

The Lamp stand in the New Testament

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Over the centuries after the lampstand, or *menorah*,¹ first lit up the Holy Place of the tabernacle, its form, function, and symbolic meaning were transformed for both practical and religious reasons.² But like the rest of the earthly tabernacle and its furnishings and rituals, the lampstand was rendered obsolete by Jesus' incarnation [his person] and crucifixion and resurrection [his work]. The single reference of the Old Testament lampstand in a literal sense in the New Testament signifies its diminishing importance in Christianity; however, figurative references to lampstands and their light reflect an ongoing interest, especially in Judaism.³

As Jesus replaced the temple and became God's dwelling (in Hebrew *schaken*) among people as in the Tabernacle of old,⁴ He declared himself "the light of the world" (John 8:12).⁵ In contrast to the tabernacle lampstand, however, Jesus' light is not tucked away behind curtains but shines boldly in the darkness with glowing love and holiness.⁶ This emphasis on publicly shining is reflected in Matthew 5:14–16, where Jesus compares His followers to lamps set on a stand—His lights before the world. In both passages, the salvation of those in darkness is in mind, a salvation that is now finished in one sense but finalized in the New Jerusalem when "the Lamb is its light" and "the nations will walk by its light" (Revelation 21:23,24). This New Jerusalem is the eternal temple of God—He will live forever among his people.

The Book of Revelation makes figurative references to lampstands in three passages. In the passage most directly connected with the tabernacle lampstand, the seven spirits of God appear in the throne-room—the heavenly tabernacle/temple—as seven blazing lamps (4:5).⁷ These seven lamps are like those that were placed on the seven branches of the lampstand and are associated here with omniscient divinity. In 1:12–20, seven lampstands are said to represent the seven congregations of John's vision (verse 20). Jesus' walking among these lampstands and His threat against one of the churches to "remove your lampstand from its place" (2:5) indicates that lampstands are still associated with the divine presence.

This association between the lampstand and God's presence is reinforced in the third Revelation passage, where two end-time witnesses are described by a double metaphor—olive trees and lampstands (Revelation 11:4).⁸ This is an adaptation of the apocalyptic vision in Zechariah 4. There, two leaders during the construction of the Second Temple are seen as olive trees standing next to the temple lampstand and "two gold pipes that pour out golden oil" (verses 2,3,12–14). The leaders have an endless, bountiful supply of the Spirit to produce fuel for the lamps, as is confirmed by the declaration: "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit" (verse 6).

Light, presence, and oil are all associated in some way or another with the lampstand in both testaments. With the coming of Jesus, there was no longer any need for a physical lampstand, for divine light had flooded into a spiritually dark world. We are now living lampstands, filled with the oil of the Spirit and burning brightly with God's glorious presence.

¹ The Hebrew word can be used for all types of lights, including candlesticks. See Willem A. Van Gemeren, Gen. Ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), vol. 2:977-78.

² Cf. *Ibid.* When Solomon built his temple, he placed ten lampstands in the Holy Place (1 Kings 7:49), indicating a more practical emphasis regarding the lampstand as a light source. These lampstands may have been more like the form described in Zechariah 4—a stand supporting a bowl with multiple spouts for wicks. Like the original tabernacle, the post-exilic temple and Herod's temple seem to have held only one lampstand. According to its depiction on the arch of Titus (which celebrates the destruction of the temple in AD 70), the lampstand in Herod's temple was like that described in Exodus. Both of these facts seem to indicate a return to tradition that paralleled an increased appreciation of the lampstand's more symbolic significance.

³ The lampstand is listed in Hebrews 9:1–10 among the furnishings of the earthly tabernacle, which stood only “until the time of the new order” when the “way into the Most Holy Place” opened up. But note in reference to Judaism: “The most popular motif in ancient Jewish art, the menorah (candelabrum) appears on coins, ceramic lamps, and decorating tombs and synagogues. It is considered the symbol par excellence of Judaism.” (Jacob Neusner, Ed. in Chief, *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999) 422-24.)

⁴ This replacement is made most clearly in John 2:18–20, just after Jesus cleared the temple: “Then the Jews demanded of him, ‘What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.’ The Jews replied, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?’ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said.”

⁵ The events of John 8 took place during the Feast of Tabernacles. Along with the carrying of palm and other branches, the singing of psalms, and with other events and ceremonies, the feast was celebrated. Large light posts in the Court of Women were wrapped with priest's undergarments, soaked in oil, and set ablaze. For a Jewish description of this feast and especially that of the lights see *Sukkah* 5:2-4. There was much expectation of the coming of the messiah during this feast. At one point, one would cry out, “*Ani waho!* Save us, we pray!” [4:5][Cf. *The Mishnah*, trans. Herbert Danby (Oxford University Press, 1933) 178; note 13 provides an explanation.] [See the Greek of John 8:58; even throughout John on the occurrence of “I Am . . .”; cf. the Septuagint and Hebrew of Isaiah 43:25) referring to the coming of God to liberate them from sin and their oppressors. This cry would resonate with the crying out of “I am He” by Jesus. “I am” and occurrences of predicates with it characterize Jesus in John's Gospel. He was God's true Light of salvation having come into the world to redeem it.

An associated feast was the eight-day Feast of Dedication (John 10:22)—known today by its Hebrew name, *Hanukkah*—which celebrated the rededication of the Second Temple during the intertestamental period. Noting that the persecution of Antiochus IV Epiphanes had forced them to wander in the wilderness during the Feast of Tabernacles, the Jews marked the Feast of Dedication with similar displays of branches and the singing of psalms, thus establishing a connection between the two feasts (2 Maccabees 10). A legend attached to the Feast of Dedication tells of a small cruse of oil that miraculously lasted long enough for the temple lampstand to burn all eight days, causing the feast to also be called “Lights” and the “Festival of Illumination.” (See “Dedication, Feast of,” *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985] 216.)

⁶ References to light in the New Testament are never explicitly, and only rarely implicitly, connected to the tabernacle/temple lampstand. More often, they are generalized conceptualizations of light versus darkness: see Matthew 4:16; 6:22,23; Luke 11:33–36; John 1:1–9; 3:19–21; 9:4,5; 12:35,36,46; Acts 26:12–23; Romans 13:12; 1 Corinthians 4:5; 2 Corinthians 4:4–6; 6:14; 11:4; Ephesians 5:8–14; 1 Thessalonians 5:5; 1 Peter 2:9; 2 Peter 1:19; 1 John 1:5–7; 2:8–11. While light is naturally associated with the lampstand, care should be taken to not place too much typological significance on the concept.

⁷ The seven spirits are equated with the seven eyes of the Lamb in Revelation 5:6. This imagery is borrowed from Zechariah 4, where the seven lights of the lampstand are compared to “the eyes of the Lord, which range throughout the earth” (verse 10). Whether the seven spirits are associated with seven lamps or seven eyes, they represent divine omniscience and are always presented in close proximity to the heavenly throne (see Revelation 1:4).

⁸ Interpretations about these two witnesses are many. For a discussion of the various views, see Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995) 86–99.