

Revelation 7

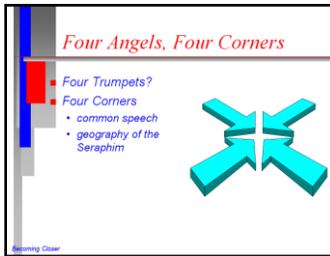
The Pause Before the Trumpets

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Four: angels, corners, winds

(Rev 7:1-3 NIV) After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. (2) Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: (3) "Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God."

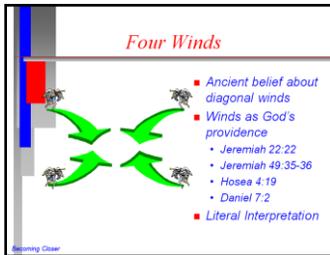
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There is some argument -- it varies by commentator, not by theory -- that these four angels are in fact the first four angels of the Seven Trumpets. This is due to the fact that those seven are grouped four and three. It also appears that when you compare the judgments there is some similarity.

The real key is that these angels are at the four corners of the world -- which to John would have meant the Roman Empire. Remember, this is a book written to Christians. We do not need to seek explanations in North America for this..

The argument for geography, rather than symbolism, is well accepted by all points of view.



The ancients had a belief that winds which blew from the orthogonal angles -- directly from the north, south, east or west -- were good winds (i.e., bringing luck). Winds from the diagonal were ill winds, unlucky winds. The picture given to anyone in John's time would be that of an ill wind blowing.

Talbot (a futurist) expresses the general consensus that these are symbolic of God's providential judgments. We might cite these passages as examples:

(Jer 22:22 NIV) The wind will drive all your shepherds away, and your allies will go into exile. Then you will be ashamed and disgraced because of all your wickedness.

(Jer 49:35-36 NIV) This is what the LORD Almighty says: "See, I will break the bow of Elam, the mainstay of their might. {36} I will bring against Elam the four winds from the four quarters of the heavens; I will scatter them to the four winds, and there will not be a nation where Elam's exiles do not go.

(Hosea 4:19 NIV) A whirlwind will sweep them away, and their sacrifices will bring them shame.

(Dan 7:2 NIV) Daniel said: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea.

This latter is most telling; for the next verse brings up four great beasts. We see the winds symbolically -- and we see the sea.

The literal interpretation -- by any group -- has only been announced since World War II. No wonder; before that time it was difficult to imagine a wind which could annihilate a civilization. Since the bomb, no more.

The Historicist view interprets this as a hiatus during which Christianity was strongly entrenched in the Roman Empire -- gaining time to become strong in the face of the barbarian invasions of the Seven Trumpets.

The 144,000

(Rev 7:4-8 NIV) Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel, (5) From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the tribe of Gad 12,000, (6) from the tribe of Asher 12,000, from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000, from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000, (7) from the tribe of Simeon 12,000, from the tribe of Levi 12,000, from the tribe of Issachar 12,000, (8) from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000, from the tribe of Joseph 12,000, from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.

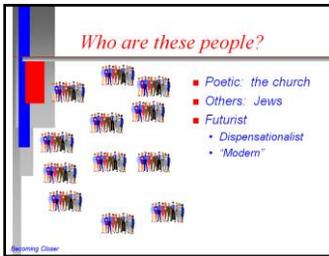
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Among those who know that they, and they alone, are the 144,000 mentioned in this passage are

- Jehovah's Witnesses (whose founder, Russell, "confided" to people that he was one of the great witnesses)
- Herbert Armstrong and Garner Ted Armstrong's movement
- Mormons know that these are the Mormon "elders"
- Seventh Day Adventists are sure it's them
- We even have some "British Israelites" -- convinced that they are members of the "Ten Lost Tribes"

One key point for all these people comes when the membership in the sect exceeds 144,000 by a large number. We then go from "all of us" to the "elders." Sound doctrine is the best antidote.



In a dazzling display of poetic metaphor, the Amillennialists have concluded that the 144,000 are “the Church”. The rationale is as follows:

12 is the number of the tribes; it is also the number of the apostles. Multiply those together, then by a thousand (signifying a multitude). Combine that with the fact the Israel is often used to represent the church in Old Testament prophecy. There you are.

The embarrassing question is, then, who are the multitudes who come next. Answer: same bunch, two different views. I’m not convinced.

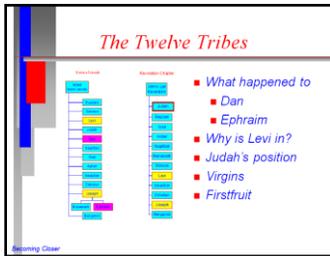
Virtually all other commentators agree that these are, in fact, bona fide Jews. In the historicist view, these are Jews living in the Roman Empire after the time of Constantine.

The futurists take this a bit further. The old dispensationalist view holds that grace has now been withdrawn from the world, and these Jews are once again under the dispensation of the Law. They therefore replace the church as God’s agents in the world, and quickly (remember, we have only three and half years to do this) evangelize the world, in fulfillment of Matthew 24:14. This is said to be in fulfillment of :

(Rom 11:25-26 NIV) I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. {26} And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.

More current futurist views ignore the idea that grace is withdrawn; they see this as a continuation of grace. The theology gets complicated here (and is a point against the futurist view).

One key point: they are *numbered*. To be numbered in Israel is to be ransomed in Israel. See Exodus 30:12-15. They are also sealed; somewhat parallel (historicists says exactly so) to to sealing of the Christian with the Holy Spirit.



John was a Jew. He knew the lists of the 12 tribes. So how could he possibly have made such a “mistake?”

To get a sense of what happened:

Levi was a son of Jacob. His tribe was taken by the Lord as priests in place of the first born. Indeed, this is so connected with the first born being the Lord’s that God had Moses collect a tax to buy back from slavery those first born Jews whose number exceeded the number of Levites. (Numbers 3:42-51) So in all the lists of the tribes of Israel, Levi is excluded. To make up the number 12, the sons of Joseph were substituted for his tribe. Joseph’s two sons were ritually blessed by Jacob (Israel). So Joseph’s name is not on the list of tribes; his sons are.

John now farbles it for us. Dan is missing; so is Ephraim. Levi is back, and Joseph is in there along with his son, Manasseh. What does this mean?

I think the answer is found here:

(1 Ki 12:26-30 NIV) Jeroboam thought to himself, "The kingdom will now likely revert to the house of David. {27} If these people go up to offer sacrifices at the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem, they will again give their allegiance to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah. They will kill me and return to King Rehoboam." {28} After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." {29} One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan. {30} And this thing became a sin; the people went even as far as Dan to worship the one there.

(Note that Bethel is in the land of the tribe of Ephraim). This is the only place where the two tribes are mentioned together in evil connection -- and it is at the dividing of the kingdom. (“That they may be one, Father, even as you and I are one.”) It would seem that restoration is promised, however. Ezekiel 48 lists both tribes as having an inheritance in the kingdom -- and Dan is listed first.

There are other thoughts here too. Levi is back in the lists -- which I take to mean that priests are like the rest of us, symbolically. There is no more special class of priests. Indeed, this is shown in Hebrews, where we are taught that we are a kingdom of priests.

Judah is listed first, instead of in the birth order. This is not too surprising; it is the tribe of Christ.

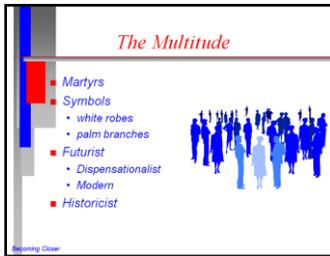
“Virgins” is probably symbolic. It does not mean celibate in the physical sense, most likely; it means those who have not committed idolatry. This is particularly strong in the historicist view, as the Jews of that time had every opportunity to commit idolatry.

Finally, they are said to be “first fruits.” The first fruit belongs to the Lord, so in that sense they obviously are. It may also mean that (in the futurist view) these are the evangelists who will convert the multitude mentioned next.

The Multitude

(Rev 7:9-16 NIV) After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. (10) And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." (11) All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God. (12) saying, "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" (13) Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?" (14) I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. (15) Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple, and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. (16) Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat.

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It is much easier to deal with the multitude. Virtually all the authorities agree: they are martyrs.

The reasoning is simple:

- White robes are a symbol of purity and of victory.
- Palms are the symbol of those who praise God (see Palm Sunday)
- They are given living water -- rewarded with life for their victorious deaths.

Futurists, of course, hold that they cannot be the church, hence must be those converted during the Great Tribulation (this is the passage from which that concept comes. Note that in the Greek the definite article, "the" is there, it is not supplied.) There are two views, again.

- For the older dispensationalists, these are not under grace, but saved under some special dispensation akin to the law of Moses.
- For the newer version (Lindsey, Smith) they are under grace, which does not end.

The historicist view is that these are the Diocletian martyrs.

"Salvation belongs to our God"

(Rev 7:10 NIV) And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

(Rev 7:15 NIV) Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.

(Rev 7:12 NIV) saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

- **Salvation - these are the saved**
- **Worship -- and the Shekinah**
- **The Seven Fold "Amen"**

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There are three final points:

Whoever these people are, they are saved, for the attribute salvation to God and to the Lamb. My own view is that they are saved by grace, since they attribute it to the Lamb.

The next passage quoted (out of order) has a wonderful point to it. It says in the English that God will "spread his tent" over them. There is a play on words in the Greek; or perhaps a textual error; it can be taken to have (in the play on words) the meaning of spreading his Shekinah, his glory, over them. A marvelous thought, to be protected by the glory of God.

Finally, there is the seven fold amen. Seven is the number of completeness; it is the number of the spirits of God -- and these seven attributes of God are truly worthy of praise. If there is one thing which Revelation teaches, it is that God is worthy of our praise.