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CARL A. EBERHARD

Worship Music in a Synthetic Culture

H. GRADY DAVIS

Brief Studies

Homiletics

Theological Observer

Book Review

Index to Volume XXXIII

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BRIEF STUDIES

THE END OF THE BIBLE AT THE END OF THE YEAR A HOMILETICAL STUDY OF REVELATION 22:12-21

This passage begins and ends with the thought of our Lord's final coming (vv. 12, 20). It therefore lends itself well as a text for the end of the church year, the Advent season, or New Year's Eve.

1. *Who the Coming One Is*

V. 13: "I am the Alpha and the Omega" (Rev. 1:8; 21:6; a few MSS and the KJV also in Rev. 1:11). Alpha, the first letter in the Greek alphabet, and Omega, the last, are symbols of the beginning and the end as in the English expression "from A to Z." But the unusual thing in the Book of Revelation is the use of these letters as a name, which has no parallel in other literature.

The old hymn *In dulci jubilo* echoes this part of the text. In the German version (*Nun singet und seid froh*) the first stanza ends: "Du bist A und O." Although recent translations of this hymn into English (such as No. 92 in *The Lutheran Hymnal*) contain no reference to "A and O," an older English translation reads:

Now raise your happy voice, Sing all and
loud rejoice!
Lowly there reclineth Our heart's Delight so
blest,
As the sun He shineth Upon His mother's
breast.
Thou art A and O! Thou art A and O!

The name "Alpha and Omega" is not fully explained in the text. The words which follow, "the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End," still leave us with the question: What does this mean? Because Alpha and Omega are letters used in writing words,

together with all intervening letters of the alphabet, it has been suggested that Christ here calls Himself God's only revelation to men in written form. Others speak of "the Alpha of Genesis and the Omega of Revelation" and point out that the center of all Scriptures is Christ, "the last book presenting to us man and God reconciled in Paradise, as the first book presented man at the beginning innocent and in God's favor in Paradise" (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown on Rev. 1:8). Still others find here a reference to Christ's eternity and deity. Jesus declares of Himself what Is. 44:6 ascribes to God: "I am the First, and I am the Last, and besides Me there is no God!" Every explanation of the name "Alpha and Omega" must take account of this claim. Only the true God could be "the Author and Finisher of our faith" (Heb. 12:2); only of the true God can it be properly said: "He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." (Phil. 1:6)

V. 16: The Coming One, whose "trustworthy and true" words are found in the Book of Revelation, calls Himself by His name "Jesus." At Christmas we are particularly reminded that the angel of the Lord told Joseph concerning the Son of Mary: "You shall call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). And to Mary the angel said: "You shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:31-33; cf. Acts 4:12; John 14:6)

"I am the Root and the Offspring of David" (v. 16). Here the Coming One identifies Himself as the Promised One of

Old Testament prophecy (cf. *L.H.*, 645). "Root" is the "shoot" which springs from the root; "a shoot from the stump of Jesse" (Is. 11:1; *L.H.*, 645). — "Root" (or "shoot") and "offspring" refer to Jesus according to His human nature. There is in this name also a reference to royalty (see Rev. 5:5; Luke 1:32,33). In fact, the Coming One is not merely the descendant of a king, but He is Himself King of kings and Lord of lords (1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 17:14; 19:16; Rev. 1:6; 1 Peter 2:9), "not the kings of the earth, but the Lamb's loyal followers, who as believers have been made kings and priests to God and the Lamb." (Carrol Herman Little, *Explanation of the Book of Revelation*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950, on Rev. 19:16)

"The bright (and) Morning Star" ("and" is not in the best MSS). At Christmas we remind ourselves of God's promise in Num. 24:17: "A Star shall come forth out of Jacob and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel." It is interesting to note that in these passages royalty and a star are linked.

In Rev. 2:28 "the morning star" is a reward which Jesus says He will give him "that conquers and keeps My works until the end" (cf. Dan. 12:3). In view of Rev. 22:16 we can perhaps say that Jesus, "the . . . Morning Star," will give Himself to the faithful. What does this mean? The text tells us no more, but in harmony with Scripture it can safely be said that when we by the grace of God receive the Morning Star and shine as the brightness of the firmament and as the stars forever and ever, Jesus alone still remains the λαμπρός (bright, shining) Morning Star κατ' ἑξοχὴν, in whose light we shall shine. The Light of the world said to His followers: "You are the light of the world." Cf. Luke 1:78; Mal. 4:2. "It is the sun and not a star that brings the day, and . . . it is not well to stress 'the Morning One' in this direction," R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation* (Co-

lumbus: Lutheran Book Concern, 1935) on Rev. 22:16. Albert Barnes (*Notes on the New Testament*), however, has the following elaboration of the comparison: "He [Jesus] sustains a relation to a dark world similar to this star. . . . He is compared with that morning star, rather with reference to its *beauty* than its *light*. May it not also have been one object in this comparison to lead us, when we look on that star, to think of the Savior? It is perhaps the most beautiful object in nature; it succeeds the darkness of the night; it brings on the day—and as it mingles with the first rays of the morning, it seems to be so joyous, cheerful, exulting, bright, that nothing can be better adapted to remind us of him who came to lead on eternal day. Its place—the first thing that arrests the eye in the morning—might serve to remind us that the Savior should be the first object that should draw the eye and the heart on the return of each day. In each trial—each scene of sorrow—let us think of the bright star of the morning as it rises on the darkness of the night—emblem of the Savior rising on our sorrow and our gloom." (Cf. the hymns "Beautiful Savior" [No. 657] and "How Lovely Shines the Morning Star" [No. 343])

2. *When He Will Come*

The word "quickly" (KJV, vv. 12 and 30) may be taken with reference to the speed rather than to the immediate proximity of His coming. No man or angel knows how long the world will stand. It cannot be proved that "we are in the last *minutes* of the world's day." Even 1 Peter 4:7 does not provide a time schedule. Nor does Phil. 4:5. Instead of "quickly" the RSV has "soon" (Rev. 22:12, 20; 3:11; Luther: *bald*). This translation is acceptable, but in raising the question "How soon is 'soon'?" we must remember that human definitions and standards of time do not apply here. For "one day is with the Lord as a thousand

years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Peter 3:8). Certainly the end of our life is for us the end of this world, for "it is appointed for men to die once, but after that the Judgment." (Heb. 9:27)

We can safely say only: (1) The final end may come at any time; (2) We are closer to it now than ever before; (3) We are moving toward it at a rapid rate.

The end or the beginning of a year, however, impresses upon us the rapid flight of time. We pause to remind ourselves that as children of God we are "waiting for and hastening the coming of the Day of God." (2 Peter 3:12; cf. Ps. 90; Job 14:1,2; 8:9; James 4:14; Job 7:6; 9:25,26; Ps. 39:4,5; 102:11)

For the church on earth the Lord is constantly the Coming One (cf. Rev. 1:4, 8; 3:11; 4:8. The words "and art to come" in the KJV of Rev. 11:17 are not in the best MSS. The final coming has taken place before this point in the vision. Also see Matt. 23:39; 24:3,27,37,42; 25:13,31).

3. *Why He Will Come*

Why is our Lord coming again? In the words of the Apostles' Creed, "to judge the quick and the dead." "Behold I am coming," says Jesus, "bringing My recompense, to repay everyone for what he has done" (v. 12). While faith alone saves and only unbelief damns (KJV: *according, not because of work*), "each man's life will . . . be . . . the public evidence of what is in his heart, either faith or unbelief" (Lenski, *Revelation*, p. 666). "The Lord's own gracious reward . . . is given by Him to each one in proportion to the work he has done in His service from the active side of faith." (Little, p. 230; Heb. 11:6; Matt. 25:31-46; Rev. 20:12; Dan. 12:3; Luke 19:16-19; 2 Cor. 9:6)

The Christian need not be afraid of the Lord's final coming. Perfect love also casts out the cause of this fear (1 John 4:18). The child of God can look up and lift up

his head, for his redemption is drawing near. (Luke 21:28)

Yes, it will be a blessed reward for those who are the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. "Blessed are they that wash their robes" (KJV: "do His commandments"), "that they may have right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates" (v. 14). The only effective "washing of the robes" is done in the blood of Jesus Christ, "the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." (John 1:29; also see Rev. 7:14; Is. 1:18; Zech. 3:3-5; Heb. 9:14; 1 John 1:7; also hymns 471:3; 149:2).*

The circle of our salvation comes full round when He who shed His blood to save us comes through the gates into the eternal holy city of God, the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2). There, by the grace of God, we will have "*the* right to the tree of life" (definite article in the Greek and the RSV, but not in the KJV) and live forever in Paradise Regained (cf. Gen. 2:9 and 3:22,24). The Proper Preface for Lent (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, p. 25), "that he who by a tree once overcome might likewise by a tree be overcome" could be expanded to include Rev. 22:14 by adding the words: "that we may have the right to the tree of life."

Whoever does not enter in through the gates into the city remains outside of it, in the company of his fellows: "dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood" (Rev. 22:15; cf. John 8:44). That is the reward of the unbelievers, the lost, the damned, whose life betrayed their lack of saving faith (cf. Rev. 20:15; 1 Cor. 6:9; Gal. 5:19-21; on Rev. 22:14,15 cf.

* Rev. 1:5 does not employ this particular picture, even though the KJV speaks there of "Him that . . . washed us from our sins in His own blood." The better reading in that verse is: "loosed (or released) us from our sins by His own blood."

Gal. 3). In the East dogs are regarded as unclean, and to call one a dog is a much stronger expression of contempt and condemnation there than with us (cf. Rev. 22:11; Phil. 3:2; 2 Peter 2:22; Matt. 7:6; 1 Sam. 17:43; 2 Kings 8:13). The Jews called the heathen dogs, and the Mohammedans call Jews and Christians by the same name. The term "dog" is also used to denote a person that is shameless, impudent, malignant, snarling, dissatisfied, and contentious. (Cf. Barnes on Phil. 3:2)

According to vv. 14, 15 there are only two places in the life to come: (1) in the city, and (2) outside of it. All people are found in one or the other of these two places. (Cf. Luke 16:19-31)

4. *How to Prepare for His Coming*

The entire hymn "O Lord, How Shall I Meet Thee, How Welcome Thee Aright?" (*L. H.*, No. 58), usually associated with Matt. 21:1-9, is a beautiful commentary on our entire text.

Since the water of life and salvation is free ("Let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price," Rev. 22:17 b; cf. Is. 55:1), we can look forward to our Savior's coming only on the basis of faith in Him and in His Word (cf. John 3:18; Rom. 3:28; Eph. 2:8, 9; Rom. 1:17; Hab. 2:4; John 3:16, 36; Gal. 3:11). The Word is essential, for "how are they to believe in Him of whom they have not heard?" (Rom. 10:14). That is why Jesus said: "If you continue in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31, 32). That is why it is of vital importance, especially for "a bishop," to "hold fast the faithful Word" (Titus 1:9). How appropriate are the Collect for the Word and the Collect for the Church (*L. H.*, p. 14), and the words: "Thou hast . . . continued unto us Thy Word" (*Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 334, lines 2, 3) in the Praise and Trust prayer for the Close of the

Year! Note the emphasis of the text (Rev. 22:18, 19) on the pure and complete Word and the dire threat of eternal damnation for him who dares to do violence to it, adding to it or taking away from it. In v. 19 the better reading is "tree of life" (RSV), not "book of life" (KJV). It harks back to the "tree of life" phrase in v. 14.

We may take "the plagues described in this book" as referring in the narrow sense to Rev. 15—16, even as the "book" at the end of v. 19 is the Book of Revelation. It is only by analogy that these verses are applied to the entire Bible. "The tree of life" and "the holy city" are "described" in the Book of Revelation. (Ch. 22:1-5)

The promise that our Savior will come again is attested by two witnesses, God the Father (v. 6) and Jesus, His Son (vv. 16, 20), and therefore fulfills the demand of faithful and trustworthy testimony (Deut. 17:6; 19:15; Matt. 18:16; 26:60; John 5:31-37; 8:17; 2 Cor. 13:1; Heb. 10:28; Rev. 11:3). There is not the slightest shadow of doubt that He will come and that "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that everyone may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in his body." (2 Cor. 5:10)

Our hope, then, does not make ashamed (Rom. 5:5). Let men say: "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation" (2 Peter 3:4). We know whom we have believed and are persuaded that He is able to keep that which we have committed unto Him against that day (2 Tim. 1:12). That day is surely drawing near. (Cf. *L. H.*, 611)

5. *The Church on Earth Longs and Prays for the Final Coming of our Lord*

"The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come'" (v. 17). The "bride" is the church. "The Spirit" is God's own Holy Spirit, by whom the church recognizes and confesses Jesus

Christ as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3). This Spirit dwells in the church and in the hearts of its members (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; Gal. 4:6). It is He who teaches and moves the church to pray (cf. Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6; Jude 20) also for the final coming of the Lord. Everyone who hears this prayer of the church (and all of its members do, because of its prominence in the prayer life of the church) is to join in it and make it his own (cf. *L. H.* 64:1, 5; 611:7). Lenski: "He who can hear the voice of the Church without raising his own is falling away from her. He who can hear the words of this book, this last revelation of Jesus, without the response, 'Be coming!' is slipping away into the company of those named in v. 15."

Barnes and others regard the entire v. 17 as being the Gospel invitation. In either case, worldwide missions are included in the prayer, for the prayer "Come" is in the Greek expressed in the present tense "Be coming" (proceed with Thy work of coming with all that it currently implies), not in the aorist, which would refer to the one act of Christ's final coming.

So there is something here which is closely akin to the Second Petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Thy Kingdom come" (where the aorist is used!). We pray not only that God would come to us in His Word and Sacrament and through them graciously grant us true faith and a godly life, but we pray also that He would come and enter the hearts of those who do not know Him and thus extend His kingdom of grace on earth (missions). This is a vital part of His coming, and it should be very much in our hearts and thoughts whenever we pray for Christ's final coming. We want that day to be a joyous day for all, as the last half of v. 17 suggests. No one can truly pray "Come!" who is not willing to use the means of grace himself or help support the preaching of the Gospel at home and abroad.

First and foremost, however, in the prayer

of v. 17a is the thought of Christ's coming in His kingdom of glory, for which His current coming to us and others by Word and Sacrament is a preparation. (Matt. 24:14)

In Rev. 22:20 John makes this prayer his own. We follow the RSV in assigning the "Amen" to John as part of his response to the words of the Lord, "Surely I am coming soon" (the KJV is noncommittal). And we can do no better than to join the divine seer and the entire church on earth in this "Amen!" and in the simple prayer of timeless scope and sweep: "Come, Lord Jesus!"

As we now close the Book at the end of the year, we do so with the benediction of Him who is to come, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all the saints (Rev. 22:21), and the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7)! Amen!"

Homiletic Suggestions

The end of the year is a time for taking stock or inventory. But it is also a time for looking ahead. Concerning the future we know definitely only what God has told us in His holy Word. The text is one of a number of passages which speak of

What Lies Ahead

On the basis of this text we consider

1. Our Lord is coming again.
2. When He will come.
3. Why He will come.
4. How to prepare for His coming.
5. The church on earth longs and prays for His coming.

(or)

The Coming One

1. Who He is.
2. When He will come.
3. Why He will come.
4. How to prepare for His coming.
5. The church on earth longs and prays for His coming.

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