

Practical Hermeneutics: JAP373

WHO ARE THE 144,000 OF REVELATION?

by Hank Hanegraaff

This article first appeared in the Practical Hermeneutics column of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 37, number 03 (2014). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

"[An angel] called out in a loud voice . . . : 'Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.' Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel." — Revelation 7:3–4

Among the numbers of Revelation, none is more misunderstood than the number of the purified bride. Jehovah's Witnesses teach that 144,000 represent the total number of Jehovah's Witnesses who will make it to heaven. The rest of the faithful will live apart from Christ on earth. Thus in Watchtower lore there is a "little flock" of 144,000 who get to go to heaven and a "great crowd" of others who are relegated to earth. Unlike the earthly class, members of the heavenly class are born again, receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and partake of communion.¹

Like Watchtower founder Charles Taze Russell, dispensationalist theologian and co-author of the Left Behind series Tim LaHaye² believes that God has two distinct people with two distinct plans and two distinct destinies. Unlike the Watchtower, however, he holds that the 144,000 are Jewish witnesses, not Jehovah's Witnesses. There is not a Gentile among them. Nor for that matter are there any women. In fact, according to LaHaye, 144,000 is a number representing *exactly* 144,000 Jewish males who have not "defiled themselves with women." They must have a visible mark on their foreheads and they must be virgins.³

In truth, the number 144,000 excludes neither non-Jewish men nor women. Far from fixated on race and gender, the number 144,000 is focused on relationship. It represents true Israel—not by nationality but by spirituality, not by circumcision of the flesh but by circumcision of the heart. Indeed, the 144,000 are "*a great multitude* that no one can count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne and to the Lamb'" (Rev. 7:9–10, emphasis added).⁴

Contra Jehovah's Witnesses and LaHaye, the 144,000 and the great multitude are not two different peoples, but two different ways of describing the same purified bride.

Literarily, the 144,000 and the great multitude are comparable to the Lion and the Lamb. Just as John is *told* about a Lion and turns to *see* a Lamb (Rev. 5:5–6), so he is *told* about the 144,000 and turns to *see* a great multitude (7:4, 9). Thus, the 144,000 are to the great multitude what the Lion is to the Lamb, namely, the same entity seen from two different vantage points. From one vantage point, the purified bride is numbered; from another, she is innumerable—a great multitude that no one can count.⁵

To suggest as LaHaye does that “12,000” from each of the twelve tribes means exactly 12,000—not 11,999 or 12,001—must surely stretch the credulity of even the most ardent literalist beyond the breaking point. To begin with, ten of the twelve tribes lost their national identity almost three thousand years ago in the Assyrian exile. The other two, Judah and Benjamin, were largely decimated two thousand years ago by Roman hordes. Furthermore, God’s priority is not race but relationship. Christians are portrayed in Scripture as true Israel as a result of their relationship to Jesus, who is described as the Lion of the tribe of Judah.⁶

Finally, the pattern of Scripture is to refer to the community of faith, whether Jew or Gentile, with Jewish designations.⁷ New Jerusalem itself is figuratively built on the foundation of the twelve apostles and is entered through twelve gates inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. Not only so, but its walls are twelve times twelve, or 144, cubits thick (see Rev. 21:12–17).

It is far more likely that 144,000 is a number that represents the twelve apostles of the Lamb multiplied by the twelve tribes of Israel, times one thousand. The figurative use of the number twelve and its multiples is well established in biblical history. For example, the tree of life in Paradise restored is said to bear twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month (Rev. 22:2), and the great presbytery in heaven is surrounded by twenty-four elders (Rev. 4:4). Likewise, the figurative use of the whole number one thousand is virtually ubiquitous in Old Testament usage. For example, God increased the number of the Israelites a thousand times (Deut. 1:11); God keeps His covenant to a thousand generations (Deut. 7:9); God owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Ps. 50:10); the least of Zion will become a thousand and the smallest a mighty nation (Isa. 60:22); a day in God’s sight is better than a thousand elsewhere (Ps. 84:10); God shows love to a thousand generations (Exod. 20:6). A thousand more examples (figuratively speaking) could easily be added to the list.

Just as the woman who rides the beast is symbolic of apostate Israel (Rev. 17), so the 144,000 represent true Israel as it was intended to be—in perfect symmetry and providentially sealed. Who can’t help but think back to Ezekiel’s epic depiction of a man clothed in linen etching a mark on the foreheads of those who grieved over and lamented all the detestable things done in Jerusalem prior to its destruction by the Babylonians six centuries before Christ (Ezek. 9:4)? Or who can fail to realize that those who were marked were the earnest of the 144,000 sealed prior to Jerusalem’s destruction in AD 70? She is the purified bride from every nation, tribe, people, and language who will step over Jordan into the New Jerusalem prepared for her from the very foundations of the world.⁸

—Hank Hanegraaff

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NOTES

- 1 For further study and refutation of the teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses, see the many resources available on the Web site of the Christian Research Institute at www.equip.org. See also the relevant entries in my book, *The Complete Bible Answer Book—Collector's Edition* (Nashville: J. Countryman, 2008).
- 2 The Left Behind series, co-authored by the theologian-novelist team of Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, is a fiction series set in the near future that depicts an invisible rapture of Christians from the earth followed by a seven-year period of tribulation led by the Antichrist, as well as other prophetic events entailed in the currently popular end-times theology of premillennial dispensationalism, which originated with John Nelson Darby. For an in-depth critique of premillennial dispensationalism, see my book, *The Apocalypse Code: Find Out What the Bible REALLY Says about the End Times...and Why It Matters Today* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007).
- 3 See Tim LaHaye, *Revelation Unveiled* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 148–50.
- 4 All Scripture quotations are from NIV1984.
- 5 David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Tyler TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 213–14; Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1993), 215–16.
- 6 Rev. 5:5. As Keith Mathison has well said, “The promises made to literal, physical Israelites were fulfilled by a literal, physical Israelite, Jesus the Messiah. He is *the Seed of Abraham*” (Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R, 1995], 29, emphasis in original). The faithful remnant of Old Testament Israel and New Testament Christianity are together the one genuine seed of Abraham and thus heirs according to the promise (see Rom. 4:16; Gal. 3:7, 16, 29). This remnant is not chosen on the basis of religion or race but rather on the basis of relationship to the resurrected Redeemer. Clothed with Christ, men, women, and children in every age and from “every tongue and tribe and nation” (Rev. 5:9; 7:9) form one and only one covenant community—true Israel. This one chosen people who form one covenant community are beautifully symbolized in the book of Romans as one cultivated olive tree (see Rom. 11:11–24). The tree symbolizes national Israel, its branches symbolize those who believe, and its root symbolizes Jesus—“the Root and the Offspring of David” (Rev. 22:16). Natural branches broken off represent Jews who reject Jesus. Wild branches grafted in represent Gentiles who receive Jesus. Thus, says Paul, “Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children....In other words, it is not the natural children who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring” (Rom. 9:6–8).
- 7 For example, Peter calls the church “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. Gal. 6:16; Phil. 3:3; Rev. 5:9–10).
- 8 Article adapted from Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code*, 124–28.