

REVELATION'S "GREAT MULTITUDE"  
AS SAINTS IN THE INTERMEDIATE STATE:  
A SUGGESTION

Hugo Mendez

In Rev 7:9ff., John beholds "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands." Questions regarding the identity of those composing this masse are woven into the very biblical text, embodied in a narrative dialogue:

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

For this reason they are before the throne of God,  
and worship him day and night within his temple,  
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

...  
(7:13-15)

According to 7:15, the multitude worships "before the throne of God. . . day and night within his temple." Several texts explicitly locate this edifice "in heaven" (11:19; 14:17; 15:5); no such edifice exists on earth (cf. 21:22). Furthermore, a time before the descent of the New Jerusalem is in view; at that point the throne of God no longer fills a celestial structure, but graces the earth (cf. 21:2-3,22-23). Indeed, this "great multitude in heaven" is elsewhere depicted rejoicing over the fall of Babylon (Rev 19:1-3), and anticipating the "marriage supper of the Lamb" (20:6-8), indicating its presence and activity in heaven *before* the second coming of Christ.

As ones "who have come out of the great ordeal" (7:14) before the coming of Christ,<sup>1</sup> the members of this multitude could consist of the

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1. Some attempt to isolate the time of the "great ordeal" to a specific time immediately preceding the coming of Christ (inspired by Dan 12:1). However, the liberal uses of the term *thlipsis* in 1:9; 2:9-10,22 suggest the opposite; in this apocalypse, Christians presently experience "great ordeal" (cf. Beale, G. K., *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek

righteous dead.<sup>2</sup> Reinforcing this inference is their possession of rewards promised those who “conquer,” including “white robes” (7:9; cf. 3:5), and a place within the temple (7:15; cf. 3:12).<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, the apocalypse identifies those who “conquer” as those who *complete* their lives in faithfulness, especially by enduring martyrdom: 12:11; 2:10-11,26 (following the pattern of the crucified Christ: 5:5), and therefore correspond to the righteous dead. Indeed, the white robes they wear (7:9) are given to martyrs *after death*, as “souls” in the intermediate state (6:11). Additionally, their beatitude (7:15-17) is loosely reminiscent of the “rest” promised the righteous dead (6:11; 14:13).

In 6:11, the martyrs receive word that they will not realize full vindication until “the number would be complete. . . of their brothers and

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Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 433-435. Although Christ prophesies of a coming “hour of trial to test “the inhabitants of the earth” (a term referring exclusively to the wicked: 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8; 17:2,8), he notes that the saints are exempt from that hour, better understood in this light as plagues.

2. If one interprets the pericope as a vision of the final triumph of the saints at the second coming, then the full number of the righteous (including the living) is included. Still, the presence and activity of this “great multitude” in heaven immediately preceding the second coming (19:1-3,6-8) recommends its (even partial) identification with the righteous dead.

Neall observes that the Greek verb translated “come out” is better rendered “coming out,” suggesting that the “tribulation is still in progress as this scene takes place” (Neall, Beatrice, “Sealed Saints and the Tribulation,” *Symposium on Revelation—Book I*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series 6, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 270). She suggests that the saints are only spiritually present in heaven; they continue to endure (synchronous) tribulation on earth—a conclusion eerily evocative of an amillennial reading of the apocalypse (Neall, 270-272). This interpretation suggests that the saints anticipate, but have not yet realized, the goal of “coming out.” However, the ambiguity attending the tense of the verb, and the possession of the rewards of “conquering,” is suggestive of a realized goal: the saints “have come out” or “are coming out” (already and successively) of the “great ordeal.” Either option better corresponds to the situation of the righteous dead.

Of course, one may still incorporate an amillennial interpretation of the great multitude into the view proposed in this paper. The “coming to life” of the souls in 20:4 could correspond to their accession of the celestial life depicted in 7:9-17, for instance. Further support for an amillennial reading emerges from the correspondence of 7:9 to 5:9-10; those constituting the “great multitude” in heaven already constitute “a kingdom and priests” before God—a status accessed at the millennium (cf. 20:4-6).

3. Palm branches also indicate victory (Beale, 428).

sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.” Could Rev 7’s fascination with enumerating the righteous recall that condition, and signal the completion (or *completing*) of that number?<sup>4</sup> If so, the “great multitude” represents the total (or nearly total) number of the martyrs—an apt prelude to the opening of the final seal (8:1).

The model presented in this paper is not the only viable solution to the “great multitude,” but it is particularly persuasive. Drawing upon several lines of evidence within the apocalypse, it has strong arguments in its favor. Adventists would do well to explore the identity of the “great multitude” cheering the end of the world from heaven; the data in Revelation may have significant repercussions on Adventist conceptions of the intermediate state.

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4. If the 144,000 and the great multitude are indeed the same group, as many commentators agree (Neall, 269; Beale, 425), the perfection of the figure “144,000” would fittingly express their totality. Rev 7:1-8 represents the predestination of the righteous to glory; in turn, 7:9-17 represents their (full, or continuing) realization of the same. (The question of whether the chapter depicts the great multitude as complete or in a process of completion depends upon the tense of the verb “come out,” as discussed in n. 2.)

If one does identify the “great multitude” with the 144,000, further analogies could be made to the visions of 7:1-8; 14:1-5; 15:2-4. The latter text does not enumerate the saints it depicts, but they carry harps like those in 14:2. Neither does the text refer to these saints by the formulaic “great multitude,” though they also stand in the same location as the great multitude. (The saints in 15:2-4 stand “beside the sea of glass” mixed with fire [15:2]; this location is “before the throne” [4:6], and is the dwelling of the heavenly creatures [4:6, cf. 4:4; 5:11], as well as the great multitude [7:15]). Of note, these saints are those “who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name” (15:2), which evidently explains why the great multitude in 7:9-17 wear rewards of conquest (e.g., white robes: 7:9; cf. 3:5).