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ABSTRACT

THE ORDER AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SEALED TRIBES
OF REVELATION 7:4-8

by

Michael W. Troxell

Adviser: Ranko Stefanovic

ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Thesis

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: THE ORDER AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SEALED TRIBES
OF REVELATION 7:4-8

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Date completed: November 2011

Problem

John's list of twelve tribes of Israel in Rev 7, representing those who are sealed in the last days, has been the source of much debate through the years. This present study was to determine if there is any theological significance to the composition of the names in John's list. Of particular interest to this study is the meaning of the inclusion of Levi and Manasseh and the exclusion of Dan and Ephraim.

Methodology

Intertextual comparisons between John's list and the many Old Testament lists of Israelite tribes were used to identify any theological significance to the composition of

the list in Revelation. In addition, two Old Testament stories (the Passover in Exod 12 and the sealing in Ezek 9), which provide the historical background for John's sealing passage in Rev 7, were compared for the purpose of ascertaining the meaning of the sealing and the composition and nature of the twelve tribes as presented by John.

Conclusions

Of the nearly twenty Old Testament listings of the twelve tribes, there are not even two lists that are the same. There are various names excluded from these lists without any explicit significance attached to their exclusion. However, John places his list of the twelve tribes and their sealing in the context of the coming of Christ and the outpouring of His wrath, apparently supporting his theological intent of answering chapter 6's question, "Who shall be able to stand?"

John's list of the twelve tribes presents an end-time remnant of the church, spiritual Israel, who overcome by the Lamb's blood, and who are thus sealed in preparation to go through the final crisis of the mark of the beast. The exclusion of Dan and Ephraim, which are in the Old Testament associated with the idolatrous apostasy of the northern tribes of Israel, seems to indicate that God's last-day servants will be cleansed from all idolatry and compromise to stand as a pure army for earth's final battle.

Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

THE ORDER AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SEALED TRIBES
OF REVELATION 7:4-8

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Michael W. Troxell

2011

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Michael W. Troxell

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
<i>ATJ</i>	<i>Ashland Theological Journal</i>
BCBC	Believer's Church Bible Commentary
BDAG	Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3d ed. Chicago, 1999
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
CC	Concordia Commentary: A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture
DBSS	The Daily Bible Study Series
EB	The Expositor's Bible
HNTC	The Holman New Testament Commentary
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>ISBE</i>	<i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i> . Edited by G. W. Bromiley. 4 vols. Grand Rapids, 1979-1988
LXX	The Septuagint
NIBC	New International Bible Commentary
NJBC	The New Jerome Biblical Commentary
NIVAC	The NIV Application Commentary
PC	The Pulpit Commentary
<i>SDABC</i>	<i>The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary</i>
SHBC	The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids, 1964-1976

WBC Word Biblical Commentary

WPNT Word Pictures in the New Testament

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

One of the most interesting passages of Revelation is found in ch. 7. It is the sealing of the 144,000. This chapter has a number of important aspects worthy of study in relation to the sixth seal's declaration that "the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand." Of special interest in this thesis is the tribal list in 7:4-8, with an investigation of the significance of the order and names of the tribes contained therein.

There are passages of the Bible whose interpretations significantly affect the interpretation of other related passages. Revelation 7 is such a passage. It is a very important chapter in relation to the meaning of the entire Apocalypse. "A right understanding of this chapter is of vital importance"¹ to the interpretation of the rest of the book.² This is because the correct identity of the two groups in this chapter affects one's understanding of the identity of the people of God in Revelation, what place they fill, and their ultimate destiny. How one understands the 144,000 also affects the

¹ Robert Henry Charles, *Studies in the Apocalypse: Being Lectures Delivered Before the University of London* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1913), 103-4.

² Bullinger suggested, "Few scriptures have suffered more at the hands of Gentile Christians than this" one (Ethelbert William Bullinger, *The Apocalypse: Or, "The Day of the Lord"* [London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1935], 278).

interpretation of the timing of the seals, the trumpets, the plagues, the great tribulation, the close of probation, and the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Robert H. Charles suggested that this is “one of the most difficult chapters in the Apocalypse.”³ Many scholars seem to agree with this assertion.⁴ Charles stated that of all Revelation this has been one of the “most misunderstood”⁵ passages. It is also observed by Lenski that “the interpretation of most of Revelation pivots on” how we understand the 144,000 and the great multitude, as well as their “relation to the rest of Revelation.”⁶

Interlude between Sixth and Seventh Seals

In addition to understanding Rev 7’s relationship to the general ideas of the rest of the book, it is also important to understand its immediate contextual relation to the sixth and seventh seals. The sealing of God’s people in Rev 7 is a parenthetical insertion between the sixth and seventh seals.⁷ Its purpose is to answer ch. 6’s question about “who shall be able to stand” (6:17),⁸ when “the great day of his wrath has come” (6:16), when the wicked flee to hide among the rocks and mountains (6:14-15). It does this effectively

³ Charles, *Studies*, 103-4. Aune agrees with this suggestion when he states, “This passage has proven to be one of the most difficult to interpret in Revelation” (David Edward Aune, *Revelation, 6-16* [WBC 52A; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998], 439).

⁴ The real difficulty arises when interpreters seek to fit this chapter into their theological construct, rather than letting the chapter shape their theological construct, when they practice *eisegesis*, rather than *exegesis* in their study of Revelation.

⁵ Charles, *Studies*, 103-4.

⁶ Richard Charles Henry Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963), 257.

⁷ Aune, *Revelation, 6-16*, 424; Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 405-6.

by giving the answer through the descriptions of the 144,000, with the tribal list of “the children of Israel” (7:4-8), and the great multitude. The tribal list is very important to finding a full answer to this question at the end of the sixth seal. In order to correctly understand the importance of the listing of the tribes in Rev 7’s sealing passage, the purpose of this parenthetical passage needs to be grasped and kept firmly in mind throughout the entire study.

Statement of the Problem

It is said in Rev 7:4 that John heard that 144,000 were sealed out of “all the tribes of the children of Israel.” This presents several issues that need to be considered in this thesis. How could John write that the list of the sealed contains “*all* the tribes of the children of Israel” (7:4; italics supplied), and yet Dan, one of the original tribes, be excluded from the list entirely? In his eschatological list, Ezekiel includes Dan (Ezek 48), but John leaves him out.

Also, equally puzzling is the exclusion of Ephraim’s name, one of Joseph’s two sons, from the list. Since Joseph was given a double portion of inheritance (Gen 48), which was divided between his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh, he did not become a tribe. They each became a tribe in his place, and they are usually included together whenever they are in a listing of the tribes. Therefore, Joseph’s name seems to be inserted in the place of Ephraim as head of his tribe, since there was no tribe of Joseph in the Old

⁸ Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2002), 245-53.

Testament. It is also curious that Manasseh is in this list, while his brother Ephraim is not.

In addition, like Joseph, Levi is listed with the other tribes, which does not usually happen. Most of the Old Testament tribal lists are either military or inheritance lists, from which Levi as the tribe that served the sanctuary is usually excluded.⁹

The order of John's list in Rev 7 does not match any list in the Old Testament. Judah is at the head of the list, while Reuben the firstborn is placed second. The names are out of birth and maternity order. This raises questions about John's purpose behind his tribal list in his sealing passage.

Purpose of This Thesis

This thesis investigates whether John was intentional in composing his list in Rev 7 in the exact order that he did. It also explores whether he had theological reasons for leaving out Dan's tribe and Ephraim's name, while including Joseph and Levi. The lessons that can be drawn from this list are important for understanding the theological intent of the sealing more fully.

Methodology

In order to make sense of why the tribes of Israel are mentioned at all in this chapter, or to understand the significance of the names of the tribes and their order, Rev 7 must be studied as a whole. That is, it is necessary to study the relationship between the 144,000 and the great multitude (Are the 144,000 of chs. 7 and 14 the same or a different

⁹ Num 1:47-54; 2:17, 33; 26:57-62; Josh 13:14, 33; 14:3-4; 18:7.

group?). It is also important to understand the purpose the chapter fills by its inclusion in Revelation, and specifically where it is located between the sixth and seventh seals. This thesis employs intertextual comparisons of John's list with the many tribal lists and some background passages of the Old Testament to discover any significant concepts they might suggest as a guide in interpreting the tribal list in Rev 7, and that might aid in discovering what theological significance there is to this sealing passage.

In chapter 2, the dominant approaches to interpreting the 144,000 are reviewed. The scholarly opinions about the identity of the 144,000 have been split between two main categories of interpretation, with some variations in each: (1) the tribes as the literal twelve tribes of the nation of Israel, and (2) the twelve tribes as representative of the spiritual nation of believers in Christ, the church as the true Israel. The majority of scholarship seems to gravitate to the spiritual Israel interpretation rather than to that of a literal Israel.

It is important to understand the true nature of the "tribes" John speaks about in this sealing passage. Without understanding this, a correct interpretation of his purpose in listing the tribes by name and why he included some names while excluding others cannot be reached. Therefore, chapter 3 examines a number of aspects of Rev 7 that may assist in understanding what John meant when he said that 144,000 will be sealed out of "all the tribes of the children of Israel" (Rev 7:4-8).

Those who are sealed in Revelation are described as "the servants of God" (7:3). This phrase will be studied in Revelation and the New Testament to see what it reveals about the nature of the tribes. The concept of the sealing will also be examined in Revelation to see if understanding the setting, timing, meaning, purpose, and uses of the

seal in Revelation, as well as the rest of the Bible, can help us identify the tribes that are sealed and why John mentions them by name.

Understanding the contextual relationships of the 144,000 is important to identifying the nature of the “tribes” John lists. The various descriptions of the 144,000 will be compared with those of the great multitude in the last half of the chapter to see what connection there is between them. If they are the same group described from two different perspectives, it would suggest a symbolic interpretation of the tribes; but if they can be established as two different groups, it leaves open either a literal or symbolic interpretation of the tribal list.

Also, there are two passages in Revelation that discuss the 144,000, chs. 7 and 14. Some scholars suggest that these are not describing the same group, so the descriptions of the 144,000 in both chapters will be compared to determine if they are the same or a different group. Chapter 14’s language is symbolic and more distinctly Christian in nature, which would suggest a symbolic interpretation of the tribal list, if the two chapters describe the same group.

The majority of scholars interpret the sealed 144,000 as a multitude of martyrs. This claim will be evaluated in light of the 144,000 data in Revelation. The background passages of the Old Testament (the Passover and Ezekiel’s sealing) will also be used to evaluate the martyrdom claim of scholars. A correct understanding of this will assist in the identification of the nature of the tribes in John’s list and how it fits in contextually with Revelation’s apocalyptic message.

How John uses the language of the Old Testament in his book is very important to the meaning of the tribal list in Rev 7. Therefore, this usage is studied to see if how he

uses names of people, places, and nations reflects a symbolic or literal meaning in John's mind. If John takes a literal approach to the use of Old Testament names and language, then this might suggest that his tribal list is to be read literally. However, if he takes a symbolic approach, then the list of the names of the tribes should probably be interpreted consistent with that usage.

The idea that Rev 7 is composed as a literary portrayal of an end-time exodus of the sealed ones will be considered. The apparent Exodus language is studied to see if there is actually an underlying attempt by John to connect this Old Testament story to the sealing passage. It investigates whether this possible Exodus motif is important to the question of the nature of the "tribes" being looked at. In addition, many scholars claim that this sealed group is an end-time remnant. This claim is evaluated by looking at the timing of the sealing according to the context of Rev 6-8 and 13-16, as well as looking at some of the characteristics of the remnant in John's book and the place he describes them as fulfilling.

Chapter 4 evaluates the specific issues of John's list of the tribes. This begins in the first section by considering the argument that John's list in Revelation is a military census. The two passages that deal with the 144,000 (7 and 14) are searched for any evidence that John is presenting them as God's holy army in an end-time religious war. Old Testament military census passages are compared with John's tribal list. The tribal list composition is studied to see if the inclusion or exclusion of names, particularly the tribe of Levi, or the order of the names indicates a military order. John's tribal list is looked at in light of the Old Testament military involvement of the tribe of Levi, considering whether Levi's presence in this list affects a possible military connection.

Also, John's tribal list is evaluated in light of the larger end-time military imagery of Revelation to see how the tribes fit into it. This will assist in understanding why John included this list and composed it as he did.

In order to better understand John's tribal list, why it was included and composed as it is, seven Old Testament tribal lists are compared to the one in Rev 7. The ideas that the differences and similarities between these lists suggest are compared with the context of John's list to see if they can help clarify whether John intentionally composed his list as he did and why. In the approximately twenty-one tribal lists in the Old Testament, each list has some names excluded from it. Twelve generally appeared to be the preferred number of tribal names in a given list, even though there were more than twelve tribes due to Joseph receiving a double inheritance split between his two sons. Those names are evaluated to see if any theological intent or significance can be drawn from their absence in these lists that might inform my conclusions about the composition of John's tribal list.

Most of the tribal lists in the Old Testament are composed of twelve tribal names (though in different order and tribal composition), but not every list maintains this number. Three lists follow a different numerical composition. These lists are evaluated to see if there are any conclusions that can be drawn from their composition that will assist in understanding John's list. Do the data in the lists indicate that there is any priority to the order or composition of the tribal names?

Old Testament tribal lists are compared with John's list in Rev 7. The purpose is to discover if there are any conclusions that can be drawn from these lists, concerning the order of the names, who heads the lists, and who is included and excluded, which informs the study of Revelation's listing of the tribes. The Old Testament history of the tribes is

used as a basis for evaluating their relationship to Revelation's sealing passage.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HISTORY OF THE INTERPRETATION OF
REVELATION 7'S 144,000

Throughout the years the 144,000 and great multitude of Rev 7 have captured the interest of many scholars. This chapter surveys the main approaches that have been followed in interpreting this passage.

Twelve Tribes of Literal Descendants of Abraham

While the majority of scholars identify the 144,000 of Rev 7 as the church or spiritual believers in Jesus Christ,¹⁰ there are those who hold to them being the literal

¹⁰ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *The General Epistles and the Apocalypse* (WPNT 6; Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1933), 350; William Kemp Lowther Clarke, *Concise Bible Commentary* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 942; Robert Henry Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John 2* (ICC 2; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 1-12; Lenski, *Interpretation*, 244-55; Charles, *Studies*, 133-7; George Bradford Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 93-102; George Raymond Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 139-49, 221-4; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 158-9; William Barclay, *The Revelation of John 2, 6-22* (DBSS 2; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 23-5; Louis F. Were, *The Certainty of the Third Angel's Message* (Sarasota, Fla.: First Impressions, 1979), 37, 61-72, 166-7, 203, 258-9; Frederick Fyvie Bruce, *The Revelation to John* (NLBC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 1691-2; John Philip McMurdo Sweet, *Revelation* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979], 146-54; Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Apocalypse* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1979), 52-3; Francis D. Nichol, *Philippians to Revelation* (SDABC 7; Hagerstown, Md.: Review & Herald, 1980), 783-4; David Brady, *The Contribution of British Writers Between 1560 and 1830 to the Interpretation of Revelation 13:16-18 (The Number of the Beast): A Study in the History of Exegesis* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983), 534-9; Eugene Boring, *Revelation: Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 127-32, 168-9; Beatrice S. Neall, "Sealed Saints and the Tribulation," in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 1* (vol. 6 of Daniel and Revelation Committee Series; ed. Frank B. Holbrook; Hagerstown, Md.: Review &

nation of Israel.¹¹ Adam Clarke, for example, saw the 144,000 as being made up of “all the Jews converted to Christianity; 12,000 out of each of the twelve tribes.”¹²

Most of the scholars who hold to a literal view of Revelation’s 144,000 are futurist in their approach to interpreting Revelation. Therefore, they see the twelve tribes of Israel spoken about in Revelation as “members of the literal nation of Israel,”¹³ who,

Herald, 1992), 247, 262, 269; Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary, New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 781-3; Louis F. Were, *The Moral Purpose of Prophecy* (Sarasota, Fla.: First Impressions, 1995), 33, 64-79; Robert K. MacKenzie, *The Author of the Apocalypse: A Review of the Prevailing Hypothesis of Jewish-Christian Authorship* (Lewiston: Mellen Biblical Press, 1997), 13-14; David Edward Aune, *Revelation, 6-16* (WBC 52A; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 443-5; Kendell H. Easley, *Revelation* (HNTC 12; Nashville: Holman Reference, 1998), 123-32; Beale, *Revelation*, 404-23, 730-47; Louis A. Brighton, *Revelation* (CC; St. Louis: Concordia, 1999), 177-204, 364-75; Mitchell G. Reddish, *Revelation* (SHBC 30; Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 146-9; Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 253-73, 435-40; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (BECNT 27; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 312; Louis F. Were, *The King of the North at Jerusalem* (St. Maries, Idaho: LMN Publishing International, 2002), 60-1; John R. Yeatts, *Revelation* (BCBC; Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2003), 142-9; Jon Paulien, *The Deep Things of God: An Insider’s Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review & Herald, 2004), 166-9; Stephen Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure, and Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 132-41.

¹¹ Charles Albert Blanchard, *Light on the Last Days: Being Familiar Talks on the Book of Revelation* (Chicago: Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1913), 66-70; Shirley Jackson Case, *The Revelation of John: A Historical Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1919), 268-73; William Henry Simcox, *The Revelation of S. John the Divine: With Notes and Introduction by William Henry Simcox* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 50-2; Philip Carrington, *The Meaning of the Revelation* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1931), 141; Bullinger, *The Apocalypse*, 280-7; Josephine Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation: Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (AB 38; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1975), 124; Gary G. Cohen, *Understanding Revelation: An Investigation of the Key Interpretational and Chronological Questions Which Surround the Book of Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 128; Earl F. Palmer, *I, 2, 3 John, Revelation* (CC 12; ed. Lloyd J. Ogilvie; Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1982), 181; Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (ed. Kenneth Barker; Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 466, 476-9; George Wesley Buchanan, *The Book of Revelation: Its Introduction and Prophecy* (MBCNTS 22; Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen Biblical Press, 1993), 190; Cleon L. Rogers Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 629; Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 216-25; Torbjorn Joretteg, *Revelation* (Brushton, N.Y.: Aspect Books, 2001), 116.

¹² Adam Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1883-84), 595. Clarke goes on to defend the idea that while they are the literal nation of Israel restored, they are “professedly, openly, and practically the children of God, by faith in Christ Jesus” (ibid., 612).

¹³ Rogers and Rogers, *The New Linguistic*, 629.

after being converted to Christianity, “spread the Word of God during the tribulation,”¹⁴ after the church has been raptured out of the world.¹⁵ Bullinger observed, “If this number is symbolical, then what number in the book may we take as literal . . . so He will reserve 144,000 in the Great Tribulation.”¹⁶

Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown argue that “where the names of the tribes one by one are specified, these names cannot have any but the literal meaning.”¹⁷ It is also observed by Walvoord that not only the mentioning of specific tribes, but also the use of specific numbers “would seem to remove this from the symbolic and to justify a literal interpretation.”¹⁸ Even though Adam Clarke thought that the 144,000 are the literal tribes of the national Israel, he said “it is not to be supposed that just 12,000 were converted out of each of the twelve tribes.”¹⁹ In this, Clarke went with a literal interpretation of the tribes, but a symbolic interpretation of the number.

Several things lead to some scholars choosing a literal interpretation of the tribes. First, John is told the number of those sealed and they are from “all the tribes of the children of Israel” (7:4), which is then followed by the delineation of those sealed from each individual tribe (7:5-8). Also, many have understood Paul’s words in Rom 11 to

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Among those who share this view are the following: Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 476; Ethelbert Bullinger, *The Apocalypse*, 278-87; Joretteg, *Revelation*, 116.

¹⁶ Bullinger, *The Apocalypse*, 282.

¹⁷ Robert Jamieson, Andrew Robert Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary: Practical and Experimental on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 1549.

¹⁸ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty, New Testament* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1983), 949.

indicate that he believed there would be a restoration of the lost and scattered tribes of Israel in the last days, and that their eyes would be opened to believe in their true Messiah, Jesus Christ. Revelation 7 seems to contrast the tribes of the nation of Israel (7:4-8) with the Gentiles from all nations of the world (7:9).

In addition, the idea of the sealing in Rev 7 comes from two main background texts in the Old Testament: the marking of the Israelite homes for protection against the death plague in Exod 12 and the marking of the faithful Israelite remnant in Jerusalem to protect them from the man with the slaughter weapon in his hand in Ezek 9. In both of those passages literal Israelites are being marked or sealed for God. So, the language of the sealing in Rev 7 is taken by some to mean that God is going to seal literal restored tribes of Israelites in the end-time.

Twelve Tribes of Spiritual Israel, Representing the Church

The most common approach to the sealed group of Rev 7 is to interpret them spiritually as referring to the church, those who believe in Jesus Christ as their personal savior. William Clarke, when interpreting this passage, affirmed that “Israel must = the Christian Church, the true Israel.”²⁰ He not only gave to the name Israel a symbolic meaning, but clearly he saw the tribes themselves in a symbolic sense, for he said, “the tribes are Christians.”²¹

¹⁹ Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary*, 595.

²⁰ Clarke, *Concise Bible Commentary*, 942.

²¹ *Ibid.*

It is clearly affirmed by Yeatts that “the Christian church” is “the symbolic Israel . . . both Jewish and Gentile.”²² Grant Osborne holds that Rev 7:4-8 describes “the church as a whole as the true Israel.”²³ The 144,000 of the twelve tribes are the church or spiritual Israel according to Beatrice Neall.²⁴ In her article “Sealed Saints and the Tribulation” she states, “Israel must refer to spiritual Israel—the church—rather than Jews or Jewish Christians only.”²⁵ In her view “Israel is coextensive with the whole church,”²⁶ and “the nation of Israel with its 12 tribes signifies the host of spiritual Israel from all nations and tribes.”²⁷

David Brady identifies the 144,000 as the whole church, made up of both Jews and Gentiles.²⁸ In agreement with this Ranko Stefanovic states that “it seems clear, then, that John had the church in view, not literal Israel. In the New Testament, the Christian church is the new and true Israel of God . . . the recipient of all the privileges and promises given to Old Testament Israel.”²⁹ G.K. Beale agrees that the 144,000 of Rev 7

²² Yeatts, *Revelation*, 148-9. For a strong defense of this interpretation, see Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary 1*, 1-12; Charles, *Studies*, 133-7. For further support of this view, see Mounce, *Revelation*, 158-9; Barclay, *Revelation 2*, 23-5.

²³ Osborne, *Revelation*, 312.

²⁴ Neall, “Sealed Saints,” 247, 262, 269.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 262. She says that the reason we need to see Israel as a reference to the church is that the 144,000 in this passage are called “the servants of our God” (Rev 7:3), and this is clearly Christian language (*ibid.*).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 269.

²⁸ Brady, *The Contribution*, 534-9. See also, MacKenzie, *The Author of the Apocalypse*, 13-14.

²⁹ Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 258. On p. 261 he states, “Both the number and Israel must be understood symbolically with reference to the church as the true Israel of God. In the New Testament, the followers of Christ constitute the new Israel as the people of God.” Similarly, on p. 262 he says, “The

are spiritual Israel, the church, which is the true Israel, and therefore, the group in “7:9 would interpret the group of 7:3-8 as those who are ‘from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue.’”³⁰

According to A.T. Robertson the twelve tribes in Rev 7 are a symbol of true, spiritual Israel.³¹ Charles asserted that the 144,000 are “Christians belonging not to Israel after the flesh, but to the spiritual Israel.”³² Throughout his entire book *The King of the North*, Louis Were defended the idea that the tribes of Israel in both Rev 7 and 14 are used as symbols that “refer to the church as ‘Israel.’”³³ In regard to this, Jon Paulien states, “So Revelation applies the language of Israel to all the people of the earth who accept Jesus Christ. Whoever is in relationship with Him belongs to Israel because Jesus is the new Israel. The language of Revelation 7 sounds as if the 144,000 are exclusively of the ethnic tribes of Israel, but the things of Israel have been explained through Christ.”³⁴

number 144,000 designates symbolically the end-time true and faithful followers of Jesus Christ as the Israel of God . . . the true Israel.”

³⁰ Beale, *Revelation*, 412-3. See also pp. 418-20.

³¹ Robertson, *The General Epistles*, 350.

³² Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary I*, 199.

³³ Were, *King of the North*, 60-61. His entire book is built on the idea that what was literal in the Old Testament in regard to places, people, nations, etc., is taken in the New Testament, particularly in Revelation, as symbols of worldwide, spiritual realities. For additional arguments on this same point see the following books: Louis F. Were, *The Certainty of the Third Angel's Message* (Sarasota, Fla.: First Impressions, 1979); Louis F. Were, *The Moral Purpose of Prophecy* (Sarasota, Fla.: First Impressions, 1995).

³⁴ Paulien, *Deep Things*, 167-8.

In his view, Paulien states that Revelation 7's 144,000 "is probably talking about the church as 12 spiritual tribes descended from the witness of the 12 apostles."³⁵ He also observes, "The new Israel is not located in any one specific place or made up of any one particular people."³⁶ Nichol saw the 144,000 sealed Israelites "as belonging to Spiritual Israel, the Christian Church."³⁷ Johnsson sees them as a victorious remnant of the church that will go through the final issue of the mark of the beast.³⁸ They are God's spiritual Israel, according to Maxwell,³⁹ and the last generation of God's church⁴⁰ who pass victoriously through the final tribulation.⁴¹

Summary

In this chapter it was demonstrated that there has been a bit of division over the interpretation of the identity of the 144,000 who are sealed in Rev 7. This difference has settled in two main categories. One interprets this group as the restored national tribes of the literal descendants of Abraham, while the other identifies the tribal list of John as a

³⁵ Ibid., 166-7.

³⁶ Ibid., 168-9. In his opinion, "there is no ethnic or geographic limitation to Israel and the twelve tribes" (ibid., 166-7). They are "spiritual, worldwide" (ibid., 169). He states that the church is "the New Testament Israel of faith" (ibid., 167-8).

³⁷ Nichol, *Philippians to Revelation*, 783-4.

³⁸ Johnsson, *The Saints' End-time Victory*, 31.

³⁹ Mervin C. Maxwell, *God Cares 2* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1985), 212-3.

⁴⁰ Hans K. LaRondelle, *Chariots of Salvation: The Biblical Drama of Armageddon* (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1987), 160-73.

⁴¹ Aune, *Revelation, 6-16*, 443; Yeatts, *Revelation*, 142-4, 147.

symbolic representation of the church in the last days, a remnant of spiritual believers, who will be sealed in preparation for the mark of the beast and seven last plagues.

CHAPTER THREE

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE “TRIBES”

IN REVELATION 7?

In order to properly understand the significance of John’s inclusion and exclusion of certain tribal names in his list, and why he even mentions the tribes by name at all, it needs to be ascertained what he meant when he spoke of the sealed ones as coming from “all the tribes of the children of Israel” (7:4). To rightly interpret the tribal sealing, it is necessary to understand the true nature of the word “tribe” as John used it in this passage. There are a number of items in Rev 7 that will help clarify whether John had a theological purpose in composing his list as he did, and may assist in discovering what that intent was. If we can determine the true nature of the tribes of which John speaks, then we can identify the meaning of the names that appear in his list.

Servants of God

Those whom the “angel ascending from the east” (7:2) comes to seal are called “the servants of our God” (7:3). In Revelation, this phrase can refer to God’s prophets (10:7; 11:18), but in most instances it refers to the believers of the Church (1:1; 2:20; 19:2, 5; 22:3, 6). Paul states clearly that those who are the servants of God have been “made free from sin” to “become servants to God” (Rom 6:18-23, 1-7, 10-13), to live a new life of obedience to God (Rom 6:4, 13, 16-17; 1:5; 16:25-26), to serve God alone

(Gal 1:10). In Rev 14, the 144,000 are described as “virgins” who have not been “defiled with women” (Rev 14:4). They are also said to have “no guile” in their mouths, “for they are without fault” (14:5).

The 144,000 who are sealed are the “servants of our God” (7:3). They are washed from their sins (Rev 1:5; 7:13-14; 19:7-8; 14:1-5). They serve God alone by being obedient to “the commandments of God” rather than the commands of men (Rev 14:6-12; 13:12-17; 12:17). The 144,000 in Rev 7 have the “seal of the living God . . . in their foreheads” (7:2-3). In Rev 14 they are presented as having the name of the Lamb “and the name of his Father” in their foreheads. This suggests strongly that the seal of God placed in the foreheads of the 144,000 is the name of God. John states that “his servants” have “his name in their foreheads” (22:3-4).

The Sealing

The meaning of the sealing is integral to a correct understanding of the twelve tribes and the significance of how John lists them in Rev 7. The order follows the setting of the sealing work by the mighty angel from heaven who commands the four angels to hold back the winds of “the great tribulation” (7:13-14) from harming the earth until God’s servants have been sealed (7:1-3). There are several aspects of the sealing to look at to give a fuller picture of the listing of the twelve tribes.

Timing and Setting

The twelve “tribes of the children of Israel” (7:4) who are sealed in Rev 7 are believers living in the last days.⁴² The “seal of the living God” (7:2), placed on those whose garments of character are “washed . . . white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:13-14), will prepare them to live victoriously through the issue of the mark of the beast.⁴³ This group is later pictured standing before God’s throne with harps and singing “a new song” (14:1-3), which is “the song of Moses . . . and the song of the Lamb” (15:1-4). It is a song of their experience of victory through faith in the Lamb slain to redeem them “from the earth” (12:11; 14:4-5, 6, 12; 7:13-14).

The sealing finishes before the outpouring of God’s wrath in the seven last plagues (14:9-12; 15:1, 7; 16:1), for they are poured upon the beast, its kingdom, and those who receive its mark and worship its image (16:1-2, 10). This indicates that the

⁴² It was previously demonstrated that the sealing passage of Rev 7 is an insertion between the sixth (6:12-17) and seventh (8:1) seals. Its purpose is to describe events taking place before the closing of the sixth seal, which prepares the Lamb’s followers “to stand” (Rev 6:17) in “the great day of his wrath” (6:17), that is, the second coming of Christ (Beale, *Revelation*, 405; Aune, *Revelation*, 6-16, 423-4). The sixth seal describes the destruction of the earth at Christ’s coming and slaying of the wicked, evidenced by the disappearance of the mountains and islands, the destruction of the cities of the earth, and the slaying of all of the wicked (Matt 24:30-31; Rev 1:7; 6:12-17; 16:12-21; 18:20-24; 19:11-21; 14:14-20; Isa 63:1-6; Joel 3:9-17; Nah 1:5-10; Isa 66:15-16; Jer 4:23-26; 25:29-33; Isa 13:9-13; 24:1, 3-6, 18-23; 2:10-22). Stefanovic states, “The number 144,000 designates symbolically the end-time true and faithful followers of Jesus Christ as the Israel of God” (Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 262). See also: Aune, *Revelation*, 6-16, 439.

⁴³ The worldwide enforced worship and death decree against those who do not worship the beast and its image, and who do not receive its mark (13:8, 12-17; 14:9-11; 19:19-20), is described in Rev 7 as the letting loose of “the four winds” to blow on the earth (7:1-3). It is also “the great tribulation” that the redeemed are said to pass through victorious and pure (7:13-14). Maxwell said that the four winds are held back just before the execution of God’s judgments against the wicked at the second coming, and will not be released until after the righteous are all sealed (Maxwell, *God Cares* 2, 190). The three messages in Rev 14:6-12, pictured as being carried to the world by angels flying in the heavens, call to true worship, obedience to God’s commandments, and faith in the gospel, while warning against worshiping the beast and its image and receiving its mark. These three messages make up the sealing message that prepares the followers of the Lamb to stand faithful to him in the last days and receive the seal of God.

tribes who are sealed are the last living generation “at the close of earth’s history . . . in the context of the great day of the Lord,”⁴⁴ which is “the day of Christ’s coming,”⁴⁵ or “the great day of his wrath” (Rev 6:15-17).

Revelation 7’s sealing is inserted between the sixth (6:12-17) and seventh (8:1) seals to give a detailed answer to the sixth seal’s question, “Who shall be able to stand?” (6:16-17). Therefore, the event of the sealing is “really an integral part of the sixth seal,”⁴⁶ taking place before the last part of the seal, when the lost flee to hide “in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains” (6:15-16). The seal that is placed “in their foreheads” assures them that they will be able to stand with confidence at the coming of the Lamb (1 John 2:28-29), when the world flees from his presence.

Meaning of the Seal

The listing of the tribes in Rev 7 finds its significance in the context of the sealing itself. The tribal list supports what the sealing itself is teaching. Those who are faithful followers of the Lamb (14:4) as “the servants of our God” (7:3) will receive “the seal of the living God” (7:2).

⁴⁴ Jon Paulien, “The Seven Seals,” in *Symposium on Revelation: Introductory and Exegetical Studies, Book 1* (vol. 6 of Daniel & Revelation Committee Series; ed. Frank B. Holbrook; Hagerstown, Md.: Review & Herald, 1992), 203-4. In these pages Paulien states that the six seals portray events that take place “from the first century until the end,” when Christ will come to deliver his followers (ibid.). See also pp. 225-6 where he says that these seals “portray events from the cross to the second coming.” Shea says that the sealing of the twelve tribes is “an end-time event . . . in the final generation of earth’s history” (Shea, *The Mighty Angel*, 280).

⁴⁵ Paulien, *The Seven Seals*, 203-4, 225-6.

⁴⁶ Shea, *The Mighty Angel*, 280.

The seal of God in Revelation is the opposite of the mark of the beast. Those who worship and follow the beast, obeying its commands of false worship, will receive its mark.⁴⁷ As a result, they will receive the wrath of God in the seven last plagues and will be cast into the lake of fire at the end of the thousand years.⁴⁸ In contrast, those who follow and worship the Lamb will receive his seal in their foreheads.⁴⁹ They will receive God's blessing and entrance into the kingdom.⁵⁰

The angel who comes from the east carries "the seal of the living God" (7:2) to apply to the foreheads of God's servants (7:3). In Revelation, John uses both the noun (*σφραγίς*) and verb (*σφραγίζω*) forms of seal. In doing this he refers to three basic things. First, he uses *σφραγίς* to describe the item used to place the seal on the forehead.⁵¹ This is "probably a signet ring like that used by oriental kings to authenticate and protect official documents."⁵² It was a ring that was pressed into soft clay or wax. The impression made was then allowed to harden to prevent tampering.

⁴⁷ Rev 14:8-11; 13:12-18; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4.

⁴⁸ Rev 14:8; 18:1-5, 8, 10; 16:17-21; 14:9-11, 17-20; 15:1-2, 7; 16:1-2, 10; 18:8; 19:14-21; 20:4-15; 21:8.

⁴⁹ Rev 7:1-8; 14:1; 22:3-4.

⁵⁰ Rev 7:1-8; 13:8; 14:1-5, 6-12, 14-16; 15:1-4; 20:4-6; 21:6-7, 23-27; 22:1-4, 14-17. The appeal to "come out of" Babylon so that God's people will not receive the seven last plagues, indicates that those who respond to and obey that message will be preserved from the plagues and will receive God's blessing (14:8; 18:1-5).

⁵¹ The only use in Revelation of seal to describe the item that makes the impression is found in 7:2. Here it is said to be "the seal of the living God," that is, the seal that belongs to God. It bears his name and authority.

⁵² Mounce, *Revelation*, 157; Robertson, *The General Epistles*, 349.

Secondly, John uses *σφραγίζω*⁵³ to describe the act of sealing documents or people.⁵⁴ Finally, he uses *σφραγίς* to describe the impression made by the seal.⁵⁵ The impression left by the seal is also called the seal. The angel from the east leaves an impression “in the foreheads” (7:2-8) of God’s servants showing that they are his faithful followers,⁵⁶ those who do not participate in the sinful idolatry of the beast and its followers. They will be preserved from the coming judgments of God and from the wrath of the wicked, portrayed as the blowing of the four winds on the earth, sea, and trees.

Purpose of the Seal in the New Testament

The New Testament concept of sealing is closely connected with the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. The true believer receives the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13; Gal 3:13-14; Acts 2:38-39; Rom 5:5), who seals for redemption (Eph 1:13-14; 4:30; 2 Cor 1:20-21) through his presence in the life as evidence of being God’s child (Rom 8:1-17; Gal 4:4-7). The sealing of the Holy Spirit that a person receives through genuine

⁵³ In Revelation’s tribal listing only Judah (the first name in the list) and Benjamin (the last name in the list) have the word sealed (ἐσφραγισμένοι). This, according to Beale, “forms an inclusio with Judah,” setting off “the literary boundaries for the tribal list” (Beale, *Revelation*, 418). Judah, who was a son of Leah, and Benjamin, the youngest son of Jacob and son of his loved Rachel, head and end the list. Judah is placed here to show the leadership of the Lamb, who is also “the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David” (Rev 5:5-6; 22:16; Gen 49:9-12; Isa 11:1, 10, 1-12; Rom 1:3-4; Acts 2:29-36; 13:22-23; 14:4; 7:17).

⁵⁴ Rev 5:1; 7:3, 4, 5, 8; 10:4; 20:3; 22:10.

⁵⁵ Most of these uses refer to the scroll that is successively opened by breaking each of the seven seals one after another (Rev 5:1, 2, 9; 6:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12; 8:1). The only other instance of this usage is describing people who are preserved from the judgments of the fifth trumpet because they have “the seal of God in their foreheads” (9:4).

⁵⁶ To “mark (with a seal) as a means of identification . . . so that the mark which denotes ownership also carries w. it the protection of the owner” (Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, “σφραγίζω,” *BDAG* 796).

faith in the gospel serves two important functions: (1) identification of ownership by and right relationship to God,⁵⁷ and (2) a guarantee of our eternal inheritance in heaven.⁵⁸

The seal placed on the 144,000's forehead (Rev 7:1-8) is "his name and his Father's name" (14:1; 22:4). The seal and name are connected together as well in 2 Tim 2:19,⁵⁹ where Paul says the seal indicates who really belong to God. There is also contained in this verse the idea of the seal being placed on the lives of those who "depart from iniquity," being purified from sin, which is part of the idea of the sealing in Rev 7 and 14.⁶⁰ When every decision has been fully made for Christ and his righteousness, the sealing will cease, ending human probation.⁶¹

⁵⁷ In 2 Cor 1:20-21, Paul states that the seal serves as an indication that we have been established in Christ, while in Eph 4:30 he indicates that it shows that we are in a saving relationship. This is also the similar usage in Rom 4:11 where Paul refers to circumcision as a sign, functioning as a seal or outward indication of Abraham's righteousness by faith.

⁵⁸ This is clearly the idea in 2 Cor 1:20-21 and Eph 1:13-14 where Paul identifies the Holy Spirit as an "earnest" or down payment guaranteeing God's pledge to give us the promised inheritance purchased by Christ's death.

⁵⁹ Beale, *Revelation*, 411.

⁶⁰ In ch. 14:1-5 the seal of God's name is placed on the forehead of those who are "without fault" and who have "no guile" in their mouth. However, ch. 7 similarly dubs the sealed as Israel, meaning that they are overcomers (Gen 32:24-30). The sealing in this chapter is parallel to the washing of the robes and making them white "in the blood of the Lamb" (7:13-14), which is symbolic language for cleansing from and victory over sin (12:11; 3:4-5, 18-21; 1:5; 19:7-8) in the lives of the end-time remnant.

⁶¹ The sealing is a divine acknowledgment of the human choice of allegiance, a "mark of divine approval" (LaRondelle, *Chariots of Salvation*, 171). It represents the working of grace on human hearts to lead them to full spiritual maturity in character and trust in God. The work of the sealing is to mature and fix the character and faith of God's people, so that it becomes unchangeable. When this finishes just before the coming of Christ, human probation will close and there will be no more changing of destiny for anyone (Rev 22:11-12). Both the mark of the beast and the seal of God signify the same thing. They differ in that the seal stands for the allegiance of the saved to the Lamb and the mark stands for the allegiance of the lost to the beast coalition.

The concept of sealing in Rev 7 is similar to the usage elsewhere in the New Testament, but is given an additional “eschatological”⁶² meaning in the apocalyptic setting of preparation for divine judgment in the last days. Those sealed in Rev 7 are protected from the blowing of the four winds, just as in 9:4. The presence of “the seal of God” preserves them from the divine judgments in the seven last plagues (14:8-11; 15:1-8; 16:1-21; 18:1-5). This eschatological idea of protection from specific end-time judgments⁶³ is the same as contained in the Old Testament sealing passages of Ezekiel’s vision (Ezek 9:1-6) and the Passover (Exod 12).

Name of God

The seal of God placed on the forehead is the heavenly recognition that the 144,000 of “the tribes of the children of Israel” (7:4-8) are authentically “the servants of our God” (7:3). By this seal, God is recognizing them as his own special ones before the watching universe. It is fitting that the impression left on the foreheads of the 144,000 servants of God by “the seal of the living God” (7:2-8) is “his [the Lamb’s] name and his Father’s name” (14:1).⁶⁴ This is confirmed in ch. 22 where John says “his servants” have “his name . . . in their foreheads” (22:3-4). The seal, which authenticates the sealed from

⁶² Aune, *Revelation, 6-16*, 452. Stefanovic states that this “additional meaning and significance . . . is a final ratification of God’s people to stand for God in the final crisis” (Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 259).

⁶³ “Revelation 7 indicates *why* the 144,000 will need a special end-time seal: to guarantee their protection from the seven angels God has commissioned from His heavenly Temple to pour out the seven last plagues on the Babylonian world” (LaRondelle, *Chariots of Salvation*, 172).

⁶⁴ “The names of Christ and God inscribed on Christians’ foreheads is equivalent to the seal placed on the foreheads of the 144,000 in 7:1-8” (Beale, *Revelation*, 734).

the tribes as his faithful, covenant people (21:3, 6-7; 1 Pet 2:9-10), stamps his name on their foreheads.⁶⁵

Forehead and Hand

Both the mark of the beast (13:16; 14:9; 20:4) and the seal of God (7:3; 14:1; 22:4) are placed in the forehead. Only the mark of the beast is described as being placed in the right hand (13:16; 14:9; 20:4). This is not describing literal tattooing on these body parts. The seal and mark are symbols of spiritual choices.⁶⁶ The hand is a symbol of the works that a person does,⁶⁷ while the forehead is a symbol of the mind, thoughts, decisions, and allegiance.⁶⁸

Being marked in the hand describes people who will go along with the end-time false worship, even if they do not believe in it. They do this to preserve their lives by maintaining their freedom to “buy or sell” (13:16-17), and by avoiding the death penalty

⁶⁵ This is the portion of the brain that is responsible for moral choice and character. It is in the forehead that God writes his moral law of the Ten Commandments under the blessing of the new covenant (Jer 31:31-34; Heb 8:6-13; 10:15-18). Revelation describes them as a final remnant of God’s true church, who “keep the commandments of God” (Rev 12:17; 14:12; 22:14; see also, Mervyn C. Maxwell, “The Mark of the Beast,” in *Symposium on Revelation: Exegetical and General Studies, Book 2* (vol. 7 of Daniel and Revelation Committee Series; ed. Frank B. Holbrook; Hagerstown, Md.: Review & Herald, 1992), 59-61), rather than the commandments of men.

⁶⁶ God told Moses that the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread were to be a “sign unto thee upon thine hand, and for a memorial between thine eyes” (Exod 13:9, 16). They were not to tattoo these things onto their body parts, but rather this was symbolic speech showing that God desired that “the Lord’s law may be in thy mouth” to pass it on to future generations. A similar idea is contained in Deuteronomy. God said that his words or laws “shall be in thine heart . . . and thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes” (Deut 6:5-15). The intent was not to literally write these words on the parts of the body, but to cherish them in one’s thought, speech, and actions, and to teach future generations about them. Thus, the placing of the mark in the hand and forehead indicates following either by a choice of allegiance or by forced actions.

⁶⁷ Acts 7:40-41; Deut 2:7; 15:10; Gal 6:11; Isa 31:7.

⁶⁸ Heb 8:10; 10:16; Ps 40:8; Jer 3:3.

(13:15). In contrast, being marked in the forehead indicates a passionate allegiance to follow either the beast or the Lamb. It symbolizes those who believe that they are right in following whichever of these two powers they choose and are dedicated to that decision.⁶⁹ Therefore, those who are sealed out of the tribes of Israel are those who are dedicated in heart allegiance to be “the servants of our God” (7:3), even if they lose everything for following the Lamb (Rev 14:4; 12:11; Luke 9:23).

Sealed Out of the Tribes

The sealing of the twelve tribes in 7:4-8 repeats the Greek phrase ἐκ⁷⁰ φυλῆς before each tribal name.⁷¹ This repeated Greek phrase shows that the individuals who are sealed are sealed “out of” a larger group of each tribe listed. This means that not everyone from each tribe is sealed, but that only a portion are selected or qualified to be sealed in the last days.

A remnant

John’s language in the tribal list shows that this is a faithful remnant of Israel, the “seed” of the woman who “keep the commandments of God” (12:17; 14:12).⁷² The fact

⁶⁹ According to Beale, the marking or sealing on the forehead reflects an “ideological commitment,” while marking on the hand represents “the practical outworking of that commitment” (Beale, *Revelation*, 717).

⁷⁰ This Greek preposition means “out, out of.”

⁷¹ The exception to this is in 7:4 where no specific tribal name is listed; rather, it is describing the total number sealed out “of all the tribes” (ἐκ πάσης φυλῆς) of Israel.

⁷² Maxwell, *The Mark*, 59-61.

that not everyone from the tribes, but only a small group, are sealed out of each tribe⁷³ demonstrates that John intended his readers to understand the tribes in a spiritual,⁷⁴ rather than literal sense.⁷⁵

An end-time judgment

The fact that only 12,000 are sealed out of each tribe, and not the entire tribe, shows that only those who are qualified will be sealed⁷⁶ in the last days. This implies some type of investigation to pass judgment on individuals as to whether or not they

⁷³ The same language appears in the military census of Num 1. There, not every male was selected for battle, but only certain ones who met certain qualifications for service. For further discussion on this, see, Bauckham, *Climax*, 217; Pattemore, *People of God*, 138-9.

⁷⁴ There are a number of passages in the Old Testament that speak about a restoration of the nation of Israel and its exultation and leadership among the nations (Jer 29:14; Isa 11:10-13; 27:12-13; 31:6-9; Ezek 36:16-36; 37:15-28). Many commentators take the passages that refer to their return from Babylonian exile after the seventy-year captivity, which was already fulfilled as a historical reality, and use them as a proof of a final restoration in the end-time. The Bible does predict that there will be a final restoration of Israel, and all Israel will be saved, but it will be the Israel of faith, the church of both Gentiles and Jews. Romans 11 is used by some to support a claim that God will restore and seal the national tribes of Israel in the last days, but neither this passage nor the rest of Paul's writings supports such a conclusion. Rather, Paul teaches that all of the true Israel, genuine believers in Jesus, will be saved as a remnant together in one body with the Gentile believers. This is consistent with his arguments of a remnant in chs. 9 and 10 of Romans. It also fits in with his overall teaching of the identity of true Israel as being not "the children of the flesh: but the children of the promise" (Rom 9:6-8), that is, those who are "born after the Spirit" (Gal 4:21-31; 3:6-9, 26-29). Paul was also very clear that the true Israelite or Jew is one who internally is a follower of Jesus, living by the same faith Abraham had, not one who can trace family history to Abraham (Rom 2:17-29; 4:1-25; Phil 3:3). Peter gave the same idea of believers being the true Israel in God's eyes (1 Pet 2:1-11). Yeatts sees the 144,000 of Rev 7 as the fulfillment of "the restoration of Israel through the church . . . the symbolic Israel" (Yeatts, *Revelation*, 148-9).

⁷⁵ The New Testament repeatedly uses the terms Israel and Jews to refer to the church made up of Christian believers from both Jews and Gentiles (Rom 2:28-29; 9:3-8; Gal 3:6-9, 26-29; 1 Pet 2:9-10). Jesus told the parable of the vineyard to the Jewish leadership of his day and gave the conclusion that "the kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matt 21:33-46). The Jewish persecutors of the church are called "the synagogue of Satan" (Rev 2:9; 3:9). Paul describes the Israel according to the flesh as in bondage, lost, and without an inheritance apart from faith in Christ and the promises of God (Gal 4:21-5:6). These and many other passages in the New Testament indicate that a literal reading of Israel and the tribes may not be the best choice when interpreting Rev 7.

⁷⁶ This seal or mark placed on the foreheads of God's servants "stands for character qualification" (Nichol, *Philippians to Revelation*, 782). The seal is a mark of God on his people that he approves of their character, that their character reflects his in purity (Rev 14:4-5).

qualify to be sealed. John's selection of an end-time remnant to be sealed out of a larger group suggests a connection with the message that remnant is to preach to the world: "the hour of his judgment has come" (14:6-7). In other words, this message that prepares God's people to be sealed points out that the last generation are living during the time of a heavenly judgment that takes place before Christ comes to give his rewards of eternal life or loss to every person.⁷⁷ This judgment determines not only the rewards that each person will receive, but also shows who will receive "the seal of the living God" (7:2-8) and who will not.

Peter says that the judgment "must begin at the house of God" (1 Pet 4:17-18), among the professed believers of the church. This is exactly what is indicated in the major background passages to Rev 7. In Exod 12 the children of Israel were commanded to kill a lamb and place its blood on "the lintel and the two side posts" (Exod 12:7, 13, 22-23). When the Lord passed through Egypt to "execute judgment" on the firstborn, he first looked or investigated to see if each house had the blood or not. If he saw the blood, he passed "over the door" of that house (Exod 12:12-13, 22-23), but the houses that were found to not have the blood applied were visited with the execution of the judgment of death on the firstborn.

⁷⁷ The idea of an investigative phase of judgment taking place in heaven with the loyal angels in God's presence is taught throughout Scripture. It is clearly pictured in Daniel (Dan 7:8-10, 13-14, 21-22, 25-27). The sealing message contains that idea of judgment as a present reality. There must always be an investigative phase of judgment in which evidence is viewed in a case, before the executive phase of a judgment is carried out. The investigative phase determines guilt or innocence of a defendant and what type of punishment is deserved. The same is true in how God deals with the people of this planet. In Rev 11:18 John affirms that "the time of the dead, that they should be judged" comes before he gives rewards to his servants. The same is implied in Jesus' promise, "And, Behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be" (Rev 22:12), and this follows immediately after the close

The same idea is present in Ezek 9's passage of the sealing of Israel. This is the main passage John directly drew his sealing imagery from. God told the man, "which had the writer's inkhorn by his side," to go all through city of Jerusalem and place a "mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done" in it (Ezek 9:3-4). To do this requires an examination or investigation of the moral qualifications of each person, to see if they had a genuine sorrow for sin (Ezek 9:4), before they would receive the mark. Not everyone in Jerusalem would be marked, but only those who met the qualifications the Lord gave to the man with the inkhorn. Men were told to follow him and execute the judgment of a death sentence on all of those who were not marked on their foreheads in the city, beginning in the sanctuary (Ezek 9:5-6).

Uses of the Seal

There are several ancient uses of seals. Each of these uses gives a clearer understanding of the sealing of the 144,000 in the last days.

Ownership

The most "basic ancient idea of sealing is ownership"⁷⁸ of a person as a slave.⁷⁹ Those who are thus marked in Rev 7 are called "the servants⁸⁰ of our God" (7:3). They are marked with his name on their forehead⁸¹ as belonging to him.⁸²

of probation when it is declared that there will be no more character change (Rev 22:11). Every decision is finally made, and will receive its due reward from Christ at his coming.

⁷⁸ Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 255.

⁷⁹ Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary*, 595.

⁸⁰ Greek δοῦλος can refer to either a slave or servant.

Consecration

Many devotees to the worship of particular gods would show their devotion by branding either the name or some symbol of the god they worship on their forehead.⁸³ They are marked to show that they are consecrated to the true worship of the Creator, rather than the beast (14:6-12; 13:12-18). The seal identifies those who are dedicated to God (2 Tim 2:19).

Authenticity

The seal was used to show that a document, item, or person was authentic.⁸⁴ Paul says that those who were converted under his labors were the seal that he was an authentic apostle (1 Cor 9:2). Haman used the king's signet ring (symbolizing the king's authority) to seal his document into law, and thereby condemned the Jews to death (Esth 3:10, 12). Jezebel gained Naboth's vineyard for Ahab by writing a letter in his name telling the elders of Naboth's city to condemn him falsely, and then she sealed the letter with his ring (1 Kgs 21:7-11). Jesus said the Father set his seal on his Son, showing him to be genuine (John 6:27).

⁸¹ Rev 7:1-8; 14:1; 22:3-4. Beale says "it was a common practice in the ancient world to mark slaves on the forehead to indicate who owned them and to whom they owed service" (Beale, *Revelation*, 411).

⁸² Paulien, *The Seven Seals*, 216; Bauckham, *Climax*, 216.

⁸³ Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary*, 612, 595. Both Beale (Beale, *Revelation*, 713-5) and Aune (Aune, *Revelation*, 6-16, 455-9) refer to a number of historical references to the tattooing or branding of devotees to a particular deity.

⁸⁴ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 468.

Protection

Anciently, it was common to place a seal on something a person desired to protect from tampering or destruction. The placing of a seal on an item⁸⁵ or document (or on a person)⁸⁶ secures it and its contents, protecting it from tampering,⁸⁷ discovery,⁸⁸ or change.⁸⁹ The seal placed on the 144,000 of Rev 7 “functions as a mark of protection.”⁹⁰ It serves to indicate that their characters have reached full maturity (or, have become fixed) in likeness to God.⁹¹ This is confirmed by the fact that the seal, according Rev 7 and 14, is God’s name⁹² placed on the foreheads of those who faithfully follow the Lamb.

⁸⁵ The Jewish leaders asked Pilate to secure the tomb with a seal and set a guard to keep the disciples from stealing the body of Jesus and then claiming he had risen (Matt 27:62-66).

⁸⁶ Satan will be cast into the abyss with a seal placed on him to prevent him from deceiving people anymore until the thousand years are over (Rev 20:1-8).

⁸⁷ The den of lions was sealed to prevent anyone from tampering with Daniel’s sentence (Dan 6:17).

⁸⁸ The scroll in the Lamb’s hand had seven seals that only the Lamb could open (Rev 5:1-5; 6:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12; 8:1). Daniel’s book was closed and sealed to prevent understanding until the end-times when it would be unsealed (Dan 8:26; 12:4, 9). However, Revelation was specifically not sealed, because what it predicted was about to take place (Rev 1:1-3; 22:6-10), but John was told to seal up what the seven thunders had spoken, so no one would understand it (Rev 10:3-4).

⁸⁹ Haman sealed the law condemning the Jews to destruction with the king’s signet ring making it unchangeable (Esth 3:10-12; 8:2, 5, 8), just like the decree condemning Daniel to the lions’ den for the night (Dan 6:8-9, 12-15).

⁹⁰ Paulien, *The Seven Seals*, 216.

⁹¹ Neall, *Sealed Saints*, 249-62. While those who receive the seal of God will have reached maturity in likeness to God (Rev 7:2-4; 14:1; 22:3-4), those who receive the mark of the beast will fully reflect the character of the beasts and Satan (Rev 13:12-18). This maturity of character is represented by the maturing of the earth’s harvest of wheat gathered into God’s barn and the grapes of wrath that are trampled in the winepress of God’s wrath (Rev 14:14-20; see also, Maxwell, *The Mark*, 55-6). The fixedness of character at the close of probation, which is just before the second coming, is taught in Rev 22:11-12.

⁹² When God told Moses he would proclaim his name to him, he proclaimed a long list of his traits of character (Exod 33:18-19; 34:5-8). This passage shows that God’s name represents his character. The same can be seen with Jacob having his name changed after the night of wrestling with God from Jacob (*deceiver, supplanter*) to Israel (*prince, overcomer*). This name change signified a change in his life’s

It shows that their characters are fixed and not subject to change anymore (Rev 22:11-12).

In addition, the seal protects those who have it from demonic (9:4) and destructive (7:1-4) forces that harm the world.⁹³ It also protects the sealed from the seven last plagues that fall on the beast, its kingdom, and those who worship it.⁹⁴ Some suggest that the sealing will not protect the 144,000 from physical suffering and martyrdom,⁹⁵ but this is

character (Gen 32:24-30). Therefore, the placement of God's name on the foreheads of the 144,000 as God's seal indicates that the character of God has been reproduced in the lives of his servants. Plummer says, "This seal is *the holy character* which the Spirit of God creates in and impresses upon a man. . . . The seal is that which is impressed *on* him, is that which we call the man's character. And it is a holy character, such as the Holy Spirit would of necessity produce" (Alfred Plummer, *Epistles of Peter, John & Jude, the Revelation* [PC 22; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950], 215-6). This seems to be what Paul intends when he says that the Holy Spirit is the one who seals believers for redemption (Eph 1:13-14; 4:30; 2 Cor 1:19-22; 3:17-18). Revelation 7's servants of God are "'the children of Israel,' in other words, the Children of a spiritual experience of victory, or the spiritual children" (Hoyt, *Studies in the Apocalypse*, 57).

⁹³ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 471; Charles, *Lectures on the Apocalypse* (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), 25; Charles, *Studies*, 122-5; Maxwell, *God Cares 2*, 175, 190.

⁹⁴ Exod 12; Ezek 9; Rev 16. See also, Brady, *The Contribution*, 537. God warns that the plagues will fall only on those who break God's commandments and follow the beast (Rev 14:6-12; 15:1-4). Those who separate from the beast (also called Babylon) will not be touched by the plagues (Rev 18:1-8; 14:8). It is also the opinion of Joretteg that the plagues do not fall on the sealed (Joretteg, *Revelation*, 110-1; see also, Maxwell, *God Cares 2*, 260, 378).

⁹⁵ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 471. Charles said that it is a misunderstanding of Rev 7's seal to assume that it provides protection from physical evil (Charles, *Lectures*, 25; see also, Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary 1*, 189, 194-6). He suggested that if preservation from physical evil were intended then they would be sealed before the first seal of Rev 6, rather than during the calamities of the sixth seal (Charles, *Studies*, 122-5). On p. 123 he stated that protection from apostasy would be a better interpretation of the sealing (*ibid.*, 123). However, in contradiction to Charles's position, this passage describes end-time saints who are living faithful to the Lamb at the time of the second coming. They are those who are "able to stand" (Rev 6:17) through the issues of the mark of the beast and the seven last plagues (7:1-4, 13-14; 13:7-17; 14:1-5, 6-20). The sixth seal in Rev 6 ends with a worldwide picture of the living wicked attempting to hide from the presence of the Lamb at "the great day of his wrath" (6:12-17). Rev 7 is a parenthetical insertion, not to describe martyrdom, but living saints who are washed and sealed, and therefore, stand faithful to the Lamb as the living remnant at his coming (12:17). Interestingly enough, the ideas of death and martyrdom do not even appear in the chapter at all, yet Charles and a number of other scholars have chosen to read it into the passage.

not what the sealing itself indicates.⁹⁶ It is specifically stated that those who have the seal in Rev 9:4 are protected from the locust-like creatures of the fifth trumpet. Also, Rev 7 is not a discussion about martyrdom and who will be resurrected at Christ's coming. It is inserted to give an answer to the question of "who shall be able to stand" (6:16-17) as living saints at the coming of the Lamb, while the wicked are fleeing to hide in the rocks (6:14-15). To suggest that the 144,000 sealed saints will be martyred violates the purpose of Rev 7's parenthetical insertion between the sixth and seventh seals. Stefanovic rightly states that in the end-time sealing of God's remnant the seal of God takes on meaning "as a sign of protection."⁹⁷

An Outward Sign or Mark of Faithfulness

Everyone alive on the earth in the last generation will receive either the Lamb's seal or the beast's mark on the forehead or the hand. This will serve as a sign that the character of either the Lamb or the beast has reached full maturity in their lives.⁹⁸ This is why John uses the imagery of "the tribes of the children of Israel" (7:4-8) when building his concept of the sealing in Revelation. Those who are sealed are the true spiritual Israel or those who overcome⁹⁹ the beast, its image and mark, and faithfully follow the Lamb.

⁹⁶ Paulien says that the seals described in Rev 6 are "a visionary description of events on the earth between the cross and the Second Coming," while events of the sealing in Rev 7 "focus on the end of that era" (Paulien, *The Seven Seals*, 203-4).

⁹⁷ Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 255.

⁹⁸ This coincides with the maturing of "the harvest of the earth" (Rev 14:14-16, 17-20; Mark 4:26-29; Joel 3:9-17)

⁹⁹ This idea of overcoming is a dominant theme in Revelation, particularly with the last generation (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:4-5, 12, 21; 7:13-14; 12:11; 13:8; 14:4-5; 21:6-8). Those who overcome the beast will "keep the commandments of God" (Rev 12:17; 14:12; 22:14-15). "They are 'the children of Israel,' in

When John refers to those being sealed as coming from the tribes of Israel he is emphasizing their spiritual character as overcomers. The sealing of Revelation reveals that “ultimately . . . on the stage of finality,”¹⁰⁰ in the battle between good and evil, “the outward manifestation of character”¹⁰¹ in the lives of God’s people will play an important role. Ultimately God’s servants will be sealed “when the divine likeness is stamped on [their] character,”¹⁰² when they reflect him in their moral choices.

The seal is not to be understood as a literal, visible mark¹⁰³ to be placed in the forehead¹⁰⁴ of the faithful. Rather, it is to be seen as a symbol of something in the lives of the Lamb’s followers¹⁰⁵ that will distinguish them from those who follow the beast. It will be “some distinguishing mark, or religious characteristic,”¹⁰⁶ “an outward badge, or a religious rite, or the doctrines which they hold and by which they would be known.”¹⁰⁷ It

other words, the children of a spiritual experience of victory, or the spiritual children” (Hoyt, *Studies in the Apocalypse*, 57).

¹⁰⁰ Charles, *Studies*, 131.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Frederick Brotherton Meyer, *F. B. Meyer Bible Commentary* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1979), 639. Nichol rightly asserted that the seal of God “stands for character qualification” (Nichol, *Philippians to Revelation*, 782). Beale observes, “The mark may also connote that the followers of Christ and the beast both are stamped with the image (i.e., character) of their respective leaders” (Beale, *Revelation*, 716, 414-5).

¹⁰³ Were, *Moral Purpose*, 62.

¹⁰⁴ As previously discussed this is symbolic language to describe something that is committed to, believed, lived out in one’s life. It does not actually indicate that there will be literal writing in the forehead.

¹⁰⁵ According to Smith this seal is “some institution or observance” that causes God’s people to stand out from the rest of the world (Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation*, 455).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 461.

¹⁰⁷ Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament: Explanatory and Practical* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1954), 172. The Sabbath, being quoted in the call to true worship of the Creator and the

is suggested by Hoyt that the sealing of God's servants is "generally recognized as being the realization of spiritual Truth and Law."¹⁰⁸ Revelation is emphatic that this realization will be experienced by the 144,000 remnant of God's church in the last days that "keep the commandments of God and follow the Lamb."¹⁰⁹

This will include the fourth commandment of the seventh-day Sabbath, which is particularly quoted or alluded to in the sealing message of Rev 14.¹¹⁰ The Sabbath of the fourth commandment calls the entire world to worship the Creator (14:6-7, 12).

Revelation demonstrates that it will function as both the sign and seal¹¹¹ that will mark God's servants in the last days as those who keep his commandments.¹¹²

keeping of the commandments (Rev 14:6-7, 12), is an outward doctrine, observance, rite, etc., that serves as a distinction of true worship. Just like circumcision was a "seal" of righteousness by faith that served as an outward "sign" or identifying mark that Abraham and his descendants truly did have faith that makes righteous (Rom 4:11), so the Sabbath is God's eternal "sign" not only of creation, but of sanctification or redemption (Gen 2:1-3; Exod 20:8-11; 31:17; Ezek 20:12, 20; Isa 58:12-14; Heb 4:1-12), which is spiritual creation (Eph 2:7-10; Rom 1:16-20; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:14-15). Brighton states, "Paul connects that 'sign' with God's 'seal'" (Brighton, *Revelation*, 186), and in agreement Joretteg says "the word 'seal' is most often connected to the meaning of a sign of identity or a sign of ownership" (Joretteg, *Revelation*, 110). So, the words *sign* and *seal* are used interchangeably for the same idea. What serves as a seal of God's people in the last days will also be a sign that they are genuinely his true worshipers. This is the function of the Sabbath in Rev 14's sealing message.

¹⁰⁸ Hoyt, *Studies in the Apocalypse*, 57.

¹⁰⁹ Aune, *Revelation, 6-16*, 444-5; see also, Rev 12:17; 14:1-12; and compare 7:13-14 with 19:7-8.

¹¹⁰ Compare the wording and ideas contained in Rev 14:6-7 with that contained the fourth commandment in Exod 20:11, 8-10. Also compare these with Gen 2:1-3, when the Sabbath was first introduced at the creation of the earth. The last-day call to obey all of God's commandments is a vital part of Revelation's focal point in the last days (Rev 14:12; 22:14-15). John says that the remnant, the last generation of the faithful believers of God's true church in the last days, are the target of Satan's wrath and attack partially due to the fact that they "keep the commandments of God" (Rev 12:17).

¹¹¹ In the new covenant, God promises to write his law in the mind (or forehead) of believers (Heb 8:10; 10:16), so that they take delight in obeying him (Ps 40:8). The Sabbath is the only commandment that identifies whose authority the commands are based on (Exod 20:8-11, 3-17). If you remove the fourth commandment of the Sabbath you strip the other nine of the authority to command them as well (Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation*, 457). As the seal of God it "occupies the central place in the Decalogue, normally reserved for the seal in ancient covenant documents" (Doukhan, *Secrets*, 71), and Maxwell said that this is not only because it contains his name, title, and territory of authority, but also because of its call

Contextual Relationship of the 144,000

The 144,000 and the Great Multitude

There are a few variations of ideas about the identity of the 144,000 and the great multitude among those who interpret them as distinct from each other. It was the opinion of Anderson that the 144,000 are a “special group” among the “innumerable company” of the Lord’s redeemed.¹¹³ He also held that they are not identical with the great multitude, but only a special part of it. That is, the great multitude of all of the redeemed includes the 144,000 who are sealed in the last days. It was the view of Maxwell that the 144,000 are the last generation of living saints who will be translated without seeing death,¹¹⁴

to holiness of character that is to be developed to full maturity in God’s last generation of saints, the remnant of the 144,000, in preparation for the final harvest (Maxwell, *God Cares 2*, 383-6). The seal or name of God will be placed in the forehead (Rev 7:1-4; 9:4; 14:1; 22:3-4), and his name is holy (Matt 6:9; Lev 20:3; 22:2; Pss 33:21; 99:3; 103:1; 11:9), which name is contained in the Sabbath commandment that is given as a sign that God sanctifies or makes holy his people (Ezek 20:12, 20), and those who receive the seal, who keep his commandments, are described as saints or holy ones (Rev 7:1-4; 14:6-7, 12). It will be marked in their foreheads as a seal and sign by being impressed in their characters as loyal obedience to God and his commandments by “the faith of Jesus” (Rev 14:6-7, 12; 12:17; John 14:15).

¹¹² Were, *Certainty*, 61, 72-74, 92, 94, 256-7; Were, *King of the North*, 44; Mark A. Finley, *The Next Superpower: Ancient Prophecies, Global Events, and Your Future* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review & Herald, 2005), 151-3, 214-5; Haskell, *Seer of Patmos*, 133-6; Gerhard Pfandl, “The Remnant Church and the Spirit of Prophecy,” in *Symposium on Revelation: Exegetical and General Studies, Book 2* (vol. 7 of Daniel and Revelation Committee Series; ed. Frank B. Holbrook; Hagerstown, Md.: Review & Herald, 1992), 303; Maxwell, *The Mark*, 60-1, 111-21; Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation*, 459-63; Neall, *Sealed Saints*, 245, 257-8.

¹¹³ Anderson, *Unfolding the Revelation*, 80-2. Smith agreed that the 144,000 are part of the great multitude. He saw the great multitude as the redeemed of all ages and nations (Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation*, 468-9). See also, Stephen N. Haskell, *The Story of the Seer of Patmos* (Brushton, N.Y.: Teach Services, 1995), 139.

¹¹⁴ At Christ’s coming the redeemed will be made up of both the resurrected righteous and the living righteous (1 Cor 15:51-52; 1 Thess 4:13-17). The living righteous will be translated in the same way that Enoch (Gen 5:21-24; Heb 11:5) and Elijah (2 Kgs 2:10-16) were.

while the great multitude represents the redeemed of all ages who are resurrected at Christ's coming.¹¹⁵

According to some, the 144,000 are converted Jews who preach the gospel to the world during the tribulation, but the great multitude are gentile Christians who accept the gospel and are saved during the great tribulation.¹¹⁶ Joretteg, similar to Carrington, holds that the 144,000 are Israelites from the Old Testament, who will be resurrected and sealed at Christ's coming, while the great multitude from all nations is Jewish and Gentile believers in the New Testament times.¹¹⁷

Correctly interpreting the relationship of the 144,000 to the great multitude is important to understanding the identity of "all the tribes of the children of Israel" (7:4). It is true that some scholars, as was discussed above, hold that the 144,000 and the great multitude are descriptions of two very different groups. However, most scholars seem to identify these two apparently different groups¹¹⁸ as actually being "one and the same

¹¹⁵ Maxwell, *God Cares* 2, 188.

¹¹⁶ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 477; Bullinger, *The Apocalypse*, 278-87.

¹¹⁷ Joretteg, *Revelation*, 112-27; Carrington, *Meaning of the Revelation*, 141.

¹¹⁸ Some of the language of Rev 7 seems to indicate that they are two distinct groups. The 144,000 are a specifically numbered group, explicitly described as coming from "all the tribes of the children of Israel" (Rev 7:4). In contrast, the great multitude is a non-specific number that "no man could number" (Rev 7:9), which come from "all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues" (Rev 7:9). The 144,000 are sealed, while it is never said that the great multitude is sealed, but instead they have their clothes washed. The 144,000 are pictured on the earth, but the great multitude is described in heaven before the throne of God. On the surface these seem like differences, but along with many other commentators I believe these descriptions are actually complementary, giving a fuller picture of the one group "who shall be able to stand" (Rev 6:17).

group . . . in different roles, circumstances, and periods, and from different points of view.”¹¹⁹

These descriptions are of one group of end-time believers,¹²⁰ who “will remain loyal to God in the closing conflict of the great controversy between God and Satan.”¹²¹ They are pictured in the first half of the chapter (7:1-8) on the earth before the tribulation caused by antichrist persecution. In contrast, in the last half of the chapter (7:9-17) the same group is described as being secure in heaven after the completion of the “great tribulation” (7:14).¹²² Many commentators believe that the descriptions of the 144,000 in 7:1-8 and 14:1-5 together with the great multitude of 7:9-17 all represent one group,¹²³ “the whole body of martyrs without distinction of race.”¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 264-72; Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary I*, 189-214. In his commentary, Charles identifies this one group as being the generation of the author of Revelation who experiences martyrdom.

¹²⁰ Jon Paulien, *Armageddon at the Door: An Insider's Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Hagerstown, Md.: Autumn House, 2008), 160, 139, 113, 131-2. In these pages, Paulien correctly recognizes that the descriptions of both of these, the 144,000 and the great multitude, while appearing to be two different groups, are really two different descriptions of the same group.

¹²¹ Neall, *Sealed Saints*, 245.

¹²² Charles, *Studies*, 104-7, 136-41; Yeatts, *Revelation*, 142-7; Vester Eugene Wolber, *A Study of the Literary Structure of Revelation as an Aid to Interpretation* (Dallas: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1950), 138-9.

¹²³ Clarke, *Concise Bible Commentary*, 946; Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary I*, 201; Isbon Thaddeus Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967), 540; LaRondelle, *Chariots of Salvation*, 160-73; Bauckham, *Climax*, 215-6; Beale, *Revelation*, 409-13, 424-31, 730-47; Russell Morton clearly sees the 144,000 of chs. 7 & 14 the same, but is a bit more unclear on their connection to the great multitude (Russell Morton, “Revelation 7:9-17; The Innumerable Crowd Before the One Upon the Throne and the Lamb,” *ATJ* 32 [2000]: 1-11); Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 253-73, 435-40.

¹²⁴ Caird, *Commentary*, 94-9. Clarke said that while they “are Christians as in 14 . . . the list must be of Jewish origin” (Clarke, *Concise Bible Commentary*, 942).

Points of Comparison

If the 144,000 and the great multitude are really two descriptions of the same group, then this significantly impacts how one interprets the listing of the twelve tribes in Rev 7:4-8. It would mean that in John's mind the phrase "the tribes of the children of Israel" (7:4) is just another way of describing the saved from "all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues" (7:9),¹²⁵ which appear in the last half of the chapter. It suggests that John was thinking in terms of spiritual tribes, not literal ones. This fits the context of the symbolic language of the sealing passage.¹²⁶ There are a number of reasons to interpret the 144,000 and the great multitude as two descriptions of the same group.

Numbering of the groups

The 144,000 are an exact counted number, but John does not do the counting. He only "heard the number" (7:4) of the sealed. He did not even see them at this point. When he actually looks he sees "a great multitude, which no man could number" (7:9). It is certainly the case that 144,000 people in one location would look like "a great mass of

¹²⁵ This language of Rev 7:9 is the same as that of 10:11 and 14:6, which in both cases describes an end-time message being preached to "them that dwell on the earth" (14:6). This message that goes to "all the world" (Matt 24:14) prepares those who believe it to stand through the last great test of the mark of the beast (12:17; 13:8-18) and the seven last plagues (15:1-8; 16:1-21; 18:4-5) by receiving the seal of God in their foreheads (7:1-4; 14:1; 22:4; Ezek 9:1-11), by being "washed . . . in the blood of the Lamb" (7:13-14). The parallel passage of Revelation's worship of the image of the beast is found in Dan 3. There, as in Revelation, "all the people, the nations, and the languages" were commanded to bow and worship the image the king of Babylon set up (Dan 3:1-7).

¹²⁶ The "four corners of the earth" (7:1), the "four winds" (7:1), the "earth . . . sea . . . tree" (7:1, 2, 3), "ascending from the east" (7:2), the "seal of the living God" (7:2), "sealed . . . in their foreheads" (7:3), and the exact and equal number of sealed ones from each tribe, which is strikingly similar to the dimensions of the new Jerusalem, all are symbols. This context of symbolic language in John's description of the sealing lends to the idea of a symbolic understanding of the tribes who receive the symbolic seal.

people,”¹²⁷ that is, a great multitude. And that is exactly what it looked like to John when the angel showed him this group of people whose garments were “washed . . . in the blood of the Lamb” (7:13-14).

Hear/see principle

The basic idea of this is that John is told (or hears) that he will see something, but when he looks he sees something else. However, even though the images are different, they really represent the same thing from two different perspectives or descriptions.¹²⁸

In Rev 5 John is told he will see “the lion of the tribe of Judah” (5:5), which is a symbol of Jesus Christ as “the root and the offspring of David” (22:16) as the “Lord of lords, and King of kings” (17:14; 19:16). When he looked he saw standing in the middle of the throne “a Lamb as it had been slain” (5:6), which the Bible clearly uses as a symbol of Jesus as a sacrifice for our sins.¹²⁹ John used these two different symbols (Lion/Lamb) in a way to indicate that John intended the reader to understand that he was actually referring to one person by the two symbols, that is, he was referring to Jesus Christ.

The end-time false religious system Babylon is described in Rev 17. John heard that he would see a “great whore that sitteth on many waters” (17:1), but he actually saw

¹²⁷ Donald Arthur Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 466.

¹²⁸ Caird, *Revelation*, 96; LaRondelle, *Chariots of Salvation*, 164; Bauckham, *Climax*, 180; Easley, *Revelation*, 127-8; Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 264-5; Paulien, *Armageddon*, 134.

¹²⁹ Isa 53:1-12; John 1:29-36; 1 Cor 5:7; 1 Pet 1:18-20. John also uses this imagery in Revelation to refer to Jesus who died to redeem us from sin (5:8-14; 7:13-14; 1:5; 12:11; 13:8; 17:14; 19:7-9, 16, 11-15; 22:1, 3).

“a woman sitting on a scarlet coloured beast” (17:3). The beast and waters that carry or support her are two symbols of the same thing—multitudes of people that support Babylon (17:15).

John does not see the 144,000 being sealed in 7:1-8. He only hears a heavenly voice declaring their number in vision. When he looks (7:9-17) he sees a great multitude. Just as in the other passages discussed above, these are two different images or descriptions of the same group. The purpose of this is to give us a fuller understanding of the identity of this end-time group of saints and how they are “able to stand” (6:17). The pattern of contrast between what is heard and seen by John in these three passages suggests that John was intentionally seeking to lead his readers to conclude that the 144,000 and great multitude descriptions are really describing the identically same group, just as the Lion and the Lamb are different descriptions of the same person, and the prostitute on many waters and the woman on the scarlet beast are two different descriptions of the same false religious system in the last days.¹³⁰

Four winds and the great tribulation

The “four winds” (7:1-3) that the four angels are restraining from blowing on and hurting the earth are a symbol of “the great tribulation” (7:14). Their placement in this passage immediately following the calamities of the sixth seal associated with Christ’s

¹³⁰ Bauckham states that the “relation between the 144,000 and the innumerable multitude is intended to be the same as that between the Lion and the Lamb” (Bauckham, *Climax*, 215-6, 180). In his comments, Bauckham notes that “to the Lion of the tribe of Judah . . . corresponds a list of the sealed of the tribes of Israel, headed by those of the tribe of *Judah*,” while “to the Lamb standing (5:6), who has ransomed people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (5:9), corresponds the multitude from all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues, standing before the Lamb (7:9)” (ibid., 216).

coming and the question of 6:17, “who shall be able to stand,” indicates that they are both symbols of the events of the sixth seal. They describe the final tribulation that God’s people will go through leading up to the second coming of Christ.

The timing

The 144,000 are seen being sealed before the blowing of the winds to hurt the earth, so that they are prepared for and protected from the winds (7:1-4). The great multitude is pictured in heaven as having successfully endured “the great tribulation” (7:13-14), coming out of it spotless and victorious.

Israel and all nations

The New Testament clearly affirms that the true Israel is the church, made up only of genuine believers in Jesus Christ, both Jew and Gentile.¹³¹ Therefore, the great multitude that comes from “all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues” (7:9) is a description of true, spiritual Israel, the same group as the 144,000. They are a fulfillment of the promise¹³² made to Abraham that he would have an innumerable seed.¹³³ They are those who are “redeemed from the earth . . . from among men” (14:3-4), by the preaching of the messages of the three angels to “every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people” (14:6-12).¹³⁴ They are the very ones the dragon and beasts unleash their wrath

¹³¹ Rom 2:25-29; 4:1-25; 9:1-8; Gal 3:6-9, 13-16, 26-29; 1 Pet 2:5-10.

¹³² Gen 13:16; 15:5; 22:17; 26:4; 28:14; 32:12; Hos 1:10; Heb 11:12; Gal 3:16, 6-9, 26-29; Rom 4:1-25.

¹³³ Were, *Certainty*, 92.

¹³⁴ Matt 24:14 affirms the same idea. This group will be gathered into the kingdom when Christ comes to “reap . . . the harvest of the earth” (Rev 14:14-16), which happens at “the end of the world” (Matt

against in the last-days issue of the mark of the beast and the worship of its image (13:1-18).

Israel and white garments

The name Israel was given to Jacob after his night of wrestling to indicate that he was an overcomer, that is, he “has prevailed” (Gen 32:28, 24-30). The name as used in Revelation indicates those who overcome sin, Satan, and the world in the last days, a victory that is signified by their being sealed (7:1-4).¹³⁵ They are able to stand faithful, having overcome “by the blood of the Lamb” (Rev 12:11). The great multitude is clothed in robes that have been washed and “made white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:13-14), and having been washed from their sins by the Lamb’s blood (Rev 1:5; Zech 3:1-6). Thus, they are “clothed in white garments,” indicating their victorious experience (Rev 3:4-5, 17-18). Both the name Israel and the washed, white garments indicate the same thing: They are a last generation of believers who overcome.¹³⁶

Purpose of this parenthetical insertion

13:39, 24-30, 36-43). They will then enter into the new Jerusalem through the twelve gates that have “names written thereon, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel” (21:10-13), showing that “the nations of them that are saved” (21:24-27) are true Israel.

¹³⁵ The seal of God in this case indicates that they have reached full maturity in character. It indicates a fixedness of character, a finality such as referred to in 22:11-12. Revelation 14:14-20 depicts the full maturing of the righteous and wicked simultaneously in preparation for the final harvest of the earth. John affirms this idea of fixedness of character when he describes this group in 14:5 as “without fault before the throne of God” and having no deception in their mouths. This final seal of God’s name will be placed on the foreheads of those only who have reached full maturity of character in righteousness through faith. This is symbolized by the bride of Christ that has “made herself ready” for the wedding of the Lamb by being clothed in “clean and white . . . fine linen,” which “is the righteousness of the saints” (19:7-8).

¹³⁶ Only those who overcome will be given entrance into the city of God, the new Jerusalem (21:6-8, 24-27; 22:14-15). This shows again that the 144,000 and great multitude descriptions are of the same group who will enter in the twelve gates with twelve tribal names over the gates (21:10-13).

As was previously stated, Rev 7 was inserted specifically as an answer to the question of the sixth seal, “Who shall be able to stand” (6:17). It would not make sense that John would be addressing all of the redeemed from all ages in this answer, because the sixth seal is referring to those only who are living when Christ comes, those who are “able to stand” on “the great day of his wrath” when the wicked flee his presence to hide in the rocks and mountains (6:15-17). This passage is not discussing the redemptive condition of the dead in Christ from previous generations. They have already been secured in Christ for eternal salvation at the point of their death, and are not under consideration in this passage.

Therefore, the contextual reasons for Rev 7’s insertion indicate that the 144,000 and the innumerable multitude are the same group from two different perspectives. The dual description of the same group with different symbolic language reinforces the theological purpose of the chapter and the listing of the twelve tribes. That is, ch. 7 reveals how to be “able to stand” at the second coming of Christ without fleeing in fear “from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb” (6:16). This preparation requires “the seal of the living God” (7:2-8) to be received in the forehead, by having the moral character purified from sin by “the blood of the Lamb.”¹³⁷

The 144,000 of Revelation 7 and 14

The number 144,000, those who are sealed in Rev 7, also appears in Rev 14. In both places the number is the same. Each has something placed in the forehead: “the seal

¹³⁷ Rev 7:13-14; 1:5; 3:4-5, 18-21; 19:7-8; 12:11; 14:1-5.

of the living God” (7:2-3) and “his name and the name of his Father” (14:1). In Rev 22:3-4, both descriptions of the 144,000 are brought together by saying they are “his servants.”¹³⁸

The claim that these two groups are different because ch. 14 does not use the definite article is very weak. The wording of the number in both passages is identical—without an article. It would not make sense that John would mention such a specific number only twice (the only times it is mentioned in the Bible) in Revelation and in both instances be referring to two separate groups, without explicitly stating so.

Both mentions of the 144,000 in 7:1-8 and 14:1-5 refer to the same group of people¹³⁹ who live in the last days and face the final crisis of the mark of the beast.¹⁴⁰ They both are referring to spiritual Israel, the church of believers in Jesus Christ.¹⁴¹ When commenting on the 144,000 in 7:1-8, W. K. Lowther Clarke asserted that “the tribes are Christians as in 14.”¹⁴² The placement of the 144,000 with God’s name¹⁴³ in their foreheads in 14:1-5, immediately following the marking of the inhabitants of the earth by

¹³⁸ Rev 22:3 needs to be compared with 7:3 where “the servants of our God” are “sealed . . . in their foreheads.” Rev 22:4 states that “his servants” will have “his name . . . in their foreheads.” This strongly links those in 7:1-8 with those in 14:1-5 as two descriptions of the same group.

¹³⁹ Mackenzie, *The Author of the Apocalypse*, 16-7; Aune, *Revelation*, 6-16, 444-8; Anderson, *Unfolding the Revelation*, 147.

¹⁴⁰ Reddish, *Revelation*, 272; Maxwell, *God Cares* 2, 349; Maxwell, *The Mark*, 52; Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation*, 456-60, 625-6.

¹⁴¹ Boring, *Revelation*, 128-9; Charles, *Studies*, 199-203.

¹⁴² Clarke, *Concise Bible Commentary*, 942.

¹⁴³ That is, “the seal of the living God” (Rev 7:2-4). Compare this with Rev 14:1 and 22:3-4.

the beasts in 13:1-18, suggests that the marking of the wicked and the sealing of the righteous occur simultaneously.¹⁴⁴

The 144,000: A Multitude of Martyrs

It seems to be the overwhelming view among scholars that the 144,000 (including the great multitude depending on the scholar) are a multitude of martyrs,¹⁴⁵ “an ideal group . . . who lose their lives because of their faith.”¹⁴⁶ Many commentators identify the 144,000 in Rev 7 as the remainder of the martyrs of the fifth seal (6:9-11).¹⁴⁷ It was affirmed by R. H. Charles that the 144,000 are believers who are martyred during “the great tribulation” (7:14), which he identified as taking place during the generation of the author of Revelation.¹⁴⁸

In the opinion of David Aune, the great multitude are martyrs of the last generation of earth’s history, “before the completion of eschatological events, which

¹⁴⁴ Johnsson, “The Saints’ End-Time Victory,” 13.

¹⁴⁵ Charles, *Lectures*, 27-8; David Brown, *The Apocalypse: Its Structure and Primary Predictions* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1981), 92-5.

¹⁴⁶ Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Apocalypse” (NJBC; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 1009-10.

¹⁴⁷ Robert W. Wall, *Revelation* (NIBC 18; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), 116; Wolber, *Literary Structure*, 141-2; Pattemore, *The People of God*, 132-4; Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary 1*, 209-13. Thomas rejects the idea that the sealing is for the purpose of martyrdom, but says that they may end up becoming martyrs (Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 474-5). The fact that the innumerable multitude is clothed in white garments (7:13-14), just like the martyrs of the fifth seal (6:9-11), does not mean that they are also martyrs. There is nothing in the fifth seal or in Revelation that indicates that receiving white robes or garments is evidence of martyrdom. John told us clearly that the white garments represent cleansing from sin (7:13-14; 1:5; Zech 3:1-6), spiritual victory (12:11; 3:4-5), and righteousness of character (19:7-8; Isa 61:4, 10).

¹⁴⁸ Charles, *Studies*, 132-41; Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary 1*, 209-13. Charles stated that these martyrs are not those who have died during any tribulation of earth’s history, but specifically contemporary to the author of the Apocalypse, which he declared is the last and final tribulation.

conclude with the victory of the Lamb and his faithful followers.”¹⁴⁹ However, Aune says that the 144,000 “are not martyrs, for they have received divine immunity from all forms of suffering and death.”¹⁵⁰ Bauckham says that these martyrs are those who “participate in his [Christ’s] victory by following his path to death.”¹⁵¹

Even though the majority of scholars seem to interpret the 144,000 and great multitude as martyrs, Rev 7 does not say anything about them being martyrs or even dying. In addition, 7:13-14 indicates that their victory is through faith in Christ’s death, not their own. The fact that the 144,000 “follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth” (14:4) does not mean that they die as martyrs. Rather, they accept Christ’s call, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23; 14:26-27; Matt 16:24; Mark 8:34). In this Jesus gives an interpretation to following him in death that is spiritual, not physical. He desires self to be crucified in our lives *daily*, which means that he is not speaking about physical death in martyrdom, but spiritual death to sin.¹⁵²

I agree with the scholars who seriously question the interpretation that those in Rev 7 are martyrs. There is nothing in chs. 7 or 14 that says that the 144,000 are

¹⁴⁹ Aune, *Revelation, 6-16*, 444-7, 480.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 444-5. He says that “there is no allusion to martyrdom,” and that the phrase “redeemed from the earth” in 14:3-4 “has been wrongly construed to mean martyrdom” (ibid.).

¹⁵¹ Bauckham, *Climax*, 226-32; Craig S. Keener, *Revelation* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 369.

¹⁵² Rom 8:12-13; 6:1-13; Gal 2:20; 5:24; 6:14-15; 1 Cor 15:31; Col 2:20; 3:1-4; 1 Pet 2:24.

martyred¹⁵³ or even die. Collins says “the vision does not clearly imply such a universal martyrdom.”¹⁵⁴ Beale agrees, saying that “it is not clear that martyrdom is in mind”¹⁵⁵ when John sees and records the events of ch. 7. According to Yeatts, “there is nothing in the passage to limit the group in this way. They most likely refer to all who remain faithful to the end of tribulation.”¹⁵⁶

The historical background for the sealing suggests that they will not be martyred. When the blood was applied at the time of the Exodus (Exod 12), everyone with the blood on the door was protected from harm. The blood served as a seal to those in the house. A similar idea is found in the main passage¹⁵⁷ for understanding the sealing of Rev 7. It is Ezek 9:1-6. In this passage those sealed were preserved from the outpouring of divine judgments all around them. Two other prophetic examples are found in the fiery furnace (Dan 3) and the lions’ den (Dan 6) incidents. God’s people had to face the death decree in both chapters,¹⁵⁸ yet they were protected from harm, and ultimately those who were trying to execute them were destroyed (Dan 3:19-23; 6:23-24; 2 Thess 2:3-8; Rev 17:12-17).

¹⁵³ Easley, *Revelation*, 130. While he states that there is no evidence of martyrdom in this passage, he says that “some surely must be.”

¹⁵⁴ Collins, *Apocalypse*, 53.

¹⁵⁵ Beale, *Revelation*, 432-3.

¹⁵⁶ Yeatts, *Revelation*, 145.

¹⁵⁷ Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary*, 595; Robertson, *The General Epistles*, 349.

¹⁵⁸ Daniel 3 is clearly a parallel to Rev 13’s image of the beast, its worship, and the death decree for not worshipping. It gives us additional info about the events of Rev 13. The lions’ den incident is also a parallel to Rev 13, calling the people of the earth to faithfulness to Christ.

The sealing background passages (Exod 12 and Ezek 9) and the parallel stories to the image of the beast in Dan 3 and 6 all point to the fact that God will preserve his people through the final crisis. There will be many who will lose their lives leading up to the close of probation. However, once probation closes and the nations are putting into motion the events to carry out the death decree against those who would not worship the beast and its image, God's people will be preserved.¹⁵⁹

Use of Old Testament Language

When studying Revelation's use of Old Testament people, places, cities, and nations, it becomes clear that John did not have a literal use in mind. Paulien rightly observes, "The book of Revelation uses the language of the Old Testament but the meaning is different. John applies physical things involving Israel and its neighbors in a spiritual and worldwide sense.¹⁶⁰ The new Israel is not located in any one specific place or made up of any one particular people."¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Paulien, *Armageddon*, 175-9.

¹⁶⁰ The names of the twelve tribes are very likely used by John in the same way that he uses other names of people and places throughout Revelation, to symbolize spiritual realities: Babylon (14:8; 17:1-6, 16-18; 18:1-24); Euphrates River (16:12; 17:1,15); Sodom, Egypt, and Jerusalem (11:8). The twelve gates of the new Jerusalem, through which "the nations of them which are saved" will enter the city (21:23-27; 22:14-15, 17, 1-2), have "the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel" written on them (21:10-13). This seems to indicate that the names of the twelve tribes are representative of all of the redeemed who enter those gates, since those who enter are from all nations.

¹⁶¹ Paulien, *Deep Things*, 168-9. He also argues that there is no ethnic or geographic limitation to Israel and the twelve tribes, but that when Revelation speaks about the 144,000 "it is probably talking about the church as 12 spiritual tribes descended from the witness of the 12 apostles" (ibid., 166-7), with "spiritual, worldwide characteristics" (ibid., 169).

Paulien further lays out a strong case for the conclusion that “John describes the history of the church in the vocabulary of the past, the language of the Old Testament.”¹⁶² This is because the Revelator is patterning the church “after the experience of Old Testament Israel,”¹⁶³ giving a new explanation of the things pertaining to Israel “through Christ.”¹⁶⁴ This is because John sees the church as the New Testament Israel of faith,¹⁶⁵ the true inheritors of all of the promises given to Abraham and his children. This is consistent with the larger New Testament interpretation of Israel as being made up of only those who are in a personal faith relationship with Jesus Christ (Rom 9:6-8; 2:28-29; Gal 3:6-9, 26-29; 1 Pet 2:9-10).

¹⁶² Ibid., 166-7.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 167-8.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. This is demonstrated by John stating that he is writing this book to “the seven churches which are in Asia” (1:4), and that its message not only comes from John, but also Jesus Christ (1:1-6). This book that is clearly addressed to the Christian church (22:16) takes the language of OT Israel and applies it to Christ and his church, spiritual Israel. Earthly Jerusalem is never spoken of in Revelation. Every reference to Jerusalem refers to the heavenly, new Jerusalem (3:12; 21:2, 10), and it is clearly stated that this city is “the Lamb’s wife” (21:2, 9-10). Also, the twelve gates of the new Jerusalem have “the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel” written above them (21:12), gates through which “the nations of them which are saved shall walk” (21:24-27; 22:14-17, 1-4). John not only said that this book was written to the church (1:1-6; 22:16), but said that it was sent to God’s servants (22:6-7, 10; 1:1-3), which in this context is used to refer to the church who was to read the book. These same servants who read the book, and will eat the tree of life and drink the water of life in the city, are those who have God’s seal or “his name . . . in their foreheads” (22:3-4; 14:1; 7:1-4), which are the 144,000. Also, the covenant promises that God would dwell with his people (21:3-4) and cause them to “inherit all things” as his son (21:6-7), and make them a kingdom of priests (1:5-6; 5:8-14; 20:4-6; 22:3-6). In Rev 14’s description of the 144,000 they are depicted as standing with the slain Lamb and “having his Father’s name written in their foreheads” (14:1), and are described as having been redeemed by the Lamb’s blood from the men of the earth (14:3-4; 5:9-10; 1:5-6), and therefore follow the Lamb wherever he leads (14:4; 7:17). All of this indicates that the 144,000 of Israel in Revelation refers to Christ’s church, the new spiritual Israel. F.D. Nichol argues that the Jews had “long lost their tribal distinctions” and that it is unlikely that each tribe would have an exact number sealed, but none from Dan. He sees this as an indication that “these Israelites thus sealed are then to be understood as belonging to Spiritual Israel, the Christian Church” (Nichol, *Philippians to Revelation*, 783-4).

Interpreting Israel symbolically to mean the church would seem to make sense when considering how Israel's enemies are used by John in Revelation in a spiritual, worldwide sense, rather than as literal and local. For example, Egypt and Sodom are used by John to describe rebellion against God's Word as an authority (Rev 11:8).¹⁶⁶ John uses the Egyptian plagues of the Old Testament in a symbolic or spiritual sense in Revelation to demonstrate the deliverance of God's spiritual Israel from its spiritual enemies. In Rev 14-18 the plagues are shown to fall on Babylon, the beast, and its worship all around the world, which is thus being depicted as spiritual Egypt that God's people will be delivered from. Babylon is used spiritually to represent the enemy of God's people in the last days, and is pictured as a woman riding on a beast, sitting on the Euphrates River, drinking a cup filled with the saints' blood (14:8; 17:1-6; 18:1-6).

Jezebel is described as seducing believers in Thyatira even though she was dead for centuries (2:18-29). The Euphrates River is interpreted as a symbol of the people and nations of the world in rebellion against and supporting Babylon (16:12; 17:1, 12-15). If the surrounding cities, nations, places, and people associated with Israel are used in Revelation in a symbolic sense, then it would only make sense to interpret Israel in the same symbolic manner. This is why Were declares, "Old Testament terminology is employed in the Revelation *because* the church *has* taken the place of Israel; because the church *is* 'Israel.'"¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ In this verse, John referred to a single city when he said it "is called Sodom and Egypt." It is also clearly stated that this is a spiritual usage of these Old Testament national enemies of Israel. In addition, this city is said to be "where also our Lord was crucified," thus picturing a spiritual usage of Jerusalem as well.

¹⁶⁷ Were, *Moral Purpose*, 33.

In Revelation, John takes the historical places, people, and events that were related to literal Israel as a nation and applies them in a worldwide, spiritual sense to the church. By using a name of a person, place, or event in a symbolic way he evokes a memory of the past history associated with it in the Old Testament, and thereby can communicate many lessons without lengthy dialogue on the topics he presents. In Rev 7's sealing he is directing our minds back to the Old Testament history of the exodus out of Egypt,¹⁶⁸ picturing the sealed as going through a similar experience¹⁶⁹ with an ultimate deliverance.

Names Represent Character

The names of the twelve tribes listed in Revelation are significant to the overall meaning of the passage. John uses them as symbols of the church, spiritual Israel, rather than as a delineation of the literal tribes. John could have just said that 12,000 were sealed from each tribe, but instead he specifically mentioned the individual tribal names. This might indicate that the names of John's list contain an important meaning for those sealed in the last days, the very people described by the sealing passage.¹⁷⁰ Maxwell

¹⁶⁸ "The exodus symbolism . . . lies behind the act of sealing the 144,000" (Wall, *Revelation*, 116).

¹⁶⁹ Easley says that the reason John uses the tribal names of Israel to symbolize the church is that there is a "parallel between the experience of the literal twelve tribes in the book of Exodus and the spiritual tribes described" in Revelation (Easley, *Revelation*, 127).

¹⁷⁰ There are a few examples of how names are used in Revelation in a way that does not emphasize the historical nation, tribe, or person, but rather, the meaning of the name or what it signifies. In Rev 9:11 "the angel of the bottomless pit" is called by two different names, which both mean *Destroyer* in their original languages that are emphasized. A similar usage is in Rev 16:16, where it is said that the armies of the world will be gathered for battle "into a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon" (16:14, 16). There is no biblical place with that name. The emphasis, like in Rev 9:11, is not on a physical location, but on the meaning of the name in Hebrew. In both of these examples, the meaning of the names is significant to the theological intent of the passages they appear in. It is likely that John had the same

noted that the names of the tribes “represent character or their career. A change of names means a change in character or career.”¹⁷¹ It is suggested by Haskell that these names “are character names, and those who develop the character, will be classed under the tribe bearing a name indicating that character.”¹⁷² There are many biblical examples¹⁷³ that demonstrate that “in OT thought ‘name’ is practically synonymous with ‘character.’”¹⁷⁴ Jacob’s prophetic blessing on his sons seems to support this idea that their names represent character,¹⁷⁵ and that they have significant meaning for God’s people.

intention in the listing of the twelve tribes by name. In the opinion of Were, this specific mention of the names by John means “these names and their meanings must be significant to the remnant church” (Were, *Certainty*, 193). He says the names contain “God’s message of assurance to those who are sealed among the tribes of Israel” (ibid., 194), “a message for God’s last day remnant of final victory through the Son of God even though they will have to face trial, and they are promised that God will dwell with them and bless them” (ibid., 193-5).

¹⁷¹ Maxwell, *God Cares 2*, 105. An indication of this is found in Gen 32 when Jacob wrestles with God and his name is changed to Israel to indicate his change in character as an overcomer. As sons of Israel in Rev 7 the tribes are a “type of all whose characters are changed through wrestling with God during the spiritual night till the dawn of eternity” (Were, *Certainty*, 37).

¹⁷² Haskell, *Seer of Patmos*, 136-7. He illustrates this with the meaning of several tribes’ names, including Dan who is excluded for his criticism and backbiting as portrayed in the prophetic description of his character in Gen 49. In a similar manner, Christie holds that the tribal names in John’s list “are all figurative names, expressing certain states of soul, spiritually” (T. W. Christie, *The Book of Revelation: A Sketch Showing the Fourth Beast of Daniel, Its Carcase, Its Millennial and Jewish Fables, a Sign of the End* (London: John F. Shaw, 1866), 70).

¹⁷³ God changed the names of Abraham and Sarah as a token that the covenant would be fulfilled to them (Gen 17:4-5, 15-16). The naming of the twelve tribes (Gen 29-30, 36) and Joseph’s two sons (Gen 41:51-52) shows the same link between name and character. It is demonstrated as well when God told Moses he would proclaim his name before Moses (Exod 33:18-19), and when God passed by to proclaim his name he described various traits of his divine character (Exod 34:5-8).

¹⁷⁴ Ford, *Revelation*, 122.

¹⁷⁵ In Gen 49, Jacob pronounces a special prophetic blessing on each of his twelve sons. The blessing on each tribe lists character traits of that son. Jacob demonstrates that he sees the sons themselves as representative of certain character traits of the tribes that would descend from them. He begins his blessings by telling his sons what would happen to them “in the last days” (Gen 49:1-2), and then the blessings are concluded by saying, “All these are the twelve tribes of Israel” (Gen 49:28), even though the tribes had not yet formed. This shows that the twelve sons of Jacob, with their characters and blessings, are representative of the twelve tribes that would ultimately come from them.

On his return home to his family, Jacob's brother Esau came out against him to take vengeance for Jacob stealing his birthright through trickery (Gen 25:29-34; Heb 12:15-17) and then his blessing by deception (Gen 27:1-46; 28:1-6; Heb 12:15-17), actions that validated him being named Jacob.¹⁷⁶ Genesis 32 describes the night Jacob wrestled with "God face to face" (Gen 32:30), while thinking he was wrestling with his brother or one of his soldiers who was trying to take his life. It was after realizing that his assailant was not a man or angel, but God himself, that Jacob refused to let him go unless God blessed him (Gen 32:24-30). God then changed his name to *Israel*, a name signifying his character as one who had overcome. This story from Jacob's night of wrestling, when the enemy was pressing in on him, and his ultimate victory, is representative of the final struggle of God's people during the mark of the beast, when the worldwide confederacy of evil will come against the sealed saints just before the second coming of Christ. This "time of trouble" (Dan 12:1) or "great tribulation" (Rev 7:14) is also referred to as "the time of Jacob's trouble" with the assurance that "he shall be saved out of it" (Jer 30:5-7). They will come out of "the great tribulation" victorious and pure (Rev 7:13-14; 14:1-5), bearing "the seal of the living God" (Rev 7:1-4).

Exodus Motif

John is intentionally portraying a new exodus event in the sealing, so that his readers will understand the significance of their names. There are several indicators in this passage that show the exodus motif is what John is trying to communicate. He lists

¹⁷⁶ The meaning of his name is *supplanter* or *deceiver*.

the tribes by name as the children of Israel. They are sealed to protect them from the seven last plagues (Rev 7:1-8; 9:4; 14:6-12; 16:1-21; 18:1-5, 8), which is a clear allusion to the exodus and the ten plagues that fell on Egypt,¹⁷⁷ during which there was a clear separation made between the Egyptians and the Israelites from the fourth plague and onward.¹⁷⁸ The blood is made prominent in their deliverance as the means of their being marked or sealed (Rev 7:13-14, 1-4), just as the blood was applied to the doors of Israelite homes. The trapping of the Israelites at the Red Sea finds its parallel in “the great tribulation” or blowing of “the four winds” (Rev 7:13-14, 1-3), from which Israel was delivered as will be God’s end-time spiritual Israel (Dan 12:1; Rev 7:13-14; 14:14-20; 17:14).

The tribes are washed in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:14) as the Israelites were in the Red Sea as God was delivering them. They will not hunger or thirst anymore (Rev 7:16), which is an allusion to God’s giving them manna from heaven daily and water from the rock in the desert. The sun and heat will not harm them (Rev 7:16), just as the pillar of cloud and fire preserved them from the extremes of the elements. Finally they will “sing the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb” (Rev 15:3-4;

¹⁷⁷ “Christ thus comforts His people who stand firm in the final crisis that their future exodus from the house of bondage to the New Jerusalem is unshakably guaranteed by the same faithful covenant God who brought about Israel’s exoduses from Egypt and Babylon. This typological perspective from OT history provides the theological meaning and message of the final plagues: *the cosmic-universal exodus of the new-covenant people*. Thus this typological light requires a Christ-church application of OT symbols and imagery” (Hans K. LaRondelle, “Contextual Approach to the Seven Last Plagues,” in *Symposium on Revelation: Exegetical and General Studies, Book 2* (vol. 7 of Daniel & Revelation Committee Series; ed. Frank B. Holbrook; Hagerstown, Md.: Review & Herald, 1992), 144.

¹⁷⁸ The seven last plagues that fell on Egypt did not touch the Israelites. They were protected from them. God did this to show a clear distinction between his followers and the wicked (Exod 8:22-23; 9:4-7, 26; 10:22-23; 11:5-7). This is a promise that all who are spiritually a member of the tribes of Israel, true believers in Christ, will be preserved from the plagues in the end.

14:1-5), just as Miriam led the Israelite women to praise God after their deliverance at the Red Sea.¹⁷⁹ Thus, the specific listing of the twelve tribes in Rev 7 adds further clarification of and support for the message of the sealing. It also serves as an encouragement to those who will be sealed to stand in the last days of earth's history.

An End-Time Remnant

Timing of the Sealing

As stated earlier, Rev 7, which contains a discussion of both the 144,000 and the great multitude, forms a complete parenthetical insertion¹⁸⁰ between the opening of the sixth (6:12-17) and seventh (8:1) seals.¹⁸¹ The sixth seal describes the events associated with Christ's coming, where the lost seek to hide from the Lamb's wrath. Their cries to be hidden are followed by the question ending the chapter, "For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?"¹⁸²

The purpose of Rev 7 is to show the answer to this question before John introduces the seventh seal and the silence in heaven that follows. He is showing who

¹⁷⁹ "This is the song of the remnant church after her triumph over the beast and its image" (LaRondelle, *Contextual Approach*, 143). He also says that this is an obvious allusion that "makes Israel's deliverance under Moses a type of the final deliverance of the church by Christ as her glorious Antitype (Exod 15:1-18)" (ibid.). Like Israel at the Red Sea the spiritual tribes of Israel in Rev 7 who are sealed will be finally delivered.

¹⁸⁰ Kenneth A. Strand, "Victorious-Introduction Scenes," in *Symposium on Revelation: Introductory and Exegetical Studies, Book 1* (vol. 6 of Daniel & Revelation Committee Series; ed. Frank B. Holbrook; Hagerstown, Md.: Review & Herald, 1992), 63. Strand here argues that the interlude of the sealing in ch. 7 plays on "the concept of ownership and preservation" (ibid.).

¹⁸¹ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 463.

¹⁸² Revelation 6:16-17. Compare this question and surrounding events with similar Old Testament passages, such as in Nah 1:5-6 and Mal 3:3. In each of these events a similar question is asked in the context of the coming of the Lord in wrath and power.

will be able to stand on the day of Christ's coming when the wicked flee and cry for the rocks and mountains to hide them (6:15-17). The sealed (7:1-8) and washed (7:9-17) will be able to stand.

Revelation 7 begins the sealing passage by mentioning four angels "holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow . . . [or] hurt the earth and the sea," until God's servants had been sealed (7:1-3). The winds will not break forth until God's servants are prepared for it by being sealed, which ensures they will be protected and able to stand, when the Lamb's judgments are poured out on the earth (6:15-17).

Since the sixth seal ends with the coming of the Lamb in wrath and asks the question, "Who shall be able to stand," the sealing (preparation to stand) must take place before the end of the sixth seal. It very likely takes place between Rev 6:13 and 14,¹⁸³ between the heavenly signs of Christ's coming and the parting of the skies, so that "every eye shall see him" (1:7). The parting of the skies is accompanied by all mountains and island being "moved out of their places" (6:14), just like the seventh plague that causes a "great earthquake" (16:18) and all "the cities of the nations" to fall (16:19), and causes every island and mountain to disappear (16:20).¹⁸⁴ These phenomena lead the wicked of

¹⁸³ Both Anderson and Smith suggested that this is the best placement of the sealing. Roy Allen Anderson, *Unfolding the Revelation: Evangelistic Studies for Public Presentation* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1974), 75; Uriah Smith, *The Prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review & Herald, 1972), 453.

¹⁸⁴ These dramatic events described in Revelation are mentioned in various apocalyptic prophecies in the Old Testament, such as: Jer 4:23-26; 25:29-33; Isa 24:1, 6, 18-23. These things indicate that the events of the sixth seal are clearly referring to the end of the world, the time of God's wrath to be poured out by destroying the people who destroyed his creation, and when he rewards his faithful servants (Rev 11:15-18). Revelation 14's end-time harvest of the earth also speaks of this time of separation between the righteous and the wicked at Christ's coming, when the righteous are gathered into the kingdom and the wicked receive the wrath of God (Rev 14:14-20; Joel 3:9-16; Isa 63:1-6; 13:9-13; Mark 4:26-29; Matt 13:24-30, 36-43).

all nations to weep when they see him “coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Rev 1:7; Matt 24:30-31). They will frantically seek in vain to hide in the rocks and mountains from the Lamb (Rev 6:12-17).

The events of Rev 7 take place before the completion of the issue of the mark of the beast,¹⁸⁵ for the 144,000 are pictured in Rev 15 after being victorious over the beast, its image, and mark standing on the sea of glass (15:1-2). They are playing harps and singing a “new song,” the “song of Moses and the Lamb,” praising God for displaying his judgments against the wicked (15:2-4; 14:1-3). The sealed 144,000 followers of the Lamb in Rev 14 are placed in distinct contrast to the marked followers of the beast in Rev 13. The 144,000 are the end-time faithful who are “able to stand” at the coming of Christ (6:12-17; 14:14-20). They are the remnant of “the servants of our God” (7:3) who “keep the commandments of God” (12:17; 14:12), and who give the last message of the gospel to the world, warning all to avoid the worship and mark of the beast (14:6-12, 14-20).

Most commentators conclude that the sealing will take place at the end of earth’s history at the day of Christ’s second coming.¹⁸⁶ This makes sense in the context of the

¹⁸⁵ Mitchell Reddish suggests that the 144,000 of Rev 7 and 14 are the same group who are sealed before the death decree of the mark of the beast in Rev 13:12-17, and are then martyred by the beast and dragon (Reddish, *Revelation*, 272). Paulien agrees that they do go through the events of ch. 13. However, he asserts that they are not martyrs, but live victorious through this great test, for “after the close of probation no such event [martyrdom of righteous] will happen” (Paulien, *Armageddon*, 179, 175-6). For further arguments that the sealing takes place before the issue of the mark of the beast, see the following authors: Neall, *Sealed Saints*, 245, 274-6; William G. Johnsson, “The Saints’ End-Time Victory Over the Forces of Evil,” in *Symposium on Revelation: Exegetical and General Studies, Book 2* (vol. 7 of Daniel & Revelation Committee Series; ed. Frank B. Holbrook; Hagerstown, Md.: Review & Herald, 1992), 30-36.

¹⁸⁶ Paulien, *The Seven Seals*, 203-4, 225-6. William Shea also states that the sealing is an end-time event during the final generation of earth’s history (William H. Shea, “The Mighty Angel and His Message,” in *Symposium on Revelation: Introductory and Exegetical Studies, Book 1* [vol. 6 of Daniel & Revelation Committee Series; ed. Frank B. Holbrook; Hagerstown, Md.: Review & Herald, 1992], 280).

sixth seal's description of a worldwide judgment against the wicked at the second coming of Christ. Adam Clarke took a different view by saying that the events of the sixth seal, and thus the sealing, "literally apply to the final destruction of Jerusalem."¹⁸⁷ Thomas still affirms that the sealing takes place in the end-time, but specifically during a seven-year tribulation.¹⁸⁸

Final Generation of Saints

Stefanovic argues that the 144,000 sealed from the twelve tribes are a symbolic number of the true Israel, the church, the end-time saints, and the remnant of the woman's seed.¹⁸⁹ They are the "final generation"¹⁹⁰ of God's spiritual Israel,¹⁹¹ "the last phase of the church."¹⁹² They are the remnant of the last generation of God's church,¹⁹³ who live and are sealed "just before the final eschatological tribulation begins, and who consequently survive that tribulation and the great eschatological battle that is the culmination of that tribulation."¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁷ Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary*, 594.

¹⁸⁸ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 463-4.

¹⁸⁹ See Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 260-7, 435-40.

¹⁹⁰ Johnsson, *The Saints' End-time Victory*, 31. He goes on to describe them as the remnant of the church who remain "loyal to Him despite the deception and opposition associated with the end-time crisis (ibid., 36) of the mark of the beast "just prior to the Second Advent" of Christ (ibid., 30), in contrast with those who worship the beast and receive his mark.

¹⁹¹ Maxwell, *God Cares 2*, 212-3.

¹⁹² Neall, *Sealed Saints*, 275-6. She also states they are "the final generation of saints translated at Christ's coming" (ibid., 274).

¹⁹³ LaRondelle, *Chariots of Salvation*, 160-73.

¹⁹⁴ Aune, *Revelation, 6-16*, 443; Yeatts, *Revelation*, 142-4, 147.

The 144,000 who are sealed at the end of earth's history, just prior to the second coming of Jesus, are the "remnant of Christians . . . who keep the commandments of God and follow the Lamb."¹⁹⁵ This is important to the message of Revelation, because they are described as the target of the dragon and the beast, along with the confederacy of the nations of the world, exactly because they prove their loyalty to the Lamb in that they "keep the commandments of God" (Rev 12:17;¹⁹⁶ 13:8-17; 14:6-12).¹⁹⁷ The sealed are called "the servants of our God" (7:3), indicating that they choose to "obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29; Gal 1:10). Thus, they are found to be "without fault before the throne of God" (Rev 14:5), and they "follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth" (14:4).

Summary

The surrounding context of Rev 7, with its various symbolic language uses, indicates that there is a theological significance to why this list of the twelve "tribes of the children of Israel" (7:4) is presented by John in this chapter on the sealing. They are God's end-time remnant of his church, those who remain faithful to him by keeping his commandments. The fact that the sealed are referred to as Israel shows that God's sealed

¹⁹⁵ Aune, *Revelation, 6-16*, 444-5. See also, Rev 14:1, 4-5, 12; 22:1-4, 14-15.

¹⁹⁶ This verse indicates that they are the remnant or last portion, remainder, of the woman's seed. They are the last generation of God's church and go through the final crisis, but are preserved out of it by divine protection due to being sealed.

¹⁹⁷ This passage, which calls to true worship of the Creator, and warns against worshipping the beast, is part of "the everlasting gospel" (14:6). It will produce people who have been changed in heart from having rebellion against God to having humble, submissive faith in his word. In this context of true and false worship and the declaration that those who worship the Creator "keep the commandments of God," John quotes or alludes to the commandment about worship, the fourth commandment about Sabbath worship of the Creator as a memorial of creation (Rev 14:12, 7; Exod 20:11, 8-11). This indicates that in some way Sabbath worship according to "the commandments of God" will figure into the final battle over worship of the Creator or the beast.

saints in the last days will be victorious over sin,¹⁹⁸ Satan,¹⁹⁹ and the beast confederacy²⁰⁰ through “the blood of the Lamb.”²⁰¹

The topic of the sealing of the 144,000 from “all the tribes of the children of Israel” has been a chapter of great interest among scholars. How one interprets this chapter of the sealing, and particularly the identity of the twelve tribes listed, will dramatically affect how one interprets the remainder of Revelation. The next chapter investigates the order and makeup of the names in the tribal list and the significance of this.

¹⁹⁸ Rev 1:5; 3:4-5, 21; 21:6-8, 23-27; 22:14-15.

¹⁹⁹ Rev 12:7-11, 13-17.

²⁰⁰ Rev 13:12-18; 14:6-12, 1-5; 15:1-4; 17:12-14; 21:6-8, 23-27; 22:14-16.

²⁰¹ Rev 7:13-14; 12:11.

CHAPTER FOUR

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TRIBAL LIST OF REVELATION 7

John's list in Rev 7 has stirred much discussion over the years, focusing on who are the twelve tribes, what led John to select the specific order of his list, and why did he leave some of the commonly appearing names out of his list, while including some that were not so common in Old Testament tribal lists. Many have wrestled with whether there are any theological reasons for John's list appearing as it does, and have questioned why he even lists the tribes at all. It will be demonstrated throughout this chapter that there are specific theological reasons why John included a tribal list and organized it as he did. It supports his overall themes of Revelation and has significant value for the end-time saints who will be sealed.

This chapter seeks to answer these questions and more from a number of approaches. The argument that John's list reflects a military census list, as in Num 1 and 26, is evaluated in the first section. In the second section, "Order of Tribal Lists," seven Old Testament lists are compared with John's list to see similarities and differences that might help in understanding Rev 7. Then the lists of the Old Testament are examined to see if any tribes are excluded from other lists, and if so, then what tribes, what lists, and under what circumstances. There is a short comparison of the numbering of tribes that make up various lists to see if there is any significance to the number twelve in John's

list, which may assist in understanding some of the omissions and inclusions in John's list. After this, a study is presented of the textual reasons why John may have chosen to formulate his list as he did. The next portion studies the meaning of the names themselves and how they are ordered to see if there is any significance to the specific order in relation to their meanings.

Military Census

A number of scholars see in the descriptions of the 144,000 of Rev 7 and 14 a picture of a military census like in the Old Testament.²⁰² The 144,000 "are *adult male* Israelites: those eligible for military service,²⁰³ which fits the Old Testament specification of only males twenty years and older serving in the military.²⁰⁴ The similarity between the Greek of Rev 7 and the LXX²⁰⁵ of Num 1's military census seems to suggest that this is also a census, the last census to be taken for earth's final battle.

This in no way is demeaning marriage or women. Rather, John is attempting to communicate that the 144,000 are Christ's eschatological army to fight in the last great conflict between good and evil, Christ and antichrist (and Satan), between God's people and the whole world, in the battle of Armageddon.²⁰⁶ Even though they are described as virgin men, this group is made up of both men and women. This symbolic picturing of

²⁰² Pattemore, *People of God*, 134-41; Treiyer, *Seals and the Trumpets*, 185-6.

²⁰³ Bauckham, *Climax*, 216-23.

²⁰⁴ Num 1:1-20; 26:1-4; 1 Chr 27:23; 1 Sam 24:9; 1 Chr 21:5.

²⁰⁵ ἐκ τῆς φυλῆς (Num 1:21-43) and ἐκ πάσης φυλῆς . . . ἐκ φυλῆς (Rev 7:4-8).

²⁰⁶ Rev 12:17; 13:4, 7, 12-17; 14:9-11, 14-20; 16:12-16; 6:12-17; 17:14; 19:11, 14-21; 20:7-9; Acts 14:22.

the entire church as men going to battle is similar to the entire church (men and women, boy and girls) being symbolized by a woman, the bride of Christ.²⁰⁷ When John states that they are “not defiled with women” (14:4) he is not speaking literally of virginity, but is referring to the women of Revelation, the harlot Babylon, and her daughters (Rev 14:8; 17:1-18; 18:1-24). These Babylonian women represent apostate religion in the last days. The church militant in the last days will not be defiled with the false teachings and worship of Babylon.

However, the connections to the Old Testament military census passages are not entirely clear. In fact, there is nothing specifically stated in the passage that identifies it as a military census. As Aune observes, “the absence of all military and holy war imagery from Rev 7:4-8 makes this suggestion doubtful.”²⁰⁸ Also, Levi was never included in a military census, because the Levites were exempt from service in the national army (Num 1:47-54), but Levi is included in this list.

The absence of census language suggests that this is not reflecting a national military census, but a special gathering of a holy army prepared for a holy war. The exactness in numbering this list appears to be built on the story of Moses’ call for exactly “a thousand of every tribe, twelve thousand armed for war” (Num 31:4-5), when they were going to fight against the Midianites and Balaam (Num 31:1-54) to “avenge the Lord of Midian” (Num 31:1-3). “This is a holy war commanded by God”²⁰⁹ against

²⁰⁷ 2 Cor 11:2-3; Eph 5:22-33; Jer 6:2; Isa 51:16; Rev 19:7-8.

²⁰⁸ Aune, *Revelation, 6-16*, 436.

²⁰⁹ Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 768. The Lord gave this command in Num 25 just after Phinehas slew Cozbi and Zimri in their bold, defiant act of fornication

Midian and Balaam for leading Israel to “commit whoredom” with the Midianite and Moabite women²¹⁰ and to bow down to their gods at Baal of Peor (Num 25:1-3). In Revelation’s sealing passage, the twelve tribes are a “perfectly symmetrical group of 144,000.”²¹¹

Levi, the tribe that served in the sanctuary as priests, is part of the tribal list in Rev 7, thus linking John’s sealing passage again to the holy war imagery of the story in Num 31. In that account “Phinehas the son²¹² of Eleazar the priest” leads the army “to the war, with the holy instruments” (31:6). It was also Phinehas, the Levite, who in zeal for God’s honor slew (25:1-13) “Zimri, the son of Salu, a prince of a chief house among the Simeonites” (25:14), and “Cozbi, the daughter of Zur . . . of a chief house in Midian” (25:15). Jesus, the new high priest (Heb 4:14-15; 5:10; 8:1-2), who is of the tribe of Judah (Heb 7:13-17), heads Revelation’s eschatological sealed army of spiritual Israelites (Rev 7:5).

(25:16-18), but it was in Num 31 when God again told them to carry out his will in their destruction that this command was followed (31:1-18).

²¹⁰ The Midianites and Moabites were allied to destroy Israel and sought Balaam’s services to curse them (Num 22:1-7). When he was unsuccessful, he gave them counsel to “put a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication” (Rev 2:14; Num 31:16). Numbers 25:1 says that it was “the daughters of Moab” who led the Israelites to be defiled by fornication and idolatry, Moses, in ch. 31 when they make war to “avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites” (31:2-3), refers to the women of Midian who were captured when he says, “Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor” (31:9-18).

²¹¹ Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 768-769. He compares these two passages by showing that in Num 31 the soldiers numbered “12,000 (12 x 1,000),” while in Rev 7 they numbered “144,000 (12 x 12 x 1,000).” John multiplies the number of his group by 12 when building off of this story, possibly to show Revelation’s holy war as symbolic and cosmic in nature, rather than literal and local as in Numbers.

²¹² Being the son of the high priest means he is a Levite.

John's description of this group as adult Israelite men who "were not defiled with women; for they are virgins" (Rev 14:4) is a depiction of their total commitment to following the Lamb, who is from the tribe of Judah (Rev 5:5; 22:16), and who is head of this eschatological army. The 144,000 are not defiled with the women of Rev 17, "the great prostitute Babylon and her daughters."²¹³ Babylon and her daughters are responsible in the last days for leading the nations to commit spiritual fornication²¹⁴ and idol worship in the issue of the beast.²¹⁵ The 144,000 sealed remnant faithfully follow the Lamb and avoid defilement from the false religious systems represented by Babylon and her daughters, successfully gaining "the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, and over his name."²¹⁶

The tribe of Levi is included in this sealed list of the church militant as ready for war. While their tribe did not serve in the national army, at various times they participated in military actions in a religious context. At the coronation of Joash, the Levites, as military guards of the sanctuary, protected him from the evil designs of Athaliah (2 Chr 23:1-15). When the children of Israel made and worshiped the golden calf at Mt. Sinai, the tribe of Levi stood faithful and performed a holy war duty against the Israelites who had sinned in participating in this false worship (Exod 32:26-29). Also,

²¹³ Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 436-7; Rev 17:1-5.

²¹⁴ Rev 14:8; 17:1-5, 15, 18; 18:1-5, 9.

²¹⁵ Rev 13:12-17; 14:9-12; 16:1-2, 10, 19; 19:19-20.

²¹⁶ Rev 15:2; 14:1-5, 12; 7:1-4, 13-14; Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 436.

in Num 25 it was a Levite who brought deliverance to Israel by slaying the Midianite woman and the Israelite man who slept with her.

Order of Tribal Lists

In the study of this passage in Rev 7, compared with the other tribal lists in the Old Testament, there appear to be twenty-one²¹⁷ lists of the tribes, not including Revelation's sealing passage. As various scholars have looked at the tribal lists, they have come up with differing numbers of lists of the tribes. Some have arrived at fifteen,²¹⁸ sixteen,²¹⁹ eighteen,²²⁰ nineteen,²²¹ and twenty.²²² Even with all of this variation on the number of lists, one thing is pretty consistent between commentators on Rev 7, and that is that there is no other list in the entire Bible that matches the tribal list in the sealing passage. In fact, there are no two lists in the entire Bible that are exactly the same.

This variation of the order of names in the different tribal lists has led some scholars to conclude that "the sequence of tribes itself is probably not significant,"²²³ because it "varied considerably in the Old Testament."²²⁴ Plummer concluded that

²¹⁷ Gen 29-35 and 41; Gen 49:1-29; Exod 1:1-6; Num 1:4-15; Num 1:19-49; Num 2; Num 7; Num 10:14-28; Num 13:4-16; Num 26; Num 34:13-29; Deut 27:12-13; Deut 33; Josh 13-19; Josh 21:1-8; Josh 21:9-45; 1 Chr 2:1-2; 1 Chr 2:3-9:1; 1 Chr 12; Ezek 48:1-29; Ezek 48:30-35.

²¹⁸ Joseph Baylee, *The Apocalypse: The Voice of Jesus Christ from the Throne of Glory, with an Exegetical and Practical Commentary* (London: James Nisbet, 1876), 192-3.

²¹⁹ Brighton, *Revelation*, 191.

²²⁰ Mounce, *Revelation*, 160, 170; Caird, *Revelation*, 98.

²²¹ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 479; Brady, *The Contribution*, 542; Osborne, *Revelation*, 314.

²²² Reddish, *Revelation*, 147; Ford, *Revelation*, 124.

²²³ Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 783.

since there are no two lists “in the same order, it does not seem probable that any special design underlies the selection and arrangement here.”²²⁵ However, others believe that it is definitely not unintelligible, but is specifically mentioned in that particular order for a purpose, or else the individual tribes would not have been mentioned at all. Thomas states, “A listing that is random and without reason raises serious questions about why the list was included in the text.”²²⁶ In Neall’s opinion, “the irregularities in the listing of the tribes”²²⁷ demonstrate that John did not intend the tribes “to be understood literally,”²²⁸ but this does not make sense in light of the fact that no two lists in the Old Testament agree in order, and many of them differ in the tribal makeup.

Old Testament Lists Compared

It is valuable to compare the listing of the tribes in Rev 7 to some of the major lists in the Old Testament. Table 1 presents seven Old Testament lists compared with John’s sealing passage.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Plummer, *Epistles*, 207.

²²⁶ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 479-80.

²²⁷ Neall, *Sealed Saints*, 263.

²²⁸ Ibid., 263.

Table 1. Tribal lists compared

Gen 29-35	Gen 49:1-29	Num 1:4-15	Num 1:19-49	Num 2	Deut 27:12-13	Ezek 48:30-35	Rev 7:4-8
Reuben	Reuben	Reuben	Reuben	Judah	Simeon	Reuben	Judah
Simeon	Simeon	Simeon	Simeon	Issachar	Levi	Judah	Reuben
Levi	Levi	Judah	Gad	Zebulun	Judah	Levi	Gad
Judah	Judah	Issachar	Judah	Reuben	Issachar	Joseph	Asher
Dan	Zebulun	Zebulun	Issachar	Simeon	Joseph	Benjamin	Naphtali
Naphtali	Issachar	Ephraim	Zebulun	Gad	Benjamin	Dan	Manasseh
Gad	Dan	Manasseh	Ephraim	Ephraim	Reuben	Simeon	Simeon
Asher	Gad	Benjamin	Manasseh	Manasseh	Gad	Issachar	Levi
Issachar	Asher	Dan	Benjamin	Benjamin	Asher	Zebulun	Issachar
Zebulun	Naphtali	Asher	Dan	Dan	Zebulun	Gad	Zebulun
Joseph	Joseph	Gad	Asher	Asher	Dan	Asher	Joseph
Benjamin	Benjamin	Naphtali	Naphtali	Naphtali	Naphtali	Naphtali	Benjamin

Genesis 29-30, 35, and 41

Reuben as firstborn is listed first in Gen 29-30, 35, and 41, and Judah is listed as fourth in birth order. Levi is mentioned in both of these passages. Dan is mentioned in this list in Genesis as the fifth son. Ephraim and Manasseh are not mentioned in Gen 29-35 since they were not sons of Jacob, but were Joseph's sons. They appear in ch. 41, and split the tribal inheritance of Joseph, as he gets a double portion when blessed by his father.

Genesis 49:1-29

The passage of Gen 49:1-29 is Jacob's prophetic blessing on his sons, in which he describes their characters and future. All twelve of the original sons of Jacob are listed, without Ephraim and Manasseh. There were no tribes at this point. Their descendants eventually grew to form tribes from each son, including Ephraim and Manasseh. Reuben

is still at the head of the list, and Judah is still in the fourth position. Both Levi and Dan are included, but Levi is in birth position, while Dan is not.

Numbers 1:4-15

Numbers 1:4-15 is a list of the tribes as they are organizing for the military census. Ephraim and Manasseh are listed, being mentioned as representing Joseph. Levi is excluded from this listing since his tribe served as priests in the sanctuary. Joseph is excluded from this list as well, because he was given a double portion of inheritance, which was divided between his two sons. They are both in this list and his name is left out, since they became tribes in his place. Reuben heads the list, but Judah is moved from his birth position to third in the list. Dan is also in this list, but out of birth order.

Numbers 1:19-49

Numbers 1:19-49 is the actual military census listing that was being prepared for earlier in the chapter. Again Levi and Joseph were excluded for the same reasons as in the previous list. Levi is specifically mentioned as being excluded due to having the priesthood (Num 1:47-49). Reuben heads this list, while Judah is in birth position. Dan is listed here, as well as Ephraim and Manasseh, who are again mentioned as representing Joseph.

Numbers 2

Numbers 2 contains a military listing that gives the layout of the camp arrangements by tribe, which also was followed as a marching order when moving from place to place. Joseph and Levi (Num 2:33) are again left out. Ephraim is included here. In this list Judah is placed in primary position to lead the camp militarily just as in Rev 7.

The tribe of Levi is placed in the center of the camp to set up their tents around the sanctuary as its priests (Num 1:50-53; 2:17), and thus are excluded from this listing. Reuben is listed fourth, but the first name on the south side encampment. Manasseh is included in this listing, as also is Dan.

Deuteronomy 27:12-13

Only the birth children of Jacob are mentioned in Deut 27:12-13, with no Ephraim and Manasseh, in this giving of the blessings and curses. The twelve tribes are divided into two groups. Levi and Joseph are both included in the group representing the blessings, but Judah does not head the list. Reuben is in position seven, but first in the curses group. Dan is also included in the curses group.

Ezekiel 48:30-35

Ezekiel 48:30-35 is the second listing in this chapter and both lists are different from each other. This chapter is a basis for John's discussion of the names of the tribes being placed over the doors of the new Jerusalem (Rev 21:12-13). Levi and Joseph are included in this listing, but Ephraim and Manasseh are not. Reuben is heading this list, unlike the lists of Num 1 and 2. In this list of what names are to be placed on the gates to Jerusalem, Dan is included. Reuben is followed by Judah in second position and Levi in third on the north side.

Winkle suggests that this list is the closest to Revelation's and probably forms the basis of John's list.²²⁹ Maxwell recognized this list in Ezek 48 as an eschatological list, like the one in Rev 7. He saw the distinct differences between the two lists as an indication that Rev 7 is dealing with spiritual Israel, not literal Israel.²³⁰ It is possible that this list is presenting members of Dan's tribe as having a place in the heavenly kingdom and new Jerusalem, while John's list is dealing with a specific group of people in the last days who are sealed to face the false worship of the mark of the beast and the seven last plagues. From this sealed group Dan's tribe is likely excluded due to its association with idolatrous apostasy in the Old Testament.

²²⁹ Ross E. Winkle, "Another Look at the List of Tribes in Revelation 7," *AUSS* 27 (1989): 53-67. He suggests changing the direction of the order to north, west, south, east, with Judah being first. "When one reverses Ezekiel's list in a counterclockwise fashion, it closely resembles the list in Rev 7!" He explains that by changing the order in this way each name is only one off from each other in position, except for Ephraim and Manasseh who were added in place of Dan. When Dan was deleted, only these two sons of Joseph could be inserted, since Joseph and Levi were already in the list. Since Ephraim had a bad history of idolatry, Manasseh was the one inserted. He also points out that each successive pair of names, except Naphtali and Manasseh, are full brothers—no half brothers are paired together. Thomas agrees with this assessment and arrangement adjustments (Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 479). Mounce says that this comparison of Revelation's tribal order to that of Ezek 48's gates list does not help, for Levi is still out of order, and Manasseh is not mentioned in Ezekiel's list, as he is in Revelation's (Mounce, *Revelation*, 157-160). Another problem with this comparison is that you can only see these two lists as similar if you change the order of one or the other list, and then seek to account for the different names in both lists. If John really intended to build off of Ezekiel's list, it would not be necessary to change his list like this in order to get them to match.

²³⁰ Maxwell said that "the list of the tribes presented in Revelation 7 poses its own problems if taken literally. It is unlike the tribal lists found elsewhere in the Bible. It is even unlike the tribal list in Ezekiel 48 which, like the one in Revelation 7, is eschatological. . . . The prophecy of Ezekiel 48 foretells the final salvation of Israel and the eschatological division of the land of Palestine. If both it and Revelation 7 really talk about the eschatological salvation of *literal* Israel, we would expect them to be the same" (Maxwell, *God Cares* 2, 212-3). A problem with this observation is that there are two lists in Ezek 48 and both of them disagree with each other as well. Also, among the numerous lists in the Old Testament there are no two that are in identical order. It does not seem like a strong argument to state that Ezek 48 must be referring to literal Israel, while Rev 7 must be speaking about spiritual Israel, because the composition of the two lists differs.

Revelation 7:4-8

The list in Rev 7:4-8 places Judah at the head of the list and Reuben the firstborn as second. In addition, Dan is excluded, and Levi is included. Joseph's name is substituted for Ephraim's.²³¹ Manasseh is included in the list as he is in most Old Testament lists. Buchanan Gray suggested changing the order of the names listed by "placing verses 5 and 6 after 8a,"²³² thus listing the sons together in their maternal order.²³³ By doing this it is suggested that Manasseh is inserted²³⁴ in the place of Dan²³⁵ to maintain the number twelve, and that Ephraim is most likely counted through Joseph's name. By making this adjustment it seems that John was not using a military or land distribution list (since Levi is included), but was using a maternal list, even though they are not in birth order. The tribes are paired together as brothers from the same mother, but

²³¹ There was no Old Testament tribe of Joseph. He was given a double portion of inheritance to be divided between his two sons (Gen 48). His sons became tribes in his place. When Joseph's name is mentioned in place of both or one of his sons it is still those tribes that Joseph is representing.

²³² G. Buchanan Gray, "The Lists of the Twelve Tribes," *The Expositor* 6, no. 5 (1902): 235. Gray makes these observations about the list in Revelation to provide, in his mind, greater clarity in reading the list. Charles said that this makes the list "intelligible and illuminating" (Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary I*, 207; see also, Caird, *Revelation*, 98). However, attempting to change the text of Scripture to fit one's opinion is not a sound hermeneutic. Gray felt that the list as he ordered it would be more close to what he thought was the original intent of John, although he had no textual or manuscript evidence to support such a change. The fact that John composed the list in Revelation indicates that he intended it to be in the order found in the text.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 225-240.

²³⁴ This reordering of the list by Gray is based on the assumption that John is seeking to use a list that reflects maternal relationship. It implies that he made a mistake in the order of his list that needs to be corrected. This reads into John's list a purpose that he likely did not have, rather than letting his list composition inform our conclusions about his purpose. However, Manasseh is in most Old Testament lists and it makes sense that he fits in this list.

²³⁵ Winkle, *The List of the Tribes*, 56-8. He suggests that John placed a genealogical reordering of Ezek 48's list to promote maternal relationships, and that Dan was removed before Manasseh was inserted in his place.

not in order of age or in order of the importance of the mother.²³⁶ Mounce holds that these efforts to reorder the tribal names in Rev 7 do “not affect the interpretation of the passage.”²³⁷

Old Testament Tribal Exclusions

A closer look at any exclusion of names of tribes in the lists in the Old Testament will shed light on whether there is any significance of Dan’s and Ephraim’s absence in Rev 7. There are multiple names that are left out of various lists of the tribes. At the same time, Dan is included in Ezek 48’s listing of the tribal names on the city gates, which poses a challenge to drawing dogmatic conclusions about his absence in Revelation.²³⁸

Joseph

Joseph is left out of most of the lists in the Old Testament,²³⁹ since he was given a double portion of the inheritance, which was divided between his two sons. His sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, became tribes in his place. However, he is included in a few lists, particularly the genealogical ones.²⁴⁰ In Num 13 and 34 the name of Joseph is

²³⁶ Simcox, *The Revelation*, 51.

²³⁷ Mounce, *Revelation*, 160.

²³⁸ Both Ezek 48 and Rev 7 are eschatological lists. The difference is that Ezekiel presents what could have been for the tribes and nation before the cross, but Revelation presents a New Testament, spiritual and worldwide interpretation of Ezekiel’s vision with some adjustments. John’s list should be seen as the interpretation and correction of Ezekiel’s, rather than a competition to his list.

²³⁹ Num 1:4-15; Num 1:19-49; Num 2; Num 7; Num 10:14-28; Num 13:4-16; Num 26; Num 34:13-29; Josh 13-19; Josh 21:1-8; Josh 21:9-45; 1 Chr 2:3-9:1; 1 Chr 12; Ezek 48:1-29.

²⁴⁰ Gen 29-35, 41; Gen 49:1-29; Exod 1:1-6; Deut 27:12-13; Deut 33; 1 Chr 2:1-2; Ezek 48:30-35.

substituted for Manasseh's, which probably means that Joseph's name is merely inserted in his place.²⁴¹

Levi

Most of the lists of the tribes are either military or inheritance lists, and therefore they do not include Levi in them.²⁴² Levi is included in the genealogical lists.²⁴³ He is also included in the lists of blessings,²⁴⁴ and in the lists of tribes that joined David to crown and follow him as their king.²⁴⁵ The exception to inheritance lists would be Levi's inclusion in the list of names on the city gates,²⁴⁶ his inclusion in the first list of Ezek 48:1-29, where living arrangements of the tribes around Jerusalem are established, with Levi in the center of the tribes around the sanctuary.²⁴⁷ Since Levi was given the priesthood, as full-time servants of the sacred things of the sanctuary and its services, it

²⁴¹ In Num 13:11 it is stated, "Of the tribe of Joseph, namely, of the tribe of Manasseh." In a similar way Num 34:23 reads, "Joseph, for the tribe of the children of Manasseh." These two verses put Joseph's name in place of Manasseh and then Moses tells his readers that that is what he is doing. There was no tribe of Joseph after his portion was split between Ephraim and Manasseh. He had no other children as descendants, and Ephraim is already mentioned in each of these two lists. This indicates that this is to be taken as a substitution of Joseph's name for his son's. These passages explain that when they mention Joseph, they really mean Manasseh.

²⁴² Num 1:4-15; Num 1:19-49; Num 2; Num 7; Num 10:14-28; Num 13:4-16; Num 26; Num 34:13-29; Josh 13-19; Josh 21:1-8; Josh 21:9-45; Ezek 48:1-29; Ezek 48:30-35.

²⁴³ Gen 29-35, 41; Gen 49:1-29; Exod 1:1-6; 1 Chr 2:1-2; 1 Chr 2:3-9:1.

²⁴⁴ Gen 49:1-29; Deut 27:12-13; Deut 33.

²⁴⁵ This can be found in 1 Chr 12.

²⁴⁶ Ezek 48:30-35. This is similar to the one in Rev 7, especially if you put it together with Rev 21's statements that the names of the tribes, presumably those in Rev 7, will be placed on the city gates of the new Jerusalem, similar to Ezekiel's arrangement.

²⁴⁷ This is similar to the camp arrangements of Num 2, where Levi was not technically counted among the tribes, but was mentioned as camping in the center of the camp around the sanctuary. It was specifically stated that Levi was not counted in the tribal list in Num 2.

was not given an allotment of land for an inheritance, but was given cities²⁴⁸ scattered throughout the land of the other tribes. The tribe of Levi did not serve in the army, and was therefore not included in most military lists, and is not in any of the inheritance lists.²⁴⁹

Dan

Dan is included in every Old Testament list except the genealogy list in 1 Chr 2:3-9:1.²⁵⁰ This may be due to the fact that Dan was associated with idolatrous apostasy, and this listing is just after returning from Babylonian captivity (1 Chr 9:1), which cured Israel's idolatry. The eschatological list of the tribes, with their names on the city gates in Ezek 48, includes Dan. It is curious that Dan is included in Ezek 48, but is not in Rev 7's listing of the tribes.

Manasseh

Manasseh's tribe is not included in several genealogy lists,²⁵¹ and is not in the blessings and curses list of Deut 27:12-13, but this list involves specifically only the twelve sons of Jacob, not the sons of Joseph. Ephraim and Manasseh are included through the name of Joseph, though not specifically mentioned. Most of the lists have

²⁴⁸ These cities (Num 35; Josh 20-21; 1 Chr 6) were used as cities of refuge for those falsely accused of crimes or guilty of a crime that they committed by accident.

²⁴⁹ Num 1:47-54; 2:17, 33; 26:57-62; Josh 13:14, 33; 14:3-4; 18:7.

²⁵⁰ Unfortunately there is nothing in this passage that indicates why Dan is excluded.

²⁵¹ Gen 29-35, 41; Gen 49:1-29; Exod 1:1-6;

Manasseh listed in them.²⁵² Manasseh is also not included in the genealogy list of 1 Chr 2:1-2 or in the names on the city gates in Ezek 48:30-35.

Simeon

Simeon is left out of only one list, which is Moses' blessing on the tribes in Deut 33. He is in every other listing of the tribes. It is possible that his tribe's exclusion is due to the bold and defiant act of fornication (Num 25:1-13) by "Zimri, the son of Salu, a prince of a chief house among the Simeonites" (Num 25:14) during the apostasy at Baal of Peor. Just after the apostasy God told Moses to conduct a holy war against the Midianites for the part they played at Baal of Peor (31:1-8), and then "afterward shalt thou be gathered unto thy people" (31:2). The apostasy and holy war took place at the very end of Moses' life (Deut 34:1-8), just before this chapter of Moses' blessing that leaves Simeon out. It is possible that Simeon's tribe is excluded from this list of blessing due to the tribe's involvement with Baal of Peor.

Maintaining the Number 12

Most of the lists of the tribes maintain the number twelve by including and excluding various names²⁵³ depending on the circumstances involved. However, there are some lists that have more and some that have less than twelve.

²⁵² The tribe is divided in half and each half is listed separately in many of the lists. This is because Manasseh's inheritance was divided between two sides of the Jordan River. Half of his tribe was the first to receive their inheritance, while the other half had to wait until they crossed the Jordan.

²⁵³ Generally this is done to accommodate the inclusion of Joseph's sons in the list of the tribes, since they take up two spots in the list, rather than just the one that Joseph would take.

Deuteronomy 33

In Deut 33, Moses gives his prophetic blessing on the tribes similar to Jacob's prophetic blessing in Gen 49. In this list there are only eleven tribes listed. This is due to Simeon being excluded, and Ephraim and Manasseh not being included in the list. They are mentioned in the section on Joseph, where Moses says that they are the two horns of Joseph pushing the people. If they were counted in the list, then there would be thirteen, unless you excluded Joseph.²⁵⁴

Ezekiel 48:1-29

This describes the land inheritance around Jerusalem. There are thirteen tribes in this passage. Joseph is excluded, being replaced by his two sons. Levi is included in this list, but you could exclude him from the list due to a similar description in this passage as in Num 2, where the camp arrangements are given with Levi being in the center around the sanctuary and not counted in the list because of that. This passage seems to be doing the same thing.

After comparing the tribal lists of the Old Testament with that of Rev 7, it seems that there was no specific order of the names in the lists.²⁵⁵ They are all mixed in different lists. Also, there is a bit of variation with what names are included and excluded in many

²⁵⁴ This would not be reasonable to do since Joseph is specifically prophesied over as one of the sons of Jacob, while his two sons are only mentioned incidentally as a small part of the prophecy on him. They do not figure importantly in the prophecy.

²⁵⁵ "From facts like these, it is clear that there was no certain and settled order in which the tribes were mentioned by the sacred writers" (Barnes, *Notes*, 1603). Barnes also believed that there is "no particular reason why" Judah is at the head of the list (ibid., 175), but this is in clear contrast to the majority of scholars who defend from Revelation that Judah heads the list because of it being the tribe of the Messiah.

of the lists. There does not seem to be any significance attached to the exclusion²⁵⁶ and inclusion of certain names in the lists, with the exception of the tribe of Levi, which is said to not have an inheritance among the tribes and not be included in the military ranks.

The listing in Rev 7 does not specifically state why John chose the order²⁵⁷ that he did, nor why some names are included, while others are excluded. Barclay held that “it would be a mistake to place any stress on the order in which the twelve tribes are given, because the lists of the tribes are always varying in their order.”²⁵⁸ It appears that there is not enough data in the Old Testament listings to clearly make strong statements about the order and inclusion and exclusion of the names of Revelation’s list.²⁵⁹ However, unlike the lists of the Old Testament that are dealing with historical issues for the literal tribes that are listed, Revelation is dealing with God’s spiritual Israel, the church. It is possible that John in dealing with the church, under the symbol of Israel and its tribes, did not have a specific purpose in mind in selecting the names and order for his list. However, he may have composed his list in a way that would support his teachings about the sealing, and the general themes of Revelation, which he was presenting in his book.

²⁵⁶ “It would seem, therefore, that the name of a tribe might be omitted without any particular reason being given” (Barnes, *Notes*, 1603).

²⁵⁷ “There is also no explanation for the order of the names” (Robert G. Bratcher and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on the Revelation to John* [New York: United Bible Societies, 1993], 125). Mounce says, “There seems to be no particular reason for the order in which the tribes are given. . . . The various irregularities of the list do not affect the interpretation of the passage” (Mounce, *Revelation*, 170).

²⁵⁸ Barclay, *Revelation 2*, 25. Caird supports this by saying, “It is unwise to assume that any one order is more rational or more traditional than another” (Caird, *Revelation*, 98).

²⁵⁹ It is possible that Jacob did not have a specific purpose in the placement of the names of his sons in his prophetic blessing on them and their descendants. However, he should have known that he took them out of birth order. When he was blessing Joseph’s two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph thought

Revelation's Omissions and Inclusions

There are several issues with the list in Rev 7's sealing. Some names are included and others are left. The primary spot is not given to the firstborn. It is important to take a closer look at these issues and see what evidence there is for why the list reads as it does.

Reuben

Even though Reuben was the firstborn he was not given the leadership position in this eschatological listing of the tribes. He lost his leadership position because he slept with Bilhah, his father's concubine (Gen 35:22; 1 Chr 5:1-2) and mother of Dan and Naphtali. This change in sibling leadership, recognized by Revelation's order, indicates that God takes sin seriously, which is a continued theme in John's book (Rev 18:1-5; 14:6-12). Leadership would be passed on to the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev 5:5-6; 22:16), who is "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS" (Rev 19:16; 17:14).

Judah

Even as early as the days of Jacob, before the sons of Israel had become tribes, Judah was identified to be the one that his brothers "shall bow down before" and who would rule with "the scepter," causing all people to be gathered unto him (Gen 49:8-12). This was clearly a prophetic description of the Messiah's ministry and reign foretold. This tribe prevailed over the others as the ruling tribe (1 Chr 5:1-2), from which David came as king of Israel and a type of Christ. The fact that Christ came through the tribe of Judah, and that John introduced him already in ch. 5 as "the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the

he did not realize what he was doing when he blessed the younger ahead of the older, but Jacob insisted

root of David” (Rev 5:5-6),²⁶⁰ may have been the strongest reason that John placed Judah first²⁶¹ in his list.²⁶² He rightly places Jesus as the prominent figure and attraction in the entire book of Revelation, as he should be, as Savior.

Judah heads the Old Testament lists when they are geographical from south to north (Num 34:19; Josh 21:4; Judg 1:2; 1 Chr 12:24), as well as the other lists of the military order²⁶³ of the tribes (Num 2:3; 7:12; 10:14). If Rev 7’s list is intended to reflect a military census,²⁶⁴ then this could also explain why Judah is placed first. The Lamb, who is “the Lion of the tribe of Juda” (Rev 5:5-6), is the leader of the armies of heaven²⁶⁵ as “King of kings” (Rev 17:14; 19:11-21; 16:12-16; 6:12-17). This is an assurance of victory to the tribes as they follow the Lamb wherever he leads them (Rev 7:16-17; 14:1-5).

that he was intentional about his actions (Gen 48).

²⁶⁰ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 480.

²⁶¹ Easley states that Rev 7 is “the only tribal list of the Bible in which Judah comes first” (Easley, *Revelation*, 126). However, there are several lists in the Old Testament that Judah is at the head of: Num 2; Num 7; Num 10:14-28; Num 21:1-45; 1 Chr 2:3-9:1. The list in Num 2 is significant because Judah is placed as the leading tribe not only in the camp arrangement, but also in military march into battle. Interestingly, Barnes said there is “no particular reason why” Judah is at the head of the list (Barnes, *Notes*, 175).

²⁶² Neall, *Sealed Saints*, 262; Mounce, *Revelation*, 159, 169; Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary I*, 208; Charles, *Studies*, 114-5; Pattemore, *People of God*, 137; Barclay, *Revelation 2*, 25. Sweet asserts, “The true Israel is led by *the Lion of the tribe of Judah*” (Sweet, *Revelation*, 149).

²⁶³ Aune suggests that this is “perhaps because of the latter importance of Judah, the tribe of the Davidic dynasty” (Aune, *Revelation, 6-16*, 462).

²⁶⁴ Some have seen this due to the makeup of the sealed as being male celibates (Rev 14:4).

²⁶⁵ Bauckham, *Climax*, 221; Keener, *Revelation*, 235; Osborne, *Revelation*, 314.

Levi

Levi is generally excluded in military and land distribution lists,²⁶⁶ except to list the cities that were given to Levi out of each of the other tribes' territories.²⁶⁷ Smith suggested that Levi is mentioned in Rev 7's list because in the kingdom of heaven Levi will receive an inheritance, since there will be no more need for a priestly tribe.²⁶⁸ Since Revelation identifies all believers as a kingdom of priests (Rev 5:8-10; 1:5-6; 1 Pet 2:9-10),²⁶⁹ rather than the tribe of Levi, it is possible that Levi is included in this spiritual list of the church to show it participates in the final fulfillment of God's original plan of a nation of priests (Exod 19:4-6). It seems that this list in Revelation is describing the remnant of God's spiritual army,²⁷⁰ his church, who are sealed in preparation for the last stand in the holy war between the dragon and the Lamb.²⁷¹

²⁶⁶ Of the twenty-one tribal lists in the Old Testament, Levi is left out of eleven of them, just over half. In every list that Levi is left out of, Joseph is also excluded from, so that his two sons can fill the absence of them both (Aune, *Revelation*, 6-16, 463). Thomas rejects the idea that Levi is always left out of land distribution lists, so that this list in Revelation could not be a land distribution list. He cites Levi's mention in 1 Chr 6:1-81 (Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 479). However, Levi is mentioned only to show what cities and suburbs were given to Levi's tribe out of each of the other tribes' inheritance, so that they would have a place to live and would be able to run some as cities of refuge. The writer of Chronicles is careful to state that the "fields of the city, and the villages thereof" (1 Chr 6:56) were given to the other tribes, not Levi.

²⁶⁷ Both lists in Ezek 48:1-29 and 30:35, which deal with land and inheritance, include Levi.

²⁶⁸ Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation*, 468. Clarke said that Levi "now belonged to the spiritual priesthood" of all believers (Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary*, 595).

²⁶⁹ Pattemore, *People of God*, 137. "In Christ Jesus there was no priestly tribe: all Christians were priests" (William Alexander, *The Epistles of St. John: Twenty-One Discourses, with Greek Text, Comparative Versions, and Notes Chiefly Exegetical* [EB 25; New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1908], 119).

²⁷⁰ Bauckham states that the inclusion of Levi here is an indication that this is a military census, but not for literal tribes. Rather, it is for a holy war (Bauckham, *Climax*, 222). The context of Revelation seems to suggest that this list is not a military census, since there are an equal number sealed from each tribe. Rather this is a listing of God's holy army prepared to stand faithfully and do battle for him in a holy

Dan

Probably the most interesting difference about John's list from most of the other lists of the tribes is his exclusion of Dan. While some would say that there is nothing significant to this, it is possible, as Collins suggests, that Dan was excluded on the basis of "theological reasons."²⁷² However, while in many of the Old Testament lists Levi is excluded due to having the priesthood, and Joseph is replaced by the division of his inheritance blessing between his two sons, there are other tribes that are excluded from the Old Testament with no apparent theological reason. These tribal exclusions in the Old Testament challenge the veracity of the "theological reasons" argument about Dan's exclusion in Revelation.

A number of scholars hold that Dan's absence from this list "has no particular theological significance."²⁷³ While it is true that various names were left out of different lists for various reasons and at different times, without any special significance attached to it, an omission from an apocalyptic list may very well be more significant than in other

war, just like in Num 31:4-5, where the children of Israel went out to battle against the Midianites and Balaam the false prophet (Num 31:1-54). This list of John is similar to the list in Num 2 that sets up the marching and encampment order with Judah heading the list, and is the result of the military census of Num 1.

²⁷¹ See, Rev 12:17; 13:7-18; 16:14-16; 21; 17:14; 19:11-21; 6:12-17.

²⁷² Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 1005.

²⁷³ Aune, *Revelation, 6-16*, 479; Buchanan, *Revelation*, 190; Bauckham, *Climax*, 222-3; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 480-1; Barnes, *Notes*, 177; Walvoord, *Bible Knowledge*, 949.

lists. It certainly should not be taken literally or no one from the tribe of Dan could be saved.²⁷⁴

Antichrist to come from Dan

The argument that Dan was excluded from this sealed list in Revelation due to the thought that the antichrist would arise from his tribe²⁷⁵ is supported by a number of scholars, such as Charles,²⁷⁶ Brady,²⁷⁷ Carrington,²⁷⁸ Barclay,²⁷⁹ Collins,²⁸⁰ and Wall.²⁸¹ Pattemore states that this idea of the antichrist coming from Dan cannot be traced back to John's day, and it likely arose from this list in Rev 7 leaving out Dan, rather than being the background that led this list to be formed.²⁸² There is no biblical evidence that the

²⁷⁴ Wolber, *Literary Structure*, 139. The exclusion of the tribe of Dan and the name of Ephraim from the list that claims to seal exactly 144,000 from "all the tribes of the children of Israel" seems to suggest that John is using these tribal names in a way other than strictly literal. If the number was to be an exact literal counting of the literal tribes, then it would not make sense that Dan and Ephraim would be excluded, while Joseph (which was not an Old Testament tribe) and Levi would be included in their place. Also, if this passage was intended to be taken as literal it would seem logical that the numbering of the various tribes would be varied, rather than exactly 12,000 from each tribe. It seems odd that John would be saying that out of each tribe listed there would only be exactly 12,000 sealed, no more and no less, and that not even one would be sealed out of Dan's tribe.

²⁷⁵ This idea seems to have originated with the teachings of Irenaeus, and is based on a misunderstanding of Jer 8:16 and Gen 49:16-18. Neither of these passages has anything to do with the antichrist at all. To use them to support Irenaeus's idea would be to take them out of their context.

²⁷⁶ Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary 1*, 208-9; Charles, *Studies*, 114-7.

²⁷⁷ Brady, *The Contribution*, 543.

²⁷⁸ Carrington, *Meaning of the Revelation*, 141.

²⁷⁹ Barclay, *Revelation 2*, 25.

²⁸⁰ Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 52-3.

²⁸¹ Wall says that by leaving Dan out of the list "John envisions not only the climactic conflict of salvation's history, which puts Christ against Anti-Christ, but also its outcome: the tribe of Antichrist is not sealed and is unprotected from the destruction of God's wrath" (Wall, *Revelation*, 118).

²⁸² Pattemore, *People of God*, 138. Aune also sees the idea of antichrist coming from Dan as the reason for his exclusion as unlikely (Aune, *Revelation, 6-16*, 462-3).

antichrist would come from any of the twelve tribes in general, or the tribe of Dan specifically. It is “sheer speculation,”²⁸³ and “the grounds for that opinion are very slight; it rests mainly on this omission itself.”²⁸⁴

Lost identity

It has been suggested that the tribe of Dan had lost its identity by the time of John and therefore could not be included in the tribal list. While some have seen this as a possibility for the tribe of Dan, it could also possibly be said about some of the other tribes as well.²⁸⁵ Yet, there is nothing in the text of Revelation that would indicate that this is the reason for Dan’s omission.

Manuscript scribal error

The supposition that scribes mistakenly copied down *MAN* (shortened form of *Μανασση*) instead of *ΔΑΝ* in the Greek manuscripts²⁸⁶ is without foundation. There is no textual evidence that this ever happened in the transmission of the manuscripts.²⁸⁷

Thomas correctly describes this idea as just supposition.²⁸⁸

²⁸³ Easley, *Revelation*, 126.

²⁸⁴ Simcox, *Revelation*, 52.

²⁸⁵ Doukhan, *Secrets*, 71; Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary 1*, 208; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 480-1; Brady, *The Contribution*, 543.

²⁸⁶ G.V. Sanderson, “In Defence of Dan,” *Scripture* 3, no. 4 (1948): 114-5. Thomas states that this suggestion “is a remote possibility because of the sparsity of manuscript support” (Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 480). Charles, writing twenty years before Sanderson, identified the origins of this scribal error theory, while he rejected the idea as improbable (Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary 1*, 208).

²⁸⁷ Beale, *Revelation*, 421; Osborne, *Revelation*, 314; Yeatts, *Revelation*, 142-3.

²⁸⁸ Brady, *The Contribution*, 543; Beckwith, *Apocalypse*, 543; Mounce, *Revelation*, 159.

A serpent-like character

Dan's prophetic blessing by Jacob describes him as a serpent that bites at the heels of horses and riders as they pass by. As a result, it has been suggested that this indicates a serpent-like character identified with Satan, which led to the tribe's exclusion.²⁸⁹ Were observes that Dan's character was one of backbiting, criticizing, and judging others, indicated by the prophetic blessing of Jacob. He further suggests that Dan's tribe is therefore excluded from the sealing of God's end-time saints to show that God will not tolerate such divisive activity among the last generation.²⁹⁰ This may have some merit, for John says their speech and lives will be pure (Rev 14:1, 4-5). However, Jacob's blessing of his sons in Gen 49 also includes negative traits of some of his other sons, whose tribes do appear in Revelation's list of the sealed.²⁹¹ Also, Dan's blessing that speaks about his character being like a serpent that bites at the back is preceded with the declaration that "Dan shall judge his people, as one of the tribes of Israel" (Gen 49:16-17). This blessing on Dan seems to indicate a positive place for Dan among the tribes in spite of his failures.

Failure to conquer territory

The tribe of Dan failed to conquer the territory originally given to it for an inheritance in the land of promise, when they were settling the land (Judg 1:34). Some have connected this failure with Dan's absence. There possibly may be something to this

²⁸⁹ Neall, *Sealed Saints*, 262; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 480.

²⁹⁰ Were, *Certainty*, 193-4.

²⁹¹ Examples of this are seen in the blessings of Reuben (Gen 49:3-4), Simeon, and Levi (49:5-7).

since Revelation emphasizes that those who are sealed in the last days are those who overcome. However, in the same chapter there are multiple tribes described as not being able to drive the pagan inhabitants out of the land.²⁹²

Idolatrous history

Probably the most common and strongest argument for Dan's exclusion is that it was the first tribe to turn to idolatry just after they entered the land of promise (Judg 18:11-31). They set up an image and hired non-Levitical priests to serve them. Jeroboam later set up one of his idolatrous images of a calf in Dan (1 Kgs 11:26; 12:28-30). Dan's omission may reflect Deut 29:10-29, where it is said that the tribes or people who enter into idolatry will be blotted out from under heaven and receive all the curses of the covenant.

This would fit within Revelation's call to true worship of the Creator and warning against idolatry in the worship of the beast and its image.²⁹³ Since the 144,000 are sealed to face the final issue of the worship of the beast and its image, it makes sense that the tribe of Dan that was wholly given to idolatry, and was a leader in it,²⁹⁴ would be excluded from this sealed group.²⁹⁵ All idolaters will be excluded from the city, new

²⁹² In Judg 1:27-34, the tribes of Manasseh, Ephraim, Zebulun, Asher, and Naphtali are also, like Dan, said to have failed to overcome the local inhabitants of the land to fully take their inheritance.

²⁹³ Rev 14:6-12; 13:12-18; 17:12-14; 18:1-5; 19:11-21. John says that those who participate in idolatry will not have a place among those who overcome, but will be cast into the lake of fire to be lost eternally (21:6-8, 23-27; 22:14-15).

²⁹⁴ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 481; Pattemore, *People of God*, 138.

²⁹⁵ Beale, *Revelation*, 420; Mounce, *Revelation*, 159; Bullinger, *The Apocalypse*, 283; Barclay, *Revelation 2*, 25; Winkle, "Tribes in Revelation 7," 60; R. H. Clayton, *Future History in the Revelation* (London: Marshall, Morgan, & Scott, 1944), 69; Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 257; Clarke, *Clarke's*

Jerusalem, which has the names of the tribes over the twelve gates, and, therefore, Dan is excluded from Revelation's tribal list (Rev 21:6-8, 27; 22:14-15; 21:12-14).

Manasseh

It is suggested by some that Manasseh was inserted in the list to make up for the absence of Dan, so that the symbolic nature of the number twelve could be maintained by John's list in the sealing.²⁹⁶ However, since Manasseh was already included in most of the lists of the Old Testament and Levi was not, it is more likely that Levi was inserted in Dan's place, and Manasseh was there because he belonged in the list.

Ephraim

Lost identity

Some have suggested that Ephraim was lost in history and therefore was not included in this listing. This certainly could be said of all the tribes, but he was the younger of the two sons of Joseph and was prophesied to become the larger of the two. Yet, Manasseh is included and Ephraim is not.

Commentary, 595; Nichol, *Philippians to Revelation*, 783; Neall, *Sealed Saints*, 262-3; Anderson, *Unfolding the Revelation*, 81. In contrast to this, there are some who say that there is "no direct exegetical evidence that this" claim of omission due to idolatry is true (Osborne, *Revelation*, 314), for this was true of all of the tribes and would not distinguish it from the others (Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary 1*, 208; Baylee, *The Apocalypse*, 192-3). LaRondelle asserts that "the probable explanation of the symbolic omission is the Jewish and early Christian conviction that Dan represented idolatry" (LaRondelle, *Chariots of Salvation*, 163).

²⁹⁶ Aune, *Revelation, 6-16*, 463; Mounce, *Revelation*, 160; Charles, *Studies*, 117-8; Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary 1*, 208; Neall, *Sealed Saints*, 263; Robertson, *The General Epistles*, 350. Buchanan says that Manasseh was inserted in place of Dan "for no known reason" (Buchanan, *Revelation*, 190).

Idolatrous history

While it may have been true that all of the tribes participated in idolatry, Ephraim, like Dan, was a leader in it and had a notorious reputation among the tribes for its idolatrous practices.²⁹⁷ Ephraim is the name that was frequently applied to the ten northern tribes after the rebellion under Jeroboam, and it played a major role in leading the northern tribes into idolatry.²⁹⁸ John is apparently redefining the tribal list for his theological purposes of cleansing all association with idolatry and apostasy from God's sealed people, to indicate that they are made up only of those who are faithful to God, those only who are pure, to show that idolaters are not part of true Israel.²⁹⁹

Leader in rebellion

Ephraim regularly joined Israel's enemies in fighting against God's people in Jerusalem.³⁰⁰ Since Revelation is emphasizing the tribe of Judah and the Messiah in leadership of God's people, it is possible that Ephraim's name is excluded due to its defection against God, his law, and the kingly tribe of Judah.

²⁹⁷ Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary*, 595; Anderson, *Unfolding the Revelation*, 81; Beale, *Revelation*, 421.

²⁹⁸ Judg 17:1-13; 18:2, 30-31; Hos 4:17-19. See also, Clayton, *Future History*, 69; Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 257-8.

²⁹⁹ Brighton, *Revelation*, 192; Beale, *Revelation*, 421. See also, Rev 21:6-8, 23-27; 22:14-15.

³⁰⁰ 2 Sam 2:8-10; Isa 7:1-9, 17; Hos 5:3-5, 9-15. See also, Brady, *The Contribution*, 543; Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 257-8.

Joseph

Joseph is listed as one of “the tribes of the children of Israel” (7:4), but there was no tribe of Joseph. His portion was divided between his two sons and they became tribes. This suggests that while Ephraim’s name is excluded due to apostasy, his descendants are represented through Joseph in the list.³⁰¹ By not mentioning Ephraim’s name, John can avoid the negative connotations of the tribe’s past.³⁰² In two lists of the Old Testament, Joseph’s name is inserted as a gloss for the tribe of Manasseh,³⁰³ where it reads, “Of the tribe of Joseph, namely, of the tribe of Manasseh” (Num 13:11, 4-16), and, “the prince of the children of Joseph, for the tribe of the children of Manasseh” (Num 34:23, 13-29). This is probably what led John to insert the name of Joseph in place of Ephraim’s for his tribe.

Summary

Those who are sealed in the last days as God’s faithful remnant will be spiritual Israelites, those who “keep the commandments of God” (Rev 12:17; 14:12) and who are purified from every association with idolatry and apostasy. The listing of the names and their order in Rev 7:4-8 communicate this through symbolic language of the twelve

³⁰¹ Maxwell, *God Cares 2*, 212-3; Nichol, *Philippians to Revelation*, 783; Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary*, 595; Neall, *Sealed Saints*, 263; Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation*, 468; Brady, *The Contribution*, 543; Aune, *Revelation, 6-16*, 464-5.

³⁰² Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 481.

³⁰³ It is very rare for Joseph to appear in a listing with only one of his sons, but it happens a few times. However, some suggest that it never happens, and that there is no parallel to John’s listing of Joseph and Manasseh, while not listing Ephraim (Bauckham, *Climax*, 221; Easley, *Revelation*, 126).

“tribes of the children of Israel” (Rev 7:4), and this is supported throughout John’s entire prophetic book.

It is possible that John had specific theological and spiritual purposes in mind when he included and excluded certain names in his sealing list of the tribes. The order of the twelve tribes in his list seems to communicate a message of encouragement to his people who would live in the last days, and who would go through the sealing and the mark of the beast. God’s true Israel, the church, is about to experience a spiritual exodus out of this world of sin to travel to “the land of promise . . . a better country, that is, an heavenly” (Heb 11:9, 16),³⁰⁴ by which they will be delivered from all their earthly enemies who persecute them.³⁰⁵ Thus, Revelation’s sealing passage is presenting to

³⁰⁴ As part of “the everlasting covenant” (Gen 17:7, 13, 19; 2 Sam 23:1-5; 1 Chr 16:15-20; Ps 105:8-13; Isa 55:3; Heb 13:20-21) God promised to Abraham and his seed an inheritance of land for an “everlasting possession” (Gen 17:8; 48:4; Dan 7:14, 18, 22, 27; 2 Pet 1:11; 1 Pet 1:3-5; Matt 25:31, 34, 46; Heb 9:15; Exod 32:13; Ps 37:9, 11, 18, 22, 29, 34; Isa 60:21; Rev 21:1, 4, 7). This inheritance was not a small plot of land in the Middle East where the literal nation of Israel is located, but rather the entire world purified from sin and sinners and then made new (Rom 4:13; Matt 5:5; Ps 37:9-11, 18-22, 25-29, 34-40; Isa 65:17-19, 25; 2 Pet 3:9-14; Rev 20:7-15; 21:1-8; Heb 11:8-16). In order to possess this eternal inheritance, eternal life is necessary, and thus also provided as part of the covenant promise through Christ’s death (Mark 10:30; John 3:14-16; Matt 19:16-17; Rom 6:23; Titus 1:2; 3:4-7; 1 John 2:25; Heb 9:12, 15). Abraham believed that he would receive this eternal inheritance with eternal life to enjoy it not until the general resurrection of the dead at the second coming of Christ (Heb 11:8-12, 13-16, 17-19; Rom 4:13, 17-21; Dan 12:2; John 5:25-29; 1 Thess 4:13-17; 1 Cor 15:12-26, 50-57; Matt 24:30-31; 25:31-34, 46; Rev 20:4-6; Acts 26:6-8; 24:14-15; 23:6), made possible by the resurrection of Christ (1 Cor 15:12-26, 50-57; 1 Pet 1:3-5; Acts 2:21-36; 13:22-39, 46; 26:22-23). Christ is the seed that Abraham was made a joint-heir with in the promise of the covenant (Gal 3:16; Matt 21:33-45; Heb 1:2; Rom 4:13; 8:14-17; Gal 4:6-7), and everyone who is joined to Christ by faith becomes a part of the one seed with him as Abraham’s seed and as joint-heirs (Rom 8:14-17; Gal 4:6-7; 3:16, 6-9, 26-29; Exod 32:13). Therefore, even though promised to Abraham “that he would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him” “he gave him no inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on” (Acts 7:1-5), and they “all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” who “desire a better country, that is, an heavenly” (Heb 11:8-16). “These all . . . received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they should without us should not be made perfect” (Heb 11:39-40).

³⁰⁵ Luke 1:68-75; Gen 22:15-18; Ps 110:1-7; Gen 3:15; Rom 16:20; 1 Cor 15:12-26, 50-57; 1 Thess 4:13-18; Heb 10:12-13; 2 Tim 1:9-10; Zeph 3:13-17; Jer 25:29-33; Joel 3:9-21; Rev 14:14-20; 17:12-14; 19:11-21; 20:1-15.

God's people the final fulfillment of "the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers" (Acts 26:6-7), the twelve tribes of Israel. Only those who have been "washed . . . in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev 7:13-14) and have the "seal of the living God" on their foreheads will be able to stand at the day of Christ's appearing. The tribes are listed as they are in Rev 7 to teach these important truths and to bring encouragement to all who study them diligently.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The sixth seal focuses the attention of Revelation's readers on the declaration that "the great day of his wrath is come" (Rev 6:17). John pictures the wicked, at that time, as fleeing to the rocks and crying out for them to fall on them and hide them from the Lamb's presence (6:14-16). Chapter 6 then ends with the question, "And who shall be able to stand" (6:17). This gives the purpose of Rev 7's sealing passage, with its tribal list of "the children of Israel" (7:4). It is inserted as a parenthetical explanation of the sixth seal's question and gives much detail about what the people who are able to stand are like, while assuring them of ultimate victory.

The sealing passage of Rev 7 is a powerful call to the people of God to stand faithful to and for Jesus Christ in the face of a worldwide confederacy of evil³⁰⁶ bent on destroying their faith in the Lamb. John was not indiscriminate in his choices of how he composed his list of "all the tribes of the children of Israel" (7:4). He could have communicated the message of the sealing without reference to Israel at all, or to the tribes

³⁰⁶ This confederacy of evil is the combination of the dragon (Satan – Rev 12:7-9; 20:2), the land beast, also known as Babylon (Rev 14:8; 16:19; 17:1-18; 18:1-24) and Jezebel (Rev 2:20-23) in Revelation, and the water beast, who is also called the false prophet (Rev 13:12-17; 16:13-16; 19:19-20), together with nations of the earth and their leaders (Rev 13:8, 14-17; 14:8; 16:13-16; 17:1, 15, 2, 12-14; 18:2-3; 19:11-

specifically. The exclusion of the tribe of Dan and the name of Ephraim suggests that God's church, spiritual Israel, who is sealed in the last days, will be cleansed from all connections to idolatry and apostasy.³⁰⁷

The evidence of this passage points to the fact that John included the listing of the twelve tribes as he did to communicate further that God's people will go through "the great tribulation" (7:13-14) of the mark of the beast, out of which they will emerge victorious. It serves to emphasize that those sealed in the end-time are those who overcome fully. This is the same as being "washed . . . in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14). The same is contained in the idea that they are "the servants of our God" (7:3).

The placing of God's seal, his name, on their foreheads is a reference to Israel's history. During the plagues that fell on Egypt, to prepare the way for their deliverance from bondage, they placed blood on their doorframes to serve as a sign or seal of protection from the death angel's work (Exod 12). The angel passed over the homes that had the blood applied, and thus they were delivered. In the time of Ezekiel, the executioners were told to follow the sealing angel through the city and slay everyone who did not have the mark on their foreheads (Ezek 9:1-6). Again those who were marked or sealed by God were preserved.

Those who will be able to stand when "the great day of his wrath has come" (Rev 6:14-17) are those who have been sealed in the forehead, by having their character

21; 20:7-9). This final confederacy of evil will seek to destroy God's people through the mark of the beast, economic boycott and sanctions, and a death decree.

³⁰⁷ Beale, Revelation, 421. Ephraim and Dan were leaders in apostasy and idolatry, and they did not repent. Therefore, they are excluded. Only those who overcome will "inherit all things" (Rev 21:6-8).

washed from sin by “the blood of the Lamb.”³⁰⁸ The twelve “tribes of the children of Israel” (7:4-8) are used by John to refer to God’s true end-time spiritual Israel, the church. They are the last-day remnant (12:17), who “keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus” (14:12). They go through the final test of the mark of the beast and get “the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, and over the number of his name” to at last “stand on the sea of glass” (15:2-4; 14:1-5). The sealing of the 144,000 great multitude in Rev 7, with its listing of the twelve tribes, assures God’s people of their victory and final deliverance by following the Lamb. Thus, this chapter is filled with much encouragement and theological instruction for the people of God living in the last days of earth’s history, the time of the sealing of the church.

³⁰⁸ Rev 7:13-14; 1:5; 3:4-5, 18; 19:7-8; 16:15.

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