

THE 144,000 JEWISH WITNESSES

Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

*"And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel."
—Revelation 7:4*

The so-called "Bible Answer Man," Hank Hanegraaff says the 144,000 of Revelation 7 and 14 are "the purified bride," "true Israel," which is the church.¹ This is a classic replacement theology interpretation. He then continues to torture the biblical text by equating the 144,000 from every tribe of the sons of Israel (Rev. 7:4) with another group of believers said by the biblical text to be "a great multitude, which no one can count from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues" (Rev. 7:9). Hanegraaff says, "the 144,000 and the great multitude are not two different peoples, but two different ways of describing the same purified bride."² So what does the Bible actually teach? The Bible teaches what the text actually says, not what Hanegraaff imagines and imposes upon the text via his allegorical alchemy.

WHO ARE THE 144,000?

When one exams the biblical text they find that Revelation 7 speaks of two different people groups: 1) 144,000 Jewish male witnesses (Rev. 7:4–8) and 2) "a great multitude, which no one can count from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues" (Rev. 7:9). Below are reasons why this passage means what it says and refers to exactly 144,000 Jewish guys (no gals or Gentiles included), and 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. First, at this point in Revelation John is writing down what he hears the angel who is crying out with a loud voice says (Rev. 7:2, 4). The angel says they are a specific number of Jewish men.

Second, if this was some kind of code word or metaphor for something else then there should be an indication in the context that such is the case. However, there is no such textual indication. Hanegraaff clearly rejects the plain meaning of the passage. Dallas Seminary professor, Roy Zuck (a dispensationalist) has written an excellent book on how to interpret the Bible.³ In a chapter dealing with figures of speech, Zuck says, "Generally an expression is figurative when it is out of character with the subject discussed, or is contrary to fact, experience, or observation."⁴ Zuck provides six guidelines to aid one in determining whether a word or phrase is figurative. Some of the most helpful include: "1. Always take a passage in its literal sense unless there is good reason for doing otherwise. . . . 2. The figurative sense is intended if the literal would involve an impossibility. . . . 3. The figurative is intended if the literal meaning is an absurdity, . . ."⁵ Matthew Waymeyer agrees and provides the following simple formula: "In order to be considered symbolic, the language in question must possess (a) some degree of *absurdity* when taken literally and (b) some degree of *clarity* when taken symbolically."⁶

Third, Hanegraaff attempts to support his allegorical interpretation that the 144,000 is the "purified bride" or the "true Israel" by saying "the pattern of Scripture is to refer to the community of faith, whether Jew or gentile, with Jewish designations."⁷ No, such a view is simply not true to what the text actually says! He fails to provide one valid example to back up his erroneous claim. In his lone attempt to support his view Hanegraaff says, "New Jerusalem itself is figuratively built on the foundation of the

twelve apostles and is entered through twelve gates inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. Not only so, but its walls are twelve times twelve, or 144, cubits thick (Revelation 21:12–17).⁸ Hanegraaff's statement provides no proof of his contention it merely makes assertions. The New Jerusalem refers to the eternal state where Jewish and Gentile believers will dwell together in a single city, the New Jerusalem. Why doesn't the passage denote Jewish believers in its reference to the twelve tribes of Israel, while the twelve apostles indicate Gentile believers?⁹ His "proof" of this pattern demonstrates the opposite. As Robert Thomas notes, "A tie-in of the term to the church through the twelve apostles (cf. Matt. 19:28) is improbable because Rev. 21:12, 14 makes a clear distinction between the two groups of twelve."¹⁰ If it was truly the pattern of Scripture to use Jewish designations for the community of faith, whether Jew or Gentile, then Hanegraaff should have been able to provide more than his single example that is questionable. Instead the pattern of Scripture is just the opposite.

There is not a single passage in the entire New Testament where language that speaks of Israel or the Jews ever is used to refer to anyone who is not ethnically Israel. Hebrew Christian Arnold Fruchtenbaum has studied every use of Israel in the New Testament¹¹ and says, "the conclusion is that the Church is never called, and is not, a 'spiritual Israel' or a 'new Israel.' The term *Israel* is either used of the nation or the people as a whole, or of the believing remnant within. It is never used of the Church in general or of Gentile believers in particular."¹² Therefore, this argument cannot be a basis for taking a non-literal interpretation of the 144,000.

Fourth, Hanegraaff believes that the numbers in this passage are symbolic and do not represent their stated value. To begin with, it is important to realize that any counting number (i.e., one, two, three, etc.) is in fact a symbol for the number of items that it references. In this case 144,000 "sons of Israel." His interpretation of the 144,000 is a case in point. As Nathaniel West punned about 125 years ago, for those like Hanegraaff, "symbolical numbers don't count."¹³ So it is in this instance, Hanegraaff's idealism generated by his own imagination, ungoverned by Scripture, imagines that these numbers don't count. He says, "To suggest as LaHaye does that '12,000' from each of the twelve tribes means exactly 12,000—not 11,999 or 12,001—must surely stretch the credulity of even the most ardent literalist beyond the breaking point."¹⁴ Why would it be silly that God would chose exactly 144,000 sons of Israel or 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel? How does that stretch the credulity of those of us who think that is what God meant by what He said? Does he think that God cannot count that high? That God is only good with small numbers but becomes sloppy and imprecise if He uses large number?

Fifth, the 144,000 are painstakingly broken down into a division of 12,000 each. The text says, "from every tribe of the sons of Israel" (Rev. 7:4). Then Scripture goes on to repeat the same language twelve times "from the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand, from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand" (Rev. 7:5) and so on to include the twelve tribes of Israel (Rev. 7:5–8). Verse 8 ends by saying, "from the tribe of Benjamin, twelve thousand were sealed." How does any of this support a figurative interpretation as Hanegraaff puts forth? How is this language figurative and what in the text supports such a notion? Every one of the tribal names is literal and not symbolic.

Seventh, Hanegraaff equates the 144,000 with the passage that follows in verse 9. Hanegraaff says, "the 144,000 are '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.'"¹⁵ He tells us that contrary to LaHaye, "the 144,000 and the great multitude are

not two different peoples, but two different ways of describing the same purified bride.”¹⁶ Verse 9 begins with the prepositional phrase, “after these things,” (which Hanegraaff omits from his quotation of the passage). After what things? After the sealing of the 144,000 *on earth* the scene turns *to heaven* and a totally different group of people and event. “This group, like the 144,000, is unhurt by the effects of God’s wrath, but for a different reason,” notes Thomas. “They have at this point been removed from the earthly scene of the wrath and have no need of protective sealing.”¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Hank Hanegraaff should not be called “the Bible Answer Man;” instead, he should be called “the Bible Distortion Man,” since many of his views of the Bible are a clear distortion of what it actually says. In fact, the nation of Israel is said by the Lord to be used “As a light to the nations” (Isa. 42:6). This statement is in a passage that speaks of Israel in a time future to our own day. This prophecy from the Lord has never been fulfilled through the nation of Israel. It appears that our Sovereign Lord will use the 144,000 Jewish, male witnesses of Revelation 7 and 14 to fulfill Isaiah 42:7 for the Gentiles during the tribulation. It is the result of the evangelism during the tribulation that a harvest of souls too great to be numbered will occur and at the same time fulfill the Old Testament prediction that Israel will be a light to the nations. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), pp. 124–25.

² Hanegraaff, *Apocalypse Code*, p. 125.

³ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide To Discovering Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1991).

⁴ Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, p. 145.

⁵ Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, p. 146.

⁶ Matthew Waymeyer, *Revelation 20 and the Millennial Debate* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian Publications, 2004), p. 50 (emphasis original).

⁷ Hanegraaff, *Apocalypse Code*, p. 126.

⁸ Hanegraaff, *Apocalypse Code*, p. 126.

⁹ This is the view of Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), pp. 476–77.

¹⁰ Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, p. 477.

¹¹ This study is provided in Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, revised (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries Press, 1993), pp. 684–99.

¹² (emphasis original) Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, p. 699.

¹³ Nathaniel West, *The Thousand Years in Both Testaments*, reprint (Fincastle, VA: Scripture Truth Book Company [1889] n.d.), p. 92.

¹⁴ Hanegraaff, *Apocalypse Code*, p. 126.

¹⁵ Hanegraaff, *Apocalypse Code*, p. 125 (emphasis original).

¹⁶ Hanegraaff, *Apocalypse Code*, p. 125.

¹⁷ Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, p. 482.