

REVELATION 14

"I looked and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty four thousand."

Twice in the Apocalypse, the **144,000**, are mentioned. They represent the *righteous remnant of Israel*, or the salvation of "all Israel" (cf. Romans 11:26). The significance of the 144,000 for the dating and application of the Revelation seems to be lost on all but a handful of commentators. This is somewhat strange however, for what is written about them definitely has dramatic implications for the dating and interpretation of the book.

The referent to 144,000 is symbolic of the righteous remnant. The number 12 multiplied by hundreds is symbolic of perfection. One thing that confuses a lot of people is the idea that ***"all Israel will be saved"*** was a promise that the totality of national Israel, or at least a majority, will one day be saved. This is misguided. The Biblical idea is that only the remnant, *but all of the remnant*, would be saved!

It seems to have escaped the notice of commentators that God had never, at any point of time in His dealings with Israel, saved a majority. There had always only been a righteous *remnant*. This is Paul's point, partially, in Romans 9-11. The apostle draws on Jehovah's past dealings with the remnant--as well as the prophecies of the salvation of the remnant in the last days⁷⁹-- to make his point that, "At this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace" (Romans 9:5). Paul's "this present time" was *his generation*.

What is so significant about this is that for Paul, the righteous remnant was being saved, *as witnessed by his own conversion* (Romans 11).⁸⁰ The last days salvation of the remnant was being fulfilled! Furthermore, that last days work of Jehovah would not drag on for centuries and millennia, ***"For He will finish the work and cut it short in righteousness, because the Lord will make a short work upon the earth."*** (Romans 9:28).

So here is what we are saying: Revelation 7 and 14 is concerned with the salvation of the righteous remnant of Israel. The salvation of the remnant was foretold by the Old Testament prophets and would occur in the last days. According to Paul, that last days work of the salvation of the remnant was present in his day, and even in his person. Not only was the salvation of the righteous remnant present in his day and in his person, the consummation of that last days work would be consummated shortly, "He will finish the work, and cut it short in righteousness." Thus, unless John was writing about the consummation of a different salvation of the remnant than Paul, we must confine John's discussion to the first century!

Paul was concerned with the salvation of the righteous remnant of Israel. John was concerned with the salvation of the righteous remnant of Israel. Paul said that God's work of bringing that salvation to consummation would be fulfilled shortly. John was told that the fulfillment of his vision was "at hand" and "must shortly come to pass."

As we shall see below, Paul confined the salvation of "all Israel" i.e. all of the righteous remnant, to the time of the completion of his personal ministry. This means that unless Paul and John were writing of two totally different salvations of Israel, at two totally different times, at two different comings of the Lord, in two different last days, then the events of Revelation 7 and 14 must be confined to the first century generation. Paul's discussion of the salvation of the remnant has a strong influence on our understanding of the dating of Revelation and its application to first century events, therefore.

If there is, as seems evident, a delineation between the 144,000 and the "great multitude" of Revelation 7:9,⁸¹ this raises a serious question: If the destruction of Jerusalem was in the past, implying that God had terminated His relationship with Israel then, why is the book of Revelation concerned about the fate of Israel, represented so unmistakably by the referent to the 12 tribes? The Apocalypse is concerned about the consummation of God's promises to the people represented by the 144,000. But, again, if Israel's history had been so dramatically terminated almost a quarter century beforehand, why is the book so focused on the *future, yet imminent*, salvation of Israel?

Notice what is said of the 144,000 in Revelation 14:4, ***"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."*** Did you catch the power of what is said? *The 144,000 were the first fruits of those redeemed*

by Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God! The text does not say that the 144,000 were the first fruit of the nations. That was said of Old Covenant Israel in Jeremiah 3:2. The text emphasizes that the 144,000 were *followers of the Lamb* (Interesting irony, is it not? The Lamb is known as the animal that *follows*, but here, the Lamb is the one that *leads!*) These were Christians!

But, these are not just Christians, they are Christian "Jews."⁸² They are out of the 12 tribes of Israel, and they are followers of the Messiah. Further, these are not just Jewish Christians, they are *the first generation of Jewish Christians!* As Stuart says, ""The writer doubtless refers to the 144,000 as being among the earliest Christians."⁸³ Russell concurs, "They are the first fruits unto God and the Lamb; the first converts to the faith in Christ in the land of Judea "(*Parousia*, 470) Notice that they "were redeemed from among men, being first fruits (*aparche*) to God and to the Lamb." The significance of the first fruits must not be missed, or dismissed, for it places the book of Revelation in an early context.

You and I are living 50 generations beyond the time of the first fruit of Christians. Furthermore, the longer time marches on, the farther removed we are from the generation of the first fruits redeemed from among men.

The 144,000 were the first fruit of "Jewish" Christians. You and I live 50 generations removed from the generation of the 144,000. You cannot posit the 144,000 anywhere except the first century generation, the generation of the first fruit!

James wrote early in the first century generation, and wrote, "*To the twelve tribes scattered abroad*" (James 1:1). What did he have to say about the first fruit concept? Hear him, "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of His mouth, that we might be a kind of first fruit (*aparche*) of His creatures" (James 1:18). Likewise, the writer of Hebrews said, "You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an unnumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven" (Hebrews 12:22). Chilton is certainly correct to note, "The New Testament uses the term first fruits to describe the church of the Last Days, the 'first generation' Church." (*Vengeance*, 357)

There can be no doubt as to the meaning of "first fruits." When Paul wrote to the saints in Rome, he gave greetings to Epaenetus, "*who was the*

first (aparche) convert to Christ in the province of Asia" (Romans 16:5 NIV). Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 16:15, the same apostle sent greetings to the household of Stephanas that was "the first (*aparche*) converts in Achaia." Paul was referring to the very first converts.

John did not say that the 144,000 were the first fruit of some far distant time. He did not say that they were to be the first fruit of a different preaching of a different gospel message. Nor did he, as Beale seems to suggest, say that the 144,000 were representative of the entirety of all the redeemed, of all the ages, being referred to as the first fruit. (*Revelation*, 7:14f). The idea of the term "first fruit" has a temporal significance that cannot be mitigated. The 144,000 were simply the very first Christians, and this has profound implications for not only the dating of the Apocalypse, but for many of today's eschatological paradigms.

John saw that the 144,000 were to come out of the Great Tribulation (7:14). If the 144,000 were the first Christians, and if they were to endure the Great Tribulation, then it follows undeniably, that the Great Tribulation was to occur in the first century generation. Of course, this is precisely what Jesus predicted in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24:15-34) in spite

The 144,000 were to endure the Great Tribulation. But the 144,000 were the *first generation of Christians*. Therefore, the Great Tribulation had to occur in the first century generation.

of the dispensational objections. You cannot divorce the 144,000 from the Great Tribulation. No other generation can ever be "the first fruits unto God and to the Lamb" (Revelation 14:4), than that first century generation. Patently, the Great Tribulation was in the first century.

Now, since James and Hebrews, writing to the first generation of Jewish Christians, called them the first fruits and the first born, there is no justification for positing Revelation outside of that first century context. Further, since both James and Hebrews were written in the context of persecution, and were both written before the fall of Jerusalem, what is the justification for placing Revelation outside of that historical context? Unless one could prove that Revelation was speaking of a different first fruits, (but there can *never* be two different first fruit Christian generations!!), at a different time, under a different persecution, being instigated by different forces, then since Hebrews and James are undeniably

written prior to the fall of Jerusalem, in the midst of Jewish persecution, it seems eminently logical, and logically compelling, to place Revelation within that identical context.

A final thought for this section. Bauckham, observes that the 144,000 are a "holy army" to fight in the battle of Jehovah. However, their triumph is not in military conquest, but "by following his path to death." He then comments that this motif of victory through martyrdom, "Shows the whole vision of chapter 7, with its play on the idea of numbering (7:4,9), to be the fulfillment of the promise of the martyrs in 6:11." (*Climax*, 229, n. 55) This is clearly correct, but it has implications for the dating of Revelation that Bauckham and others seem not to have seen.

We will develop this concept extensively later in the book, but for now, we need to see that the promise of Revelation 6:11 is that the Day of the Lord would come when the number of the martyrs was filled up. The connection of this promise to the promise of Jesus and the ministry of Paul is direct, yet, generally ignored or unseen.

Jesus accused Israel of killing the prophets, of seeking to kill him, and said that he would send his own apostles and prophets to that nation (Matthew 23:29-39). They too would be killed, and in that persecution, Israel would fill up the measure of her blood guilt. This implies and demands of course that the eschatological measure of suffering, the number of the martyrs, would be filled up as promised in Revelation 6.

Paul, repeating the message of his Master, said that Israel had killed the prophets, had killed the Lord, and were now killing the apostles and prophets of Jesus. In doing so, they were filling the measure of their sin, and of course, filling the number of the martyrs (1 Thessalonians 2:15-17). What is more, Paul emphatically said that *his personal ministry*, and that of the apostolate, was the final act in filling up the suffering of the martyrs.

In Colossians 1:24f (see our discussion below), the apostle said that he, *emphatically* he, had been chosen to fill up what was lacking in the afflictions of Jesus. In addition, he said the apostles had been set forth "last of all" as men designated by Jehovah for martyrdom (1 Corinthians 4:9).

Revelation promised the judgment on "Babylon" for killing the apostles and prophets (18:20, 24), the final act of filling up the measure of those appointed to die (Revelation 6:11). Yet, Paul said, emphatically, that he personally⁸⁴ and the apostolate, were the ones designated to fill up that measure of martyrdom. Now, since the martyrs of Revelation 6 were promised that the Day of the Lord against their persecutors would come when the number of the martyrs was completed, and since Paul said that the

number of foreordained martyrs was to be completed with his own suffering, this amounts to *prima facie* evidence of an early date for the Apocalypse. Paul undeniably was martyred before the fall of Jerusalem. He was martyred, and Jerusalem fell almost immediately. The correspondence is amazing. The only way to counter this bit of evidence is to be able to prove that the 144,000 and what they signified, the filling of the number of martyrs, was totally unrelated to what Jesus and Paul had to say.

This is an excerpt from “[Who Is Babylon](#)” by [Don K. Preston](#)

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