

18th Annual Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics

Southern California Seminary

September 17 & 18, 2025

What is the Meaning of ‘All Nations, Tribes, Peoples, and Tongues’ in Revelation 7:9?

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Introduction

When Christ removes His church from the earth by means of the pretribulational rapture, its active witness will be finished. It will certainly leave behind a wealth of print, audio, video and online resources, but there will be no one alive with the understanding or skill to guide unbelievers specifically into the knowledge of salvation. Yet God, in His grace, will still provide amazing opportunities for many, many people to respond to the gospel—even in that time of tribulation, and in the midst of extreme circumstances—through the ministries of some incredibly special witnesses.

At first—perhaps soon after the rapture—there will be just two of them. The ministry of these “two witnesses” (Rev. 11:3) is described by John in Rev. 11:3-12. Probably the most common understanding among dispensationalists is that the two witnesses will be Moses and Elijah (cf. Mal. 4:4-6; Matt. 17:1-13)—resuscitated from death to succeed where they once failed, and to undertake the glorious second aspect of their earthly ministries (cf. John 11:43-44).¹ Thus, they will appear *supernaturally*.

In Revelation 7, the Apostle John introduces the readers of Revelation to 144,000 additional Israelite witnesses. Their story is told in Rev. 7:2-8, as well as Rev. 14:1-5. These will be young Jewish men who will have grown up in the normal fashion—but missed the rapture as unbelievers. Thus, they will appear *naturally*, in their non-glorified human bodies, and will ultimately become the “firstfruits” of the saved and restored nation of Israel (Rev. 14:4; cf. Isa. 4:3; Zech. 13:8-9; Rom. 11:26).

¹ Alva J. McClain, writing about the two witnesses, stated: “The effect of their testimony is very impressive, appearing very early in the Book of Revelation and probably accounting for the martyrs seen under the fifth seal (6:9). In chapter 7 the effect greatly expands, including 144,000 Israelites (vss. 3-8), and also ‘a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations’ (vss. 9-14).” *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1974), 458.

By implication from the text, the assertion in this paper is that the two witnesses will identify, evangelize, train and commission these 144,000 witnesses—12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel.² Furthermore, it is this writer's understanding that these events will transpire during the first half of the tribulation.

By further implication, it appears from Rev. 7:9-17 that John is forming a logical connection between the worldwide outreach of these 144,000 witnesses and, presumably, their evangelization of a global congregation that responds to the proclamation of the "gospel of the kingdom" (Matt. 24:14).³

As Pentecost stated:

... 144,000 set apart from the tribes of Israel ... evidently will be brought to faith in Messiah the same way Saul of Tarsus was brought to faith in Christ on the Damascus road. They will be given a revelation of the person of Christ and they, like Saul, will be set apart to be God's messengers to the Gentiles. The result of their ministry will be that "a great multitude that no one could count, from

² This list of 12 tribes is unique among the many listings of the tribes found throughout the Old and New Testaments (this also being the final one in the canon). Including Joseph and his sons Manasseh and Ephraim, there are a total of 14 tribal names from which to select to comprise a list of 12. Notable for its exclusion here is the tribe of Dan. On the basis of Jacob's prophecy in Gen. 49:16-17, some have conjectured that the tribe of Dan will produce the antichrist. This reasoning is questionable, however, because Dan is indeed included in the list of tribes that will inherit land in the millennial kingdom (see Ezek. 48:1, 2, 32).

³ Tim LaHaye (whose view will be discussed further later in this paper) is perhaps the most famous advocate of the scenario presented here. He wrote: "These witnesses will harvest a multitude which no man can number according to Revelation 7:9. This would indicate ... that the early days of the Tribulation will experience the greatest revival in world history." Tim LaHaye, *Revelation—Illustrated and Made Plain*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 196. David Larsen was thinking in the same vein when he wrote: "Revelation 11 describes how the 144,000 are converted, and with their conversion a great multitude of Gentiles comes to Christ during the Tribulation. The Tribulation period is a time of salvation, as every period must be, because of our great God's gracious and loving plan of salvation. He wants people to be saved!" David L. Larsen, *Jews, Gentiles, and the Church: A New Perspective on History and Prophecy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 1995), 294. Andy Woods agrees, saying: "In the first part of the chapter people are numbered, 144,000, 12,000 from each tribe. The group in the second part of the chapter they're innumerable, you can't number them. The group in the first part of the chapter are Hebrews; the group in the second part of the chapter come from all the nations. The group in the first part of the chapter are sealed by God; this second group though, as we'll see today, is slain and many of them suffer martyrdom. The first group is sealed before the tribulation period or at least towards the beginning of it. The second group, as I'll show you, is converted out of the coming tribulation period. You sort of get the idea here of cause and effect. The cause is the first part of the chapter, the effect is in the second part of the chapter which explains to a large extent why these evangelists are Jews, Hebrews, coming from the twelve tribes. They are fulfilling, in essence, God's purpose for the nation of Israel." Andy Woods; "So Great a Salvation (Revelation 7:9-17)"; SpiritandTruth.org; 13 January 2019; https://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Revelation_by_Andy_Woods/026_Revelation_7_9-17/20190113_026_revelation_7_9-17_transcript.html?x=x; Internet; accessed 31 August 2025. The highly respected commentator Robert Thomas took a different view, writing regarding the words, "After these things I looked," at the beginning of Rev. 7:9. He stated: "It is not a connective phrase advancing what John has just seen by way of a causal connection, i.e., the fruit of the ministry of the 144,000 being the Gentile multitude of the second vision. Conditions depicted in the two visions appear to be simultaneous rather than consecutive." See Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1992), 483.

every nation, tribe, people and language” (v. 9) will “[wash] their robes and [make] them white in the blood of the Lamb” (v. 14).⁴

As Ice states: “I believe Scripture indicates that millions of people will be saved during the Tribulation. We see, in Revelation 7:9, a report of what are the apparent results of the evangelistic efforts of the 144,000 Jewish witnesses.”⁵

Fruchtenbaum concurs, stating:

The expression “after these things” means that the salvation of these myriads of Gentiles follows chronologically the 144,000 Jews, and there is a cause and effect relationship. After describing the worship of the One on the throne (vv. 11-12), the text proceeds to identify who these Gentiles are that are found around the throne (vv. 13-14). They have come out of the great tribulation. ... Since they follow chronologically the ministry of the 144,000 Jews, the implication is that they are the Gentiles who come to Messiah as a result of the preaching of these people.⁶

It is important, from this writer’s perspective, to place these events during the first three-and-a-half years of the tribulation—before the critical events at the midpoint that are described at such great length in Revelation 12 and 13, when the Antichrist rises to assume worldwide control.⁷ Hindson reinforced the point that the multitude is certainly not saved before the tribulation, when he stated: “The fact that one of the elders (representing the Church) asks who they are (7:13) implies they are not Church Age saints.”⁸

Levy writes:

... it is possible that the *sheep people* (saved Gentiles), who come to the Lord during the Tribulation, will do so through the witness of Jewish people (the 144,000) who are scattered worldwide because of persecution by the Antichrist. These saved Gentiles will have housed,

⁴ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1995), 252. Pentecost also reinforced the basic prophetic arrangement presented in this paper in *Things to Come*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 237-238.

⁵ Thomas Ice; “Salvation in the Tribulation: Revisited,” Rapture Ready; 9 July 2010; modified 1 March 2017; <https://www.raptureready.com/2010/07/09/salvation-in-the-tribulation-revisited-by-thomas-ice/>; Internet; accessed 31 August 2025.

⁶ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events*, rev. 6th ed. (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2023), 228.

⁷ Whitcomb stated: “... the basically regenerated nation, called ‘the woman’ in Rev. 12, will flee into the wilderness and be nourished by God for 1,260 days (Rev. 12:6, 14; cf. Isaiah 26:20-21), namely, the last half of the week. ‘The dragon,’ Satan, will then ‘make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ’ (12:17), presumably the 144,000 witnesses from the 12 tribes of Israel and multitudes of their Gentile converts.” John Whitcomb, “The Two Witnesses: First of Second Half of the Tribulation?”; Pre-Trib Research Center; n.d.; <https://pre-trib.org/pretribfiles/pdfs/Whitcomb-TheTwoWitnessesFirstOrSecondHalfOfTheTribulation.pdf>; Internet; accessed 31 August 2025.

⁸ Edward Hindson, *The Book of Revelation: Unlocking the Future*, in Mal Couch and Ed Hindson, gen. eds., *Twenty-First Century Biblical Commentary Series*, Vol. 12 (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2002), 91. This, of course, presumes that the elders represent church-age saints in Rev. 4:4, 10; 5:5, 6, 8, 11, 14; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3; and 19:4.

clothed, fed, visited in prison, and provided medical care to the Lord's brethren (Jews) during the Tribulation (Mt. 25:31, 35–40) and will have heard of their salvation.⁹

This “great multitude,” then, is comprised of people from “all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues” (Rev. 7:9). Here is the key phrase which this paper will examine. It is actually found, in various forms, seven times throughout the book—in a slightly different format in each occurrence.

The thing that makes this collection of people so unique and intriguing is that John tells us, in fact, that this is a group “which no one could number.” Based on the text in Rev. 9:16, this must certainly be more than “two hundred million” in number—perhaps well beyond a billion people. Fruchtenbaum therefore pronounces this “a worldwide revival.”¹⁰

Assuming that the inferences presented above are valid, this whole scenario raises a number of questions which we must consider, such as:

- What is the significance of the four descriptive words in this phrase?
- Why does this phrase appear differently in each usage in Revelation?
- Is this a description of Gentiles, or of the tribes of Israel?
- How does this phrase relate to John's concept of *earth-dwellers*?
- How does this phrase relate to Jesus' words in the Olivet Discourse?
- How does this phrase relate to Daniel's vision of “all peoples, nations, and languages” (Dan. 7:14) in the future kingdom of Christ?

This paper will strive to answer these questions in such a way as to uncover the significance of this oft-neglected and sometimes abused text, Rev. 7:9.

What Is the Significance of the Four Descriptive Words in This Phrase?

As we consider Rev. 7:9, as well as the other texts where John utilizes a similar descriptive phrase, we wonder why he selected these four words—even as he employed them somewhat differently in each case. Are there any clues in any of these uses, or any of their contexts, that shed light on the particular meaning or significance of this combination of words?

The terms themselves are somewhat straightforward. *Nations*, Biblically, trace back to the so-called *Table of Nations* in Genesis 10, which forms a point of reference to be used throughout Scripture, into the prophetic future, regarding the identity of nations from God's perspective. *Tribes* would appear to be defined broadly by its first usage in the book of Revelation, in Rev. 1:7, where it refers to “all the tribes of the earth,” and John uses it in both Jewish and universal contexts. *Peoples* seems to be self-explanatory, as the various people groups that trace their origins back, ultimately, to the

⁹ David M. Levy, *Revelation: Hearing the Last Word* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1999), 101.

¹⁰ Fruchtenbaum, 228.

scattering from the Tower of Babel in Gen. 11:1-9.¹¹ *Tongues*, like people groups, are traced to Babel (Gen. 11:7-9)—and will continue to exist until the day when the Lord “will restore to the peoples a pure language” (Zeph. 3:9).

Lenski stated eloquently regarding Rev. 7:9:

This multitude is gathered from over all the world ... no matter what sort of division is applied, that of nations bound by their customs and laws, that of tribes bound by blood ties, that of peoples as organized masses, that of tongues as the tie of language.¹²

Kistemaker offers the following comment related to the four basic terms, as found in Rev. 5:9, where the phrase first appears:

The word *tribe* conveys the meaning of physical ties and descent, while the term *language* has a much broader connotation and points to linguistic communication. The word that I have translated as *people* relates to an ethnic group of common descent; and the expression *nation* refers to a political entity with distinct geographic boundaries. But because of the frequent appearance of these four categories in Revelation, it is better to interpret them as an all-encompassing idiom.¹³

Smith’s commentary on Rev. 7:9 is also insightful. He stated:

The four groups mentioned constitute the world population. Four is the world number. The word *kindred* is the word usually translated *tribe*; hence when these groups are mentioned, Jews are not excluded, for they are frequently referred to under tribe.¹⁴

Thus, the words in and of themselves are not unusual, or technical, and do not convey any deep significance. Strung together, they form the outline of a worldwide populace that may be swayed toward either good or evil purposes. In the text at hand, however, the descriptor is especially meant to convey the magnitude of this enormous group of people—“a great multitude which no one could number” (Rev. 7:9).

Why Does This Phrase Appear Differently in Each Usage in Revelation?

Variations of the phrase found in Rev. 7:9 appear seven times in the book of Revelation. The first—a truly positive reference—describes church age saints in heaven and is found in 5:9. It designates them as being from “every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” This surely informs us regarding the nature of the church today, since it will have this appearance in retrospect—even following the glorification of all believers (cf. 1 John 3:2), when they are seen in heaven.

¹¹ The writer intentionally refrains from using the term *race*, which is not a Biblical concept (cf. Acts 17:26).

¹² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation* (Columbus, OH: The Wartburg Press, 1943), 255.

¹³ Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 211. Kistemaker notes in his footnote: “Apparently, John uses the phraseology of Daniel 3:4 (Old Greek and Theod.), ‘nations and lands, languages and tribes.’”

¹⁴ J.B. Smith, *A Commentary on the Book of Revelation: A Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1961), 134.

The next reference, our main passage in this paper, is also positive, speaking of the evangelism of tribulation saints, which will be accomplished by the 144,000 witnesses (Rev. 7:2-8), under the direction of the two witnesses. Rev. 7:9 states that these believers come from “all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues.”

The third reference occurs in Rev. 10:11. It is neutral—simply outlining those regarding whom John would yet “prophesy” as including “many peoples, nations, tongues, and kings” (note the change in the last term).

The fourth citation is entirely negative—referencing those *earth-dwellers* who “rejoice over” (11:10) the death and desecration of the bodies of the two witnesses. These come “from the peoples, tribes, tongues, and nations” (11:9). Green called them, “People of every ethnicity....”¹⁵ Ironside wrote, “We see the whole apostate world – Christendom and Judaism alike – congratulating one another....”¹⁶

Rev. 13:7 offers another negative reference, related to those who are under the “authority” of the antichrist. They are, again, from “every tribe, tongue and nation.” Note that there is a textual variant here. The ESV reflects the critical Greek text—and the Majority text—when it states: “every tribe and people and language and nation.”¹⁷

Pentecost writes about this passage:

... Antichrist will be given political power over all the earth (v. 7). By establishing a one-world government, he will imitate the worldwide authority that will belong to Jesus Christ in His kingdom.... Further, he will introduce a one-world religion ... which will be an imitation of that authority which Jesus Christ will exercise as King-Priest when He reigns.¹⁸

An angelic gospel presentation is the basis for the sixth usage in Rev. 14:6, which uses the phrase “every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” to speak of the universal nature of this proclamation.

Finally, in 17:15, John once again changes one of these terms when he writes about those under the grip of the Babylonian system, calling them “peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues.” He replaces “tribe” with “multitude” in this reference. LaHaye said of this passage, “This can only mean a one-world religious system.”¹⁹

Comparing the references in color-coded chart form, they display as follows:

¹⁵ Daniel Green, “Revelation,” in Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham, gen. eds., *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 2014.

¹⁶ H. A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Revelation* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1920), 194.

¹⁷ See the textual footnote in the NKJV.

¹⁸ *Thy Kingdom Come*, 303.

¹⁹ *Revelation—Illustrated and Made Plain*, 234.

5:9	tribe	tongue	people	nation
7:9 ²⁰	nations	tribes	peoples	tongues
10:11	peoples	nations	tongues	kings
11:9	peoples	tribes	tongues	nations
13:7	tribe	people ²¹	tongue	nation
14:6	nation	tribe	tongue	people
17:15	peoples	multitudes	nations	tongues

Here are some observations about this chart:

- 1) No two of the word lists are identical. John never uses the same word order twice in presenting these categories. Smith provided a rationale for these differences in his commentary on Rev. 11:9, first saying the list “denote[s] the sum total of humanity dwelling upon the earth,” then stating: “... they never appear in the same order, signifying apparently the confusion and disorder prevailing in the world system at this time.”²²
- 2) Thus, it appears that John uses this formula as a way of describing the entirety of the population of the world, yet assigns no technical meaning—especially to the order of the terms, and apparently not to the terms themselves. The power of the phrase lies in the arrangement of the words as they are united together—yielding a linguistic force that is greater than the sum of its parts.
- 3) The main combination of the four basic words, found first in Rev. 5:9, is used in five of the seven references—three times in the singular and twice in the plural.²³
- 4) Overall, as John alternates between the use of singular and plural, he favors the plural in four of the seven cases.²⁴
- 5) The Greek root words behind the corresponding terms John uses are consistent in all seven passages.
- 6) The words *tongue*, *people* and *nation* (in either singular or plural) are used in all seven lists.
- 7) John inserts two additional terms, in addition to the main four—*kings* in Rev. 10:11 and *multitudes* in Rev. 17:15.

²⁰ In Greek, “nations” is singular in this verse, while the other three terms are plural. Fanning notes: “The Greek wording for this phrase shifts from an initial singular (‘every nation’) to a series of plurals (‘and tribes and peoples and tongues’) but the universal sense of the ‘every’ carries over to all of the nouns by agreement according to sense....” Buist M. Fanning, *Revelation*, in Clinton E. Arnold, gen. ed., *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 267.

²¹ “People” is taken from the ESV. See the textual footnote in the NKJV.

²² Smith, 173.

²³ See footnote no. 19 regarding “nations” in Rev. 7:9.

²⁴ See footnote no. 19 regarding “nations” in Rev. 7:9.

- 8) The first two listings are related to saved groups of people. In Rev. 5:9, they cover church-age saints, speaking of their past experience on this earth. In Rev. 7:9, they speak of those who will be saved in the future during the tribulation.
- 9) Of the remaining references, Rev. 10:11 and 14:6 are neutral—at least as far as the current spiritual condition of the population so described is concerned—while 11:9, 13:7 and 17:15 each describe a worldwide coalition of the wicked.
- 10) Thus, we must conclude that these terms can be applied to both believers and unbelievers—as well as to those unbelievers who are still in need of the gospel, and will indeed hear it proclaimed.

Is This a Description of Gentiles, or of the Tribes of Israel?

The use of the term “tribe” in this listing has prompted some to posit that this listing describes the Jewish people specifically, rather than the entire world at large.²⁵ Other than this word, however, which certainly can be used in a Jewish context (see Rev. 7:5-8, where a form of this word is used 13 times), there seems to be little evidence to take these as being descriptions solely of the nation of Israel.

First, we must recognize that—in spite of differences in the order of the terms—these words, taken together, do appear to have a technical significance related to the whole population of some particular entity, be that Israel or the entire world.

If that entity is Israel, would this imply that the entire group of church age saints are Jewish (cf. Rev. 5:9)? Also, what would be the distinctions of “tongues” and “peoples” if these terms relate exclusively to the people of Israel?

Another challenge to the theory that these terms describe Israel is found in Rev. 7:9. John says that this group comprises “a great multitude which no one could number.” Comparing this text to Rev. 9:16, we know that this must be more than “two hundred million” people (cf. Dan. 7:10). Practically speaking, this has surely never been an accurate description of the nation of Israel. From a futurist perspective, this is not a definitive argument, as no one can state with certainty what the population of Israel will be during the future time of tribulation. It appears unlikely, however, that they would attain such vast numbers. And, if that were a requirement for the fulfillment of this prophecy, this would seem to call the doctrine of imminence into question, as well.

Juxtaposed against the 12 Israelite tribes in Rev. 7:1-8, it would also seem highly unlikely that the *tribes* mentioned beginning in verse 9 would continue the discussion about the *tribes* of Israel. Rather, there is a contrast strongly implied here between Israel and the *nations*. Fruchtenbaum said that “... John sees a multitude of Gentiles

²⁵ Johnson ties the 144,000 to the great multitude, stating: “The identification of this second group is related to the identification of the first one (vv. 1-8). ... Thus, what some have seen as contrasts may actually be designed to complement each other and show the continuity of the first group with the second.” Alan F. Johnson, “Revelation,” in Frank E. Gaebelin, gen. ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 484.

from every nationality....”²⁶ MacArthur wrote that they are simply, “All the earth’s people groups,”²⁷ and stated, “Those four terms ... encompass all of humanity.”²⁸

Leading off a string of documentation from dispensational commentators, we read the words of Robert Thomas:

The best solution is to identify this vast crowd as Gentile and Jewish believers who have died either natural or violent deaths during the period of the first six seals and come out from the Great Tribulation. The universality of terminology agrees with this....²⁹

Walvoord stated:

The second half of chapter 7 of Revelation demonstrates that not only will many be saved in Israel but also many Gentiles will come to Christ in the great tribulation. ... In contrast to those coming from the twelve tribes as pictured earlier in the chapter, this throng comes from all nations.³⁰

Wiersbe dealt with this issue succinctly, stating:

There is no doubt as to who this multitude is, because one of the elders explained it to John (Rev. 7:14): they are Gentiles who have been saved through faith in Christ during the Tribulation. ... John himself did not know who they were! If they had been Old Testament believers, or the church, John would have recognized them. That the elder had to tell John who they were suggests that they are a special people, which, indeed, they are.³¹

Levy writes:

Who is this multitude of people? They are not the 144,000 mentioned earlier. The first group is exclusively Jewish, whereas this new multitude is a mixture of Gentile and Jewish believers. This group is a vast multitude of people who became believers during the Tribulation, many of whom died violent deaths.³²

Hindson stated:

The innumerable multitude is not just Jews from the twelve tribes of Israel. They are a host of people from every nation (Gentiles and Jews) and are so great in number they cannot humanly be counted.

²⁶ Fruchtenbaum, 228.

²⁷ John MacArthur, gen. ed., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, 2nd Edition, ESV (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2021), 1,841, note on Rev. 7:9.

²⁸ John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Revelation 1-11* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 172.

²⁹ Thomas, 485.

³⁰ John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 144. In another reference, he refers to this group as “the saints in general, both Jews and Gentiles, who will suffer martyrdom (7:9-17).” See John F. Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), 535.

³¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, Vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1989), 590-591.

³² Levy, 100.

... The partitive *ek* (“from”) means only some from every one of these groups [“nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues”] will be represented.³³

Ironside definitely agrees that these *tribes* are composed of Gentiles, but saw them—not in heaven—but specifically in “the millennial temple.”³⁴ He stated:

This great multitude embraces the Gentile nations who will enter into millennial blessing. It is the great ingathering of the coming dispensation, when ... a vast throng from all parts of the earth will be redeemed to God by the blood of the Lamb, and will enter into the earthly kingdom of our Lord. During the dark days of the great tribulation they will heed the testimony which will be carried to the ends of the earth by Jewish missionaries....³⁵

Pentecost agreed, stating:

It is also God’s purpose to populate the millennium with a multitude of saved Gentiles, who are redeemed through the preaching of the believing remnant. This is accomplished in the multitude from “all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues” (Rev. 7:9) and in the “sheep” (Matt. 25:31-46) that enter the millennial age.³⁶

He also calls this group “saved Gentiles”³⁷ in another reference. Whether they are seen here in heaven—the view of the writer of this paper—or in the millennial kingdom makes little difference as to the identity and magnitude of the group being referenced.

De Haan stated,

... the great masses in the world who have never heard the Gospel of God’s grace will hear the message in the Tribulation from the lips of these 144,000 Israelites, and as a result a great number will be saved, most of whom will be martyred....³⁸

He goes on to make his point unmistakably clear: “a great multitude of Gentiles are saved.”³⁹

³³ Hindson, 91.

³⁴ Ironside, 129.

³⁵ Ibid., 128-129. Ironside’s view that these Gentile tribulation saints, converted under the ministry of the 144,000 Jewish evangelists, will apparently survive physically to go into the millennium does not affect the overarching purpose of this paper, although the writer does not share it. If anything, it would disrupt the writer’s view of the flow and purpose of events in the tribulation. It should be noted that some dispensational expositors also extend the ministry of the 144,000 witnesses into the earthly millennial kingdom. The writer of this paper also rejects that view. Walvoord deals with this view, and presents the view of this paper’s author—that this group actually appears in heaven, following their death as martyrs. See *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 145-146.

³⁶ *Things to Come*, 238.

³⁷ Ibid., 298.

³⁸ M. R. De Haan, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1946), 135.

³⁹ Ibid., 136.

Kroll adds, likewise: “An election out of Israel [the 144,000] will be redeemed with an innumerable multitude of Gentiles.”⁴⁰ Ryrie stated, “This group is composed of many nationalities.”⁴¹

Price sums it up well: “... the 144,000 Jewish witnesses ... ministry is to both Jews and Gentiles worldwide (7:1-17)....”⁴²

Thus, it appears to most mainstream dispensational commentators that this is indeed a description of a worldwide evangelistic effort, during the future tribulation, that leads to the salvation of an innumerable assembly of people, at least most of which must be Gentiles.

How Does This Phrase Relate to John’s Concept of *Earth-Dwellers*?

Another one of the most fascinating and highly descriptive phrases in the book of Revelation is found first in Rev. 3:10—“those who dwell on the earth.”

It is interesting that this description ties to the main phrase under consideration in this paper in three of its seven contexts (see Rev. 11:9-10; 13:7-8; and 14:6).

MacArthur called this “a phrase used as a technical term in the book of Revelation for unbelievers....”⁴³ Feinberg pointed out that “Gk is not merely *oikeō*, to dwell, but *katoikeō*, to settle down, which is contrary to the pilgrim nature of the church, cf. Phil. 3:18-20; I Pet. 2:11.”⁴⁴

Thomas commented persuasively about the people referred to here, stating: “This is a company of people constantly in view throughout the Apocalypse as objects of God’s wrath because of their rebellion against Him.”⁴⁵

He went on, in a footnote, to explain:

... in Revelation it includes all peoples. The phrase is used ten other times in Revelation and always in a bad sense. These are men given up to evil and hatred of God’s saints (cf. 6:10; 8:13; 11:10 [twice]; 13:8, 12, 14 [twice]; 17:2, 8....)⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Woodrow M. Kroll, *Jesus Shall Reign* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador Publications, 1998), 23.

⁴¹ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 52.

⁴² Randall Price, *Jerusalem in Prophecy: God’s Stage for the Final Drama*, rev. and expanded (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 2020), 137-138. Elliott Johnson also takes this group to be Gentiles. See *A Dispensational Biblical Theology* (Allen, TX: Bold Grace Academic, 2016), 486.

⁴³ *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Revelation 1-11*, 124.

⁴⁴ Charles L. Feinberg, “Revelation,” in Jerry Falwell, exec. ed., *Liberty Bible Commentary: New Testament* (Lynchburg, VA: The Old-Time Gospel Hour, 1982), 800.

⁴⁵ Thomas, 289.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* Kistemaker, in a footnote, adds to this list, stating “compare also 13:12; 14:6; 17:2,” 163.

Price describes *earth-dwellers* as “a term used of the unbelieving Gentile nations that resist the witness of the 144,000.”⁴⁷ Morris says “it seems always to refer to unregenerate mankind as a whole.”⁴⁸

Ironside, I believe, captured the essence of the meaning of this technical phrase very well when he wrote:

It does not simply mean those who live in the world, but a careful reading of the various passages in which this peculiar term is found, will make it manifest that “the earth-dwellers” are in contrast to those whose citizenship is in heaven. They are persons who, while professing to be Christians, refuse the heavenly calling, and prove by their earthly-mindedness and worldly ways, that they really belong to this world. All their hopes are here, and their treasures likewise, and the Lord has said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” The coming Great Tribulation will be, for them, a time of fearful trial.⁴⁹

Johnson said “the phrase ... refers not to believers but to unbelievers who are the objects of God’s wrath—i.e., the ‘beast-worshippers’....”⁵⁰ Levy, likewise, notes, “The phrase ... refers, not to the church, but to unbelievers who will be settled into the world’s system during the Tribulation.”⁵¹

Pentecost, fittingly, defined the members of this group as “those that have settled down to permanent occupancy,” and clarified, “it can have no reference to the church.”⁵² Showers sums it up by stating: “... they will be unsaved people of the future period of testing who will never get saved.”⁵³

On the basis of the textual evidence, one would have to say that the term *earth-dweller* can be used to describe the worldwide populace that is categorized by the main phrase under consideration in this paper—especially as it is used in Rev. 11:9-10; 13:7-8; and 14:6. Certainly, however, these two descriptive phrases are not identical, as the worldwide congregations found in Rev. 5:9 and 7:9 could not rightfully be described as *earth-dwellers*.

How Does This Phrase Relate to Jesus’ Words in the Olivet Discourse?

Jesus’ own prophetic description of the worldwide gospel ministry that will take place during the tribulation, given in the Olivet Discourse, is truly astounding when one considers the magnitude of the outreach that He predicted.

⁴⁷ Price, 138.

⁴⁸ Leon Morris, *Revelation, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 106.

⁴⁹ Ironside, 72.

⁵⁰ Johnson, 454.

⁵¹ Levy, 56.

⁵² *Things to Come*, 197.

⁵³ Renald Showers, *Maranatha—Our Lord, Come!* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1995), 216.

Matt. 24:14 speaks of “all the world” and “all the nations” as the target of gospel proclamation and “witness,” respectively. Showers was referring to this verse when he stated: “... it must refer to the entire inhabited earth, not just the Roman Empire.”⁵⁴

Hindson, also writing on Matt. 24:14, notes: “The gospel shall be preached in all the world (Gr *oikoumenē*), i.e., the inhabited world and unto all nations (Gr *ethnos*), ‘gentile nations,’ as contrasted with the Jews.”⁵⁵

MacArthur stated: “... the message ultimately penetrates every part of the globe. God is never without a witness, and he will proclaim the gospel from heaven itself if necessary (cf. Rev. 14:6).”⁵⁶

Jesus went on to talk about “all the tribes of the earth” in Matt. 24:30, and “the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” in Matt. 24:31.

Regarding Matt. 24:31, Showers stated, “... the elect will be gathered from all over the world at Christ’s coming with His angels.”⁵⁷

Woods states, “Only after this regathering does Matthew then portray the inauguration of Christ’s reign on David’s throne (Matt. 25:31).”⁵⁸

D.A. Carson writes regarding Matt. 24:31:

The “four winds” represent the four points of the compass (Ezek. 37:9; Dan. 8:8; 11:4): the elect are gathered from all over (cf. [Matt.] 8:11), “from one end of the heavens to the other” (from every place under the sky), since that is how far the gospel of the kingdom will have been preached (v. 14).⁵⁹

Clearly, the phrase under consideration in Rev. 7:9 must be taken in the context of Jesus’ earlier statements—and Matthew’s inspired recording of them. This background makes it all the more clear that John was indeed describing a worldwide revival during the days of the tribulation.

How Does This Phrase Relate to Daniel’s Vision of “all peoples, nations, and languages” (Dan. 7:14) in the Future Kingdom of Christ?

⁵⁴ Showers, 214.

⁵⁵ Edward E. Hindson, “Matthew,” in Jerry Falwell, exec. ed., *Liberty Bible Commentary: New Testament* (Lynchburg, VA: The Old-Time Gospel Hour, 1982), 81. While Hindson’s comment is helpful, it must be noted, in fairness, that—surprisingly—he also stated in the same note “that the ‘gospel of the kingdom’ refers to the missionary expansion of the church into all the world,” and “Then shall the end come would then refer to the end of the church age” (Ibid.).

⁵⁶ *The MacArthur Study Bible*, 1,307, note on Matt. 24:14.

⁵⁷ Showers, 182.

⁵⁸ Andrew M. Woods, *The Coming Kingdom* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2016), 243.

⁵⁹ D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” in Frank E. Gaebelein, gen. ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 506.

There is a counterpart to the phrase that John penned these seven times—which long predates his use of it. Indeed, John may have drawn on none other than the prophet Daniel in formulating his phrase.

Leon Morris writes the following in commenting on our main text, Rev. 7:9:

The universal scope of redemption is brought out by piling up expressions to show that the redeemed come from no restricted group but from all over the world. ... The expression resembles the 'peoples, nations and men of every language' (Dn. 3:4, 7, 29 *etc.*), and indeed some think that John is quoting Daniel. ...for the most part Daniel has three members whereas John has four. John is probably using an expression of his own, though one suggested by the language of Scripture.⁶⁰

Thomas wrote: "The origin of the expression is the prophecy of Daniel (cf. Dan. 3:4, 7, 29; 5:19; 6:25; 7:14)...."⁶¹

Kistemaker stated: "John alludes to the Book of Daniel, where a threefold phrase (people, nations, languages) occurs six times."⁶² He points in the footnote to Dan. 3:4, 7; 4:1; 5:19; 6:25; and 7:14.

Walvoord also includes Dan. 7:23 in his comment on Rev. 13:7-8.⁶³ This verse is more definitive, perhaps, than the others, but does not follow the same basic pattern as they do—that of "peoples, nations, and languages" (Dan. 3:4).

It is interesting that Daniel, like John, favors such a phrase, and also uses it in a variety of contexts (compare, for instance, Dan. 3:4 with 6:25). Daniel's phrase serves to provide background for John's phrase, both in terms of its construction, and by means of the sense it provides, and John apparently assumed and built upon this meaning by employing his own sevenfold phrase.

Conclusion

John's description of the "great multitude" in Rev. 7:9, composed of people "of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues," is a testimony to the incredible richness of God's grace—yet to be displayed in the future, but described for us now, to motivate us in the present. The writer of this work calls it "the great untold story of Bible prophecy."

This paper has attempted to unfold the unique place that this innumerable group occupies in the history of God's redeemed people—with regard to the timing of their redemption, the significance of their ministry and, especially, the universal nature of their influence.

⁶⁰ Morris, 97.

⁶¹ Thomas, 401.

⁶² Kistemaker, 317.

⁶³ John F. Walvoord, "Revelation," in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 961.

It appears to this writer that this understanding flows directly from the text of Scripture, and this has been obvious to many dispensational Bible teachers—numbers of which have been quoted here.

This discussion would be lacking, however, without a concluding reference to one of the leading teachers of Biblical prophecy during the 20th and 21st centuries, and the unique perspective he had concerning this text.

World-renowned prophecy teacher and author Tim LaHaye offered a very provocative commentary regarding this incredible seventh chapter of Revelation, when he stated:

The greatest revival the world has ever known will not occur during the church age but immediately following, during the first 21 months of the Tribulation. According to Revelation 7, while the Antichrist is busy orchestrating his political advances, the Holy Spirit, working through a group referred to as the 144,000, will move in the hearts of millions of people. He will lead them into a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, resulting in the largest soul harvest in earth's history.⁶⁴

He went on to write:

The total number of people who come to the Lord during the first part of the Tribulation could possibly exceed the number of those who have converted to Christ during the last 2000 years. Several factors could make this possible, including the size of the world's population, the chaotic conditions during the Tribulation, and the powerful work of the Holy Spirit through the tireless evangelism of the 144,000 witnesses.⁶⁵

Of course, such figuring involves a measure of speculation, and makes much sense especially at this late hour in history due to the vast increase in global population.

Interestingly, however, LaHaye did not adopt this view only in recent years, or after co-authoring the wildly successful *Left Behind* series. He actually presented the concept roughly 30 years before the previous reference, in his commentary on Revelation. There he stated:

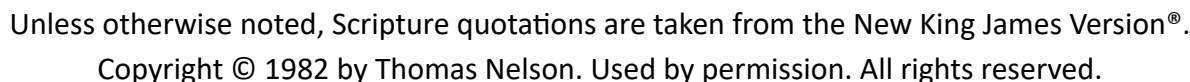
... during the first part of tribulation the greatest soul harvest in all history will take place. In fact, it is this writer's belief that more people will accept Christ during the early months of the tribulation, before the Antichrist really has a chance to consolidate his one-world government and set up his one-world religion of self-worship (Rev. 13:5-7), than have been converted in the entire 1900+ years of the church age.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Tim LaHaye, "One Hundred Forty-Four Thousand," in Tim LaHaye and Ed Hindson, gen. eds., *The Popular Encyclopedia of Bible Prophecy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2004), 256.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 257.

⁶⁶ *Revelation—Illustrated and Made Plain*, 114.

As readers of John's "Revelation of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 1:1), we must be truly astounded at this "great untold story of Bible prophecy," and ought to thus be motivated toward becoming involved in global evangelism—with an ever-growing passion—in these closing days of the church age.



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⁶⁷ Credit goes to Dr. Cory Marsh for the opportunity to study LaHaye's Bible and take pictures of it, and to use this photo here. Marsh received this Bible as a gift from the LaHaye family upon the passing of Tim LaHaye.