Ephraim is conspicuous by its absence in the list of twelve tribes given in Rev. 7:4-8. This list of tribes, from whom the 144,000 are to be sealed, is unique in known ancient literature, as it includes Joseph and Manasseh but not Ephraim. The few previous attempts to explain this aspect of the list have been unpersuasive. R. Bauckham observed recently that the list’s inclusion of Joseph and his son Manasseh, rather than either just Joseph or his two sons, “is unparalleled and has never been explained.” This note proposes that Ephraim was excluded from the list as part of a polemic against Pharisees.

Two other notable features of the list of twelve tribes in Rev. 7:4-8 have been accounted for plausibly. These two features also show that the make-up of the list is not merely a random grouping of twelve names, but that it conveys symbolic meaning. First, also absent from the list is the tribe of Dan. Many commentators attribute this omission to possible associations of Dan with idolatry; idolatry is a major concern in Revelation. Second, Judah is placed

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1 The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993) 221. On pages 221-22 in his chapter titled, “The Apocalypse as a Christian War Scroll,” Bauckham first dismisses the proposal of an error in copying which would have confused Dan and Manasseh, then he offers two alternate proposals involving a mistaken exegesis by the author of Revelation of either Ezekiel 37 or Numbers 1. Bauckham does not present these with confidence; he begins, “Possibly...” (his italics). These two proposals are not persuasive, because they involve reading Joseph in Rev. 7:8 as if intended to mean Ephraim; but it is not clear why the author of Revelation would so misread either of these passages in the manner suggested. Even if that were the case, and he conflated Joseph and Ephraim, the mention of Manasseh in Rev. 7:6 would still be anomalous. Bauckham does provide an excellent survey and bibliography, to which may be added S. Pines, “Notes on the Twelve Tribes in Qumran, Early Christianity and Jewish Tradition,” Messiah and Christos: Studies in the Jewish Origins of Christianity Presented to David Flusser on the Occasion of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday (ed. I. Gruenwald, S. Shaked and G.G. Stroumsa; Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum 32; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1992) 151-54.

2 See, e.g., Judg. 18:30 and 1 Kgs 12:29. Bauckham (The Climax of Prophecy, 223) dismisses the relevance of speculation (in, e.g., Irenacus, Adv. Haer. 5.30.2)
at the head of the list. This place of prominence is reasonably considered as a manifestation of the Christian view of Jesus as the Davidic Messiah with ancestry from Judah. Nonetheless, it is worth noting further that Judah is also a term used self-descriptively by Qumran Essenes.

In several sectarian texts from Qumran the name Ephraim is used symbolically for "those who seek smooth things," הָלָה הָלָה . For example, in 4QpNah 3-4 ii 2 the commentator interprets Nah. 3:1a as follows: "The interpretation of it: this is the city of Ephraim—the Seekers-After-Smooth-Things at the end of days—who in deceit and false[hood c]onduct themselves." Numerous scholars have correctly recognized the phrase הָלָה הָלָה as a pun against those who pursue הָלָה, i.e., the Pharisees. Though the Qumran Essenes surely pursued their own legal exegesis and determinations, it should be clearly noted that nowhere in the known Qumran manuscripts do Essenes call their own legal decisions הָלָה הָלָה .

It is interesting that Jubilees, which retells most of the content of Genesis, omits any retelling of Gen. 48:1-20 in which Ephraim receives a greater blessing than his older brother, Manasseh. See J.C. VanderKam, The Book of Jubilees (CSCO 510-11, Scriptores Aethiopici 87-88; Louvain: E. Peeters, 1989).


This assessment is based on the published texts known to me, and on inquiries made to some of the Qumran editors, including consultation of J.A. Fitzmyer, et al., A Preliminary Concordance to the Hebrew and Aramaic Fragments From Qumran... (Göttingen: photocopied, 1988). Also I did not find the term הָלָה הָלָה in any of the microfiche photographs of 4Q251, called 4QHalakah by J. Milik (and also known as 4QLegal Commentary on the Torah), and of 4Q524, called 4QHalakhic.