



## Revelation - Chapter Seven

III. Revelation 4:1-7:17 - The Lamb and the scroll: current and coming woes, precursors of the end (continues/concludes)

III.b Revelation 6:1-7:17 - The Lamb opens the scroll's seven seals (continues/concludes)

### Summary of Chapter Seven

After the opening of six of the seven seals John saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of judgement, so that no wind would blow. He then saw another angel who called out with a loud voice to the four angels not to harm the earth, sea or trees until God's servants had been sealed on their foreheads. Those sealed were 12,000 of each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Then John saw a great multitude of every nation that no one could number standing before the throne and before the Lamb. These are believers who came out of the great tribulation.

III.b.ii Revelation 7:1-17 - Interlude: the sealing of God's international Israel

There are three interludes in Revelation, with the others being 10:1-11:14 and 20:1-6, explaining the place of the saints in the events being described. As with the Egyptian plagues, the seven seals, trumpets and bowls relate only to sinners.

Literal and symbolic approaches differ sharply in interpreting the vision of the 'one hundred and forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel' (v.4), and its relation to the next vision of an innumerable multitude 'from every nation' (v.9). Many understand this to be a reference to ethnic or biological Israel, and they would view the 144,000 as a symbolic or actual number of Jewish believers brought to faith immediately after Jesus returns and removes the church from the earth before or during a seven-year tribulation; this is a 'pretribulation rapture' view.

However, another common approach understands Israel as a reference to the church, the new covenant people of God, and in this view the visions of the 144,000 and of the international multitude are complementary perspectives on the church, believers from every nation including ethnic Israel. They are protected

from the Lamb's wrath as his own flock (v.17), but are exposed to persecution by evil enemies. The 144,000 reappear in 14:1-4, and their description there has a bearing on the interpretation here.

### III.b.ii.1 Revelation 7:1-8 - The 144,000 of Israel Sealed

Before judgement comes upon the world John has a vision of four angels strategically positioned to restrain the winds of judgement from coming upon the earth until the elect of God have been sealed on their foreheads. John then hears that the number of those sealed represent 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, although the tribes listed provides a surprise.

<sup>1</sup> After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth so that no wind could blow on earth or sea or against any tree. <sup>2</sup> I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage earth and sea, <sup>3</sup> saying, 'Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads.'

#### Revelation 7:1-3

The sixth seal (6:12-17) showed an earthquake and a wind that shook the stars from the sky. God's cringing enemies asked, <<**Who is able to stand?**>> (6:17). The answer is those sealed with the seal of the living God, as illustrated in Ezekiel 9:3-6. Therefore John sees four angels charged with holding back the four winds of the earth, winds of judgment, until all of God's servants have received his seal. This was despite the fact they had been given power to damage earth and sea.

The idea that wind might be a form of judgement might be more familiar to those living in climates where tornados, hurricanes and tropical cyclones are a frequent threat than it is to those who live in calmer climates. However, the concept would not have been unfamiliar to those reading OT prophecies on judgement: <<*and I will bring upon Elam the four winds from the four quarters of heaven; and I will scatter them to all these winds, and there shall be no nation to which the exiles from Elam shall not come*>> (Jeremiah 49:36), <<*One-third of you shall die of pestilence or be consumed by famine among you; one-third shall fall by the sword around you; and one-third I will scatter to every wind and will unsheathe the sword after them*>> (Ezekiel 5:12), <<*Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live'*>> (Ezekiel 37:9), <<*I, Daniel, saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea*>> (Daniel 7:2), and: <<*The angel answered me, 'These are the four winds of heaven going out, after presenting themselves before the Lord of all the earth*>> (Zechariah 6:5).

I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun. The east is the direction from which light comes upon a dark world and is also seen as the

direction from which both deliverance and judgement will come: <<*Like the wind from the east, I will scatter them before the enemy. I will show them my back, not my face, on the day of their calamity*>> (Jeremiah 18:17), and: <<*When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live'*>> (Jonah 4:8).

The seal of the living God evokes a picture of a royal signet ring by which kings authenticated documents or marked ownership of an item; refer to the comments on John 6:27. This seal is the name of the Lamb and of God (14:1), a gift promised to all who conquer by faith (3:12). It is antithetical to the mark of the beast (13:16) and symbolises God's ownership and protection of his people. Circumcision functioned as such a seal under the old covenant: <<*He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them*>> (Romans 4:11), and God's Holy Spirit seals God's people as his property under the new covenant: <<*In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory*>> (Ephesians 1:13-14).

A seal on their foreheads. As already mentioned, Ezekiel 9:3-6 provides a similar image for the sealing of God's people: we have marked the servants of our God, against the outpouring of judgment upon the rest of humanity. It was already prophesied that they would be gathered from the four corners of the earth: <<*He will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth*>> (Isaiah 11:12), that is, from every part of the world where they may be living when the time of the end comes.

<sup>4</sup> And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel:

<sup>5</sup> From the tribe of Judah twelve thousand sealed,

from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand,

from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand,

<sup>6</sup> from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand,

from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand,

from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand,

<sup>7</sup> from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand,

from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand,

from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand,

<sup>8</sup> from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand,

from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand sealed.

### Revelation 7:4-8

John does not record that he witnessed the sealing as part of his visionary experience but only that he heard the number of those who were sealed.

The selection and order of the twelve tribes suggest that the one hundred and forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel have symbolic significance, representing the church. However, refer back to the narrative for the sub-section introduction for an alternative view.

These tribes do not represent all of Jacob's sons, for Dan is omitted and Manasseh, the son of Joseph is included; although Jacob did claim him as a son and heir shortly before his death: <<*Therefore your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are now mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, just as Reuben and Simeon are*>> (Genesis 48:5). Neither are they the tribes that inherited land in Canaan, for Dan is omitted and Levi, the priestly tribe, is included, and Joseph is listed instead of his son Ephraim.

Judah, the tribe of the Messiah (5:5), appears first rather than Reuben, the firstborn. When vv.5-8 are compared with the list of Jacob's sons in Genesis 35:22-26, the promotion of the remaining tribes descended from concubines Bilhah and Zilpah, i.e. Gad, Asher and Naphtali, over the sons of Leah and Rachel suggests that those once excluded from privilege are now included.

The number twelve thousand reappears in the dimensions of the New Jerusalem: <<*The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long*>> (Revelation 21:16 NIV). Indeed, the number 144,000 (12x12x1,000) suggests symbolism here, but that does not necessarily decide the question of whether Israel is also a symbol for the church, or is intended to refer to literal, ethnic Israel.

### III.b.ii.2 Revelation 7:9-17 - The Multitude from Every Nation

Having heard the number of those saved from Israel, John is now shown an uncountable multitude of those saved because of their witness to Jesus. These are not drawn from one small ethnic group but represent every nation in the world.

<sup>9</sup> After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

### Revelation 7:9

After this I looked. John had just heard of the 144,000 being sealed; here he is able to see the global response to the Gospel message of Jesus as the Christ.

As in 5:4-5, where John first heard the OT title ‘the Lion of Judah’ and then saw its NT fulfilment, i.e. the slaughtered Lamb, so here John hears (v.4) the names of the sealed sons of Israel and then sees the NT fulfilment: a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, as also noted in 5:9, whom God has rescued from wrath through the blood of the Lamb (v.14). They stand before the throne and before the Lamb in heaven, worshiping their Saviour. They are robed in white like victorious conquerors and martyrs, as noted in 2:17 and 6:11.

With palm branches in their hands. This is reminiscent of Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem that marked the beginning of Passion Week: <<*So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!*>> (John 12:13). On that occasion, the waving of palm branches by the people hailed Jesus as the Davidic king and echoed the language of Psalm 118:25-26, ‘blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord’, hoping that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Indeed, in an apocalyptic text from the Maccabean era (164-63BC), palms are mentioned in association with the coming of the messianic salvation on the Mount of Olives (Testament of Naphtali 5). This symbolism is maintained and enhanced in John’s vision.

<sup>10</sup> They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’

<sup>11</sup> And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, <sup>12</sup> singing,

‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom  
and thanksgiving and honour  
and power and might  
be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.’

### Revelation 7:10-12

All the angels stood around the throne. John has already described that the elders and the four living creatures surround God’s throne. Now this multitude of angelic beings surround them, making it clear that the throne is the centre of their attention and their focal point of worship.

Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb! This would be familiar to those who read the psalms of David: <<*Salvation belongs to the Lord; your blessing be on your people!*>> (Psalm 3:8 ESV). When the multitude extols God and the Lamb for salvation, angels and living creatures fall down and break out in a sevenfold doxology: Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might, almost replicating the sevenfold praise of the Lamb in 5:12.

That they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God would be clearly understood as the normal posture for worship before both God and King: <<*Then Jehoshaphat bowed down with his face to the ground, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell down before the Lord, worshipping the Lord*>> (2 Chronicles 20:18), which is exemplified in the attitude of Jesus before his Father: <<*And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want'*>> (Mark 14:35-36).

To our God for ever and ever! Amen. The doxology is clearly directed to the Lord God Almighty as Paul also makes clear in his own praise of the Father: <<*For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever. Amen*>> (Romans 11:36).

<sup>13</sup> Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' <sup>14</sup> I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.' Then he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'

#### Revelation 7:13-14

Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from? Once again it is not John who asks a question of what is being shown to him but one of the elders on this occasion. His response: Sir, you are the one that knows gives the elder the chance to explain what is being represented. Although John never asks any questions about what he sees, leaving the questioning to others around him, this shows the importance of asking questions in order to gain a better understanding of God's purposes. Without questions there can be no answers.

The effect of the elder's initiative is to assure John's readers that the elder's explanation of the innumerable multitude comes from God and can be trusted. The explanation includes both the prehistory of the group John sees (v.14), and a glimpse of what is in store for them (vv.15-17). The prehistory is familiar to John from 6:9-11, where: <<*the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given*>> (Revelation 6:9b), were: <<*told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete*>> (Revelation 6:11b). These souls have come out of the great tribulation by martyrdom, and now the implication is that their number is complete.

One of the elders identifies the multitude as the ones who have come out of the great ordeal, that is, the great tribulation. Some understand the definite article 'the', Greek *hē*, to refer to one great final period of suffering, but others take this to represent the sufferings of the church throughout all history.

They have washed their robes and made them white. The source of their robes' whiteness is not their own blood that they have shed for their faith but the blood of the Lamb: <<*For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal*

*Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!>> (Hebrews 9:13-14), and: <<If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin>> (1 John 1:6-7), a state of purification greater even than David sought after his affair with Bathsheba: <<Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow>> (Psalm 51:7).*

John will later hear that ‘our brothers’ have conquered their accuser by the blood of the Lamb and their testimony: <<*But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death*>> (Revelation 12:11).

- 15 For this reason they are before the throne of God,  
and worship him day and night within his temple,  
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.
- 16 They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;  
the sun will not strike them,  
nor any scorching heat;
- 17 for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd,  
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,  
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’

### Revelation 7:15-17

For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple. If the churches need any encouragement to persevere in the face of persecution to the point of death then John provides it here. Their reward for faithfulness is greater than they could expect.

The one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. This does not promise that God will protect believers from harm during their lifetime but that he will do so once they have come to join him in heaven.

The sufferings on earth of those mentioned in vv.13-14 are left behind, showing that John now reflects on the future heavenly inheritance. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more: <<*Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty*>> (John 6:35).

As priests, they serve God within his temple, in which he will shelter them from the sun and scorching heat: <<*they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them*>> (Isaiah 49:10), spreading his tent over them and dwelling with them: <<*My dwelling-place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people*>> (Ezekiel 37:27), <<*And*

*the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth>> (John 1:14).*

Under the protective care of the Lamb, their shepherd, they find refreshment in the springs of the water of life: <<*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters>> (Psalm 23:1-2), tasting the promised joys of the New Jerusalem even before its final descent from heaven: <<*Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb>> (Revelation 22:1), their every tear wiped from their eyes by God himself: <<*Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken>> (Isaiah 25:8b), and: <<*See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away>> (Revelation 21:3-4). Such comfort gives martyrs and other deceased believers rest as they await their resurrection and their persecutors' destruction (6:11 and 14:13).****

Many who hold to a pretribulation rapture of the church think that the two groups of vv.1-8 and vv.9-17 are different, with the first group representing converted Jewish people still suffering on earth, and the second group the raptured church rejoicing in heaven in vv.9-17. Others think these are Gentiles converted during the tribulation through the witness of the 144,000 Jewish believers who remain on earth (v.4). Those who do not hold to a pretribulation rapture usually see vv.1-8 and vv.9-17 as the same group, with their suffering in vv.1-8 turned to joy and reward in vv.9-17.