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Notes on the use of ἄγγελος in the Greek New Testament (REV29)

Revelation 1:1

“The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must shortly take place; and He sent and communicated *it* by His angel to His bond-servant John.”

1) “His angel”:

a) The Bible is clear that the Law was mediated by angels.

Unfortunately, the statements are made without explanation or commentary:

✠ **Acts 7:51-53:** [Stephen to the Elders of Israel] “You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained [διατάσσω - *to arrange thoroughly*, i.e. *to charge, to appoint*] by angels, and yet did not keep it.”

✠ **Galatians 3:19:** [Paul] “Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained [διατάσσω] through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed should come to whom the promise had been made.”

✠ **Hebrews 2:2-3a:** [Apollos to the Jewish believers at Rome] “For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?”

† The name of the angel is not mentioned, but he may possibly be Gabriel (cf., **Daniel 8:16, 9:2, 9:21-22; Luke 1:26-31**).¹ He is, however, identified as *his angel* (ἄγγελου αὐτοῦ), that is, *Jesus' own [personal] angel*.

b) Angel is the Greek word ἄγγελος.

i) It means messenger or refers to an angelic being.

ii) It is used of human messengers - *an envoy, one who is sent*.

- **Luke 9:51-56:** “And it came about, when the days were approaching for His ascension, that He resolutely set His face to go to Jerusalem; and He sent messengers [ἄγγέλους – accusative plural] on ahead of Him. And they went, and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make arrangements for Him. And they did not receive Him, because He was journeying with His face toward Jerusalem. And when His disciples James and John saw *this*, they said, “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But He turned and rebuked them, [and said, “You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.”] And they went on to another village.”
- **Luke 7:24:** “And when the messengers [ἄγγέλων – genitive plural] of John had left, He began to speak to the multitudes about John, “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?”
- Of John the Baptizer: **Luke 7:26-27** (also **Matthew 11:10; Mark 1:2**): “But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and one who is more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, ‘BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER BEFORE YOUR FACE, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.’”

¹ Walvoord, John F., *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, (Chicago: Moody Press), 1966, p. 36.

- **Galatians 4:14:** “and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel (αγγελος) of God, as Christ Jesus *Himself*.”
 - **James 2:25:** “And in the same way was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works, when she received the messengers (αγγελος) and sent them out by another way?”
- c) These are the only instances of the word being used of anything but literal angels in the New Testament.
- i) The word is used 68 times in the book of Revelation.
- ii) To interpret the “angel” of the church as referring to a human messenger:
- (1) Would be inconsistent with the way the rest of the book uses the word.
- The word appears in the book of Revelation an astonishing 68 times.
 - With the *human messenger* interpretation of **Revelation 1-3**, the word would be interpreted as referring to a human messenger in only 10 of 68 times.
 - If you remove the instances where the messenger is referred to as *the angel of the church* or *the angels of the churches*, it would have no such interpretation anywhere in the book!
 - In the gospel by the same author, John, αγγελος is used exclusively of celestial beings.
- (2) Would be inconsistent with the most common usage of the word throughout all the New Testament.
- Of the more than 180 times the word is used in the New Testament, it refers to angels about 5 times (with three of

them being a quotation of **Malachi 3:1** (“BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER BEFORE YOUR FACE.”)

- Would be the only instances of the word being applied to a pastor, teacher, elder, deacon or other church leader.
- Would be the only instance of the word being applied to a human messenger after the Day of Pentecost!

(3) Would be inconsistent with the most common usage of the word throughout the Old Testament.

- It is only used of a one OT prophet, and that by the Prophet himself!
- **Haggai 1:13**: “Then Haggai, the messenger (αγγελος) of the LORD, spoke by the commission of the LORD to the people saying,” ‘I am with you,’ declares the LORD.”

(4) Would be a violation of the hermeneutical law of Consistency of Interpretation. This law would require the interpretation of αγγελος in **Revelation 1-3** to see it as referring to an angelic being.

d) Why then would a pastor interpret the word as referring to a human messenger in **Revelation 1-3**?

i) The answer is both simple and saddening – to control and manipulate the flock.

ii) Here’s how the story usually goes:

(1) Each time the word angel is used with reference to the church the definite article is used + the dative case.

(2) This indicates that there is ONLY ONE SPECIFIC angel per church and not many.

(3) Since the “angel” here refers to a human messenger, this teaches that there is only one pastor per church who has absolute authority under God. And that pastor is me!

iii) John Calvin’s comment on **1 Timothy 5:17** is helpful in this respect:

“We may learn from this, that there were at that time two kinds of elders; for all were not ordained to teach. The words plainly mean, that there were some who “ruled well” and honorably, but who did not hold the office of teachers. And, indeed, there were chosen from among the people men of worth and of good character, who, united with the pastors in a common council and authority administered the discipline of the Church, and were a kind of censors for the correction of morals. Ambrose complains that this custom had gone into disuse, through the carelessness, or rather through the pride, of the doctors, who wish to possess undivided power.”²

e) But the Bible teaches otherwise:

i) The church should be administrated, not by one pastor with sole authority, but by a *plurality* of elders with one pastor primarily responsible for communicating the vision of the church.

ii) This protects the flock from an impure and dishonest man in the pulpit. It keeps the leadership accountable to one another.

iii) Pastors to local assemblies are always spoken of in the plural, never in the singular.

(1) “That the titles elder, pastor, and overseer all describe the same person is made clear by the use of all three words to describe the same men in **Acts 20:17, 28**.

(a) The term “pastor” emphasizes their shepherding or feeding function,

² Calvin, John, *Calvin’s Commentaries: 1 Timothy* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Book House).

(b) “overseer” their authority and leading function,

(c) and “elder” their spiritual maturity.”³

(2) The word for “pastor” is used only one time in the entire NT of a church leader other than Christ.

(a) In that place - **Ephesians 4:11** - it appears as the masculine accusative *plural* of ποιμήν.

(b) Ephesians was primarily written by one man to one specific local assembly to whom God gave: “apostles...prophets [this is in the pre-canon period of the dispensation of the church] and...evangelists, and...pastors and teachers.”

(c) Notice the consistent use of the plurals. Even Paul did claim exclusivity as THE apostle of the Church of Ephesus!

(3) Note some other examples:

- **Acts 14:19-23:** “But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. But while the disciples stood around him, he arose and entered the city. And the next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe. And after they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and *saying*, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” And when they had appointed elders [the accusative plural of πρεσβύτερος] for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”
- **Acts 15:1-6:** “And some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised

³ MacArthur, John F., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody Press) 1983, on 1 Timothy 5:17.

according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, *the brethren* determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders [the accusative plural of *πρεσβύτερος*] concerning this issue. Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. And when they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed, stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.” And the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.”

- **Acts 20:17:** “And from Miletus he [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders [the accusative plural of *πρεσβύτερος*] of the church [i.e., *at Ephesus!*].”
- **1 Timothy 5:17:** “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching [*διδασκαλία - instruction*].”

Dr. John MacArthur: “Preaching is from *logos* and literally means “speech.” It looks at public proclamation of the truth that includes exhortation and admonition. Teaching translates *didaskalia*. It emphasizes the idea of instruction more than proclamation. Preaching calls for a heart response to God, while teaching is a necessary bulwark against heresy. Not all elders will have the same burden of preaching and teaching. Some may teach or preach infrequently, some constantly. Those whose ministry demands all their attention should be freed from

any need to earn a living and be cared for and even rewarded for their singular devotion.”⁴

- **Titus 1:5:** “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders [the accusative plural of πρεσβύτερος] in every city as I directed you.”
- **James 5:13-14:** “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praises. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders [the accusative plural of πρεσβύτερος] of the church, and let them pray over him.”

f) There is only ONE Shepherd (singular), and that is Christ Himself (**Genesis 48:15, 49:24; Ecclesiastes 12:11; Matthew 2:6, 26:31; Mark 14:27; John 10:11, 14, 16**).

g) Conclusion: *αγγελος*, then, is best seen as a reference to guardian angels that were assigned to the various churches scattered about Asia Minor.⁵

h) Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum writes:

“The seven stars of verse 16 [chapter one] are the seven angels appointed to these churches...Wherever the word star is used symbolically, it will always be a symbol of an angel. This is true in the Old Testament. This is also true in the New Testament including the various parts of the book of Revelation.”⁶

Revelation 1:20

“As for 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 are the seven churches.”

⁴ MacArthur, John F., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody Press) 1983.

⁵ Walvoord holds to the “human messenger” interpretation (*The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, p.53), as does Larkin (*The Book of Revelation*, p.12).

⁶ Fruchtenbaum, Arnold G., *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events*, (Tustin, California: Ariel Ministries Press) 1982, p.15.

- 1) “Everywhere else in the book of Revelation, angels are supernatural messengers, and there is no reason to make an exception here. When angels in this book are identified, it is always either:
 - a) In relation to whomever they serve:
 - i) God’s angel, or Christ’s, in **1:1; 3:5; 22:6, 16;**
 - ii) “Michael and his angels” in **12:7;**
 - iii) “The dragon and his angels” in **12:7, 9,** or
 - b) In relation to the realm over which they rule:
 - i) “The angel of the Abyss” in **9:11;**
 - ii) The angel “who had charge of the fire” in **14:18;**
 - iii) “The angel in charge of the waters” in **16:5.”**⁷
- 2) “*Angels of the seven churches* belong to the latter group. They rule or preside over the churches just as an angel presides over the sources of fresh water or over fire or over the realm of death and destruction (compare the four angels in control of the winds “who had been given power to harm the land and the sea” in **7:2**)...to John they are, quite literally, angels whom God holds responsible for the life and well-being of the congregations...[Paul] had urged proper conduct in worship at Corinth “because of the angels” (**1 Corinthians 11:10**). They seem to have had their greatest importance in Paul’s Asian congregations (Colossae and Laodicea), and Paul is careful to point out the danger of esteeming them too highly or putting them at the center of Christian worship or religious experience (see Colossians 2:18) ... They are as much a part of this world as the churches for which they are responsible.”⁸

⁷ Michaels, J. Ramsey, *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series: Revelation*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press) 1998, c1997.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Michaels.