



Why do the Jehovah Witnesses believe that only 144,000 people (the first 144,000 Jehovah's Witnesses) will get to heaven?

This is one of the questions I get whenever the topic of Jehovah's Witnesses comes up - as it did when we were studying what they believe in Bible Study forum a couple Sundays ago.

In the book of Revelation the Bible talks about 144,000 being "sealed" for eternity with God. The belief that this is the actual number of people who will be in heaven comes from a basic error in interpretation: Taking literally something that was intended to be symbolic.

For example. If I say, *"In my mind's eye I can see our new church building,"* a literal interpretation would lead you to believe that I actually have a third eye buried somewhere in my brain. What I was trying to say, however, was that in my imagination I can picture how a certain thing might look. There's no third eye lurking inside my mind.

We do the same type of thing with numbers. *"I've got a million of them in my yard,"* might be a typical comment I might make about the box elder bugs. I didn't literally mean that there are one million bugs in our yard. What I were simply indicating is that there are tons of them. Oops. I just used another symbolic "figure of speech." see how often we use them in language?). "Tons" doesn't mean there are at least 4000 pounds of the goofy bugs. It simply means that there are a lot of them - more than we care to have.

You get the idea. When we take literally things that were not meant to be taken literally, we're going to end up with a totally different meaning than what the speaker intended.

The book of Revelation is a type of literature known as "apocalyptic." It deals with prophecy. Prophecy specifically about the Second Coming of Christ and the ultimate defeat of evil. Apocalyptic/prophetic literature is typically very symbolic. To read it literally would be get into the same kinds of trouble as if you thought I had a third eye buried in my mind or that I actually have 4000 pounds of box elder bugs in my yard. You'd "miss the boat" (symbolically, of course) on what I really meant. Yet that's what Charles Russell (founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses) did with Revelation 7:4, 14:1 and 14:3. He took the figure to be a literal figure when in reality 144,000 is symbolic.

So, what is 144,000 a symbol for Well, 144,000 is the same as $12 \times 12 \times 1000$. In the book of Revelation the number 12 is symbolic for the church. (12 Tribes in the Old Testament church; 12 apostles in the New Testament church.) The number 1000 in Bible times was symbolic for an extremely large number - too many to count. (Kind of like when I said there are "millions" of box elder bugs.) So what is most likely being indicated in the passage is that those who are "sealed" for heaven are all the believers (an extremely large number - too many to count) from both the Old Testament and New Testament times. Quite a different interpretation from just the "first 144,000 people who became Jehovah's Witnesses."

So, that brings up the question, "How do we know when to interpret something literally or symbolically?" I could probably spend a lot more time on that one. But the simple answer is this: The context. Is the

type of literature typically symbolic or literal? Does the situation give an indication that the speaker /writer is meaning it to be taken literally or symbolically? The context of Revelation definitely points us to a symbolic meaning.

Thanks for asking,
Pastor David

Send your questions to <mailto:pastor@livingwordlutheran.net>