

The first reference to the afterlife in Revelation occurs in ch. 6, with the breaking of the fifth seal (6:9-11). Nothing happens on earth, but the prophet sees the souls of those who had been “slaughtered for the word of God” and the “witness they gave” under an altar in heaven, as they cry out to God: “How long before you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on earth?” An altar, of course, is the point of contact between God and humans, so these martyrs for Christ have a special access to the divine presence. They want to be vindicated for their faithfulness. But they are deferred in their wishes: each is given a white robe and told they need to “rest a little while longer,” until all their fellow Christians also destined for martyrdom have met their fates.

These other martyrs are described in chapter seven, after the breaking of the sixth seal. There are two groups: 144,000 Jews, twelve thousand from each of the twelve tribes, and “an enormous crowd that no one could number” from among peoples of “every nation” (Revelation 7:4-9). The numbers are staggering, and cannot be used to document how many Christians were actually martyred for their faith in John’s time. In periods of persecution, it often seems to those who are suffering that their entire population is being decimated. But there were not even 144,000 Christians in the world at the time, and recent studies have convincingly shown that martyrdom was rare rather than regular. (See Candida Moss, [The Myth of Christian Persecution](#)).

It is striking that for the entire book of Revelation ...

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