

The Twitter Commentary on Revelation

Jon Paulien

Revelation Chapter 7

Rev 7 (Introduction)—

Rev 7 moves from the hopelessness of human rebellion to the hope in God's protection of those who call on Him (Psa 46).

Rev 7 offers two answers to the question "When the great day of his (their) wrath comes, who will be able to stand?" (Rev 6:17) (1) The 144,000 from the tribes of Israel (Rev 7:1-8) and (2) the great multitude from all the nations (Rev 7:9-17).

The four winds of Rev 7 are an end-time manifestation of the four horses of the seals (see Zech 6:5).

Rev 7:1-3 (Introduction)—

There is a strong structural parallel between Rev 6:12 – 7:3 and the Synoptic Apocalypse, particularly Mark 13:24-27.

Both Matthew and Rev 7 have a pause in the catastrophes of the End in which the safety of God's faithful is secured. Rev 7 adds an allusion to the horrific sequence of Ezek 9.

The securing of the righteous occurs at the Second Coming of Jesus in Matt 25:31. Here it occurs just before that event.

Rev 7:1—

The concept of "four corners of the earth" implies that the entire earth is the ultimate object of what is about to take place (see Isaiah 11:12 and Ezekiel 7:2). It is somewhat like the contemporary phrase "the four points of the compass."

Strong winds are a symbol of God's judgment throughout Scripture. While judgment can sometimes be positive, the imagery here is negative, these winds would bring catastrophe and are, therefore, being restrained for a time.

The earth, sea and trees together symbolize the whole of humanity, both faithful and unfaithful. The restraining of "the winds" is to safeguard God's faithful ones before general destruction is unleashed.

Winds, earth, sea and trees are all symbolic, representing human experience during the crisis days of the End-time. But the one behind evil and suffering (Rev 9:11; 12:9) is not mentioned in this text, only the one restraining him (God or Christ).

Rev 7:2—

While the other four angels are stationary at the four "corners" of the earth, another angels ascends from the rising of the sun (east). He is clearly in charge of the others.

Possession of the seal and command over the four angels means that this angel either represents God or was one specially favored by God (Daniel 6:17; and also Genesis 41:42; Esther 3:10; 8:2, 8). In the NT sunrise is consistently associated with Jesus Christ.

This other angel is the commander of the four angels, called Michael in Rev 12:7, and ascends from the sunrise (Luke 1:78). He is acting the role here that the Lamb acts in chapter six. He is likely Jesus Christ.

The phrase “of the living God” tells us that the sealing process is a positive one, perhaps even life-giving. The seal belongs to God and He shares it with those who are in relationship with Him. But here the context is End-time.

While the winds threaten earth, sea and trees, this verse makes clear that the trees are not the object of destruction. The sealing marks them out for protection from the winds.

Rev 7:3--

God’s protection of the sealed was a reality throughout human history. But in the troubles of the End-time, a special kind of intervention by God is necessary.

The forehead is the seat of thinking and character. To be sealed by Christ means to adopt the mind and character of Christ. The sealed are those who are fully settled into their loyalty to God.

The sealing of this passage is the culmination of the sealing work throughout Christian history (Eph 1:13; 4:30; 2 Tim 2:19).

The sealing at the End is compatible with the gospel seal but involves something more as well.

In this verse sealing is a verb. The object of that verb is “the servants of God.” This implies that the objects of the End-time sealing are people who were already sealed in the Pauline sense (Eph 1:13; 4:30) before they received the end-time sealing.

The sealing in this passages functions more as a protection than a validation, more like Ezek 9 than Eph 1:13.

The opposite of the seal of God in Revelation is the mark of the beast. While the seal of God applies the character of God to end-time believers, the mark of the beast applies the character of the beast to the lives of his end-time followers.

Rev 7:1-3 (Conclusion)—

The final proclamation of the gospel operates under the special protection of God. The full manifestation of evil is restrained by God until the entire world is divided into two camps in relation to the characters of God and Satan.

Rev 7:1-3 (Spiritual Lessons)—

In Rev God is the one who restrains evil and suffering, He is not the one who causes them (Rev 7:1-3; 9:11).

The little battles we fight every day are part of a much larger conflict. When we learn what God is truly like, we become more and more like Job, who knew he could trust God, even in the midst of intense suffering and trial.

Rev 7:4-8 (Introduction)—

The 144,000 as a whole is a military number, modeled after the numbering of Israel in the latter part of the book of Numbers. Each of the twelve tribes had an army of between 30,000 and 75,000 in English translations (Num 1:17-43).

The Hebrew word for “thousand” is *eleph*, which is not necessarily an exact thousand, but can mean clan, military unit (like a platoon), or family. This passage would likely be read in Hebrew as 144 platoons.

The number thousand in English translations of the OT is not always to be taken literally, it can have multiple meanings. But what counts in Rev 7 is that 144,000 represents the totality of Israel, either militarily or politically.

Since Revelation is a Christian book and is speaking about the far future, Israel is being illustrated here in the Christ-centered spiritual sense, God’s end-time followers of Jesus.

The number 12 in Scripture is made up of 3 (number of godhead) times 4 (number of the earth), and it represent the people of God on earth.

12 times 12 in Rev points the reader to the description of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21-22) and also of the 24 elders (Rev 4, etc.).

The number 12 is the number of Israel, both in Jacob and in Jesus Christ (Jam 1:1; Matt 19:28). So the 144,000 as an image is the totality of Israel, both old and new.

The number 144,000 occurs 3 times in Rev (7:4; 14:1, 3). The group represents God’s faithful people at the end of history, in contrast to the 200,000,000 of 9:16.

Rev 7:4-8 (Excursus on the 144,000: Literal or Symbolic?)—

Upon first reading the 144,000 does appear to be a literal number of Jew drawn from each of the twelve tribes. But there are several problems with that reading.

To take this text literally today would fly in the face of the fact that it is impossible to reconstruct all twelve tribes in any literal sense.

The twelve tribes are actually thirteen, since the two sons of Joseph (the double portion) were both heads of tribes. This means that the number twelve is purposeful and not just an accident of history.

Rev 7:4-8 (Literal or Symbolic?)— The order in which the 12 tribes were listed in the OT is varied, but the list in Rev differs from all other lists; Joseph and Levi are added, Ephraim and Dan are subtracted.

Rev 7:4-8 (Literal or Symbolic?)— In the NT, Israel is expanded to include the Gentiles, hence the things of Israel are applied to the church, those in relationship with Jesus. So in Rev, ethnic and geographical Israel represents the worldwide, spiritual followers of Jesus.

While not every detail in Revelation is necessarily symbolic, Rev 1:1 and its allusion to Dan 2:28 and 45 make clear that the primary language of the book is symbolic.

The number 144,000 is not to be taken literally, neither are the twelve specific tribes and their subdivisions. It is a figurative description of the totality of Israel, with particular emphasis on the people of God in the very final period of earth’s history.

Rev 7:4--

The strong verbal parallel between this verse and Rev 9:16 indicate that the 144,000 are the divine counterpart of the 200,000,000 of the sixth trumpet.

The promised sealing of verses 1-3 is seen as past in verse 4, so while the sealing is not described, it appears to have occurred between verse 3 and verse 4.

The original sons of Israel were the sons of Jacob. Jesus is the new Israel and chooses twelve disciples, representing the twelve tribes.

Rev 7:5-8 (Introduction)—

The tribe of Dan is probably left out of the narrative because it was the first tribe to fall into idolatry and is associated with Antichrist in early Judaism.

The tribe of Joseph replaces and represents Ephraim in this passage. The Danites and Ephraimites initiated idolatry in Israel.

What all three tribes in this verse have in common is that they are related to Leah in some way. Judah has replaced Reuben as the chief tribe.

Rev 7:6—

What these three tribes have in common is that none of them is the direct son of Rachel or Leah.

Rev 7:7—

What all three tribes in this verse have in common is that they are all sons of Leah and are listed in the relative order of their birth in the original story.

Rev 7:8—

What these three tribes have in common is that all three are listed in birth order, which is striking, since none of the other tribes are listed exactly in birth order.

Rev 7:5-8 (Conclusion)—

The order of the tribes does not seem greatly significant, the number twelve certainly is. In all the OT listings, there were always twelve tribes, but which twelve and in what order, seems governed by the perspective of the one making the list.

In the NT the literal (ethnic) and local (geographical) things of Israel are interpreted in a spiritual, worldwide way. In the broadest sense, Israel = the church.

Rev 7:9-13 (Introduction)—

The 144,000 and the Great Multitude appear on the surface to be opposites: Countable vs. not countable, Jew vs. Gentile, on earth vs. in heaven, sheltered vs. passing through the storm.

John hears the number 144,000, but when he looks he sees a great uncountable multitude. This reminds the reader of the lion and the lamb of Rev 5:5-6. Opposites can be the same when John hears one and sees the other.

In Rev 17, the prostitute sitting on many waters (17:1; Jer 51:13) is the same as the woman sitting on a scarlet beast (17:3-5). The waters and the beast also represent the same thing, the secular, political powers of the world (17:15).

The literary pattern of hearing and seeing is also confirmed in Rev 1:10-12. The 144,000 and the great multitude are the double answer to the question of 6:17.

Rev 7:9—

“After these things” often signals a new section in Rev. John never sees the 144,000, but when he looks he sees a great multitude. The two designations are two different ways of describing the same group, God’s end-time people.

The “great multitude” reminds the reader of the scene in Rev 4 and 5, also Acts 2:5-11, where an international group of Jews receives the Spirit (sealing?).

In this four-fold grouping “nation” is singular and the other three designations are plural. This suggests that “every nation” is the human race seen as a whole, while the other three designations highlight human diversity.

The four terms in this verse cover the whole human race; all its ethnic groups, family groups, communities and language groups.

To stand before the throne means two things: to be in the highest place, status wise, and to be in readiness for service (Rev 7:15).

The mention of white robes makes many connections with other parts of the book of Revelation (3:4-5, 18; 6:2, 11; 7:14; 19:7-8).

Palm branches were emblems of victory in the ancient world and also connect this passage with the triumphal entry of Jesus (John 12:13) and the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev 23:40).

Since Revelation portrays a New Exodus motif, Feast of Tabernacles imagery is appropriate. The palm branches recall the celebration of victory at the end of the festal year. It is also a foretaste of the bliss of eternity, which is described later on in this chapter (7:15-17).

Rev 7:10-12 (Introduction)—

This passage is a replay of Rev 5. Rev 7:9-17 is the climax of both Rev 5 and the foundational promise of 3:21.

Rev 7:10—

The great multitude acknowledges that they are not the authors of their salvation, this belongs only to the one sitting on the throne and the Lamb (see Psalm 3:9 LXX).

“Salvation” with the article generally means one of two things; salvation as an abstract, like love, truth and beauty, or a very specific salvation that the characters in the drama would know or have experienced. Both of these are pertinent here.

Rev 7:11--

This recalls the entire body heavenly host seen in 5:9-12. Their standing repeats verse nine and ceases when they fall down in worship.

Rev 7:12--

The origin of the word “amen” is in the Hebrew Bible. The word strongly affirms the truth of something that has been said previously. So in this verse the angelic host begins their song by affirming the truth of the previous song (7:10).

This seven-fold song of praise echos 5:12 with significant differences. The article in front of each item emphasizes quality. 5:12 is sung in praise of the Lamb and 7:12 is to “our God.” Seven-fold praise is complete and universal.

Rev 7:13-17 (Introduction)—

This passage is an explanation or interpretation of 7:9-10. It does not focus on the angelic hymn of 7:11-12, but on the vision of the great multitude in 7:9-10.

Rev 7:13-14 (Introduction)—

“Those in white robes” refers to the Great Multitude of 7:9-10. The two questions, 1) who (Greek: tines [two syllables]) are these dressed in white robes, and 2) from where (Greek: pothen) have they come? are answered in verse 14.

Rev 7:13--

This is one of two places in Rev (the other is Rev 5:5-6) where an elder is involving in explaining something to John, these are of particular importance to the church.

The elder here “answers” a question that hasn’t been asked with a question that he knows the answer to. A strategy for increasing interest in the story.

By asking what he intends to explain, the elder provides dramatic vividness that makes the explanation much more interesting. White robes are evidently critical to the identity of the great multitude.

Rev 7:14—

John responds in a way as to suggest “read his mind.” John’s attention is now moved from what he has seen to what he is about to hear. His focus is on the portion of the great multitude that has passed through the tribulations of the end time.

The term “Lord” is used in this view in the common meaning of “sir,” a term usually directed to a superior in rank or age. John acknowledges that the elder is better qualified than he to answer the question of verse 13.

The Great Multitude are “coming out” of the Great Tribulation. The focus is more on the process than the conclusion. The visionary location of the great multitude is anticipatory, their dwelling in heaven is not literal at that moment, but spiritual.

The definite article with “great tribulation” makes it a particular one that readers would already know about, one associated with the very end of time.

“The Great Tribulation” here is likely a reference to Matt 24, where Jesus speaks of tribulation in the context of heavenly signs (Matt 24:29). Both passages go back to Dan 12:1, which speaks of a “time of trouble.”

The washing of the robes preceded their experience of tribulation, it is an expression of their character. Suffering and martyrdom are indications of what Paul calls faith or trust (Rom 3:28; Rev 12:11).

There is a paradox between the helplessness of the slain Lamb and the “wrath of the Lamb” (Rev 6:16; 14:9-11). This is best explained with texts like Rom 1:24-28.

Rev 7:15-17 (Introduction)—

This section combines sanctuary language with the language of the countryside and its care for domestic animals. The death of Christ provides the title to stand before the throne.

Rev 7:15—

It is not because of their sufferings that the Great Multitude are before the throne of God, but because of God's merciful provision in the blood of the Lamb. Fulfillment of Rev 3:21.

The service here is priestly. The redeemed serve as priests (7:15) and kings (3:21) in eternity. More on that when we get to the last two chapters of Rev.

Day and night together constitute the whole of time. In the worship of heaven there will be no weariness and no need for an intermission or for periods of rest.

There is a heavenly temple here but not in Rev 21:22. It is likely that the temple concept still applies during the millennium, the period after the Second Coming. But with the destruction of sin (Rev 20:9-10) there is no further need for a temple.

Tents allow for mobility and flexibility but also represent a situation that is not ideal. This term is also applied to the earthly Jesus in John 1:14. Jesus' humanity was an emergency measure so that sinners would not be harmed by His glory.

The language of tenting recalls the Shekinah glory in the Most Holy Place of the Hebrew sanctuary. This presence is available to all who are in relationship with Jesus Christ.

Jesus understood His personal presence in the world to be the fulfillment of Jewish expectation of the Shekinah (Matt 12:6; John 2:19-21; Matt 18:20).

For the NT, if Jesus is the Shekinah glory, then the temple is wherever Jesus is: In heaven (Heb 8:1-2; Rev 15:5-8; in the church (1 Peter 2:5-10) and even the human body of each believer (1 Cor 6:19-20).

The tent language recalls the Feast of Tabernacles and the pillar of cloud. God sheltered His people during their wandering in the wilderness.

The description in this verse envisions a Bedouin-like existence for the people of God in eternity. A reminder that Scripture needs to be read in context to be fully understood.

Rev 7:16—

This verse is a series of four negatives (Greek: *ou, oude, oude mê, oude*) with four expressions of the future. This verse is telling us what the life of eternity will **not** be.

The climate of the Mediterranean is relatively dry, so the worst kind of heat is the desert sirocco, a burning sun and a hot breeze. The ancients at such times longed for nothing more than a cooling breeze. The life of eternity is here portrayed as a cooling breeze on a warm day.

Rev 7:16-17 together is one of the strongest verbal parallels to the OT in Rev, reflecting the language of Isa 49:10. Isaiah's promise, never fulfilled in the return from exile, is now re-activated in the context of the church.

Rev 7:17—

The Lamb in the middle of the throne will feed and protect His "sheep." Lamb as shepherd is a delightful irony here.

The living waters reference is another piece of the major allusion to the Feast of Tabernacles in 7:15-17 (see also Zechariah 14:8, 16-19). Following the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Tabernacles was like a foretaste of the promised land.

Living springs are a positive image of happiness, the wiping away of tears is a negative image of happiness. Eternal life will be a mixture of joyous things that are added to human existence and unhappy things that will be removed.

Rev 7 (Conclusion)—

Rev 7 is an interlude between the sixth and seventh seals. It answers the question at the end of Rev 6—“Who will be able to stand?” 6:17. The answer is: The 144,000 and the Great Multitude.

The time leading up to the End is a time of restraint, in which angels commissioned from heaven hold back the winds of destruction until the servants of God are sealed on their foreheads (7:1-3). The 7th seal (8:1) belongs with chapters 6 and 7.

Rev 7 (Spiritual Lessons)--

As bad as things are in this world, they would be much worse if it were not for God's restraining Spirit (Rev 7:1-3).

In Rev God is the restrainer (7:1-3) and Satan is the destroyer (9:10-11). In the context of the cosmic conflict, God does not always get what He wants.

Those redeemed from this earth will play a kingly and priestly role in eternity. Those who have suffered greatly and dealt with pride can handle great power without corruption.