

REVELATION

Chapter 7

144,000 of Israel Sealed

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. 2 Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, 3 saying, “Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.” 4 And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel: 5 12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed, 12,000 from the tribe of Reuben, 12,000 from the tribe of Gad, 6 12,000 from the tribe of Asher, 12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali, 12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh, 7 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon, 12,000 from the tribe of Levi, 12,000 from the tribe of Issachar, 8 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun, 12,000 from the tribe of Joseph, 12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

7:1–17† A parenthesis separating the final seal from the preceding six (the same feature is found in the trumpet sequence; see 10:1–11:13). It contains two visions: (1) the sealing of the 144,000 (vv. 1–8) and (2) the innumerable multitude (vv. 9–17). The church on earth is described in vv. 1–8; the church in heaven in vv. 9–17. (CSB)

Between the sixth and seventh seals (6:12–17 and 8:1–5, respectively) there is an *interlude* in which John sees two scenes. In the first scene he sees the 144,000 sealed (7:1–8), and in the second scene he sees the glorious picture of the saints before God’s throne in heaven (7:9–17). The 144,000 represent God’s people on earth in perfect order and thus ready to march. This is interpreted to be the church militant, poised and ready to carry out the marching orders—the mission—that her Lord has given to her. In the second scene John sees the great multitude of people before God’s heavenly throne. Their number is so great that it cannot be counted. This is the most beautiful picture in the entire Bible of the saints of God in heaven: the church triumphant. (CC pp. 180-181)

What John sees in this interlude *comforts* him. After the horrifying scenes introduced by the first six seals, scenes that could have melted John’s heart like wax in awe and terror, he is now lifted up by what he sees next. The two scenes, of the church militant and the church triumphant, would at any time and place appear beautiful, instilling peace and hope in the Christian heart. But here in this setting, in sharp contrast to the horrors of suffering and despair and darkness and death depicted by the first six seals, these scenes appear even more beautiful to John. (CC pp. 180-181)

In the scene of the 144,000, he sees God’s people on earth as they are ready to carry out their mission and thus enter the valley of the shadow of death (see 14:1–5; 15:2–4). But before the onslaught he sees them sealed. John is comforted and encouraged by this sealing, for it means that no matter how much he and God’s people on earth suffer as they fulfill the mission of their Lord, God will protect them in their faith. And when, in the second scene, he sees the church triumphant—all those who are coming out of the great tribulation and suffering—he is full of joy and enthusiasm. The church militant will suffer and die in the Lord’s mission, but she will not lose faith, for her God will defend her in that faith (see 2 Cor 1:10; 2 Tim 1:12; 4:18). And in the

end the church militant will become the church triumphant. Not only is the church sealed and kept in her faith no matter what she suffers, she will soon be elevated and glorified just as the Lord Christ was. Thus John—and through him God’s people—are comforted and full of hope, for God will protect them on earth and soon take them to the glorious company of the saints in heaven. And he and his readers are now all the more encouraged and emboldened to be about the mission of Christ on earth, so long as God gives breath and life. (CC pp. 180-181)

7:1 This vision continues the previous one, though the focus now shifts from cosmic upheaval and judgment to the salvation of God’s elect. (TLSB)

holding back – The reason that these four angels hold back the destructive winds is given in v. 3. (TLSB)

After the opening of the sixth seal, which introduced to John the scene of the collapse of the heavenly bodies and the great day of the wrath of God and of the Lamb (6:12–17), John sees “four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds” (7:1). When Scripture uses the description “the four corners of the earth,” it does not imply that the earth is a flat square. Rather, this is a metaphorical expression which refers geographically to the entire earth. For example, in Is 11:12 the prophet foretells the gathering of the exiles of Israel from the four corners of the earth. Similarly in Rev 20:8 Satan attempts to deceive all the nations “in the four corners of the earth.” In both Isaiah and Revelation the expression clearly refers to the entire geographic earth *without implying any shape or form of the earth*. So here in Rev 7:1 it means that the four angels stand astride over the whole earth. (CC pp. 181-182)

As the angels stand on the “four corners of the earth,” they hold “back the four winds of the earth” (7:1). In Jewish thought the angels under God’s providence controlled and thus were the keepers or custodians of the elements and forces of nature. For example, in the Book of Jubilees (2:2), the angels of the elements and forces of nature are listed: “the angels of the spirit of fire, and the angels of the spirit of the winds, and the angels of the spirit of the clouds and darkness and snow and hail and frost, and the angels of resoundings and thunder and lightning, and the angels of the spirits of cold and heat and winter and springtime and harvest and summer.” 1 Enoch 66:1–2 mentions angels who are under God’s command and are in charge of the flood waters. 2 Enoch 19:4 lists “angels who are over seasons and years, and angels who are over rivers and the ocean, and angels who are over the fruits of the earth and over every kind of grass.” In Rev 16:5 an angel of the waters is mentioned. Of the biblical writings, only Revelation refers to these angels of the natural elements and forces. (CC pp. 181-182)

four winds. Destructive agents of God (see Jer 49:36). (CSB)

The four winds are to be identified or associated with the four horsemen of Revelation 6 and thus are another symbol of destruction and suffering. This connection is made because of Zech 6:1–8, where the four chariots and their horses are interpreted for the prophet by an angel as the four winds of heaven sent out by God over the earth. A similar identification is made in Dan 7:2–3, where the “four winds of heaven” stir up the sea and the four beasts come out of it. Thus the “four winds” symbolize the tribulations and sufferings which take place all over the earth under the permissive will of God; they express his anger and judgment over against the sinful human race. At times the “four winds” from heaven sent out by God can take the graphic form of “four great beasts” (Dan 7:3) or four chariots with horses (Zech 6:1–8) or four horsemen (Revelation 6). Such symbolical use of the winds with other graphic symbols occurs elsewhere in the OT (See Ps. 18:10 {MT 18:11}; 104:3; cf. Is. 66:15). Also the destructive power of the winds is metaphorically used to refer to acts of God’s anger visited on the earth. For example, in Jer

49:36–39 (LXX 25:16–19) God tells the prophet that he will bring upon Elam the “four winds from the four corners (or extremities) of heaven.” By these four winds God would drive out the people of Elam so that they would no longer be a nation. God’s acts of judgment, symbolized there by the four winds, would be by the sword of Elam’s foes (Jer 49:37). It would be quite natural, then, for John to recognize a relationship between the horsemen and the “destructive capacity” of the winds. (CC p. 182)

7:2 rising of the sun – The “four angels” hold back the “four winds” so that they “would not blow upon the earth” (7:1), that is, afflict it, until “the slaves of our God” (7:3) had been sealed. The winds of eschatological wrath are restrained so that the work of sealing God’s people may be accomplished. A fifth angel now comes from “the rising of the sun” (7:2), from the east (E.g., Josh. 1:15; 13:5; Is. 41:25; 59:19). “The rising of the sun” is a common expression in the OT to refer to the direction of the east. Perhaps Swete is right in saying that from John’s point of view “East is the direction of Palestine and the countries beyond it; and it was fitting that the angel who is to seal the tribes of Israel should appear from that quarter.” Mounce, on the other hand, sets forth several other options: “East” may be “no more than a picturesque detail,” or it could be a “reminiscence of Ezekiel 43:4 where the glory of the Lord enters by the east gate” or an “indirect reference to the Nativity story and the Wise Men who came from the east (Mt 2:1).” (CC pp. 183-184)

The reference in Ezek 43:1–4 may indeed explain this angel’s coming from the east, from “the rising of the sun” (Rev 7:2). In a vision of the future, the prophet Ezekiel sees the glory of the Lord coming from the east (Ezek 43:2), and as a result all the land of Israel would be made radiant by God’s glory. The prophet remembered that in a former vision he had seen the glory of the Lord leaving by the east gate (Ezek 10:18–19) before the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem (Ezek 10:1–22; 33:21). Now in the vision related in 43:1–4 Ezekiel sees that Jerusalem will be restored, which restoration is signified by the glory of Yahweh entering the city by the east gate (Ezek 43:4)—the same glory which had lit up the whole land (Ezek 43:2). This reference in Ezekiel is complemented by one from Malachi. In Mal 4:2 (MT 3:20) the prophet hears the Lord say, “the Sun of righteousness will dawn with healing in its wings.” In the day of the Lord, when all the wicked will be destroyed (Mal 4:1 [MT 3:19]), upon those who praise and keep holy the name of the Lord “the Sun of righteousness will dawn,” and God’s people will rejoice (Mal 4:2–3 [MT 3:20–21]). In Rev 16:12 this same expression, “from the rising of the sun” (ἀπὸ ἀνατολῆς ἡλίου), is used to designate the direction from which the enemies of God’s people will come and instigate the battle of Armageddon (16:16). But in 19:17 an angel stands “in the sun” (ἐν τῷ ἡλίῳ) and with a mighty voice calls out to all the birds of prey to come and feed on the corpses of the enemies of God’s people who have been destroyed (19:18–21). (CC pp. 183-184)

The east, the place of the rising of sun, does not, then, refer merely to the direction of the east. Rather, it is a symbol of the working of God’s permissive will to judge the peoples of the earth, similar to the symbolical use of the “four winds of heaven” (Dan 7:2). That permissive will also unleashes the wicked actions of humans so as to punish the people of the earth. But also the same symbol serves as a blessed reminder of the motion of God’s grace in the one who would bring back the glory of Yahweh to God’s people and thus enlighten the whole human race, the one who is the Messiah, the “Sun of righteousness” (Mal 4:2 [MT 3:20]). Here in Rev 7:2, the fact that the angel comes from “the rising of the sun” indicates that though God’s people would suffer because of the four horsemen and the four winds, the motion of God’s grace through the sealing of his people would protect them. (CC pp. 183-184)

seal of the living God. Ancient documents were folded and tied, and a lump of clay was pressed over the knot. The sender would then stamp the hardening clay with his signet ring or roll it with a cylinder seal, which authenticated and protected the contents. The sealing in ch. 7 results in the name of the Lord being stamped on the forehead of his followers (see 9:4; 14:1; cf. 22:4). Its primary purpose is to protect the people of God in the coming judgments. For the background see Eze 9:4, where the mark was the Hebrew letter *Taw*, made like an X or +. (CSB)

Signifies ownership, as becomes clearer below. (TLSB)

This fifth angel, who comes “from the rising of the sun” has “the seal [σφραγιδα, the accusative of σφραγις] of the living God” (7:2). This seal could be the equivalent of a signet ring of God. Pharaoh gave his signet ring (תַּבְּעֻט, LXX: δακτύλιος) to Joseph so that he could act with Pharaoh’s authority (Gen 41:41–42; cf. Esth 3:10; Dan 6:6–9 [MT 6:7–10]). Signet rings were used by Oriental kings of the ancient world to authenticate documents and protect people in their service by marking them as their property. Here “the slaves of our God” (Rev 7:3) are thus to be sealed so that they are marked—identified and signed with God’s own signature—as God’s personal property and under his authority, care, and protection. The seal (signet ring) of God represents God’s special way or manner of identifying his people and marking them as his own for their protection and eternal well-being. But what exactly is this sealing and marking, and how does God carry it out? God does know those who belong to him (Jn 10:14; 1 Cor 8:3), but beyond or in addition to this knowledge of God, John sees here those who belong to God being sealed. Is this sealing some kind of public acknowledgement like that in which God marked out Jesus of Nazareth as his Son in his baptism (Mt 3:16–17; Jn 1:32–34)? (CC p. 184)

Matthew 28:20...” And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

1 Corinthians 10:13 “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

Hebrews 13:5... “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”

given the power to harm – This curious reference to angels doing harm is likely related to one of Jesus’ parables. Cf. Mt. 13:41-42. (TLSB)

7:3 sealed – Cf. Ezekiel 9:4-5, where the Lord commands men to pass through Jerusalem and put a mark on foreheads. Subsequently, those not bearing this mark were struck without mercy, while those who had it were spared. Already by the first centuries, making the sign of the cross upon the forehead reminded the baptized person that Christ redeemed him. Paul also refers to Baptism as a “seal” in his writings (cf. 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13, 4:30). (TLSB)

In the post-apostolic period, the seal of the Lord was thought by some to be the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. But that view was not universal. Origen did not mention Baptism but suggested that the seal, which was placed on the forehead, was the name of the Lamb of God and of his Father. Oecumenius in his Greek commentary on Revelation (sixth century) also did not mention Baptism; he thought the seal was the light of God’s face shining on his people (taken from Ps 4:6 [MT 4:7]). (CC pp. 184-188)

Perhaps Paul gives the best clue as to what the seal of God is. In 2 Tim 2:19 he says, “The firm foundation of God stands, having this *seal* [σφραγιδα]: the Lord knows those who are his.” Paul maintains that the “foundation of God” is certain because it has this “seal”: the Lord knows those

who belong to him. That is, the Christian can be absolutely certain and sure of his salvation and faith because it rests on the truth of God’s Word and God’s seal within that Word: “the Lord knows those who are his.” Thus it is through his Word that God seals his people, assures them by his Spirit that they belong to him and that he will protect them in their faith. Paul says that Christians are “sealed” (σφραγίζω) by the Holy Spirit, given to the Christian as God’s “pledge” or “guarantee” (ἄρραβών) of the inheritance that God has promised (Eph 1:13–14; see also 2 Cor 1:22). The Holy Spirit, the “pledge” of God’s promise, seals the Christian in his heart. The seal of God, then, assures the believer that he belongs to God and is known by God. The Holy Spirit does this through the Word of God’s promise, which has been brought to fulfillment by Jesus Christ. (CC pp. 184-188)

Thus the Spirit’s presence and activity in the heart through God’s spoken and written Word, creating and sustaining the Christian’s faith in Christ, is this precious sealing work of God. Does the sealing also take place by the Spirit through the Sacraments? The baptism of Christ, when the Father declared audibly and visibly (by the Spirit descending as a dove) that Jesus is his beloved Son, and biblical thought about “signs,” “marks,” and “seal(ing)” support the answer yes. (CC pp. 184-188)

In Ezek 9:1–6 the people of God who grieved and lamented over the idolatry in Jerusalem and in the temple had a “mark,” an x or a cross (𐤀; LXX: σημεῖον, “sign”), placed on their foreheads so that they would escape the terrible judgment and slaughter that would come upon the city. Was this sign or mark on the forehead, by which a person could be known and identified as a true follower of Yahweh and not an idolater, something visible or an invisible symbol?²⁷ Whether it was a visible sign, or whether the marking was merely a symbolical way of saying that God identified the faithful Israelites even if he alone could see who they were, God did in fact recognize and protect his people. The fact, however, that the rabbis of Alexandria in their Septuagint translation of Ezek 9:1–6 used σημεῖον, “sign,” for the Hebrew 𐤀 suggests that they interpreted this “mark” as a visible sign. That is because in the LXX and in the NT, the Greek word σημεῖον, “sign,” indicates a visible mark, activity, or event that can be seen; it is tangible evidence or convincing proof and often is miraculous. In the gospel of John the miracles of Jesus are called “signs” (σημεῖα) because they visibly demonstrated God’s gracious presence. Of particular importance in both testaments is the labeling of circumcision as a “sign” (σημεῖον) because it was an identifying mark of God’s people that could be seen (LXX Gen 17:11; Rom 4:11). Paul connects that “sign” with God’s “seal” when he says that Abraham “received the sign [σημεῖον] of circumcision as a seal [σφραγίδα] of the righteousness that is through faith, which he had while still uncircumcised” (Rom 4:11). Paul also sees the sign of circumcision as a precursor to Baptism, which he calls “a circumcision not done with hands” because in Christian Baptism it is God, not people, who puts off the sinful flesh of the person baptized, raises him up to new resurrection life with Christ, and freely forgives all his transgressions (Col 2:11–13). (CC pp. 184-188)

God’s Spirit, then, does use signs, visible marks or actions, in the sealing of God’s people. Even as Jesus’ ministry was accompanied by “signs” (σημεῖα, Acts 2:22), so also the ministry of the apostles was accompanied by “sign(s)” (σημεῖον, σημεῖα {Acts 2:19, 43; 4:16, 22; 6:8; Heb. 2:4})—perceptible activities of the Spirit—which confirmed that their ministry of preaching the Gospel (Acts 2:14–35), baptizing (Acts 2:38, 41), and the breaking of the bread (Acts 2:42) was of God. The Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are visible signs, that is, tangible elements (water, bread and wine) accompanied by words of God promising the forgiveness of sins (Mt 26:28; Acts 2:38). Through these signs, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the Spirit works according to those words and promises of God, and the Spirit thereby seals God’s people and confirms that they are indeed his people. Thus the Spirit of God, in his gracious activity through

God's Word and the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, seals God's people so that they know they belong to God and that he will protect them in their faith in the midst of all the tribulations they endure. (CC pp. 184-188)

One other place in Revelation mentions this sealing on the foreheads of God's people on earth. In Rev 9:1–6, in the second vision of events on earth, in the fifth scene (the fifth trumpet-angel) of the vision, John sees scorpion-like demons from the abyss (hell) afflicting the human race. But the command was given to these demons that they should afflict only those who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. *Whatever these demon-like afflictions were to be, God's own people were defended and kept safe from them, because they bore the seal of God on their foreheads. (CC pp. 184-188)*

In addition there are two references in Revelation which speak of God's people bearing his *name* upon their foreheads. In 14:1, 3, the only other times the 144,000 are mentioned, God's people are standing on Mt. Zion with the name of the Lamb and of his Father on their foreheads. Here the name of God seems to have the same purpose as the seal of God, namely, the identification and protection of his people. The other reference is in 22:4, where also the name of God and the Lamb is on the foreheads of his people. But in this case God's slaves are in his presence in the new heaven and new earth. The archenemy of God also marks his minions with the name and number of the beast to indicate that they belong to the evil one (13:16–17; 20:4). The people thus marked are thereby enabled to carry on their earthly pursuits of money and honor and power. However, in these two instances of the mark of the evil one, the word used for the marking is not σφραγίς, the word for God's "seal," but rather χάραγμα, "mark, stamp." This means that those under the influence of the evil one do not bear a "seal" that affords them salutary protection under him, but rather they bear his "image" or "representation" so they may be used by him for his own evil purposes. Throughout the time period covered by the prophetic message of Revelation, from Christ's ascension to his return, the slaves of God and the slaves of Satan each have a mark that identifies them as belonging to their respective masters. And there are no "neutral" or independent people who serve no one; every person is a slave, either of God or of Satan. (CC pp. 184-188)

The sealing of God's people in 7:2–8 does not refer to their initial sealing, though this is in the background, that is, it does not refer to their conversion, for the slaves of God are already his people when John sees them as the 144,000. Rather, the sealing here in Revelation 7 refers to the *ongoing* work of the Spirit through God's Word and Sacraments by which the Christian is kept in faith and protected in godly hope through all the tribulations and sufferings and persecutions illustrated by the four horsemen. No matter how dire the dangers become for the Christian, God will not permit his people to be lost. He will keep them in their faith and hope regardless of what is thrown at them, even death itself (see Phil 3:12–14; 2 Tim 4:6–8). And this sealing of God is most relevant and comforting for Christians. In particular, at those times in the "good fight of faith" (1 Tim 6:12) when all seems to be only darkness and despair and defeat, God's Spirit, working through the Gospel in his own special way, assures the believing heart of God's eternal presence and grace: "You are mine, and nothing can pluck you out of my hand"—the hand of the Good Shepherd, the victorious Lamb (see Jn 10:11, 14–15, 27–30). (CC pp. 184-188)

The four winds and the four horsemen are held back—restrained—until God's slaves are sealed. When they have been sealed, the four horsemen will be unleashed to cause their havoc and destruction. Throughout the time period covered by the prophetic message of Revelation, from the time of Christ's resurrection victory on earth to his second coming, the four horsemen are held back while God seals his people. In each Christian's life, in each Christian community and church, God *restrains* the horrors represented by the horsemen until each Christian and each

church are mature and ready by his Spirit to meet the onslaughts of the world as they carry out Christ's mission on earth (cf. Eph 4:11–16; 1 Pet 1:3–7). (CC pp. 184-188)

Rev 7:1–8 thus suggests a pastoral application for each church and each Christian. At any given time throughout human history and in relation to each church and each Christian, the horsemen may be either restrained or let loose. They are restrained so that Christians may grow in grace and knowledge for the faith and steadfastness needed in the activity of God's kingdom on earth in the midst of their suffering (cf. 2 Cor 4:7–15). The horsemen may be let loose on Christians who have been matured and made ready to take their place in the mission of Christ's church despite the persecution and sufferings inflicted by the opposition. For once Christians are sent out into the world, they will be hit by all the forces of the opposition and all the evils perpetrated by humanity (the four horsemen). They would be overwhelmed unless sealed by God, that is, unless identified and protected and matured by the work of the Spirit through God's Word and Sacraments. The horsemen are held back until each Christian has been fortified by the Spirit for sacrificial Christian service. (CC pp. 184-188)

Sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads." *sphragizō* means "set a mark or seal on to serve as protection as well as identification." This seal of God put on his people is the certainty they have that they belong to him in faith and that he will protect them in their faith. It is through the truth of his Word that God seals his people, assuring them they belong to him and are sealed by the Holy Spirit, whose indwelling in believers' hearts guarantees their promised inheritance of salvation and eternal life in heaven. The Holy Spirit uses the Word to create, strengthen, and preserve faith in the believer. This he also does visibly through the Sacraments, where the mark, or sign of the cross, is made over the person's head and heart. The sealing in vv 2–8 refers to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit through God's Word and Sacraments, which keeps believers in faith and protects them in faith; through all tribulation they are assured of God's grace and presence in the midst of their darkest despair. Unless thus matured and strengthened, the Christian would be overwhelmed by evil in this world. So evil is held back until each Christian is strengthened in God's Word and Sacraments for sacrificial Christian service (Louis A. Brighton, *Revelation*, Concordia Commentary [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999], 183–88). (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 19, Part 4)

7:4 144,000.† Not a reference to members of actual Jewish tribes, but symbolic of all the faithful believers on earth. The list of the 12 tribes does not agree with any listing used in the OT (e.g., Levi was not counted as a tribe, and Dan is omitted here). Everywhere in Revelation, 12 is the number associated with the church. Twelve squared is 144. One thousand is 10 cubed, a number for completeness. (CSB)

While John's use of "every tribe of the sons of Israel" (7:4) can be understood as a description of all the followers of Jesus Christ, what does his use of the number 144,000 mean? Interpreting 7:4 in its narrower and broader biblical context leads to the understanding that this number must be symbolical and not literally numerical. For according to the scene of the saints in heaven, their number is so great that the crowd could not be counted (7:9). And in the second mention of the 144,000 in Revelation, it would be impossible to take the number literally, for there the 144,000 are depicted as male virgins (14:1–5). *The number is a multiple of twelve: twelve times twelve thousand. It suggests a total completeness. It gives a numerical picture of God's people on earth in perfect marching order, in perfect step. It suggests that God's Israel, the church of Jesus Christ, as it advances to battle in the mission given it, is a perfect and complete army, fully equipped and ready to do God's work.* (CC pp. 190-191)

There is biblical precedent for this picture of the tribes, counted and marshalled, in perfect order as they follow Yahweh. In Num 2:1–34 the Lord instructed Moses to arrange the twelve tribes around the tabernacle so that Israel at rest, encamped in the wilderness, presented a perfect numerical pattern: three tribes to the east of the tabernacle, three to the south, three to the west, and three to the north. Each tribe had its assigned position. When Israel journeyed, it was also according to this pattern. In particular, when the tribes went to war, it was from this formation. *Israel was thus organized as a military camp “in the wilderness for the conquest of the promised land.”* In the war against the Midianites, one thousand men were chosen from each of the tribes, twelve thousand in all for the battle (Num 31:1–6). A census of all the males twenty years and older from all the tribes was taken to determine the number and size of the army that could be called upon (Num 1:1–46; cf. Num 26:1–64), but often only a representative number went out to battle, with equal numbers from each tribe. David also organized his army in twelve equal divisions, 24,000 men in each division (1 Chr 27:1–15). (It could be conjectured that the equal numbers were so that no tribe could take credit for the victory, only God; cf. Ex 14:14; 2 Chr 32:8.) The community at Qumran idealized the army of eschatological Israel which would “reconquer the promised land in the messianic war.” For example, the Temple Scroll describes the composition of the king’s guard. It was “to be made up of 12,000 ‘chosen men,’ 1,000 from each tribe.” (CC pp. 190-191)

John is within this tradition when he describes the sealed people of God as 12,000 from each tribe, totaling 144,000. The number is symbolic of perfection, similar to the perfectly square dimensions of the new heavenly Jerusalem, whose four walls each measures 144 cubits (Rev 21:17). The new Jerusalem has twelve foundations and twelve gates with twelve angels, one at each gate, and the twelve gates are inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, while the twelve foundations are inscribed with the names of the twelve apostles (21:12–14). *The 144,000 thus present a picture of the church militant throughout the entire period of the prophecy of Revelation and at any given moment in this time period.* The church of Jesus Christ is always in perfect marching order as she stands ready to carry out the mission given to her by the Lord. To the human eye the church looks anything but perfectly ordered as she is torn asunder by schisms, tribulations, and persecutions. But in God’s eyes she is in perfect pattern and position for the purpose of Christ’s mission (cf. Eph 5:27). And this is so because she has been sealed (Rev 7:1–8). She will not lose faith. She will not deny her Lord. Unto death she will remain faithful to the Lamb of God. (CC pp. 190-191)

Israel – Refers to the true Israel, as defined in Romans 9:8. All true believers from both before and after Christ are members of the 144,000. (TLSB)

The number of the slaves of God who are sealed is 144,000—God’s people from all the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel. In all of Scripture this number appears only here in Rev 7:4 and in 14:1, 3. Oecumenius (sixth century) in his Greek commentary believed these saints were the faithful Jews who believed in Jesus. In support of this he quotes Acts 21:20, where those with James, in response to Paul’s report on his work, said, “You see, brother, how many myriads there are of Jews who have believed” (θεωρεῖς, ἀδελφέ, πόσαι μυριάδες εἰσὶν ἐν τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις τῶν πεπιστευκότων). Victorinus (third century) in his Latin commentary also interpreted the 144,000 to be Jewish people called back to faith (faith in Christ). Primasius (sixth century), also in a Latin commentary, interpreted them to be the one church of God’s faithful, drawn from both Jews and Gentiles (“unam ex genere Israel et ex gentibus existere monstraret Ecclesiam”). A few modern commentators believe the 144,000 refer to the nation of Israel. Others interpret them to be the Jewish Christians, after Oecumenius and Victorinus. (CC pp. 188-190)

The majority, however, believe that the number 144,000 is symbolical and refers to *the whole body of Christians, Jews and Gentiles, on earth throughout the time period covered by Revelation* (from Christ's ascension to his return at this world's end) and at any given time in that period. Swete says that "the Israel of the first vision [that of Rev 7:4] is coextensive with the whole Church." Caird suggests that the 144,000 are "the whole body of martyrs without distinction of race," and that they are the same as the 144,000 in 14:1 and as the great innumerable throng from every nation in 7:9. Since John sees them in the context of a vision of events *on earth* (7:1-3), they are the church militant on earth. (CC pp. 188-190)

The fact that John calls those who have been sealed "of every tribe of the sons of Israel" (7:4) would, on the surface, suggest that they are Jewish Christians. The 144,000 are described in OT terms, as the twelve tribes of Israel. But it is not uncommon for NT authors to refer to the church of Jesus Christ, *both Jews and Gentiles*, in OT language. For example, Jesus promised the disciples that they would "sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Mt 19:28; Lk 22:28-30). Paul says that the believers in Jesus, both Jews and Gentiles, are the true Israel of God and the true sons of Abraham (Rom. 4:1-12; 9:6-8; 11:11-27; Gal. 3:26-29). James (1:1) addresses his epistle to "the twelve tribes in the diaspora" (ἐν τῇ διασπορᾷ), that is, scattered throughout the Graeco-Roman world. (While most of the recipients of James' epistle were Jewish Christians, Gentiles would be included too.) "The church has quite naturally appropriated the title ["the twelve tribes"], for it was the work of the Messiah to reestablish the twelve tribes ([Jer] 3:18; [Ezek] 37:19-24; [Psalms of Solomon] 17:28), and Christians recognized themselves as the true heirs of the Jewish faith (Romans 4; ... Gal. 4:21-31; Phil. 3:3)." Historically, by the time of the NT, not all of the twelve tribes of the sons of Jacob were identifiable, especially the ten northern tribes which were scattered and disappeared in Assyria, though some remnants survived.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, both the ethnic Jews and the Jewish and Gentile Christians still used the designation "the twelve tribes of Israel." To most adherents of Judaism, the restoration of the twelve tribes was an apocalyptic hope; to the Christians (Jews and Gentiles in Christ), that restoration was already a theological reality in Jesus Christ and his followers. It was, then, quite appropriate for John to use OT language in describing the Christians of his day, both Jews and Gentiles, for in Christ they were now the true Israel of God. And in the context of the entire book of Revelation, the use of this designation would have to be interpreted in light of other descriptions of God's people, such as the twenty-four elders (4:4), the seven churches (2:1-3:22), the great multitude of saints in heaven (7:9), the woman and her seed (12:13-18), the 144,000 standing with the Lamb on Mt. Zion (14:1), and the bride of the Lamb (19:5-10). (CC pp. 188-190)

7:5-8 The list of the twelve tribes in 7:5-8 is unlike any in the OT, for it is not according to birth order or birth mother nor according to the allotment of the land. For example, Judah is mentioned first, but he was actually the fourth born. Joseph and Benjamin are correctly listed eleventh and twelfth according to the order of birth. Manasseh, who was a son of Joseph and a grandson of Israel and who is listed as one of the twelve tribes in the allotment of the land, is mentioned (7:6). But Manasseh's brother, Ephraim, is completely missing even though he (like his brother) was allotted a portion of the land! Another son of Israel by birth and also one of the twelve tribes allotted a portion of land was Dan. But he too is completely missing from John's list of the tribes. *In this list in Revelation, Levi and Joseph, who were sons of Jacob but who were not allotted a portion of the land, have taken the place of Ephraim and Dan, who were allotted portions (though one of them, Ephraim, was a grandson of Jacob).* (CC pp. 191-193)

John gives no explanation for these differences between his list and those in the OT. However, certain conclusions can be surmised. Judah is probably mentioned first because the Messiah came from this tribe (Gen. 49:8-12; Micah 5:2 {MT 5:1}; Mt. 1:2-3; 2:4-6; Heb. 7:13-14). Dan is

missing probably because it was in this tribe that graven images were erected, so that Dan became associated with idolatry (Judg 18:1–31; cf. Gen 49:17). And later in the history of Israel Dan was one of the two places where King Jeroboam set up a golden calf for the people to worship, in opposition to the true place of worship, the temple in Jerusalem. (The other place where Jeroboam set up a calf was Bethel [1 Ki 12:25–30].) In the pseudepigrapha, Dan was thus associated with apostasy and idolatry. Testament of Dan 5:6 says that the prince of Dan was Satan. The church father Irenaeus states that Dan was left out of the list in Revelation 7 because the Antichrist will come from Dan. Hippolytus also says, “For just as from the tribe of Judah the Christ is born, so also from the tribe of Dan the Antichrist will be born” (“Ὡσπερ γὰρ ἐκ τῆς Ἰουδα φυλῆς ὁ Χριστὸς γεννᾶται, οὕτως ἐκ τῆς Δάν φυλῆς ὁ Ἀντίχριστος γεννηθήσεται). Ephraim was connected with this apostasy and idolatry because it was in league with Dan (Judg 17:1–13; cf. Judg 18:1–7, 18). Possibly for this reason Ephraim also was left out of the list. *It is clear that a redefined list of the twelve tribes of Israel is used in Rev 7:5–8: a list that has been cleansed of any association of apostasy and idolatry; a list that emphasizes faithfulness to God, hence the inclusion of Joseph and Levi; and in particular a list that focuses on the Messiah because of the placement of Judah.* (CC pp. 191-193)

Thus in Rev 7:4–8 the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel serve to symbolize the church of Jesus Christ. The use of the number 144,000, twelve thousand from each tribe, points to the church militant, ready for mission, in her marching order. The specific names in the redefined list show she is cleansed from idolatry and apostasy. And she is sealed, protected in her faith, as she stands as a witness in the time of tribulation. (CC pp. 191-193)

7:5 *12,000 from the tribe* – Differs from all OT lists of Israelite tribes, perhaps signaling its symbolic character. E.g., it begins with Judah, the tribe of the Messiah. Joseph and his son Manasseh are included separately. However Joseph’s other son Ephraim is missing, though the tribe was famous for leading Israel. Levi, the priestly tribe, is included, though they did not inherit land in Israel. But Dan is excluded, a tribe that foundered early in Israel’s history. (Judges 18). (TLSB)

Judah. Perhaps listed before Reuben, his older brother, because the Messiah belonged to the tribe of Judah. (CSB)

7:6 *Manasseh.* One of the two Joseph tribes (Ephraim and Manasseh), yet mentioned separately, probably to make up 12 tribes since Dan is omitted. This omission is due perhaps to Dan’s early connection with idolatry (Jdg 18:30), or to a tradition that the antichrist was to come from that tribe. (CSB)

Ephraim was connected with apostasy and idolatry because it was in league with Dan. This is a refined list of the twelve tribes of Israel that has been cleansed of any association of apostasy and idolatry; the list that emphasizes faithfulness to God, hence the inclusion of Joseph and Levi; and in particular a list that focuses on the Messiah because of the placement of Judah. (CC p. 192)

7:1–8 John’s vision depicts God placing a protective seal on His people and thus marking them as those who will be delivered from the great final conflagration. Given the signs that daily surround us, God could release the devastating winds of His judgment at any moment. Yet God holds back now because He is “patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2Pt 3:9). • Lord, help us to order our days in wisdom so that we are found faithful when You call us to appear before You. For Christ’s sake, forgive our sins and move us to perseverance in good works. Amen.

A Great Multitude from Every Nation

9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” 11 And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.” 13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” 14 I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 “Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the thr will shelter them with his presence. 16 They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. 17 For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

7:9 *great multitude*. † Identified in v. 14 as those who have come out of the great tribulation described in ch. 6. (CSB)

Likely the 144,000 described in vv. 4-8. Later they are identified as believers who have survived “the great tribulation” (v. 14). (TLSB)

The second scene in this great interlude is in sharp contrast to the first. “After these things” (μετὰ ταῦτα) in 7:9 (cf. 4:1) indicates a fresh and new sight to be viewed, a sight that probably none on earth had ever been permitted and privileged to behold. The church militant on earth appeared as the 144,000. Though symbolic, this number suggests a much smaller crowd of people than the great host in heaven that is too numerous to count (7:9). In addition, the church militant on earth (as witnessed by the orderly arrangement of the twelve tribes) was prepared to march out in mission. In contrast, the great multitude of people before the heavenly throne of God is at rest and peace, celebrating the results of the mission of the church on earth. As the 144,000 stand poised to be launched out into a world of turmoil and suffering, they are quite aware of the peril they face, though they are confident of God’s sealing protection. But the church triumphant, at rest and peace and awaiting the final act of God’s judgment and the resurrection at the End, will never again experience tribulation and persecution on earth. For them the latter part of Paul’s words has come true, “I reckon that the sufferings of this present time cannot be compared to the glory that shall be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18). (CC pp. 193)

The crowd of people before the throne of God is *countless*. This may have reminded John of the promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that their descendants would be beyond counting—as numerous as the sand of the seashore and as the stars in the heavens (Gen. 15:5; 22:17; 26:4; 32:12; cf. Heb. 11:12) And this crowd standing before God’s throne is not only from the ethnic people of Israel, but from every ethnic group of people on earth. Certainly this demonstrates that the true Israel of God, represented on earth by the 144,000 and in heaven by this countless crowd before God’s throne, is all those who have the same faith as Abraham, both Jews and Gentiles. That faith alone justifies, the faith in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ (Rom 3:21–31; 9:7–8, 30–31). (CC p. 193)

“A great multitude . . . from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” refers to all believers in Christ in the Church Triumphant. Vv 9–17 deal with the Church Triumphant just as vv 2–8 deal with the Church Militant and, more precisely, how God treats each. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 19, Part 4)

every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. All four are mentioned together also in 5:9; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6. Cf. 10:11; 17:15, in which one of the four is changed. (CSB)

white robes – The great crowd is *arrayed in white robes*. This is the third time that John sees heavenly figures dressed in white robes. The first time was the twenty-four elders sitting on thrones around God’s heavenly throne (4:4). The second was the souls of the martyrs beneath the incense altar in heaven, to whom were given white garments (6:11). And now again John sees heavenly figures so clothed. In addition two earlier references mention people *on earth* wearing white or white robes. In 3:4–5 and 3:18, in the fifth and seventh letters, members of these two particular churches wear white garments; they are those who remained faithful to their Lord. In these two references God’s saints *on earth* are referred to as wearing white. Here in 7:9 (as in 4:4 and 6:11), those who are so dressed are before God *in heaven*. As in the instances of the elders and the martyrs, the white robes here in 7:9 symbolize the purity and righteousness of Christ, which purity and righteousness have been given to his people because of his blood (7:14). (CC p. 193)

palm branches.† Used for festive occasions (see Lev 23:40; Jn 12:13) and as symbols of victory in Greek literature. (CSB)

Symbol of victory. They were displayed when victorious kings were welcomed, most famously when Jesus entered Jerusalem. (TLSB)

The heavenly crowd is also *carrying palm branches* in their hands. Palm branches appear only twice in the entire NT, here in Rev 7:9 and in Jn 12:13. This is the first time that John sees heavenly figures with palms, though Jewish tradition about palm branches goes back to the OT. (CC pp. 194-195)

Palm trees were quite prevalent in the Near East, even in oases in desert regions (Ex 15:27). The city of Jericho is frequently described as the “city of palms.” (Deut. 34:3; Judg. 1:16; 3:13; 2 Chr. 28:15) Deborah held court underneath a palm tree (Judg 4:5). Solomon’s temple had palm trees carved on the walls and doors (1 Ki. 6:29, 32-35; 2 Chr. 3:5; cf. 1 KI. 7:36). Because of the abundance of palm trees in the Near East, they had many uses, especially in decorative applications, as in Solomon’s temple and in the visionary temple of Ezekiel (Ezek. 40:16,22, 26; 41:17-18, 25-26). They were also used in figurative language, as in Ps 92:12 (MT 92:13), “the righteous will flourish like the palm tree.” In Song 7:7 (MT 7:8) the bearing or stature of a beautiful woman is likened to a palm tree. (CC pp. 194-195)

But it is with their use in sacred rites or symbols that is of most interest. For example, in the ancient Near East the palm tree often appears in artistic form as the tree of life on cylinder seals. In the OT palm branches are associated with the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles (Lev 23:40; Neh 8:13–17). In Jewish celebrations, as when Simon Maccabaeus delivered Jerusalem from the pagan enemy, palm branches were used in the victory celebration. In 2 Macc 10:5–8 palm branches were carried at the celebration of the purification of the temple; the people were thus reminded of the Feast of Tabernacles (10:6). (CC pp. 194-195)

John would have been aware of this tradition. As he reflected on the sight of the palm branches, he may have thought of the crowd that went out to meet Jesus as the King rode *triumphantly* into Jerusalem (Jn 12:12–13). Whatever their thoughts or the motivation of their actions, including their waving of the palm branches, they were consciously taking part in a celebration. A celebration of a triumphal entry of a king? A celebration of rejoicing over a promised deliverance? A celebration of a rededication of the temple? With the palm branches they were participating in a godly reception of the promised King, the Son of David, who would cleanse the temple (Jn. 12:13-15; cf. Mt. 21:9, 12-13; Mk. 11:9-10). (CC pp. 194-195)

Now John sees again palm branches in the hands of celebrants. Only this time the crowd is much larger, and a host of people from every nation is in heaven before God. As Morris states in connection with Jn 12:13, “Palms were an emblem of victory, and in John’s mention of them here we must detect a reference to the triumph of Christ.” *John now views the result of Christ’s triumphal victory on earth: a host waving palm branches in heaven.* (CC pp. 194-195)

7:10-12 God’s Church Triumphant shouts a hymn of praise to God and the Lamb, to whom they attribute their salvation. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 19, Part 4)

7:10 *Salvation belongs to our God.* See Ge 49:18 (“deliverance”); Jn 2:9. (CSB)

The “Hosanna!” cried on Palm Sunday means “Now save us.” In this vision, salvation is acclaimed as an accomplished fact. (TLSB)

John hears the multitude shouting *a hymn of praise* in which God’s people attribute their salvation (σωτηρία) to God and to the Lamb (7:10). No greater praise can be given to God than that his creatures attribute their salvation to him and to his Christ (cf. 5:9–14). This hymn of praise for salvation is a new stanza to the great Te Deum begun in 4:8. In the glorious vision of God’s throne in heaven and of the enthronement of the Lamb in Revelation 4–5, the heavenly host added new stanzas of praise to the Te Deum, a stanza giving glory to God for creating all things (4:11); two stanzas lauding the Lamb for the salvation purchased by his blood (5:9–10 and 5:12); and another stanza extolling both God and the Lamb (5:13). Similarly now in 7:10 a great heavenly crowd adds yet another stanza in praise of God and the Lamb for their salvation. Their voice was a great shout of praise which can be imagined to have shaken the rafters of God’s heavenly tabernacle. And as John hears the large crowd thus crying out their stanza of praise, he most likely thought of the twenty-four elders and the four winged creatures and their stanza of praise to the Lamb, in which they exclaimed how the Lamb had purchased for God a people “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (5:9). Is this that same redeemed people from all nations now standing before God in heaven which John sees in 7:9–10? For they are a people “out of every nation and tribes and peoples and tongues” (7:9). The same words are used to describe the diverse people in 5:9 and 7:9, though in a slightly different order. (CC p. 195)

7:11 *elders.* See note on 4:4. (CSB)

four living creatures. See note on 4:6. (CSB)

WORSHIPED GOD – As in the vision of God’s heavenly throne and the coronation of the Lamb (Revelation 4–5), so also here in Revelation 7 all the angels around the twenty-four elders and the four winged creatures hymn a stanza of praise (5:11–12; 7:11–12). And similar to the stanza in 5:13, sung by “all creation,” “[all] the blessing and the glory and the wisdom and the thanksgiving and the honor and the power and the strength” are ascribed to God (7:12). But here the stanza of praise is given only to God the Father. Why is the Lamb not also the object of the

praise, as he is together with God in 5:13? Perhaps the reason is that here we can imagine him presenting this great crowd (7:9), washed in his shed blood (7:14), to his heavenly Father. For as their Shepherd he now leads them to the “fountains of the waters of life” before God in heaven (7:17). However this is interpreted, the heavenly Father is singled out as the object of the heavenly host’s praise, for he as their Creator is the source of the salvation of his people through the blood of the Lamb. He sent the Shepherd to the earth to gather his people (Jn 10:14–18, 27–30). Now the Shepherd, as the victorious Lamb (Rev 5:9–10), presents the flock to his heavenly Father. At the end of the stanza of praise by the angels to God, as at its beginning, “amen” (ἀμήν) is spoken (7:12). In 5:14 the four winged creatures spoke it. Here in 7:12 “amen” is spoken by the host of angels at the end of their stanza of praise. (CC pp. 195-196)

7:12 blessing...power. The sevenfold list of attributes expresses complete or perfect praise (see note on 5:12). (CSB)

The company of heaven repeats their refrain (cf. 4:11). (TLSB)

It is worth emphasizing here that it is *the angels* who sing to their God and Creator this hymn of praise (7:12). In 5:12 the host of angels around the throne of God and around the four winged creatures and around the twenty-four elders also sang the praises of the Lamb because of his victory for God and his people (see also 5:9–10). Now here the angels around the throne and around the winged creatures and elders again sing a hymn of praise, but this time to God the Father (7:11–12). This great Te Deum, begun in 4:8 by the four winged creatures, has stanzas throughout Revelation. Some are sung by angels, some by the saints of God, and some by the whole heavenly host. One can imagine this heavenly choir of God singing the Te Deum antiphonally, stanza by stanza. The angels praise God and the Lamb for the salvation of human beings; they praise God for rescuing a fallen humanity through his Son, who is also their Lord. There comes to mind the praise of the angels at the birth of Christ (Lk 2:13–14). What does this all mean, this praise of God in which the angels give thanks because God’s people are brought back to him? Certainly it suggests that the angels praise God for his every action. *But in particular it points out that the redemption of God’s people in Christ is the most important action since his creation of all life.* The glory of God’s grace moves his angels to rejoice in this great mystery (Eph. 3:8-12; Col. 1:26-27; 1 Tim. 3:16; 1 Pet. 1:10-12). (CC p. 196)

7:13-14 The “great tribulation” is the worst of the tribulations all Christians experience throughout history for the sake of the Gospel, which will take place immediately before Christ’s second coming; it will be cut short for the sake of God’s people, and it includes all tribulations Christians go through at all times in history for the sake of faithfulness to God’s Word. The Church revealed to John here is the entire Church of God as it will appear on Judgment Day. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 19, Part 4)

7:13 white robes. One of the twenty-four elders asks John, “These who are clothed about with white robes, who are they?” (7:13). Of course the elder himself knows, for he, together with the other twenty-three, represents all the saints before God’s heavenly throne (4:4). One would have expected John to have asked the question. The perfect tense (εἶρηκα, “I say,” 7:14) may indicate that John had indeed already asked the question, but to himself. He was perhaps so awe-struck by the appearance of the great crowd in heaven that he had said to himself, “Who are these?” The elder then sensing John’s private wonder asked the question for him in 7:13. John responded, “My lord, you—you know” (7:14). The elder not only asked John who this great crowd was, but also, “whence have they come?” (7:13). When John saw in Revelation 4–5 the vision of God’s heavenly glory and the enthronement of the Lamb, he beheld the elders and the winged creatures as well as the thousands of angels, but he did not see a multitude of people. So in chapter 7 he

evidently was wondering not only who they were but also from where they came. The elder included this in his question to John, as if John had asked, “From where did these people come, for I did not see them before?” (CC pp. 196-197)

An elder, and not an angel, attends John in this vision of the saints in heaven. This is the second and final time that an elder stands with John as he looks at a vision or a scene within a vision and helps interpret it for him. The first time that an elder thus attended John in a vision was in 5:5, when he served John by pointing out to him the victorious Lamb. Both in 5:5 and now here in 7:13 the scene or vision has to do very pointedly with the victory of the Lamb *for the purpose of God’s people*. So in both instances God gives to one of the elders, *representatives of God’s people*, the honor of attending John as he views the scenes. All the other times throughout Revelation it is an angel, or angels, who accompanies John to help him interpret and understand the visions and their scenes. (CC pp. 196-197)

7:14 *the great tribulation*.† Described in ch. 6. No passage of Scripture teaches that the church will be “raptured” out of this world for seven years. Jesus also spoke of great distress in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem and the final destruction of the world (Mt 24:15–28). Nowhere in Scripture are the words “great tribulation” used in connection with a reference to “seven years.” (CSB)

Because John’s vision includes the faithful from every nation and every time, it is appropriate to see those who yet live faithfully here on earth as part of that gathering. In fact, when Christians gather for worship in this world, they may be understood as participating by faith in the ongoing heavenly praise. (TLSB)

In answer to the question of the identity of the crowd and its origin, the elder states, “These are those who are coming out of the great tribulation, and they washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). John had already observed the tribulations and the horror caused by the four horsemen (6:1–8), and he had seen the souls of the martyred saints in heaven praying to God for vengeance, which vengeance would come only after their brothers and sisters had endured the horror of the same persecutions and sufferings (6:9–11). Are the things described in Revelation 6 “the great tribulation” (ἡ θλίψις ἡ μεγάλη) that the elder speaks about here in 7:14? (CC pp. 197-199)

Elsewhere Revelation pictures tribulation as a continuing reality for all Christians. In 1:9, at the beginning of John’s description of how the exalted Christ commissioned him to write Revelation (1:9–20), John states that he was sharing “in the suffering/tribulation” (ἐν τῇ θλίψει) that other Christians were experiencing at that time (1:9). Certainly his exile to the island of Patmos was a part of that tribulation. John had likely suffered other forms of persecutions and tribulations in his long life of witness to Christ. He was not unfamiliar with hardship; his own brother James had suffered martyrdom (Acts 12:1–2). In one of the letters to the seven churches, the Lord Christ acknowledged that his people on earth were and would continue to experience “suffering/tribulation” (θλίψις), part of which was the suffering of persecution and imprisonment (Rev 2:9–10). But these tribulations were not described as “the *great* tribulation” (ἡ θλίψις ἡ μεγάλη as in 7:14). Christians of all ages are always suffering tribulations of one kind or another, including persecutions. In encouraging the Christians in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, Paul once stated that “through *many tribulations* [διὰ πολλῶν θλίψεων] it is necessary for us to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22; cf. Jn 15:20; 2 Tim 3:12). (CC pp. 197-199)

The fact that the tribulation here in Rev 7:14 is called “great” (μεγάλη) seems to indicate that it is the worst of the common tribulations that all Christians in general experience throughout

history. The “great tribulation” is the time toward the end of the “thousand years” (the millennium, which is the NT church age) when Satan will be let loose for a short time (20:7). (CC pp. 197-199)

In Mt 24:15–31 (cf. Mk 13:14–27; Lk 21:20–28) Jesus describes the terrifying days before the end of this present world, and before his second coming, in which he says that there would be a “great tribulation” (θλίψις μεγάλη) as had never been experienced before since the beginning of the world’s existence (Mt 24:21). This “great tribulation” would be so horrible that even God’s own elect would not be saved unless those horrific days were cut short for their sake (Mt 24:22). And the Lord Christ said (Mt 24:15) these last days of this “great tribulation” would be introduced by the “abomination of desolation” (τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως) prophesied by Daniel (Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11; cf. 1 Macc. 1:54; 6:7). Jesus’ discourse concerning the sufferings of the last days before his second coming is concluded with these words (Mt 24:29–30): (CC pp. 197-199)

And immediately after the tribulation of those days [εὐθέως δὲ μετὰ τὴν θλίψιν τῶν ἡμερῶν ἐκείνων], the sun will be darkened and the moon will no longer give its light and the stars will fall from heaven and the powers [δυνάμεις] of the heavens will be shaken, and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven [καὶ τότε φανήσεται τὸ σημεῖον τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐν οὐρανῷ], and then all the tribes of the earth will wail and they will see the Son of Man [καὶ ὄψονται τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου] coming on the clouds of heaven with great power and glory.

The evil days *immediately before Christ’s second coming*, together with their sufferings and persecutions, are called the “great tribulation” (θλίψις μεγάλη, Mt 24:21) and “the tribulation of those days” (τὴν θλίψιν τῶν ἡμερῶν ἐκείνων, Mt 24:29). (CC pp. 197-199)

Is the “great tribulation” of Mt 24:15–31 the same as that of which the elder speaks in Rev 7:14? It certainly seems so, for the Lord’s words in Matthew locate the “great tribulation” in a sequence of historical events leading up to the return of Christ at the End (cf. ὅταν, “when,” Mt 24:15; εὐθέως, “immediately,” Mt 24:29). However, the elder’s words in Rev 7:14 (especially the present participle ἐρχόμενοι in the phrase “those who *are coming* out of the great tribulation”) also suggest that the picture here is of a condition out of which all the saints are being delivered, not only through the “great tribulation” just before the End, but also through tribulations throughout the whole time period covered by the prophetic message of Revelation. (CC pp. 197-199)

Thus this vision of the church triumphant has a message of comfort for all Christians, including those who go through death long before the “great tribulation” at the End. Since every Christian experiences testings of faith and witness, every such trial points to the future “great tribulation” at the End and becomes at that moment in time existentially a great tribulation for that believer. For example, when Jesus describes the last days before his second coming as the “great tribulation,” he speaks also of the destruction of the temple and the evil days of suffering preceding it (Mt 24:1–14). Jesus uses the word “tribulation” (θλίψις) in referring to those days of sufferings and persecutions which the residents of Jerusalem and Judea would endure. The foretelling of the destruction of the temple and of Jerusalem, and the preceding days of tribulation, while serving as an admonition *then*, serve in turn also as a *prophetic type* of the end of this world and of the days of the “great tribulation,” which will come right before the End. Immediately following Jesus’ warning about the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple is his discourse about the last days of the “great tribulation” and his second coming at the End (Mt 24:15–31). It is evident that, *for the*

people of Judea and Jerusalem, their sufferings preceding the fall of the city in A.D. 70 were their “great tribulation” before the end of their lives in the holy city. (CC pp. 197-199)

The picture of eternal glory of Rev 7:14 is for the comfort of all Christians of all times as they experience whatever tribulations sorely test their faith and patience. Some tribulations and sufferings will be so piercing and poignant that the very faith and foundation of the believer’s hope will be severely tried, almost to the point of despair and defeat. For that Christian at that moment, his sufferings and trials are his great tribulation. And every Christian will experience tribulation. (CC pp. 197-199)

white in the blood – White is the color of purity, and Christ’s people are purified by His blood shed for them. (TLSB)

The people in the great crowd which John sees before the throne of God in heaven have already experienced “the great tribulation” (7:14) and have come out of it. The present participle in the phrase οἱ ἐρχόμενοι ἐκ, “those who are coming out” (7:14), suggests that Christians are continually emerging from this tribulation, adding to the crowd in heaven. *John is looking at the whole people of God entering and becoming the church triumphant. The crowd that John sees represents the whole church as if it were already triumphant, as if it were already compete, as it will be at the resurrection at the End* (Cf. Rev. 6:9-11; 14:1-6; 15:2-4; 20:11-15; chapter 21). In contrast, the souls of those who had been martyred, which John saw in heaven at the foot of the incense altar, were not yet complete in number (6:9–11). Also only their “souls” (6:9) were mentioned, which implied that the resurrection of the body had not yet taken place, while in 7:9–17 no such differentiation between body and soul is made concerning the great crowd before God’s heavenly throne. This suggests that the great crowd of the church triumphant is complete in number, but uncountable. *John is looking at the church in its eschatological state*, which state the souls of all Christians enter the moment of their death and which is consummated at the resurrection of the body at the End. (CC pp. 199-201)

The crowd of saints comes out of the great tribulation victorious because of *the blood of the Lamb* (cf. 15:2–4). They had “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). Because of the redeeming death of Jesus Christ and because he now as the victorious Lamb presents them to the heavenly Father, the crowd of people stands pure and holy in the presence of God (cf. Rom 3:21–26; Heb 4:14–16). With sins forgiven by the blood of Christ (1 Jn 1:7–9; 2:1–2), and covered now with the righteousness of the Lamb (Rom 3:22; 10:4), they share in the victory of the Lamb before the heavenly Father. The *active* Greek verbs “washed” and “made ... white” (7:14) with the people as the subject suggest that the saints did the washing. They were the recipients of God’s grace, with the result that as they held to Christ in repentance and faith, they “washed” their garments and “made them white” in his blood by means of Word and Sacrament (Mt. 26:27-28; Acts 2:38-39; 22:16; Rom. 10:14-17). Yet there is no contradiction between passages that speak of Christians washing their robes (active forms of πλύνω in 7:14; 22:14) and those that refer to Christians washing themselves or being washed. Since salvation is by grace alone, it is impossible for a person to wash himself or his clothes so as to (actively) achieve the forgiveness of sins (e.g., Jer 2:22; Job 9:30–31). God alone can turn scarlet sins to “white” (Is 1:18). God must wash the sinner clean from sin (e.g., Ps 51:2, 7 [MT 51:4, 9]; Is 4:4), as confirmed by the baptismal language about God’s “washing” of his church (the verbal noun λουτρόν in Eph 5:26; Titus 3:5). Therefore when God calls for people to wash themselves clean from sin (Is 1:16) or “be baptized and wash away your sins” (Acts 22:16), and when Christians are described as having washed their robes (Rev 7:14; 22:14), it is always with the theological understanding that God is the one who instills the desire, prompts the action (Phil 2:13), and accomplishes the result: forgiven sins and eternal glory. (CC pp. 199-201)

7:15–17† The perfect bliss of the heavenly host is described in a series of 10 statements. The first three lines of the poem describe the blessedness of believers in the presence of God. The next four lines depict the freedom of God’s people from the effects of sin. The last three lines give the source of their bliss: the Lord will shepherd them to the water of life (cf. Jn 4:14). (CSB)

7:15 *serve* – Greek *latreuo*, a verb associated with worship and religious service. (TLSB)

The crowd of saints shares in the heavenly celebration of the victorious Lamb (cf. Rev 5:8–10). As they stand before the throne of God, “they worship him day and night” (7:15). As the four winged creatures “do not cease, day and night,” singing the Trisagion (ἅγιος ἅγιος ἅγιος) of the great *Te Deum* (4:8), so now the saints of God continually participate in the heavenly worship. Certainly a part of that worship includes their joining the winged creatures and the elders and all the angelic host in the singing of that glorious *Te Deum*, as is attested by their shout, “Salvation is with our God” (7:10). However, here their worship is noted but not described in any detail. Rather, their relationship to God and the Lamb is emphasized. (CC p. 201)

temple. All 16 references to the temple in Revelation use the word that designates the inner shrine rather than the larger precincts. It is the place where God’s presence dwells. (CSB)

will shelter them. The imagery would evoke memories of the tabernacle in the desert (Lev 26:11–13). (CSB)

σκηνώσει—In classical Greek this literally meant “to pitch a tent, to encamp, to live or dwell in a tent.” As time went on it began to be used for dwelling in any kind of lodging. The noun σκηνή was thus used to refer to a “tent,” and then also to any kind of an “abode.” The LXX uses σκηνή for both יִשְׁכַּח and לָחַץ when they refer specifically to the tabernacle that Moses was instructed to erect so that God would have a dwelling and sanctuary among his people Israel (e.g., for יִשְׁכַּח in Ex 25:9; 26:1, 13; for לָחַץ in Ex 26:9, 12, 13; cf. Heb 8:2–5; 9:2–21). While σκηνή, the noun, appears regularly throughout the LXX, the verb, σκηνώω, is used very little. An example is in LXX 3 Kingdoms 8:12–13 (MT/ET 1 Ki 8:12–13), where Solomon mentions how the Lord had said that he would “live, dwell” (τοῦ σκηνώσαι) in darkness, but Solomon had now built a royal house or temple (οἶκος, translating תֵּבַד) for God’s everlasting dwelling place (ἔδρασμα τῆ καθέδρα). (CC p. 179)

The one who sits upon the throne “will spread his tent over them” (7:15). The verb σκηνώω (“pitch a tent,” “live/dwell in a tent”) points to an earthly dwelling, a dwelling in which people share the intimacy of family living. In biblical literature it carries an incarnational idea of God living in an earthly form or abode that can be experienced through the senses. In Jn 1:14, when the Logos (λόγος) became flesh (σάρξ), he “tabernacled” or “tented” (ἐσκήνωσεν) among God’s people. The verb emphasizes a familial, intimate dwelling together in an earthly sense. Even when it is used of those now in heaven dwelling with God (Rev 12:12; 13:6) and the emphasis is on the familial, intimate manner of living together, the earthly, sensory connotation is not totally lacking. It could be that, in using this word, God is condescending to our human understanding of existence and manner of speaking. But more likely, the word is used to direct attention to the fact that God’s people, considered in their eschatological existence, raised from the dead, will live intimately *in the flesh* with God in the new heaven and new earth (21:3), and in a familial, intimate way, he will dwell with them sensately, that is, in a manner that can be experienced also with the human senses (see 1 Jn 1:1–3). The future tense of the verb emphasizes the “not yet” aspect of this promise. *Now* this is understood and experienced only through the mind and eyes of faith, but *then, after the resurrection*, it will be a sensory reality (see Job 19:25–27; 2 Cor 5:1–5;

cf. 2 Pet 1:13–15). Here in Rev 7:15 John is assured that God will dwell with his saints who have come out of the great tribulation. God dwells with them forever in a manner that is in keeping with what Jn 1:14 reveals: the Word became flesh and came to dwell among us in the person of Jesus Christ. (CC pp. 201-202)

7:16 *they will hunger no more, neither thirst anymore, the sun shall not strike them* – Because God will tent among his saints in heaven, “they will never again hunger nor ever again thirst” (Rev 7:16). This description and those which follow are to be received in an eschatological, incarnational sense. The state of existence that is being described, though true now for all the saints before God’s heavenly presence as “souls” (6:9), will reach its final and full meaning *at the resurrection of the body in the new heaven and new earth*. For example, in describing life with God in the new heaven and earth, John says that every tear will be wiped from the eyes of God’s people (21:4), and all who are thirsty will drink from the fountain of living water (21:6). While Revelation 21 does not explicitly speak of never again being hungry nor thirsty, it does say that in the new heaven and earth there shall never again be any pain or sorrow or death (21:4). Again, while all this is understood as true *now for the souls* of God’s people with him in his heavenly presence, it finds its final and complete meaning *after the resurrection of the body* in the eternal life with God in the new heaven and earth. (CC pp. 202-203)

Though 7:16 describes the blessed state of existence as the *absence* of physical traumas, it touches the very core of natural human life and needs. Hunger, thirst, and burning, scorching heat are especially applicable to living in a desert-like wilderness as the children of Israel did (Ex 16:1–3; 17:1; cf. Rev 12:6). They are, nevertheless, woes common to all life in this fallen world. These words of Rev 7:16 call to mind the promise that God gave through Isaiah (49:8–10). God said to his people that in the day of his salvation he would help them and restore them to their land. When that happened they would not hunger nor thirst, nor would the heat of the desert or the sun smite them (Is 49:10). What John heard in Rev 7:16 may have reminded him of the manna in the wilderness and the miraculous way God provided water (Ex 16:4–5; 17:3–7). It also may have evoked his memory of Jesus feeding the five thousand (Jn 6:1–15). And John must have remembered the words of Jesus to the woman at Jacob’s well that whoever drinks the water he gives will never thirst again (Jn 4:7–15). Jesus also said that because he is the bread of life, whoever comes to him will never hunger again, and whoever believes in him will never thirst again (Jn 6:35). (CC pp. 202-203)

As John reflected on what he had heard in Rev 7:16 and related it to such words and deeds of the Lord, he must have been comforted with this thought: God always keeps his promises. *For John now sees and hears the final end of God’s promise concerning his people*. Now in their existence as “souls” (6:9) in heaven before God and the Lamb, and in his vision of the future final fulfillment after the resurrection of the body in the new heaven and earth, John sees God’s people at rest, never again to be pained by the harshness of life as they formerly experienced it in their earthly existence. For in their new life with God—now before his heavenly throne and then in the new heaven and earth—the Lamb “will shepherd them, and he will lead them to fountains of the waters of life” (7:17; cf. 21:6). (CC pp. 202-203)

Images recall Israel’s wilderness wanderings and the hardships of the Church’s earthly pilgrimage. It anticipates a peaceful existence without the hardships of this fallen world. (TLSB)

7:17 *shepherd*. Ancient kings often referred to themselves as the shepherds of their people. (CSB)

Before his death and resurrection Jesus had identified himself as the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:11–14). In the OT Yahweh had promised his people that like a shepherd he would look after them in

order to rescue them and care for them (Ezek. 34:11-16; cf. Ps. 28:8-9; 78:52; 80:1 {MT 80:2}; Jer 31:10-11; Micah 7:14). In order to carry out this word, God then promised to provide his people with a shepherd who would tend them. This promised shepherd would be his servant, a new David (Ezek. 34:23-24; cf. Is. 40:9-11; Ps. 78:70-72). According to Jesus' own words, Jesus himself is this servant, this David (Mk. 12:35-37; cf. Mt. 1:1; 15:21-22; Rom. 1:3; 2 Tim. 2:8). It was also well known at the time of Jesus' earthly ministry that the Messiah would be born at Bethlehem from the seed of David (2 Sam. 7:11-12; Ps. 89:3-4 {MT 89:4-5}; Micah 5:2 {MT 5:1}; Mt. 2:5-6; Jn. 7:40-42). The relationship between God and his people, as pictured by his being their shepherd, was revealed so beautifully in the twenty-third psalm. In this psalm, as the psalmist declares that Yahweh is his shepherd, he says that his Lord will lead him to "quiet waters" and thus restore his soul (Ps 23:2-3). Now in Rev 7:17 John sees and hears the final outcome of these promises in the OT and of the Lord Christ himself. The shepherd of Yahweh has now been provided. By his death and resurrection, the servant David has rescued God's people (5:5-6). And as their Good Shepherd he tends the flock, caring for them and leading them through "the great tribulation" (7:14) to the quiet waters of eternal life—already now on earth, then in heaven with God, and finally forever in the new heaven and new earth. (CC p. 203)

springs of living water – Jesus spoke of this gift during His earthly ministry (cf. John 7:37-38). Note that whereas v. 16 describes heaven as being devoid of anguish, this verse describes heaven in positive terms. Luther: "While worms and rottenness are before our eyes, we cannot be unmindful of them, nevertheless there will be a time when God will wipe away every tear, as is stated in this verse. Therefore faith should begin to forget tears and dishonor which it does not see. Although the eyes see the rottenness, the ears hear the complaints and sobs, and the noses smell the stench of the corpses, nevertheless it is the part of faith to say 'I do not know this. I see nothing. Indeed, I see a multiplication and a brightness surpassing the sun itself and the stars.' Therefore, such examples are set before us in order that we may learn that God is the Creator of all things, restores the dead to life and glorifies worms and the foulest rottenness. And He wants this to be acknowledged and celebrated by us in this life of faith. Later, however, in the future life, we shall experience it in actual fact" (AE 7:210-211). (TLSB)

"Fountains of the waters of life" (7:17) is an expression for the source of life. God himself is that source of life (Ps 36:9 [MT 36:10]; cf. Rev 21:5-6). Jesus Christ leads the flock to God for the gift of life. For as God the Father has life in himself, he has also given to his Son to have life in himself (Jn 1:4; 5:26). In order to give the gift of life to God's people, the shepherd laid down his life for the sheep (Jn 10:11). And in his resurrection he received his life back (Jn 10:17-18) so as to lead his followers to God, the ultimate source of life. (CC p. 203)

wipe away every tear – A final truth describes the rest and the peace of the crowd of saints before God's throne in heaven: "God will wipe every tear from their eyes" (Rev 7:17). Tears and laments are part of the experience and character of the faithful people of God while on this earth. Tears are shed over one's sins and the sins of others (Is 22:4; Pss 6:6; 39:12 [MT 6:7; 39:13]), over the ruin and sufferings experienced by others (Jer 9:1, 18 [MT 8:23; 9:17]; 13:17), over one's own afflictions (Job 16:16; 30:31), when confronted with God's anger (Ps 80:5 [MT 80:6]), when alone and in sorrow (Ps 102:9 [MT 102:10]). In the OT David mourned over the death of Absalom and would not be comforted (2 Sam 18:33-19:4). Rachel in Ramah wept over her children (Jer 31:15; cf. Mt 2:16-18). In the NT we are told that Mary shed tears at the death of her brother Lazarus (Jn 11:33; cf. Lk 8:52). The women of Jerusalem wept over Jesus as he went to the cross (Lk 23:26-27), but Jesus urged them to weep for themselves and their children because of the coming afflictions (Lk 23:28-31). The sinful woman shed tears of sorrow over the feet of Jesus (Lk 7:37-38). Both Paul and the elders of Ephesus shed tears at their final parting (Acts 20:18-19, 37-38). Paul wept tears over the Christians of Corinth (2 Cor 2:4), and Timothy

wept over Paul (2 Tim 1:4). Jesus warned his disciples and followers that they would weep and mourn while the world would rejoice (Jn 16:20). And the Lord Jesus wept tears over Jerusalem (Lk 19:41) and at the tomb of Lazarus (Jn 11:35). (CC p. 203-204)

In this life the shedding of tears is as much—at times even more—the experience of Christians as are joy and laughter. In fact, tears precede the joy (see Jer 31:15–17; Jn 16:20–22). While it is of the nature of the people of God to weep and lament, it is the gift of God’s grace to turn the weeping and sorrow into joy (Jn 16:20). Still on earth, tears will flow together with the godly joy. And the tears of God’s people are precious to him in his love for them (Ps 56:8 [MT 56:9]). But God will turn the weeping into joy (Ps 126:5), for he has promised a day when “the Lord Yahweh will wipe away tears from all faces” (Is 25:8). *John now sees (in Rev 7:17) the complete and final fulfillment of this promise of God. The final word describing the peace and joy of the saints before God in heaven says it all: “and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.”* (CC p. 203-204)

Conclusion: An Interlude of Comfort and Encouragement

While the inaugural vision of God’s heavenly glory and the coronation and enthronement of Jesus Christ (Revelation 4–5) controls and dominates the prophetic message of Revelation, the vision of the church militant sealed by God and of the church triumphant shepherded by the Lamb encourages and nurtures a comfort and hope that permeates the same prophetic message. *The purpose of Revelation 7, the interlude between the sixth and seventh seals, is to encourage John and his hearers—despite the fears and horrors already introduced by the first six seals and also in view of all the tribulations yet to be revealed.* While John and the seven churches have experienced the sufferings and persecutions revealed in Revelation 6—and will continue to experience them until the end of this world, when Christ returns—they are not to forget that what they had seen in the inaugural vision (Revelation 4–5) controls everything for the sake of God’s glory and that of the Lamb, and for the benefit of God’s people on earth. And now for their own encouragement and comfort and hope, they are also not to forget what they had just seen and heard in this interlude. God will protect his people as they carry out the mission of their Lord here on earth. He will not forsake them. He will not permit them to lose their faith and hope. And he promises soon to conduct them to the glorious citizenship of the church triumphant. That is to be their end—not the suffering here on earth, but instead the glory of God and of the Lamb. How much John and his hearers will need such knowledge and encouragement in their faith, for even more dreadful portents are yet to be revealed after the seventh seal is opened! (CC p. 204)

7:9–17 John gives a glimpse of the glory that is Christ’s. How incredible to be part of that blessedness! Drawn onward and upward by the magnificence of this hope in Christ, God’s people join in the heavenly chorus even now. • By Your grace, Lord, keep me among the faithful, so that I may forever sing Your praises in the glory of heaven. Amen