

# The Seven Spirits Of God

And The Man Who Will Judge The World



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PLEASE NOTE:

1. As in the original language Scriptures, I use the masculine pronoun sometimes in reference to a specific male *and* sometimes in reference to a person or persons generically. In other words, except when a specific male is in view, I use *he* or *him* to mean *that person* regardless of sex.
2. Throughout this document biblical references appear (usually) with the 3-letter book name abbreviations used by Logos Bible Software. The book name abbreviations are not followed by a period, but a period rather than a colon separates chapter and verse numbers. For example, Act 2.39 would designate the 39th verse of the second chapter of Acts.
3. Names cited in footnotes generally refer to authors whose works appear in the bibliography.

# Abbreviations Used

## *Bible Books*

1Ch	1 Chronicles	Hos	Hosea
1Co	1 Corinthians	Isa	Isaiah
1Jo	1 John	Jam	James
1Ki	1 Kings	Jdg	Judges
1Pe	1 Peter	Jer	Jeremiah
1Sa	1 Samuel	Job	Job
1Th	1 Thessalonians	Joe	Joel
1Ti	1 Timothy	Joh	John
2Ch	2 Chronicles	Jon	Jonah
2Co	2 Corinthians	Jos	Joshua
2Jo	2 John	Jude	Jude
2Ki	2 Kings	Lam	Lamentations
2Pe	2 Peter	Lev	Leviticus
2Sa	2 Samuel	Luk	Luke
2Th	2 Thessalonians	Mal	Malachi
2Ti	2 Timothy	Mar	Mark
3Jo	3 John	Mat	Matthew
Act	Acts	Mic	Micah
Amo	Amos	Nah	Nahum
Col	Colossians	Neh	Nehemiah
Dan	Daniel	Num	Numbers
Deut	Deuteronomy	Oba	Obadiah
Ecc	Ecclesiastes	Phil	Philippians
Eph	Ephesians	Phm	Philemon
Est	Esther	Pro	Proverbs
Ex	Exodus	Psa	Psalms
Eze	Ezekiel	Rev	Revelation
Ezr	Ezra	Rom	Romans
Gal	Galatians	Rut	Ruth
Gen	Genesis	Song	The Song of Solomon
Hab	Habakkuk	Tit	Titus
Hag	Haggai	Zec	Zechariah
Heb	Hebrews	Zep	Zephaniah

## Literature Ancient And Modern

1Cl	<i>First Epistle of Clement</i> which appears in The Apostolic Fathers
ACCS	<i>Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture</i>
ANF	<i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> , Roberts et al editors
Ant	Flavius Josephus, <i>The Antiquities Of The Jews</i>
Apion	Flavius Josephus, <i>Against Apion</i>
Bar	<i>Epistle of Barnabas</i> which appears in The Apostolic Fathers
CBC	Ross and Oswalt, <i>Cornerstone Biblical Commentary</i>
DBI	<i>Dictionary of Biblical Imagery</i> by Leland Ryken <i>et al</i>
DSS	<i>The Dead Sea Scrolls</i>
ESV	<i>The Holy Bible</i> , English Standard Version © 2016 Good News Publishers
JE	<i>The Jewish Encyclopedia</i>
JPSTC	<i>The Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary</i>
LXX	<i>The Septuagint</i> , the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures
MT	The Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible
NLT	<i>Holy Bible</i> , New Living Translation © 1996, 2004, 2007 Tyndale House
NPNF	<i>A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i>
NT	The New Testament
Sib Or	<i>Sibylline Oracles</i> (in Charlesworth)
Sir	<i>Wisdom of Ben Sirach</i> which appears in the biblical Apocrypha
Tes Lev	<i>The Testament of Levi</i> , which appears in <i>The Testaments Of The Twelve Patriarchs</i>
Tes Reu	<i>The Testament of Reuben</i> , which appears in <i>The Testaments Of The Twelve Patriarchs</i>
Tob	<i>The Book of Tobit</i> which appears in the biblical Apocrypha

## Miscellaneous

c.	<i>circa</i> , approximately	i.e.	that is to say
ch.	chapter	ms, mss	manuscript, manuscripts
Eng	English	<i>op cit</i>	in the work cited
<i>et al</i>	and others	rev.	revised
<i>et seq</i>	and what follows	trans.	translation
Grk	Greek	v., vv.	verse, verses
Heb	Hebrew or Hebrews		
ibid.	in the same place		

## Lest Diamonds Disappear

When we misinterpret inspired words, gems of insight and application slip through our fingers, losing themselves among the encroaching weeds of our mental pathways. For the believer with a high view of Scripture, the scintillation of *every sacred word*, even if that word does not attach contextually to a central doctrine of the faith, reflects the mind of God (cf. Mat 4.4). It behooves every teacher of the Word, then, not to complacently parrot the assumptions of others with regard to obscure and difficult texts. Instead, he must expend his own mental and spiritual energy in the attempt to confirm or deny the antecedent conclusions of others, with a view toward arriving at the best interpretation that sound exegesis can provide.

No expositor can give the scrutiny to *every* passage of Scripture that every passage deserves. However, once someone decides to preach or teach a passage, or write a commentary on the book in which it appears, he must not blindly follow earlier commentaries. Simply parroting the expositions of others teaches the Bible-believing community to accept an interpretation by virtue of nothing more than its constant repetition. Instead, the teacher must first examine the glittering facets of the passage for himself through the exegete's loupe. He must gaze upon it from varied perspectives, and with all the spiritual and academic tools he can muster.

In the end, the process may result in an admission of uncertainty. The honest commentator does not balk at humbly confessing that he cannot confidently assert the correct interpretation a passage, even though various possible interpretations present themselves. A handful of mysterious Bible passages, none of them central to the doctrines of the faith, will probably continue to mystify us until we can confer with their authors in glory. Nevertheless, what the honest expositor *does not do* is suggest as certain, or even likely, an interpretation that he has not subjected to the most fundamental of hermeneutical rules.

Now, since the first century, what book of the Bible has generated more sermons, Bible studies, and commentaries, *unencumbered by the rules of hermeneutics and sound exegesis*, than the book of Revelation? And in the book of Revelation, what phrase have even disciplined scholars taken for granted more than the unusual expression, "the seven spirits of God"? Have diamonds of insight

disappeared by virtue of hermeneutical complacency toward this phrase and what it designates? This work attempts to answer that question for anyone called to expound upon the book of Revelation.

## Part 1: What The Seven Spirits Of God Are Not

The Bible introduces us to “the seven spirits of God,” at least by that designation, in Rev 1.4, and mentions them again in Rev 3.1, 4.5, 5.6. For the Trinitarian English reader, the very phrase startles us: doesn’t God have only one Holy Spirit? Yes, certainly! With regard to the Holy Spirit, the seven unities of Eph 4.4-6 affirm that there is “one Spirit”; this fact, together with the other six unities, provides the basis for our unity in the one body of Christ. However, the genitive phrase *of God* does not have to mean “belonging innately to,” but can signify “under the ownership or authority of.” So, should we interpret “the seven spirits of God” in the Revelation as literally seven spirits, or as a metaphor for something divine and innate to God Himself?

### *The Untenable Interpretation*

As long ago as the late second or early third century, many Christian writers assured their readers that the phrase, “the seven spirits of God,” refers to the one Holy Spirit in a sevenfold abstraction, i.e., the Spirit who is “sevenfold in His operations,” or sevenfold in His gifts.<sup>1</sup> Commentators and theologians have continued to propose this interpretation largely on the basis of Isa 11.2-3. For example, Hippolytus conflated the phrase from Revelation with Isaiah’s prophecy, quoting Isaiah as having said, “And the seven spirits of God shall rest upon Him.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Clement of Alexandria wrote, “And they say that the seven eyes of the Lord ‘are the seven spirits resting upon the rod that springs from the root of Jesse.’”<sup>3</sup> These two early statements do not explicitly equate the seven spirits with the one Holy Spirit, but by the beginning of

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<sup>1</sup> The NAU, KJV, and NKJV err in thrusting this interpretation upon readers by capitalizing the word *Spirits* in the phrase “seven Spirits of God.” The word *spirits* is abbreviated in **Σ** and **A** in a manner most commonly done with sacred terms, but this was either by blind convention or was itself an interpretive choice by the fourth and fifth century scribes; this ms phenomenon does not help us decide whether the “seven spirits” were the Holy Spirit or something other.

<sup>2</sup> ANF Vol. 5, p. 174.

<sup>3</sup> ANF Vol. 2, p. 452.

the fourth century, Victorinus, in his commentary on the Apocalypse wrote in connection with Rev 1.4, “We read of a sevenfold spirit in Isaiah, — namely, the spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, of knowledge and of piety, and the spirit of the fear of the Lord.”<sup>4</sup> To this day, commentators on the Revelation continue to affirm that “the seven spirits of God” refer to the one Holy Spirit who would rest upon and empower the Messiah as predicted by Isa 11.2-3 — or at least that Isa 11.2 provides background for the figurative “seven spirits” of Revelation.<sup>5</sup>

However, the following points make the identification of “the seven spirits of God” with the one Holy Spirit, as well as the connecting of “the seven spirits” of Revelation with Isa 11.2-3, hermeneutically untenable.

### *Passages About The Seven Spirits Not Pneumatological*

It should go without saying that the passages in the Revelation which mention the seven spirits of God are not pneumatological passages, i.e., they do not focus upon the Holy Spirit nor develop the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. In this the Revelation passages contrast greatly with, for examples, the teaching of Jesus in the gospel of John, chapters 14 to 16, and the teaching of Paul in 1 Corinthians, chapters 12 to 14. Were the Revelation passages about the seven spirits of God pneumatological, we would expect hints in those passages that aspects of the Holy Spirit or His ministries were in view. Such hints do not appear at all in Rev 1.4 and 3.1. In Rev 4.5, we find a depiction of the seven spirits’ *function*, but nothing whatsoever in the context (Rev 4.5-10) that connects them to the Holy Spirit. Likewise, in the final passage that mentions the seven spirits of God, Rev 5.6, we see that the seven spirits serve as the Lamb’s eyes, and are “sent out into all the earth,” but the context (Rev 5.1-10) provides not even an allusion to the Holy Spirit. This is significant in a Trinitarian

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<sup>4</sup> ANF Vol. 7, p. 344. Today, the NLT goes so far as to translate “the seven spirits” throughout the Revelation as “the sevenfold Spirit,” with a footnote showing the more literal reading.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Trench, as cited in Friedrich Düsterdieck, p. 122 ff. Robert Tuck , p. 478; Norman L. Geisler and Thomas A. Howe, p. 551; G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, p. 1089; M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. p. 421; Morris, p. 54. Alford, v. 4, p. 549, understands the seven spirits as the workings of the one Holy Spirit, but saw the fallacy of supporting this position with Isa 11.2. Likewise, Robert L. Thomas, pp. 67-68; Ladd, pp. 24-25; Lenski, pp. 41-42.

book of the Bible that mentions the Holy Spirit explicitly at least nine times!<sup>6</sup> However, that the passages mentioning the seven spirits of God have no contextual connection to the Holy Spirit should not surprise us since the canonical scriptures have never abstracted the one Holy Spirit of God in a sevenfold manner.

## *No Precedent Exists For A Seven-Fold Spirit*

### Isaiah 11 Refers To Only One Aspect Of The Spirit

Isa 11 <sub>1</sub> A shoot will have sprung forth from a stem of Jesse,  
And a branch from his roots will bear fruit.  
<sub>2</sub> And *the* Spirit of YHVH will have rested upon him,  
*the* Spirit of wisdom<sup>7</sup> and discernment<sup>8</sup>,  
*the* Spirit of counsel<sup>9</sup> and strength<sup>10</sup>,  
*the* Spirit of knowledge<sup>11</sup> and fear of YHVH<sup>12</sup>.  
<sub>3</sub> And he will delight in *the* fear of YHVH,  
And not by *the* sight of his eyes will he judge,  
And not by *the* hearing of his ears will he decide,  
<sub>4</sub> But he will have judged in righteousness *the* poor,  
And he will have decided in uprightness for the humble of the earth;  
And he will have smitten *the* earth by the rod of his mouth,  
And by the spirit of his lips he will slay the wicked one.<sup>13</sup>

According to Isaiah, the Spirit of YHVH, will rest upon the Messiah. It is vital that we understand the first colon of Isa 11.2 as a heading for what follows, otherwise we could interpret the following three cola as referring to three other spirits, distinct from the Spirit of YHVH. Recognizing the first colon as a heading, however, we can then interpret the following cola as describing the one Spirit of YHVH. Isaiah describes this one Spirit with six terms from Pro 8 to emphasize that the Branch from Jesse will rule with the divine wisdom and the moral strength by which “kings reign,

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<sup>6</sup> Rev 2.7,11,17,29; 3.6,13,22; 14.13; 22.17, and probably 1.10; 4.2; 17.3; 21.10.

<sup>7</sup> Pro 8.1,11,12.

<sup>8</sup> Pro 8.14.

<sup>9</sup> Pro 8.14.

<sup>10</sup> Pro 8.14.

<sup>11</sup> Pro 8.9-10,12.

<sup>12</sup> Pro 8.13.

<sup>13</sup> My translation of the Heb text.

and rulers decree justice” (Pro 8.14; cf. Luk 2.40). Messiah’s possession of this wisdom and strength is summed up by the bookend facts that the Spirit resting upon Him will be (A) the very Spirit of YHVH, and thereby (B) the Spirit of the fear of YHVH, i.e., the Spirit that will cause Messiah to delight in the fear of YHVH. The qualities of the Spirit listed within the inclusio of these two bookends are expressed in three synonymous couplets, all describing wisdom. We can summarize that wisdom as “the wisdom that derives from the fear of YHVH.” Thus, this prophecy **only describes the wisdom inherent in the Spirit of YHVH**, not six or seven distinct “operations” or “gifts” of the Spirit.

Many authors, early and recent, have observed from the structure of Isa 11.1-3, that at most, six aspects of the Spirit of YHVH are expressed in the Heb text of these verses. Thus, they have used the LXX version to support the idea of a “sevenfold” Spirit. The LXX (translated into Eng) reads,

Isa 11. <sup>2</sup> And God’s spirit will rest on him, a spirit of wisdom and intelligence, a spirit of counsel and strength, a spirit of knowledge and piety. <sup>3</sup> He will fill him with a spirit of the fear of God; he will not judge according to reputation or reprove according to speech.<sup>14</sup>

We see, however, that the ancient translators of the LXX reduced “*the* fear of YHVH” at the end of v. 2 to the synonymous εὐσεβείας, “piety” or “godliness,” perhaps to stylistically avoid repeating the phrase “fear of God” which occurs again in v. 3. They also seem to have misread the hifil infinitive at the beginning of v. 3, יִרְיֶה, “he will delight,” which at first glance appears to contain the letters of רִיחַ, “spirit,” and so added a reference to “the *Spirit* of the fear of God.” Thus, a careful analysis of the LXX version reveals that “the spirit ... of piety,” and the “spirit of the fear of God,” are one and the same thing (not a sixth and seventh thing). Even in Greek translation, the passage still expresses parallel aspects of the Spirit as the source of divine wisdom, and not seven (or six) distinct “operations” or “gifts” of the Spirit.

For all the reasons given above, no Hebrew or Christian author before AD 135 interpreted Isa 11.1-3 as speaking of a “sevenfold” spirit, or connected Isa 11.1-3 with the seven spirits of Revelation. Understanding the poetic structure of the Isa passage

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<sup>14</sup> Rick Brannan, et al.

and its allusion to Pro 8 prohibits both a sevenfold idea *as well as* any hint of seven (or six) distinct spirits in Isa 11.1-3.

A passage does exist in the pseudepigraphal 1 Enoch<sup>15</sup> that does seem to describe seven distinct qualities of the Holy Spirit. Charlesworth renders the verse this way:

On that day, they shall lift up in one voice, blessing, glorifying, and extolling in the spirit of faith, in the spirit of wisdom and patience, in the spirit of mercy, in the spirit of justice and peace, and in the spirit of generosity. They shall all say in one voice, 'Blessed [is he] and may the name of the Lord of the Spirits be blessed forever and evermore.'<sup>16</sup>

Notice, however, that while this passage mentions seven spirits, it includes no unifying heading that explicitly combines them as referring to the one Holy Spirit of YHVH. The passage may refer to the Holy Spirit, but it never mentions the Holy Spirit in the context. On the contrary, it mentions many *other* spiritual entities. The preceding verse reads,

And he will summon all the forces of the heavens, and all the holy ones above, and the forces of the Lord—the cherubim, seraphim, ophanim, all the angels of governance, the Elect One, and the other forces on earth [and] over the water.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, because of the lack of a heading or any other clear indicator that 1En 61.11 has the Holy Spirit in view, we can hardly imagine that this pseudepigraphal passage would somehow become John's model for referring to the Holy Spirit as "the seven spirits of God" in his revelation.

## The Menorah Does Not Symbolize A Sevenfold Spirit

The seven-branched golden lampstand that God directed Moses to put in the holy place of the tabernacle did not represent the Holy Spirit, else it would have transgressed the second commandment of the decalogue (Ex 20.3-5). No one ever understood this lampstand, the menorah, as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, and so, Jewish and Christian commentators have never associated it with the Holy Spirit in

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<sup>15</sup> This work survives in an Ethiopic version, but was probably composed in Hebrew or Aramaic c. 105-64 BC.

<sup>16</sup> 1En 61.11, James H. Charlesworth.

<sup>17</sup> 1En 61.10, James H. Charlesworth.

any direct way. Instead, they have offered a variety of other explanations for the symbolism of the menorah, as we shall see below.

Nevertheless, the *oil* that fuels the seven lamps of the menorah (Ex 25.37; 37.23) *may* serve as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The oil that feeds the seven lamps, and that comes from the two olive trees, in the vision of Zec 4 *implicitly* represents the Spirit of “YHVH of armies” (Zec 4.6). We must note, however, that the oil is one thing, not seven. It is one thing that feeds seven lamps *and* anoints the two “anointed ones” (Zec 4.2,14). Thus, we find no background for the idea of a seven-fold Spirit in the seven-branched lampstand of the tabernacle nor in the similar lampstand of Zechariah’s vision.

## The Gifts Of Romans 12 Do Not Present A Sevenfold Holy Spirit

The NT epistles mention many more than seven charismata, or “gifts of the Spirit.” The charismata are gifts *given* however, and though dependent upon the Holy Spirit for their origin and working, they are not attributes of the Holy Spirit. Instead, all together they point to *one* wonderful aspect of the Spirit, namely that He is the One who empowers and equips the church for ministry and mission.

The one passage in which we have an enumeration of seven charismata, Rom 12.6-8, does not mention the Holy Spirit directly. In fact, Rom 12 is not a *pneumatological* passage, but an ecclesiastical and practical one. It emphasizes humility, unity and faithfulness.

If “the seven spirits of God” referred to the one Holy Spirit, we would expect that some biblical passage, antecedent to the book of Revelation, would connect the Spirit of God to some seven-fold aspect. This expectation is overwhelmingly confirmed by the number of writers who have attempted to find just such an antecedent in Isa 11.2-3, and less often in Rom 12.6-8. Having ruled out these passages, however, we conclude that *no* biblical passage characterizes the Holy Spirit with a sevenfold aspect.

## For John, *Seven* Always Means Seven

In his writings, John never used a numeral with following noun to mean anything other than a number of things. He used cardinal numbers to express straightforwardly the number of the objects in view:

- one devil; head (Joh 6.70; Rev 13.3).
- two disciples; woes; olive trees; horns (Joh 1.37; Rev 9.12; 11.4; 13.11).
- three days; witnesses (Joh 2.19; 1Jo 5.7).
- four parts; living creatures; horns (Joh 19.23; Rev 4.8; 9.13).
- five husbands; months (Joh 4.18; Rev 9.5).
- six waterpots; wings (Joh 2.6; Rev 4.8).
- seven stars; lamps; seals; angels; etc. (Rev 1.16; 4.5; 6.1; 8.2).
- ten horns (Rev 13.1).

Granted, the style of writing in the Revelation differs from the style of John's gospel and epistles — so much so that many have argued against John's authorship of the Revelation.<sup>18</sup> The fact remains, though, that in the canonical corpus of Johannine writings, John never used a numerical multiple in the way that so many have suggested he used the number seven in the Revelation to refer to a unit.

As every reader of the Revelation knows, the word *seven* (ἑπτὰ) occurs frequently in the text, but it always refers to seven items, never to one item in its manifold aspects or workings. Notice that *seven* (ἑπτὰ) appears twice in Rev 1.4, 3.1, 4.5 and thrice in Rev 5.6. In each of these verses, one instance of *seven* refers to the “seven spirits,” and in its other instances refers *in the same verse* to churches, stars, torches, horns or eyes. **John never used the phrase “seven spirits” in a verse that didn't mention seven of something else. He seems to have done this purposely to indicate that by *seven* he means literally seven.** To read one instance of *seven* (ἑπτὰ) in these verses metonymically<sup>19</sup> (i.e., as a figure of speech referring to the Holy Spirit obliquely by mention of His sevenfold qualities or operations) or synecdochically (i.e., as a figure of speech in which seven qualities or

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<sup>18</sup> I will not diverge from the main topic of this treatise to give all my reasons for maintaining John's authorship of the Revelation, beyond saying that the difference in literary genre between it and John's other works provides the simplest explanation for the stylistic differences.

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Düsterdieck, p. 123.

operations of the Spirit are used to signify the one Holy Spirit), while reading the other instances of *seven* (ἑπτὰ) literally (as simply expressing that the objects are seven in number), is to abandon the rules of grammar. If we are not prepared to interpret the seven churches in Rev 1.4 as signifying the one holy church, or to interpret the seven stars of Rev 3.1 (and 1.20) as the one holy angel, then we must admit the unreasonableness of interpreting the seven spirits of God as the one Holy Spirit. This holds particularly true with regard to Rev 3.1 which opens the letter to the church of Sardis. The letter begins with a reference to the seven spirits (plural) and closes, like the other letters to the seven churches, with “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit [singular] says to the churches.” Some parts of the Revelation are admittedly difficult to interpret, but can we really imagine that the glorified Jesus would refer to the Holy Spirit with an obscure figure of speech at the beginning of the letter to Sardis *and* close the same letter with a traditionally singular reference to the Spirit?

### *John Never Used An N-Fold Construction*

In biblical usage, to say “*n*-fold” where *n* is a number, means “*n* times as much.” Thus, sevenfold signifies seven times as much as the amount of the antecedent referent. Greek has suffixes, which when added to the word for a number, express the *-fold* idea. Thus, to say *seven*, the word is ἑπτὰ, and to say *sevenfold* the word is ἑπταπλάσιος with the added -πλάσι- suffix (see Psa 79.12 [78.12<sup>LXX</sup>]; Pro 6.31). Likewise, to say *thousand*, the word is χιλιάς, and to say *thousand-fold*, the word is χιλιοπλασίως (Deu 1.11<sup>LXX</sup>; cf. 2Sa 12.6; Job 42.10).

Because the *n*-fold idea appears so often in an agricultural context, it can be implied by simple cardinal numbers. Thus, in Mat 13.8,23 and Mar 4.8,20, Jesus used cardinal numbers, *hundred*, *sixty*, *thirty* and *thirty*, *sixty*, *hundred*, to imply *hundredfold*, etc. One might ask, therefore, since Jesus used cardinal numbers without the -πλάσι- suffix to *imply* the *-fold* idea, could not John have used the number *seven* to imply a *sevenfold* Spirit? The answer is No. In the Matthew and Mark passages, both relating the parable of the soils, the cardinal numbers all express a multiplication of an antecedent referent, namely *seeds*. The references to the seven spirits in Rev 1.4 and 3.1 have no antecedent referent, implying that John

intended the reader to understand *seven* as a simple cardinal number. On the other hand, if we were to carry the principle from the parable of the soils and use it in Rev 4.5 and 5.6, it would produce the following translations:

... and seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the sevenfold, i.e., forty-nine, spirits of God ...

... having seven horns and seven eyes which are the sevenfold, i.e., forty-nine, spirits of God sent into all the earth.

No one has ever suggested such translations of the Revelation passages, but they are the logical, grammatical result of the false transference of the “cardinal = multiple” idea from the gospels.

John did have one occasion to use the idea of a numerical multiple in the account of Jesus predicting Peter’s denials: “a rooster will not crow until you deny me three times” (Joh 13.38). In this instance John did not use the cardinal *three* but the Grk adverb *thrice*. In Rev 12.14, John also used the chronological multiple, “a time and times and half a time.” Aside from these two passages, John never used the idea of a numerical multiple in his writings, in the sense of one thing multiplied. Instead, as detailed above, he used cardinal numbers to express straightforwardly the number of the objects in view.

Furthermore, had John wished to refer to the Holy Spirit in His manifold or diversified aspects, two NT adjectives exist which he could have used, and which would have eliminated all confusion. The one term is *ποικίλος* (1Pe 4.10), and the other is the more emphatic *πολυποικίλος* (Eph 3.10). The first term in 1Pe 4.10 refers to “the manifold grace of God” in imparting spiritual gifts; grace (singular) imparting gifts (plural). Had John, in the Revelation, wished to refer to the Holy Spirit (singular) in His manifold workings (plural), one of these two terms would have done the job. Rev 1.4, for example, would read,

... from the One who is and the One who was and the One coming, and from the manifold Spirit of God [τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ποικίλον τοῦ θεοῦ] who is before His throne ....

## *For John, The Holy Spirit Singular In Number*

In view of John's consistently normal use of cardinal numbers, and the absence of the *n*-fold construction in his writings, we cannot miss the significance of the fact that the Revelation refers to the Holy Spirit in the biblically conventional, singular number. John referred to the singular Spirit at the beginning of his vision (Rev 1.10), at the close of each of the seven letters, again when he was caught up into heaven (Rev 4.2), again in 14.13 where the Spirit speaks, again when he (John) was carried to the wilderness vision, once more when carried to a high mountain to see the holy city (Rev 21.10), and finally in the closing exhortation of 22.17 where the Spirit and the bride together invite the thirsty to "come." Admittedly, the references to *spirit* at the starting points of specific visions (Rev 1.10; 4.2; 17.3; 21.10) may refer to the spiritual realm, rather than the Holy Spirit. However, even excluding these instances, nine explicit references to the Holy Spirit given in the singular number remain. We see from this that John in the Revelation spoke of the Holy Spirit in the conventional way that the entire Bible speaks of God's Holy Spirit.

Now, had John ever in the Revelation used "the seven spirits of God" as the subject of a singular verb, that would have let us know that he had a unified whole or a collective of some kind, in view.<sup>20</sup> It would have been easy and grammatically correct for him to do this, since the Grk noun *spirit* is neuter in gender, and neuter plural subjects can take a singular verb when considered as a collective. This occurs with the plural word *spirits* in Luk 10.20 and 1Co 14.32. If John, therefore, had used a singular participle to write, "... the seven Spirits of God, **sent** [sing. part., ἀπεσταλμένος] into all the earth" (Rev 5.6), we would then know that these "seven spirits" operated in a unified fashion. Likewise, if he had used a singular pronoun and verb to write, "... seven lamps burning before the throne, **which is** [ὃ ἐστίν] the seven spirits of God" (Rev 4.5), we would know that the phrase, "the seven spirits of God," referred to a singular entity. John could have achieved the same effect from the

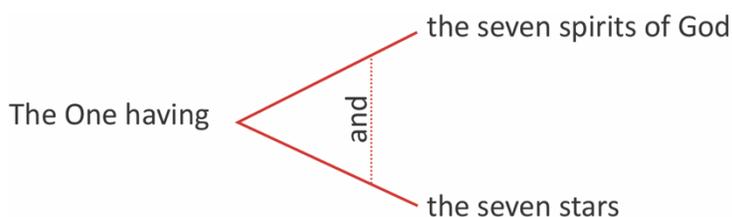
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<sup>20</sup> By way of comparison, consider Gen 1.1: "In the beginning, God (אֱלֹהִים) created (בָּרָא) the heavens and the earth." It may surprise the first-time reader of the Heb Bible that the Heb word *God* is plural. The reason for this plural form remains a matter of speculation and debate. However, lest the reader be confused and think that the text teaches creation by multiple gods, the author put the verb *created* in the singular. Thus, God, who has some aspect of plurality in His being (or perhaps just in the spelling of His title), acts in creation as One.

beginning of the Revelation with an article and pronoun had he written, “from **the** [sing. article, τὸῦ] seven spirits **which** [sing. pronoun, ὃ] *is* before His throne” (Rev 1.4). Since, instead, John took care to always use coordinated plurals when referring to the seven spirit of God, and in the same work referred to the Holy Spirit in the conventionally singular number, we know that he intended to guard the reader from confusing the seven with the One.

## Christ Has The Seven Spirits And The Seven Stars

In Rev 3.1, the glorified Christ speaks of Himself as “the One having the seven spirits of God ....”<sup>21</sup> The participle, *having*, presents some ambiguity, but it expresses continuous action, and grammatically it applies in the same way to both the seven spirits *and* the seven stars:



Rev 1.20 identified the seven stars as “the angels [i.e., messengers] of the seven churches,” and in the vision Christ holds them in His right hand. Christ’s claim of “having” the seven stars in His hand implies *having them under His authority*. Thus, Christ *has* both the messengers of the seven churches and the seven spirits under His authority.

This rules out Robert L. Thomas’ belief in a reminiscence “of the doctrine of the procession of the Spirit from Christ.”<sup>22</sup> Clearly, Rev 3.1 does not allude to the procession of the seven stars, i.e., the messengers of the seven churches, from Christ. Therefore, Christ’s “having the seven spirits” does not mean that the seven spirits signify the Holy Spirit which proceeds from Him. Likewise, the parallel “having” of the seven spirits *and* the seven stars rules out Buist M. Fanning’s suggestion that having the seven spirits refers to “the [Holy] Spirit’s empowering presence and

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<sup>21</sup> My trans.

<sup>22</sup> Robert L. Thomas, p. 244.

activity” in Christ’s life.<sup>23</sup> The glorified Christ does not have the “empowering presence and activity” of the seven stars, i.e., of the messengers of the seven churches, in His life! The grammatical construction of Rev 3.1b implies that to maintain the identity of the seven spirits with the one Holy Spirit, we must read this part of the verse as containing an epexegetical hendiadys that identifies the angels of the seven churches as *also* referring to the Holy Spirit. No one proposes this interpretation, since identifying the seven spirits of God and the seven stars as one and the same creates more interpretive problems than it solves.<sup>24</sup>

## Letters Not Written To Spirits

For example, Rev 1.4 includes the seven spirits in the opening salutation for the whole of the Revelation. Therefore, identifying the seven spirits of God and the seven stars as one and the same leads to the absurdity of the seven spirits including letters *to themselves* addressed to “the angel of the church in Ephesus,” “the angel of the church in Smyrna,” etc. In fact, it doesn’t make sense to write letters to spirits at all. In confirmation of this, the angels of the seven churches (= the seven stars, Rev 1.20), are addressed in the seven letters as accountable to the Lord together with their congregations. Were these angels of the churches *spirits*, they could only be holy angels or evil demons. If evil demons, they would not receive the commendations included in some of the letters; if holy, sinless angels they would not receive the reproofs included in most of the letters. Clearly, the angels of the seven churches are human messengers, not spirits. The Spirit in John rightly represented these human messengers as stars because they were heavenly persons, like all true followers of Jesus, and probably also because they were luminaries in their congregations and cities. They were *not*, however, identical with “the seven spirits of God who are before His throne.”

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<sup>23</sup> Buist M. Fanning, p. 161. Fanning says that “To say that Christ ‘has’ or possesses the Spirit is the common idiom for the Spirit’s empowering presence and activity in someone’s life (Rom 8.9; 1Co 6.19; 7.40; 2Co 4.13; Jud 19).” He overlooks the fact that John does not use this “common idiom” in any of his works.

<sup>24</sup> David E. Aune reads Rev 3.1b as involving just such an epexegetical construction but does not identify the seven stars as identical to the Holy Spirit; instead he sees the seven stars as identical to the seven spirits of God which he interprets as archangels. See his *Revelation 1-5*, p. 219.

## Christ Does Not Exercise Dominion Over The Holy Spirit

So, in Rev 3.1, the glorified Christ does not *have* one Being (i.e. the Holy Spirit) designated by two groups of seven; He *has* two groups of seven beings: the seven spirits of God, and also the seven stars (which are the seven angels of the churches). *Having*, or *possession*, in this instance expresses dominion. Christ has authority over the individuals in these two groups, i.e., they are His servants, a relationship confirmed for the seven spirits by their position “before the throne.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, Jesus intended that the churches understand the actions of these serving entities as authorized and directed by Him. Why this authority is emphasized in Rev 3.1 has to do with the functions or responsibilities of the seven spirits on the one hand, and of the seven stars (angels) on the other. We will explore the function of the seven spirits of God below, but let’s consider the responsibilities of the stars (angels) here.

When the word ἄγγελος, *angel*, appears in connection with the seven churches, we should translate with the word *messenger*.<sup>26</sup> The seven stars (identified as angels, i.e., messengers) were likely leaders of the seven churches of Asia, and possibly representatives sent to visit exiled John on the island of Patmos. As leaders and representatives of the churches they had responsibility *before the Lord* to transport (possibly), read (probably), and apply (definitely) the letters to their individual churches. The execution of these responsibilities might decide whether each lampstand (= church) would continue to illuminate its city, or have its testimony extinguished. Thus, the reminder of these messengers’ accountability to Christ in Rev 3.1 is apropos. They must take their responsibilities vis-à-vis their letters and the Revelation as a whole with the utmost seriousness, and the churches must receive their reading of the Revelation as authorized by the Lord Himself.

With this in mind, we must see the *awkwardness* of Christ supposedly using such a tone of subordination when He supposedly refers to the Holy Spirit in Rev 3.1. The Holy Spirit is the One speaking in Christ, and the One to Whom anyone who has

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<sup>25</sup> This spatial position, “before the throne,” connotes service (Rev 7.15; cf. 1Ki 17.1; 22.10; 2Ch 18.9; Tobit 12.15), worship (Rev 4.10; 7.9-11; 14.3), or judgment (Rev 20.12; cf. Dan 7.9-10; Act 25.17). Contra Matthew Y. Emerson, p. 37, position before the throne *does not* speak of “participation in the Godhead, else we would have to say that the twenty-four elders, the great multitude, and even the sea of glass all “participate in the Godhead”!

<sup>26</sup> Consider the different translations of ἄγγελος in Luk 1.11 (*angel*) and Luk 7.24 (*messengers*).

an ear must listen; we can hardly picture the Holy Spirit as a submitted servant in the same letter! Yes, Jesus said in Joh 15.26 that He would send the Spirit, but He also said that the Spirit “proceeds from the Father,” and in Joh 14.26 that the Father would send the Spirit (cf. Gal 4.6). Furthermore, in the gospels we see the Spirit leading *Christ* (Mat 4.1). Yes, Jesus said in Joh 16.13 that the Spirit would not speak from Himself, but Jesus also said in Joh 5.19 that He, the Son, could do nothing from Himself. Without diminishing the distinctions between the Persons of the Trinity, we must recognize their eternal mutualities and admit that the Scriptures never picture one Person of the Trinity “lording it over” another Person of the Godhead. Though Jesus spoke of sending the Spirit (Joh 15.26), and of the Spirit glorifying Him and of the Spirit disclosing that which belongs to the Father and the Son (Joh 16.14-15), Jesus never spoke of the Spirit as a servant but as a partner in divine ministry. Though Jesus was anointed by and full of the Holy Spirit (Luk 4.1,18), He never claimed to “have” the Holy Spirit in the sense of having authority over Him, nor even in the sense of being filled with Him. We should also note that, generally speaking, the one anointing is greater than the one being anointed.

Therefore, while the statement of Rev 3.1, that Christ “has the seven spirits of God,” *does* mean that Christ exercises authority over the seven spirits, all the commentators who interpret this as meaning that Christ “exercises authority” or has “divine control”<sup>27</sup> over the Holy Spirit have read a radically foreign idea into the text.<sup>28</sup>

## ***Interpreting Interpretations Is Madness***

A final reason why we cannot interpret “the seven spirits of God” as a metonym or synecdoche referring to the Holy Spirit, is that “the seven spirits of God” is *already an interpretation* of two apocalyptic symbols, one in Rev 4.5 and another in 5.6. A hermeneutical principle that even some great scholars have overlooked is the rule to **never interpret an interpretation in the biblical text as if it were a new symbol**. Like the book of Daniel, the Revelation abounds with symbols, many of which are interpreted in the text. Where the text itself does not interpret its symbols

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<sup>27</sup> As does Simon J. Kistemaker, p. 150.

<sup>28</sup> See for example, Grant R. Osborne, p. 173.

for us, we appropriately interpret them ourselves on the basis of biblical clues. However, where the text *does* supply an interpretation, *we must not reinterpret the interpretation*, as though it were itself a new symbol or metaphor.

For example, the first chapter of Revelation presents us with a great deal of symbolism, including the symbols of the seven stars and seven lampstands. The text interprets these two symbols in Rev 1.20 as the “angels [= *messengers*] of the seven churches” and “the seven churches” respectively. While we may appropriately attempt to discover the individual identities of the angels and churches, it is not appropriate that we try to interpret the angels and churches as symbols for something else. The churches, for example, do not represent the seven heavens. The angels are angels, and the churches are churches, the latter identified specifically in the following chapters as real congregations of first-century Asia Minor.

In like manner, we see that “the seven spirits of God” in the Revelation are not a symbol or metaphor, but the interpretation of “the seven lamps of fire burning before the throne” in Rev 4.5 and the “seven eyes” of the Lamb in Rev 5.6. Thus, “the seven spirits of God” do not in turn represent something else, like the one Holy Spirit. Just as “the seven churches” of Rev 1.20 are seven churches, “the seven spirits” are seven spirits. We can (and will) discuss the specific identities of these seven spirits, but we cannot turn *the interpretation* of the seven lamps before the throne and of the seven eyes of the Lamb into a new symbol or metaphor for an altogether different entity any more than we can turn *the interpretation* of the seven golden lampstands into a new symbol for, say, the one universal Church. **Let this truth sink in: the moment we begin to reinterpret interpretations already given in Scripture, we have disconnected our exegesis from the biblical text.**

A 19th century eschatology scholar whom I admire, Benjamin Wills Newton, stumbled over this principle in his interpretation of Revelation 17. Newton, erroneously took the seven hills of Mystery Babylon in that passage as symbolic and requiring interpretation. In his justified eagerness to disabuse his contemporaries of the idea that Mystery Babylon is the Roman Catholic religion or the papacy, he fastened his mind too hastily on the idea that Mystery Babylon signified none other than Mesopotamian Babylon. He therefore had to interpret the seven hills as non-literal, because Iraqi Babylon has no hills. Mr. Newton reasoned this way:

... the woman is said to be seated on (1) many waters, which are explained to mean many peoples and multitudes, (2) on a beast, [and] (3) on seven mountains. Now, inasmuch as no one has ever thought of inferring from the first two of these statements that Babylon physically was builded either on waters, or on a Beast, so it should never have been inferred that Babylon physically was builded on seven mountains.<sup>29</sup>

The logic of Newton's argument is sound, but he failed to take one very important thing into account, and that is the distinction between vision and interpretation. Mystery Babylon is seated upon many waters and on the beast *in the vision*. That the waters represent "many peoples and multitudes," and that the seven heads of the beast represent "seven hills" are part of the angel's interpretation of the vision. If we interpret "the seven hills" as representing something else, we have turned the angel's interpretation into a new symbol! If we do that, consistency would demand that we interpret the "many peoples and multitudes" as symbolizing something else as well. However, if we reinterpret the angel's interpretations, our new interpretation will have left behind any direct connection to the text. The "seven hills" signify just that, the famous seven hills, not of Mesopotamian Babylon, but of Rome, Italy.<sup>30</sup>

If we do not commit to the principle of never reinterpreting an interpretation in the biblical text as if it were a new symbol, we open the door to all manner of confusion and even mystical speculation. So, please, let's renounce the ancient interpretive error that "the seven spirits of God" is a figure of speech for the Holy Spirit.

## *The One Persistent Argument*

### Examples Of The Argument

The error of interpreting "the seven spirits of God" as a designation of the Holy Spirit would have disappeared long ago if not for one major argument in support of it. To this day, commentators argue that "the seven spirits of God" must refer to the Holy Spirit, since the seven spirits of God appear in the Revelation's opening Trinitarian

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<sup>29</sup> Newton, pp. 118-119.

<sup>30</sup> I agree with Mr. Newton, however, that the beast does *not* represent the Roman Catholic religion or the papacy.

salutation (Rev 1.4), as one of the sources of grace and peace. Hence, we find statements like the following in an array of commentaries:

[Rev 1.4] ... **and from the seven spirits which (are) before His throne** Andreas, in catena, takes these for the seven principal angels (ch. 8:2)... But this is highly improbable, as these angels are never called *πνεύματα*, and as surely mere creatures, however exalted, would not be equalized with the Father and the Son as fountains of grace.<sup>31</sup>

**From the seven spirits** means from the Holy Spirit in his sevenfold fullness (cf. 3:1; 4:5; 5:6)... since the preceding phrase refers to God the Father and the following phrase to God the Son, it is certain that John included a reference to God the Holy Spirit, thus including all persons of the Godhead.<sup>32</sup>

... some scholars say that they are seven angels ... but angels ... can never fill the role of the third Person in the Trinity.... Instead we assume that John employs the symbolism of the number seven and thus describes the Spirit.<sup>33</sup>

The Trinitarian motif in 1.4-5 shows that “seven spirits” is a figurative way to describe the Holy Spirit in his fullness ....<sup>34</sup>

The seven spirits are sometimes identified with the Holy Spirit because they are mentioned here in an epistolary salutation between God and Christ....<sup>35</sup>

Some doubt that “seven Spirits” are identical to the Holy Spirit. .... The most obvious argument is that “grace and peace” is a gift of God, and therefore the “seven Spirits” who, with the Father and Son, give grace and peace [Rev 1.4] must be divine.<sup>36</sup>

All the Scriptures testify that grace and peace come to us sinners from *God* alone. These seven spirits before the throne are *God*. No created source for grace and peace can be named besides the Father and Jesus Christ. In Paul’s greetings and in II John two Persons are named as the source, God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The interpreters do not note the absence of the Third Person. Here the three *ἀπό* phrases introduce the Trinity. The seven spirits denote the Third Person, the Holy Spirit.<sup>37</sup>

**But it is hard to explain juxtaposing a reference to angels between glorious descriptions of God and Christ.** The parallel element is much more likely to be a reference to the Spirit, so closely associated with the work of the Father and Son in John’s Gospel .... The Trinitarian motif in 1:4–5 shows that “seven spirits” is a figurative way to describe the Holy Spirit in his fullness....<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Henry Alford, vol. 4, p. 549.

<sup>32</sup> George Eldon Ladd, pp. 24-25.

<sup>33</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, p. 82.

<sup>34</sup> Buist M. Fanning, p. 161.

<sup>35</sup> David E. Aune, p. 33.

<sup>36</sup> Peter J. Leithart, vol. 1, p. 88.

<sup>37</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, p. 40.

<sup>38</sup> Buist M. Fanning, pp. 80, 161, emphasis mine.

The most decisive consideration against a reference to angels [in the salutation of Rev 1.4-5] is the impossibility that created beings could be seen as a source of an invocation of grace and peace in 1:4–5. This would place them alongside the Father and the Son as equals, and the strict prohibitions against angel worship elsewhere in the book (19:10; 22:9) make it inconceivable that angels would be placed side-by-side with the Father and the Son in such a role ....

It is more satisfying to identify “the seven spirits” as a reference to the Holy Spirit, and thus as an additional *divine* source for the greeting of v. 4. It is improper to associate anyone less than Deity with the Father (1:4) and the Son (1:5) .... a reference to angels would indeed be an intrusion of created beings into the Holy Trinity.<sup>39</sup>

## The Essence Of The Argument

From this sampling, we see that the argument *for* identifying the seven spirits of God with the Holy Spirit, and *against* identifying them with created beings consists of the following elements:

1. The salutation of Rev 1.4-5 is Trinitarian and surely includes a reference to the Holy Spirit.
2. It is improper to associate anyone less than Deity with the Father and the Son, particularly juxtaposed between them.
3. The salutation of Rev 1.4-5 makes the seven spirits equal with the Father and Son as fountains of grace and peace, which gifts come from God alone.

## A Trinitarian Formula Anachronistic

How interesting that, with the exception of R. H. Charles,<sup>40</sup> the scholars in the minority who *do not* interpret the seven spirits of God as designating the Holy Spirit express no anxiety about the seven spirits appearing in the salutation<sup>41</sup> — nor should they. As David E. Aune explains, the Trinitarian focus in the exposition of the salutation in Rev 1.4-5 often arises “from the perspective of later trinitarianism,” and the explanations of how “the seven spirits” means “the Holy Spirit,” “are artificial and

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<sup>39</sup> Robert L. Thomas, p. 67.

<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, R. H. Charles, biblical scholar and translator of ancient Jewish and Christian literature, correctly identified the seven spirits as created beings, but was so convinced of the Trinitarian nature of the Revelation’s salutation that he decided the reference to the seven spirits in Rev 1.4 was “beyond question an interpolation of a later hand”! See R. H. Charles, vol. 1, p. 9.

<sup>41</sup> Like, for examples, Craig Keener, note on Rev 1.4, or Robert H. Mounce, pp. 46-47.

unconvincing. In part ... because of the later conceptualization of God in terms of three interrelated persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”<sup>42</sup>

This does not mean that John or his writings are less than Trinitarian. On the contrary, the Revelation is eminently Trinitarian in its expressions of the being and working of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, neither the Revelation nor any other book of the Bible present the Trinity via the formal doctrinal formulations of the following centuries — hence, the criticism flung at us by non-Trinitarians that the word *Trinity* does not appear in the Bible. Neither the word, nor a formal summary of the doctrine, appear in Scripture, but the reality does, and certainly pervades the Revelation. The point is that, in spite of the Trinitarian content of the NT, we should not expect a Trinitarian formula in the salutations proper of its epistolary texts.

## *Epistolary Elements*

Before proceeding further, we must review the elements of a first-century letter, and define what we mean by the term *salutation*. A graphic illustration appears on the following page, showing the typical components that might appear in a letter of the Hellenistic era. No one letter or NT epistle will necessarily contain all of these elements, but most will include the major components of **opening**, **body** and **closing**, with the opening including the names (and possibly a description) of the author(s) and recipient(s) along with at least a salutation proper. This last component may consist of only a single word (e.g., “Greetings,” Act 15.23; Jam 1.1), but we call it the salutation (from Lat *salus*, health), because, in spite of its sometimes abbreviated form, and the ambiguity of Eng translations, it historically expressed the author’s desire for, or inquiry into, the health or wellbeing of the recipient.<sup>43</sup> It is *the salutation proper* of the Revelation that interests us in our present pursuit to better understand the significance of “the seven spirits of God.”

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<sup>42</sup> David E. Aune, pp. 33-34.

<sup>43</sup> A brief letter from Oxyrhynchus, dated AD 16, begins, “Theon to Heraclides his brother, many greetings and wishes for good health.” The wish for good health sometimes extended into a prayer, as in a 2nd century letter from a fellow named Apion: “Apion, to Epimachus his father and lord, many greetings. Before all things I pray you are in health and that you prosper and fare well continually ....” See John A. Thompson, p. 430.

# A FIRST-CENTURY LETTER

## OPENING

AUTHOR : RECIPIENT

GREETING

*Salutation Proper* →

Desire for good health

Thanksgiving

Prayer for recipient(s)

TRANSITION

## BODY

TRANSITION

## CLOSING

Greeting(s)

Wishes

Doxology/Benediction

Date

As stated above, in spite of the Trinitarian content of the NT, we should not expect a Trinitarian formula in the salutations proper of its epistolary texts. The data overwhelmingly supports this observation. *None* of the epistles of the NT include all three Persons of the Trinity in their salutations. *None* of the epistles of the NT include the Holy Spirit in their salutation proper.<sup>44</sup> Paul's epistle to the Colossians includes only the Father in the salutation (Col 1.2), and though James mentioned God and the Lord Jesus Christ in his opening, obviously none of the divine Persons appear in his one-word salutation proper. We do find what some may construe as a Trinitarian *benediction* in 2Co 13.14, but we do not find inclusion of the Holy Spirit in the salutation proper of a Christian epistle until the letter of Ignatius to Smyrna (in AD 107, or as some contend, in AD 116).<sup>45</sup>

## Salutations Neither Symbolic Nor Doctrinal Formulas

Thus, even supposing that John recorded the Revelation during the final decade of the first century, we have no reason to expect a Trinitarian formulation in his salutation proper. However, were John to speak of the Holy Spirit in the salutation of the Revelation, or in its preamble, the other NT epistles show us what we would have had the right to expect. Paul in the personal preamble of his epistle to the Romans speaks of God's Son "who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead according to the Spirit of holiness" (Rom 1.4). We see here that Paul spoke of the Spirit concretely, without metaphor or symbol, in order to express a point clearly about Jesus Christ. Similarly, in 1Pe 1.1-2, Peter wrote, "To those who ... are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying word of the Spirit to obey Jesus Christ ..." Again we see that in his preamble to the salutation proper, Peter spoke of the Spirit explicitly and concretely so as to leave no confusion regarding the source of sanctifying power for Christian obedience. **Let us take note: an epistolary salutation is not the place to introduce an obscure metaphor or symbolic representation of a divine**

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<sup>44</sup> Paul did mention the Holy Spirit (or at least "a spirit of holiness") in his personal preamble for his epistle to the Romans (Rom 1.4), but not in the salutation proper of v. 7. Likewise, Peter includes all three Persons of the Trinity in the preamble of his first epistle, (1Pe 1.2), though he connects none of them explicitly to his wish for grace and peace in his salutation proper.

<sup>45</sup> "Ignatius, ... to the church ... which is at Smyrna ... wishes abundance of happiness, through the immaculate Spirit and word of God."

**Person.** Furthermore, a salutation proper is *never* the place to begin a sermon, teach a doctrine, or make a doctrinal statement. The salutation proper has one purpose, and that is to wish, or inquire of, the wellbeing of the recipient(s).

## Salutations Proper Did Not Include An Explicit Prayer

A survey of non-canonical, non-patristic letters of the Hellenistic era shows that in rare instances, a prayer or reference to a prayer, to some god on behalf of the recipient, may follow the salutation proper. For example, a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup>-century papyrus letter from someone probably named Hermes, to a patron named Sarapion, reads,

Herm ... [to Sarapion] ... greetings, and that you may always remain in good health in your whole person for long years to come, since your good genius allowed us to greet you with respect and salute you. For as you also make mention of us on each occasion by letter so **I here make an act of worship for you in the presence of the lords Dioskouroi and in the presence of the lord Sarapis, and I pray for your safe-keeping during you entire life and for the health of your children and of all your household.** Farewell in everything, I beg, my patron and fosterer. Greet all your folk, men and women. **All the gods here, male and female, greet you.** Farewell. Thoth 16<sup>th</sup>.<sup>46</sup>

Because any mention of God or the gods in Hellenistic letters occurs so infrequently, it's surprising that Hermes not only describes his prayer offered to the Dioskouroi and to Sarapis, but also includes a polytheistic greeting in his closing (cf. 2Co 13.14). The important thing to note in this example, though, is that the description of Hermes' prayer constitutes *the body* of the letter; it is not part of the salutation proper.

Even in later Christian letters, the writer may include a prayer in the opening, but the salutation proper is straightforward. For this we have a 4<sup>th</sup>-century example in the letter of Antoninos to Gonatas:

To my lord brother Gonatas the landowner, Antoninos, **very many greetings.** Before everything I pray for your health before the Lord God that I may receive you back in good health. ...<sup>47</sup>

Again, note that while the writer includes a prayer in the opening of his letter, the prayer follows the salutation.

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<sup>46</sup> G. H. R. Horsley, p. 57, emphasis mine.

<sup>47</sup> G. H. R. Horsley, p. 135, emphasis mine.

At this point we should also observe a rule, illustrated in the Hellenistic letters just quoted (and countless examples not included here), that the salutation proper is always *from no one but the writer*. We might imagine an exception to this rule in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup>-century letter of a possibly-Christian tenant farmer to his patron Dionysios, the opening line of which reads:

To my lord patron Dionysios, Besarion: **many greetings in God.**<sup>48</sup>

The Grk preposition *in* is a flexible little word, and so injects a bit of ambiguity into the precise meaning intended by this salutation. Furthermore, like our present-day *hellos* and *goodbyes*, the brief salutations in antiquity — in general — were hardly a detail of careful and intentional composition, but more just a matter of custom. Nevertheless, Besarion may have meant something along the lines of, “I wish you many occasions of rejoicing **in** God’s goodness to you.” What Besarion *did not mean* was that the “many greetings” came *from* God.

## The Apostolic Revolution

Our observations with regard to letters of the Hellenistic era should help us realize that the theologically rich openings of the NT epistles were an epistolary innovation. This new way of beginning a letter was undoubtedly the brainchild of Paul of Tarsus, who also invented some of our NT words.<sup>49</sup> In fact, the openings of NT epistles illustrate an evolution in which the earlier single-word salutation, “Rejoice,” of Act 15.23 and Jam 1.1, gives way to Paul’s, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” (Rom 1.1), which in turn influences Peter’s, “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, ...,” (2Pe 1.2), and culminates in John’s unique salutation of Rev 1.4-5. Experimentation with epistolary openings and salutations continued in the writings of the Apostolic

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<sup>48</sup> G. H. R. Horsley, pp. 130-131, emphasis mine. The Grk of the salutation is: Π[ολ]λά ἐν θεῷ χαίρειν. The letter closes with, “I pray you will be well for a long time.”

<sup>49</sup> The following words have never been found in surviving Grk literature *prior to* Paul’s writings: συζητητής, ὁ, joint inquirer: disputant, 1Co 1.20; συναρμολογέω, fit or frame together, Eph 2.21; 4.16; σύσσωμος, ον, united in one body, Eph.3.6; σύμψυχος, ον, of one mind, at unity, Phil.2.2; united in soul; συμμιμητής, οὔ, ὁ, joint imitator, Phil.3.17.

Fathers, but then salutations seem to have reverted back to the basics during and after the second century.<sup>50</sup>

As a philatelist, it reminds me of the evolution in the postage stamps of many nations, including those of the United States. The earliest postage stamps of a nation often have a very utilitarian, monochrome design, depicting the profile of the head of state or some other national luminary. In time, the postal authority attains the means to print more creative designs, and realizes the promotional (or propaganda) potential of the humble postage stamp that can carry a brief message worldwide.<sup>51</sup> At that point, the stamps begin to broadcast the political merits of the nation, commemorate its triumphs, celebrate its natural beauties, and promote its industries.

In a similar fashion, I imagine that Paul realized from the outset of his letter-writing ministry that the humble salutation of old could combine the Heb greeting of *shalom* with the Grk greeting of *rejoice* (in Grk a term in the same word family as the word for *grace*) and build upon it an explicitly Christian statement, “Grace and peace from ... Jesus Christ.”<sup>52</sup> What we must understand as we come to the exegesis of John’s salutation in Rev 1.4-5, is that the structure and content of epistolary openings in general, and the salutation proper in particular, were in flux, and *we dare not speak dogmatically about what they had to contain and how they had to function*.

## The Salutations Of The NT And Revelation 1.4-5

From a perusal of epistolary salutations of the Hellenistic era, we have learned that salutations proper:

1. Did not express doctrinal formulas, and were certainly not consciously Trinitarian in the NT corpus.
2. Never introduce symbolic or metaphorical elements.
3. Did not contain a prayer; prayers could follow the salutation in the epistolary opening.

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<sup>50</sup> Thus, for example, Augustine in AD 411, “To Albina, Pinianus, and Melania, ... Augustine sends greetings in the Lord,” (Letter 124, in the NPNF 1.1).

<sup>51</sup> The newborn state of modern Israel understood the promotional value of postage stamps from the beginning. They not only depicted nationalistic coins from the Bar Kochba era on their very first postage stamps, but made innovative use of the tabs (the bottom edge of a sheet of stamps usually left blank by other nations) to inscribe the nationalistic mottoes from the depicted coins.

<sup>52</sup> See Porter and Evans, p. 406.

With these facts in mind, we must recognize that the phrase, “Grace to you and peace from ...,” whether in Paul’s epistles, Peter’s, Jude’s or in the Revelation, were not indicative declarations by the authors that grace and peace were being communicated to the recipients, nor declarations that the source of grace and peace were from the persons named in the salutation. Instead, the phrase was optative, *expressing a wish* that grace and peace would be extended to the recipients by the persons named. Only Peter and Jude included the optative verb (πληθυνθείη, *be multiplied*), but judging from the fundamental character of Hellenistic salutations, an optative verb is implicit in all the other NT salutations. The only exception occurs in 2Jo 1.3 where John used an indicative verb.<sup>53</sup>

We can confidently affirm, therefore, that in Rev 1.4-5, John *did not* tell the churches of Asia that the persons he named were extending grace and peace to them, but instead John expressed his wish that the persons named *would* extend grace and peace to them. Our next step, then, is to identify the persons whom John wished would extend grace and peace, and to understand just what it meant to extend grace and peace. Let us reiterate before proceeding, though, the observation that we need have no expectation of a Trinitarian salutation for the Revelation, and that John had no demand of convention that he include one.

## A Wish Not From The Trinity But From The Throne Room

The title of the first entity from whom John wishes grace and peace for the churches is conventionally translated, “Him who is and who was and who is to come” (Rev 1.4). This threefold title only appears in the Revelation (Rev 1.4,7; 4.8), but derives from and combines statements about God made by Himself and others in the earlier Scriptures.<sup>54</sup> In the context of the Revelation, the four living creatures apply this threefold title “to Him who sits on the throne” (Rev 4.8-9). That the threefold title

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<sup>53</sup> John, uniquely used an indicative verb, *will be*, in 2Jo 1.3, to make his salutation an explicit assurance of God’s continuing mercy and peace. Neither 1Jo nor 3Jo include a salutation, though 3Jo 1.2 communicates a prayer that would typically follow the salutation proper.

<sup>54</sup> G. K. Beale, pp. 187-188, notes similar twofold and threefold titles for God in ancient literature, but most of his citations refer to later Jewish works that John would not have known. Josephus did use the “Beginning and the End” title, *Ant.* 8.280, *Apion* 2.190, but the most similar threefold title antedating John, though probably not influencing him, is in Sib Or 3.15, where God is referred to as “as existing now, and formerly and again in the future.”

applies to the enthroned One in the salutation (Rev 1.4), is confirmed by the reference to the seven spirits as those “who are before His throne” (cf. Rev 4.5). Therefore, the One “who is and who was and who is to come,” is “the Lord God, the Almighty”<sup>55</sup> *enthroned*. Because He is enthroned, and is “like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance” (Rev 4.3), He seems distinct from the “Lamb standing as if slain” who “took the [scroll] out of [His] right hand” (Rev 5.7). This distinction implies to most exegetes that the enthroned One “who is and who was and who is to come” is God the Father.

However, the Revelation never explicitly makes this identification (though the Father is mentioned five times in the book<sup>56</sup>). Furthermore, the threefold title oozes with allusion to the *second* Person of the Trinity. John took the initial participle,  $\delta \omega \nu$ , the One being (i.e., the existing One), directly from Grk version of the I AM passage in Ex 3.14. In that passage, the Person who spoke to Moses was the Angel of YHVH (Ex 3.2), Who, in the development of the Bible’s progressive revelation, is more and more definitively revealed as the second Person of the Trinity. This second Person of the Godhead is the divine Person Who would repeatedly come to God’s people in bodily form, such that YHVH (the only God among the nations who ever actually shows up) would become known as *the Coming One*, especially as considered in the person of the Messiah (Psa 96.13; 118.26; Isa 30.27; 40.10; Dan 7.13,22; Zec 2.10; 9.9; Mal 3.1).<sup>57</sup> Thus, the final term in the threefold title, “the Coming One,” also alludes strongly to the *second* Person of the Trinity, but not exclusively since the Father comes to those who love Jesus (Joh 14.23), as does the Holy Spirit (Joh 15.26). The

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<sup>55</sup> Reiterated in Rev 11.17 and 16.5-7.

<sup>56</sup> Rev 1.6; 2.27; 3.5,21; 14.1.

<sup>57</sup> The *coming [one]* motif from the Psalms and Prophets is developed further in the gospels by John the Baptist (Mat 3.11; 11.3, “are you the coming One?”), and by Jesus Himself (Mat 9.13; 10.34; 11.19; 16.27; 20.28; 23.39; 24.30; 25.31; 26.64; ). In John’s gospel particularly, the *coming* motif appears in the words of John the author, John the Baptist, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the crowds, Martha, and powerfully in the words of Jesus Himself (Joh 1.9,11,15,27,30; 3.2,19,31; 4.25; 5.43; 6.14; 7.28,31,41-42; 8.14,42; 9.39; 10.10; 11.27; 12.13,27,46-47; 14.3,18,23,28; 16.28; 18.37; 20.19,24,26; 21.13,22-23). The divine *coming* motif is not absent from the Acts or Epistles (Act 1.11; 13.25; 19.4; 1Co 4.5; 11.26; Gal 3.19; Eph 2.17; 2Th 2.10; 1Ti 1.15; Heb 10.37; 1Jo 4.2; 5.6; 2Jo 1.7; Jud 1.14), but is reemphasized in the Revelation, usually with direct reference to the glorified Christ (Rev 1.7-8; 2.5,16; 3.11; 4.8; 16.15; 22.7,12,20).

middle term, ὁ ἦν, “the One who was,” also alludes to the *second* Person of the Trinity because John borrowed the term from the prologue of his gospel, “In the beginning **was** the Logos, and the Logos **was** with God, and the Logos **was** God, this One **was** in the beginning with God” (Joh 1.1-2). No wonder, then, that when the threefold title is repeated in Rev 1.8, it seems to refer to Jesus (Rev 1.5) who is “coming with the clouds” (Rev 1.7), especially since the one “who is and who was and is to come” identifies Himself as “the Alpha and the Omega,” as Jesus also does in Rev 22.12-16.

I do not suggest by the preceding observations that the threefold title in the salutation of Rev 1.4, “Him who is and who was and who is to come,” refers to Jesus as such. Were that so, the salutation would wish “grace and peace from Jesus, the seven spirits, and Jesus Christ” (Rev 1.4-5). No one would suggest such an awkward construction. Instead, I share the above analysis of the threefold title to underscore the fact that we can hardly read it as a reference to God *as Father*, and that we cannot and should not look for a Trinitarian formulation in this salutation. I propose instead that the threefold title refers to God in His eternal fullness without differentiation of Persons, and without reference to His incarnation, and in this case to God as the One enthroned in John’s vision. This explains why John added the seven spirits of God, and “Jesus Christ ... who ... released us from our sins by His blood,” to his salutation. Both appear before the throne in the vision, albeit with Jesus Christ appearing as a Lamb that had been slain. In his salutation, John wished grace and peace to flow to the seven churches of Asia *from the celestial throne room*.

Consider the implications of this salutational wish. John wished the churches of Asia grace and peace from *God enthroned, God in His eternal fullness*. This had direct implications for the believers in the seven churches who already endured trials for their faith, or would shortly. John wished them grace and peace from the eternal God who was present with them then as He was in the past and would be in the future. As He was with Israel in the furnace of affliction (Isa 48.10), so wonderfully illustrated by His speaking to Moses from *within* the burning bush (Ex 3.1-7), so He would be with the seven churches in whatever fiery trial they must face, and *whenever* they would have to face it. However, while the prospect of grace and peace from God in His eternal fullness had wonderful implications, John went on to specify that he wished grace and peace to the churches also from *God in His incarnate person*,

namely, in Jesus Christ. God in Christ has specific roles with specific implications that relate directly to all that John was about to communicate to the churches in the Revelation. Would the coming apocalyptic trials test their commitment to the testimony of Jesus? Well, John wished them grace and peace from the faithful Witness Himself. Would the threat of death at the hands of persecutors intimidate them? Well, John wished them grace and peace from the One who defeated death, “the firstborn of the dead.” Would they tremble at the prospect of the Beast assembling an antichristian federation of kings? John wished them grace and peace from “the ruler of the kings of the earth.”

John’s salutation, then, moves from a wish of grace and peace from God enthroned, to a wish of the same from the seven spirits which we soon find “burning before the throne,” and finally to a wish of grace and peace from Jesus Christ, the very One who had already triumphed over the very trials and enemies that the seven churches would face. This progression in the salutation piques our interest in John’s wish for grace and peace from the seven spirits, particularly since we have eliminated the idea that “the seven spirits” is a figurative expression for the Holy Spirit. If the seven spirits are not the Holy Spirit, and clearly distinct from God in His fullness, and from Jesus Christ, we have no choice but to recognize them as non-divine, created beings, (albeit with a throne room presence). How is it, then, that John can wish grace and peace for the churches of Asia from *non-divine beings*? Don’t grace and peace flow from God alone?

### *Who Can Extend Grace And Peace?*

In the examples given above for the argument that “the seven spirits of God” designates the Holy Spirit, we saw that various commentators have expressed their umbrage at the idea that created beings could extend peace and grace. Henry Alford, for example, wrote, “surely mere creatures, however exalted, would not be equalized [in the Revelation’s salutation] with the Father and the Son as fountains of grace.”<sup>58</sup> Likewise, Robert L. Thomas, commenting on the identity of the seven spirits, remarks upon “the impossibility that created beings could be seen as a source of an invocation

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<sup>58</sup> Alford, vol. 4, p. 549.

of grace and peace in [Rev] 1.4-5.”<sup>59</sup> Again, Peter J. Leithart writes that, “‘grace and peace’ is a gift of God, and therefore the ‘seven spirits’ who, with the Father and Son, give grace and peace must be divine,” i.e., they cannot be created beings.<sup>60</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, perhaps in Lutheran anti-papal zeal, may have stated it most strongly, writing, “All the Scriptures testify that grace and peace come to us sinners from *God* alone.”<sup>61</sup>

We can commend each of these commentators for the doctrinal truths they seek to defend. No mere creature can “be equalized with the Father and the Son.” It is impossible “that created beings could be seen as a source ... of grace and peace,” but only if we mean *saving grace* and *the peace of sins propitiated*. Certainly this kind of “‘grace and peace’ is a gift of God,” and can “come to us sinners from *God* alone.” However, salutations proper are not doctrinal, and the grace and peace that they wish for epistle recipients differ from the specific kind of grace and peace that arises from divine election and substitutionary atonement.

Let us do a little thought experiment to help us understand this. Consider the result if we paraphrase the salutation proper of 1Th 1.1, using the doctrinal assumptions of the commentators just cited:

Paul and Silvanus and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: we wish you to experience saving grace and the peace that comes through the forgiveness of your sins.

Does such a salutation make sense in its context? Since the recipients constitute a church already recognized as *in* God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, does it make sense that Paul would then express a hope that they would yet experience saving grace and the peace of reconciliation with God? Should we interpret all of Paul’s grace-and-peace salutations as expressing his desire that the recipients of his epistles experience God’s *saving grace* and the *peace of divine forgiveness*? If this

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<sup>59</sup> Thomas, p. 67.

<sup>60</sup> Leithart, p. 88. Leithart also interprets the angel of Rev 1.1 as a reference to the Holy Spirit and then makes a point that “the order of unveiling is: God→Jesus→Angel/Spirit→John, and the order of blessing is: God→Spirit→Jesus.” This neat and tidy order of unveiling and blessing, however, rests again on an unwarranted need to find a Trinitarian structure in the opening and salutation of the Revelation.

<sup>61</sup> Lenski, p. 40.

ridiculous notion were true, why not make it explicit? Why, on the contrary, do the salutations of 1Th 1.1, 1Pe 1.2, and Jud 1.2, as well as the closing wishes of 2Ti 4.22, Tit 3.15 and 1Pe 5.14, not even specify *from whom* the grace, mercy, peace and love should come to the recipients?

The fact is that the dogmatic statements of commentators, assuming that the grace and peace of Rev 1.4 could only come from God, betray an impoverished understanding of how the terms *grace* and *peace* were used in biblical times, as well as a poor understanding of ancient salutations. The Hellenistic-era salutations were *generalized* wishes for blessing, and the specific blessings named were themselves *generalized* ideas expressed in words that “were used in everyday human interactions.”<sup>62</sup> *Grace* in a salutation was not meant as the specific wish for an experience of saving grace, but as a *generalized* wish for *favor* or *benefit*.<sup>63</sup> *Peace* did not express a wish for the specific peace of having one’s sins forgiven, but as a *generalized* wish for *relational harmony*, *safety*, or even more generally, *prosperity*, *welfare*, or *wellness*.<sup>64</sup> Scripture abundantly confirms this usage for the terms *grace* and *peace*. *Grace*, in the sense of *favor*, comes not only from God but also from people (Luk 2.52; Act 2.47; 7.10). Even our words are to give grace to those who hear (Eph 4.29; cf. Col 4.6). Regarding *peace*, we find that Jesus instructed His disciples to extend peace to the houses of their hosts (Mat 10.12-13; Luk 10.5-6). Brethren can send messengers back “in peace to those who had sent them out” (Act 15.33; 1Co 16.11; cf. 1Cl 65.1). Christians are to “pursue the things which make for peace” (Rom

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<sup>62</sup> See James Rowe Adams’ entries on *grace*, p. 128 ff., and *peace*, p. 212 ff.

<sup>63</sup> The word *grace*, *χάρις*, is used in this sense of *favor* from Genesis (LXX) to Revelation (for a few of many examples, see Gen 6.8; 18.3; 33.8; Ex 3.21; 11.3; Num 32.5; Deu 24.1; Rut 2.10; 1Sa 1.18; 2Sa 14.22; 1Ki 11.19; Est 2.9; Pro 3.3; 11.27; Ecc 9.11; Zec 4.7; Dan 1.9; Luk 2.52; Act 2.47; 2Co 1.11; 1Pe 2.19-20; Rev 22.21). The Grk verb for bestowing favor, *χαριτόω*, is a cognate of the familiar noun for grace, *χάρις* (See Luk 1.28,30). Also, the Hellenistic expression for asking a favor was to “ask a grace” (Act 24.27; 25.3,9; 2Co 8.4; cf. Bar 21.7, “*χάριν αἰτούμενος*”). The same Grk noun, *χάρις*, can also refer to any benefit, like that Paul hoped to bestow upon the Corinthian believers (2Cor 1.15), or to a *gift*, which can come from God or from people (Rom 12.6; 1Co 16.3).

<sup>64</sup> The Grk terms *εἰρήνη*, and the Heb *שָׁלוֹם*, are used throughout Scripture with reference to relational harmony expressed, extended, or sought by a person or people to or with another or others; not just by God to or with humanity. For a few examples, see Gen 26.29; Deu 20.10; Jos 9.15; Jdg 18.6; 1Sa 7.14; 2Sa 15.27; 1Ki 2.6; 1Ch 12.18; Ezr 9.12; Psa 28.3. For examples of their use with reference to safety, see Jdg 8.9; 1Sa 20.7; 2Ch 18.26-27; Isa 41.3; Luk 12.51. For examples of their use with reference to general prosperity, welfare, or wellness, see 2Ki 4.26; 5.22; Psa 35.27; 38.3; 73.3; 122.6-8; Jer 38.4.

14.19; cf. 2Ti 2.22; Heb 12.14). These NT examples echo earlier events in which Rahab received the Israelite spies in peace (Heb 11.31), the congregations of Israel “proclaimed peace” to the sons of Benjamin (Jdg 21.13), men from Benjamin and Judah proclaimed their peace to David (1Ch 12.16-18). As already noted, the NT salutations of peace are simply a logical extension of the age-old Jewish greeting of *shalom* (Ezr 4.17; 5.7), meaning (according to the specific occasion), “I come in peace,” or “I wish you peace” (Luk 24.36; Joh 20.19,26).

None of this negates the truth that the apostle Paul started a trend of reformulating the old salutations into expressions recognizing God and Christ as the ultimate sources of grace and peace. Still, this truth did not alter the generalized purpose of the Hellenistic salutation, which, in earliest Christian epistles, was to wish favor upon and harmony among the corporate recipients. The favor for which Paul wished he considered as ultimately from God, yes, but also from earthly authorities, as well as from one another. Likewise, he understood that the peace he desired for the Christian was made possible by God, but, according to the emphases in early Christian writings, the peace he wished for was harmony between members of the congregation, and between the congregation and their leaders. This peace with one another was something for which the believers themselves were to take responsibility (Mar 9.50; Rom 14.19; 1Th 5.13).

Once we understand biblically that *people*, not just God, express and extend grace and peace to one another, this knowledge frees us from the ill-conceived argument that the seven spirits of God, from whom John wished grace and peace to the churches of Asia, must signify the Holy Spirit. We can now proceed with a better understanding of John’s salutation: he wished the churches of Asia favor and harmony, not only from God and Jesus Christ, but also from seven spirits, created beings who fulfill a throne-room responsibility. This understanding piques our interest, of course! If John wished favor and harmony for the churches from spirits, neither divine nor human but who serve before God’s throne, *who are these seven spirits of God?*

## *The Seven Spirits Distinct From Other Groups Of Seven*

Before proceeding with a detailed analysis of the seven spirits themselves, we must lay aside any impulse to identify them with other groups of seven in the Revelation. First, we must distinguish them from the seven lampstands of Rev 1.12. Though the seven spirits seem to bear a similarity to the lampstands (*λυχνία*), since John saw the seven spirits as “lamps of fire” (*λαμπάς*, Rev 4.5), Jesus explicitly identified the seven lampstands of Rev 1.12 as the seven churches (Rev 1.20; presumably “the seven churches that are in Asia,” Rev 1.4). While the seven lampstands, i.e., the seven churches, reside in Asia, the seven lamps, i.e., the seven spirits, burn before God’s heavenly throne (Rev 1.4; 4.5). Furthermore, the seven churches which are *recipients* of the epistolary revelation are clearly not the seven spirits *from whom* John wishes the churches grace and peace (Rev 1.4). Thus, we must make a definite distinction between the seven lampstands (= churches) of Rev 1.12,20, and the seven spirits of God of Rev 1.4 and 4.5.

Second, we must distinguish the seven spirits of God from the seven angels that appear in Rev 8.2. Two details have tempted some commentators to identify these seven angels with the seven spirits of God: (1) as the seven spirits appear as lamps “burning before the throne” (Rev 4.5), so John identifies the seven angels as the ones standing before God” (Rev 8.2); (2) the article, i.e., the word *the*, before the phrase *seven angels* in Rev 8.2 could be anaphoric, referring to a group antecedently mentioned in the Revelation narrative. As to the first detail, we observe that in the Revelation many entities appear before God and before His throne (Rev 7.9,11-15; 11.16; 14.3; 20.12); this spatial position alone does not equate one entity or group with another.

As to the second matter, all commentators recognize the significance of the definite article in Rev 8.2, but the vast majority interpret it as having a “well known,” rather than an anaphoric “previously introduced,” usage in this instance. Ladd, as most others, leans toward identifying these seven angels as the seven archangels of Jewish tradition (1En 20.1-8), and mentions Gabriel as one who stands in God’s presence (Luk 1.19).<sup>65</sup> Beale concurs with Ladd, and cites Tob 12.15 along with

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<sup>65</sup> Ladd, p. 124.

references in 1En, and Tes Lev 3.5, but adds confusion by mentioning the temptation “to identify [the seven angels of Rev 8.2] with the seven guardian angels of the seven churches in chs. 2-3 ...”<sup>66</sup> Aune also leans toward the “well known” use of the article in Rev 8.2, which would identify these angels as the archangels of Jewish tradition, but also explains that if understood anaphorically, the article would point to either the angels of the seven churches (Rev 1.20) or to the seven spirits of God (Rev 1.4, etc.).<sup>67</sup>

Certainly, though, we should dismiss all thoughts of identifying the seven angels of Rev 8.2 (and 15.1) with the “guardian angels of the seven churches”! The angels of the seven churches in Rev 1-3 are *human messengers*, not celestial spirit-beings. As stated above, one does not write letters to celestial spirit-beings. Furthermore, each church’s “angel” receives commendation and reproof along with his congregation (Rev 2-3), but “guardian angels” are holy and do not bear responsibility for the foibles of humans, nor receive reproof for having fallen short.

Therefore, the seven angels of Rev 8.2 are either the archangels of Jewish tradition (with the “well known” definite article), or the seven spirits of God (with the anaphoric article), or, as R. C. H. Lenski interpreted Rev 8.2, simply a group of angels which at that point came within John’s perception (indicated with the deictic article), as did “**the** seven thunders” of Revelation.<sup>68</sup> Lenski’s interpretation has merit, as does the majority view identifying the seven angels of Rev 8.2 with the archangels. Much less likely is the identification of the seven angels of Rev 8.2 with the seven spirits of Rev 1.4, etc. John describes the seven angels as having one job: announcing judgments that fall from heaven directly or indirectly upon the earth. The seven spirits, as we shall see, have instead a ministry upon the earth as well as task in heaven. Furthermore, it seems incongruous to wish grace and peace to the seven churches (Rev 1.4) from those about to announce horrific judgments that will rain down upon the earth. In the light of the different names used and functions described for the seven spirits and the seven angels, and without any explicit reason to equate

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<sup>66</sup> Beale, p. 454.

<sup>67</sup> Aune, p. 509.

<sup>68</sup> Lenski, p. 268.

the two groups, we best maintain the distinction between the seven spirits of God and the seven angels who stand before God.

Another group of seven angels appeared to John in Rev 15.1. This group of seven angels might be the same as that of Rev 8.2 ff., but John introduced it as though new to his visionary experience. This latter group of seven angels has a related task to that of the first group, but instead of announcing judgments by trumpet blast, they themselves pour out bowls of wrath upon the earth (Rev 15.7 ff.). For the same reasons that apply to the first group of seven angels, we must maintain the distinction between this second group and the seven spirits of God. In the final analysis, the Revelation does not identify either group of seven angels beyond their actions as described by John, but they appear as distinct entities from the seven spirits of God.

## Part 2: What The Seven Spirits Of God Are

### *The Biblical Data*

Having shown that “the seven spirits of God” does not signify the Holy Spirit, and that we should not identify the seven spirits with the angels (= messengers) of the seven churches, nor with the other groups of seven angels in the Revelation, let us now see what the Revelation says and implies specifically about the seven spirits of God:

1. Obviously they are seven in number (Rev 1.4), but their number implies a completeness to their corporate character, and that they fulfill their assigned task perfectly. That the number seven indicates the full and complete efficacy of these seven spirits can be illustrated by the “seven spirits of deceit” and the “seven spirits...[by which] every human deed (is done)” in *Tes Reu*, chs. 2 and 3,<sup>69</sup> as well as by the mention by Jesus of seven spirits that wholly dominate a once delivered man (Mat 12.45; cf. Luk 8.2). A team of seven spirits covers all the bases!
2. They do not serve *primarily* as messengers, and thus are called simply “spirits” rather than “angels.” While all celestial angels are spirits, not all spirits in the heavenly realm are angels (cf. Act 23.8). In the Revelation, John used the term *angel* (ἄγγελος) with high consistency to emphasize the role of certain characters, whether human or spirit, as messenger-proclaimers.<sup>70</sup> In a few instances, John wrote of angels executing judgements, an activity which also “sends a message.”<sup>71</sup>
3. They are entities from whom a congregation could enjoy, even if unwittingly, favor and harmonious relationship (Rev 1.4).
4. They serve under the authority of Christ Himself (see above, “Christ Has The Seven Spirits And The Seven Stars”), and have a connection to Christ and His knowledge of the deeds of the church in Sardis (Rev 3.1).

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<sup>69</sup> Charlesworth, pp. 782-783.

<sup>70</sup> Rev 1.1,20; 2.1,8,12,18; 3.1,5,7,14; 5.2,11; 7.2,11; 8.6,8,10,12,13; 9.1,13-14; 10.1-11; 11.15; 14.6-11,15,18; 15.1,6-8; 16.1-6; 17.1,7; 18.1-3, 21; 19.17-18; 21.9-10,12; 22.6,8,16.

<sup>71</sup> Rev 8.2-5; 9.11, 15; 12.7-9; 14.17,19; 20.1-3; 21.17.

5. As eyes of the Lamb, they observe and are “sent out into all the earth” (Rev 5.6). The direct allusions to Zec 1.10, 4.10, and 6.5, imply that the eyes of the Lamb, i.e., the seven spirits of God, are not only sent out, but also “range to and fro throughout the earth” in the execution of their duty.<sup>72</sup>
6. Their primary station is directly before the throne of God (Rev 1.4; 4.5). This implies that they not only have a throne-room responsibility, but that they report directly to God enthroned and stand ready to execute His orders.<sup>73</sup>
7. They provide illumination before the throne of God (Rev 4.5; cf. 1.4).

## Correspondence Between The Heavenly And Earthly Temples

This final datum, the matter of illumination before the throne, deserves further scrutiny. Students of the Revelation cannot miss the book’s intentional depiction of the correspondence between the heavenly temple in which God sits enthroned and the earthly temple familiar to Jewish-Christian readers (Rev 7.15). The correspondences should not surprise us since the earthly tabernacle and its furnishings were patterned after, and served as copies and shadows of, the heavenly sanctuary erected by God Himself (Heb 7.1-5). Consider the following:

### **EARTHLY TEMPLE**

1. Mercy seat (Ex 25.17-20)
2. Cherubim (Num 7.89; Isa 37.16)
3. Bronze sea (1Ki 7.23-44; 1Ch 18.8)
4. Gold altar (Ex 40.5)
5. Ark of the covenant (1Ki 8.6)
6. Scroll (Deu 31.26)
7. 24 prophetic harpists (1Ch 25.1-4)
8. Slain lamb
9. Lampstand of seven lamps (Num 8.2)

### **HEAVENLY TEMPLE**

- Throne (Rev 4.2)
- Living creatures (Rev 4.6-8)
- Sea of glass (Rev 4.6)
- Golden altar (Rev 8.3)
- Ark of His covenant (Rev 11.19)
- Scroll (Rev 5.1)
- 24 harpist elders (Rev 4.4; 5.8)
- Lamb apparently slain (Rev 5.6)
- Seven lamps (Rev 4.5)

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<sup>72</sup> See “The Eyes Sent Roaming” below.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Elijah’s and Elisha’s repeated self-references as standing before YHVH (1Ki 17.1; 18.15; 2Ki 3.14; 5.16).

## The Meaning Of The Menorah

Regarding the lampstand of seven lamps in the earthly temple, i.e., the menorah, the Jewish Encyclopedia logically says, “The assumption that this seven-branched candlestick has a symbolic meaning is confirmed by Zec 4.1 *et seq.*”<sup>74</sup> Students of the Bible, Jewish and Christian, have felt this intuitively, and so have often speculated about what the lampstand of seven lamps in the holy place signified. In Jewish tradition, theories as to the Menorah’s meaning run mostly in expected directions:

... the menorah represented the creation of the universe in seven days, the center light symbolizing the Sabbath. The seven branches are the seven continents of the earth and the seven heavens, guided by the light of God.<sup>75</sup>

Additionally, however, Jewish tradition stated that “The seven lights may be said to represent the seven planets ....”<sup>76</sup> Among Christian commentators, Walter L. Wilson conveys the thoughts of many when he writes, in connection with Ex 25.37, “The lampstand had seven branches, and these are generally taken to represent the sevenfold Spirit of God who is the Spirit of light.” He repeats the thought in connection with Rev 4.5: “The passage tells us that these lamps do represent the Holy Spirit in His wonderful sevenfold aspect. The Spirit gives light and life.”<sup>77</sup> M. M. Kalisch, drawing attention to the almond decorations on the menorah, focused on the enlightening power of God’s word, writing,

It is well known that the almond-tree is a Biblical type for rapid growth and vigilance; it is among the first trees to produce buds and fruits (compare Num 17.16–24; Jer. 1.11); and the almonds symbolize, therefore, on the candlestick, which is itself the emblem of enlightenment and knowledge, the quick diffusion and eternal efficacy of the latter through the word of God.<sup>78</sup>

Victor E. Hoven, agreed that, “[The menorah] was a type of the word of God (Psa 119.105) ....”<sup>79</sup> Benjamin Keach instead put the emphasis of the menorah’s meaning on Christ Himself and His mystical body, i.e., the ministers of the gospel, as light-

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<sup>74</sup> JE Vol. 3, p. 531.

<sup>75</sup> JE Vol. 8, p. 494.

<sup>76</sup> JE Vol. 3, pp. 532-533.

<sup>77</sup> Wilson, pp. 249-250.

<sup>78</sup> Kalisch, p. 508.

<sup>79</sup> Hoven, p. 174.

bearers to the world, and more recently, W. W. Rugh follows suit.<sup>80</sup> Patrick Fairbairn thought that the lampstand *undoubtedly* signified the Church empowered by the Spirit “to act under God as the bountiful dispenser of its grace and truth.”<sup>81</sup> Tremper Longman III, on the other hand, minimizes the idea of light associated with the menorah, and instead associates the lamp stand of the holy place with an Edenic tree, or the burning bush of Ex 3.<sup>82</sup> He writes, “The menorah is essentially a tree,” following with,

That the place of God’s presence is associated with a tree should not be surprising. After all, the place where humans and God fellowshiped freely with each other was in a garden, the Garden of Eden. The tabernacle, thus, represents the Garden of Eden as well as heaven on earth.<sup>83</sup>

Eugene Carpenter also wishes to connect the symbolism of the menorah to the creation, and see in it the tree of life and an allusion to “the God of fire and light.”<sup>84</sup>

Regarding this tree imagery, since *almond shapes* decorated the menorah, and because the almond tree budded in the spring before the rest of Israel’s flowering trees,<sup>85</sup> some, like John N. Oswalt, have thought that the almond-decorated lampstand “may well have been a symbol of the life-giving light of God,” or “the tree of life in the garden of Eden.”<sup>86</sup> Nahum M. Sarna also sees in the menorah the tree of life, and, because of the early flowering of the almond tree, a hint in the almond decorations of “life renewed and sustained.”<sup>87</sup> Douglas Stuart, attempting to harmonize the symbolism of the menorah with Zec 4 and Rev 11, writes, “There is some reason to conclude, however, that [the menorah] more nearly resembled an olive tree, albeit an olive tree with twenty-two almond flowers on it.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Keach, p. 985.

<sup>81</sup> Fairbairn, Vol. 2, pp. 323-327.

<sup>82</sup> Longman, *Immanuel In Our Place*, p. 57.

<sup>83</sup> Longman, *How To Read Exodus*, p. 138.

<sup>84</sup> Carpenter, p. 189.

<sup>85</sup> I saw an almond tree in full blossom in Tel Aviv in early February, 1978.

<sup>86</sup> Allen Ross and John N. Oswalt, *CBC Vol. 1*, p. 496.

<sup>87</sup> JPSTC *Exodus*, p. 165.

<sup>88</sup> The almond blossoms decorating the menorah certainly did not mean that the menorah represented an almond tree any more than the pomegranates on the hem of the high priest’s robe (Ex 28.33-34) signified that he represented a pomegranate shrub.

The abundance of varied theories about the symbolism of the menorah underscores the fact that Scripture nowhere tell us *explicitly* what the menorah signified (though Zec 4.2 with 4.10 comes close). However, since the tabernacle, its rituals and furnishings in large part memorialized the Exodus,<sup>89</sup> we should look for symbolism relating to that great redemptive drama before leaning to speculations which make no direct connection to the deliverance from Egypt and Israel's calling as a kingdom of priests. Tremper Longman III and others correctly sense an Edenic connection to the design of the tabernacle and temple, for the temple does hold the promise of the restoration of the Edenic fellowship between man and God. Prior to that restoration, however, an exodus, both personal and global, must occur, and to this exodus the tabernacle-temple rituals and furnishings point more directly.

Longman had the correct impulse to connect the menorah to the burning bush of Ex 3. Besides the general Exodus-Tabernacle connection that we should expect, we will see shortly that the primary symbolism of the menorah has to do with seeing, and the primary message of the burning bush theophany was, "I have surely **seen** the affliction of My people ..." (Ex 3.7). Longman is also correct to dismiss the Jewish association of the menorah with the seven planets as nothing more than speculation, but he missed the significance of that planetary connection.<sup>90</sup> Jewish tradition "regarded [the seven planets] as **the eyes of God**, [which] behold everything."<sup>91</sup> Thus, Jewish thinking about the menorah, burning before the symbolic throne of the mercy seat, provides a direct link for us to the seven torches burning before the real throne of heaven (Rev 4.5), torches identified as the seven spirits of God and the **eyes of the Lamb** (Rev 4.5). The almond decorations of the menorah confirm this connection. R. Alan Cole comes very close to piecing together the clues from Jeremiah's vision of the almond rod (Jer 1.11-12), saying, "the almond, as the first tree that blossomed in the springtime, was an appropriate symbol of God's wonderful care over his people,"<sup>92</sup> but he missed the play on words in the Heb text. Sarna comes closer, noting that, "The [Heb] stem [for almond] *sh-k-d* means 'to be watchful,

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<sup>89</sup> See, for example, the commemorative aspect of the Aaronic baptism described in my *Magic Baptism And The Invention Of Original Sin*, p. 78 et seq.

<sup>90</sup> Longman, p. 57.

<sup>91</sup> JE Vol. 3, pp. 532-533, emphasis mine.

<sup>92</sup> Cole, p. 201.

wakeful, vigilant' ...,” but still limits the interpretation of the almond flower to “a symbol of life renewed and sustained.”<sup>93</sup> Without making explicit reference to the Heb text, Thomas B. Dozeman hits the mark:

The almond tree symbolizes wakefulness in the call of Jeremiah (Jer 1:11–12) and may have a similar meaning here. The imagery is likely directed to **Yahweh, whose wakeful eyes are represented by the menorah**. This is the interpretation offered in Zechariah’s fifth vision, which equates the menorah with the eyes of God (Zechariah 4).<sup>94</sup>

Finally, Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum provides an explanation of the almond symbolism in Jer 1.11-12 which simultaneously accounts for the almond decorations on the menorah:

**Jer 1.11** The word of the LORD came to me saying, “What do you see, Jeremiah?” And I said, “I see a rod of an almond tree.”

**12** Then the LORD said to me, “You have seen well, for I am watching over My word to perform it.”<sup>95</sup>

.... In these two verses, there is a play upon a Hebrew word which is impossible to translate into English with the intent that the author had. This is one of those places where something is lost in translation, so the English does not make sense. God asked Jeremiah: *Jeremiah, what see you?* Jeremiah answered that he saw an almond-tree. God’s response is: *you have well seen: for I watch over my word to perform it*. In English there is no connection between the words almond and watch. In Hebrew there is such a connection because the Hebrew word for *almond* and the Hebrew word for *watch* have the same root, and they sound almost the same. The only difference is a slight vowel pattern shift.

Verse 11 is the actual vision: *What see you?* Jeremiah saw *a rod of an almond-tree*. The Hebrew word for “almond” is *shakeid* from the Hebrew root *shakad*, which means, “to be aware,” “to be watchful,” “to be alert.” In Psalm 127:1, it is translated as *the watchman*. The word *shakeid* denotes the almond. In the Land of Israel, the almond is the first shrub to awaken from winter. It is the first to flower, and the pink flowers come out before the leaves unfold. They come out as early as January, much earlier than most other things that flower in the Land of Israel. Fruit begins to appear as early as March. So it is like a *watchman* who announces the coming of spring.

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<sup>93</sup> JPSTC *Exodus*, p. 165.

<sup>94</sup> Dozeman, p. 619, emphasis mine.

<sup>95</sup> I’ve substituted the NAU’s rendering for Fruchtenbaum’s translation which uses the spurious name *Jehovah*.

The application is in verse 12. The Hebrew word for “watching” or “to watch” is very similar: *shokeid*. So *shakeid* with an “a” means “almond,” *shokeid* with an “o” means “to watch.” But the root is the same for both the almond and the watcher. In Hebrew it is a play on words which is missed in the English. The point of this play on words is that God watches over His Word to perform it. This is a special promise to Jeremiah that whatever he prophesies, God will make sure that it will be fulfilled.<sup>96</sup>

Thus, the application for our present investigation is that the almond decorations on the menorah, with its lamps oriented to shine upon the twelve cakes of showbread, are a mnemonic device,<sup>97</sup> reminding the priests who entered the holy place that the eyes of the Lord (symbolized by the seven lamps) watch over the twelve tribes of Israel in their holy calling (Lev 11.45; 20.26).<sup>98</sup> **The bottom line: the menorah represented the seven eyes LORD, i.e., the seven spirits of God, through whom He watches over His people.** Zec 4.10 does tell us after all what the seven lamps of Zec 4.2, and thereby of the menorah, represent.

In the face of the many Christological interpretations of the menorah, though, let us leave no room for misunderstanding: the menorah *did not* represent the LORD Himself, nor the Angel of the LORD (whom we now know as Jesus the Messiah), else the menorah would risk violating the second commandment of the decalogue. Instead the menorah represented God’s agents, the seven spirits, providing illumination in the holy place, that space in front of the veil enclosing the holy of holies where the LORD’s *real presence* dwelt enthroned above the cherubim of the mercy seat.

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<sup>96</sup> Fruchtenbaum, Vol. 123, pp. 8-9.

<sup>97</sup> Interestingly, rabbi Abonah, cited in the Jerusalem Talmud recognized the almond in Jeremiah’s vision as “a mnemonic,” only not pointing to the eyes of the LORD, but to the twenty-one days between the breaching of Jerusalem’s wall and the destruction of the temple, since the almond fruit takes twenty-one days to ripen. Neusner’s translation of the Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Ta’anit 4.5.

<sup>98</sup> Hence, the placement of the twelve cakes of showbread in the holy place. However, the showbread also represented Israel as dependent upon God for their daily provision. Each cake of showbread was made from 2/10 ephah of flour (Lev 24.5) which amount equals 2 omers, the sabbath day supply of manna (Ex 16.22).

## MENORAH

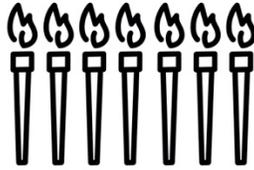


Represents the seven “eyes of the LORD” in Jewish tradition. The almond decorations a mnemonic device for “watching” (Jer 1.11-12). A reminder of burning bush and the message, “I have surely **seen** the affliction of My people ...” (Ex 3.7).

Stood “before the LORD” enthroned above the mercy seat (Ex 40.25).

Illuminate the work of the priests, and symbolically observe the 12 cakes of showbread (= Israel).

## SEVEN TORCHES

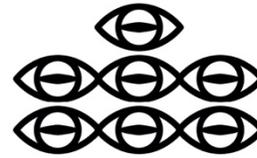


Identified as the seven spirits of God (Rev 4.5).

Burn before God’s throne (Rev 4.5).

Illuminate what occurs in the heavenly sanctuary-throne room.

## SEVEN EYES



Identified as the seven spirits of God (Rev 5.6).

In the center before God’s throne and the surrounding elders (Rev 5.6).

Provide complete vision for the Lamb, i.e., allow the Lamb to see all.

## *The Eyes Of The LORD In The Earlier Scriptures*

Alongside their representation by the menorah, the eyes of the LORD appear as a familiar theme in the Scriptures.

### The Eyes That Are

Sometimes in Scripture, “the eyes of the LORD,” is a synecdoche for the LORD Himself, and serves to draw attention to His constant and universal observation of all that occurs.<sup>99</sup> Pro 22.12 provides a case in point:

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<sup>99</sup> “Within the Hebrew tradition, they eyes of Yahweh ... refer to his constant observance of all the affairs of humanity ...,” Mark J. Boda, p. 308. Cf. Sir 15.18-19 in Feldman, et al: “For great is the wisdom of the

The eyes of the LORD preserve knowledge,  
But He overthrows the words of the treacherous man.

This is a complex antithetical proverb with purposeful asymmetry, but my only point here is to note that though “the eyes of the LORD” is plural in the first colon (dual in MT, plural in LXX), the parallel subject of the verb in the second colon is singular. Thus, “the eyes of the LORD” refer to the LORD Himself. Pro 15.3 provides another example. It reads,

The eyes of the LORD are in every place,  
watching the evil and the good.

In this proverb, though *eyes* is again in the normal dual/plural, and “the eyes of the LORD” constantly watch, they are nevertheless presented as static with regard to location. They don’t go everywhere, they simply *are* everywhere, which accords with the doctrine of God’s omniscient omnipresence.

## The Eyes Sent Roaming

However, other passages refer to the eyes of the LORD as external agents who move about geographically. In 2Ch 16.9 <sup>ESV</sup>, Hanani the seer said to king Asa,

... the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him.

This statement presents a startling mental image. It’s hard not to picture great two-legged eyeballs sprinting along the roads and pathways of the earth. It would not have surprised us if the seer had said that the eyes of the LORD *scan* the whole earth, or even *dart over* the whole earth. However, the Hebrew verb rendered “run to and fro,” is the same one used in Amos 8.12 of people running to and fro searching vainly for the word of the LORD. The same verb appears also in Dan 12.4 <sup>ESV</sup>, which predicts that, “Many [people] shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase.” The same verb appears in 2Sa 24.2,8, describing the movement of David’s census takers as they went about through the whole land, and again of Satan reporting that he had come

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Lord; he is mighty in power and sees everything; his eyes are on those who fear him, and he knows every human action.”

“from roaming about on the earth” (Job 1.7; 2.2). Therefore, the verb choice in 2Ch 16.9, implies that in some passages “the eyes of the LORD” refer to *agents* of the LORD, rather than to the LORD Himself. In these cases, the phrase, “the eyes of the LORD,” employs a figure of speech, used from antiquity to the present, by which we speak of another person, or persons, as being “our eyes.”<sup>100</sup>

## *The Ministry Of Confirmation*

This prompts the all-important question: Why would the omniscient God use external agents to observe anything? As the Spirit of YHVH said through Isaiah,

Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord,  
Or as His counselor has informed Him?  
With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding?  
And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge  
And informed Him of the way of understanding?<sup>101</sup>

That God *works* through agents (whether humans, angels, insects or donkeys) is beyond questions.<sup>102</sup> That He would be *informed* through agents is another matter. Nevertheless, as counter-intuitive as it seems, those sent by the LORD “to patrol the earth,” return and report to “the angel of the LORD” (Zec 1.8-11). Just as counterintuitively, the LORD Himself comes to investigate matters, like the tower building of which He was already aware (Gen 11.5-7), and the crimes of Sodom and Gomorrah about which He had already heard an outcry (perhaps from Lot; Gen 18.20-21).<sup>103</sup> These activities, whether by the LORD Himself or by external agents who inform Him, do not imply a gap in His knowledge, but only that He has a purpose for a witness to events. We need not doubt that the function of eyes is to observe. If external “eyes of the Lord” (or of the Lamb) observe, it is under His authority and for His purposes.

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<sup>100</sup> As mentioned in the DBI, “in antiquity ‘the eyes of the king’ were his spies,” or as another proposed, “the eyes of the king” were “Informers, accusers, internal spies, censors, secret agents, and their like,” by which rulers “retained their grip on power ....” See DBI, p. 170, and Mark J. Boda, pp. 130, 309.

<sup>101</sup> Isa 40.13-14.

<sup>102</sup> Ex 8.21; Jos 24.12; 2Ki 17.13; Jer 1.7; 7.25; 35.15; 44.4; Joe 2.25; Mic 6.4; 2Pe 2.16; cf. Luk 11.49; Act 1.8.

<sup>103</sup> It is also counterintuitive to make our requests “know to God” (Phil 4.6) when our “Father knows what [we] need before [we] ask Him” (Mat 6.8).

Clearly, though, His purposes for external “eyes” do not include making Himself aware of things about which He was previously ignorant. The “seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God,” provide illumination, but not because the One who sits upon the throne lacks light within Himself (Rev 4.5). Though the seven spirits of God observe and provide illumination, they do not *cause* the LORD to know but instead *confirm* what He knows (cf. Rev 3.1). A principle which God has built into the administration of His kingdom in the world necessitates this: Any important judgment requires the testimony of [a minimum] of two or three witnesses (Deu 17.6; 19.15; Mat 18.16; Joh 8.17-18; 2Co 13.1; 1Ti 5.19; Heb 10.28; cf. 1Ki 21.7-13; Mat 26.60). This brings us to the matter of the celestial books

## *The Book Of Life*

In the biblical record, Moses first expressed the idea of a book connected with one’s final destiny (Ex 32.33):

“... if You will forgive their sin — but if not, please wipe me out from Your book which You have written.” And then YHVH says to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against Me, I will wipe him out from My book.”<sup>104</sup>

This introduces the Bible reader to the idea of *names* written in a book of God. David also knew of the “book of life,” in which the righteous are recorded, and from which he wished God to blot out the wicked (Psa 69.28). The glorified Jesus would confirm the existence of this book (Rev 3.5), and the apostle Paul would refer to it (Phil 4.3). Daniel also knew of a book containing the names of all his people who would be saved at the end of the age (Dan 12.1). Malachi, likewise, knew of a “book of remembrance” written before the LORD, having to do with whom God will spare on the coming Day (Mal 3.16-18).

## *The Book Of Deeds*

In addition to the celestial recording of names, David introduced the idea of personal *actions or experiences* recorded in God’s book (Psa 56.8). In the Revelation, John would

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<sup>104</sup> My trans.

later confirm that he saw books opened from which “the dead were judged from the things which were written,” i.e., “according to their deeds” (Rev 20.12-13). This may strike us as figurative, God’s “book” or “books” simply referring to His knowledge. For example, regarding the books that John saw, G. K. Beale opines that “The record books are metaphorical for God’s unfailing memory, which at the end provides the account of the misdeeds of the wicked to be presented before them.”<sup>105</sup> However, *book* (βιβλίον) in the Revelation does not refer to God’s innate memory, but to something that another person can read and internalize (Rev 1.11; 5.1-4; 10.8-11; 22.7-10).

That humanity’s deeds are written in a celestial book which will be used in the final judgment, was assumed in the intertestamental period. We find in 1En 81, for example, that Enoch himself purportedly read these books:

1En 81.1 Then he said unto me, “Enoch, look at the tablet[s] of heaven; read what is written upon them and understand [each element on them] one by one. 2 So I looked at the tablet[s] of heaven, read all the writing [them], and came to understand everything. I read that book and all the deeds of humanity...”<sup>106</sup>

Further on, in 1En 97, we find this warning:

1En 97.3 What do you intend to do, you sinners,  
whither will you flee on that day of judgment,  
when you hear the sound of the prayer of the righteous ones?  
4 [In respect to your lot], you shall become like them,  
[the ones] against whom you shall become witness[es],  
such is the fact: You have become bedfellows with sinners.  
5 In those days, the prayers of the righteous ones shall reach unto the Lord;  
but for all of you, your days shall arrive.  
6 He shall read aloud regarding every aspect of your mischief,  
in the presence of the Great Holy One.  
Then your faces shall be covered with shame,  
and he will cast out every deed which is built upon oppression.<sup>107</sup>

One more warning appears in 1En 104:

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<sup>105</sup> Beale, p. 1033.

<sup>106</sup> C. 110 BC. Charlesworth.

<sup>107</sup> C. 105-104 BC. Charlesworth, emphasis added. Cf. Charlesworth, 2En 52.15, late 1<sup>st</sup> century AD: “[For] all these things [will be weighed] in the balances and exposed in the books on the great judgement day.”

1En 104.7 Now, you sinners, even if you say, 'All our sins shall not be investigated or written down,' nevertheless, all your sins are being written down every day.<sup>108</sup>

## *The Angelic Scribes*

As to who does the writing in the Book of Deeds, the Testament of Abraham, written in the apostolic or subapostolic era, describes angels busied with this work:

"The two angels, the one on the right and the one on the left, these are those who record sins and righteous deeds. The one on the right records righteous deeds, while the one on the left [records] sins."<sup>109</sup>

Likewise, the earlier Apocalypse of Zephaniah envisions watchers at the gate of heaven recording the deeds of the righteous, while the devil's angels write down men's sins:

Apo Zep 3.5 Then I saw two other angels weeping over the three sons of Joatham, the priest. 6 I said, "O angel, who are these?" He said, "**These are the angels of the Lord Almighty. They write down all the good deeds of the righteous upon their manuscript as they watch at the gate of heaven.** 7 And I take them from their hands and bring them up before the Lord Almighty; he writes their name in the Book of the Living. 8 Also the angels of the accuser who is upon the earth, they also write down all of the sins of men upon their manuscript. 9 They also sit at the gate of heaven. They tell the accuser and he writes them upon his manuscript so that he might accuse them when they come out of the world [and] down there."<sup>110</sup>

Of particular interest for this study, we find that 1 Enoch 90 describes one of the celestial writers as "one of those seven snow-white ones":

22 **He spoke to the man who was writing in his presence—that [man] being one of those seven snow-white ones**—saying, "Take those seven shepherds to whom I had handed over the sheep, but who decided to kill many more than they were ordered." 23 Behold,

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<sup>108</sup> C. 105-104 BC. Charlesworth. Cf. Neusner, *Mishnah*, Pirqe Abot 2.1, E-G:

"And keep your eye on three things, so you will not come into the clutches of transgression: "Know what is above you: "(1) An eye which sees, and (2) an ear which hears, and (3) all your actions are written down in a book."

<sup>109</sup> Testament of Abraham 13.9, c. AD 75-125. Charlesworth, emphasis added.

<sup>110</sup> 100 BC to AD 100. Charlesworth, emphasis added.

I saw all of them bound; and they all stood before him. 24 Then his judgment took place....<sup>111</sup>

In the context of 1En, the seven “snow-white” ones include three from the earth, i.e., Adam, Noah, and Shem, and four from heaven. The four from heaven in 1 Enoch may have provided a template for the four Watchers of the later 3 Enoch.<sup>112</sup> We find in chapter 28 of that later work, that,

... the four great princes called Watchers [have their abode] opposite the throne of glory, and their station is facing the Holy One .... Moreover the Holy One, blessed be he, does nothing in his world without first taking counsel with them; then he acts, as it is written, ‘Such is the sentence proclaimed by the Watchers, the verdict announced by the holy ones.’

Though all these intertestamental and later works lack biblical authority and contain much confusion, they illustrate the following elements of Jewish thinking with regard to divine jurisprudence:

1. The righteous and wicked deeds of mankind are written in a book.
2. Angelic beings act as the scribes who record the deeds of mankind.
3. 1 Enoch envisioned these angelic scribes as exalted “snow-white” ones.
4. Though the link of tradition is admittedly tenuous, the angelic scribes seem to correspond to the Watchers stationed before God’s throne.
5. God takes counsel from His Watchers in matters of judicial verdicts. (We will return to the matter of these “Watchers” below.)

Along with these five points, all the traditions about the recording of the deeds of mankind assume that the record will be brought forth at the final judgment. This, of course, accords with the canonical Scriptures. Indeed, returning to the Bible, we note that Daniel, centuries before John, saw the books opened at the time of the judgment (Dan 7.9-10):

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<sup>111</sup> C. 165-161 BC. Charlesworth, emphasis added. The “seven first snow-white ones” include Adam, Noah, and Seth, as well as four unnamed heavenly beings. The one writing in the books was probably of the heavenly group of four.

<sup>112</sup> Charlesworth believes 3 Enoch reached its final form in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> c. AD.

... And the Ancient of Days took *His* seat ... Thousands upon thousands were attending Him, And myriads upon myriads were standing before Him; The court sat, and the books were opened.

So, having established biblically (and illustrated from tradition) the ideas of (1) external celestial agents serving as “the eyes of the LORD” who observe the doings of mankind, and (2) the writing of celestial books prepared for the day of judgment, let us proceed to the biblical teaching regarding the judgment itself, in order to discover how “the eyes of the LORD,” the seven spirits of God, have a role in that awesome event.

## Part 3: The Man Who Will Judge The World

### *The Final Judgment Anticipated*

The book of Revelation comes to its ultimate climax with the vision of the new heaven and new earth, the Bride city shining in all her splendor, and the restoration of the Edenic state in which God dwells again among men (Rev 22.1-3). The climactic events leading up to this, however, include the judgment upon Mystery Babylon, the marriage of the Lamb, the coming of the King of kings, the demise of the beast and false prophet, the binding of Satan, the millennial reign, the Gog and Magog “war,” and judgment before the great white throne (Rev chs. 18-20). While the Revelation provides some new *details* regarding these eschatological events, the earlier scriptures had long anticipated the events themselves, particularly the final judgment of every person before God.

Since the garden of Eden, mankind has known that our Creator is a God who holds persons accountable for their actions (Gen 3). The people of God have also recognized that God holds persons accountable according to a righteous standard of justice that emerges from His own holiness (Gen 18.25). With the rise of the Israelite theocracy, people primarily connected God’s office as judge with His earthly recompense and overthrow of Israel’s enemies (Psa 7.11-13). However, Solomon reflected upon the personal and exhaustive judgment by God that everyone will face (Ecc 3.17; 11.9; 12.14), and God Himself declares His prerogative and commitment to judge every soul (Eze 18). In time, the prophets associated God’s judgment more and more with the Day of the LORD, emphasizing earthly recompense, but also promising the judgment of spiritual entities, and envisioning eternal punishment (Isa 2.11-12; 10.1-3; 13; 24.21; 27.1; 34.8-10; Jer 1.10; 46.10; Joe 1.14-15; 2.11-13; Oba 1.15; Zep 1.14-18; Mal 4.1). Then Daniel provided the vision of the heavenly court, with the books open and countless people standing before the throne (Dan 7.10). In the inter-testament period, the phrase “day of judgment” came into use (1En 10.6; 19.1; 22.11; 54.6; 62.3; etc.; Sib 3.740; 4Ez 7.38; 12.34). Jesus then took up this phrase, “day of judgment,” as did Peter and John (Mat 10.15; 11.22,24; 12.36; 2Pe 2.9; 3.7; 1Jo 4.17).

## *The Final Judgment Elaborated*

So, everyone knew that the judgment comes, but the Jesus and His apostles revealed new details, and clarified others, as follows:

1. The Father “has given all judgment to the Son” (Joh 5.22);
2. The Father gave the Son “authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man” (Joh 5.22,27);
3. All the dead will come forth to “a resurrection of life” or a “resurrection of judgment” (Joh 5.28-29; cf. Dan 12.2);
4. The word (message) of Jesus will serve as a criterion of judgment at the last day (John 12.48);
5. God appointed Jesus “as Judge of the living and the dead,” and all will give an account to Him (Act 13.38-43; 2Ti 4.1; 1Pe 4.5);
6. God has indeed fixed “a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed” (Act 17.31);
7. God will judge the very “secrets of men through Christ Jesus” (Rom 2.16; cf. 1Co 1.5);
8. “We will all stand before the judgment seat of God” and the “judgment seat of Christ” (Rom 14.10; 2Cor 5.10);
9. Saints, i.e., God’s faithful, will participate in judging the world and angelic beings (1Co 6.2-3; cf. Rev 20.4);
10. There is an eternal aspect of the judgment (Heb 6.2);
11. Judgment is appointed for every person following their death (Heb 9.27);
12. The final judgement will occur at the conclusion of the Lord’s thousand-year reign, after the Gog and Magog rebellion and the final demise of the devil (Rev 20).

With these details and clarifications of the final judgment, the full glory, genius and inescapable power of it becomes apparent.

## *Judging Righteously*

Consider: sinful humanity before the great white throne, if not rendered speechless by the Holy God before them and the gaping maw of dark eternity below them, would fulminate against the injustice of God judging them, since He had “never walked in

their shoes.” We find Jewish awareness of this underlying issue of divine jurisprudence in the pseudepigraphal *Testament of Abraham* (written about the time that John penned the Revelation), which insists that man must be judged by man:

13.1 And Abraham said, “My lord Commander-in-chief [Michael], who is this all-wondrous judge? And who are the angels who are recording? And who is the sunlike angel who holds the balance? And who is the fiery angel who holds the fire?” 2 The Commander-in-chief said, “Do you see, all-pious Abraham, the frightful man who is seated on the throne? This is the son of Adam, the first-formed, who is called Abel, whom Cain the wicked killed. 3 And he sits here to judge the entire creation, examining both righteous and sinners. **For God said, ‘I do not judge you, but every man is judged by man.’** 4 On account of this he gave him judgment, to judge the world until his great and glorious Parousia. And then, righteous Abraham, there will be perfect judgment and recompense, eternal and unalterable, which no one can question. 5 For every person has sprung from the first-formed, and on account of this they are first judged here by his son.<sup>113</sup>

Though the understanding of the judgment of man by man in this ancient work is speculative and flawed, the principle of justice is correct; it is appropriate that human beings be judged by one of their own. The problem is that no simple human knows the hearts of men, nor understands the character of God, to the depth required for passing eternal judgment upon mankind. How glorious, then, that God has appointed as judge a divine Man who understands completely “what is in man” (Joh 2.25; Act 17.31), and also “has been tempted in all things” in the very same way as we have (Heb 2.18; 4.15). At the final judgment, no one will be permitted to complain that the Judge does not understand the challenges they faced in life.

One problem might remain, however. Once the true humanity and complete deity of the final judge has been affirmed in order to silence any objection with regard to His sympathy and insight, Pharisaical humanity, Jewish and Gentile, will seize upon the very law of God that they had trampled in this life, and remind their judge that only on the basis of two or three witnesses can anyone be condemned. Whether God or man, the judge is only one witness! Should such a last-gasp attempt to indict the justice of God occur, it will prompt the spirits, dubbed “watchers” in Dan

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<sup>113</sup> AD 75-125. Charlesworth, emphasis added.

4.13,17,23,<sup>114</sup> to give their testimony as the independent “eyes of the LORD” who had observed the works of men throughout the ages.

The origin and meaning of the term “watchers” have confused Christian commentators since the early centuries. For example, Theodoret, Bishop of Cyr (c. AD 393-466), speculated that “watchers” simply refers to angels, since angels (being bodiless) never sleep.<sup>115</sup> However, we now see that the menorah with its almond decorations, had pointed to “watchers” since the time of the Exodus. It should not surprise us that Jewish tradition, probably encouraged by the mentions in Dan 4, took up the term *watchers* and developed a body of lore about these entities. Looking again at 3 Enoch, a Jewish work building on traditions from the Maccabean era and taking its final form in the fifth or sixth century AD, we see the watchers, at least the holy ones — as distinguished from watchers believed to have fallen in the crisis of Gen 6.1-5 — portrayed as a high rank of angel, four in number, whose “abode is opposite the throne of glory, and their station is facing the Holy One ....”<sup>116</sup> 1En 20, describes them as the “holy angels who watch” over other spirits, creation, people *and their sins*, and the text names six of these angels as Suru’el, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Saraqa’el, and Gabriel. In other words, *watchers* is not simply a synonym for ever wakeful angels, but has always referred to exalted spirits tasked with *watching*.

We see, then, that Jewish tradition regarding the holy watchers intersects with the menorah symbolism and the biblical data regarding the seven spirits of God. The seven spirits of God are the eyes of the Lamb (Rev 5.6), and eyes watch. The seven spirits of God are stationed before the throne (Rev 1.4; 4.5), and this is where the menorah stood symbolically, and where 3En 28 stations the watchers.

Now, a station before the throne implies a military and/or judicial office. Indeed, regarding the watchers, 3 Enoch states that, “the Holy One, blessed be he, does nothing in his world without first taking counsel with them.”<sup>117</sup> For this latter statement, the author of 3 Enoch found a precedent in Dan 4.17, which says that the

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<sup>114</sup> Dan 4.10,14,20 in the Aramaic text.

<sup>115</sup> *Commentary On Daniel*, 4.13, quoted in *ACCS XIII: Ezekiel, Daniel*.

<sup>116</sup> 3En 28.1-6.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*.

“sentence” against Nebuchadnezzar came about “by the decree of the watchers, and the decision [was] a command of the holy ones [= the watchers].” Furthermore, and of interest to us in this study, 1 Enoch (written much earlier than 3 Enoch) understood “the eternal judgment” to be “executed by the watchers ....”<sup>118</sup> This brings us back to the matter of the books.

John testified,

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.<sup>119</sup>

We see that at the final judgment, besides The Book of Life, other books will be opened that record the deeds of all mankind. I propose that the seven spirits of God, the biblical “eyes of the LORD,” known traditionally as watchers, will open the books of deeds, perhaps having themselves inscribed the books, and will, as needed, add their testimony as witnesses to the acts of human beings who now appear before the great white throne. The final verdict rendered for each human being will be pronounced by One of their own race, and confirmed by two or three witnesses who watched through the ages without blinking, without sleeping.

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<sup>118</sup> 1En 91.15-16.

<sup>119</sup> Rev 20.11-15.

# Favor And Harmony From The Seven Spirits

## *Biblical Certainties*

In connection with the seven spirits of God, we can now summarize what we know from the Scriptures, using the rules of sound hermeneutics:

1. In the Johannine corpus, the author never used a numerical multiple to refer to a numerical unit. He always used cardinal numbers to express straightforwardly the number of the objects in view. Accordingly, when John referred to the Holy Spirit, he always did so using the singular number.
2. In spite of the misuse of Isa 11.1-4, no biblical precedent, nor even a pseudepigraphal or apocryphal model, exists for the idea of a “sevenfold” Spirit.
3. The seven spirits of God are not the one Holy Spirit of the Trinity. Instead, they are created beings stationed before God’s throne, assigned with both throne-room and earthly tasks.
4. The biblical phrase “eyes of the LORD” sometimes refers to YHVH Himself in His omniscience, and sometimes to external agents who are, or work in concert with, the seven spirits of God.
5. John’s salutation for the Revelation does not include a Trinitarian formulation.
6. The salutations proper of the New Testament epistles do not make doctrinal statements about the Trinity as the only source of grace and peace.
7. In the salutation proper of the Revelation, John *did wish* the churches of Asia *favor and harmony* in their relationship with God, Jesus Christ and the seven spirits of God.
8. The seven spirits of God serve as eyes of the Lamb. With divine authority, they are sent out into all the earth as watchers to observe the doings of mankind (Rev 5.6).
9. In the heavenly throne room, the seven spirits of God provide illumination (Rev 4.5).
10. Every human being will face the Son of Man in a final judgment, at which time He will hand down eternal sentences (Mat 25.31-46).
11. In accord with the principle that man should be judged by man, God will judge the world through a Man, the God-Man, Jesus Christ (Act 17.31).

12. In the final judgment, the Judge will not lack for testimony, but will judge in accordance with the law of two-or-three-witnesses.

## *Confident Conclusions*

In addition to the above certainties, we can affirm the following points with a high degree of confidence, though we cannot hold to them dogmatically in the absence of explicit scriptural support:

1. From of old, the menorah, with its almond decorations and seven lamps, pointed to the seven spirits of God as those who watch over Israel (the show bread) in the holy place (i.e., with respect to Israel's call to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation).
2. John wrote the salutation of the Revelation as an anticipation of his vision of the heavenly throne room, to draw the reader's attention to the role of the seven spirits, a matter which readers would otherwise easily overlook amidst the many stunning images of the book.
3. We should not identify the seven spirits of God with other groups of seven angels in the Revelation.
4. Since the seven spirits of God serve as the eyes of Lamb and are sent out into all the earth like the eyes of the LORD in 2Ch 16.9 and Zec 4.10, they probably range to and fro (roam) like the eyes in those antecedent passages, in the typical movement of census takers (2Sa 24.2,8) and those tasked with supporting the godly population (2Ch 16.9).
5. As the eyes of the LORD, the seven spirits of God do not add to God's innate omniscience, but as watchers they will confirm what the final Judge already knows, and *as witnesses* will provide illumination before the throne on judgment day.
6. As witnesses at the final judgment, the seven spirits of God (= the eyes of the LORD) will testify as needed against the wicked, but will also testify to the faithful living of the righteous.
7. **Thus, for the churches who realized that the eyes of the LORD constantly watched them, it was appropriate that the apostle John would wish them favor and harmony from those watchers, the seven**

**spirits of God, who would in the coming Day support them before the great white throne.**

## *Tentative Inferences*

In addition to the preceding conclusions, we can loosely hold to the following inferences:

1. The seven spirits of God are those who inscribe the books of deeds mentioned in Rev 20.12, and the ones who open them and testify from them in the judgment.
2. A full exegesis of the relevant visions of Zechariah would have unnecessarily encumbered the flow of this study's argument, but the visions of the horsemen in Zec 1, of the lampstand with seven lamps in Zec 4, and of the four chariots in Zec 6, unquestionably provide background for John's statements about the seven spirits of God in the Revelation. Since Zechariah identified the four chariots (or their drivers) of Zec 6 as "the four spirits of heaven," a phrase tantamount to "the four spirits of God,"<sup>120</sup> we can infer that the spirits seen by Zechariah were four of the seven spirits of God seen by John as eyes and torches in the Revelation. That the four spirits of heaven seen by Zechariah go forth after "standing **before the Lord**" (Zec 6.5), even as the seven spirits of the Revelation burn **before the throne** (Rev 4.5), and as the eyes of the Lamb appear **in the midst of the throne** and the surrounding elders (Rev 5.6), seems to confirm this identification. Since the four horsemen of Zec 1 match in number the four chariots of Zec 6 (albeit with some horses of differing colors), and since both groups of four are sent and go about "in the land," the four horseman and four charioteers are either identical, or execute similar duties. Therefore, as we have inferred in the main body of this study that the seven eyes of the LORD in Zec 4.10 are identical to the seven spirits of God (= the eyes of the Lamb) in the Revelation, so also, we can now infer that the "four spirits of heaven" of Zec 6.5, and possibly the four horsemen of Zec 1.8-11, are identical with four of the seven eyes of the LORD and of the Lamb. This begs the question, *If so, why four charioteers and horsemen instead of seven?* A full answer to this

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<sup>120</sup> Consider the interchangeability of "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God" in the gospels.

question can only emerge from a full exegesis of the book of Zechariah, but for now let me float, as a hypothesis for further exploration, the idea that God has assigned four of the seven eyes to patrol the land of Israel and that part of the world that surrounds it (cf. Deu 11.12; Isa 11.11).

3. While we cannot prove from Scripture that every person has their own guardian angel,<sup>121</sup> we know that angels are “all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who inherit salvation” (Heb 1.13-14). Thus, an unspecified number of angels are sent out on unspecified occasions to aid the elect. It appears, therefore, that the ministry of angels in general overlaps with the task of the seven spirits of God (= the eyes of the LORD), in that they are “sent out” (Heb 1.14; Rev 5.6) to “give strong support to those whose heart is blameless” (2Ch 16.9). The difference is that while other angels render all manner of aid (Mat 4.11; Luk 22.43), the seven spirits of God (= the eyes of the LORD) render aid specifically by acting as those who watch and report (cf. Zec 1.10-11), and who will finally testify on behalf of the righteous in the judgment.

## *Practical Applications*

### Recommit To Rules Of Hermeneutics

Hopefully this examination of the Revelation’s “seven spirits of God” will encourage the reader in his commitment to the rules of hermeneutics too often ignored in current Bible teaching and preaching. Let us turn the spotlight on a handful of those rules. In order to demonstrate that the phrase *the seven spirits of God* does not refer to the one Holy Spirit, I have applied the following hermeneutical rules<sup>122</sup>:

1. **The Rule Of One Spirit (Eph 4.4).** This *theological* rule of hermeneutics hardly needs mention among Evangelical believers, but it informs the interpreter from the outset that whatever “the seven spirits of God” means, it does not mean that we worship a God of nine persons rather than three. In the case of the Revelation, it helps us see that John consistently speaks of the Holy

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<sup>121</sup> The idea is inferred incorrectly from Psa 34.7, and more plausibly but not conclusively from Mat 18.10. The suspicion of the believers that Peter’s angel had appeared (Act 12.15) admits of a variety of interpretations.

<sup>122</sup> For additional discussion of these rules, see Roderick Graciano, *Polishing*, 2020.

Spirit using the singular number (Rev 2.7, etc.), in accordance with biblical orthodoxy, and we should not expect him to speak of a sevenfold Spirit in an unprecedented manner.

2. **The Rule Of Literary Genres.** We must not interpret epistolary salutations (= one genre) as if they were didactic, doctrinal, or evangelistic passages (= a different genre). Likewise, we should not interpret a passing reference in a prophetic vision (= one genre) as if it were a doctrinal (e.g. a *pneumatological*) passage (= a different genre). Nor should we interpret Paul's passing reference to spiritual gifts in the practical application part of Romans as if it were a doctrinal, pneumatological passage teaching some sort of seven-fold Spirit (Rom 12.6-8). To force a preconceived kind of content upon a genre of biblical literature unreceptive to that type of content cannot help but produce exegetical errors.
3. **The Rule Of Context.** The internal context of Rev 3.1 tells us that Christ "has" the seven spirits of God in the same manner that He "has" the angels (= messengers) of the seven churches, informing us that the seven spirits of God cannot signify the Holy Spirit. The hermeneutical rule of context applies beyond the contents of a single verse, of course, and includes the principle of interpreting according to the consistent usage and syntax of a given author. In the case of John, we find that he consistently used cardinal numbers to express a literal number rather than an abstraction. Therefore, literary (authorial) context demands that the seven spirits of God are literally seven in number. In the study of Scripture, the Rule Of Context ultimately eddies out to include the entire literary content of the Bible. When the more distant context of Isa 11.1-4 came into view, we applied the Rule Of Literary Genres again, in this case, recognizing the genre of Hebrew poetry, and discovering in accordance with that genre that the poetry of that passage does not at all speak of a seven-fold Spirit. If we consider the context of the Bible as a whole, we realize that it includes positive and negative teachings that assure us that one does not write letters to spirits. This helped us recognize that the angels of the seven churches of Asia were human messengers. Finally, the cultural and historical context of the Bible, helped us realize that though Scripture presents God as a Trinity,

the time and culture of the apostles precluded formal Trinitarian formulations in epistolary salutations or anywhere else in the NT. Furthermore, the cultural and historical context of Scripture, which makes use of non-canonical writings of the biblical era, helped us gain insight into the Jewish worldview of antiquity, and thereby hone in to the possible meanings of the biblical items, symbols and expressions covered in this study.

4. **The Rule Of Apocalyptic Symbols.** One part of this rule states that “we must not reinterpret interpretations.” Since the seven spirits of God in Rev 5.6 are not a symbol, but the interpretation of “the seven lamps of fire burning before the throne,” we must not interpret the seven spirits of God as another symbol or abstraction. They are, as stated, the seven spirits of God.
5. **The Rule Of Documenting Distinctions.** This rule teaches us to *not* distinguish similar entities in Scripture unless we can demonstrate why they are distinct from one another. The corollary is that we *should* distinguish between biblical entities that are similar but demonstrably distinct. Applying this rule helped us not confuse the seven spirits of God with other groups of seven angels in the Revelation.

## Take Courage In Awareness Of Our Spiritual Auxiliaries

Though we may not have a personal guardian angel watching over us at all times, the Lord Jesus Himself, presently in the person of His Holy Spirit, will never leave us nor forsake us (Deu 31.6,8; Mat 28.20; Joh 14.18; Heb 13.5).<sup>123</sup> In addition, the biblical passages about angels make it clear that they will be sent to us when needed to support us according to God’s purposes. Now we can say also that the seven spirits of God range to and fro to report on our doings to the LORD, supporting our efforts for God’s kingdom in the present, and keeping a record by which to testify on our behalf when we stand before the throne of judgment. Whether with reference to God’s innate omniscience, or to His external agents, “the eyes of the LORD upon the good ones are compassionate” (Psa 154.16).<sup>124</sup> That Jesus, His Holy Spirit, His angels, and the seven spirits of God under His authority (Rev 3.1) all work in concert to

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<sup>123</sup> Note that the author of Hebrews takes the corporate promises of Deu 31 and applies them in the singular for the believer.

<sup>124</sup> DSS, 11Q5 18.13-14.

compassionately uphold us during our earthly warfare, should comfort us and strengthen our resolve.

## Fulfill Obligations Accepted Before Invisible Witnesses

When Paul charged Timothy to maintain his pastoral principles, he charged him “in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of chosen angels” (1Ti 5.21). Our study of the seven spirits of God has helped us realize that when it comes to covenants, obligations and responsibilities, made or accepted, that have to do with the work of God and His calling upon our lives, we have invisible witnesses who track our faithfulness, or lack thereof. The men who ordained us may no longer observe our daily habits or the progress of our ministry. The officiants and wedding party who heard us say our vows, may not check up on the health of our marital relationship. Even our closest ministry associates may not have the ability to accurately gauge our motives and attitudes, and our subtle acts of compromise. However, the eyes of the LORD miss none of these things. Let us serve Him in a renewed awareness of His constant watchfulness, not for our condemnation (Rom 8.1), but for our aid (2Ch 16.9).

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