

# THE IDENTITY OF THE TRIBULATION SAINTS\*

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**I**N REVELATION 7 JOHN SAW “one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel” (v. 4), and then he saw “a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues . . . clothed in white robes [with] palm branches in their hands” (v. 9). An elder told John that the people in this innumerable multitude “are the ones who come out of the great tribulation” (v. 14). Who are the people in this “great multitude”? Are they the same as the 144,000, or are they a different group? Are they a present-day group or people from a yet-future period? Scholars give various answers to these questions.<sup>1</sup>

The additional three articles in this series will discuss the function of these Tribulation saints, their rewards, and the timing of their resurrection. The present article seeks to establish that while Tribulation saints have much in common with church-age saints, important distinctions exist. Such distinctions add credence to the pretribulational rapture of the church.

## DISTINCT FROM THE 144,000

If the 144,000 and the multitude are distinct, then certain redeemed Jews are in a category separate from many redeemed Gentiles. Since this is not the case during the church age (Eph. 2:11–16), the distinction could then support a futuristic and possibly pretribula-

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<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 484.

tion rapture viewpoint.<sup>2</sup> The following discussion examines John's terminology to determine if the two groups are different.

#### THE GRAMMAR OF REVELATION 7:9A

John began his discussion of the great multitude with two clauses that indicate he described an entirely new scene and thus a different group of people. The first of these two wordings is *μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον* ("After this I saw"). This clause is used elsewhere in the New Testament in Revelation 4:1; 15:5; and 18:1. In each case the clause introduces new subject matter. In 4:1 the words serve as a transition from the revelation John received on earth to the new vision he received in heaven. In 15:5 *μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον* is used to transition from John's view of human victors to his subsequent vision of seven angels with their plagues. In 18:1 the clause indicates that John saw a different angel. Thus *μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον* normally indicates a vision *distinct* from the previous one.<sup>3</sup>

A similar clause, *μετὰ τοῦτο εἶδον*, occurs once in the New Testament in Revelation 7:1 and introduces the vision of the 144,000. There the words clearly introduce a different vision and subject matter from what John saw in the seal judgments recorded in chapter 6. Thus the occurrence in 7:9 of the words *μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον* could also refer to a separate vision.

Furthermore in verse 9 John used *μετὰ* with the accusative to show what he saw *after* his vision of the 144,000.<sup>4</sup> This temporal aspect is distinct from the use of *μετὰ* with the genitive, for the latter stresses a close association of two things.<sup>5</sup> Thus the grammar indicates that the second vision in Revelation 7 is distinct from the first, and could be related to a different subject matter.

The second clause in verse 9, *καὶ ἰδοὺ ὄχλος πολὺς* ("and behold a large crowd"), includes *ἰδοὺ*, which implies that the group John saw was entirely new to him. This is because *ἰδοὺ* was often used as a "prompter of attention . . . introducing something new or

<sup>2</sup> Implications regarding the timing of the rapture will be discussed in the fourth article.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Alford, *The Greek New Testament* (London: Rivingtons, 1866; reprint, Chicago: Moody, 1958 [4 vols. in 2]), 4:623; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Priester für Gott: Studien zum Herrschafts- und Priestermotiv in der Apokalypse*, Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen (Münster: Aschendorf, 1972), 7:389; and J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 118.

<sup>4</sup> A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 4th ed. (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 612.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 611.

unusual.”<sup>6</sup> This shows that the referents in verses 9–17 are not the same group as those in verses 1–8.

#### EVALUATION OF DISTINCTIONS

Other factors show that the great multitude is distinct from the 144,000. The multitude is said to be innumerable, whereas the 144,000 are precisely numbered. The multitude includes people from every nation, whereas the 144,000 are from Israelite tribes. Also the multitude will suffer during the Great Tribulation, but the 144,000 will be protected from impending harm. In addition John saw the multitude in heaven, but the 144,000 were viewed on earth. The multitude is more closely related to the heavenly vision of Revelation 4–5, while the 144,000 deal with events on earth. Furthermore the members of this multitude are dead, while the 144,000 are alive until a later scene in Revelation 14.

#### DEFENSE AGAINST THE COMPETING POSITION

In spite of the above distinctions many writers argue that the great multitude “is identical with the 144,000.”<sup>7</sup> They maintain that the descriptions portray the same group from different viewpoints.<sup>8</sup> To them, the first group is the church militant, and the second is the church triumphant—before and after the Tribulation.<sup>9</sup>

Those contending that they are the same group point to the pattern in which John saw a vision and then heard an interpretation (5:6 with vv. 7–14; 14:1 with vv. 2–5; 15:2 with vv. 3–4; 17:1–6 with vv. 7–18) or vice versa (5:5 with v. 6; 9:13–16 with vv. 17–21). It is suggested that 7:9 (like 15:5) begins the second part of one vi-

<sup>6</sup> Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 468.

<sup>7</sup> For example R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, 1920), 1:201.

<sup>8</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 424.

<sup>9</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, New Century Bible Commentary (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1974; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 140, 145 n. 1; M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation, Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Knox, 1989), 131; G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: Black, 1966; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 95; Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 253; and Håkan Ulfsgård, *Feast and Future: Revelation 7:9–17 and the Feast of Tabernacles*, Coniectanea Biblica New Testament Series (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1989), 73.

sion of the same people.<sup>10</sup> The proponents of this view also suggest that since the lion and the lamb are the same in 5:5–6, then the Lion of Judah vision (7:1–8) and the Lamb vision (vv. 9–17) refer to the same subjects. Also they say the rounded number of 144,000 refers to all believers, because numbers in apocalyptic genre, they say, are to be taken symbolically.<sup>11</sup> They hold that the twelve tribes in verses 1–8 cannot refer to literal Israel because the list does not name all the Old Testament Israelite tribes.<sup>12</sup> Thus they argue that this list refers to the church, claiming that the church is the new Israel (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30; Rom. 2:29; Gal. 3:29; 6:16; Eph. 1:11, 14; Phil. 3:3; Titus 2:14; James 1:11; 1 Peter 2:9).<sup>13</sup>

Also the fact that John applied Old Testament Jewish eschatological blessings to Gentiles in Revelation 7:15–17 is used by proponents of this view to support their position. They add that it is unlikely that John would single out Jews for unique blessings.<sup>14</sup> Since all unbelievers will be given the mark of the beast (13:16–17), proponents of this view reason that all believers would be sealed with God's mark (7:1–8 and 9:4).<sup>15</sup> They also point to the Pseudepigrapha (4 *Ezra* 2 and *Apocalypse of Elijah* 1:9–10; 5:4–6) to support their position. Also the fact that both groups are victorious warriors is said to support the view that the two groups are identical.<sup>16</sup>

However, the great multitude is distinct from the 144,000 because verses 9–17 are not a follow-up interpretation of verses 1–8. Instead verses 13–17 interpret the distinct vision of verses 9–12 but not verses 1–8, for none of the elements in verses 1–8 are referred to in the interpretation in verses 13–17.

The use of numbers in Revelation is not always symbolic. In other parts of the book numbers are clearly taken literally. For ex-

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<sup>10</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 317–18.

<sup>11</sup> Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 95; and Ulfgard, *Feast and Future*, 73.

<sup>12</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 677.

<sup>13</sup> Robert E. Coleman, *Songs of Heaven* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1980; reprint, *Singing with the Angels* [Grand Rapids: Revell, 1998]), 79; and John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross MacKenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 255.

<sup>14</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 425.

<sup>15</sup> James Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 2:438.

<sup>16</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 425.

ample the number seven refers to seven literal churches that existed in John's day (2:4). Also numbers used in Revelation indicating the length of days or months are literal, for they are quite specific (9:5, 10; 12:6; 13:5).<sup>17</sup> Thus the number 144,000 refers to a specific number of individuals, composed of twelve thousand from each of Israel's twelve tribes.

The twelve tribes of 7:1–8 refer to all ethnic Israel rather than the church. The fact that the tribes of Ephraim and Dan are not mentioned does not require that the text be interpreted symbolically. The Old Testament did not have one standard list of the actual thirteen tribes of Jacob (Gen. 48:5). Yet only twelve names are normally given. In Genesis 49:28 and Exodus 1:1–4 Joseph is noted as one of the twelve tribes that includes Levi. However, in 1 Chronicles 27:16–22 the list includes the two sons of Joseph and excludes Levi. Thus in Revelation 7:8 Joseph could stand for Ephraim, since Joseph received two tribes (Ephraim and Manasseh) and only Mannaseh is mentioned.

The fact that Dan is not mentioned in verses 5–8 is not unusual. Dan, along with Zebulun, is not mentioned in 1 Chronicles 4–8, which was written after the Exile. Yet even with Dan's absence, the listing of the other tribes is normally taken in Chronicles in a literal way. Some speculate that Dan was omitted in Revelation 7 because of that tribe's idolatrous history, as narrated in Judges 18:30 and 1 Kings 12:29.<sup>18</sup> Others credit its omission to the view that the Antichrist might come from the tribe of Dan.<sup>19</sup>

It seems best to interpret "every tribe" (*πάσης φυλῆς*) as inclusive of all of Israel and to take the references to the tribes literally (Rev. 7:4). This indicates a distinction between certain redeemed Jews and the great multitude, which includes redeemed people from every nation.

The opinion that Israel is reconstituted in the church and that the church is the referent to the 144,000 is weak for three reasons.

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<sup>17</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, "Evidence from Revelation 20," in *A Case for Premillennialism: A New Consensus*, ed. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsend (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 249.

<sup>18</sup> Ford, *Revelation*, 118.

<sup>19</sup> Irenaeus wrote the following regarding the Antichrist and the omission of Dan in Revelation 7. "And Jeremiah does not merely point out his sudden coming, but he even indicates the tribe from which he shall come, where he says, 'We shall hear the voice of his swift horses from Dan; the whole earth shall be moved by the voice of the neighing of his galloping horses: he shall also come and devour the earth, and the fulness thereof, the city also, and they that dwell therein.' This, too, is the reason that this tribe is not reckoned in the Apocalypse along with those which are saved" (*Against Heresies* 5.30.2).

First, in the New Testament the word “Israel,” which occurs sixty-five times, always refers to Jews, that is, ethnic Israelites.<sup>20</sup> In fact this is clearly its meaning elsewhere in Revelation (2:14; 21:12). Second, there is no clear-cut example of the church being called Israel in the New Testament. The “Israel of God” in Galatians 6:16 refers, as seen in the context, to Christian Jews, who are a part of the one body of Christ (Rom. 9:8).<sup>21</sup> Third, the New Testament predicts that God has a future plan for Israel as such (Rom. 9–11). Romans 11:25–26 “clearly affirms the salvation of a literal Israel” after the fullness of the Gentiles.<sup>22</sup> Therefore a normal and literal hermeneutic suggests that the 144,000 Israelites are distinct from the great multitude and should not be equated with the church.

If John envisioned end-time events, it is reasonable that he would single out Jews for unique blessings. Distinctions in kingdom blessings are predicted for Jewish and Gentile believers in the end times (Ezek. 39:7; Zech. 14:14, 16; Rom. 11:11, 25–27). Also, although John used words that referred to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel (Rev. 7:15–17; cf. Isa. 49:10; Ezek. 37:27), the statements in Revelation 7:15–17 describe similar blessings that Gentiles will receive, as noted in 21:3–4.

That all unbelievers will be given the mark of the beast (13:16–17) does not prove that all believers will be sealed with God’s mark of protection, as are the 144,000. Instead many believers will suffer persecution (6:9; 7:14; 20:4). Their mark of identity is that they will not take the mark of the beast (20:4). Nothing is noted in the Bible that indicates that *all* believers will receive the seal (*σφραγίδα*) of God mentioned in Revelation 7:2 and 9:4. Today believers are sealed (*σφραγίζω*) by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13; 4:30). The sealing of the 144,000 is a different seal, for a specific time period (Rev. 7:3). Thus it could be for a distinct group of Israelites.

Furthermore the pseudepigraphical writings mentioned elsewhere do not mean that the two visions in Revelation 7 refer to one group. *Four Ezra 2* could refer to two distinct groups. The vision of the sealed is given in verses 33–41. Yet a separate vision of the

<sup>20</sup> Johann Albrecht Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament*, ed. Andrew R. Fausset, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1860), 5:233.

<sup>21</sup> Donald K. Campbell, “Galatians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985; reprint, Colorado Springs, CO: Cook, 1996), 611.

<sup>22</sup> George E. Ladd, “An Historic Premillennial Response,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. R. G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977), 27–28.

great multitude follows in verses 42–48. These visions seem to be distinct, for the interpretation (vv. 45–48) relates only to what Ezra saw about the multitude (vv. 42–44). The *Apocalypse of Elijah* 1:9–10 and 5:4–6 indicates that those who are sealed with God's name on their foreheads will receive the same destiny as those noted in Revelation 7:16. While this could mean that the writer connected the two groups, it could also simply reflect the fact that he envisioned two distinct groups with the same destiny.

Also it is not correct to state that both groups are described as victorious warriors. While a strong case can be made for the great multitude being overcomers (12:11; 13:7),<sup>23</sup> this is not true of the 144,000 (14:4). And even if both groups are overcomers, this does not prove that they are identical. Such argumentation fails to recognize their distinctions.<sup>24</sup>

#### DISTINCT GROUPINGS OF JEWS AND GENTILES

The distinction between the 144,000 and the great multitude helps clarify the identity of these Tribulation saints. While some Jews could be part of the large multitude, an ethnic distinction is made regarding who will be protected from the plagues. God will seal only 144,000 *Israelite* saints (7:3–4; 14:4). Thus this Jewish group is distinguished from the multitude that represents all nations.<sup>25</sup>

During the present church age God has broken down the dividing wall, making believing Jews and Gentiles one body in Christ (Eph. 2:14; 1 Cor. 12:13). But in the Great Tribulation Jewish and predominately Gentile believers are distinguished from each other.<sup>26</sup> While distinctions regarding divine blessings existed between Jews and Gentiles before the church age, in the present dispensation God's blessings are enjoyed equally by believers of all races.<sup>27</sup> In Revelation 4–19 the distinction is again established.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 425.

<sup>24</sup> D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 92.

<sup>25</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 135.

<sup>26</sup> Donald W. Kopecky, "Salvation in the Tribulation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 436 (December 1952): 362.

<sup>27</sup> Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993), 113.

<sup>28</sup> Erickson maintains that "none of the special and peculiar promises given to the church in the present age are given to these saints of the tribulation" (*A Basic Guide to Eschatology*, 135). See also John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 37.

This distinction between Jews and Gentiles is also seen in Revelation 11, which describes the revival of Israelite temple worship (v. 2). Also, if the woman in Revelation 12 refers to Israel, then unique protection is given for Jewish believers (vv. 13–17).

This focus on Jewish believers will occur in the last days (Amos 9:11–12; Zech. 14:14, 17). The Old Testament points to a day when Israelites will turn to their Messiah (Deut. 4:30; Jer. 16:15; Ezek. 36:24; Zech. 12:10), and surviving Israel, as a whole, will be saved (Rom. 11:26).<sup>29</sup> The rabbis maintained that “all Israel has a share in the world to come.”<sup>30</sup> Revelation 7:1–8 is a pledge that God still has a distinct plan for Israel. His present preservation of the nation affirms this. Recognizing that Jews and Gentiles are treated diversely in this Tribulation suggests that John’s vision refers to the last days—when such distinctions will exist. Also the fact that believing Jews and Gentiles are united in the church as the unique body of Christ, indicates that the church age will differ from the Great Tribulation when those distinctions will again be evident.<sup>31</sup>

#### SALVATION OF INDIVIDUALS FROM EVERY NATION

Revelation 7:9 affirms that God’s plan for reconciling all nations to Himself will one day be fulfilled. This plan was unfolded in the Old Testament; Israel was to be a kingdom of priests to attract the world to God (Gen. 12:3; Exod. 19:5–6; Deut. 4:6; Pss. 67:3–4; 86:9; 96:3; 117:1). The New Testament later recorded how the church was commissioned to take the gospel to all nations (Matt. 28:19–20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8), predicting a time when the fullness of Gentile salvation will be completed (Rom. 11:25–26).<sup>32</sup> This salvation is based on God’s impartial and universal love (John 3:16; Acts 10:34–35; 2 Cor. 5:14, 19; 2 Pet. 3:9). Along with Old Testa-

<sup>29</sup> “Paul was thinking of a restoration of the nation of Israel as a whole to God at the end, an eschatological event in the strict sense” (C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary [Edinburgh: Clark, 1975], 577 [italics his]).

<sup>30</sup> *Sanhedrin* 10.1.

<sup>31</sup> Disputing this point, Douty notes that distinctions between Jewish and Gentile believers existed between the birth of the church and A.D. 70. Thus, he says, the church can exist with distinction in race again (Norman F. Douty, *Has Christ’s Return Two Stages?* [New York: Pageant, 1956], 100). However, it can be argued that the period before A.D. 70 was transitional, leading to a permanent establishment of the church being one body (Gal. 6:15; Eph. 4:4).

<sup>32</sup> J. Lanier Burns, “The Future of Ethnic Israel in Romans 11,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 229.



ment texts (Isa. 25:6–9; Jer. 3:17; Mic. 4:1–4; Zech. 8:20–23; 14:16) the scene in Revelation 7:9–17 affirms that this universal undertaking will be accomplished. John foresaw the day when the redeemed will include someone from every conceivable ethnic group, with angels praising God for His salvation (Rev. 7:10).

The scene in verses 9–14 presents the event that was anticipated in 5:9–10. There “four living creatures and the twenty-four elders” (v. 7) are seen praising the Lamb for paying the purchase price to save individuals from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation.<sup>33</sup> They *anticipate* people from each nation ruling as priests on the earth. Then in chapter 7 the fulfillment of that anticipation is revealed as John was shown redeemed people from every nation (v. 9). This great salvation of individuals from every nation has not yet been realized. It will come in the future when the gospel will have been preached in the whole world (Matt. 24:14; Rom. 11:17).

### A YET-FUTURE PERIOD

John was told that these saints are *οἱ ἐρχόμενοι ἐκ τῆς θλίψεως τῆς μεγάλης* (“coming out of the Great Tribulation,” Rev. 7:14). Thus they are a distinct and universal group of people who will have lived in the world’s severest period of affliction (Dan. 12:1; Matt. 24:21). This period of Great Tribulation was prophesied to last three and a half years (Dan. 7:25; 9:27; 12:7; Rev. 11:2; 12:6, 14; 13:5). These facts pave the way for determining when these saints exist in human history. Inquiry confirms that the time of these saints’ tribulation and salvation is yet future, not contemporary.

The existence of a multitude of believers from every conceivable ethnic group on earth, as John saw in his vision, has never been realized. Even today a large portion of the world’s population consists of non-Christians who have never heard the gospel. Of the approximately 16,000 ethnic people groups in the world today, 6,845 are classified as unreached or least reached. Of the 6.36 billion people in the world, 40.5 percent live among unreached people

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<sup>33</sup> For discussions of the textual problem in 5:9 involving *ἡμᾶς*, “us,” see Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 360; Zane C. Hodges and Arthur L. Farstad, eds., *The Greek New Testament according to the Majority Text*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 1985), 738–39; J. Harold Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 116–17; H. C. Hoskier, *Concerning the Text of the Apocalypse* (London: Quaritch, 1929), 155; Eberhard Nestle et al., eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche, 1993), 642; Constantius Tischendorf, ed., *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Leipzig: Giesecke and Devrient, 1886), 935; and Barbara Aland et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament*, 4th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Biblegesellschaft, 1994), 842–44.

groups.<sup>34</sup> So the gathering of redeemed people from *every* ethnic group is still to come. And verse 14 states that it will occur when people come out of the Great Tribulation.

The Great Tribulation refers to the time when the Antichrist will bring worldwide persecution against God's saints (Matt. 24:9, 21; Rev. 13:7, 10). Such *global* tribulation hardly reflects the localized situation of A.D. 70, John's day, or shortly thereafter. This indicates that John was looking at a period that would take place after his time (1:19). The fact that John could not identify these saints without an interpreter (7:13) supports the view that they were not from John's time. This future view of "the Great Tribulation" (τῆς θλίψεως τῆς μεγάλης) is verified in other Scripture.

The Bible supports the concept that a specific time of severest suffering will occur immediately before Christ's return to earth. This period will be more severe than the general tribulations of any other age. Moses predicted that in the latter days Israel would be in exile during a specific time. The Septuagint used the same term John used (τῇ θλίψει) to note this period of coming "distress" (Deut. 4:29–30, Septuagint). At that time Israel will return to Yahweh in obedience. Since the nation of Israel has not returned to God and does not seem on the verge of doing so, this specific time of distress lies in the future.

Deuteronomy 30:1–10 gives further details of what will happen when Israel repents during this time of specific distress. First, Israel's repentance will occur during their time of banishment (v. 1). This banishment began in 722 B.C. when the Northern Kingdom was scattered throughout the Assyrian Empire. In 605 B.C., the exile of Judah to Babylon began, culminating in 586 B.C. Later, in 536 B.C., a remnant of Israelites returned. By the time of the Roman Empire most Jews remained in dispersion. Further dispersion took place when the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70. The Jewish exile continues today. Currently most of those who profess Judaism are ethnic Israelites. Of the thirteen million adherents to Judaism in the world today, fewer than five million live in Israel.<sup>35</sup> Since this dispersion continues, the specific conditions that will come immediately before Christ's return have not yet been met.

Second, Deuteronomy 30:2 states that the specific, intense persecution will be followed by a time when the entire nation will turn

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<sup>34</sup> "Joshua Project 2," <http://www.joshuaproject.net/introleastreached.html>.

<sup>35</sup> "The Jewish Population of the World," <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/jewpop.html>, 1. See also Melanie Parry, ed., *Chambers Book of Facts* (London: Chambers, 2002), 264.

their hearts fully to God. At that time Israel will spiritually return to the Lord as a nation and to its land (Ezek. 16:53–63; Amos 9:9–15; Zech. 12:10–12; Acts 15:16–17; Rom. 11:26). This will take place when Christ returns to the Mount of Olives (Zech. 14:1–5; Matt. 24:30), which, of course, has not yet occurred. In Ezra's day only a portion of Israelites returned to the land, and even they were in need of spiritual revival (Ezra 9:1; Hag. 1:5; Neh. 13:23). Today many Jews have returned to the Promised Land with national fervor but not with a renewed obedience to God. Of the 5.8 million Jews in the United States,<sup>36</sup> the majority have not embraced Jesus as their Messiah. Thus the time of Israel's regathering to Yahweh and their land is still to come.

Third, when Israel returns to their land and their God (Deut. 30:3–5; Isa. 11:11–12; Jer. 23:3–8; Ezek. 37:21–28; Matt. 24:31), the nation will finally possess its inheritance between the Euphrates River and the river of Egypt (Gen. 15:18), a prophecy that has not yet been fulfilled (Zech. 8:1–8; 10:8–12).<sup>37</sup> So the time of Israel's distress, when the nation will return to Yahweh and receive its Promised Land, is still future.

Jeremiah also predicted a specific time of "distress" for Israel, after which the nation will serve Yahweh and David (Jer. 30:7–9). Such national revival has not yet occurred. The Hebrew word צָרָה ("distress") that Jeremiah used "defines the quality of time when Judah suffers her severest punishment for violating the covenant (Jer. 30:7; cf. Ps. 78:49)."<sup>38</sup> Some hold that this prediction refers to the fall of Judah to Babylon or the later fall of Babylon to Medo-Persia.<sup>39</sup> However, the text relates to both Jewish kingdoms, since it is to be "Jacob's [i.e., Israel's] distress," not simply Judah's. In both periods mentioned above, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was not affected.<sup>40</sup> Thus Jeremiah referred to a still-future period when Israel will undergo a time of unparalleled "distress." Other proph-

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<sup>36</sup> "The Jewish Population of the World," 1.

<sup>37</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 388.

<sup>38</sup> John E. Hartley, "צָרָה, צָר, צָרָה," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2:779.

<sup>39</sup> J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 115.

<sup>40</sup> Charles H. Dyer, "Jeremiah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985; reprint, Colorado Springs, CO: Cook, 1996), 1168.

ets taught that this period will end when the Messiah rescues His people (Joel 2:32; Zech. 13:7–14:5).

Daniel 12:1 also referred to a specific time of distress (πῆξ) that Israel will experience. This period will last a time, times, and half a time (v. 7), which refers to three and a half years, the length of the last half of Daniel's seventieth week (Dan. 7:25; 9:27; 12:11; Rev. 12:6, 14). After this affliction Israel will be rescued from the Antichrist and his armies (Dan. 7:26–27; 11:45–12:1). No period in history fits these time parameters. Antiochus's desecration lasted "exactly three years."<sup>41</sup> His persecution is not the yet-to-come three and a half years of severest affliction that the Antichrist will unleash on future saints (Rev. 13:5–7), but it does typify it.

Also Zechariah predicted a specific time of testing for God's people, in which they will turn to Yahweh (Zech. 13:9).<sup>42</sup> At that time enemies will surround Jerusalem, taking captive half her population (14:2). Then Yahweh, coming to the Mount of Olives, will bring deliverance (vv. 3–5); Israel will accept their Messiah and be saved (12:10; Rom. 11:26). Such deliverance for Israel, with God splitting the Mount of Olives, has not yet occurred (Zech. 14:4). Thus this time of Tribulation, immediately before the Second Coming, has not taken place.

Jesus stated that a specific and severe Tribulation awaits God's saints. This *θλίψις μεγάλη* ("Great Tribulation") will take place between the abomination of desolation and the appearance of the Son of Man in the clouds (Matt. 24:21, 29). After speaking of the coming abomination, Jesus used the word *τοτέ* to clarify the chronology of events. "But pray that your flight may not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath; for *then* [*τοτέ*] there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will" (vv. 20–21). *Τότε* clarifies that this terrible time of tribulation will occur immediately after the abomination of desolation. This Great Tribulation will be followed by Christ's return in the clouds (v. 31). Since Christ has not yet literally returned in the clouds to split the Mount of Olives (Zech. 14:4), just as He literally ascended from it (Acts 1:11), the Great Tribulation is still future. If it is not future, the world would presently be in it

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<sup>41</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, "Between the Testaments," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 185.

<sup>42</sup> The prediction that the restoration of Israel to Yahweh would come on the heels of the messianic woes is found in Deuteronomy 4:30; Jeremiah 30:7–24; Daniel 7:24–27; and Zechariah 14:2, 20–21 (cf. 2 *Apocalypse of Barak* 68:2–5; 4 *Ezra* 6:24–28; *Sibylline Oracles* 3.185–95).

and there would be less than three and a half years until Christ's return to the Mount of Olives.

As previously noted, Jesus also indicated that the end would come when the gospel will have been preached to all the nations (Mark 13:10). Since Revelation 7:9 is a scene of saved people from all nations, which delights the angels (vv. 11–12), it is arguably a preview of a yet-future event that will take place immediately before the end of this age.

Jesus also stated that the time of Great Tribulation, just before the end, would be signaled by the “abomination of desolation” (Mark 13:14, 19). He noted that after the abomination there would be an unprecedented time of *θλίψις* (“tribulation”) “such as has not occurred since the beginning of the creation which God created until now, and never will” (v. 19). This intense persecution during the end times, as prophesied in Daniel 7:25; 12:1–7; Zechariah 13:7–14:3; and Revelation 12–13, has not yet occurred. The following table indicates that Jesus referred to the same time period that Daniel predicted, affirming that the Great Tribulation is the three-and-a-half-year period between one prince's (Antichrist's) abomination and another Prince's (Jesus Christ's) return in the clouds.

**TABLE 1** Comparison between Daniel and Mark 13

<i>Events Predicted</i>	<i>Daniel</i>	<i>Mark</i>	<i>Time of Fulfillment</i>
Temple destroyed	9:26	13:2	A.D. 70
Rumors of wars	9:26; 11:44	13:7	Before the three-and-a-half-year Great Tribulation
Abomination of desolation	9:27; 12:11	13:14	Start of the Great Tribulation
A time of “tribulation”	12:1	13:19	During the Great Tribulation
Son of Man on clouds	7:13	13:26	After the Great Tribulation

Matthew 10:17–23 records Jesus' prediction of a specific time of severe suffering that will occur immediately before His coming. During this time Jesus' disciples would be delivered up to political leaders, turned over to death by family members, and hated by all. The apostles did not experience this degree of persecution during His earthly ministry.<sup>43</sup> Also the multiplicity of rulers in Israel, noted in Matthew 10:18, 23, does not fit with Israel's situation from

<sup>43</sup> “There is not a shadow of a suggestion in the outward circumstances of anything which could form a natural occasion for such predictions of, and exhortations relating to sufferings” (Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery [London: Black, 1910; reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1959], 361).

A.D. 33 to 70. “At no time were there more than one king and one ruler in Palestine.”<sup>44</sup> Also the apostles were not universally hated (10:22; Luke 21:17). Instead the gospel was generally well received in the Roman Empire during the time of the apostles (Acts 26:26). Even today, Christianity is popular in many countries. Yet Jesus predicted a specific future time when His evangelists would be hated by *all*.<sup>45</sup> Thus the events in Matthew 10 parallel Jesus’ other descriptions of the end times as indicated in the following table.

**TABLE 2** Comparison between Matthew 10 and the Olivet Discourse

<i>Matthew 10</i>	<i>Matthew 24</i>	<i>Mark 13</i>
<p>17 But beware of men, for they will hand you over to the courts and scourge you in their synagogues; 18 and you will even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles.</p> <p>19 But when they hand you over, do not worry about how or what you are to say; for it will be given you in that hour what you are to say.</p> <p>20 For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.</p> <p>21 Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death.</p> <p>22 You will be hated by all because of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.</p> <p>23 . . . you will not finish going through the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes.</p>	<p>9 Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name.</p> <p>10 At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another.</p> <p>13 But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved.</p> <p>30 and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.</p>	<p>9 But be on your guard; for they will deliver you to the courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them.</p> <p>11 When they arrest you and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit.</p> <p>12 Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and have them put to death.</p> <p>13 You will be hated by all because of My name, but the one who endures to the end, he will be saved.</p> <p>26 Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.</p>

Another clue that Jesus referred to a yet-future tribulation is His statement that “the Son of Man comes” (Matt. 10:23). He noted

<sup>44</sup> J. M. McDermott, “Mt. 10:23 in Context,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 28 (1984): 233.

<sup>45</sup> This views πάντων in an absolute sense, since in the parallel passage of Mark 13:10, 13, the persecution relates to universal preaching.

that this coming would end the specific afflictions mentioned in verses 17–23. Also in Matthew 16:27 Jesus said, “The Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every man according to his deeds.” This repayment (*ἀποδοῦμι*) can refer to the Second Coming as seen in its usage in Revelation 22:12. Thus the afflictions mentioned refer to the Great Tribulation that will immediately precede Christ’s return to earth.

Matthew 10:23 is the first New Testament reference to the “coming” of the Son of Man. Other New Testament texts that mention the time when “the Son of man comes” also refer to the end of the Tribulation (Matt. 16:27; 24:27, 30, 37, 39, 44; 25:31; 26:64; Mark 8:28; 13:26; 14:62; Luke 9:26; 12:40; 17:30; 18:8; 21:27). The exception is Matthew 16:28, which refers to a preview of that time.

The coming of the Son of Man is mentioned once in the Old Testament in Daniel 7:13–14 as a specific time when one would deliver the saints from tribulation. That event would occur after the saints had been persecuted for “a time, times, and half a time” (vv. 25–27). This period of three and a half years refers to the Great Tribulation. Thus the coming of the Son of Man will occur immediately after the Great Tribulation, and the events in Matthew 10 describe circumstances of the yet-future Great Tribulation, from which the saints of Revelation 7:9–17 will come out.

Second Thessalonians 1:7 also indicates that Christ’s return will end the saints’ affliction. Yet before that end the lawless one will desecrate the temple (2:3–4). Thus the Bible envisions a unique time of tribulation to occur after the abomination of desolation and on the brink of Christ’s second coming. This is the period from which the great multitude will emerge (Rev. 7:9–17). Such a time is yet future.

## CONCLUSION

The great multitude of Revelation 7:9 is a distinct and universal group, delivered from a future three-and-a-half-year period of severest persecution, known as the Great Tribulation. Certain facts make them distinct from the church. First, these Tribulation saints are unique from church-age saints in that they are distinguished in some ways from some of their contemporary Jewish saints. Second, unlike present-day believers, these saints represent redeemed people from every ethnic group. Such a situation has not yet occurred and is promised to unfold at the end of the age. Third, these saints will experience the world’s severest time of persecution, which is yet future.

The next article in this series discusses what these Tribulation saints will do on the earth and in heaven.