

TEXT Revelation 7:1-8

REVIEW

We understand the symbolism of the sealing on the foreheads:

- when there is much religion, but much of it is phony, and people are really just pagans in Christian disguise
- when God is going to bring judgment on such people
- God knows who his real servants are, who are the true disciples of Jesus Christ
- these God will protect in the judgment that is coming

But how are we to interpret the 144,000? Are they literally Israelites, or do they represent something else?

The best published authors disagree!

Geneva: of the Jews a number

Clarke: Jews converted to Christianity

Gill: not that these were all Jews in a literal sense

Poole: to be understood of the several gospel churches of the Gentiles, who are now God's Israel

Some even get pretty forceful about it.

MacArthur:

The term Israel must be interpreted...as...the physical descends of...Jacob
any attempt to identify Israel as the church in Revelation 7:4
...becomes...ridiculous...

Barnes:

No one can seriously maintain that the writer meant to refer literally to the Jewish people . . .
...that...is absurd

We reviewed some biblical material that showed us we could legitimately understand the 144,000 as literally Israelites, those who trust in Jesus Christ while most of the nation rejects him.

LESSON

Now, let's examine the other side of that coin. Would it be ridiculous to think that the 144,000 are simply Christians, not literally Israelites? What reasons are there to take seriously the interpretation that these 144,000 are not literally Israelites? The main reason I know is Paul's doctrine of the abolishing of the separation between Jew and Gentile in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:26-29 For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. 27 For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Ephesians 2:11-22 11 Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; 12 That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: 13 But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. 14 For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; 15 Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; 16 And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: 17 And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. 18 For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father. 19 Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; 20 And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; 21 In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: 22 In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

Romans 2:26-29 26 Therefore if the uncircumcision keep the righteousness of the law, shall not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision? 27 And shall not uncircumcision which is by nature, if it fulfil the law, judge thee, who by the letter and circumcision dost transgress the law? 28 For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: 29 But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

Knollys:

So then, by those many twelve thousands, we may understand the many thousands of God's Spiritual Israel, both Jews and Gentiles converted to Christ under the administration of the gospel of the grace of God.

Gill:

they take in all the saints within this long tract of time, even all that are the true Israel of God, who are Jews inwardly, of what nation, kindred, tongue, and people soever

Ellicott:

...the Apostle most emphatically laid down the principle that "he is not a Jew which is one outwardly, neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh, but he is a Jew which is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit and not in the letter" (Rom_2:28-29); and the principle he applies by affirming that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek" (Gal_3:28). The Christian Church absorbs the Jewish, inherits her privileges, and adopts, with wider and nobler meaning, her phraseology.

CONCLUSION

In Paul's doctrine of the unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ, we find reason to take seriously the possibility that the 144,000 are not literally Israelites, as if in God's reckoning the separation between Jew and Gentile in Christ still exists.

Remember the main application here:

In times and places where it is popular to be religious, even Christian, but where much of what passes for Christianity really is paganism in disguise, God knows who are the true disciples of Jesus Christ. He has you marked out for his special care and protection.

For next time, with Poole quote

Romans 11:1-24 I say then, Hath God cast away his people? God forbid. For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. 2 God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew. Wot ye not what the scripture saith of Elias? how he maketh intercession to God against Israel, saying, 3 Lord, they have killed thy prophets, and digged down thine altars; and I am left alone, and they seek my life. 4 But what saith the answer of God unto him? I have reserved to myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal. 5 Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace. 6 And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work. 7 What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded 8 (According as it is written, God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear;) unto this day. 9 And David saith, Let their table be made a snare, and a trap, and a stumblingblock, and a recompence unto them: 10 Let their eyes be darkened, that they may not see, and bow down their back away. 11 I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy. 12 Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness? 13 For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office: 14 If by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them. 15 For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead? 16 For if the firstfruit be holy, the lump is also holy: and if the root be holy, so are the branches. 17 And if some of the branches be broken off, and thou, being a wild olive tree, wert graffed in among them, and with them partakest of the root and fatness of the olive tree; 18 Boast not against the

branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee. 19 Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in. 20 Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear: 21 For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee. 22 Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off. 23 And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graff them in again. 24 For if thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and wert grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree: how much more shall these, which be the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?

Knollys:

So then, by those many twelve thousands, we may understand the many thousands of God's Spiritual Israel, both Jews and Gentiles converted to Christ under the administration of the gospel of the grace of God.

Poole:

That by the tribes of Israel mentioned here, are to be understood the several gospel churches of the Gentiles, who are now God's Israel ingrafted into the true olive.

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Geneva:

That is, of the Jews a number certain in itself before God, and such as may be numbered of us: for which cause also the same is here set down as certain. But of the elect who are Gentiles, the number indeed is in itself certain with God, but of us not possibly to be numbered, as God, (Gen_15:5). This is spoken with respect, when a certain number is put for one uncertain. Compare with (Rev_7:9)

Knollys:

This mystical number of twelve seemeth to be taken from the twelve apostles of the Lamb, whose names were written in the foundations of the holy city of God, called the New Jerusalem, {Re 21:2,10,14} upon which the foundations (that is, the doctrine of the twelve apostles) the gospel church of God is built, Jesus Christ being the chief corner stone, {Eph 2:19,20-22} called the heavenly Jerusalem; that is, the church of the first-born, which are written in heaven. {Heb 12:22-24} So then, by those many twelve thousands, we may understand the many thousands of God's Spiritual Israel, both Jews and Gentiles converted to Christ under the administration of the gospel of the grace of God. {Re 7:9} A great multitude, which no man could number, of all the nations, and kindred's, and people, and tongues. Even all Christ's redeemed ones. {Re 5:9-10} The Lord having given his gospel churches the name of Zion, and Jerusalem and his gospel converts the name of Israel, which is for the honor and dignity of his churches of saints in the latter days.

Poole:

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the summary sense of all these verses is this: That although within that period of time which is signified under the seventh seal, there should be great persecutions of the church, yet God would preserve unto himself a great number in all his churches, which should not apostatize, and who in the persecutions should not be hurt; so as his church should not fail, though the archers should shoot sore at it; for though men raged, yet it was by God's permission; and his angels overruled it, who should take notice of those numbers that he had sealed, and marked in their foreheads.

Gill:

not that these were all Jews in a literal sense, for the time of their conversion in great numbers is not yet come. Dr. Goodwin thinks these sealed ones design the believers of the Greek and Armenian churches, and his reasons are not despicable; but this is to limit and restrain them to a particular part of the church of Christ; whereas they take in all the saints within this long tract of time, even all that are the true Israel of God, who are Jews inwardly, of what nation, kindred, tongue, and people soever; and is a certain and determinate number for an uncertain and indeterminate one; and only intends a large number of persons known to God and Christ

Clarke:

In the number of 144,000 are included all the Jews converted to Christianity

Barnes:

If literal, it is necessary to suppose that this refers to the twelve tribes of the children of Israel. But on every supposition this is absurd. Ten of their tribes had been long before carried away, and the distinction of the tribes was lost, no more to be recovered, and the Hebrew people never have been, since the time of John, in circumstances to which the description here could be applicable. These considerations make it clear that the description here is symbolical.

whether this refers to those who would be sealed and saved among the Jews, or to those in the Christian church - we may answer:

(a) that there are strong reasons for supposing the latter to be the correct opinion. Long before the time of John all these distinctions of tribe were

abolished. The ten tribes had been carried away and scattered in distant lands, never more to be restored; and it cannot be supposed that there was any such literal selection from the twelve tribes as is here spoken of, or any such designation of twelve thousand from each. There was no occasion - either when Jerusalem was destroyed, or at any other time - on which there were such transactions as are here referred to occurring in reference to the children of Israel.

(b) The language is such as a Christian, who had been by birth and education a Hebrew, would naturally use if he wished to designate the church. Compare the notes on Jam_1:1. Accustomed to speak of the people of God as "the twelve tribes of Israel," nothing was more natural than to transfer this language to the church of the Redeemer, and to speak of it in that figurative manner. Accordingly, from the necessity of the case, the language is universally understood to have reference to the Christian church. Even Prof. Stuart, who supposes that the reference is to the siege and destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, interprets it of the preservation of Christians, and their flight to Pella, beyond Jordan. Thus interpreted, moreover, it accords with the entire symbolical character of the representation.

(c) The reference to the particular tribes may be a designed allusion to the Christian church as it would be divided into denominations, or known by different names; and the fact that a certain portion would be sealed from every tribe would not be an unfit representation of the fact that a portion of all the various churches or denominations would be sealed and saved. That is, salvation would be confined to no one church or denomination, but among them all there would be found true servants of God. It would be improper to suppose that the division into tribes among the children of Israel was designed to be a type of the sects and denominations in the Christian church, and yet the fact of such a division may not improperly be employed as an illustration of that; for the whole church is made up not of any one denomination alone, but of all who hold the truth combined, as the people of God in ancient times consisted not solely of any one tribe, however large and powerful, but of all combined. Thus understood, the symbol would point to a time when there would be various denominations in the church, and yet with the idea that true friends of God would be found among them all.

(d) Perhaps nothing can be argued from the fact that exactly twelve thousand were selected from each of the tribes. In language so figurative and symbolical as this, it could not be maintained that this proves that the

santo definite number would be taken from each denomination of Christians. Perhaps all that can be fairly inferred is, that there would be no partiality or preference for one more than another; that there would be no favoritism on account of the tribe or denomination to which anyone belonged; but that the seal would be impressed on all, of any denomination, who had the true spirit of religion. No one would receive the token of the divine favor because he was of the tribe of Judah or Reuben; no one because he belonged to any particular denomination of Christians. Large numbers from every branch of the church would be sealed; none would be sealed because he belonged to one form of external organization rather than to another; none would be excluded because he belonged to any one tribe, if he had the spirit and held the sentiments which made it proper to recognize him as a servant of God. These views seem to me to express the true sense of this passage. No one can seriously maintain that the writer meant to refer literally to the Jewish people; and if he referred to the Christian church, it seems to be to some selection that would be made out of the whole church, in which there would be no favoritism or partiality, and to the fact that, in regard to them, there would be some something which, in the midst of abounding corruption or impending danger, would designate them as the chosen people of God, and would furnish evidence that they would be safe.

Ellicott:

Some have thought that the sealed ones must be Jewish Christians: i.e., they are disposed to take the twelve tribes literally. The scope of the previous verses seems decisive against this view. The time of judgment and trial is drawing near; we have seen the tokens of the coming storm in the opening of the sixth seal; our wish is to know the lot of the saints of God; this chapter answers this wish: they are safe, having the seal of God. Now, to limit the answer to the Israelitish Christians is to break in abruptly upon the general flow of thought with a bold literalism. The sealed ones are explained to be the servants of God; the description which follows proclaims them to be the "Israel of God." It would be a strange leap away from the subject to introduce a sudden limitation of thought. Nor is there any necessity for doing so. Israelitish and Jewish names are freely adopted by the sacred writers, and used in a spiritual sense without any explanation of such usage; and the Apostle most emphatically laid down the principle that "he is not a Jew which is one outwardly, neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh, but he is a Jew which is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit and not in the

letter” (Rom_2:28-29); and the principle he applies by affirming that in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek” (Gal_3:28). The Christian Church absorbs the Jewish, inherits her privileges, and adopts, with wider and nobler meaning, her phraseology. She has her Jerusalem, but it is a heavenly Jerusalem (Heb_12:22): a Jerusalem from above (Gal_4:26): a new Jerusalem (Rev_21:2; see Rev_3:12); and to that Jerusalem of God the true Israel of God, the chosen generation and royal priesthood of every age, turn the eye of faith. It is needless to say that this view does not rob, as it has been said, the Jew of God’s promises; it only intensifies those promises by showing the growth of that Church in which the Jew may yet find the truest consummation of his holiest and highest hopes, and into which God is yet able to graft them in again (Rom_11:23; Rom_11:25-26), and in which he may yet play a part loftier than men dream of.

JFB:

Rev_3:12; Rev_21:12, are no objection, as Alford thinks, to the literal Israel being meant; for, in consummated glory, still the Church will be that “built on the foundation of the (Twelve) apostles (Israelites), Jesus Christ (an Israelite) being the chief corner-stone.” Gentile believers shall have the name of Jerusalem written on them, in that they shall share the citizenship antitypical to that of the literal Jerusalem.

RWP:

There are two opposite views here, one taking the sealed as referring only to Jews (either actual Jews as a remnant or just Jewish Christians), the other including Gentiles as well as Jewish Christians, that is the true Israel as in Rev_2:9; Rev_3:9. and like Paul in Galatians and Romans. This is the more probable view and it takes the twelve tribes in a spiritual sense.

B.H. Carroll:

Revelation 7 presents this great thought: That God's imminent wrath, just about to fall, is suspended until all the righteous are sealed and so safeguarded. And then follows the sealing of the 144,000 of the Jews; a 'symbolic number representing 12,000 or a complete number from each tribe, and then a great multitude that no man can number, out of every nation and tribe and tongue and country. Every one of them must be saved before those terrible convulsions that attend the advent of our Lord, when the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll, when the whole world shall be wrapped in fire. It cannot take place as long as a righteous man is living on the earth, or a righteous man's dead body is sleeping in a grave. These must get out of the way first. As when Abraham said to God: "You are about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Shall not the Judge of all the earth

do right? It may be there are fifty good men in that city; will you destroy them?" He said, "If there be fifty, no" – perhaps forty – perhaps thirty – perhaps twenty – perhaps ten. And when not ten could be found, the angel grasped hold of the only righteous man, Lot, and said to him: "We cannot visit God's wrath upon this place until you get out," and they dragged him out. So the vengeance that comes with this advent does not reach this earth until each child of God is secure.