

Sealed to Salvation: Assurance in the Book of Revelation

Bill Berends

The doctrine of assurance of salvation is one of the most wonderful and comforting teachings of the Bible. Yet, sadly, many Christians do not fully appreciate this doctrine because they fail to see that the outworking of their salvation is wholly in God's hands. Instead of recognising that God protects his people from the onslaughts of Satan and his minions, they believe their security depends on their own efforts. The outcome of such an approach is that they cannot be certain about their final destiny until they come to the end of their life. Such Christians pray that they might act true to their faith at the moment the Lord calls them home in the belief that their faithfulness determines their salvation. How much more joyful their life would be were they to realise the Bible says our salvation is grounded in God's faithfulness, and not our own.

One book where this doctrine of assurance of salvation is clearly taught is the Book of Revelation. Written for Christians during times of persecution the book encourages them to look to God's promise that he will protect them come what may. Yes, the book does encourage Christians to "hold on" to the faith and strive to "overcome" temptations (2:11, 17, 25, 26; 3:5, 11, 12, 21, 25). But such tenacity and perseverance is not presented as the ground of their salvation, rather it is seen as the outworking of their salvation. God works through his Word and Spirit to effect obedience and perseverance among his saints so that not a single one of them will perish.

The theme of perseverance comes out strongly in John's vision of the 144,000 in chapters 7 and 14. Regrettably these passages are often misunderstood, especially by those who understand the book as a prophetic vision giving a chronological description of what will befall the Church between Christ's first and second coming. Most commentators today understand the book as addressed first of all to John's contemporary readers, written to encourage them during times of persecution. In a series of parallel visions the Spirit shows John that there will be many upheavals and catastrophic events before Christ will return to gather his church, but that all of these are under God's control. Christians must faithfully endure in the knowledge that God will protect his people and allow not one of them to be lost.

The identity of the 144,000 has been debated on at least three accounts: one concerns the **number**, a second the **ethnicity** and a third the **virginity** of the people concerned. The fact that they are also identified as men is usually ignored, though as we shall see, this is not insignificant. The 12,000 from each of the tribes of the sons of Israel in chapter 7, are identified as “virgins” (παρθένοι) who kept themselves pure of women in chapter 14.

An example of an interpretation that took all three of these literally can be found with early Jesuits. Annotations to the 1582 Jesuit Rheims Bible read: “He signifieth by these thousands and the multitudes following all the elect: but [only] the elect of the Jews to be in a certain number: the elect of the Gentiles [verse 9] to be innumerable.” However, the 144,000 elect Jews are not deemed to be the same as the 144,000 mentioned in chapter fourteen. The latter are seen as a saintly class of non-Jewish believers, and the annotations commend virginity as “the one state of life more excellent than the other, and virgins for their purity surpassing the rest, and always accompanying Christ...This the Church applieth to holy Innocents that died first for Christ.”⁸¹

While the Jesuit celibate lifestyle accounts for their interest in upholding virginity as a state to be rewarded, their futurist interpretation of the Book of Revelation may have been prompted by the Protestant charge that the Pope was Antichrist.⁸² Around 1585 the Jesuit Francisco Ribera, from Salamanca in Spain, wrote a 500 page commentary on the Apocalypse to counter this interpretation. He argued that almost all of the events described, especially those surrounding the Antichrist, pertained to the future. While a number of authors claim Ribera and the Jesuits are the source of **all** futurist interpretations of the Book of Revelation,⁸³ this claim is questionable.⁸⁴ Such an analysis seems to be aimed at giving futurism a bad name among Evangelicals by linking it to Jesuit theology. As we shall see, futurism has its own history in the Protestant tradition.

⁸¹ Francisco Ribera, cited in Rand Winburn *Jesuit origins of futurism proven*, http://www.iconbusters.com/iconbusters/htm/false_prophecy/jesuit/j_3.htm

⁸² See H. Grattan Guinness, *Romanism and the Reformation from the Standpoint of Prophecy* (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1887).

⁸³ See e.g.: H. Grattan Guinness, *op. cit.*; Joseph Tanner, *Daniel and the Revelation* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1898).

⁸⁴ Tim Lahaye comes close to following the Jesuit explanation of the 144,000, but there is no reason to believe there is a connection. See his *Revelation Illustrated and Made Plain* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), pp. 190-203.

Jehovah's Witnesses, who follow in the teaching of Charles Taze Russell, are an example of those who take the number, but not the ethnic identity or virginity of the 144,000 literally. Russell taught that only 144,000 people (of all nations) would be saved. When his followers began greatly to exceed this number, this teaching called for modification. The new interpretation stated many would be saved, but only the 144,000 would go to heaven for an eternally secure salvation. Others could find a lower level of salvation on earth, but always conditional on their ongoing obedience.

More frequently held is the view that it is not the number or the virginity, but only the ethnic identity that must be taken literally. This view is commonly traced to the ministry of the Presbyterian pastor, Edward Irving, of Scotland. He participated in the Awakening, but centred his teaching on tongue speaking and prophecy. Around 1831 a Miss Margaret MacDonald of Port Glasgow, Scotland, prophesied a rapture of the Church before the advent of Christ.⁸⁵ Irving built his teaching on this prophecy, leading to a British Adventism based on an expectation of a secret rapture. The Irish Plymouth Brethren adopted Irving's teachings, and from them it spread abroad through the ministry of John Nelson Darby. In Darby's teaching the futurist interpretation of the biblical apocalyptic literature was linked to a dispensational interpretation of salvation history.

That the dispensational premillennialism of the Brethren spread to other Christian groups was largely the result of a publication by Cyrus Ingerson Scofield. He promoted the position in his annotations to a Reference Bible published in 1909. Scofield's interpretation called for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, and the seemingly miraculous establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 gave the position much credence. The survival of Israel now became the goal of Christian action, going by the name of *Christian Zionism*. In the USA, especially, concern for Israel's welfare became a major political issue, gaining support with the publication in 1970 of Hal Lindsey's bestseller, *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

Premillennialism lost some of its impetus when the collapse of the Berlin wall called into question the popular identification of Russia and China with Gog and Magog. But church leaders like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson continued to champion Christian Zionism in the politics of the American Christian right. In 1995 Pat Robertson wrote *The End of the Age*, and that same year Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins began the popular *Left*

⁸⁵ M.L. Moser, Jr., *An Apologetic of Premillennialism*, p.28, cited at <http://www.champs-of-truth.com/books/3schools.htm>

Behind series of books and films. Here we should note that LaHaye does hold to a kind of assurance of salvation he calls *eternal security*. In the *Left Behind* series this security is based on having the seal of God applied to the foreheads of his saints.⁸⁶

It is not the purpose of this article to delve into the movements based on questionable interpretations of the passages under consideration other than to show that interpretations are numerous, and are at times not without their consequences in church and international affairs. This makes it all the more important to ask what message God brings us through the Revelation given to John. Are the passages speaking of a literal 144,000 Jews and/or virgins, or should these be interpreted in a symbolic manner? Are we dealing here with a specific epoch in the history of the world, or should these passages be applied more broadly to the time between Christ's first and second coming?

The first thing we want to note is that there is great arbitrariness in the more literal interpretations listed above. They appear to pick and choose between what they interpret as literal and what they see as symbolic without any reason other than the predispositions of the interpreter. Thus by identifying his followers with the 144,000, Russell follows the typical sectarian ploy of identifying his group with the whole number those who are to be saved. However, there is no consistency in his interpretation, as the Jewish identity and (male) virginity of the 144,000 are taken symbolically.

The Jesuit interpreters may at first glance appear to be more consistent in taking all three aspects literally, but this leads to the questionable interpretation that there are two distinct groups of 144,000, one Jewish and the other Gentile. Again it is not difficult to see the Jesuit prejudices in identifying virginity with celibacy, and in placing the fulfilment of the prophecies in the future. Even to Roman Catholics it must have been clear that many of the earlier popes could hardly be seen as representing the holy Christ and serve as role models of Christian behaviour. But by placing the fulfilment of prophecies about Antichrist in the future they could avoid the question whether such popes represented Antichrist.

While the premillennial Dispensationalism of right-wing evangelicals has obvious political clout, it would not seem that the development of this position was motivated by any personal prejudices. However, we strongly

⁸⁶ See, e.g., the teachings of one of the heroes, Dr. Tsion Ben-Judah, in volume 9, *Desecration*, pp. 8ff.

question the wisdom of following a Bible interpretation that has its origin in a revivalist vision. Not only do we hold God's revelation in Scripture to be complete and in need of no further explanatory visions,⁸⁷ but it is clear that such claims to additional revelations have led to very different and contrary interpretations. Here we need only remember the visions of Ellen White of Seventh Day Adventism and Garner Ted Armstrong of the Worldwide Church of God, not to mention the more extreme revelations of Muhammad, Joseph Smith and Sun Myung Moon.

As with the other interpretations stated, premillennial Dispensationalism is arbitrary about which aspects of the account of the 144,000 it takes literally and which it does not. Only the Jewish identity is taken literally, while the number and the virginity are taken symbolically. No explanation is given for this hermeneutic which conveniently fits with the view the interpreters concerned wish to place on the passage. In his teachings on hermeneutics Berkeley Mickelsen warns against such an approach:

If an interpreter declares that a certain expression is figurative, he must give reasons for assigning a figurative meaning. These reasons must arise from an objective study of all the factors and must show why the figurative meaning is needed. Sometimes interpreters insist that elements are figurative because their system of eschatology requires it, not because the Scriptures and objective factors demand it. It is surprising how figurative some adherents to extreme literalistic schools can be!⁸⁸

That the Book of Revelation is filled with symbolism has long been recognised, yet there are those who would still argue for a literal interpretation wherever possible. Thus in Walvoord's commentary on the book he proceeds from "the presumption that, where expressions are not explained, they can normally be interpreted according to their natural meaning, unless the context clearly indicates otherwise."⁸⁹ Against that position G.K. Beale has shown that the introduction to the Book of Revelation itself points to a symbolic interpretation. In Rev. 1:1 John writes that his "revelation" (Ἀποκάλυψις) was "made known" (σημαίνω) by God. The latter Greek word is the cognate verb to the noun meaning *sign* or

⁸⁷ See the articles by Stephen Voorwinde and myself in *Vox Reformata* 60 (1995), entitled *Canon and Prophecy*.

⁸⁸ A. Berkeley Mickelsen *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), p. 304.

⁸⁹ J.H. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1966), p. 30.

symbol. The verse is clearly an allusion to Dan. 2:28-30, where we find the same construction in the LXX. This leads Beale to conclude that in Revelation, like much of the book of Daniel, “the manner of communication is defined by the context of the vision **as symbolic communication** by means of a dream vision” (our emphasis).⁹⁰

Equally important is Beale’s recognition that “The OT and Judaism are the primary background against which to understand the images and ideas of the Apocalypse.”⁹¹ He himself does this with great thoroughness in his commentary, where he provides a listing of more than three and a half thousand OT references, as well as another two hundred and fifty relating to intertestamentary literature. While a good deal of the symbolism comes from other apocalyptic and prophetic writings, much of it also stems from the historical books, especially the accounts of the exodus. The analogies of Israel escaping the tyrannical might of Egypt, surviving under God’s care in the wilderness, and entering God’s promised land of rest are drawn out to assure God’s new covenant people of his sovereign rule and care.

Having come to a similar conclusion myself in preparation for participation in a consortium on *Preaching the Apocalypse*⁹² I asked myself the question, where in the OT do we find a census of God’s people Israel listed by tribes? The answer is, in the opening chapter of the Book of Numbers. Here we have a listing of all the men above twenty years of age able to serve in the army. In exploring a possible connection several details confirmed there is an allusion to this event in Revelation 7 and 14. But before we investigate this further we should settle the matter whether these two passages about the 144,000 should be taken together in the first place. As we have seen, this connection was denied by Ribera and the Jesuits, who identify the first group as Jews and the second as Gentiles.

The obvious links are the number 144,000 found in both passages, and the fact that the seal on their foreheads in chapter 7 appears to correspond to the Father’s name written on the foreheads in chapter 14. There are also some differences. The 144,000 in chapter 7 are identified as servants of God, sons (υἱοί) belonging to the twelve tribes of Israel. The 144,000 in chapter 14 are identified as men (ἄνθρωπος), without mention of ethnic identity. Of the latter it is also stated that they have kept themselves pure

⁹⁰ G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation, A Commentary of the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 50.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁹² *Preaching the Apocalypse* was the theme of the 2006 Preaching Conference held at the Reformed Theological College, Geelong, Sept. 28, 29.

from women and are blameless and honest. They were purchased to be offered as firstfruits. They are pictured as standing on Mt. Zion in the presence of the lamb, and follow the lamb wherever he goes.

Though these descriptions do not fully coincide, there are no contradictions between them that would prevent us identifying the first 144,000 with the second. This is, in fact, required by the unique symbolism of the 144,000. The variations are easily explained if the differences in the description are seen as indicating a difference in time rather than in identity. Even though the book does not follow a strict chronological progression, it is clear that chapters 7 and 14 bracket the events listed in the chapters in between as descriptions of a situation before and after the events.

Before we proceed to say more on their identity we need investigate the significance of the number 144,000. Besides the two passages in question the number occurs nowhere else in Scripture. But the number 144 occurs in the description of the New Jerusalem: its wall will be 144 cubits thick (Rev. 21:17). Here the context suggests that we must see the number as the square of twelve, a number that figures prominently in the description of the city of God. The city is laid out like a square, with each wall 12,000 stadia in length (21:16). There are twelve gates with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel and with twelve angels in attendance (21:3). There are twelve foundation stones bearing the names of the twelve apostles (21:14), decorated with twelve precious stones (21:19, 20). The city has twelve pearly gates (21:21) and inside its walls the *tree of life* bears twelve crops, one every month (22:2).

Twelve is the number for God's people, symbolised in the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles. Thus the dimensions of the New Jerusalem reveal a city prepared for the complete number of God's people. This full number of the people of God consists of those who belong to the twelve tribes as well as those who have been called in by the twelve apostles. They are one community, because in Christ there is no Jew or Greek (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). The New Jerusalem, measuring 12,000 stadia cubed, is clearly prepared for all of God's people.

Outside of the more bizarre explanations provided by sects and the literalism of dispensational premillennialism there is a wide support for the identity of the 144,000 as the complete people of God. Beale observes:

Twelve is the number of God's people, which is squared to indicate completeness, and multiplied by one thousand to connote vastness.

This number is so significant that twelve occurs twelve times in the portrayal of the New Jerusalem as an image of the end-time completeness of the saints (21:9-22:5, which includes the three fours in 21:13 and ordinals up to twelve in 21:19-20).⁹³

Ben Witherington also regards the 144,000 as “coterminous with the total number of believers.”⁹⁴ Yet we need to recognise that this number does not necessarily indicate the whole of God’s people spanning all of history. Thus from the context it would seem that the 144,000 sealed in Rev. 7 represent only the complete number of the NT people of God, who are likened to Israel before their journey into the wilderness.

The census of the Israelites by their tribes recorded in Numbers 1 is the most likely source of the imagery used by John in this chapter. This connection is worked out in some detail by Richard Bauckham,⁹⁵ who compares the account to the War Scroll from Qumran (1QM). He does so in an ingenious way, whereby he links the account of *the 144,000* to the **Lion of Judah** and the vision of the *multitude that no one could count to Lamb that was slain* (Rev. 5:5, 6). The implication is that the Lion of Judah represents the church militant (7:1-8), and the Lamb that was slain the church martyred (7:9-17).

While this is an attractive interpretation, it is not entirely obvious whether John intended these links to the Lion and the Lamb. However, identifying the 144,000 with the church militant in itself is more convincing, as it is also confirmed by other details. First, the language is similar to the LXX account in Numbers, which lists the number of warriors by their tribes (Gk. ἐκ φυλῆς). Second, in chapter 14 the 144,000 are identified as men who kept themselves pure. The significance of this is not to exclude women from the church militant, but rather that this meets one of the requirements for soldiers in Israel.⁹⁶

The order and identity of the tribes are both unique to this passage. Judah is mentioned first, ahead of Simeon, while Ephraim and Dan are omitted. The reason for Judah’s ranking may be that this represents the tribe of Christ, while the missing tribes may have been excluded because both were

⁹³ Beale, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁹⁴ Ben Witherington III, *Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 137.

⁹⁵ Richard Bauckham, “The List of Tribes in Revelation 7 Again” in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 42, (1991), pp. 99-115.

⁹⁶ Implied in 1 Sam. 21:5; 2 Sam 11:11; Deut. 21:11.

associated with idolatry. We will not here enter into the debate about the identity and order of the tribes listed, but will point out that this unusual listing makes it very unlikely that John should be talking about literal Israelites. The picture we have is that the 144,000 are NT believers who, like the Hebrews of old, will fight forces of evil as the militant church of God. But before they enter the battle, they are marked with the seal of God.

In the context we note that the sealing takes place before the unleashing of the four winds that will bring disasters on the world. These four winds are usually taken as equivalent to the four horsemen of chapter 6,⁹⁷ so that the sealing of the 144,000 must be seen as preceding the excursions of the four horsemen. This jump back in time is fully explained when the events in chapter 7 are seen as the answer to the question voiced at the closing of chapter 6: “For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” Humanly speaking, few could withstand the tribulation of the horsemen. But chapter 7 proceeds to show that God’s people will withstand because they have been sealed by him for that purpose.

In biblical times there were three main reasons for using seals: to indicate **ownership**, to guarantee **authenticity** and for **protection** from tampering. Examples can be found in the Bible itself. When Jeremiah bought a field at Anathoth a seal was placed on the deed to confirm his ownership (Jer. 32:10). Jesus points to Caesar’s image on the denarius to indicate the coin was Caesar’s, though the real purpose of the emperor’s seal on coins was to confirm the authenticity of the coin (Lk. 20:24, 25). The seal on the grave of Jesus provides an example of how seals were used to prevent any tampering (Mt. 27:66). This is also the purpose of the seals in Rev. 5:1-5. So which of these reasons is the purpose of the sealing of the 144,000?

There is good reason to believe that all three meanings apply. God’s ownership of those who are sealed is indicated in a number of ways. First, those sealed are identified as “servants of our God” (7:3). Second, they have Christ’s and the Father’s names written on their foreheads (14:1). And third, they have been “purchased” (14:4), which points back to 5:9, where we read God’s people are “purchased for God” by the blood of the Lamb. As for their authenticity, their identity as firstfruits points to this, as well as their faithfulness, purity and honesty as mentioned in chapter 14. No doubt

⁹⁷ See Beale, *op. cit.* pp. 404-408; Leon Morris, *The Book of Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary* (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1987) p. 13; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974) p. 142.

they are one and the same as those “who did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death” (12:11).

But in the context the seal is speaks particularly of protection. The four winds of doom are held back so that the seals may be applied before any harm should fall upon God’s people (7:1-3). Like the Israelites in Egypt, God’s people are spared from the worst calamities (9:4), protected by their seal even as the Israelites were protected by the blood of the Passover lamb. There is an allusion here to yet another OT passage, Ezekiel’s vision of the faithful Israelites who are protected from God’s judgment on sinful man (Ezek. 9). As in the passages in question, in Ezekiel’s vision God’s people are indicated with a mark on the forehead.

A question that arises is: what constitutes the sign or seal given to God’s people? Some see it as a kind of countersign to that given to followers of the Beast, whose number is 666. Explanations here are legion, and where this involves some physical mark, so the Christian countersign is seen as physical. Thus in the *Left Behind* series the Christian seal is a smudge on the forehead that on closer inspection turns out to be a three dimensional image of the cross.⁹⁸ Of course the series is fictional, but that the sign involves either a visible or invisible cross is a widely held position. This interpretation has been maintained with reference to the vision of Ezekiel mentioned above. Here the Hebrew word for the “mark” given to God’s people is *taw*, which is also the name for the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In the time of Ezekiel the letter *taw* was reportedly written as a cross (like the Greek letter *chi*).

The view that the seal for Christian identification and protection is a cross has often been associated with water baptism. Roman Catholics apply the baptismal water in the shape of a cross. This “sealing” is repeated at confirmation, where oil is used to trace the sign of the cross. It would appear that this tradition has a long history, because already in the middle of the second century baptism was referred to as a “sealing” (2 Clement 7:6; 8:6). But there is no NT support for this practice, and the text itself identifies the seal with the names of the Lamb and the Father (Rev.14:1)

Protestants have rejected the identification of the seal with baptism, along with the sacramental view that regards all who are baptised as Christians. While the Westminster Confession does refer to baptism as “a sign and seal of the covenant” and the Belgic Confession speaks of those who are

⁹⁸ *Left Behind* series vol. 4, *Soul Harvest*, p. 53.

baptized as bearing God's "mark and sign" (WCF Chap. 28; BC Art. 34; cf. the Heidelberg Catechism Q & A 66; cf. Rom. 4:11), there is no suggestion that baptism places a seal upon God's people, as in Revelation 7, 14 and 21. The danger of such an identification is that it would give false security to those who have received water baptism but do not belong to the people of God. We are on safer grounds when we identify the seal with Spirit baptism.

The New Testament nowhere associates the seal given to God's people with some physical mark, but rather identifies it with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is given as a sign of ownership and a guarantee of authenticity. Thus Paul writes:

Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (2 Cor. 1:21, 22).

And elsewhere he explains,

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession--to the praise of his glory. (Eph. 1:13).

While John himself does not use the word "seal" in his epistles, there too he links the anointing of the Spirit with the authentic Christian identity, writing: "... *that anointing is real, not counterfeit.*" (1 Jn. 2:27).

In the final analysis whether we can precisely identify the seal or not is of little consequence, the main message remains the same. And that is that all the 144,000 mentioned in chapter 7, representing the whole church militant, appear again in chapter 14 as the church triumphant. Not a single one of them is lost. There is no doubt that this is the purpose for the repetition of the number 144,000 to identify God's people in chapter 14. After the four winds, or the four horsemen, have done their worst, God's people remain intact because God has sealed them against succumbing to the Evil One. The church militant has become the church triumphant.

This stunning conclusion is all the more remarkable when it is compared to what happened to Israel during the exodus. Israel, too, was protected in the

wilderness (Deut.29:5), and it is likely that this is the imagery behind the protection of the “woman”, representing the Church, in Rev.12:14ff.⁹⁹ But of all the fighting men of Israel listed in Num. 1, only two entered into the promised land. These were Joshua and Caleb, who alone trusted God’s promises and followed him wholeheartedly (Num. 32:11-13). Although the 144,000 are also urged to follow God wholeheartedly in “patient endurance and faithfulness” (Rev. 13:10) ultimately they are saved not because of their own faithfulness, but because of the faithfulness of the Father and the victorious Lamb (Rev.1:5; 12:11; 17:14).

This is the comfort we discover in reading the Book of Revelation. God will protect his people, come what may. Terrible things will happen, but they are all under God’s control. God’s people may suffer or even lose their lives, but they need not fear. Not a single one of them will be lost to salvation, because:

Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb. (Rev. 7:10)

⁹⁹ See Beale, *op. cit.*, pp648f.