

Who are the “144,000” in Revelation Chapter 7?

Introduction

A rather intriguing set of passages is contained in Revelation chapter 7. The first eight verses of that chapter refer to a very *specific* group of individuals. Those individuals are referred to as “servants of God” – and they are subsequently “sealed” by an angel of God. Here are those eight verses:

Revelation 7:1-8 (ESV):

7 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.

As noted above, Revelation 7 gives us a very specific number of individuals that are contained in this group – and that number is: **144,000**.

Two Doctrines about the 144,000

Not surprisingly, there are many different beliefs, among the various Christian denominations, about who, *exactly*, this group of “144,000” represents. However, from my experience, there are two broad “categories” of doctrines about that group.

One of those doctrines states that the number 144,000 is completely **literal**. In other words, that doctrine states that there will be exactly 144,000 specific individuals, who will comprise that group. As a result, I call that doctrine the “completely literal” doctrine.

The other main doctrine states that the number 144,000 is completely **figurative**. In other words, that doctrine states that the “144,000” number does not have *any relation whatsoever* to the actual number individuals who will comprise that group. As a result, I call that doctrine the “completely figurative” doctrine.

Exploring the “Completely Literal” Doctrine

First, let’s take a look at the completely literal doctrine. In other words, let’s consider the ramifications of the 144,000 number being the *exact* number, which will be a part of the “servants of God” group.

Take a look at Revelation 7:1-8 again. As listed, the 144,000 number is generated by assigning 12,000 individuals, from each of the 12 tribes of Israel. That is, there are 12,000 from the tribe of Judah, 12,000 from the tribe of Reuben, etc.

So, consider this: if the **number** 12,000 from each tribe is literal, then why wouldn’t the **tribe**, itself, also be literal? In other words, if we accept that Revelation 7 is completely literal, then not only will there be exactly 12,000 individuals from each tribe, but those individuals will **also** be literal Israelites! That is, the first group of 12,000 will be literal descendants of the man named Judah, the second group of 12,000 will be literal descendants of the man named Reuben, etc.

As a result, if Revelation 7 is completely literal, then that means that this group of 144,000 will **only** be comprised of Israelites – i.e., there will not be *any* **gentiles** in that group at all.

The reason why this is important is that many of the groups that hold the “completely literal” doctrine state that **only** the number 144,000 is literal. In other words, those groups claim that the tribes of Israel that are listed are **figurative**. For example, Revelation 7:5 states that “12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed”. Some groups are very insistent that the “12,000” is literal, but the “tribe of Judah” is figurative. In other words, those groups split up a **single verse**, into literal and figurative “halves”.

Certainly, there are some parts of Scripture that are literal, and some other parts that are figurative. However, splitting up a *single verse* into literal and figurative components indicates that one is trying to force Scripture into validating a preconceived doctrine.

Another item to note is that there are quite a few numbers in Scripture, which have great symbolic significance. Some of those numbers are 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 10, and 40.

Two other numbers that are very symbolic in Scripture are: 12 and 1,000. The number 12 is used in many places, to denote “governmental perfection”. For example, there were 12 tribes of Israel, as well as 12 apostles. In addition, the number 12 appears quite frequently in the description of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21. For example, there are 12 gates in the city, with 12 angels at the gates.

In addition, the number 1,000 has great significant in Scripture – and in at least **some** cases, that number is used in a very figurative sense. For example, Psalm 84:10 states “A day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere”; and 2 Peter 3:8 says “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day”. So, in those cases, the number 1,000 is used to denote “a very large number”.

So, in Revelation 7, we see that for each of the 12 tribes, there are **12,000** individuals sealed – for a total of 144,000 individuals. Of course, 12,000 is **12 times 1,000**. In other words, we have the number 12 – which often represents governmental perfection, multiplied by 1,000 – which often represents a very large number. As a result, it is certainly possible that the 12,000 from each tribe is a *figurative* number – and that, in turn, would mean that the overall 144,000 number is figurative as well.

It appears to me that a good general rule to use, to determine if a given passage is literal or figurative, is to examine the *context* of the passage in question. So, let’s take a look at Revelation 7 again. The very first verse of that chapter tells us that there are “four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding

back the four winds of the earth”. So, can we take that verse literally? For example, are there literally four corners of the earth? Of course not – the earth is mostly spherical in shape; and there are no “corners” on a sphere. Similarly, there are not literally four winds that blow upon the earth. Finally, note that 4 angels + 4 corners + 4 winds = 12. In other words, verse 1 contains yet *another* reference to the number 12, in Revelation 7.

So, overall, it appears to me that the number 144,000 is most likely a *figurative* number – i.e., that the size of the “servants of God” group will not be exactly 144,000 individuals. This is especially true due to all of the **other** figurative references in Revelation – e.g. the “stars of the sky falling to the earth” in Rev 6:13, and the “woman clothed with the sun” in Rev 12:1.

Exploring the “Completely Figurative” Doctrine

Some other Christian groups have a much different belief about the 144,000 individuals listed in Revelation chapter 7. Basically, those groups believe that that the 144,000 represent every Christian who has ever lived.

One of the reasons that those groups give for this belief is that Revelation 7 continues on, after verse 8, to describe a much larger group of people. Here is the remainder of Revelation 7 – verses 9 through 17:

Revelation 7:9-17 (ESV):

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 throne 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.”

So, some Christian denominations believe that the “144,000” mentioned in verses 4 through 8 are a reference to the “great multitude” in verses 9 through 12. In addition, those groups then identify the great multitude as being all Christians who have ever lived.

Another item to note is that most of the groups who hold this belief also espouse the “eternal security” doctrine – a.k.a. “once saved, always saved”. In other words, these groups state that if a person has ever accepted Jesus as his Lord, then that person is **guaranteed** to be saved – even if the person later *rejects* Jesus.

As a result, according to these groups, the “144,000” refers to all people who have ever accepted Jesus as their Lord. So, let’s explore that belief.

First of all, in many places the New Testament appears to refer to a subset of Christians, who will be given authority to rule in the Kingdom with Jesus. Take a look at some examples:

Matthew 19:27-30 (ESV):

²⁷ Then Peter said in reply, “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” ²⁸ Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

Revelation 20:4-6 (ESV):

⁴ Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. ⁵ The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. ⁶ Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

Luke 12:32-34 (ESV):

³² “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

The above passages are very instructive. First, the passage Matthew evidently refers to two separate “groups” of Christians – one group which has the apostles in it; and the other group which consists of all *other* followers of Christ. The primary difference between the two groups is that the “apostles’ group” is given the authority to **rule with Christ** (i.e., to “judge the twelve tribes of Israel” . . .), but the other group is not given that authority.

The passage in Revelation also appears to divide up Christians into two distinct groups. Again, the first group is given the authority to rule with Christ, while the second group is *not* given that authority. The first group consists of people who were explicitly granted the authority to rule with Jesus, and people who were martyred for the sake of Jesus. This definitely appears to indicate that **not all** Christians will rule with Jesus – because if they will, then why would Scripture explicitly mention that martyrs for Jesus will rule with him? In other words, why make a point about Christian **martyrs** ruling with Jesus, if all Christians (not just martyrs) will rule with him?

Finally, the passage in Luke also refers to the group of Christians who will receive authority to rule with Jesus. In that passage, the group in question is referred to as the “little flock”. The reason why that is important is because currently, about 2.2 **billion** people identify themselves as Christians. It strains credulity to imagine that a group of *that* size would be referred to as a “little” flock. Not only that, but almost one third of the **total** world population identify themselves as Christian. In other words, the total non-Christian population is only about twice as large as the total Christian population. One might expect that the total population would be hundreds (if not thousands) of times larger than a “little flock”.

As a result, it certainly appears to me that the “144,000” group does **not** refer to all Christians – instead, it appears to only refer to a *subset* of Christians.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, Revelation 7 describes a group of 144,000 servants of God – 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel. There are two broad doctrines about the identity of that group of “144,000”:

- Some groups believe that that group consists of 144,000 literal individuals, from all nations (not just Israelites).
- Some other groups believe that the 144,000 refers to all Christians who have ever lived, throughout history.

From what I can see, the truth lies somewhere **in between** those two extremes.

Basically, Scripture appears to indicate that there will be two separate “groups” of Christians – a “little flock”, and a “great multitude”. The primary difference between those two groups is that the little flock will be given authority to *rule with Jesus*, during the millennium – while the great crowd will not have that authority.

So, the 144,000 appears to refer to the “little flock” group. The number 144,000, itself, is probably *not* literal – i.e., there will probably **not** be exactly 144,000 members in that group. (I suspect that there will actually be many *more* people in that group than 144,000.)

However, the number 144,000 **is** significant, in relative terms. In other words, that number refers to the fact that the *size* of the little flock will be much **smaller** than the *size* of the great crowd. As mentioned previously, there are about 2.2 billion people in the world who identify as Christians. So, even if the little flock turns out to have 100 million people in it, 100 million is still a **relatively** small number, compared to 2.2 billion.

Of course, the above information raises *another* question – who, *exactly*, is going to be a part of the “little flock”? In other words, which Christians will be placed in the little flock – as opposed to being a part of the great multitude?

From what I can see, it appears that God is only “calling” a *minority* of people during this age – probably a relatively *small* minority. So, I suspect that the 144,000 group is comprised of those individuals who were “called” by God – *and* who responded to that call. (Just because God *calls* a person, that does not necessarily mean that a person will *respond* to that call.)

For more information, the following article goes into great detail, about the concept of God only “calling” a *minority* of people during this age:

[God’s “Call” to Salvation](#)