

# Introduction to the Revelation of Jesus Christ\*

## The Theme: "I am the Alpha and the Omega"

The key to understanding the theme of *Revelation* is in God's statement in Rev 1:8:

8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

God repeated this theme at the end of *Revelation* in chapter 21:6:

6 Then He said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost.

In Rev 22:13-15, Jesus, the Lord, takes the *Alpha and Omega* characteristic unto himself, promising the tree of life and entrance through the heavenly city to the truly *blessed*. The evil and pleasure-seekers remain outside. He said in Rev 22:13-14

13 "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city. 15 Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying.

This theme of *Revelation* is God's emphatic declaration, supported by the all-powerful images and figures of the book, that He and Jesus, the Lord, the only begotten son, are the Alpha and Omega, and no other. This A to Z imagery, which is the beginning and end and encompasses everything in between and which in a figure describes a oneness explained in John 1:1-4, 14:

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

14 And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The book is not a symbolical assertion of the iniquities of the Romans as the oppressors of the early church, although that was bad, indeed. Nor is the book about the destruction of Jerusalem and a coming of the Lord at that time. Nor is it about the Roman Empire, the Roman Catholic Church, the barbaric hordes, or the Muslims. The connection

\* All scripture are from the NASU, unless other wise noted.

that institutions and governments have to the content of *Revelation* is one where the people who compose them are defiant, evil, immoral, and rebellious, or submissive, good, moral, and obedient, as the case may be.

This great theme—I am the Alpha and the Omega—centers on the power and eternal nature of an almighty God and His only begotten son as their power is arrayed against the heavenly hosts of wickedness—a theme so powerful that it dwarfs nations, philosophic arguments, and theological speculations. Since there are so many digressions and speculative interpretations from the real theme of *Revelation*, time, and space will not allow their refutation or, indeed, their reiteration. The text that follows may allude to some of these in passing, but the text claims no fairness or justice in the treatment of these many viewpoints. Instead, the text will make the case for an interpretation based on the theme that the Lord God and Jesus, the Lord, are the Alpha and the Omega. A consistency of treatment of the symbolism will emerge, clarifying what many efforts have obscured, as they force The *Revelation* into preconceived notions, ideas, and temporal events and happenings in the history of the past and the future of man. It is with an open mind that we now “hear the words of this prophecy.”

Special and insightful clarifications come from paying close attention to the apostle Paul’s interaction with the philosophies of the age, especially those that he confronted in Athens, recorded in Acts 17. Paul found Athens full of idols, which was very distressing to him. Paul reasoned with the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles in the synagogue, but also took the gospel to the people in the marketplace. Here, Epicurean and Stoic philosophers challenged Paul, who was fulfilling the Great Commission by preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection to all men. Primarily Paul engaged two groups of philosophers--the Epicureans and Stoics.

### The Epicureans

The Epicureans followed the philosophy of Epicurus who was born on the island of Samos in 341 BC, and who taught first in Asia Minor and afterward in Athens till his death in 270 BC. That the philosophy spread widely in Asia Minor makes it influential to the everyday lives of the churches of the seven cities of Asia. Jesus orders John to write to these seven churches in chapters Revelations 1 and 2. (Some notes are from *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Electronic Database Copyright © 1996, 2003 by BibleSoft, Inc.)

Epicurus taught:

“The aim and end of life for every man is his own happiness, and happiness is primarily defined as pleasure. ‘Wherefore we call pleasure the **Alpha and Omega of a blessed life** [Emphasis added]. Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge every good

thing” (Epicurus, Letter to Menoecus from International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Electronic Database Copyright © 1996, 2003 by Biblesoft, Inc.).

Epicurus used the phrases *Alpha and Omega* and *blessed life* to describe his pleasure-dominated philosophy. These same words become the thesis-setting words of *Revelation*. In chapter 1:3, John uses the word *blessed* of people very different from Epicurus’ pleasure seekers: “Blessed is he that reads, and they that hear the words of the prophecy, and keep the things that are written therein: for the time is at hand.”

The comparison in language is so stunningly the same that there can be no coincidence. A similarly stunning comparison occurs in the thesis-setting words of Rev 1:8, which follow immediately: “8 I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” That is to say neither Epicurus and nor the central element of the Epicurean philosophy—pleasure—are the Alpha and Omega. Only the Almighty God and his son Jesus take these words and the preeminence and power that such words convey.

The origin of Epicurus’ philosophy lends even more credence to its being a primary target of *Revelation* and its symbolism. His birth off the coast of Asia Minor on Samos and the spread of his popular, hedonistic philosophy across the region, give great meaning to these phrases as used by Lord God, the Almighty, and Christ, the Lord, in the Revelation. When God said, “8 I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” An Epicurean audience would know immediately that God was directly attacking their pleasure-dominated philosophy. Blessedness is not in pleasure; it is in the Lord God, the almighty. God repeated the same strong teaching in Rev 21:6-8 for righteousness and against hedonistic pleasure. Near the completion of His revelation He said:

6 Then He said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. 7 "He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son. 8 "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

God sets the inheritance of the faithful against the tragic second death of pleasure-seekers of every kind. In Rev 22:13-15, Jesus takes the *alpha and omega* characteristic unto himself, promising the tree of life and entrance through the heavenly city to the truly *blessed*. Thus, he adds the Godhead to the Alpha and Omega symbol. The evil and pleasure-seekers remain outside:

13 "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city. 15 Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying.

*Revelation* also makes clear the truly blessed are not the pleasure-seekers but those who follow the Lord:

Rev 1:3: 3 Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.

Rev 14:13-14: 13 And I heard a voice from heaven, saying, "Write, 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!'" "Yes," says the Spirit, "so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them."

Rev 16:15-16: 15 ("Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes, so that he will not walk about naked and men will not see his shame.")

Rev 19:9-10: 9 Then he said to me, "Write, 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.'" And he said to me, "These are true words of God."

Rev 20:6: 6 Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.

Rev 22:7: 7 "And behold, I am coming quickly. Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book."

Blessedness ( a Godlike happiness) is not in pleasure. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, efforts to make worship the feel-good province of the praise worshipers have echoes of the problems confronted by the churches of Asia and Greece. Truth comes only from God and those who worship him must worship "in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). It is not the feelings or insights of the worshiper that count, but the pleasure of God. The danger then and now is that the disciples fellowship the unbelievers and fellowship the demons whom these unbelievers worship. Paul stated the case in 1 Cor 10:18-22:

18 Look at the nation Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices sharers in the altar? 19 What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? 20 No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons. 21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. 22 Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? We are not stronger than He, are we?

That Paul reiterated the same argument in 2 Cor 6:14-17 only emphasizes how critical it is that Christians understand the deceptive and enticing nature of human religions and philosophies surrounding them:

14 Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? 15 Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? 16 Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said,

"I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM;  
AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE.

17 "Therefore, COME OUT FROM THEIR MIDST AND BE SEPARATE,"  
says the Lord.

### The Stoics

The people of Asia Minor knew very well the other philosophy addressed by Paul in Athens. This group, the Stoics, derived their name, Stoic, from the Stoa Poikile, the painted porch at Athens, where the founders of the school first lectured. This school of Greek philosophy was founded at Athens circa 294 BC by Zeno (circa 336 BC - 264 BC), a native of Citium, a Greek colony in Cyprus. But the Semitic race predominated in Cyprus, and it has been conjectured that Zeno was of Semitic, rather than Hellenic origin. This would have given him close ties to the religions of the Samaritans and Hebrews, both of which looked to the almighty God of the five books of Moses. It is from this background that Paul refers to an unknown god in Acts 16:23. Zeno's Greek critics taunted him with being a Phoenician. It suggests, therefore, that the distinctive moral tone of the system was Semitic and not Hellenic. The centers, among others, were Tarsus and Sidon. Paul, who was formerly Saul of Tarsus, would have known with certainty the Stoic precepts. In the 2nd century B.C., the doctrine came to Rome where it spread widely among the upper classes of Roman society. The philosophy with a center in Tarsus would influence the cities of Asia. Whether from Rome, Athens, or from Taurus, these seven cities were in a crossroads of Stoic influence.

The system acquired its most lasting influence when Rome adopted some of its precepts as the formative factor in the jurisprudence of imperial Rome and Roman law. As the Roman church assimilated aspects of the Romans and Roman law, the philosophy also contributed to the formation of Roman Catholic doctrine and ethics. The main principles of Stoicism may be summarized:

Adherents follow nature.

The law of Nature is reason (logos)--the principle of intelligence in man, and the divine reason imminent in the world.

Their metaphysics inclined to be a materialistic pantheism. On the one side, Nature is the organization of material atoms by the operation of its own uniform and necessary laws. On the other side, it is a living, rational being, subduing all its parts to work out a rational purpose inherent in the whole. As such, it may be called Providence or God.

[These notes on the Stoics are in part from *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, Electronic Database Copyright © 1996, 2003 by Biblesoft, Inc.]

Modern religions reflect the influence of Stoicism, when they seek rational answers from within themselves, their councils, clergy, and conventions, denying the infallibility of the inspired word of God as the only rule of faith and practice. Again the apostle Paul summarized the case against these reason-dominated philosophies in Col 2:8:

8 See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. 9 For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, 10 and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority;

## Application

This study will show that the enemy of the church in Asia, and by extension, of all churches for all times, was the two evils generating from the prevailing philosophies in Asia Minor. One philosophy—Epicurean—centered on pleasures with its lust of flesh and the lust of the eyes and the vain glory of life. The other—Stoic—centered on man's own reason as the final arbitrator of faith and doctrine, the very core of boastful and vain glorious man. Of these, John wrote in 1 John 2:15-18:

15 Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. 17 The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.

Of the human wisdom from which both philosophies come, Paul wrote in 1 Cor 1:18-21:

18 For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written,

"I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE,  
AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE."

20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God

was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

As *Revelation* unfolds, the wounded beast will reign over some men through their evil lusts and the false prophet will reign over other men through their empty, human reason. Of course, Satan—the serpent, the dragon, the great deceiver—will reign over the wounded beast and the false prophet. These evils and personalities play out within the human experience for mortal and immortal stakes transcending governments, religions, and economies. Those humans who constitute earthly organizations make them evil.

However, God almighty, the Alpha and the Omega, the King of Kings, reigns over all and above all, and with him, reign his son—also called the Alpha and the Omega, the King of Kings—and those who are dressed in white garments, which are the righteous acts of the saints in Rev 19:5-8:

5 And a voice came from the throne, saying,

"Give praise to our God, all you His bond-servants, you who fear Him, the small and the great." 6 Then I heard something like the voice of a great multitude and like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, saying,

"Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.

7 "Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready." 8 It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

## Reading Figurative Language

Revelation 1:20 explains the mystery and symbolism of the seven stars and the seven golden lampstands:

20 "As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Many of the metaphors and figures that follow in the Revelation will be explained in the text. We are not free to speculate in cases where the exact meaning is given. When the meaning is not in the text, we must understand that metaphoric language uses two or more things that are essentially unlike. Therefore, lampstands are not literally churches. What do they have in common? Churches are a light to the world.

Matt 5:16: 16 "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

1 Cor 4:5: 5 Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God.

Eph 5:8-11: 8 for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light 9 (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), 10 trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.

If the meaning is not in the text, we must next look to other passages on the subject, making sure there is no contradiction. The figures of speech in the Bible have a meaning provided by the Holy Spirit who searches the spiritual things of God. Man is not free to speculate what the meaning might be. Paul explains this in 1 Cor 2:10-13:

10 For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. 11 For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, 13 which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.

It is from these symbols that the Spirit illuminates truth. People have no frame of reference outside their own experiences. These objects and experiences of daily life reveal what was hidden, thus illuminating the spiritual meaning. Since the meaning is from God, we have no right to speculate. The meaning will always be the same to all people. Mankind is not permitted to speculate in regard to these matters. Revelation reveals God's mystery.

### No Scriptures Are of Private Interpretation

Paul revealed the unwavering authority and infallibility of the scriptures in 2 Tim 3:16-17:





16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17 so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

There is only one way to read *furnished completely*; just as there is only one way to read *every scripture*. Peter was equally unequivocal in asserting the standard for interpretation in 2 Peter 1:19-21:

19 So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. 20 But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, 21 for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

One cannot make up interpretations of God's word, for the scriptures are not open to imaginary constructs from the mind of man. One cannot separate the will of God from the Spirit of God, telling what the deep things of God are. It has been this way from the beginning—from Genesis to Revelation. When Pharaoh's butler and cupbearer sought the interpretation of their dreams from Joseph, Joseph revealed an eternal and abiding truth about prophecy in Gen 40:8:

Gen 40:8

8 Then they said to him, "We have had a dream and there is no one to interpret it." Then Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God?"

How more certain could it be? The interpretations of God's prophecies, dreams, and visions belong to God. Man is not free to render the deep things of God, just any way that he might like in his own mind and imaginings. Later, in Gen 41:8, Pharaoh had difficulty with interpreting his dreams:

8 Now in the morning his spirit was troubled, so he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt, and all its wise men. And Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them to Pharaoh.

When Pharaoh called on Joseph to help him, Joseph answered forever the question of who holds the deep meanings of God, whether the meaning of visions, dreams, or prophecies. In Gen 41:15-16, Joseph answered emphatically:

15 Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, but no one can interpret it; and I have heard it said about you, that when you hear a dream you can interpret it." 16 Joseph then answered Pharaoh, saying, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer."

Neither can modern man do it, for the answer is in the mind of God. Moses went on to write in Gen 41:32:

32 "Now as for the repeating of the dream to Pharaoh twice, it means that the matter is determined by God, and God will quickly bring it about.

When He gives visions, dreams, and prophecies, God has firmly decided the meaning. People are not and have never been free to decide the meaning at the pleasure of their human thoughts and imagination, as if it were some romantic novel, some work of science fiction, or some verse from Shakespeare himself.

Daniel, when confronted with the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, reiterated the teachings of Joseph on the matter of interpretation, teaching that the very same principles apply across the centuries. Our story begins in Dan 2:19-23:

19 Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a night vision. Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven; 20 Daniel said,

"Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever,  
For wisdom and power belong to Him.

21 "It is He who changes the times and the epochs;  
He removes kings and establishes kings;  
He gives wisdom to wise men  
And knowledge to men of understanding.

22 "It is He who reveals the profound and hidden things;  
He knows what is in the darkness,  
And the light dwells with Him.

23 "To You, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise,  
For You have given me wisdom and power;  
Even now You have made known to me what we requested of You,  
For You have made known to us the king's matter."

When the king questioned Daniel (Dan 2:26-27), he replied without hesitation that God reveals and interprets his mysteries:

26 The king said to Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, "Are you able to make known to me the dream which I have seen and its interpretation?" 27 Daniel answered before the king and said, "As for the mystery about which the king has inquired, neither wise men, conjurers, magicians nor diviners are able to declare it to the king. 28 "However, there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will take place in the latter days.

The dream revealed God's plan for the coming of Christ and his kingdom in Dan 2:31-35

Therefore, this study shall make every effort to allow the scripture to illuminate scripture for, truly the Scriptures and the interpretation of Scriptures belong to God. Rev 10:5-7 teaches:

5 Then the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land lifted up his right hand to heaven, 6 and swore by Him who lives forever and ever, WHO CREATED HEAVEN AND THE THINGS IN IT, AND THE EARTH AND THE THINGS IN IT, AND THE SEA AND THE THINGS IN IT, that there will be delay no longer, 7 but in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound, then the mystery of God is finished, as He preached to His servants the prophets.

The mystery of God is the same for us as it was for the prophets who spoke the mystery; and so is the interpretation the same—see Rev 10:5-7.

5 Then the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land lifted up his right hand to heaven, 6 and swore by Him who lives forever and ever, WHO CREATED HEAVEN AND THE THINGS IN IT, AND THE EARTH AND THE THINGS IN IT, AND THE SEA AND THE THINGS IN IT, that there will be delay no longer, 7 but in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound, then the mystery of God is finished, as He preached to His servants the prophets.