

144,000: A Priestly Army

Revelation 14:1 Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.

² And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps,

³ and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth.

⁴ It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb,

⁵ and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.

(Rev 14:1-5)

War Songs of the Prince of Peace

*Onward, Christian soldiers,
Marching as to war ...*

So begins one of the better known Christian hymns of the last 150 years. It is sung in church. It is sung in Sunday School. It tells the simple story, now quite politically incorrect, that Christians are a people living in a state of

perpetual warfare. “[The Church Militant](#)” it has often been called. How often do you think of yourself as being at war? What is this war about and what does it mean that you fight in it? One of our children’s hymns begins,

*I may never march in the infantry
Ride in the cavalry
Shoot the artillery
I may never zoom o’er the enemy
But I’m in the Lord's army!*

This song parses part of these questions amazingly well. [Rather than pure pacifism](#), it admits that I may be called to fight for my country. But [rather than confuse my country](#) with the Christian marching off to war, it declares that I *am* in the Lord’s army. Therefore, it is possible that a Christian could be fighting in two wars at once; but he is always fighting in at least one.

Of all the passages in Revelation that [I did not think would ever begin such a way](#), it has to be [Rev 14:1-5](#). The rest of the chapter, maybe. But not these verses. Nevertheless, the more I studied them, the more fixed my thinking became on this. Then, as I was looking up songs about the war, my very first hit confirmed it. The great hymnodist [Isaac Watts](#) wrote his own song about this topic. It begins,

*I am a **soldier** of the Cross,
A follower of the Lamb ...*

A “**soldier**” is military language. As with many other songs like these, **the cross** is the central focus. Given the medieval use of “the cross of Jesus going on before,” as the Crusaders sought to recapture places like Jerusalem from its enslavement to Islam, the image may or may not blur the lines between the two wars we fight for some people. Nevertheless, the cross is central to this war.

But it is **the second line** that confirmed my thinking for this sermon. “**A follower of the lamb**” is a phrase found in only one place in all of God’s word, and it was revealing that Watts used it for this song. “**It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes**” (**Rev 14:4**). Watts clearly sees this as warfare imagery and rightly so. Cloaked in language of the Lamb from the earlier vision of heaven in **Revelation 5**, we read, “**And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.’**” Who is this song sung to? Obviously, Jesus. But in the context, just like here he is called “the Lamb” (**vs. 8**).

The Lamb has just fought his greatest battle, during which he was struck a mighty blow by his enemy the devil. In fact, the blow was mortal. The serpent bruised the head of Seed of the woman. But while he lay three days in the grave, his spirit was not sleeping. Instead, he was blasting open the gates of hell, announcing his victory to its hounds and captors, and pillaging the realm of the dead of the saints who were long awaiting the moment their faith in him would be vindicated he they would be released from the bonds of Sheol. That's when he rose from the dead. And now, this kingdom army of priests follows the living General, the Commanding Lamb, into whatever battle he may lead them. That's why we sing our war songs of the Prince of Peace. As we move through the passage, along with hints from what we will look at next time, my aim is to help you think more clearly about who you are and this great battle that we constantly fight.

Revelation 14:1-5 – Context and Structure

I've chosen only to look at five verses this week, because they are their own clearly self-contained unit fixed to the number 144,000.

- A. **Lamb** (14:1a)
- B. **144,000** who are with him and have two names on their head (14:1b)
- C. **Voice** from heaven – threefold description (14:2)
- C1. **Voice** as new song – threefold location (14:3a)
- B1. **144,000** only can sing the song as the redeemed of the earth (14:3b)
- A1. The **Lamb** and the 144,000 (14:4-5)¹

The unit itself breaks down into **two smaller units** where the **voices** in heaven singing about the Lamb and the **Lamb** himself who is their leader form the two centers:

- A. **144,000** who are with him and have two names on their head (14:1)
- B. **Voice** from heaven – threefold description (14:2)
- B1. **Voice** as new song – threefold location (14:3a)
- A1. **144,000** only can sing the song as the redeemed of the earth (14:3b)
- 2A. They are **undefiled** (14:4a)
- 2B. They follow the **Lamb** (14:4b)
- 2B'. They were redeemed for God and the **Lamb** (14:4c)
- 2A'. They are **blameless** (14:5)²

In other words, that's at the heart of what we must be thinking about.

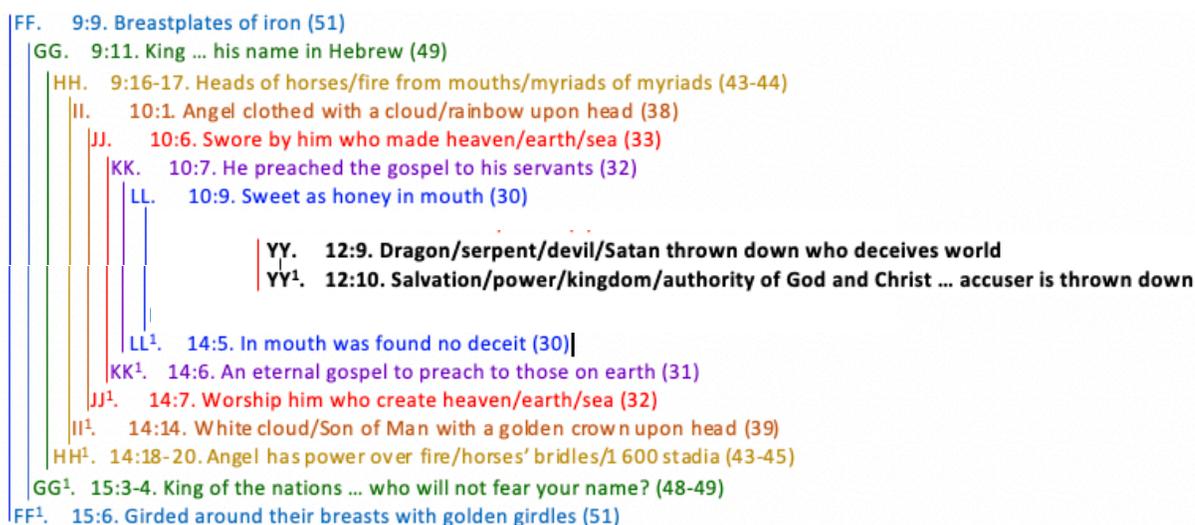
However, we **must not remove ourselves from the overall context**, which is as intricate as the most complex woven tapestry. In the way we are looking at the book, we are in **the last chapter of the fourth of seven cycles**, which

¹ Pieter G. R. de Villiers, "The Composition of Revelation 14:1-15:8: Pastiche or Perfect Pattern?" *Neotestamentica* 38.2 (2004): 216 [209-249]. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43048511?read-now=1&refreqid=excelsior%3A009d82219366ed1822992f601f48bab6&seq=7#page_scan_tab_contents.

² Ibid. Also <https://www.chiasmusxchange.com/2017/06/28/revelation-141-5/>.

ends at **the great harvest of souls** at the end of days. In terms of cycles, this puts a sharp break between chs. 14 and 15. However, it is also clear that at the very least, **Rev 14:1-15:8** form their own larger mini-unit.³ Some have linked nearly all of 14-16 together.⁴ And so, even though they are divided in one sense, they belong together in another. Such is the way the whole book works. Since this many verses is too long to speak about what I want to help us see today, we will look at the return of the 144,000 all by itself.

The number **144,000** appears in only two chapters in the Bible. The first is Revelation 7, the second is here. Curiously, in the chiasm of the entire book, this is *not* where the earlier parallel is to be found (that is in chs. 9-10):



³ de Villiers.

⁴ **Christine Smith**, “Rev 14:5-16:21 Chiastic Structure: The Series of Seven Bowls of Wrath,” *A Little Perspective* (Dec 30, 2016), <https://www.alittleperspective.com/chiastic-structure-of-the-seven-bowls-of-wrath/>.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the two passages help interpret the other.

This is important because there is a great debate about who these 144,000 are. Is it a literal number telling us there are only 144,000 Jehovah's Witnesses that get to spend eternity in heaven while all the other poor believing saps have to stay on earth? Is it a literal number of Jews saved during a future great tribulation? Or is it a symbolic number representing Jesus' church, perhaps first typified by the church in Jerusalem that fled the city just before the Romans sacked it and destroyed the temple?

To see that they are the same group in both passages, consider the main parallel between them. In Revelation 7 we learn that these 144,000 are to be "sealed" as "servants of our God" with a seal that goes "on their foreheads" (Rev 7:3). In Rev 14 we see that there are 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name "written on their foreheads" (14:1). To put it another way, they "know" the Father and Son. Or, to put it in the parallel in John 14, "If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him" (John 14:7).

The connection of the “foreheads” in the two chapters means that knowing the name of Christ and of the Father is **the seal**, a sealing that is performed, as we have seen, by the Holy Spirit, who seals our redemption (**2Co 1:22**; **Eph 1:13**; **4:30**) and changes our minds (foreheads) and works (hands) to serve the living God. Recall specifically that parallel earlier parallel to Revelation 7 in **John 6:27** that the Father set his seal on Jesus, which refers back to **Jesus’ baptism** where the Spirit descended on him. In the early church, baptism was often referred to as a “seal.”

The other main thing we learned about the 144,000 previously was that there are 12,000 of them from 12 tribes. However, the **list of those twelve tribes is unique** in all the Bible. It is not the actual 12 sons of Jacob. Nor is it the usual list of something like Numbers which leaves Levi out and counts the two sons of Joseph instead. This one contains Levi, which is strange, but does not contain Dan, which is also strange. Similarly, the order of the list is highly unusual. In fact, it is unique. With all these facts, we concluded that the 144,000 were therefore a number representing, not biological Jews, but *spiritual* Jews—**the Church**. Revelation 14:1-5 is going to show us this in greater ways.

I want to mention **two more points of context** that will return as we move through the passage. First, remember that the book of Revelation is very much an **antitype of the book of Joshua**. Joshua is the book of Holy War. We began this morning by thinking about **war**. The main war of the book is its first—the battle of Jericho. That battle was preceded by a vision of that Joshua had of the Commander of the Hosts of Heaven—the Angel of the LORD. It was also preceded by a visitation of Jericho by two spies who went in and, with message of doom and deliverance in hand, were saved by a Canaanite prostitute who lived inside the city. Finally, it was preceded by the marching around of the city for seven days with seven great trumpet blasts before the walls fell and the city was captured and put to death—all save Rahab.

In Revelation, we have likewise seen our vision of **the Commander of the Hosts of Heaven**—Jesus, who has been fighting a great war. We have seen **two witnesses** that are to go throughout the earth with a message of doom and deliverance in hand. Similarly, we have the same kind of **message** that will appear immediately after our 144,000 passage (**Rev 14:6-7**). This will be followed immediately by the first mention of “**Babylon**” (8), the city which is about to be destroyed, but not before the **prostitute** that lives in

the city is called to leave both it and her sins behind. Why? Because the **seventh trumpet** has sounded (**11:15**) and its doom is nigh.

The second parallel is also one we have seen before. This is the parallel with Exodus and Sinai. For today, I simply want to mention that scholars have noticed great similarities between the larger unit **Rev 14:1-15:8** and **Exodus 19-29**.⁵

I. Introduction		
Exodus 19 12 Tribes at Sinai Language of Theophany Ceremonial Cleansing		Revelation 14:1-5 12 Tribes on Sion Language of Theophany Spiritual Cleansing
II. Body of the Message		
Exodus 20-22 Ten Commandments People's Response Covenant Code	Apodictic Law Historical Interlude Casuistic Law	Revelation 14:6-11 1st Angel's Message 2nd Angel's Message 3rd Angel's Message
III. The Witnesses		
Exodus 23A First Law of Witness Second Law of Witness		Revelation 14:12-13 Witness of Living Saints Witness of Dead Saints
IV. The Harvest		
Exodus 23B Sabbatical Law of Har- vests Festival Law of Harvests		Revelation 14:14-20 Harvest of the Right- eous Grain Harvest of the Wicked Fruit
V. The Curses		
Exodus 23c Upon the 7 enemies of God's people		Revelation 15:1 7 plagues upon the enemies of God's peo- ple
VI. The Result		
Exodus 24b Caught up in the cloud on the mountain They see God upon the fiery firmament		Revelation 15:2-4 Caught up to heaven itself They themselves stand on fiery firmament
VII. The Commission		
Exodus 25-29 Build and commence the sanctuary The tent of tabernacle of testimony		Revelation 15:5-8 Finish and leave the sanctuary The temple of taberna- cle of testimony

⁵ Table from **William H. Shea**, "Literary and Theological Parallels Between Revelation 14-15 and Exodus 19-24," *JATS* 12.2 (Autumn 2001): 177.

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1299&context=jats>.

Specifically for our passage, there are several direct relationships with Exodus 19.⁶

Exodus 19	Revelation 14:1-5
1. Location: Mount Sinai (v. 2)	1. Location: Mount Sion (v. 1)
2. Location: at the foot of the mount (v. 23)	2. Location: on the mount (v. 1)
3. People present: 12 Israelite tribes (vs. 1, 3, 6)	3. People present: the 144,000, made up of 12 Israelite tribes (v. 1)
4. A voice from heaven: thunder and a musical instrument—the trumpet (v. 16)	4. A voice from heaven: thunder and musical instruments—harps (v. 2)
5. Origin of the people—redeemed from Egypt (v. 4)	5. Origin of the people—redeemed from the earth (v. 3)
6. Purity of the people: “do not go near a woman” (v. 15)	6. Purity of the people—“not defiled themselves with women” (v. 4)
7. Purity of the people: Moses consecrated the people and “they washed their garments” (v. 13)	7. Purity of the people: “they are spotless” (v. 5)
8. Words of the people: “all that the Lord has spoken we will do” (v. 8)	8. Words of the people: “in their mouth no lie was found” (v. 5)

If this is deliberate, then our passage is preparing us for **how to wage this Holy War of Christ** as warriors of the cross, just as Sinai was preparing Israel to enter and take the Promised Land so that it might be their eternal dwelling.⁷

A Divine Council and 144,000 (Rev 14:1)

As we take to the passage, we read, “**Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 ...**” (Rev 14:1). What are we seeing here? It is very much more than most people think as they look with

⁶ Ibid., 166.

⁷ Remember, in Exodus, the great sin of the 10 spies had not yet occurred. Israel had every reason at that moment for thinking they would very soon enter and take the Land.

natural, physical eyes. First, the Lamb is here in fulfillment of Psalm 2, “I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill” (Ps 2:6). That psalm is a war-psalm where God’s enemies are attacking him and the church, but he laughs at them. “Be warned you rulers of the earth” (10).⁸

Next, the Lamb is meeting with the 144,000 on Mount Zion, ala Heb 12:22. “You have come to Mt. Zion.” This also has a parallel in John 14 when Jesus says, “I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (John 14:3), and in the anti-parallel in John 6, “And Jesus went up on a mountain, and there he sat with His disciples ... in number about five thousand” (6:3, 10).

Whenever God meets with man on a mountain, it is a divine council scene. This is plain in the Sinai parallels where the 70 elders, the priests, and Moses are allowed to eat with God on Sinai (Ex 24) and when 10,000 angels (“holy ones”) came with the LORD to deliver the law to Moses (Dt 33:2). Heiser (and many more) suggests that this is “the heavenly Zion, God’s throne room ... a divine council scene”⁹ (perhaps likened to “the place” Jesus goes to prepare for us (John 14:1-2)). But MacArthur (and many more) says this is

⁸ See also Psalm 110:2, 5.

⁹ Michael S. Heiser, “Naked Bible Podcast Transcript: Episode 373 Revelation 7, Part 2,” Naked Bible Podcast (April 24, 2021), <https://nakedbiblepodcast.com/podcast/naked-bible-373-revelation-7-part-2/>.

the earthly Mount Zion, “The city of Jerusalem, where Messiah will return and plant his feet.”¹⁰ A third view says that this Zion is identical with the new Jerusalem which comes down from heaven (Rev 21:2), such that Jerusalem above and below are brought into unity together.¹¹ Who is right? The context isn’t clear enough to say in any direction, and all three have biblical and extra-biblical support.¹² What matters is that the heavenly and earthly type mirror one another in such a way that what happens in one happens in the other. What matters more is that we have a gigantic number, indeed a symbolic number (see n. 11), of humans meeting with God on the cosmic mountain, a place often reserved only for angelic creatures and occasionally, a prophet or a small group.

¹⁰ John MacArthur, ESV MacArthur Study Bible, Rev 14:1.

¹¹ For a short discussion see Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (London: SPCK, 2005), 354. Also, Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 731-32.

¹² Perhaps the earliest Christian commentary we have on this comes from 4 Ezra, which is often dated to the late first century AD. It seems to put it in heaven. “I, Ezra, saw on Mount Zion a great multitude that I could not number, and they all were praising the Lord with songs. 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. Then I asked an angel, ‘Who are these, my lord?’ 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.’ Then I said to the angel, ‘Who is that young man who is placing crowns on them and putting palms in their hands?’ 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. 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” (4Ezra 2:42-48).

Why are they here? Because they have obviously been invited by God. Men do not walk into God's presence on their own prerogative. So, perhaps it is a **commissioning service**, much like the Lamb was given in chs. 4-5 as he alone was found worthy to open the seals of the scroll, much like we saw with John himself in ch. 10, and much like we see of so many prophets in the OT when they, too, go to God's throne room. If so, they are being **commissioned to be great witnesses** in the world, in Babylon, as they carry out their Holy War.

Let's notice again that these 144,000 had the Lamb's name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. Something too often overlooked is that this comes **just two verses after** we heard that the earth-beast "**causes all ... to be marked on the right hand or the forehead ... [with] the name of the beast...**" (**Rev 13:16-17**). Clearly, this marking of the 144,000 is not a literal tattoo of Jesus' name on their forehead. Rather, it is being marked by the Holy Spirit as holy,¹³ when a person first calls upon the Name of the Lord, and I would argue symbolically is baptized into his Name.¹⁴

¹³ Another very early interpretation equates "**the name of the Son of God**" with "**the seal of the Son of God**" (**Shepherd of Hermas, Similitudes 9.16-17**). Curiously, the High Priest wore a turban on his "forehead" that bore the engraving "Holy to the LORD" (**Ex 28:36**). Obviously, the physical idea is representing a spiritual reality.

¹⁴ Sealing and baptism goes hand in hand in John 3:33, as Thomas Manton in a sermon on John 3:33 writes, "**For the occasion of these words, we must look a little back into the context. There**

Keep in mind for later that baptism is the Christian initiation into the new covenant [priesthood](#).

Similarly, we saw that [the mark of the beast is not a physical mark](#), but rather a spiritual identity they are given by the beast at birth, much like the United States marks each citizen at birth as belonging to this country. Having this mark is God's way of saying that you are protected by his Divine Presence, just as coming to Zion is coming to God's mountain fortress of protection ([Ps 48:2-14](#); [125:1-3](#)). Why would we need [protecting](#)? [Because we are in a war](#). Beale suggests [that two numbers contrast](#). 666 shows the [incompleteness](#) in achieving the divine design for humanity. Day six when we were created was not the end of the work-week. 144,000 shows the [completeness](#) of God's true people.¹⁵

Singing a New Song: The Weapons of the Warrior (Rev 14:2-3)

After seeing the 144,000 on Mt. Zion, John suddenly “hears” a voice from heaven. The voice he hears is singular, yet it is like the roar of many waters and like the sound of

you will find that both John and Jesus were admitting proselytes into the kingdom of God by baptism; Jesus in the land of Judea, and John at Ænon, near Salim.” [Thomas Manton](#), *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, vol. 15 (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1873), 379.

¹⁵ [Beale](#), 733.

loud thunder (Rev 14:2a). Is this the voice of Christ, as we have seen earlier (Rev 1:15)? Or perhaps it is the thunderous voice of one of the living creatures that we heard before (6:1)? Importantly, in the parallel 6th cycle, we have an almost exact Greek equivalent where it says the voice is collective. “Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out” (Rev 19:6).

Whatever the case about the voice here, peculiarly he adds that the voice he heard was “like the sound of the harpists playing on their harps” (14:2b). This intense sound is disorienting. Harps are usually quiet, soft instruments. But this harp-voice is as loud as thunder and a roaring waterfall.

What it says next is the most important thing. “And they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth” (3). There is a lot going on in this verse. First of all, there is Jewish background to the entire scene. “Later Jewish sources foresaw that God would be praised by harps and ‘a new song’ in the messianic days and in the ‘world to come’ (Midr. Rab. Num. 15.11 and b. Arakhin 13b).”¹⁶ Of

¹⁶ Beale, 735.

course, these Jews missed the actual Messiah and therefore they do not understand that the song has begun to be sung already.

Second, notice that they are **singing this song in heaven**. Who is singing exactly? It doesn't appear to be the 144,000, because they alone of the people of earth are able to learn its words. Perhaps this is why the sound is like thunder and mighty breakers of water. There is no voice that can be discerned in such a sound, only a singular crushing non-verbal blast. Perhaps this is why it is likened to a harp rather than to words. It is a song of heaven sung in the tongues of angels. To a man, it is mysterious song that only those sealed with Christ's name can understand.

What is the content of the song? Here is where we must broaden our context and move to the chiastic parallel in Ch. 15, though I will show you in a moment that we technically do not need this information, because we have a clue even here as to its contents. But Pieter de Villiers and Wolfgang Fenske are certainly right when they say that not only are **14:1-5** and **15:3-4** mutually related, but they are **both necessary in order to interpret the hymn described in both**.¹⁷

¹⁷ De Villiers, 213 citing Fenske, "das lied des Mose, des Knechtes Gottes, und das Lied des Lammes," 257.

A. Mt. Zion and the Song of the 144,000 (14:1-5)

B. Three Angels (14:6-13)

C. One like a son of man (14:14)

B¹. Three Angels (14:15-20)

A¹. Heavenly Temple and the Song of Moses (15:1-8)¹⁸

The parallel is going to inform us that “those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name” (15:2) “sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb” (3). Conquering the beast is language of warfare. The Song of Moses is the great song of war of the OT:

“I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea ... the LORD is a man of war; the LORD is his name ... Your right hand, O LORD ... shatters the enemy ... overthrow(s) your adversaries ... consumes them like stubble ... You stretched out your right hand; the earth swallowed them. You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode. The peoples have heard; they tremble ... terror and dread fall upon them ... they are still as a stone, till your people, O LORD, pass by, till the people pass by whom you have purchased. You will bring them in and plant them on

¹⁸ See also Peter Leithart, “Structure of Revelation 14,” *Leithart* (May 19, 2015), <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/leithart/2015/05/structure-of-revelation-14/>.

your own mountain, the place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode.”

(Ex 15:1-18).

Given that the literary parallels link these two passages in **Revelation 14:1-5** and **15:2-4** together, it is clear that the song sung by the 144,000 is a **song of victory in war**. But we can see this even in our passage.

It says they sang “**a new song**.” In the OT, a “new song” is always associated with **praising God for his victory over enemies** (**Ps 33:2-7; 40:3, 13-15; 96:1-6; 149:1-9; Isa 42:10-13**). In other words, it’s always about **victory in warfare**. It’s like **2Chr 20:27-29**, “Then they returned, every man of Judah and Jerusalem, and Jehoshaphat at their head, returning to Jerusalem with joy, for the Lord had made them rejoice over their enemies. They came to Jerusalem with harps and lyres and trumpets, to the house of the Lord. And the fear of God came on all the kingdoms of the countries when they heard that the Lord had fought against the enemies of Israel.”

A new song sung with harps is found in Revelation only in **5:8-10** and **15:2-4**. In both cases, the song is sung because of Christ’s victory ... **over sin, death, and the devil**. That’s the war of Revelation. It is Christ’s war. His people fight in

it, but they use very **unorthodox weapons** even as they look like very **unorthodox warriors**.

We can think about **the weapon** of our war by just looking at hints of what is to come in the rest of Revelation 14. Notice how in **vs. 6** we have an angel flying overhead “with an eternal gospel *to proclaim* to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people.” **His weapon is the word**. Notice how in **vs. 7** with his voice he *tells* people to, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come.” Again, **the word**. In **verse 8**, again another angel “*says*.” He speaks. His word declares, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great.” And yet again in **vv. 9-10** another angel says in *a loud voice*, “If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath...” It isn’t the angelic messenger doing the battle. It is God himself, just like in Jericho, Joshua did nothing except march around the city in faithful obedience and blow the trumpets. These angels remind me very much of the famous statement from Martin Luther,

I simply taught, preached, wrote God’s Word: otherwise I did nothing. And when, while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my Philip and my Amsdorf, the Word so greatly

weakened the papacy that never a Prince or Emperor inflicted such damage upon it, I did nothing. The Word did it all.

That's faith in the power of God's word such as we see throughout the Scripture. "Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" (Jer 23:29). "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa 55:11). "The gospel is the power of God..." (Rom 1:16). "The Lord gave the word: great was the company of the preachers" (Handel's *Messiah*, paraphrasing Ps 68:11). Hence, "The sword of the Spirit" is "the Word of God" (Eph 6:16).

It's curious that this last one is linked directly to another form of the word in what immediately follows: prayer. In the imagery of a warrior putting on his armor it says, "Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for

which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak” (Eph 6:17-20). There is a reason why the old song says, “And when the planes and tanks and guns have done all that they can do ... let us trust and use the weapon of prayer.”¹⁹

Finally, there is the **song** itself. While we do not have the words here, the parallel in **Rev 15:3-4** may give them to us. “Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed” (**Rev 15:3-4**). Again, we could focus on **the word**, but in this instance, the word is post-war **thanksgiving and worship** directed to the Almighty God and his great Name Jesus for their work in defeating the beast and those who have not the mark of God on their foreheads, but the mark of the beast, who stand opposed to God and his kingdom. These three kinds of words are the weapons used to fight the war: the law and the gospel, prayer, and worshipful song.

¹⁹ Charles and Ira Louvin, “The Weapon of Prayer,” Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, 1962.

Priestly Redemption: The Look of the Warrior (Rev 14:3b-5)

Having seen the weapon, let's turn our attention to **the look of the warriors** themselves. First we learn that the 144,000 “**had been redeemed from the earth.**” This is precisely what Moses sang about in his great Song of the Sea. “**You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed ... the people whom you have purchased.**” The situation is also the same, as these are people whom God has planted on his own mountain (Zion), as we saw in vs. 1.

To be redeemed is to have the mark of God on your forehead. But more, it is to have your mind transformed in a way that now you care about this God. It is even more than that. A specific group within Israel was “redeemed,” and this was the priests (**Rev 5:9**).²⁰ As we will see in a moment, all this causes you to follow the Lamb in very specific ways. This is the new creation that takes place by God's Holy Spirit when someone hears the good news that Jesus has won the victory over sin, death, and the devil and are transformed by that word into worshipers of Jesus Christ. We call this regeneration, the creation of a new person. But

²⁰ Besides Manikam (below), see also fascinating the discussion in **Margaret Barker**, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh, Scotland, T&T Clark, 2000), 242-45.

that person is identified in several more ways in vv. 4-5, each of which is related to the priests.

“It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins” (4a). This phrase has baffled commentators. It has been called “John’s most puzzling sentence” and “perhaps the most misunderstood words in the book.”²¹ Some have suggested that some monkish scribe added this because he was staunchly against marriage. Others think that there must have been a group of male celibates within the early Church which were the forerunners of said monks. When you note that it is males here who are virgins, you see that this is highly unusual. For this reason, feminists have taken this in bizarre directions being outraged because, “There is no talk of women being defiled by men, sex defiles, but only sex by women,”²² or saying things like, “It sounds as if women cannot themselves be redeemed”²³ or “A surface reading feels like a body blow. Only celibate men are worthy to stand with the Lamb. Even worse, all women are unclean, causing men to be defiled, and unfit to be among the redeemed.”²⁴

²¹ George Caird and J. P. M. Sweet cited in Daniel C. Olson, “‘Those Who Have Not Defiled Themselves with Women’: Revelation 14:4 and the Book of Enoch,” *CBQ* 59.3 (July 1997): 493.

²² Leonard Swidler, *Jesus Was A Feminist: What the Gospels Reveal about His Revolutionary Perspective* (Chicago: Sheed & Ward, 2007), 255.

²³ Angela Barron McBride, *A Married Feminist* (Virginia: Harper & Row, 1976), 148.

²⁴ Reta Halteman Finger, “Revelation 14:1-5: ‘All Saints’ Day’ in Zion,” *Christian Feminism Today*, <https://ewc.com/revelation-14-1-5-all-saints-day-in-zion/>.

The common Evangelical reading has been that what is in view here is the laws of Holy War where men were not permitted to have sexual relations with women while at war, because it made them and therefore the war ceremonially unclean.²⁵ This view has a lot to commend it, not the least of which is that the entire section is about holy war! However, there is one seemingly glaring problem, which is that those laws only forbade temporary relations. They never demanded virginity. But the men here in this passage are virgins!

For this reason, scholars have gone looking elsewhere for an explanation that makes sense, and the best option out there is that John is alluding to the sin of the watchers as described in 1 Enoch.²⁶ In Enoch, which greatly expands Genesis 6:1-4, once holy angels “cohabited with the daughters of the men of the earth, and had intercourse with them, and they were defiled by the females” (1En 9:8). Thus,

²⁵ For example, “There is holy bread-- if the young men have kept themselves from women.’ And David answered the priest, ‘Truly women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition. The vessels of the young men are holy even when it is an ordinary journey. How much more today will their vessels be holy?’” (1Sam 21:4-5). Or, “When you are encamped against your enemies, then you shall keep yourself from every evil thing. If any man among you becomes unclean because of a nocturnal emission, then he shall go outside the camp. He shall not come inside the camp” (Dt 23:9-10).

²⁶ Three works that deal with this are Olson (n. 19); Terel Manikam & Jan A. du Rand, “The 144,000 Undefined ‘Levites’ of Revelation 14:1-15 and the Link to the Defiled Watchers of 1 Enoch 1-36,” *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 94 (2012): 123-36; Michael Heiser, *Reversing Hermon: Enoch, The Watchers & The Forgotten Mission of Jesus Christ* (Crane, MO: Defender Publishing, 2017), 165-67 (see also the transcript of the Naked Bible Podcast in n. 8).

God commands the most severe punishment for these “watchers of heaven who have left the high heaven and the holy, eternal Sanctuary and have defiled themselves with women” (1En 12:4). Of course, this results in the giant offspring that become the demons of the Bible.

But among the sins committed here, and there was more than one, may be the fact that the watchers are eternal beings and therefore do not need to reproduce. Some interpret this as supposing they were to remain virgins forever. Instead, they defiled themselves with women. They committed the grossest kind of sacrilege, denying their eternal condition and crossing over to have relations with our women. Whether or not Enoch thinks that angels are supposed to remain virgins, it does seem very clear that John is alluding to this crime and his point is that the 144,000 redeemed stand in radical opposition to the fallen angels of Enoch.²⁷ In this way, John may also be playing into a very common idea with early Jews and in the early church which is that when Christians die, they become angels.²⁸ That has a potential

²⁷ Olson, 500.

²⁸ Olson cites Matt 19:12; Rom 8:14, 19-23; Gal 3:26; Col 1:12; Eph 1:18; 2:19 along with 1QH 3:21-22, “And I know there is hope for him whom Thou hast shaped from dust for the everlasting Council. Thou hast cleansed a perverse spirit of great sin that it may stand with the host of the Holy Ones, and that it may enter into community with the congregation of the Sons of Heaven. Thou hast allotted to man an everlasting destiny amidst the spirits of knowledge;” Clement of Alexandria (*Frg.* 2); Tertullian (*De res. Carn.* 62); the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (last second century), “Blessed are those who have fear of God, for they shall become angels of God;”

impact when read against the many angelic voices that follow these verses, not to mention if this is taking place in the heavenly Zion.

What I have not seen brought out is how this actually complements the holy war view. For what were the watchers actually doing in committing this deed? They were committing an act of war against our race according to the promise of Genesis 3:15 that the seed of the serpent would fight against the seed of the woman. The whole idea was that in creating a hybrid race that was not fully human, the woman would no longer have a Seed to crush the serpent's head. Therefore, the contrast to the watchers is even more stark. The 144,000, in overcoming the beast, have *not* defiled themselves in their holy war, but have remained steadfast and faithful to the Lamb whom they follow.

There is a further thought that scholars have taken with this Enoch-Watcher allusion. This is the idea that the Watcher's sin polluted their bodies and the heavenly temple. As such, we enter into the realm of Leviticus and holy space and unclean things (sinful or not), and especially, of priests.

Martyrdom of Polycarp 2:3 (second cent.) that “they are no longer men but were already angels;” the *Vision of Isaiah* how Isaiah became “equal to the angels” (*Asc Isa* 8:14-15); and others. John himself may allude to this by equating the wall of 144 cubits which is “a measure of a man, which is of an angel” (*Rev* 21:17), especially noting that gematria of *aggelos* (angel) transliterated into Hebrew adds up to 144.

Someone explains this concern for human (family) and heavenly purity of the watchers and priests this way,

The maintenance of family purity has as its primary goal the protection of the purity of the priesthood, and, at least on one level, the marriages of the angels seem to reflect a concern with illegitimate marriages on the part of the priests. The [story] is thus to be taken as a paradigm . . . of the origin of evil. Evil arises at both the cosmic and the human level as the result of rebellion against the divine will expressed in the laws that regulate the order of the cosmos or of society.²⁹

In this way, I want to move finally to **how the 144,000 reflect the new Levitical role** that God has given to his people in this holy war. Recall that Revelation has said that we, Christ's church—male and female—have become “**a kingdom, priests to his God and Father**” (**Rev 1:6; 5:10**). This language comes from Exodus 19. Exodus 19 is the story of how Israel was to **prepare themselves for God's coming** to them on Mt. Sinai with the giving of the Ten Commandments. God tells them that he is taking them to be his treasured possession among all the peoples and “**you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation**” (**Ex 19:5**).

²⁹ **D. Suter**, *Fallen Angel, Fallen Priest: The Problem of Family Purity in 1 Enoch 6:16*, Hebrew Union College Annual. Vol. 50 (1979): 116-17. Cited in **Manikam**, 134.

The situation is similar. The 144,000 are on the holy mountain (Ex 19:2, 23; Rev 14:1). They consist of twelve tribes (Ex 19:1, 3, 6; Rev 7:5-8). There is a voice from heaven (Ex 19:16; Rev 14:2). These are the people “redeemed” by God (Ex 19:4; Rev 14:3). At Sinai, they men were not to go near a woman (Ex 19:15; cf. Rev 14:4). Now we want to think about the remaining parts of our list that describes the 144,000.

Skipping that they follow the lamb wherever he goes, since we have already discussed this several times, “These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb” (Rev 14:4c). This is language directly associated with the tribe of Levi and the Levites and helps you see not only the priestly nature of the 144,000, but also how the number is symbolic of all Israel.

After Israel’s great sin against God at Sinai with the Golden Calf, the nation loses its status as a priestly nation.³⁰ But God graciously allows the Levites to become substitutes for their tribesmen (Num 3:9-13; 40-51; 8:14-19). Curiously, they reason why seems to be because Levi alone stands up for God in Holy War to purge the evil from

³⁰ See the excellent and thorough discussion in Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009), 136-58.

Israel (Num 8:18; cf. Gen 34:25; Ex 32:26-28; Num 25:11-12; etc.). In this way, the 144,000 are identical to the Levites in that they are substitutes for the whole of the church. Thus, in a very real sense, they in fact *are* the church.

But there is more priestly language that follows. First, “no lie was found in their mouth” (Rev 14:5a). This speaks to their **purity**. The parallel is found in Exodus 19:13 where the people had to wash their garments to be clean. This has to be the case, because this is not talking about sinless perfectionism, but being washed in the blood of the lamb. As it said in the parallel in Revelation 7, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” *Baptism.*

Second, “They are blameless” (Rev 14:5b). The parallel is in Exodus 19:8 when the people of Israel proclaim, “All that the LORD has spoken, we will do.” The kingdom of priests in Exodus was the type of the 144,000 priestly warriors of Revelation 14. And this now helps you see what it means when it describes the 144,000.

Christian, this passage teaches you about the war. As we have seen, Chapter 15 will show us beyond doubt that in this

war we **conquer the beast** and its image and the number of its name (**Rev 15:2**). That's the enemy. That's **the war**. It isn't a war of flesh and blood, but a fight against rulers and authorities and cosmic powers and spiritual forces of evil over this present darkness who reside in invisible, heavenly places (**Eph 6:12**).

The way you fight is by being strong in the word, both the law and the gospel. The Gospel tells you that Jesus has won the war by defeating sin, death, and the devil in his death and resurrection. Therefore, as we saw in the last chapter, this is **a call for the endurance and faith of the saints**. As we will see later in Revelation 14, this is **a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus**.

It is by faith alone that you are saved. Faith alone. Faith that the Lamb was slain for your sins. Faith that he is raised that you might have newness of life. *Faith is the victory that overcomes the world*. This faith causes the army of the Lamb to follow him wherever he goes. *I am a soldier of the Cross, a follower of the Lamb*, Watts sang.

But then he adds the Christian view of the law, as that which guides the Christian in his or her battle with sin. He adds,

And shall I fear to own His cause,
Or blush to speak His name?
Must I be carried to the skies
On flowery beds of ease,
While others fought to win the prize,
And sailed through bloody seas?
Are there no foes for me to face?
Must I not stem the flood?
Is this vile world a friend to grace,
To help me on to God?
Since I must fight if I would reign;
Increase my courage, Lord.
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain,
Supported by Thy Word.

*In the name of Christ the King,
Who hath purchased life for me,
Thro' grace I'll win the promised crown,
Whate'er my cross may be.*

That's the courage of the saints in the War of the Lamb. Those are the war songs of the Prince of Peace. That's how you face the coming challenges of your life, of the country, and of the world. Fight the good fight by following the Lamb alone, and he will win the victory—bringing you to

his God and Father because he has sealed you with the Holy Spirit and marked you as his, kept safe and secure, until the end of days and beyond.

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