

Who Are the 144,000?

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | February 8, 2024



There has been much speculation throughout history as to whom comprises the 144,000 of Revelation chapter seven. Do they represent the totality of the saved or just a subset of the saved? Are they the literal biological descendants of Abraham? Is this a literal or symbolic number?

The Bible does not give a specific answer. It does not say “the 144,000 are thus and so”; therefore, we are left to examine the weight of biblical evidence and come to our own conclusion.

Examining this question is a good exercise in reasoning, weighing and balancing biblical evidence, and keeping our minds open to new insights and truths—i.e., not becoming dogmatic and insisting one’s conclusion is the only possible right answer. While I’m sharing my thoughts as to whom I currently believe this group represents, I also recognize that my understanding is growing and truth is ever unfolding; thus, I am not stating my findings as a final, absolute conclusion, only that this is my best understanding of the evidence I have at this time. When new evidence or better explanations come along, we must be eager to grow and willing to update our conclusions.

With this in mind, there are some facts we must identify that will set the framework for our conclusions.

First, Revelation is a book filled with symbolism; very little of its text is to be understood literally. For instance, lamps, stars, the Lamb, dragon, beasts, horns, book with seals, bowls, women, and more are

all symbolic of something else.

Thus, as we consider the 144,000, with 12,000 from twelve tribes of Israel, we must decide whether the number is to be taken literally or symbolically. The overall symbolic nature of the book would suggest this is a symbolic number, and there are other clues that support the symbolic interpretation, such as the names of the tribes—which are not the exact list of the original twelve tribes (see below).

Another reason to understand the number as symbolic is that much of the imagery of Revelation is taken from the Old Testament sanctuary service and *everything* in that service was symbolic, metaphor, an acted-out object lesson, and was not to be taken literally. Examples of the sanctuary symbolism in Revelation include lampstands (Revelation 2:1), the sacrificial lamb (Revelation 5:6;12), the temple (Revelation 3:12), Jesus as High Priest (Revelation 1:13-20), bowls full of incense (Revelation 5:8), golden censer and golden altar (Revelation 8:3), white robes (Revelation 7:9;13), and the ark of the covenant (11:19).

When God gave instructions through Moses for the Jews to set up a camp around the sanctuary, they did so with thirteen, not twelve, tribes. There were thirteen tribes because Joseph received a double-portion inheritance and, therefore, both of his sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, received a full inheritance. Thus, around the sanctuary on all four sides were three tribes, totaling twelve tribes, but in between those twelve tribes and the sanctuary camped the Levites for a total of thirteen tribes.

This layout of the tribes symbolically represents the plan of salvation—the reality of how it works. The sanctuary is the symbolic place in which sinners are restored to at-one-ment with God, in which sin is removed and reconciliation with God and heaven happens. The Levites represent the priesthood of believers, whose mission it is to take the gospel of salvation to the people in all four corners of the earth, represented by the twelve other tribes on the four sides of the sanctuary. The twelve tribes on the four sides represent the unconverted peoples of the world who come to the sanctuary of God for salvation through the witness of God's people (the Levites—priesthood of believers).

My conclusion that the 144,000, 12,000 from each tribe, is a symbolic group drawn from the Old Testament sanctuary symbolism is supported by Revelation being highly symbolic, the symbolic nature of the sanctuary service, and the change in the list of the twelve tribes from the original twelve to the modified list in Revelation. But there is more ...

Another clue to their symbolic nature is that the 144,000 are called the “servants of our God.” Throughout Scripture, the term “servant” is repeatedly applied to God's prophets. And God's prophets are not primarily those who foretell the future, like Daniel and John did, but they are God's spokespersons, the individuals who are sent by Him to the people of that time with a message from God specifically for them (1 Kings 14:18; 2 Kings 9:7, 17:23, 21:10; Ezra 9:11; Jeremiah 7:25, 25:4, 26:5, 29:19, 35:15; Ezekiel 38:17; Daniel 9:10; Zechariah 1:6). As Amos has written:

Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his **servants the prophets** (Amos 3:7 NIV84, emphasis mine).

This would include the culmination of the events on planet Earth—God would not bring to completion

the plan without first revealing it to His “servants the prophets,” who are here represented as the 144,000.

In the context of Revelation 7, an angel comes from heaven to the angels at the four corners of the earth, representing the four points of the compass (east, west, north, south)—in other words, the entire planet—which reflects the layout of the twelve tribes on the four sides of the sanctuary (east, west, north, south). So, the symbolism is that God’s angels are working among all the people of the world, holding back the winds of strife until the people called by God to be His messengers of the final call to salvation are sealed; then, the four winds are loosed.

The 144,000 of Revelation 7, therefore, represent God’s end-time spokespersons. These people are sealed by God—so settled into the truth, both intellectually and spiritually, so that they cannot be moved—and have been established at the four corners of the earth. Once these spokespersons are settled and, therefore, ready to give the final message of mercy to the world, the four winds *begin* to loosen and from the testimony of the 144,000, a great multitude from every nation, kindred, tribe, and people respond to accept Jesus and are saved! (Revelation 7:9).

The Names of the Tribes and Their Meaning

But there is an additional hint found in the names of the twelve tribes chosen in Revelation that add weight to my conclusion that this is a symbolic representation of people and not the literal genetic descendants of Jacob—which is that the list of tribes is given in a different order than the birth order and one of the original tribes is missing (Dan).

In Scripture, names of people have meaning. The name “Jacob” means deceiver, but when he was converted, his name was changed to “Israel,” which means one who with God overcomes.

If we examine the names of Jacob’s twelve sons, the fathers of the original twelve tribes, in the order of their birth and supply the meaning for each name, we find a message—and when we do the same thing with the twelve tribes listed in Revelation 7, we find a very powerful change to the message.

The Original Twelve Tribes:

Reuben means behold a son is born to us.

Simeon means to hear.

Levi means joined or to be joined to, attached.

Judah means praise the Lord.

Dan means judge, judging.

Naphtali means wrestling, my struggle.

Gad means good fortune.

Asher means blessed or happy.

Issachar means wages, hire, or reward.

Zebulun means exaltation, glorious dwelling place.

Joseph means increaser, may he add to my family.

Benjamin (Ben-Oni) means son of my right hand, son of righteousness.

So, in the order of their birth, the twelve sons of Israel give the following message:

Behold a Son, our Savior, is to be born to us, one who will hear us and join himself to us. Praise the Lord, He will judge [diagnose] our struggle and bring us good fortune, blessings, happiness, reward, and exalt us to His glorious dwelling place, making us His family—the children of righteousness.

The original twelve names in the order of their birth have embedded the message of Jesus, the coming of the promised Messiah. But notice the subtle but important and powerful change in the message in the way Revelation orders the names and replaces Dan with Manasseh:

The Twelve Tribes in Revelation 7:

Judah means praise the Lord.

Reuben means behold a son is born to us.

Gad means good fortune.

Asher means blessed or happy.

Naphtali means wrestling, my struggle.

Manasseh means forgetting.

Simeon means to hear.

Levi means joined or to be joined to, attached.

Issachar means wages, hire, or reward.

Zebulun means exaltation, glorious dwelling place.

Joseph means increaser, may he add to my family.

Benjamin (Ben-Oni) means son of my right hand, son of righteousness.

Now the message reads,

Praise the Lord, for God's Son has been born to us and has brought us the good fortune of His remedy, healing us and restoring us to happiness, and our struggle is now forgotten by Him who heard our plea and joined Himself to us and ransomed us from sin. Through Him we now receive our eternal reward and are honored to be part of God's heavenly family, offspring of faith in God's

right Hand—Jesus Christ, children of righteousness.

If my understanding of these verses is correct, God is waiting for those who will be His special end-time spokesperson to be sealed, to be settled into the truth so that no trial, tribulation, or trouble will shake them out of their love and loyalty to Him, and are able to tell the truth about His character and government in the setting of the Great Controversy—meaning, they have returned to Creator worship and understand God's law as design law.

When this happens, the four winds begin to loosen and terrible calamities, tribulations, wars, conflicts, pestilences, and other manifestations of Satan's power increase, making the contrast between the message of mercy from God and the malignancy of evil ever more stark and easy to see, so that people will be capable of discerning the two sides in this conflict and choose for themselves to reject the beastly powers of this world and surrender to Jesus Christ and be eternally saved.

I invite you to become one of God's end-time spokespersons, settled into love and loyalty to God, a representative of God's kingdom who understands the truth in the setting of the Great Controversy, who has rejected the human imposed-law lie, and who worships God as Creator, understanding His laws as design laws. For when His spokespersons are sealed, then the four winds loosen and Jesus will soon return!