

# WHO ARE THE 144,000?

**By H. C. Heffren**

Just who are the 144,000 select individuals mentioned in Revelation chapters 7 and 14? The Scriptures, which describe this mysterious group have been subjected to a great deal of speculation as well as a variety of interpretations. This very interesting subject is introduced as follows: "And I heard the number of them that were sealed; and there were sealed 144,000 of the tribes of the children of Israel" (Revelation 7:4). Then follows the detailed classification in verses 5 to 8 which allots 12,000 members from each of the tribes of Juda, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Naphtalim, Manasses, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulon, Joseph and Benjamin. It will be observed that while twelve tribes are listed, the tribes of Dan and Epharim are omitted and replaced with Levi and Joseph. What does this imply? Does this have any significance?

Several religious groups and cults owe their origin to leaders who believed they fulfilled this prophecy. Usually, they taught that when the full complement of 144,000 members associated themselves with their group, Christ would come again and a millennial reign on earth and the end of the world would ensue. The once-publicized House of David of Benton Harbour, Michigan, is a prime example. However, some Sabbatarians and Jehovah's Witnesses and others have made similar claims. Usually these people make sweeping declarations that they believe what the Bible says, literally. Let us investigate these claims in the light of the Scriptures.

In the first place, if we accept the literal figure of 144,000 then to be consistent we should also accept the literal tribes of Israel mentioned. Since all tribal distinctions have been obliterated after the Dispersion in

A.D. 70, it is no longer possible to distinguish separate tribes in the original sense. Nor were the descendants of Joseph and Levi numbered among the inheritance of Israel's twelve tribes, although they are found here as substitutes for Dan and Ephraim.

A further description of the 144,000 is found in Revelation 14. The portion reads as follows: "And I looked, and lo, a Lamb stood on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 having the Father's name written in their foreheads. And they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders; and no man could learn that song but the 144,000, which were redeemed from the earth. These are they, which were not defiled by women; for they are virgins. These are they, which follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth. These were redeemed from among men, being the firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb" (Revelation 14: 1,3 and 4.).

The literal interpretation of this Scripture would demand the elimination of all married men and the exclusion of all women. The Berkley translation defines the company as "celibates." A further stipulation requires the Father's name in their foreheads and the ability to sing the new song which only the redeemed could master. Thus we have 144,000 people of Jewish ancestry selected equally from twelve specified tribes that no longer exist due to assimilation, and all of them celibates. This is literally what it says, and for those who claim to believe the Bible literally, this is what they must accept as conditions required.

It seems to me there must be a much more Scriptural interpretation of this portion of God's Word. First let us ask why Dan and Ephraim were eliminated and why Levi and Joseph were substituted to occupy their places, despite

the fact that the "tribe" of Joseph never did exist as such. This greatly complicates the problem of being literal.

The real solution lies in observing the meaning of the names of Jacob's sons. You will recall that when Jacob blessed his sons while on his deathbed, he also blessed both the sons of Joseph. By doing so, he maintained the twelve tribes of Israel and still left the tribe of Levi free for the office of the priesthood. The meaning of those names, furnish us a clue as to why these specific tribes constituted the 144,000. Reuben, the firstborn, means excellence of dignity and power. Judah means praise. Gad means overcomer. Joseph, please note, means a fruitful bough by a well. Manasses means forgetting, with emphasis on forgetting the harsh past, which Joseph experienced in Egypt. Levi is chosen more because of his office of the priesthood, signifying the priesthood of believers. You will notice that all these names have meanings characterizing Christian graces, such as praise, victory, fruitfulness, and so forth.

The name Dan, on the contrary, means "A serpent by the way, an adder in the path..." There is nothing redemptive or consistent with this characteristic in God's church. Consequently the tribe of Joseph, the fruitful bough, is substituted for Dan. The omission of Ephraim is not so clear because his name means "double fruitful." This might indicate preference over some of the others chosen, but is qualified by "bringing forth fruit in a strange land," There are no "foreigners" in God's household. In Psalm 87, a great issue is made for those who are born in Zion, and it specifically excludes those who were born in Egypt or nations outside Israel. The new birth mentioned in the New Testament symbolizes deliverance from bondage (Egypt) and makes us citizens of the Kingdom of God. This is why Levi, of the priesthood, takes precedence over Ephraim, the foreigner.

When we examine the further limitations of membership among the 144,000, it seems preposterous to exclude all women and all married men. But this absurdity immediately dissolves when we relate the interpretation to its proper Scriptural place. We must remember that the church is the Bride of Christ. It is espoused to Christ. To be espoused means to be given under a solemn vow to marriage. Mary was espoused to Joseph and when Mary was discovered to be with child, Joseph was lenient in planning to offer her a bill of divorcement for the law permitted stoning. Mary made a sacred commitment to be the bride of Joseph, and only the divine intervention of the angel convinced Joseph that he should honor his espousal. Christ regards His Bride, the church, in the same light; and any flirtation, compromise or assimilation with the world is compared with adultery. That is why the 144,000 are said to be celibates. They are undefiled. They have not defiled themselves by committing adultery with the world (James 4:4). They are all redeemed ones. They all sing the new song of deliverance and victory. They follow Christ wherever He goes. What a glorious portrayal of the church this affords!

Twelve is the Biblical number that signifies completeness. Twelve tribes of Israel and twelve apostles were chosen to introduce both the Old and New Testaments. The 144,000 is the square of twelve multiplied a thousandfold. Thus it represents all the redeemed from both the Old and New Testament times. They represent the true church, undefiled by the world, separate from evil and joined in holy wedlock to Christ. In the church are manifest all the Christian graces, and through it Christ spreads His blessings. If you are redeemed and can sing the new song of deliverance from sin, then you can have assurance of being included in this

perfect number of completeness that signifies all the redeemed.

In Revelation 7 we are told that each one of the 144,000 is sealed. This strongly suggests the seal of the Holy Spirit. This is referred to a number of times. In Ephesians 1:3b, "In whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption" (Ephesians 4:30), "Who also hath sealed us, and given the earnest (pledge) of the Holy Spirit in our hearts" (2 Corinthians 1:22). Thus it is plain that those who are saved receive the seal of the Holy Spirit, which corresponds with the seal of the 144,000.

You will observe that the location of the 144,000 is on Mount Zion in the presence of the Lamb. This is significant. Mount Zion is the church, the dwelling place of God in the New Testament. The 87th Psalm glows with prophetic ecstasy by extolling the significance of Zion. "The Lord loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God...And of Zion it shall be said, this and that man was born there." God is the census taker and He wants to know where you were born. If you were born (born again) in Zion, it makes you a citizen of the Kingdom of God, a member of the church, which is the Body of Christ. You accept all the responsibility of a follower of Christ, and you receive all the privileges and protection afforded through citizenship in Zion, both in this world and in the world to come. Your birth certificate will be sealed by the Holy Spirit and this is your passport to heaven. No wonder the recipients sing a new song, which only the redeemed could learn. This seal, citizenship, and song, separates this group from all other people on earth. This seal is the evidence of membership in this select number. It is the exclusive mark of the redeemed.

Let us now observe reference to the fact that the 144,000 are said to be, "The firstfruits unto God and the

Lamb" (Revelation 14:4b). In the Old Testament the firstfruits were regarded as belonging to the Lord. In some cases it was the earliest portion of the harvest, but it could also be first in the sense that it is the principal or best quality fruit. This was an acknowledgement that all life and produce was a gift from God over which the worshipper was a steward. In James 1:18 the antitype of this principle is refined and its spiritual significance is demonstrated. "Of His own will begat He us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures." In Romans 8:23, Paul further identifies it thus, "And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves, groan within ourselves, to wit, the redemption of the body." Other references could be supplied but these suffice to show that the church of believers constitute those bearing their firstfruits to God in accordance with Revelation 14.

It is necessary to call attention to the sentence, which says, "These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth." Suffice to call attention to the well-known words of Christ recorded in John 10:27: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." To truly follow Christ implies much more than being a nominal church member. It means total surrender and complete obedience to His will. This is another hallmark of the redeemed.

Perhaps we ought to include some reference to the words, "Having his Father's name written in their foreheads" (Revelation 14:1b). Evidently these people are branded. A brand signifies ownership. They belong to God, because they have been redeemed by His Son. We are told in Genesis that God created Adam in His own image. In Romans 1:23 we are told how fallen man "Changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man." It is not possible for fallen man to reflect the likeness of God. But in Romans 8:29 we read "For whom He did foreknow, He did also predestinate

to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first born among many brethren." Here firstborn refers to the highest, or first in rank, rather than first in genealogy. But it also implies that the image of God, which was lost through Adam's fall into sin is restored through redemption. It is evident in the believers. This image, or likeness, characterizes every child of God regardless of race, color, creed, language or social status. They all bear the image of family-likeness of Him who has "begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). The Father's name is written in our foreheads when, as Paul said, "We have the mind of Christ" (2 Corinthians 1:16). Only redemption can perform this miraculous transformation. It is not difficult to identify the 144,000 if we reject all private interpretations and simply compare Scripture with Scripture. It is not a mathematical number, but a number symbolizing the complete totality and fundamental unity of all the redeemed for all time.

Let us briefly return to the phrase, "Whom He did foreknow, He did also predestinate to be conformed to the image of the Son" (Romans 8:29). What does predestinate mean here? Perhaps a simple illustration will help. Suppose a man who could not swim decides to leap into the deep swirling waters of a raging torrent. From a natural standpoint he is predestined to drown. Or if a man wearing only light summer attire goes out in a blinding snowstorm with extreme sub-zero temperatures, he is predestined to freeze. If, however, he decides to enter a cabin where there is a blazing fire in the stove, he is predestined to get warm once he enters that room. In a similar manner, when a sinner comes to Christ in repentance, and surrenders himself to His will and follows Him obediently, God says that such a man "Is predestinated to be conformed to His image." The choice is ours. The effect is according to God's eternal law. You are conformed to the likeness of the thing you love. That

is why God warns us not to love the world but to love God (1 John 2:15). To have the Father's name in our foreheads indicates the enthronement of Christ and His reign in our hearts. We make the choice. God's law determines the consequences.

The foregoing interpretation is in complete harmony with God's Word in a sense not possible with a literal application. Any cult that claims to be the 144,000 ignores the other elements required, namely 12,000 from each of twelve tribes and the fact that all are celibates.

Viewed in the light of its intended meaning to represent the redeemed of all ages, it is etched on the prophetic horizon as a theme of enchanting beauty and lofty purpose. The Bride, which is the church, is "celibate" in that it is espoused to Christ and is not defiled by any illicit love affair with the world. They all sing the song of the redeemed, which none can learn until delivered from the bondage of sin. They follow the Lamb wherever He goes, a characteristic which only the redeemed can fulfill. The number is not limited to mathematical exactness, but it symbolizes completeness, which the tribal compositions indicate by their meanings that they produce the fruit of the Spirit. Only such a group could be called the "firstfruits." Only the redeemed could be said to be without guile and without fault before God, as the passage asserts. Literalism only distorts this metaphor into a caricature of private interpretation which is condemned in 2 Peter 1:20 and 21. Truth in symbol is just as valid as truth in any other attire. Truth is found in its meaning and its intent. The words are meant to communicate the idea. The majestic beauty of the church revealed through these symbols is beyond controversy, for they glorify our Redeemer as Saviour and Lord throughout endless ages.