

# **The 144,000 and Early Christian Thought**

by  
Francis X. Gumerlock

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## **PART ONE: THE 144,000 IN BIBLICAL CONTEXT**

Good morning. In the handout there is an outline if you would like to follow along; or the complete paper starts on page 3. Part One, which will take about 45 minutes, will look at the passage biblically. Part Two, which will use the last half hour, will look at the 144,000 in early Christian exegesis.

### **Introduction**

The Passage. This morning I would like to share with the conference some gems and blessings from a passage of Scripture from John's Revelation. That passage is Rev 7:1-8. Please open your Bibles to Revelation, and we shall read from 6:12-8:1. (Read.)

The Prayer. Now at the beginning of the Book of Revelation, it says, "Blessed is the one who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy," and so I trust that you as the hearers and me as the reader will be blessed by God. Please join me in prayer: "Lord, thank you for your holy word. May the words of this book, this inerrant word, strengthen us and comfort us. May this prophecy that you gave John lift up our heads, direct our minds, and guide our hearts to trust in You as our Rock and our Refuge, an ever present help in the time of need. We pray this in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

The Problem. According to commentator Sean Kealy, "The main problem in this chapter [seven of Revelation] is to identify the 144,000."<sup>1</sup> Similarly another commentator on Revelation, Alan Johnson, expressed: "The principal exegetical difficulty in chapter 7 centers around the identification of the 144,000."<sup>2</sup> Who are these 144,000? Perhaps in your life you have heard any number of interpretations of these 144,000. Maybe a preterist interpretation, that the 144,000 were a group of Jewish Christians in the first century; maybe a futurist interpretation, that they are Jewish evangelists which will take the world by storm during the time of the Antichrist. This is probably the most popular view. Or maybe you have heard various groups, like Jehovah's Witnesses, or Moses Berg's Forever Family, or the Branch Davidians claim that they are the 144,000. So what are we to make of all of these interpretations?

The Solution. This morning I would like to share an interpretation based on context: the context of this section of the book of Revelation, the context of the book of Revelation as a whole, and the context of the whole of New Testament teaching. I would also like to share some of the views of early Christianity, and evaluate those views, weighing both their merits and their demerits.

### **The Immediate Context**

In the Book of Revelation, Chs 2 & 3 contain the letters to the seven churches; Ch 6 the opening of the seven seals. In Chs 8 & 9 we see the sounding of the seven trumpets. Just as Ch 4 & 5 was a little interlude between the seven letters and seven seals, Ch 7 is an interlude between the seven seals and the seven trumpets.

The seven seals showed us a series of judgments unleashed upon the earth culminating in the Last Judgment pictured in the sixth seal which we just read. In the opening of that seal the sun is darkened, the moon is turned to blood, and the sky split apart. People hide themselves in caves and rocks and mountains saying, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the

Lamb.” (6:16). For, the great day of wrath has come, and who is able to stand? Chapter 7 answers this question: Who is able to stand in the day of wrath? Who is able to stand on Judgment Day?

In Ch. 7 John relates two visions that he saw which answer that question. Both, I believe, picture the Church. In verses 1-8 we see the people of God on earth, the church militant. In verses 9-17 we see the people of God in heaven, the Church triumphant “*standing* before the throne and before the Lamb” (7:9) holding palm branches, which were a symbol of victory.

So the immediate context shows that the visions in Ch. 7 seem to answer the question of 6:17: Who is able to stand?

### **The Context of the Book of Revelation as a Whole**

Next, let us examine the context of this vision of the 144,000 within the framework of the whole book of Revelation. Here are a few principles that guide us in interpreting all of the visions in Revelation.

First, the purpose of the book is to encourage believers to be overcomers. I have two handouts at the back of your packet with all the verses in Revelation that encourage its hearers or readers to faithfulness, and all the times John speaks of overcoming throughout this wonderful book. So the vision in Ch. 7 of the 144,000 should encourage the readers or hearers to be faithful and to be overcomers.

Second, Revelation is a symbolic book of visions. Rev 1:1 says: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to Him to *show* to His bond-servants...” The Revelation is to be “shown.” In Rev 1:11, John is commanded to write down the visions which he “sees.” Now what John is shown and sees in these visions is one thing, but what the visions mean is another.

For example, sometimes Christ, or an angel, or John tells us exactly what the vision symbolizes. In Rev 1:20 Christ says “the seven lampstands are the seven churches.” In Ch 5 John sees bowls of incense and it says that these “are the prayers of the saints” (v. 8) In Ch. 12 John sees a great red dragon and he tells us that it is the devil, Satan (v. 9). In Ch 17 John sees a woman sitting on a beast “having seven heads and ten horns,” (v. 3) and then in v. 12 it says “the ten horns which you saw are ten kings.”

At other times, however, the meanings of the visions are not explained explicitly, but through passages elsewhere in the book of Revelation or at other places in the NT, one can interpret the vision, hopefully with a great deal of accuracy. For example, John sees a beast in Ch 13, an animal who “deceives those who dwell on earth” (13:14). What does the animal or beast symbolize or mean? It is thought by most to be a very evil human person called Antichrist who exalts himself as God, demands worship as God, deceives the world, persecutes the people of God, and who is eventually thrown into hell by Jesus Christ.

In Ch. 14 John sees one like a son of man on a cloud over the earth swinging a sharp sickle upon the earth. But what does it mean or symbolize? What it means is that the world is ripe for judgment and Jesus is coming from heaven to execute judgment. And we know this from other visions in Revelation where Christ is coming to execute the Last Judgment, such as in Chs. 6, 19, & 20.

Revelation is a symbolic book of visions. Therefore, although John sees or hears 144,000 sealed in Ch. 7, the group of people that he sees, along with their sealing symbolize something. And that's what we want to figure out this morning.

Thirdly, the visions in Revelation are often recapitulatory, that is, they recap. They repeat something that was seen before, but from a different perspective. For example, we see a great battle three different times: in Ch 16, then in Ch 19, then in Ch. 20. These are all about the same battle between Christ and Antichrist and his followers. We see the destruction of Babylon in Ch 17 & then again in Ch 18 but from different perspectives. Similarly we see the Second Coming of Christ for the Last Judgment described in various visions: in 6:12-17; 11:15-18; 16:14-16; 19:11-16; and again in 20:7-10.

Because we know that book of Revelation is recapitulatory, both visions in Ch 7, the one in verses 1-8 and the one in verses 9-17 may be referring to the same group of people, just from different perspectives.

And fourthly, numbers are often symbolic in the book of Revelation. For example, we see that God promised tribulation for "ten days" in Rev 2:10, which probably symbolize completeness or perhaps brevity. In Ch 17, verse 12 the kings receive authority to reign "with the beast for one hour." One hour probably means for a short time, not literally one hour. The number seven is used continuously throughout the book. So when we come to the number 144,000 in Ch. 7, it is very likely that this also is a symbolic number.

### **The Context of the New Testament**

Whatever the visions mean in the book of Revelation, they are not going to conflict with the message and the contents of the New Testament as a whole. Although there were many different apostolic writers of the New Testament books, we believe they were all inspired by the same Holy Spirit.

New Testament teaching regarding faith and ethnicity. In the Old Testament time period, God chose the Jews as his people. But in the New Testament, Jews and Gentiles are one body of Christ (Gal 3:28; Eph 2:14-18).

In the New Testament, the genealogy of a person is not the basis of his calling (Matt 3:9; Gal 2:15-16; 1 Tim 1:4).

In the New Testament circumcision is not about outward circumcision of the flesh, the distinguishing mark of a Jewish person, but about circumcision of the heart by the Holy Spirit, the removal of the hardness of one's heart (Rom 2:28-29).

In the New Testament the children of Abraham are not those who have physically descended from Abraham, but those who have the faith of Abraham (John 1:11-12; 3:3; 5:46; 8:39), that is, faith in Christ (Acts 2:38-39; Rom 11:23; Gal 3:9, 26, 29; 4:6; 6:16) regardless of their ethnicity.

In the Old Testament God called Israel "a chosen race," "a holy people," and "a people for God's own possession," but in the New Testament these designations are attached to all believers in Christ (1 Pet 2:9).

So when we look at the 144,000 sealed in Rev 7, and John says that he saw 12,000 from one tribe of Israel and 12,000 from another tribe, in the context of the New Testament as a whole, although he sees tribes of Jews in the vision, I believe that the meaning cannot be that God is sealing these people on the basis of their Jewish ethnicity.

Sealing in the New Testament. Also, the New Testament at other places besides the book of Revelation speaks of God sealing His people. They are in 2 Cor 1:22 and Eph 1:13; 4:30. So the sealing that takes place in the book of Revelation is a symbol that other New Testament writers use. So these other writers, namely Paul, can provide us information about what this sealing entails.

To summarize, Ch 7 of the book of Revelation is an interlude between the seal judgments and the trumpet judgments, and it answers the question of who is able to stand before the Lamb and his wrath. It will fit into the overall purpose of the book to encourage believers to be overcomers. The sealing of the 144,000 is a vision and therefore, in keeping with the rest of the book, is symbolic of something. Numbers in the book of Revelation are often symbolic, so the number 144,000 probably has symbolic meaning. Since we know that the book of Revelation is recapitulatory, perhaps the group of 144,000 sealed can be seen in another vision in the book. And finally, the other books of the New Testament teach about a sealing of believers and they teach that God does not choose a people anymore based upon Jewish lineage.

### **The Sealing of the 144,000 (Rev 7:1-8)**

The Angels Prevented from Unleashing Their Judgments. In verses 1-3 we see the four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, and it was granted them “to harm the earth and the sea.” These are angels of judgment. And they are prevented from harming the earth or the sea, that is, from unleashing the judgments that harmed the earth and sea in the judgments of the seals (6:1-8) and the trumpet judgments (read 8:7-9), until the bond-servants of God are sealed on their foreheads.

The Symbol of Sealing. The sealing is a mark or writing of some kind on the forehead. It suggests ownership. In the ancient world it was not uncommon to see a slave branded or tattooed with the name of his master on his forehead. If you have seen the old movie Spartacus, the gladiatorial school branded all the gladiators, much like today we brand cows. It is a symbol of ownership. Ch. 14:1 explains what this seal that John saw was: “And I looked, and behold, the Lamb was standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His name and the name of His Father written on their foreheads.” So this sealing that John sees is a marking or writing of the name of the Lamb and the name of the Father of the Lamb on the foreheads of the 144,000.

*This sealing expresses ownership.* These 144,000 are the servants of God; they belong to Him. They do not belong to the world or to the devil, but to the Lamb who purchased them with the price of His blood. God has a people. When He came to earth, He said, “This is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for many.” He calls them out of the deadness of their sins to Himself, to serve Him. He calls them by name and marks them, meaning He knows them. He purchased them by dying and shedding His blood on the cross, and taking the wrath of God for their sins onto Himself. He then imputes His righteousness to them. He puts a white robe on them, a symbol of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. We do not stand before God in our own righteousness. We have an Advocate, Jesus Christ the Righteous One (1 John 2:1). His righteousness is our covering. “What the law could not do in that it was weak in the flesh, God did, sending His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh... that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Rom 8:3-4). And He marks them.

This sealing, or marking the head or hand with a name, was prophesied about in Isaiah. Isaiah wrote that God would pour out His Spirit upon people and one will “write on his hand, ‘Belonging to the Lord’” (Isa 44:3-5).

In Rev 7 & 14 John sees the 144,000 with the name of the Lamb written on the forehead of His people, but in reality this sealing is not with physical ink. He marks or seals them with the Holy Spirit, identifying them as belonging to Himself. Paul said in 2 Cor 1:22 that God “sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge.” In Eph 1:13-14 Paul wrote “After listening to the message of the truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession.” And then in Eph 4:30 Paul says “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” The Holy Spirit is that seal, and every believer has the Holy Spirit residing in him. Are you sealed with the Spirit today? If you believe in Jesus Christ, that He died for you and took away your sins, you are sealed.

So John sees the sealing of 144,000 servants of God, angels writing the name of the Lamb and of His Father on their foreheads. And Paul uses the symbol of sealing of all believers with the Holy Spirit. So we know that this symbol of believers in Christ being sealed was part of the preaching of the apostles. I would contend that the sealing in both John and Paul are speaking of the same act of the Holy Spirit by which God sets His mark of ownership upon His people. He owns us. Sometimes I despair of my own sin. And if I were to look at my own righteousness I would plunge into a deep abyss. So I must look up, to His righteousness which like the father of the prodigal covers me like a robe. “Dressed in His righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne,” says the old hymn.

*The sealing also symbolizes protection.* In Exodus, God’s people were to put a mark on their doorposts, and when God brought the plagues upon Egypt, the death angel would pass by those houses which had the seal. In Ezekiel 9, the prophet has a vision of a man with a writing case, and he is to go through Jerusalem and put a mark on the forehead of every person who sighs and groans over the abominations in Jerusalem. And then in the vision executioners come and slay every person that does not have the mark. So, both in Exodus and in Ezekiel, having the mark or seal of God protected them from God’s wrath. And here in the book of Revelation, God is pouring out terrible judgments upon the whole world, and the question is asked “Who is able to stand?” And the answer is those servants of God who are sealed will be protected from God’s wrath when it is poured out upon the earth.

And this protection is not necessarily a physical protection. Our brothers who hold firmly to a pre-tribulation rapture say that God will protect the Church physically by catching believers away out of the tribulation. But I believe that the sealing provides spiritual protection. Here is why. Elsewhere in the book of Revelation, it shows believers experiencing persecution and even death for the sake of the Gospel. Rev 2:10 says: “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested. . . Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Rev 12:11 says that they overcame the devil by the blood of the Lamb, the word of their testimony, and “they loved not their own lives even unto death.” In Rev 13:15, all those believers who do not worship the image of the beast are killed. So the

sealing of the servants of God is a protection, but not necessarily physical protection from persecution or death. It is spiritual protection against the devil and his demonic forces. This is taught in Rev 9. John sees the bottomless pit opened and demonic creatures like scorpions coming out, and they are permitted to torment only those “who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads.” The marking of the name of the Lamb upon their foreheads, provides the sealed bond-servants with spiritual protection from spiritual wickedness in high places (Eph 6), so that we might be able to stand before the throne with robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb.

Who Are Sealed? In verse 3 of Rev 7, it says that the “bond-servants” are marked. Now who are the bond-servants of God? In Rev 14:3 it says that the sealed are those who were “purchased” from the earth. Who are those who are purchased? It is we Christians, who believe in the name of the Son of God, regardless of our ethnic heritage, who are bond-servants of God and who are purchased by God. We owed a debt we could not pay. Jesus paid a debt He did not owe when He died on the cross. And this propitiatory sacrifice of Himself, John wrote in his epistle, was a propitiation not only for the sins of Jewish believers, but for the sins of the whole world, the sins of all Gentiles who believe.

God seals all the bond-servants of Christ, all those purchased by Christ, all believers in Christ, regardless of ethnicity. That this sealing is for all believers, not just Jewish people, is confirmed in Rev 3:12. To the church at Philadelphia, Jesus said to the one who overcomes, “I will write upon him the name of My God.” (Repeat.) God promised to seal or mark the overcomers in that church, with the name of God, just as we saw in Rev 14 that the 144,000 have the name of God written on them. Now are we to believe that there were only Jewish Christians in the church at Philadelphia? No, there were certainly Gentile Christians in that church who would be sealed. This shows that the sealing in Revelation is for all Christians, Jew or Gentile, slave or free.

How Many Are Sealed? In verse 4 of Rev 7, John says “I heard the number.” And it was 144,000 sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel. And then he lists the tribes. But the tribes that he listed are unlike any of the lists of the tribes in the Old Testament. Judah is placed first; and Judah is never placed first in any of the Old Testament lists. Also in this list the tribes of Ephraim and Dan are omitted. This listing, which is unlike any of the lists in the Old Testament, suggests that it is symbolic.

### **The Number 144,000**

The listing of the tribes of Israel and the number 144,000 is full of meaning and full of comfort to believers suffering persecution and striving to be overcomers. I believe they are a symbol of the Church.

*1. The 144,000 from the tribes of Israel indicates that the Church is chosen and numbered.* Just as Israel was a people chosen for God’s own possession, so also the Church is made up of people called by God, adopted by God, grafted into His body, and sealed with a mark of ownership and protection. “No one can snatch them out of My hand,” Jesus said (John 10:29). The body of Christ is numbered. Jesus said to the Father in the high priestly prayer, that He guarded those who were given to him and not one of them perished except the son of perdition about whom it was foretold would fall away (John 17:12). And it is a great comfort in the midst of tribulation to know that God has



numbered you. The Shepherd said, "I know My own...and they shall never perish" (John 10:14, 28). Paul said, "The Lord knows those who are His" (2 Tim 2:19). In the midst of earthly tribulations, this is a great comfort. The Lord remembers us, and He has numbered us. He has washed us clean in the blood of the Lamb. Thank God for His indescribable gift!

*2. The 144,000 shows that we are a complete people.* The number 12 is the complete number of the tribes of Israel, and also the full number of the body of the apostles of Jesus Christ. In Rev 5 we saw twenty-four elders bowing down worshipping, saying "You have redeemed us in your blood!" (Rev 5:8-9) Were only 24 people redeemed? No, this vision of 24 elders, 12 plus 12, represents the complete people of God which has been redeemed by the blood of Christ. We know this because they are called a "kingdom" (Rev 5:10). So the number there is certainly a symbol of the entire people of God.

When the number 12 is squared, it makes 144. In Rev 21, John is taken up in to a very high mountain and sees a glimpse of a heavenly city. And that city had 12 gates and the names of the twelve tribes were on those gates. And then he saw 12 foundation stones and the names of the 12 apostles were on them. And the measurement of the wall is 144 cubits (Rev 21:9-17). 12 squared, or 144, is a symbol of the complete people of God. How do we know that this heavenly city that John saw is the complete people of God? The New Jerusalem is described as "a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev 21:2). And who else is that except the Church? In addition, Heb 12:22 says that "you have come to the heavenly Jerusalem" and then specifically calls it "the church of the firstborn" (Heb 12:22-23). The heavenly Jerusalem, pictured with the symbols of 12 gates, 12 foundation stones, and a wall of 144 cubits is a picture of the Church. And that Church is one body of believers in Christ, "one new man" (Eph 2:15) made up of Jew and Gentile, symbolized in the book of Revelation by the number 144.

In the vision in Ch 7, John hears that number 144 multiplied by ten, another number signifying completion. And not just ten but 10 X 10 X 10. The 144,000, I believe, is a symbol of completeness. The 144,000, I believe, represent the entire body of Christ.

### **The Listing of the Tribes**

We saw earlier that in the New Testament that God does not seal people because of their race and that the listing of the tribes is unlike any other listing in the Old Testament. Tribes are missing, and the order is mixed up. This suggests that it is a symbol. I believe the listing of the twelve tribes is a further symbol of the Church, the new Israel founded by Christ and the twelve apostles.

*1. The listing of the twelve tribes shows that the Church is apostolic.* One of the marks of the Church is that the Church is apostolic. That means it follows the teachings of the apostles of Jesus Christ as written down by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. Ephesians says that the Church was built upon the foundation of the apostles, with Jesus Christ being the cornerstone. The people that are able to stand in the Day of Judgment are the people who follow the teachings of Jesus Christ and His apostles. This is why I do not believe the Jehovah's Witnesses and various Adventist

groups, who claim to be the 144,000, are not them: because they do not believe the teachings of the apostles. The apostles believed in the full and true divinity of Christ; the Jehovah's Witnesses do not. The apostles taught the doctrine of hell or everlasting punishment; most of the Adventist groups do not believe in eternal conscious punishment of the wicked. The Church militant is an apostolic Church.

*2.The figure of the twelve tribes suggests that we are sojourners.* The twelve tribes journeyed in the wilderness among snakes and scorpions. But that was not their true home; they looked forward to the promise land. So also the Church is sojourning here on earth. We are just traveling through. Yes, we are in the world, and we are to make good use of the things of the earth, and bring the kingdom of God to this earth, but our true home is in heaven. "Our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil 3:20). And we set our "affections on things above, not on things below" (Col 3:2). We are looking forward to our heavenly promised land, the heavenly Jerusalem, a city not made by human hands but by God (Heb 11:10, 16; 12:22-23). The figure of the twelve tribes suggests that we are sojourners.

*3.The listing of the twelve tribes shows the Church militant with Christ as Commander.* Dennis E. Johnson, a commentator on the book of Revelation, sees in the 144,000 the "sealed and numbered army of Israel," the people of God "arrayed for battle."<sup>3</sup> Judah, the tribe of the Messiah, is promoted from the fourth place in the usual lists of the twelve tribes in the Old Testament to the first place in this list. Judah is listed first because the Church's leader, its Commander, is Jesus Christ, the lion from the tribe of Judah. The picture is: the armies of Israel with Judah as its head. So as we, the Church, are fighting against the devil and his forces here on earth, let us take comfort that we are fighting for and with a Champion. This champion rides on a white horse with a sharp two edged sword. He defeated Satan on the cross and will ultimately defeat him by casting him into the lake of fire (Cf. Rev 19:11-20). There is great comfort in that and encouragement for us to be overcomers. The listing of the twelve tribes shows the Church militant with Christ as her commander.

*4.The omission of the tribes of Ephraim and Dan from the list shows that the Church that overcomes and is able to stand on the Day of Judgment is one free from idolatry.* The tribes of Dan and Ephraim in ancient Israel unfortunately fell into idolatry, and because of that they are excluded from the list. John doesn't see them.

Idolatry was a very real temptation for the original recipients of the book of Revelation. Societal life in Asia Minor in the first century was very wrapped up in idol worship. We see in Acts 19 when Paul preached in Ephesus and Christians put away their idols, how incensed the people of that city became. The guild of craftsmen got together a mob and the whole city rushed to the amphitheater; and for two hours they shouted, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" Idol worship in the cities of Asia Minor in the first century was an integral part of the social fabric. To be in a trade union, to sell merchandise, and to participate in most social events, sacrificing to idols was expected. And this was a temptation for the Christians. In Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira, we see in Rev 2 that some Christians were eating things sacrificed to idols, and Jesus said that they must not do that and told them they must repent of it (Rev 2:6-22).

The listing of the twelve tribes and its omission of Dan and Ephraem show that the overcoming Church, the people that are able to stand in the day of Judgment, are the people who have cast off idol worship. They follow the Lamb and Him alone. They have no other gods before Him.

### **Conclusion of Part One**

As you heard, I believe the 144,000 is a symbol of the Church militant on earth. These, sealed with the Holy Spirit, and with help of Jesus as their Commander in battle, will be able to stand in the day of wrath. In the second vision in Ch. 7 we actually see them standing before the throne, crying out, "Salvation is to our God...and to the Lamb." In Ch. 14 we see them in heaven playing harps and singing a new song. They made it. What a great comfort. As the old hymn goes, "Grace has brought me safe thus far; and grace will lead me home." The sealing of the Spirit gives us a down payment and a promise that "He who began a good work in us will complete it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6).

I want to persevere in my Christian faith until Christ comes or until the end of my life, whichever comes first. I am very encouraged when I see older folks walking with Christ, because they are an example of the perseverance of the saints. So this morning I want to encourage myself and you to persevere in our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and in our love for God and neighbor until the end. "When the saints go marching in, I want to be among that number."<sup>4</sup> How about you?

Before going into Part 2, let me take one or two questions for about five minutes; and if you need to get up and stretch, feel free to do so.

## PART TWO: THE 144,000 IN EARLY CHRISTIAN EXEGESIS

In Part One we saw from the context of the book of Revelation and the whole New Testament that the vision of the 144,000 sealed in Rev 7:1-8 answers the question of who is able to stand in the day of God's wrath. That number, I argued, is a picture of the Church on earth, which is apostolic, chosen, numbered by God, sojourning on earth on its way to the heavenly promise land, militant, and free from idolatry. In this section I would like to review some of the opinions regarding the 144,000 from the earliest Christian authors. Some of the views of early Christians are similar to views held by our Christian brothers and sisters today. Also I shall evaluate those views and state their good points, and if applicable, where I believe they fall short.

### The Ecclesiastical View

The 144,000 is the Church. First is the ecclesiastical view. This says that the 144,000 is a picture of the Church, similar to how I expounded the passage above.

The earliest comments on Rev 7 from post-apostolic Christianity are from *The Shepherd* of Hermas. This text was written very early, between 90 and 150 AD, so just decades after the writing of the book of Revelation. In the section called *Similitudes*, Hermas interprets the passage. I shall quote Gregory Beale's explanation of this text:

In Hermas, *Similitudes* 9.10 believers possess "the name of the Son of God" and this is equated with "receiving the seal of the Son of God." In 9.17 some of these believers are referred to as "twelve stones," "twelve mountains," "twelve tribes that inhabit the whole world," and "twelve nations" who inhabit the world. These nations "were called by the one name of the Son of God...having received the seal." This reflects the earliest interpretation of Rev 7:2-8 and 21:12-20, and it views the twelve tribes as the church, the true Israel.<sup>5</sup>

So the earliest interpretation of Rev 7, that in the *Shepherd* of Hermas, written almost contemporaneous with the Apocalypse, or a few decades after it, says that the twelve tribes in this passage symbolized the Church.

This is why I like studying church history. Sometimes these authors can bridge the temporal, linguistic, and historical gap between us today, 20 centuries later, and them. Not that they are by any means infallible or always correct. But they do offer insight.

Around the year 380 Tyconius of Carthage in North Africa wrote a hermeneutical text called *The Book of Rules* and an *Exposition of the Apocalypse*. In the former work, he wrote: "Again, through the number twelve, 144,000 is mentioned with reference to the whole church."<sup>6</sup> Then in his *Exposition*, he commented upon Rev 7:4-8 saying: "The 144,000 is the whole entire Church."<sup>7</sup> In the early sixth century, Caesarius of Arles (d. 542) in Gaul or modern day France repeated that interpretation verbatim in his own Apocalypse commentary.<sup>8</sup>

Primasius of Hadrumetum in Africa wrote a commentary on the book of Revelation before the year 542. On Rev 7:4 he commented: "It is manifestly acknowledged that by this evidence of a mystical number is designated the innumerable multitude of the elect."<sup>9</sup> Cassiodorus Senator, writing from southern Italy around 580 in *Brief Notes on the Apocalypse*, wrote of "the 144,000, by which number is included the sum of all the blessed."<sup>10</sup>

In the early eighth century Bede wrote a commentary on Revelation. On Ch 7:4: *And I heard the number of those sealed*, he wrote: “In this finite number is signified the innumerable multitude of the whole Church.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the Irish “Reference Bible,” written about 750, commented: “In this finite number is signified the infinite number of the faithful.”<sup>12</sup> And finally, Alcuin, who was a secretary to Charlemagne in the early ninth century, wrote on Rev 7:4 in his commentary: “A finite number is put for the infinite. It does not pertain only to the twelve tribes of Israel, but in the chosen ones, the whole Church is designated through this [number].”<sup>13</sup>

As one can see, many of the Latin commentators on Revelation in early Christianity and into the early middle ages, held that the number 144,000 and the listing of the twelve tribes were symbolic. The number was a finite one that symbolized the innumerable company of all of the faithful, all of the elect, in other words, of the whole Church.

This view was and is held in our time by commentators who generally take an idealistic approach to the Apocalypse like Beale, Dennis Johnson, and Vern Poythress cited in Part One, and by some Catholic commentators.<sup>14</sup> And this view I believe is the best interpretation of the vision.

The 144,000 are Martyrs or Virgins in the Church. A subset of the ecclesiastical view of the 144,000 is that the number represents not the whole entire Church, but a particular group within the Church, a segment of especially holy people within the Church. Methodius of Olympus (d. 311) saw the 144,000 virgins of Rev 14 “as predictive of the ‘very small number’ of virgins found in the church.”<sup>15</sup> The Apocalypse commentary of pseudo-Jerome (before 767) has on Rev 7:4: “This perfect number signifies the multitude of all the martyrs who are going to suffer.”<sup>16</sup> Theodulphus of Orleans, in 810, wrote similarly: “This perfect number is of all of the martyrs.”<sup>17</sup> These two commentators held that the 144,000 was a symbol of all of the martyrs in the Church. They might base this on the phrase “they follow the Lamb wherever He goes” (14:4). Of course the Lamb went to death; He was slain.

*Modern advocates.* Today, Adelp Yarbro Collins leans toward this view, based more on Ch. 14 than on Ch. 7: that the 144,000 is a symbol of a particular group of ideal disciples within the Church, although not necessarily all martyrs.<sup>18</sup> The Presbyterian pastor turned Catholic apologist, Scott Hahn, seems to also hold this view, that the 144,000 represent either martyrs or virgins in the Church.<sup>19</sup>

*Evaluation.* Positively, they are said to have come out of great tribulation in Ch. 7, having washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. In Ch 14 they follow Him wherever He goes, and of course we know that Christ went to His death. And in Rev 19:2 martyrs are called “bond-servants.”

The reason I do not believe the 144,000 represent a segment of the Church is because the 144,000 are referred to as “bond-servants,” “purchased,” and “sealed.” And all Christians are bond-servants; all Christians purchased by Christ; and all Christians sealed with the Holy Spirit, not just martyrs or those with the gift of lifelong celibacy. Also, if, as we have said, the vision answers the question of who is able to stand in the day of God’s wrath, then are only martyrs or those committed to celibacy able to stand? No, the Psalmist wrote: “If Thou, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” And then he answers, “But there is forgiveness with Thee” (Ps 130:3-4). Those

who are able to stand in the day of wrath are those who have their sins forgiven through the blood of Jesus. And that is the only way anyone will stand. One must go through the door of Christ. “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6). And all who go through that door, not just a special segment of the Church, are promised pastures.

### **Preterist Views**

Second are the preterist views. Praeterist means “past.” These interpretations see the 144,000 as representative of a group of people in the first century.

The Infants Murdered by Herod. The *Revelation of Stephen* is a text from around the year 415 about the finding of the body of Stephen, the deacon martyred in Act 7. In it, it says that Herod slew 144,000 children.<sup>20</sup> Around the year 500 this text was declared apocryphal in the pseudo-Gelasian decree, and not many in early Christianity seem to have held this view of the 144,000. In the eighth century, however, Beatus of Liebana in Spain knew of it, but rejected it, saying in his commentary that the 144,000 “are not, as some think, those infants whom Herod killed...for they were only from the tribe of Judah.”<sup>21</sup>

*Evaluation.* As for my evaluation of this view, I understand that John could have had a vision of a past event that had particular applicability to the church at John’s time or could have been a type of what is to come. But I reject this view for the same reason as Beatus did. The infants that Herod killed when he was trying to kill the Messiah were from the tribe of Judah alone, so fitting the imagery of them with 12,000 from each tribe seems like a stretch.

The Firstfruits of the Jews who believed in Christ. Hippolytus of Rome (d. 235) wrote one of the earliest commentaries on Revelation in church history.<sup>22</sup> Although this *Apology for the Apocalypse and Gospel of John the Apostle and Evangelist* against Gaius did not survive, later commentators cited from it. Fragments of that work have been found, among other places, in an anonymous thirteenth-century Arab Apocalypse commentary. The first fragment found in this Arab commentary is on Rev 7:4-8. If it accurately reflects Hippolytus’ view, as it claims, Hippolytus interpreted the 144,000 as Jewish believers in the first century.<sup>23</sup> It reads:

As to the fact that they [the 144,000] are of Hebraic origin, from the fact it is clear that their tribes were privileged. It is undeniable that the majority of this group was firstborn (in Christianity) with respect to the whole of the members of the tribes of Israel who believed in the Christian gospel.

For, as one reads in the book of Acts, that the priests who were in Jerusalem said to Paul, when he came back to them from those regions where he announced the Good News: *Have you seen, my brother, how many myriads of Jews have already believed?* (Acts 21:20) And if that is the case in the city of Jerusalem alone, what must one think of the entire world where the tribes have dispersed, which is proven by the word of Jude [sic], in the beginning [James 1:1]? But the admirable thing is the concordance between the numbers of these firstborn. The number (furnished by) one tribe is not greater than that (furnished by) the other. Glory to those who know these eternal mysteries! Hippolytus, the bishop of Rome, in his explication of this part of the vision is of this opinion, which is the true one.<sup>24</sup>

A comment attributed to Origen (d. 254) in a *Scholia on the Apocalypse* said that the 144,000 sealed Jews probably did not mean Israelites according to the flesh in the lifetime of John, but “the true Israel” made up of Jews and Gentiles who came to Christ at

that time. He wrote that those allocated in Israel's division in Rev 7 represent "everyone, both Jews and Greeks, who came to Christ," and they "fulfilled this supra-mundane nation."<sup>25</sup> So according to Origen the vision of the sealing of the 144,000 was fulfilled in those "who came to Christ" in the early church.

*Evaluation.* Positively, Rev 14 calls them "firstfruits." Also, this interpretation uses other New Testament Scripture to interpret this passage, that is, it uses Acts 21 about thousands of Jews coming to the faith in primitive times. Next, this interpretation, that the 144,000 represent the Jewish people who believed in Christ and first came into the Church, tries to put the vision into its first century context which would have been familiar to the original recipients of the book; and that is not a bad thing.

But the problem is that this vision in Revelation is an interlude between the opening of the sixth and seventh seal. If this interlude vision of the 144,000 is only about something that took place in the first century, then it would seem consistent to interpret the seal judgments also as having to do only with first century Christianity. But the seal judgments seem to culminate in the Second Coming of Christ (Rev 6:12-17), and that did not happen in the first century.

Jewish Christians who escaped the destruction of Jerusalem right before 70 AD. In the sixth-century Ecumenius wrote an Apocalypse commentary in Greek. He interpreted the 144,000 of Rev 7 as the Jews who escaped Jerusalem when the Romans destroyed it in the first century, and to Jewish believers in the first century who were "sealed" in the faith of Christ. He wrote:

And the sealed, it says, was [sic] 144,000. For those from the Jews who believed in Christ were numerous and greater than [this] number, and they were accounted worthy to be saved from the common destruction, as those testified who spoke to Paul when he was in Jerusalem: *Do you see, brother, how many thousands there are of the Jews who have believed?* [Acts 21:20] And it was likely that not only the faithful escaped, but also those who were deceived and in ignorance assisted in the crucifixion of the Lord, about whom he said, *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do* [Luke 23:34]. . . And perhaps not only these [escaped], but also those who were not present at that time or were not living in Jerusalem and so were not complicit in the impious plot of the accursed high priests concerning the crucifixion, and also those who were perhaps present but were not involved in that murderous defilement. Indeed, [Christ] himself blessed everything under heaven, in contrast to what the irreligious council of transgressors had wanted. It is likely that all of these were later sealed in the faith of Christ; otherwise the angel would not have called them the servants of God. And when these had been rescued, either by flight or by desertion to the Romans, those wicked ones who remained were destroyed in a terrible manner, *having become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men* [1 Cor 4:9] in a way quite different from what Paul had said of the blessed apostles. And of these things, Josephus is again witness, counting those who were killed by famine as more than ten thousand.<sup>26</sup>

Andrew of Caesarea, who wrote a Greek Apocalypse commentary in the early seventh century, commented on Rev 7:8 and gave two interpretations. The first is that the 144,000 refers to believing Jews who took flight from the Romans during the siege of Jerusalem in the first century. The second interpretation, which he preferred, is that the 144,000 refers to Jews who will be saved at the end of the world. He explained:

This refers either to those believers from the Jews who fled the siege of the Romans and equaled this number, or, what is rather more likely, to those from the Jews who are saved at the consummation when, as the apostle puts it, after *the full number of the Gentiles come in, all Israel will be saved.* Either interpretation is acceptable.<sup>27</sup>

*Modern advocates.* Now today, many who take a preterist approach to the book of Revelation hold an interpretation similar to Ecumenius and the first interpretation of Andrew. One writer explained their view saying, "The normative view among

evangelical *preterists* is that this 144,000 is a symbolic number representing the full number of Jewish Christians who escaped the doomed city [i.e. Jerusalem] before its destruction.”<sup>28</sup> For example, Hank Hanegraaff, holding this view, believes that the 144,000 were “sealed prior to Jerusalem’s destruction in AD 70.”<sup>29</sup> Jay Adams wrote similarly saying: “[I]t is obvious that these 144,000 Christian Jews who are sealed against the destruction ought to be identified with those who escaped to Pella...”<sup>30</sup> Here Adams uses a familiar story from Eusebius, a Christian historian of the fourth century, who told of Christians in Jerusalem escaping the Roman siege and taking refuge in a city called Pella. Kenneth Gentry, Jr. also holds this view of the 144,000, that they represent Christian Jews who escaped the city of Jerusalem right before it was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.<sup>31</sup>

*Evaluation.* Positively, this interpretation tries to put the vision in the context of its original first century recipients. Ecumenius also used Josephus, a first century historian, to support his interpretation. This is sometimes helpful to use texts contemporaneous with the New Testament, whether that be a rabbinic writing or something from the Essenes or a secular historian, to help interpret the text.

But this interpretation views the vision of the 144,000 as only about a first century event. And since the sealing of the 144,000 answers the question of who can stand in the day of God’s wrath, they are forced to say that the day of God’s wrath was only the destruction of Jerusalem. But the prophecy of Revelation was not only about the coming destruction of Jerusalem in AD70. Angels said to John, “You must prophesy again concerning many peoples and nations and tongues and kings” (Rev 10:11), not concerning only the Jewish nation. The beast in Ch. 13 is given authority over “every tribe and people an tongue and nation” (Rev 13:7). The evil and destruction of Babylon is worldwide (Rev 14:8; 17:15; 18:3, 23); and in the vision of Christ returning in Ch. 19 he smites the nations (Rev 19:15). My point is that there is evidence within Revelation that the book was not intended as a prophecy just about the judgment of the Jewish nation.

Also, against the view that the 144,000 is only about Jews who escaped the destruction of Jerusalem in the first century is that I believe the second vision in Rev 7 contains the same people in the first vision, distinguished only by their location. The first group is the Church militant on earth; the second group is the Church triumphant in heaven. And it is made up of people “from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne” (Rev 7:9). So the second vision I believe helps to interpret the first vision, and the second vision says it is not only Jews but people from every nation, people and tongue.

Finally, this interpretation is dependent upon an early date of the book of Revelation, that John wrote it before the destruction of Jerusalem. In their view, John is writing Revelation in the late 60s and this vision of the 144,000 is a promise of divine protection of Jewish believers who very soon will escape Jerusalem. But if it can be shown that John wrote Revelation after 70 AD, perhaps in the 80s or 90s—and many Christians hold to those later dates and give their reasons—then this preterist interpretation of the 144,000 is invalidated, because it is dependent upon an early date of Revelation.

So those are some preterist views that were expressed in early Christianity.



### The Futurist View

Third is the futuristic view. This interpretation sees the sealed in this vision as 144,000 literal Jewish males who will be converted in the last few years of world history. Victorinus of Pettau wrote a commentary on the Apocalypse around the year 260, and he said of the 144,000: “[T]hese are those from among the Jews who will come to believe at the end of time through the preaching of Elijah.”<sup>32</sup> Another text called “About Enoch and Elijah,” once thought to be from Prosper of Aquitaine (d. 455) but now dated to the late sixth century, interprets the 144,000 in a futuristic manner as well. It reads: “It is said that Enoch and Elijah are coming and going to preach about the coming of the Lord and the Day of Judgment for forty-two months. It is believed that an army from each of the tribes except Dan, for which the tribe of Levi replaces, [will come] twelve [thousand] virgins sealed and killed for Christ.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly a ninth-century Spanish tract “On the Coming of Enoch and Elijah,” took a futuristic view teaching: “And then those 144,000 virgins from the Jews, from the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel, whom John in the book of the Apocalypse mentions were sealed, are going to believe.”<sup>34</sup>

This ancient futuristic view of the 144,000 says, based on Malachi 4:5-6, that Elijah will return to earth in the last days to convert the Jews. They also believed that the two witnesses of Rev 11 would be Enoch and Elijah, and that they are going to come from wherever they are now to earth during the time of Antichrist. At that time they will preach to the Jewish people that Antichrist is not the Messiah, and will convert Jews to the real Christ. And this conversion of Jews under Enoch and Elijah is what John saw in the vision of the 144,000.

*Modern advocates.* Now some in our modern times believe that the sealing of the 144,000 is for the last days and only for Jewish males. Arno Gabelein wrote in his 1915 commentary on the book of Revelation: “This chapter [seven] can have no application to the Church on earth, nor to the Church in glory, for the simple reason that the Church is already complete and translated to glory.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, the 144,000 must be Jews and cannot be the Church because the Church has already been raptured when this sealing takes place.

John Walvoord, former president of Dallas Theological Seminary, believed that the vision prophesies of 144,000 literal Jewish believers during the Tribulation. He wrote: “There is no justification whatever for spiritualizing either the number or the names of the tribes in this passage, to make them represent the church.” And: “The fact that specific tribes were mentioned and specific numbers from each tribe were indicated would seem to remove this from the symbolic and to justify literal interpretation.”<sup>36</sup>

John MacArthur, president of Master’s Seminary, wrote: “The term Israel must be interpreted in accordance with its normal Old and New Testament usage as a reference to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Nor is there any exegetical reason not to interpret the numbers 144,000 and 12,000 literally.” MacArthur not only thinks that these 144,000 will be Jewish believers during the Tribulation, he also calls them “evangelists.”<sup>37</sup> Hal Lindsey referred to them as going to be “144,000 Jewish Billy Grahams.”<sup>38</sup> Mal Couch, former president of Tyndale Theological Seminary, not only believes that they will be 144,000 literal Jewish “witnesses” during the Tribulation, but that they will literally “have a special mark on their foreheads.”<sup>39</sup>

*Evaluation.* Positively speaking, those who take a futurist approach are trying to put this vision in the context of a futurist view of Revelation. And there does seem to be

a lot about eschatology and future things in this book like the coming of Antichrist, the judgment of the world, the Last Judgment, and the new heaven and the new earth. So, I have no problem with a futurist reading of the 144,000 if it is a symbol of *the whole Church* on earth during the Tribulation. But, of course, they are saying that the 144,000 are only Jewish males during the Tribulation.

The literalist futuristic view of the 144,000 is also trying to avoid spiritualization in their hermeneutic, and that is not a bad thing. They certainly succeeded in that, but I think to an extreme of not seeing symbolism in the passage, or in the numbers. This symbolism to me is very obvious, especially in light of the description of the holy city in Rev 21, which is specifically called the church, and yet is described with twelve gates, twelve stones, and a wall 144 cubits high.

The futurists also bring other passages in the Bible, both Old and New Testament, which imply that God is going to convert Jews in the last days, to bear upon how they interpret the text of Rev 7. So in that sense they are using the principle of analogy of Scripture, and that, if used correctly, is a good thing.

But here is why I do not hold this very literalistic view. First, those who hold this view say that the 144,000 must be Jews because the Church age has been completed and the Church has been raptured in Ch 4, when God said to *John* “Come up here.” They say that during the Tribulation, God will once again be dealing primarily with Jews. “This is the time of Jacob’s trouble, the seventieth week of Daniel 9,” they say, “so it cannot be the Church.” To this, I say with Paul that in Christ the Jews and Gentiles have been made into one new man, the body of Christ. I believe this Church, made up of Jew and Gentile alike, will be on earth all the way until Christ comes again once (not in two stages) for the Last Judgment. And I believe that when any Jews are saved after Christ came into the world and died on the cross and rose again—whether they are saved in the early Church, in the Middle Ages, in Reformation times, in modern times, or at the end of the world—those Jewish people, when they believe, are baptized into the body of Christ and are grafted into the Church. I do not believe there will be a reversion to a separate program for the Jews; but I believe that God’s promises to the Jewish people in the Old Testament looked forward to the Church, made up of Jew and Gentile, which is Christ’s “fullness.”

The literalist says that John saw 144,000 Jewish male virgins sealed, but that it doesn’t mean or symbolize anything. So why does God seal them? Why the number 144,000? So most modern futurists make them evangelists, even though there is nothing in the text that says so. They see in the next vision a great multitude from every tribe and nation, and reason that they must be the converts of these Jewish people sealed. And so they make the 144,000 evangelists. And then they use a cross reference from Matthew 24 which says that the gospel of the kingdom must be preached in all the world and then the end will come. And they make these 144,000 into preachers. But even the futurists of the early church did not seem them as evangelists, but simply as converts. So, if we take the 144,000 and the 12,000 literally and the Jewish tribes literally and the seal literally, to be consistent, they should not insert the idea that the 144,000 are evangelists, because the text says no such thing. The text says they are “bond-servants.”

Also, if the sealing of the 144,000 is God’s way of literally fulfilling promises to Jews in the Old Testament, God is not literally fulfilling it here because he omits the tribe of Dan and Ephraem from the sealing.

Lastly, I think there is all the justification we need in the book of Revelation and the New Testament to interpret the number 144,000, the listing of the tribes, and the sealing as symbols of spiritual realities, as I have shown in Part One.

### **Summary of This Session**

The main difficulty in interpreting Rev 7:1-8 is to identify the 144,000. In this session I have proposed a solution. We did this first by looking at its context of the vision within the book of Revelation, and saw that it answers the question of Rev 6:17: “Who is able to stand?” We also tried to relate the vision to the purpose of Revelation which is to encourage faithfulness, and believers to be overcomers, to the book’s use of numerical symbols, and to the book’s style of recapitulating.

Next, we tried to put the vision in the context of New Testament theology as a whole: what the New Testament says about sealing and what it says about God no longer dealing with His people based upon their ethnicity. God enters relationship with people not because they are the physical offspring of Abraham, but the means of relationship with God is having the faith of Abraham. “The just shall live by faith” (Gal 3:11).

Then we looked at the passage and interpreted the sealing, the writing on the forehead, as being symbolic of the presence of the Holy Spirit within all believers. That sealing implies ownership by God and protection by Him from Satan’s ultimate deception. We saw the symbolism of the Church in the number 144,000 and in the listing of the twelve tribes in their being called “bond-servants,” which is a term for all Christians, and because of the unusual listing of the tribes, which begs for a symbolic interpretation as the new Israel. This vision of 144,000 sealed, 12,000 from each tribe, suggests that the Church is chosen and numbered, apostolic and free from idol worship, is sojourning on its way to the heavenly promised land, and here on earth is militant with Christ as the head of the army.

We also confirmed this interpretation from other passages in Revelation. For example, in Rev 2 where Jesus promised to write the name of God on the overcomers of the church at Philadelphia. These Christians in Philadelphia, who were promised the sealing, were both Jewish and Gentile. Also in Rev 14, God calls the 144,000 “purchased,” and we know that all Christians have been redeemed or purchased for God with the costly price of Christ’s blood. Our Lord and Savior shed His blood not only for Jews but was a propitiation for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). Also, the second vision in Ch. 7 is probably a recapitulation of the first vision, with simply a change in location. The first vision is the Church militant on earth; the second vision the Church triumphant in heaven. And that vision says that it was a multitude made up of “every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues” (Rev 7:9).

In Part Two we looked at early Christian exegesis of Rev 7, and saw that there were three main views. The preterist view saw the 144,000 as either the infants slaughtered by Herod, the firstfruits of the Jews who came to faith in early Christian times, or the Jewish Christians who escaped the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The futurist view saw the 144,000 as Jews who would be converted during the time of Antichrist. While both the preterist and the futurist views had positive points, I believe they fall short for the reasons I stated. The view that I think captured the essence of John’s vision was the one expressed by Hermas, Tyconius, Caesarius, Primasius, Bede, and others. These said that John’s vision of 144,000 sealed represents the Church on

earth. Today, let us thank our Lord for His sealing, His protection, His priesthood, and His advocacy. Thank you for listening.

At this time we will have a question and answer period.

<sup>1</sup> Seán Kealy, *The Apocalypse of John* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987), 140.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Johnson, "Revelation," in Frank E. Gabelein, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 477.

<sup>3</sup> Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2001), 134.

<sup>4</sup> For Part One, besides the references in the footnotes, I want to acknowledge the help of Hank Hanegraaff, "Who are the 144,000 of Revelation?" *Biblical Worldview* 23:5 (May 2007):20; Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2000); Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999); J. A. Draper, "The Heavenly Feast of Tabernacles: Rev 7:1-17," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 19 (1983):133-47; Albert Geysler, "The Twelve Tribes in Revelation, Judean and Judeo-Christian Apocalypticism," *New Testament Studies* 28 (1982): 388-99; Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Apocalypse* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1979); Herman Hoeksema, *Behold He Cometh. An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1969); William Hendricksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (1967; reprint: Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007); A Feuillet, "Les 144,000 Israélites marqués d'un sceu," *Novum Testamentum* 9 (1967):191-224.

<sup>5</sup> Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 420.

<sup>6</sup> William S. Babcock, trans., *Tyconius: The Book of Rules* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 97.

<sup>7</sup> Roger Gryson, ed., *Tyconii Afri. Expositio Apocalypseos*. CCSL 107A (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011), 148. My translation of: *Centum quadraginta quattuor milia omnis omnino ecclesia est.*

<sup>8</sup> Caesarius of Arles, *Expositio in Apocalypsim*. In *Sancti Caesarii Arelatensis opera omnia*. Edited by Germain Morin (Bruges, Belgium: Desclée, De Brouwer, and Cie, 1942), 2:228.

<sup>9</sup> A. W. Adams, ed., *Primasius episcopus Hadrumetinus. Commentarius in Apocalypsin*. CCSL 92 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1985), 108. My translation of: *evidenter agnoscitur hoc mistici numeri indicio innumerabilem electorum multitudinem praesignari.*

<sup>10</sup> Gryson, ed., *Commentaria minora in Apocalypsin Johannis*. CCSL 107:119. My translation of: *cxliii, in quo numero omnium beatorum summa concluditur.*

<sup>11</sup> Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypsis*. PL 93:150. My translation of: *Hoc numero finito, innumerabilis significatur totius Ecclesiae multitudo.*

<sup>12</sup> Gryson, *Commentaria minora*, 261. My translation of: *in hoc finito numero infinitus numerus fidelium significatur.*

<sup>13</sup> Alcuin, *Commentariorum in Apocalypsin libri quinque*. PL 101:1130. My translation of: *Finitus est numerus por infinito: nec ad duodecimo tanum tribus Israel pertinet; sed omnis Ecclesia per hunc in electis designatur.*

<sup>14</sup> Michael Barber, *Coming Soon: Unlocking the Book of Revelation* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2005), 108; Kealy, *Apocalypse of John*, 140; John Tickle, *The Book of Revelation. A Catholic Interpretation of the Apocalypse* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1983), 64.

<sup>15</sup> Bernard McGinn, "Turning Points in Early Christian Apocalypse Exegesis," in Robert J. Daly, *Apocalyptic Thought in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 81-105 at 99.

<sup>16</sup> Gryson, *Commentaria minora*, 211. My translation of: *iste numerus perfectus est, omnium martyrium multitudinem, qui passuri sunt, significat.*

<sup>17</sup> Gryson, *Commentaria minora*, 318. My translation of: *iste numerus perfectus est omnium martyrium.*

<sup>18</sup> Collins, *Apocalypse*, 52-3.

<sup>19</sup> Scott Hahn, *The Lamb's Supper* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 87-8.

<sup>20</sup> Montague Rhodes James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1926), 565.

<sup>21</sup> E. Romero-Pose, *Sancti Beati a Liebana Commentarius in Apocalypsin*, Vol. 1 (Rome: Typis Officinae Polygraphicae, 1985), 660. My translation of: *Non, ut quidam putant, isti sunt infants quos Herodes occidit...illi enim tantum ex tribu Iuda fuerunt.*

- <sup>22</sup> There is some scholarly debate over whether the writings that make up the Hippolytus corpus came from one author or two Hippolyti, one from the east and one from the west. For a summary of the issue, see chapter one of W. Brian Shelton, *Martyrdom from Exegesis in Hippolytus: An Early Church Presbyter's Commentary on Daniel* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2008).
- <sup>23</sup> Doubts about the existence of two separate works, an *Apology for the Apocalypse and Gospel of John the Apostle and Evangelist* and *Chapters against Gaius* abound in scholarship. The tendency is to view them as one work. However, some scholars think there may have been a florilegia of Hippolytus' comments on the Apocalypse gathered from his other works that later commentators used. There are also questions about the extent to which the fragments attributed to Hippolytus reflect his thought and about the editorializing of the later commentators. Other passages attributed to Hippolytus' lost writing on the Apocalypse are extant in Coptic and Old Slavonic. See McGinn, "Turning Points in Early Christian Apocalypse Exegesis," 91. According to McGinn, fragments are still being discovered.
- <sup>24</sup> Prigent and Stehly, "Les fragments du De Apocalypsi d'Hippolyte," 320. My translation of the French. Special thanks to Stephanie Brown of Denver, Colorado who assisted me with the translation.
- <sup>25</sup> Origen, *Scholia in Apocalypsin*. Scholium 31. Constantin Diobouniotis and Adolf Harnack, eds., *Der Scholien-Kommentar des Origenes zur Apokalypse Johannis* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrich, 1911), 37-8. Translation by Thomas Schmidt of Utica, New York with slight alterations by me. Used by permission. While some of the scholia are clearly not Origen's, Schmidt believes Scholium 31, from which this paragraph came, is Origen's. In a personal correspondence dated May 24, 2011, Schmidt wrote: "I believe Scholium 31 is from Origen. It greatly parallels his comments in his *Commentary on John 1.1-2*." Cf. Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 1.1-2. ANF 10:297-8.
- <sup>26</sup> Eucumenius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*. On Rev 7:4. Translated in William C. Weinrich, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament XII. Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 105.
- <sup>27</sup> Andrew of Caesarea, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*. On Rev 7:8. Translated in Weinrich, *Revelation*, 108.
- <sup>28</sup> Steve Gregg, ed., *Revelation: Four Views* (Nashville: Nelson, 1997), 130.
- <sup>29</sup> Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code* (Nashville: Nelson, 2007), 127.
- <sup>30</sup> Jay Adams, *The Time is at Hand: Prophecy and the Book of Revelation* (Woodruff, SC: Timeless Texts, 1966, 2000), 65.
- <sup>31</sup> Kenneth Gentry, Jr., *The Beast of Revelation*, Rev. ed. (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2002), 128-30.
- <sup>32</sup> Cited in Weinrich, *Revelation*, 333.
- <sup>33</sup> "De Enoch et Helia," MGH, Auctorum Antiquissimorum, Vol. 9 (Berlin: Weidmannos, 1982), 493. My translation of: *Dicitur venire Enoch et Helia praedicaturi adventum domini et diem iudicii mensibus XLII. Creditur acis de singulis tribubus excepto tribu Dan, pro qua reponitur tribu Levi XII virginum signatorum et interfectorum Christo.*
- <sup>34</sup> Ioannes Gil, ed., *Corpus Scriptorum Muzarabicorum*, Vol. 2 (Madrid: Instituto "Antonio de Nebrija," 1973), 126. My translation of: *Et tunc creditura sunt illa CXXXVIII milia virginum ex Iudeis ex duodecimo tribus filiorum Srael, quos Ioannes in libro Apocalipsin signatos esse commemorat.*
- <sup>35</sup> Cited in Gregg, *Revelation*, 131, from Gaebelein, *The Revelation: An Analysis and Exposition of the Last Book of the Bible* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1915).
- <sup>36</sup> John F. Walvoord, "Revelation" in Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary. New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 949.
- <sup>37</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Revelation 1-11* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 219.
- <sup>38</sup> Cited in Gregg, *Revelation*, 133 from Lindsey's *There's a New World Coming* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1973).
- <sup>39</sup> Mal Couch, *A Bible Handbook to Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2001), 175.