

Revelation 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Revelation chapter 7

12,000 from the tribe of Levi, 12,000 from the tribe of Issachar, 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun, 12,000 from the tribe of Joseph, 12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

worshipped God, saying, Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever. Amen. Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come? I said to him, Sir, you know.

And he said to me, These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 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 shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more. The sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Six seals have already been opened. In chapter 7 of Revelation, we are expecting the seventh to be opened right away, but it is not opened yet. Before it can be opened, the righteous have to be sealed.

Sealing here is a response to the martyrs. The sealed persons will make up the complete number that is spoken of in chapter 6 verse 11. Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been. The chapter opens with four angels standing at the four corners. As they are standing at the four corners of the earth, the land of Israel in particular, this might perhaps be associated with the altar. The altar, which represents the land, has one horn at each corner. They are holding back the four winds of the earth, which might remind us again of the four living creatures and the four horsemen of the preceding chapter. The winds of the spirit that shake up the land in judgment are prevented from taking their effect until the people have been sealed. This is a Passover type event. The judgment upon the firstborn is coming.

[3 : 43] Israel is God's firstborn son, as we see in Exodus chapter 4, and God is marking his people out before the destroying angels are set loose. In verse 2, we see that the four angels are the ones that have been given power to harm the earth and the sea. These are the destroyers, the ones that are going to come and, as it were, kill the firstborn. Just as blood was put on the doorposts and on the lintel, the spared firstborn need to be marked out on their foreheads. The forehead might be associated with the lintel. It might also be associated with the mark of the high priest, who had holy to the Lord on a special plate that was put upon his forehead. The hero of this passage might also recall Ezekiel chapter 9, another passage talking about judgment upon Jerusalem and the preparation of certain people within the city before that judgment fell. In Ezekiel chapter 9, there are six men bringing judgment, perhaps corresponding to the six seals that have already been opened, and then a seventh man who seals people before the judgment falls. Then he cried in my ears with a loud voice, saying,

Bring near the executioners of the city, each with his destroying weapon in his hand. And behold, six men came from the direction of the upper gate, which faces north, each with his weapon for slaughter in his hand. And with them was a man clothed in linen, with a writing case at his waist.

And they went in and stood beside the bronze altar. Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub on which it rested to the threshold of the house. And he called to the man clothed in linen, who had the writing case at his waist. And the Lord said to him, Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it. And to the others he said in my hearing, Pass through the city after him, and strike. Your eyes shall not spare, and you shall show no pity. Kill old men outright, young men and maidens, little children and women, but touch no one on whom is the mark, and begin at my sanctuary.

So they began with the elders who were before the house. Then he said to them, Defile the house, and fill the courts with the slain. Go out. So they went out and struck in the city. And while they were striking, and I was left alone, I fell upon my face and cried, Ah, Lord God, will you destroy all the remnant of Israel in the outpouring of your wrath on Jerusalem?

Then he said to me, The guilt of the house of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great. The land is full of blood, and the city full of injustice. For they say, The Lord has forsaken the land, and the Lord does not see. As for me, my eye will not spare, nor will I have pity.

[6 : 19] I will bring their deeds upon their heads. And behold, the man clothed in linen, with the writing case at his waist, brought back words, saying, I have done as you commanded me. In Revelation chapter 7, we are seeing the same pattern of events more or less playing out. Judgment is held back and restrained until the faithful remnant are marked out.

And then, at that point, the judgment can fall. In verses 4-8, we are given the list of those who are sealed. And there are a few things to notice about this list. First, it is a perfected number. It's 12 times 12 times 10 times 10 times 10. This is a vision of a complete and perfected number of Israelites, with each tribe fully represented. The omission of Ephraim and Dan, and the inclusion of Joseph and Levi, is perhaps surprising to many readers. Likewise, the ordering of the tribes might also surprise us. It exhibits some elements of order. For instance, it begins with Judah, the leading tribe, and it ends with Benjamin, both the last born, and the other Judahite, and royal tribe. Benjamin and Joseph are also next to each other, as the two sons of Rachel. But as we go through the rest of the list, it seems that there is no rhyme nor reason to it. There are many different orderings of the tribes in scripture, according to different principles. Sometimes it's according to birth order, sometimes according to their mothers, as we see in Genesis chapter 46. On occasions, such an order classes children of the handmaids together, sometimes separately from each other, associating them rather with one of the sisters, Leah or Rachel, to whom the handmaids belonged.

Sometimes the tribes are listed more according to their position in the land. In Numbers chapter 2, the tribes are ordered around the camp. In Ezekiel chapter 48, verses 30 to 35, the order is that of the gates of the city. And here we should notice Joseph is included as a tribe in his own right.

Levi is also included. Ephraim and Manasseh are not mentioned. These shall be the exits of the city. On the north side, which is to be 4,500 cubits by measure, three gates, the gate of Reuben, the gate of Judah, and the gate of Levi, the gates of the city being named after the tribes of Israel. On the east side, which is to be 4,500 cubits, three gates, the gate of Joseph, the gate of Benjamin, and the gate of Dan. On the south side, which is to be 4,500 cubits by measure, three gates, the gate of Simeon, the gate of Issachar, and the gate of Zebulun.

On the west side, which is to be 4,500 cubits, three gates, the gate of Gad, the gate of Asher, and the gate of Naphtali. The circumference of the city shall be 18,000 cubits, and the name of the city from that time on shall be, The Lord is there. Austin Farah identifies a crucial clue in the ordering of the gates in Revelation chapter 21 verses 12 to 13. It had a great high wall with 12 gates, and at the gates 12 angels, and on the gates the names of the 12 tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed. On the east, three gates. On the north, three gates. On the south, three gates. And on the west, three gates. The list in chapter 7 is ordered not by compass directions, but by sides of the camp.

[9 : 28] It moves from the east, to the north, to the south, to the west. In Ezekiel chapter 48, the senior tribes of Leah are to the north, the tribes of Rachel to the east, the junior tribes of Leah to the south, and the tribes of the handmaids to the west. If we order the tribes as gates to the sides of the city, starting with the corner gates and working accordingly, we get four similar groupings.

There's a senior and a junior group of Leah tribes, a group associated with the handmaids, and a group associated with Rachel. Working from the leading tribe, which is Judah, who faces towards the east, oriented towards the rising of the sun, we get the following order, following clockwise.

Judah, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin, Manasseh, Naphtali, Asher, Gad, and Reuben. Working by corners, we get the following order. There's a group of Leah tribes, led by Judah, Reuben, and Simeon. Junior Leah tribes come next, Levi, Issachar, and Zebulun. Then Rachel tribes, Joseph, Benjamin, and Manasseh, followed by the handmaid's children, Naphtali, Asher, and Gad.

This will help us to understand the omission of certain ones and the inclusion of others. It is the same group as we see in Ezekiel chapter 48, except that Manasseh has taken the place of Dan.

In Ezekiel, Dan was with the group of Rachel tribes, but here Manasseh takes his place. Joseph gets the double portion in Ephraim and Manasseh. In this list, Ephraim, as the leading of the two tribes, can be exchanged for Joseph more appropriately. Joseph is represented most of all in Ephraim. Manasseh is included to fill up the double portion and to include three natural descendants of Rachel, making up a full complement of Rachel tribes to go alongside the Junior Leah tribes, the Senior Leah tribes, and the Handmaid tribes. Another contrast with the listing of the tribes in Ezekiel is the fact that Levi has been demoted to the Junior Leah tribes. Levi no longer has the same significance in the new covenant, and now Simeon has taken his place. This sealed group then represents the full complement of Israel. It should be seen as the full measure of Jewish Christians that are saved prior to the judgment upon Jerusalem in AD 70. The judgment is held back until this group is marked out. Following this, we see another group, a multitude that no one can number. This, however, is not a group of Israelites. This group is from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. They're clothed in white robes, possibly the same robes that were given to the martyrs under the altar in the preceding chapter. Now that the faithful Israelites have been sealed, the full complement of the saved can be brought together, and this great multitude includes both the souls who are beneath the altar, and also the faithful Gentile Christians that have suffered during that period. Later on in this chapter, they are described as those who have come through the tribulation. We shall perhaps understand this as a reference to all the suffering of the martyrs from the beginning of the world, from Abel to Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, who was slain between the altar and the temple. They have been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb. They have washed their robes in his blood.

[12 : 37] Thinking back to the book of Genesis chapter 49 verse 11, this might recall royal themes. He has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes. These are the people of the lion of the tribe of Judah. They are also a priestly company who have been cleansed by the blood of sacrifice. In Matthew chapter 23, we get a sense of the destruction of Jerusalem as being a comprehensive judgment upon the whole old order, stretching back to the very dawn of time in Abel and his blood that was shed by Cain. All of the blood of the righteous will come upon this city. The great multitude gather together in worship. They're clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands. Perhaps the themes of the Feast of Tabernacles come out here. And they lead the greater assembly in praise, as they say salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. The angels who are assembled all around respond to them. They are now leading the angels in their worship. They are also spoken of as attaining God's full salvation, in anticipation of the new heavens and the new earth that is yet to arrive at the end of the book. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more. The sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. This is language that we associate with chapters 21 and 22, but it is found here, anticipating what will come later. This is, as it were, a first harvest. Peter Lighthouse also suggests in here that we might hear the echoes of Ezekiel chapter 37. The response of John to the elder here is similar to the response that Ezekiel makes to the Lord in Ezekiel chapter 37 verse 3.

In response to the question that he is asked, John says, Sir, you know. In response to the question that Ezekiel is asked by the Lord, Ezekiel responds, O Lord God, you know. In both cases, there is the description of the raising up of a great company. A question to consider, is there any significance to be seen in the location of the company of the multitude in verse 15?