

144,000

True Israel and the Worship of Jesus

Revelation 7:1 When After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree.

² Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea,

³ saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads."

⁴ And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:

⁵ 12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed, 12,000 from the tribe of Reuben, 12,000 from the tribe of Gad,

⁶ 12,000 from the tribe of Asher, 12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali, 12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh,

⁷ 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon, 12,000 from the tribe of Levi, 12,000 from the tribe of Issachar,

⁸ 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun, 12,000 from the tribe of Joseph, 12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,

¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

¹¹ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,

¹² saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?"

¹⁴ I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

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 shelter them with his presence.

¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

(Revelation 7:1-17)

Two Keys to Revelation

The Literary Key: Cycles and Chiasms

In the same way that **Jesus holds two keys** in this book—the keys of Death and Hades (**Rev 1:18**), so there are **two vital keys to Revelation** which the modern interpreter must

use properly. The first is *a literary key*. This key unlocks the “room” of literary *genre*. You identify it by understanding that this is a different kind of book from others in the Bible. If you opened up Dr. Seuss’ *Green Eggs and Ham* (currently *not* on the “cancelled” list of his unwoke titles) and interpreted it as a cookbook, you would be in as much trouble as many people get into by opening up Revelation and interpreting it as a non-symbolic chronological unfolding of all future history.

We have spent much time looking *the overall structure* and *independent literary units* within Revelation. We have noticed that the book is one giant chiasm of repeating ideas centering on ch. 12, that is has parallel and inverted chiasms with the Gospel of *John* that teach us to view Jesus’ earthly ministry from both an earthly and heavenly perspective, and that it is a kind of antitype of *Joshua*, showing the churches the holy war that they are about to engage in. We have also seen how most of the chapters have repeating themes in them which themselves repeat in a series of *seven parallel cycles*. So whatever genre(s) the book is, it is clear that it is not a linear map to be divided into exacting timelines and prophetic date-setting.

The Theological Key: Israel

The *second key is theological*. This deals with what's behind the room labelled "Israel." We have not spent much time on this one. But beginning in Revelation 7, this will become more and more important to a proper understanding of the book. Let's think about this term "Israel" and how the Bible uses it.

The word first appears when **Jacob wrestles with the Angel of the LORD (Gen 32:28)**. The LORD changes Jacob's name to Israel. This man Israel is the father of twelve sons: (in order of their birth) **Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin**. These twelve sons become the fathers of an uncountable number of people whom we call the **twelve tribes of Israel**. So far, this is all perfectly biological.

It is just here that we must remember something else about Jacob. A couple chapters earlier, before his name was changed, Jacob had a **dream**. In that dream he saw the Angel standing above a ladder or ziggurat. There, the LORD spoke to Jacob and told him, **"I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your**

offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south [four corners], and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (Gen 28:13-14).

What is Christ doing here? He is **reconfirming the covenant** that he gave first to Abram and then to Isaac. To **Abram** he said, “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen 17:4). He then changed Abram’s name to **Abraham** to prove it. “No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations” (5). This name Abraham bears in its essence the idea that this man, and therefore Jacob, will not only be the father of one nation, but many. For whatever reason, many people either seem to forget this or to make too little of it.

So how does this promise of a father of many nations work itself out in the Bible? It is **tempting** think of it *biologically*. For example, Abraham has a son named Ishmael and **Ishmael** becomes the father of a host of nations (Gen 25:13-16). Curiously, the Bible names **twelve sons** which become “**princes according to their tribes**” (16). But this is basically the last we hear of Ishmael and his descendants.

After Sarah died, Abraham remarried and had at least six other sons (**Gen 25:2**). But most people don't even know that. No. Abraham as the father of many nations would come some other way.

That way would be through a **promise** centered upon a **miraculous birth**, a type of the Messiah to come. “Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him ... Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year” (**Gen 17:19, 21**). The reason Isaac was a miraculous birth was because **Sarah's womb was dead**. She was ninety years old (**Gen 17:17**). Even back then, ninety-year-old women were decades past the age of bearing children. The Apostle puts it this way, “In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations” (**Rom 4:18**). So he was **justified by faith**. Then, at the right time, the promise came true, the boy was born, and God says, “Through Isaac shall your offspring shall be named” (**Gen 21:12**).

It is the miraculous nature of Isaac's birth that shows us the way forward to understanding **the meaning of “Israel.”** The apostle unfolds this for us in Romans 9 when he makes the stunning statement, “**Not all who are descended from**

Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring” (Rom 9:6-7). *What do you mean, they aren't all Israel, of course they are!* Many Christians refuse to hear these verses, and not just because of predestination. But Paul isn't making this up. The Lord Jesus himself told the Pharisees, whom he had just recognized as in one sense “offspring of Abraham” (John 8:37), that they were “of your father the devil” (44). He said, “If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did” (39). Instead, they sought to kill their promised Messiah.¹

What Jesus and Paul are both doing is distinguishing between a **biological** or natural Israel vs. a **mystical** or supernatural Israel. Neither denies that Jews like wicked Pharisees were Israel in a biological sense. That is self-evident. In fact, Paul begins Romans 9 with great anguish in his heart for these his fellow brothers of his own race. But, just as Isaac is the child *of the promise*, so also his **true descendants** must be children *of the promise*.

It is not enough to be a child of Abraham biologically. That doesn't get anyone eternal life. Ask the Pharisee Nicodemus. To explain this, Paul begins to talk about the

¹ **Gage** does not make too many connections between the parallels in John and Revelation in chs. 8 (in fact none) and 9. But it isn't stretching it to say that this section of John could be parallel to the 144,000 in Revelation 7.

doctrine of election. Ask Ishmael. Being a true child of Abraham means that you are a “child of God” (Rom 9:8; John 8:42), born again from above (John 3:3). Paul explains that Isaac was born solely of the miraculous promise (Rom 9:8-9). Jacob came to the promise solely at the good choice of God’s purpose in election, not of works but of him who calls (11-12). He didn’t deserve this; Esau was older. We saw all this back with the doctrine of the “firstborn” back in Revelation 5, where the firstborn isn’t necessarily the oldest as men reckon it. He is the child of the promise.²

It is into this biblical theology of Israel that Gentiles are grafted into the vine of Israel, even as many of the natural branches are cut off as worthless and dead (Rom 11:17). With a tree, you can do that such that the branch from another tree literally becomes part of the new, while the dead branch becomes as though it had never been part of the tree at all. For this reason, the NT, getting it from the Old (in such places as Hosea and Isaiah) calls the church the following striking names: the “circumcision” (Php 3:3), a “royal priesthood and holy nation” (1Pe 2:9), “Jerusalem from above” (Gal 4:26), a “chosen people” (Col 3:12),

² We saw the relationship of “firstborn” and “firstfruits” in the sermon on Revelation 5:9-10. Later in Revelation, the 144,000 that we will talk about today are called the “firstfruits” (Rev 14:3-4).

“God’s temple” (1Co 3:16), “true Jews” (Rom 2:28-29), “sons of Abraham” (Gal 3:7), and even “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16). Why? Because being an Israelite means that you are born of the Spirit rather than the flesh (Rom 9:8; Gal 4:27-29).

If you can identify this teaching, then you will have the second key to unlocking the meaning of Revelation. Though this will unfold in many different ways in this book, we will begin to really see it at work in ch. 7’s listing of 144,000 “sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel.” We are going to explore this now as we come to this fascinating chapter.

Revelation 7: Structure and Context

In the overall structure of the book’s seven cycles, Revelation 7 is the last chapter of the second cycle—the seven seals. It feels like a kind of interlude. Almost all commentators take it that way. Chapter 6 ended with the opening of the sixth seal (Rev 6:12-17). In my understanding, this sixth seal (depending on the date of the book) dealt with the destruction of the temple, also church history whenever God deals heavily with wicked nations, and lastly to the end of days prior to the Second Coming. Its

language is profoundly apocalyptic but serves as merely one perspective, a perspective that will get worse as the book moves along, for events prior to Christ's Return. Since the seventh seal is not opened until **8:1**, chapter 7 feels like an interlude.³

But I question if it is an interlude. There is much language that this chapter has **in common with chapter 6** and it is important to identify it here. **First**, we can notice that there is a direct relationship with the way the two chapters unfold. Sometimes it is in **parallel** “sevens” of “numbers” and other times there is an **inverse** relationship with one chapter being full of horror on earth while the other parallels it in great **peace in heaven**. This is a hint that perhaps the two chapters are telling the story from two different perspectives. One of the really interesting things to me about this is that it could mean that this second cycle has **not one but two “end of the world” endings**—one horrific and the other beatific. That great day will not be a terror to everyone!

³ Beale is a good example. “Although John experienced this vision subsequent to that of ch. 6, what it depicts comes before what ch. 6 depicts chronologically. The section stands as a kind of parenthesis explaining how God will keep believers safe during the tribulations of the church age. As a result, the believers will not be harmed spiritually when they go through the trials unleashed by the four seals of 6:1–8.” **G. K. Beale** and David H. Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 143.

Revelation 6	Revelation 7
Four seals: Four horsemen of the apocalypse and a loud voice calling (1-8)	Four angels standing at the four corners of the earth and a loud voice calling (1-3)
The “number” of brothers (on earth) should be complete (11)	144,000 (on earth) sealed from every tribe (4-8)
Multitude under the heavenly altar lamenting with white robes (9-10)	Multitude in white in heaven singing with white robes (9-12)
Sixth seal of horrible tribulation (12-14)	Coming out of the great tribulation (13-14)
THE END: Kings of the earth in turmoil (15-17)	THE END: Saints in heaven at peace (15-17)

A specific part of this parallel I want to call attention to is found in [the fifth seal](#) of chapter 6. Unlike the other seals which were full of doom and gloom, this one took us to heaven where John saw the souls of the martyrs who had been slain under the altar. They were crying out, “[How long?](#)” In answer, they were each “[given a white robe](#)” and then told to rest “[until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been](#)” ([Rev 6:11](#)). This gave us [two](#)

groups of Christians: those in heaven and those still on earth. Those in white robes are the ones in heaven.

Revelation 7 sees two groups of people as well, and like ch. 6, one group is in heaven and one is on earth. Those in heaven are uncountable, “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev 7:9). The scope is same language we heard come out of the mouths of the four living creatures and twenty-four elders when they praised Christ because he had ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev 5:9). In other words, it’s the same group of people. These are Christians. I’ll also point out that in this same place, they were called “a kingdom and priests” (10), which we will return to later.

Rather than under the altar, this multitude is “standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev 7:9). This is how we know that they are in heaven. But next it says that they are “clothed in white robes.” Therefore, this multitude at the very least consists of the same Christian martyrs as we saw in ch. 6. Now, it doesn’t necessarily mean it is only the martyrs, because Jesus promised the Christians at Sardis that if they conquered, they would be clothed in white garments

too (3:5). But it is important not to miss the connection with ch. 6's white garments.

The second group is **on earth**. We know this because vv. 1-3 all have the earth as their stated focus. "... **four corners of the earth**,"⁴ and "**four winds of the earth**" and "**earth or sea or against any tree**," and so on. Those on the earth are identified as having been sealed by God as his servants (3). And they are, like the previous chapter, numbered. This time the number is specific: **144,000** from every tribe of the sons of Israel (4). Here is where our difficulty is found. **Who are these people?** Are they Jews? Are they Christians? How could that possibly be? I'm simply mentioning here the relationship between the two groups in heaven and earth between the two chapters here so that you can be thinking about how there is clearly a literary relationship going on, a relationship that I believe helps us determine their identity.

The last thing to see about this chapter **is how it unfolds**. We can outline the chapter with two points and their subheadings:

⁴ **Gentry** understands "earth" throughout this chapter to be more than the land of Israel. Only this first use he thinks is questionable. The "four corners of the earth" is stock language in our day for the whole earth. Isaiah 11:12 is clearly more than just the Promised Land. However, **Ezekiel 7:2** clearly uses it of only the Promised Land. These are the only occurrences of the phrase in the OT. I don't think the "four corners" language of the altar in the tabernacle/temple can help us, even though it clearly symbolizes the same thing. This is because the tabernacle both symbolizes the earth-Eden sanctuary and the Israel-Jerusalem sanctuary.

- I. 144,000: God's People on Earth (**Church militant**). **Rev 7:1-8**
 - A. The Angels (**7:1-3**)
 - B. The Church Militant (**7:4-8**)

- II. Great Host: God's People in Heaven (**Church triumphant**), **Rev 7:9-17**.
 - A. The Host (**vs. 9**)
 - B. Their Worship (**vs. 10-12**)
 - C. Their Identity (**vs. 13-14**)
 - D. Their Task (**vs. 15a**). They serve God day and night in his temple.
 - E. Their Blessed State: Eternity (**vs. 15b-17**)

This outline gets ahead of ourselves a bit, since we haven't demonstrated who the 144,000 are. Nevertheless, for the sake of making the point early, we can think of this as the **church militant** (on earth) and **triumphant** (in heaven). Recall our parallels with Joshua. This makes good sense of that book of war. Given the parallels with chapter 6, we can then go back and read that passage with similar eyes.

Finally, the chiasm of the chapter has **heaven as the center**, just as the **fifth seal in heaven** was the center of ch. 6. Furthermore, whereas it was **the cry, 'How long'** that was the center previously, this time it is **the worship of the heavenly host** who bow down before the Lamb and worship God.

- A. Bondservants of God sealed/standing “before the throne” and “before the Lamb. (7:3-9a)
- B. Clothed in white robes, with palm branches in hand. (9b)
- C. Worship: “Salvation belongs to our God (10a)
- D. who sits on the throne (10b)
- E. and to the Lamb. (10c)
- D¹. And all the angels were standing around the throne (11)
- C¹. Worship: “Amen! Blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, power, might be to our God forever and ever. Amen” (12)
- B¹. Clothed in white robes came out of the great tribulation/robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb. (13-14)
- A¹. Before the throne of God, serve him day and night / Lamb shelters and shepherds them. (15-17)⁵

144,000: The Church Militant

The chapter begins, “When after this...” That is, after the sixth seal had been opened. To be honest, we do not know if this is still part of the that sixth seal or something new, but scholars almost always opt for the latter. Suddenly, John’s vision shifts. Or does it? Again, we can’t be sure. “I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth” (Rev 7:1a). Hopefully it goes without saying that this is not a scientific statement that the earth is a flat square. “Four” is a figurative number which appears three times in this verse.

⁵ Modified from Christine Miller, “Revelation 7,” *A Little Perspective* (Dec 8, 2016), <https://www.alittleperspective.com/revelation-7-2016/> and “Revelation 7:9-15,” *Biblical Chiasm Exchange* (Jan 23, 2019), <https://www.chiasmusexchange.com/2019/01/23/revelation-79-15/>.

It is also a noticeable parallel to the way ch. 6 opened with the four horsemen. And in Zechariah's horsemen parallel, you also have four winds (**Zech 6:5**), which adds to the connection.

The horsemen were riding throughout the earth to cause devastation. Those horsemen were obviously supernatural beings—riders on horses. Here, it is angels standing at the four corners of the earth, but there are no horses. Yet, the idea seems similar save one thing. The similarity is their work of devastation. They hold the “**four winds of the earth**” which are set against **earth**, **sea**, and **tree**⁶ (**1b**). They are “**given power to harm earth and sea**” (**2b**). But they are “**holding back**” their disaster.

Also, like ch. 6, a heavenly being calls out to them with a loud voice (**2a**). But this time it is the opposite, “**Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees**” (**3a**). He comes from **the rising of the sun**, meaning **the east**. Since he is ascending above them, he is in heaven. It is a picture of an angel from the heavenly temple with its “door” in the east coming with the message.

⁶ There is a focus at the end of the chapter on food, drink, and scorching heat (see the “four winds” here). In this way, the idea of saving the earth, sea, and trees could be that these are needed for our livelihood. Hence, common grace.

Do not harm “until” (3b). There is to be a delay in judgment. Men think this means God doesn’t exist. “Everything goes on as it always has,” they say. But the very reason they are allowed to say this is because this delay is God’s common grace in action allowing them to survive in his creation though they blaspheme him.

But isn’t that their work won’t happen at all. It is until something else happens first. This common grace has at its root very special, saving grace. “Until we have sealed the servants of God on their foreheads” (3b). This has an OT parallel in Ezekiel 9. Just after the Glory-Spirit of God left the Most Holy Place and rested on the threshold of the temple (on his way out of Israel altogether), The LORD said to him, “Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sign and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it” (Ezek 9:4). Given that it is the Angel of the LORD speaking here, it is a safe bet that he is the Angel calling to the four to hold off in Revelation.

A few verses later in Ezekiel, they are called “the remnant of Israel” (8). The Angel commanded (six) others to begin the work of killing the Israelites for their sins (through the Babylonian), but Ezekiel interceded and begged God not

to kill those who live by faith (8). This is **the remnant**. These are the true Israel (Note: this is not a comment on temporal death and martyrdom in Revelation).

This is the purpose of saying they are “sealed.” Poythress rightly explains that this sealing **represents divine protection** when the calamities are unleashed. The last chapter ended with the question, “**Who can stand?**” Now we have the answer! Those sealed by God can. Again, not that they may not die or even be martyred, but that God now owns them and will protect them to eternal life.⁷

So what is the seal? I would propose three things. First, it is **the Word of God**. **Deuteronomy 6:8** commands Israel to take the Law and bind it as a sign on your hand and as frontlets between your eyes, that is **on your forehead**. This law is the word of God. But of course, the Scripture and the Second Person who is the Word must never be separated. This is why Jesus told the Pharisees, you think that in the Scripture you have life, but these testify about me (**John 5:39**). He is the Word.

Second, it is **the Holy Spirit**. Ephesians teaches us, “**In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel**

⁷ Vern Poythress, *Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 118.

of your salvation, and believed in him, *were sealed* with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it” (Eph 1:13-14).

Again, *eternal life*, even if in this life we should suffer or die.

Third, Jesus promised the church at Philadelphia that he would “write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name” (Rev 3:12). His name is separate from the name of his God, and in Rev 14:1 we learn that the name of his God is *God the Father*. “With him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads.” In other words, they are sealed by *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* to be his people. It is *a spiritual seal* that goes from the mind (forehead) to the heart and soul of a person. It cannot be put there by a man and it cannot be taken away by one. I want you to remember this when we come to *the mark of the beast* and the 666 which is also written on people like this seal is. It will help you understand what it means. His seal is a counterfeit, and it cannot guarantee this protection.

We can now understand our difficulty. “And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000” (Rev 7:4a). This number parallels Ezekiel’s remnant. It is a minor part of a whole.

Like the remnant, which is identified as a tenth ([Isa 6:13](#); [Amos 5:3](#); [Rev 11:13](#) KJV; etc.), 144,000 is a nothing near the whole of either Israel or mankind. Nevertheless, it is a big and significant number which teaches us something.

To see what that is, we need to read the rest of the verse. “144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel.” This would seem to make it Jews who are somehow saved.⁸ Yet, we’ve just been talking about Christians. So what’s going on?

[Vv. 4-8](#) give us a very common OT feature: a [genealogy](#) of the twelve tribes. It lists 12,000 from twelve tribes. This right here shows you the [symbolism](#). It is not a literal number. $12,000 \times 12 = 144,000$. Another way to write it is $12 \times 12 \times 1000 = 144,000$.⁹ Either way, the number is symbolic. The thousand is the easy part. 1,000 which is a

⁸ [Jehovah’s Witnesses](#) take this number and say only 144,000 JW’s go to heaven. These are the “Anointed Class.” All remaining JW’s are God’s “other sheep,” and will live forever on a paradise earth. Only members of the Anointed Class are “born again.” [Dispensationalists](#) teach that there will be 144,000 Israelites who during the period of the Tribulation will not bow the knee to Antichrist. Larkin says, “[This sealing is not the Sealing of the Holy Spirit, by whom the Believer is sealed, but it is a ‘sealing’ at the hand of Angels. Christ refers to it in Matt 24:31.](#)” Preterists like Andrew of Caesarea see them as 144,000 Jews that converted to Christianity in the days of the temple desolation. The JW material is from [Ron Rhodes](#), *Jehovah’s Witnesses: What You Need to Know, a Quick Reference Guide*. [Larkin](#) is *Revelation*, 64. [Andrew](#), *Greek Commentaries*, 34.

⁹ In [Revelation 21:16-17](#), the New Jerusalem coming out of heaven is 12,000 stadia cubed with walls 144 cubits. The same numbers come into play.

great quantity in the Bible (see [Rev 5:11; 9:16; 20:1-7; 21:16](#)).

What about the two sets of twelve? They are listed as [four rows of threes](#), which parallels the camp of Israel in the wilderness on four sides of the tabernacle—three tribes on each side. This helps us see the temporary nature of the plight, the wilderness experience of the 144,000 is not the eternal Promised Land. But the camp itself reflects the heavenly twelve signs of the zodiac and we've seen them before.

But the actual names of the list point to different symbolism. There is another twelve in the NT. The twelve apostles. These represent the church.¹⁰ How might we see this? This is the [only time in the entire Bible](#) that we have [this list](#) of these twelve tribes. That means something is being conveyed through the list. The names are in order here, Judah, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin. There are several things to note.

First, this is [not the same order as their birth](#). Nor do they correspond to the ordering around [the camp](#) as we have

¹⁰ I've noted before that the four Gospel writers were often depicted and described as the lion, ox, man, and eagle by the Church Fathers, thus emulating the heavenly zodiac like the Four Living Creatures do.

seen the Four Living Creatures do. Sometimes Levi is left off. Not here. One of them, Manasseh, **isn't even a son of Jacob**, but a grandson. Manasseh's brother Ephraim **doesn't make it**, though he often does. And one of Jacob's sons, **Dan**, **isn't even in the list**. So what's going on?

Order of Birth of Jacob's Sons		Order as Listed in Revelation 7
Leah	Reuben	Judah
Leah	Simeon	Reuben
Leah	Levi	Gad
Leah	Judah	Asher
Bilhah	Dan	Naphtali
Bilhah	Naphtali	Manasseh
Zilpah	Gad	Simeon
Zilpah	Asher	Levi
Leah	Issachar	Issachar
Leah	Zebulun	Zebulun
Rachel	Joseph	Joseph
Rachel	Benjamin	Benjamin

First, **Judah** the fourth born is **raised to the first spot**. This clearly symbolizes **election**, for it is through Judah that Messiah would be born, not Reuben. Reuben is next, and he was the firstborn of Leah. **Dan**, who should be on the list

isn't, probably because he became associated with **great idolatry** (**Judg 17; Rev 22:15; 21:8**), built pagan altars at the foot of Mt. Hermon, and became associated with **Antichrist**.¹¹ Manasseh replaces him, but his brother Ephraim doesn't make the list. **Being brothers does not guarantee you a place** in the 144,000. Finally, Gad, Asher, and Naphtali are all sons of **concubines** and they are put before most of Leah and Rachel's children. Johnson puts the significance well, **"They are promoted from the end of the line to positions three through six, above six of the sons of the wives, Leah and Rachel. The elevation of these descendants of women who were outsiders to the covenant family signifies in inclusion of the Gentiles among 'the bond-servants of our God' (Rev 7:3)."**¹² Here, notice that these concubines are servants of Leah and Rachel. This is what the 144,000 are called, but of God (*doulos*) and it is the same word used to describe the church of Thyatira (**2:20**; cf. **14:4**).

The **conclusion** is obvious. The people sealed in these verses **are the church** which is made up of the elect (Judah),

¹¹ **Irenaeus, Hippolytus**, and **Andreas** identify Dan with Antichrist. See note in Johnson, 132, n. 28.

¹² **Dennis E. Johnson**, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 132.

first the Jew (Reuben), but not of the flesh (Dan and Ephraim). Those born of rivalry and bondservants (Gad, Asher, Naphtali). And Gentiles (Manasseh, born of the Egyptian Asaneth). All of this is of him who calls. God writes his name on them (ala **Rev 3:12**). This is the new covenant people of God. These people are sealed for salvation and preservation from the wrath of God. Hence, it is appropriate to call them the church on earth or **the church militant**. This militance is not with guns and swords and bombs and rockets and armies. It is with the power of the Gospel to conquer sinners and usher them into the kingdom of Christ. And this is why they end up so often as martyrs. They are fighting a spiritual war.

The Innumerable Host: The Church Triumphant

Being ushered into this kingdom has its **counterpart in heaven**, for it is the kingdom *of heaven* after all. This is the second half of the chapter. “**After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number**” (**Rev 7:9a**). Compare this with the number 144,000 previously. Compare it also with the uncounted number of saints under the altar slain for the word of God in the previous chapter.

Who are they? “From every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (9b). These are obviously Christians.

This is made clearer in the next couple of statements. They are clothed in white robes (9c). This connects them to the martyrs under the altar in chapter 6. They have palm branches in their hands (9d). This connects them to the triumphal entry of Jesus when the throngs were celebrating the coming of their King Messiah.

This triumphal entry imagery is perfect for the movement we see in this part of the chapter: leaving earth and entering heaven. Let’s skip ahead and move past the center of the chapter to see where they have come from, for this is a question that an elder in heaven wants to John know (13). One said to him said to him, “who are these?” John said, “Sir, you know.” He replied, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation” (14a).

“The Great Tribulation.” This is the language made famous by Dispensationalism. It is either a 3 ½ year or 7-year period of time just prior to the millennial return of Christ (which is different from the Second Coming). They get the idea of seven years from Daniel’s unfinished “70th week” which is a seven-year period of time. But scan this chapter. You will look in vain for any references to this. In

fact, such an idea hurts their linear interpretation. How can people be coming out of the Great Tribulation here, when it is supposedly the next many chapters which tell us all about it? That doesn't mean there may not be some kind of **terrible tribulation at the end of days**. I believe there most likely will be. It just means that the chart-drawing prophecy schools can't be as specific as they think they can.

Preterists, of course, see this great tribulation as having occurred in 70 AD. Jesus literally used this word to describe that event. He said, “**They will deliver you up to *tribulation* and put you to death ... there will be *great tribulation*, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be**” (**Matt 24:9, 21**). Make no mistake, a million people were killed at this event and many Christians suffered terribly in the years leading up to it. Nevertheless, this is hyperbolic language, just like we saw in the last chapter with the universe collapsing. This is why **historicists** see these events as taking place sometime after 70 AD, probably in the early centuries of the church under the persecutions of the Caesars.

All these interpretations, again, lead me to think that probably all are onto something. As Poythress notices, “**Tribulation for Christians occurs throughout the church**”

age, so that the whole age can be characterized as one of tribulation (2 Thess 1:5-6; 2 Tim 3:1, 12). Thus, this passage provides comfort to first-century Christians as well as to those in the final crisis (see 11:2).¹³ This idea that only one future generation will suffer “the great tribulation” makes mockery of so much suffering before us.

How does it provide comfort? There are at least four ways. First, they have these white robes. This is told to us not once, not twice, but three times. Vs. 9: they are clothed in white robes. Vs. 13, “Who are these, clothed in white robes?” Obviously, this is a curious thing? But the most curious of all is how they are white. “They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (14). Of course, blood is red, and it stains deeply. So, once more, this is not to be taken literally. Rather, it is a spiritual metaphor. The blood of Christ washes away sin, it purifies the conscience, it sanctifies the one upon whom it is sprinkled. In this way, this uncountable throng have been made fit for heaven itself.

This leads to the second point. Not only have they been made fit for heaven, they have now entered it. Coming out of tribulation, not in a rapture, but in these last two

¹³ Poythress, p. 119.

chapters most likely through martyrdom has taken them to heaven's gate. "Therefore they are before the throne of God" (15a). This is the very place from which John has been granted this glorious vision.

What do they do here? Again, they do not sleep. Instead, they "serve him day and night in his temple." All of them, not just a class of Levites. This is Christians, the new kingdom and priests of God. The "him" here is the Son of God. Because the next part of the verse says that "he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence" (15). This is the Father.

This takes us to the third point. This sheltering presence of God, which is also quite reminiscent of the Holy Spirit (see Ps 51:11; 139:7; Isa 63:9-11) who shelters with the cloud (Ex 13:21; Isa 4:5-6). Curiously, the word "shelter" here is literally the word for "tabernacle." The NAS reads, "... they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne shall spread His tabernacle over them." This is a great translation and shows the sanctifying holiness of believers in heaven. This sheltering is also a protection, a covering. A covering from what? Compare vs. 16 to vs. 1-2. "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst

anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat” (16).

At the beginning of the chapter, the angels were being sent like “the four winds” to blow on earth, the sea, and the trees. These are the sources of our food, water, and shelter. But if God punishes even them, what hope does man have? Your hope is in the forgiving sheltering tabernacling kindness of God in Christ by his Spirit who protects you from God’s wrath. But more, there is a fourth point. Christ himself, like Psalm 23 so famously teaches, becomes the risen Lamb who “will be their shepherd,” guiding them “to springs of living water” and “wiping away every tear from their eyes” (17). This is an eternal work of Christ for you, not a temporary one. We are people of the new eternal creation.

Indeed, there is more than a temporary reprieve here from the disaster-filled judgment of the angels. For God’s people, this is a new creation. Quite literally. These seven things (day and night, tabernacle over them, no hunger, no scorching from sun, Lamb as shepherd, springs of water of life, wiping away every tear) are comparable to the seven days of creation:

Genesis 1

Light

Firmament

Land/sea, plants

Sun, moon, stars

Swarming things

Land animals and man

Sabbath

Blessings

Serve day and night

Lord's tabernacle spread over them

No hunger

Not harmed by sun

Lamb is shepherd

Springs of water of life

Wipe every tear¹⁴

All of this has **inverted parallels** with **John**. In John 14, He shall spread his tabernacle upon them is parallel to Jesus saying, “**in my Father's house are many dwelling places**” (**John 14:2**), as well as to him telling his disciples, “**My Father will love him, and We will come and make our abode with him**” (**23**). God shall wipe every tear from their eyes is parallel to “**Let not your heart be troubled**” (**14:1**). The Lamb shall guide them is parallel in the same passage in John

¹⁴ **Peter J. Leithart**, *Revelation*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, vol. 1, The International Theological Commentary on the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments (London; Oxford; New York; New Delhi; Sydney: Bloomsbury; Bloomsbury T&T Clark: An Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018), 343. **Going Deeper:** The light and sun are obvious. For the rest he explains, “**The tabernacle spread over the multitude is like the firmament covering spread above the earth (cf. Isa. 40:22: “He spreads out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in”). We live in a cosmic tent, the sky as our tent curtain above (Day 2). Day 3 was a day of separating water and land, but also a day on which the earth sprouted grains and fruit-bearing plants. Day 5 is often obscure. Swarming things create a cloud, which is like a garment. The priests' garments are spread over them to mark them as shepherds of the people. Water is not mentioned on Day 6, but πῆγη appears in the LXX of Gen. 2:6. In the absence of a man, a spring arose to water the face of the ground. Once man is created, we hear no more of the spring. Adam becomes the spring of living water in the garden, the one who ensures that the shrubs and plants will sprout. John 7 is in the background, with its promise of the gift of the Spirit.**”

to “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6). The Guide is the Way!

There are also **inverted chiastic parallels** with ch. 16 as well. The Lamb guiding them to springs of living water parallels Jesus sending the Spirit of truth who will guide you into all truth (16:13). Those coming out of the great tribulation parallels Jesus predicting his coming death and likening it to a woman in labor and then saying, “**When she has given birth, she no longer remembers the tribulation ... in the world you will have tribulation, but take heart, I have overcome the world**” (16:21, 33).

Finally, there are **direct parallels** with John 6 and 7. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore parallels Jesus telling them, “**He who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst**” (John 6:35). He will lead them to springs of the water of life parallels “**rivers of living water will flow from him**” (7:38). And In these ways, **Jesus’ earthly ministry becomes the grounding of our eternal comfort**. For his has already lived through the Apocalypse for us! As the parallel to no wind blowing on the earth or the sea until the servants of God are sealed shows you, “**And the sea was stirred ... a great wind was blowing ... for this one [Jesus] God the Father sealed**” (6:18, 27).

The end of our chapter is the **exact reverse picture of the horrors** of the end of ch. 6, which to me gives us the flip side of God's judgment. His judgment is coming upon mankind. However, he has a remnant, an elect, a spiritual Israel, people whom he calls to himself, people that he already knows the number of, whom he will protect from his wrath. Not from man's wrath. But from his. What can man do? Take a body. What can God do? Take that body and put it into eternal fire in hell. Which would you rather be saved from if you only had one choice?

Yes, this is **the flip side of Chapter 6** and it is given to us to **comfort** Christians at just the point that they feel the weakest, the most unable to stand and endure. God gives that grace to his saints when they need it. I believe like Stephen, that he does so by giving them a powerful glimpse of what life will be like in eternity after the short time of testing is over. I believe the greatest glimpse you can have of that is in the life of the Lord Jesus and what he overcame for you. That's what you are seeing now. The only question is, **how will you respond?**

Let's look at **the center of the chapter**, which as always is the main focus. How do these 144,000 translated now to heaven with the uncountable numbers of saints there

respond? **In worship**. Revelation is **the great book of liturgy** in the NT. Worship is the only rational answer to such things as these. This worship is their cry. **“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb”** (10). Technically speaking, **“Lamb”** is probably **the very center** of the chapter, just like we’ve seen previously.

These saints know of his mighty salvation from sin, death, and the devil. Now **they cry out in opposition to the cry of the kings** previously. Those kings cry for the rocks to fall on them to save them from the wrath of the Lamb. These saints cry out, **“Thank you for such great salvation. Oh the cost. Oh the power!”**

But it isn’t just the saints. **“All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures”** (11). This is the host of heaven. **“And they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, ‘Amen!’”** Amen what? Amen to his salvation. And for it, **“Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might”** (seven nouns) **“be to our God forever and ever! Amen”** (12).

The order of these seven is fascinating. They are directly comparable to the seven-fold praise given to God by the heavenly beings in chapter 5. In fact, they are the same seven

things with one exception: riches is exchanged with thanksgiving. However, their order is different. The difference in the order is not decipherable unless you understand that ancients “retuned” lists according to fifths on a musical scale (the fifth to C is G for example). So, for example, you have the order of seven stars (planets, moon, and sun that we talked about in chapter 1) as understood in their distance away from earth being “retuned” to the order of the days of the week.

Ancient order of planets from earth

moon
Mercury
Venus
sun
Mars
Jupiter
Saturn

Days of the Week (Planets)

Monday (moon)
Tuesday (Mars/Tyr)
Wednesday (Mercury/Wodin)
Thursday (Jupiter/Thor)
Friday (Venus/Freia)
Saturday (Saturn)
Sunday¹⁵

This is precisely what is happening with our list here.

¹⁵ Leithart, 338. He explains, “To tune a list, begin at the bottom or top, go up or down to the fifth item, which becomes the second item on the new, tuned list. Continue with the next item on the original list, and count another five (wrapping around to the bottom or top of the list when necessary), to get the third item.” So, five from the moon (down) is Mars. Five from Mars (down) is Mercury. Etc.

5:12	7:12	5:12	“Tuned” list
Power	Blessing	Power	Blessing
Riches	Glory	Riches	Wisdom
Wisdom	Wisdom	Wisdom	Glory
Might	Thanksgiving	Might	Riches
Honor	Honor	Honor	Honor
Glory	Power	Glory	Power
Blessings	Might	Blessings	Might ¹⁶

What possible purpose could this serve? Why, **the harmonization of the heavenly and earthly realms**. Peter Leithart summarizes it. **“Human voices harmonize with the angelic chorus in the heavenly liturgy. The angels sing, as it were, a single tone, the one complex blessing. When the human choir joins, they break out into a sevenfold harmonization, organized by fifths.”**¹⁷ All of creation is praising God in this eschatological choir with glorious harmonies that one can scarcely dare imagine. Therefore, let God’s people enter into such praises with the angels of heaven and sing the glories of the Lamb until he sees fit to Return or take us to finally be at home with him.

¹⁶ Ibid., 337–338.

¹⁷ Ibid., 338.

Select Bibliography

- Beale, G. K. and Campbell, David H. *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015.
- Gage, Warren. *John's Gospel: A Neglected Key to Revelation?* Fort Lauderdale, FL: Warren A. Gage, 2001.
- Gentry Kenneth L Jr. *The Divorce of Israel: A Redemptive-Historical Interpretation of Revelation*. Dallas, GE: Tolle Lege Press, forthcoming.
- Johnson, Dennis E. *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation*. Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2001.
- Larkin, Clarence. *The Book of Revelation: A Study of the Last Prophetic Book of Holy Scripture*. Philadelphia, PA: Rev. Clarence Larkin Estate, 1919.
- Leithart, Peter J. *Revelation*. The International Theological Commentary on the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments vol. 1. Ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain. London; Oxford; New York; New Delhi; Sydney: Bloomsbury; Bloomsbury T&T Clark: An Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018.
- Oecumenius and Andrew of Caesarea. *Greek Commentaries on Revelation*. Ancient Christian Texts. Ed. Thomas C. Oden and Gerald L. Bray. Trans. William C. Weinrich. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2011.
- Poythress, Vern S. *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation*. Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2000. <https://frame-poythress.org/ebooks/the-returning-king/>.
- Rhodes, Ron. *Jehovah's Witnesses: What You Need to Know, a Quick Reference Guide*. Harvest Eugene, OR: House Publishers, 1997.
- Smith, Christine. "Revelation 7," *A Little Perspective* (Dec 8, 2016), <https://www.alittleperspective.com/revelation-7-2016/>.

Communion on Earth	Communion in Heaven
14:1–2 <i>“Let not your heart be troubled ... in My Father’s house are many dwelling places”</i>	7:15, 17 <i>“He shall spread His tabernacle upon them ... and God shall wipe every tear from their eyes.”</i>
14:6 <i>“I am the way, the truth, and the life.”</i>	7:17 <i>“the Lamb ... shall guide them ...”</i>
14:23 <i>“If anyone loves Me ... My Father will love him, and We will come and make Our abode with him.”</i>	7:15 <i>“they serve Him day and night in His temple, and He who sits on the throne shall spread His tabernacle upon them.”</i>

The Grace to Persevere	The Reward of Perseverance
16:13 Jesus will send “the Spirit of truth (who) will guide you into all truth”	7:17 <i>“the Lamb ... will guide them to springs of living water”</i>
16:21, 33 <i>“when she has given birth, she no longer remembers the tribulation ... in the world you will have tribulation”</i>	7:14 <i>“These (the redeemed) are the ones who have come out of great tribulation”</i>

John-Revelation Parallel Correspondence Chart	
6:18, 27 <i>“And the sea was stirred ... a great wind was blowing ... for this one has God the Father sealed”</i>	7:1–3 <i>“so that no wind should blow on the earth or on the sea ... until we have sealed the servants of God”</i>
6:35 <i>“He who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst”</i>	7:16 <i>“they shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore”</i>
7:38 <i>“rivers of living water will flow from him”</i>	7:17 He <i>“will lead them to springs of the water of life”</i>