

The One Hundred Forty-Four Thousand

Revelation 7: 4-8

The End Times

In my last post, we began our journey in **Revelation 7** as the **God's Servants** were **Sealed**. In this post, we discover who those **Servants** are.

"⁴ I heard how many were sealed - 144,000 from every tribe of the people of Isra'el: ⁵ From the tribe of Y'hudah:12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Re'uven:12,000, from the tribe of Gad:12,000, ⁶ from the tribe of Asher: 12,000, from the tribe of Naftali:12,000, from the tribe of M'nasheh:12,000, ⁷ from the tribe of Shim'on:12,000, from the tribe of Levi:12,000, from the tribe of Yissakhar:12,000, ⁸ from the tribe of Z'vulun:12,000, from the tribe of Yosef:12,000, from the tribe of Binyamin:12,000." ~ Revelation 7:4-8 (CJB)

The terrible judgment previously described in 6:15-17 would seem to be so severe that no one could survive. Yet there is mercy even amid judgment. After the immense turmoil, there is a sudden stillness in which the winds of destruction are held back. The angels are commanded to hold back the four winds of the earth (they will blow again when the seven trumpets sound in chapters 8 and 9) until the 144,000 of God's servants from all the tribes of Israel are sealed on the forehead with God's seal (the sign of God's ownership). It is no surprise that later this seal is imitated by the Antichrist in 13:17-18, when people receive the **666** seal, the **mark of the beast**.

144,000. Whether this number is to be taken literally or figuratively, the obvious question is: why exactly this number? The answer is usually along these lines: there are twelve tribes of Israel and twelve emissaries; there are Ten Commandments; squaring the former and cubing the latter bespeaks perfection, the perfection and fullness of Israel. Yechiel Lichtenstein offers an intriguing explanation:

"Israel numbered 7,200,000 at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple. The t'rumah [the offering to cohanim from the firstfruits] is normally one fiftieth (Mishna, T'ruamot 4:3), which here comes to 144,000. At Romans 11:16 Paul remarked that 'if the challah offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole loaf.' Thus, the meaning is that if the firstfruits of Israel, the 144,000 Messianic Jews who put their trust in Yeshua, is holy, then the whole loaf, all of Israel, is holy. Therefore, Paul continues, 'In this way all Israel will be saved. As the Tanakh says, "Out of Zion will come the Redeemer; he will turn away ungodliness from Jacob" (Romans 11:26).' This is in accordance with my comment on Revelation 1:7, which says that when the sign of the son of man is seen in heaven, the children of Israel will repent, recognize the Messiah, and mourn because they pierced him unjustly. That is when all Israel will be saved. Yet the condition for this is the prior salvation of 144,000." (Commentary to the New Testament, on Rev. 7:9) ¹

Although there is no way of knowing exactly how many Jews there were in 70 CE, scholars agree that the number was between five and ten million. The number of Messianic Jews then, as now, was surely in six figures, but it would be sheer speculation to fix it at 144,000.

About these 144,000 M. R. DeHaan writes: ²

Many are the human interpretations of the 144,000. There are first of all those who make themselves Israel. They say that God will deal no more with literal Israel and they maintain that the church now is spiritual Israel. Consequently, they claim for themselves the Abrahamic covenant and declare that Jerusalem is the church and that all the prophecies to the land of Palestine must be spiritually interpreted as applying to the church. This spiritualizing of Scripture, I repeat is one of the most

¹ Jewish New Testament Commentary by David Stern.

² A Layman's Commentary on Revelation by Don Jones.

serious evils which has beset the church. Begin with this rule in your interpretation of Scripture: God means what He says, and although we find types, symbols and figures of speech in the Bible, as we do in every other book, it is written that simple folk like you and me may understand it if we read and believe it as it is written and do not twist the meaning to fit our personal preconceived ideas.
(Emphasis added.)

From every tribe of the people of Israel. The *p'shat* (plain sense) of this phrase is "from among the entire Jewish people." But many commentators say it refers to the Church. In Romans 2:28-29, Stern's suggest that even where the *p'shat* of a text refers to Jews, there may be a midrashic application to the entire Body of the Messiah. Moreover, at Galatians 6:16 and Ephesians 2:11-13, **Israel** is used in a way that does include saved Gentiles, new creations formerly distant but now brought near and grafted in (Romans 11:17-24). However, the case that the **144,000 from every tribe of the people of Israel** means "**the Church**" is harder to make here; because v. 9 (which we will look at in our next post) speaks of **a huge crowd, too large for anyone to count, from every nation, tribe, people and language.** Apparently, this innumerable crowd of saved Gentiles is to be contrasted with the delimited number of saved Jews in the present verse. Furthermore, to emphasize the fact that these 144,000 are Jews, vv. 5-8 lists the twelve tribes; this would have no immediate relevance to the Church. ³

The Jehovah's Witnesses used to claim that their adherents constituted the 144,000. When their membership came to exceed this number, they simply revised their theology! Such a blatant appeal to pride at being among the supposed spiritual elite is a favorite tactic of cults.

No matter who the 144,000 are, there is a problem with these verses, in that the listing of the twelve tribes is very strange: (1) **Dan** is missing, (2) **Efrayim** is missing but included in **Yosef**, who was Efrayim's father, (3) **M'nasheh** is counted twice, since **Yosef** was also his father, (4) **Y'hudah**, not **Re'uven**, is mentioned first, and (5) **L'vi** is included, even though this tribe is sometimes not counted, since it was not assigned a portion in the Land. **Efrayim** and **M'nasheh** were the two sons of **Yosef**, and their descendants were at first counted as half-tribes; but over time they became elevated to the status of tribes because **Yosef**, after saving his family from starvation, was treated like the firstborn and given a double portion (Genesis 48:22).

Some say **Dan** is excluded because he sinned by worshipping idols (Judges 18:30, 2 Kings 10:29); as proof, they quote 1 Chronicles 2-7, where the tribe of **Dan** is not mentioned. But this is not a valid proof, because **Z'vulun** is not mentioned there either; and the reason in both cases is that the author, Ezra, wrote in his book only what he found in the scrolls available to him. Therefore, the subjects there often follow one another without logical connection - there are missing links.

If it is meant literally that 12,000 from each tribe are to be selected, it can be objected that no one will know who belongs to which tribe, since genealogies no longer exist. One answer: God, who will be doing the choosing, will know.

Special Comparative Note on Chapter 7: 4-8 ⁴

Historicist Approach:

Historicists take the view that the 144,000 are symbolic of the visible professing church in the Roman empire. The sealing is protection against the barbarian horde. (Personally, I reject this view as I find it anti-Semitic and fosters replacement theology on its face.)

³ Jewish New Testament Commentary by David Stern.

⁴ Material in this section is taken from "Revelation: Four Views, Revised & Updated" by Steve Gregg

Preterist Approach:

Preterists take a more acceptable approach in recognizing the 144,000 as Messianic Jews – the faithful remnant of the first century. Just prior to the siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE, the Messianic Jews were warned by a prophetic oracle to flee from the city as confirmed by historian Eusebius in 325 CE.

Futurist Approach:

Futurists believe that the 144,000 are the Jewish Believers who are sealed for protection from the later plagues to be revealed in the Bowl Judgments during the **Great Tribulation**. The omission of the tribe of **Dan** from the list may be an indicator that the Anti-Messiah will be from that tribe. Alternatively, it may be that **Dan** and **Efrayim** are omitted because of their historical involvement in idolatry. Hal Lindsey has referred to the company as "*144,00 Jewish Billy Grahams*." That view is reflected in Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* series. Ray Stedman speaks of them as "*Christ's Commandos*."

Idealist Approach:

Idealists believe that the 144,000 represents the church as the true and spiritual Israel. (Again, I reject this view as I find it anti-Semitic and fosters replacement theology on its face.)

In my next post, we will continue to explore **Revelation 7**.