

THE ORIGIN OF ‘ALPHA AND OMEGA’
(REVELATION 1.8; 21.6; 22.13): A SUGGESTION

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Although scholars have proposed various understandings of John the Elder’s derivation of the title ‘Alpha and Omega’ for God (Rev. 1.8; 21.6) and for Jesus (22.13) in the Apocalypse, none has been entirely convincing. Many commentators have been content to see it as a rather straightforward assertion that God or Jesus is the sovereign ‘A to Z’, so to speak, and perhaps to suggest its origin in the clear connection with the nearby titles, ‘the first and the last’ (1.17; 22.13; cf. 2.8) and ‘the beginning and the end’ (21.6; 22.13), both of which may be fairly characterized as instances of John’s intertextual recourse to Isaiah’s Greek text (e.g. Isa. 41.4; 44.6; etc.). While this intertextual move is probable, the origin of the title itself may still be patient of further explanation. Other scholars have suggested that the title ‘Alpha and Omega’ in Revelation arose through reflection on the Greek form of the divine name, ΙΑΩ. This note takes up and extends that evidence to put forth the possibility that John ‘exegeted’ the divine name, in light of Isaiah 40–48 and emerging scribal practices of abbreviating the *nomina sacra*, as a reference to Jesus as the Alpha and Omega.

Austin Farrer, sometime warden of Keble College, Oxford, suggested over fifty years ago that the ‘Alpha and Omega’ title had its roots in speculation about the Greek form of the divine name, ΙΑΩ.¹ Farrer’s further conjecture that the three letters each referred to a temporal aspect of God’s being (cf. Rev. 1.8) was in due course rightly criticized.

1. A. Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St John’s Apocalypse* (Boston: Beacon, 1963 [orig. Westminster: Dacre, 1949]), pp. 262-70. Perhaps of significance is the fact that Keble College’s chapel features a central mosaic of Christ in glory with a sword coming out of his mouth and a large open book in his hands, with the letters alpha and omega prominently inscribed on its pages.

But in his suggestion that the title has its birth in reflection on the trigrammaton there may be some truth.

Perhaps more than any other modern commentator, David Aune has sought to explore such a connection. Aune has repeatedly drawn attention to the two letters, alpha and omega, as a constitutive aspect of ΙΑΩ. He has further noted the repeated combination of both the syllables, αω, and the divine name, ΙΑΩ, in later magical contexts, most notably in that great amalgam known as the Greek Magical Papyri. At one point he suggests that to call God or Jesus the Alpha and Omega would have been to engage in polemic against Greco-Roman magical practices.² Although it is true that the magical papyri are probably late in the most part, they are occasionally conservative of older traditions.³ The chief problem, however, with the evidence Aune adduces is that of derivation; one must still explain why certain items may have been taken up, whether in affirmation or confrontation, and not others.

Perhaps, however, John stands rather nearer the beginning of the chain of reflection on the divine name that later eventuated in such magical reservoirs. His penchant for finding deeper significance and symbolic representations in names is well-known. Might it have been the case that John, perhaps taking his cue from the emerging Christian practice of abbreviating names in the *nomina sacra*,⁴ 'exegeted' the

2. See D.E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5* (WBC, 52a; Dallas: Word Books, 1997), p. 57; D.E. Aune, 'Iao', *RAC* 17.1-12; D.E. Aune, 'The Apocalypse of John and Greco-Roman Revelatory Magic', *NTS* 33 (1987), pp. 481-501 (489-91). Cf. also, in part, W.B. Stanford, 'The Significance of the Alpha and Omega in Revelation I.8', *Hermathena* 98 (1964), pp. 43-44. On the later prevalence of the alpha and omega pair, the masterful article by H. LeClercq and F. Cabrol, 'Α Ω', in *DACL I* (Paris, 1907), pp. 1-25, is still useful, esp. for the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the title in inscriptions and art.

3. An argument from chronology against a position like Aune's was mounted by T. Holtz, *Die Christologie der Apokalypse des Johannes* (TU, 85; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1962), pp. 148-52, although this should probably be abandoned in light of more recent study that suggests the Greek divine name may have been present in early magical traditions.

4. One recent investigation has suggested that the practice of abbreviating names in the *nomina sacra* began prior to 70 CE: see L. Hurtado, 'The Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*: A Proposal', *JBL* 117 (1998), pp. 655-73 (659, 672). Admittedly, the use of an initial letter to serve as a *nomen sacrum* is rare, though not unknown. According to C.H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt* (Schweich Lectures 1977; Oxford: Oxford University Press on behalf of the British Academy, 1979), p. 83, there are occasional (third century and later)

divine name ΙΑΩ as Ἰησοῦς ἀλφά ω̄, that is, Jesus is the Alpha and Omega?

We know that the Greek name ΙΑΩ was current as a rendering of the Hebrew Tetragrammaton at the time from its presence in at least one Septuagintal manuscript of Leviticus found at Qumran (4QpapLXX-Lev^b = 4Q120).⁵ How universal the name was or whether this was the original Greek rendering of the tetragrammaton need not preoccupy us here.⁶ The divine name was already by this time widely viewed as intrinsically powerful, as seen in sources ranging from the third century BCE (*Artapanus, apud* Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 9.27.24-26 = Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 1.154.2-3; Lev. 24.16 LXX) to the circumlocutions employed in the Gospel of Matthew and the whole range of

instances of the single initial letter employed as a *nomen sacrum*. J.Z. Lauterbach, 'Substitutes for the Tetragrammaton', *PAAJR* 2 (1930-1931), pp. 39-67, esp. 41, provides some later instances when an initial Hebrew letter was used as an abbreviation for the divine name. More generally, A. Millard surveys some uses of abbreviations in antiquity that might have fed the practice: 'Ancient Abbreviations and the *Nomina Sacra*', in C. Eyre, A. Leahy and L. Montagnò Leahy (eds.), *The Unbroken Reed: Studies in the Culture and Heritage of Ancient Egypt in Honour of A.F. Shore* (Occasional Publications, 11; London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1994), pp. 221-26.

5. For the Greek fragment, see P.W. Skehan, E. Ulrich and J.E. Sanderson, *Qumran Cave 4.IV: Palaeo-Hebrew and Greek Biblical Manuscripts* (DJD, 9; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), no. 120 (pp. 167-86; pl. 39-41). Ulrich further suggests that ΙΑΩ may well be the form of the divine name to be reconstructed in 4QLXXDeut (= 4Q122) as well (p. 196).

6. That ΙΑΩ is the earliest rendering has been argued by G. Howard, 'The Tetragram and the New Testament', *JBL* 96 (1977), pp. 263-83 (263-66); and P.W. Skehan, 'The Divine Name at Qumran, in the Masada Scroll, and in the Septuagint', *BIOSCS* 13 (1980), pp. 14-44. For the conclusion that κύριος is the earliest, see A. Pietersma, 'Kyrios or Tetragram: A Renewed Quest for the Original LXX', in A. Pietersma and C. Cox (eds.), *De Septuaginta: Studies in Honour of John William Wevers* (Mississauga, Ontario: Benben, 1984), pp. 85-101. See also M. Delcor, 'Des diverses manières d'écrire le tétragramme sacré dans les anciens documents hébraïques', *RHR* 147 (1955), pp. 145-73 (165-72), for some indication of possible Hebrew precursors in both literary traces (but only as 'une pure hypothèse') and epigraphic remains. Either way, the evidence for the temporal proximity of ΙΑΩ is much stronger than the parallel that is often cited from *Gen. R.* 81 with reference the first and last letters of יהוה, *pace*, e.g. T. Holtz in *EDNT* I, p. 65.

substitutions for and special renderings of the tetragrammaton.⁷ The name ΙΑΩ was also apparently deemed powerful in another roughly contemporaneous apocalypse, the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, where the angel says, 'I am Iaoel and I was called so by him who causes those with me on the seventh expanse, on the firmament, to shake, a power through the medium of his ineffable name in me' (10.8; cf. also 17.13).⁸

Furthermore, if Rev. 1.8b, 'the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come' is recognized as an implicit exegesis of the revelation of God's name in Exod. 3.14,⁹ to find reflection on a different name of God in 1.8a may not be entirely surprising. Of course, two of the three times the title 'Alpha and Omega' appears in Revelation, it is given not to Jesus but to God (1.8; 21.6). If our suggestion is correct, how are we to explain this? A certain progression in the assignation of titles to Jesus may be observed in the Apocalypse. Indeed, it seems that to refer divine titles to Jesus seems to have been a favorite strategy of John.¹⁰ In connection with the three interrelated titles, 'Alpha and Omega', 'the first and the last', and 'the beginning and the end', note the following sequence, which has often been observed:

God: 'I am the Alpha and the Omega' (1.8)

Jesus: 'I am the first and the last' (1.17; cf. 2.8)

God: 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end' (21.6)

Jesus: 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end' (22.13)

7. For a helpful survey, see S. McDonough, *YHWH at Patmos: Revelation 1:4 in its Hellenistic and Early Jewish Setting* (WUNT, 2.107; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999).

8. Translation by R. Rubinkiewicz and H.G. Lunt in *OTP* I, p. 694. This is the preferred reading of the editors, though it should be noted that most manuscripts read 'speakable name' instead of 'ineffable name'. The editors date this work to the late first or early second century CE.

9. Cf. Rev. 1.4. See McDonough, *YHWH at Patmos*. He also considers a connection of the Alpha and Omega title with ΙΑΩ to be probable (pp. 218-19), and even notes the possibility that the iota could be taken as a yod, hence, 'YHWH is Alpha and Omega' (p. 219 n. 84).

10. See, e.g., C.H. Talbert, 'The Christology of the Apocalypse', in M.A. Powell and D.R. Bauer (eds.), *Who Do You Say that I Am? Essays on Christology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), pp. 166-84.

We may recognize a progression with an almost narrative dimension to it. With John, the reader/hearer is told not to worship any lesser being, but only to ‘Worship God!’ (22.9). The auditor is then immediately confronted with one who is subtly but unmistakably identified with God by means of sharing in his previously enumerated attributes, chiefly his eternal power over history in all its moments, expressed in the threefold merisms of 22.13. The frame also recalls the introductory scene when John offers worship to Jesus and is not rebuked as he is when he does the same to the angel (1.17-18). The statement of 22.13 justifies and clarifies the actions of 1.17-18 as worship toward one who has come to share in the divine identity. This implies that 22.13 is the fundamental use of the title ‘Alpha and Omega’ for which its previous uses prepare the reader/hearer. Not until it is brought together climactically with the two other merisms is its full significance made clear.

This might then suggest the following, admittedly speculative, reconstruction of the course of events that led to the statement in 22.13. John, during the period of long gestation that must have preceded such a learned work as his Apocalypse, reflected on the meaning and deeper significance of various divine names. Steeped in the already considerable Christian tradition of identifying Yahweh’s predicates and actions with those of Jesus, often by means of the Greek translation of Yahweh as ‘Lord’ (κύριος), John wondered what it might mean to identify Jesus by means of that alternative rendering of the tetragrammaton into Greek, ΙΑΩ. He held ΙΑΩ in his mind while reading or hearing Isaiah 40–48 and the temporal merisms there applied to Yahweh, ‘the first and the last’ and ‘the beginning and the end’.¹¹ Knowing by Christian conviction that ΙΑΩ ultimately was to be referred to Jesus, he was struck by the alphabetical merism, that is, the alpha and omega, included in the divine title, and with how well this might express and stand in continuity with the other two merisms derived from Isaiah. This left the initial iota unaccounted for; might this have been a

11. Cf. also Josephus, *Ant.* 8.280: God is ‘the beginning and end of all things’ (ἀρχὴ καὶ τέλος τῶν ἀπάντων). Further, G.K. Beale (*The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], p. 199) suggests, ‘The “Alpha-Omega” merism could well have been formulated through reflection on similar clauses in Isaiah 41–48’. For the connection to Isaiah, see also, *cum grano salis*, W.J.P. Boyd, “I am Alpha and Omega” (Rev. 1,8; 21,6; 22,13)’, *SE* 2 [=TU 87] (1964), pp. 526-31.

divinely ordained reference to the initial letter of Jesus' name? Thus: Jesus is the Alpha and Omega. Especially in tandem with the two other merisms gleaned from Isaiah, John now had a rich triad of compact statements expressing the ultimate divine identification and sovereignty of the risen Lord Jesus, and employed them accordingly in the writing of his Apocalypse.

John's Apocalypse has been justly characterized as a work of 'immense learning', 'astonishingly meticulous literary artistry', and 'remarkable creative imagination'.¹² If this reconstruction of his implicit exegesis of the divine name has anything to commend it, then we have one more confirmation of the accuracy of that judgment.

12. R. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), p. ix.