

Revelation Ch. 7: The 144,000

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Before the war begins, there is an interlude. The time for repentance is up (cf. 2 Pet. 3:9), and all Jews who would obey the gospel at this time had already done so. It was time to put the seal on this remnant (cf. Rom. 11:5), and then wipe out Jerusalem.

Verses 1-3

After these things I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, on the sea, or on any tree. Then I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God. And he cried with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and sea saying, “Do not harm the earth, the sea, or the trees till we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.

The symbolic number for the creation, or the earth, was four, and so it makes sense that these angels would be standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds. Since the next verse states that it was granted to these angels to harm the earth and sea, these winds were that of a destructive storm (cf. 1:7; Ezek. 7:1-4; 13:11-16; Jer. 49:36; 51:1-2). We later see the angels released to kill a third of the earth (9:14, 15), and so it logically follows that these are the same as the four horsemen just discussed (Ch. 6). The east often symbolized a source of destruction, usually depicted as the east wind (cf. Jer. 18:17; Hab. 1:9).

The judgment on Jerusalem was stored up for nearly a generation (forty years, cf. Heb. 3:9, 10; Matt. 24:34), during which these angels of destruction would have to wait until the servants of God were sealed (cf. 6:11).

The seal represents protection or approval. The forehead is the most visible place on a person, and symbolizes that everyone would know that they had been protected (cf. Ezek. 9:1-6). It also could indicate that the seal is really on our minds, that only those who are truly convicted of the truth are approved by God (cf. Matt. 22:37; 2 Tim. 2:19; Eph. 1:13; 4:30; Deut. 6:6-8).

Verse 4

And I heard the number of those who were sealed. One hundred and forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel were sealed.

The 144,000 is not a literal number, but a symbol of completeness. Since the tribes of the children of Israel are specified, a logical conclusion is that they represent Jewish Christians, since it was the end of the Jewish nation that is the theme of this book. There were no more Jews in that generation that would obey the gospel prior to the destruction of Jerusalem, and so their number was complete. Christians in Jerusalem, likely all Jews, were told to flee Jerusalem (Matt. 24:16; Lk. 21:18, 21). Eusebius records that this is exactly what happened (see 7:14).

These are described later as the firstfruits to God and to the Lamb (14:4), a reference to that first generation of Christians, which harmonizes with the idea that these are Jewish Christians (cf. Rom. 1:16; Jas. 1:18), but also could mean both Jew and Gentile Christians (Rom. 16:5; cf. Gal. 3:28; 6:15-17). Whether Jews only or both Jews and Gentiles, it is this generation that stands out as being sealed because they had to deal with the wicked people about to be punished (Matt. 12:39; 23:36;

24:34; Acts 2:40; Phi. 2:15).

Some view these as the saved who died before the death of Jesus who would never be called Christians, contrasting them with the great multitude. While this view recognizes the distinction between these two groups and fits the visions later in the book (Ch. 14), it does not appear to give a reason for restraining the winds while the 144,000 are sealed, which seems to be a clear reference to protection. It is unclear why dead saints would need protection.

Others hold that these 144,000 represent all the faithful servants of God for all time, and are identical to the great multitude (7:9). This is doubtful, however, because these are identified as having come out of the great tribulation, which took place in the first century (7:14; Matt. 24:21). Also, this idea seems problematic due to the obvious distinction made between the two groups (children of Israel vs. all nations, tribes, peoples), though it is likely that the great multitude included the 144,000.

Conversely, it could be that while John *heard* the *symbolic* number of those who were sealed, when he saw them in *actuality* they were truly innumerable, and makes the connection that God's true Israel encompasses many peoples (Gal. 3:28; 6:15-17). If this is the case then these still do not represent all Christians for all time, but all those up to this point in time (when the book was written). This also ties in with the idea that these were that first generation of Christians, Jew and Gentile.

Still other religious groups hold that this is a literal number, and is indicative of the actual number of souls that will be in heaven, while the rest will reside on a renovated earth. Taken to this literal extreme, it would mean that only Jewish male virgins can enter heaven (14:4), which would exclude Peter (Lk. 4:38; Jn. 14:3), not to mention the fact that the great, innumerable multitude is said to be standing before the throne (7:9), which, in a literal interpretation, would have to mean that they had died and went to heaven (cf. Matt. 5:34). A literal interpretation produces too many problems, and goes against the main thrust of the book. The Bible teaches that all Christians have the hope of heaven (Lk. 6:23; 1 Pet. 1:3, 4).

Whatever the exact meaning of this symbol, we certainly know that it represents faithful servants of God that would be protected from the coming storm (cf. 1:7; 7:1-3).

Verses 5-8

of the tribes of Judah, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin, twelve thousand were sealed.

The 12,000 from each tribe here is not literal, as mentioned previously. It is worthy of note that Joseph was not a tribe per se, nor was Levi numbered with the traditional twelve (cf. Num. 1:5-15; 1:49; Deut. 18:1; Ezek. 48).

It is also interesting to note the choice of including Joseph and Levi, and excluding Ephraim and Dan. This may be a reference to the false worship locations setup in Dan and Bethel introduced by Jeroboam when the kingdom was originally divided (1 Kings 12:26-29), emphasizing the fact that only the true servants were sealed.

The ordering of the names is also unusual (not by birth), perhaps further emphasis that this is symbolic. It should remind us of a census (cf. Num. 1), and that God has His people numbered (cf. Matt. 10:30; 2 Tim. 2:19).

Verses 9-10

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

This great multitude consisted of all peoples, and so, regardless of what exactly the 144,000 symbolize, this represents all Christians who would overcome (3:5, 18; 6:11; 19:8), and make it out of the great tribulation (7:14).

Following from the interpretation that these and the 144,000 are distinct, the number is innumerable because it is not fixed, and not complete, whereas no one else from this generation (whether Jews or Gentiles) would be converted. However, the next generation is taking root, and Christianity continues to spread beyond this dark period in time. As previously mentioned, if they are not one and the same, the great multitude includes the 144,000, since the reason for sealing the servants is to protect them (7:1-3), and we see this multitude is protected (cf. 7:14; Lk. 21:36). The palm branches signified praise to the King and rejoicing (cf. Jn. 12:13; Lev. 23:40).

They are figuratively standing before the throne (cf. Heb. 4:16), symbolizing their relationship with God; a picture of triumph (3:21).

Verses 11-12

All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God saying: “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen.”

See Ch. 4-5. Perhaps “thanksgiving” is substituted for “riches” (5:12) to make a contrast between looking forward to riches and being thankful when receiving them. Seven words likely symbolize a complete expression of praise.

Verse 13

Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, “Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?”

Instead of asking John if he knew who these were, one of the elders starts the dialog by asking John what he had probably been thinking (notice that the elder “answered”).

Verse 14

And I said to him, “Sir, you know.” So he said to me, “These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

John had wanted to ask this himself, and it was obvious that the elder knew the answer. These Christians were to come out of the great tribulation (Matt. 24:21; cf. Lk. 21:36). They listened to Jesus and fled Jerusalem (Matt. 24:16; Mk. 13:14; Lk. 21:21), and were therefore spared, not only physically, but also spiritually. They had not let these troubled times cause them to lose faith.

Eusebius records that, at this time, Christians fled to a town in the mountains called Pella, and that Jerusalem seemed “as if holy men had entirely abandoned the royal city itself and the whole land of Judea” (Ecclesiastical History 3.5.3).

Verse 15

Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them.

Since these survive the great tribulation, the temple symbolizes the church (see 3:12), in which its members are able to draw near to the throne of grace (Heb. 4:16). God dwells in our hearts (Eph. 3:17), an abiding presence in our daily lives (Acts 3:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Rev. 21:3).

Verses 16-17

They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters.

This is a symbolic reference to the protection and providence of God, and is nearly a direct quote from Isaiah (cf. Isa. 49:10; Matt. 5:6; Jn. 6:35; Phi. 4:19; Rev. 2:17; 22:1).

And God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes”

This is a symbolic reference to the comfort God provides His people, and also a foreshadow of heaven (cf. Isa. 25:8; 65:19; Rom. 8:28; 2 Cor. 1:4-7; 2 Thes. 2:16, 17; Rev. 21:4).

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