

## The Facebook Commentary on Revelation

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### Revelation Chapter 7

#### Rev 7 (Introduction)—

Chapter seven ends the description of immediate cataclysmic events surrounding the Second Coming of Christ. The rebellious portion of the human race acknowledges its hopeless condition, but without repentance. In hopelessness all cry out, “the great day of his wrath has come, and who is able to stand?” But there is a corresponding reality that the people of God experience in chapter seven, well expressed in Psalm 46, NIV: “God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. . . . Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts. The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.” What Psalm 46 describes in poetry, the sixth seal describes in apocalyptic vision.

The answer to the question of Revelation 6:17 is found in Revelation seven. In a sense, Revelation seven offers two answers to the question “When the great day of his (their) wrath comes, who will be able to stand?” The answer to the question provided in chapter seven is (1) the 144,000 from the tribes of Israel (Rev 7:1-8) and (2) the great multitude from all the nations (Rev 7:9-17). The relationship between the 144,000 and the great multitude is one of the most controverted issues in the book.

The relationship between chapters six and seven is demonstrated in another way. Chapter six began with a series of four horsemen. We noticed that the four horsemen were based on earlier depictions in the book of Zechariah (1:8-17 and 6:1-8). There it was explained to the prophet that the four horses of Zechariah’s vision are the four winds of heaven which go out from the presence of the Lord (Zech 6:5). So the four winds of chapter seven (Rev 7:1-3) are an end-time manifestation of the four horses of the seals. Revelation 6:17 sets the time of chapter seven, the time of the final events of earth’s history. The sixth seal also sets the purpose of chapter seven, to answer the question of who can stand justified before God when that time comes. So the opening verses of chapter seven set the stage for the remainder of the chapter.

#### Rev 7:1-3 (Introduction)—

We have noticed a structural parallel between Revelation six and the Synoptic Apocalypse that Jesus delivered to His disciples (Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, Luke 21). That structural parallel continues and is completed in the first portion of Revelation seven. Revelation 6:12 – 7:3 contains a clear allusion to the sayings of Jesus recorded in Mark 13:24-27 (see also Matthew 24:29-31, Luke 21:25-28 is a little more distant from the wording in Revelation): “But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,<sup>25</sup> and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens

will be shaken. <sup>26</sup> And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup> And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” Mark 13:24-25 parallels Revelation 6:12-14. Mark 13:26 parallels Revelation 6:15-17 and Mark 13:27 parallels Revelation 7:1-3.

There is an additional element in Matthew’s account of the Synoptic Apocalypse (compared to Mark 13). There, as in Revelation, the cataclysmic convulsions of the end are followed by a pause in which God’s faithful are secured (Matt 25:31-46). In Matthew this is described in terms of the separation of sheep and goats. In Revelation, the distinction comes in terms of who is sealed and who is not. The author of Revelation adds to the description of Matthew 24 and 25 the horrific description of Ezekiel 9:1-7. In Ezekiel 9 the mark on the forehead is a mark of protection from the judgment that follows. In Revelation 7 the seal is the mark of protection from the destructive winds that are for a time held back. So chapter seven begins by separating and securing the people of God and goes on to identify them as the 144,000 and the Great Multitude. The first three verses of the chapter focus on this pause to separate and secure the people of God before the End.

There is one difference between the securing of the servants of God in the Synoptic Apocalypse and here in Revelation. The securing of the righteous in Matthew 25 occurs at the Second Coming itself (Matt 25:31). In Revelation it occurs just before.

This passage is also somewhat reminiscent of the *Apocalypse of Baruch* 6:4-5, where four angels with four lamps are instructed not to light them until they are told to do so. Since the apocalyptic book of Baruch is set in the context of Nebuchadnezzar’s conquests of Jerusalem in the time of Jeremiah (Baruch was Jeremiah’s secretary in the Bible), this passage, like Revelation 7, seems to recall Ezekiel 9. In Ezekiel 9 the sealing is a symbolic mark of protection during the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

#### **Rev 7:1—**

“After this I saw **four angels standing at the four corners of the earth**. . .” Since they are operating under God’s command, these are not evil angels, like the three frogs of Revelation 16:13-14. Only the actions of the angels are described, not their physical appearance. The four angels here remind the reader of the four living creatures in chapters four through six. They each have control over fourths of the earth (Rev 6:8), so the connection of the four living creatures with the angels standing at the four corners of the earth here makes sense (see comments on Rev 7 [Introduction]). The concept of “four corners of the earth” implies that the entire earth is the ultimate object of what is about to take place (see Isaiah 11:12 and Ezekiel 7:2). It is somewhat like the contemporary phrase “the four points of the compass.” The four winds are depicted as arising from the north, south, east and west, and spreading out from there, affecting the whole earth. In this imagery, the earth is possibly conceived here as a disc-shaped plane. If the earth is conceived as round, on the other hand, John is pictured looking down on it from heaven above, seeing it spread beneath him like a map. This text recalls Psalm 104:4, where Yahweh makes His angels (or messengers) “winds” (Hebrew: *ruachoth*—see also Jeremiah 49:36; cf. 1 Enoch 18:3).

“After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, **holding back the four winds of the earth**. . .” Winds sweep away chaff and purify the atmosphere, so they are fitting symbols of God’s judgment actions throughout Scripture (1 Kings 19:11; Job 1:19; 21:18;

30:15; Psalm 1:4; 147:18; Isaiah 11:15; 27:8; 32:2; 41:16; Jeremiah 22:22; 49:36-37; 51:1-2; Daniel 2:35; 7:2). Winds are also called God's chariots (Jer 4:13), which God uses to execute judgment (Isa 66:15-16). In the extra-canonical book *Psalms of Solomon* 8:1-2, a strong wind is associated with the sound of many people, so it can be symbolic of human activity, both positive or negative. Since the winds in Revelation 7 have the purpose to hurt (Rev 7:2), they are negative images, it is a hurtful blowing that is being restrained. The four winds represent a final, worldwide catastrophe in the context of the disasters in the sixth seal (on winds as catastrophes see Jeremiah 18:17). So the four angels are depicted as "holding back" (Greek: *kratountas*) the four winds, to delay their actions and the consequences of their actions. The angels are not the creators of these winds, but they have power over them and are restraining them from blowing over the earth.

"In order that the wind might not blow upon **the earth, upon the sea, or upon any tree**. . ." In an extra-canonical Jewish book, the *Sibylline Oracles* 8:203-204, a hurricane is to sweep the earth prior to the resurrection of the dead (see also *Wisdom of Sirach* 39:28). The command in Revelation 7 is to not loose the winds until certain things have happened, but these things are not spelled out until verse three. The winds are not to blow on the earth, the sea, or any tree. The earth and sea together are negative symbols, they are the sources of the two beasts of Revelation 13. The trees, on the other hand, represent God's people (Rev 9:4, see also *Psalms of Solomon* 14:3). Both the wicked and the righteous seem to be in view here. The fate of these groups is differentiated in verse two. As we noted earlier with regard to Psalm 46, the purpose of restraining "the winds" is to safeguard God's faithful ones before general destruction is unleashed (as in Revelation 6:14-17). The final end-time events are not to begin until all of God's people are sealed Rev 7:2-3).

"In order that the wind might not blow upon **the earth, upon the sea, or upon any tree**. . ." The earth, sea and trees will be affected by the releasing of these winds. If these winds are symbolic of catastrophic action, then the earth, sea and trees must also be understood in a symbolic way. The four winds are agents of destruction rather than just literal winds. The question could certainly be asked at this point, if God is doing the restraining, who is doing the hurting? Many of the spiritual and literal disasters in the world are an outcome of human activity, but there is another actor who does not appear in Revelation until later in the book. While John doesn't state it here, that actor is the "angel of the Abyss," Apollyon and Abaddon (Rev 9:11), it is the devil and Satan in the form of the dragon (Rev 12:12-13). God is not the author of destruction, it is Satan. God allows Satan to use this earth as a demonstration of his form of government and its outcome. He in turn seeks to blame God for the suffering and evil in the world. The Book of Revelation is written, in part, to expose that cosmic conflict.

### Rev 7:2—

"And I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun. . ." The mention of "another" angel emphasizes similarity with the first four, but there is also contrast between them. The first four angels are already standing in their place, this angel is ascending (Greek: *anabainonta*) from the east in order to take part in the action of chapter seven. The term "rising of the sun" (Greek: *anatolê heliou*) is somewhat redundant as *anatolê* by itself expresses sunrise, but in this case John leaves no doubt as to the meaning. We know today that if someone or something was approaching from "heaven" (outer space) today, it would appear to

be rising in the east as the earth turns. In this case the angel arises to secure the servants of God in the final crisis. In the midst of the darkness of the final storm, a light arises for the people of God.

Who is this angel from the east (the rising of the sun—Greek: *anatolê*), the commander of the other four angels, and the one who is in ultimate control of events? The possession of the seal means this angel either represents God Himself or one especially favored of God (see Daniel 6:17; and also Genesis 41:42; Esther 3:10; 8:2, 8). Coming from the east has similar significance. In Ezekiel 43:2 it is the glory of God that comes from the east. In Malachi 4:2 the sun of righteousness rises (LXX: *anetelei*) with healing in his wings. If the four angels are the same as or equivalent to the four living creatures, then it would likely be Christ (the Lamb) who is in charge of them.

In the New Testament, the concept of the rising of the sun is always associated with Christ. In Matthew 2:2 and 9 the wise men see a star in the east and come looking for the baby Jesus. In Luke 1:78 the term east or sunrise is applied directly by Zechariah to Jesus himself. And in Revelation 16:12 there are kings who come from the rising of the sun, probably another way of describing the armies of heaven led by the Lamb, the rider on the white horse—Rev 17:14; 19:11-16).

Since the angel here has the authority to command the four archangels, he would seem to be the commander of the heavenly hosts. That commander is called Michael in Revelation 12:7 and Michael is very likely another name of Jesus Christ in the book of Revelation (see comments on Rev 12:7). So we see here a symbol of Jesus Christ in full control of the timing of the final events of the End and, until His people are safely sealed, He does not allow many tragic events to happen. In the next verse, however, the healing agent is expressed in the plural (“until we have sealed [Greek: *sphragisômen*] the servants of God”—Rev 7:3), so all five angels have some role in the sealing.

“And I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having **the seal** of the living God. . .” The phrase “of the living God” (Greek: *theou zôntos*—a shorter version of Revelation 4:9; 5:14; 10:6; and 15:7) indicates that this sealing process is a positive one, perhaps life-giving. The phrase is probably a genitive of ownership. The seal belongs to God and He shares it with those who are in relationship with Him. The use of “seal” (Greek: *sphragida*) here is a play on words. In chapter five you have a book that is sealed with seven seals. In chapter six the seals on that book are broken one by one. For various possible meanings of “sealing” see Rev 5:1 (Excursus on the Identity and Contents of the Sealed Scroll). Sealing of books is done for concealment, to certify the contents or as a sign of ownership. But the seal here is not placed on a book, it is people that are being sealed. So in the comments on the next verse (Rev 7:3) we will explore in greater depth what this sealing of people might mean in the end-time context of Revelation 7. While some have suggested that the seal is the sign of the cross (analogy with the Hebrew letter “tau” that is placed on the foreheads in Ezekiel 9) and others that it is the name and character of God (or Christ—See Rev 14:1-3; 22:4), the text here does not specify the meaning.

“He cried out with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom **it was given to harm the earth and the sea**. . .” The mention of a loud voice is reminiscent of 1:10, 5:2; and 6:10. It is interesting that in verses one and three you have the three-fold grouping of “earth, sea and trees.” But here there is only a two-fold grouping of earth and sea. Since earth and sea are

associated with opponents of God and trees with His faithful people, this distinction is significant. Christ does not give the angels the commission to harm the trees. While the “winds” are capable of harming all three, God’s “permission” (the “was given” [Greek: *edothê*] is a divine passive) is limited to His opponents. This divine passive indicates that God is not the one who destroys or harms (Greek: *adikêsai*) here, another being (unmentioned in this context—but see Rev 9:11) is the cause, but God limits that being’s work. The land and the sea are protected along with the trees until God’s servants are sealed. The wicked are apparently protected along with the righteous even though they get angry with them. When the day comes that God’s people are sealed, all restraint is drawn away from the wicked and they receive the final judgments of the four horsemen/winds. So the reason for holding back on the judgments of the time of the end is that the sealing of God’s servants is not complete--the plagues of the winds are for the wicked and they cannot be unleashed until it is clear just who the righteous are.

### Rev 7:3—

“Do not harm the earth, the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God upon their foreheads.” It is here that the commission to the four angels holding the four winds becomes clear. The winds, whatever they are, will bring harm to the earth, sea and trees, the entire human race. God designs that no harm come to the human race from the final crisis until the servants of God are ready to endure whatever comes. This kind of intervention on God’s part is especially necessary in the troubles of the End-time. But it also illustrates God’s general work of protection throughout human history. This was seen in the context of the blood on the doorpost in Exodus 12:21-23. It is also confirmed in Revelation 9:4 (and in different words, Revelation 3:10), where God’s protection of the sealed within history is affirmed. Who knows how often unbelievers have been spared in tragedy because of the presence of believers who allow God to work through them and for them? The first two chapters of Job give a small glimpse behind the curtain of a larger and less visible conflict behind the visible ones.

“Until we have sealed the servants of our God upon their foreheads.” What does it mean to seal people? In the wider Greco-Roman culture, slaves were sometimes branded on the forehead with the name of their master. As the seat of thought and character, sealing on the forehead would seem to have something to do with the thinking and character that the servants of God would develop in this critical time. The parallel between the sealing of Revelation 7 and the name of God and the Lamb on the forehead (both associated with the 144,000) is supportive of applying this concept to this passage. Furthermore, in Judaism, sealing was associated with circumcision, the bodily sign that one was born a Jew. In the second-century Christian context, sealing was associated with baptism. The latter was no doubt the result of New Testament teaching.

In the New Testament, sealing is related to the reception of the Holy Spirit into one’s life. “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with **a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.**” Ephesians 1:13, NIV (see also Ephesians 4:30). Christ marks His believers with the seal of the Holy Spirit and it is the assurance of salvation--the guarantee of heaven (1 John 2:3; 4:13). The sealing takes place when a person comes to Christ and in the New Testament it is clearly not limited to the End-time. “Nevertheless, God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this

inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his' and 'Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.'" 2 Timothy 2:19. NIV. The latter text offers the clearest summary of the New Testament concept of "seal," "The Lord knows those who are his." Sealing was clearly a present reality in Timothy's day and was the mark of a genuine Christian, as opposed to those who merely profess to be Christian.

Sealing, therefore, is a process that in some sense has gone on throughout the Christian era, but reaches a final climax at the time of the end. Does the sealing of Revelation 7 mean exactly the same thing as it does in Paul? Is it the sealing process at the End a gospel proclamation that causes many to receive the Holy Spirit, become genuine believers and be baptized? If that were the case, Revelation 7 would portray the final proclamation of the gospel, with the result that people at the End are being sealed in the New Testament sense, joining God's faithful people just before the End. This point of view is supported by Revelation 7:14, where the great multitude have washed their robes in the context of the "Great Tribulation," images that parallel the sealing of this passage. But is the sealing of Revelation 7 somehow also different? Is the "sealing the servants of God" sealing people who were already sealed in the original sense? Is there added value in the sealing of the End-time?

It is notable that in this verse sealing is a verb (Greek: *sphragisômen*). The object of that verb is "the servants of God" (Greek: *tous douλους του θεου*). This implies that the objects of the End-time sealing are people who were already sealed in the Pauline sense (Eph 1:13; 4:30) before they received the end-time sealing. That means that the sealing is an additional work of God, a work of deepening spiritual maturity as the end-time approaches. An important Old Testament background, Ezekiel 9, is relevant here. In Ezekiel 9 the marking on the forehead is done in acknowledgement of their prior faithfulness and is added as a mark of protection (Ezek 9:1-7). When everyone who is faithful has been marked, the destroying angels kill those who are not marked. The "servants of God" are those who are known to Him and who are to be protected in the final crisis. The special need for this kind of sealing in Revelation 7 is the danger that comes when the four winds are released.

Unlike the general New Testament view, the sealing in this passage seems to function as a protection more than a validation (Ezekiel 9 not Ephesians 1:13). While recognizing those who are God's, the primary purpose of the seal is to shelter them from the tribulations to come (Rev 7:14). In interpreting Revelation, we should not forget the fundamental meaning of sealing--that which distinguishes genuine Christians from all other people (2 Tim 2:19). But in the final crisis of earth's history, it will take on an additional importance in the sense that it will also be a mark of protection--a protective aura around the follower of Jesus as he or she faces the terrible final events of earth's history.

Stefanovic points out that the opposite of the seal of God in Revelation is the mark of the beast. That mark is received by those who oppose God, His people and the gospel in the final days of earth's history (Rev 13:16-17, see also 14:9; 16:2; 19:20 and 20:4). While the seal of God consists of the name or character of God being applied in the lives of end-time believers, the mark of the beast consists of the name and character of the beast being applied in the lives of his end-time followers. Some of the followers of the beast embrace his character willingly (mark on the forehead), others simply go along for economic and other benefits (mark on the hand). The seal and the mark denote conformity to the character of the respective "God" that

human beings worship at the End. In the final crisis everyone on earth will bear “the image of the demonic or the divine.” (Beatrice Neall, quoted in Stefanovic, second edition, 262)

### **Rev 7:1-3 (Conclusion)—**

This passage is best understood within the larger picture of the book of Revelation. God’s faithful people, named by many names (144,000, great multitude, remnant, saints, etc.) proclaim the final message of God to the world (Rev 14:6-12). During this time they and the entire world are under special protection of God, so that the final work of the gospel can go forth. A counterfeit gospel also goes forth to the world at this time (Rev 16:13-14). As a result of both of these gospel proclamations, all people are more and more conformed into the image of the “God” that they choose to worship. These decisions are confirmed by the seal of God, on the one hand, and the mark of the beast, on the other (Rev 7:1-3; 14:1-3; 13:16-17). Then the whole world is plunged into a Great Tribulation (Rev 7:14; 13:15-17). God’s people are not exempt from that hour of trial (3:10; 17:14), but they are under the special protection of the Holy Spirit during that time and are brought safely through it. When the preaching of the gospel comes to a close and all have been settled into their respective beliefs and characters, God permits “all hell to break loose.” This will demonstrate what the world would be like today if Satan were given a free hand to demonstrate his character and government.

### **Rev 7:1-3 (Spiritual Lessons)**

1) In this passage God is the one who restrains evil and destruction. If God is restraining, who is causing evil and destruction? The answer is not given in this passage. The “Destroyer” (Greek: *Apolluôn*) is only identified later on (Rev 9:11) and is exposed as the dragon who pulled down the stars of heaven (12:4), used Herod to try and destroy the Christ child (12:5), pursued war in heaven and was defeated (Rev 12:7-9), worked through the serpent in the garden (12:9), accuses the “brethren” day and night (12:10), was essentially defeated at the cross (12:11) and will ultimately be defeated after the millennium (20:7-10).

2)—People suffering in hospital beds often ask the question of chaplains, “Is God punishing me? Is that why I am here?” At times like that it is good to be able to say, “No, God is not punishing you. In the words of Jesus, ‘An enemy has done this’” (). There is a grand cosmic conflict going on over the character of God. God chooses to win that conflict, not by force, but by demonstration of who He is. The Enemy accuses God of having a character like his. The trials we experience are a “theater of the universe” (Eph 3:10) in which God and Satan are exposing what they are like so that the true character of God can be seen. The little battles we fight every day are part of a much larger conflict.

The ultimate lesson of texts like this is that God is on our side. God is not the one who brings misery and suffering, there is Another who is doing that. When we learn what God is truly like (demonstrated at the cross—Rev 12:11), we become more and more like Job, who knew he could trust God, even in the midst of intense suffering and trial. We realize that other pictures of God are a Satanic deception. The kind of trust that Job was developing brings peace now and also secures the universe for eternity. This bigger picture enables us to live in confidence now that all things will work out in the End.

### Rev 7:4-8 (Introduction)—

In this passage the “servants of God” (in Revelation 7:3) are defined as 144,000, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. The 144,000 as a whole is a military number, modeled after the numbering of Israel in preparation for the invasion of the promised land. The entire army of Israel was called the “thousands” of Israel (Num 31:5). Out of that army twelve “thousand” were chosen to fight the Midianites in Numbers 31:1-8, one unit of a “thousand” from each tribe. The number 12,000 in this passage is actually twelve thousands, each tribe has twelve subdivisions of a “thousand” each (see Judges 6:15 and Micah 5:2). In Old Testament Israel each tribe had an army of between 30,000 and 75,000 (Num 1:17-43). So the tribal armies were all double-figures of a “thousand” (Hebrew: *eleph*), just as is the case here in Revelation 7.

The Hebrew word for “thousand” is *eleph*, which is not necessarily an exact thousand, but can mean clan, unit (like a platoon), or family. So when the Bible says that 600,000 Israelites left Egypt, a number that seems impossibly large for a people group that numbered only seventy a couple hundred years before, it is actually 600 *eleph*, a grouping that is not clearly understood. The translators of the Septuagint (LXX) seem not to have been sure either, but chose the Greek word for thousand (*chilias, chiliados*) to translate it, hence the huge numbers in parts of the English Old Testament. When one considers that Jerusalem in the time of David was the size of a single hole on a golf course (perhaps 1500 inhabitants), it seems likely that David’s army was a lot less than 1,300,000 (2 Sam 24:9). 1300 units ( platoons) of perhaps a dozen men each would fit the archeological evidence much more closely.

In the Old Testament the number thousand (Hebrew: *eleph*) can mean different things. It can mean a literal number, one thousand more or less. It can mean a military unit, like a brigade, battalion, company or platoon. The Roman cohort had 500-1000 soldiers in it, and the legion, something like 5000-6000. *Eleph* can also mean a clan or a district. Each of Israel’s twelve tribes was divided into smaller groups, with the 10,000 number representing the tribal army and the thousand number the clans or districts. The thousand number would correspond to a county today. *Eleph* could also designate a head of household, or the head of a clan. So the number thousand in English translations of the Old Testament is not always to be taken literally, it can have multiple meanings. But that should not necessarily affect the way that we read Revelation 7. What counts is that 144,000 represents the totality of Israel, either militarily or politically.

It is clear that in Revelation the thousand is to be taken at face value. And if the LXX was the Bible of the early Christians, they would have accepted the LXX number thousand at face value as well. The resulting symmetry of the number here is too obvious. It is the sum total of 12 times 12 times a thousand. Since all the tribal armies were two-figures of thousands, the twelve tribes with twelve “thousands” each corresponds to the totality of Israel’s army. Since a thousand is a complete but somewhat uncertain number, 12 x 12 x 1000 is a perfectly balanced number that is not necessarily exact and specific. Even if one were to apply the “clan” meaning of *eleph* here, it would still be the totality of Israel, twelve tribes, each with twelve clans of soldiers. So the core symbolism of the 144,000 is the totality of Israel. Since Revelation is a Christian book and is speaking about the far future, Israel is being illustrated here in the Christ-centered spiritual sense, God’s end-time followers of Jesus.

The number twelve is the root number behind 144,000. It is made up of three times four. Four is the number of the creation, with a view to the whole universe or the whole earth,

as can be clearly seen in Revelation 7:1-3. Three is the number related to God and to spiritual things. Numerically twelve (4 x 3) is related to the number seven (4 + 3). They are the two most frequent numbers in Revelation, expressing completion. As a combination of four and three, the number twelve itself represents the totality of God's people. It appears more than a hundred times in Scripture and consistently represents the people of God. Israel was made up of twelve tribes (Gen 35:22; 49:28), Jesus had twelve disciples (Matt 10:1-5, Mark 3:14; Luke 6:13, John 6:70-71, etc.), the New Jerusalem has twelve gates and twelve foundations (Rev 21:12-14), and the Tree of Life has twelve fruits (Rev 22:2). Less well known are the twelve sons of Ishmael, all of whom were princes (Gen 17:20; 25:16), the twelve chiefs of Israel (Num 1:44), the twelve spies of Israel (Deut 1:23), the twelve stones of the Jordan River (Josh 4:2-9), the twelve cities of the Levites (Josh 21:40), the twelve governors of Solomon (1 Kings 4:7), the twelve bronze oxen that held up the bronze sea in Solomon's temple (1 Kings 7:44; 2 Chr 4:2-4; Jer 52:20), the twelve lions in front of Solomon's throne (1 Kings 10:18-20; 2 Chr 9:17-19), the twelve stones of Elijah (1 Kings 18:31), the twenty-four courses of priests each had twelve trained musicians (1 Chr 25:1-31), the twelve thrones upon which Jesus' disciples would one day sit (Matt 19:28), and the twelve patriarchs (Acts 7:8).

In the book of Revelation, twelve times twelve reminds us of the New Jerusalem (see Revelation 21). Each gate in the walls of the New Jerusalem represents one of the twelve tribes of Israel (Rev 21:12-13). Each foundation of the New Jerusalem represents one of the twelve apostles (Rev 21:14). So in Revelation 21, twelve times twelve truly reminds the reader of the totality of Israel; the twelve tribes of Old Testament Israel (tribes) and the twelve apostles of New Testament Israel. The walls of the city were 144 cubits in height. So the imagery of twelve times twelve is solidly established in the book of Revelation. Another number of interest is the twenty-four elders of Revelation 4. Here the number is the total of twelve and twelve. The twenty-four elders also represent the totality of Israel. See comments on Rev 4:4 (Excursus on the Twenty-Four Elders).

In New Testament understanding, the church has become a new Israel, founded in the person of Jesus Christ. It is not an accident that Jesus had twelve apostles, not eleven or thirteen. He was deliberately signaling His intention of re-shaping Israel in relationship with Himself. Just as the first Israel (Jacob) had twelve sons, so the new Israel (Jesus) had twelve disciples. This is evident from the following texts: "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings." James 1:1, NIV. Here the brother of Jesus writes to the churches and describes them as the twelve tribes scattered among the nations. "Jesus said to them, 'I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.'" Matthew 19:28, NIV. You can see how the twelve apostles are understood by Jesus in terms of the twelve tribal heads of Israel. So, the true followers of Jesus have become a new Israel. The 144,000, then, is the totality of Israel in both the Old and New Testaments. They represent the people of God in every age of history, but especially applied to the people of God in the very last period of history.

The number 144,000 occurs only three times in the book of Revelation, in verse four here and twice in Revelation 14:1-3. It is one of several titles the author of Revelation gives to God's faithful people in the final days of earth's history. The act of sealing the servants of God is promised in verse three and seen as a past event in verse four, so the act of sealing itself occurs

“off camera.” John never actually sees the 144,000 here, he only hears the number. This is similar to the background scene in Ezekiel 9, where the act of sealing is also commanded but is not in fact seen. “Hearing the number” also places the 144,000 in contrast to the 200,000,000 of Revelation 9:16.

#### **Rev 7:4-8 (Excursis on the 144,000: Literal or Symbolic?)—**

Upon first reading it seems obvious that the 144,000 is a literal number of Jews drawn from each of the twelve tribes. After all, that is exactly what the text says. So why not a literal 144,000? Why not literal Jews? Is it not possible in the last days there will be from among the twelve tribes of ancient Israel descendants who will come to accept Jesus Christ and be a vital part of God’s end-time remnant? The apostle Paul seems to promise something like that (Rom 11:25-26). Could that be what this vision is referring to here? I believe that there are several problems with that approach.

First of all, the twelve tribes of ancient Israel no longer exist in any literal sense. There are Jews today who can trace their solid and verified descent back to Judah, Benjamin, and Levi. But the ten northern tribes have basically been lost to history. They broke away from the rest after the death of Solomon and formed the independent kingdom of Israel, with Jeroboam as the first king. They were later taken into captivity by the Assyrians (723-722 BC—2 Kings 17:6), were assimilated into the other peoples of what we call the Middle East (2 Kings 17:34), and essentially disappeared from history. It would not be possible to reconstruct the twelve tribes in any literal sense. A substantial portion of the Jews in the world today are descended from converts over the centuries in many parts of Europe, particularly Eastern Europe. Some Jews of today can trace their lineage to Judah, Benjamin and Levi because these tribes were restored intact back to Jerusalem after the Babylonian Captivity (605-539 BC), but descendants of the “ten lost tribes” of the Assyrian exile cannot be identified today.

Second, the list of tribes in Revelation 7 is unlike any other list in the Bible. The original list of the twelve tribes is based on the sons of Jacob. In birth order they were Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulon, Dan Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Joseph and Benjamin. In Genesis 49 Jacob blesses his twelve sons, but had already given special attention to the two sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh (Gen 48:8-22—the firstborn gets a double portion of the inheritance, so Joseph’s two sons also become ancestors of recognized tribes). So right from the beginning the tribes actually numbered thirteen, the restoration of the number twelve occurred after Levi was withdrawn for the priesthood, and given no distinct territorial inheritance (Josh 14:3-4; 18:7). Clearly the number twelve was considered important in its own right. It is maintained to show that while the details and circumstances of human experience change, the purposes of God continue to operate through them.

While the tribes were listed consistently in Numbers and Joshua as Reuben, Simeon, Judah, Issachar, Zebulon, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Benjamin, Ephraim and Manasseh (Levi is left out because of its priestly inheritance—Num 18:20-24; Josh 13:14), the order in which the tribes was listed varied. In Numbers 1, the leaders chosen to perform the first census (Num 1:5-16) are listed in a different tribal order than the totals of the census itself (Num 1:20-46). These variations continue in the listing of tribal offerings for the tabernacle (Num 7:10-83—this time Judah is listed first), in Israel’s second census (Num 26:3-50—Reuben first), the tribal leaders who divided the land (Num 34:16-29—Judah first), and the order of dividing the land (Josh

13:14 – 19:51). Two further lists, also distinct from each other, can be found in Ezekiel 48 (verses 1-27 and 31-34).

So the order in which the tribes were listed in Israel's history was never fixed. The order of the tribes in Revelation (which is different yet again—but Judah first and Reuben second) is not unusual, therefore, but the tribal listing itself is unusual, different from any other listing. The tribes of Dan and Ephraim are missing from the twelve, Levi and Joseph are added. In this list the children of the free women and the bondwomen are mingled together, which would symbolize the Christian uniting of Jew and Gentile. So it does not appear that the listing here was intended to be taken literally. Why these particular tribes are added or subtracted will be addressed in the comments on Revelation 7:5-8.

Third, in the New Testament, the things of Israel are applied to the church, the faithful followers of Jesus (some examples of this kind of thinking include Romans 2:28-29, 9:6-7, Gal 6:16, and Philippians 3:3). We have already noted that Jesus chose twelve disciples, not eleven or thirteen. He did not see the church as a replacement for Israel, rather He saw the church as the expansion of Israel. An Israel that had been limited to children born of a Jewish mother was now expanded to anyone, Jew or Gentile, who was in relationship with the Jewish Messiah. An Israel that had been limited to those living in the area of Palestine was now expanded to the entire world. The ethnic and geographical limits of ancient Israel were now expanded in a spiritual and worldwide way. This is evident in the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3. The church is promised all the things that had belonged to Israel, the Tree of Life (Rev 2:7), the manna (2:17, the Book of Life (3:5), the temple (3:11) and a new Jerusalem (3:12). All these things are now available in relation to Christ. Through Jesus the church inherited all the things of ancient Israel. In Revelation 14:1-3, the 144,000 themselves are clearly defined in terms of their relationship with the Lamb (Jesus Christ). Since the entire book of Revelation was written to the seven churches (22:16) and the 144,000 have the name of the Lamb on their foreheads, the natural reading of the 144,000 would be in relation to the church, not just to original Israel.

Finally, Revelation as a whole is a symbolic book. While not every detail in Revelation is necessarily symbolic, Revelation 1:1 makes clear that the overall context of the book is symbolic. In Revelation 1:1 it tells us that Jesus Christ received a revelation from God, which he “symbolized” (Greek: *esêmanen*) and handed on to John to write down for the churches. The context of that term recalls Daniel 2:28 and 45 where Nebuchadnezzar's symbolic vision of the giant statue sets the tone for the book of Revelation as a whole. While the normal way to read any work is to assume straightforward language unless it becomes evident that a symbol is intended, in Revelation you take everything as symbolic unless it is compelling that the author intended something to be taken literally (a good example of the latter is the sixth seal, which contains several phrases that call for a literal reading of the sun, moon and stars—see comments on Rev 6:12-14). In this particular case the number is too exact to be taken literally. It is not in accord with human experience that exactly twelve thousand from each tribe might be listed.

So, the text of Revelation 7:4-8 should not be taken literally. The number 144,000, the twelve tribes and their twelve subdivisions are clearly grounded in literal realities of Old Testament Israel, but the number itself is not to be taken literally, neither are the twelve specific tribes and their subdivisions. The 144,000 is a figurative description of the totality of Israel, with particular emphasis on the people of God in the very final period of earth's history.

We will revisit this concept after exegesis of the rest of the chapter gives us a wider context for this reading. Before moving on I do want to be clear on something. A reading such as is suggested here is in no way intended to exclude Jews from salvation, it is simply that a group of literal Jews is not the intent of this particular passage.

#### **Rev 7:4—**

“And ***I heard the number*** of those who were sealed, 144,000, sealed from all the tribes of the sons of Israel.” The phrase, “I heard the number” appears two times in the book of Revelation (7:4 and 9:16). Revelation 9:16 reads as follows: “The number of the mounted troops was two hundred million. ***I heard their number.***” The Greek behind both phrases is identical (Greek of 7:4: *êkousan ton arithmon*; Greek of 9:16: *êkousa ton arithmon*). In context, the two groups in the last crisis of earth's history are 1) the people of God, and 2) the opponents of God. The final proclamation of two competing gospels (Rev 14:6-7 and 16:13-14) results in the entire world being gathered into two opposite groupings at the end of time. The 144,000 and the two hundred million are symbolic, rather than literal, numbers which represent the two outcomes of the final proclamation of the gospel. Probation closes because people on both sides are so settled in their beliefs they would rather die than change.

Since the promised sealing of 7:1-3 is seen as past in verse 4 (those who had been sealed, Greek: *esphragismenôn*), the sealing can be seen as occurring between verses 3 and 4. John does not actually see this sealing, he only hears the number of those who had been sealed, probably from the sealing angel himself. So the sealing itself is omitted in the account, which is also the case with the parallel narrative of Ezekiel 9:1-7.

“And I heard the number of those who were sealed, 144,000, sealed ***from all the tribes of the sons of Israel.***” The “sons of Israel” in the original sense were the twelve sons of Jacob. After his wrestling with the angel, God changed Jacob’s name (which means “deceiver” or “supplanter”) to Israel, which means “prince with God” (Gen 32:27-28). Jesus embraced a similar shift in His choice of twelve disciples rather than eleven or thirteen. That He had the sons of Jacob in mind when choosing the disciples is clear from Matthew 19:28-30. Christians, in their connection to Jesus Christ, are represented as being a new or true Israel, grounded in Israel’s Messiah. Just as the first Israel had its capital in ancient Jerusalem, so the new Israel has its capital in the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21:12-14, which will one day be revealed on earth for all to see.

#### **Rev 7:5-8 (Introduction)—**

In the Old Testament, the tribe of Dan was the first tribe to fall into idolatry after Israel’s entrance into Canaan. After that it seems to have gradually sunk into idolatry and immorality and eventually dwindled down to a single family, even before the Assyrian exile. While Dan is listed among the tribes at the beginning of Chronicles (1 Chr 2:2), there is no listing of his descendants as is the case of the other tribes. And the tribe plays no part in the subsequent history of Israel as written in the Chronicles. The absence of Dan in the listing here may also be due to the first century Jewish association of Dan with the Antichrist. This association was based on speculative interpretation of Genesis 49:17, Deuteronomy 33:22, and Jeremiah 8:16. The second century Christian author Irenaeus (*On the Antichrist* 5:30, 32) followed this line of thinking with regard to both Jeremiah and Revelation 7. Dan is also the location where

Jeroboam placed one of his two golden calves (1 Kings 12:29-30), which served as Israelite substitutes for the worship of Yahweh in Jerusalem. So perhaps the omission of Dan is intentional, for reasons like the above.

The tribe of Joseph listed here replaces and also represents Ephraim, who is present in all Old Testament lists of the tribes. According to Hosea (10:11; 13:1), the Ephraimites tended to think of themselves as the pre-eminent tribe, but the one that exalted itself among the Israelites is now in Revelation subsumed under the overall rubric of Joseph. The absence of both Ephraim and Dan from the list in this chapter also may be related to the account in Judges 17 and 18. There a man of Ephraim gets involved in idolatry, draws a Levite into his scheme and then is overpowered by a renegade army from Dan, who takes both the idol and Micah's "priest" back home to their own territory. So Dan and Ephraim are associated together in the introduction of idolatry into Israel (see also Hosea 4:17).

#### **Rev 7:5—**

"From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the tribe of Gad 12,000. . . ." Judah was Jacob's fourth son, by Leah (Gen 29:35). The name signifies "praise" (Gen 29:35). He is no doubt in the pre-eminent place here because he is the ancestor of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Reuben, the eldest son of Jacob, is no longer listed as first, Judah has taken the firstborn position. The name Reuben signifies "see the son" (Gen 29:32). Reuben had all the advantages of being first-born, yet failed to hold his place among the twelve. But while the instability of his character seems reflected in the tribe as a whole, nevertheless, the tribe is not cast out entirely, it still retains a high place in all the lists. The tribe of Judah, however, is now the true ruler, it is the lion of the tribes (see also Revelation 5:5) and the tribe from whom the Messiah has come. So for Christian readers, Judah is truly the pre-eminent tribe.

The third tribe on the list is strange, Gad, the son of Zilpah, Leah's maid. The name Gad signifies "troop" or "good fortune" (Gen 30:11). After Leah had four sons, Rachel persuades Jacob to take Bilhah, her hand maid, and they have two sons, Dan and Naphtali. Leah then persuades Jacob to take Zilpah, her handmaid, and Gad is the first son of that union (Gen 30:11). Not only is Gad far from the third in birth order, he isn't even from one of the two chief wives of Jacob. What all three tribes in this verse have in common is that they are related to Leah in some way.

Response from Craig Robinson worth considering: "Can we rearrange lists? I know others like Farrer have attempted to do so.

Take the last six tribes listed and lay them next to the first six so that the top two from each list now makes a group of four. Now compare to Gen 29:31-30:24. We get three groups of four just like the original birth accounts and then Leah's first four are still the first four, but of course with Judah now first - Judah, Reuben, Simeon, and Levi. The next four also belong to Leah (and her handmaid) - Gad, Asher, Issachar, and Zebulun. The last four (or one third - see Rev 8-9 and Rev 12:1) belong to Rachel (and her handmaid) - Naphtali, Manasseh, Joseph, and Benjamin.

In the original Genesis birth account, between each of the four births is a narrative account that reflects badly on Rachel. Rachel is also shown to be idolatrous in Genesis 31. In the rearranged list Rachel's

children are last. Does John intend for us to rearrange the lists to point us to Rachel?

The numbering of the tribes here in Rev 7 almost surely alludes to the numbering of the tribes in the book of Numbers where, when the tribes marched out, they were split six tribes before the ark of the covenant and six tribes after the ark of the covenant.

Is there the possibility of some subtle message, where John is not only trying to highlight the lifting up of Judah from Leah, but also the demise of Rachel, her sons, and their idolatry?

When pregnant with Benjamin, Rachel dies on the way to Bethlehem, but Mary when pregnant arrives at Bethlehem. Is Rachel crying over the dead male infants of Bethlehem, or is she crying over the fact that her sister has supplanted her and a son of Leah will forever sit on the throne, not a son of Rachel? Rachel's children are no more. Jesus has arrived, and the hope of a Messiah from the tribes of Rachel is dead.

Surely, Rev 12:1-4 also alludes to the scene with Herod. Joseph, son of Rachel has the dream of Sun, Moon, and 11 stars, which Rev 12:1 is surely alluding to. When the dragon casts down a third of the stars, are they not the same stars just mentioned? And Rachel's 4 out of 12 equals a third. "And the Dragon's tail swept away Rachel's children and cast them to the earth." But Mary gives birth to a child from Leah/Judah who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron (Rev 12:5, Gen 49:10).

Sorry to hijack your thread, just want to get your thoughts on some ideas on the tribes and possibly John's bigger intentions. It seems speculative, but it all fits."

#### **Rev 7:6—**

"From the tribe of Asher 12,000, from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000, from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000. . . ." Asher, the second son of Zilpah, is mentioned fourth in this list. The name means "blessed" (Gen 30:13). Naphtali, the fifth on this list, was the second son of Bilhah (Gen 30:8). The name means "wrestlings" (Gen 30:8). As noted earlier, the tribe of Dan, the first son of Bilhad, is left out of this list for several reasons. Perhaps his tribe is subsumed under his tribal "brother," Naphtali, just as Ephraim is subsumed under Joseph later on. Manasseh was the son of Joseph, the grandson of Rachel (Gen 30:22-24). The name signifies "forgetting" (Gen 41:51). What these three have in common is that none is the direct son of one of the two main wives of Jacob, Leah and Rachel. Asher and Naphtali are the second sons of the servant wives and Manasseh is the grandson of Rachel.

#### **Rev 7:7—**

"From the tribe of Simeon 12,000, from the tribe of Levi 12,000, from the tribe of Issachar 12,000. . . ." Simeon, Jacob's second son by Leah (Gen 29:33), is placed seventh on this list. The name means "hearing" (Gen 29:33). Levi, the third son of both Jacob and Leah (Gen 29:34), is placed eighth. The name signifies "joined" or "attached" (Gen 29:34). While the tribe of Levi is listed in this grouping, it is not listed in birth-order (third place). Levi is, perhaps, so deeply subordinated because of his association with the Levitical system. While that system retains meaning in the New Testament era, it is largely at an end in Christ. But a better reason for that position is that Levi is in the place of Dan in this list, Dan is seventh in the order of birth and the first son of Rachel's handmaid Bilhah. Since Judah has already been mentioned, the list

now skips to Leah's fifth son, Jacob's ninth (Gen 30:18), Issachar. The name signifies "hire" or "reward" (Gen 30:18). What all three tribes in this verse have in common is that they are all sons of Leah and are listed in the relative order of their birth in the original story.

#### **Rev 7:8—**

"From the tribe of Zebulon 12,000, from the tribe of Joseph 12,000, from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000." The basic meaning of the name Zebulon is "dwelling" (Gen 30:20). Zebulon, Leah's sixth and last son, and Jacob's tenth (Gen 30:20), is listed in exact birth order, tenth on this list as well as on the original one. Joseph, Rachel's first son, was eleventh-born of Jacob (Gen 30:22-24) and is listed as eleventh here. The name Joseph signifies "adding" (Gen 30:24). It is interesting that in Numbers 13:11, Joseph is listed in place of Manasseh, not Ephraim, here Joseph seem clearly to be replacing Ephraim. Of the two, Manasseh was the oldest (Gen 48:14), but Ephraim turned out to be the largest (Deut 33:17). The last tribe on the list, Benjamin, was also the last son of both Rachel and Jacob. His name means "son of my right hand" (Gen 35:18). What these three tribes have in common is that all three are listed in birth order, which is striking, since none of the other tribes are listed exactly in birth order.

#### **Rev 7:5-8 (Conclusion)—**

Upon careful reading of the listing of tribes, it does not seem likely that any special design underlies the selection and ordering of the tribes in this passage. We have noted reasons for the omission of Dan and Ephraim, and there are parallels for tribal omissions elsewhere in the Bible. In Deuteronomy 33:5-25, Simeon is omitted, making room for Levi. In I Chronicles 4-8, the names of Zebulon and Dan are both omitted. One possibility for the different lists in the Old Testament is by analogy with the gospels, different people remember things a little differently. But since most of the lists are in the five books of Moses, a conservative view of Scripture would seek a more theological motive for this variety, but the absence of convincing theological motives is challenging for that perspective as well. The one thing in common about all the lists is the number twelve. That there were twelve tribes, not eleven or thirteen, seems crucial both for the memories of the ancient Israelites and the author of Revelation.

Barnes offers, perhaps, the most helpful explanation of the variety in which the tribes are listed with an analogy to the fifty states of the USA. One could list the states in a number of ways. You could list them in the order in which they were settled or formed as organized territories, in which case Virginia would be first (European settlement beginning in 1607) and Massachusetts second (European settlement beginning in 1620). You could list them in the order in which they joined the union, in which case Alaska would be 49<sup>th</sup> and Hawaii the 50<sup>th</sup>. But Alaska was purchased years before some parts of the American west were organized into territories, so that could affect how you placed it. Or one could list the states geographically, beginning with Maine in the northeast corner or Florida in the southeast. They could also be listed in terms of their size or importance. All of these listings would seem natural to at least some people. And so it seems to have been with the twelve tribes. There were always twelve, but which twelve and in what order is less important.

This passage should be read through the lens of the New Testament's view of Israel. In Old Testament times God made a covenant with Israel as the literal descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob, located in a strip of land at the southeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea. Israel

was understood in both ethnic and geographic terms. But ethnic and geographical Israel was never the faithful covenant partner God was looking for. So in New Testament terms, the meaning of Israel shifted. The covenant was no longer with a literal people located in a specific place, it between God and Israel's Messiah. Jesus was God's faithful covenant partner and His twelve disciples became the equivalent of the twelve tribes through their relationship with Jesus. So in New Testament, the meaning of Israel was expanded from literal Jews to everyone who is in relationship with Jesus. Thus the meaning of Israel was expanded to include the Gentiles. Read with that background in mind, the 144,000 are truly a great multitude that no one can number, from every nation, tribe, people and language (Rev 7:9).

### **Rev 7:9-13 (Introduction)—**

With this verse we come to the second part of the answer to the question of Revelation 6:17: When the great day of God's wrath comes, who will be able to stand? The answer to that question is two-fold, the 144,000 (Rev 7:4) and the great multitude (Rev 7:9). At first glance, the two groups are completely opposite. The first group is numbered exactly, the second cannot be counted. The first group is drawn from the twelve tribes of Israel, the second is made up of every nation and tribe. The first group is depicted on earth (Rev 7:1-3) while the second is seen standing before the throne of God and the Lamb (Rev 7:9). The first group is sheltered from the Great Tribulation (Rev 7:1-3), the second group has passed through it (Rev 7:14). So the immediate impression is that the two groups are as opposite as they can be.

Although the 144,000 and the Great Multitude appear, at first, to be opposites, there is evidence that opposites in Revelation can point to the same thing under special circumstances. Thus the two groups could be two different ways of describing the same group, the end-time people of God. The signal that chapter seven may be one of those special circumstances is grounded in a special literary technique. In the book of Revelation, what John hears and what he sees are often very different, yet they can be the same. For example, in Revelation 5:5 he hears about the Lion of the tribe of Judah. But when he looks, he does not see the lion he was expecting. Instead he sees a Lamb looking as if it had been slain. He never sees the lion. Are the Lion and the Lamb two different things? No, they are both representations of Jesus Christ. The symbolic language is opposite, you can't get much different than a lion and a lamb. Yet in Revelation 5 the two symbols are clearly pointing to the same person, Jesus Christ.

Something similar occurs in Revelation 17. One of the seven bowl angels tells John about a prostitute who sits on many waters (Rev 17:1). Then in verse three he sees a woman sitting on a beast with seven heads and ten horns. Are the prostitute and woman the same or are they different women? Do the waters of verse one represent the same thing as the beast or something different? The woman on the beast is later named Babylon, the mother of prostitutes (Rev 17:5). This combination makes an identification of Babylon with the prostitute of verse one likely. That identification is confirmed when one realizes that the "many waters" upon which the woman sits (Rev 17:1) are another way of describing the Euphrates River in Jeremiah 51:13. So the woman of verse one is also Babylon. John hears of a woman who sits on many waters (Rev 17:1) and sees a woman sitting on a scarlet beast (Rev 17:3). The two women are the same, hence the waters and the beast are also two ways of describing the same thing, the secular, political powers of the world (Rev 17:2, 15).

The literary pattern of hearing and seeing is confirmed also in Revelation 1:10-12. There John hears a voice like a trumpet behind him. But when he turns to look, he does not see a trumpet, but a son of man speaking with him. So when John hears one thing and sees another, the two things, people or groups are two different ways of saying the same thing, even when they appear to be opposites.

This literary strategy is important for understanding chapter seven of Revelation. John never sees the 144,000. He hears the number (Rev 7:4). But when he looks he sees a great multitude that no one can number (Rev 7:9). The one group is made up of people from the twelve tribes. The other is people from every nation. But as opposite as the two groups appear, they are the same group but in different roles. These two groups together answer the question: "Who will be able to stand? (Rev 6:17)?" They are clearly the same group in different circumstances. The key may be found in Revelation 7:1-3, 14. The context of the 144,000 is the time of restraint before the loosing of the winds (7:1-3), so the announcement of the 144,000 (7:4) comes as the world is entering into tribulation. The great multitude is seen after the tribulation (7:14) and so assures us that the end-time people of God is not a limited but quite vast and diversified. This is in contrast to the opinion that only a few will be saved.

#### **Rev 7:9—**

***"After these things I looked carefully and a great multitude, which no one was able to count,*** from every nation; tribes, peoples and languages, was standing before the throne and before the Lamb, having dressed in white robes and having palm branches in their hands." The vision here seems to transition from earth to heaven. Such transitions are frequent in the book of Revelation (Rev 4:1; 6:1-8; 12:6-7; 16:1).

"After these things" (Greek: *meta tauta eidon*) often signals a new section in Revelation. Following on after Revelation 7:4-8, it is clear that John never sees the 144,000, a very specific number, it is only in verse nine that he actually looks. And what he sees is not the 144,000, but a great multitude that no one was able to count. Along with the literary strategy outlined above, this language itself suggests that the two groups are really the same, just two different ways of designating the same group.

"After these things I looked carefully and ***a great multitude,*** which no one was able to count, from every nation; tribes, peoples and languages. . ." The idea of a great multitude reminds the reader of the scene in Revelation 4 and 5. There in other words is described a vast multitude numbering ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands. But these two multitudes are different. The multitude in Revelation 5 is made up of heavenly angels (Rev 5:11). The multitude in Revelation seven is made up of human beings from every nation, tribe, people and language. So the first group is angelic and the second group human. But the great multitude of chapter seven is gathering for inclusion in the heavenly throng, so the connection between the two groups is significant.

Craig Robinson points out that in Acts 2, there is a coming of the Holy Spirit (akin to the sealing? Acts 2:1-4), followed by the Spirit falling on a multitude (Acts 2:6) of Jews from every nation and language (Acts 2:5-11). This could have foreshadowed the end-time combination of the 144,000 (Jews) and the great multitude (international).

“From every nation; tribes, peoples and languages.” The word “from” (Greek: *ek*) is the same in the original as the word introducing the 144,000. The 144,000 are “out from” the twelve tribes of Israel. The great multitude is “out from” every nation, tribe, people and language. The four-fold listing contains one of Revelation’s grammatical oddities. In the Greek “nation” is actually singular (*ethnous*), while tribes (Greek: *phuôn*), peoples (Greek: *laôn*), and languages (Greek: *glôssôn*) are plural. This suggests that “nation” encompasses the whole, while the other three categories are subordinate, signifying all that is meant by “nation” in this text. The emphasis of “every nation” is on the whole human race, not on the various ethnic groups that make up the human race. The many nations are one humanity (see Acts 17:26). The diversity within humanity, on the other hand, is signified by the other three, plural categories. So unless this is simply a grammatical error, it is better to translate “from every nation; tribes, peoples and languages.” The “and” (Greek: *kai*) before “tribes” should then be taken as “namely,” explicating what was said before. Other passages in Revelation with a similar four-fold grouping are either all singular (Rev 5:9; 13:7; 14:6) or all plural (Rev 10:11; 11:9).

“From every nation; tribes, peoples and languages.” The word “nation” (Greek: *ethnous*) in English means territories with a common government, like the United States or Japan. The Greek word *ethnos*, however, is the root of the English “ethnic,” referring more to races of people. As noted earlier, the singular suggests a focus on the human race as a whole. The word “tribes” (Greek: *phuôn*) refers to people descended from a common and verifiable ancestry, a greatly extended family, or a related subgroup within a nation. The word “peoples” (Greek: *laôn*) refers to masses of people or communities distinguished by location or other features rather than common ancestry or language. The word “languages” (Greek: *glôssôn*) refers to groups of people who share a common way of speaking, whether or not they share a common ancestry or are located together. With this designation the human race is divided by speech rather than national boundaries, kinship or location. The combined meaning of this four-fold grouping is that people from all over the earth and of all types will be among the redeemed. God makes no distinctions in terms of who can be saved.

“A great multitude. . . was **standing before the throne and before the Lamb**, dressed in white robes and having palm branches in their hands.” Standing before the throne and the Lamb recalls the scene of Revelation five. Standing before the throne implies two things. First of all, to be near the throne is to be in the highest place. The ultimate goal of Christian existence is to be close to God. Second, standing before the throne is a position for courtiers. It implies readiness for service, as is supported by 7:15. The great multitude offers God “priestly service” (Greek: *latreuosin*) day and night before the throne. This does not support the idea of idleness in eternity, instead the redeemed are occupied in useful service to God, serving as both kings and priests (see 1:5; 5:9-10).

This great multitude is located in heavenly places. That may mean that the scene is after the Second Coming of Christ, but it may also be taken in a spiritual sense. Throughout the book of Revelation “those who live on the earth” represent the wicked, those in rebellion against God. By contrast, the redeemed are often depicted as those who live in heaven (Rev 13:6-7; 14:1-5). So this could be understood in terms of realized eschatology, the glories of the new age are already tasted in the present by those who follow Christ (see John 5:24 as an example).

“Dressed in white robes. . .” The mention of white robes here recalls the promise to the overcomers in Sardis. They would one day walk with Christ in white garments (Rev 3:4-5). There is possibly also an allusion to Laodicea, which is invited to don white garments as a remedy for lukewarmness (3:18). The reference here also anticipates verse fourteen, where the great multitude has washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. The color white in the book of Revelation always refers to the things of Christ and His people and never to things that are clearly evil. See comments on Rev 6:2 for more detail. See also Revelation 19:7-8. Since white robes are mentioned in the fifth seal (Rev 6:11) and the great multitude have come through great tribulation (7:14), there may be a special relationship between the great multitude and the souls under the altar (6:9). Cleansing by blood (7:14) makes no sense in reality, we are dealing with a multiple metaphor illustrating the connection between the death of Christ and the spiritual condition of the saved.

“Having palm branches in their hands.” In the Greco-Roman context, palm branches were emblems of victory, given to winners at athletic events. They are, therefore, quite appropriate in this context. Palm branches only appear twice in the New Testament. One of those appearances is here. The other occasion is the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem (John 12:13). In both instances, palm branches are associated with acclamation of Jesus. In John Jesus was being acclaimed as he approached the city of Jerusalem, here He is being acclaimed by the great multitude of God's people before the throne in heaven. By mentioning palm branches here, the author connects the two scenes. Just as in the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, Jesus is here being acclaimed by His people for His final victory and His role as King of the Universe.

In the Old Testament, palm branches are associated with the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev 23:40; Neh 8:14-15), which reminded a people settled in Canaan of the hardships they endured to reach the promised land. Since Revelation portrays a New Exodus motif, Feast of Tabernacles imagery is appropriate to this depiction of end-time victory. Just as the sealing reminds us of the protection provided by the blood on the doorpost during the Exodus, so the palm branches remind us of the celebration of victory at the end of the festal year in the Bible. The Feast of Tabernacles commemorated God's care for Israel in the wilderness and Israel's gratitude for the Fall harvest. It is also a foretaste of the bliss of eternity, which is described later on in this chapter (7:15-17).

### **Rev 7:10-12 (Introduction)—**

This passage is, in many ways, a replay of Revelation 5. The setting is the heavenly throne room, with a multitude of angels, 24 elders and the four living creatures falling on their faces before the throne to worship God (7:11-- the one sitting on the throne in chapter five). These heavenly beings sing songs reminiscent of the songs in chapter five as well. The great multitude praise the one sitting on the throne and the Lamb for the salvation that belongs to them (7:10; 5:13-14). Then the heavenly host offer a seven-fold praise to God like the one given in 5:12. Revelation 7:9-17 is the climax of both Revelation 5 and the foundational promise in 3:21. This passage fulfills the promise that the one who overcomes would join Jesus on His throne in the same way Jesus joined the Father on His throne.

### **Rev 7:10—**

“And they are crying out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation to our God, who is sitting on the throne, and to the Lamb.’” The “crying out” of the great multitude is in the present tense (Greek: *krazousin*), which indicates that this is not just a single event, but an ongoing activity. They are continually focused on the God who has delivered them and placed them in a new state of blessedness. In many ways this scene is similar to the triumphal entry of Jesus in John 12:13. The “loud voice” (Greek: *phonê megalê*) occurs frequently in Revelation, usually in heavenly contexts or to represent dramatic interventions by God (Rev 5:2, 12; 6:10; 7:2; 8:13; 10:3; 12:10; 14:7, 9, 15; 19:17).

The word for “salvation” here has the definite article (Greek: *hê sôtêria*), as does the interesting parallel in Psalm 3:8 (LXX of Psa 3:9: *hê sôtêria*). In the Psalm, salvation is related to God by a genitive (salvation is “of” Yahweh—LXX: *tou kurio hê sôtêria*), in this verse it is related to God by the dative (salvation is “to” our God—Greek: *hê sôtêria to theo hemon*). In both cases most translations interpret the grammar as implying “belongs to.” The great multitude acknowledges that they are not the authors of their salvation, this belongs only to the one sitting on the throne and the Lamb.

“And they are crying out with a loud voice, saying, ‘**Salvation to our God**, who is sitting on the throne, and to the Lamb.’” The root meaning of “salvation” is deliverance, safety, and preservation, with overtones of prosperity and victory. The word “salvation” in the Bible has a double meaning. On the one hand, it means being delivered from evil or tragic circumstances, on the other, it means a positive state of happiness and the good life. Salvation with the article (Greek: *hê sôtêria*) generally means one of two things; salvation as an abstract, like love, truth and beauty, or a very specific salvation that the characters in the drama would know or have experienced. Both of these are pertinent here. The ones singing the song have just come out of the Great Tribulation at the end of time. They have been delivered from sin and its consequences in the general sense. God and the Lamb are the authors of that salvation in the broadest sense. But here there is also a specific focus on deliverance from the murderous intentions (Rev 13:15; 17:6) of the beast, the image of the beast, and Babylon.

It is an interesting feature of Revelation that although the Spirit is included in the heavenly trio (Rev 1:4-5) nowhere in the book is praise directed to the “seven spirits before the throne” (Rev 4:5).

#### **Rev 7:11—**

“And all the angels standing around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures fell down upon their faces before the throne and worshiped God. . .” “All (Greek: *pantes*) the angels” indicates that this is not a small group, but the entire body of angels introduced in chapter five. Based on Revelation 5:11, this group of angels is nearly as innumerable as the great multitude of the previous verse, so the joining of the two groups here is interesting. See comments on Rev 5:11. Revelation 7:11 is largely made up of elements drawn from Revelation 4 and 5. The angels standing around the throne appear in 5:11 along with the elders and the living creatures. The elders (Rev 4:4) and the living creatures (4:8) first appear in chapter four and retain a role through chapter five and the rest of Revelation. The dual language of worship appears in 4:8-10 and 5:14.

The “standing” (Greek pluperfect: *eistêkeisan*) refers back to and continues the standing (Greek perfect participle: *estôtes*) in verse nine. But the standing ceases when they fall down on their faces and worship in the latter part of this verse.

### **Rev 7:12—**

“Saying, ‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength to our God forever and ever.’” While the first song before the throne is sung by the great multitude, representing redeemed humanity, this second song is sung by the angelic hosts, including the twenty-four elders, who preceded the great multitude into the heavenly court. The song begins with “Amen” (Greek: *amên*), the same in both Greek and English. But the true origin of the term is in the Hebrew Bible (*âmên*), not the LXX. The LXX translated the Hebrew *âmên* with “may it be” (consistently in the LXX: *genoito*—Num 5:22; Deut 27:15-26; 1 Kings 1:36, etc. although in 1 Chronicles 16:36 and Nehemiah 8:6 the transliteration *amên* is used in the LXX). The word “amen” strongly affirms the truth of something that has been said previously. So in this verse the angelic host begins their song by affirming the truth of the song of the great multitude in verse ten. They also echo the response of the four living creatures to the acclamation of the entire universe before the throne in 5:13-14.

The seven-fold song of praise here echoes the song of 5:12 with four differences. First, in 5:12, the seven descriptive nouns are all introduced with a single article and separated from each other by “and” (Greek: *tên...kai...kai...kai...kai...kai...kai...*). See comments on Rev 5:12. In Revelation 7:12, on the other hand, each descriptive noun has its own article. The single article at the beginning of 5:12 means either that special emphasis is being given to the first item, “power,” or that all seven items are being treated as one. The article in front of each of the seven items in 7:12 brings emphasis on the quality of each item, “all” blessing and “all” glory and “all” wisdom, etc. Second, the nouns are listed in a different order. Third, “riches” (Greek: *plouton*) in 5:12 is replaced by “thanks” (Greek: *eucharistia*) in 7:12. Fourth, the seven-fold praise is directed to the Lamb in 5:12, here it is directed to “our God” (Greek: *tô theô hêmôn*). Both God and the Lamb are entitled to equal praise of the highest quality in heaven. The fact that the praise is seven-fold, in both cases, indicates that it is complete and universal, praise in the highest imaginable sense. See the comments on Rev 5:12 regarding the meaning of the various components of this praise here. The replacement of riches with thanks heightens the God-centeredness of this song.

### **Rev 7:13-17 (Introduction)—**

This passage serves as an explanation or interpretation of the scene in Revelation 7:9-12. It is one of the twenty-four elders that comes to John and provides the explanation, beginning with a question. The explanation continues to the end of the chapter. John has not asked any question, but the elder discerns that the previous vision does not make sense to John on its own and moves in to provide the information that John was lacking. This explanation focuses not on the angelic hymn of 7:11-12, but on the vision of the great multitude in 7:9-10. Thus, the explanation could have been given after verse ten, but the angelic song is placed between.

### Rev 7:13-14 (Introduction)—

Some consider the mention of white robes in 7:13 as a reference to the 144,000, but this is not supported by the text. The reference to white robes (Greek: *tas stolas tas leukas*) points back to the white robes of the great multitude in verse nine (Greek: *stolas leukas*), rather than the 144,000, which are never seen. So the elder in this passage is offering an explanation of the great multitude. He is not concerned to explain the number or the meaning of the great multitude, but its origin and character.

The elder asks the two questions that any reader would naturally ask after the previous four verses. 1) Who (Greek: *tines* [two syllables]) are these dressed in white robes, and 2) from where (Greek: *pothen*) have they come? The answers to these two questions are given in verse 14: 1) They are the ones who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. 2) They have come out of the Great Tribulation.

### Rev 7:13—

“And **one of the elders answered me**, ‘These who are dressed in white robes; who are they and where have they come from?’” Presumably, the elder mentioned in this verse is one of the twenty-four introduced in Revelation 4. In the two times in Revelation when one of the elders is directly involved in an explanation, it is because that explanation is of particular importance for the church (see also Revelation 5:5-6). When angels are involved in explanations, on the other hand, the subject is either more cosmic in scope or there are aspects of a vision that are not necessary to know (Rev 5:2; 7:1-3; 10:1-3).

The content of this verse is odd at first glance. The elder is “answering” (Greek: *apekrithê*) John. The root meaning of “answer” in Greek is the same as in English, a reply to a question that has been asked. Yet the elder begins with a question, not an answer, and John has not asked a question. In addition, the elder clearly knows the answer to the question he is asking, as is evident in verse 14. So the elder is questioning in order that he might teach.

In the Bible words for “answer” or “answering” are sometimes used at the beginning of a speech, even when no request has been made (see John 2:18, for example). It is as if replying to something that could have been asked, or a question that is in the mind of another but has not yet been asked. It is reminiscent of Isaiah 65:24, where God says, “before they call, I will answer.” In Daniel 2:26, likewise, Nebuchadnezzar expects Daniel to tell him a dream what has only been in his mind.

Commentators have noted that this scene is like the account in Dante, where he describes himself in Paradise, “Silent was I, yet desire was painted in my looks; and thus I spake my wish more earnestly than language ever could” (*Paradiso* 4:10-12). While Dante was silent, desire to know was painted on his face! In any case here, we get additional information about the great multitude in the verses that follow.

“These who are dressed in white robes; **who are they and where have they come from?**” To begin an explanation with a question is reminiscent of Jeremiah 1:11 and Zechariah 4:2. By asking what he intends to explain, the elder provides dramatic vividness that makes the explanation much more interesting.

In the Greek of verse 13, the mention of white robes comes before the two questions, placing the appearance of the great multitude in the emphatic position. “These who are

dressed in white robes, who are they and where have they come from?" These are presented in the natural order in which they would come to mind. The mention of white robes comes first because that is the most important aspect of the question. John is impressed with the apparent holiness or purity of this group of human beings, symbolized by the white robes.

#### Rev 7:14—

"And I said to him, 'My Lord, you know,' and he said to me. . ." The verse opens with an interesting detail in the Greek. The word for "said" is not a narrative aorist, as is typical in Revelation, it is in the perfect tense (Greek: *eirêka*). The perfect implies an event in the past that has lingering effects in the present. One could translate "I have said" (in the past already). It is possible that this is an example of John's "solecisms" or grammatical errors. But the choice seems appropriate in this particular place. It implies either John's instantaneous response or the idea "you've just read my mind." The elder's question has anticipated John's own.

The great multitude with palm branches in their hands has fully attracted John's attention. But in this verse John's attention is moved from what he has seen to what he is about to hear. With words, the elder now focuses his attention more specifically on the part of the multitude that has passed through the tribulations of the end-time. These would include at least some of the additional martyrs predicted in the fifth seal (Rev 6:11). This is a note of encouragement to readers of Revelation who are still in the midst of "tribulation." Those who endure with patience (Rev 13:7; 14:12) will be triumphant at the end.

"And I said to him, '**My Lord, you know,**' and he said to me. . ." In response, John addresses the elder with "my Lord" (Greek: *kurie mou*), a typical term of respect in the ancient world. It is usually directed to a superior by one who is inferior in rank or age. Old Testament precedents for this address are Ezekiel 37:3, Daniel 10:16-17 and Zechariah 4:5 and 13. In the New Testament, see John 4:11 and 12:21. If John recognizes the elders as redeemed humanity (see Rev 4:4 [Excursis on the Twenty-Four Elders]) he would perceive himself as inferior on two counts. First, there is the title, which has overtones of wisdom and advanced age. Second, there is the fact that the elders are in place around the throne of God, which suggests very high status in the universal order of things. The humility John shows here gets him in trouble later on when he attempts to worship angels who have come to explain things to him (Rev 19:10; 22:8). John struggles to balance appropriate humility with the need to reserve ultimate worship for God alone.

When John says, "you know," he is acknowledging that the one who posed the questions in verse 13 is better qualified to answer them than the one addressed by those questions. It is a humble way of expressing his ignorance and also his desire to know. This interchange is most reminiscent of Ezekiel 37:3.

"And I said to him, 'My Lord, you know,' and he said to me, 'These are the ones who **are coming out of** the Great Tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'" The "are coming out of" phrase expresses the Greek participle (*oi erchomenoi*). This an extremely continuous expression whose time is governed by the main verb "are" (Greek: *eisin*), which is a present indicative. So the great multitude's experience of the Great Tribulation is not described in past tense: "have come out of" (NIV, RSV, NRSV, see also KJV). Instead, they "are coming out of" the Great Tribulation (more accurately translated in ESV and NASB). They don't come out of the Great Tribulation all at once, but gradually. The

focus is more on the process than the conclusion. The tense of the participle supports the idea that the visionary location of the great multitude is anticipatory, their dwelling in heaven is not literal at that moment, but spiritual. They are counted as already being “in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6) and “having already passed from death to life” (John 5:24), even while in the midst of suffering. This is very compatible with the “already, not yet” perspective of the New Testament.

“These are the ones who are coming out of **the Great Tribulation**. . .” “Great tribulation” without the article (Greek: *thlipsin megalen*) appears in Revelation 2:22 (and also Acts 7:11, which refers to the slavery in Egypt before the Exodus). This is a reference to a severe, but local and limited tribulation. “The” Great Tribulation (Greek: *tês thlipseos tês megalês*) means that not just any persecution is in view here, but a particular one that readers would already know about, one associated with the very end of time. It is for this reason that I capitalize the phrase in the above translation. The repeated article is especially emphatic: “The Tribulation, the Great One” (*tês thlipseos tês megalês*). The word “tribulation” in general means oppression and affliction (Matt 24:9; Acts 11:19; Col 1:24), or in some instances simply difficult circumstances (2 Cor 8:13; Jam 1:27). It is not limited to religious persecution. But in this location, building on the experience of the martyrs in the fifth seal, persecution and martyrdom seems particularly in focus.

The phrase “the Great Tribulation” does not occur before this in Revelation, but 3:10 does refer to “the hour of trial” (Greek: *tês hôras tou peirasmou*). The choice of words here is more likely a reference to Matthew 24:21, where Jesus speaks of “great tribulation” (Greek: *thlipsis megalê*). He follows that reference in Matthew 24:29 with heavenly signs similar to those in the sixth seal, so a direct allusion to Jesus’ Olivet discourse is probable. In Matthew Jesus may have been building on Daniel 12:1, which speaks of a “time of trouble” (Heb: *êth tzara*; LXX: *hê hêméra thlipseôs*) unlike any other. A similar use of the article is in Revelation 1:7, where Jesus Christ comes with “the clouds” (Greek: *tôn nephelôn*), implying specific clouds, not just any clouds. So this is a very specific tribulation, the one alluded to in the fifth seal (Rev 6:9-11), where the list of martyrs was waiting to be completed. In this verse, the list is now complete.

“They have washed their robes and made them white in **the blood of the Lamb**. . .” The word for “washed” (Greek: *eplunan*) is an aorist indicative, which means that the washing preceded their experience of tribulation. In a spiritual sense, robes are an expression of character. Cleansing by blood is likely a sanctuary reference. While the description of this verse recalls the martyrs of the fifth seal and their successors, the great multitude do not wash their robes in their own blood, but in the blood of the Lamb. As noted in Hebrews, the blood of animals cannot purify from sin, but the death of Christ can (Heb 10:1-14). Their martyrdom is not, in itself, meritorious, they too are dependent on the merits of the Lamb. He is the faithful martyr (Rev 1:5—Greek: *ho martus*) who has gone down the path of suffering before the great multitude did. Suffering and martyrdom for the faith are not, in themselves, “tickets to heaven.” But they can be indications of the kind of heart commitment to God that Paul would call “faith” or “trust” (Rom 3:28; Rev 12:11). One can be redeemed without being a martyr, but it is hard to imagine anyone being faithful unto death (Rev 2:10) that is not redeemed first.

There is a paradox in Revelation between the helplessness of the slain, bloody Lamb (here and in Rev 5:6) and the wrath of the Lamb (6:16). How can the same being be so passive

in one instance and so assertive in another (see also comments on Revelation 14:10)? This is, perhaps, best explained by texts like Romans 1:24-28, where the wrath of God is understood as God's "giving people up" to the consequences of their own choices. God respects human freedom and limits intervention in human affairs to actions that (at times) liberate His people from oppression or get the attention of those who are spiritually blind or hard of hearing. Wrath is not inherent in God's nature, but it is the just response to rebellion and oppression. At the end of time, the wrath of the Lamb rescues His people from the oppression of the Great Tribulation.

**Rev 7:15-17 (Introduction)**—Although it is still fairly early in the narrative of Revelation, this passage offers a foretaste of eternal life, it is a first glimpse of the glorious reward of the redeemed which will be brought out in greater and clearer measure in Revelation 21-22. The "therefore" (Greek: *dia touto*—"for this reason") at the beginning of the passage points back to the previous verse where the great multitude have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. The death of Christ is seen as providing their title to stand before the throne and take part in the governance of the universe. It on account of the cleansing of their robes that they are elevated to the throne room (cf. Eph 5:25-27). In the most likely reading of Revelation 22:14, washing the robes is the condition for access to the Tree of Life.

This section combines sanctuary language with the language of the countryside and its care for domestic animals.

**Rev 7:15**—"For this reason they are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in his temple, and the One sitting on the throne will spread His tent over them." As noted earlier, "for this reason" (Greek: *dia touto*) points back to the great multitude's washing of their robes in the blood of the Lamb in verse 14. It is not because of their sufferings that they are before the throne of God but because of God's merciful provision in the blood of the Lamb. Apparently no one can approach the heavenly throne unless they are wearing the appropriate uniform.

"Before the throne" (Greek: *enôpion tou thronou*) is the outcome predicted in Revelation 3:21, where the overcomers of chapter six are promised to sit with Jesus on His throne. What is promised to the righteous in the future is already a privilege for at least some of the angels (Matt 18:10; Luke 1:19). The Greek word "before" (*enôpion*) implies "before the face of" or "in the presence of," reminiscent of Matthew 5:8, 18:10, and 1 Cor 13:12).

"For this reason they are before the throne of God and **serve Him day and night in his temple**. . ." The word for "serving" (Greek: *latreuosin*) is not the typical Greek word for serving others (Greek: *diakonein*—as in Acts 6:2 and Gal 5:13). It is particularly associated with serving God directly, and often in a liturgical or priestly setting (Matt 4:10; Luke 1:74; Acts 7:7; 26:7; 2 Tim 1:3; Heb 9:9, 14; see also Revelation 22:3). So this is not just any kind of service, it is the language of priesthood. The people of God will serve as priests in the heavenly kingdom. It is the natural counterpart of joining Jesus on His throne (Revelation 3:21). There may also be a connotation of ruling as well. We talk about the president, parliamentarians and judges "serving" terms. The heavenly temple will be the governing center of the universe and the great multitude seem to be members of God's ruling cabinet, combining the roles of king and priest, as Jesus does.

“Day and night” (Greek: *hemeras kai nuktos*) occurs five times in the book of Revelation. The four living creatures do not rest day or night in the singing of “holy, holy, holy” (Rev 4:8). The great multitude serve God day and night in His temple (7:15). The dragon accuses the “brothers” day and night (12:10). In the third angel’s message of Revelation 14 the tormented have no rest day nor night (14:11). That language of constant torment is repeated in 20:10. The essential meaning of the expression is “constantly” or “continually.” Day and night together constitute the whole of time. On earth daily toil is suspended so people can rest during the night. But in the worship of heaven there will be no weariness and no need for an intermission or for periods of rest. An interesting precedent for this kind of singular focus on worship is in 1 Chronicles 9:33 where the singers of the temple had no other duties so they could be available “day and night” (cf. Psa 134:1). The great multitude seem to function along similar lines.

“... **serve him day and night in his temple.**” Reference here is to the heavenly temple (Greek: *naô*), which appears frequently in the book of Revelation (Rev 8:3-5; 11:19; 15:5-8, etc.). See Rev 1:12 (Excursus on the Sanctuary in Revelation) for a detailed discussion of sanctuary imagery in Revelation. See also comments on Revelation 3:12. It is interesting that there is a temple in heaven here (Rev 7:15) while there is no temple in the New Jerusalem (21:22). How can one reconcile the two ideas? One possible solution is to follow the scenario in John 14:1-3. According to that passage, Jesus returns to take the righteous to heaven for a thousand years. The reference in 7:15 would be to that period in heaven and the heavenly temple that the righteous serve in. But at the end of the thousand years the New Jerusalem comes to earth (Rev 21:2), perhaps along with the heavenly temple. But following the destruction of Satan and sinners, there is no further need for a temple in the new earth. In this passage the throne room and the temple are the same, as Christ is both king and priest.

“... **he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.**” The Greek verb for tent (*skênôsei*) is used here. It is a reminder of the tents in the wilderness during the Exodus, in which not only Israel, but also God, was dwelling. Tents allow for mobility and flexibility but also represent a situation that is not ideal. This term is also applied to the earthly Jesus in John 1:14 (see also Rev 12:12; 13:6 and in the Old Testament Lev 26:11; Isa 4:5-6 and Ezek 37:27). The sanctuary language implies here is that the throne of God is in heaven. The same language is used in Revelation 21:2-3, where after the millennium God has come down to earth with the New Jerusalem. So the picture of this verse is probably during the millennium, when the people of God are in heaven (John 14:1-3) and the earth is desolate. See Rev 20:4 (Excursus on the Timing of the Millennium).

The language of tenting (Greek: *skênôsei*) recalls the Hebrew word (*shekinah*) for the Divine presence over the mercy seat in the Most Holy Place of the Hebrew tabernacle. Lurking behind this image is the reality that the magnificent temple of John’s day had had no such token of divine presence and that temple was now in ruins. In Jewish Messianic expectation, the end-time arrival of God’s kingdom would restore the Shekinah glory to the temple. New Testament use of this image implies a restoration of the living presence of God among all who are in relationship with Jesus Christ. Paul seeks a personal experience of this Shekinah in 2 Corinthians 12:9.

It is clear that Jesus understood His personal presence in the world to be the fulfillment of Jewish expectation of the Shekinah. When Jesus said that “something greater than the temple is standing here” (Matt 12:6), He is recalling the fact that for the Jews only one thing

was greater than the temple and that was the Shekinah glory in the middle of the temple. So Jesus' own body was a temple, housing the divine presence (John 2:19-21). Jesus alludes to a Jewish saying that the Shekinah glory appears wherever two or three gather to study Torah (*Mishnah Pirke Aboth* 3:2). But He places Himself in the middle of that promise. "Where two or three gather **in My name**, there **I** am in the midst of them" (Matt 18:20). Jesus is the one the Torah is all about (John 5:39-40) and in His person the Shekinah glory has truly returned to His people.

So for the New Testament, the temple is no longer a building in Jerusalem, it is the person of Jesus Himself. Jesus is the ultimate presence and revelation of the character of God on this earth. And the temple of Jesus is present wherever Jesus is. Since He is seated at the right hand of God in heavenly places (Heb 8:1-2; Rev 5:6-14), there is a sanctuary/temple in heaven (Rev 11:19; 15:5-8). Since He is present wherever two or three gather in His name, the church itself becomes a temple, with the individual members making up the stones with which that temple is built (1 Cor 3:17; Eph 2:19-21; 1 Pet 2:5-10). And since the New Testament promises that Jesus dwells in the hearts of His followers through the Holy Spirit, the bodies of believers are also considered temples (1 Cor 6:19-20). So the New Testament has a three-fold application of the temple imagery in Christ, and Revelation is reflecting that larger picture here.

But there is an additional aspect to this tenting in Revelation 7:15. It also recalls the Feast of Tabernacles, where the tent, often made of plant materials, served as a shelter from the elements and recalled the tenting of the Israelites in the Exodus. In a sense the temple was also a shelter. It allowed the presence of God among His people in a form that would not destroy them on account of their sinful condition. God's life-giving glory is a consuming fire and a terror to those who embrace sin and rebellion (Rev 6:15-17; Rev 20:9). So the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple in Jerusalem enabled a restrained form of God's presence that was no threat to the sinners in Israel. So Revelation 7:15 is startling in that context. It portrays the complete safety of the redeemed as they stand in the very presence of God, His glory and His throne. God's glory is no threat to them because they have "washed their robes" in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:14). This also recalls the pillar of cloud which sheltered the Israelites from the desert heat (Exod 13:21-22; Num 14:14; Isa 4:5-6).

I remember a trip my family took to Petra, Jordan. It is a red rock area similar in appearance to the national parks in Utah. The heart of the site is some two to three miles through a slot canyon made famous by Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade. As we hiked and hiked and climbed up and down, there was plenty of hot desert sun and no water except what one carried in. When we climbed down to the valley from one of the high places, it was around noon. We saw a Bedouin tent and a gentleman at the front beckoning us in. At first, we were reluctant tourists (didn't know what we would be getting in to) but when we saw some of our colleagues from the tour inside, we went in too. The tent was made from black hides but there were beautiful carpets on the ground and lovely cushions to sit on, etc. The man offered us lunch and cold drinks. I marveled at the reality of an ice-cold Sprite in the middle of nowhere. In that heat and dryness, coming in for a cool drink and delicious food could not have been better. A feeling of deep contentment came over us as we rested our tired muscles and allayed our hunger and thirst.

If that is the way Bedouin people feel about their tents in the heat of the day, they can perhaps understand the meaning of this text better than most of us can. God will shelter His

people from the heat and the storm, from hunger and thirst. And on top of all that, in the kingdom to come there will be no more tears or death.

**Rev 7:16**—“*Never* again will they hunger; *never* again will they thirst. The sun will *not* beat upon them, *nor* any scorching heat.” This verse is a series of four negatives (Greek: *ou, oude, oude mê, oude*) with four expressions of the future. This verse is telling us what the life of eternity will *not* be. The first two clauses are governed by future indicatives (Greek: *peinasousin, dipsêsousin*), which express things that are present now but will stop then, namely hunger and thirst. The last two clauses are governed by a single verb, an aorist subjunctive (Greek: *pesê*). The subjunctive expresses probability, rather than a statement of fact. When you add a negative to a probability, it expresses something that will not even start, there is no chance of a burning sun or scorching heat. It is completely excluded. The sentence as a whole is an “*ou mê*” sentence (combining the first and third negative), which is an especially emphatic construction along the lines of “absolutely not.” And the emphasis increases as one reads through the verse.

The climate of the Mediterranean is relatively dry, so the worst kind of heat is the desert sirocco, a burning sun combined with a hot breeze. The ancients at such times longed for nothing more than a cooling breeze. The life of eternity is here portrayed as a cooling breeze on a warm day. In sharp contrast is the experience of the wicked in the fourth bowl-plague (Rev 16:8). Similar expressions can be found in the parable of the sower (Matt 13:5-6) and in the epistle of James (1:11). The idea that the sun won’t even light on God’s people anticipates the New Jerusalem, where the sun won’t even be needed; light and warmth will come directly from the presence of God (Rev 21:23). In this life being a believer is no guarantee of adequate food and drink and certainly not a guarantee of physical comfort. But according to this verse, in eternity things will be different.

This whole verse is one of the strongest verbal parallels to the Old Testament in the whole book of Revelation. The first two clauses, in fact, are almost identical in the LXX (*ou peinasousin oude dipsêsousin*). The only difference is that Revelation adds “any more” or “again” (Greek: *eti*) twice. In the New Testament, writers tend to use an Old Testament reference as a pointer to the larger context. Isaiah 49 is one of the Servant Songs, foretelling a Messiah who would suffer but would also be a light to the Gentiles (Isa 49:6-7). The promise was that after Israel’s return from exile in Babylon “They will neither hunger nor thirst, nor will the desert heat or the sun beat upon them (Isa 49:10, NIV).” In Isaiah this is shepherd imagery (Isa 49:9—see also Psalm 23). This promise was never literally fulfilled to Old Testament Israel, but is here in Revelation re-activated in the context of the church. The promises to Old Testament Israel are applied spiritually in the New Testament to the church and more literally to New Earth and the New Jerusalem.

**Rev 7:17**— “For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” The Lamb at the center of the throne (Greek: *ana meson tou thronou*) is in the same place that we last saw Him in Revelation 5:6-7. He is not “around the throne,” like the elders and the angels (4:4; 5:11), he is not “in front of the throne,” like the Great Multitude (7:9, 15), He is in the midst of the throne, as is appropriate for one who shares full deity with the one sitting on the throne.

According to the KJV, the Lamb will “feed them.” But the Greek is actually the verb for shepherding (Greek: *poimanei*), hence the above translation. Feeding the sheep, of course, is one of the main tasks of shepherding. But “ruling” over the sheep is another matter, so this image involves rulership as well as sustenance (see Rev 2:27 in the Greek). The Lamb as a shepherd (a bit ironic) picks up on the wider context of Isaiah 49 (verse 9).

“He will lead them to springs of living water.” “Living springs” offer a contrast with standing water or stagnant pools. Living springs are an oriental symbol of happiness and the good life. Spiritually, they represent the work of the Holy Spirit (John 4:10). The word order of the Greek here is interesting. It actually reads “living springs of water” (Greek *zoês pégas hudatôn*). The key emphasis is on “living.” This is the “water of life” mentioned in 22:17. The “springs of living water” reminds the reader of Psalm 23, Isaiah 49:10 and John 7:37-39, except that in John 7 it is the Holy Spirit that flows like a spring from the heart of those who believe in Jesus.

The living waters is another piece of the major allusion to the Feast of Tabernacles in 7:15-17 (see also Zechariah 14:8, 16-19). During the Feast of Tabernacles there was a water ceremony. A jug of water would be drawn from the Pool of Siloam and carried in procession up to the temple precincts. There the jug would be poured out in a basin in the temple courtyard. That basin was connected by pipes to the Brook Kidron. If it happened to be raining when the ceremony was held, the water would make it all the way down to the Dead Sea. This would be seen as a foretaste of the purification of the Dead Sea and the greenification of the Judean Desert in the visions of Ezekiel 47:1-12. It would also be taken as a sign of a rainy growing season and abundant crops the following year. The Feast of Tabernacles was a foretaste of the restoration of Eden at the eschaton.

“And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” Like the living springs, this is an ancient image of happiness. But whereas living springs are a positive image of happiness, the wiping away of tears is a negative image of happiness. Happiness is the absence of sadness and deep distress. Eternal life will be a mixture of joyous things that are added to human existence and unhappy things that will be removed. The wiping away of all tears anticipates Revelation 21:4 and is an appropriate response to the Great Tribulation of 7:14. The sorrow the Great Multitude suffered during the Tribulation is now ended.

**Rev 7 (Conclusion)**—Chapter seven serves as an interlude between the sixth and the seventh seal, but it is also a response to the question at the end of chapter six, “When the great day of (the Lamb’s) wrath comes, who will be able to stand?” Rev 6:17. Chapter seven gives a two-fold answer to this question, the 144,000 (7:4) and the Great Multitude (7:9) will be able to stand on that day. As we have seen, these groups are two different (almost opposite) ways of describing the same thing, the end-time people of God. John hears about the first group but actually sees the second. God’s end-time people are portrayed here in the language of Old Testament Israel and its twelve tribes (7:5-8), and is more directly described as a universal gathering of all nations at the conclusion of the Great Tribulation (7:9-14).

The time leading up to the End is a time of restraint, in which angels commissioned from heaven hold back the winds of destruction until the servants of God are sealed on their foreheads (7:1-3). There are multiple messages implied in that. 1) Like 2 Peter 3:9, it expresses delay on account of God’s patience, not willing anyone to be lost but all to come to repentance.

2) The sealing of God's servants on their foreheads implies a deepening of commitment to where they would rather die than deny God (see Rev 12:11). 3) While the Enemy has not yet appeared in the visionary part of Revelation (9:11; 12:9), the implication is that if God is the restrainer, His counterpart is the destroyer (9:11). God is not the author of evil and destruction, it is because of Him that evil and destruction are not much greater than they are.

Although the seventh seal is included in chapter eight, it really belongs with chapters six and seven. We will address the seventh seal in the next chapter of the commentary before moving on to the seventh trumpet.

**Rev 7 (Spiritual Lessons)**--As bad as things are in this world, they would be much worse if it were not for God's restraining Spirit (Rev 7:1-3). Those that don't know God are often protected because of their proximity to the righteous, whom God is protecting. Even approaching the chaos of the End-time, things would be much worse if God's Spirit was not at work in the world. People often ask the question, "If God is real and He is powerful, why is there so much evil and suffering in the world?" But the opposite question could also be asked, "If things are as bad as they are, why is there so much good and so much beauty in this world?" A God who respects the freedom of His creatures is slow to interrupt that freedom by frequent intervention. If God intervened to spare us the consequences every time we made a foolish decision, we would not truly be free.

Among all the difficulties in this world, it is easy to forget that God is actively restraining evil and takes special care that harm against His own is minimized. Sometimes we blame God for the difficult things that happen to us, but in the book of Revelation it is Satan that brings the troubles into to our lives. He is the Destroyer (Rev 9:11), not God. When God chooses not to intervene, we need to remember that He did not choose to intervene to save His own Son. There were deeper issues and deeper questions that needed to be addressed. Should our lives involve a cross, there will be a model to follow. And we can remember that the suffering of Jesus was vindicated in His resurrection. And his resurrection is a foretaste of our own (1 Cor 15:22).

In the book of Job the curtain is drawn back and we come to understand that it's not just about us, but that there is a universal conflict over the character of God, and by implication, the character of those He protects. In the context of the cosmic conflict, God cannot always do what He would prefer to do. When we come to know His character, we learn to trust (knowing of His deep care and love for us) that He has His reasons when he does not intervene to do what might seem best to us.

What an incredible future we have in store. Serving God will be well worth it. To serve as kings and priests (Rev 3:21; 7:15) is to be in the highest positions available in the universe. In the ancient world, kings had the highest status in the political realm and priests had the highest status in the religious realm. The redeemed, therefore, will have a central role in the governance of the entire universe. As Jesus said in the Parable of the Talents, "If you are faithful in a few things, I will put you over many things." Our scientific knowledge of the universe makes clear just how awesome and vast God's "many things" are. The redeemed will also play a priestly role in eternity. This is more difficult to imagine, but we will explore both these roles more deeply when we get to the New Jerusalem section of the commentary. I suspect that

when we experience what is only hinted at in this chapter, we will consider all the sufferings and disappointments of this life to have been worth it all.