

Who are the 144,000?

Revelation 14:1-5

Introduction: Who are the 144,000 in the book of Revelation? Tim LaHaye, a premillennialist, says they are gentiles who converted during the tribulation period and served the Lord with distinction before martyrdom (Revelation Illustrated and Made Plain). Jehovah's Witnesses say it is a small group of Jehovah's Witnesses. Some say the 144,000 represent the Church while others say they are all the saved of all time. But who does the Bible (the defining source document) say they are?

I. The 144,000 are defined in Revelation chapters 7 & 14.

- A. They are Israelites (Rev. 7:4).
- B. They were sealed after their deaths (Rev. 7:3).
- C. They were redeemed *from* the earth (Rev. 14:3).
- D. They were celibate males (Rev. 14:4a).
- E. They were the first fruits of all redeemed (Rev. 14:4b).

II. The 144,000 are not distinguished as martyrs, Christians, Jehovah Witnesses, the saved, the Church or even women.

- A. Most definitions for the 144,000 are purely contrived.
- B. They must meet all the criteria laid out for us in scripture!

III. First rule of interpretation.

- A. Take statements literally unless it makes no sense in its context.
 - 1. Don't abandon the literal understanding prematurely.
 - 2. Stick with the literal understanding until it makes no sense.
 - 3. Symbolism should only be deployed when it must be used.
 - 4. Any alternative explanation must make sense.

B. For example, the Apostle John said the 144,000 were "*of all the tribes of the children of Israel*" (Rev. 7:4). At the very least, they were Israelites. Note we did not immediately resort to an alternative symbolic/spiritual explanation like Paul referring to Christians as Israel (Rom. 9:6-8). This could be true if this statement was the only thing we need to consider.

C. For example, the Apostle John said, "*These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins*" (Rev. 14:4a). This statement cannot be literal, so a symbolic/spiritual explanation is necessary. (A literal understanding does not need to be literal throughout a book when we don't do that with any other New Testament books.)

1. The 144,000 were unmarried males. Enumeration under the Old Law only counted males (Num. 1:2). Males would be the only ones counted in an Old Testament census of the redeemed. Equally, obedient females would also be included in the redeemed, but they would not be counted. These males are symbolic for the whole.

2. The celibates (the actual Greek word used for virgin) could refer to several possibilities.

a. Spiritual adultery is a favorite (but that would require the application of a previous relationship that was abandoned for another relationship).

b. Spiritual purity (or chastity) makes the most sense (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:27).

IV. When were these Israelites sealed and redeemed?

A. Using a scriptural concept to define the same concept elsewhere in scripture we take note that Christians were sealed and redeemed upon baptism (2 Cor. 1:21-22; Gal. 3:13; Eph. 1:13-14, 4:30; 1 Pet. 1:18-19).

B. The 144,000 were not sealed or redeemed until after their physical deaths.

1. Revelation 14:3 says they were “*from the earth.*” They were physically dead. They were sealed and redeemed after their deaths.

2. The 144,000 were sealed with God’s name after their deaths, before they were redeemed and before the judgment day (Rev. 7:3-4, 14:1, 3, 7).

C. Redemption is not possible without Christ’s shed blood on the cross (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

1. Consciousness of transgression could not be removed until the debt of sin was paid (Heb. 9:11-15).

2. The 144,000 were the first-fruits of all redeemed (Rev. 14:4b).

a. They were redeemed before any Christian was redeemed by definition of first-fruit.

b. It means that after Christ’s death and before the Church was established, Christ had the 144,000 sealed and redeemed before anyone else became sealed and redeemed in baptism.

c. That means the throne scenes in Revelation 7 & 14 occurred immediately following Christ’s death and before the Church was established in Acts 2.

Conclusion: The 144,000 could not be all the saved of all time because it would make no sense for Christians that were sealed and redeemed at baptism to be sealed and redeemed a second time after death. Whatever explanation we chose must make sense. The only explanation that makes sense and is consistent with scriptures would be the Old Testament faithful.