Revelation chapter 7 “Who can stand interlude?”

We’ve seen that the cry of the saints in seal number five introduces a very important theme throughout the book of Revelation and several times we’ll be referring back to seal number five in the, so called, cry of vengeance. We’ve said that theme is one that is actually rooted in the Old Testament, in some of the Psalms and even some of the prophetic literature. It is the promise of God, avenging the blood of His people; the promise of God vindicating his suffering people, those who have suffered and died at the hands of a godless, oppressive empire. God would vindicate them by rewarding and vindicating his saints but also by punishing those who have oppressed them and those who have harmed them and even put them to death. We’ll see how that plays out in a couple of other places in Revelation, but what I want to look at before we move on to the final seal, and then into chapter 7, is the two-fold response to the saints in their cry for vengeance—the souls who are under the altar.

Souls under the Altar

First of all, God responds to their cry by giving them white robes. Some have suggested, this is a picture of the resurrection of the saints and that the white robes would be the resurrection body they will now receive. However, I would suggest that we do not see the saints, who are beheaded for their faith, receiving their resurrection bodies until Revelation chapter 20 verses 4 through 6 where those who have been beheaded for their faith are then finally raised and they come to life and they reign with Christ for a thousand years. So at this point, I don’t think this is the picture of the saints receiving the resurrection bodies, which doesn’t happen until chapter 20. So in a sense, chapter 20 will be the ultimate answer to the cry of the saints in chapter 6, when they are finally vindicated and are raised. They come to life and they reign with Christ for a thousand years and contrast to how they have been treated on this earth and in a
context where the beast reigns, they will reign and they will be raised.

Instead, probably as elsewhere in Revelation, the white robes suggest victory and probably even purity as well and righteousness. For example, back in Revelation chapter 3, in one of the messages to the churches, to the church in Sardis in verse 4, “Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not yet soiled their garments. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.” Probably as in that section, the white seems to suggest purity in contrast to those who’ve not soiled their garments by being tainted by the world by compromising with the Roman Empire and their idolatress, godless system of worship; instead, they have maintained their purity. So I take it here that the white robes demonstrate their purity or righteousness. The white robes are identified with the righteous acts of the saints later on in Chapter 19 of Revelation. So here, probably indicating their righteousness and purity and their victory as well and here God, in a sense, is already reversing the world’s verdict on the saints that their witness was useless that they suffered in vain, and that they were conquered by the beasts and death. Now, God already vindicates them and rewards them with white garments, indicating their victory, their righteousness, and their purity.

The second response of God to the saints is after giving them the white robes; he tells them that they must wait patiently until the full number of the others who are to suffer for their faith, is completed and fulfilled. In another words, we have this interesting picture that God seems to suggest that there is a set number, or predetermined number, or at least a number of God’s people who have yet to be martyred or who have yet to be put to death for their “martyr” or for their witness or for their faith and that number must be filled up. That number must be complete before God comes to render his final verdict, before God comes to avenge the blood of the saints, before he comes and vindicates them finally by raising them and by giving them life.

We find that idea already in number of Jewish, apocalyptic books or texts, and we’ve alluded to books like 1 Enoch and others. Jewish, apocalyptic texts that are not included in the Old and New Testaments, along with Daniel and Revelation which are two canonical examples. But books that would have provided understanding of a
certain type of literature and sometimes these books provide background since Revelation is an apocalypse. Often we see John picking up on themes and ideas, and language that are not only from Old Testament but sometimes themes, and ideas, and language we find in some of the Jewish apocalypses.

Parallels in 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra

In two apocalypses in particular, we find this idea of a set number of God’s people or a set number of those who must suffer before, that must be fulfilled before God comes and consummates his purposes for history and brings about final and ultimate judgment. For example, in 1 Enoch, this is from the book of 1 Enoch that we’ve read about. We read briefly earlier, in chapter 47 in 1 Enoch he says, “In those days, the prayers of the righteous ascended to heaven,”—and notice interestingly the connection with the prayers of the righteous, a theme in John’s apocalypse and Revelation as well, the prayers of the righteous ascending to heaven or the prayers of the righteous, the cry of the righteous and God responding to that. “In those days, the prayer of the righteous ascended to heaven, and the blood of the righteous from the earth before the Lord of the Spirits, there shall be days when all the holy ones who draw on heaven above shall dwell together. And with one voice they shall supplicate and pray, glorifying, praising, and blessing the name of the Lord of the Spirits on behalf of the blood of the righteous ones, which has been shed. Their prayer shall not stop from exhaustion before the Lord of the Spirits; neither will they relax forever until judgment is executed for them. In those days, I saw him, the antecedent of time, while he was sitting upon his throne of glory and the books of the living one were open before him and all his power in heaven above and his escorts stood before him. The hearts of the holy ones were filled with joy because the number of the righteous had been offered. The prayers of the righteous ones had been heard, and the blood of the righteous has been admitted before the Lord of the Spirit.” And that phrase, “the number of the righteous” and again connected this idea of the prayer of the saints on behalf of those whose blood has been shed, and that in connection with a certain number who had now been offered up, so that now God’s judgment will follow.
We find this similar idea in another very popular and important apocalyptic work known as 4 Ezra. And in 4 Ezra chapter 4 in verses 33 through 37, and again 4 Ezra is a book where the seer has a vision and enters into an extensive dialogue with an angelic being, but it also includes visionary material. In dialogue with this angelic being in chapter 4 in verses 33 through 37, we read this, “Then I answered and said, ‘How long,’”—and again notice the phrase—“How long and when will these things be? Why are our years few and evil?’—And he answered me and said, [the angel who is dialoguing with him, answered and said], “You do not hasten faster than the Most High, for your haste is for yourself but the Highest hastens on behalf of many. Do not the souls of the righteous in chambers ask about this matter saying, “How long are we to remain here?” This is a similar situation to the fifth seal in Revelation chapter 6. And “When will come the harvest of our rewards?” And they again are crying out for, “When will we be vindicated? When will you judge? When will history be consummated?” and “When will you come to judge?” The archangel answered them and said, “When the number of those like yourself is completed, for he has weighed the age in the balance, measured the times by the measure, and numbered the times by the number. And he will not move around or arouse them until that measure is fulfilled.”

And so in these two works, in 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra, that I just read, you have this concept of set number or a number of saints of God’s people who must still be martyred, who must still suffer, and be put to death for their faith. Only when that time is completed, and 4 Ezra also adds the idea of that there is a set amount of time when that is completed then God will come and judge and God will vindicate and reward his people fully.

So John may be drawing on that concept whether he read 1 Enoch or 4 Ezra, I don’t know, but John is probably drawing on that concept found in apocalyptic literature of a set number and an appointed number of God’s people yet to suffer and perhaps in appointed time and only when that is filled up, only when that is complete, then God will come and bring full vindication for his people, avenge their blood, and will judge those who have caused them to suffer.
The use of this motif from apocalyptic literature may be used to demonstrate why a delay may be one of the explanations for it is embodied in this voice of those souls of the martyrs but also probably to demonstrate again God’s sovereignty over these events. No matter how bad it gets, they can understand that God has a set time and there’s a set number of God’s people that still have yet to be fulfilled and yet to be filled up. Perhaps John is thinking literally in terms of God has a precise set number that once it gets there, God will come for his people. But certainly, John is drawing on this idea to explain the delay and to provide assurance for his people who are suffering for their faithful witness for Jesus Christ. Therefore, for those who are compromising to wake them up and to cause them to maintain a faithful witness for Jesus Christ for the other two churches back in chapters 2 and 3, that are suffering, again this would be a message of assurance, that their suffering will not last even though there is some delay, but God certainly will come and avenge the blood of his faithful people.

Seal Six

This brings us now to seal number six in verses 12 through 17. Interestingly it’s actually seal number 6 that at least begins to answer the question of seal number 5 in the cry of the saints, who are the souls of those who are under the altar who cry out “How long?” And now we see God beginning, in seal number 6, to pour out his judgment on an unbelieving world. In this last seal, which is quite lengthy, the author once again alludes to, and draws from the language from a number of Old Testaments texts that all have in common this notion of or this vision, this description of cosmic upheavals and the constellations of the universe doing all kinds of whacky things and the image of the sky bring rolled up etc., obviously using metaphorical language of the whole kind of a dismantling of the entire universe. So, to read again starting in verse 12 John says, “I watched as he opened the sixth seal.” And when he did, here’s what happens. “There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave
and every free man, hid in the caves among the rocks in the mountains.”

Day of the Lord Prophetic Imagery

So God is portrayed as no respecter of persons when it comes to judging. All spectrums of people belonging to socio-economic spectrum are now subject to God’s final judgment. These people called out in verse 16, “to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of the wrath has come, and who can [stand]?’” That language of “the Great Day” probably reflects the Day of the Lord language from the Old Testament prophetic literature. The Day of the Lord is the time where in the future when God would come to bring history to its end. He would come and bring judgments on an unbelieving, wicked world but also reward and vindicate his people. And here we see John borrowing from Old Testament prophetic texts, the language of judgment by drawing on what is probably rather simply stock imagery, or stock language, he finds from a prophetic texts. So we are probably not to take this language with strict literalness as if you were standing outside in this day, you can actually see the moon turning red and see a meteorite shower or something like that. Certainly one could not watch the sky get rolled up, I’m not sure what that would even look like. So clearly, John is speaking in the language of symbols, but symbols that he find, from his Old Testament predecessors.

So, for example, one significant text is Isaiah chapter 24 and also chapter 34. Isaiah chapter 24, for example, in verses 1 through 6, “See, the LORD is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it; he will ruin its face and scatter its inhabitants—it will be the same for priest as for people, for the master as for servant, for the mistress for maid, for seller as for buyer, for borrower as for lender, for debtor as for creditor. The earth will be completely laid waste and totally plundered. The LORD has spoken this word. The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the exalted of the earth languished. The earth is defiled by its people, they have disobeyed its laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant.” In that text notice the devastation of the earth affecting everyone along the entire spectrum of the socio-
economic classes in the beginning part of chapter 24. But another important text is chapter 34 in verse 4 of Isaiah, “All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; and all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shrunken figs from the fig tree.” Clearly that language influences and gets picked up in sixth seal of the book of Revelation, but also one other text to read, Joel chapter 2.

In Joel chapter 2, again an anticipation of the coming Day of the Lord, we find similar language in verse 10, “Before them the earth shakes, the sky trembles, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine.” So notice, what you have going on here, you almost have the prophets drawing on a stock series of images to describe the final Day of the Lord, the final end time judgment. That again suggests that this is probably not to be taken with strict literalness. Jesus himself in Matthew 24 seems to pick up on this language.

So John is simply taking rather common language to describe end time judgment. It might be like today we might say that “Someone turned the world upside down,” or we might say “All hell broke loose.” Not speaking literally but speaking of an event so cataclysmic or an event so earth shaking, which is another image or metaphor, an event that has such far reaching and significant effects it can be described in language that suggests the complete dismantling and dissolutionment of the universe.

Sixth Seal: Vision of the End

So clearly with this sixth seal, we are finally at the end, we are now at the time where God comes to bring history to a close and in fulfillment of Old Testament prophetic text. Now the Day of the Lord breaks loose and that means judgment for the people, especially the oppressors of those in seal five, who now cry out “How long…. Now we see that beginning to take place.

Final Comments on Rev 6

So the seal then ends with everyone all from every socio-economic class where God does not recognize distinctions between those who have refused him and who have oppressed his people and who have followed the beast in the throne in their
lot with pagan idolaters. Now finally, the day of God’s wrath has arrived, again, bringing us to the very end of history. Now, two things before we move on to chapter 7. First of all, as a reminder, seal 7 has not yet been opened, yet. We said that this will be true of the trumpets, which is the next series of seven. Six and seven get broken off or separated and there’s intervening material. So we’ll see as we’ve said couple of times already, seal number 7 gets opened at the beginning of chapter 8. So there’s an intervening section in all of chapter 7 which we’ll look at next.

But the other thing to recognize is chapter 6 ends with an important question that is voiced by those who are subject to the Day of God’s Wrath. This imagery of hiding in the rocks just demonstrates the horror and terror of God’s wrath to try to flee from, and run from it. Again, this is Old Testament imagery. But the text in verse 17 ends with a question, they say, “For the great day of wrath has come upon us.” That’s why they want to hide from it and it ends: “Who can stand?” Now this “stand” then I take it will get answered in chapter 7. Chapter 7 is going to tell us who can stand in the Day of God’s Wrath. Who can stand against these plagues that are narrated in chapter 6 that culminate with the Day of God’s Wrath? “Who is able to stand and resist that?” or “Who is able to survive that?” Chapter 7 will provide the answer to that.

Revelation 7

So let’s look at chapter 7 of Revelation. As we’ve said, chapter 7 sort of functions as an interlude between seal 6 and seal 7 which finally gets opened in chapter 8. We’ll look at that when we get there. We’ve said it functions in chapter 7 then plays a role not as a digression or as something that has indiscriminately inserted in between the seal sequence between sixth and seventh seal. But instead, but as we’ve seen, it answers clearly the question chapter 6 ends with “Who is able to stand?” Chapter 7 will tell us that. Who can persevere through the seals of chapter 6? Who can withstand the final Day of Judgment? And then we’ll see after this interlude, the judgments will resume again in chapters 8 and 9, in the form of seven trumpet judgments.

But in answering the question “Who can stand?” in another words, chapter 7 is
going to further interpret and describe the events of chapter 6. Again, chapter 7 does not chronologically follow the events of chapter 6. Notice chapter 7, verse 1, begins with, “After this [or after these thing].” This is a visionary sequence after John saw those things in chapter 6. Now he sees the events in chapter 7. But chapter 7 scene 2 goes back again and answers that question “Who can stand?” In another words, chapter 7 is not just a digression; it further interprets the events narrated in chapter 7. So I want to read chapter 7 and then we’ll again talk a little bit about broadly about what’s going on in it and then exam in couple of the details, especially the two central groups that are introduced in two sections of chapter 7.

Text of Revelation 7

Chapter 7 begins, “After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: ‘Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.’ Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the tribe of Gad 12,000, from the tribe of Asher 12,000, from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000, from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000, from the tribe of Simeon 12,000, from the tribe of Levi 12,000, from the tribe of Issachar 12,000, from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000, from the tribe of Joseph 12,000, from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000. After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’ All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: ‘Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!’ Then one of the
elders asked me, ‘These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?’ I answered, ‘Sir, you know.’ And he said, ‘These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, ‘They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; and he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’”

Two Groups of Rev 7

As I said, Chapter 7 revolves around, or at least most of the interesting revolves around the understanding of these two groups. We’re introduced to two separate groups and the question is: “What might be the relationship to each other? What is their identity? Who are they? Are these the same groups? Is this the same group being referred to? Are these two separate groups? And how are we to make sense of this?”

The two groups are: group number one, the 144,000 Israelites who are sealed—12,000 each from the twelve tribes that are numerated in this text. And then group number two is introduced in verse 9, which is a multitude that cannot be numbered. It is a multitude that is made of people from every tribe, language, and tongue. The question then is: How are we to identify each of these groups? and then again, What is their relationship? Are they the same or are they somewhat different?

It’s interesting too with chapter 7, John’s perspective, in a sense, still seems to be on earth. Though the beginning of chapter 7 could almost be a heavenly perspective where it says, “He sees four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds.” But clearly John seems to be seeing an event on earth. Then the sealing of the 144,000 would presumably take place from an earthly perspective. But then with the second group starting in verse 9, John’s perspective seems, again, to be a heavenly one. We’ve said Revelation keeps shifting back and forth between heaven and earth. So now in verse 9, it’s a heavenly one as he sees this
great multitude surrounding, the heavenly throne, presumably the same one as back in
chapters 4 and 5, in the heavenly courts and in the heavenly throne room of God. Now
the rest of chapter 7 is from a heavenly perspective. In Chapter 8, he’ll shift back to an
earthly perspective or an earthly scene.

But let’s start by looking at the first group in verses 1 through 8 and that is the
144,000. The first thing to know is the vision begins, interestingly, before the author
ever gets to describing the 144,000 Israelites sealed from each of the twelve tribes. He
begins by describing a vision of an angel or four angels who are at the four corners of
the earth. Again, notice the significance of the number four. Four is symbolic of the
earth. Four indicating, we might say, the four corners of the earth, indicating the
entirety of the globe, the entirety of the earth. So the four angels are holding back the
four winds. The question that raises in my mind is: What in the world are the four
winds and why are they holding them back? Most likely the four winds, probably, at
least represent the four horses back in chapter 6. The winds probably here suggest
destruction/judgment, as they could in apocalyptic literature, and also in the Old
Testament I believe. So the four winds probably refer back to the first four horses,
who come out and wreak havoc on the earth in the form of plagues. They may also
perhaps anticipate some of the plagues, especially the trumpet plagues to come
because those plagues harm the earth and the water and the sea. So the point is, these
four winds are the plagues or at least the ones that chapter 6 and may also be
anticipating the ones in chapter 8 that come out of the earth to harm the earth and to
harm the sea. So the angels are told to hold back, to restrain the winds, that is the
judgment from happening, and not allow them to happen until something else happens,
and that is verse 2.

Revelation 7 and Ezekiel 9

Then John sees and angel that comes from the east, and he has an order to seal
the 144,000. This event clearly refers back to Ezekiel chapter 9. Remember we’ve said,
Revelation roughly follows the exact order of Ezekiel. Chapter 4 and 5 were
dependent on Ezekiel chapters 1 and 2, Ezekiel’s throne room vision. Now in chapter
9 of Ezekiel, we find the seal of God; God comes to seal his servants. So now we find
an angel who comes down and seals his people before the plagues can be let out, before the four winds can be loosed to wreak their havoc. They are sealed so that they will not be harmed. Now, just to again summarize, this does not mean that they’re spared from all physical harm, as we see throughout Revelation, because of their suffering witness, John expects that his people will indeed suffer and will indeed be put to death. But as far as being recipients of God’s judgments, as far as anything harming them spiritually, and thwarting their inheritance, they are now sealed and kept from these judgments.

144,000

The question then of these 144,000, and when you read this John is fairly specific, he doesn’t just say 144,000 from the tribes of Israel, but he goes down in verses 5 through 8, he goes down the list of tribes and specifies the number from each tribe, which is 12,000. Now, at first off, let me just remind you, and we’ll return to this, but remind you of the significance of the number 12. That we probably should not expect that these numbers here are to be taken with strict mathematical precision or literalness, but what is important is the number 12. And the number 12 signifies the people of God. In this case, the 12 tribes of Israel from the Old Testament, and 12,000 being 12 times the number 1000 and then the 144 is simply 12 times 12. So again, John is working with 12 and multiples of 12 times 1000 to come up with this number, maybe we’ll talk a little bit more about that. So, the first point is, whoever this group is we should not take this with too strict of a literal approach or mathematical precision as if John was sitting there with a calculator, counting all of these persons and came up with exactly 144,000. The numbers in Revelation are to be taken symbolically.

But who are these 144,000 who receive this sealing that protects them from God’s judgment and probably also especially seal number 6, the Day of God’s wrath? Who are the 144,000? Just a couple of suggestions, and there have been a number of them, but I’ll highlight the most prominent suggestions that suggest what I think this might be.
First of all, many have maintained that this is literal Israel, that the 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel and especially the precise specifying of the tribes, and 12,000 from each one, indicates that this is national, ethnic Israel in the end time. This is usually associated with a certain way of interpreting Revelation that we’ve mentioned a few times, especially in very, very popular form communicated in the series like the Left Behind series. But the idea that once God has removed his church, the people of God before chapter 4, then God will usher in a period of time where there will be Tribulation in fulfillment of the Old Testament. He will restore his people, Israel, and restore the promises to them, but before that they will go through a period of Tribulation. Now, God is seen as sealing 144,000 from the nation of Israel who will be his people, who will be his faithful witness during that time of Tribulation. That is what is envisioned here. So we should take this fairly literally of God choosing people from ethnic Israel, who will be sealed and kept during this time of future Tribulation. So this is clearly referring to an event in the future.

A second possibility, some have understood this as a similar to the first view, but some have understood this along the lines of Romans chapter 11 in verses 24 through 26. Especially, where Paul in chapters 9 through 11, Paul is addressing the issue of the faith of God’s people, and towards the end of chapter 11, he utters those words, “And then all Israel will be saved” which most take as Paul expecting that sometime in the future, perhaps at the Second Coming of Christ, many of God’s people, Israel, will be saved. Although Paul doesn’t tell us all the details and exactly how that takes place, but there are indications that he envisions a future event that occurs at the Second Coming of Christ and some would interpret chapter 7 of Revelation in light of that in Romans chapter 11, “All Israel will be saved” in the future. Here we see the author portraying that event, and again, most would agree in highly symbolic language. But like view number 1, it takes the reference to the 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel as a reference to literal Israel, though, very different from view 1.

A third view that has a few subsets to it that I’m not going to go into any detail; a third view is that this mention of 144,000 from the tribes of Israel is to be taken
symbolically for the complete people of God, consisting of both Jew and Gentile. In other words, this is to be seen along the similar lines to what Paul and even other New Testament authors do with Old Testament language referring to Israel, applying it to the new people of God, the church consisting of Jew and Gentile. We see Paul doing that at times. Read Ephesians chapter 2, and especially 11 to 22, where Paul takes language of the covenants and of nearness to God, and participating in the promises of Isaiah’s temple language and applied it to household of Israel, and now applies it to Gentiles as well. Or I think also 1 Peter chapter 2, where Peter, doing something similar that John does in Revelation, taking texts such as Exodus 19:6 temple language: they are a kingdom of priests, they are a royal nation, a priesthood. He takes that and now applies it to the church made up of Jew and Gentile. So then is it possible then that this is language from the Old Testament referring to ethnic, national Israel that like other New Testament authors, John now applies to the new people of God. Old Testament Israel now finds a fulfillment in and anticipates a people no longer restricted to just national Israel, but expanding that and including along with Israel, including Gentiles as well in the new people of God that New Testament authors now call “church.” In fact, I would suggest that this is the way that we should understand that John has taken Old Testament language about Israel and now applies it to the church—the new people of God consisting of Jew and Gentile. He is following in the steps of other New Testament writers. In fact, John has already done this; I’ve already mentioned chapter 1 verses 5 and 6, and chapter 5 as well in the first seal song where the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders, where John takes Exodus 19:6, the promise made to Israel back in Exodus that they would be “a kingdom of priests,” they would represent God’s rule and his presence. Now, John applies that to the international or transcultural people of God, including Israel but also including other tongues and tribes and languages and people from other nations that now, make up the new people of God. They fulfill the intention and destiny of God’s people Israel; now embodied in the new people of God that centered around the person of Jesus Christ, centers around the Lamb. These are the people that now the Lamb has purchased and created to be his kingdom of priests, as his new people.
And so, I think that this is what probably John is doing here. Now before we look at: “Why then would he portray the church as the people of God, as a 144,000 from the tribes of Israel?” and “Why would he go to such lengths to number them and to single out each tribe and number them?” Before we do, just two, interesting and maybe significant details of this list, there are number of things going on in this list that I don’t want to go into a lot of detail about, but I do want to highlight two of them.

It’s based on the fact that, when you compare this list with Old Testament list, when you go back to Old Testament, when the tribes of Israel are numerated as the twelve tribes, this is very different from those. In at least, in two respects, but I want to highlight two.

Number one is that fact that there is no mention of Dan or Ephraim, the tribes of Dan or Ephraim. The reason for that might be, and this would be very significant for Revelation, because at times Dan and Ephraim were both associated at times in other Jewish literature with idolatry. So, for that reason, in a context, perhaps where John is addressing readers tempted to engage in an idolatress, godless empire; for that reason, he may have left these two tribes out. It’s possible because of the associations in some literature with Dan and Ephraim with idolatry, they’ve been left out of this list.

The second one I want to draw attention to is it’s interesting that the tribe of Judah heads the list. When you read the texts of Revelation carefully, this probably has the easiest explanation and that is already back in chapter 5 verse 5. Were we not introduced to Jesus as the lion from the tribe of Judah? So this list has a Christological emphasis, beginning with the tribe of Judah, the author is probably saying something. Again, this list is unique, this group is unique, because now it centers around the person of Jesus Christ. Now it centers around the one from the tribe of Judah, who again is the slain Lamb, who has purchased people from every tribe and language and nation to become a kingdom of priests. Now here they are and so Judah heads the list. Also, clearly as in chapter 5, verse 5 probably the list here reflects Genesis chapter 49 verse 10, role that the tribe of Judah was to play where there was a ruler promised from the tribe of Judah. So, the emphasis again would be membership in the people of God as determined by their relationship to the one from the tribe of Judah. So
probably Judah has been moved to the beginning of the list, because of the significance of Jesus Christ as the one from the tribe of Judah and as the one who comes as the slain Lamb that purchased people for himself.

So, in conclusion, it appears that the author has taken the imagery from the Old Testament of the twelve tribes of Israel and now he has utilized this imagery as a symbol for the new people of God. The church defined now by their relationship to the slain Lamb, the one from the tribe of Judah who is now creating a people to be his kingdom and priests. So, it is probably not referring to a literal twelve tribes of Judah, Israel, probably not referring to a literal restoration of people from each of the twelve tribes; and there’s many that debate whether that could even be done or whether there’s still people from twelve tribes of Israel. I don’t want to get into all that, but simply just stress that John is probably using this symbolically as he does and as other New Testament authors do to take Old Testament to now refer to the New Testament people of God.

Again, we’ve said, the reason for using 144,000 is the 12 times 12; 12 being symbolical of the people of God, both the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve apostles. Then 12 times 12 to get a 144,000, John is playing with the multiple of 12 to get 144 and times 1000; 1000 being a large and complete number. So what you have here is John envisioning the complete people of God in fulfillment of Old Testament. Now John sees the complete people of God in the form of the 144,000 sealed from all the tribes of Israel.

Now we still have to ask the question, why does John enumerate the 12 tribes? or Why does John go to the extent of going to the entire list of 12 tribes and drawing 12,000 from each of them? What is the purpose of that? Well, first of all, one thing to say, when John says, “from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the Judah 12,000, from the tribe of Levi,” Again, I don’t think that we should take that with strict literalness as if there are two groups here. You have a larger group of the tribes of Israel and you have a smaller group 12,000 from each tribe, so that what you end up with is 144,000 that is actually smaller group taken out of a much larger group of the tribes of Israel. I don’t think that’s what John is intending, that this is kind of a select group out a much
larger group. Instead, I’ll demonstrate, I think, instead of taking this with a level of literalness, I’ll hopefully demonstrate there’s another reason why John would say 12,000 from each tribe.

Key Books on Revelation

The solution to all this is then, has been effectively suggested and compellingly argued by Richard Bauckham, British scholar; we’ve mentioned him several times, and is sort of a literal excursus. One of the best books that you can get your hands on for helping you to understand Revelation is a little book that Richard Bauckham wrote called *The Theology of Revelation* published by Cambridge University Press. That’s part of a whole series of a Theology of Matthew, Theology of Luke, Theology of Shorter Epistles, Later Epistles of Paul and a Theology of Hebrews etc. But *Theology of Revelation* is a short paper back written by Richard Bauckham. In my opinion, it is the single most valuable introductory to reading the book of Revelation. It introduces you to what kind of literature Revelation is, to its function, how to read it, and to its main theological themes. It doesn’t give you commentary in every passage, but it introduces to main theological themes, has a section in applying it and reading it for the modern day. Just overall it is the most balanced and sane, and in my opinion the most helpful introduction to interpreting and reading the book of Revelation. I highly recommend that you purchase that. Another one, while I’m on books more recent, at least from American perspective is a book called *Reading Revelation Responsibly* by an author named Michael Gorman. Again, it’s similar; it’s more of an introduction to how to read Revelation in light of its background, in light of the kind of literature it is and how do we read it, how do we read the different sections. It’s full of insights as to how we apply it to the modern day situation. So, outside of major commentaries those would be two very helpful works.

But back to Richard Bauckham who has suggested that when you go back to the Old Testament and you look at sections where the tribes of Israel are numbered, he says that predominately what is taking place when God is determining the military strength of Israel, to see basically, counting the number, finding men from each of the tribes and determining their military strength.
A good example of that is in Numbers chapter 1 that we’ll look at in just a moment. You remember the story in 2 Samuel chapter 24, where God incites David to number the tribes of Israel, basically that is determining their military strength, and determining the number of eligible persons to enter into warfare. So, the census here of the tribes is the census to determine the military strength, and for the purpose of determining eligible warriors from each of the tribes. In my opinion, this is probably why John uses that language “from each tribe.” So again, I don’t think we should push this too literally to suggest that 144,000 is just a smaller group from a larger group. I think the entire people of God; the entire church here is being portrayed as a mighty army.

The language “from each tribe” is just to recall; for example, Numbers chapter 1, in fact, if you go back to Numbers chapter 1, which is a census of Israel to determine the size of the army, in a sense. It begins in chapter 1 verse 1, “The LORD spoke to Moses in the tent of meeting in the Desert of Sinai on the first day of the second month of the second year after the Israelites came out of Egypt. He said: “Take a census of the whole Israelite community by their clans and families, listing every man by name, one by one. You and Aaron are to determine or number by their divisions all the men in Israel twenty years old or more who are able to serve in the army.” And then notice, some of the language; for example in verse 20, “From the descendants of Reuben the firstborn son of Israel: All the men twenty years old or more who were able to serve in the army were listed by name, one by one, according to the records of their clans and families. The number from the tribe of Reuben was 46,500.” And again, John uses 12,000 because he’s working with symbolic numbers. Or verse 22, where again, when he counts the number of the descendants of Simeon, the number from the tribe of Simeon, is the very same language that John uses here. So, I think John is by using this language “12,000 from the tribes” he is deliberately eluding back to Numbers chapter 1 and other texts where Israel was counted as a census to determine the number of eligible fighting men, to determine the military strength of the nation.
Army as to War

So here, John applies that language to the people of God to say something about them. The people of God in chapter 7 are depicted as those who are sealed who are able to stand in the Day of the Lord, those who are sealed and protected from the plagues are now depicted as a mighty army that goes out and does battle. In fact, to further substantiate that; interestingly, when the 144,000 appear later on in Revelation in chapter 14 in the verses 1 through 4, notice how they’re described, “Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads.”

Probably the seal they get from chapter 7. “And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder…” Verse 3 “And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure [remained virgins].” It’s interesting that in chapter 14, they’re described basically as male virgins, who do not engage in sexual relationships with women, which was exactly one of the requirements during war under the Old Testament. You remember the story of the David and Bathsheba, when he got Uriah to go home, he tried to get Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba to cover up what David had done, in fact, he had gotten Bathsheba pregnant. But he refused to sleep with her that was part of the requirement for war: abstinence from sexual relationships. So adding chapters 7 and 14 you come up with this picture of 144,000 as an army, as a military enclave, that goes out to do battle.

However, while the churches are portrayed as the mighty army that goes out to do battle, having read chapter 5 especially and reading the rest of the book of Revelation, it makes clear that how they do battle. Ironically, the church as the mighty army will go out and do battle, but they will conquer and they will overcome and they will be victorious in the same way the Lamb was, through their suffering witness for the person of Jesus Christ. So this is sort of an ironic vision, this is not an army that goes out with swords and weapons and kills like Rome does in chapter 6 in the first
two seals. Instead, here you have a mighty army that goes out to do battle, yet they do so ironically through their faithful suffering witness even to the point of death.

So, I take it then, the first group consists of the entire church as God’s people, who are now portrayed as a mighty army along the lines of, and using imagery of Old Testament. Now they go out as the mighty army as Israel did to do battle, yet they do so not by weapons but through their faithful witness even to the point of death.

Now, in the next section we’ll look at: Who are the multitude that cannot be numbered in the rest of the section? And, what is their relationship to the first group the 144,000 in the first 8 verses of chapter 7?