

The 144,000

Several branches of the armed services have an elite team of commandos that are carefully trained in guerrilla warfare and other special combat conditions. To qualify for one of these units, a person must pass through an incredibly gruelling process of physical and mental training. Only those who demonstrate unflinching self-control and perfect obedience are chosen. These special-forces commandos are assigned difficult and dangerous missions, such as rapidly attacking enemy troops or raiding behind enemy lines. Their job is to lead the way for the main troops. Because of their thorough training, a small team of commandos is often able to achieve great victories. During the Gulf War, a team of about a dozen Navy Seals were able to create a diversion on the beaches of Kuwait that fooled the entire Iraqi army into thinking that the U.S. attack was coming from the sea.

The 12 apostles were a type of special-forces unit during the time of Jesus' first coming. After three and one-half years of intensive personal training with Jesus, God was able to use them to achieve great victories. They were able to penetrate Satan's dominion and spearhead a great revival.

The book of Revelation tells us of another special-forces unit that will do a mighty work in the last days. Known as the 144,000, they have a critical mission to prepare the world for Jesus' second coming. They enjoy a special relationship with the Lamb, sing a special song, and are sealed with a special name. Who is this holy army? To find out, let's first look at the two main passages that describe this grand assembly.

Who Are They?

Revelation 7:1-4 states: "After these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree. And I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads. And I heard the number of them which were sealed: and there were sealed an hundred and forty and four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel."

Then the Scripture lists 12,000 from each of the following 12 tribes: Judah, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin.

The next main passage that describes the 144,000 is Revelation 14:1-5: "And I looked, and, lo, a Lamb stood on the mount Sion [Mount Zion], and with him an hundred forty and four thousand, having his Father's name written in their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder: and I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps: And they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders: and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth. These are they which were not defiled with women; for they are virgins. These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were redeemed from among men, being the firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb. And in their mouth was found no guile [deceit]: for they are without fault before the throne of God."

I should mention that when we explore these things, we venture on holy ground. I share the following study with confidence, but I also realize and respect that others may have a different interpretation.

The Twelve Tribes

Perhaps one of the first things we should ask is whether or not the 144,000 are actually 12,000 literal Israelites from each of these respective tribes. I don't want to be tedious, but to really understand this subject we should briefly review what the Bible says about the Old Testament tribes. First, there were actually 13 tribes. Twelve tribes came from the 12 sons of Jacob, who the Lord renamed Israel. But because Joseph was sold into slavery by his older brothers, he was separated from his family for many years. After Joseph finally reunited with his father, Jacob promised to compensate by adopting Joseph's two sons as his own, to be numbered with his sons in place of Joseph. "Now thy two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, which were born unto thee in the land of Egypt before I came unto thee into Egypt, are mine; as Reuben and Simeon, they shall be mine." Genesis 48:5. Hence, Joseph would be numbered twice through his sons.

One reason you still find only 12 tribes mentioned throughout the Bible is that after the Levites were chosen to be the priests for Israel, they were excluded from receiving a specific territory inheritance (Deuteronomy 10:8, 9; 18:1) and from census figures (Numbers 1:49). Instead, they were to spread out among all the tribes as teachers and priests.

There are several reasons why the tribes mentioned in Revelation chapter 7 can't possibly be literal Israelite tribes. The Old Testament reveals that 10 of the 12 tribes were carried away by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. "In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria took Samaria, and carried Israel away into Assyria, and placed them in Halah and in Habor by the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes." 2 Kings 17:6.

History records that long before the time of Jesus, some of the 10 tribes returned to Samaria after intermarrying with the Assyrians. Their descendants, known as Samaritans, were hated by the Jews because they were no longer "pure" Israelites in blood or religion. In fact, because the 10 tribes have been so thoroughly scattered around the world and absorbed by their host nations, today a person would be hard pressed to find even one pure descendant from the tribe of Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, or Simeon-much less 12,000 of them!

Another strong clue that Revelation is not speaking of the literal Israelite tribes is that in the Old Testament, the 12 tribes were very unequal in population numbers. Judah was very large, while Benjamin was very small. God divided the Promised Land in proportion to each tribe's needs. But the 144,000 is composed of 12,000 per tribe, right across the board.

So who does make up this group? I believe the answer to this question lies in the fact that God's promises to literal Israel now apply to spiritual Israel. Since the year A.D. 34, the prophecies and attention of Scripture have focused on the children of faith-either Jew or Gentile. "For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit." Romans 2:28, 29. "And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." Galatians 3:29.

What's in a Name?

My first clue that there must be a spiritual meaning to the 144,000 was the way in which the tribes are listed in Revelation 7:5-8. This is the only time in Scripture that the names of the tribes appear in this order. Reuben, the firstborn of Jacob, is listed as second while Judah, fourth in birth order, is listed as first. Joseph and Levi are included, while Ephraim and Dan are left out. Why?

Because "Dan shall be a serpent by the way, an adder [viper] in the path, that biteth the horse heels, so that his rider shall fall backward" (Genesis 49:17), and "Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone" (Hosea 4:17).

In the Bible, a serpent is a symbol of Satan. The critical, backbiting nature of Dan aligned this tribe with the kingdom of Satan instead of the kingdom of God. Likewise, the tribe of Ephraim had forsaken the God of Israel and had embraced paganism. Hence, Ephraim and Dan are left out of the 144,000.

Jewish names always had a meaning that depicted some characteristic of the child or an event connected with his birth. For example, Genesis 29:32-35 says: "Leah conceived, and bare a son, and she called his name Reuben: for she said, surely the Lord hath looked upon my affliction; now therefore my husband will love me. And she conceived again, and bare a son; and said, because the Lord hath heard that I was hated, he hath therefore given me this son also: and she called his name Simeon. And she conceived again, and bare a son; and said, now this time will my husband be joined unto me, because I have born him three sons: therefore was his name called Levi. And she conceived again, and bare a son: and she said, Now I will praise the Lord: therefore she called his name Judah."

In fact, Rachel and Leah made prophetic statements for all 12 of Jacob's sons. Here are the names of the tribes that make up the 144,000 (in the order listed in Revelation chapter 7), together with the meaning of each name:

1. Judah = "I will praise the Lord"
2. Reuben = "He has looked on me"
3. Gad = "Granted good fortune"
4. Asher = "Happy am I"
5. Naphtali = "My wrestling"
6. Manasseh = "Making me to forget"
7. Simeon = "God hears me"
8. Levi = "Joined to me"
9. Issachar = "Purchased Me"
10. Zebulun = "Dwelling"
11. Joseph = "God will add to me"
12. Benjamin = "Son of His right hand"

Now notice what happens when the meaning of the names are combined, in the same order, into a paragraph:

"I will praise the Lord for He has looked on me and granted good fortune. Happy am I because my wrestling God is making me to forget. God hears me and is joined to me. He has purchased me a dwelling. God will add to me the Son of His right hand." (The words in italics are supplied to complete each thought.)

These names describe the story of the church's struggle, redemption, victory, and marriage to the Lamb.

How Many?

Now let's address the next big question. Is 144,000 a literal number? Well, perhaps I should answer that question with another question. Are the other numbers in Revelation literal? Will there be 12 gates and 12 foundations in the holy city? Are there really 12 different kinds of fruit on the tree of life? Yes, of course. Our understanding of the dimensions of the New Jerusalem is likewise based upon the assumption that these numbers are real.

Even the numbers used to describe prophetic time periods in the book of Revelation are precise measures. The numbers would be useless for reckoning if they were merely symbolic.

Although the number of the 144,000 may be exact, it will be humanly impossible to identify the individuals who make up this special group. When Jesus walked the earth, it was easy to determine His 12 most devoted followers. But the 144,000 in the last days are spiritual Jews, scattered across the circle of the earth and leading out in a magnificent revival.

Now some may be thinking, "How can you say that the names are symbolic but the number is literal?" It's simple. Jesus did. He did not seem to care which tribes the 12 apostles came from, but He did purposely choose 12 of them. Also remember that all of the numbers in Revelation depict a specific value, while all the proper names in Revelation are symbols (the Lamb, the Dragon, the Lion, Balaam, Jezebel, etc.).

For these reasons and others, I believe the number 144,000 is a precise figure. Just as there were actually 12 literal tribes in the Old Testament and exactly 12 apostles in the New Testament, there will be 12 times 12,000 spiritual apostles in the last days.

Many have wondered, "If this number is not just a symbol, then will the 144,000 be the only ones saved in the last days? And if only 144,000 will be saved, then what are my chances?"

Let's do some simple figuring. The ratio of 144,000 to six billion (the approximate world population at the present time) would mean that one person in 41,666 alive would be saved if Jesus were to come today. This statistic is much better than the odds offered by most state lotteries, but we would all agree that it's pretty slim for the hope of salvation.

The Bible does not teach that the 144,000 are to be the only ones saved in the last days. Immediately after listing the tribes of the 144,000, the prophet sees that "a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands." Revelation 7:9.

In verse 13, one of the 24 elders asks John who these people are that are clothed in white robes, and from where they came. Then in verse 14, he answers his own question: "These

are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

Now the Bible speaks of two great tribulations in prophecy. One was during the papal persecution of the Dark Ages, when millions of Christians were slain. But the primary "great tribulation" must refer to the time just before Christ's second coming, as referred to in Daniel 12:1, 2: "And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book. And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

The Number Twelve

The key to understanding the 144,000 may be the number itself. In the Bible, the number 12 almost always represents leadership of the church. There were 12 patriarchs from Seth to Noah, then 12 from Shem to Jacob. Twelve spies led the way to the Promised Land, and there were 12 judges from Othniel to Samuel.

There is an interesting story in the Gospels of how in one hour, Jesus healed a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years and then went immediately to resurrect a girl who was 12 years old (Mark 5:25-42). The first woman represents the Old Testament church with a continual flow of sacrificial blood. The young girl represents the New Testament church that came to life after Christ's resurrection. They both touched Him the same day and were made whole.

God's church is also pictured in Revelation 12:1, which says: "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars." The 12 stars above the woman's head are a symbol of the inspired leadership of the church (1 Corinthians 11:10).

Exodus 39:14 tells us that there were 12 precious stones on Aaron's breastplate, "according to the names of the children of Israel, twelve, according to their names, like the engravings of a signet, every one with his name, according to the twelve tribes." These stones appear to be identical to the foundation stones of the New Jerusalem (see Revelation 21:19, 20). "That great city, the holy Jerusalem ... had a wall great and high, and had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel." "And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb." Revelation 21:10, 12, 14.

The number 12 appears time after time throughout Scripture. King David appointed 24 groups of 12 (a total of 288) to lead music of praise in the temple (1 Chronicles chapter 25). Similarly, Revelation 4:4 describes two groups of 12 (a total of 24) elders who sit around the throne of God. This represents the 12 tribes of the Old Testament and the 12 apostles of the New Testament.

Jesus promised His disciples, "Ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." Matthew 19:28. And in Revelation, Jesus makes a similar promise to some who will come out of the last age of the church, known as Laodicea (which means "judging the people"). He says, "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne." Revelation 3:21.

In heaven, it seems there will be an expanding square formation around God's throne. First there is God Himself on His throne. Then the four creatures, then the 24 elders in a square around them with six on each side, then the 144,000 in a perfect square with 36,000 on each side, then the great multitude all around them. The perfect order and harmony of this assembly is astounding!

Their Mission

The 144,000 live during the last age of the church and share the experience of the early apostles.

At the time of His first coming, Jesus chose 12 men whose primary mission was to reach Israel. And as a result of the outpouring of the former rain during the Pentecost revival, the 12 apostles reached thousands. Matthew 10:5, 6 says: "These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

In the last days, Jesus will use 144,000 (12 times 12,000) spiritual apostles, whose primary mission is to reach the world with the news of His second coming. The great multitude spoken of in Revelation chapter 7 includes those converted by the influence and preaching of the 144,000 following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the latter rain.

The prophet Joel referred to both of these events when he wrote: "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit." Joel 2:28, 29.

Please keep in mind that the 144,000 are not the only ones preaching the gospel in the last days. Just as the 12 apostles were part of a larger group of 120 disciples leading out in the Pentecostal revival, so the 144,000 are leaders in the end-time revival, but not the only ones preaching.

I believe it is also significant to note that Jesus chose the 12 apostles from the laity, not the priesthood. In the same way, the 144,000 will not likely be composed only of ordained ministers. Rather, I believe it will largely be made up of lay persons.

Acts chapter 1 describes an interesting sequence of events that took place just before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the former rain. First, the disciples focused on Jesus (verses 10, 11). Then they prayed and put aside their differences (verses 13, 14). Finally, they chose Matthias to replace Judas, the apostle who had died (verses 16-26). Notice that as soon as the number 12 was complete, the Holy Spirit was poured out in the Upper Room (Acts chapter 2).

Even now, Jesus is training an army of Special Forces to lead in this final mission of rescuing God's children, who have become Satan's prisoners of war. Revelation 14:4 proclaims of the 144,000: "These are they which were not defiled with women; for they are virgins. These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth."

If we desire to be among those who follow the Lamb throughout eternity, we must first learn to follow Him here, now. Then together we can sing the song of Moses and the Lamb.