

# Lampstands, Stars, and Angels, Oh My!

## *Revelation 1:20*

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*The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.*

In our homework we discussed that the presence of the Holy Spirit was found in the burning lampstand. The fire of the lampstand of the earthly temple was an image of the Spirit of God present among the nation of Israel, the only nation set apart by God to be his holy nation, a nation of priests to carry the light of truth to the nations of the world. We also talked about the seven lampstands of the heavenly tabernacle representing the Church as a whole. Now we have Jesus explaining the meaning behind the symbolism of the seven stars and the seven lampstands. Let's look at the lampstands first. The seven lampstands in the verse represent the seven churches mentioned by name in the revelation. They also come to represent seven types or archetypes of churches. Churches that fall into a similar model represented by each one of the seven Asian churches. We will explore this further when we look at each church individually. For the time being, recognizing a correlation between each lampstand and each individual church of the seven addressed in the letter is sufficient.

It may seem a little unclear to say that the lampstand represents both the presence of the Spirit of God in the church as well as it representing the church itself. Let's take a quick look at a few scriptures that bring this idea together.

- In Acts 1:8 Jesus says, *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* This verse makes it clear that only when the power of the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples will they be witnesses to the Gospel in Jerusalem, its surrounding area, and beyond. Only by the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit is the church able to spread the gospel.
- 2 Corinthians 4:6 *"For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face*

*of Christ.*” By God’s work in our hearts we are able to have the light of knowing God in the presence of Jesus. It is nothing we have done or learned on our own that allows us to know the presence of God in Jesus; only by the work of the Holy Spirit are we able to do so.

- 1 Peter 2:9 says, *“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”* Here Peter reminds us that as a chosen people, a people anointed by the Holy Spirit, we are set apart from the world to bring the truth of God’s love to those in darkness.
- Matthew 5:14 Jesus says, *“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”* This verse to me seems a wonderful parallel to the idea of the lampstands being the presence of God within the church. The dwelling of the Holy Spirit within the church illuminates the church for all in darkness to see, drawing the lost to the light of God. Finally, through this verse we see that in unity with the Spirit, truth shines in us and before the world as a beacon. We are to let that light shine through us for all to see the presence of God working in us and through us. This verse will also be one that we come back to in view of the way an individual church shines the light of God in its city.

Now that we’ve gotten a handle on the idea of the lampstands being a church illumined by the presence of the Holy Spirit, we will tackle the next metaphor:

*“The seven stars are the angels of the 7 churches.”*

As we first saw Jesus walking among the lampstands he is described as holding those seven stars in his right hand (v16). Whatever these stars represent, we know they are in his hand, under his control. He knows who and what they are intimately. What David described in the way that God knows him so intimately (Ps 139), so God knows just as intimately all of his creation. God created everything. From John 1:1 we know that not only was Jesus there before and at creation, he was actively participating in creation. Just as David describes how well God knows him, Jesus also knows him, and not just him but everything in creation. Whatever these stars represent, Jesus knows everything about them, intimately. Nothing about them is unknown to him or hidden from him. What we do know about these seven stars is that they are connected with the seven churches. Jesus in

this verse from Revelation tells us that the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. Lets first explore the meaning of both angels and stars, we'll start with stars.

According to Dictionary.com we have a few meanings for "star".

- "A celestial body that gives off light." Stars shine brightly in a dark sky. They provide light in the darkness.
- "A heavenly body as a fixed luminous point in the sky at night." Stars are fixed points of light in the night sky. We know that people have navigated by the stars at night when landmarks are unseen in the darkness.

These are both literal meanings of stars. (I purposely left out the factual definition of a star being a flaming ball of gas. This would have been unknown at the time this revelation was made known to John, and does nothing to illumine our metaphor.) Let's take a look at a couple of figurative meanings to the word "star".

- "A person who has obtained eminence in his field"
- "A person who enlightens and influences others"

From these two definitions we can say that a star is **someone** who is **brilliant** and **influences** others.

And finally we have one other alternate meaning from astrology:

- "A celestial body, esp. a planet, supposed to influence events and people." Planets are not fixed points of light they move about in the sky and if used for navigation would quickly lead someone astray.

Astrology is not condoned biblically. God is the one who ordered the universe and he did not give celestial bodies authority to influence people and events. Although the Lord has strong things to say against astrology, this definition will come to shed some light on Jesus' words.

Next we'll look at the meaning behind the word "angel". These definitions are based on the translation from the Greek word *angelos*: "a **messenger**" (from *angellō*, "to deliver a message"), sent whether by God or by man or by Satan, "is also used of a guardian or **representative** in Rev. 1:20<sup>1</sup>; "by implication a **pastor** :- angel, messenger."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words

<sup>2</sup> Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary

According to these two definitions, *angelos* can be translated as either a heavenly messenger (the angel Gabriel for example) or a human messenger (John the Baptist is called *angelos* in Matt 11:10 and Mark 1:2). The word *angelos* is used in Luke 7:24: John (the Baptist) sent his messengers a head to Jerusalem; and, James refers to the spies received by Rahab as messengers (James 2:25). The word *angelos* as a human messenger is used the most frequently in scripture, as opposed to a heavenly messenger. Paul even describes his “thorn in the flesh” as a messenger of Satan, again the word *angelos* is used to describe this agent of Satan. According to the definition above, the intent of *angelos* is implied in the function of a pastor, as well. A pastor is appointed by God to teach, shepherd, and guide an individual church. He functions as a messenger from God to his congregation.

Did you notice in the definition above, one of the meanings of *angelos*, directly associated with the verse Rev. 1:20 is a “guardian or representative”. A pastor, as head of a church or leader of a church, represents Christ to that congregation. (What a fearful proposition – to be the one called to be Christ’s representative on Earth!) We know we cannot hold our ministers and pastors accountable to the same infallible level as Christ, but they are accountable to a higher level than the rest of the congregation due to their vocation and training. We can say that a pastor of a church is Christ’s representative in that church, their position stands for Christ’s presence, teaching and authority in that church. We can also say the reverse; a pastor of a church is representative of that church before Christ. That pastor is responsible for the spiritual welfare of the congregation to which he has been entrusted.

So we can sum up the above definitions as follows:

- a) The most frequent translation of *angelos* is messenger of the human variety.
- b) *Angelos* can refer to a pastor.
- c) *Angelos* is representative of Christ to his church and of the church before Christ.

Accordingly, I’m not sure that we must follow a strict interpretation of the word *angelos* in verse 20 to indicate a heavenly messenger, or angel, along the lines of Gabriel, or as something like a “guardian angel” as some scholars have suggested. I think it is very biblical to interpret “angel” in verse 20 as a human messenger: the representative of a church, the pastor, one who is appointed to bring, teach, and share a message from God to a church. We can also take the figurative meaning of the word “star” and apply it to the one who is the messenger or representative of the church. Do we not all hope that each of our pastors is **someone** who is **brilliant** and **influences** others?

We can easily see how these stars and angels come together in Jesus’ statement “*The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches.*” I think we can say that the seven stars (persons of brilliance who influence others) are the seven angels (messengers, pastors, representatives) of the seven churches. The letters addressed to the churches are more

appropriately directed at the “star” or “angel” of the church. Jesus’ stern words against most of the seven churches indicate a failing on the part of the “messenger” or “pastor”. Humans are lead astray or lead others astray. It is not likely that a heavenly messenger would lead a church astray, but it is possible that an earthly messenger could. Could a false messenger in one of these churches be described as a “wandering star”? A “wandering star” being a brilliant leader with strong persuasive influence leading a church away from their early instruction and away from Christ’s teaching. An earthly messenger, pastor, or church leader would be subject to Jesus’ rebukes and would need to lead his entire church to repentance.

## Ephesus

This week we will be looking at the letter to Ephesus. Before we get into those scriptures I thought it might be helpful to have a little background on the region of Asia Minor in the time John wrote these letters. We’ve already discussed that this region was subjugated to the Roman Empire. “Asia” is a term used at the time to refer to Proconsular Asia, the Roman province of western Asia Minor. Luke and Paul refer to “Asia” throughout Acts in mention of Paul’s letters and journeys in that region. When Asia is spoken of, Ephesus is its un-official capitol. Ephesus was the major city and commercial center of the region. At the time it was a port city possessing a deep water port allowing for the transport of goods from Rome, across Asian Minor and to Persia. Before the Roman Empire, this region had been conquered by Alexander the Great. Ephesus and its surrounding cities were Hellenized – they spoke Greek, accepted Greek culture and its pantheon of Greek gods. The Temple of Artemis (one of the seven wonders of the ancient world) was situated in this city and was a major economic power in the city. The Gospel first came to this region shortly after Pentecost (Acts 2:9, 6:9). Paul preached in this city during his first missionary journey, and left Priscilla and Aquilla in his place (Acts 18:18-21). On his third missionary journey Paul returned and stayed for three nearly years. Acts 19:9-10 records, that Paul spoke to his disciples in the Hall of Tyrannus and “[t]his went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord”. Timothy also spent time teaching and preaching in Ephesus. Later John settled here and oversaw those churches as well as the establishment of many more. Likely during the time of Paul’s journeys and sojourn in Ephesus, the churches mentioned in the Revelation were established. These were not the only churches in the area, but became somewhat representative of smaller regions or divisions within the entire region.

The seven churches mentioned in Revelation are all found to lie on a major road which circles through Asia Minor. Each city Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea served as a means of communication to outlying cities and churches. On a secondary road system, each of the seven churches would serve its surrounding area; sometimes the church mentioned was a smaller church in comparison with a church in its district. For example, Pergamum's district reached north and included Troas, a much larger city and church. It also included Adramyttium, and probably Cyzicus and other cities on the coast; Thyatira served an inland district on the northeast and east; Sardis provided for the wide middle valley of the Hermus; Philadelphia for Upper Lydia; Laodicea for the Lycus Valley, and for Central Phrygia, of which it was the Christian metropolis in later time; Ephesus for the Cayster and Lower Meander Valleys and coasts; Smyrna for the Lower Hermus Valley and the North Ionian coasts, perhaps with Mitylene and Chios.<sup>3</sup>

The Letters issued by Jesus and recorded by John were written specifically for each church named and addressed issues specific to those churches. The letters were not sent separately to each individual church, but each church received the Revelation, including the seven letters, in its entirety. The Revelation was then likely distributed to each region from the church mentioned in order that they too should receive the teaching and instruction contained in the letters as well as the Revelation itself.

While the seven churches and their corresponding letters do have a particular significance in their time and place in history, they still remain significant to all churches for all times. The seven churches take on a symbolic relevance as well as their initial literal instruction. Notice again the recurrence of the number seven. The number *seven* representing: whole, complete, unified, and perfect. While these seven churches themselves may not reach this goal of being perfect and unified on their own, (what church can?) when taken as a whole and in the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit they do attain such a completeness, at least in the heavenly realm. On a spiritual level we can take the seven churches to represent the Church as a whole. The entire body of believers worldwide is represented by the seven churches in the heavenly throne room, and the seven letters speak a spiritual truth appropriate for all churches. As we explore each letter we will come across that spiritual truth that is a pillar in the life of all churches. Some churches today may identify more with one of the seven churches than the others, but what is true for one church is true of all churches. For example, as we shall see in our study of the letter to Ephesus, love is a pillar that should hold together the church, but it is the lack of love in Ephesus that is leading to its weakening and downfall. The message to each of the seven churches is an instruction on what is either needed or lacking in that church, or is

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<sup>3</sup> Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia, The; Ramsey, W.M.; 1904

something for which the church is commended. If we follow each of these rebukes and or commendations we will see an outline of what is needed to perfect the church (individually as well as in a body of world-wide believers.)

Some scholars hold that the seven churches hold a secondary representation correlating with *seven ages* in church history, although scripture does not necessarily direct such interpretation. The issues and experiences of each church do seem to correspond to different times in the course of history. The church of Ephesus seems to model the apostolic church – founded and ministered by the apostles Paul and John. This time period would end with the 1<sup>st</sup> century, around 100AD. Smyrna reflects the church under persecution, 100- 313 AD. Smyrna was persecuted by a series of Roman Emperors. The church at Pergamum was riddled with false doctrine and carnality, as paralleled by the Church under Constantine’s Edict of Toleration issued in 313. This period of Church history lasted until the establishment of the Papacy in approximately 500. Tyatira represents the papal Church from 500 until the Reformation in 1500. The period of the Reformation, 1500-1700 is represented by the church in Sardis. Missionary activity exploded between 1700-present day and is modeled by the Philadelphia church. Laodicea, the seventh church described as being lukewarm and liberal, caught up in complacency and wealth, represents the modern church. This idea cannot be applied too strictly as we find a variety of churches in existence now, as there must have been at the time of the writing of these letters to the seven churches. Generally speaking such a pattern of reveling the nature of the Church as a whole in relation to the order and experience of the seven churches can be seen through the lens of reflecting back over history. If the modern church is a reflection of the Laodicean church, it would seem to lead us into the end times as no other of the seven churches remains unassociated with a church age. An interesting prospect, and only time will tell if there is truth to this interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Gregg, Steve; Revelation: Four Views, A Parallel Commentary; 1997.