

A STUDY OF REVELATION 7:2-9

An Exegetical Paper

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ABSTRACT OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

1. Main Idea.

After John had seen six seals broken on a scroll which brought devastation to much of Israel, an angel called a pause on the action to seal 144,000 servants of the Lamb against the final stage of judgment. These Jewish Christians escaped the destruction of Jerusalem in the following judgments and went on to become a part of a Church which John saw as a great multitude of every tribe and nation.

2. Outline. Revelation 7:2-9.

- I. 144,000 servants of the Lamb were sealed against the remaining judgments (vv. 2-9)
 - A. An angel from the east told the angels holding the four winds of completed judgment to wait for the sealing (vv. 2-3)
 - B. John heard the number of those sealed (vv. 4-8)
 1. 144,000 were sealed from the tribes of Israel (v. 4)
 2. The 144,000 were broken down into 12 tribes of 12,000 (vv. 5-8)
 - C. John saw a great multitude emerge after the enumeration of the 144,000 (v. 9)

Introduction

“Why read a book you cannot understand?” This question, which sounds perfectly logical, is often applied to the biblical book of Revelation. While many people would not specifically say, “I shall not read Revelation,” this is the usual *de facto* practice among those many people who feel as though the entire book is an enigma. They are not entirely unjustified in this. Countless years of bad interpretations, gimmicky Bible prophets, date-setting, and other abuses to the book of Revelation have poisoned many wells against the God-given apocalyptic epistle. Even so, as Scripture, the book remains authoritative for the people of God, and God intends for its message to be read, understood, and applied to them today. One particular passage which the author of this study has found intriguing for these purposes is Revelation 7:2-9. In this text, 144,000 people are sealed by an angel in the face of coming judgments on the earth and the sea. Who are these 144,000? What did the seal do for them? What does the account mean for Christians today? These questions can be profitable if answered, and this essay will seek to make these answers clear from the text of Revelation itself. Specifically, the text will be probed in its historical and literary context to find that a hybrid preterist-historicist, apocalyptic interpretation of the 144,000 as Jewish Christians who escape Jerusalem before its destruction by Rome makes the most sense of the passage, and that this interpretation, despite involving now past events, holds important theological and practical applications for the people of God in the present day as they await the final, visible, bodily return of Christ to consummate history.

On Textual Context

Context is always determinative for interpreting literature, as much for Scripture as anything else, and in Revelation, the situation is no different. In fact, the book of Revelation probably requires more attention to historical and literary context than any other book in the New

Testament, or even any other book in Scripture. The debates about preterism, historicism, futurism, and idealism are very often debates about context, about when Revelation was written and what kind of literature the author intended to write. The various interpretive options for Revelation rise or fall with context, therefore these questions will now be treated at some length.

Historical-Cultural Context

The interpretation of Revelation 7 and the book as a whole may be more determined by historical factors than anything else in the New Testament. The very possibility of certain interpretive options is ruled out or made largely plausible depending on the details of historical context. The first of these details, however, probably makes the least interpretive difference, namely authorship. The author of Revelation identifies himself as John in the first verse. This is the only detail given. When interpreters raise the question “John who?” the text offers no clear answer. The most common positions are John the Apostle and a man called John the Elder from Ephesus, though John the Baptist and others have also been suggested. The traditional church consensus has been that John the Apostle is the John of Revelation. Paige Patterson listed early church sources for this view to include Irenaeus, Justin, Melito of Sardis, Tertullian, Origen, Hippolytus, and the Muratorian Canon.¹ There seems little reason to question this overall, and few evangelical scholars do. Perhaps the strongest line of evidence is the literary resemblance between Revelation and John’s other writings, especially his Gospel. Both call Jesus the “Word” of God² and the “Lamb” of God.³ Both treat believers (Jewish particularly) as the true Jews.⁴ The books taken together are bookended with commonalities like Jesus at a wedding feast⁵ and God

¹ Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, New American Commentary Series (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2012), pg. 21.

² John 1:1, Rev. 19:13.

³ John 1:36, Rev. 5:6-13.

⁴ This theme is present throughout John underneath but surfaces well in John 8:39-59. Cf. Rev. 7:3-13, 12:17.

⁵ John 2:1-11, Rev. 19:6-9.

“tabernacling” with men.⁶ These important connections are strong enough, but only scratch the surface of the deep unity between Revelation and the other Johannine writings. Therefore, taking John the Apostle as the author is a solid and reasonable move.

Far more important than authorship to interpreting Revelation is dating. The debate between preterism with its cousins against futurism, historicism, and the like depends rather largely on when Revelation was written. The two major options are the latter days of Domitian, which would be around AD 95, and the time of Nero shortly before the war with Rome, around AD 65-68 (though there have been other suggestions for early dates as well). Since preterists and the like take AD 70 as the referent of much of Revelation, they require an early date (with some exceptions to be noted later). In favor of an early date are the widely noted problem that evidence for much persecution under Domitian is quite limited⁷ and the testimonies of Epiphanius⁸ and the Muratorian Canon, which speaks of Paul as “following the rule of his predecessor John”—who wrote the Apocalypse—in writing letters only to seven churches.⁹ On the other hand, evidence suggests that Neronian persecution was mostly limited to Rome, and according to Patterson, the majority of patristic witnesses attest a later date, including the likes of Irenaeus and Eusebius.¹⁰ The value of some of these witnesses can be questioned for their ambiguity or the fact that many of them actually cite Irenaeus for their information, thus reducing the real number of sources, but regardless there are still more representatives for a late date than an early one. The imperial cult

⁶ John 1:14, Rev. 21:3.

⁷ Patterson, *Revelation*, pg. 22.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Caius, “Canon Muratorianus,” in *The Ante-nicene Fathers / Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian, Appendix*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, D.D. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), accessed March 29, 2017, https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05/Page_603.html.

¹⁰ Patterson, *Revelation*, pg. 22-23.

also seems to have better developed in Domitian's time, with many calling him "master" and "god," even in the seven cities addressed in Revelation.¹¹

In the end, the decision on dating is quite difficult, but a later date seems to have a slight edge. This, if true, rules out full/hyper-preterism altogether and makes most partial preterist interpretations very difficult to sustain. However, for those preterist cousins who view only certain parts of the book as about AD 70 and more of it as about the fall of Rome, there remains the possibility, anticipated in some of the Old Testament prophecies and seen on a small scale in the first verses of Revelation 12, that the material about the fall of Jerusalem was included as a theological interpretation of recent events which then sets the eschatological context for the further, prophetic content of the book. This paper will assume this view quite tentatively with the background qualification that an early date might also be correct. No matter what view of dating is taken, Revelation is quite clear that the historical situation of the churches was either suffering or impending suffering under intense persecution by both Jews and Romans.

Literary Context

With the historical context of Revelation covered, the text of 7:2-9 needs also to be situated in literary context. The first important element of literary context is the canonical context of the whole book. Revelation is canonically the last book of Scripture, is quite possibly the last book to be written, and discusses the "last things." The place of Revelation is as a conclusion. The words of John in Revelation wrap up the eschatological narrative of Christ in the New Testament, the creational narrative of the larger Scriptures, and the personal narratives of the churches to which John wrote. Revelation 7 will need to be interpreted with this note in mind.

¹¹ Craig S. Keener, *Revelation: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), "Introduction."

The place of the text also requires for understanding knowledge of the book's genre. Scholarly consensus puts the genre of Revelation as basically apocalyptic with epistolary and prophetic elements as well.¹² This has been a surprisingly debatable, with some like Andy Woods arguing that the whole classification of apocalyptic serves simply as a convenient preterist tool to avoid the necessities of literal interpretation, akin to playing loose with the Constitution by calling it a "living document."¹³ The arguments against this classification, however, are unconvincing and smack of pedantry. As an apocalyptic but still prophetic work in epistolary form, Revelation describes significant present and future events in the life of the Church and the world using hyperbolic, cosmic, mythological, and poetic imagery. The primary interpretive issues will revolve around just how future and just how symbolic Revelation's imagery actually is. In light of the historical context, the connections with the Old Testament prophets, and the parallels with Jesus' Olivet Discourse, as well as much internal evidence, the most likely referents for Revelation's material are three specific horizons: the war with Rome which destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70, the conquest of the Roman Empire by Christ and His Church, and the final judgment and new creation. To substantiate this entire framework is beyond the scope of this essay, but hopefully, the arguments employed in the interpretation of 7:2-9 will suffice to plausibly show how such a reading can serve to illumine the whole Apocalypse.

With the canonical context and literary genre of Revelation in view, the stage is set to examine the context of the text in question, 7:2-9, within the book. Revelation 7 sits approximately a quarter of the way through the book, in an interlude between the sixth and

¹² Keener, *Revelation: NIV*, "Introduction."

¹³ Andy Woods, "A Case for the Futurist Interpretation of the Book of Revelation," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 13, no. 1 (2008): pg. 3-4.

seventh seals of the scroll opened by the Lamb. The interlude generates suspense and offers a break to see an important angle in the action. N. T. Wright noted:

So far the lamb has opened six of the seals, and we are all agog for the seventh, which will surely bring a decisive climax, as the scroll can at last be read. But instead John keeps us in suspense, a trick he will play more than once more. Like the souls under the altar, we must wait and watch while something else happens first.¹⁴

The remaining meaning of the interlude is largely determined by the meaning of the seven seal judgments. To what do they refer? There are several possibilities, but only three are particularly relevant to this look. First, they may refer in a mostly literal way to judgments which are presently still future. Next, they may refer to judgments upon the Roman Empire leading up to its fall and conquest by the followers of the Lamb. Finally, they may refer to judgments upon Israel and Jerusalem in the war with Rome in AD 66-70 (or 73). The last of these seems the most likely. A primary reason for this is the parallels between the seals and Jesus' Olivet Discourse. The Olivet Discourse is rather explicitly, at least at the beginning, about the impending judgment on Jerusalem,¹⁵ and C. Martin Pate, along with others, has noted the close connection between the nature and order of the seal judgments with the eschatological signs Jesus gave at Olivet.¹⁶ In Matthew and Mark, the order is wars, international strife, famine, earthquakes (this reversed with the last in Mark), persecutions, and cosmic disturbances. The first six seals are wars, strife, famine, pestilence, persecutions, and earthquakes with cosmic disturbances.¹⁷ The lists are not identical, but neither are the Olivet lists as given in Matthew, Mark, and Luke to each other. The parallels are sufficiently close to suggest that the two texts are in fact about the same events, which should be understood as the war with Rome and fall of Jerusalem.

¹⁴ N. T. Wright, "Revelation 7:1-8: Sealing God's People," in *Revelation for Everyone*, The New Testament for Everyone (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

¹⁵ Matt. 24:1-3, Mark 13:1-4, Luke 21:5-24.

¹⁶ C. Marvin Pate, "A Progressive Dispensationalist View of Revelation," in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), "The Messianic Woes."

¹⁷ Ibid.

If, in fact, the seal judgments represent judgment on Israel, then perhaps Andrew Perriman's outline of Revelation is quite likely. He employed the following structure:

Chapter 1: John's vision of Jesus
Chapters 2-3: Letters to churches
Chapters 4-5: The Lamb is worthy to open the judgment scroll
Chapters 6-9: The seals open and judge Israel
Chapters 10-14: The Son of Man judges the nations
Chapters 15-19: Rome is destroyed and the kingdom given to martyrs
Chapters 20-22: Final judgment and new creation¹⁸

Chapter seven, then, would stand in the middle of the judgment against Israel as the heavenly interlude between the sixth and seventh seals. If this is correct, the implications for understanding 7:2-9 are massive, and they will be explored later. Nonetheless, there is also the possibility that the seals are in fact judgments on Rome rather than Israel, in which case they are probably the first instance of a cycle of visions covering the same judgment reality which also includes the trumpets and bowls.

Finally, the intertextual context of Revelation 7:2-9 is of extreme import. There are two other texts closely related to this which shed light on its meaning. The first, Revelation 14:1-5, is in the same book and refers to the same group of 144,000. Most likely, these are the same people, and thus the two passages can shed light on each other. The second is an Old Testament text with great similarities, namely Ezekiel 9. In Ezekiel 9, Ezekiel had just been shown pagan abominations being performed in God's temple, and thus God ordered angels to kill all the people. Before they could kill, they were required to mark the foreheads of all the faithful who mourned at these detestable practices. These people were to be spared. The parallel is strong and clear, so the connection will need to factor into the interpretation of 7:2-9 later. So the only remaining aspect to cover before this interpretation is the content of the text itself.

¹⁸ Andrew Perriman, "Revelation, the Book Of, and the Defeat of Pagan Empire," *P.OST* (blog), February 28, 2014, accessed February 23, 2017, <http://www.postost.net/lexicon/revelation-book-defeat-pagan-empire>.

Understanding the Text

The Context of Revelation 7:2-9

In Revelation 7, after the sixth seal has been broken, angels were restraining the four winds of the earth when John saw an angel arise from the east (literally the “rising of the sun”). In his hand, he held the seal of the living God. Apparently in command, he told the angels in charge of the destruction of the earth and sea to wait until all of the servants of God had been sealed on their foreheads before hurting anything.

Following this command, John heard those who were sealed enumerated. The total was 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. The sealed were then broken down by tribe. There were 12,000 each from Judah, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin. Then John looked and saw a countless multitude of utter diversity in white robes standing before the throne before the Lamb and holding palm branches. Although the text under immediate consideration ends here, immediately following this the multitude broke out in praise of the God and the Lamb.

To simplify the core material, there are four distinct “moments” in this short text. First, the angel commands the other angels to wait for the sealing. Second, 144,000 from the tribes of Israel are sealed. Third, someone declares the tribal breakdown of this 144,000. Fourth and finally, John suddenly sees a great multitude in heaven. Each of these moments has a particular significance, and the significance of each may be a matter of debate, though without doubt the correct understanding of each has important ramifications for all of the rest. Accordingly, the meanings of the four shall be examined individually and in relation, though the second and last of these shall be handled together for the sake of brevity and clarity.

Interpreting the Four Moments

The Nature and Purpose of the Seal

The first important question with which the interpreter is confronted is simply to what the “sealing” refers. What is literally happening? What judgment is about to take place in Revelation 7:2, and how does the sealing relate? There are two components to this answer. First is the literal referent. There are a few possible options. While most interpreters agree that this seal offers some kind of protection, particularly from the seal judgments,¹⁹ the precise meaning of this protection is debated. Each interpretive camp views the seal judgments differently, leading to different ideas of what protection entails. The view advanced above in which the seal judgments are parallel to the Olivet eschatological signs about the fall of Jerusalem casts the protection as somehow related to this event. Kenneth Gentry offers a view of this kind in which the 144,000 are enabled to escape Jerusalem before its demolition by the suicide of Nero in AD 68.²⁰ Perriman concurs,²¹ and this view aligns closely with the use of the same concept in Ezekiel 9. If, however, the seal judgments were targeted against Rome rather than Israel, then the seal may serve another purpose, such as marking out the 144,000 for vindication and resurrection by baptism or their confession.

This leads to the question of the seal’s theological significance. Regardless of what specific protection the 144,000 received, the theology of the seal is rich. The word for “seal” is σφραγίζω (*sphragizō*), which appears a handful of times in the New Testament. Sometimes the sense is a physical fixing,²² and there are some other uses like “verify” or “affirm,”²³ but the

¹⁹ See, for example, the agreement in such diverse interpreters as Patterson, *Revelation*, Rev. 7:2-3 and Wright, “Sealing God’s People.”

²⁰ Gentry, “A Preterist View of Revelation,” in *Four Views*, “The 144,000 Saints.”

²¹ Perriman, “Revelation, the Book Of,” in which he summarizes the Rev. 7 as “righteous Jews in Judea are sealed against the coming destruction.”

²² E.g. Matt. 27:66.

dominant sense is “to put a mark on an object to show possession, authority, identity, or security.”²⁴ The 144,000 were claimed by God as His own people, to be safeguarded by Him against all competition for their lives. Moreover, in Revelation 14:1, the mark on their foreheads appears to be the names of the Father and the Lamb, which means they belong to both. Peter Leithart has remarked on the significance of each name in the seal.²⁵ The name of the Lamb indicates that they share in His role as “faithful witness,”²⁶ which leads to sharing in His martyr’s death and His victorious resurrection.²⁷ The name of the Father means they are held by the providence of the One who was, who is, and who is to come.²⁸ Even if the 144,000 are a limited group, this is clearly baptismal imagery,²⁹ which therefore also has wider significance.³⁰

The Identities of the 144,000 and the Multitude

Closely related to the nature of the sealing is the identity of the sealed, and related to this identity is the identity of the great multitude in 7:9. So who are these 144,000 sealed by the angels before God’s judgment? There are three views which will be of concern here. Futurists in general, and Dispensational interpreters in particular, tend to take a basically literal view. The 144,000 are a literally numbered group of ethnic Jews, made up of 12,000 from each tribe, who will be marked out by God during a time of great tribulation for protection from His impending wrath.³¹ In this case the great multitude is the Gentile church. On the other hand, many interpreters think the 144,000 are simply symbolic of the whole church, and thus they are

²³ John 3:33, Rom. 15:28.

²⁴ John R. Kohlenberger, III, “G4972,” in *NIV Word Study Bible* (Zondervan, 2016).

²⁵ Peter J. Leithart, “Sealed with the Name,” *First Things*, March 30, 2015, <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/leithart/2015/03/sealed-with-the-name-1>.

²⁶ Rev. 1:5.

²⁷ Leithart, “Sealed.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Matt. 28:19.

³⁰ Leithart, “Sealed.”

³¹ An example proponent of this common view: Patterson, *Revelation*, Rev. 7:2-3.

identical to the great multitude. This position is common to idealists,³² some preterists, and many more eclectic interpreters.³³ Finally, most preterists and some of their cousins take what might be called a “literal apocalyptic” view of the 144,000 as generally representing the believing Jews who escaped the judgment Israel faced in AD 70. Robert Gentry represents this view in very specific terms:

The first six seals represent the early stage of the Jewish war, wherein Vespasian fought his way through Galilee toward Jerusalem. But before he has an opportunity to besiege Jerusalem, the action pauses as these angels seal the 144,000 from the twelve tribes of Israel...before the Jewish war reaches and overwhelms Jerusalem, God providentially causes a brief cessation of hostilities, allowing the Jewish Christians in Judea to escape (as Jesus urges in Matt. 24:16-22). This happened when the emperor Nero committed suicide (A.D. 68), causing the Roman generals Vespasian and Titus to cease operations and withdraw for a year because of the turmoil in Rome.³⁴

Not all who take this “literal apocalyptic” view necessarily agree with all the precise details, but the common gist is that the 144,000 are Jewish Christians, not necessarily a literal number, spared from the final judgments on Jerusalem. The multitude is then the interethnic, Jewish-Gentile church which results and carries on the existence of the people of God beyond the judgment on Israel.

Each option has different strengths and weaknesses. The futurist interpretation reasonably takes the charged Jewish description seriously, resisting the overly spiritualistic tendencies of many non-futurist interpreters. Nonetheless, there are a few telling problems. First, a total of 144,000 made of units of 12,000 is painfully symbolic in significance. Big round numbers built on the thematic numbers of 10 (symbolizing completeness) and 12 (consistently referring to the fullness of Israel’s tribes) hardly lend themselves to strict literal interpretation.³⁵ Likewise, the specific list of tribes is simply bizarre if taken as a literal enumeration, as it diverges in

³² Hamstra, “An Idealist View of Revelation,” in *Four Views*, “The Seven Seals.”

³³ E.g. Wright, “Sealing God’s People.”

³⁴ Gentry, “A Preterist View of Revelation,” in *Four Views*, “The 144,000 Saints.”

³⁵ *Ibid.*

substantial ways from all the tribal lists in the Old Testament (this peculiarity will be addressed in more detail later). Capping both issues is the probability that the tribes no longer exist. The problem is not simply that human records have been lost, for futurists are correct to argue that the omniscient God could recall the true records in that case.³⁶ Yet this possibility assumes that the tribal distinctions are still genealogically extant, which is unlikely. With the loss of human records also certainly has come the total intermingling so that none of the tribes are even theoretically distinguishable.

The second view, that the 144,000 represent the whole Church, enjoys wide support from many interpreters and has some formidable strengths. The numbers, as just mentioned, are clearly loaded with symbolic value. John also seems to have treated the Church or believers generally as the true Jews.³⁷ In chapter fourteen, the 144,000 appear again as virgins, which occasionally symbolizes moral purity, and they are described as those who “follow the Lamb wherever he goes,” “were redeemed from humanity...to God and the Lamb,” and maintained truthfulness.³⁸ These statements all seem to apply to the whole Church. Moreover, they may be identified literally with the multitude: just as John earlier heard about a lion and turned to see a lamb, both of whom are Jesus,³⁹ now John heard a roll call for 144,000 redeemed Jews and turned to see a great, multiethnic multitude, both of whom represented the Church. This view lacks obvious problems but does raise two questions. First, why the dual imagery for the Church? What is the purpose of the two-fold description? Second, if John had wanted to say that the 144,000 are literally ethnic Jews, then there seems to be little more he could have done to make

³⁶ Woods, “A Case for Futurism,” pg. 16.

³⁷ See essentially the entire Gospel of John, and Rev. 2-3.

³⁸ Rev. 14:4-5.

³⁹ Rev. 5:6-7

the point explicit.⁴⁰ These are not fatal flaws, but they do leave space for the possibility of the third view.

The “literal apocalyptic” view has perhaps the best strength. Like the more futurist, literal view, it takes seriously the explicitly Jewish description of the 144,000 and resists over-spiritualizing. Like in the second view, the clearly symbolic nature of the enumeration receives full weight. This also corresponds to a probable, Old Testament-grounded understanding of the sealing as protection from a historical, military judgment. The relation of the 144,000 to the great multitude also makes sense: these 144,000 are firstfruits in surviving God’s judgment on the world, but the great multitude represents the final, multiethnic product when the whole ordeal is passed after Christ conquers Rome. In addition, since the 144,000 are not an exact literal group but rather representative of rescued Jews, the tribal list does not present the same problem. Instead, the list can function in another symbolic sense, such as echoing Old Testament military censuses to portray these people as Christ’s eschatological army.⁴¹ The tribal list, in fact, will need to be examined next.

The Significance of the Tribal List

If the sealed 144,000 do indeed represent Jews who God rescued from the destruction of Jerusalem, or even if they represent the entire Church, what is the significance of the tribal enumeration in 7:5-8? This list has endlessly puzzled commentators for a few peculiar features. The names and order of the names in this tribal list does not match any of the lists in the Old Testament, and in fact does not even resemble them much at all. The order in this text is Judah, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin. This does not match the birth order of Jacob’s sons or even the common device of

⁴⁰ See Woods, “A Case for Futurism,” pg. 14, and Keener, *Revelation: NIV*, “Revelation 7:1-8.”

⁴¹ Keener, *Revelation: NIV*, “Revelation 7:1-8”

grouping them by their mothers (Jacob's proper wives Leah and Rachel, and their maidservants Bilhah and Zilpah). Additionally, because Joseph's tribe was divided between Ephraim and Manasseh, most lists include both of them while subtracting Levi (since the priestly tribe had no land and was set apart to God) or some other tribe to keep a total of twelve. This list, however, includes Levi, Joseph, and Manasseh while excluding Ephraim and Dan. All of these oddities have led many commentators to agree with the suggestion that "there seems to be no particular reason for the order in which the tribes are given."⁴²

There are, nonetheless, some possible hints of meaning. Part of the significance of using such a counted tribal list to describe a group not literally numbered may be the Old Testament association of census and army. John may well have been presenting the 144,000 sealed as the eschatological army of the Lamb, marked out for victory over the pagan empire which opposed Him and them.⁴³ Is there, however, any meaning to the specific names and order of the tribes? Christopher Smith has suggested that an order is indeed discernable and that this order serves to highlight the nature of the Church as a true or new Israel.⁴⁴ Judah has been promoted to the first for the obvious reason that Jesus the Messiah came from Judah. He is the head of this redeemed and sealed body. Reuben, Smith says, comes next to signify that the Jews are properly the firstborn heirs of the covenant.⁴⁵ He is then followed by the sons of the handmaidens, Gad, Asher, and Naphtali (with Dan excluded and replaced by Manasseh). These sons, having been born of less proper "wives," have been promoted high in the list in representation of the inclusion of the

⁴² Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pg. 170, quoted in Christopher R. Smith, "The Portrayal of the Church as the New Israel in the Names and Order of the Tribes in Revelation 7:5-8," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 39 (June 1990): pg. 112, accessed March 16, 2017, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rh&AN=ATLA0000828830&site=ehost-live>.

⁴³ Keener, *Revelation: NIV*, "Revelation 7:1-8."

⁴⁴ Smith, "The Church as New Israel in Rev. 7:5-8", pg. 113.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 115.

Gentiles in the covenant.⁴⁶ Those who had lesser rights have now been fully included. Finally, the remaining sons of the true wives—Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin—take their place at the end of the list to show that the rest of the Jews are not abandoned but are rather destined for the day when “all Israel will be saved.”⁴⁷

Whether Smith’s rather elaborate interpretation of the tribal list is correct warrants further debate, but his suggestion does indicate that there may be a real significance to the list here. Of course, if he is right, the list would seem to favor the view that the 144,000 represent the whole Church rather than the view adopted above in which they are Christian Jews rescued during from Jerusalem’s fall. These two components to 7:2-9 need not conflict, though. There remains the possibility that the tribal list is meant to point forward from the 144,000 to the great multitude. Christian Jews escaped judgment on Israel, and following this judgment the people of God grew in a new way as a multiethnic, Jew-Gentile community who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. The tribal list’s focus on Gentile inclusion could then serve as a bridge connecting the 144,000 to their larger destiny.

Concluding Points and Applications

Summary of the Interpreted Text

If the understanding of the four moments in the content of Revelation 7:2-9 put forth in this paper is correct, then the passage runs as follows. In verse two, six seal judgments had already been unleashed on Israel through the armies of Rome, the angels were preparing to unleash the judgment winds which would bring the climax of the seals—the destruction of Jerusalem—when another angel told them to stop and wait until the believing Jews still in

⁴⁶ Ibid, pg. 114.

⁴⁷ Ibid, pg. 115, and Rom. 11:26.

Jerusalem could escape. This opportunity came most likely in AD 68 when Nero committed suicide. Many Christian Jews heeded Jesus' warning from Luke 21:20-24 and fled for their lives. These dispersed Jews joined other cells of Christ-followers, ultimately to become part of a great multitude from every tribe and nation which would carry on the existence of the people of God into the next stage in eschatological history, namely the war of the beast Rome against Christ and His people. By their witness, they served as the Lamb's army, and they advanced His kingdom against the kingdom of the beast. This is, in fact, not the author's original position (which saw the 144,000 as symbolizing the Church at large, equivalent to the great multitude) but a conclusion of study. The strengths of this view over its predecessor, while perhaps not decisive, were sufficient to change the course of this paper.

Training under the Lamb's Army: Applications from the 144,000

With a solid understanding of Revelation 7:2-9 in its original context in place, the interpreter may find many ways to mine theological and practical applications from this passage of Scripture, which like all passages is "inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."⁴⁸ A few initial suggestions shall be offered here in two categories: theological significance and practical significance.

Theological Significance

Revelation 7:2-9 is a rich theological text. Several important themes arise from careful study. A first point is that God offers protection for His people in times of judgment. This happened in the days of the Flood when He rescued Noah and his family by telling them to build an ark. During the Exodus, the Israelites were spared from most of the plagues, climaxing in their exemption from the death-angel during Passover by the blood of a lamb. In the many

⁴⁸ 2 Tim. 3:16.

judgments by which God afflicted Israel in the time of the prophets, God always left a remnant, and even through the exile, they survived the tumult of changing empires (which did not survive) until God brought them home again. Finally, in this text, Jesus' coming marked out a remnant, those who bear His seal, who escaped the final judgment on unfaithful Israel. No matter what lies ahead, and no matter what judgments God sees fit to send, He will always provide a seal for His people, so that whoever endures to the end will be saved.

Another important point is the confessional, identifying nature of the seal. By the seal, the 144,000 were marked with the name of the Father and of the Lamb. As mentioned earlier, this echoes baptism into "the name." There is a confessional character to this. Those who God preserves and protects are those who confess the Father and the Son—God and His Lamb—no matter what the cost.⁴⁹ Ultimately, the seal reminds the reader that "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved... For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."⁵⁰ Salvation is by confession, which is to say by faith. Those who depend and trust upon the name of the true God, and they alone, shall be redeemed.

Finally, the story of the 144,000 who survived and went on to join the great multitude as martyred witnesses recalls, going back to baptism, the integration of the people of God into the story of the Lamb. The nature of the Church to follow Jesus, as the 144,000 follow the Lamb wherever He goes, even into death, so that in the end she will share in His resurrection and His victorious reign. Then He who deserves and receives all glory and worship as Lord of all will share His benefits with His servants. Being baptized with Christ into death means a guarantee of

⁴⁹ Daniel Istrate, "Sealing the Slaves of God: Revelation 7 in the Stream of Biblical-christological Interpretation," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 77, no. 2 (September 2015): pg. 386., accessed March 16, 2017, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLAn3826196&site=ehost-live>.

⁵⁰ Rom. 10:9, 13.

resurrection into His new life,⁵¹ and this applies to all Christians. Yet this baptism into death is not a one-off moment but rather a whole life of repentance, self-denial, and mortification of the flesh.

Practical Significance

Following these theological lines of thought, there are a few clear practical implications for this passage. First, the call of Christians is to do what the 144,000 did. The whole sum of the Christian life is to follow the Lamb in obedience unto death. Christians must suffer, witness, and, when necessary, die for Jesus rather than submit to various competing lords and ideologies in the world. This way of self-sacrifice for the cause of Christ, even when literal martyrdom is not involved, is the way of the Lord and the only assured path to final glory. This self-sacrificing ethic is difficult and unnatural for all people, but perhaps especially modern Western Christians accustomed to comfort and some degree of religious privilege. Such readers of Revelation will need to learn this lesson of the *martyrium via*.

In addition to this, the role of the Church in the mold of the great multitude is to persevere in suffering witness for the sake of conquering the nations for Christ, for she remains the army of the Lamb. Even though a kind of worldwide conquest by the Lord has been accomplished once before in the conversion of the Roman Empire and the gradual replacement of the empire with Christendom, the world today is far from submissive to the rule of Christ, and many nations were not part of the previous narrative at all. Therefore the Church is called to bear witness to the Lordship of Christ in sacrificial, faithful, and loving ways so that the nations might see, repent of their rebellion, and come to confess Jesus as the true Lord of the world who judges and makes war when usurpers try to corrupt His domain.

⁵¹ Rom. 6:4.

The last and final word is the need for faith to the end. As mentioned in the discussion of theological significance, the seal of the 144,000 has a confessional character. Those who are redeemed are those who confess God and the Lamb, who believe in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They depend upon Him at every point, which is the fuel for their steadfastness, willingness to suffer, and their faithful witness. In the end, this faith must trust in the promise of resurrection and vindication. Much will go wrong in this world, many of the Lamb's followers will be slaughtered after Him, and the world will often look on this minority, like 144,000 out of the whole earth, as bizarre enemies. Yet by faith, God's people may go on, trusting in the hope of future glory and eternal life in the likeness of the Lamb Himself.

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