

Understanding Revelation – Topic 22

The one hundred and forty-four thousand

Who are they?

**An exposition of
Revelation Chapters 14:1-5 and 7:1-17**

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Introduction

Two chapters in the Book of Revelation refer to the number *one hundred and forty-four thousand*. They are Chapters 7 and 14. The most comprehensive description is found in Revelation 14.

Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, like the voice of many waters, and like the voice of loud thunder. And I heard the sound of harpists playing their harps. They sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth. These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being first-fruits to God and to the Lamb. And in their mouth was found no deceit, for they are without fault before the throne of God. Revelation 14:1-5

This is a remarkable description of the *one hundred and forty-four thousand*, who will exist in the last days of this world's history, prior to the Second Advent of Christ.

Context of Revelation 14:1-5

The passage of Scripture quoted above is situated between the conclusion of Revelation 13 and Revelation 14:6-12. Revelation 13 reveals the powers of earth united under Satan's banner and in opposition to God and His people in the last days. Revelation 14:6-12 describes God's response to Satan's final effort in the form of the three angels' messages. In between these two passages we find a group of people known as the *one hundred and forty-four thousand*. The positioning of this reference to them implies that they are in the centre of the great final conflict that ensues before the Second Advent of Christ.

The *one hundred and forty-four thousand* are pictured as being *with the Lamb*. This is in contrast with the rest of the world who are pictured as being with the Beast.

*All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.
Revelation 13:8*

The *one hundred and forty-four thousand* are also pictured as being on *Mount Zion*. Mount Zion is a symbol of the kingdom of God.

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels. Hebrews 12:22

Lucifer's original high and privileged position was on Mount Zion -

...on the mount...on the farthest sides of the north. Isaiah 14:13

The Psalmist enquired:

*Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place?
Psalm 24:13*

Scripture tells us that some individuals have already ascended to the *hill of the Lord*. Enoch is there, having been translated without seeing death. Moses is there. He was resurrected and taken to heaven and later appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration. Elijah is there for he also was translated without seeing death. Then there are those saints who were resurrected when Jesus was resurrected and subsequently ascended with him to heaven (Matthew 27:50-53). They have since been associated with Christ in the services of the heavenly sanctuary (see Revelation Chapters 4 and 5).

Finally, in answer to the Psalmist's question, *Who shall ascend to the hill of the Lord?* the answer comes that the *one hundred and forty four thousand* will stand on Mount Zion as a special group.

Characteristics of the 144,000

True Israelites

And I heard the number of those who were sealed. One hundred and forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel were sealed: of the tribe of Judah twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Gad twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Asher twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Levi twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand were sealed; of the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand were sealed.

Revelation 7:1-8

Revelation 7 reveals that the *one hundred and forty-four thousand* are from the 12 tribes of Israel. In the New Testament era an Israelite represents a true Christian.

And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. Galatians 3:29

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God. Romans 2:28-29

This means that a true Israelite is one who is *born again*, is a true child of God and who has the approval of God.

Revelation 7 lists the names of the twelve tribes of Israel and the numbers from each tribe. Names are significant in Scripture. A name denotes character and the name of the tribe indicates the particular characteristics of that section of the *one hundred and forty four thousand*.

An analysis of Revelation 7 reveals that two of the Old Testament tribes are missing: the tribes of Dan and Ephraim. Those two tribes were unfaithful and therefore they are not counted as representing the people of God in the last days.

The term *Israel* has spiritual significance. The word Israel means *overcomer, a prince with God* or one who is *God-ruled*. This term represents God's people through the ages who have given themselves to Christ, who have accepted him as their King and have been ruled as it were, by Him. The *one hundred and forty-four thousand* are a special group composed of various types of characters in the Christian church who have allowed God to rule in their lives and have overcome the evil conditions of the world in the last days. They are victorious in Christ.

Sealed

The next characteristic to note is that the *one hundred and forty-four thousand* have God's seal in their foreheads.

And I heard the number of those who were sealed. One hundred and forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel were sealed. Revelation 7:4

This text reveals the period of the time in which the *one hundred and forty four thousand* exist. The final seal of God is given at the close of probation. This will be about one year before the Second Advent of Christ.¹

The seal of God involves the keeping of the Sabbath of the fourth commandment. God declares:

Hallow My Sabbaths, and they will be a sign between Me and you, that you may know that I am the LORD your God. Ezekiel 20:20

The Sabbath is the sign (or seal) that reveals to whom we really belong in the last days. Revelation 14 indicates that instead of having the *seal* in their foreheads, the *one hundred and forty four thousand* have God's *name* in their foreheads.

Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads. Revelation 14:1

Christ-like

The passage in Revelation 14:1 reveals that the *seal* and the *Father's name* are synonymous. As stated above, a name in Scripture denotes character. Therefore in this application of Revelation 7:1-4 the seal also represents God's character. It indicates that the *one hundred and forty four thousand* have reached a stage of spiritual development in which their characters are Christ-like and they are ready for translation.

The *one hundred and forty-four thousand*, by the grace of God, have reached maturity of Christian character. In the last days God works to produce a group of people who reflect His image. The outward sign of this will be the true observance of the seventh-day Sabbath.

Moreover I also gave them My Sabbaths, to be a sign between them and Me, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them. Ezekiel 20:12

The Sabbath is a sign that God is sanctifying His people - making them holy - meaning that He is perfecting their character.

¹ A.P. Cooke, *A Shelter in the Storm* (Sydney: Self published, 1985).

Thus in the last days, there will be two strikingly contrasting groups. There will be the followers of the Beast who will reveal the character of Satan, and there will be the followers of the Lamb, who will reveal the character of Christ. One group of individuals will have the Mark of the Beast and the other group will have the Seal of God.

Endure great tribulation

... These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation.... Revelation 7:14

The *one hundred and forty four thousand* are a group which has experienced great tribulation having passed through severe trouble and even persecution.

There are two main tribulations in the Bible that involve the people of God. First there is the tribulation of the Dark Ages as recorded in Matthew 24:21-22. The second tribulation commences just before the seven last plagues and climaxes in what is referred to as *the time of Jacob's trouble* (Jeremiah 30:7).

Sing the Song of Moses and the Lamb

The *one hundred and forty-four thousand* sing the song of Moses and the Lamb referred to in Revelation 15:2-3. The Song of Moses was a song sung by Israel after they had passed through the divided waters of the Red Sea when God had marvelously delivered them from Egyptian bondage. When Israel looked back and saw their enemies destroyed and realized that after hundreds of years of cruel captivity they were forever free, they burst into a song of gratitude to God. The Song of Moses represents deliverance from earthly foes.

The Song of the Lamb, by way of contrast, is a song of deliverance from spiritual foes: it celebrates deliverance from Satan and the dominion of sin. Thus the Song of Moses and the Lamb that the *one hundred and forty four thousand* will sing is also to be a song of their experience.

Scripture indicates that all the redeemed will sing the Song of Moses and the Lamb, because all have been delivered from their spiritual foes by the Lamb. However there is a special section of the song which only the *one hundred and forty four thousand* can sing.

...and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth. Revelation 14:3

They sing a particular portion of it because they have gone through an experience that no other group on earth has had to endure. The *one hundred and forty four thousand* will have been delivered from the *beast and his image*. They will have been delivered from earthly powers that have united together during the last days against God. They will have been delivered from an evil world intent on destroying the faithful. Of course, like those redeemed, they will also be delivered from the guilt and power of sin.

And I saw something like a sea of glass mingled with fire, and those who have the victory over the beast, over his image and over his mark and over the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, having harps of God. They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb. Revelation 15:2-3

This song will be a song of marvelous deliverance.

Will not die

The one hundred and forty-four thousand will not experience death.

*They....were redeemed from the earth.... These were redeemed from among men....
Revelation 14:3-4*

The one hundred and forty-four thousand are redeemed from among *the living*.

Speaking of the righteous dead who will be resurrected, the prophet Hosea says *I will redeem them from death* (Hosea 13:14), that is, they are redeemed from the grave. In contrast the *one hundred and forty-four thousand* will be redeemed *from the earth, from among men*, from among the living. These people are alive at the time when Christ returns. They behold Him when the eastern heavens part asunder. They have the marvelous privilege of seeing the small dark cloud in the distance as it turns into a glorious white cloud.

A symbolic number

The fact that the *one hundred and forty-four thousand* will see Christ come should not be used to imply that this is the total number saved from among the living at the Second Advent.

Recall that the Book of Revelation is full of prophetic symbols and is to a large extent based on the Old Testament. Consequently in order to understand this book correctly we must always refer back to the Old Testament's pages. Many books in the Old Testament make an essential contribution to the understanding of the Book of Revelation. The Book of Daniel in particular is so closely linked that we cannot understand the Book of Revelation without referring to its symbolism.

The Old Testament method of estimating populations was not to count single individuals but rather to count the heads of families. Therefore when Revelation refers to the *one hundred and forty-four thousand* we must be aware that this number could represent *one hundred and forty-four thousand* heads of families and thus include many more people.

The number twelve in Scripture

The number *one hundred and forty four thousand* is a multiple of twelve ($12 \times 12 \times 1000 = 144,000$). Throughout Scripture the number *twelve* symbolises the church of God and in particular, church government.

The number of patriarchs before the flood was *twelve* if Shem and Japheth are included (refer to Genesis 5). After the flood there is a genealogy of *twelve* patriarchs. The church in the wilderness consisted of *twelve* tribes. (Actually there were thirteen tribes if you count the Levites, but only twelve are ever mentioned because twelve is the number which represents God's church). There were *twelve* judges of Israel. There were *twelve* apostles in the early church (Spiritual Israel). Revelation 21, while describing the New Jerusalem, uses the number *twelve* several times, and also the number *one hundred and forty-four* (verse 17) which in the original text is expressed as *twelve times twelve*.

The number *twelve* denotes rulership and it is connected with *Israel*, which means *God ruled*. The number *one hundred and forty-four thousand* therefore is a number symbolising the Remnant church that stands ready for the Second Advent and for translation.

The twelve tribes

When comparing the twelve tribes of Revelation 7 with the wilderness tribes of Israel listed in Numbers 1 we find that two of the Old Testament tribes have been replaced. These are the tribes of Dan and Ephraim. There were thousands belonging to the tribes of Dan and Ephraim in the time of literal Israel indicating that the *Israel* of Revelation cannot be literal Israel. The reason these two names are missing is that these tribes persisted in disobedience.

The name *Dan* means *he has judged me*.² It represents those in the church of God who persist in destructive criticism, those who are backbiters, slanderers. For them, like Dan, if they do not repent there is no inheritance.

The name *Ephraim* means *joined to idols*.³ It represents those among God's people who mix with the world and who are unfaithful to Christ. The Scripture says:

Whoever...wants to be a friend of the world, makes himself an enemy of God.
James 4:4

True Christians cannot belong to the world and belong to Christ at the same time.

It is important to note that the order of the names of the tribes given in Revelation 7 is also very significant. In the Old Testament the list of the twelve tribes always starts with Reuben, the first-born son. In Revelation, however, we find that the tribes are not listed in order of their birth dates. There is a reason for this. The order of names given in Revelation conveys a very significant message. The first name is *Judah* – which means *praise*. The second name is *Reuben, a son*. The next is *Asher* which means *happy*, followed by *Naphtali* which means *struggling*, then *Manasseh*, which means *forgetting*. After this is *Simeon* which means *hearing*. *Levi* means *joined*. *Issachar* means *service*.⁴ *Zebulon* means *dwelling*. *Joseph* means *added* and *Benjamin* means *son of the right hand*.

If we put all these name meanings together in their order in sentence form, they speak a very beautiful message, as follows

Praise God, a son, a company of sons, redeemed and happy, after wrestling in prayer, forgetting self and the past, hearing God's word, joined to God as servants, dwelling with added joys and blessing, as sons of the right hand.

This is a description of the condition that the *one hundred and forty four thousand* will reach by the grace of God in the last days.

2 Genesis 49:16.

3 Hosea 4:17

4 Genesis 49:14

Pure

The next feature brought to view concerning the *one hundred and forty-four thousand* is that

These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins.
Revelation 14:4

Some have concluded that the *one hundred and forty-four thousand* must be all males, but in the Greek the word *virgin* encompasses both male and female. Neither does the word imply that the *one hundred and forty-four thousand* are unmarried, because Scripture is clear that marriage does not defile.

Marriage is honorable... and the bed is undefiled. Hebrews 13:4

The significance of the statement *they are virgins* is based on the fact that:

1. The *one hundred and forty-four thousand* will be morally pure. The blood of Christ has cleansed them from all sin (I John 1:7). In a time of extreme moral corruption and perversion, they have resisted the all-pervading immorality and have overcome.
2. Women in prophecy represent churches. In Revelation Chapter 17 *Babylon the Great* is brought to view. This is the counterfeit religious organization inspired by Satan and called *the mother of harlots*. It follows that there must be daughters – daughter churches – who are following in the steps of the mother church. An analysis of Revelation 17 reveals that the great mother church is none other than the Church of Rome and the harlot daughters are those churches which have come out of Rome but who are now following in their mother's footsteps. These are the apostate churches of Protestantism.

The *one hundred and forty-four thousand* are not *defiled with women*, that is, they are not defiled with the harlot churches of Christendom. They have not embraced the false doctrines and practices of spiritual Babylon, but have rather obeyed the call:

Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues. Revelation 18:4

Firstfruits

These are ... firstfruits to God and to the Lamb. Revelation 14:4

The expression *firstfruits* does not necessarily mean *first* chronologically, but rather first in importance. Jesus Christ is described as *the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep*, that is, the firstfruits of the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20). We know that Jesus was not the first to rise from the dead, but He was certainly the first in importance to rise from the dead. Because of His resurrection, all others can be raised.

...Because I live, you will live also. John 14:19

In the Old Testament the term firstfruits referred to the best fruits of the crop and not necessarily to the earliest of the fruit.

All the best of the oil, all the best of the new wine and the grain, their firstfruits which they offer to the LORD, I have given them to you. Numbers 18:12

The best of all first-fruits of any kind... Ezekiel 44:30

This means then that the *one hundred and forty-four thousand* are not necessarily the first to be reaped. Rather, at the Second Advent of Christ, they represent the best of the harvest. The *one hundred and forty four thousand* are *without fault*.

And in their mouth was found no deceit, for they are without fault before the throne of God. Revelation 14:5

This tells us what God plans to accomplish with the last generation of believers.

Commandment keepers

Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. Revelation 14:12

The best endeavours of a Christian to keep the commandments of God are typically flawed. However, God accepts these endeavours in the spirit they are undertaken. While we are growing in grace Christ's righteousness covers our shortfall.

But the last generation who are awaiting translation will indeed come to the state where they fully *keep the commandments of God*. This is very significant. The *one hundred and forty-four thousand* will be used by heaven to vindicate the character of God in a special way.

From the beginning, one of Satan's major accusations has been that it is impossible for God's people to keep His law. However God exposed the falsity of Satan's accusation by showing that Jesus, while on earth and having a human nature, perfectly kept the commandments of God.

In a final demonstration, using the last generation on earth - the weakest generation of all time - God will prove to the universe that His people can keep the commandments of God. This demonstration will occur after the high priestly intercession of Christ has ceased. There will be no mediator between God and mankind and the Holy Spirit will have completed His work on earth. Out of this final generation, which has inherited the weaknesses and degeneration of the ages, God will take a people and develop them to be without fault.⁵ *In their mouth is no deceit* - a marvelous demonstration of God's grace.

This could explain why the dragon is so enraged against the Remnant and endeavors to blot them out of existence. It explains the great tribulation through which the *one hundred and forty four thousand* will pass. God permits Satan to try them to the utmost. Satan will exert extreme efforts to cause them to sin, but he will fail. The *one hundred and forty-four thousand* vindicate God. They prove before the universe that God's law can be kept.

Receive a special reward

The one hundred and forty-four thousand stand *with the Lamb*.

Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads.... These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. Revelation 14:1, 4

⁵ John 1:12 - True believers are given the power to become Sons of God. (KJV)

Philippians 1:6 - God undertakes to manage the growth of His people to Christian maturity.

God's people are saved by grace. Eternal life is a gift. Christians cannot reach the kingdom by virtue of their own works, yet for the works that they do accomplish by His grace, God will reward them accordingly in the kingdom. This passage tells us that not only will the *one hundred and forty-four thousand* be delivered, but also that a glorious privilege and reward will be theirs.

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 dwell among them...for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Revelation 7:15, 17

This passage reveals the tremendous privileges that will be given to this group. They will *serve Him... in His temple*. God will *dwell among them*. Christ *shepherds* them and leads them.

Composition of the redeemed

There is a view that the number *one hundred and forty-four thousand* represents *the great multitude* that stand before the throne, and who have *come out of great tribulation* (Revelation 7:9,14). Such a conclusion is possible at first reading. However a careful analysis of the whole chapter makes this idea untenable.

After introducing the *one hundred and forty-four thousand* in verses 4-8, John subsequently beholds *a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues* (v9). The fact that this group is innumerable is good news since it indicates that so many people from this earth will be in God's kingdom. Today even with the population explosion it is still possible to count the world's inhabitants. If the saints at the end time are so abundant that no one can number them, then they must comprise a significant proportion of the world's population.

However if the idea that the *great multitude* is synonymous with the *one hundred and forty-four thousand* is correct this means that the Biblical doctrine of the remnant cannot be sustained. The exponents of the above view therefore need to consider whether they believe that God's people in the End Time will comprise the majority of the population or whether they will in fact be only a remnant.

The only logical conclusion is that the *great multitude* of Revelation 7:9 comprises the saved of all ages, as is so clearly confirmed in *The Great Controversy*. Through history, compared to the rest of the population, God's people have always been in the minority – a remnant.⁶

Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Luke 12:32

For the same reason the view that the *one hundred and forty-four thousand* proclaim the Loud Cry and win over *the great multitude* cannot be sustained. If the number won in the Loud Cry amounted to an innumerable group of people, this would fly in the face of the clear teaching of Scripture that the wicked comprise the majority of the Earth's population who support the leaders of Babylon.

⁶ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1898) 665.

**...Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where do they come from?
Revelation 7:13**

The only people directly described as having white robes are *the great multitude* (Revelation 7:9). However if they were in fact the only group wearing white then the *one hundred and forty-four thousand* would have to be clothed in some other colour. This is unthinkable because white robes represent *the righteous acts of the saints* (Revelation 19:8) and all the redeemed will be so clothed.

As explained above, it is quite obvious who comprise *the great multitude* and from where they have originated. They are from *all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues*. The elder speaking in verse 13 must be referring to a separate group clothed in white robes. The distinction is that *these are the ones who come out of the great tribulation* (v14).

Those who endure the final time of tribulation are the remnant referred to in Revelation 12:17, not *a great multitude which no one could number*. Note these contrasts between the *one hundred and forty-four thousand* and the great multitude:

Contrasts between the 144,000 and the great multitude	
The 144,000	The great multitude
A limited number	An unlimited number
Of the 12 tribes of Israel	From all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues
Sealed in their foreheads	No mention of being sealed
Exist in the last days	From all ages ⁷

It is informative to recall the description given by Ellen White of the redeemed as they stand before the throne. At least four groups are pictured in their order.

1. The one hundred and forty-four thousand, or those represented by that number, are *those who were once zealous in the cause of Satan... and have followed their Saviour with deep intense devotion.*
2. *Next are those who perfected Christian characters in the midst of falsehood and infidelity, those who honoured the law of God when the Christian world declared it void.* (This would include faithful Seventh-day Adventists).
3. *...the millions of all ages who were martyred for their faith.*
4. *...beyond is the 'great multitude which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues...clothed with white robes and palms in their hands.'*⁸

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ellen G. White, Testimonies to the Church (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1948) , 8:44

Conclusion

The most critical question for readers relates to whether they can be among those represented by the *one hundred and forty-four thousand*. If you are permitted to live until the Second Advent and your trust in Christ continues, if you follow Christ *with deep intense devotion*, then the answer is *Yes*, you may have the privilege of being one of that number.

The one hundred and forty-four thousand *follow the lamb wherever He goes*. If by His grace we follow the Lamb now, we will surely follow Him in the Kingdom. We follow Christ by emulating His example, by obeying Him.

If you love Me, keep My commandments. John 14:15

May God help us to *follow the Lamb wherever He goes*, until we finally stand before the throne with the millions of redeemed from all ages.

Appendices

Appendix A - Twelve identifiers of the 144,000

1. Exist in the last days
2. Israelites – of spiritual Israel – true Christians
3. Sealed, which involves the observance of the true Sabbath and receiving the mark of protection at the close of probation
4. Not defiled by the teachings and practices of Babylon
5. Experience the *great tribulation* of the End Time
6. Experience being without a mediator
7. Victorious in the conflict with the Beast and his image
8. Attain to perfection of character
9. Vindicate God by demonstrating that human beings can keep God's law
10. Do not experience death
11. Represent the living righteous who will be translated
12. Receive a special reward in the kingdom.

Appendix B - Parallels between Revelation 7:1-8, 13-17 and Revelation 14:1-5

Revelation 7:1-8 and 7:13-17	Revelation 14:1-5
1. one hundred and forty four thousand in number (v4)	one hundred and forty four thousand number (v1)
2. Seal of God in their foreheads (v3-4)	The Father's name in their foreheads (v1)
3. Seal is received in the End Time (6:17)	Name is received in the End Time (v4)
4. Have washed their robes and made them white (v14)	Not defiled – <i>virgins</i> (v4)
5. Have come out of the Great Tribulation (v14)	Located in centre of the conflict (Between Revelation 13 & Revelation 14:6-12)
6. Are before the throne (v9)	Are before the throne (v5)
7. Have special privileges in the kingdom (v15)	Have special privileges in the Kingdom (v1, 3-5)

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