

## Introduction to Notes on the Revelation

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

The key to understanding the theme of *Revelation* is in God's statement in chapter 1:8 "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: "He said to me: 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life.'" 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, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End."

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. 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 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 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 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 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, forcing *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 Biblsoft, 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 Menoeceus from International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Electronic Database Copyright © 1996, 2003 by Biblsoft, 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 those very different from Epicurus’ pleasure seekers: “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.” 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: “‘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, “I am the Alpha and the Omega 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 at the completion of his revelation:

6 He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega , the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. 7 He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. 8 But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This 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, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. 15 Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

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

- 3 Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. Rev 1:3.
- 13 Then I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord

from now on." Rev 14:13

- 15 "Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed." Rev 16:15
- 9 Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'" And he added, "These are the true words of God." Rev 19:9
- 6 Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years. Rev 20:5-6
- 7 "Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book." Rev 22:7

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:

Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? 19 Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? 20 No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. 21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.

That he 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 philosophies surrounding them:

Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? 15 What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? 16 What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."

17 "Therefore come out from them  
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 by its adoption 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.

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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: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ."

### ***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 and the lusts of eye and flesh; and the other—Stoic—centered on man's own reason as the final arbitrator of faith and doctrine, the very core of boastful man. Of these, John wrote in 1 John 2:15-17:

15 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world. 17 The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

Of the human wisdom from which both philosophies come, Paul wrote:

18 For the message 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;  
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher 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 know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. 1 Cor 1:18-21:

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 humankind 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, reigns over all and above all, and with him, reigns his son, the king of kings, and those who are dressed in white garments, which are the righteous acts of the saints:

For the wedding of the Lamb has come,  
and his bride has made herself ready.

8 Fine linen, bright and clean,  
was given her to wear."

(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints). Rev 19:7-8