

## Who are the 144,000 in Revelation 7 and 14? All Believers, Jew and Gentile.

The 144,000 in Rev. 7, 12,000 each from 12 tribes,\* according to most commentaries, are a heavenly view of the whole church, much as the 7 golden lampstands in Rev. 1 were a heavenly view of the individual churches to which John wrote. The “144,000” is a symbolic description of all believers (to encourage John’s 7 churches), rather than a literal number count of Israelites.

Below are the reasons why I agree that the “144,000” is a symbolic description of all believers:

1. **Several (six) key words** that describe the 144,000 are used elsewhere in Revelation and elsewhere in the Bible to describe all believers.

- (a) “*Servants*” Rev 7:3 – Seal the “*servants*” of our God. See 1:1; 22:3, where all believers are God’s *servants*.
- (b) “*Forehead*” Rev 7:3; 14:1 – Seal 144,000 on their “*foreheads*.” Rev 22:4 – All God’s servants have his name on their *foreheads*. Rev 13:16 – All those who worship the beast have his counterfeit mark on their *foreheads*. Ezekiel 9:4, the OT source of the seal: all the righteous people are given a protecting mark on their *foreheads*, not just some.
- (c) “*Seal*” – Eph 1:13; 4:30 – All believers are sealed by God.
- (d) “*Purchased*” Rev 14:3,4 – the 144,00 are “*purchased*” from the earth. In 5:9, the Lamb is praised because he “*purchased*” people from every nation, i.e. all believers.
- (e) “*Follow*” Rev 14:3 – the 144,000 *follow* the Lamb. All believers are called by the Lord to *follow* him.
- (f) “*Firstfruits*” Rev 14:3 – the 144,000 are *firstfruits* to God and the Lamb; in James 1:18 all believers are *firstfruits* of God’s creatures.

2. **I heard then I saw.** A few times in Revelation, John “hears” something, and then he “sees” what he heard. What he hears and what he sees are different descriptions of the same thing. The most striking is that John heard that the Lion of Judah had conquered, and then turned to see not a lion but a slaughtered Lamb that lived. Both lion and lamb refer to the Lord. In Rev 7:4, John “hears” the “number,” 12,000 from every Israelite tribe. Then in 7:9 he “sees” an “crowd impossible to number” from every nation. So both probably describe the same reality.

3. **Who is truly a Jew?** Revelation 2:9 – *I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.* 3:9 – *Those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars.* These are ethnic, circumcised Jews, but are not Jews at all as far as John (who is a Jew) is concerned, because they reject Christ. These lines in Rev 2:9 and 3:9 tell us John would and does easily use Israelite language to describe Gentile believers (i.e. “priests”). John in Revelation agrees with Paul in Romans 2, that true believers including Gentiles are the real “Jews”: *A person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.*

4. **The number Twelve.** There is one important 12 in the OT: the 12 tribes; and one important 12 in the NT: the 12 disciples of the Lord. These both suggest that the number “12” symbolizes the people of God. Revelation brings believing Israelites and believing Gentiles together into one true people of God. This is why Revelation likes to put two “12s” together.

So in Rev 4, we have 24 elders, 12 + 12. The wall of the New Jerusalem is 144 cubits high, 12 x 12. The New Jerusalem has 12 gates which are the twelve sons of Israel, and also 12 foundations which are the 12 apostles of the Lamb. All of this includes both Jewish and Gentiles believers. 12 tribes of 12,000 in each tribe fits with two 12s nicely, the Lamb's followers from both Israel and Gentiles.

**5. Numbers in Revelation are often symbolic**, which means Revelation is the last book of the Bible in which to take numbers concretely. "Seven" means complete or something like that, so the Lamb has seven eyes (complete perception) and seven horns (complete strength). But when we see the Lord, he will not have seven eyes or seven horns. "Four" means the four directions of the compass, everywhere on earth. "Two" is the number of witnesses in Revelation as throughout the Bible. Let us not assume in Revelation that numbers are best taken literally.

**6. Seals.** Rev 13:6 – all the beast's people have his counterfeit mark on their forehead and hands, not just a select few. So one assumes all the Lamb's followers also have His seal. In Ephesians 1:13 and 4:30, that every believer is *sealed* with the Holy Spirit. The purpose of the Spirit *seal* in Ephesians is the same as the purpose of the *seal* of God in Revelation 7: to mark God's people as his own, protected from falling away, to guarantee for them their inheritance.

**7. God's protects ALL of His own.** Rev 9:4. When the fifth trumpet blows, God releases demonic locusts onto the earth. They inflict such torment that for five months people will want to die, but will not die. In 9:4 we read that the locusts are instructed: only injure people who do *not have the seal of God* on their foreheads. It seems unlikely that God would protect a selection of Israelites from this torment, but not all Israelites, and protect no Gentile believers at all. (Remember, Revelation never speaks about "the rapture" – all believers are present for this.)

Rev 9:20–21 tells us that these torments, fifth and sixth trumpets, were released to bring godless people to repent from their idolatry and evil. Why include unsealed believers? In Revelation, God's people need not fear God. We will be attacked by the dragon and the beast, but not tormented by God. It fits Revelation best if the 144,000 sealed servants means all believers.

**8. John wrote his letter to comfort 7 first century churches**, who were entering a time of severe persecution. Revelation was written to help and encourage and guide them in their troubles. It would comfort those first century believers to know that they been sealed by God, protected by God's mark, his name and the Lamb's name written on their foreheads, and so they will end up in that innumerable crowd at the End of time, praising God before his Throne. It is hard to see the benefit to them of being told that in more than 2,000 years God would select 144,000 Jews for some special protected work.

\*This list of 12 tribes in Revelation 7 is peculiar in two ways. One, the tribe of Dan is not mentioned at all. Two, Joseph and Manasseh (father and son) are both mentioned but not Ephraim (other son). The land of Israel was divided into 12 sections, Levi getting none, and Joseph's sons Manasseh and Ephraim each getting a section. If *the 12 sons* were listed, Dan should be named rather than Manasseh. If the *twelve divisions of land* were listed, Ephraim should be named rather than Joseph. There is no obvious explanation for these peculiarities. It does not seem intended as a careful list.

Ed Neufeld, February 2019.