

The Significance of the Symbolism

The symbolism of the 144,000 is significant, representing unity, perfection and the completion of God's church.¹ Revelation 6:11 indicates that before God's martyrs can be avenged and enter into the heavenly city, "the brethren that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled" or "complete." (This can infer their number or the character being "fulfilled" or made up.)

The book of Hebrews indicates that the faithful of past ages are waiting for this "promise" of entering the "city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10). "And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us that they *without us* should not be made perfect" (Hebrews 11:39, 40). They are waiting for the completion or perfection of the number of God's people, namely "us." Despite all the faithful victories and the good reports of the faithful of old, they are not complete or made perfect "without us." This is a type of corporate oneness revealed by God's people in rare times of spirituality and exemplified by Christ's prayer for us (see Daniel 9:5-11; Ezra 9:3-15; John 17:20-23).

This same oneness is described in Revelation 7:4-8 with the final sealing of God's people. When this sealing is finished, the number of the redeemed is complete, "the mystery of God should be finished" (Revelation 10:7). All who will make up the new Jerusalem city, all who have and would ever accept the gift of salvation have done so and the four winds can be let loose.

Thus, 144,000 becomes *the* number of those who are the "sealed." It is a number which symbolizes the completion or perfection of the redeemed of all generations. When the 144,000 are "sealed out of every tribe of the sons of Israel" (Revelation 7:4), the four winds can be let loose. All who have placed their faith in Christ as Savior have God's mark in their foreheads.

¹"The number 144,000 (12 x 12 x 1,000) is based upon the kingdom number 12. The number suggests perfect symmetry and completeness as well as the vastness of the multitude of the sealed. Twelve is the number of ancient Israel, based upon the twelve tribes. It is also the number of the church, built upon the 12 apostles. The New Jerusalem, structured to represent both Old and New Testament Israel, has 12 gates with the names of the 12 patriarchs, and 12 foundations containing the names of the 12 apostles (Rev 21:12-14; Eph 2:20-21). The dimensions of the city are in multiples of 12 (21:16-17).

"The great square city is designed to accommodate the 'hollow square' of saints who will enter its gates by the names of their respective tribes, 12,000 through each gate. This suggests that all who enter the gates of pearl will be assigned to a tribe, perhaps on the basis of character (see Gen 49 for a preliminary description of their traits). The blending of the tribes and the apostles in the structure of the city suggest the unity of God's church, Jews and Gentiles united into the one (Eph 2:14, 18-22). The number 144,000 should thus be understood as a symbol of the unity, perfection, and completion of God's church—complete because the number has been made up (Rev 6:11)" (*Symposium on Revelation*, book 1, p. 262).

The Great Multitude

Consider some closing thoughts of encouragement as John looks upon the great multitude of the redeemed and points out some important characteristics about them:

- 1) First, he says that "no man could number" them (see Revelation 7:9). This gives hope to all. Though the road to heaven is "narrow," there will be countless millions saved at last (see Matthew 7:13, 14).
- 2) John also says that the redeemed come from "all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues" (Revelation 7:9). Here it is shown that "God is no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34, 35). Every race of people, nation, kindred or tongue is granted a place in His kingdom.
- 3) Then John sees that the redeemed are "clothed with white robes" (Revelation 7:9). This indicates that they have received the free gift of the cleansing "blood of the Lamb" (Revelation 7:14; see also Isaiah 1:18). They do not depend on salvation by their works, but they cry, "Salvation to our God...and unto the Lamb" (Revelation 7:10).
- 4) Though they have "come out of great tribulation," they will not hunger or thirst anymore (see Revelation 7:14, 16). Neither shall they know sorrow anymore, for "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes" (Revelation 7:17). This is a tremendous hope for us now. Someday soon life is going to be different. Hurt, pain and sorrow; sickness, mourning and heartache were never in God's plan for us. And soon, very soon, all things will be new. This is the closing message of Revelation 7.



Unlocking Revelation

The 144,000 and the Great Multitude

Who Shall be Able to Stand?

Revelation 7 can be seen as an interlude, an interruption of sorts, to the Seven Seals. In this chapter John is answering the question put forth in the last verse of chapter six, "who shall be able to stand?" (Revelation 6:17). This being the case, the interpretation of Revelation 7 is bound up in the context of the sixth seal.

The Second Coming of Christ

The sixth seal describes the second coming of Christ. As He approaches the earth there is tremendous commotion in sky, land and sea. Stars fall and entire mountains and islands are moved out of place (see Revelation 6:13, 14; Matthew 24:29, 30; Mark 13:24-26).

So awesome and terrifying is the sight that "the great men,...and the mighty men" call for the "mountains and rocks" to fall on them rather than face God, who sits on the "throne," and the "Lamb," who is on His "right side" (Revelation 6:15, 16; Matthew 24:30; Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62). As "every eye" sees Christ coming, the lost who have survived "the seven last plagues," and who have just "blasphemed the name of God," now long to "hide" from "the wrath of the Lamb" (Revelation 1:7; 15:1; 16:9; 6:15, 16).

The Servants of God

In this context the question is asked, "who shall be able to stand?" (Revelation 6:17). The question is answered twice in chapter 7, first by the angel with the words, "the servants of our God" (Revelation 7:3), and then when John says, "I beheld, and lo, a great multitude" who "stood before the throne" and "before the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9).

Notice that the question is:

"Who shall be able to **stand**"
before "the **throne**"
and before "the **Lamb**?" (Revelation 6:16, 17).

And it is answered twice:

- 1) "the servants of God," "an hundred and forty and four thousand" (Revelation 7:3, 4).
- 2) "a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations and kindreds, and people, and tongues, **stood**"
"before the **throne**"
"and before the **Lamb**" (Revelation 7:9).

Two Groups of Redeemed

John's vision is consistent with the rest of the Bible which pictures two groups of people who shall be able to stand before "Him that sitteth on the throne," and the "Lamb" at the second coming:

- (1) Those whose hope is in Christ and are "alive" when He comes, and
- (2) those who "sleep in Jesus" and are resurrected at His second coming (see 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; see also 1 Corinthians 15:12-23, 51, 52).

The Seal of the Living God

The central focus of this chapter is the seal of God which is placed upon the "foreheads" of the servants of God (see Revelation 7:2, 3). What is this seal of God? The Bible gives four meanings to the sealing which all seem to apply to this chapter.¹

- 1) In the book of Revelation the seal of God in the forehead is the same as the name of God in the forehead (compare Revelation 7:2-8; 14:1; 22:4). This word *name* in both the Old Testament and the New Testament means "character." It describes

¹ Much of the insight in this section is owed to the writer in *Symposium on Revelation*, book 1, pp. 254-256.

those who have developed, through the Spirit of God, the attributes of His character; they have the mind of Christ (see 2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 4:30; Philippians 2:5).

2) A *seal* is the same as a “mark” or “sign” and infers ownership and dedication. Abraham was to circumcise his house as a “sign” or “seal” that he belonged to God (see Romans 4:11; Genesis 17:9-12). The high priest was to bear the engraving, “Holiness to the Lord” on his “forehead” as a sign of his dedication to God (see Exodus 28:36-38).

3) The Bible also speaks of the concept of a seal or mark as offering protection (see Revelation 9:4; Genesis 4:15; Ezekiel 9:1-11). In Revelation God’s people are “sealed” to protect them against the seven last plagues or four winds that “hurt” the earth (see Revelation 7:1-3; 16:2). At the same time, they are not protected from the persecution of the beast (see Revelation 13:15-17; 20:4). Likewise, the “mark” of the beast gives protection to its worshipers from the beast’s persecution. Yet they are not protected from the plagues of God (see Revelation 15:1; 16:1-11).

4) Another aspect of sealing that gives insight to this chapter is that of genuineness. Documents are “sealed” up to protect them from change or alteration. Thus God’s servants are sealed as a guarantee that they will remain righteous and loyal to God (see Revelation 3:12; 22:11).

5) And finally the sealing of God’s people denotes their obedience to Him as faithful “servants” (Revelation 7:3; Romans 6:16). They are to be sealed by the Holy Spirit which is “given to them that obey Him” (Acts 5:32; see also Ephesians 4:30; Revelation 14:12).

The 144,000—Literal or Symbolic?

One question concerning this chapter which might be more challenging is: Are the 144,000 literal or symbolic? Here are a few thoughts to consider:

1) Usually what John hears is the same as what he then sees; i.e., John “heard” a “great voice” like a “trumpet” and then “saw” the “Son of man” (Revelation 1:10-13). John “heard the number” of “horsemen” and then “saw the horses in the vision” (Revelation 9:16, 17). It is significant to note that John first “heard” the number of them that were sealed, and then he “beheld” a “great multitude which no man could number” (Revelation 7:4, 9).

2) In Revelation 14:1-5 the 144,000 are shown again. This time it is on “mount Zion” with the “Lamb,” a scene future to the second coming (see Hebrews 12:22, 23).

Here the description of the 144,000 seems to be a picture of all the redeemed. Notice their characteristics:

- a) They have the Father’s *name* written in their foreheads (Revelation 22:4).
- b) They were *redeemed* from earth (Isaiah 43:1; 1 Peter 1:18, 19).
- c) They are *virgins* (2 Corinthians 11:2-4).
- d) They *follow* the Lamb (1 Thessalonians 1:6).
- e) They are *firstfruits* (Jeremiah 2:3; James 1:17, 18).
- f) They have no guile in their mouths (1 Peter 3:10).
- g) They stand without fault before God (Jude 24).

3) Another important insight to consider is that the sealed are from the “tribes of the children of Israel” (Revelation 7:4). Since the Old Testament church was designated as the twelve “tribes of Israel” (Genesis 49:28; Acts 26:7), and since the New Testament church is likewise described as “the twelve tribes scattered abroad” and “the Israel of God” (James 1:1; Galatians 3:29; 6:15, 16; see also Matthew 21:43; Romans 2:28-29; 1 Peter 2:9, 10), this would therefore allow the 144,000, which are from the twelve tribes of Israel, to symbolize all the saved, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament.

4) Again consider that the sealing of “the servants of our God” (Revelation 7:3) includes all who have died with “faith” in Christ as well as those who are alive at His coming (see Romans 4:11; Hebrews 11:13; Ephesians 1:10-14; 4:30). This is an important point. Every person who stands before the throne in heaven will have the seal of God’s “name” in their foreheads (see Revelation 22:4.) This seal of God is equivalent to having our names written *and retained* in the “Lamb’s book of life” (see Psalm 69:28; Philippians 4:3; Luke 10:20; Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15). Therefore, the sealing includes all of the redeemed, not just an end-time group.

5) The “great multitude” is said to have come out of “great tribulation” (Revelation 7:14). God’s faithful servants in all generations, including the last generation, will have gone through “great tribulation” (Matthew 24:21, 29; Acts 14:22; see also Deuteronomy 4:30, 31; John 16:33; Revelation 2:10; Daniel 12:1).

6) The 144,000 are called the “*servants* of our God.” The “great multitude” is pictured as those who “*serve* Him day and night in His temple” (Revelation 7:9, 15). In a scene future to the second coming when “all” the “servants” of God are called to praise Him, John hears “the voice of a great multitude” which are called the Lamb’s “wife” and are beckoned to the “marriage supper” (Revelation 19:5-9). There is no mention of the 144,000.

Based on these thoughts, it can be seen that the number 144,000 is used symbolically to represent “the Israel of God,” the “redeemed” (Galatians 6:16; Revelation 5:9).

This brings yet another question to mind—why then are the 144,000 a precise number?

The Symbolism of the 144,000

It is important to recognize that the 144,000 is an exact number, which, if it were literal, would pose some problems.

1) Contrary to His character, God would have to cut off any person over 144,000 from being sealed, written in the book of life and eternally saved (see 2 Peter 3:9). Not only so but He would be limited to sealing only 12,000 people from each tribe.

2) Biblically the numbering of people only included males (see Luke 9:14; Matthew 14:21). Even taken literally, Revelation 7:4-8 would still have to be symbolic of sorts in that it is not inclusive of women and children.

3) If literal, the twelve tribes listed in Revelation 7 would be the same as the original twelve tribes, but they are not (see Genesis 49). Manasseh, a son of Joseph, is added to the list (see Genesis 48:13). And the tribe of Dan is missing (see Revelation 7:4-8).

4) Also the Revelation 7 listing of the twelve tribes is different from the listing in Ezekiel 48. Since both lists are understood to be eschatological or end-time prophetic pictures, if the twelve tribes are literal, these lists should be the same.

5) When John is shown the “bride,” the “Lamb’s wife,” he sees the “great city, the holy Jerusalem” (Revelation 21:9, 10). This city, the “Lamb’s wife,” symbolizes God’s faithful both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. And as such, it helps us to see the 144,000 as this same symbolic representation of the “bride” of Christ, the “Israel” of God, the redeemed of all ages.

Thus, while we know that this city is a literal city, it also symbolizes God’s people. It is called the “bride of Christ,” and so are God’s people in both the Old Testament and the New Testament (see Revelation 19:7, 8; Ephesians 5:23-32; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Jeremiah 3:14). In a symbolic sense the Jerusalem city is described in the same way as God’s literal Old Testament and spiritual New Testament “Israel.”

That is:

- a) It is “foursquare” (Exodus 28:16, 21).
- b) It is “set” with precious stones (Exodus 28:17-21).
- c) It has four sides all of “equal” “length...breadth... and...height,” and they measure “twelve thousand furlongs” (Revelation 21:16). Four x three = 12, and 12 x 12,000 = 144,000 (see Revelation 7:4).
- d) The “wall” is “an hundred and forty and four” cubits (Revelation 21:17; 7:4).
- e) The “wall” has “twelve gates” with the names of the “twelve tribes of the children of Israel” (Revelation 21:12; 7:4; Genesis 49).
- f) It also has “twelve foundations” with the “names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb,” the New Testament “twelve tribes” (Revelation 21:14; James 1:1).

6) Consider also that there are numerous instances in the New Testament like Romans 9 where the apostle Paul clearly describes the “seed of Abraham” as including the “Gentiles” (Romans 9:7, 24). In this instance Paul quotes an Old Testament prophecy which intermingles the terminology of Revelation 7:4 and the 144,000 with Revelation 7:9 and the great multitude.

“Yet *the number of the children of Israel* shall be as the sand of the sea, which *cannot be measured nor numbered*; and it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God” (Hosea 1:10).

Notice:

- a) This prophecy includes Jews and Gentiles (see Romans 9:1-27).
- b) It speaks of the “number of the children of Israel” (Revelation 7:4).
- c) It describes a people which “cannot be measured nor numbered” (Revelation 7:9).

Considering all of the previous information, we can see that the 144,000 are not literal Jews, who are literal “virgins” (Revelation 14:4). They are a symbolic number representing all of the redeemed, the Lamb’s “wife,” New Jerusalem Jews and Gentiles, the “Israel of God” (Revelation 19:7; Galatians 6:16).