
Krapf Commentary Series

The Scroll with Seven Seals (Rev. 4:1-8:1)

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Summary

The opening of the seven-seals is preceded by a dramatic vision of God's throne room—it is the throne room of the universe (4:1-5:14). In this vision, the holiness of God and his sovereignty over the earth is highlighted. The focus shifts to the Redeemer in Ch. 5, the Lamb, who by the death has become the conquering Lion (5:5). The scene focuses on the Lamb/Lion who has redeemed a people, and for this he is worthy of the praise of the whole creation (5:7-14).

Most interpreters agree on the interpretation of chapters four and five. While different approaches view the timing of the events differently, it is generally agreed that what follows in the opening of the scrolls, is the sovereign degrees of God over history, and the rightful authority of the Lamb alone to reveal and administer the decrees of God, to judge the wicked and preserve his people.

Some see these events as the fall of Jerusalem (preterist and historicist), others as the events of the final years of world history (futurist), and some view the events revealed in the scroll as the occurrences throughout history without reference to a particular time or cases (idealist, spiritual interpretation). In this view, the gospel will ride

triumphant (according to some, with the first horseman) and the Church throughout history will be vindicated (represented by the 144,000).

The throne of the Creator (4:1-3, 5-6)

Before the opening of the scroll (Ch's. 6:1-8:1), John (and we) must experience a holy awe of the creator God. We must pause and let this sink in, and we must learn first that everything that happens in this world, including the persecution of the Church, is ordained by a sovereign God.

Persecution and martyrdom are not an indication of defeat but opportunity for faithful and victorious endurance. All that we see in this world, the political structures, economic systems and social orders must be viewed in light of the throne of the living God. The throne is not just the seat of sovereign authority over creation, but of justice and divine vindication in a hostile world also. This is the overwhelming sense of Ch's 4 and 5 and the theme that runs through the book.

"After these things" marks the beginning of the next vision. John hears the trumpet-voice of the Son of Man (1:3) and he is immediately "in the Spirit." A door opens in heaven. John did not open it, he is still on the isle of Patmos, but in spiritual

vision he is brought in to see the divine council of the King of kings (see also Isaiah 6:1ff; Ezekiel 1:1ff; Amos 3:7). The description of Jasper (or clear crystal, 21:11, 18-19) may indicate purity, while the red sardius (carnelian) stone indicates the wrath of God against a rebellious world. The rainbow around the throne with the appearance of an emerald, clearly calls to mind the covenant of mercy of God from ancient times (Genesis 9:12-15, see also Ezekiel 1:28). Think of God's purity, his holy wrath on the one hand and mercy to his Church through the history of the world.

The glory and awe of this heavenly scene is heightened by the sounds and sights; *"flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder..."* (vs. 5), reminiscent of Sinai (Exodus 19:16). But by contrast, in this scene, there is a sense of peacefulness, represented in the sea of glass, like crystal (vs. 6), and the fulness of the Spirit in the seven torches of fire. This sea will appear again with the victorious celebration of the martyred dead (15:2).

The Attendants around the throne (4:4-6)

John saw twenty-four elders and four living creatures around the throne. Are the twenty-four elder angelic beings or human beings? Two things

we need to consider: their identity and their number. Interpreters are divided. Some see them as angelic servants of God ministering to God in the universe; they constitute the council of Lord's heavenly servants (Beasley-Murray, Johnson, see 5:5; 7:13-14).

Others think that they are human beings who represent the royal priesthood of all believers (Kretzman), and point to the twenty-four orders of priests in charge of the temple worship (1 Chronicles 25:5-7) or the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles as representing the church throughout all time (the Old and New Testament, see Revelation 21:12-14).

Whatever way one views the details in the symbolism, it is clear that the twenty-four elders present a body of seated and settled worshippers of the living God, seen later holding harps (5:8). The point is that for all the distress of the church on earth (Ch's. 2-3), victory and peace reign in heaven and all of God's creation share in the awe that surrounds the throne (vs. 5), and they lay "their crowns before the throne" (vs. 10) - the hope of all who endure to the end.

The identity of the four creatures is also disputed (4:6b-11). It seems that what John saw here is a

combination between a similar vision in Ezekiel 1:5-18 and Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1). In Ezekial's vision, the cherubim stood on either side of the throne of God, who is said to dwell "between the cherub" or "enthroned on the cherub" (see 1 Samuel 4:4; 2 Samuel 6:2; Psalm 80:1; Isaiah 37:16). It seems that these four living creatures represent the cosmic throne of God supported by the four corners of creation (Caird), and point to the fact that all things were created for the praise of God (see 5:13).

The Praise of the throne room (4:8-11)

I have divided chapter four into three sections, the throne (4:1-6), the worshiping attendants around the throne (4:4-8) and the praises that surround the throne (8-11). This helps us get a broad view of the scene described by John.

The praise around the throne forms an interesting continuous and expanding stream over five expressions of praise (4:8, 11; 5:9-10, 12, 13). The central "song" is the longest and is accompanied with harps (5:9-10). How these expressions of praise expand from the twenty-four elders and the four creatures (4:8,11) to "every creature in heaven and on earth..." (5:13) is important and we shall consider in chapter 5.

The sounds that surround the thrones, the peals of thundering and flashes of lightning all speak to the awesome and sovereign power of God over his creation (4:5). The praise begins with the four creature and ascribing to God a three-fold holiness (see Isaiah 6:3), all power, and eternity – *“who was and is, and is to come”* (4:8, see also Daniel 4:34, 12:7). The twenty-four elders follow as they prostrate themselves before the throne and cast their crowns before God ascribing to him who created all things, glory and honour and power (4:10-11).

The Seven-Sealed Scroll (5:1-4)

John has seen the throne and those who attend the throne in worship, he has seen the flashes of lightning, the seven torches of fire which are the seven spirits of God and what looks like a sea of glass around the throne (4:5-6). He has heard all the peals of thunder and the praise of the elders and the four creatures.

Chapter five continues the description as John observes the details of the same scene. “Then I saw,” he said, “in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back” (5:1). He has not yet seen Jesus, but this

scroll and the voice of the accompanying angel take his attention.

Three things about this scroll are important. First, we need to try to identify what was written in it, what it is all about. Some think it was the Lamb's book of life, others the redemptive plan of God, while others think it contained the purposes of God for the world. It seems that we should look to the opening of the seven seals for some clues, and we may take the view of Matthew Henry; "the designs and methods of divine providence towards the Church and the World." This is certainly what we find in what comes afterwards, particularly regarding the judgment of the world and the salvation and security of God's people.

Second, it was in the right hand of God. All things—every detail of our lives—are in the right hand of God, under his authority, governance and control.

Third, notice that the scroll was sealed, which indicates that the thoughts of God are complete and sealed up—no one can add or take from it.

In ancient times, a seal was a wax stamp on a document, for two main purposes. First, to authenticate the document (see Jeremiah 32:10-11; Paul uses the image of the seal in 1 Corinthians

9:2 to authenticate his apostleship). Second for privacy (Daniel 12:4; Revelation 10:4).

The problem for John is that there was no one worthy, no one qualified or authorised to “open” the seals and to “look into it”. No one-anywhere-was found and John wept loudly!! John wept not out of a simple curiosity, but for the same reason Christians weep today, because of godly desire, expectation and anticipation for the kingdom of God and the victory of the gospel, the will of God for our lives. If there was no one to open and implement the purposes of God in salvation, vindicate truth, and execute judgment then there is no hope.

The Lion of Judah and the slain Lamb (5:5-6)

John has described the scene of the throne room, but he has not seen Jesus up to this point-Jesus was pointed out to John for he stood as a meek and innocent Lamb. But Jesus is the only solution to John’s problem, and to our problem. The angel pointed him out to John, identified as the Messianic “Root of David”—the one alone who is qualified and who was promised from ancient times from the line of David. He is also identified as the Lion of the tribe of Judah which further

underscores his Messianic qualifications (Genesis 49:9-10).

But there is a third identifying marker for the One who alone is worthy to open the scroll, and this should give us glue as to what is in the scroll. He is the slain, yet “standing Lamb” (vs. 6), showing that he did not remain slain and dead (2:8). John the Baptist had pointed to him as the sacrificial Lamb (John 1:30) and in this book of Revelation he is identified as the Lamb over twenty times. He is not a Lion sometimes and a Lamb at other times, he is the Lion and the Lamb at the same time. He is the champion Lamb who through his death and resurrection has come out like a lion against the enemy.

He is a Lamb with seven eyes, symbolising his omniscience (all-knowing), and seven horns, symbolising his honour (Psalm 75:4-5; 112:9) and might (Psalm 18:2). This is the only one who is supremely worthy to open the scroll, to look into it and carry out the purposes of God on earth. He is the only one who can approach God as Mediator (Jeremiah 30:21), and for this he will receive the praise of all creation, fulfilling the prophecy of Daniel 7:9-14.

The songs of praise for the champion Lamb (5:7-14)

John's attention has been drawn from the God of creation to the God of redemption. Immediately the Lamb is identified, the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures begin to praise the Lamb.

The content of the praise is the redemptive work of Jesus (vs. 9). The elders and the creatures are not praising out of personal gratitude for salvation (they have not been redeemed) but for the worthiness of the Saviour who has redeemed "people to himself" and they shall reign on the earth, either in the millennium as some think or as others argue, reigning spiritually at this time as 1 Corinthians 3:21-23 may indicate. He who has God through Christ, has all!

As we noted before, the songs of praise in this section are part of five doxologies found in this first vision (Chs. 4-5). The first two (4:8,11) praise God for his might and eternity. These songs of praise focus on the Lamb (5:9, 12, 13). The sound of praise echoes out from the throne in three waves; first among those closest to the throne (vs. 8), then those angels standing around (vss. 11-12), and finally among "every creature in heaven and on earth ..." (vs. 13). All of God's creation joins in the

song of praise for the accomplishments of the Lamb.

This new song is the song of the new Covenant, the song of redemption, first sung by Moses when the Israelites were brought out of Egypt (Exodus 15:1-18, Revelation 15:3). A future exodus was graciously promised to Israel out of Babylon, and they would be given the opportunity to sing again (Isaiah 42:1-10). But this “new song” is for all nations ... it is for us today (vs. 9, see also Psalm 96:1-4).

The four horsemen of the Apocalypse: Review and overview (Revelation 6:1-8)

The vision of the four horsemen (Revelation 6:1-8) is introduced by an awe-inspiring vision of the throne of the God (Revelation 4-5). In that vision, John saw the scroll in the hand of God, sealed with seven seals. The only one qualified to open the scroll is the conquering Lamb who is also, by his death and resurrection, the Lion of the tribe of Judah (5:5). The **sealed scroll** indicates that the thoughts of God are complete, sealed up, and no one can add or take from it.

What we see as John opens the seven seals is the purpose of God in history, for the scroll contains

both comfort and encouragement for God's people and judgement on a rebellious world.

The four horsemen are companion riders. They represent war, bloodshed, famine and death and are to be considered together. The fourth horseman is not just the final rider in a series, but it seems he represents all four. The previous riders are summed up in the final rider-Death (vs. 8).

These riders show us the ongoing judgement in the providences of God on a wicked world today. The continuous situation of judgement on this world is serious, but it is not catastrophic (as in Revelation 15:1). A final judgement will come.

So, these four riders of God's judgement manifest themselves in today's world in wars, bloodshed, famine and death. They represent only part of the seven seals, and while we may be in suspense with each new seal and cry "how long" (6:10), God is not rushed to open and to unroll the events of history. When the seven seals are broken and the scroll is completely and finally opened, we will understand, not only the judgment of God against "those who dwell on the earth" but the triumph of the saints who have followed Jesus and have been sealed and protected by the sovereign Lord through it all (7:1-7).

The first seal: the white horse and rider (6:1-2)

The first rider comes out on a white horse, the colour of conquest. It has been common among a wide variety of scholars and preachers to view the first rider as Jesus Christ. This is because the rider of the white horse is identified as Jesus in Revelation 19:11-21, and both riders wear a crown. It is also most likely because these words “conquering and to conquer” seem to beautifully present one going from victory to victory as Christ does.

However, the word for crown in Revelation 6:2 and 19:11 are different and the rider of the white horse in Revelation 19 has many crowns, not just one. So, we are forced to take a second look. Also, “conquering and to conquer” may have another interpretation as we shall see later.

While the similarities between these two riders are significant—the white horse, the crown and the conquering—the differences are also significant and instructive. The wicked will have their victories with the bow given to them (6:2), but Jesus, the Faithful and True, judges in righteousness (19:11) with the sword of his mouth (19:15; see also 2:12 in the letter to Pergamum). The emphasis here among the warmongers of the world (6:2), is not of one

going continuously from one victory to another, but of one who has a lust for war. A literal translation might be "going forth conquering, and that he may conquer," or "bent on conquest." The language of the passage heightens this idea of evil intent. John says also that a crown "*was given*" to the rider (6:2). This term, which is used of other riders is most often used of God giving permission to evil powers to carry out their work (9:1,3,5; 13:5,7,14,15 (see 6:4 where it is translates "*power was given*" KJV, or "*was permitted*" ESV, and also 6:8).

The judgement of God on the world is, in part, that it might fight with itself, and this is what the first rider is doing. With a lust for war, he rides all over the world; in Russia and Ukraine, in Israel and Gaza and in many other parts of the world where there are wars and rumours of war...but "the end is not yet" because he is merciful and longsuffering (Matthew 24:6, Romans 2:3-4; 2 Peter 3:9).

The second seal: the red horse and rider (6:3-4)

The second seal reveals another horse and rider. The horse is "fiery" red or "bright" red (6:4), signifying bloodshed. The rider was given permission to take peace from the world so that

people might slay one another, and for this he was given a "great sword" (6:4).

The activity of this rider is like the previous (war and bloodshed), but there are significant differences. The previous rider, it seems, represents armies going out to invade and conquer other nations. We might say international warfare. The phrase that is used of this rider "so that people should slay one another," has more of a domestic emphasis. The word "slay" is not used for warfare as the first rider, but for slaughtering or butchering. This rider's interest is to remove peace, to stir up strife; civil wars, racism and tribal warfare, gangs and mobs, violence and bloodshed.

John writes to these Christians in the first century, who were living through violence and bloodshed, for there were those who had been "slain" for the Word of God" (6:9 same word that is used for the slaying of the Lamb, 5:6,9,12; 13:8).

We, like those early Christians, are to recognise this as permitted by God, the "sovereign Lord, holy and true" (6:10), and to pray for the Lord's vengeance and vindication (6:10), and for his return (22:20).

The third seal: the black horse and rider (6:5-6)

When John saw the third seal open and heard the invitation of the third living creature to “come and see,” another horse and its rider came out. This horse was black, and the rider had in his hand a pair of scales. The colour of the horse indicated mourning, and the scales showed that food will be scarce and will have to be measured out or rationed in judgement. The price of a quart of wheat was the amount allotted for one soldier for one day, and the point is that the workers' entire earnings are used up just for bread to stay alive!

As we know famine can be caused by weather patterns and by infestations (see Deuteronomy 28:23-24, 38-42), but here, in connection with the other riders, it seems that it is the result of human action—food shortages as trade and transportation are interrupted because of wars and bloodshed, as we see currently in Gaza and in part of South Sudan.

The command to “*not harm the oil and wine*” (6:6) indicates that while the common man may suffer need and hunger from lack of staple foods, the rich of this world will continue with their luxurious self-indulgence. The riches of the ungodly may be considered a judgement on those who rest on the

comforts and luxuries of their self-sufficient life (see Matthew 19:24).

The fourth seal: the pale horse and rider (6:7-8)

When the fourth seal was opened, John saw another horse and rider. The horse was a pale greenish/grey in colour, the ghastly colour of a corpse. The rider was Death, and he was followed by the grave. Death and the grave are necessary allies (Revelation 1:18; 20:13,14). The grave follows on foot, like a wild beast, swallowing up the victims of all the previous horsemen; war, violence and famine, fulfilling the "four disastrous acts of judgment" spoken of in Ezekiel 14:21.

These are all instruments of the Lord, rolled out by the Lamb against a wicked world that has rebelled against him, thrown off his authority and rejects his mercy. They are all warnings that full and final judgement is coming.

What are we to learn from these four horsemen of the Apocalypse?

First, we should remember that the wars, bloodshed, famines and death are part of a fallen world, and they are under the sovereign control of the One who sits on the throne of the universe,

who is sovereign, holy and true (6:10). These things should not surprise us. He has subjected the world to vanity (Romans 8:20) and has permitted man's inhumanity to man, barrenness on earth, and death as judgement against sin because the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23; Revelation 6:1-8).

Second, we should give ourselves to prayerful praise that the judgement of God is limited. The confusion, pain and suffering in this world is that the judgement of God is on those "who dwell on the earth" (6:10), or those who "feel at home" on the earth. The saints then, can praise God and pray for vengeance and vindication in a wicked world, knowing that God judges evil. What we see in the world today is not the full or final judgement; that is still to come. But during all this, God has preserved and sealed his people for himself (7:1-17).

A third response to the four horsemen should be to focus our hope. Our hope is not in world peace, secure geopolitical structures, not even in law and order although we should pray towards that, for the sake of the Church (1 Timothy 2:2). Our hope is not in the lack of need or having plenty (6:6). In a world in which these four horsemen are permitted to work havoc, we must learn, as Paul

did, to suffer hunger with grace and to enjoy plenty with gratitude, because they come from the same God. *"I know," Paul said, "how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need"* (Philippians 4:12).

Our hope is in the conquering Lamb, and whatever he rolls out from the scroll should be received as for our good and his glory (Romans 8:28).

A fourth lesson we need to learn is the responsibility of the Church to mutual encouragement. Should the sense of responsibility to one another not be heightened as the Church recognises the insecurity of worldly structures and the violence and bloodletting among humanity, not to mention the hostility of the world against the Church (John 15:18; 1 John 3:13).

In these conditions, the church should seek ways to support and encourage one another and not model the violence of the world within the Church (see the relief of the saints in 1 Corinthians 16:3; 2 Corinthians 8:4). We are to do good to everyone, alleviate pain and suffering where we can, but our

primary calling is to “those of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10), and we are called to discriminate and strategize in how we offer help to those around us (1 Timothy 5:3,16).

A fifth important lesson from the four horsemen is to remember that we have the only message of hope for the world in the midst of suffering. These four horsemen are, as one writer put it, “instruments of pre-wrath wrath and pre-judgement justice, foreshadowing the end when God’s victory over the enemy will be total” (Johnson, 122). It is our responsibility to preach the good news, the message of reconciliation to “those who dwell on the earth.”

The fifth seal: the souls of the martyrs (6:9-11)

Before we focus on what is behind the fifth seal, we need to remind ourselves that it is the Lamb opening these seals. All authority has been given to him (Matthew 28:18), and these are the souls of those who have given their lives for the Lamb from the death of Stephen (Acts 7:54-60), during the time of John’s writing, and throughout history.

Some would extend it (and it certainly could be by way of application) right back to the martyrdom of

Abel, whose blood, like the blood of these martyrs cries out for vengeance (Genesis 4:15).

Notice, first the confidence of these souls, “beneath the altar.” The souls of the martyrs identify with Christ and his sacrifice—they have died *with* him (Romans 6:4) and they have died *for* him (see Philippians 2:7; 2 Timothy 4:6). Just as the blood of the animals sacrificed in the Old Testament is poured under the altar, so here, the souls of the martyrs are under the altar (Leviticus 4:7).

This is a place of security and hope. Jeremiah told Pashur that he would die and be buried in a foreign land, outside of the promised land (Jeremiah 20:6). The Jews referred to this as “the second death” or death outside of hope and promise—the death of judgment (See 2:11).

Second, the souls of the martyrs are conscious, and they recognise the sovereignty and holiness of the Lord. This is hugely important in the context of their martyrdom. It shows us that in our suffering we must recognise the sovereign Lord.

Third, the souls of the martyrs are crying. They are crying out for vengeance and vindication, not for personal revenge but in an objective sense that truth and justice must be vindicated against those

who have wronged them; those who “dwell on the earth.” This term “dwell on the earth” is a technical term used throughout the Revelation to identify those who are at home on the earth (3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8,14), They are not those who look for a city that has foundations (Hebrews 11:10).

Fourth, the souls of the martyrs are comforted. They are told to “rest” in their Saviour. Although they cry for vengeance and vindication (and rightly so), they can rest in the “sovereign Lord” and in his timing for vindication. They are given “white robes” also, the symbol of justification, as those who have washed them in the blood of the sacrifice (7:13-14).

The sixth seal: the earthquake, blacked sun, etc. (6:12-17)

The scene that is revealed by the breaking of the sixth seal is of cosmic catastrophe, and it seems clear from other scriptures that this is a picture of the great day of the Lord, the day of God’s wrath against a sinful world (vs. 17; see other O.T. Scriptures, Psalm 68:7-8; Isaiah 2:12-21, 13:10-13, 24:1-6, 34:4; Jeremiah 4:23-28; Ezekiel 32:6-8; Joel 2:10, 30-31; Amos 8:8-9; Habakkuk 3:6-11).

The first four seals reveal the ongoing judgement of God by his providential dealing throughout

history. The previous seal showed the restraint of God's judgement against the world and the protection of his people, but here we see the universal judgement of God at the end of time; it will be the end of the world (and the heavens) as we know it (6:12-14). The first heaven and the first earth will be dissolved. For the believers, those things which cannot be shaken will remain (Hebrews 12:26), and there will be a new heaven and a new earth (see 21:1).

For the unbeliever this will be terrifying, a judgement that will cut across cultural and social boundaries (6:15) when those who were previously at home on the earth (those who dwell on the earth, see 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8,14) will call on the earth to fall on them and hide them from the wrath of the creator (vss. 15-16).

Insert Pt.1: The followers of the Lamb are sealed (7:1-3).

At this point in the visions, there is a pause and a vision inserted that seems intended to comfort John and the Church in times of affliction (this is common Ezekiel 9:3-5; Matthew 24:15-16).

John sees four angels at the four points of the compass, controlling the winds. These angels were given power to destroy, but they are holding back

the four winds. Another angel appears, and with him the seal of the living God to put it as a seal of protection on the faithful.

It seems that John is carried back to the beginning and shown what will happen to the people of God in the midst of the suffering and destruction that he has seen in the previous visions. John is shown that through all the suffering of this world (with the four horsemen) and the destruction of the earth in the sixth seal, the church is indestructible. There are three natural divisions in this vision.

- First, the servants of God sealed (7:1-3).
- Second, the number of the 144,000 (7:4-8).
- Third, the innumerable multitude (7:9-17).

The “sealing” of these servants of God identifies them as the faithful and has parallels in other parts of Scripture.

The “seal” makes three important points.

- First, a seal means ownership (Song of Solomon 8:6), just as a slave was marked and identified by the owner.
- Second, the seal certifies the authenticity of an object or person.
- Third, the seal signifies protection (Matthew 27:66; Revelation 5:1). Just as

the binding of the law on the foreheads and hands of the Jews symbolised God's sovereignty over their thoughts [forehead] and their actions [hands] (see Deuteronomy 6:8), so God set his seal of protection over his people they were sealed against the deception of the devil and the allurements of this world (Revelation 12:15-17; 13:11-18; 16:13-14).

The seal on the 144,000 is a reference back to Ezekiel 9:1-6, where he sees the city awaiting the executioner, where the man clothed in linen is asked to go through the city and put a mark on all those who were faithful. The executioner was then to go through the city slaying everyone without mercy, but he was not to touch those who had the mark on their forehead.

In the New Testament also, Paul speaks of the faithful as those who are sealed with the promised Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13-15). God has put his seal on each of his children, marked us out and by his Spirit protects and keeps us against the deception of the devil and the allurements of the world.

Insert Pt.2: The 144,000 (7:4-8).

There are four reasons why this figure of 144,000 must be read as a symbolic number.

- First, the numbers in other parts of Revelation are symbolic (e.g. Revelation 14:14-20).
- Second, the number 144,000, and the 12,000 in each tribe, is too tidy a figure to be a statistic. Other listings of the tribes of Israel are not round numbers (Numbers 1-4, 26; 1 Chronicles 21:5).
- Third, in every other numbering of the twelve tribes there are small tribes and large tribes, but here they are all the same number.
- Fourth, the list begins with Judah and not with Reuben the firstborn, putting the emphasis on the Messianic tribe (Genesis 49:10), and symbolising Messianic authority.
- Fifth, the omission of the tribe of Dan from the list is significant. Dan was always associated with idolatry in Israel (1 Kings 12:28-30). Because of this the Jews said that Dan's prince was Satan, and the early church held that the antichrist would come from Dan.

With that said, and we can disagree on the symbolism or otherwise of the figure, but it seems clear that this list represents the people of God, the

true and spiritual Israel. That this number does not represent national Israel is clear from the fact that John sees them as “the servants of our God” in his own time and not in Old Testament Israel (vs 3). This is not unusual in the New Testament, for the Church is often referred to as the true Israel (Romans 2:28-29; Galatians 3:29, 6:16; Philippians 3:3; 1 Peter 2:9).

Notice two simple truths.

- First, this is the Church Militant. God has numbered his Church for war (the census in Israel was always associated with war; Numbers 1-4; 31:4-5). The Church cannot forget that in this world we will have tribulation (John 16:33). John was aware of this in the opening of the seals, especially the fifth seal (6:9).
- Second, this list shows us that God knows the number of his people. In the next paragraph there is a number “*which no man can number,*” for the children of Abraham are as the stars of the sky and the sand of the sea (Genesis 15:5), but here God has the complete number, and he knows each of them (2 Timothy 2:19), indeed each of them has a unique number that only God knows, showing not only his interest in the Church as

a body, but also the Church as individuals (2:17).

Insert Pt.3: The great multitude following the Lamb (7:9-12).

Who is this great multitude in relation to the 144,000? To understand this, it will be helpful to look back to Ch. 5. There, John "heard" the elder inform him of the lion of the tribe of Judah (5:5), but when he looked, he "saw" the standing Lamb (5:6). So here, John "heard" the number given (7:4), but he "saw" a great multitude (7:9).

Just as the Lion and the Lamb were the one and the same Son of God, the 144,000 and the great multitude are the one and the same--the Church of Jesus Christ, seen from two perspectives. God sees them as spiritual "Israel," his chosen people, his holy nation (1 Peter 2:9). From a human perspective however, John sees them as coming from every nation under heaven, from every tongue and tribe and people--they are the children of Abraham after the faith (Galatians 3:7; Romans 9:8).

This great multinational gathering shows the Church coming out of great tribulation, pure (white robes) and victorious (palm branches). This is the

Church triumphant (whereas the previous aspect showed the Church militant). The cry of the Church triumphant is victory to our God.

While others think of this “great tribulation” as a particular time at the end of the age, I am inclined to see this as the state of affairs throughout the history of the Church (2 Timothy 3:12). In this world he has spread his tabernacle over us (vs. 15, see also Isaiah 4:6, 49:10), and leads us to green pastures (vs. 17, see also Psalm 23). Remember the victorious entry of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem (Zechariah 9:9; Matthew 21:1-11).

One author put it this way. “The difference between the 144,000 “Israelites” and the countless multiethnic multitude is not in the ethnic composition of the two groups but in their location. The sealed and numbered army of Israel shows the faithful Church on earth, shielded from apostasy and from God’s wrath by our union with the Lamb (bearing his name, sealed by his Spirit). The innumerable assembly of nations shows the victorious Church in heaven, emerging triumphant from tribulation, not through painless rapture, through a faithful death (Revelation 12:11), (Johnson).

Before we consider who this multitude is and where it comes from (vss. 13-17), let's look for a moment at the praise that resounded from them (vss. 10-12). Consider the sight of a great multiracial crowd emerging—thousands upon thousands—from every tribe and language, with palm branches and clothed in white, signifying victory and purity.

But what are they singing; they are praising God for salvation: *"Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"* The angels, the elders and the four living creatures have never been redeemed, but they say "Amen!" to the praise of the redeemed, and add, *"Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen"* (vs. 12).

First, salvation (*sōtēria*) in the Bible means not just being saved "from" something, but "to" something. Second, it belongs to God. These redeemed one recognise that they have done nothing to contribute to their present state of blessedness and glory. It has been God from beginning to end.

Insert Pt.4: Who are these whose tears are wiped away? (7:13-17)

In this paragraph we have an interesting conversation going on. One of the elders, it seems, saw the curiosity or confusion on John's face, or perhaps seeking to stimulate further conversation, asked John, who are these (vs. 13)? The question was not so much dealing with their number, but their character.

These people had overcome, they were victorious, had conquered the enemy of their souls and been faithful unto death. This does not indicate merit on their part, for all their righteousness were as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). But they had washed their garments and made them clean in the blood of the Lamb (vs. 14). The white robes represent the righteousness of Jesus Christ which they received through faith. The "therefore" (vs. 15) shows that the only reason they are before the throne, is because of the blood of the Lamb.

This great number, gathered before the throne, has come out of great affliction, hunger and thirst. It has been a time of tears. But that time has now passed, they have reached home and there are no more affliction and pain, and no more tears forever (Isaiah 49:10). The sovereign Lord will shepherd them to the living waters of eternal life, feeding

them in green pastures (vs. 17). He will be their shelter also from the enemy, by his presence (vs. 15), and support them (vs. 17).

All their tears will be wiped away, leaving no trace of former pain (Isaiah 25:8; Revelation 21:4). This is the removal, not just of the affliction itself, but of the emotional scars of the affliction.

The Lord Jesus had scars in his glorified body (Luke 24:39; John 20:20, 24-29), and these are the only scars in heaven. He bore our burden, and he bears our scars. His scars are proof of his suffering for us and evidence of his resurrection victory.

The seventh seal: silence in heaven (8:1-5)

Revelation chapter eight begins with the opening of the seventh seal, which leads to the sounding of the seven trumpets. Commenters struggle to find a clear line between the seventh seal and the next division of the book—the blowing of the seven trumpets.

It seems clear to me that the division should come in verse five. The seventh seal reveals the angel with the golden censer which is the prayer of the saints (vss. 3-5). We will come back to that. But John also saw seven angels with seven trumpets.

The seven trumpets will take up the next major section of the book, but trumpets in Scripture are associated with a major announcement, usually warning but can also be associated with celebration.

Before these trumpets are sounded and the warnings of the judgement of God are given, there is a period of silence in heaven (vs. 1). What does this silence mean, and why is it so important?

It is especially linked with the prayers of the saints. The "silence in heaven" is not an awkward silence, or a silence of awe and expectation of the coming judgement. The "silence in heaven" is for the solemn hearing of the prayers of the saints before the waiting angels blow their trumpets.