how the Apostle John could be both the writer and one of the witnesses, or how Jesus could be one of the witnesses when v. 8 contains the phrase “their Lord.”29


27 Charles, Revelation of St. John, 1: 281; Mounce, Book of Revelation, 216; Aune, Revelation 6-16, 600.

28 Aune, Revelation 6-16, 601.

29 Aune, Revelation 6-16, 601-2.
Another approach for identifying the two witnesses is to see them not as historical figures but as symbols for the church. There are six main reasons the two witnesses can be identified with the church. First, since Revelation 1:20 equates the seven lampstands with seven churches, it is consistent to interpret the two witnesses as two churches because Revelation 11:4 also equates the two witnesses with two lampstands. Second, the beast in 11:7 can be seen as the same beast as in Daniel 7:21 which persecutes Israel. Since the beast is said to oppress a nation and not an individual, it can be said that the beast in Revelation 11:4 is also oppressing the church, which is called a “holy nation” in 1 Peter 2:9.  

Third, that the entire world sees the resurrection and ascension of the witnesses suggests that the witnesses are a larger group and not two individuals. However, some have countered this point by saying that modern technology makes it possible for the entire world to view a single event simultaneously. Fourth, the 1,260 days in v. 3 correspond to the forty-two months of v. 2. If the temple in vv. 1-2 can be interpreted as the church, then so can the two witnesses in v. 3 because the period of their suffering (1,260 days = 42 months) is the same.  

The fifth reason that the two witnesses can be interpreted as the church is that the community of believers is often identified as the source of testimony to Jesus (Rev. 6:9; 12:11, 17; 19:10; 20:4), making the witness of the church parallel to the two witnesses of Revelation 11:3. The sixth and final reason is that both witnesses are said to be Moses and Elijah, rather than one witness being identified with Moses and the other witness as Elijah. The powers of Moses and Elijah described in vv. 5-6 are attributed to both witnesses equally and without distinction. That the two witnesses behave as “prophetic twins” suggests that they are symbolic of the church and not two individuals.  

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In addition to these six reasons, the term “witness” can also be translated as “testimony”; both words come from the Greek word μαρτυρέω, which can be translated either as “to bear witness” or “to testify.” If the two witnesses are taken as a collective testimony, then it is possible to see them as the church since the church is the steward of God’s testimony.33

When all the evidence is weighed, it seems best to conclude that the two witnesses were indeed modeled after Moses and Elijah, as most modern scholars attest, and that they may or may not represent two actual individuals or historical figures. Whether the two witnesses are two individuals or not, they symbolize the professing church and their witness to the world, for which they are opposed and persecuted to the point of death, only to be raised again in the eyes of the world by the power of God. In this way, there can and probably is a blend of specific and symbolic when it comes to the identity of the two witnesses.34

Word Study on “Witness”

The word “witness” in Revelation 11:3 is μάρτυς in Greek (the verb form is μαρτυρέω). The etymology of the word appears to come from the root smer, which means “to bear in mind,” “to remember,” or “to be careful.” It is related to the Greek word mermeros, which means “that which demands much care or deliberation” or “he who considers or deliberates much,” and also other Greek words such as mermairo, mermerizo (“to consider, deliberate, hesitate”), and merimnao. It can be used to witness to facts in legal settings but also to witness to facts in general, to testify of general truths or viewpoints.35

32 Beale, Book of Revelation, 575; Osborne, Revelation, 418.
33 Aune, Revelation 6-16, 602.
34 Aune, Revelation 6-16, 602-3; Mounce, Book of Revelation, 217; Osborne, Revelation, 418; Ladd, Revelation of John, 154.
The noun ἡμάρτυς appears only a few times in the Synoptic Gospels (twice in Matthew, once in Mark, and twice in Luke) and appears most often in the Book of Acts (thirteen times). Paul uses it nine times, Hebrews twice, and Revelation five times. It is most interesting to note that while John uses ὑπερευθείν forty-seven times and ἡμάρτυρια thirty times in the Gospel of John and 1–3 John, the word ἡμάρτυς does not appear even once in these writings.36 Some have taken this as evidence that John did not author the Book of Revelation. As many Revelation scholars point out:

It was biblical rather than postbiblical Hebrew or Aramaic that influenced the author and that Revelation is almost certainly not a translation of an original Hebrew or Aramaic work. In contrast, the Greek of the fourth gospel, while simple and having its share of Semitisms, is accurate and clear. Most contemporary scholars agree with Dionysius: the same person could not have written both books.37

However, making that conclusion solely on statistical evidence is premature and does not take into account the development of the unique Christian usage of the word over time.38 ἡμάρτυς has one basic sense that is maintained in all occurrences in the NT, but it takes on different nuances depending on its context.39 Non-biblical usage of the word encompassed both the meaning of witnessing to ascerturable facts and witnessing to truths based on inner convictions. Both uses are present in the NT and are developed through their application to the Gospel and Christian theology, especially by Luke and John (in Revelation).40

It is used in the LXX in the legal sense based on the OT law that every incident must be affirmed by two or three witnesses (Deut. 19:15; Matt. 18:16; 2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:9).41

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38 Strathmann, “ἡμάρτυς,” 489.

39 Balz and Schneider, Exegetical Dictionary, 394.

40 Strathmann, “ἡμάρτυς,” 489.

41 Balz and Schneider, Exegetical Dictionary, 394.
Other instances of the legal usage of μάρτυς can be found in Matthew 26:65, Mark 14:63, Acts 6:13 and 7:58.42 Μάρτυς is also used in a non-legal or religious sense, as in the cases of Isaiah 43:9-13 and 44:7-11. In these passages, the worshipers of false gods are challenged to prove that their gods are Greater than Yahweh and to witness on behalf of their gods. They also witness the superiority and sovereignty of Yahweh over all other gods.43

Other instances of the non-legal use of μάρτυς can be found in Paul’s letters in which he calls upon God to witness the inner thoughts and motivations of his heart (Rom. 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:23; Phil. 1:8; 1 Thess. 2:5).44 Not only God, but other human beings can be called upon to testify to something as well. Instances of humans witnessing can be found in 1 Thessalonians 2:10, 1 Timothy 6:12, 2 Timothy 2:2, and Hebrew 12:1.45

The most important development of the Christian usage of “witness” is found in the writings of Luke. He more than any other NT writer pushed the meaning of the word to a new level while maintaining the original meaning. Luke uses μάρτυς for the disciples in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus, even though they did not witness Jesus’ resurrection with their own eyes. While this seems to contradict the basic meaning of “witness,” it actually confirms the meaning from God’s point of view; to God, the events concerning the resurrection of Christ are historical facts and as real and objective as the other events in Jesus’ life.46

In addition to this perspective, the word μάρτυς can also mean to testify to one’s inner convictions, and the disciples were certainly following this meaning when they witnessed

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43 Strathmann, “μάρτυς,” 484.

44 Strathmann, “μάρτυς,” 491.

45 Bauer et al., BDAG, 494.

46 Strathmann, “μάρτυς,” 492.
about Jesus’ resurrection to others. They witnessed based on what they concluded must be true according to the evidence, on the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and on what they saw with their spiritual eyes (not their physical eyes, since they did not actually see the resurrection take place). For this reason, Luke differentiates between ἀυτόπτης (“eyewitness”) and μάρτυς (“witness”). Eyewitnesses see with their eyes but are merely observers and reporters. Witnesses, in the Lukan sense, are more than observers but are participants and promoters of what they saw. They witness not only to the event of the resurrection but also the salvific significance of the resurrection. In this way, Luke equates witnessing to facts with witnessing to truth. Furthermore, Luke’s position is that only qualified people can be called witnesses, those who lived through the events in question. True witnesses, according to Luke, are both called (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8, 22-26) and equipped (Luke 24:48; Acts 5:32) to be witnesses.

Conclusion

John, who only uses μάρτυς in Revelation, uses it twice to refer to Christ (1:5; 3:14). In the case of the two witnesses, John does not call them witnesses because they are martyred (although “martyr” also comes from μάρτυς); he calls them martyrs primarily because of their fearless testimony and prophetic activity against pagans and the beast. Because Jesus calls Himself a witness in Revelation, He is the model for all Christian witness. Just as Christ gave Himself unto death for sake of the Gospel, so too only those who give up all for Christ are called true martyrs in the Book of Revelation. For this reason, not every believer who dies because of their faith is called a martyr by John; only those who die as a result of their

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48 Balz and Schneider, Exegetical Dictionary, 394; Strathmann, “μαρτυς,” 492.

49 Strathmann, “μαρτυς,” 492.
evangelistic activity and suffering. In the case of the two witnesses of Revelation 11, the title “martyr” is deserved because they died in the way of Jesus.\(^{50}\)

\(^{50}\) Strathmann, “μαρτυρίς,” 495-96.
Appendix:

DIAGRAM OF REVELATION 11:1-13

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Rev 11:5 καὶ ἐκπορεύεται ἐκ τοῦ στόματος αὐτῶν καὶ κατεσθίει τοὺς ἐχθρούς αὐτῶν. αὐτῶν ἀποκτανθῆναι αὐτοὺς δεῖ τις θέλει. αὐτῶν ἀδικήσαι αὐτοὺς δεῖ τις θελήσῃ. αὐτῶν ἀδικήσαι αὐτοὺς

Rev 11:6 ἐχοῦσιν τὴν ἐφανερώθησαν καὶ τῶν οὐρανῶν κλείσαι τῶν οὐρανῶν τίνα ὑπότος βρέχῃ μὴ τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς προφητείας αὐτῶν. ἐχοῦσιν ἐφανερώθησαν καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ὕδατων στρέφειν αὐτὰ εἰς αἷμα πατάξαι τὴν γῆν ἐν πλήγμῃ (τοσάκις) πάσῃ (X) θελήσωσιν ὀσάκις ἕαν
Rev 11:7 καὶ τὸ θηρίον τὸ ἀνφελοῦν ἐκ τῆς ἀβύσσου δὴν καὶ μετ' αὐτῶν καὶ μικήσει αὐτοὺς καὶ ἀποκτείνῃ αὐτοὺς (X) τελέσσειν τὴν μαρτυρίαν

Rev 11:8 καὶ τὸ πτώμα αὐτῶν ἐπὶ τῆς πλατείας τῆς πόλεως τῆς μεγάλης καὶ ἀνακύψει ἐσταυρώθη καὶ καλεῖται καὶ Σόδομα καὶ Αἴγυπτος

Rev 11:9 καὶ βλέπουσιν τὸ πτώμα αὐτῶν ἡμέρας τρεῖς καὶ θανάτου καὶ αὕλων καὶ φυλάνων καὶ γλωσσῶν καὶ ἕθνων

Rev 11:10 καὶ οἱ κατοικούντες ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς χαίρουσιν καὶ ἐπὶ αὐτοῖς εὐφραίνονται καὶ πέμψουσιν χώρας ἀλλήλοις οἱ προφήται ἐβασάνισον τοὺς κατοικούντες αὐτοὶ δόοι (X) ἔπειτα ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς
Rev 11:11 καὶ τὰς ἡμέρας ἐστηραν, καὶ ἔπι τοὺς πόδας αὐτῶν, καὶ ἐς ἐπέπεσεν τοὺς θεωρούτας αὐτῶς.

Rev 11:12 καὶ φωνῆς ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ αὐτῶς, καὶ ἔστησαν ἐπὶ τῷ σέισμῷ καὶ θεωρήσαν αὐτῶν.

Rev 11:13 καὶ σεισμὸς ἐγέινε καὶ πνεῦμα ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτοῖς.


