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The 144,000 and a Great Multitude

By Bryan Hodge

The Jehovah Witnesses have built an entire system of eschatology (end time doctrine) based upon a distinction between the 144,000 and the Great Multitude (Revelation 7; 14). (1) They believe that a literal 144,000 will inherit heaven. These are the one's "redeemed from the earth" (Revelation 14:13). These compose the "little flock" that would be given the kingdom (Luke 12:32). (2) They believe that the Great Multitude will be rewarded on earth (cf. Matthew 5:5). They point out that the words "from the earth" (cf. Revelation 14:13) are not connected with the Great Multitude. They write, "The Bible plainly shows that some of these, that is, the 144,000, will share in heavenly glory with Christ Jesus, while the others will enjoy the blessings of heaven down here on earth" (Let God Be True, p. 298). These are supposedly the "other sheep" (John 10:16). Included in this flock would be: David (Acts 2:29, 34); Job (Job 14:13-15); and John the Baptizer (Matthew 11:11); "In fact, all faithful men and women who died before Jesus had the hope of living again on earth, not in heaven" (You Can Live Forever in Paradise on Earth, p. 122-123). (3) Moreover, they teach that the Lord's supper is to be observed by the 144,000. No one else has the right. They write, "Who should partake of these memorial emblem? Logically, only these in the New Covenant – that is, those who have the hope of going to Heaven. God's Holy Spirit convinces such ones that they have been selected. What about those who have the hope of living forever in paradise on earth? They obey Christ's command and attend the Lord's evening meal, but they come as respectful observers, not partakers" (What Does The Bible Really Teach? P. 207-208).

The 144,000

There are several reasons to conclude that the 144,000 should not be taken as a literal number in Revelation 7 and 14. (1) The book of Revelation is a book of symbols (Revelation 1:1). (2) If literal, only those of the tribes of the children of Israel will be included (Revelation 7:4-ff). It is interesting to observe that this list mentions a tribe of Joseph (Revelation 7:8). There was no literal tribe of Joseph. It counts the Levites (Revelation 7:7); Yet, the Levites should not be counted (see Numbers 1:4-16; 47-49). The tribes of Ephraim and Dan are not included. All of this strongly suggests that literal tribes are not in view. Even the Jehovah Witnesses admit this (Reasoning From Scriptures, p. 166-167). (3) If literal only virgin men are included (Revelation 14:4). (4) If literal the same exact number for each tribe is saved.

Why 144,000? Robert Mounce comments that the 12 tribes are squared and multiplied by 1,000, which is, "...a two-fold way of emphasizing completeness." (p. 168, recorded in Revelation by Wayne Jackson, p. 175).

Who are the 144,000? Some believe that they are the redeemed out of physical Israel. Others believe that this symbolizes spiritual Israel of God (Galatians 6:16; 1 Peter 2:9 cf. Deuteronomy 14:2).

The Great Multitude

Some believe that the Great Multitude is the church in contrast with the 144,000 which is the redeemed out of Israel. This is a possibility.

Others suggest that the 144,000 and the Great Multitude are just different ways of considering the same group it is suggested that John heard the number 144,000 (Revelation 7:4), but he looked on a great multitude (Revelation 7:9). "John said he merely heard the number 144,000. But what he saw when he looked was a great multitude" (Mile Hadwin, The Overcomers, p. 74).

Consider these points- (1) Both groups are described as before the throne of God (Revelation 14:1-3; Revelation 7:15). This throne is in heaven (Revelation 4:2). (2) The multitude serves God night and day in the temple (Revelation 7:15). Yet, the temple is in heaven (Revelation 11:19). (3) The Great Multitude have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 7:14). Yet, those who have washed their robes have a right to the tree of Life and may enter into the city (Revelation 22:14 NWT) and that city is where the throne is (Revelation 22:1-3), and that is in heaven (Revelation 4:2).

Little Flock/Other Sheep

The "little flock" (Luke 12:32) refers to the fact that few will truly follow (cf. Matthew 7:13-14). There is nothing in this context about two destinies. The "other sheep" (John 10:16) refers to Gentiles (cf. Matthew 10:5-6). There is nothing in this context which suggests two destinies.

David, etc.

The reason that David had not entered into heaven is that such was not ready (John 14:3; Hebrews 9:8; 9:11-12; 9:23-26; 10:19-20). Even the Apostles, who according to the Jehovah Witnesses are a part of the 144,000, needed Jesus to go and prepare a place for them (John 14:1-3).

The dead go to Hades. One day Hades will be no more (Revelation 20:11-15). This is where Jesus, himself, initially went (Luke 23:43 cf. Acts 2:30-31).

Earth

This present earth will be destroyed (1 Peter 3:10-11). We will be given a new heavens and a new earth (2 Peter 3:13). That is – a new realm of existence. We are encouraged "thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17).

Lord's Supper

Where is the passage which hints that some (even most Christians) are not to partake? Where is the passage which teaches that those not partaking are commanded to be there to observe? This is a strange doctrine.

Encouragement

While it is true that few statistically will be saved (Matthew 7:13-14; Luke 13:23-24), the saved collectively speaking form "a great multitude... of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues" (Revelation 7:9). We are not alone. "Therefore... since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1). This is the great lesson to be learned.