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The Usage of Α και Ω Formula in the Book of Revelation

A seminar paper presented to the Faculty
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by

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Approved by


Advisor


Reader

The Usage of the “Α και Ω” Formula in the Book of Revelation

I. Introduction

In the New Testament, the usage of the formula “Alpha and Omega” is special and appears alone in the Book of Revelation. It only occurs three times in Rev. 1:8, 21:6, and 22:13. Scholars suggest different speculations about the background for using this formula. Kittel suggests two possibilities of the background for using this formula: a. reflection of Hellenistic speculation, and b. indirectly through the mediation of Palestinian Judaism (Kittel, 1). Other scholars try to find answers besides these two possibilities. Some relate it to the Greek Magical Papyri; others try to connect it with the early Christian confession. In this paper I will first describe the background and usage of the “Alpha and Omega” formula. Next, I will evaluate all these possibilities. Finally, I will explain the meaning and significance of this formula in the Book of Revelation.

II. The Background and Usage of the “Alpha and Omega” formula

There are at least five distinctive speculations: 1) a reflection of the early Christian confession; 2) a reflection of Hellenism; 3) a reflection of Gnosticism; 4) a reflection of Judaic tradition; and 5. a deity shown in the Greek Magical Papyri. Here are the different ideas as follows:

1. A Reflection of the Early Christian Confession

Some scholars think that a puzzle named the Sator-Rotas word square has shed light on the appearance of Alpha-Omega in the Book of Revelation (Beasley-Murray, 1974, 60). They relate this formula to the early Christian faith. The Sator-Rotas word square presents the same set of five words written both vertically and horizontally within a twenty-five-letter square (Chevalier, 182). This word square was first discovered in

1868 and was found on a Roman wall-plaster in Cirencester. In 1933 four more copies were found in Dura-Europos. In addition, a partial copy was unearthed in Pompeii in 1925. A complete square was discovered in 1936 in the same city in a building near the amphitheater (Beasley-Murray, 61).

The discovery of this word square has drawn the curiosities of many scholars, who hope to unlock its secret. The letters setting in the word square is as follows:

R O T A S		S A T O R
O P E R A		A R E P O
T E N E T	O R	T E N E T
A R E P O		O P E R A
S A T O R		R O T A S

From then to now, scholars have used an anagrammatic method to rearrange the letters in order to form a meaningful sentence. As a result, a number of sentences are proposed¹ (Last, 94).

However, scholars are not satisfied with all the results. Later, a scholar named Grosser observed that the letters of the square spell out the opening phrase of the Lord's prayer, *Paternoster*, provided that the N is used twice. Then, all the letters could be rearranged as a cross, where the two A's and O's will be left out as follow (Beasley-Murray, 61):

A
P
A
T
E
A P A T E R N O T E R O
O
S
T
E
R
O

¹ *O Pater ores pro aetate nostra*
or *Retro Satana toto opere asper*
or *Petro et reo patet rosa Sarona*

Furthermore, some scholars (Corcopino, Jerphanion, etc.) find that the central letter on each side of the square is the letter T which has been written as a cross in Ancient times.² In this sense, the word-square is connected to the early Christian faith. Therefore, they suggest that ‘this word-square was Christian in origin and invented during a time of persecution as a secret sign for believers to recognize each other without revealing to the pagans their religious identity’ (Atkinson, 2). The A and O were the Latin letter of Alpha and Omega. As Beasley-Murray explains, “the significance of the square lies in its embodiment of the faith that he who is the Alpha and Omega of all things has been revealed as ‘our Father’ in Christ who died on the cross.” (Beasley-Murray, 62).

2. A Reflection of Hellenism

The term “Hellenism” that I use here is to highlight the Hellenistic Astrology (more correctly as Astralism) and Hellenistic mythology of alphabets.

I. Hellenistic Astrology

Some scholars try to argue that the Revelation of John encoded astrological ideas to his prophecy. This idea is widely suggested by some post-modern scholars. In his *book A Postmodern Revelation: Signs of Astrology and the Apocalypse*, Chevalier states that “Christian notions of spirituality and prophetic revelation have played an important role in downgrading the spheres of heaven. They reduced star-gods to the level of mere signs and subaltern spirits dwelling in the visible heavens, below the immaterial Lord ruling from above” (Chevalier, 3). The author believes that the book of Revelation is a response

² Some scholars suggested that the word TENET was identical with the Greek “Tau” which has the symbolic meaning of the cross. This evidence is supported and referred to in the letters of Barnabas (9:8), (Beasley-Murray, 61, see also Atkinson, 8)

of Christianity towards the visible and tangible celestial bodies. The book of Revelation has also expressed the signs of heavenly desire for governing the cosmos and the wheels of time (ibid.).

Chevalier also uses the whole second chapter of the same book to explain Hellenistic astrology (and Jewish astrology as well). He sees ancient astrology or astralism as a combination of a cult of an organized nature with the pursuit of scientific learning. This knowledge of the gods of heaven is synonymous with an understanding of the laws of mathematics and their application to rituals of divination (ibid. 54). Astralism ties the laws of heavenly geometry and the moving of heavenly beings to the aspirations and emotions of human dwelling on earth (ibid. 55). As a result, in Hellenistic culture, ancient astrology entailed a fatalistic view of life and the word (ibid. 56). By observing the zodiacal system, people originated a belief that one's future was determined by the astral configuration appearing at the time of one's birth (ibid. 60).

As for Chevalier, Astralism has provided fertile soil in the Hellenistic concept of superior Reason and divine essence governing the universe, concepts well illustrated by the immutable motions and everlasting harmony of the heavenly bodies (ibid. 63). Chevalier thinks that Greek philosophers subsume naturalistic cults and belief systems in deifying astral bodies (ibid.). Some practice of star-worship is found in Greco-Roman cultures (ibid. 64). Roman solar-worship echoed earlier formulations of astro-solar mysticism. This astrological later also was adopted on the political level and mixed with emperor worship in order to strengthen the power of the Roman Empire³. If this post-

³ Chevalier says, "These sun-centered ideas were politically sanctioned towards the end of the Roman principate, with the imperial enthronement of the sun-priest Heliogabalus, representative of the sun on earth" (Chevalier, 75).

modern scholar were correct, then John wrote the book of Revelation when the idea of astrology would have been widespread in his contemporary world. Therefore, to relate the “Alpha and Omega” formula with the background of Astralism is understandable.

The question is asked, “how did the ‘Alpha and Omega’ formula reflect Hellenistic astrology?” Chevalier addresses his idea in chapter four of the same book, and he explains how the ideas of astrology are revealed in Rev. 1:1-20 (ibid. 175-96). The equation of seven angels with seven stars in 1:20 points to the astral foundations of Near Eastern religions (ibid. 178); and the seven stars are the seven heavenly bodies: Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn (ibid. 183).

Concerning the “Alpha and Omega” formula, Chevalier says, “these two-sides title converge on two critical moments of the solar cycle ... the equinoxes when the sun crosses the equator. When astronomically transposed, Alpha becomes the Hebrew *Aleph* that stands for Aldebaran, Taurus δ , follower of the seven Pleiades, leading Star of Stars, the star whose heliacal rising used to mark the new year” (ibid. 180). Furthermore, he says, “Stories of the sun’s yearly downfall brings us to the other side of the Living One – Omega as opposed to Alpha ... Like the sun in pagan mythology, God governs the alpha and omega, the first and the last moment of cyclical time” (ibid. 181).

II. The Mythology of Alphabets

In addition, scholars have examined the Hellenistic mythology of alphabets and numbers in order to relate Hellenistic culture to the “Alpha and Omega” formula. The symbolism of numbers and alphabets is common to both Hellenism and Rabbinical Judaism as well⁴ (Kittel, 2). Hellenism denotes the religious 12 or 24-hour day of the

⁴ I will describe more the numbering system in the section of Rabbinic Judaism below.

Egyptian by the letters of Greek alphabet, and also establishes a link with the 12 signs of the Zodiac (ibid.). The mythology of numbers in Hellenistic culture can be traced back to the Pythagorean tradition of Magna Graecia (Billigmeier, 217). Two contributions Pythagoreas has made concerning this issue were: a) number given by dots or by letters of the alphabet; and b) musical scale expressed by arithmetic ratios; i.e. A, B, C, D, E, F, G (ibid.). Later, his followers connected the seven tones with the seven known ‘planets,’ ‘seven days of the week,’ and ‘the seven vowels of the Greek alphabet, i.e. A E H I Y Ω. All these came to play an important role in magic and mysticism (ibid.). The Greek alphabet has 24 letters, 2 have to be devoted to each sign. There are two different systems: a) 1 and 13, and 2 and 14 etc. are conjoined (ram = $\alpha\nu$, steer = $\beta\xi$ etc.), and b) 1 is linked with 24, 2 with 23 etc., (α/ω , β/ψ), (Kittel, 2). Therefore, the usage of the “Alpha and Omega” formula is related to the practice of the mythology of the alphabet.

3. A Reflection of Gnosticism

Some scholars try to find a relationship between Gnosticism and the book of Revelation. They want to prove that the “Alpha and Omega” formula is a reflection of Gnosticism.

This term “Gnosticism” is derived from the Greek word “Gnosis,” which means “knowledge” or “understanding.” Gnosticism was a heresy in the eyes of many early Church Fathers, e.g. Iranaeus, Hippolyus, etc., while some recent scholars count it just as a kind of religious movement⁵(Rudolph, 55). It arose in contemporary early Christianity.⁶

⁵ R. McL. Wilson says, “By Gnosticism we mean the specifically Christian heresy of the second century A.D., by Gnosis, in a broader sense, the whole complex of idea belonging to the Gnostic movement and related trends of thought (Wilson, 9).

⁶ Rudolph quotes R. McL. Wilson’s saying in another article named “‘Gnosis and Gnosticism’ – the Problems of their Definition and their Relation to the Writings of the New Testament” as follows:

Scholars try to differentiate the idea of “Gnosis” from “Gnosticism.” R. McL. Wilson explained, “By Gnosticism we mean the specifically Christian heresy of the second century A. D., and by Gnosis, in a broader sense, the whole complex of ideas belonging to the Gnostic movement and related trends of thought” (Wilson, 9). The first possible reference to the term and about Gnosticism in the Holy Scripture is 1 Tim. 6:20 (Rudolph, Anchor Bible Dictionary, vol. 2, 1033). A. D. Nock lists three factors for the arising of Gnosticism: a. a preoccupation with the problem of evil; b. a sense of alienation and recoil from man’s environment; and c. a desire for special and intimate knowledge of the secrets of the universe (Nock, 256).

How do the Gnostic traditions reflect the Alpha and Omega formula? In the Gnostic tradition, the combination of ΑΩ could also mean “head”⁷ (Kittel, 2). Also, some scholars found that there is a similar “Alpha and Omega” formula-like usage in the book of Revelation.⁸ In a paragraph named “Narration by Barbelo”, such praise of the anointed Word is as follows:

“... There [we] glorify you. Ma! Mo! You are omega, omega, omega. You are alpha. You are being. O eternal realm of the eternal realms! O eternal realm that gave itself” (Gnostic Scripture, 92)

Also, in the Gospel of the Egyptians, they praise the Doxomedon-aeon as follows:

“The New Testament itself affords evidence of an incipient movement, which by the second century had grown into a world-religion and constituted a real danger to the Christian faith.” Rudolph thinks that this movement, which developed from the ‘pre-Gnosis’ or ‘Gnosis of the first century into the ‘Gnosticism’ of the second and third centuries, is to be dated as more or less contemporary in the rise of Christianity. (Logan, 23)

⁷ Kittel said that the Gnostic Marcus applied the mythology of alphabets to his theology, e.g. head = αω, neck = βψ, etc. (Kittel, 2)

⁸ Some scholars think that the discovery of the library at Nag Hammadi library brought to the light the connection between the New Testament Scriptures and Gnosticism. R. McL. Wilson, Kurt Rudolph, etc. contribute a lot especially in this field. (see R. McL. Wilson Gnosis and the New Testament. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968; Logan, A.H.B. and A.J.M. Wedderburn edited. The New Testament and Gnosis. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Limited, 1983; Rudolph, Kurt. Gnosis. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Limited, 1984 etc.) C. K. Barrett specially examines the connection between John the Revelation and Gnosticism in an article named “Gnosis and the Apocalyptic of John (see Wedderburn, 125-37).

“... Domedon Doxomedon came forth, the aeon of the aeons, and the [throne] which is in him, and the powers [which surround] him, the glories and the [incorruption. The] Father of the great light [who came] forth from the silence, he is [the great] Doxomedon-aeon in which [the thrice] male child rests. And the throne of his [glory] was established [in it, this one] on which his unrevealable name [is inscribed], on the tablet [...] one is the word, the [Father of the light] of everything, he [who came] forth from the silence, while he rests in the silence, he whose name [is] in an [invisible] symbol. [A] hidden, [invisible] mystery came forth

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iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii[iii]
eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee[ee
o]oooooooooooooooooooo
uu[uuu]uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu
eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee
aaaaaa[aaaa]aaaaaaaaaa
ooooooooo[oo]oooooooooooo

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And [in this] way the three powers gave praise to the [great], invisible, unnameable, virginal, uncallable Spirit, and [his] male virgin” (The Nag Hammadi Library in English, 196-197).

The unrevealable name was made up of the seven Greek vowels: IHONEYAΩ, each written twenty-two times as the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet (Aune, 1996, 57; see also footnotes in the Gnostic Scriptures, 107). If comparing with the Greek Magical Papyri, the ordering of the seven vowels is slightly different. In Gnostic literature the letter A goes first, i.e. AEHIYΩ. Possibly, the Gnostic adherents chose this symbol from the Greek Magical formula, then they adopted and renewed their philosophy. The first four letters, IHONY, may be the name of the true god according to certain Gnostics. It may ultimately derive from IAΩ, a conjuring name of Yahweh commonly used in Jewish-Greek magical spells (footnotes in the Gnostic Scriptures, 107). Some scholars think that the order of these seven vowels may mean: Ιηου ε(στιν) Α και Ω, i.e. Jesus is the Alpha and Omega (Aune, 1996, 57).

4. A Reflection of Judaic Tradition

Some scholars argue that the “Alpha and Omega” is a Greek rendering of a corresponding Hebrew expression (Charles, 1950, vol. I, 20). They think that this “Alpha and Omega” formula can be fixed by its conjunction with “*protos/eschatos*” and “*arche/telos*.” It refers to the notion of God found in the OT prophets (Kittel, 1). Scholars

try to relate this formula to the oracles of Isaiah in Isa. 44:6 and 48:12, where the phrase “first and last” is used.⁹

W. J. P. Boyd thinks that the sentence “I am Alpha and Omega” is a brilliant translation of the Hebrew logion for these two Isaiah’s oracles. He explains the “Alpha and Omega” formula to be translated as “the superlative sense of the Hebrew ideas of ‘the front’ and ‘the back’” (Boyd, 526). Hebrew characteristically uses basic simple words to express more complex ideas. Therefore, the words for front and back have a wide range of secondary meanings. These two words have three different levels of use: local, temporal, and personal use (ibid.). Locally, front and back denotes the East and the West. Temporally, this phrase indicates future and past. Personally, it applies to one’s actual life span (ibid. 527).

As for Boyd, “the antonyms of front and back are combined in Hebrew to make up an idiom denoting completeness or wholeness, and even uniqueness” (ibid.). He lists three examples of antonyms to elucidate his comments: left and right, first and last, and East and West (ibid. 528). Boyd concludes that all those expressions signify the relationship of man to God (ibid. 529). Finally, he summarizes all his findings, related to the “Alpha and Omega” formula, as follows: “1) The use of the superlative Alpha and Omega compares God with Man. 2) Alpha and Omega is a declaration by God that He is the foremost front and the hindmost back. 3) Christ is Alpha: He is the new front of the new man. 4) Christ is Alpha because He predestines and recreates the sons of God. He is also Omega because He is the gift of eternal life and ultimate sanctification to all found in Him” (ibid. 530-31).

⁹ Comparing the translation in LXX and MT, we will see some difference in these two verses. In Isa. 44:6, MT writes “I am the first, and I am the last.” However, LXX does not translate similarly.

As we examine LXX and MT, there is not a direct connection with the “Alpha and Omega” formula; nor do we find the use of alphabet to express theology in the MT. Instead, some sources, derived from Jewish mythology and Rabbinical Judaism, are more reliable and directly related to this “Alpha and Omega” formula.

Scholars discovered that in the time of Inter-testament, Judaism adopted the Greek custom of alphabets that have been used as numerical signs. For examples: א is 1, ב is 2 and so on up to י for 10, and finally ת is 400 (Divan, 743). The first use of the alphabets as numerical appeared on Maccabean coins around 135 B.C. (Kaufman, 204).

From the Talmud and Midrash the alphabet played an important role in the creation of the world (ibid.). In the Genesis of Midrash Rabbah, R. Jonah asks R. Levi why the world was created with a א¹⁰? The answer is that this word is closed at the sides but open in front, so one is not permitted to investigate what is above and what is below, what is before and what is behind (Freeman, vol. 1, 9). Another answer in response to the same question is to teach one that there are two worlds. The third answer is to connote blessing and not cursing. That is why it has not been started with א¹¹ (ibid.).

Another example expressed the truth as a combination of the first and last letter in Midrash is below:

“What is meant by the verse, that which is inscribed in the writing of truth (Dan. 10:21)? If ‘truth’, why is ‘truth’? ... It is inscribed before the decree [is sealed], ... it is ‘truth’ once it has been definitely decreed.’ (What is the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He? אמת (Truth). Why ‘emeth’?” said R. Simeon b. Lakish. “א is the first of the letters, מ the middle one, and ת the last, thus, it corresponds to, I am the first, and I am the last, beside me there is no God (Isa. 44:6)” (ibid. vol. 2, 747).

Moreover, Sefer Raz’el states that Adam engraved the letters out of the likeness of the fallen angels from א to ת. Abraham knew the secrets of the wisdom of the alphabet

¹⁰ א is the first letter of the word, “created.”

from \aleph to η , in which God tied the twenty-two letters to his tongue and revealed to him all the mysteries of the universe (ibid. 206). Finally, some sources mentioned that God is said to bless to Israel from \aleph to η , but to curse only from \beth to ζ (Charles, Dictionary of the Bible, 43).

5. A Deity shown in the Greek Magical Papyri

The Greek Magical Papyri, as Betz says, is “a name given by scholars to a body of papyri from Greco-Roman Egypt containing a variety of magical spells and formulae, hymns and rituals” (Betz, xli). The earliest texts in the Greek Magical Papyri can even be traced to the second century B.C.¹² These papyri are very helpful for understanding the Greco-Roman religions and the influence of Egyptian religions on Hellenistic culture. Its importance is as strong as the Qumran texts for Judaism and the Nag Hammadi library for Gnosticism (ibid.). In fact, scholars put much of their efforts and interests in Greek Magical Papyri in order to find the background and usage of the “Alpha and Omega” formula. David Aune helps us to bridge between both of them. In his commentary of the book of Revelation, Aune says the vowel α and ω occur together in the Magical Papyri as a “permutation and abbreviation of the seven vowels” (Aune, 1996, 57), i.e. α ϵ η ι \omicron υ ω , (see an example: PGM III, 663, in Betz, 35). His viewpoints are highlighted as below:

- a. The seven vowels frequently function as a divine name (Aune, 1996, 57). In PGM, XXI. 14, the papyri is mentioned that a god’s name which had seven-letters is in harmony with the seven sounds (Betz, 259). Aune says this seven-vowel divine name can be used in self-predictions: “I am $\alpha\epsilon\eta\iota\omicron\upsilon\omega$ ” (Aune, 1996, 56). This is also a

¹¹ \aleph is the first letter of the word, “curse.”

name obtained with praise. In PGM, IV, 1025 has such an example: "... you who are seated within the 7 poles, AEHIOYΩ, you who have on your head a golden crown and in your hand a Memnonian staff ..." (Betz, 58).

- b. AΩ is sometimes found in conjunction with another divine name, e.g. "Abraxas AΩ" mentioned in PGM, V, 363, 367. Also, AΩ appeared as a divine name¹³ in PGM, IV, 1182, IV, 992-93, 3238, etc. (Aune, 1996, 57).
- c. The letter aleph was understandably associated with the concept of beginning or αρχη εϥ in PGM, IV, 4870-88 (ibid.).
- d. Most frequently the divine name used in the Magical Papyri is IAΩ (ibid.). Aune further explains in another article that the name has been used sixty-six times (Aune, 1987, 490). It is a name "used in conjunction with AΩ in sequence of vowel permutations functioning as *voces magicae* often juxtaposed with a series of other divine names" (ibid.). PGM, IV, 992-93 provides some examples on this point.
- e. Aune bridges the relationship between this divine name and the covenant name of the God of Israel. He says,

"IAΩ almost certainly entered magical repertoire as a Greek transliteration of the divine name *yhw* ('Yahu'), a shortened form of *yhwh* (Yahweh), the covenant name of the God of Israel. This form is attested in the fifth century B.C. Elephantine Papyri and was presumably current in Egyptian Judaism. A Papyrus manuscript of Levitus from Qumran (4Q LXX Lev b), late first century B.C. to early first century A.D., contains the divine name in phonetic Greek spelling IAΩ, rather than the expected *Kyrios*. The only other occurrence of IAΩ in a Greek OT manuscript is in the sixth century Codex Z, (Marchalianus) of the Prophets. Undoubtedly one of the attractions of the name IAΩ was the fact that it contains three of the seven vowels ..." (Aune, 1987, 490).

¹² Betz says that the extant texts are mainly from the second century B.C. to the fifth century A.D. (Betz, xli).

¹³ Aune, however, does not clearly explain this point in his commentary on Revelation, although he lists some evidences from PGM. For example, in PGM, IV, 1182: "I call upon you with your name AΩ EY HOI etc." The question will arise, "Are there mentioned three divine names, i.e. AΩ, EY, and OYΩ? Or the three words composed a single divine name? The Greek Papyri did not mention clearly. Aune, in another article "The Apocalypse of John and Magic," parenthetically explains: "under the supposition that the seven vowels, individually, in various combinations and collectively symbolize the divine name" (Aune, 1987, 490). Yet, as I think, it's still does not answer the question.

He further says,

“IAΩ is used several times in the Magical Papyri with divine predicate “the one who is” in the formulaic phrase “strong lord, mighty IAΩ OYΩ IQ AIΩ OYΩ, who exist” (PGM, XIII, 1020, 1045). PGM, LXXI, 3-4 has even more similarity to Rev. 1:8, since both passages have the epithets ‘the one who is’ and ‘pantokrator’ (author’s trans.): ‘the god who is, IAΩ! Lord, ruler of all’” (ibid. 491).

Another scholar, Austin Farrer, thinks IAΩ can be referenced to both a divine name and a sentence (Farrer, 265). His explanation is as follows:

“Under the influence of the IAΩ, St. John develops it in the three tenses, ‘the is, was, and cometh.’ Exodus and the IAΩ are at one in demanding that the *is* should stand first. When St. John writes: *‘I am the A and the Ω,’ saith the Lord God the is and was and cometh the Almighty* We ought to see that he is writing a triple parallel:

Says	I am A Ω
	IAΩ
	Is. Was. Cometh

Almighty” (ibid.).

III. Evaluation and Observation

First of all, some scholars prefer to relate the Rotas-Satar word square to Latin speaking Jews and the wheel-vision of Ezekiel¹⁴ (Last, 95; Beasley-Murray, 61). They find that the speculation of early Christian confession is less convincing because of the early date of this word-square. After further examining the discovery of the Sator-Rotas word square in Pompeii, they date it to a period before 79 A.D.(Atkinson, 3). Five reasons for those scholars to give up the speculation that “Alpha and Omega” showed the light of early Christian confession are (Last, 96; Atkinson, 3): 1) Too early for Christians to appear at Pompeii before the destruction. 2) If this word-square originally existed among Christians of the first century, it should be in Greek, rather than Latin. 3) A and O

¹⁴ After rearranging the words, they found a sentence as follows: “the sower AREPO holds the wheels with care” (Last, 95). Scholars interpret that Rotas means wheels, therefore it can be related to the wheel-vision of Ezekiel. In this vision Ezekiel told of a man with an ink-horn going through Jerusalem marking with a letter T the foreheads of the righteous in order to preserve them from the coming judgment. The divine sower has marked them out for Salvation (Beasley-Murray, 61). However, this theory still has its difficulties: e.g. a. the meaning of the word ‘AREPO’ still unknown and/or controversial (Atkinson, 4); even though scholars latter found that this word is Celtic, which means ‘plough.’ This word occurs

as a Christian parlance should begin from the book the Revelation. 4) The cross as a symbol should have appeared after the Epistle of Barnabas. 5) The concealment of Christian symbols by means of cryptograms seems to appear first in the third century and as a result of persecution. Among all these arguments, the first point, as I think, is the key argument held by scholars.¹⁵ Della Corte,¹⁶ after examining and translating the discovery of the graffiti and comparing the names in the graffiti and early Christian ones, he argues that a group of Christians stayed there while the pagans' attitude was still indifferent to the new faith and the new religious people. As he says, "there is a group of Chrstians 'who were ransacking the house of the Poppaei and took the opportunity to express its satisfaction at the destruction which had overwhelmed the heathen occupants,'" (Atkinson, 10). Moreover, while scholars still have not concurred with the explanations of the wheel-vision of Ezekial, Atkinson suggests to re-examine the possibility of a Christian origin again. He says, "if neither the Jewish nor the later Christian origin of the square deserves to be accepted, it seems worthwhile to look again at the possibility of a Christian origin before 79" (ibid. 15). He further states, "the alternative explanations of the origin and date of the Sator Rebus are untenable, or at least less convincing than that which assigns to it a Christian origin before 79 A.D." (ibid. 17). However, a question will arise, "if there were Christians living in Pompeii before 79A.D and in keeping used Alpha and Omega as one of the symbols, where did they get this concept?" This is also a

nowhere else, but the agricultural writer Columella in 50A.D. b. the description of divine sower is extremely slight, (Atkinson, 4).

¹⁵ In fact, if no Christian has been found in Pompeii before 79 A.D., we shall not care about the language they used or the symbol they carried. If some Christian indeed lived there before the date, why couldn't they use the official language, Latin, to express their faith; also, even though the symbol of the cross has been used in the latter days, the concept should be existed earlier. Finally, one must be aware that the persecution had been appeared since the first century – the beginning of the Christianity.

¹⁶ Della Corta is one of the most vigorous supporters of the presence of Christians at Pompeii, (Atkinson, 9).

related question I ask in this paper, if John did not create this formula, or if he used the early Christian confession, where was this formula brought into meanings? This speculation, however, cannot provide an answer fully. Also, if this was an important early Christian confession in the early Christian time, why was it not mentioned in the epistles or gospels?

Secondly, the influence of Hellenism in the book of Revelation is controversial. As for me, I cannot accept the idea that John uses astrological ideas in his prophecy. The text did not show a direct connection between them. This is a post-structuralist's hermeneutical feature which ignores the main meaning of the text and finds side meanings according to the readers' interest. Even though the words α and ω have been used as an expression in astrology, it does not mean whenever people use these words it must signify Astralism. In the same way, when I express “作業深重,” (literally: to do too many karma), it does not tell people I am a Buddhist. Actually, I just want to signify that I have sinned a lot. Therefore, the text and context are very important to decide what the writer wants to signify.

Concerning the mythology of alphabets, I agree that the mythology of alphabets is relevant to the background of the “Alpha and Omega” formula. The mythology of alphabets also influenced the development of Jewish mythology. However, this speculation does not fully mention why $\alpha\omega$ is chosen. So we need to see some other possible speculations.

Thirdly, to decide whether the “Alpha and Omega” formula is a reflection of Gnosticism, one may ask, “can we give an answer by reviewing the relations between Gnosticism and the book of Revelation?” However, this road is a dead end. On one side

scholars argue the influence of Gnosticism in the book of Revelation; on the other side, scholars reject it completely. For examples: Barclay Newman claims that the book of Revelation did show some gnostic motifs while rejecting this as heretical¹⁷ (Newman, 139). C. K. Barrett argues that the author of the book Revelation has a double-attitude, i.e. both Gnostic and anti-Gnostic¹⁸ (Logan, 127). E. S. Fiorenza suggests that the author of Revelation, like Paul resisted the Gnosticizing process with the help of an apocalyptic theology¹⁹ (Fiorenza, 581).

Another way to evaluate this speculation is to find out the concepts of Gnosticism and to see whether the “Alpha and Omega” formula is helpful to bring them forth. One of the key ideas in Gnosticism is its dualism. Dualism dominates the whole of gnostic cosmology, and particularly in relation to creation. Evil is an identification of matter; therefore Gnosticism is anti-cosmic. Salvation saves the soul from all evil matter with the aids of Gnosis (or Knowledge), (Rudolph, 1984, 60). However, in the last two chapters of the book of Revelation, this “Alpha and Omega” deity is going to build a new Jerusalem and new heaven on earth. This vision is against the cosmological idea of Gnosticism.

Finally, the third way to evaluate this speculation is to find the date when the Gnostic materials use the “Alpha and Omega” formula. We find that those materials are later than the book of Revelation. It seems that this Christian apocalyptic book influences them rather than the other way round. Also, those materials apply this formula to intermediate beings, i.e. aeon, alone. This is not consistent with John while he is applied

¹⁷ He lists some gnostic motifs as follows: e.g. Serpent deity, Wisdom, Book of life, Numerology, Gnostic formulas, Redeemer myths, Wedding motif, etc. (Newman, 139)

¹⁸ Barrett talks about the Gnostic movement in a broader sense. In his article, “Gnosis and the Apocalypse”, Barrett carefully lists examples from both sides. Those who are interested in this subject can find helpful from his contributions. (Logan, 129)

¹⁹ In his comment, the Christian apocalyptic theology has appeared to be against enthusiastic gnostic tendencies within the communities of Asia Minor. (Fiorenza, 581)

it to the “Almighty God” (1:8) in the book of Revelation. Therefore, this speculation is still not satisfactory.

Fourthly, many scholars seem to support the speculation that the “Alpha and Omega” formula reflects the Judaic tradition. It is true that many OT scriptures are used in the book of Revelation.²⁰ However, this formula did not find any direct quotation from the MT or LXX (as mentioned above), but rather from Jewish mythological traditions. This speculation must assume that the author has created a Greek formula in the book of Revelation in order to express the Jewish divine concept. What is the purpose for this? Mounce explains, “Alpha and Omega represents the Hebrew Aleph and Tau” (Mounce, 73). If one compares the threefold titles in Rev. 1:8, the second one ‘who is and who was and who is to come’, is more closely to the thought of the OT, the divine name YHWH. Also, as we know, the book of Revelation is written in Greek; this is clear enough to show this Hebrew divine concept into the Hellenistic world. If there is no direct source about of the “Alpha and Omega” formula in OT, and if the divine name has already translated into Greek and used as the second title in 1:8, it would not be necessary for the author to create such less important formula here; unless there is another reason.

Moreover, what Boyd’s assumption that the equivalent usage of “Alpha and Omega” is “front and back” is also rejected because of lacking any support from the linguistic evidence.

Finally, after examining all the speculations, the fifth one is the best to describe the background of the “Alpha and Omega” formula. This speculation describes why the

²⁰ Steve Moyise, in his book The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation, says that the book of Revelation is the highest one using OT scriptures, in which they include 82 times quotes from the Pentateuch, 97 times from Psalms, 122 from Isaiah, 48 from Jeremiah, 83 from Ezekiel, 74 from Daniel,

author chose to use ΑΩ in the book of Revelation. The usage either of ΑΩ or ΙΑΩ is to describe God and/or Jesus Christ because this is a name of deity. Betz says, “In Greek Magical Papyri, the text reflects “an amazingly broad religious and cultural pluralism (Betz, xlv). As a result, some Egyptian divine names are used in the Greco-Roman culture; and even the Jewish divine name ΙΑΩ is mentioned as well”²¹ (ibid.).

I think, John adopts this idea for several reasons.²² 1) This divine name can dig up the treasure from the Judaic tradition. In Judaic tradition, the usage of alphabet, which refers to divinity, still found no position in Canonicity.²³ 2) This term did not lower the divinity into the intermediate beings, e.g. Aeon.²⁴ 3) This term is to highlight that God is the Lord of Hellenistic culture. He is also the Lord of Judaic tradition. He is above all nations and cultures. As a whole, he is God above all and all. The “Alpha and Omega” formula reveals the divine omnipotence. 4) This term builds a bridge among the distinctive groups of people. It is especially suitable to be used in the churches in Asia (the addressee of the book of Revelation) where they were mixed with Jews, Greeks, GBJ (Greek born Jew), etc. Just as John has used “Logos” in the Gospel in order to build a

and 73 from the Minor Prophets. Also, this figure includes quotation from MT, LXX, Qumran, etc. (Moyise, 16).

²¹ In Glossary, Betz says the ΙΑΩ originally derived from the name of the Hebrew God YHWH, became an important deity in the magical literature; this divine name can be found in Qumran and the Nag Hammadi Library, (Betz, 335). Hegel thought that this divine name even appeared in the early Chinese philosophical literature. Lao Tze, one of the well-known wise men in the end time of Chou Dynasty, said the following speech: “He whom ye look at and do not see is name I; thou hearkened to him and hearest him not, and he is called Hi, thou seekest for him with thy hand and touchest him not, and his name is Wei. Thou meetest him and seest not his head; thou goest behind him and seest not his back.” Hegel said that this I-H-W or I-hi-wei is further made to signify an absolute vacuity and it is the abstract universal, name Tao or reason, (Hegel, 125).

²² John adopted some concepts which were rooted in Egypt alone. Aune lists some examples as follow: a. the motifs of ‘the second death’ and the ‘lake of fire’, (Rev. 20:14, 21:8), (Aune, 1987, 483); b. Hellenistic concepts of Hekate expressed in the image of the risen Jesus as keybearer (ibid, 484-85); c. The invocation for God to ‘come’ (ibid. 492); d. use ΙΑΩ as self-prediction, (as I mentioned above).

²³ Some scholars try to relate the Midrashic explanation of ϩϩϩ (God is the first, the middle, and last) to Isaianic source in Isa. 44:6 and Paul’s writings in 1 Cor. 8:6, in which Paul said, “yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came [first] and for whom we live [last]; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live [middle]” (NIV).

bridge between the Hellenistic culture and Judaic culture²⁵, “Alpha-Omega” formula can achieve the kerygmatic purpose in the book of Revelation.(see below)

B. Observation

1. The Process of Assimilation and Uniformity

To judge whether “Alpha and Omega” formula is influenced by one and certain speculation is not easy. Since Hellenism, Gnosticism, Judaism, and Greek Magical Papyri are all the result of cultural assimilation and uniformity, another term that can be used is syncretism.²⁶ Through Greek Magical Papyri, the Egyptian religious ideas are transplanted into the Hellenistic world. While examining the Rabbinic literature, one may find that dualistic viewpoints have fostered some of the Judaic ideas, and brought forth Apocalypticism. Meanwhile, Apocalypticism and Gnosticism share some common ground with each other.²⁷ Finally, Hellenism, in terms of the mythology of numbers and alphabets, has sowed the seed for the Jewish mythology. Indeed, all these speculations are like a cluster of thoughts to impact the rise of Christianity.

The process of assimilation and uniformity, as for religious belief, is not limited only to a horizontal dimension, i.e. among cultures, but it also includes the vertical

²⁴ Later, Gnostic writing use this concept and renew it for their own use.

²⁵ As Guthrie says, “Greek readers would presumably think he [John] was talking about the rational principle of the universe [Logos] and would be amazed at his statement that that principle became not only personalized but incarnate. Jewish readers on the other hand would not find the transference of thought so alien, for their minds would at least be prepared for some kind of personified pre-existent Wisdom who could operate in the world of men.” (Guthrie, 326) He thinks that John presents Jesus as the true Logos in order to prepare to present Him as the Son of God. (ibid.)

²⁶ Another pair of sociological terms is “diffusion and innovation”. Diffusion refers to the process by which a cultural item spreads from group to group or society to society. Innovation denotes the process of introducing an idea of an object that is new to a culture, (Schaeffer and Lamm, 1992, 70), (see also Peter Berger Social Construction of Reality, where he uses dialectic process to describe the phenomenon of socialization).

²⁷ The following references may help readers know more about this topic: Joseph Dan and Frank Talmage edited. Studies in Jewish Mysticism; Arthur Wainwright. Mysterious Apocalypse; A. H. Logan and A. J. M. Wedderburn edited. The New Testament and Gnosis, etc.

dimension,²⁸ namely the encounter with God through a revelation or prophetic oracle.

This special revelation or prophetic oracle, through proclaiming, guarantees the purity of truth uncontaminated by the idolatry of the neighborhood.

2. The Breakthrough of Revelation

The word “αποκαλυψις” means “uncovering, disclosing.” As showing an action, it means “to reveal, to uncover, or to disclose.” As showing an end time this word means “revelation, disclosure.” This word also appears a particular form of disclosure, as through vision and personal guidance. It expresses the manifestation of a deity (Oepke, TDNT vol. 3. 564). In the OT, God reveals himself as the living God. In the NT, God reveals himself through Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:18). The vision of John in the book of Revelation counters the false view of reality by opening the world to divine transcendence. In this last book of the NT, God speaks in prophetic oracle but His words are written in a genre of Apocalyptic. Scholars label the book of Revelation as “Apocalyptic prophecy” (Bauckham, *Theology*, 9). When John expresses the “Alpha and Omega” formula, he uses prophetic oracle type and messenger formula (see below) in order to prove that his vision is not just for apocalyptic purposes, nor simply a word of comfort for those religious sufferers. On the contrary, John has recorded a prophecy, which has been fulfilled in human history, and it will continue to be fulfilled in His time and in the future as well. The prophecy in the expression of the “Alpha and Omega” formula is to correct and warn of the dangers of syncretism; also this prophecy turns

²⁸ One must be very careful while discussing this vertical dimension of assimilation and uniformity. Since a. God cannot be changed. So human being always place himself in a passive situation. Man is always the one ready to change; b. God is the first cause of all effects, he would and could not be influenced by the earthly effects.

people from the Roman-Empero-centric speculation back to Theo-centric which is revealed in Christology.

IV. The Meaning and Significance of the “Alpha and Omega” formula in the Book of Revelation.

1:8 Ἐγὼ εἰμι τὸ Ἄλφα καὶ τὸ Ὠ, λέγει κύριος ὁ θεός,
ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος, ὁ παντοκράτωρ.

[translated: “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.]

v.8 is a part of the prophetic pronouncement (v.7-8), in which John mentions the coming of Jesus Christ and proclaims the omnipotence of God. There are three issues related to this single verse. First of all, the genre of prophetic oracle is used in this verse; secondly, the change of the subject between v.7 and v.8; and finally, three titles are used to describe the divine God.

A. The Usage of the Genre of Prophetic Oracle in this Verse

John uses *εγω ειμι* (I am) and *λεγει κυριος ο θεος* (says the Lord) to reveal God’s prophecy. The *εγω ειμι* is an expression of oracle so as to guarantee the legitimacy of the prophecy. Aune says that this formula is “an expression of an oracular dialogue and a reminiscence of the self-disclosure oracle” (Aune, 1983, 280). This expression appears frequently in OT prophetic speech²⁹ (ibid.) and the “I”-style in revelatory speech is “a common form used in the ancient Near East in a variety of ways” (ibid, 372, footnote 116).

The *εγω ειμι* appears frequently in Jesus’ speeches in the Gospel of John (e.g. Jn. 6:41, 10:7, 14:6, 15:1, etc.). In fact, this is a favorite phrase of John. It appears about 24 times in the fourth Gospel, but less than “a dozen times” in the Synopics (Mounce, 80).

The other expression *λεγει κυριος ο θεος* is a messenger formula which also appears frequently in the prophetic oracles, especially in the book of Ezekiel (Aune, 1983, 280). A question is asked, “Why is the prophetic pronouncement used in this verse?” Two reasons are listed as follows: 1. This is one of the two instances in which the voice of God directly addresses the hearer-readers (also 21:6). 2. This prophetic pronouncement used in the beginning and the end of the book emphasizes that this is not just an apocalyptic literature, but an authentic prophecy. John, in his book, was proclaiming the apocalyptic-prophetic nature of Revelation. This can be defined as “God’s revelatory interpretation (through visions and auditions) of his mysterious counsel about past, present, and future redemptive-eschatological history, and how the nature and operation of heaven relate to this” (Beale, 1999, 380). In fact, the difference between prophetic literature and apocalypse is in its understanding of history, in terms of the fulfillment of what has been said in time and space.³⁰

B. The Change of the Subject between v.7 and v.8

From v.7 to v.8, the subject changes from Jesus Christ to God.

v.7 Ἰδοὺ ἔρχεται μετὰ τῶν νεφελῶν, καὶ ὄψεται αὐτὸν πᾶς ὀφθαλμὸς καὶ οἵτινες αὐτὸν ἐξεκέντησαν, καὶ κόψονται ἐπ’ αὐτὸν πᾶσαι αἱ φυλαὶ τῆς γῆς. ναί, ἀμήν.

[translated: Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, so are those who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn themselves because of Him. Amen.]

In this verse, scholars think that John refers to two OT scriptures here: one is from Dan 7:13, “... coming with the clouds of heaven” (NIV); the other is from Zech. 12:10, “...look on me, the one they have pierced, they will mourn for him” (NIV). Some refer to

²⁹ Aune gives some examples on pp.95-96 of the same book.

Matt. 24 in NT as well³¹ (Boring, 1989, 78, Aune, 1996, 54, Lenski, 1963, 49-50). The first citation (Dan. 7:13) refers to the enthronement of the Son of man over all the nations. The second one pertains to the end-time period when “God will defeat the nations around Israel and the Israelites will be redeemed after repenting of their sinful rejection of God and his messenger,” (Beale, 196). The subject is the one who will come with clouds, and who has been pierced by some people in the past. Who is this in John’s understanding? John talks about the advent of the victorious Christ and the response of the world (Mounce, 72, Beale, 198).

However, in verse 8 the one who speaks is the sovereign God. Lenski argues that the title “the Lord God” is applied to Jesus. Both the title “who is and who was, and who is to come” and “Almighty God” refers to Jesus Christ here³² (Lenski, 54). This is less convincing. These two titles normally apply to God the Father alone (see below). Also, in verse 4 the title “who is and who was and who is to come” is given to God and separated with the name Jesus Christ. He would not suddenly apply this title to Jesus in a later verse (v.7). Therefore I agree that John changes the subject from Jesus to God in v.7-8.

C. Three Titles used to describe the Divine God

Three titles are used to describe the divine God³³ i.e. α. ο ων και ο ην και ο ερχομενος, b. ο παντοκρατωρ, and c. το αλφα το Ω. In the following passages I am going

³⁰ Mounce analyzes the difference between prophecy and apocalypse, saying, “Revelation [prophecy] differs from standard apocalyptic a. in its view of history; b. in its moral urgency,” (Mounce, 24).

³¹ I think Act. 1:11 is also referable.

³² See also the Concordia Study Bible footnote, p.1946. Some intend to refer this verse to Jesus. I think this is not necessary. If verse 8 is a speech given by Jesus our victorious Christ, it will eventually disparage an effectiveness of the prophetic pronouncement.

³³ Some manuscripts add “αρχη και τελος” (Beginning and End), (⋈ 1854. 2050 (2329), etc.) Based on the principle of shorter text more accuracy, this title has been ignored. As Metzger says, “If the longer text were original no good reason can be found to account for the shorter text, whereas the presence of the longer expression in 21:6 obviously prompted some copyists to expand the text here,” (Metzger, 730, Beale, 200).

to elucidate these divine titles, their meanings and usage, and the relations with the Alpha and Omega formula.

a. ο ων και ο ην και ο ερχομενος (who is and who was and who is to come)

John uses the title, ο ων και ο ην και ο ερχομενος, two times in the same chapter (1:4, 8). Including 4:8, 11:7, and 16:5, the word appears five times in the book of Revelation. Scholars observe three problems when John used this phrase. 1) Grammatical error: John used a nominative case after the preposition word, “απο” instead of the genitive (v.4). 2) Inconsistency with the syntax: the finite verb is inconsistent with the other two participle clauses. 3) Different word order and quotation: 4:8 is in different word order,³⁴ 11:7, and 16:5 have been cut short.³⁵

Some judge this as a mistake of one who did not know the Greek very well. However, many scholars believe that John intentionally presents the title in this way. This is one of the characteristic solecisms in the book of Revelation (Beale, 188). Charles says it is a reproduction of a Hebraism (Charles, I, 18) Mounce thinks John cites the divine name as an indeclinable noun (Mounce, 68). He says, “the unchangeable form is more appropriate to the majesty of God and to the grandioseness of the apocalyptic style” (Mounce, quoted from Beckwith, 68). Indeed, John has showed his reverence for God so high that he refuses to change the form even to break the rule of grammar (Suen, 71). Finally, some observes that proper names are often left in the nominative case³⁶ in the book of Revelation (e.g. Rev. 2:13), (ibid.).

³⁴ 4:8 ο ην και ο ων και ο ερχομενος

³⁵ 11:17 and 16:5 ο ων και ο ην (ο ερχομενος is omitted)

³⁶ The kind of grammatical irregularity would have the same significance for the devil’s name in 20:27 (Beale, 189).

The title ο ων και ο ην και ο ερχομενος is a paraphrase of the divine name, יהוה, referred in OT. Scholars use a comparative approach to find from where John quotes this title in his book. There are four suggestions: (Suen, 72, Beale, 188, Mounce, 68, Charles, I, 20-21)

1. To refer to Exod. 3:14 from LXX version.
2. To refer to the same verse from Midrash.
3. From Hellenistic world and the way they addressed to their pagan god, Zeus.
4. From Palestinian Targum referred to Deut. 32:39.³⁷

While scholars are still arguing which one is the best explanation for this title, two results are found as follow: a) both the Judaic and Hellenistic world had the same way to address to their deities; b) none of the suggestions exactly uses the exact same wording like John's. We may ask two questions about the results: Why did both cultures have the same expression and how to explain their difference as to John's expression?

As we know, this title expresses the sovereign God with twofold or threefold temporal descriptions³⁸. Also, this title signifies God's eternal and unchanging character, and this God is eternally existent (Suen, 73) in terms of past, present, and future existence. Philo expresses the divine eternity in hellenistic philosophical fashion as timeless being (Bauckham, Theology, 28). In fact, eternity is a divinely ontological description as well as a temporal expression. It is meaningless to say "He is a sovereign

³⁷ Ford says that the closest reading is found in Targum Jerusalem which reads "I am He who is and who was and I am He who will be," (Ford, 144, see also Charles, I, 10). Suen agrees and concludes that this divine name in Revelation is a translation of the Aramaic of Deut. 32:39. However, no matter whether scholars support Exod. 3:14 or Deut. 32:39, these two verses should not be handled separately. They both help to know an etiology of this important divine name.

³⁸ Twofold descriptions of God: who is and who was (Rev. 11:7, 16:5) ; threefold descriptions as: who is, who was, and who will be (Greek's expression, Midrash, Palestinian Targum, etc.)

God and he is dead.”³⁹ This title calls attention to the fact that all time is embraced within God’s eternal presence (Mounce, 68). Therefore, we could find the same expression of Divinity in both cultures.

As mentioned above, John presented this title in a unique way: ο ων και ο ην και ο ερχομενος.⁴⁰ Bauckham thinks, “John had in mind those many Old Testament prophetic passages which announced that God would ‘come’ to save and judge. Meanwhile, early Christians understood to refer to the Lord’s eschatological coming to fulfill his final purpose for the world,” (Bauckham, *Theology*, 29). John interprets the divine name as indicating that God is not as an eternal being apart from the world but his eternity is in relation to the world. In other words, this verse does not just speak of God’s being but of his acts: he comes (Boring, 1989, 75). In Hebrew “being” is “a dynamic, powerful, effective being.” This Hebrew term is in contrast to Greek thought, which understands being as something immutable (Gianotti, 42). The believer has the faith to wait for His final coming to bring all things to fulfillment in His eternal future (Bauckham, *Theology*, 30). By this understanding I agree John refers this title to the Old Testament setting, i.e., the one “who is, who was, and who is to come” is YHWH. This YHWH God, ontologically speaking is a sovereign God; temporally speaking, he is everlasting One; and phenomenologically speaking, he is God who keeps his covenant made with his people and reveal Himself in His actions through history⁴¹. By this understanding it

³⁹ Existence means someone appears in time and space. This is also a background of how Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) designed his ontological argument.

⁴⁰ Compare with Palestinian Targum on Deut. 32:39, “Ego sum qui sum, et fui, et ego sum qui futurum sum” (I am He who is and who was and I am He who will be). Also the pagan god Zeus is addressed as “Ζεὺς ἦν Ζεὺς ἐστίν Ζεὺς ἐσσεταί (Zeus was, Zeus is, and Zeus will be), (Charles, I, 20).

⁴¹ The connotation of the last part is borrowed from Charles Gianotti. He says that scholars explain the meaning of the Divine name YHWH in five ways: a. the unknowable view, b. the ontological view, c. the casuative view, d. the covenantial view, e. the phenomenological view. Finally, he thinks the last one is more convincing. He says, “to summarize, the name YHWH points to God’s relationship to Israel in both

explains why John shortened this threefold description in 11:17 and 16:5. The last part is omitted because “in the narrative story-line of Revelation the pronouncement is made when the *eschaton* has become a present reality (Boring, 1986, 259, Suen, 82).

b. ο παντοκρατωρ

This title means “Almighty, All-powerful, or the Omnipotent one.” This word does not just indicate an abstract idea of omnipotence, but also expresses that God’s actual control over all things (Bauckham, *Theology*, 30). Beasley-Murray comments the word chosen in John’s message is used to express God’s sovereignty over the believers, the church, the nations, and even the whole history of human beings (Beasley-Murray, 60). This title is connected with the standard translation of the expanded form of the divine name, אֱלֹהֵי הַצְבָּאוֹת (the Lord, the God of hosts), (Bauckham, *Theology* 30). This is a very common title in the Old Testament prophets because it indicates Yahweh’s supreme power over all things and therefore his supremacy over the course of historical events (ibid.). The presupposition of an omnipotent God is a faith that the consummation of history can be fulfilled. Beale thinks, “the divine omnipotence is also the basis for the similar confident affirmation about the accomplishment of God’s glory in v.6” (Beale, 199). God is ο παντοκρατωρ because he is the creator of the world.

c. το αλφα και το ω

The title το αλφα το Ω is a borrowed divine name from the Greek Magical Papyri, as mentioned above. This title is proclaimed by the prophetic pronouncement.

His saving acts and His retributive acts, manifesting His phenomenological effectiveness in Israel’s history,” (Gianotti, 48). I think both the phenomenological view and covenantal one are closely linked with each other. So, I put them together as one.

Grammatically speaking, το αλφα το Ω is a figure of speech called merism⁴² which denotes God's control of all things, and all history, in Him he owns everything. In verse 8, only this title is proclaimed by God Himself. The other two reflect John's understanding about God. Ontologically speaking, this is the greatest or highest divine name and it symbolizes the whole, i.e. from A to Z; he is the almighty God, the most perfect one. Temporally, he is the one from the beginning until the end.

If we put these three titles together, the message is clearly formatted as follow:

I am Alpha and Omega (*I am the sovereign God to the Hellenistic world, to the Gentiles*), says the Lord,
 who is and who was and who is to come (*I am the sovereign God to the Judaic world, to the Jews*)
 Almighty (*I am the sovereign God, the creator of the heaven and earth, to all things and all people*)

21:6 καὶ εἶπέν μοι, Γέγοναν. ἐγὼ [εἶμι] τὸ Ἄλφα καὶ τὸ Ὠ, ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ τέλος. ἐγὼ τῷ διψῶντι δώσω ἐκ τῆς πηγῆς τοῦ ὕδατος τῆς ζωῆς δωρεάν.

[translated: He said to me, "they have come to pass. I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give the thirsty one from the fountain of water of life as a gift."]

This verse is within a section, entitled "the new heavens and the new earth", (21:1-22:5), (Mounce, 368). The coming down of the New Heaven and the New Earth is a hope for all believers⁴³. Throughout the Bible, there are many OT scriptures that pictured the Kingdom of God in terms of a redeemed earth (Isa. 11:6-9, Joel 3:18, Amos 9:13-15) (Ladd, 1974, 631). In Isaiah 65:7 and 66:22, the prophet foretold the creation of a new heaven and new earth, and that will be forever. This new earth is the final term in

⁴² The use of the first and last letters of the alphabet was typical of the ancients in expressing merism (Beale, 199). This merism states polar opposites in order to highlight everything between the opposites (ibid.).

⁴³ New Heaven and Earth is a common idea for Christians no matter what kind of Millennial views they agree (see _____, "The End Times," CTCR, 1989, 45).

the revelation of how this redemption is to take place. Also, it is the scene of the final goal of redemption (21:1-2,9-11) (ibid. 632).

The first question will ask, “Who is the one that spoke to John in v.6?” The one who spoke to John is the same one sitting on the throne. He is God the Father who sits on the throne to receive the glory and honor (4:2, 9; 5:1, 7; 6:16; 7:10, 15; 19:14). In the following verse (v.7) John says that He is God to those who have overcome in all the trials. The word $\gamma\epsilon\gamma\omicron\nu\alpha\nu$ ⁴⁴(Perf. A. I 3p) means “become, come about, carry out, fulfilled, etc.” Some Bible versions translate it as 3rd singular form: it is done (NRS, RSV, NASB, NIV, etc.). Although the subject of $\gamma\epsilon\gamma\omicron\nu\alpha\nu$ is controversial, I prefer to translate as “they have come to pass⁴⁵.” The subject can apply to “the eschatological events that are part of the eternal plan of God (Aune, 1998, 1126). Beale thinks “it underscores the climactic nature of the fulfillment of the prophecies woven throughout vv1-5” (Beale, 1054). In other words, this “new heaven and new earth” are no longer a hope in the future. This is a promise that is fulfilled while John sees the descending of the new heaven and earth through a vision.

We may ask, “how could that be?” “Could John tell the suffering Christians in his time that they were then living in new heaven and earth – the chaotic, persecuted, and filthy land?” In response to this question, I rephrase what I have said in the above section that the book of Revelation is not simply an apocalyptic literature, which just focuses on the future and provides the contemporary people some comfort. John is giving the

⁴⁴ Some manuscripts read this word as $\gamma\epsilon\gamma\omicron\nu\alpha$ (1st sing.) coincident with the followed word $\epsilon\gamma\omega$, (1st pronoun). Beale says that “it may be the unusual second aorist ending on the perfect inspired such a change. External evidence favors taking $\gamma\epsilon\gamma\omicron\nu\alpha\nu$ by itself and $\epsilon\gamma\omega$ as the beginning of the following clause,” (Beale, 1057).

⁴⁵ Some scholars think that the verb $\gamma\epsilon\gamma\omicron\nu\alpha\nu$ (3rd plural perfect) is unexpressed. They translate it as a third-person singular perfect form ($\gamma\epsilon\gamma\omicron\nu\epsilon\nu$) like 16:7, in which it is translated as “it is done,” (Aune, 1998, 1126).

Almighty God's prophecy. In fact, John does not turn the eyes of his readers away from history and towards the future alone in order to make sense of the absurdity of the situation. For John, the future is determined, for it has already begun. The end has already begun. The key and answer are in the understanding of the twofold titles: το αλφα και το ω and of η αρχη και το τελο.

The title το αλφα και το ω here is paralleled with η αρχη και το τελο. Both of these titles are figures of speech - merisms. Both of them are common in Greco-Roman culture. Therefore, the understanding of η αρχη και το τελο would help to denote the meanings of το αλφα και το ω formula. Since I have explained the background and its use in the book of Revelation, now I will concentrate on the title η αρχη και το τελο.

With the help of the comparative study of literature, we have the following discoveries about this title (Charles, II, 220, Aune, 1998, 1126):

- a. The title was used to address to Greek gods⁴⁶.
- b. Plato used this title to address to the god in the 4th century B.C⁴⁷.
- c. It was familiar to the Palestinian Jews⁴⁸.
- d. The Church Fathers used this title to address the Christian God⁴⁹.
- e. Nowhere did we find the same expression in OT and the other books of NT⁵⁰.

Aune concludes that this divine title η αρχη και το τελο is “drawn from Hellenistic religious and philosophical tradition and has a cosmological significance

⁴⁶ Aune says that ‘Beginning and End’ is a divine epithet found in magical papyri and other magical texts, e.g. “PGMIV. 2836-37 is part of a hexameter hymn to Hekate that reads in part, ‘Beginning and end [αρχη και τελος] are you, and you alone rule all,” (Aune, 1998, 1127).

⁴⁷ Plato *Leg.* 2.715e, “God ... holds the beginning and the middle and the end of all things which exists [αρχην τε και τελευτην και μεσα των ουτων απαντων εχων] (Aune, 1998, 1126).

⁴⁸ Josephus quotes it in *c.Ap. ii 22* and *Ant. Viii. II. 2* (Charles, II, 220).

⁴⁹ Quoted by Justin Martyr, Hippolytus, Irenaeus, Clement of Alex, Origen, and etc. (Charles, II, 220-21, Aune, 1998, 1126).

(Aune, 1998, 1126). However, as one agrees this title most likely derived from the Hellenistic world, one should not be too hasty to reject any relations to the OT ideas⁵¹. In fact, this Hellenistic Divine title for John sheds the light with reference to the OT writings and the revelation of YHWH – Jesus Christ. The next sentence of the same verse (v.6) tells us their relation: ἐγὼ τῷ διψῶντι δώσω ἐκ τῆς πηγῆς τοῦ ὕδατος τῆς ζωῆς δωρεάν (I will freely give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life). Beale suggests this is referred to Isaiah 49:10 which describe Israel’s restoration into the presence of God. Isaiah’s ‘fountain of waters’ have now become “fountains of the waters of life” (Beale, 1056). John’s vision also recalls to Jesus’ proclamation in the Gospel of John (Jn. 4:14, 7:37-38).

The title *ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ τέλος* expresses God’s sovereignty over history, especially by bringing it to an end in salvation and judgment. God transcends above time and guides the entire course of history (Beale, 1055). Time itself is encompassed by God’s eternal nature (Mounce, 374). God is the beginning: not only to the fact that he was the first in point of time, but also the source and origin of all things. He is the end: he constitutes the goal and aim (ibid.). Boring wisely states, “God does not merely bring the End, God is the End” (Boring, 1986, 215).

The role of a prophet, while he is giving his prophecy, is to interpret history – the saving act of God (Boring, 1986, 261). Boring explains,

“With prophetic insight, John sees that the threatening persecution, the historical reality in which he and his congregations must live out their lives, does not signify meaningless nihilism or an impotent or faithless God but is the penultimate act in the drama of God’s redemptive history. ... Contrary to the common opinion that apocalyptists fled from the present into future fantasy, John’ prophetic role binds him to his present as its interpretive” (ibid. 262-63).

⁵⁰ We do not find the same expression in OT or the other books of NT, though we find ‘Beginning’ and ‘End’ used separately. Also, we do not find this term applying to the Deity.

⁵¹ Suen comments, “methodologically, etymology alone is rarely a safe guide to the meaning of a word since words change their meaning through us,” (Suen, 75).

There is a triumph because it is the fundamental truth of human life corresponding to the saving act of God through Jesus Christ. The faith of the church is not exclusively directed to the future, but rather moves between the historical fulfillment of redemption in Christ and the expected ultimate revelation of Christ's victory in the future (Suen, 89). This *ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ τέλος* does not just tell us God as the creator, he is also the God who brought forth the new creation for the sake of his people (Bauckham, *Theology*, 27). Temporally speaking, the New Heaven and Earth will happen in the future. Historically speaking, it is set in the eternal decree of the sovereign God. He is the beginning and the end. Therefore, the twofold titles can be arranged as follow:

ἐγὼ [εἶμι] τὸ Ἄλφα καὶ τὸ Ὠ (I am the Alpha and Omega: *I am the sovereign God*)
 ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ τέλος. (the beginning and the end: *the Lord of the History*)

22:13 ἐγὼ [εἶμι] τὸ Ἄλφα καὶ τὸ Ὠ, ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος, ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ τέλος.

[Translated: I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end]

This is the first and only time John the author put these three formulas together and the only time they appear as such in the NT. Two characteristics appear here: a) they are parallel. b) three titles are applied to Jesus Christ. In the next passages I will elucidate the meaning of the title ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος, then I will examine the explanation about the worship of Christ in the book of Revelation, finally, I will conclude by explaining what messages these three titles altogether bring forth.

a. ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος

This title appears three times in the book of Revelation (1:17, 2:8, 22:13). Many scholars agree that this title is referred to in the book of Isaiah 44:6. In verse 6 of the forty-fourth chapter, Watt says that it is a challenge to Israel in its Babylonian setting to

affirm again the First Commandment (Watts, 143). They are challenged to bear witness in that pagan setting that Yahweh alone is God (ibid.). The title “Redeemer” is previous to the title “I am the first and the last.” In fact, God’s sovereignty should not be separated from his faithfulness revealed in the redemption. In v.6-23 of the same chapter “a new pledge of redemption” is given. Thus, a fresh exhortation is made to trust in Yahweh, and to cast out the idols, listening to God’s word (Delitzsch, vol. 7, 205). The title “first and last” is more closely related to God’s saving act. Likewise, in the book of Revelation, this title is given solely to Jesus Christ. In Rev. 1:17, Christ is not just the first and last, but also the living one. This is to refer to his resurrection. He lives and he is the firstfruit of the dead (1 Cor. 15:23). Jesus is the first and the last. This merism is to express how he keeps his faithfulness in the salvation.

b. The worship of Jesus Christ

Ever since the early century, the debate about Jesus’ deity has been happened again and again. Dune, in his book *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, has the following comment: “In the following centuries [*after the formation of NT*] of course the tension between the Lordship of Jesus and the oneness of God became the central problem of theology. And to this day it remains the chief stumbling block in Christian-Jewish, Christian-Muslim dialogue. To an important degree also it is the basic problem which underlies much of modern Christian theology: how to speak of God and of Jesus today?” (Dune, 54) In fact, whether to accept the deity of Jesus Christ or not is a core issue of our Christian faith.

Some modern scholars try to examine ancient Judaism in order to figure out the development of this unique idea. Hurtado gives us an example of this viewpoint. In his

book, *One God, One Lord*, Hurtado tries to elucidate the close relationship between early Christology and the ancient Judaism. He raises a question in the beginning of the book: “How did the early Jewish Christians accommodate the veneration of the exalted Jesus alongside God while continuing to see themselves as loyal to the fundamental emphasis of their ancestral tradition on one God, and without the benefit of the succeeding four centuries of Christian theological discussion which led to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity?”(Hurtado, 2) He says an approach - looking back from ancient Judaism to see the development of Christology - is overlooked by some scholars⁵². As a result, the veneration of Jesus is seen as merely a particular example of the syncretistic tendencies characteristic of Greco-Roman religion and as an early stage of the Hellenization of Christianity (Hurtado, 3). So he, by examining the contributions of the Judaic literature, tries to prove the origin of the binitarian shape of early Christianity devotion and its relationship to the religious context in which it first appeared, ancient Judaism (ibid. 12). In the next chapters of his book, Hurtado discusses the divine agency in ancient Jewish Monotheism (Chapter one), the personified divine attributing as divine agents (Chapter two), and the exalted patriarchs as divine agents, and principal angels as chief Agents. Finally, he explains the mutation⁵³ of Jesus’ worship in Jewish traditions among the early Christian writers.

As for Hurtado, there are three types of divine agency: 1) Divine attributes and powers (e.g. Wisdom or Philo’s Logos); 2) Exalted patriarchs (e.g. Moses and Enoch); 3) Principal angels (e.g. Michael). (ibid. 17) Some descriptions about these divine agencies

⁵² He says, “Conscious of the distinctive binitarian shape (*i.e. worshipping one God and one Lord*) of early Christian devotion against the monotheistic emphasis of early Judaism and also that Christianity began as a kind of Jewish sectarian movement, scholars have sought to explain the veneration of Jesus as due to the influence of the veneration of a wide variety of divine figures in Greco-Roman paganism,” (Hurtado, 3).

are similar to the way the early writers described Jesus Christ. Later, the earliest Christian devotion constituted a significant mutation or innovation in Jewish monotheistic tradition, including I) to set the place of the exalted Jesus in the religious life, devotion, or piety of its adherents. II) Christ came to be included as an object of the devotional attention which characteristically reserved for God. III) An unprecedented reshaping of monotheistic piety to include a second object of devotion alongside God. IV) This reshaping of Jewish monotheistic devotion began among the early Jewish Christians (Hurtado, 100).

Hurtado's approach in his book is appreciated. However, he does not explain very clearly the difference between the description of Divine Agency in ancient Judaic literature and the description of Jesus Christ in early Christian writings. He focuses on their similarities. Yet Hurtado assumes that the difference is a clue of the mutation/development/evolution of Christology. This is a chief weakness in Hurtado's book⁵⁴.

Hurtado compares the use of Logos and Wisdom between ancient Judaism and NT writings. He says, "In some studies Wisdom and Logos are described as the most important factors in the Jewish tradition as far as understanding the development of the belief in the exalted Jesus as a divine being is concerned" (Hurtado, 41). However, Hurtado overlooks that John 1:1-18 shows us one of the key understandings of Logos is expressed in his "incarnation." This Logos is not just an exalted one but also a

⁵³ Hurtado explains this word as "earliest Christian devotion was a direct outgrowth from, and indeed a variety of, the ancient Jewish tradition," (Hurtado, 99)

⁵⁴ Some scholars suggest their cautions about this comparative approach. Sandmel questions the value and relevance of collecting 'parallels' to New Testament passages and ideas from a wide range of Jewish sources of different periods and characters. He gives a warning, called "Parallelomania" (Lane, 19). France suggests us a few cautions of this approach as follow (ibid.): 1. Are the parallels real? 2. Do the 'parallels'

humiliating “Word.” Logos is not just a philosophical idea but an action rooted from the divine passion.

Hurtado indicates “six features of the religious devotion of early Christianity that indicate a significant mutation in the Jewish monotheistic tradition,” (Hurtado, 100) including hymnic practices, prayer, use of the name of Christ, the Lord’s Supper, confession of faith in Jesus, and prophetic pronouncement of the risen Christ (ibid.). But a strong argument is that no divine agency (personified divine attributes, exalted patriarchs, or principal angels) is being praised and worship as like as God. If Jesus is to be worshipped, either he is God or the Jewish Christian creates a cultic practice to him⁵⁵. As Bauckham argues, “Jewish monotheism could not tolerate a mere spectrum between God and creatures, and in religious practice it was worship which signaled the distinction between God and every creature, however exalted. God must be worshipped, no creature may be worshipped” (Bauckham, 118). I think Hurtado’s book has still not solved this problem yet.

Hurtado does not handle some scripture passages which clearly state Jesus as God, e.g. Phil. 2:6⁵⁶, John 20:28, Rev 22:13. He does not explain why and how Jesus argues with the Jews about his divinity in John 10:31-36. In fact, the early Jewish Christians put Jesus on the side of Divinity rather than on the side of the chief agency and/or creatures. Finally, Paul did not create the title “Lord” to Jesus Christ, on the

come from a relevant culture?’³ Are the parallels significant? 4. Is a parallel necessarily a source or influence? (ibid.)

⁵⁵ The Jewish Christian on one hand suggests to worship Jesus Christ, on the other hand they suggest a practice of worshipping the chief agency.

Unless they prove Jesus Christ who is Lord God, they would not escape from this strong and severe accusation. This is a key issue of Christology.

⁵⁶ Hurtado does not explain the phrase ‘το ειναι ισα θεω’ (to be equal to God) while he quotes this scripture on pp.96-97.

contrary, he addressed God in a new way, i.e. God, the Father, which showed an influence of Jesus' teaching.

The book of Revelation helps us to understand about Jesus' divinity. In fact, Jesus' divinity is assured in the book of Revelation. Jesus belongs with God as giver⁵⁷ (Bauckham, The Climax of Prophecy, 135). He is the source of the revelation⁵⁸ (ibid.). He is the divine agent of Salvation and judgment (ibid. 136). He is one to be praised and worshipped by the angels (ibid. 127, 135, 138-39). In the last chapter of the same book, the self-declaration God is equivalent to the Son. The one designation of God which appears in Revelation as a self-designation by God also appears as a self-designation by Christ (Bauckham, The Climax of Prophecy, 26). Jesus Christ is the supreme manifestation of God. He is the word became flesh and lived for a while among us, (John 1:14). He is the one who continues God the Father's work (John 5:19-31). He is

τὸ Ἄλφα καὶ τὸ Ὠ, (the Sovereign divinity, ontologically)
ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος, (Savior, soteriologically,)
ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ τέλος. (Lord of the History, temporally)

As a whole, God is "Alpha and Omega." This formula contains ontological, temporal and soteriological meanings. However, this formula is not as abstract as the Hellenistic thinking. It has very clearly and very practically revealed in the history of human beings. The supreme revelation is through the Word, Jesus Christ. Because of Christ's redemption work, the end of history is set. His victory as well as the victory brought to the suffering Christians is affirmed. The triune God is "Alpha and Omega."

⁵⁷ Bauckham says, "It is clear that for John Jesus belongs with God as giver, while the angel belongs with John as instrument," (Bauckham, Prophecy 135).

⁵⁸ "The angel is mere intermediary, Jesus is the source of revelation," (Bauckham, Prophecy, 134).

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