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Thoughts on the 144,000

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Variant Views

The history of prophetic interpretation takes us down a winding path. It is sometimes a twisted, or even a knotted path, and none more bewildering than the variety of views on the 144,000 sealed ones of Revelation 7 and 14.¹

Dispensationalists generally believe that the 144,000 are Jews who will convert to Christianity after the secret rapture.² This is probably the most popular view among conservative Christians today.

Evangelical Christians who are not dispensationalists hold a variety of views. One of the most prominent expositors is the late George Eldon Ladd of Fuller Seminary. Ladd believed that the 144,000 represent the church just before the great tribulation, and the “great multitude” (also mentioned in chapter 7) represents the same individuals *after* the tribulation.

There are not many liberals who take the book of Revelation seriously enough to study it in detail. Those who do generally take a preterist position. They believe the entire book refers to events that happened in the first century. Thus, the 144,000 are Jews John hoped would join the church in his day.³

Numerous sects have emphasized the 144,000. They generally say: “We are the 144,000, and the rest of you are Babylon.”

Adventist interpretation of the 144,000 began with controversy. At one meeting not long after the disappointment, a “brother Arnold” stirred things up by insisting that the 144,000 were the people who rose with Christ at His resurrection.⁴ Another brother was sure they were the babies that Herod killed in Bethlehem,⁵ while still another thought they were Jewish Christians of the first century.

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But after this initial flurry of controversy, the mainstream among those who would later be called Seventh-day Adventists arrived at a consensus. There was some disagreement as to details,⁶ but all agreed that the 144,000 were end-time believers, and that they were sealed so they could go through the “time of trouble” and be translated at Christ’s second coming.

Around the turn of the century another flare-up occurred over details of the prophecy, and this brought a rebuke from Ellen White:

Christ says that there will be those in the church who will present fables and suppositions, when God has given grand, elevating, ennobling truths which should ever be kept in the treasure house of the mind. When men pick up this theory and that theory, when they are curious to know something it is not necessary for them to know, God is not leading them. It is not His plan that His people shall present something which they have to suppose, which is not taught in the Word. It is not His will that they shall get into controversy over questions which will not help them spiritually, such as, Who is to compose the hundred and forty-four thousand. This those who are the elect of God will in a short time know without question.⁷

It may be this warning has led most Seventh-day Adventist since that day to shy away from further discussion of the 144,000. However, before we decide to abandon the topic altogether, we need to consider the same messenger also said: “Let us strive with all the power God has given us to be among the 144,000.”⁸ Now if we are going to strive that hard, it seems it would not be wrong to find out something about them. The counsel is to avoid a debating spirit. We are not to “get into controversy” over the topic. Furthermore, we should avoid speculation presenting “something which [we] have to suppose.” We begin, then with the basic question: “Who are the 144,000?”

Marks of Identity

A good deal of what has been written about the 144,000 is based on a spoonful of textual study (exegesis) stirred in with several gallons the interpreter’s own ideas (eisegesis). But this is no reason for despair. Much can be discovered about the 144,000 even when we limit our study to what the text itself plainly says about them.

The 144,000 are God’s People. When we say the 144,000 are God’s people, we are starting with the most fundamental and indisputable truth we can state about them. We see their relationship with God reflected in several ways:

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Sealed by God. This is how the 144,000 are described when they are first mentioned: literally, “the sealed ones.”⁹ The seal means God identifies them as His own, and He identifies *with* them. He says: “I will write on [them] the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem.”¹⁰ So by the sealing, God labels these people with His own name and address.

God is not embarrassed or ashamed to have them carry the family name.¹¹ In fact, He writes it conspicuously on their foreheads. Thus, He commits Himself to them. This is a fulfillment of the first term of the covenant: “I will be their God.”¹² When this seal, which is God’s name and address, is written on their foreheads, it becomes *their* name and address as well. This means that their walk with God has become such a fundamental part of their being, that it identifies them. Anyone who looks at them, can see it clearly written on their faces.¹³ This is in fulfillment of the second part of the covenant: “They will be my people.”

*Loyal to God. They are followers of the Lamb.*¹⁴ This implies steadfast devotion, loyalty, and obedience.¹⁵ *They are virgins.* The OT prophets often compared God’s faithful people to virgins.¹⁶ They also said that worshiping false gods was just the opposite—like visiting a prostitute.¹⁷ The 144,000 live in a time when the great prostitute Babylon is advertising her wares, yet they do not allow themselves to be seduced. They remain loyal and faithful to their promised Bridegroom.

Witness for God. The 144,000 *carry God’s seal—in a symbolic sense—on the most visible part of their bodies.* When the sealing takes place, the “beast” is demanding everyone to carry his mark and do what he says, or die. And yet here are God’s people going around with God’s mark plainly showing: there it is, right in the middle of their foreheads.

They sing God’s song. This is another evidence of the bold public character of their testimony. There is nothing muted about it. The verse says that their song is “like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder.”¹⁸

They are not ashamed to be seen with Him in public. The record states that the 144,000 follow the Lamb wherever He goes. Like the twelve apostles, they understand that the first and most important part of their commission is to be with Jesus.¹⁹ When we walk with Him, we have something to proclaim, something to witness about.

They witness to the truth. The great majority in the last days has refused to love the truth and has been overwhelmed by powerful delusions.²⁰ But in the mouth of the 144,000 no lie is found.²¹ This means that the truth is found there. The truth has not only been hidden in their hearts; it has been on their lips as well.

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In summary, the 144,000 are God's people. He unashamedly identifies with them, and testifies before the universe that they are part of His family. They are also a people who loyally and boldly take their stand for Him; they identify with Him and they witness on His behalf in the midst of nearly universal apostasy.

The 144,000: the Genuine Distinguished from the False. We could say that the 144,000 are God's Who's Who. The enemy makes a special effort to blur the lines of distinction. And he has been amazingly successful. Where he has his way, everything is fuzzy. Truth and error are confused. Right and wrong are hard to tell apart. Jesus recognized this when He said the "wheat" and the "tares" look alike. However, in the end-time He will resolve this problem once and for all: "At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned, then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn."²² He is talking here about the sealing.²³ When this takes place, the difference will stand out in bold, contrasting colors.²⁴

Here are two more contrasts that stand out in addition to the ones we have already observed: The multitude obeys the lamb-like beast who rose up from the earth, while the 144,000 worship the Lamb who came down from heaven. The multitude "with wondering admiration"²⁵ follows after the beast who has miraculously recovered from a mortal wound; the 144,000 follow the Lamb "that was slain from the creation of the world."²⁶

In other words, every characteristic described in Scripture places God's people in sharp contrast with the multitude of the apostate world. This is part of what it means for them to be marked with God's seal while the multitude is receiving the mark of the beast.

The sealing of the 144,000 functions as a time line. It establishes a before-and-after relationship to certain events in the plan of salvation. In Revelation 7 four angels are depicted as being about to release the winds of earth when another angel comes rushing in. He shouts his message "in a loud voice." "Wait!" he cries. "Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees *until* we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God". This word, "until" establishes a before-and-after relationship. If the destruction must wait *until* the sealing is over, then it is clear that before the sealing God's people are not prepared. After that, they are.

The sealing is an essential preparation for the time of trouble just as the bloodstain on the doorpost of the Hebrew homes at the time of the Exodus was an essential preparation for the coming of the death angel. Later in Christian history John saw the judgments of God (under the fifth trumpet) would fall only on "those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads;"²⁷ and still later, under the first plague,

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“ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image.”²⁸

Under the sixth seal, people “will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”²⁹ As they see the judgments of God in the land, they cry out in terror: “The great day of [His] wrath has come, and who can stand?”³⁰ The answer is given at once: There they are, 144,000 sealed ones (Rev 7).

In chapters 13 and 14, a similar contrast is portrayed. Chapter 13 is a walk through hell. There is cursing and blasphemy, persecution and death. “Jezebel” terrorizes and murders until “Elijah” is ready to exclaim: “I am the only one left.”³¹ Not so, answers the Lord. Look! Up there on Mount Zion. There they are, my 144,000 sealed ones, where no earthly power can touch them.³²

The Number

The message in the vision of the 144,000 is one of hope and encouragement for God’s people. But there is still another truth, which may be the most important point of the vision. What does the number itself mean? What message does it convey?

A Simple Statistic? Is the figure cited to give us information about the exact number of sealed persons? Are we to conclude that in the book of destiny there is written with mathematical precision the number of those who will finally bear the seal of God, so that there can never be even one more or one less than 144,000?

The answer can be found by considering other passages in Revelation that demonstrate the usage of number in this book of symbols. For example, when the sixth trumpet sounds, a great horde of soldiers marches by, and we read: “Their squadrons of cavalry, . . . numbered two hundred million.” Not only is the exact number given, but John adds categorically: “Whose count I heard.”³³ Yet no interpreter has ever insisted that this number is a precise mathematical datum on the number of soldiers in the hosts of evil. Similarly, we read in chapter 11 that those who died in the earthquake were seven thousand (Rev 11:13). And yet, this has never been interpreted as a precise statistic.

So the answer to our first question is, No. This number is not intended to convey mathematical information. It is not a statistic. Rather, as with most numbers in the book of Revelation, the number itself is the message.³⁴

The Message of the Number. We notice first how this number is obtained. Verse 4 states that the sealed ones are taken “from all the

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tribes of Israel.” And in order to make the point abundantly clear, the Scripture adds:

Twelve thousand from the tribe of Judah,
Twelve thousand from the tribe of Ruben,
Twelve thousand from the tribe of Gad,
Twelve thousand from the tribe of Asher,
Twelve thousand from the tribe of Naphtali,
Twelve thousand from the tribe of Manasseh,
Twelve thousand from the tribe of Simeon,
Twelve thousand from the tribe of Levi,
Twelve thousand from the tribe of Issachar,
Twelve thousand from the tribe of Zebulun,
Twelve thousand from the tribe of Joseph,
Twelve thousand from the tribe of Benjamin³⁵

But what would such a listing have meant to John who wrote out this seemingly unnecessary repetition?

During the early centuries of Israel’s history, the twelve tribes remained intact as distinct ethnic groups within the nation. But the Assyrian captivity largely brought about the disappearance of ten of the tribes (722 B.C.).³⁶ By the time John wrote the book of Revelation, the distinct tribal organizations had ceased to exist.³⁷ However, the loss of the ten tribes always weighed heavily on the Hebrew consciousness. It was a break in the circle of God’s family, a failure in His plan.

Ezekiel foretold a restoration of the twelve tribes to full strength.³⁸ Jesus evidently saw His mission as a fulfillment of this prophecy. He said to His disciples: “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”³⁹

There can be no doubt the leaders of the early church had the same idea. James addressed his epistle to Christians as “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.”⁴⁰ Paul refers to the church as the “Israel of God.”⁴¹ And he tells the believers, “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”⁴² So the apostles saw the Christian church as a fulfillment of the promise of the restoration of the twelve tribes.

But why do we have the number 144,000, and why the emphasis on 12,000 from each tribe? As we have noticed, Satan could claim the apostasy of Israel and the subsequent disappearance of the ten tribes was a defeat for God and a great victory for Satan and his cause. The sealing is the opposite of this. It takes place during the time Satan is throwing his worst temptations and his most subtle deceptions at the world. It comes when violence and death are a daily threat to the

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faithful. At that very moment, God will bring forth His own. In the preadvent judgment, after every case has been examined in the presence of the heavenly witnesses, God's triumph will be seen in those who have been accounted worthy and sealed.

So the sealing is a great victory for God and a defeat for Satan. The end-time 144,000 are God's shout of victory. He is saying: See! I have my children back! They are all there, and they are all there in full strength. In a symbolic sense not one tribe has any more than the others, and not one has any less.

The number 144,000 means that God has achieved His purpose of preparing an end-time people for Himself whose loyalty is unwavering: He has prepared His bride and made "her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word." In the 144,000 He presents "her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."⁴³

Ellen White said: "Let us strive with all the power that God has given us to be among the hundred and forty-four thousand."⁴⁴ Well, I say to you, "Brothers and sisters, Let's do it!" Today, as Revelation 13 is being fulfilled before our eyes, as infidelity and apostasy are growing every day bolder and more sophisticated, let's do it. Today, let's follow the Lamb wherever He goes. Today, when standards are coming down, and when values are fuzzy, let's not be afraid to stand out in the crowd and witness for Him. Today, let's keep ourselves pure and unspotted from the world, because we want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in.

Appendix A

The Seal of God and the Sabbath

In the book of Revelation God often calls attention to His faithful followers. In the end-time they will be marked with "the seal of God" in their foreheads.⁴⁵ In chapter 14 this mark is defined as Christ's "name" and His Father's "name." God's "name" is properly interpreted to refer to His character.⁴⁶ In Revelation 14:12, God again identifies His people, placing them in sharp contrast with those who have the mark of the beast. He says: "Here is the patience of the saints. Here are they that keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus."⁴⁷

"Patience" in this instance means firmness, perseverance. When the masses are doubting and falling in line with the enemy, God's people will be steadfast and unmovable. Keeping the commandments of God tells us the nature of their firmness. They are steadfast in their obedience to God's commands.

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By comparing these three verses, we can see that the seal, or identifying characteristic of the end-time people of God, is not a visible sign. *The trait that identifies them is their firm commitment to keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.* Another way of expressing the same idea is to say that the identifying trait is their loyalty to God. This is what it means to have the “name” or character of God written on their foreheads.

Likewise, *the mark of the beast*, which is the counterpart of the seal of God, will not be a visible mark. The lost are not going to wake up suddenly to find the number “666” stamped on their foreheads or hands with indelible ink. Neither will it be, as some have suggested, the famous bar code or their social security number. If the seal of God is the persistent attitude of obedience to the commandments, then the *mark or identifying characteristic of God’s enemies is their rebellion*, expressed as a persistent attitude of disobedience to the commandments of God.

For something to be a “sign” it has to be visible. Otherwise, it does not identify anything at all. Even so, the sign of obedience must be visible. Some of the commandments can be kept in secret. But since all of them are to be kept—not just nine of them—this must necessarily include the fourth, or Sabbath commandment. The observance of the Sabbath places the Christian at once in a position of distinct and visible contrast with the majority.

So, is God’s seal the Sabbath? Here we must answer carefully. We must not imply that anyone who keeps the Sabbath will automatically be sealed, or that Sabbath-keeping is the only way God’s last-day people show their loyalty. But there is a relationship. The seal stands for identification with God, loyalty to God in all aspects of life. In the last days, the great visible test of loyalty will be the Sabbath. At that time, when Sabbath-keeping is the outward sign of an inward decision and permanent attitude, then it can be said to be equivalent to the sign or seal of God.

Notes

1 Ray Summers presents a summary of numerous positions in *Digno Es el Cordero* (El Paso: Casa Bautista de Publicaciones, 1985), p. 196-197.

2 See, for example, Ivan Barchuk, *Explicacion del Apocalipsis* (Barcelona: CLIE, 1975), p. 140. Lockyear believes the 144,000 are Jews who will be converted before the rapture (Herbert Lockyear, *Apocalipsis: el Drama de los Siglos* [Miami: Editorial Vida, n.d.], p. 97).

3 For example, William Barclay *The Revelation of John* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1959), 2:29.

4 *Life Sketches of James and Ellen White* (Battle Creek: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1988), p. 110-111.

5 Reported by James White in *Review and Herald*, (R&H 5:16). Cf. The view of William Miller: “We in this verse [Rev 14:1] have an account of the whole number

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of infants saved by the number 144,000, it being a perfect or square, showing, in my opinion, that all those who die in infancy are saved" (*Miller's Works*, vol. 1, ed. Joshua Himes [n.p., 1842], p. 135).

6 For example, there was the idea that the 144,000 were Adventists who had never been members of another denomination. This view was based on the statement in Rev 14:4 that they are "virgins" who have never been defiled with "women"; women were understood to mean churches. Uriah Smith rejected this idea as early as 1860 (*Review & Herald*, Dec. 25, 1960), but it persisted. This is the explanation I was given as a boy.

7 Ellen White in *SDA Bible Commentary*, (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1953), 7:978.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 970.

9 Greek *tōn esphragismenōn*.

10 Rev 3:12, NIV. Cf. *Early Writings*, p. 15: "The 144,000 were all sealed and perfectly united. On their foreheads was writwen, God, New Jerusalem, and a glorious Star containing Jesus' new name.

11 1 John 3:1; Heb 2:11; 11:16.

12 Gen 17:8; Jer 31:31-33; 2 Cor 6:16, etc.

13 "When Moses came down from Mount Sinai he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD" (Exod 34:29).

14 Rev 14:4.

15 Amos 3:3; 2 Cor 6:15-17.

16 Isa 37:22; Jer 31:4; Ezek 23:3; Amos 5:2.

17 Deut 31:16; Judg 2:17; 1 Chr 5:25, etc.

18 Rev 14:2. This is God's voice (see Ezek 43:2). In other words, they speak with God's voice just as the lamblike beast speaks with the dragon's voice.

19 Mark 3:14.

20 2 Thess 2:10-12.

21 Rev 14:5.

22 Matt 13:30.

23 *Early Writing*, p. 118. "I then saw the third angel [of Revelation 14]. Said my accompanying angel, 'Fearful is his work. Awful is his mission. He is the angel that is to select the wheat from the tares, and seal or bind the wheat for the heavenly garner. These things should engross the whole mind, the whole attention.'"

24 Ellen White often spoke of a "demarcation" or a "line of demarcation." For example: "As we near the close of time the demarcation between the children of light and the children of darkness will be more and more decided." (*Last Day Events*, p. 215. See also *Counsels on Health*, p. 238-239 and many others.)

25 Rev 13:3; NEB.

26 Rev 13:8.

27 Rev 9:4.

28 Rev 16:2.

29 Lk 21:26.

30 Rev 6:17.

31 1 Kgs 19:14.

32 "All who follow the Lamb in heaven must first have followed Him on earth, not fretfully or capriciously, but in trustful, loving, willing obedience, as the flock follows the shepherd (Ellen White, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 591); see also Ellen White, *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 978.

33 Rev 9:16; NEB.

34 Another case where the number itself is a message, can be seen in the vision of the seven lamps (Rev 4:5) which are the "seven spirits of God." Since there is no evidence to conclude there are seven Holy Spirits, interpreters uniformly agree that the number, in this case, is a message. Its purpose is to transmit the idea of the universal and all-embracing work of the Spirit. A similar use of numbers is seen in the vision of four angels standing on the four corners of the earth holding back the four winds (Rev 7:1).

35 Vss. 5-8.

36 Kgs 17:1-23.

37 Apparently there were still some individuals who identified themselves as belonging to one or another of the ten tribes. We read, for example, of the prophetess Anna, "of the tribe of Asher" (Lk 2:36).

38 Ezek 47:13-48:35.

39 Matt 19:28.

40 Jas 1:1; 2:1.

41 Gal 6:16.

42 Gal 3:29.

43 Eph 5:26, 27; cf. Rev 14:12; Rom 14:10, 11.

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44 Ellen White in *SDA Bible Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association), 7:970.
45 Rev 7:2, 3.
46 Rev 14:1; cf. John 17:6.
47 Rev 14:12, KJV.