

Who Are the Angels of the Seven Churches in Revelation?

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Introduction

Perhaps you, like me, have wondered what Jesus meant when He spoke of the “angel of the church” in the letters to the seven churches in Asia in the Book of Revelation. “The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches”¹ (Rev.1:20). This has been a curiosity issue for me for many years. Moreover, it is our privilege and responsibility to probe more into interpretive issues that are challenging (I call it the “tension of the text” divinely placed in the Word to make us study it more earnestly). The messages to the seven churches are addressed to these angels. Rev.1:20 explains the mystery of the seven golden lampstands and seven stars. The lampstands are the churches, and the stars are the angels of the seven churches.

We have the added difficulty that the “star” is a symbol of the “angel,” but is the word “angel” a symbol of something else? So how do we take the word “angels”? Can we take this as a reference to angelic beings (literal angels), or do we take this as a reference to human messengers who carry the message of these letters or who are leaders (pastors/elders) of these churches, or do they personify the prevailing spirit of the church?

Various Explanations on the Identity of the Angels

The identity of the angels is debated. There have been countless theories about it. Let’s take a brief look at the more popular explanations and then try to reach a conclusion that would do justice to the basic rules of biblical interpretation (please note that explanations related to more technical matters and bibliographical references are given in the footnotes). As we investigate the various possible interpretations, we must finally lean toward the best possible option. The only consensus among commentators on this issue is that there is insufficient basis here for being dogmatic about the identity of the angels.

View I: The Angel is the Pastor of The Church: At the outset itself we know that this is more of a Baptist view though others also have embraced it. Many commentators would make the angel the symbol of the Pastor or Minister of the church. This is a popular view among evangelical Protestants. In the light of the contemporary church polity practiced in many denominations, some would even argue that the angel is the “senior pastor” of the congregation. The Baptist theologian A. H. Strong has been a major proponent of this view and it continues to have a great influence among Baptists. According to Strong, “the angel of the church” in Rev.2-3 “is best

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible*.

interpreted as meaning the pastor of the church; and if this be correct, it is clear that each church had, not many pastors, but one.”²

There are several reasonable objections to this view. This view reads into the text certain traditional denominational practices that have no Scriptural warrant. We do not see a diversity of forms of government in the New Testament church. **The biblical norm for church leadership is a plurality of elders. It is the only pattern given in the New Testament.** Nowhere in Scripture do we find a local assembly ruled by one pastor. We know that the Ephesian church was ruled by a plurality of elders. The apostle Paul met with the *elders* (plural) of the church at Ephesus 30 years before John wrote the Book of Revelation. “And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church” (Acts 20:17). When Paul wrote the Ephesian letter (A.D.61-62) it was addressed to the *saints* who are at Ephesus, and not to any single leader or pastor (Eph.1:1).

There is no need to assume that there was an evolutionary development in biblical ecclesiology in which the plurality structure gradually gave way to a single pastor or bishop. When John wrote Revelation (A.D. 90's) there was no singular pastoral authority in the New Testament churches. It was a later development.³ Since the New Testament churches know no single pastor or bishop leading the church, the modern evangelical preference for a single pastor in the churches in Revelation is simply anachronistic. Sensing this problem, Lenski suggested that the singular “angel” could be collective pastors.⁴

It must be noted that the word “angel” is nowhere else in the New Testament used to designate an ecclesiastical office. Churches are not governed by angels. The Greek word for angels (*angeloi*) occurs 67 times in Revelation (out of the 176 uses in the New Testament), far more than any other book and **in every other instance refers to literal angels** (heavenly messengers). Angel is a strange term to describe an elder or pastor.

Some who would reject the *Pastor View*, prefers to interpret the angel as “the oversight in the assembly or the “responsible elder.” But this explanation also faces the same difficulty as described above.

One of my friends who viewed the Pastor View as very simplistic and unacceptable, used to ask, “Does your church have an angel?” Then he himself will answer, “No, but we’ve got plenty of demons!” Tim Lahaye quotes J. Vernon McGee, the radio Bible teacher, who said, “I like to think

² *Systematic Theology*, 916. Swindoll understands the angel in each of the seven churches as “the head elder or pastor of the church.... But although the primary recipient was the pastor of each church, Revelation 1:11 reminds us that these messages were intended for the church under his care” (*Revelation, Swindoll's Living Insight Commentary*), 27.

³ The New Testament texts and texts from the early second century indicate that a plurality of elders was the standard practice in the Christian churches. The idea of a singular bishop began to dominate only by the end of the 2nd century.

⁴ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation*, 68.

that it refers to the local pastors. It is good to hear a pastor being called an angel; sometimes we are called other things.”⁵

View II: The Angel Refers to a Human Messenger: This is also a predominant view. The angels are the messengers who represent the seven churches. While *angelos* primarily means angel (celestial being), and generally translated in that sense, there are some instances in the New Testament when it refers to human messengers (Matt.11:10; Luke 7:24; 9:52; 2 Cor.8:23; Jam. 2:25).⁶ Those who prefer this view see the angels as messengers of these churches. “The heavenly messengers ordinarily indicated by the word *angel* seem here to refer to messengers from the seven churches...who are responsible for the spiritual welfare of these seven churches...”⁷ They are delegates from the churches or actual pastors of the churches (who may be one and the same). Others view them as human representatives or leaders of these congregations, or correspondents or secretaries. Still others have identified the angels as teachers or prophets.

Everett Ferguson, in his erudite research paper on the identity of the angels, defends the view that interprets the angel as a member of the congregation who led it in prayer and reading of Scripture or other communications (the reader of a communication corresponding to the reader in Synagogue meetings).⁸ In his view, the angels are the readers of the letters to the congregations. In my estimation, if the angels are human messengers, this explanation perhaps, is a better choice. But if we consider the context and content of Revelation, if the angels were human messengers, they would more likely be exercising a prophetic role than a pastoral one.

In his superb exegetical commentary on Revelation, Robert L. Thomas prefers to take the *angeli* “as men who are representatives of the churches but are without a unique leadership function....If this is correct, Christ’s explanation of the stars informed John that they stood for seven visitors to Patmos....men who come to help John but will return home with a specific mission to the churches that sent them. They will be bearers of a message to their own city as part of the larger package of the whole contents of the Apocalypse.”⁹ Thus, the angel is the human representative of the church who was the primary recipient of this letter, and who carried this letter, along with the rest of Revelation to his church. Hence, each letter is addressed to the church’s representative, not directly to the church itself. Among the various explanations of the

⁵ *Revelation Unveiled*, 39.

⁶ Some commentators try to give us the impression that the word simply means a messenger in the sense of human messenger. But human messenger idea is very minimal in the New Testament (may be 7 instances out of the 176 uses of *angelos*). Scofield sees the natural explanation of the word as “messengers” (*Scofield Study Bible*, KJV, 1331). This seems to be a bold assumption!

⁷ John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 45, 53.

⁸ As far as I know, the most detailed and scholarly research paper analyzing all the various views of the identity of the angel is by Everett Ferguson of Abilene Christian University. His article titled “Angels of the Churches in Revelation 1-3: “Status” “Quaestiois” And Another Proposal” published in the *Bulletin for Biblical Research* (Vol.21:3, 2011), accessed through Galaxie Software Electronic Publishing. *Status Quaestiois* is a Latin phrase meaning, “State of investigation.”

⁹ *Revelation 1-7, An Exegetical Commentary*, 118-119; 128.

messenger view, this is a better choice. It has more weight as it does not interpret *angelos* as “pastor” or “leader” of the congregation.

The “messenger view” may be an easy solution to the problem of the identity of the angel. But just because *angelos* can be translated as a human messenger doesn’t mean that it *should* be translated this way. The semantic range of a word is a *necessary condition* for the messenger view, but it isn’t a *sufficient condition*. MacArthur argued “angels” should be “messengers” because angels never lead the church. But he admits that the word *angelos* is translated as “angel” throughout the Book of Revelation.¹⁰

In context, the Book of Revelation typically uses the term “angel” to refer to spiritual angelic beings – not to human messengers. Does the usage of *angelos* in the message to seven churches make an exception? Angels are mentioned in almost every chapter of Revelation. As Alan Johnson points out, “A strong objection to the human messenger sense here is the fact that the word is not used that way anywhere else in apocalyptic literature. Furthermore, in early noncanonical Christian literature, no historical person connected with the church is ever called an *angelos*.”¹¹

View III: The Angel as Personifying the Prevailing Spirit of the Church: According to Robert Mounce, “The most satisfactory answer, however, is that the angel of the church was a way of personifying the prevailing spirit of the church.”¹² In this view, the angels represent the prevailing characteristics of each church – the personified spirit of the church, the spiritual condition of the church. There are different variations of this view. Some see the angels as the personification of the churches themselves. This leads some to conclude that the angel **IS** the church (so angel of church equals church). In this view, the interpretation leans more towards to the idea “*to the angel which is the church*.”

It seems to me that J. Allen, in his substantial commentary on Revelation, leans to a modified version of this view. While taking the angel literally, he modifies the literal view and interprets angels representatively – the idea is representation before God. “The Lord’s use of the term “angel” representatively focuses the thought of the true “spirit” or “essence” of the assembly... the actual state of the assembly in view. For this reason, it is the angel, the church viewed in the actual spiritual state, which is variously commended, condemned, charged, and challenged.”¹³ In this view, the lampstands represent literal physical congregations on earth, and the stars represent the same company in their moral and spiritual condition against a heavenly background.¹⁴ In the final analysis, both lampstands and stars represent the churches. This view also is related to the interpretation that the angels are the heavenly doubles or counterparts of

¹⁰ *The MacArthur Study Bible, NKJV*, 1993.

¹¹ *Revelation, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol.12, 430.

¹² *The Book of Revelation, The New International Commentary on The New Testament*, 82. Another prominent commentator who support this view is Leon Morris.

¹³ *Revelation, What The Bible Teaches (Ritchie New Testament Commentaries)*, 55-56.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

the seven churches.¹⁵ I believe these views stem from the Hebrew concept whereby a messenger is identified with the party he represents.

Other related views see the angel as the *ideal* of each church, personification of each church's identity, or the spiritualized personification of the church itself. *NIV Quest Study Bible* gives one possible explanation of the angels "symbolically, as the spirits of the congregations – the collective personalities of the believers."¹⁶ William Ramsay believed that each angel represented "the Divine presence and the Divine power in the church; he is the Divine guarantee of the vitality and effectiveness of the church."¹⁷

The prevailing spirit and related views suffer from the same weakness as the first two options in that it requires, **we deviate from the regular, normal, and literal use of the term "angel" in the Book of Revelation** (or modify the literal view). The angels of the seven churches are described as distinct from the seven churches themselves, making their identification less likely. The prevailing characteristic of each church is an approach that shifts the emphasis more to the human aspects of the churches.

View IV: Literal Angel (Heavenly Messenger): Could these be literal angels? This isn't as odd as it sounds. The angel of each church as a literal angel seems to be the explanation with the most Scriptural support.¹⁸ There is no definitive explanation in the text for who these angels were or what function they discharged in relation to these congregations. All the various explanations (including the literal angel view) run into interpretive difficulties that cannot be easily resolved. **Yet I believe, in the context of the book of Revelation, natural reading is the best one – angels are literal angels** (and no need to modify this sense in any way). This is the most defensible interpretation with minimal problems. The following explanations are given in support of this view.

1. **The Prominence of Angels in Revelation:** From the beginning until the end, angels play a prominent role in the eschatological drama unfolded in the Book of Revelation. We see them in almost all the chapters of this book. The Greek word for "angels" (*angeloi*) occurs 67 times in Revelation and in every other instance refers to literal angels. Even in its usage throughout the New Testament, only occasionally it means a human messenger.

The word "angel" is nowhere used in the New Testament to designate an ecclesiastical office. Moreover, Revelation is an apocalyptic book. Angels play a key role in apocalyptic events. The word is not used for human messengers anywhere else in apocalyptic literature. "Furthermore, in early non-canonical Christian literature no historical person

¹⁵ This is a modified literal view. R.H. Charles is an influential figure in the acceptance of this interpretation. See, *The Revelation of St. John, The International Critical Commentary*, Vol.1, 34.

¹⁶ *Revelation 2:1*, 1843.

¹⁷ *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, 69.

¹⁸ Though this may not be the most popular interpretation, several prominent commentators represent this view (e.g., George K. Beale, Henry B. Swete, George E. Ladd, David E. Aune, J. B. Smith, Alan F. Johnson).

connected with the church is ever called an *angelos*.”¹⁹ The consistent use of *angelos* in Revelation, throughout the New Testament, in apocalyptic literature, and non-canonical Christian literature is in reference to literal angels (heavenly messengers). **This does place the burden of proof on the one who contends that the word here deviates from its standard use.**

2. **The Basic Hermeneutical Principle:** Clear passages in Scripture help us understand the passages that aren't so clear. The safest guideline is to take the clear and consistent pattern we see throughout the New Testament as the model we are to follow. It makes poor sense to take an ambiguous passage in a highly symbolic book to form a conclusion – not from the reading of the text, but based on speculation, then use the questionable assertion to challenge the clear consistent pattern found elsewhere in Scripture. **This is a violation of basic hermeneutical principles.**
3. **The Meaning of the Symbol of Angel is Already Given:** Revelation is a book of symbols. In some instances, the text doesn't tell us the meaning of symbols or what the symbols symbolize. And so, we discuss and debate what they really mean. But in Rev.1:20, the symbols of the lampstands and stars are explained. “The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.” The symbols represent something real. **We don't find symbols of symbols.** If the great dragon represents Satan, then we don't have to debate what Satan represents. The seven stars represent the angels of these churches. **We don't have to figure out what these angels symbolize.** They are angels. The meaning of the symbol is already given. By angel, we normally understand celestial beings, literal angels.

A symbol cannot be interpreted by a symbol. The stars are symbolic of angelic beings. It **is odd to conclude that the “star” is symbol of the angel, but the word “angel” is a symbol of something else.** The Lord has explained the stars as angels. That settles it; no further imaginative or speculative explanation is needed.

4. **In Scripture “Stars” and Angels Are Closely Related:** Stars and angels are linked in Scripture (Job 38:7; Dan.8:10; Rev.12:4). **People and stars, however, are never associated with each other in Scripture.** Angels served in Israel's history concerning prophetic revelation and end-time events. God sent the angel Gabriel to give Daniel “insight with understanding” (Dan.9:21-27). The angel supernaturally strengthened Daniel and illuminated the Word of God to him (Dan.10:16-21).

“The stars of the seven churches are angels” (Rev.1:16, 20). Revelation states at the very beginning that Jesus Christ sent an angel to communicate this revelation to John (1:1). If

¹⁹ Alan Johnson, *Revelation*, 430.

an angel was part of conveying this revelation to John, why would it be odd for angels to be part of conveying the letters to the seven churches (though this may not be easily comprehensible to us). From the beginning until the end of Revelation, we see the ministry of angels in disclosing prophetic events to John. The book begins with angelic communication to John (1:1) and concludes with an angel showing John various prophetic events (22:1). *Why and how* John addresses these letters to angels (though the content of each letter is intended for that church, indeed for all the churches) is something difficult for us to fully explain. **But because of the limitations of our understanding, we shouldn't quickly reject the idea of literal angels**, as it seems to be the most defensible interpretive option.

5. **Angelic Involvement in Churches:** Angels are “ministering spirits sent out to render service” to believers (Heb.1:14). The ministry of angels on behalf of believers continues today. It may be a little stretch to hint at the idea of a guardian angel over each church. **But I do not think it is unscriptural or unreasonable to think about angelic service and protection to individual believers and congregations of God's people.**

In instructing the church at Corinth on the principle of headship and the veiling of women, Paul wrote that the insubordination of an unveiled woman would offend the angels who observe the conduct of believers in their church gatherings. “Therefore, the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head because of the angels” (**1 Cor.11:10**). The expression “because of the angels” could mean angels are present in the worship services and will observe the woman's conduct. Peter wrote that even angels are amazed at what a wonderful salvation God has enacted on our behalf (**1 Pet.1:12**). So glorious is the realities of God's redemption that believers enjoy at the present time, angels are eager to steal a glimpse of them from heavenly portals. Again in **Eph.3:10**, we read that God's manifold wisdom is to be displayed to the angelic beings by the members of the church. Angels are learning about God's wisdom as they watch His grace working in the church. The angels know about the power of God as seen in the creation. But the wisdom of God is seen in His new creation, the church. God wanted to show angels His wise plan by using the Church.

Angels served in Israel's history concerning Divine revelation, particularly regarding prophecy. We see this in the ministries of prophets Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. Daniel and Zechariah imply angels assigned to nations. Michael is the special guardian of the affairs of Israel (Dan.10:21; 12:1). Gabriel was sent in answer to Daniel's prayer to reveal the prophecy of the seventy weeks (Dan.9:20-27). **Using all this background in relation to Bible prophecy**, we can see why God would have literal angels in the prophetic Book of Revelation chapters 1-3, rather than mere human messengers. **If angels were involved in the disclosure of the prophetic program for Israel, we can also believe the involvement of angels in Rev.1-3 in God's program for the church.**

6. One major objection raised against the literal angel view is how can the heavenly angels be blamed for the problems in the church on earth? How can the message of repentance, rebuke, and correction apply to the angels? But in the content of the letters, Jesus speaks to the church itself. **Jesus writes to the angel a message for the church and the content does not apply to the angel.**
7. What is the role of these angels to the seven churches? One cannot be very specific or dogmatic about it. But in the light of all the arguments presented in defense of the literal angel view, can we suggest that these angels are **Christ's representatives for the churches standing before Him in heaven**. Are they assigned to guard each of the seven churches – just as angels guard and minister to individual people (Heb.1:14; Matt.18:10)?²⁰ As we have already observed, the New Testament pictures **angels as being witnesses of the events happening on earth** (1 Cor.4:9; 11:10; Eph.3:10; 1 Pet.1:12). Angels are God's messengers and ministers to us. Each church's interests are known to the Lord, and that her heavenly representative angel shall take care of it. They will also guard and protect the people of God.

Angels are “ministers” (*leitourgos*, Heb.1:14). The Greek word suggests a priestly service. Though we may not know all the details, **it seems the Lord has assigned many duties to the angels regarding the assemblies of God's people**. There may be a need to adjust or modify our view of guardian angels from the individual to the corporate. Does this imply that every church has a guardian angel? The text doesn't say, and we are not sure of that. **But the suggestion that the seven churches had angels assigned to them is a real possibility.**

Conclusion

No interpretation is free of difficulties. With all due respect to the other interpretations, when all factors are considered, exegetically and contextually, it is best to view the angels as literal angels/spirit beings. Most of the studies on “angels” in the Book of Revelation favor this view (whether as guardian angels or as representatives). According to Everett

²⁰ This verse is not a reference to guardian angels. It teaches that the heavenly Father uses angels to care for His lowly disciples. This section of teaching started with children. So, the reference here may be to children and those with childlike faith. Angels guard and protect God's people and minister to them. “Their angels in heaven seeing the Father's face” means they always have access to His presence and communicate with Him (like the officers in the court settings in the Eastern world standing before the King). I believe this includes communications concerning their ministry to us. Even if we take it to mean the angels represent the little ones, it again confirms the idea supported here that they represent them in relation to their safety, protection and needs. I believe the implication here is that the high ranking angels are assigned and commissioned by God to watch over His “little ones.” “It is his “angel “in Acts 12:15 probably reflects the Jewish thought that each person had a guardian angel who could assume the form of that person (in this context, Peter's guardian angel). It is possible that Luke is describing their belief without himself endorsing it. The Greek word *angelos* never means “spirit” or “ghost.”

Ferguson, this interpretation has been the default position.²¹ **The normal New Testament meaning of the word “angel” is of spirit beings who minister to believers. The literal angel view preserves the most natural reading of the Greek *angeloi* (angels),** especially in light of the frequency with which the word appears in the Book of Revelation.

After considerable study on the role of angels in Revelation, and in the major prophetic books of the Bible, there is no other way for me to interpret this matter. The non-literal interpretations of angels run into more problems than they try to resolve. There is also no need for a modified literal view. Therefore, this difficult reference to “angels” should be understood to refer to literal heavenly angels who have been entrusted with responsibility over the churches. If the Word of God suggests angels that are related to nations (Dan. 10:13, 20-21; 12:1) and the presence of heavenly visitors (angels) in the worship of the congregations (1 Cor. 11:10), it is not unreasonable for me to view angels as having some authority over, and responsibility to carry out, some assignments for churches in the present age.

²¹ “Angels of the Churches in Revelation 1-3”, *Bulletin for Biblical research*, 21:3 (2011), 373.