

“Unto the Angel of the Church Write”

Mike Willis

So opens each of the seven letters to the churches of Asia in the book of Revelation. Men have wrestled with the meaning of the phrase which is somewhat enigmatic. Swete opts for the understanding of “angel” in its normal sense (*The Apocalypse of St. John* 22), Summers states that it means “the elder, the leading pastor, of the church” (*Worthy Is The Lamb* 108), Caird describes the angels of the seven churches as “no doubt also the seven planets, pictured as a necklace of glittering jewels hanging from the hand of the Son of Man” (*The Revelation of St. John* 25), Hailey believes “the stars may well represent the inward life or spirit of the congregations addressed by Jesus” (*Commentary on Revelation* 116), Dusterdieck says the angel “appears as the living unity of the one organism of the church, which, as it were, in mass clings to the Lord” (*Meyer’s Commentary on the New Testament* 119), “angels representing the communities” (TDNT I:87), and the list could be extended.

A few months ago, I was reading the following interesting observation by John Lightfoot about the organization of the synagogue. I will reproduce his original languages:

Besides these there was ‘the public minister of the synagogue,’ who prayed publicly, and took care about the reading of the law, and sometimes preached, if there were not some other to discharge this office. This person was called שליח ציבור, *the angel of the church*, and חזן הכנסת, the Chazan or *bishop of the congregation*. The Aruch gives the reason of the name: “The Chazan (saith he) is שליח ציבור, *the angel of the church* (or the public minister), and the Targum renders the word רואה by the word חררה one that oversees; צריך לראות *for it is incumbent on him to oversee* how the reader reads, and whom he may call out to read in the law.” The public minister of the synagogue himself read not the law publicly; but, every sabbath, he called out seven of the synagogue (on other days, fewer) whom he judged fit to read. He stood by him that read, with great care observing that he read nothing either falsely or improperly; and calling him back and correcting him if he had failed in anything. And hence he was called חזן, that is επισκοπος, or *overseer*. Certainly the signification of the word *bishop*, and *angel of the church*, had been determined with less noise, if recourse had been made to the proper fountains, and men had not vainly disputed about the signification of words, taken I know not whence. The service and worship of the Temple being abolished, as being ceremonial, God transplanted the worship and public adoration of God used in the synagogues, which was moral, into the Christian church; to wit, the public ministry, public prayers, reading God’s word, and preaching, &c. Hence the names of the ministers of the Gospel were the very same, *the angel of the church* and *the bishop*; which belonged to the ministers in the synagogues (*Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica* II: 90-91).

There are obviously some things about these comments that are contrary to revealed truth about the organization of the church (similar comments appear in others who compare the officers in the synagogue with those in the church) and, to this aspect of Lightfoot’s comments, one can find response in Meyer’s *Commentary* 119) and Swete (22). Both authors take exception to the idea that the organization of the church had developed to the point that one had a bishop over the elders in such an early date as the book of Revelation was written and in this respect they are correct. The Bible identifies the *pastors*, *elders*, *overseers*, *bishops*, and *presbytery* as one and the same men. However, the idea that the church has a שליח ציבור, *the angel of the church* deserves more investigation.

The word שליח is derived from the verb שלח, “to send” (Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1018). The word שליח appears frequently in the Mishna in the sense of “one’s agent” (see *Terumoth* 4:4; *Bikkurim* 1:5; *Kethuboth* 4:5; *Kiddushin* 2:1; *Makkoth* 2:2), “delegate” (*Yoma* 2:5), and “messenger” (*Gittin* 2:1, note 5; 3:5, note 1; 3:6, note 3; 4:1; 6:1, note 1; 6:2, note 1; 6:3, note 4 defines him as a “deputy, agent”; 5:1, note 1;). The phrase שליח ציבור also appears in the Mishna. In *Berachoth* 5:5 the phrase is translated “the Reader for a congregation” (cf. Blackman’s note on *Rosh Hashanah* 4:7; *Taanith* 1:2).

In W. Bacher’s excellent article on “synagogue” in *Dictionary of the Bible* (James Hastings, editor), he explained the role of the שליח ציבור:

The leader in prayer who as the representative of the congregation recited aloud the prayers in the synagogue, was called שליח ציבור “delegate of the whole” (ציבור is the name of the collective body assembled in the synagogue, in opposition to the individual, יחיד). This leading in prayer was a voluntary function discharged by members of the congregation who were qualified for it and invited to undertake it.

In the article on “synagogue” in McClintock and Strong’s *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature*, the following description of the role of the שליח ציבור is presented:

3. *The Legate of the Congregation, or the Leader of Divine Worship* (שליח ציבור = ἀγγελος ἐκκλησιας, αποστολος). — To give unity and harmony to the worship, as well as to enable the congregation to take part in the responses, it was absolutely necessary to have one who should lead the worship. Hence, as soon as the legal number required for public worship had assembled (מניין), the ruler of the synagogue (פרנס = ποιμην), or, in his absence, the elders (זקניו = πρεσβυτεροι), delegated one of the congregation to go up before the ark to conduct divine service. The function of the apostle of the ecclesia (שליח ציבור) was not permanently vested in any single individual ordained for this purpose, but was alternately conferred upon any lay member who was supposed to possess the qualifications necessary for offering up prayer in the name of the congregation. This is evident from the reiterated declarations both in the Mishna and the Talmud (X:75).

When I read these comments I thought of the custom in Canadian congregations of having a “chairman” over the services. He has no role similar to an elder. His only responsibility is to conduct the service in an orderly way. He will make announcements, call on men for prayer, designate who is to serve in the public worship, and dismiss the assembly. The early churches may have called such a man שליח ציבור, variously translated “reader for the Congregation” or “messenger of the congregation” (ἀγγελος ἐκκλησιας). This appears to be the man so designated as the “angel” of the church in the letters to the seven churches of Asia. If this material is correct, this would simplify what has been considered an enigmatic reference in the book of Revelation.