

## **Revelation 1**

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, <sup>5</sup>and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed<sup>[d]</sup> us from our sins by his blood, <sup>6</sup>and made<sup>[e]</sup> us to be a kingdom, priests serving<sup>[f]</sup> his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

<sup>7</sup>Look! He is coming with the clouds;  
every eye will see him,  
even those who pierced him;  
and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.  
So it is to be. Amen.

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

## Revelation 22:8-21 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

### Epilogue and Benediction

<sup>8</sup>I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me; <sup>9</sup>but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant<sup>[a]</sup> with you and your comrades<sup>[b]</sup> the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God!"

<sup>10</sup>And he said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. <sup>11</sup>Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy."

<sup>12</sup>"See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. <sup>13</sup>I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

<sup>14</sup>Blessed are those who wash their robes,<sup>[c]</sup> so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. <sup>15</sup>Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

<sup>16</sup>"It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star."

<sup>17</sup>The Spirit and the bride say, "Come."  
And let everyone who hears say, "Come."

And let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

<sup>18</sup>I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; <sup>19</sup>if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

<sup>20</sup>The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon."

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

<sup>21</sup>The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

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**The Beginning and the End, Alpha and Omega**

**Revelation 1 (excerpts) Revelation 22:8-21**

**Kerra Becker English**

There's a strange kind of proclamation happening through the bookends of Revelation, one that is not new to us, and yet, we struggle to grasp its meaning. What does it mean when we hear, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end?" For one thing, it signals that this is an end-times book. And we've all heard it get used that way. Maybe you remember the book series *Left Behind* that was made into a movie with Kirk Cameron in 2000, then re-made with Nicolas Cage in 2014. Both films were panned for their terrible plots and even worse acting. Not to mention that there aren't enough rotten tomatoes to aptly critique the bad theology! But then again, maybe you've been kind enough on a rainy day to let the door-knocking brand of Christians into your house to chat. The Jehovah's witnesses are quick to point out that the book of Revelation caps the quota for heaven at 144,000 people, perhaps even as soon as you let them in the door. How do you counteract that? Are you willing to say that you think God loves a few more people than that given the billions of them that have walked the earth? Or perhaps you've been questioned by a neighbor or acquaintance you know who is focused on the earth's last days – especially as we have just narrowed the number of candidates for

the 2016 Presidential election down to two. John may have written his vision down with Rome in mind, but it also brings to mind the past destruction of Babylon, and future empires like Nazi Germany, and any other historical time when we imagine that a nation-state with great power and influence looks like it is about to explode and take the rest of the known world down with it. Armed with a little bit of historical perspective, you might be able to help your neighbor see that the “end-times” have come and gone many times over. The world changes, but so far, it has continued to support life through some pretty rough ages of human folly.

But lest I wander too far from the subject I want to address. Simply be mindful, that when reading Revelation, folks can get hyper-focused on the ending, and with reason. We are scared of such an ending. It seems so much more traumatic to think that the world as we know it could all end at once, in a nightmare of fire and brimstone. It seems to make this vision even more dramatic than knowing that each of us will face our own deaths one day. Trust me, end times are inevitable. And yet the proclamation we get about Christ in these two texts, which are echoes of the prologue to John’s gospel, and the Christological hymns found in the first chapters of Colossians and Hebrews, and the opening chapter of first John, is that Christ is both BEGINNING and Ending, first and the last, from point A to point Z. And that can be a real mind-blower as well.

My mother tells a story on me that as a young kid, I had asked her where I was before I was born. Of course she took this at first as a “where do babies come from” kind of question. When I kept saying, no, not that, she figured out that wasn’t what I was asking. I was asking about where I was BEFORE that. I couldn’t imagine that there would be a time when I wasn’t – but that was many years ago now. Sadly, perhaps, I don’t wonder about those things in quite the same way anymore. Human beings arguably have a beginning and an ending. We are born and we die. But our spiritual selves are inclined to push those boundaries of before and after. It was a great question, if I do say so myself. Was there a “me” even before I was born? Biblical writers were willing to explore that question, at least about this person they knew as Jesus – who seemed to walk in much bigger shoes than any human being they had known before or since.

So being a friend of mystical thinking as he is, Richard Rohr might say, now is the time to remind you that “Christ” is not Jesus’ last name. Jesus of Nazareth, born to Mary, the carpenter, the friend of tax collectors, women, and fishermen was a human being, a living breathing person. Like us he was born, and like we will do, he died. But in him God was pleased to dwell. And what exactly was “it” that dwelled within the person of Jesus? That’s what these writers were attempting to describe.

They realized that a presence existed in the person of Jesus that was much, much bigger than any human being could contain. Eventually that would become the

doctrine of the two natures which would claim that Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah, and by that I mean that he was both fully human and fully divine. It is a mystery. It is a puzzle. It is a claim that cannot be proven, but is simply accepted as an understanding of our faith. One of the ways we make this claim is to believe that the Christ co-existed with God, in God, from the very beginning of time, and continues with God throughout all eternity. These Christological hymns make that claim. In the beginning was the Word, the Logos, the Christ. He is the Alpha and the Omega, beginning and ending. There is no time when Christ wasn't.

For me this tempers the "end times" picture we often get from the book of Revelation. Focusing on the end times leads to that obsession with judgment. Who will make it into heaven? Who gets the clean white robes for being an elder? Who gets left behind on earth or worse yet, gets sent to hell? No, if we say that Christ was also there from the very BEGINNING and isn't just handing out the spiritual candy on judgment day, this picture painted in Revelation becomes less about judgment and more about fulfillment. Christ is watching over the whole fulfillment of humanity, of this planet, of the universe. The scope of the thing becomes that much more expansive. Christ is there through the best of times and the worst of times. As far as humans can get off course, to that end Christ is still watching over us, loving us, praying for us. That throne room in heaven that John describes is a hub of activity – always – and is the center of the ongoing creation of life and all its intricacies.

There are parts of the Bible about Jesus that are easy to understand, maybe difficult to put into practice, but they do make plain sense to us. Jesus spoke in practical terms to very real people – love God, love your neighbor, be kind to the poor, forgive those who hurt you. His human sense for being in the world was genuine and compassionate, a true example for us to follow. Then we get those parts of the Bible, with what Jesus said, and how his life gets interpreted that confuse and confound us. He tells his disciples that he will return to God, his Father, and the Pharisees accuse him of blasphemy. He talks about life as existing well beyond our common boundaries of birth and death. “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” he says. And to us it sounds something like Buzz Lightyear pointing to the sky and saying, “To infinity and beyond.” The mystery is left open for us to explore even when we cannot explain. I am grateful to those mystics and visionaries who have left us with words to try to capture those realities which words cannot adequately describe. Christ is the beginning and the ending, which to me means that Love is also the beginning and the ending, for where Christ is, love follows. Amen.