A QUESTION ABOUT NUMBERS

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Category: Language In the Bible

Cross-cultural missionaries, such as myself, place a great deal of emphasis on Revelation 7:9.

> *After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.*

The statement that people from every tribe, people and language (or tribe, tongue and nation in other translations) is a very precious one to people who are involved in bringing God's Word to the minority groups of the world. It is a huge assurance to know that there will be representatives from every people group in eternity. Or will there?

Lately, I've started to have a few doubts about the way in which this verse has been read. I'm not sure of my ground here, so I'll tread lightly, but let's ask the question: does this verse really say that there will be people from every ethnolinguistic group in heaven?

The first thing to note is that this passage occurs in the Book of Revelation and belongs to a literary genre called apocalyptic. Apocalyptic literature uses an awful lot of colourful, descriptive language which was never meant to be taken literally. You can get into all sorts of doctrinal and practical confusion if you forget that Revelation is apocalyptic and start taking it literally.

Secondly, John's description of the crowd is clearly not meant to be taken literally. He says that the crowd could not be counted. Of course it could, if everyone stood still for long enough and someone had the patience, the could have counted the crowd. This is clearly a figurative statement indicating that there were an awful lot of people there! If John starts off by using a deliberate hyperbole, it doesn't take a huge leap to imagine that the rest of the phrase is not to be taken too literally either.

My third point is a pragmatic one. Nations have been coming and going all through history and many ethnolinguistic groups simply vanished from the map long before the Christian Gospel made it to their part of the world. I'm not sure what would need to happen or how a special case could be made for these groups to get a special dispensation for representation in eternity.

Does it matter if this passage was not intended to be taken literally? Well it would probably mean that a lot of mission publicity material would need to be rewritten! Seriously, I don't think it should make a great deal of difference because our responsibility to make disciples at home and around the world would not change in the slightest. The Church would still have a call to witness to Christ at home and around the world.

So why ask the question? Because the Bible is important and we have to take reading the Bible seriously, we shouldn't accept a possibly dodgy reading just because it fits our missionary strategy or we have never thought to question it before.

I'd value your thoughts on the interpretation of this verse in the comments.