



THE REIGN OF CHRIST

The Final Word

October 29, 2017

Revelation 22:6-21

Jesus Is Coming

6 And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.”

7 “And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”

8 I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, 9 but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God.”

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

12 “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

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

16 “I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”

17 The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.

18 I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

20 He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

21 The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.

10. EPILOGUE (22:6–21)

John rounds off his book with a series of somewhat miscellaneous observations. The connections here are so loose indeed that some commentators feel that John did not revise this last section and put it into final shape. Be that as it may, this epilogue stresses the importance of the book now concluding and assures its readers that Jesus will be coming again soon.

6. Once again we have the combination *trustworthy and true* (the same Greek in 3:14; 19:11). It is not clear whether this is meant to apply to the words that precede or those that follow, or, as Swete thinks, to the whole book. As we are now rounding off the whole, it seems that this last is correct (cf. v. 7). The whole book then is to be relied on. John goes on to speak of God as *the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets*, an unusual expression (cf. 19:10, and for 'the spirits of the prophets', 1 Cor. 14:32). It links God in no uncertain manner with the prophets. John may mean that it is the God who inspired the Old Testament prophets who has given him his visions.

More probably it is the New Testament prophets who are in mind. They were being oppressed and this is a reminder to them that God is not ashamed to be called their God. In their trouble he *sent his angel to show his servants* things to come (cf. 1:1). What was happening was not outside his control. Rather these things *must (dei) soon take place*. This does not necessarily mean that everything in the vision would happen very soon. The language would be satisfied if there were no delay in beginning the sequence. Torrance comments on the language of imminence, 'The New Testament does not think of the difference between the presence of Christ here and now and His Second Advent so much in terms of a passage of time as the difference between the veiled and the unveiled. That is why the whole of the New Testament by an inner necessity of personal faith thinks of that day as imminent.'

7. That the coming is imminent is repeated. This is followed by a blessing on him who observes *the words of the prophecy in this book*. For *blessed ...*, see note on 1:3. John is clear that this book is a prophecy. We should beware of classing it otherwise.

8. There is an emphasis on *I, John*. The previous verses have assured us of the divine attestation. This one assures us that the human instrument vouches for what he has written. He saw certain things and heard certain things. He is not writing at second hand. John goes on to say that he prostrated himself before the angel who had shown him these things. This renewed attempt at angel-worship is curious in view of the fact that a similar impulse had been so recently rejected (19:10). It is likely that among the recipients of Revelation there were some who were tempted to this kind of worship. John may wish to make it clear that he sees its attractiveness but that it is forbidden.

9. The impulse to worship is checked sharply; the prohibition is repeated in the words of 19:10. The angel gives as the reason that he is John's *fellow-servant* (*syndoulos* = 'fellow-slave!'). He is linked also with *the prophets* and with *all who keep the words of this book*. It is an intriguing thought that angels tell forth the word of God like the prophets do and that they too keep such words as are recorded here. We should not miss the importance of these words for an understanding of the proper dignity of the prophets. They rank with angels as servants of God. But even the greatest of God's servants are not to be worshipped. Worship is reserved for God alone. Further, it is salutary to reflect that even one who has seen all the visions of this book may go astray. We are warned to be alert lest we fall into temptation.

10. The angel adds another command. *Do not seal up* (see note on 10:4) means 'Do not keep hidden'. The words of this book are intended for publication. They are not hidden wisdom (contrast Isa. 8:16; Dan. 8:26; 12:4, 9). Once again John calls his book a *prophecy*, and once again he stresses imminence (cf. 1:7, and note on v. 6).

11. The angel continues by calling on people to pursue their characteristic course. He singles out on the one hand the doers of *wrong* and the *vile* (cf. Dan. 12:10), and on the other the doers of *right* and the *holy*. He probably means that the Lord's coming will be so swift that there will be no time for change. As they are at that moment, so the Lord will find them. The words are clearly meant as an encouragement to believers. The evil continue to pursue their way. Well, let them. The Lord's return is sure and soon. The last word is not with the wicked. The saying may also be meant as a challenge to repentance now. John is saying that there will be no opportunity for a last-minute repentance. The Lord will come too quickly for that. But now there is time. Let people repent while they can.

12. The promise of a speedy return of Christ is repeated from verse 7 (cf. v. 20; 3:11). To it is added the thought of the exact requital he will give to everyone. The returning Christ will bring 'wages' (*misthos*, *reward*, means 'what is due'). The verb *give* (*apodounai*) also signifies requital. *Everyone* is involved. There will be no escaping in that day. As we have seen elsewhere, judgment according to works is insisted upon throughout the New

Testament.

13. In 1:8 (where see note) God has said that he is *the Alpha and the Omega* and again in 21:6 where he adds, *the Beginning and the End*. Now the identical expression is applied by the risen Christ to himself, with the insertion *the First and the Last* (cf. 1:17; 2:8). All three expressions mean much the same and they set Christ apart from all created beings. None other than God could share in these titles of God.

14. There is a change of speaker, apparently back to John, though this is not said expressly. A blessing (see note on 1:3) is pronounced on those *who wash their robes* (cf. 3:4; 7:14; 1 Cor. 6:11). The present tense points to a continuous washing. There is a sense in which the saved are washed once and for all (e.g. 7:14, where the tense is the aorist). But we so easily defile ourselves day by day as we live with the pressures of the world that it is necessary for Christ's own to be cleansed continually (1 John 1:7). We are reminded of the soiled robes of those in the church of Sardis. John brings out the effect of the washing in terms of two pieces of imagery he has already used: those who wash in this way *have the right to the tree of life* (cf. v. 2), and they *may go through the gates into the city* (cf. 21:27).

15. There is a contrast with those outside. *Dogs* symbolize evil people (cf. Ps. 22:16, 20; Phil. 3:2), but exactly which is not clear. Swete suggests the 'abominable' (21:8) and Sweet false Jews (as Phil. 3:2). For the other sinners here see notes on 21:8. The separate mention of loving and making lies makes up a total of seven types of sinner, quite in John's manner. It is interesting to have this conjunction of attitude and act (cf. Jer. 8:10). Precisely where these sinners were is not said; indeed, after the destruction of the evil it is hard to imagine. But John's point is that such things are not to be found in the holy city. Let his readers be warned accordingly.

16. The emphatic *egō* stresses the fact that *Jesus* is the speaker. He tells us that the angel has spoken on his authority (cf. 1:1). That he can send an *angel* shows that his authority is great. The angel was sent 'to testify', an important concept in this book. *You* is plural, which is a little unexpected, for the angel spoke to John. But his message was not a private one; it was for Christians at large, and so the plural is meaningful.

For *the Root ... of David* see note on 5:5. Here *Root* is joined with *Offspring* to emphasize the Davidic descent. Right to the end the point is made that Christ is of David's line. The *bright Morning Star* heralds a new day, a new day so sorely needed by John's hard-pressed readers; cf. Beckwith, 'It seems to denote the one who is to bring in the perfect day of God.' Some see a reference to the coming of 'a star ... out of Jacob' (Num. 24:17), an idea taken up in later Jewish writings (e.g. *Test. Levi* 18:3; *Test. Judah* 24:1).

17. *The Spirit* presumably means the Holy Spirit, here speaking through the prophets. *The bride* is the church. Farrer is impressed by the linking of the two: 'The Spirit and the bride are one voice—what inspiration prompts, the body utters.' These then say, *Come!* But to whom are they issuing the invitation? And who is meant by *him who hears* who is urged to say *Come*? Taking the latter point first, the expression ought to apply to unbelievers,

because believers are all included in the bride. But if this were the case the response would surely be 'I come', not an invitation to Christ or to other believers to come. It may be best accordingly to take the expression as referring to the individual church member. And who is invited to come? It would harmonize with the emphasis on the second advent in these closing verses (cf. v. 20) for the invitation to be addressed to Christ to return. But that would mean a sudden change, for there can be no doubt that the end of the verse has to do with unbelievers.

It seems best accordingly to understand the invitation as issued by the church and every member of the church to the outsider. This is made specific with *Whoever is thirsty, let him come* (cf. John 6:35; 7:37) and the further invitation to anyone who wills to *take the free gift of the water of life*. People's deepest needs will be met, though those needs must be felt.

18-19. Now comes a solemn warning that *the words of the prophecy of this book* are not to be tampered with. Notice that it is called *the prophecy*. It is more than the product of human genius. It comes from God. Some hold that these two verses are an instruction to future scribes who will copy out the book. They are not to tamper with these God-given words. This kind of instruction seems to have been not uncommon, a well-known example being in the *Letter of Aristeas*, with reference to the translation of the LXX: 'And when the whole company expressed their approval, they bade them pronounce a curse in accordance with their custom upon any one who should make any alteration either by adding anything or changing in any way whatever any of the words which had been written or making any omission. This was a very wise precaution to ensure that the book might be preserved for all the future time unchanged' (311).

Yet we should notice that John does not address the words to copyists, but to *everyone who hears the words*. It seems likely that we should take the exhortation as addressed to the same hearer as in the previous verse. In other words, they are a strong exhortation to heed what is written. It is not to be modified or evaded (cf. Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:6; Jer. 26:2). If anyone adds to the book's teaching, John says, *God will add to him the plagues described (gegrammenas, 'which stands written'; there is an air of finality about the perfect) in this book*. If anyone takes away part of the book's teaching *God will take away ... his share* of the blessings the book has so glowingly depicted. The same verb is used of the man's taking away from the words of the prophecy as of God's taking away *his share*. There is a fitness about it all. The punishment fits the crime.

20. Again we have the thought of testimony, an important concept in this book and in the Johannine writings generally. The Witness here is plainly the Lord Jesus. He affirms that he is coming speedily, and his words are greeted with the fervent prayer that he will do just this. *Amen* is the transliteration of a Hebrew or Aramaic participle with a meaning like 'confirming'. It indicates assent to what the previous speaker has said. This is reinforced with the prayer, *Come, Lord Jesus*. Charles points out that the Greek here is the equivalent of the Aramaic transliterated as *Maranatha* in 1 Corinthians 16:22. There is an air of certainty

and of eager longing about the references to Christ's coming. The designation *Lord Jesus* is found in the whole book only here and in the next verse.

Preston and Hanson see significance in the fact that the last note struck in this book, a note that resounds in many places in the New Testament, is the longing for the Lord's return. John's confidence is finally not in human efforts for the betterment of mankind, but in 'an active, living God, whose love and whose wrath are alike revealed in the events of human history, a God who has played the decisive part in that history when he sent Jesus Christ among us'. They add, 'Only if we hold this faith can we retain any real hope in this present world ... It is the only faith that can dare to hold its own in the atomic era.'

21. *The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people* is unusual as an end to an apocalypse, but the normal close to a first-century Christian letter. There is some doubt about the concluding word or words, for the MS evidence is sharply divided. Some read 'with the saints', some 'with all', some 'with all the saints', some 'with you all' (and there are other variants). On the whole 'with all' seems the most probable reading. It puts the emphasis on universality. John looks for grace for all God's people. He closes his book by reminding us that all Christians, not just some, depend on God's free grace.¹

REVELATION 22:8-21

'I Am Coming Soon!'

I stood in the cloister and listened to the bells. To begin with, I could hear each of the ten, clear in the morning air. But gradually, as the order changed and the echoes multiplied in the ancient stone colonnades, they seemed to merge into one: a glorious, wild, ancient sound, awakening not only echoes but memories of years long past and imaginings of years yet to come. Even so, out of the rich confusion of their noise, the lowest two or three notes kept intruding, wherever they were in the constantly changing pattern: dong—dong—*dong*, dong ... dong ... *dong*. They were part of the whole music and yet seemed to be saying: Pay attention. This is important. Listen hard. We're telling you something. Keep awake.

Something of that sense comes over us as we reach the end of this most remarkable of books, whose surface we have skimmed in the interests of time and space and yet whose depths we have glimpsed as we have sped by. To begin with, we may have been able to hear most of the notes. But as the pace quickened and the echoes multiplied, the sequence of events—the letters, the seals, the trumpets and the bowls, and all that went with and around them—may have merged into one in our memory, a glorious, wild, ancient sound, pointing us back to the very dawn of time and the most ancient of scriptures, and yet pointing us on through symbolic signposts to things yet to come in God's ultimate future.

¹ Morris, L. (1987). *Revelation: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 20, pp. 245–250). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

But, out of this rich confusion of vision and image, two or three notes now stand out, emerging variously from all that has gone before, part of the music and yet with something else to say. Pay attention. Keep these words. I am coming soon. I am coming soon.

Coming soon! That had been the hope of Israel for many a long year, before ever John saw Patmos, indeed before Jesus opened his eyes to the frosty light of a Bethlehem morning. Malachi, four hundred years earlier, had warned the bored and careless priests that ‘the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his **Temple**’. He will come! Ezekiel had described the glory of the Lord abandoning the Temple to its fate (Ezekiel 10:18–19; 11:22–23), but Ezekiel had also promised that he would come back once the Temple had been properly restored (43:1–5). At no point in the next four hundred years, however, did anyone report the kind of vision Ezekiel had had in mind, or an experience that might correspond to the vision of God’s glory in the Temple as in Exodus 40 or Isaiah 6. The Lord had not returned—but he would come. He would come. The hope of God’s coming back was at the heart of the hope for the restored Temple, which was itself at the heart of the hope for a restored Israel. The hope within the hope within the hope. Surely, he is coming soon!

The early Christians all believed that this promise had been fulfilled—in Jesus. He had come to Jerusalem, to the Temple, as the solemn judge whose coming they had been promised. But they saw the promise fulfilled even more completely, in the most startling and shocking way, when Jesus was ‘lifted up’ on the cross, and then raised from the dead. This was the real ‘return of the Lord to Zion’. This was the moment when the glory of the Lord was revealed, for all flesh to see it together.

And so they were able, without difficulty and from the very beginning, to translate the much older Jewish hope, for $\Upsilon\text{H}\omega\text{H}$ to come back, into the sure and certain hope that Jesus would come back. The fusion of identity between Jesus and God, sharing the throne and both able to say ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega’ (21:6 with 22:13), together receiving the worship which must be given to no other (22:9), gave this translation a firm base. And the multiple ‘comings’ of Jesus which the church experienced in worship, in prayer, in the witness of the martyrs, and not least at the time of their own deaths, meant that the hope was not set in a vacuum, but reinforced daily and weekly. The great bell rings on in these verses. I am coming soon. The time is near. I am coming soon. Yes, I am coming soon!

The note of urgency explains the second bell which we hear in these verses, repeated again and again against the echoes and resonances of all that has gone before. This is a book of urgent prophecy. These words are trustworthy and true (verse 6). God’s blessing on the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book (verse 7), on those who keep the words of this book (verse 9). Don’t seal up the words of the prophecy of this book (verse 10). To everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book ... if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy ... which are described in this book (verses 18–19). These words. This prophecy. This book. This book. One might almost hear it as the voice of a very, very old man, slipping in and out of consciousness of the present **life** but more and more into consciousness of the next life, repeating again and again the

thing he is seeing, the thing that really matters. I am coming soon. This book. This prophecy. I am coming soon.

How easy it is to hear the bells and walk away. How easy to dismiss them as a cheerful cacophony. What is Revelation all about? say people. Can't make head or tail of it myself. Happy hunting ground for heretics and fanatics, sneer others. Full of rambling fantasies and dark, sub-Christian threats, say others again. But still the bells ring on. I am coming soon. This book. This prophecy. Coming soon. Listen to this man. He may be old, he may even be rambling, but it's just possible he knows where the treasure is buried. It's just possible he's trying to tell us. These things are trustworthy and true.

And through the echoing bells, we hear another voice, a voice singing within the church. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony. I am David's root and offspring, the bright morning star. The song mingles with the bells, the voice of Jesus clearly audible through the echoing repetitions, the urgings, the warnings. Warnings there are indeed: it's too late to change now; wash your clothes in the lamb's blood, so that you can eat from the tree of life, because those who don't, those who love inventing lies of every kind, will be outside (verse 15). John isn't worried about 'consistency' here; that's not how bells and choirs work. Yes, those people were in the lake of fire before, and now they're outside the city. It's the same picture with another twist of the kaleidoscope, as usual. Stop worrying about that; listen to the music. The words of this book. Coming soon. This prophecy. Yes, I am coming soon.

And, when you are ready, join in. 'The **spirit** and the bride say, "Come!"' The spirit has been a mysterious presence throughout John's book: sometimes sevenfold, sometimes 'the spirit of prophecy'. So much of the focus has been on God and the lamb. We might have thought, if we weren't careful, that John believed in a Binity rather than a Trinity.

How wrong would we have been. It is the spirit that enables the bride to be the bride. It is the spirit that enables the martyrs to keep up their courage and bear true witness. It is the spirit that inspires the great shouts and songs of praise. The spirit goes out from God's throne and, breathing into and then through the hearts, minds and lives of people of every nation, tribe and tongue, returns in praise to the father and the lamb. This is as trinitarian as it gets, and the bride is caught up in that inner-divine life, so that when she says 'Come!' to her beloved we can't tell whether this is the spirit speaking or the bride, because the answer is both. The spirit of the **Messiah** enables his bride to be who she is, lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his.

And the bells find tongue to fling out broad his name, to ring out their praise and their invitation. Come to the waters. There is still time. Come and take the water of life, freely. John's readers may find it hard to see in their neighbours on the street anything but cold, hostile stares and the threat of informing the authorities. They may be so aware of the present rule of the dragon, the monster and the false prophet that all they want is to escape, to be rescued, not to hold out to their neighbours God's repeated and generous

invitation. But see they must, because the mercy of God is vast and his invitation wide as the world. Because he has made us as he has, he will not compel except with the appeal of love; only those who tell lies about his love, and about everything else, will resist (verse 15). But because he is who he is, the creator whose purposes are gloriously fulfilled in the slaughtered lamb, he will go on inviting and welcoming and pouring out the water of life for all the thirsty. Listen to the bells. These words. This prophecy. This book. Coming soon. Yes, I am coming soon.

And the spirit awakens in one and another, in the cloister and the church, in the war zone and the throne room, in the island of exile and the house of torment, in the hearts of men and women, in the dreams of little children, even on the bishops' bench and in the scholar's study, the prayer, the cry, the song, the hope, the love: Amen! Come, Lord Jesus.

The letter—it always was a letter, as well as a prophecy and a revelation—ends as it should, with a closing greeting. ‘The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all’ (verse 21). But, however conventional, this greeting now carries the freight of the entire book. It is dense with a thousand images of ‘grace’, pregnant with the power of the word ‘Lord’ when spoken under the nose of Caesar, sparkling in the still-open invitation to ‘you all’, and above all delicious with the name, the name that is now exalted high over all, the name of the slaughtered lamb, the name of the one we love and long to see. This book has been a revelation of Jesus, a testimony to Jesus, an act of homage to Jesus. This word. This book. This prophecy. Listen to the bells. Coming soon. This Jesus²

WORDS OF AUTHORITY

Revelation 22:6–16

22:6–16 Several pronouns in this section are somewhat ambiguous. In 22:6 and 22:10 the “he” who speaks may be the angel who has shown John the city. In 22:6 he announces the validity of the words given to John to proclaim. But in 22:7 the “I” is Jesus speaking in the first person. He announces the closeness of the end time, when he will come again. He then gives a blessing to those who are faithful to the vision given to John.

With these words directly from Jesus, the reader is returned to the atmosphere of the beginning of the book. It was Jesus who commanded John to write the book to be sent to the seven churches. Now that the vision is complete, Jesus blesses those who remain faithful to it. John then adds his own witness that he has indeed written what he saw and heard.

As in 19:10, when the angel assures John of the trustworthiness of what he has been told, John falls to the feet of the angel to worship him, only to be told not to do so. God only is to be worshiped. The angel and John are fellow servants, along with all those who are

² Wright, T. (2011). *Revelation for Everyone* (pp. 201–207). London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox.

prophets and with the faithful. John's response shows the overwhelming authority given to the true Word of God. The angel's response shows that the authority given to the Word must not be transferred to the messenger.

It is the angel who tells John not to seal the book that he has written (22:10). This is unlike the visions of Daniel, who was told to seal up his writings, because the time had not yet come for the events depicted in his vision to happen (Dan. 8:26). This is also in contrast to the earlier portion of John's vision, where the book sealed with seven seals could be opened only by the Lamb (5:1-9). That earlier book contained the goal of God's creation and the process by which it would be achieved in history. That goal had been there all the time, but only "the Lamb who was slaughtered" (5:12) could open the sealed scroll after the work of redemption had been accomplished on the cross.

John's vision does refer to future times, but his message clearly is for the Christians of his own day, urging them to remain faithful. It has no need to be sealed. Its time has come, even as the vision is being received.

John knows that he lives in the time before the fulfillment of what he has been shown in his vision. Therefore, it is a time of choice for all people. Those who are evil will still be evil. There will be no apparent penalty for their sinfulness. In fact, given what is said earlier about Babylon, those who are evil may well prosper in the immediate days ahead. Those who are holy should remain holy, even if doing so leads to trouble for them. The end has not yet come. Babylon still depicts the condition in which the earth lives. But John has been given a glimpse of what lies ahead, what even now is being prepared behind the scene. The time is near when his vision will become reality. The present is the time for faithfulness.

The call to faithfulness brings again the words of Jesus, saying that he is coming soon. It is not clear how much of 22:12-16 is to be understood as the words of Jesus. Some commentators put all five verses as a direct quotation. Other assume verses 14 and 15 are the words of the angel spoken between words of Jesus. The meaning remains the same.

As the book draws to a close, the words of Jesus become a blessing or a condemnation for the future readers. Those who are faithful will be able to enter the city of God and eat of the tree of life, which will give them eternal life. Those who are unfaithful will be outside of the city and not receive its blessed inheritance (22:14-15). The words of Jesus reinforce the words of the angel who has led John through the vision (22:16). The angel had been sent by Jesus. It is not John, but the readers, who need this added word of authority.

BACK TO THE LITURGICAL SETTING

Revelation 22:17-21

22:17-21 This final section of Revelation is not only an ending; it is also a beginning. There is an invitation issued by the Spirit and the bride. The invitation is to come to take the water of life. The concluding verses make it clear that the invitation is the same as, or at

least includes, an invitation to the Lord's table.

These last verses include words that from other sources we know are the liturgical lead into the Eucharist: "Come, Lord Jesus!" These words can be found in the *Didache*, a very early document of church worship. Paul also concludes his first letter to the Corinthians in the same way (1 Cor. 16:22). Paul and the *Didache* use the Aramaic phrase "Maranatha," which in Revelation is put into Greek. Both are translated into English as "Come, Lord Jesus!" In both Paul and Revelation, the phrase clarifies where such letters were to be read in the worship service.

John's vision was not written to be circulated privately to individual Christians. It was a message to churches and therefore was expected to be read in the gathered community. Its placement in the service is seen in the concluding words. It was an authoritative message to the congregation by one of its own prophets. Remember, John's vision took place on the Lord's day (1:10). Separated from his church, he carries on the role of a prophet in the congregation. He does it in writing when he cannot do it in person. Even the words of blessing and condemnation in 22:14–15 can be understood in this context, as the proper warning to the faithless before the sacrament.

The faithful congregation gathered at the Lord's Table cries to the Lord to be present with them but also to return in the final time with the promised kingdom—in Revelation, the promised city. In the Holy City at the end, the faithful will eat of the tree of life and receive the water of life. Here, the faithful gather at the Table and receive the sacrament as the temporary form of that final eating and drinking. Through the Lord's Table, the faithful are nourished as the bride of the Lamb, being prepared for the marriage feast yet to come. The blessing of 22:21 is also part of the traditional opening of the eucharistic service.

Between the invitation (22:17) and the conclusion (22:20–21) is the final warning to take seriously what John has written. Who is the "I" who says these words (22:18–19)? Most likely it is John himself. This parallels the warning given by Jesus in 22:14–15, although there the warning is addressed to those who do not wash their robes rather than to those who change the words of the book.

John has finished his task. He has faithfully recorded what he has seen and heard in his vision. His words have been authenticated both by the angel and by Jesus himself. Now it is up to those who receive the book to follow its guidance. Will the words be so difficult that some readers will be tempted to tone them down and change them, enabling those readers to compromise with the powers that be? Difficult as they are, the words are to remain. Those who would change them would be revealing that they are among the unfaithful, thereby suffering the consequences described in the book.

Is John's message positive or negative? For the faithful, it is a message of hope and encouragement. It presents a vision of the Holy City that will be their reward and therefore gives them strength to continue along the difficult path. For the wavering, John's message presents a clear choice: remain faithful or be condemned. There is no middle way, no

compromise with the evil structures that control so much of earthly life. For them, it may be a frightening message, for it shows that life is about to be more difficult for the faithful, rather than easier.

For those whose clear desire is to remain faithful, the final verses of the book point to the reality of Christ's presence in their midst even now, in the form of the sacrament. For all, the promise and the warning have been given. It is up to the reader, the hearer of John's vision to respond to the invitation.³

■ Epilog and Epistolary Conclusion (22:6[10]–21)

This concluding section, which at first seems to be a collection of haphazardly arranged sayings, serves several functions. In the first place, we have already seen that 22:6–9 corresponds to 19:9–10 and thus serves as conclusion to the new Jerusalem vision, parallel to the conclusion of the Babylon vision. At the same time these verses are part of the epilog which, with its epistolary benediction (v. 21), forms an inclusion with the prolog of 1:1–8 and reminds us that this book is meant to be a letter to the seven churches of Asia. Note the following parallels between the epilog and the prolog:

1. Compare 22:6 with 1:1: Authentication of the whole book; God is the ultimate origin of the revelation of Jesus Christ; God who through angels as his heavenly agents, and Spirit-filled prophets as his earthly agents, communicated in visions and auditions “what must soon take place,” namely, the final “revelation of Jesus Christ.”

2. Compare 22:7–8 with 1:3: Beatitude to those who “keep what is written therein,” who keep “the words of the prophecy of this book,” for “the time is near,” which means that Jesus is coming “soon.”

3. Compare 21:8 with 1:9 and 1:2b: “I John” can testify to the visions and auditions found in this book, to all I “heard and saw.”

4. Compare 22:12 with 1:7: The parousia as recompense.

5. Compare 22:13 with 1:8: God and also his Messiah as “the Alpha and the Omega.” As “the Alpha,” Christ has “freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God” (1:5–6); as “the Omega” he shall soon be “coming with clouds” for judgment (1:7; 22:12) and for salvation (20:4–6; 21:9–22:5).

6. The epistolary benediction (22:21) and the epistolary prescript establish this writing as a letter.

In the second place, the epilog clarifies once more that John would have us understand

³ González, C. G., & González, J. L. (1997). *Revelation*. (P. D. Miller & D. L. Bartlett, Eds.) (pp. 144–148). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

the content of his epistle, not in terms of predictions of future historical events according to a timetable, but as prophecy (22:7, 18–19). His visions and exhortations unveil, reveal, the hidden dimensions of the church and of the world in the present and the future. Hence in the epilog John made use of *prophetic forms of speech*:

1. Beatitudes and parousia announcements in the first person singular: **“Behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book”** (vv. 6–7); **“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have access to the tree of life.”**

2. Announcement of judgment in the first person singular: **“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done”** (v. 12).

3. An oracle of doom and of encouragement and a list of rogues: **Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy; their judgment is assured. And let the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy** (v. 11). The demarcation between the elect and the reprobate is final, but the saints must persevere. **Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and every one who loves and practices falsehood** (lies) (v. 15). Jews frequently referred to Gentiles as “dogs,” while Christians pinned this label on (Jewish) heretics (cf. Matt. 7:6; Phil. 3:2; 2 Peter 2:22). In John’s list, “dogs” is either an equivalent to “the polluted” of 21:8 or it has the additional meaning of sodomite, or male prostitute. The background might be Deut. 23:18: “You shall not bring the hire of a harlot, or the wages of a dog, into the house” of God. In either case, this list draws a sharp line between the community and the outsiders (cf. 2:14, 20). **“Liars”** once again summarizes this catalog as in 21:8. A parallel to the exclusion of immoral persons is found in Hellenistic mystery religions: “If there be any atheist, or Christian, or Epicurean here spying upon our rites, let him depart in haste” (Lucian, *Alex.* 38).

4. The epilog contains two self-identifications of Christ, beginning with “I am”: **“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end”** (v. 13). We have already noted that this oracle virtually identifies Christ with God (cf. 1:8, 17; 21:6), who in the beginning created all things (4:11) and at the end speaks: “Behold, I make all things new” (21:5). Christ reveals himself as the Alpha and the Omega through his prophet in the epilog. He is the victim, whose death had always been his (and God’s) victory and the beginning of redemption. He is the **firstborn** of the dead (1:5, 17), and now in the end he has been revealed before all in John’s vision as the victor (19:11–22:5). The end, “the Omega,” is not an event but a person.

“I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star” (v. 16). According to Isa. 11:1, “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” In this self-disclosure Jesus reverses Isaiah’s image. He, the risen Messiah who is “the beginning of God’s creation” (3:14), is “the root” from which David came and he is David’s promised descendant. Hence he is the source of David’s line, “the root,” as well as David’s “offspring,” the promised Messiah, the Lion of the tribe of Judah (cf. 5:5; cf. Mark 12:35–37). This is a daring Christological conception, and it

probably represents John's answer to Jewish anti-Christian polemics. In the message to Philadelphia, Jesus disclosed himself as "the one who has the key of *David*." He therefore, not the Jews who trouble the community, will decide who is included and who is excluded from the new Jerusalem, the city of God and of the new David (2:8–13).

In the designation "the bright morning star" several traditions meet. First, Balaam had announced that "a star shall come forth out of Jacob" (Num. 24:17). Second, this text was understood messianically in Qumran (4QT 9–11) and in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (*Test. Levi* 18:3; *Test. Judah* 24:1). Third, while "the star" is a familiar messianic symbol among Jews (e.g., Bar Kochba), we have no Jewish text that speaks of the Messiah as "the morning star." This is none other than Venus, the "Day Star," the brightest and the largest star (planet) in the opinion of antiquity. This "morning star" signaled victory over all the other stars that represent nations. Venus could be related to male deities and kings. In Isaiah's taunt against the king of Babylon we hear, "How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn" (Isa. 14:12–14). When Jesus promised the conquerors in Thyatira that he would give them "the morning star" (2:28), he was promising them a share in his millennial reign after the defeat of the powers of darkness (19:11–20:6). He can make such a promise, because he is "the morning star," the eschatological victorious conqueror. In short, these self-designations combine Jewish and Hellenistic ideas in order to set forth the uniqueness of Christ.

We should also be aware that the resurrected Jesus speaks through John not only in his self-disclosure but also in vv. 7, 12–16, and 20a. Because Jesus speaks through him, John is in fact a prophet even though he never claims the title "prophet" for himself. His words, his narration of visions and auditions, are prophecy also when they are mediated by an angel. For this angel has been "sent" by Jesus (22:16) and by God (1:1; 22:6).

5. Last, John included a solemn warning against tampering with his prophecy (vv. 18–20a). In Deut. 4:2 we read, "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it" (cf. Deut. 13:1; *1 Enoch* 104:10–13). The *Letter of Aristeas* concerning the Greek translation of the Old Testament stated: "There should be no revision ... and they [the elders] commanded that a curse should be laid, as was their custom, on any one who should alter the version, by any addition or change" (*Letter of Arist.* 310–311). John clothed his warning in the form of the law of retribution. **If any one adds to the words of prophecy in this book, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if any one takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city.** The importance of this law of retribution is seen in that it is bracketed by two different speakers in vv. 18 and 20: **I (John) warn every one** (Greek, *martyrō*, v. 18); **He (Jesus) who testifies** (Greek, *martyrōn*) **to these things** (v. 20) and who is coming soon likewise prohibits tampering with John's prophecy. **These things** (v. 20) include John's prophetic warning of vv. 18–19. His lengthy letter was also a substitute for his personal presence, and he was quite aware that prophets like Jezebel and others would find his message rather objectionable (cf. 2:2, 14–15, 20–23). He had therefore started his letter with a blessing on the "lector" who would read his message during the community's worship (1:3), and he now concludes it with a threat against those who would tamper with it. In so doing, he seems to imply that his "words of prophecy"

would be read more than once.

In the third place, John's epilog repeatedly emphasizes his expectation of the imminent end. God's angelic agent communicated **what must soon take place** (v. 6), and he told John, **the time is near** (v. 10). Therefore John may **not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book** (v. 10), in contrast to Dan. 12:4 (cf. *1 Enoch* 1:2). Daniel had predated himself and his visions into the Babylonian period and therefore had to "seal up the vision, for it pertains to many days hence" (Dan. 8:26), that is, to the author's real present. John has no need of pseudonymity and predating, for the eschaton has already come with the death and resurrection of Christ and the time to the end is short; Jesus is coming soon (vv. 6c, 7a, 10, 12, 20; cf. 1:1; 2:16; 3:11). Also note: There is no reference to an interim kingdom in the epilog! The reason seems obvious. John's millennium (20:4–6), which appears with the imminent coming of Jesus, signals the beginning of the new Jerusalem and of the new paradise to which v. 14 refers.

We should keep in mind that all of John's visions are determined by the expectation of the imminent end, as his epilog abundantly demonstrates. We may recall that the dragon's time on earth is short (12:12) and that the church's persecution will last but a short time (11:1–2; 13:5). The imminent-end expectation undergirded the urgency of the call to repentance (2:16), to perseverance (2:25; 3:11), to bringing one's life into conformity with the commandments of God (cf. 12:17; 22:14) and cutting out lackadaisicalness (3:15–22). The epilog links the imminent coming of Christ (vv. 7, 12, 20) with the urgency of taking John's prophecy seriously and "to *keep* the words of the prophecy of this book" (v. 7; cf. 1:3).

In the fourth place, the epilog reflects the situation within the churches, because the epilog is to serve as bridge between the world of visions and auditions on one side and the world of the hearers on the other. There may be a connection between the Christological designation "morning star," the Balaamites of chap. 2, and "the sorcerers" of 22:15 (cf. 21:8; 18:23; 9:21), especially since the Gentile prophet Balaam was denounced as chief sorcerer and magician among Jews. But we can no longer see that connection. Perhaps John merely wished to declare: what some hope to gain from Venus, the bright morning star (an angel?), this has been realized by Christ in his resurrection and will be realized at his parousia. He fulfills not only the Jewish expectations of a Davidic Messiah but also the dreams of Gentiles that focus on stars.

At any rate, the epilog gives the impression that persecution by the state and the demands of the emperor cult were not the issues of the moment. They loom on John's horizon, in the near future, but the present problems are related to the rogues' catalog (v. 15), to threats from Judaism (2:8–11; 3:7–13), and from syncretism. The last of the seven beatitudes in Revelation draws the contrast between the "Blessed" and those who are, or should be, and certainly will be "outside" the community of Christ (22:14–15).

Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree

of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. The verb tense for **wash** is present participle, which signifies an ongoing activity rather than a past action as in 7:14. Their present moral behavior is depicted with the image of a continuous activity of washing their robes. And their moral behavior should maintain the once and for all redemptive washing received in baptism and maintain it to the end. The contrast to the rogues in the verse that follows (22:15) is as obvious as the contrast with the majority of Christians in Sardis who had “soiled their garments” (3:4). Access to “the tree of life” in paradise is promised to the Ephesian conquerors and entry to “the city” to those in Philadelphia.

It is odd that in spite of the rebuke by the angel (19:10), John for the second time falls down **to worship at the feet of the angel** (22:8–9). The mere repetition of this curious action and the fact that it occurs also in the epilog, which forms a bridge between the world of John’s visions and the world of John’s hearers, underscores the problem of angel worship among churches in Asia. The identification of stars with angels is reflected in 1:20, and astrology had a broad base in the ancient world. The details of the angel worship in Asia and Phrygia are unknown to us, but not its presence (cf. Col. 2:16–18). In this strange episode John undercut angel worship by making a fool of himself, having to be rebuked a second time and hear a second time: **“You must not do that!... Worship God.”** If not even the angelic agent of revelation may become an object of worship, then there is no room for this syncretistic practice in the church. And just as John, the prophet, had to obey, so should his hearers follow his example and the angel’s command. But more, John restructured the significance of angels. Even the angelic agent of revelation is but a **fellow servant** with the prophets on earth and with Christians who are not prophets but **who keep the words of this book**. The imperative “Worship God” constitutes the commission of John and of his hearers to do just that. The sisterhood and brotherhood of prophets exist not above but within the worshipping community.

In the fifth place, the epilog authenticates John’s book in the highest possible degree. God, Christ, and the angel vouch for the reliability of the whole message, its visions, promises, and warnings. **The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel** not just to John but through him also to **his servants** (22:6), that is, to the other prophets of the seven churches. The “spirits” of prophets, their prophetic inspiration, may not be autonomous, mouthing what feels right at the moment. Inspiration is to be theonomous. Hence several times the epilog emphasizes that John’s message has its source in God (22:6b; 21:5b), Christ (22:16a, 20), and the angel (22:6a). This stress on reliability and authentication reflects the threat from false prophets like Jezebel, the Nicolaitans, and their emissaries. For John the source of his authority does not lie in the title “prophet” but in God, Christ, and the angel of revelation, and so, in contrast to Jezebel, John avoided the title “prophet” for himself, even though the angel implied it (22:9). Since his message is confirmed and guaranteed by the highest authorities, John utters a solemn threat, a curse, upon those who would dare to change that message (22:18–19).

The fact that John never mentioned bishops and elders should not lead us to conclude that the seven churches addressed by John were without them but were led by prophets

only (cf. Bornkamm, Satake). He wanted his letter to be read to and heard by the whole community rather than just by its bishop and elders. John's view of church leadership contains an interesting dialectic. On one hand, all believers are and shall be kings and priests and hence a hierarchical structure has no place in the church. On the other hand, prophets are not only members within the church but also God's spokespersons over against the church, as demonstrated by his seven messages. Thus John distinguished the (true) prophets from the saints and simultaneously related them closely to each other (cf. 11:18; 16:6; 18:20, 24; 22:9). Moreover, the prophets in the Apocalypse were probably not local leaders but itinerant prophets, perhaps within a region, and John may have been their leader. At any rate, they knew him. Yet his prophetic leadership was rejected by prophets like Jezebel, and therefore he emphasized the divine authority of his message and pronounced a curse on those who would alter it (22:18–19).

In the sixth place, the most important function of this epilog is to serve as bridge from the world of visions and auditions to the worship of the assembled community. John expected his letter to be read during the communities' gatherings, and therefore he had opened his letter with a beatitude for the reader, the lector (singular), and the hearers (plural) and he noted that it was "on the Lord's day" that he was commissioned to write to the seven churches (1:3, 10).

By listening to the reading of the letter, the hearers were drawn into his visions and reexperienced them. As they followed from vision to vision, it was like walking through a maze with seals being broken, trumpets blowing, beasts arising, bowls pouring out wrath. They experienced the reality of the hidden God whose ways are not our ways and whose judgments stagger the imagination, who appears as a moral enigma in the light of the tragedies and catastrophes that befall self-assured idolatrous humanity. They were also enveloped in the triumphant worship in heaven and heard the admonition, "Fear God and give him glory ... worship him who made heaven and earth" (14:7). And at last they heard the voice of God himself: "Behold, I make all things *new* ... It is done!" and they saw the "new" which will never grow old, the new Jerusalem, the future city of God and their city, and their ultimate future became present as they participated in John's visions.

Being drawn into the vision of the future kingdom of God has profound consequences, for it alters one's perspective. A new vision of what God, Christ, the world, and worship are all about strengthens, modifies, or changes one's outlook, hope, and conduct. When Luther gained a new perspective on the righteousness of God, it was so powerful an experience that it propelled him right out of the church of his day. When Augustine read Rom. 13:13–14 it opened up a new world for him; it was "as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled."

John's epilog signals the exit from the visions and the entry into the life of the community, specifically its worship. The hearers are led back from the vision of the future paradise (22:1–5) to their present, and in their present they must be able to rely on John's words as word of God (22:6). Therefore the author reveals himself: **I John** stand behind my

visions and auditions (22:8), and through John, Jesus addresses the hearers directly: **I Jesus** have sent this testimony **to you** (plural, 22:16). So then, at the exit are the two persons, John and Jesus. For the hearers of the recital John represents the historical continuity between the recital and the prophet they know. Jesus represents the theological continuity beginning with their redemption via the recital that they had just heard, to his presence in the Eucharist which they are about to celebrate, and to his final appearance in glory in which they hope to participate. Both John and Jesus lead the assembled hearers into the celebration of the coming of Jesus in the Eucharist. Not that John quotes from the eucharistic liturgy any more than he quoted from the Old Testament, but he certainly alludes to the liturgy in the closing verses (vv. 14–21). Compare the following liturgical transitions:

1 Cor. 16:20, 22

Didache 10:6

Greet one another with a holy kiss.

If any one is holy, let him come

Blessed are those who wash their robes

If any one has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed.

If any one is not, let him repent

Outside are the dogs

Maranatha (Our Lord, come!)

Maranatha (Our Lord, come!)

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The announcement of Jesus' imminent coming, which is highlighted in the epilog (cf. 22:12; 3:11; cf. 16:15 and 22:14), requires an answer from the worshipping community which had listened to John's letter. **The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." Let him who hears say, "Come."** After the reading, the community, which is "the Bride," prays in the power of the Spirit for the coming of Jesus in the Eucharist. His coming and presence in the Holy Supper are his pledge and sign of his future coming. Just as he comes to the gathered community through the prophetic word of John and through the recital of the Apocalypse, so he comes to them in the Eucharist. And the recital of this letter as well as the celebration of the meal looks back to his coming in the past when he accomplished redemption by shedding his blood (1:5; 5:9). The hearing of this letter and the celebration of the Eucharist look forward to his coming in glory when his faithful followers shall reign with him in millennial bliss. **"Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints.** Thus the recital of the Apocalypse leads into the celebration of the communion with our Lord Jesus Christ. Worship is not an individualistic affair between me and sweet Jesus. It is the community's political statement concerning the kingdom, power, and glory of God and his Christ (11:15) *on earth*. Therefore worship of God and Christ must be in radical opposition to idolatry within state and society. For such worship the church needs the **grace** of God and of the Lord Jesus as stated in the beginning (1:4) and at the end (22:21) of this letter. No other apocalypse ends with a benediction like

that. But the church lives by grace, and grace shall sustain it through the turmoils of the future until we reach the consummation in the life of the world to come. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you too!⁴

⁴ Krodel, G. A. (1989). *Revelation* (pp. 368–378). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.