

**Identifying the “Ἄγγελος” in  
Revelation 2 & 3  
By Robert Dean, Jr.<sup>1</sup>**

**Introduction**

*The Need of the Study*

One of the hermeneutical challenges facing the student of the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ to John the Apostle, one that has generated significant discussion is the identification of the “seven angels of the seven churches” in Revelation 2—3. The seven letters of Revelation 2—3 are each addressed “to the angel of x” where x stands for the location. These angels are initially introduced to the reader in Revelation 1:20:

“The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches.”<sup>2</sup>

This explanation is delivered by the Lord Jesus Christ in a vision to John the Apostle on the island of Patmos. John is instructed to write down what he sees and then to send, not just specific individual reports, but the complete copy of this entire revelation to each of the seven churches.

The apostle John, obedient to the command which had come to him, sent the Book of Revelation to the seven Churches, from Ephesus to Laodicea, in the form of a single letter, of which seven copies were probably made, if he had scribes at his disposal (i.4, 11).<sup>3</sup>

The two symbols are each identified: the stars are the angels of the churches; the lampstands are the seven churches. However, this still raises a number of questions. Who exactly are these angels? Why are these reports seemingly addressed to angels? If these are not angels,

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<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the NKJV.

<sup>3</sup> Theodore Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament* Reprint (Minn.: Klock and Klock, 1973), 3:413.

then to what could ἄγγελος refer? How does the star symbolism help identify them? What is the relationship between these ἄγγελοι and the churches?

Of the different views taken in the commentaries, none has garnered a majority support. Several commentators affirm difficulties with all the views, regardless of which view they finally adopt. Perhaps a fresh reading of the evidence with a special emphasis will clarify the dilemma. The purpose of this paper is to reexamine the evidence related to the meaning of the term “ἄγγελος” in Revelation 2—3 in light of its lexical usage, context, and the role of angels in the Apocalypse specifically as well as in the remainder of Scripture. A new interpretive option is then proposed.

#### *The Procedure of the Study*

The first section of the paper presents a survey of the three major interpretive alternatives. Each will be summarized along with the various subcategories within each option. Some of the key advocates of each option will also be identified, along with a summary of the observed strengths and weaknesses for each alternative. No analysis will be offered in this section.

The second section evaluates three lines of evidence which set the hermeneutical boundaries for any interpretive option. First, the lexical data on ἄγγελος will be examined. Second, the symbolism of “stars” (Rev. 1:20) will be investigated in light of its range of usage. Together these two considerations seem to point to supernatural beings rather than ordinary humans in the letters to the seven churches. Commentators, however, have frequently discarded this conclusion because of the difficulty explaining the relationship between angels and churches that fits with the format and subject matter of these letters. Thus the third line of evidence will be an examination of the role of angels within the Apocalypse

itself. Conclusions from these three studies will then be applied to propose an understanding of this term within its lexical, and literary context.

### **Summary of the Three General Views**

The interpretation of ἄγγελος in Revelation 2—3 can be synthesized into one of three major options: celestial bodies, human messengers, or supernatural beings.<sup>4</sup> The last two of these options have different variations within them. Each of these positions will be summarized, along with their strengths and weaknesses as set forth by commentators.

#### *Seven Literal Stars*

The first view to be considered is the one with the least attestation and weakest support: the stars relate to seven literal stars. Walvoord describes the view of Stauffer who claims the seven stars originated with a gold coin minted in A.D. 83 by Domitian picturing the dead child of Domitian sitting on the globe of heaven, playing with the stars.<sup>5</sup> The seven stars indicate the seven planets, a symbol of heavenly dominion over the world. Aune references several scholars who suggest that the seven stars are linked to the seven stars of Ursa Minor (the Little Dipper).<sup>6</sup> Bousset and Kraft are two he mentions who suggest this view. He also references the pseudepigraphical 1 Enoch 18:1.3-16 which mention seven fallen stars and 2 Enoch 30:2-3 which mention seven stars created by God. This view has no support in biblical usage or reference and can be disregarded.

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<sup>4</sup> David E. Aune, *Word Biblical Commentary: Revelation 1-5:14*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 52A:110

<sup>5</sup> Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 45.

<sup>6</sup> Aune, 52A:112.

### *Human Messengers*

The second interpretive option identifies the angels as human messengers. This view takes two forms: the leader of the local church (bishop, pastor, elder) or human couriers who delivered the apocalypse from John to each local church, or perhaps they were originally envoys sent from each church to Patmos and subsequently carried the evaluation back to their local church.

#### **Ecclesiastical Leader**

The first view is that the messenger in view here is the responsible leader or leaders of the local church, the pastor or “the bishop, or college of presbyters, or chief teacher, who represents the church.”<sup>7</sup> Support for this view appeals to Malachi 2:7 and 3:1 where the angel/messenger of the Lord of the Armies (מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת) describes the priest as the one who instructs the people as a messenger of the Lord (Mal. 2:7) and describes the predecessor to the Messiah as “My messenger” (מַלְאָכִי)(Mal. 3:1). מַלְאָךְ is also used of the prophet Haggai (Hag. 1:13), as well as prophets in general (2 Chr. 36:15-16). In each of these cases, ἄγγελος is used in the LXX translation. New Testament support is found in Matthew 11:10, Mark 1:2, Luke 7:27 (all of which quote Mal. 3:1 from the LXX using ἄγγελος). Since ἄγγελος is used of human messengers of God in the Old Testament, advocates of this view argue that the ἄγγελοι of Revelation 2—3 must also be human messengers of God. Each of the addressees appears to be on earth and thus should be understood as earthly beings rather

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<sup>7</sup> Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 445.

than heavenly.<sup>8</sup> Further, since the pastor [bishop, elder] is the communicator of God's message to the congregation, then he should be understood as the ἄγγελος of the local church. Walvoord advocates this view.

### **Human Courier**

The second variation of the human messenger view is that this term refers to the envoy or couriers sent by John with these evaluation reports. These are men who were representatives of the church, but who had no specific leadership role. An alternative to this is that these were human messengers sent originally from each church to John who were then given these reports to bring back to their churches. Attestation of the courier usage is found in Genesis 32:4; Judith 1:11; 3:1; 1 Maccabees 1:44; 7:10; Josephus, *Antiquities* 14:451. This latter view is challenged on the grounds that there is no mention of messengers from the churches to John. Instead we find that John is directed to initiate the action of sending a report to the churches.<sup>9</sup> Thomas advocates this view.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses**

This “human messenger” view has as its major strength that it has the simplest etymological meaning of the word as messengers.<sup>10</sup> Second, the church leader option is sustainable since the Pastor (Bishop, Elder) as the leader of the local congregation is accountable for its successes and failures, so he can stand as the responsible representative of the local assembly. Third, the final formula in each of the seven reports states, “Let the one with ears hear what the Spirit says to the churches” shows that each local congregation was the intended audience, and an earthly, not heavenly, messenger must therefore be in view.

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<sup>8</sup> H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, 4 vols. (Munich: Beck'sche, 1926–28), 3:790-91.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Govett, *Govett on Revelation* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle: 1981), 1:62

<sup>10</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol. V c1932, Vol. VI c1933 by Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), Rev. 1:20.

The most common objection to the single leader view or pastor view is that ἄγγελος is never used of a pastor. If “pastor” were intended, why did John not use the word indicating pastor, bishop or elder? In relation to the emphasis of this view on a single leader, some argue there is no evidence of single man leadership this early in the church. The most convincing aspect of this interpretation is that it avoids the difficulties associated with explaining why angels seem to be addressed as the corporate representatives responsible for the failures of these churches. Thomas concludes:

“The view that takes the *angeloi* as men who are representatives of the churches but are without a unique leadership function appears to be the most probable choice, largely because objections to it are easier to answer than objections to the other three views.”<sup>11</sup>

Several weaknesses to different parts of this view have been identified. First, the idea that this would refer to a plurality of elders is negated by the singular pronoun. Second, that this would be a bishop over the elders is weakened by the lack of evidence of strong or monarchical bishops this early in church history. Third, there is no explanation why a simple errand boy would be held responsible for the failures of the congregation.

In terms of the human interpretation as a whole, the most significant weakness is the lexical argument. Nowhere in the New Testament is a church leader referred to as an ἄγγελος. Second, this is inconsistent with the use of the word in Revelation.

But the use of ἄγγελος in Apocalyptic in general and also in our author is wholly against making ἄγγελος represent a human being. If used at all in Apocalyptic, ἄγγελος can only represent a superhuman being.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7, An Exegetical Commentary*, Kenneth Barker, Gen. Ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 1:118.

<sup>12</sup> R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Revelation of St. John*, The International Critical Commentary, ed. S. R. Driver, A. Plummer, C. A. Briggs (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920), 1:34.

Third, some argue that the evaluation, commendation and condemnation could not be laid on any single church officer.<sup>13</sup> Fourth, this interpretation violates the symbolism of Revelation 1:20 where the angels, “stars,” are clearly distinct entities from the churches, “lampstands.”<sup>14</sup> To make the stars represent angels, and the angels represent pastors introduces new meaning to the symbolism of stars and the meaning of angels that appears in no previous canonical book. This is contrary to the use of symbols and terms in Revelation which consistently uses prophetic symbols and terms in their historic sense to pull together the threads of biblical prophecy in this final book.

Another odd problem that surfaced with this view is that some advocates recognize the problem with the stars of Revelation 1:20 and solve this apparent conflict by denying that the ἄγγελοι in that verse are identical with the angels of the seven churches in Revelation 2—3.

The seven stars which Jesus holds in His hand, united as if by an invisible hoop in the form of a wreath or diadem, are angels (but not *the* angels) of the Churches previously mentioned.<sup>15</sup>

Zahn argues thus:

The omission of the article before ἄγγελοι shows that the latter is no technical designation derived from the real conditions surrounding the author, or from the group of ideas familiar to him, or from the revelation which has just begun, but that it is a qualifying characteristic, and therefore in some way a figurative designation of the persons meant.<sup>16</sup>

Such a gambit, however, only adds to the weakness of the human messenger option by breaking the lexical coherence of John’s visions.

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<sup>13</sup> Beckwith, 445; Thomas, 1:118.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Alford, *Alford’s Greek Testament: An Exegetical and Critical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Guardian Press, 1976), IV.2:560.

<sup>15</sup> Theodore Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament* Reprint (Minn: Klock and Klock, 1973), 3:413

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

*Angels as Supernatural Beings***Guardian Angels**

Among those commentators who identify the angels as supernatural beings, three positions emerge. The first views the angels of the churches as “guardian angels who guide and protect each congregation.”<sup>17</sup> Support for this is based on examples of heavenly representatives appointed to watch over earthly nations [Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; cf., Deut. 32:8 (LXX) 1 Enoch 20:5, Sirach 17:17.].<sup>18</sup> Additional support is derived from the role of angels as guardians to individuals.<sup>19</sup> The idea of guardian angels for the protection of individuals is found in Daniel 11:1; Matthew 18:10; Acts 12:15; 1 Corinthians 11:10; Hebrews 1:14 (cf., Jubilees 35:17; Tobith 12:14). A number of early church fathers understood these angels of Revelation 2—3 to be heavenly guardians of these churches: Gregory Nazianzus, Origen, Basil of Caesarea, Hippolytus, Eusebius.<sup>20</sup> Among modern commentators we find Johnson in the *Expositors Bible Commentary* on Revelation.

**Personified Spirit**

The second variation relates these angels to a heavenly or spiritual counterpart in the sense of a personified spirit of the earthly congregations.<sup>21</sup> An enigmatic reference in the apocryphal Ascension of Isaiah 3.15, referring to “the angel of the church which is in heaven,” forms part of the basis for this view. Some have suggested an influence from the Persian *fravashis*, “spirits of the just,” a combination of ancestral spirits, soul doubles, and guardian spirits. Charles argues that this is the only viable option because “the letters in

<sup>17</sup> Aune, vol. 52A:110

<sup>18</sup> Aune cites three references: W. J. Harrington, *Apocalypse*, 80–81; Beasley-Murray, 68–70; Karrer, *Brief*, 185–86; WBC 1:110; Charles, *The Revelation*, 1:34.

<sup>19</sup> Aune, 1:110 Strack-Billerbeck, 1:781–83; 2:707–8; 3:437–40 as support for the view that individuals can have heavenly patrons.

<sup>20</sup> Aune cites Gregory Naz., *Or.* 42; Origen *Hom. on Luke* 23; Basil *Comm. on Isa.* 1.46; Hippolytus *De ant.* 59; Eusebius *Comm. on Ps.* 47, 50.

<sup>21</sup> William F. Ramsey, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, 69–70, Charles, 1:34–35. Swete, 22, 73.



question are wholly concerned, not with these supposed angels, but directly with the Churches themselves and their spiritual condition.”<sup>22</sup> Several variations of this view exist, Govett held to a mystical representation of each church in heaven, others suggest more of an accountable angel, with less of an emphasis on personification. Swete, Mounce, Beckwith, Beale, Leon Morris, Hastings Dictionary of the Bible, Wink and Beasley-Murray are some who hold this view. The number who take this view is impressive, even Thomas writes of this view:

Taking the *angeloi* to be personified spirits of the churches alleviates some of these difficulties. The obvious blending of *angelos* and church in stating the destination of each message (cp. [?] 1:11 with the address and contents of each of the seven messages) finds its best explanation in this interpretation (Beckwith). This is the only view that provides for the obvious intention of Christ that each message go to the church as a whole (Mounce; Hailey). When the frequency of personification in Revelation is added to the case for personified spirits (cf. 7:1; 9:11; 14:18; 16:5), the evidence is still more impressive (Lee; Beckwith).

### **Visionary Counterpart**

The third view understands them to be a “visionary, counterpart of such a community prophet.” Aune attributes this last minor view to Schüssler Fiorenza and A.-M. Enroth.<sup>23</sup>

### **Strengths and Weaknesses**

In general the angels-are-angels view has significant support. First, the term ἄγγελος is used consistently everywhere else in Revelation to describe supernatural beings. Second, the ἄγγελος are identified as stars in Revelation 1:20, a common metaphor for angels (cf., Rev. 12:4). Lexical and contextual evidence for a supernatural being view appears to be strong.

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<sup>22</sup> Charles, 1:34.

<sup>23</sup> Aune, 52A:111.

However, the major flaw of this view is that none of the explanations for the role of these angels seems satisfactory. The guardian angel option merely affirms the role of angels as guardians but fails to show either how a “church guardian” role fits the context of the book of Revelation or supply the exegetical justification for such a role from the rest of the New Testament. Allen notes: “The idea of a guardian angel of an assembly may appeal to a religious inclination of mind but has little scriptural support.”<sup>24</sup>

The view that the angels are a personification of the spirit of each congregation requires the stars to represent angels, which in turn represent a church. The stars then, must also represent the lampstands, which completely confuses the metaphor of Revelation 1:20 where the stars (angels) are clearly distinguished from the lampstands.

Critics of the angels-are-angels view focus on several other difficulties. First, it is presumed that this view entails a convoluted message process: Christ sends a message through an earthly agent John, to earthly churches through the intermediate agency of angels.<sup>25</sup> Zahn argued that this view “first found in the writings of Origen,” should be rejected because “it is absurd that the Lord should make known His will to the spirits which like Himself belong to the invisible heavenly world, through the agency of John, a being of this earth and that they should learn of this will only as unseen visitors at the meetings of the Churches when John’s book is read (Revelation 1.3).” Second, the evaluations are “to the angels” who are consistently addressed through the second person singular pronoun, which makes it appear as if they are the ones being accused of sinful conduct. Almost all of the

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<sup>24</sup> J. Allen, *What the Bible Teaches: Revelation*, Ritchie New Testament Commentary Series (Kilmarnock, Scotland: Ritchie, Lmt., 1999), 10:55

<sup>25</sup> Beckwith, 445.

rebukes use the second person singular pronoun. Since elect angels do not sin, why are they accused of sin and why would they need to repent?<sup>26</sup>

The cited weaknesses with the angel interpretation appear to be centered on why the letter to each church would be addressed to an actual angel. So despite strong lexical and contextual evidence for it, the problem of such an angel's relationship to the associated church seems to be the decisive reason for rejecting it.

### *Conclusion*

In summary, only two of the three current interpretative views of the angels in Rev 2-3 are viable—the human messenger and the heavenly being. The human messenger view suffers lexical and contextual problems; the heavenly being view, suffers from not having a convincing explanation of angelic role in an evaluation of a local church. The next section, therefore, will re-examine the lexical data regarding angels and will search the larger biblical literary context for an angelic role left undiscussed in current commentaries.

### **Re-examination of the Lexical and Literary Context of “ἄγγελος”**

Before working through the exegetical details, certain salient features related to these angels must be noted. *First*, the initial appearance of these angels is part of the vision of the Lord Jesus which John recorded in Revelation 1:9-20. This vision of the Lord is the background out of which the seven letters of Revelation 2—3 come. Here our Lord is pictured not as sacrificed Lamb, nor as a Prophet or as a Priest, but as the royal Judge.<sup>27</sup> As Royal Judge, He holds the seven stars in his right hand, indicating the sovereignty exercised over these stars within the vision is *judicial* sovereignty. *Second*, the angels, represented

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas, 1:117

<sup>27</sup> Thomas, 1:101-102.

symbolically in Revelation 1:20 as seven stars in the hands of the glorified Christ, are distinct from the seven lampstands which represent the churches. *Third*, the nature of each of these missives is distinct from the purpose of the corpus of New Testament epistles. Their function is to present the divine critique of the churches' behavior, to warn them of future judgment, to rebuke them for failure, and to encourage them with a promise of reward for obedience and perseverance if they listen and change (repent). These are judicial evaluations, not doctrinal instruction or hortatory exposition.<sup>28</sup> *Fourth*, the addressing of these seven evaluations to an angel (sg.) as a singular individual is followed predominately by second person singular pronouns and verb forms (though with occasional third person plural forms included). Aune observes this to be:

a literary fiction, which the author is simply not able to maintain consistently. Sometimes the address shifts to the second person *plural*, a shift that occurs when a particular group within the church is addressed.<sup>29</sup>

Although the Pauline and other NT epistles are generally addressed to groups, and plural verbs and pronouns are used, it is not uncommon in Scripture elsewhere to address a group as if it were an individual and to use second person singular verbs and pronouns in a collective sense. *Fifth*, the angel of each assembly may only appear to be addressed as if he is the church and the one responsible for this behavior, whether commendable or unrighteous. However, we must note that the addressing of each ecclesiastical critique to an angel seems to be in contrast with the initial command to John to write the entire Apocalypse and have the entire revelation sent to the seven. No mention of angels is made in Revelation 1:11. In these evaluation reports, each is said to be spoken by the Spirit "to the churches" (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). It is very likely that the address "to the angel" does not mean the angel is

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<sup>28</sup> Though there are hortatory imperatives in these evaluations, the purpose and tone of these is not exhortational in the same way of the epistles to James or to the Hebrews.

<sup>29</sup> Aune, 52A:109.

held responsible for their actions, but that the angel is being made aware of the performance assessment of each church. *Sixth*, none of these individual angels nor this group of seven is mentioned again following Revelation 4:1 and the rapture of the Church to heaven.

To gain further perspective on the angels in Rev. 2-3, the larger context of the term ἄγγελος should be examined for its predominate meaning, whether human messenger or heavenly being, and what contextual clues point to one meaning or the other.

*Lexical data on the NT and Old Testament terms for “Ἀγγελος”*

**The Use of the Term “Ἀγγελος” in “Revelation”**

“The term ἄγγελος, “angel, messenger,” occurs one hundred seventy-five times in the New Testament, and sixty seven times in Revelation in both singular and plural forms.”<sup>30</sup> Of these, the identification of only eight in Revelation is in question. These are the references to the angels associated with the seven churches (1:20; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). Fifty-six uses clearly refer to elect angels, supernatural beings who carry out the directives of God toward man. In three passages the term describes Satan (9:11) or his minions (12:7, 9).

**The Use of “Ἀγγελος” in the New Testament**

In the New Testament, this noun is translated messenger(s) seven times (Matt. 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:24, 27; 9:52; 2 Cor. 12:7; James 2:25). Three of these are synoptic citations of the LXX translation of Mal. 3:1 (Matt. 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27) which use the Hebrew מַלְאָכִים to describe the prophet who would be the forerunner of the Messiah. Another arguably

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<sup>30</sup> Aune, 52A:108 states 77 occurrences. A lemma search using Logos in both the NA27 with Gramcord Greek New Testament and in the Hodges, Farstad Majority Text, yields 75 uses.

describes an “angel from Satan” or a demon (2 Cor. 12:7).<sup>31</sup> Thus, apart from the eight uses of ἄγγελος in question in the book of Revelation, one hundred sixty two occurrences of the word refer to supernatural beings. Only six do not, and three of these cite the same Old Testament passage.

Discounting for the repetition, only four distinct uses in the New Testament (aside from the Old Testament quotation) out of one hundred seventy-five unambiguously describe human messengers. In each of these four instances, the context is clear that these must be human couriers: each time the messengers are sent by other humans or Jesus in His humanity. However, none of these refer to a communicator of the Word of God or a pastor of a local church with the exception of the Old Testament quotation. A canon of hermeneutics states that a word should have its normal, literal meaning unless there is compelling contextual reason to understand the term in some other way.

When these results are combined with the other uses of ἄγγελος in the book of Revelation then there must be compelling contextual evidence in these eight instances to indicate a human referent. This can only be supplied by context. Three contextual aspects therefore, will be studied below, following the completion of the present lexical data: the star metaphor in Revelation 1:20, the role of angels in the remainder of the book of Revelation in light of the role of these angels in the seven letters, and third, relating this role to that of angels within the entire corpus of the canon.

### **The Use of מַלְאָכִים in the Old Testament**

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<sup>31</sup> One argument for human messenger states that Paul’s use of “messenger” always describes human messengers. That may be true with the English translation, but Paul’s thirteen uses of ἄγγελος all refer to supernatural beings. Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Milton Keynes, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Paternoster Press, 2005), 855.

The Hebrew מַלְאָכִים is used for the same range of meanings as ἄγγελος: human messengers; angels, fallen and elect; and the Angel of the Lord. מַלְאָכִים is used a total of two hundred thirteen times in the Old Testament corpus. Of these, at least eighty refer to the Angel of the Lord (if the “angel of God” is identical to “angel of the Lord”) and one hundred fifteen uses clearly indicate human messengers. This leaves fewer than twenty which could refer to angelic beings, eleven of these are the interpreting angel in Zechariah. So, while its range of meaning is the same as ἄγγελος, its frequency of distribution is oriented in the opposite direction, favoring usage as human messenger. The angelology of the Old Testament is conveyed primarily through terms other than מַלְאָכִים, as will be discussed later in this paper. The Old Testament shows a less robust angelology, and thus the term is more often associated with human envoys.

### *Conclusion*

To sum up, the use of ἄγγελος within the book of Revelation is overwhelmingly in favor of a heavenly being. This is also true of its use in the New Testament though four distinct exceptions are noted. When Malachi 3:1 is considered, the translation of מַלְאָכִים by ἄγγελος fits the predominate pattern in the Old Testament. When this verse is subsequently quoted in the New Testament, the LXX translation is simply transferred. But in these NT passages ἄγγελος should probably be understood in terms of Old Testament usage and not New Testament usage which is quite different. Thus, to use the Malachi quotations which reflect a different usage pattern, as support for a human messenger meaning in Revelation fails to take into account these distinctions.

### **The Identification Of The 7 Stars As The 7 Angels**

What contributions, if any, does the identification of stars with the angels in Rev. 1:20 have for the present discussion? An examination of both Old and New Testament data is needful to discover any links between stars and angels.

#### *Old Testament Association of Stars and Angels*

The first mention of stars (כּוֹכָבִים) occurs on the fourth day of creation (Gen. 2:17), almost as an afterthought. Their creation is linked to that of the sun and moon. God then sets them in place to provide light on the earth (Gen. 1:17-18; cf., Psa. 136:9). “Star[s]” is used thirty-seven times in the Old Testament, all but two in the plural. The vast majority of these uses refer to the literal orbs of light hung in space on that fourth creation day (Gen. 15:5; Isa. 13:10).

Frequently, stars are used as a point of comparison in a simile, where one characteristic of physical stars is compared to something else. For example, the prophesied number of Abraham’s descendants is compared to the countless, but finite number of stars (Gen. 22:17; 26:4; Deut. 1:10). In these comparisons, Abraham’s descendants are not called or identified as stars. In another simile, the glorious brilliance of the celestial stars is compared to the future glory of key leaders in Israel (Dan. 12:3). It is important to note that in neither of these similes is Israel called stars, an important, yet often neglected observation.

In a number of other passages a connection is made between the literal stars of the skies, called the “host of heaven” (Deut. 4:19) and the angelic hosts, also called the “host of heaven” (1 Kings 22:19). This is another confirmation of stars being identified with angels. Further, several times the “host of heaven” are listed as the object of idolatrous worship in



Israel. Recognizing Paul's claim that those who sacrifice to idols sacrifice to demons (1 Cor. 10:20), one cannot avoid the implication of demonic powers behind the false worship of the stars.

Scripture frequently describes the ability of immaterial angels to insert themselves into physical objects or physical processes. How this works is left unexplained. Some examples include: Satan speaking through the serpent (Gen. 3), the sons of god procreating with the daughters of men (Gen. 6:3), angels as flames of fire (Psa. 104:4, cf., Heb. 1:7), angels interacting with the winds (Rev. 7:1), angels and other physical processes. On the negative side, the false gods of the pagan pantheon which are scripturally identified as demons, are associated with the stars, the "host of heaven" as objects of worship (2 Kings 17:6).

In two relate passages the tribes of Israel are symbolically represented by stars. This first occurs in Joseph's second dream in Gen. 37:9. In that dream the sun represented Jacob, the moon, Rachel, and the eleven stars, his eleven brothers the progenitors of the tribes of Israel. This symbolism is the background for Rev. 12:1 where the woman is clothed with the sun, the moon, and has twelve stars in her crown. This symbolism indicates that the woman is Israel. Several key passages merit extended discussion.<sup>32</sup>

### **Judges 5:20-21**

"The stars fought from heaven,  
From their courses they fought against Sisera.  
"The torrent of Kishon swept them away,  
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.  
O my soul, march on with strength.

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<sup>32</sup> The association of stars with angels also occurs in a variety of extra-biblical sources. This writer assumes the priority of biblical truth, and that mythological similarities indicate a reflection of once known truth, as well as the distortion which set in over time as different peoples moved away from the original truth of the Creator God. Some of these works include the *Greek Magical Papyri*, *Testament of Solomon*, and *1 Enoch*. Plato and Philo also make this connection.

When Deborah penned her praise to God for Israel's triumph over the chariot army of Sisera, she cryptically alluded to the heavenly allies of Israel. Some believe the stars refer to a meteorological disaster or perhaps a comet descending. One article suggests a solar eclipse. Others seek a closer influence: a polemic derived from Canaanite mythology perhaps. Craigie attempts to draw a parallel between Deborah's leadership of the army of Israel and the Canaanite goddess Anat's rule over the stars.<sup>33</sup> In this view, the stars stand for Israel's soldiers. Chisholm suggests the stars depict *Yhwh*'s heavenly army causing a storm and flash flood.<sup>34</sup> The immediate context suggests an interaction between the stars and a flood. However, nothing in the function of stars relates to flash floods. In what way we might ask, does this metaphor relate to flooding? Interestingly, G. F. Moore lists several older commentaries that identify this as angels.<sup>35</sup> In light of the control the angels have over the weather as seen in Revelation 7:1, this is a distinct possibility.

An angelic interpretation would be consistent with the biblical teaching that human history is part of a larger, angelic rebellion and that the two intersect at numerous places in history, including the final campaign on earth which involves both human and angelic armies. However, there is not sufficient evidence to be dogmatic about an angelic interpretation of Judges 5:20.

### **Job 15:15; 25:5**

If *God* puts no trust in His saints [holy ones],  
And the heavens are not pure in His sight,

If even the moon does not shine,

<sup>33</sup> Peter C. Craigie, "Deborah and Anat: A Study of Poetic Imagery (Judges 5)," in *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 90 (1978): 379-80.

<sup>34</sup> Robert G. Chisholm, Jr., "The Polemic against Baalism in Israel's Early History and Literature, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (July-September 1994): 277.

<sup>35</sup> G. F. Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges* in *The International Critical Commentary*, S. R. Driver, A. Plummer, C. A. Briggs, ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1895), 159 Note: Aune identifies the "host of heaven" and "stars" of Dan. 8:10 as angels in WBC, 52B: 525.

And the stars are not pure in His sight,

Job's friend Eliphaz speaks in Job 15:15. In an earlier speech, he declared that God even charges His angels with error (Job 4:18). Again he asserts that the heavens are not pure in the sight of God. The second line of 15:5 is an example of synthetic parallelism where the second line amplifies or develops the first line. "Heavens" identifies the location of "the holy ones," a term used elsewhere for angels (Psalm 89:5, 7) thus reinforcing the focus on angels. Job's other friend Bildad echoes this idea in Job 25:5, claiming that not even the stars, let alone men (Job 25:6) are pure in God's sight. Kidner and Andersen understand the stars to include the angels.<sup>36</sup>

Both passages compare the spiritual uncleanness of mankind with the uncleanness of the heavens. For the analogy to work, the speaker must compare volitionally-responsible agents to volitionally-responsible agents. Job 15:5 begins an *a fortiori* argument that if the heavens, i.e., heavenly beings are morally flawed, how much more humanity? For the comparison to work, the comparison must be between personal creatures. Since both Eliphaz and Bildad use this analogy to enforce their view of Job's sinfulness, their analogy with inanimate objects would be weak. In light of other passages where stars definitely refer to angels, these verses indicate the same.

### **Job 38:7**

When the morning stars sang together,  
And all the sons of God shouted for joy?

In this stanza, the phrase, "morning stars" is in synonymous parallelism with "sons of God." Throughout Job, this phrase refers to the angelic host, including both elect and fallen angels. Thus "stars" is a metaphor for angels.

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<sup>36</sup> Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1985), 215.

**Isaiah 14:13**

For you have said in your heart: ‘I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north;’

Although some current scholars question the identification of this passage with the fall of Satan this is not the view of this writer. Others have admirably defended the fall of Satan view and their conclusions are assumed in this paper.<sup>37</sup> Lacking any knowledge of specific Canaanite or Phoenician myth from which this would borrow, it is better to affirm that various myths related to rebellions among the gods are shadowy memories of Satan’s original rebellion against God.

The phrase “I will ascend into heaven” is further developed in the second stanza as the “stars of God.” The “stars of god” are the “hosts of heaven” and thus stand in synonymous parallelism with the term “heaven.” In this way, Lucifer arrogantly announces his intent to ascend into heaven, the domain of the angels, to take a ruling position over the angelic host.<sup>38</sup>

**Daniel 8:10**

“And it grew up to the host of heaven; and it cast down *some* of the host and *some* of the stars to the ground, and trampled them.”

The notes of the original Scofield Reference Bible state that “this [passage] is confessedly the most difficult in prophecy” The majority of commentaries, including most premillennial and dispensational commentators, understand the phrase “host of heaven” and the term “stars” to refer in this context to Israel.<sup>39</sup> The argument is stated:

<sup>37</sup> Jose M. Bertoluci, *The Son of the Morning and the Guardian Cherub in the Context of the Controversy Between Good and Evil*. (Andrews University: Unpublished Th.D. Dissertation, 1985).

<sup>38</sup> Robert Govett, Jr. *Govett on Isaiah, Isaiah Unfulfilled* (Miami Springs, FL.: Sonely and Schoettle, 1984), 185.

<sup>39</sup> Walvoord, *Daniel*, Showers, *The Most High God*, Wood, *Daniel*, are but a few who argue for this interpretation. Walvoord however, later changed his view.

The term “host” (*tzābā*) means “army” but frequently is used figuratively to designate the angelic servants of God (1 Kings 22:19) and the celestial bodies (Deut 4:19). While the term here refers directly to the stars, it is as they symbolize the saints (interpreted in v. 24) as shining lights or glorious ones (cf. 12:3). This king (the little horn) will become so arrogant that he is willing to assert himself against the saints of God and even against God himself.<sup>40</sup>

These commentators affirm that since “host” is used of the armies of Israel, and that the descendants of Abraham are countless as the stars, in context they claim this must refer to Israel. However, to complicate things, many of these same commentators also see some connection between this passage and Revelation 12:4 where they interpret the “stars” to be angels.

There are several incongruities with this predominate view. First, the phrase מַלְאֲכֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם “host of heaven,” is used nineteen times in Scripture, eighteen in the Old Testament. This phrase either speaks of the literal stars in the expanse of heaven (Deut. 4:19; Isa. 34:4; Jer. 33:22), often worshipped by pagan religions (Deut. 17:3; cf., 2 Kings 17:16; 21:3, 5; 23:4-5; 2 Chron. 33:3, 5; Jer. 8:2; 19:13; Zeph. 1:5; Acts 7:42); or refers to the entire angelic host (1 Kings 22:19; 2 Chron. 18:18; Isa. 24:21). In Daniel 4:35 (Aramaic) a similar phrase is used in contrast to “the inhabitants of the earth” to refer to the angels. In light of revelation that the fallen angels were often behind idol worship in the Old Testament, we cannot escape the implication that the worship of the stars was a worship of fallen angels. Again a mysterious connection between angels and stars is affirmed.

Support for the view that that the stars here represent the nation Israel is expressed by Renald Showers in his 1982 commentary: “In the Scriptures the Jews, particularly the righteous Jews, are sometimes symbolized by stars (Gen. 15:5; 22:17; Dan. 12:3; Rev.

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<sup>40</sup>Stephen R. Miller, vol. 18, *Daniel*, Includes Indexes., electronic ed., Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1994), 225.

12:1).<sup>41</sup> The difficulty with Showers' statement is that in Gen. 15:5 and 22:17 stars do not symbolize Israel; they represent a numerical standard of comparison for expressing the extent of Abraham's descendants. Dan. 12:3 has similar difficulties. Here it is the brilliance of the stars light that is the point of comparison. Those who demonstrate insight and leadership will shine (כִּי־יִשְׁרָע is ellipsized in the second clause). In none of these examples are God's people called stars, they are simply compared to some aspect of stars, i.e., their number and their brilliance.

Revelation 12:1 is different. The symbolism here is based on Joseph's dream in Genesis 37 where the interpretation of the symbols is given. In that dream, the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to Joseph. The sun and moon represented his mother and father; the eleven stars represented his brothers. Thus in this context the entirety of the promised seed is depicted. This imagery is then used to depict the twelve tribes of Israel in Revelation 12:1. However, Daniel 8:10 lacks any other term that would uniquely connect this to Israel and instead uses a term in parallel to stars, which everywhere else in the Bible means the host of angelic beings.

In his more recent work on angelology, Showers appears to have either rethought his understanding of Daniel 8:10 or he has added to the ambiguity.<sup>42</sup> There he approvingly cites Robert Thomas on Revelation 12:4 where Thomas draws a comparison between the events of Revelation 12:4 and Daniel 8:10, clearly stating that Daniel 8:10 must refer to angels.

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<sup>41</sup>Renald E. Showers, *The Most High God : Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Bellmawr, NJ: Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1982).

<sup>42</sup>Renald Showers, *Those Invisible Spirits Called Angels* (Bellmawr, NJ: Friends of Israel, 1997).

Two other possible interpretations have been set forth for Dan. 8:10 which more consistently take “host of heaven” to refer to the angelic host.<sup>43</sup> The first, sees the historical events in the activities of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (reigned *ca.* 175-164 B.C.) as foreshadowing the events in the future career of the Antichrist (Dan. 7:8). As there will be a correspondence between the military attacks on Israel on the earth and battles between the angels in heaven, so there were corresponding events among the angels at the time of Antiochus’ invasion of the land. Support for this kind of correspondence in the angelic fighting is seen in Daniel 10:12-14; 20-21 as well as in Judges 5:12 and Revelation 12:3ff. Goldingay articulates this as follows:

Perhaps it is the case, then, that an attack on the Jerusalem temple, the people of Israel, and the priesthood is presupposed to be implicitly an attack on the God worshiped there and on his supernatural associates who identify with Israel...<sup>44</sup>

More thought needs to be given to the intersection between angelic and human history especially where Israel is concerned.<sup>45</sup>

The second view which takes the host of heaven and stars in an angelic sense is that this describes Antiochus self-elevation among the gods of the pagan pantheon which were often associated with the stars. Though Walvoord took a standard view in his earlier commentary on Daniel, his mature reflection is presented in the *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook*.

According to history, Antiochus Epiphanes set himself up as God, thus disregarding “the starry host” (v. 10) or the powers of heaven. He set himself up as the “Prince of the host” (v. 11) in the sense of making himself great. Antiochus took away and stopped the daily sacrifices offered by the Jews in the temple and desecrated their

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<sup>43</sup> Those affirming an angelic understanding of Dan 8:10 include: Walvoord, *PKH*; Aune, WBC 52B:525; Goldingay, WBC:D. S. Russell, *Daniel*, The Daily Study Bible Series (Louisville: John Knox, 1981), 144; and Montgomery, *Daniel*, ICC.

<sup>44</sup> John E. Goldingay, vol. 30, *Word Biblical Commentary : Daniel*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 210.

<sup>45</sup> Eugene H. Merrill in his recent work, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006) comments on Old Testament angelology that it is robust enough to suggest a heavenly court of angelic beings to do God’s bidding as well as a hierarchy of fallen angels who “control the affairs of nations”, 316f.

sanctuary (v. 13), turning it into a pagan temple. He fulfilled the requirements of throwing truth to the ground (v. 12). History has recorded that Antiochus by taking the name Epiphanes, which means glorious one, assumed that he was God, much as the little horn of Daniel 7 will do in the future Great Tribulation. His role is similar to the future role of the coming world dictator.<sup>46</sup>

The writer of Macabees describes Antiochus as one who thought he could reach to the stars of heaven (2 Macabees 9:8). His edict against religion is referenced in 1 Macabees 1:41. His desecration of the Temple fulfills the prophecy of Daniel 8:11 that reveals how Antiochus will magnify himself to be like God (the Commander of the Host). This foreshadows the future Antichrist who will commit the abomination of desolation and “exalt himself above every god and speak monstrous things against the God of gods” (Dan. 11:36).

### *Conclusion*

In summary, the Old Testament speaks of a “mysterious” connection between the stars and the angels.<sup>47</sup> Judges, Job, Isaiah, and Daniel all connect stars to heavenly beings that serve God. The imagery of Revelation therefore, in linking stars to angels does not introduce new content into the symbols of the Old Testament. However, to identify the stars with pastors or human messengers would be a departure from the Old Testament symbolism.

### *The Use of the term ἀστήρ in the NT*

#### **Literal Use As a Heavenly Light-Bearer**

The term ἀστήρ appears twenty-four times in the New Testament. Of these, several refer to literal heavenly luminaries (Matt. 24:29; 1 Cor. 15:41), four refer to the literal Star of

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<sup>46</sup>John F. Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook*, Includes Indexes. (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1990), 239. Also see G. F. Moore, “Daniel 8:9-14” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 15 (1896), 193-197, for support of this view.

<sup>47</sup>Franz Delitzsch, *Job*, Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes, trans. Francis Bolton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 4:314; Taylor Lewis, *Job*, Lange’s Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical, ed., John Peter Lange, trans. And ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), 4:602. Merrill Unger, “The Old Testament Revelation of the Creation of Angels and the Earth,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 114(July-Sept 1957):211.



Bethlehem (Matt. 2:2, 7, 9, 10), one figurative use for wandering false prophets (Jude 13), once as a symbol for the twelve tribes of Israel (Rev. 12:1, based on Gen. 37:9), and Christ as the “Bright, Morning star” (Rev. 22:16). The remaining passages, all of which are in Revelation, use stars to refer to angels (Rev. 1:16, 20; 2:1; 3:1; 9:1; 12:4).

### **Symbol for Angels**

The opening vision of Revelation provides the interpretive key for some of these stars. They are specifically identified as angels: “the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches” (Rev. 1:20, cf., 2:1, 3:1). The identity of these “stars” as supernatural beings is confirmed by three other uses in Revelation.

In Rev. 9:1 a star from heaven falls to the earth. That this is an angel and not a literal star is indicated by the personal pronoun, and the action. Only persons can unlock prisons; an inanimate object cannot.

The final battle in heaven between Michael with his angels and the dragon with his angels culminates in a third of the “stars of God” being cast to the earth with the dragon (Rev. 12:4, 7-9). These are the number of angels who followed Satan in his rebellion.

Thus, consistent with Old Testament usage in Judges, Job, Isaiah, and Daniel, Revelation also identifies stars as angels and clearly refers to angels in two passages. No passage in the Old or New Testaments uses “star” to describe a communicator from God; no passage uses stars to symbolize prophets or pastors. Thus the metaphor of Revelation 1:20 identifying the angels of the churches with the seven stars conforms to the predominant lexical meaning of *ἄγγελος* to refer to an order of rational, supernatural creatures. With the weight of the lexical evidence favoring the supernatural being view over the human messenger view, there remains the so far insurmountable objection that there seems to be no biblically credible

relationship between angels and the seven churches that fits with the format and subject matter of these letters. Can one find an angelic role that might support such a relationship?

### **The Role of Elect Angels in Revelation**

Since angels are mentioned frequently in the immediate context of the angels of the seven churches, it would seem appropriate to examine the predominate role of other angels in the book of Revelation. Twenty-one instances follow.

#### **1. The Angel sent by Christ to John (1:1, 19:9-10; 22:6, 8, 9, 16)**

The entire apocalypse was communicated to John via an angel. Six times reference is made to this angel, who apparently remained with John and guided him through the revelatory process.

This angel is first introduced in 1:1 as being uniquely assigned to the Lord Jesus Christ. He is called “His angel” (1:1) and “My [Jesus’] angel” (22:6, 16). This could mean merely that either that he was an angel under the authority of Christ, but it seems more likely that he was assigned expressly to serve Christ on special missions. This is consistent with other ministries of angels, some of whom are assigned to specific saints, or the nation Israel, or to attend the throne of God. Christ was attended by specific angels at both His birth and death (Luke 2:10-14; 24:23).

The primary mission of this angel was to reveal the contents of this revelation to John. The theme of the Apocalypse is the completion of God’s plan for judging the wicked, both human and demonic, in history and in eternity and for blessing believers with eternity in heaven.

## 2. **General References to the Elect Angels: (3:5; 5:11-12; 7:11-12; 14:10)**

Several references to angels as a group appear in the Apocalypse. Though it is common in theological categorization to include Seraphs and Cherubs as angels, nowhere in Scripture are they so classified. It may be that the distinction lies in their function. The seraphs, cherubs, and living beings surround the throne of God and are associated with His glory. Whereas those designated as angels carry out various missions, indicated by their name, “messengers.” Where the living beings appear in Revelation they are also distinguished from the angels (Rev 5:11; 7:11).

Twice the angelic company convenes before the Divine Throne (Rev. 5:11-12; 7:11-12). The number of these angels are described as “myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands.” (Rev. 5:11). In these convocations, the elect angels join with the Living Beings and the twenty-four elders in praising God for His work in human history.

Of these general statements referring to the angels, perhaps the most significant for our purposes is the description of the unsaved being tormented in the presence of the elect angels (Rev. 14:10). “In the presence of...” must indicate something more than the angels are sadistic voyeurs. As with the observance of the church (1 Cor. 11:10; Eph. 3:10; 1 Pet. 1:12), a purpose for their observation or presence must exist. In a prison scenario the best conclusion is that they serve as guards to oversee the punishment of the fallen angels. Since angels are not omnipresent, for this to happen, a designated guard detail of angels in association with the Lamb supervise the punishment of the wicked. This reveals one major role of angels in the Apocalypse: to execute mandates, supervise judgments, and be legal witnesses to the consistent outworking of the justice of God over His creatures.

The scene of the heavenly courtroom centers on the throne of God which is the seat of the power and authority of God the Father, Creator of the Heavens and the Earth, to bring justice

to the earth. It is this scene that sets the stage for understanding the events of unsealing the scroll. For each opening of one of the seven seals initiates another divine judgment upon the earth. Thus the heavenly scene is loaded with judicial overtones. The scroll itself is a judicial document that outlines the procedure by which the Lord Jesus Christ will take ownership of the planet. The seals used on the scroll reinforce its uniqueness, only one who is judicially authorized could access such a document.<sup>48</sup> The opening of each seal enacts another judicial decision from God against rebellious creatures. In these judicial enactments of the Court of Heaven, angels carry out legal duties as court herald, record keepers, overseer of judgments. In short they carry out roles not unlike that of a combined court reporter, sergeant at arms, and federal marshal in the U.S. federal court system.

The scene of the Lamb stepping forward to receive the scroll depicts the transfer of judgment from God the Father on the throne to God the Son who enacts the judgment (John 5:22). Thus it is the Lamb who opens each seal but it is the angels who witness and discharge the judgments.

### **3. The Four Living Beings (4:6-9; 5:6, 8, 11, 14; 6:1, 3, 5-7; 7:11; 14:3; 15:7; 19:4)**

The four Living Beings are mentioned in eight scenes in Revelation. They are always distinguished from the group identified as angels, though in theological categorization they are a subcategory of angels. The identification of the four Living Beings has been frequently debated, as many as twenty-three discrete interpretations have been catalogued.<sup>49</sup> The similarity of them to the Seraphs of Isaiah 6, as well as their close resemblance to the cherubs of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:4-14; 9:3; 10:1) which are called “living beings” in Ezekiel 10:20 has been noted. Some identify them more closely with seraphs because of the six wings, others

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<sup>48</sup> Beckwith, 505-506; Charles 1:138.

<sup>49</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation* (Minn.: Augsburg, 1943), 179.

with the cherubs because of Ezekiel's terminology, and still others as a distinct but similar order of supernatural being. They are initially introduced in the heavenly throne scene of Revelation chapters 4—5 where they are central to the worship of the Father on the throne (Rev. 4) and the adoration of the Lamb (Rev. 5). They are also present in subsequent throne worship scenes (Rev. 7:11; 14:3; 19:4).

However, these creatures are also involved in overseeing the outworking of divine justice in the Tribulation.

...they have something to do with the judicial authority of the throne (Scott). The present scene and its emphasis upon God's judicial dealings with the creation provide part of the hint... Their participation in the administration of divine justice is evident later in the book....<sup>50</sup>

Each time the Lamb breaks one of the first four seals on the scroll, initiating these judgments, one of the living creatures in successive order calls for John to come witness the execution of the judgment (Rev. 6:1, 3, 5, 6, 7). In the final series of judgments, it is one of the four Living Beings who distributes the seven golden bowls of the wrath of God to the seven angels.

#### **4. The Strong Angel (5:2)**

Three angels in Revelation are described as strong (ἰσχυρός) (Rev. 5:2; 10:1; 18:21). The first of these angels serves as court herald announcing [κηρύσσω] a judicial question with a loud voice: "Who is worthy to open the scroll?" The use of this verb reinforces the official nature of his mission. The opening of the scroll initiates the final series of judgments which will bring to conclusion Satan's rebellion against God and usurpation of human sovereignty over the planet. Thus, this strong angel serves as a judicial emissary from the throne of God, seeking one worthy to execute these final judgments.

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<sup>50</sup> Thomas, 1:357.

**5. The Four Angels at the Four Corners of the Earth (7:1-2)**

In an interlude following the judgment of the sixth seal, John sees four angels at the four corners of the earth restraining the winds of the earth. The power angels have over the natural forces of the universe can also be observed in Revelation 14:18 and 16:5. These four winds depict God's judgment upon the earth dwellers through meteorological disaster. The Jewish concept was that the winds directly from the four points of the compass were favorable, but those in between (northwest, northeast, southwest, southeast) would be unfavorable and destructive. Thus, these angels are restraining winds which will bring destruction on the earth. (Mounce, Charles, Thomas). Again, we discover angels as officials carrying out judicial decrees from the judgment throne of God.

**6. The Angel with the Seal of the Living God (7:2-8)**

At this juncture, John sees another angel rising from the east with a seal, crying to the four wind restraining angels to wait to release their winds until he seals the 144,000. The role of this angel is to forestall execution of the judgments of the four angels to provide time to seal the 144,000 from Israel. The act of sealing was a legally-recognized means for identifying property and protecting it. The angel is carrying out a mission related to the Judge of the earth.

**7. The Seven Angels with the Seven Trumpets (8:2, 6-13; 9:1, 13-15; 10:7; 11:15)**

When the Lamb breaks the seventh seal, silence descends over the heavenly court awed by the finality of these judgments. This seventh seal is comprised of seven trumpet judgments, and each judgment is announced by an angel serving as an officer of the heavenly court. The final judgment will be revealed to hold seven final "bowl" judgments.

**8. The Angel with the Golden Censer (8:3-5)**

The first angels sound the four trumpets initiating these judgments in Revelation 8:7-12. Following this another angel, not one of the seven, presents a golden censer at the altar. The incense burning in the censer represents the prayers of the Tribulation saints presented before the throne of God. These burning coals are then thrown upon the earth (cf., Ezek. 10:2). Again the throne here continues to be a throne of judgment. The prayers are “the prayers of the saints return to the earth in wrath.”<sup>51</sup>

This brief scene involving the casting of fire upon the earth is clearly a metaphor anticipating the judgments that attend the blowing of each of the seven trumpets. This divine punishment is implicitly linked with the prayers of the saints offered with the incense to God in v 4, while the prayers themselves should be read in light of the prayer for revenge uttered by the souls under the altar in 6:9-10.<sup>52</sup>

The angel representing the Tribulation saints corroborates the idea of angels representing believers, and confirms that angels of Revelation 2—3 can be corporate representatives of those assemblies.

## 9. The Star With the Key to the Abyss (9:1)

The ninth chapter of John’s Apocalypse reveals the intensification of the warfare between God’s angels and Satan’s angels in the Tribulation. The blast of the fifth angel’s trumpet dispatches a “star from heaven” (Rev. 9:1). The star metaphor is again used for angels (cf., Rev. 1:20). That this is a person and not a physical object is confirmed by the use of the masculine pronoun αὐτός, and that only a sentient being could unlock and open a prison. “This star must be an unfallen angel dispatched on a divine mission to advance the next stage of God’s punishment against the rebellious earth dwellers.”<sup>53</sup> Such an act of releasing those imprisoned is again that of a court official carrying out the decrees of the Judge.

<sup>51</sup> Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 2d. ed. (New York: The Macmillan company, 1907), 107.

<sup>52</sup> Aune, 52B:515.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas, 2:27.

The view of this writer is that the army released from the Abyss is demonic in nature,<sup>54</sup> as is the army of two hundred million horsemen held for this time at the Euphrates, the border of the land God promised to Israel. The four angels are their commanders (Thomas). In this unique case the trumpeting angel is also the one who releases those imprisoned. The verbs λύειν, “loose,” and δεῖν, “bind,” are loaded with judicial connotation.

In both instances, these demonic armies are composed of the angels who followed Satan in his rebellion against God. Their release is consistent with God’s use of demons or evil spirits in the Bible to bring about His judgments (cf., Saul, 1 Sam 16:14ff, and Ahab, 1 Kings 22:19ff). So even here we have fallen angels used by God to carry out judgment decrees of the Heavenly Court.

#### **10. The Mighty Angel Clothed with a Cloud (10:1-11)**

The second ἰσχυρὸν angel descends in dramatic fashion. His visage shines like the sun, a reflection of the glory of God which invests the angel with heavenly authority. He is clothed with a cloud and rainbow, which mark him as an emissary from the court of Heaven.

[The cloud] shows his mission to be related to judgment. Of the twenty other occurrences of νεφέλη in the NT, nine come in connection with scenes of judgment (cf. Matt. 24:30; 26:24; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Luke 21:27; Rev. 1:7; 14:14-16). This context fall into that category because of the angel’s function in relation to the trumpet judgments past and future (Walvoord).<sup>55</sup>

The little scroll in his hand is opened and from this he announces with a terrible voice like a roaring lion that judgments he announces are that John is prohibited from recording them. However, in a scene reminiscent of Ezekiel 3:2-11, John is instructed to eat the scroll which becomes bitter in his stomach reinforcing the harsh bitterness of God’s final judgments on the earth.

<sup>54</sup> Aune, 22B:539.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas, 2:61.



**11. Michael and His Angels (12:7)**

The twelfth chapter draws back the veil again on the war in the heavenlies, Michael and his angels (the elect angels) are engaged in war with Satan his fallen angels (the demons). Finally the devil's minions are permanently ejected from heaven and thrown down to the earth. While this scene is more military than judicial it does have judicial overtones and sets the stage for the final judgments on fallen angels and the wicked men upon the earth.

When Lucifer, *Helel ben Shahar* originally defied God he introduced sin and evil into the universe (Isa. 14:12-14; Ezek. 28:12-19). A second genesis of sin occurred when the devil, the Serpent of old, deceived Eve, and then Adam led the race in a spiritual fall. From that root has sprung all manner of sin, evil, and suffering in human history. Throughout history the righteous have suffered unjustly and the unjust have frequently prospered. Evil has seemingly gone unpunished. However, in the close of the Tribulation God's Justice is served. The Great Dragon and his demons are cast to the earth. Rather than remaining unseen, they become visible and their effects are visible seen from the release of those horrific demon armies in Revelation chapter 9. But at the end, even Babylon becomes inhabited by demons (Rev. 18:2), and as the final campaign of Armageddon approaches, the armies of men and demons gather to destroy the chosen people of God. At the conclusion of the Tribulation God's justice is finally delivered against sin and evil in history.

Yet even in the midst of final judgment, God's grace continues to be extended through the message of three announcements made by angels.

**12. The Three Angels Announcing Judgment (14:6-11)**

Following a two chapter description of how the Dragon will maneuver against the Seed of the Woman the two Beasts and their activities are summarized. Following this John saw

the Lamb and His sealed 144,000. This scene is followed by three climactic announcements from three angels.

The angel announcing the eternal gospel (14:6-7). The first announcement is a reminder of God's grace before judgment. This angel calls all the earth-dwellers to turn to God (cf., Rev 16:9 where repentance is equated to giving God the glory) because the hour of judgment has come. The announcing of judgment is like that of legal counsel advising the one about to be condemned of one final hope of release.

The angel proclaiming the fall of Babylon (14:8). A second angel then announces the certainty of divine judgment on Babylon and her final doom.

The angel announcing the warning against worshipping the Beast (14:9-11). This third angel then announces the certainty of divine judgment on anyone who worships the beast and receives his mark.

### **13. The Three Angels In The Temple Of Heaven (14:15, 17-20).**

Following the three angelic heralds, are three angels, each of whom comes out of the heavenly temple and each successively calls upon the Son of Man to begin his final judgment. The image compares judgment to reaping at the harvest. The first angel calls for Christ to begin reaping (14:15). The second angel then appears with a sharp sickle (14:17-20) but does not begin the reap until the third angel appears and calls for him to begin the final judgment (14:18). The harvest illustration depicts evil in its prime and fully ripe for judgment. The time for the harvest has come, and the time for the Reaper to judge evil has finally arrived.

### **14. The Seven Angels with the Seven Last Plagues (15:1, 6-8; 16:1-6, 8-12, 17; 17:1-3, 7-18; 21:9-10, 15-17; 22:1, 6)**

Like the seven angels who sounded the trumpets, these angels oversee the final judgments from the throne of God. Six bowls of wrath are poured out upon the earth.

“Wrath” expresses the outworking of divine judgment throughout the Scriptures.

Following the third of these unparalleled plagues, an angel not of the seven, speaks. Identified as only the “angel of the waters,” this angel inserts a hymn of praise to God extolling God as Holy and His judgments as righteous and true (Rev. 16:5-6)

The seventh bowl brings the final judgment, the campaign of Armageddon, the destruction of the kings of the earth and the civilizations of the earth dwellers. One of these seven angels then takes John to witness the final judgment of Babylon the Great (Rev. 17:1)

#### **15. The Angel Having Great Authority and glory (18:1-3)**

Unlike the two earlier “strong angels” this one is identified as having “great authority” (ἐξουσίαν μεγάλην). Some think this alludes to his authority to execute the Judgment (Swete), but this is not indicated in the text. The authority seems related to the gravity of God’s announcement and like a sergeant at arms, his voice commands respect, his appearance still radiating the glory of the divine presence from which he has just come. His message so weighty that it could only be delivered by one manifesting such glory (Thomas). He announces Babylon’s fall, the end of the kingdom of man.

#### **16. The Strong Angel throwing the Stone likened to a great millstone (18:21-24)**

A third angel identified as “strong” now casts a great millstone into the sea, the imagery depicts the destruction of Babylon. The angel describes the totality of the destruction of Babylon: she will not be found any longer, music, trades, crafts, industry, social and business life will all be finally destroyed.

#### **17. The Angelic Guide (19:10)**

As the Lord Jesus prepares to descend to the earth in victory, John is overwhelmed by his vision of the bride making ready for the marriage of the Lamb. At the moment the angelic guide instructs him to write, John begins to fall down to worship the angel. The angel quickly admonished him saying that he is but a fellow servant of John and his brethren, i.e., church age believers. This is another example that some angels guide and serve church age saints.

**18. The Angel Standing in the Sun Crying Out (19:17-18)**

The description of the final military campaign against the forces of wickedness is interrupted by another announcement. The birds of the air are invited to partake of a great supper, a meal of carrion, feasting on the carnage following the battle of Armageddon. Like the previous angels announcing the doom of Babylon, this angel reinforces the final judgment of God in history.

**19. The Angel Having the Key to the Abyss and a Great Chain in His Hand (20:1-3)**

This angel “comes down from heaven,” indicating his origin is from the Supreme Court of heaven. His role is that of an officer of the court, a bailiff, in conducting the condemned to his place of imprisonment. The one chained is the dragon, Satan, bound for a thousand years. The vocabulary here is that of prison: key, chain, bound, shut, released.

**20. The Twelve Angels at the Twelve Gates of New Jerusalem (21:12)**

The gates around the city reinforce the idea of the security and power of the city. The twelve angels serve as guards, strengthening the impression of the city’s might and security.

**21. Angelic Measuring (21:17)**

John’s angelic guide then takes him to the new city and proceeds to measure it. “The measurements taken by the angel convey the holiness, perfection, absolute conformity to the

ideal pattern of creation, and divine presence in the city in terms of numerical and geometrical symbols.”<sup>56</sup>

### *Conclusion*

With the exception of the angels in the final two chapters, the role of the other angelic creatures in Revelation is related to the outworking of divine justice. The throne room of Revelation 4—5 depicts a throne of judgment. The angels serve as legal witnesses to divine judgment, they carry out divine judgment, they serve warning of divine judgment.

The seven letters to the seven churches also fit this forensic theme. Thus, involving angelic witnesses in these judicial evaluations is consistent with the role of angels throughout Revelation and is most consistent with the theme of the Apocalypse.

### **An Improved Understanding of the Role of Angels in Rev 2-3**

Given the interpretation that the angels of the seven churches are angels indeed and not human messengers and given that the primary role of angels in Revelation are agents of divine justice, is there now a credible explanation of how such angels fit into the format and subject matter of the seven letters?

#### *The Letters as “Open” Evaluation Reports*

Little objection can be made to interpreting the letters as evaluation reports of the seven churches that address compliance and non-compliance with divine performance standards. The subject matter predominately concerns divine justice, the theme that is central to the rest of the book as the historical forces of evil are conquered once and for all, whether they be human or angelic. These seven ecclesiastical evaluation reports reveal that Church Age

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<sup>56</sup> Thomas, 2:466

believers will not be exempt from future judgment, though the issue will not affect their eternal destiny.

The problematic crux, however, lies not in the subject matter but in the format of the seven letters. All seven churches were to receive the entire book of Revelation. All seven churches, therefore, would see the evaluation reports of their neighboring churches. And each would notice that their own report was addressed to an angel somehow assigned to it.

It is proposed here that the manner of address be interpreted in this manner. The first line, “to the angel of the church of ‘x’ write”, means that the subsequent report is open to and is to be known by the angel linked to that church. The body of the report immediately following is addressed to the particular church itself. And the conclusion of the report, “let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches,” broadens the application to all the churches who would eventually read the others’ reports.

There is no “convoluted message process” here. The angels did not have to learn God’s evaluation via a human letter, *but the churches needed to understand that their performance was being reported to an angel watching them* (cf. 1 Cor. 4:9; 11:10; Eph. 3:10). Each church would have their responses to their performance review recorded in light of future accountability. It was also imperative for them to know that the performance of each played a role within a larger cosmic intrigue involving doxological purposes with supernatural beings that either do not need redemption or that cannot be redeemed.<sup>57</sup> Every church, when it would eventually read all seven evaluation reports, would read them within the larger context of the final judgments of history that involved such supernatural beings as well as mankind. Every church would learn that its historical moment of existence related to future history that

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<sup>57</sup> Traditional dispensational theology rightly points to the doxological purpose of history as the greater intrigue beyond redemption. By so doing it gives an adequate account of non-redeemable angelic creatures alongside the redemptive work of God with mankind.

would unfold a grand cosmic purpose. And every church would be sobered that other creatures, who knew more than they of God's justice were intimately involved with its prosecution.

### *Angels as Forensic Witnesses*

Are the details of this proposal utterly without Scriptural precedent? Do angels have a role as legal witnesses besides the other more frequently discussed role of guardian? The answer to both of these questions is yes.

God's actions toward man seem to be overwhelming expressed in legal terminology and judicial actions. Lucifer's rebellion against God invokes a judicial sentence and eternal punishment which has already been prepared for him and his angels (Matt 25:41). Adam's disobedience invoked a judicial sentence expressed in covenantal overtones in Genesis 3. God limits and defines His actions toward man within covenant structures, legal contracts. The conflict between God and Satan is expressed in legal terms: Satan means legal accuser, (Zech. 3:1-3), Christ is our advocate (1 John 2:1; cf., Zech. 3:1-3), angels and men are legal witnesses (μάρτυς). The problems between man and God are stated in forensic terminology as is the solution: sin, transgression, imputation, justification, righteousness, expiation, forgiveness. The judicial integrity of God is vindicated again and again (Psa. 25:9; Psa. 89:14; Psa. 111:7) and His role as righteous Judge who acts in history is affirmed continuously (Psa. 7:8; Psa. 9:8; Psa. 58:11; Psa. 94:2) all of which anticipate a final judgment when God will render to all according to their deeds.

In the outworking of His judicial acts and oversight of His creation God employs mysterious creatures called angels. Among these angels sin was discovered which invoked divine judgment. That the Lake of Fire has been already prepared for these angels (Matt.

25:41) raises a question regarding their postponed judgment, yet the Bible confirms that it will indeed transpire.

Is 24:21 So it will happen in that day, That the LORD will punish the host of heaven on high, And the kings of the earth on earth.

Just as there is a mysterious yet inescapable relationship between the immaterial angels and the physical nature of this universe, so there is a mysterious yet inescapable relationship between the outworking of divine justice and the ministry of angels in the period prior to the final judgment.

Cherubs were posted as armed guards to prevent the human race from accessing the tree of life. Angels execute the judgment against the cities of the plain. Angels are present in the reconfirmation of the Abrahamic covenant to Jacob at Bethel (Gen. 28:12). God used his angels (Psa. 78:49) to carry out the judgments against the Egyptians. And in Zechariah, though the angels there are related to interpreting the revelation as in John, the revelation they are interpreting consists of divine judgment. In the Gospels, Jesus reports on the angels role in carrying out final judgments (Matt. 13:39, 41, 49; 24:31)

At Sinai, no angels are mentioned in Moses' account, yet Gal 3:19 affirms that the Law was "ordered" [διατάσσω] through angels. Διατάσσω had a variety of uses, one of which was also used in contexts of legal authority, the appointment of judges, the order of government. Hebrews connects their presence at the giving of the Law to judicial accountability (Heb 2:2). This seems more than mere agents of revelation, but is in keeping with a forensic role of being legal witnesses of a covenant.

In the reaffirmation of the Sinaitic Covenant, Moses calls upon heaven and earth as a witness (Deut 4:26; 30:19; 32:1). This is more than simple personification. As non living entities the heavens and earth cannot serve as legal witnesses. This phrase seems to be



shorthand for the inhabitants of the heavens and the earth. Old Testament prophets functioned as prosecutors from the Supreme Court of Heaven to enforce God's enforcement of the Sinaitic Covenant in a lawsuit format (this format is characterized by the Hebrew verb *רָיב*).<sup>58</sup> Frequently in these contexts they would call upon the heavens and the earth as legal witnesses following the pattern of two witnesses for a legal accusation. In light of the present discussion, the format they used has some similarities with the seven letters. In Moses' prophetic format he begins by addressing the legal witnesses in heaven and earth in Deut. 32:1 and then addresses Israel's covenant violations in both the second and third person. Centuries later Isaiah brings lawsuit against Israel in the same fashion. In Isaiah 1:2 God charges Israel before the legal witnesses in heaven and earth and follows with addressing Israel directly in second person as well as indirectly in third person. Micah in similar fashion records God's charges against Israel by addressing first nature as a legal witness and then the nation directly. A background of legal witnesses is involved in human covenant performance.

The New Testament affirms another dimension to angelic activity toward the church. Angels are portrayed as observers. They observe the conduct of the church as well its ministries (1 Cor. 4:9; 11:10; Eph. 3:10; 1 Pet. 1:12). It is often left that they simply observe, but in light of Revelation, it seems they are more than watching; they are watching for a purpose. They are witnessing how each church develops in light of the collective criteria of the seven letters. They are learning of the justice of God in His dealings with His creatures, but specifically they are witnessing the outworking of divine justice toward the church. As these believers respond to the teaching of God's Word the resulting spiritual growth is preparing them for a future role as priests and judges who will reign with Christ and also

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<sup>58</sup> A frequent synonym is *רָיב* (*yakah*) which frequently indicates a portion of the lawsuit or legal case. Prophetic passages that express this type of accusation are: Jer 2:5-9; Hos 2:4-25; 4:1-3; Mic 6:1-8.

judge the angels (1 Cor. 6:3). From the observations, the angels also learn why these saints are elevated above them and are authorized to judge them.

### **Conclusion**

The most frequently stated objection to the angels-are-angels interpretation of the seven angels in Revelation 2—3, centers on explaining why these letters would be addressed to angels. In spite of such a vexing objection re-examination of the lexical data and the star-angel metaphor of Revelation 1:20 reinforce the strength of the angels-are-angels interpretation. That being the case, a search was made for a biblically-confirmed angelic role that could explain the address format of the seven letters. It is proposed in light of the attested role of angels as legal witnesses throughout Scripture and especially in Revelation that their being addressed in the letters can be explained. Just as Israel's writing prophets called upon angels to witness Israel's covenant violations, John is told to call upon angelic observers of the seven churches in the evaluation reports. The churches were expected to soberly reflect upon the realization that their performance was being reported to the same kind of supernatural beings that would eventually execute the coming judgments of God upon heaven and earth. All seven churches would get the "big picture" as each received the book of Revelation. Each church would see the evaluation reports of the other churches and learn that all of them were involved in a cosmic intrigue that extended beyond the redemption of mankind.

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