



THE REVELATION OF JOHN

Bible Study 21

Text: Rev. 7:9-17

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1 Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀγέλου οὗ ἦν ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ ὁ θεὸς δεῖξαι τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς αὐτοῦ ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει, καὶ ἐσήμανεν ἃ οὐκ ἀρτῶρησεν τὸν λόγον τοῦ βιβλίου καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀγέλου ὅσα εἶδεν. 3 Μακάρι οἱ ἐργασκῶν καὶ οἱ ἃ ἔγραμμένα

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2. What the text means.

Rejoicing in Heaven

Greek NT

9 Μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον, καὶ ἰδοὺ ὄχλος πολὺς, ὃν ἀριθμῆσαι αὐτὸν οὐδεὶς ἐδύνατο, ἐκ παντὸς ἔθνους καὶ φυλῶν καὶ λαῶν καὶ γλωσσῶν ἐστῶτες ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου καὶ ἐνώπιον τοῦ ἀρνίου περιβεβλημένους στολὰς λευκάς καὶ φοίνικες ἐν ταῖς χερσὶν αὐτῶν, 10 καὶ κράζουσιν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ λέγοντες·

ἡ σωτηρία τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν τῷ καθημένῳ ἐπὶ τῷ θρόνῳ καὶ τῷ ἀρνίῳ.

11 Καὶ πάντες οἱ ἄγγελοι εἰστήκεισαν κύκλῳ τοῦ θρόνου καὶ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων καὶ τῶν τεσσάρων ζώων καὶ ἔπεσαν ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου ἐπὶ τὰ πρόσωπα αὐτῶν καὶ προσεκύνησαν τῷ θεῷ 12 λέγοντες·

ἀμήν, ἡ εὐλογία καὶ ἡ δόξα καὶ ἡ σοφία καὶ ἡ εὐχαριστία καὶ ἡ τιμὴ καὶ ἡ δύναμις καὶ ἡ ἰσχὺς τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων· ἀμήν.

13 Καὶ ἀπεκριθὴ εἷς ἐκ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων λέγων μοι· οὗτοι οἱ περιβεβλημένοι τὰς στολὰς τὰς λευκάς τίνας εἰσὶν καὶ πόθεν ἦλθον; 14 καὶ εἶρηκα αὐτῷ· κύριέ μου, σὺ οἶδας. καὶ εἶπέν μοι·

Gute Nachricht Bibel

9 Danach sah ich eine große Menge Menschen, so viele, dass niemand sie zählen konnte. Es waren Menschen aus allen Nationen, Stämmen, Völkern und Sprachen. Sie standen in weißen Kleidern vor dem Thron und dem Lamm und hielten Palmzweige in den Händen. 10 Mit lauter Stimme riefen sie:

»Der Sieg gehört unserem Gott, der auf dem Thron sitzt, und dem Lamm!«

11 Alle Engel standen im Kreis um den Thron und um die Ältesten und um die vier mächtigen Gestalten. Sie warfen sich vor dem Thron zu Boden, beteten Gott an 12 und sprachen:

»Das ist gewiss: Preis und Herrlichkeit, Weisheit und Dank, Ehre, Macht und Stärke gehören unserem Gott für alle Ewigkeit! Amen.«

13 Einer der Ältesten fragte mich: »Wer sind diese Menschen in weißen Kleidern? Woher kommen sie?« 14 Ich antwortete: »Ich weiß es nicht, Herr. Du weißt es!« Da sagte er zu mir:

»Diese Menschen haben die große Verfolgung durchgestanden. Sie haben ihre Kleider ge-

NRSV

9 After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. 10 They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

11 And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?”

14 I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me,

“These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes

NLT

9 After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb.

They were clothed in white and held palm branches in their hands. 10 And they were shouting with a mighty shout,

“Salvation comes from our God on the throne and from the Lamb!”

11 And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living beings. And they fell face down before the throne and worshiped God. 12 They said,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and strength belong to our God forever and forever. Amen!”

13 Then one of the twenty-four elders asked me, “Who are these who are clothed in white? Where do they come from?”

14 And I said to him, “Sir, you are the one who knows.” Then he said to me,

“These are the ones coming out of the

οἳτοί εἰσιν οἱ ἐρχόμενοι ἐκ τῆς θλίψεως τῆς μεγάλης καὶ ἔπλυναν τὰς στολὰς αὐτῶν καὶ ἐλεύκαναν αὐτὰς ἐν τῷ αἵματι τοῦ ἀρνίου.	waschen und im Blut* des Lammes weiß gemacht.	and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.	great tribulation. They washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb
15 διὰ τοῦτο εἰσιν ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ λατρεύουσιν αὐτῷ ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτὸς ἐν τῷ ναῶ αὐτοῦ, καὶ ὁ καθήμενος ἐπὶ τοῦ θρόνου σκηνώσει ἐπ’ αὐτούς.	15 Darum stehen sie vor dem Thron Gottes und dienen ihm Tag und Nacht in seinem Tempel. Er, der auf dem Thron sitzt, wird bei ihnen wohnen.	15 For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his tem- ple, and the one who is seat- ed on the throne will shelter them.	and made them white. 15 That is why they are standing in front of the throne of God, serving him day and night in his Temple. And he who sits on the throne will live among them and shelter them.
16 οὐ πεινάσουσιν ἔτι οὐδὲ διψήσουσιν ἔτι οὐδὲ μὴ πέση ἔπ’ αὐτοῦς ὁ ἥλιος οὐδὲ πᾶν καῦμα, 17 ὅτι τὸ ἀρνίον τὸ ἀνά μέσον τοῦ θρόνου ποιμανεῖ αὐτούς καὶ ὀδηγήσει αὐτούς ἐπὶ ζωῆς πηγᾶς ὑδάτων, καὶ ἐξαλείψει ὁ θεὸς πᾶν δάκρυον ἐκ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν αὐτῶν.	16 Sie werden keinen Hun- ger oder Durst mehr haben; weder die Sonne noch irgendeine Glut wird sie versengen. 17 Das Lamm, das in der Mitte des Thrones steht, wird ihr Hirt sein und sie an die Quellen führen, deren Wass- er Leben spendet. Und Gott wird alle ihre Tränen abwischen.«	16 They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; 17 for the Lamb at the cen- ter of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”	16 They will never again be hungry or thirsty, and they will be fully protected from the scorching noontime heat. 17 For the Lamb who stands in front of the throne will be their Shep- herd. He will lead them to the springs of life-giving water. And God will wipe away all their tears.”

INTRODUCTION

In this second unit of the ‘interlude’ in chapter seven, the scene shifts from the preparation of God’s wrath being poured out on earth (vv. 1-8) to a picture of heaven centered in an unnumbered multitude standing before the throne of God (vv. 9-17). The atmosphere in heaven is celebration of victory and salvation. Joining the multitude of people in praise of God are the angels in heaven. John interacts with one of the elders in a dialogue over the identity of the multitude and their experience in heaven.

Something of the joyous theme that characterized the images presented by John in chapters four and five comes back center stage. Additionally we find here a continuation of the emphasis of the central theme in the fifth seal with the multitude of martyrs protected by God in the heavenly altar. Increasingly when attention is focused on activities in heaven the central theme is joyous praise of God and of the Lamb. When attention is shifted to activities on earth the central theme is God’s righteousness leading to the outpouring of His wrath on evil and evil people. The 4 + 3 emphases in both the seals and the trumpets guides the content of this material.

Several interpretive issues arise here. Most prominently is the connection of these people in Heaven to

the 144,000 on earth who are presented in the first part of this interlude in vv. 4-8. Related to this is the specific identity of this multitude. Are we looking again at the martyrs in the fifth seal? Or, is this a broader picture of the end time scene of eternity that encompasses all of the redeemed of God over all of human history? The fluidity of apocalyptic visionary understanding can easily allow John to jump around like this.¹

Once these issues are sorted out properly, what we have in vv. 9-17 is a marvelous picture of both praise of God and in the dialogue of John with the elder a beautifully affirmation of the pastoral care of God of His people in heaven. There’s a lot we can learn here!

1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

Again the background issues play an important role in the understanding of this passage of scripture. This will especially be true in the literary genre con-

¹Another interpretive issue is the literary formation of the discourse material in verses 10, 12, and 14-17. The dialogue material especially moves from straight narrative discourse to poetic oriented prophetic oracle format. See 1:7-8 for the introductory example of this literary form. The precise formation poetically of the oracle material differs somewhat among scholars beginning with the editors of both the UBS and the Nestle-Aland Greek texts which do not completely agree on its structuring.

cerns in trying to clearly sort out how John utilizes the existing literary forms for communicating the content of his vision.

Historical Aspects:

External History. In the Transmission History of this passage interestingly no variation of wording in the passage surfaces which the editors of *The Greek New Testament* (UBS 4th rev. ed) considered sufficiently significant so as to impact the translation of the passage. Thus no variations are listed for vv. 9-17 in the Text Apparatus of this printed Greek New Testament.



Of course, this does not mean that variations in the wording of this passage are not present in the known manuscript copies of this passage. The Text Apparatus of the *Novum Testamentum Graece* (N-A 27th rev ed) lists some 24 places where word variation surfaces.²

²Offenbarung 7,9

* 1 3 4 5 C (The sequence of καὶ ἰδοὺ ὄχλος πολὺς, ὃν is either altered or replaced with alternative wording)

| ὄχλον πολλὸν καὶ A (vg sy^{ph} sa^{ms} bo); Cyp Prim

* 2329 M^K (αὐτὸν is omitted in some mss)

* -τας 1006. 1611. 1841. 1854. 2053. 2329. 2351 M^K (Alternative spellings of the participle ἐστῶτες are found)

| -των C pc

| txt x A 2344 M^A

* -νοι x1 1854. 2053. (2329). 2344. 2351 M^A (the nominative spelling is given instead of the accusative περιβεβλημένου)

¹ -κας x 2351 M^K (the nominative spelling of the participle φοίνικες is replaced with the accusative spelling)

Offenbarung 7,10

* -ζοντες 1 pc sa^{ms} bo (The present tense verb κράζουσιν is replaced by either the present participle or the Aorist verb)

| ἐκράζαν 2329 latt

* εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰῶνων· ἀμην x* (This adverbial assertion of forever is added to τῷ ἀρνίῳ at the end of the verse)

Offenbarung 7,11

* αὐτοῦ 1611c M^K sy^h (The personal pronoun αὐτοῦ is added after θρόνου).

Offenbarung 7,12

* A pc t (καὶ ἡ σοφία is omitted in some mss)

* C pc t; Prim (ἀμήν is omitted at the end of the verse)

Offenbarung 7,13

* x 1611. 1854 (the preposition ἐκ is omitted)

Offenbarung 7,14

* εἶπον 1854. 2329 M^K (The perfect tense spelling of εἶρηκα is replaced by the aorist spelling)

* A 1611* pc ar gig vg^{ms} sa bo^{ms}; Cyp Prim Bea (the possessive μου is omitted in some mss)

* ἐπλατυναν 1854. 2053. 2329 M^K (The verb ἐπλυναν is replaced with an alternative spelling based on different root stem)

*¹ 2351 M^K (αὐτὰς is omitted)

Offenbarung 7,15

* τῷ -ῶ 1854. 2053. 2351 M^K (The genitive spelling of τοῦ θρόνου is replaced by the dative spelling)

* γινώσκει x* (σκηνώσει ἐπ' is replaced)

Offenbarung 7,16

* x pc vg sy^{ph} co (ἔτι is omitted in some mss)

But as is typically the case, most of these variations are efforts at stylistic updating to the pattern more common in the copyist's own time. And thus they become a more up to date way of saying the same thing as the original wording of the text.

Thus we can exegete the adopted wording of this passage in the full confidence that it represents the original wording of this scripture passage.



Internal History. The only truly history based background point in these verses is the allusion to shepherds taking care of their sheep in verse 17. This image of the Lamb as an earthly shepherd, however, clearly reflects apocalyptic visionary depiction that goes differently from the earthly background of a human shepherd taking care of his sheep. Interestingly, although sheep and shepherds existed in the Greco-Roman world, they seem never to serve as a foundation for a figurative depiction of care and concern for others. Although the literature is very sparse at this point, it seems as though the reputation of shepherds outside Jewish circles in Palestine had taken on the hugely negative image that Jewish shepherds had by the beginning of the Christian era.³ The details of this apocalyptic image of the Lamb as a shepherd in heaven is better treated in the

*¹ 1006. 1841. 2053. 2329 M^A gig sy^{ph} bo^{ms} (ἔτι is omitted in some mss)

* οὐδ' οὐ 052. 2329. 2351 M^K (οὐδὲ μὴ is replaced)

* [παιση ετι Swete et al cjj] (πέση ἐπ' is replaced)

Offenbarung 7,17

* -μανει et -γει 2351 M^K (bo^{ms}) (the aorist verb ποιμανεῖ is replaced by the present tense verb or an alternative spelling)

* ζῶσας 2329. 2344 al (the genitive noun ζωῆς is replaced by the genitive present participle)

*¹ ἀπο x 1854. 2053. 2351 pc (ἐκ is replaced)

[Eberhard Nestle et al., Universität Münster. Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27. Aufl., rev. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1993), 645-647.]

³In a Rabb. list of thieving and cheating occupations we find that of the shepherd.³⁸ This classification of herds as notorious robbers and cheats means that like the publicans and tax-gatherers they were deprived of civil rights, i.e., they could not fulfill a judicial office or be admitted in court as witnesses.³⁹ This discrimination against shepherds on the part of Pharisaic Rabbinism is best understood if one realizes that the independence of the shepherd, who during the summer was on the move with the flock for months at a time with no supervision (→ 486, 5 ff.), constituted a serious temptation to steal some of the increase of the flock. It is worth noting that to buy wool, milk, or a kid from a shepherd was forbidden on the assumption that it would be stolen property.⁴⁰ The Rabb. ask with amazement how, in view of the despicable nature of shepherds,⁴¹ one is to explain the fact that God is called 'my shepherd' in Ps. 23:1.42." [Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 6:488-489.]

exegesis of the text.

Literary Aspects:

Here the interpretive issues are more directly impacted by background determinations of the literary traits of the text in vv. 9-17.

Genre: At the broad level of literary pattern, this pattern continues the apocalyptic vision of John, and thus reflects a lot of the 'beyond earth' kind of thinking and thought expression.

It is at the small units of text that genre becomes particularly important to the understanding of this passage. As a unit vv. 9-17 reflects that widely used 'throne vision' found in Jewish apocalyptic literature (e.g., 1 Enoch 14:8-25; 4 Ezra 2:42-48; Ezekiel Trag. Exagoge 68-82). Additionally several sub-forms also surface here that are found elsewhere in the Jewish literature.⁴ Even elsewhere in the NT, visionary style language surfaces in reference to the heavenly Jerusalem and temple. For example note Heb 12:22-24:

22 ἀλλὰ προσεληλύθατε Σιών ὄρει καὶ πόλει θεοῦ ζῶντος, Ἰερουσαλήμ ἐπουρανίῳ, καὶ μυριάσιν ἀγγέλων, πανηγύρει 23 καὶ ἐκκλησίᾳ πρωτοτόκων ἀπογεγραμμένων ἐν οὐρανοῖς καὶ κριτῇ θεῷ πάντων καὶ πνεύμασιν δικαίων τετελειωμένων 24 καὶ διαθήκης νέας μεσίτη Ἰησοῦ καὶ αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ κρεῖττον λαλοῦντι παρὰ τὸν Ἄβελ.

22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.⁵

⁴"The throne vision, a literary form that occurs quite frequently in Jewish apocalyptic literature (e.g., 1 Enoch 14:8-25; 4 Ezra 2:42-48; Ezekiel Trag. Exagoge 68-82), consists of several subtypes, including the eschatological heavenly worship of God, the eschatological reward scene, and the eschatological judgment scene. There are enough striking structural and thematic similarities between Rev 7:9-17 (particularly vv 9-12) and other passages in early Jewish and early Christian literature to suggest the presence of a 'type scene,' i.e., a brief recurring narrative episode (primarily limited to apocalyptic contexts) that is constituted by a restricted constellation of motifs (see R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* [New York: Basic Books, 1981] 47-62). Perhaps the closest and most complete example of this type scene is found in Heb 12:22-24, though examples are also found in Rev 14:1-5, 5 Ezra 2:42-45, 4 Ezra 13:5-50, and Odes Sol. 36." [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 436.]

⁵"The introductory verb προσεληλύθατε, 'you have come,' suggests that this type scene is being used in a metaphorical sense (see v 18, 'for you have not come to what may be touched'), which indicates the widespread familiarity of this particular scene with its constituent elements. The main motifs in this type scene include a concentric arrangement beginning with the setting and then proceeding from the outside to the inside: (1) Mount Zion, the heaven-

In later Christian apocalyptic tradition also can be seen the typical image of the heavenly Jerusalem. Note the example from [2 Esdras](#) 2:42-45, which is a later Christian addition to 4 Esdras (= 2 Ezra) that is often labeled 5 Ezra:

42 Ego Ezra vidi in monte Sion turbam magnam, quam numerare non potui, et omnes canticis conlaudabant Dominum. † 43 Et in medio eorum erat iuvenis statura celsus, eminentior omnibus illis, et singulis eorum capitibus inponebat coronas, et magis exaltabatur; ego autem miraculo tenebar. † 44 Tunc interrogavi angelum et dixi: qui sunt hii, domine? 45 qui respondens dixit mihi: hii sunt qui mortalem tunicam deposuerunt et inmortalem sumpserunt et confessi sunt nomen Dei; modo coronantur et accipiunt palmas. † 46 Et dixi ad angelum: ille iuvenis quis est, qui eis coronas inponit et palmas in manus tradit? † 47 qui respondens dixit mihi: ipse est Filius Dei, quem in saeculo confessi sunt. ego autem magnificare eos coepi, qui fortiter pro nomine Domini steterunt. † 48 Tunc dixit mihi angelus: vade et adnuntia populo meo, qualia et quanta mirabilia Domini Dei vidisti.

42 I, Ezra, saw on Mount Zion a great multitude that I could not number, and they all were praising the Lord with songs. 43 In their midst was a young man of great stature, taller than any of the others, and on the head of each of them he placed a crown, but he was more exalted than they. And I was held spellbound. 44 Then I asked an angel, "Who are these, my lord?" 45 He answered and said to me, "These are they who have put off mortal clothing and have put on the immortal, and have confessed the name of God. Now they are being crowned, and receive palms." 46 Then I said to the angel, "Who is that young man who is placing crowns on them and putting palms in their hands?" 47 He answered and said to me, "He is the Son of God, whom they confessed in the world." So I began to praise those who had stood valiantly for the name of the Lord. 48 Then the angel said to me, "Go, tell my people how great and how many are the wonders of the Lord God that you have seen."⁶

ly Jerusalem (the setting), (2) an innumerable angelic host in festal gathering, (3) the assembly of the firstborn, (4) God the judge of all, (5) the assembly of righteous people, (6) Jesus, and (7) the sprinkled blood (implying the figurative presence of the ark)." [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 437.]

⁶"The primary motifs of this type scene are the following: (1) Mount Zion (the setting), (2) an innumerable multitude who praised God with song (2:42), (3) the young man of great stature, i.e., Christ (2:43), (4) the coronation of each member of the innumerable multitude (2:45), (5) the presentation of palms to each member of the innumerable multitude (2:45), and (6) the seer who asks an angel about the meaning of this scene, followed by (7) an explanation. The unknown author of this passage (and those

This document is dependent on Rev. 7:4-17 in adopting the widely used image of Heaven.

Additionally, 7:9-17 has a striking number of similarities to Rev. 21:1-22:5. As Aune notes:

These include: (1) the seal on the forehead, (2) mention of the twelve tribes, (3) the nations of the world, (4) the throne of God, (5) worship, (6) the temple (present in 7:15; explicitly absent in 21:22), (7) God's dwelling with the faithful (7:15; 21:3), (8) the end to thirst (7:16; 21:6), (9) the absence of the sun (7:16; 21:23), (10) the springs of living water (7:17; 21:6), and (11) the wiping away of tears (7:17; 21:4); see Comblin, ETL 29 [1953] 38 n. 87. J. Comblin, who argues that Rev 21:1–22:5 reflects the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, suggests that the multitude in Rev 7:9–17 is presented as celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles, a conclusion suggested by the palm fronds (v 9) and their σωτηρία exclamation (ETL 29 [1953] 38–39).⁷

Careful examination points to the worship scene in 7:7-19 referring to the same scene in 21:5-22:5 but with less detail. Some possibility also exists that the nature of the worship depicted here is a reflection of the earlier Jewish worship in the Jerusalem temple during the Feast of the Tabernacles. Of course, the earthly Feast of Tabernacles pattern of worship was by intent supposed to be a mirror reflection of what took place in the heavenly temple. Through this theological design of worship activities in the Jerusalem temple one can find possible clues as to the meanings behind both worship actions and the content of the praises lifted to God in the heavenly setting.

Literary Setting:

The rather obvious setting for 7:9-17 is as follows. First it comprises the second half of the interlude (7:1-17) between the opening of the sixth (6:12-17) and the seventh (8:1) seals. This 'interlude' plays a somewhat similar role as the interlude -- 10:1-11:13 -- between the sixth and seventh trumpets in the subsequent series (8:2-11:19). Both interludes stress the protection of God's people in anticipation of the pouring out of divine wrath upon the earth.

One of the interpretive issues in chapter seven is the connection of vv. 1-8 to vv. 9-17. Analysis of the verb tense in the two sections is an important aspect coming to a conclusion about this connection. In vv. 1-8, one finds a sequence of nine past time verbs (with that precede and follow it) has based much of it on Rev 7:4–17, including (1) reference to God as shepherd (v 34), (2) reference to the number of those sealed (v 38), (3) the multitude clothed in white (v 40), (4) their praise of God with songs (v 42), and (5) the palms they carry (v 45–46).” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 437.]

⁷David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 437–438.

the present subjunctive πνέη, “might blow,” in the ἵνα clause in v 1. But this really doesn't impact the pattern, since Greek verb tense only has time implications in the indicative mood. Other mood uses and verbal uses reflect only the type of action rather than time of action. Thus everything in vv. 1-8 is viewed as having already happened.

But in vv. 9-17 the pattern is very different regarding the tense form of the verbs.⁸ A mixture of past time,

⁸“The tense sequences of Rev 7:1–17 obviously play an important role in the narrative. 7:1–8 contains a sequence of nine aorist verbs, interrupted only by the present subjunctive πνέη, ‘might blow,’ in the ἵνα clause in v 1. More irregularity is evident in 7:9–17, where the overall pattern is a sequence of past-tense verbs, then a sequence of present-tense verbs, followed by a sequence of future-tense verbs. Even though this vision sequence begins with the aorist verb εἶδον, ‘I saw,’ the author immediately switches to the imperfect in v 9 (ἐδύνατο, ‘could even begin’), in a parenthetical relative clause. This is followed by a present tense in 7:10, where κράζουσιν, ‘they cry,’ introduces the hymn sung by the innumerable multitude. This is followed by a series of four aorists in 7:11–13, interrupted by one of the few pluperfect verbs in Revelation, εἰστήκεισαν, ‘had been standing’ (v 11). The explanatory speech of the elder (7:13–17) is introduced with an aorist verb (ἀπεκρίθη, ‘said’), and his question to John contains a present and an aorist verb: ‘Who are [εἰσὶν] these dressed in white robes, and where did they come from [ἤλθον]’ (v 13). The explanatory speech of the elder in vv 14b–17 contains thirteen verbs, beginning with a present tense (εἰσὶν, ‘are’), followed by two aorists that explain that they washed (ἔπλυναν) their robes and made them white (ἐλεύκαναν). Two present tenses follow in v 15, εἰσὶν, ‘they are,’ and λατρεύουσιν, ‘they worship,’ followed unexpectedly by a sequence of eight verbs, all futures with the exception of the aorist subjunctive πέση in v 16: (1) σκηνώσει, ‘he will dwell,’ (2) πενάσουσιν, ‘they will [not] sorrow,’ (3) διψήσουσιν, ‘they will [not] thirst,’ (4) πέση, ‘it might [not] fall,’ an aorist subjunctive (n.b. that the future and the subjunctive are closely related), (5) ποιμανεῖ, ‘he will shepherd,’ (6) ὀδηγήσει, ‘he will guide,’ and (7) ἐξάλειψει, ‘he will wipe away.’ While the aorist subjunctive (e.g., πέση) has the semantic features of projection with no expectation of fulfillment, the future semantically designates the speaker's expectation that an event is occurring (Porter, Verbal Aspect, 129, 134). Thus the problem in interpreting 7:13–17 is that vv 14b–15a describe what is already occurring, i.e., the present, while vv 15b–17 describe what is expected to occur, i.e., the future. This is a sequence-of-tense pattern that occurs frequently in the visions of Revelation, namely, the movement from past tenses to present tenses to future tenses (Mussies, Morphology, 334–36; see 4:8–10; 9:4–6; 18:4–15; 19:14–16; 20:4–7; 21:22–26). The author uses this sequence of tenses to convey visions (purportedly) seen in the past and described vividly in the present, which at the same time predict future events. The future tenses describe the final state of the innumerable host, but John does not actually claim to see them enjoying that state. Further, the presence of this innumerable host before God in the heavenly temple is not a final state of salvation, since the destruction of the old heaven and earth and the creation of a new heaven and earth provide the necessary setting for the earthly presence of the New Jerusalem.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 438.]

present time, and future time verbs surface. Particularly worth noting is 7:13-17 where in the dialogue what is happening (vv. 14b-15a) is followed by what is expected to happen (vv. 15b-17). But this is a pattern frequently employed by John in his visions as reflected in 4:8-10; 9:4-6; 18:4-15; 19:14-16; 20:4-7; 21:22-26. He has seen the vision in the past, and describes vividly present action which also predict future time expectation. Considering this pattern in 7:9-17 in contrast

to 7:1-8 should be a part of whatever conclusions are reached about the relationship of vv. 1-8 to vv. 9-17.

Literary Structure:

In the block diagram below, a visual presentation of the interrelationship of ideas inside the passage are presented in a highly literal English translation of the underlying Greek text.

7.9 After these things
216 **I saw,**
 and
 behold
217 **(there was) a large crowd,**
 which no one was able to number it
 out of every nation and tribes and peoples and tongues
 standing before the throne
 clothed with white robes
 and
 with palm branches in their hands,
7.10 and
218 **they are shouting**
 with a loud voice
 saying,
 Salvation (be)
 to our God
 who sits
 upon the throne
 and
 to the Lamb.
7.11 And
219 **all the angels stood**
 in a circle around the throne
 and
 around the elders
 and
 around the four living creatures,
 and
220 **they fell down**
 before the throne
 upon their faces
 and
221 **they worshiped God**
 saying,
 amen, -----
 blessing
 and
 glory
 and
 wisdom
 and
 thanksgiving
 and
 honor
 and
 power
 and
 strength (be) to our God'

angels to the unnumbered host, but the grammar does give signals of a formal connection. Three discourse sections for each of the three groups play a major role in contributing ideas in the passage. The large crowd expresses gratitude to God and the Lamb for their salvation; the angels chant a doxological praise to God for His greatness; then one of the 24 elders explains to John who the large crowd is.

The background atmosphere of this throne vision centers on proper worship of God in the heavenly temple. This repeats the throne visions in chapters four and five, with the primary distinction of growing out of the preceding image of God's protective action of His true people in anticipation of His wrath coming upon the earth.

Exegesis of the Text:

Clearly the most natural way to exegete the passage is to structure it around the three natural units of text material lined out in the above diagram.

A. The declaration of the multitude, vv. 9-10.

9 Μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον, καὶ ἰδοὺ ὄχλος πολὺς, ὃν ἀριθμῆσαι αὐτὸν οὐδεὶς ἐδύνατο, ἐκ παντὸς ἔθνους καὶ φυλῶν καὶ λαῶν καὶ γλωσσῶν ἐστῶτες ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου καὶ ἐνώπιον τοῦ ἀρνίου περιβεβλημένους στολὰς λευκάς καὶ φοίνικες ἐν ταῖς χερσίν αὐτῶν, 10 καὶ κρᾶζουσιν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ λέγοντες·

ἡ σωτηρία τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν τῷ καθημένῳ ἐπὶ τῷ θρόνῳ καὶ τῷ ἀρνίῳ.

9 After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. 10 They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

The introductory phrase Μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον, after this I saw, signals the moving to a new text theme, and has no time implications at all. It is sequential in nature, consistent with the other uses in 4:1; 7:1; 15:5; and 18:1.⁹ This becomes necessary since the large number of 144,000 in vv. 1-8 were located on earth, but now he sees a large group in heaven in vv. 9-17. There is curiosity about who this group is, but that is reserved

⁹“This represents an intentional contrast with 7:4, where the author hears that the number of those sealed from the tribes of the sons of Israel is 144,000. In seeking to equate the 144,000 of 7:4-8 with the innumerable host of 7:9-17, some have argued unpersuasively that 144,000 would have appeared innumerable had the seer not been told their number (Giesen, 193). However, 7:4-8 is not a vision but an audition; that is, the seer does not claim to see those who were sealed but simply reports that he heard their number.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 466.]

until the end of the passage with one of the 24 elders explains their identity to John. Since John only heard the number of 144,000 with the first group, he has not identified them beyond their being τοὺς δούλους τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν, servants of our God (v. 3). But here, even though having seen this large group in heaven, he still doesn't fully understand who they are, and thus the elder fills in the gaps in his understanding (vv. 13-17).

What he does realize initially is limited to three aspects: their size; their origin; and their actions before the throne.

First he describes them as καὶ ἰδοὺ ὄχλος πολὺς, ὃν ἀριθμῆσαι αὐτὸν οὐδεὶς ἐδύνατο, and behold a large crowd whom no one was able to number them. Was John trying to estimate the number of Christians at the end of the first century? It is very doubtful, since the best estimates vary greatly due to very limited information. The estimations range from a total of around 50,000 to 320,000 with 80,000 of them in Asia.¹⁰ The simple truth is that we do not know how many there were at the end of the first century. The number depiction by John here

¹⁰“The enormous size of this group, which must be in the millions, is striking since the number of Christians, both Jews and Gentiles, living toward the end of the first century A.D. cannot have been very large. Attempts to estimate the Christian population of the Roman empire during the first three centuries, however, vary greatly because of the paucity of evidence. Zahn estimated (in part on the basis of Acts 21:20) that there were between 70,000 and 75,000 Jewish Christians in Palestine about A.D. 58 (372). B. Reicke estimated that there were about 40,000 Christians in A.D. 67, with a total of ca. 320,000 about the turn of the century, 80,000 of whom lived in Asia Minor (Reicke, *New Testament Era*, 302-4; cf. Elliott, *I Peter*, 63-64).

“In contrast to these bloated figures, R. L. Wilken estimated that by the end of the first century there were fewer than 50,000 Christians living in forty to fifty different cities of the Roman empire (*The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* [New Haven: Yale UP, 1984] 31; this view is shared by W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984] 968). L. von Harling estimated that there were about two million Christians in the Roman empire by the end of the third century (“Die Zahl der Christen zu Beginn des 4. Jahrhunderts,” *ZKT* 68 [1934] 234-52), and R. L. Fox estimated that by A.D. 250 the Christian population of the empire was perhaps 2 percent of the population of the Roman empire (*Pagans and Christians* [New York: Knopf, 1989] 317). R. MacMullen, on the other hand, estimates the Christian population by A.D. 300 to have been approximately five million (*Christianizing the Roman Empire* [New Haven: Yale UP, 1984] 32-33, 135-36 n. 26). Ancient evidence for the size of the Christian population in the first centuries of the Christian era is assembled and discussed by A. von Harnack, but without any specific numerical estimates (*Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, 4th ed. [Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1924] 2:529-52, 948), and more recently by R. M. Grant in a very careful way (*Early Christianity and Society* [New York: Harper and Row, 1977] 1-12, with bibliography on 193-94).” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 466-467.]

would imply a much larger number than any of the estimates.

The indeterminate number given by John may very well reach back to the promise made to Abraham of an innumerable number of descendants from all the nations of the earth.¹¹ If this is correct -- and it seems to be -- then the point of John's depiction of the number is not because a specific number is important. But rather his depiction is intended to link this multitude in heaven with the promise given by God to Abraham.¹²

This is particularly signaled by the indication of their origin: ἐκ παντὸς ἔθνους καὶ φυλῶν καὶ λαῶν καὶ γλωσσῶν, *out of every nation and tribes and peoples and*

¹¹“This innumerable multitude suggests the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, which had two distinct traditional aspects: (1) The promise of innumerable descendants, ‘as the dust of the earth,’ ‘as the stars of the sky,’ or ‘as the sand of the sea’ (Gen 13:16; 15:5; 16:10 [‘I will so greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be numbered for multitude’]; 22:17–18), a promise repeated to Isaac (Gen 26:4) and to Jacob (Gen 28:14; 32:12). This promise or its fulfillment is frequently repeated in later contexts (Exod 32:13; Deut 1:10; 10:22; 28:62; 2 Sam 17:11; 1 Kgs 3:8; 4:20; Neh 9:23; Isa 10:22; 48:19; 51:2; Hos 1:10[MT 2:1]; Sir 44:21; Jub. 13:20; 18:15; 25:16; 27:23; Ladder of Jacob 1:10; Pr Azar 1:13; T. Abr. [Rec. A] 1:5; Gk Ap. Ezra 3:10; 1Q20 = 1QGenesis Apocryphon 21:13; Rom 9:27 [quoting Isa 10:22]; Heb 11:12). (2) The promise that Abraham would be the father of many nations (Gen 17:4–6, 16), a promise repeated to Isaac and to Jacob (Gen 28:14; 32:12; 35:11; 48:19) and found occasionally in later contexts (Sir 44:19), and one that is particularly emphasized in Christian authors (Rom 4:16–18; Justin Dial. 11.5; 119.4; Tertullian De monogamia 6; Adv. Marcionem 4.34; 5.3[2x]). See Norelli, Aug 22 (1982) 285–312; Westermann, Verheißung, 138–43. Occasionally, the notion of a census was seen to conflict with the promise of innumerable progeny made by God to Abraham (1 Chr 27:23; Ps.-Philo Bib. Ant. 14:2; cf. 1 Chr 21:1–6). This passage implies that the promise to Abraham has been fulfilled, though not through physical descent from Abraham. The spiritualization of the promise to Abraham is found in Rom 9:6–13. In Gal 3:16, Paul interprets the ‘offspring’ of Abraham to mean Christ.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 466.]

¹²“Bauckham asserts that Rev. 7:9 alludes precisely to the form of the patriarchal promise occurring in Gen. 17:4–6; 35:11; and 48:19, where the patriarchs are referred to as progenitors of a multitude ‘of nations.’ He mentions in particular Gen. 17:4, whose ‘a multitude of nations’ (πλήθους ἔθνῶν) he sees reflected in John’s ‘a great multitude ... from all nations’ (ὄχλος πολὺς ... ἐκ παντὸς ἔθνους). This allusion is, he says, signposted by the placing of ‘nations’ (ἔθνους) first, which is unique among the fourfold formulas elsewhere in the Apocalypse (see on 5:9), and by the grammatical awkwardness of ‘nations’ being set apart from the rest of the members of the formula. He concludes that the significance of this is that ‘7:9 as a reinterpretation of 7:4–8 indicates not so much the replacement of the national people of God as the abolition of its national limits,’ which is consistent with 21:12, 24–26, where the gates of the new Jerusalem have ‘the names of the twelve tribes’ and remain open for the nations to enter.¹⁵⁴” [G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 429.]

tongues. The pattern of expression seems to follow the twofold promise given to Abraham: 1) ὄν ἀριθμησαὶ αὐτὸν οὐδεὶς ἐδύνατο connects up the promise of Abraham having innumerable descendants; 2) ἐκ παντὸς ἔθνους καὶ φυλῶν καὶ λαῶν καὶ γλωσσῶν links up to the promise that Abraham would be the father of many nations.

This listing here is but one of several places where a listing of people is provided with similar terminology:

Rev. 5:9. ὅτι ἐσφάγης καὶ ἠγόρασας τῷ θεῷ ἐν τῷ αἵματί σου ἐκ πάσης φυλῆς καὶ γλώσσης καὶ λαοῦ καὶ ἔθνους, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints *from every tribe and language and people and nation*;

Rev. 10:11. δεῖ σε πάλιν προφητεῦσαι ἐπὶ λαοῖς καὶ ἔθνεσιν καὶ γλώσσαις καὶ βασιλεῦσιν πολλοῖς. You must prophesy again *about many peoples and nations and languages and kings*.

Rev. 11:9. καὶ βλέπουσιν ἐκ τῶν λαῶν καὶ φυλῶν καὶ γλωσσῶν καὶ ἔθνῶν τὸ πτώμα αὐτῶν ἡμέρας τρεῖς καὶ ἡμισυ καὶ τὰ πτώματα αὐτῶν οὐκ ἀφίουσιν τεθῆναι εἰς μνήμα. For three and a half days *members of the peoples and tribes and languages and nations* will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb;

Rev. 13:7. καὶ ἐδόθη αὐτῷ ἐξουσία ἐπὶ πᾶσαν φυλὴν καὶ λαὸν καὶ γλώσσαν καὶ ἔθνος. It was given authority *over every tribe and people and language and nation*.

Rev. 14:6. καὶ ἐπὶ πᾶν ἔθνος καὶ φυλὴν καὶ γλώσσαν καὶ λαόν, *to every nation and tribe and language and people*.

Rev. 17:15. τὰ ὕδατα ἃ εἶδες οὗ ἡ πόρνη κάθηται, λαοὶ καὶ ὄχλοι εἰσὶν καὶ ἔθνη καὶ γλώσσαι. The waters that you saw, where the whore is seated, are *peoples and multitudes and nations and languages*.

Although the sequencing of the terms varies somewhat and one or two of the terms as well, it is obvious that this package of terms is John's way of referring to all of humanity and at the same time to allude to its diversity.¹³

¹³Clearly Paul makes the connection of an unnumbered group of people from all over the world to the promise of God to Abraham, as is reflected in **Rom. 4:16–18**,

16 Διὰ τοῦτο ἐκ πίστεως, ἵνα κατὰ χάριν, εἰς τὸ εἶναι βεβαίαν τὴν ἐπαγγελίαν παντὶ τῷ σπέρματι, οὐ τῷ ἐκ τοῦ νόμου μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ τῷ ἐκ πίστεως Ἀβραάμ, ὃς ἐστὶν πατὴρ πάντων ἡμῶν, 17 καθὼς γέγραπται ὅτι πατέρα πολλῶν ἔθνῶν τέθεικά σε, κατέναντι οὗ ἐπίστευσεν θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶποιοῦντος τοὺς νεκροὺς καὶ καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα. 18 Ὅς παρ’ ἐλπίδα ἐπ’ ἐλπίδι ἐπίστευσεν εἰς τὸ γενέσθαι αὐτὸν πατέρα πολλῶν ἔθνῶν κατὰ τὸ εἰρημένον· οὕτως ἔσται τὸ σπέρμα σου,

16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, 17 as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the



And for those above passages affirming believers from this diverse group of people in the world, there exists a powerful affirmation of the diversity of the Christian community both in this world and in heaven itself. John's first readers in [Asia](#) represented a diverse group of people. An analysis of the social history of this province in the ancient world reflects that it was a gathering point not just for native inhabitants with a long family history in this region of the Mediterranean world, but also immigration from other parts of the Roman empire added significantly to the ethnic and cultural diversity of the area. Much like in our world, where there was economic prosperity as in Asia that was at the top of the list economically for the first century empire, the prospects for a better life and livelihood in Asia functioned like a magnet pulling people into it from elsewhere in the Mediterranean world. Added to that was a very diverse mixture of cultures that had appeal to many people. Among the Jews for example, by John's day the province of Asia represented the largest concentration of Jewish inhabitants located any where in the Roman empire. Interestingly, by the end of the third century AD it would likewise have the largest concentration of Christians found anywhere in that same world. Christians stood in a dramatic majority of the people in western and central Anatolia, where Asia represented the western part of Anatolia.

The location of this huge crowd of people is given as ἐστῶτες ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου καὶ ἐνώπιον τοῦ ἀρνίου, [standing before the throne and before the Lamb](#). Clearly this crowd is in heaven rather than on earth. The reference to the throne is the standard way in Revelation of referring to God as introduced in 4:10 and found in 8:3. Also they are standing before the Lamb whose position is in front of the heavenly throne of God [dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist](#). [18 Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be."](#)

as specified in 5:6. Compare 7:10 and 22:1, 3 for similar references to both God and Christ.

Their spiritual status is reflected in their appearance: περιβεβλημένους στολᾶς λευκᾶς καὶ φοίνικες ἐν ταῖς χερσίν αὐτῶν, [robed in white, with palm branches in their hands](#). Inside Revelation, white robes signal existence in heaven as reflected in 6:11 and 7:13. This specification may serve to link this multitude with the martyrs in chapter six.¹⁴ But this is not certain. Additionally in 3:4, 5 being dressed in white reflects receiving salvation for entrance into heaven. In everyday society in the first century white was the color of choice for festive occasions as well as the appropriate dress for divine messengers appearing on earth out of heaven.¹⁵ Thus these people have passed through this life and have entered heaven as their eternal home.

Additionally, the holding of palms in their hands confirms this with the palm branch as a symbol of victory in celebrations of the first century world.¹⁶ For Jew-

¹⁴John observes further that those in the Great Multitude are 'clothed in white robes' (7:9). Again the reader recalls the promises to the conqueror (3:4–5, 18) and, most recently, the fact that 'those who had been slain' were given white robes to wear (6:9–11). Since this is the first mention after 6:9–11 of someone wearing white robes, it is reasonable to identify the Great Multitude in 7:9 with the slain in 6:9–11, especially since both passages use the same word: *stole*. 6:9–11 speaks of them before receiving the white robes; 7:9 after." [Joseph L. Trafton, *Reading Revelation: a Literary and Theological Commentary*, Rev. ed., Reading the New Testament Series (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2005), 83.]

¹⁵"White robes are mentioned in 6:11; 7:13; in 3:4 the phrase ἐν λευκοῖς, 'in white [garments],' is a reward for those in Sardis who have not soiled their garments, a reward reiterated in 3:5. In Revelation, white robes appear to symbolize heavenly existence or worthiness of heaven (Ulfgard, *Feast*, 85). White was worn during festive occasions (Ecc 9:8) and was also the typical color of garments thought to be worn by supernatural revealers or other heavenly figures, including God himself (Dan 7:9; 2 Macc 11:8; 1 Enoch 14:20; T. Levi 8:2; Matt 17:2 = Mark 9:3 = Luke 9:29; Matt 28:3; Mark 16:5; John 20:12; Acts 1:10)." [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 468.]

¹⁶"While palm fronds were symbols of victory throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, in Egypt they symbolized length of life and life after death, and in Judaism they could suggest the Feast of Tabernacles (Meshorer, *Jewish Coins*, no. 161). They also appear to have symbolized blessing (see Zazoff, *Gemmen*, 301). The palm frond was used by metonymy to mean 'victory.' A mosaic in the Museum of Sousse (Tunisia) depicts Dionysus/Bacchus in a triumphal procession in a chariot drawn by four tigers; beside him stands winged Victory, carrying a palm frond, not (as one would expect) a *thyrsus* (M. Simon, *La Civilisation de l'Antiquité et le Christianisme* [Paris: Arthaud, 1972] plate 33). The association of the palm with victory is so close that statues of the goddess Nike or Victory can be described by metonymy as *palmaris deae facies*, 'with the appearance of the goddess of the palm.' In Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 9.4, Isis is described as wearing sandals woven with 'leaves of victorious palm' (*palmae victricis*). Venus

Victrix, “Victorious Aphrodite,” is depicted holding a palm frond (Zazoff, Gemmen, 334; plate 104, 5). Olympic victors were given a frond of palm to symbolize victory (Pausanias 8.48.1–2), and in Hermas Sim. 8.2.1 the righteous are rewarded with wreaths and palm fronds. The true palm, *phoenix dactylifera*, was not native to the northern shores of the Mediterranean, and when grown there it did not produce fruit. Dioscorides, a first-century A.D. physician and pharmacologist, discusses the medicinal value of the date palm (*phoenix dactylifera*), which grows in Egypt (Materia medica 1.109.1–2; ed. Wellmann, Pedanii 1:102), as well as the φοῖνιξ θηβαυκαί (*hyphaene coriacea*) or doum palm found in Greece and Turkey (1.109.2–3; ed. Wellmann, Pedanii 1:102). In Quaest. conv. 8.4 (723A–724F), Plutarch and his friends puzzle over the fact that the palm frond (ὁ φοῖνιξ) is awarded to victors at all athletic festivals. This practice was borrowed by the Romans, ca. 292 B.C., to reward victors in the Roman games (Livy 10.47.3); Vergil refers to palmas, *pretium victoribus*, ‘palms, the prize of the victor’ (Aeneid 6.111). After 293 B.C., victorious Roman generals wore the *toga palmata* when celebrating a triumph (Livy 10.7.9). Tertullian identified the palms as signs of victory (Scorpiace 20). According to 1 Macc 13:51, palms were carried in Simon the Hasmonean’s victorious entry into Jerusalem:

The Jews entered it [the citadel in Jerusalem] with praise and palm fronds [βᾶϊων], and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel.

“In 2 Macc 14:4, an ex-priest named Alcimus presented the Syrian king Demetrius I Soter (187–150 B.C.) with a gold crown and a palm, probably symbols of a victorious ruler, and similar gifts were given to Demetrius II Nicator (161–125 B.C.) by Simon the Hasmonean (1 Macc 13:36–37). The frequency with which palm fronds occur on Jewish coins together with the name of the current ruler suggests that they symbolize, like the wreath, an ascendant ruler (Meshorer, Jewish Coins, nos. 6, 21, 24, 40, 46, 48, 49, 66–74, 160).

“In John 12:13, the crowds welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem by waving palm fronds (not by cutting branches of trees and strewing them in his path, as in Mark 11:8 = Matt 21:8) and shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel.’ Here also, palms apparently symbolize victory (see Schnackenburg, John 2:374–75). According to Lev. Rab. 30 (Str-B, 2:789), ‘We do not know who the victor is, but whoever carries the palm frond in his hand, by this we know that he is the victor.’ These references demonstrate that palm fronds could be used in various contexts in early Judaism to symbolize victory, and they suggest that those who understand the palms in Rev 7:9 as symbolic of victory are essentially correct (Charles, 1:211; Prigent, 124). Deissmann (*Bible Studies*, 370; cf. K. Berger et al., *Hellenistic Commentary*, no. 942) cites as an instructive parallel to Rev 7:9–10 an inscription from Stratonicea in Caria (CIG 2:2715, lines 8–10), which refers to thirty noble youths who are obligated to sing a hymn in the *bouleuterion* ‘clothed in white and crowned with olive branches, and bearing olive branches in their hands. These boys shall be accompanied by a zither player and a herald and shall sing a hymn composed by Sosandros the secretary, the son of Diomedes.’ Since the festal use of both white garments and palm fronds connotes victory in the Near East as well as in the Greco-Roman world, Bousset suggests that it is not necessary for Deissmann to emphasize parallels found in the practices of Greek religious cults ([1906] 284–85). The major objection to understanding the palms as symbols of victory is that this significance was primarily pagan (Kraft, 128; Ulfsgard, Feast, 90). Yet the texts discussed above



ish people such palms additionally signified the [Feast of Tabernacles](#) and the victory inherent in the Exodus. It is quite likely that the worship scene in chapter seven of Revelation is set against the backdrop of the celebrations at the Feast of Tabernacles in the Jerusalem temple prior to its destruction in 70 AD, some decades prior to the writing of Revelation.¹⁷ These who stand

make it problematic to regard palms as symbolic of victory only in Greco-Roman culture.

“In Egypt the palm frond symbolized length of life and in a funerary context was a symbol for life after death (Wallert, Die Palmen). Thoth, the ‘Lord of time,’ is depicted as holding a palm frond symbolizing length of life (Wallert, Die Palmen, 101ff.). Palm fronds were also placed on the breast of a mummy when it was carried in a funeral procession. In a procession honoring Isis, described in Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 11.9, set in Cenchræe near Corinth, five priests are described as dressed in white linen, and one of them carried a palm frond with leaves of gold and a caduceus; the god Anubis (the Egyptian mortuary god and the god of embalming and of cemeteries) is often represented holding these two objects (see Griffiths, *Isis-Book*, 198–200; Witt, *Isis*, 199). The palm as a symbol of victory appears to have originated in the Greek world, possibly on Delos in the seventh century B.C., and only in Roman times is it to be found with this significance in Egypt (Wallert, *Die Palmen*, 103–4).”

[David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 468–469.]

¹⁷“Since Jews carried palm fronds around and into the temple in Jerusalem in connection with the celebrations of the Feast of Tabernacles, it is possible to understand the palms in Rev 7:9 in that connection (Ulfsgard, Feast, 89–92). The sheaf carried in the celebration during the Feast of Tabernacles was called the לולב, *lūlāb* (literally ‘palm frond,’ but it actually consisted of palm, myrtle, and willow branches tied together into a bundle in accordance with Lev 23:40; see m. Sukk. 3:1–8; Draper, JSNT 19 [1985] 137). According to Neh 8:15, branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, and palm are used to construct booths to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. Josephus (*Ant.* 3.245; LCL tr.) speaks of those who celebrate Tabernacles as ‘bearing in their hands a bouquet composed of myrtle and willow with a frond of palm [κράδη φοίνικος], along with fruit of the perseae’ (see 13.372). In Plutarch’s discussion of the Feast of Tabernacles (Quaest. conv. 4.6.2, 671E), he describes the festival as a ‘procession of branches’ (κραδηφορία), in which

before God in heaven have experienced the σωτηρία τοῦ θεοῦ not from slavery in Egypt but deliverance from sin and the evils of life on this earth. Thus the theme of their shouting is appropriately suited to their visible appearance.

Their appearance matches their words of celebration (v. 10): καὶ κρᾶζουσιν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ λέγοντες, *They are crying out in a loud voice, saying.*¹⁸ The use of ‘cried out’ in many English translations masks the present tense verb κρᾶζουσιν used by John. What John observes is a celebration taking place, rather than having taken place. As affirmed in v. 15 this is a continuous celebration, rather than some passed event.

Their praise focuses on both God and the Lamb: ἡ σωτηρία τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν τῷ καθημένῳ ἐπὶ τῷ θρόνῳ καὶ τῷ ἄρνῳ. *Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!* The absence of a main clause verb in the Greek highlights this as a shout of victory lifted up to God. The use of ἡ σωτηρία can suggest victory, but primarily it alludes to the entrance of the multitude into heaven in line with their being given the white robes.¹⁹ Their victorious passage from earthly life to life in heaven is the essence of σωτηρία, which

each Jew entered the temple carrying a *thyrsus* (θύρσος is a Greek term for the combined palm, myrtle, and willow branches Jews carried during the festival). Jub. 16:31 retrojects a later ritual of Tabernacles to the practice of Abraham (Charlesworth, OTP 2:89):

And Abraham took branches of palm trees and fruit of good trees and each of the days he used to go around the altar with branches. Seven times per day, in the morning, he was praising and giving thanks to his God for all things.

[David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 469–470.]

¹⁸As noted in an earlier study, there is a lot of ‘loud talking’ that goes on in heaven. Note this phrase κρᾶζουσι φωνῇ μεγάλῃ in 6:10, 10:3, 14:15 (18:2), 19:17. It comes from the martyrs (6:10), the multitude (7:10), and powerful angels (10:3, 14:15; 18:2; 19:17)

¹⁹“Salvation belongs to our God: here, and in the similar passage in verse 12, there is no verb; the Greek text says ‘Salvation to our God,’ a way of confessing that God is the one who saves. So something like TEV can be said, or else a verb phrase, ‘We are saved by our God,’ or ‘It is our God who has saved us.’ The Greek noun is usually translated salvation; in some instances it may mean ‘victory,’ and that is how SPCL and REB translate it. One commentator says ‘It is not their salvation that the martyrs are celebrating, but their triumphant passage through persecution’ (Caird). Most, however, translate ‘salvation,’ and this is probably the better choice. If the crowd is understood as addressing one another, then our God is inclusive. However, if this is a statement of praise and worship addressed to God and the Lamb, then our God is exclusive. Local worship practices in the receptor-language culture may help determine which form to use. In certain languages Salvation will need an object to indicate what it is that God saves them from. In this context it most likely refers to the time of great suffering in 6:1–7:3. So one may translate ‘It is our God who has brought us through the time of great suffering safely.’” [Robert G. Bratcher and Howard Hatton, *A Handbook on the Revelation to John*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 127.]

literally signifies a deliverance.²⁰

The objects of this praise and also the source of this σωτηρία is God and the Lamb. The source of their deliverance is God on His throne and the Lamb, and thus become the objects of this praise. It is essentially the same praise offered by this crowd again in 19:1, Μετὰ ταῦτα ἤκουσα ὡς φωνὴν μεγάλην ὄχλου πολλοῦ ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ λεγόντων· ἀλληλουϊά· ἡ σωτηρία καὶ ἡ δόξα καὶ ἡ δύναμις τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν, *After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to our God.”*²¹

B. The chanting of the angels in heaven, vv. 11-12

11 Καὶ πάντες οἱ ἄγγελοι εἰστήκεισαν κύκλῳ τοῦ θρόνου καὶ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων καὶ τῶν τεσσάρων ζώων καὶ ἔπεσαν ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου ἐπὶ τὰ πρόσωπα αὐτῶν καὶ προσεκύνησαν τῷ θεῷ 12 λέγοντες·

ἀμήν, ἡ εὐλογία καὶ ἡ δόξα καὶ ἡ σοφία καὶ ἡ εὐχαριστία καὶ ἡ τιμὴ καὶ ἡ δύναμις καὶ ἡ ἰσχὺς τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων· ἀμήν.

²⁰“What John sees is an *ochlos*, translated in ESV as ‘multitude,’ but perhaps rendered more simply as ‘crowd.’ It is the same word used in the Gospels to denote the common people who swarmed excitedly around Jesus (Mark 14:43; 15:8; Matt. 27:20). Moreover, this crowd is drawn from ‘every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages’ (Rev. 7:9; cf. 5:9; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15). In the poetic formula of Henry Swete, this phrase used repeatedly in the Apocalypse ‘found a daily illustration in the polyglott [sic] cosmopolitan crowd who jostled one another in the agora or on the quays of the Asian seaport towns’ (1908: 100). A few years ago I found myself waiting for a flight at Pearson International Airport in Toronto, watching the polyglot, cosmopolitan crowd jostling for position at the ticket counters. The computers were down and many flights were being canceled, making the scene even more chaotic than usual. I often find crowds depressing, but on this occasion there was something oddly exhilarating about the scene. I noticed a few men wearing yarmulkes. The presence of Jews was a quiet reminder that there is a central thread to the human story and that it is made up of God’s covenant with Israel, to which the Gentiles, too, have been added in Jesus Christ. When the heavenly city comes, its name will be Jerusalem, and it will receive ‘the glory and the honor of the [Gentiles]’ (21:26).” [Joseph L. Mangina, *Revelation*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 112–113.]

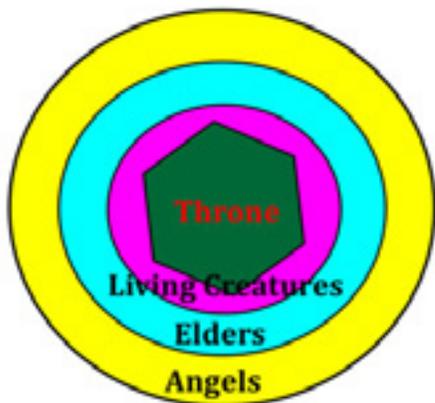
²¹“In Rev. 4–5 we saw the heavenly worship around the divine throne continually expanding, from the cherubim and elders to countless angels to ‘every creature’ in the cosmos (5:13). If that is the cosmic liturgy, the present scene is the liturgy of the nations, the Internationale of redeemed humankind. Although the crowd is multilingual, it is nonetheless able to cry aloud with one voice to God and the Lamb (7:10). Unity and difference, the one and the many, are here depicted as being mutually reinforcing rather than competitive. It is now the nations’ turn to lead the worship of God, and when they sing their hymn the cherubim, elders, and angels respond with a doxology of their own: ‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen’ (7:12).” [Joseph L. Mangina, *Revelation*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 113.]

11 And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Next it is the turn of the angels to affirm the praise of the multitude. In verse eleven first their position in heaven is defined: πάντες οἱ ἄγγελοι εἰστήκεισαν κύκλῳ τοῦ θρόνου καὶ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων καὶ τῶν τεσσάρων ζώων. That is they formed a circle, κύκλῳ, around

Listing of the Arrangement in Heaven, Rev. 7



God, the elders and the four living creatures. This is the same essential position as defined in their first appearance in 5:11, κύκλῳ τοῦ θρόνου καὶ τῶν ζώων καὶ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων, in a circle around the throne and the living creatures and the elders. Most likely no symbolism should be read into this arrangement since the sequence in 7:11 is throne, elders, living creatures, angels, but in 5:11 it is throne, living creatures, elders, angels. Also of some importance is that the angels were standing: εἰστήκεισαν.²² The location of the huge mul-

²²“The verb εἰστήκεισαν, ‘they stood,’ applies only to the angels who surround God’s throne (no angel in Revelation is ever described as seated) but not to the elders, who are elsewhere described as seated (4:4), nor to the four cherubim, whose posture is never described. The description of angels standing before God suggests an awareness of the Jewish tradition that angels had no knees and therefore were unable to sit (y. Ber. 2c; Gen. Rab. 65.21 [ed. Theodor-Albeck, Midrash, 738]; see Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic*, 66–67). This tradition was apparently based on the phrase ישׁר רגל ורגליה רגל *wəraglêhem regel yěšārâ*, ‘and their legs were straight,’ in Ezek 1:7. In Jewish tradition there was a widespread view that no one is permitted to sit in the presence of God (4Q405 20 ii 2 [see Newsom, *Songs*, 303–9]; b. Hag. 15a; 3 Enoch 16), though in Revelation the twenty-four elders constitute an exception (see Comment on 4:4). While the innumerable multitude is described as standing before the throne (v 9), it appears to be presupposed that they encircle the angels. The closest parallel is found in Rev 5:11, where myriads of angels along with the cherubim and the elders

titude is not specified precisely and is listed in v. 9 as ἐστῶτες ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου καὶ ἐνώπιον τοῦ ἀρνίου, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. Perhaps they are encircling the large number of angels, but this is not clear. But along with the angels they also are standing before God: ἐστῶτες.

Second, their action in worship is specified: καὶ ἔπεσαν ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου ἐπὶ τὰ πρόσωπα αὐτῶν καὶ προσεκύνησαν τῷ θεῷ, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God. Usually adoration by heavenly beings in falling prostrate before the throne of God is centered on the twenty-four elders (cf. 4:10; 5:14; 11:16; 19:4), but here the angels are the ones expressing this posture of respect for God.²³ But depending upon the subject of ἔπεσαν, ? fell down, whether just angels or both angels and elders, it may be either angels or both angels and elders who express this worship posture. And then the doxology would be chanted by either one or both groups together, due to the Greek grammar.²⁴ Once more we are reminded that worship combines both words and posture before God.

Note the angels’ first praise chant in 5:11-12:

11 Καὶ εἶδον, καὶ ἤκουσα φωνὴν ἀγγέλων πολλῶν κύκλῳ τοῦ θρόνου καὶ τῶν ζώων καὶ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων, καὶ ἦν ὁ ἀριθμὸς αὐτῶν μυριάδες μυριάδων καὶ χιλιάδες χιλιάδων 12 λέγοντες φωνῇ μεγάλῃ· ἅξιόν ἐστιν τὸ ἀρνίον τὸ ἐσφαγμένον λαβεῖν τὴν δύναμιν καὶ πλοῦτον καὶ σοφίαν καὶ ἰσχὺν καὶ τιμὴν καὶ δόξαν καὶ εὐλογίαν.

11 Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, 12 singing with full voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”

It was centered on the salvation accomplishments of the Lamb through His being slaughtered. This second praise in chapter seven centers on the greatness of God. But both of these form a doxology, in which God are described as encircling the throne of God.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 470–471.]

²³ “καὶ ἔπεσαν ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου ἐπὶ τὰ πρόσωπα αὐτῶν καὶ προσεκύνησαν τῷ θεῷ, “fell prostrate before the throne and worshiped God.” The motif of the adoration of heavenly beings who fall prostrate before the throne of God is normally limited to the twenty-four elders (4:10; 5:14; 11:16; 19:4). Here they are joined by the angels encircling the throne and the four living creatures, while in 5:8 the twenty-four elders are joined by the four living creatures (though in 5:8 the object of worship is the Lamb rather than God).” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 471.]

²⁴The core verbal structure is ἔπεσαν... καὶ προσεκύνησαν... λέγοντες, ? fell down...and worshiped...saying.

and Christ are praised. Also it should be noted that both doxologies contain seven attributes each in praise of God and the Lamb.

7:11	5:12
ἡ εὐλογία	τὴν δύναμιν
ἡ δόξα	πλοῦτον
ἡ σοφία	σοφίαν
ἡ εὐχαριστία	ἰσχύν
ἡ τιμὴ	τιμὴν
ἡ δύναμις	δόξαν
ἡ ἰσχὺς	εὐλογίαν

Only one word in each list is not found in the other. Wisdom, ἡ σοφία / σοφίαν, seems to be the dividing line for both lists. ἡ σοφία occurs only four times in Revelation: twice in these two doxologies and then in a similar expression in 13:18 and 17:9.²⁵ Blessing and glory are the first two in 7:11 but the last two in 5:12 in reverse order. Four of the traits are found only in these two doxologies in Revelation: εὐλογία, σοφία, εὐχαριστία, ἰσχὺς. In a doxology, the named attributes are not given to God or wished into existence for God. To the contrary, the doxology acknowledges what God already possesses, and affirms it in public worship.

Interestingly the phrase τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν, to our God, is fairly common inside Revelation: cf. 4:11; 5:10; 7:10, 12; 12:10 [2x]; 19:1, 5, 6. Also important and unusual in Revelation is the double ἀμήν, *amen*, both at the beginning and the ending of the doxology. Most likely the first ἀμήν is intended to link the doxology of the angels to that of the multitude in v. 10. The angels affirm the praise of the multitude before offering up their own praise. The very Jewish specification of forever with εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων is not surprisingly common in Revelation: 1:6, 18; 4:9, 10; 5:13; 7:12; 10:6; 11:15; 14:11; 15:7; 19:3; 20:10; 22:5.²⁶

Thus the worship scene in chapter seven centers on the victory shout of the multitude followed up by the doxological praise of the angels.

C. The dialogue of John with one of the elders, vv. 13-17.

13 Καὶ ἀπεκρίθη εἷς ἐκ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων λέγων μοι· οὗτοι οἱ περιβεβλημένοι τὰς στολὰς τὰς λευκὰς τίνες εἰσὶν καὶ πόθεν ἦλθον; 14 καὶ εἶρηκα αὐτῷ· κύριέ μου, σὺ οἶδας. καὶ εἶπέν μοι·

οὗτοι εἰσὶν οἱ ἐρχόμενοι ἐκ τῆς θλίψεως τῆς μεγάλης

²⁵Rev. 13:18. Ὡς ἡ σοφία ἐστίν. [Here is wisdom.](#)

Rev. 17:9. ὧς ὁ νοῦς ὁ ἔχων σοφίαν. [Here is the mind that has wisdom.](#)

²⁶Interestingly with these references using εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων, the punishment of evil lasts just as long as the blessings upon the righteous in heaven. Both of which via εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων continue as long as God exists.

καὶ ἔπλυναν τὰς στολὰς αὐτῶν
καὶ ἐλεύκαναν αὐτὰς ἐν τῷ αἵματι τοῦ
ἀρνίου.

15 διὰ τοῦτο εἰσὶν ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου τοῦ θεοῦ
καὶ λατρεύουσιν αὐτῷ ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτὸς ἐν
τῷ ναῷ αὐτοῦ,
καὶ ὁ καθήμενος ἐπὶ τοῦ θρόνου σκηνώσει ἐπ’
αὐτούς.

16 οὐ πεινάσουσιν ἔτι οὐδὲ διψήσουσιν ἔτι
οὐδὲ μὴ πέση ἐπ’ αὐτούς ὁ ἥλιος οὐδὲ πᾶν
καῦμα,

17 ὅτι τὸ ἀρνίον τὸ ἀνά μέσον τοῦ θρόνου ποιμανεῖ
αὐτούς
καὶ ὀδηγήσει αὐτούς ἐπὶ ζωῆς πηγὰς
ὕδατων,
καὶ ἐξαλείψει ὁ θεὸς πᾶν δάκρυον ἐκ τῶν
ὀφθαλμῶν αὐτῶν.

13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying,
“Who are these, robed in white, and where have they
come from?” 14 I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that
knows.” Then he said to me,

“These are they who have come out of the great
ordeal;
they have washed their robes
and made them white in the blood of the
Lamb.

15 For this reason they are before the throne of
God,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will
shelter them.

16 They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching
heat;

17 for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be
their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the wa-
ter of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their
eyes.”

The third scene shifts from worship, but not en-
tirely, to a dialogue between John and one of the twen-
ty-four elders. It is introduced in a very Hebraic manner
that most translations do not fully grasp in their patterns
of translation: Καὶ ἀπεκρίθη εἷς ἐκ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων
λέγων μοι, *And one of the elders responded, saying to me.*
Normally the verb ἀποκρίνομαι introduces a reply or an
answer to a previous question. For example, the NRSV
uses “answer” in 162 of the 205 uses of ἀποκρίνομαι in
the NT, and “reply” in another 25 uses. Its use of “ad-
dressed” here is matched on in Acts 3:12 where Peter
speaks to the crowds in reference to the healing of the
lame man.

Thus the elder volunteers to explain the meaning

of the multitude and their victory song, not because John asked him to, but simply to provide a depiction of why these people were motivated to praise God with such a victory expression.²⁷

The depiction begins with a typical interrogation scene in epic dialogue: οὔτοι οἱ περιβεβλημένοι τὰς στολὰς τὰς λευκὰς τίνες εἰσὶν καὶ πόθεν ἦλθον; “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” The elder poses a question of identity and origin in order to set up his explanation.²⁸ This pattern somewhat

²⁷“The phrase καὶ ἀπεκρίθη is not a response to an unspoken question (Bousset [1906] 285; Beckwith, 544; Charles, 1:212) but reflects the Hebrew use of the verb פנה .*ānā*, meaning ‘begin to speak,’ referring to something that has already occurred to which the remarks refer (LXX Isa 14:10; LXX Zech 1:10; 3:4; Matt 11:25; 12:38; 15:15; 17:4; 22:1; 28:5; Mark 9:5; 10:24; 11:14; 12:35; 15:12; Luke 14:3; John 2:18; 5:7; Acts 3:12; see BDB, 773; Thayer, Lexicon, 63; BAGD 93). Here the phrase καὶ ἀπεκρίθη ... λέγων, ‘and he answered ... saying’ (an idiom found only here in Revelation, but common in various forms in the Gospels and Acts), is a Semitism reflecting the Hebrew phrase וַיֹּאמֶר וַיֵּן wayya.an lē.mor, ‘and he answered, saying,’ translated in the Greek phrase καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν with a participle followed by a finite verb (e.g., Luke 1:19, 35; 4:12; 5:5) or with a finite verb followed by a redundant participle, as in ἀπεκρίθη λέγων (LXX Ezek 9:11; Theod Dan 3:16; Gk. 1 Enoch 22:7, 9; 25:3; 106:9, 13; T. Job 23:5; John 1:26) and ἀπεκρίνατο λέγων (Luke 3:16). Asyndeton is characteristic of the introductory biblical Aramaic phrase וַיֹּאמֶר וַיֵּן .*ānēh wē.āmar*, ‘he answered and said’ (Turner, Style, 150; Black, Aramaic, 56–57), rendered in the LXX as ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, ‘answering he said,’ a locution frequently found in the Gospels. One of the distinctive features of Revelation is that the author never asks the meaning of any of the symbols in his visions. Nevertheless, the elder volunteers to interpret the scene for the seer, and this constitutes a variation on the motif of the *angelus interpretis*, or ‘interpreting angel’ (see Comment on 1:1), typical of many Jewish apocalypses (see H. Reichelt, *Angelus*, 175–76). Reichelt draws attention to an analogous setting in Dan 7:9–18, where there is a vision of a great judgment scene in which an enormous number of angelic beings attended God and one like a son of man appeared to the Ancient of Days and received dominion. Unlike the seer in Rev 7:13, who is approached by one of the elders, the narrator in Dan 7:16 approached ‘one of those who stood there’ to ask the meaning of the vision.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 471–472.]

²⁸“οὔτοι οἱ περιβεβλημένοι τὰς στολὰς τὰς λευκὰς τίνες εἰσὶν καὶ πόθεν ἦλθον. ‘Who are these dressed in white robes and where did they come from?’ The use of the interrogative pronoun and interrogative adverb τίς, ‘who,’ and πόθεν, ‘from where,’ together is a standard formula used for the interrogation of visitors in epic dialogue (Odyssey 1.170; 14.188; 16.57–58) and as a literary device to identify the deceased in funerary epigrams (see L. Robert, *Hellenica* 4:47ff., and Roueché, *Aphrodisias*, 63–64). When Aeneas is touring the underworld, he asks his deceased father Anchises about some of the sights he sees (Vergil *Aeneid* 6.711–12; tr. LCL): ‘What is [quae sint] that river yonder, and who are the men [quive viri] thronging the banks in such a host?’ These questions serve to focus the interest in the preceding scene on the identity, the clothing, and the origin of the innumerable host. The elder answers these questions in reverse order in v 14, while in vv 15–17 he deals

mimics both Zech. 4:4–5 and 6:4–5.²⁹

Notice the present time (οὔτοι οἱ περιβεβλημένοι τὰς στολὰς τὰς λευκὰς τίνες εἰσὶν) and past time (καὶ πόθεν ἦλθον) frames of the questions as they are posed in v. 13. In his explanation in v. 14, the present (εἰσὶν) and past (ἔπλυναν, ἐλεύκαναν) sequence is maintained. But the amplification in v. 13, οὔτοι οἱ περιβεβλημένοι τὰς στολὰς τὰς λευκὰς, *these who have been clothed with white robes*, reaches to the past time verbal expressions in v. 14: καὶ ἔπλυναν τὰς στολὰς αὐτῶν καὶ ἐλεύκαναν αὐτὰς ἐν τῷ αἵματι τοῦ ἀρνίου, *and they washed their robes and made them white with the blood of the Lamb*. Thus, they now enjoy wearing white robes which were made white in the blood of the Lamb. But their present existence in white robes means that they have come through a washing of these robes in the blood of the Lamb, answering the second question of πόθεν ἦλθον.

Interesting to note is that angels never possess the same level of knowledge as God, but they can be quite knowledgeable.³⁰ This becomes also true for the elders as is reflected here by John’s words: καὶ εἶρηκα³¹

with the present and future of this throng.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 472.]

²⁹Zech. 4:4–6. 4 καὶ ἐπηρώτησα καὶ εἶπον πρὸς τὸν ἄγγελον τὸν λαλοῦντα ἐν ἐμοὶ λέγων Τί ἐστὶν ταῦτα, κύριε; † 5 καὶ ἀπεκρίθη ὁ ἄγγελος ὁ λαλῶν ἐν ἐμοὶ καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς με Οὐ γινώσκεις τί ἐστὶν ταῦτα; καὶ εἶπα Οὐχί, κύριε. † 6 καὶ ἀπεκρίθη καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς με λέγων Οὗτος ὁ λόγος κυρίου πρὸς Ζοροβαβελ λέγων Οὐκ ἐν δυνάμει μεγάλη οὐδὲ ἐν ἰσχύι, ἀλλ’ ἢ ἐν πνεύματί μου, λέγει κύριος παντοκράτωρ. †

4 I said to the angel who talked with me, “What are these, my lord?” 5 Then the angel who talked with me answered me, “Do you not know what these are?” I said, “No, my lord.” 6 He said to me, “This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts.

Zech 6:4–5. 4 καὶ ἀπεκρίθη καὶ εἶπα πρὸς τὸν ἄγγελον τὸν λαλοῦντα ἐν ἐμοὶ Τί ἐστὶν ταῦτα, κύριε; † 5 καὶ ἀπεκρίθη ὁ ἄγγελος ὁ λαλῶν ἐν ἐμοὶ καὶ εἶπεν Ταῦτά ἐστὶν οἱ τέσσαρες ἄνεμοι τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, ἐκπορεύονται παραστῆναι τῷ κυρίῳ πάσης τῆς γῆς; †

4 Then I said to the angel who talked with me, “What are these, my lord?” 5 The angel answered me, “These are the four winds of heaven going out, after presenting themselves before the Lord of all the earth.

³⁰“While angelic beings are never considered omniscient, knowledge is one of most prominent qualities associated with them in 4QShirShabb (Newsom, *Songs*, 30), where they are called פנה ילם .*ēlē da.at*, ‘angels of knowledge’ (4Q400 2:1; 4Q403 1 i 31; 4Q405 23 i 8), or יודים yod.im, ‘those who know’ (4Q400 3 ii 5; 4Q401 35:1).” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 472.]

³¹“The juxtaposition of the perfect εἶρηκα, ‘replied,’ with the aorist εἶπεν, ‘said’ (v 14b), suggests that the perfect functions as an aorist; see Comment on 5:7 (Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 302–3). A similar response is made by Ezekiel (Ezek 37:3) when God asks him (NRSV), ‘Mortal, can these bones live?’ and Ezekiel replies ‘O Lord God, you know.’” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol.

αὐτῷ· κύριέ μου, σὺ οἶδας, and he said to him, “Sir, you know.” Thus John’s reply to the elder’s question serves to set up the explanation given by the elder in vv. 14b-17.

The elder’s explanation contains assertions cased in the literary mold of ancient prophet oracle sermon delivery.³² The unit of vv. 14b-17 basically falls into two sub-divisions of vv. 14b-15 and 16-17 with the first unit focusing on the present and the second on the future.

Their present status in heaven, vv. 14b-15b. First this huge crowd of believers are οὔτοί εἰσιν οἱ ἐρχόμενοι ἐκ τῆς θλίψεως τῆς μεγάλης, *these are the ones coming out of the great affliction*. Note carefully the present tense for both the verb εἰσιν which determines the time frame and the present participle ἐρχόμενοι which determines the kind of action as ongoing process. This multitude is continuing to grow as John sees it; the number is not yet completed as indicated regarding the martyrs with the fifth seal in 6:11. The implication of this way of framing their exit from ἐκ τῆς θλίψεως τῆς μεγάλης is that they are suffering martyrdom as the means of exiting their suffering on earth. This depiction points in the direction of the τὰς στολὰς τὰς λευκὰς, white robed, multitude here being linked to the martyrs under the martyrs in the fifth seal (6:9-11).

This link becomes stronger with the closing question at the end of the sixth seal (6:17) which raises the issue of who can withstand the great day of wrath: ἦλθεν ἡ ἡμέρα ἡ μεγάλη τῆς ὀργῆς αὐτῶν, καὶ τίς δύναται σταθῆναι; *the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?* The following ‘interlude’ in chapter seven proposes to answer this question with the visions of the 144,000 and the huge multitude. The day of wrath has already arrived and is underway. The scene of the 144,000 presents the sealing on earth of the believing group before the full impact of this day is unleashed. The scene of the huge multitude pictures those believers suffering martyrdom during this time frame and thus making their entrance into heaven in order to complete the number of martyrs in 6:11. Some believers remain on earth under divine protection while others pay the ultimate price for their faith commitment to Christ during this period.

A central question then becomes What is this τῆς θλίψεως τῆς μεγάλης, *great affliction*?³³ Probably in 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 472.]

³²It is interesting to note that both printed Greek texts and translations differ over the literary form of v. 14b. The UBS 4th rev. ed. Greek text and the NRSV treat v. 14b as prose but vv. 15-17 as poetic expression. But the N-A 27th and 28th editions consider v. 14b as poetic along with vv. 15-17. This doesn’t significantly impact the interpretation, but does signal some of the challenges of identifying poetic structure in ancient Greek.

³³Note that I intentionally translated τῆς θλίψεως τῆς μεγάλης

the background of this phrase here as well as in Mark 13:19³⁴ and 1QM 1:11ff^{35 36} is Daniel 12:1.³⁷ In Daniel’s

as ‘great affliction’ rather than ‘great tribulation’. This latter phrase in English has way too much accumulated baggage from the last two hundred years of interpretive history. Plus ‘great affliction’ is actually more accurate to the English.

³⁴Mark 13:19-20. ἔσονται γὰρ αἱ ἡμέραι ἐκεῖναι θλίψις οἷα οὐ γέγονεν τοιαύτη ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς κτίσεως ἢν ἔκτισεν ὁ θεὸς ἕως τοῦ νῦν καὶ οὐ μὴ γένηται. 20 καὶ εἰ μὴ ἐκολόβωσεν κύριος τὰς ἡμέρας, οὐκ ἂν ἐσώθη πᾶσα σὰρξ· ἀλλὰ διὰ τοὺς ἐκλεκτοὺς οὓς ἐξελέξατο ἐκολόβωσεν τὰς ἡμέρας.

19 For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be. 20 And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days.

³⁵1 Qumran The War Scroll 1:11-12. 11 The Sons of Light and the forces of Darkness shall fight together to show the strength of God with the roar of a great multitude and the shout of gods and men; a day of disaster. It is a time of 12 distress fo[r al]l the people who are redeemed by God. In all their afflictions none exists that is like it, hastening to its completion as an eternal redemption.

[Michael O. Wise, Martin G. Abegg Jr., and Edward M. Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (New York: HarperOne, 2005), 148.]

³⁶“The first lines of the scroll (1QM 1:1-7) lay the framework for a three-stage conflict between the Sons of Light — that is, members of the Yahad (see IQS 3:13, text 7) — and the Sons of Darkness. The first battle finds the adversaries led by the Kittim of Assyria. (Although the name Kittim is most often used in the scrolls as a reference to the Romans, its basic sense seems to have been ‘archetypical bad guys.’) The Kittim of Assyria come in alliance with the biblical enemies Edom, Moab, Ammon, and Philistia. Cooperating with this unholy alliance are the ‘violators of the covenant’: Jews who had spurned the message of the Yahad, and in so doing aligned themselves with the Sons of Darkness. The second stage expands the war’s influence to the Kittim who dwelt in Egypt, and then finally to the Kings of the North.

“Although this war is said to extend over forty years, the writer of the scroll was particularly concerned with the details of the very final day of battle. After six bloody engagements during this last battle, the Sons of Light and Sons of Darkness are deadlocked in a 3-3 tie. In the seventh and final confrontation ‘the great hand of God shall overcome [Belial and al]l the angels of his dominion, and all the men of [his forces shall be destroyed forever]’ (1QM 1:14-15).” [Michael O. Wise, Martin G. Abegg Jr., and Edward M. Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (New York: HarperOne, 2005), 146-147.

³⁷Dan. 12:1-2. 1 καὶ κατὰ τὴν ὥραν ἐκείνην παρελεύσεται Μιχαὴλ ὁ ἄγγελος ὁ μέγας ὁ ἐστηκὼς ἐπὶ τοὺς υἱοὺς τοῦ λαοῦ σου· ἐκείνη ἡ ἡμέρα θλίψεως, οἷα οὐκ ἐγενήθη ἀφ’ οὗ ἐγενήθησαν ἕως τῆς ἡμέρας ἐκείνης· καὶ ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ὑπωθήσεται πᾶς ὁ λαός, ὃς ἂν εὐρεθῆ ἐγγεγραμμένος ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ. † 2 καὶ πολλοὶ τῶν καθευδόντων ἐν τῷ πλάτει τῆς γῆς ἀναστήσονται, οἱ μὲν εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον, οἱ δὲ εἰς ὄνειδισμόν, οἱ δὲ εἰς διασπορὰν καὶ αἰσχύνην αἰώνιον. †

1 At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. 2 Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall

period of great affliction, the pressure is upon the people of God to compromise their commitment and thus prove themselves to be false.³⁸ But as Rev. 1:9 and 2:9–10, 22 suggest, this pressure to compromise is already underway at the end of the first century and is gradually increasing. It will reach its zenith at the eschatological end of time.³⁹ In a brief slacking off of persecution, the

awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

³⁸In Daniel's tribulation, the eschatological opponent persecutes the saints because of their covenant loyalty to God (cf. Dan. 11:30–39, 44; 12:10). Some will apostatize and persecute those remaining loyal, especially attempting to cause them to forsake their loyalty (11:32, 34; 12:10; Dan. 11:32 of the Greek OT [Theod.; cf. LXX] makes the Jewish apostates, not the evil pagan king, the subject of the 'seducing'). The same idea is involved in the tribulation in Revelation 7, since the seven letters in chs. 2 and 3 have revealed that three of the churches addressed (Ephesus, Sardis, and Laodicea) are in danger of losing their identity as the true people of God and two others are in the process of seriously compromising their loyalty to Christ (Pergamum and Thyatira). A similar idea occurs again in 7:3–8, where only a remnant among the professing new covenant community on earth, the church, is given a seal to remain faithful.

"Therefore, the tribulation consists of pressures to compromise faith, these pressures coming both from within the church community through seductive teaching and from without through overt oppression. Sometimes the persecution is economically oriented (so θλίψις ['tribulation'] in 2:9, and θλίψαι ['to afflict'] in Lev. 26:26, referring to a 'famine of bread' and distributing 'loaves by weight,' which stands partly behind Rev. 6:5–6). At other times the tribulation is heightened to include imprisonment and even death (so θλίψις ['tribulation'] in 2:10). Whatever its nature, tribulation always comes because of believers' faithful witness to Jesus (so θλίψις ['tribulation'] in 1:9; cf. 6:9). The 'greatness' of the tribulation is the intensity of the seduction and oppression through which believers pass. Some suggest that μεγάλη ('great') refers to the immense totality of tribulations that have occurred throughout the whole course of the church age,¹⁶⁷ which is possible but is not emphasized." [G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 433–434.]

³⁹"This period is also a time of punishment for unbelievers (2:22). The use of the article highlights that this is the expected tribulation prophesied both by Daniel and Christ. But this tribulation does not occur only at the very end of history.¹⁶⁸ The trial has already been set in motion in John's day (see on 1:9; 2:9–10, 22; so likewise John 16:33; Acts 14:22; Rom. 5:3; 8:35–36; 2 Tim. 3:12; 21 of Paul's 23 uses of θλίψις ['tribulation'] refer to a present reality).

"Elsewhere John sees the end-time prophecies of Daniel already beginning to be fulfilled (see on 1:1, 13, 19; note that John 5:24–29 sees the resurrection of the saints predicted in Dan. 12:2 as being inaugurated in Jesus' ministry). This could be supported by viewing the article in 7:14 as anaphoric, referring back in part to the 'great tribulation' that was to occur imminently in the church of Thyatira (θλίψιν μεγάλην in 2:22).¹⁶⁹ 'The great tribulation' has begun with Jesus' own sufferings and shed blood, and all who follow him must likewise suffer through it; this corporate identifica-

tion of suffering believers with Jesus is expressed especially by συγκοινωνός ἐν τῇ θλίψει ... καὶ ὑπομονῇ ἐν Ἰησοῦ ('fellow-partaker in the tribulation ... and endurance in Jesus') in 1:9, as well as by Col. 1:24 and 1 Pet. 4:1–7, 12–13.¹⁷⁰

"Indeed, the author of 1 Macc. 9:27 understood that the 'great tribulation' of Dan. 12:1 had already begun in the second century B.C., as a result of the chaos produced by Judas's death at the hands of Israel's enemy: 'So was there a great tribulation (θλίψις μεγάλη) in Israel, the like of which had not occurred since the time that a prophet was not seen among them.' Midr. Ps. 119.31 applies the Dan. 12:10 tribulation prophecy to the afflictions of Israel throughout history: 'we have long since become white, we have long since been tried ... [with] all kinds of troubles.... Can there be a trial greater than this?' The midrash goes on to cite Ps. 79:10, as does Rev. 6:10, in a context of asking how long it will be before God takes vengeance against the persecutors. We have seen that the 'hour of testing' in Rev. 3:10 also alludes to Dan. 12:1, 10, and that it appears to include the entire time before Jesus' ministry and the parousia. If so, the present analysis of the tribulation in 7:14 is supported further, though others also see a parallel between 3:10 and 7:14, but see both as alluding to a final trial at the very end of history.¹⁷¹ The tribulation has begun in the present and will be intensified in its severity at the end of history (e.g., 20:7–9; cf. 2 Bar. 48:31; Test. Mos. 8:1 for a futuristic interpretation of the tribulation of Dan. 12:1)."

[G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 434–435.]

⁴⁰"The variant reading θλίψεως μεγάλης ('of a great tribulation') in uncial A may reflect one of the earliest interpretations identifying 'the great tribulation' of 7:14 with the 'great tribulation' of 2:22 (θλίψιν μεγάλην), as well as with 1:9 and 2:9–10. This may also have been sparked by the scribe's recognition that θλίψις ('tribulation') predominantly refers to a present reality in the Pauline literature.

"However, in support of an exclusively futuristic view of the tribulation in 7:14, Charles appeals to Shep. Hermas, *Vision* 2.2.7–8, which he rightly affirms is based on Rev. 7:14 and 3:8, 10: μακάριοι ὑμεῖς ὅσοι ὑπομένετε τὴν θλίψιν τὴν ἐρχομένην τὴν μεγάλην, καὶ ὅσοι οὐκ ἀρνήσονται τὴν ζωὴν αὐτῶν ('blessed are you, as many as endure the coming great tribulation and as many as will not deny their life,' which the next line defines as denying 'their Lord').¹⁷²

"Nevertheless, the context shows that the tribulation that will come in the future is but a continuation of what has already begun. *Vision* 2.3.1 describes Hermas himself as already enduring 'great tribulations' (μεγάλας θλίψεις), as others have also (so 3.2.1). And 2.3.4 asserts that 'tribulations come' (θλίψις ἐρχεται) on others if they deny the Lord. The phrase 'great tribulation,' found in 2.2.7–8 and 2.3.1 occurs also in 4.3.4–6, referring to a reality presently experienced by Hermas, which serves as a 'type of the great tribulation that is to come' (or 'type of the tribulation that is coming with greatness'). These verses allude not only to the descriptions in Dan. 11:35 and 12:10¹⁷³ but probably also to the incomparable 'tribulation' in Dan. 12:1, which suggests that the earlier references in Hermas to the tribulation are also based on Dan. 12:1, as is Rev. 7:14. Some preterists believe that the great tribulation was to take place before and during the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. But they

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entering heaven via martyrdom in 7:14 is filling up this number during the interim.

John indicates that those who continue to enter heaven have gone through a blood bath in order to get there: καὶ ἔπλυναν τὰς στολὰς αὐτῶν καὶ ἐλεύκαναν αὐτὰς ἐν τῷ αἵματι τοῦ ἀρνίου, and they washed their robes and made them white with the blood of the Lamb. Very likely the rituals of the Feast of Tabernacles with the sprinkling of blood play some background image role here.⁴¹ But dominantly here is the image in the song of praise to the Lamb in 5:9b-10,

ἐσφάγης καὶ ἠγόρασας τῷ θεῷ ἐν τῷ αἵματι σου ἐκ πάσης φυλῆς καὶ γλώσσης καὶ λαοῦ καὶ ἔθνους καὶ ἐποίησας αὐτοὺς τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν βασιλείαν καὶ ἱερεῖς,
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God,

It is the enduring faith commitment of this multitude that placed them in Christ and therefore qualified them for entrance into heaven upon their death.

Second, because of this commitment they now stand before the throne of God. The causal διὰ τοῦτό, because of this, links their present status before the throne of God to their having washed their robes with the blood of Christ (v. 14).⁴² Both their status and ac-

do not adequately explain how the churches of Asia Minor would be affected by a future tribulation limited to Jerusalem or even to Palestine.^{174*}

[G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 435.]

⁴¹“In addition to the Daniel 11–12 background, 7:14ff. possibly also evokes an escalated Exodus pattern applied to the church’s redemptive pilgrimage: (1) a great multitude coming out from tribulation (e.g., τὴν θλίψιν Exod. 4:31 LXX), followed by (2) Israel’s ‘washing (πλύνω) garments’ (Exod. 19:10, 14) and (3) being sprinkled by blood (Exod. 24:8) to (4) prepare for God’s tabernacling among them, which (5) provides them with food, water, protection, and comfort.¹⁸³ This follows naturally from 7:9, which echoes the Feast of Tabernacles, which commemorated Israel’s dwelling in tents under divine protection during the pilgrimage in the wilderness after the redemption from Egypt (Lev. 23:40, 43; see above on 7:9). Allusions to the exodus are found elsewhere in the Apocalypse (e.g., 1:5–6; 5:9–10; 15:2–4; the trumpet series, the bowl series).

“Combined with Ezekiel 37 may be an echo of Isa. 4:4–6 in Rev. 7:14–16: [For the Lord will wash away (ἐκπλυνεῖ) the filth of ... Zion and purge out the blood from the midst of them.... And it [God’s glory] will be for a shadow from the heat, and as a shelter ... from inclemence and from rain] (cf. Targ. Isa. 4:4–6).^{184*}

[G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 438–439.]

⁴²“The martyrs are able to stand before God only because of their purity, based on the atoning death of Christ.” [David E. Aune,

tions are based on having washed their robes in the blood of Christ.⁴³ They εἰσιν ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου τοῦ θεοῦ, are before the throne of God. Although the location of the martyred saints in the fifth seal was ὑποκάτω τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου, under the altar (cf. 6:9), this location of ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου τοῦ θεοῦ in 7:15 is not contradictory since the altar was in front of the throne as well, based on the mirror image of the altar of incense in Herod’s temple. Plus generalized depiction rather than precise, detailed description typifies apocalyptic visionary expression. They have made it into heaven. No more harm can come to them now in the very presence of God.

Also they λατρεύουσιν αὐτῷ ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτὸς ἐν τῷ ναῷ αὐτοῦ, are worshiping Him day and night in His temple. The worship of God in the heavenly temple is unending!⁴⁴ The word for worship here is λατρεύουσιν, while for the angels it is προσεκύνησαν (7:11). One implication of this difference is that while the angels worshiped from a position of being prostrate on their faces, the believers worship while standing. This is distinct from the worship of the elders (4:10) and the four living creatures (5:8, 14) and the angels (7:11). Additionally λατρεύω normally denotes a broad range of activities defined as rendering religious service to God. But it is very appropriate for specifying activities ἐν τῷ ναῷ *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 475.]

⁴³That this idea of washing a robe is religious in nature since washing a piece of cloth in red blood would never produce a pure white garment.

⁴⁴“The worship of God in the heavenly temple by heavenly beings continues unendingly (4:8), and the righteous will eventually become full participants in this unceasing worship (3:12). Normal worship at the temple in Jerusalem involved the closing of the gates following the evening sacrifice and the opening of the gates at the morning sacrifice (Ezek 46:1–3; m. Tamid; Schürer, *History* 2:286–87). Using a metaphor for continual worship, Acts 26:7 states that ‘the twelve tribes worship day and night.’ On the hendiadys ‘day and night’ (or ‘night and day’), which means ‘unceasingly,’ see Comment on 4:8. Occasionally this metaphor is used, usually hyperbolically, in connection with prayer and other forms of religious observance (Jer 16:13 [used negatively]; Pss 1:2; 88:1; Neh 1:6; Jdt 11:17; Luke 18:7; 1 Thess 3:10; 1 Tim 5:5; 2 Tim 1:3).

“The presence of a temple in heaven is frequently mentioned in Revelation (11:19; 14:15, 17; 15:5, 6, 8; 16:1, 17; cf. 22:3, ‘and his servants will serve [λατρεύσουσιν] him’). The heavenly temple is mentioned in early Jewish literature as the location of the throne of God (T. Levi 5:1; 18:6). God dwells in the heavenly holy of holies (T. Levi 3:4), where bloodless sacrifices are made (T. Levi 3:5–6). According to b. Pesah. 54a, the temple was one of the seven things created before the creation of the world, and according to 2 Apoc. Bar. 4:3, it was made when God created Paradise. The heavenly tabernacle, the pattern for the earthly tabernacle (Exod 25:9, 40; 26:30; 27:8; 2 Apoc. Bar. 4:5), is referred to in Wis 9:8; Heb 8:2; 9:11–12.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 475–476.]

αὐτοῦ, in His temple. This connection between noun and verb probably dictated John's choice of verbs here. The use of ναός for temple is common in Revelation: 3:12; 7:15; 11:1, 2, 19; 14:15, 17; 15:5, 6, 8; 16:1, 17; 21:22. The broader term covering the entire temple complex ἱερόν is never used in Revelation; only ναός which specified the inner sanctuary where God was.

Their anticipation for the future, vv. 15c-17.

This third stich in verse 15c begins a new emphasis of future anticipation of actions from God and the Lamb due to the multitude being in heaven. The shift from present to future tense verbs especially signals this: σκηνώσει, οὐ πεινάσουσιν, οὐδὲ μὴ πέση,⁴⁵ ποιμανεῖ, ὀδηγήσει, ἐξαλείψει. And the uniform focus is upon divine provisions to this multitude in heaven.

a) καὶ ὁ καθήμενος ἐπὶ τοῦ θρόνου σκηνώσει ἐπ' αὐτούς, and the One sitting upon the throne tabernacles them. The participle subject of the verb σκηνώσει has already been introduced to the readers in 4:2 as an indirect reference to God. The meaning of the verb especially with the prepositional phrase ἐπ' αὐτούς presents some challenges. The idea of σκηνώσει μετ' αὐτῶν in 21:3 is simpler and easier since the idea is He will dwell with them. But σκηνώσει ἐπ' αὐτούς, literally he will dwell over them, in the probable sense of protecting them. Very likely some sense of connection of this phrase reaches back to the instructions of Moses regarding the Feast of Tabernacles in Lev. 23:39-43, especially v. 42-43.⁴⁶ The correctness of σκω (sukkôt),

⁴⁵οὐδὲ μὴ πέση is something of an exception to the future tense verbs, but in meaning this Aorist subjunctive verb form is essentially future time in meaning with the sense of "is not permitted to fall". But this verb form is also due to a close allusion to Isaiah 9:10 from the LXX.

Interestingly just the opposite happens to the unrighteous in the fourth bowl (16:7) where the sun burns people with fire. Being righteous and in heaven means no need of any sun tan lotion! But being on earth at that same time means that no sun tan lotion made can protect you adequately.

⁴⁶"The biblical instructions for the Feast of Tabernacles (סכּוֹת *hag hassukkôt*) prescribed that the people of Israel live in booths (סכּוֹת *sukkôt*) during the seven-day feast because 'I [Yahweh] made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt' (Lev 23:42-43). This use of booths (not tents) was probably taken over from Canaanite religious practice and projected back into the wilderness experience of Israel. Later rabbinic interpretation understood סכּוֹת *sukkôt* to mean the 'clouds of glory' (here 'glory' is a circumlocution for 'God') with which God covered and protected his people during their wandering in the wilderness (see Ulfgard, Feast, 121-27, for references). According to Tg. Onq. Lev 23:42-43 (tr. Grossfeld):

You should dwell in booths [Hebrew סכּוֹת *sukkôt*, from סָךְ *sākak*, meaning "to cover," rendered here in Aramaic as מִיִּטְלִיחַ *mytlyh*, from טַלְלָא *ṭēlal*, meaning both "to cover" and "to protect"] for seven days; every native born among Israel should dwell in booths, in order that your future generations should recognize that I made the Israelites dwell under the protection of My cloud [Hebrew

booth, central to this Jewish festival as a symbol of God's protection of the Israelites during their Exodus largely depends, unfortunately, on a Jewish rabbinic interpretation first made in the early second Christian century which associated סכּוֹת (*sukkôt*) with the clouds of fire symbolizing God's Shekinah presence in the clouds. But the phrase here in 7:15 points to similar language in Ezek. 37:27,⁴⁷ perhaps more so than to Lev. 23.⁴⁸ And there the presence of God in the midst of His covenant people is a witness to others of the care and concern of God for His people.⁴⁹

"in booths"] when I brought them out of the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.

"The interpretation of the phrase 'in booths' to mean 'under the protection of My cloud' is attributed to R. Akiba in Sipra Lev. 103a and Mek. de-Rabbi Ishmael 35.10 (references in Grossfeld, Targum Onqelos, 53-55 n. 12; Ulfgard, Feast, 124 n. 522). Ulfgard (Feast, 125-26) thinks that since the various targumic versions of Lev 23:43 agree with the interpretation attributed to R. Akiba and R. Eliezer, this tradition goes back to the end of the NT period. According to this tradition, 'God's protective presence during the wilderness wandering is conceptualized in the theological term 'cloud(s) of glory,' in which the desert generation is said to have dwelt' (Ulfgard, Feast, 126). Ulfgard, however, sees the reference to booths in Lev 23:43 as an example of the early theologization of the festival in which they are associated with God's presence in the desert (Feast, 146). There is absolutely no evidence supporting this interpretation, which is not demonstrably earlier than the late second century A.D."

[David E. Aune, Revelation 6-16, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 476-477.]

⁴⁷Ezek. 37:27. καὶ ἔσται ἡ κατασκηνώσις μου ἐν αὐτοῖς, καὶ ἔσομαι αὐτοῖς θεός, καὶ αὐτοὶ μου ἔσονται λαός.†

My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

⁴⁸"This passage alludes to Ezek 37:27 (RSV), 'My dwelling place [MT מִשְׁכַּנִּי *miškani*; LXX κατασκηνώσις μου] shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.' See also Lev 26:11 (RSV), 'And I will make my abode [MT מִשְׁכַּנִּי *miškani*] among you.' The verb σκηνοῦν means 'to live, dwell' and suggests nothing about the mode of dwelling (i.e., whether in tents or houses, though τὸ σκῆνος means 'tent,' implying that the extent of time involved in such a dwelling is temporary)." [David E. Aune, Revelation 6-16, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 476.]

⁴⁹"The reference to the multitudes being 'in his temple' (ἐν τῷ ναῷ αὐτοῦ), where God 'tabernacles over them,' is a clear echo of the prophecy of Israel's restoration in Ezek. 37:26-28 (cf. LXX). There God says, 'I will establish my sanctuary (ἄγια) in the midst of them forever. And my tabernacle (κατασκηνώσις) will be over them ... when my sanctuary (ἄγια) is in the midst of them forever.' The link with Ezekiel is confirmed from the parallel in Rev. 21:3, where Ezek. 37:27 is quoted more fully and is immediately followed in 21:4, 6b by the same OT allusions found in 7:16-17. Yet again, the innumerable multitudes of redeemed in the church are viewed as the fulfillment of a prophecy concerning Israel's latter-day restoration. The application of Ezek. 37:27 to the church is striking because Ezekiel emphasizes that when this prophecy takes place the immediate result will be that 'the nations will recognize that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is

son of David, who is the great shepherd, and the sacrificed Lamb, now provides the divine help that is needed by the multitude who have entered heaven. In earthly based shepherding terminology He takes care of them (ποιμανεῖ αὐτούς)⁵⁶ and provides the 'living water' that

56 "Rev 7:17 reflects the use of a common ancient pastoral metaphor in which the relationship between leader and those under him (usually a king and his people) is compared to a shepherd and his flock, and the term 'shepherd' was a stock term for 'king' (Zimmerli, Ezekiel 2:213–14). This imagery occurs frequently in the OT (2 Sam 7:7; Isa 44:28; Jer 3:15; 10:21; 25:34–36; Nah 3:18) and is very common in Greek literature (Iliad 2.243 and passim [where Agamemnon is called 'shepherd of the people']; Plato Republic 4.440d; Politicus 271e; Xenophon Cyropaedia 1.1.2; Dio Chrysostom Or. 1.13; 4.41; 4.44–45; Plutarch De Alex. virt. 329A–B; in pseudo-Pythagorean literature [Stobaeus 4.5.61 = 36.4–5; 7.64 = 82.5–6]; see J. B. Skemp, Plato's Statesman [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952] 52–66).

"The verb ποιμαίνειν is used four times in Revelation (2:27; 7:17; 12:5; 19:15); in 7:17 it means 'to shepherd' (Louw-Nida, § 44.3) or 'to guide or help' (Louw-Nida, § 36.2), while in 2:27; 12:5; 19:15 it means 'to rule' (Louw-Nida, § 37.57). The metaphor of shepherd is applied to Paul in Acts of Paul 21, 'But Thecla sought for Paul, as a lamb [ὡς ἀμνός] in the wilderness looks about for the shepherd.' It appears at first peculiar that it is a lamb who plays the role of a shepherd, yet it must be noted that the Lamb in Revelation is the Davidic Messiah (a figure described as a shepherd), as is Jesus, who is called a shepherd several times in the NT and early Christian literature (Matt 15:24; 25:32; Mark 14:27–28 = Matt 26:31–32 [an allusion to Zech 13:7, which is also found in Barn. 5:12]; Luke 19:10; John 10:2, 11, 12, 14; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25; 5:4; 1 Clem. 16:1; Clement Paed. 3.101.3).

"In early Christian art, Jesus is frequently depicted as the Good Shepherd, typically carrying a sheep on his shoulders; see Tertullian On Modesty 7.1–4; J. Quasten, "Der gute Hirte in hellenistische und frühchristliche Theologie," *Heilige Überlieferung* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1938) 51–58; W. Schumacher, *Hirt und Guter Hirt*, RQSup 34 (Freiburg: Herder, 1977); B. Ramsay, "A Note on the Disappearance of the Good Shepherd from Early Christian Art," *HTR* 76 (1983) 375–78; A. Pollastri and A. M. Giuntella, "Shepherd, the Good," and "Iconography," *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, ed. A. Di Berardino (New York: Oxford UP, 1992) 2:776–78.

"In the Abercius epitaph (ca. A.D. 200), lines 3–6, Jesus is called the 'pure shepherd who feeds his flocks of sheep on mountains and plains' (text in J. B. Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, 2/1:496; see W. M. Calder, "The Epitaph of Avircius Marcellus," *JRS* 29 [1939] 1–4). This metaphor occupies a significant place in John 10:1–16 (esp. in vv 2, 11, 12, 14, 16), a fact that has been used to argue for a close relationship between John and Revelation (Böcher, *NTS* 27 [1981] 312). Yet since the Fourth Gospel uses only the noun ποιμήν of Jesus, and Revelation uses only the verb ποιμαίνειν, the Johannine metaphor is in fact closer to the use of the metaphor in other NT passages such as Heb 13:20, where the exalted Jesus is called 'the great shepherd of the sheep,' and 1 Pet 2:25, where he is called 'the shepherd and overseer of your souls.' In the OT, God as the shepherd of Israel is an ancient metaphor (Gen 49:24 [Jahwist writer]; 48:15 [Elohlist writer]), which continued to be used with some frequency (Pss 23:1, 3; 68:7–10; 80:1; Isa 40:11; 49:10; Jer 50:19). In the NT, God is referred to as a shepherd only in a single parable of Jesus found in Q (Luke 15:4–7 = Matt

they need (ὁδηγήσει αὐτούς ἐπὶ ζωῆς πηγὰς ὑδάτων).⁵⁷

18:12–14), and in the Apostolic Fathers only in Ignatius Rom. 9:1 (this metaphor, however, is based on the fact that Ignatius regards the bishop as the shepherd of the local flock of Christians; see Phld. 2:1; Ps.-Clement Hom. 3.72.1). The conception of Christians as the flock of God who are shepherded by church leaders occurs with some frequency in early Christian literature (Mark 14:27 = Matt 26:31; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2; 1 Clem. 16:1; 44:3; 54:2; 57:2; see Joachim Jeremias, *TDNT* 6:500–502). This metaphor is based on the common application of the shepherd/flock imagery applied to the king and his people. Mic 5:4 (interpreted messianically in Matt 2:6) prophesies the coming of a ruler who will shepherd the people of Israel (see Mic 5:4). The role of David redivivus is described in Ezek 34:23, NRSV (see 37:24), 'I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.' This same metaphor is explicitly used of the Davidic Messiah in Pss. Sol. 17:40, where the flock is carefully described as the Lord's (tr. Charlesworth, *OTP* 2:668): 'Faithfully and righteously shepherding the Lord's flock [ποιμαίνων τὸ ποίμνιον κυρίου] ... He will lead [ἄξει] them in all holiness.' It seems clear, then, that the imagery of Rev 7:17 is based on traditional conceptions associated with the Davidic Messiah.

[David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 477–478.]

⁵⁷"καὶ ὁδηγήσει αὐτούς ἐπὶ ζωῆς πηγὰς ὑδάτων, 'and guide them to the springs of life.' The author, who in v 16 began to allude to Isa 49:10, now continues the allusion (cf. LXX Isa 49:10d, καὶ διὰ πηγῶν ὑδάτων ἄξει αὐτούς, 'he will lead them through springs of water').

"The phrase ζωῆς πηγὰς ὑδάτων, literally 'springs of the waters of life,' is very close to the Hebrew phrase מַבְּבֵי חַיִּים *mabbūa· mayim hayyim*, found in 1QH 8:16 (where it is a metaphor for the elect who will, like the Teacher of Righteousness, be a 'fountain of living water'). The phrase מַבְּבֵי חַיִּים *māqōr mayim hayyim*, 'fountain of living water,' also occurs in 4Q416, 418, frag. 2, line 5 (Eisenman-Wise, *Scrolls*, 245, 250), though the context is not clear. The image of 'living water' also occurs in Rev 21:6; 22:1, 17 and is perhaps the most striking common metaphor that Revelation shares with John (4:14; 6:35; 7:17–18; see Taeger, *Johannesapokalypse*, 29–66). The phrase ὕδωρ ζῶν, literally 'living water,' means 'flowing water,' i.e., a spring or river rather than water standing in a cistern LXX Gen 26:19; Lev 14:5; Jer 2:13; Zech 14:8; Did. 7:1–2; Klauser, "Taufet," 157–64, esp. 157–59; see Ps.-Clement *Diamart.* 1, cited in Rordorf-Tulier, *Doctrine*, 170–71 n. 5). The Hebrew phrase מַבְּבֵי חַיִּים *mayim hayyim*, 'waters of life,' occurs in 1QH 8:7, and in 1QH 8:16 the author says that 'Thou, O my God, have put in my mouth ... a spring of living waters [מַבְּבֵי חַיִּים *mabbūa· mayim hayyim*] which shall not run dry.' The phrase in Rev 21:6 is δῶσω ἐκ τῆς πηγῆς τοῦ ὑδάτος τῆς ζωῆς δωρεάν, 'I will freely give from the well of living water,' while 22:1 has ποταμὸν ὑδάτος ζωῆς, 'river of living water,' and 22:17 has λαβέτω ὕδωρ ζωῆς δωρεάν, 'let him receive as a gift the water of life.' A relatively close parallel is found in LXX Jer 2:13, πηγὴ ὑδάτος ζωῆς, 'spring of living water,' a metaphor for Yahweh (in the Tg. Neb. Jer 2:13, this is changed to a metaphor for goodness). In the early church, ὕδωρ ζῶν, 'living water,' or ὕδωρ τῆς ζωῆς, 'water of life,' is used as a metaphor for prophetic inspiration (Ignatius Rom. 7:2), baptism (Justin Dial. 14.1), Christ (Justin Dial. 69.6), the teaching of Christ (Clement of Alex. *Strom.* 7.16), and the Holy Spirit (Didymus Trin. 2.22; PGL, 1425). The phrase 'spring [of the] water of life' also occurs in the Coptic-Gnostic treatise Ap. John 4.21–24.

Here the image of a spring containing living water is a spiritual reference pointing to spiritual life provided by the slaughtered Lamb who has guided these to this spring. There the multitude enjoys eternal life unendingly.

e) καὶ ἐξαλείψει ὁ θεὸς πᾶν δάκρυον ἐκ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν αὐτῶν, *and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.* The same expression is found also in Rev. 21:4, καὶ ἐξαλείψει πᾶν δάκρυον ἐκ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν αὐτῶν, *he will wipe every tear from their eyes*, as a part of the beautiful traits of life in heaven. Very likely in the background here is Jeremiah 31:16 (=18:16 in LXX):

LXX 38:16. οὕτως εἶπεν κύριος Διαλιπέτω ἡ φωνή σου ἀπὸ κλαυθμοῦ καὶ οἱ ὀφθαλμοί σου ἀπὸ δακρύων σου, ὅτι ἔστιν μισθὸς τοῖς σοῖς ἔργοις, καὶ ἐπιστρέψουσιν ἐκ γῆς ἐχθρῶν,†

MT 31:16. *Thus says the Lord: Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says the Lord: they shall come back from the land of the enemy;*

Even more direct is Isaiah 25:8,⁵⁸

κατέπιεν ὁ θάνατος ἰσχύσας, καὶ πάλιν ἀφεῖλεν ὁ θεὸς πᾶν δάκρυον ἀπὸ παντὸς προσώπου· τὸ ὄνειδος τοῦ λαοῦ ἀφεῖλεν ἀπὸ πάσης τῆς γῆς, τὸ γὰρ στόμα κυρίου ἐλάλησεν.†

he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

Here the focus returns to the heavenly Father with the use of the prophetic message of Isaiah of the joyous return of a remnant to Jerusalem after the Babylonian conquest.⁵⁹ They would celebrate restoration to their

[David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 478–479.]

⁵⁸“On the motif of the eschatological cessation of weeping and mourning, see Isa 35:10; 51:11; 65:19; Matt 5:4 = Luke 6:21 (perhaps alluding to Isa 61:2); cf. Ps 116:8. Matthew uses the descriptive term ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’ to describe the fate of those cast into outer darkness (Matt 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30), a fate for which there is no respite.

“The Epicurean view of the gods was that they lived in perfect peace and tranquility, free from all grief, sorrow, and pain (Lucretius *De rerum nat.* 1.44–49 = 2.646–51; cf. Bailey, *Titi Lucreti* 2:601–4), and served as models for human aspirations. For the Epicurean, death also functioned as the cessation of pain and sorrow (Lucretius *De rerum nat.* 3.905), a common *τοπος* in ancient consolation literature.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 1124.]

⁵⁹“The picture of a Father gently wiping away his children’s tears is but another metaphor Isaiah used for the joyous relief of the coming restoration. Those who had faithfully endured suffering, including death, during the captivity would be comforted by God’s presence and rejoice in the salvation for which they had waited (Isa. 25:8–9; cf. Jer. 31:16 for a similar metaphorical depiction of Israel’s restoration hope). As in 7:15–17a, John sees the OT hope

hometown, just as the saints of God celebrate their home going to heaven.

2. What does the text mean to us today?

Sorting out the meaning and relevance of this passage is one more challenge! Sorting out the progression of themes is foundational.

In the opening of the first four seals clearly the stress is upon the wrath of God both having been poured out upon the earth and continuing to be so with growing intensity until the very end of time when the intensity will reach its highest point. In the fifth seal we were privileged to see a major reason for this wrath: the many followers of God who paid the ultimate price of martyrdom for their faith commitment. They have already entered heaven and are awaiting the moment when God defends His character as an absolutely holy and just God by punishing those who martyred these saints.

The sixth seal provides a glimpse into just what this ‘vengeance of God’ will look like, particularly when it reaches its zenith point in an eschatological future. This seal closes with the question in 6:17, “*the great day of wrath upon them has come, and who is able to stand?*” (ἦλθεν ἡ ἡμέρα ἡ μεγάλη τῆς ὀργῆς αὐτῶν, καὶ τίς δύναται σταθῆναι;)

The two visions in chapter seven seeks to answer that question who can survive God’s wrath.⁶⁰ First the impact of the plagues described in seals one through four and then summarized in seal six are held temporary in abeyance while the 144,000 δούλους τοῦ θεοῦ, *servants of God*, are being marked off on earth so they can endure the outpouring of God’s wrath. Once that ‘sealing’ is completed then the outpouring of the full force of divine wrath will begin, as is described with the seventh seal that introduces the seven trumpets and then the seven bowls of wrath. Now this ‘sealing’ process does not exempt the ‘144,000’ servants of God -- depicted in 14:5 as οὗτοι ἠγοράσθησαν ἀπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀπαρχὴ τῷ θεῷ καὶ τῷ ἀρνίῳ, *these have been redeemed from humanity as first fruits to God and the Lamb* -- from suffering persecution. Instead the ‘sealing’ enables them to endure the time of affliction, even at the end. God’s sealing protects their faith commit-

of Israel’s joyous restoration fulfilled in the salvation of Christian multitudes who have so faithfully suffered for Christ.” [G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 443.]

⁶⁰“The question that concludes Rev 6 provides an introduction to 7:1–17, for it deals with the problem of how the “servants of God” (7:3) will fare during the catastrophes unleashed by the sixth seal.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 479.]

ment from compromise and abandonment. Thus they represent the true ‘remnant’ from the larger group with false claims to commitment to God in the pattern of the Israelite remnant who returned from exile in Babylon.⁶¹ This is the true significance of the image of the ‘twelve tribes of Israel.’

But during this period martyrs continue to pay the supreme price and are entering heaven in large numbers as depicted in 7:9. They are completing the number mentioned in 6:11: ἕως πληρωθῶσιν καὶ οἱ σύνδουλοι αὐτῶν καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοὶ αὐτῶν οἱ μέλλοντες ἀποκτείνεσθαι ὡς καὶ αὐτοί, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed. Once that number is complete, then the full wrath of God will be unleashed upon the earth. This will be described in the seven trumpets and bowls of wrath. This is no small number of folks as 7:9 makes clear: ὄχλος πολὺς, ὃν ἀριθμῆσαι αὐτὸν οὐδεὶς ἐδύνατο, ἐκ παντὸς ἔθνους καὶ φυλῶν καὶ λαῶν καὶ γλωσσῶν, a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.

But once entered into heaven, they are not sitting around idly with their wings and harps. As 7:9-17 make very clear, they participate in the non-stop worship of both God and the Lamb that we were first introduced to in chapters four and five. They have found in their martyrdom release from the sorrows and pains of life on earth. The provisions of God and the Lamb in heaven have brought them into the ultimate experience of divine blessing for all eternity.

Continuously this number in heaven is growing⁶² while the chosen remnant continues to suffer on earth during the sealing period prepared to endure the τῆς θλίψεως τῆς μεγάλης, the great affliction (7:14). Thus while not exactly the same two groups -- one on earth

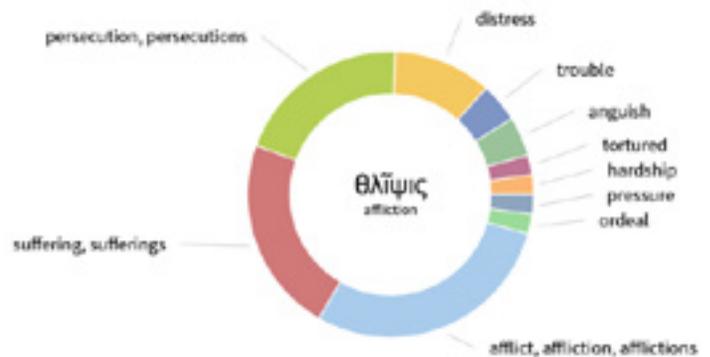
⁶¹The spiritual principle reflected here is that of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount at Mt. 7:21-23 for the eschatological end time:

21 Οὐ πᾶς ὁ λέγων μοι· κύριε κύριε, εἰσελεύσεται εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν, ἀλλ’ ὁ ποιῶν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου τοῦ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς. 22 πολλοὶ ἐροῦσίν μοι ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ· κύριε κύριε, οὐ τῷ σῶ ὀνόματι ἐπροφητεύσαμεν, καὶ τῷ σῶ ὀνόματι δαιμόνια ἐξεβάλομεν, καὶ τῷ σῶ ὀνόματι δυνάμεις πολλὰς ἐποιήσαμεν; 23 καὶ τότε ὁμολογήσω αὐτοῖς ὅτι οὐδέποτε ἔγνων ὑμᾶς· ἀποχωρεῖτε ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ οἱ ἐργαζόμενοι τὴν ἀνομίαν.

21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ 23 Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’

⁶²The present tense forms in 7:14, οὗτοί εἰσιν οἱ ἐρχόμενοι, make the continuous process of entering heaven unquestionably clear.

and the other in heaven -- these two groups are closely linked to one another. The differing sizes of the two groups is largely irrelevant, since the smaller number of 144,000 is not focused on quantity but quality of a select authentic smaller group from a larger group⁶³ containing a majority of false followers of God. And yet this smaller authentic group reflects a large number of people who are authentic in their faith and demonstrate it in their martyrdom.



Relevancy to us today. Are we in the era of τῆς θλίψεως τῆς μεγάλης, great affliction, now? Clearly the answer is both yes and no. With the 45 uses of this term θλίψις inside the NT, and 4 uses of the phrase θλίψις μεγάλη, great affliction, as well,⁶⁴ it is clear that God’s people have been experiencing θλίψις throughout all time. Interestingly Paul will speak of θλίψις in his life more often than another writer in the NT. What John envisions in 7:14 is that this experience of θλίψις for God’s people is continuous and will increase toward the end time.

Plus the answer to this question of being in θλίψις depends largely not on time but geography. For the most part in the western hemisphere, the answer is no. But if we were answering this question today from Syria or northern Nigeria, the answer would likely be a resounding yes!

The larger and more significant application of this passage to us concerns what the multitude experienced once entering heaven in 7:9-17. Particularly exciting is

⁶³See above discussion on the language of ὄχλος πολὺς, ὃν ἀριθμῆσαι αὐτὸν οὐδεὶς ἐδύνατο, ἐκ παντὸς ἔθνους καὶ φυλῶν καὶ λαῶν καὶ γλωσσῶν in 7:9 being commonly used in the Greek speaking ancient world to specify a large number of people. It was never used with the intent of being taken strictly literally.

Failure to recognize this lays behind the useless speculation of some commentators about the number of Christians at the end of the first century either throughout the Roman empire and/or in the province of Asia.

⁶⁴Acts 7:11 (past; θλίψις μεγάλη); Mt. 24:21 (future; θλίψις μεγάλη); Acts 14:22 (past; πολλῶν θλίψεων); 2 Cor. 2:4 (present; πολλῆς θλίψεως); Rev. 2:2 (present; θλίψιν μεγάλην); Rev. 7:14 (τῆς θλίψεως τῆς μεγάλης).

the elder's explanation of the multitude in vv. 14b-17. Their martyrdom has brought them into heaven where not only are they privileged to join the heavenly worship of God and Christ, but they become recipients of the amazing care and concern of both God and the Lamb. For them -- and all who enter heaven -- the sufferings and worries of life on earth are left behind forever. Perfect safety from danger and harm are their lot for all eternity. Now that is a hope that can encourage anyone seeking to follow Christ on this earth and facing difficulties.

Another lesson from the passage comes out of the first vision of the 144,000. For John's first readers it stood as dramatic confirmation of Christ's warnings about the dangers of heresy creeping into the life of the church in chapters two and three. Those who receive God's help and protection on this earth are not the supposed Christians who talk a good talk. Rather it is the believers who faith commitment to Christ is authentic and is demonstrated by consistent doing of God's will, as Jesus said in Mt. 7:21. The picture in 7:1-8 reminds us graphically that authentic Christianity will always be a minority group, never the larger group. But that minority group is who receives the 'seal of God' to enable them to successfully endure the garbage thrown at them for putting God above the 'popular way' and the ways of the world, even in church. It was true of covenant Israel in the OT, and remains true in Christianity from the first century to the end of time.

John is teaching us a lot in Revelation!

