

Jesus—the End and the Beginning

TRACING THE CHRIST-SHAPED NATURE
OF EVERYTHING

Telford Work


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To whom else could I dedicate this book than its subject?
With fear and trembling, I present it to Jesus of Nazareth—
my end and my beginning—as well as
to his Father and the Holy Spirit whom
he so graciously shared with us.



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Acknowledgments

This book's core structure is indebted to the many theologians and preachers who have formed me over decades by honoring and teaching the centrality and universal relevance of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. They are too many to name here, but I appreciate each deeply—for inspiring the book, to be sure, but much more so for shaping so many into more faithful disciples.

In 2005, All Saints-by-the-Sea Episcopal Church in Santa Barbara, California, invited me to deliver a Lenten series. I was grateful for the opportunity and even more grateful that the resulting presentation, "Omega and Alpha: Jesus, the Center of Christian Faith," became the embryo from which this book grew. I had the privilege of teaching an expanded version at El Montecito Presbyterian Church, which has graciously hosted me for a number of teaching series over the years.

This book was written while I was on a sabbatical leave courtesy of Westmont's provost office. My esteemed colleagues in the religious studies department covered for my absence.

I spent that year abroad, writing while volunteer teaching in remarkable institutions of Christian learning: Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; St. Frumentius Theological College in Mekele, Ethiopia; LCC International University in Klaipėda, Lithuania; Ukrainian Catholic University and Lviv Theological Seminary in Lviv, Ukraine; Asia Pacific Theological Seminary in Baguio, Philippines; Trinity Theological College in Singapore; Torch Trinity Graduate University in Seoul, South Korea; and South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies in Bangalore, India. Each place's spirit worked its way into these pages somehow or other. That was the year of a lifetime, and I can't fully express my gratitude for it.

My wife, Kim, and younger children, Junia and Benjamin, accompanied me on most of that adventure and extended grace and support then and back at home while I wrote, thought, edited, and edited some more. My older children, Jeremy and Daniel, and our extended family endured our yearlong absence, and it wasn't always easy.

Westmont students patiently read my draft, suggested improvements, and offered critical feedback. Theological colleagues at other institutions kindly read sample chapters and offered assessments that helped this project see the light of publication. Editors Bob Hosack, Melisa Blok, and John Simpson patiently and wisely made or suggested further clarifications and improvements. I so appreciate their careful and insightful reading. Any flaws that remain are solely my own.

Thanks to all of you!

Telford Work
May 2018

Preface

Am I Writing to You?

Nowadays books are pitched to particular audiences. Am I pitching to you or to someone else?

I'm pitching to you if you have some familiarity with the Bible—not necessarily a lot, but enough to know your way around—and are looking for insight into how the parts relate to the whole. I'm especially pitching to you if you aren't totally satisfied with the formulas and paradigms you've already been taught. Not because they're necessarily wrong, but perhaps you've found them too hard to understand or use or too unwieldy and complicated. Perhaps these paradigms seem like round holes for which too many parts of the Bible are ill-fitting square pegs. Or it may be that those formulas and paradigms are fine but need fresh illumination or explication.

If this is you, then I'm pitching to you, whether you are a student new to this, a Bible study leader looking for a more powerful framework for understanding the big picture, or a pastor or academic colleague whose deep experience needs fresh energy. I've tried to keep my writing accessible. The tone may be a stretch for some and yet too casual for others, but I aim to straddle these different walks and seasons of life.

I'm pitching to you if you have some familiarity with the big topics of Christian theology—salvation, incarnation, Trinity, church, and our hoped-for future (theologians call this “eschatology”)—but are struggling with them. Whether you have absorbed these doctrines in church or have taken formal courses in theology doesn't matter to me. I'm pitching to you if you want to see more clearly how they all fit together, or how one or more of them applies to your life, or how it functions, or even whether it's true at all. Maybe your

understanding of things like the Trinity, the church, the cross, and creation's future are compartmentalized, standing alone like silos on a farm. Or maybe one of them is weak and could use strengthening.

I'm pitching to you if you have a hard time relating the first thing I mentioned (the Bible) to the second (church teachings or theologies). Maybe you find church doctrines tidy and clarifying—many people in my field do—but the Bible frustratingly messy, unorganized, and apparently contradictory. Or maybe you find the Bible full of vivid narratives, pithy guidance, and delightful surprises but theology cold, abstract, predictable, and distant. Or maybe *both* of them feel foreign, whereas Jesus is real and alive and present to you, and worship and prayer are the life-giving ways the Holy Spirit draws you to him. Or maybe you're in that dreadful place where the church's Scriptures and doctrines are the familiar things, and it's Jesus that seems distant and unreal. If you suffer from any of these disconnects, I want to help.

I'm also pitching to you if when you hear (or repeat) the grandiose claims Christians make about Jesus, salvation, or whatever, voices of dissent are crying out from inside you: *Really? Jesus is the answer to all of creation's challenges? Jesus is the hope of every nation in the world? Jesus is the source of life when Christians I know are stagnant, hypocritical, and corrupt?* Too often theology ignores these complaints, and that just encourages them to grow. I want to honor some objections by giving them a fair hearing along the way.

I've been in all these places and more in my years as a new Christian, a new churchgoer, a seminary student, and an academic who likes to teach and preach what I call "the good stuff." I'm still looking for clarity, simplicity, answers to stubborn questions, and new energy. If you are too, I hope you find some here.

Jesus, Center of Everything?

Here is my focus: Christians claim all the time that Jesus is the center of everything. And we genuinely mean it. Still, we need to improve at understanding and explaining *how*.

In what ways is Jesus the *center* of everything? What does that really look like? How does it play out in life and in history?

And how is it that Jesus is the center of *everything*—not just the things we naturally associate with him, but the whole world, all creation, and our entire lives?

One sign that we need to do better is our struggle to expand on the formulaic ways we confess this claim. There's nothing wrong with formulaic answers. All my significant relationships can be named neatly in a word or two: wife, son, mother, boss, Lord and Savior, student, pastor, colleague. These terms are powerful because they are *packed*. So if someone asks me what I mean by one of them, I can *unpack* it. I can explain what being a husband means, expand on it, illustrate it, and demonstrate it. And if I can't? Well, I may just be inarticulate or unreflective: a person who loves his wife but needs a Hallmark card to say it, or who hasn't stepped back to consider just what she means to him. But at some point people will begin to wonder whether anything really *is* packed into that term. If I keep insisting that "she's my wife" when pressed to describe her, a thoughtful friend might suspect a poor or strained relationship. A psychologist might perceive an empty one. A skeptic (perhaps an immigration officer) might gather that our marriage is a sham.

Are those confessional formulas packed and rich, maybe even beyond our capacity to unpack? Or does our reliance on them indicate that we really don't know Jesus well? Or is Jesus a sham—a socially constructed illusion?

Sometimes the answer to each question is yes. There are Christians whose terms for Jesus are just Hallmark cards that they trust—sometimes rightly—more than their own words. Others are just mimicking the faith of a parent. Others use them as a balm to bring comfort during tough times. For still others, these words are a cultural vestige that is likely to fade with time.

We can do better. In fact, we who grasp how rich and dependable our Scripture, liturgy, and dogmas are can still do better than merely repeating them back to God. I buy Hallmark cards too, but I'm not going to just sign my name and seal the envelope. I'm going to write something of my own.

This book works toward a deeper appreciation of Jesus as the center—and specifically, since the Bible puts it this way, as *the end* and *the beginning*—of everything. My core focus is that slogan: the end and the beginning, *the omega and the alpha*. It deserves a lengthy unpacking and repacking. I want it ready—full, compact, organized, and familiar—so I can take it everywhere I go and use it well. That's how a good formula ought to work.

Why Write This?

I have a list of writing projects, some years old. Why did I write this one, and why might you want to read it? A few stories will help me answer this.

First, until middle age I never flossed my teeth. I didn't see the point. Fluoridated water, advances in dental care, and good genes have all given me

good teeth and few cavities. I found the little boxes of floss too inconvenient anyway. That changed one day during a visit to my hygienist.

“Do you floss?” she asked.

“You tell me,” I said. “I assume you can tell.”

“I can tell,” she said.

“Then why do you ask?”

“Just to see whether people will be honest.”

I would have told the truth anyway. “No, I don’t floss much,” I admitted.

“You should,” she told me. “It can put six years on your life. And not just years, but *good years*.”

That got my attention. “Why is that?”

“Gum tissue is similar to heart valve tissue,” she told me. “When you get gum disease, the bacteria can migrate to your heart and weaken it.”

That was enough for me. That and the little plastic flosser she handed me, which I use instead of wrapping the stuff around my fingers like a tourniquet. I’ve flossed more or less faithfully ever since, thinking about the chance for those six extra years to live, serve the Lord, and maybe see my grandchildren, which is something my father didn’t get to do.

The connection made the difference. That morning in the dentist’s office I learned that something I hadn’t cared about was related to something I cared about. And that made me start caring. My circle of interests has widened again and again as I have learned that something I had shrugged off or ignored turned out to matter after all. I hated backpacking as a kid but embraced it as a parent as I learned that Scouting could help children grow up well (and that backpacking could be light and comfortable). Now I look forward to getting on the trail. I grew frustrated with philosophy as an undergrad and set it aside but found it interesting again as a graduate student after seeing how it has shaped the Christian tradition I cared so much about.

This book explores *connections* among Jesus Christ and our lives, our communities, our nations, the people of Israel, the human race, the world, and God. You care about at least some of these already. The more we learn about their connections, the more we’ll care. And yet caring isn’t the whole challenge we face.

Now for my second story. One morning while I was teaching a general Christian doctrine course, my students were suddenly staring back like deer in headlights. I had asked them to discuss how their responsibilities as citizens of their countries relate to Christ’s reign and victory. This was a Christian theology class at an evangelical liberal arts college. A number of these students studied political science, history, philosophy, and sociology. They were

all constantly prodded to think about matters of social and political involvement, often for the sake of Christian faithfulness and responsibility. And I had just taught them in detail about Jesus's primacy as the crucified, risen, and reigning King of kings. They already cared about these things. Yet when it came time to connect the dots, they were still dumbfounded. One student even dared to say what others were surely thinking: "How are we supposed to answer that?"

My classic question is an important one in our age of powerful nation-states. Why had it blindsided my students? Because they had segregated the kingdoms of this world from Christ their King. Caring apart from connecting leads to *compartmentalizing*. It's not enough to show *that* all things relate to Jesus. We must begin to understand *how* they relate.

This leads to my third anecdote. Ten years ago, a nearby Episcopal church invited me to teach a Lenten series at a retreat. Since Lent is a season of preparation for celebrating Passion Week, I wondered how I could help the class grasp the sheer significance of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. It's one thing to say and hear that Christ's love reaches great "breadth and length and height and depth" (Eph. 3:18). It's another thing to *display* all that. Beyond listing the usual titles, abstractions, and all-encompassing claims about Christ, I wanted the vivid *specifics* of his impact to reach our finite minds. I wanted the people of this church to see not just a confessional forest but individual trees. Moreover, I wanted them to see how each shapes the other, how the Christian faith is a forest *of* trees.

We often operate in detail mode, analyzing pixels rather than the image they render, threads rather than the pattern of the tapestry. Then we turn around and do the opposite. We proclaim the pattern without showing how the pattern (forest) is made up (of trees), which turns the pattern into an irrelevant abstraction. This can happen with essential theological formulas such as "justification by grace through faith," "one being in three persons," "the fellowship of saints," and "Christ died for our sins." It can even happen with Jesus's own name:

The Sunday school lesson for the day was about Noah's Ark, so the preschool teacher in our Kentucky church decided to get her small pupils involved by playing a game in which they identified animals.

"I'm going to describe something to you. Let's see if you can guess what it is. First: I'm furry with a bushy tail and I like to climb trees."

The children looked at her blankly.

"I also like to eat nuts, especially acorns."

No response. This wasn't going well at all.

“I’m usually brown or gray, but sometimes I can be black or red.”

Desperate, the teacher turned to a perky four-year-old who was usually good about coming up with the answers. “Michelle, what do you think?”

Michelle looked hesitantly at her classmates and replied, “Well, I know the answer has to be Jesus—but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me.”¹

The answer has to be Jesus. The apostle Paul said so: “Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:11). But the kids in this story have no clue as to *how* or *why*. My dazed college students were in the same position. They knew that everything summarizes to Jesus and resolves in Jesus. Both their churches and our lecture notes said so! They had learned the rules of how to throw his name around among evangelicals. Just don’t ask them to explain how *this* tree—their national citizenship, for instance—is part of *that* Passion-shaped forest. And don’t expect academic theology to teach them how to do it since the same problems often appear there.²

The answer *does* have to be Jesus. But the answer doesn’t have to be trite. It doesn’t have to be idealized or forced. It can be *shown*. It can be developed. It can even be derived. When we do that, it becomes clear that screens and tapestries are too rough as metaphors. An image doesn’t modify a screen’s pixels as Jesus transforms his collective bride. A forest context affects its trees, and Jesus changes us far more than that. So it won’t do to just teach a macro view of “Jesus as all things” alongside a micro view of the things as such. Paul’s metaphors are better, which might be why he chose them: a body of members, a temple of cut stones, a cultivated field, a household, and so on. The parts of these things owe their character to the whole and vice versa.³

1. Susan Webber, *Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul*, ed. Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 176.

2. Forests dominate in some traditions of systematic theology, while trees dominate in others. In “forest” theology, dogmatic or ideological claims drive theological visions and dominate biblical and later texts that supposedly support them. Contrary texts tend to be explained away or simply ignored. Movement primarily runs from the top down, from the abstract to the specific. In “tree” theology, by contrast, biblical and other passages are sorted into theological categories such as Christology, soteriology, eschatology, and so on. These compilations are then generalized, producing categories that are treated as doctrines. This movement is primarily bottom up, from specificity to abstraction.

Champions of each approach tend to find the other side’s productions unsatisfying and end up talking past each other. The situation in theology might be improved through greater attention to the genuine interaction happening across these levels, both in the formative eras when the biblical and patristic texts were being written and freshly read and broader Christian sensibilities were taking shape, and in later settings when both the texts and sensibilities were in wide and increasingly stable use.

3. The term *organic* is worn out, and *emergent* seems more or less ruined, but these terms are closer to capturing the relationship.

I did come up with an approach for the Lenten series I was invited to preach. The omega-and-alpha trope that structures this book struck me as a promising way both to get across the absolute relevance of Jesus's death and resurrection for every aspect of Christian life and to indicate some familiar as well as unfamiliar specifics. This book grew out of that Lenten challenge. It aims to demonstrate formative and essential ways that Jesus's human life, death, and resurrection shape many areas of Christian life and thought and vice versa. Jesus as omega and alpha isn't just a formula to memorize for a test or a catechism. It's something to take in, to learn to love, to see in Scripture and in action, to glimpse in far-flung settings, and to stand on when we desperately need things in our lives to end and better things to arrive.

My reflections stress biblical texts, for these are molten with the energy of prophetic and apostolic imaginations dazzled by the fresh realization of Christ's implications for everything. The book's chapters don't fall into the usual theological categories, because they are exploring the common pattern underneath them. But basic theological categories unavoidably recur and mingle throughout: Christology, eschatology, creation, soteriology, Trinity, and ecclesiology.

It's a blast to see students discover that the all-purpose Sunday school answer is no cliché but a kind of theorem that comes to life as we use it. They see how the whole structure fits and works together, and they find they're in on something even better than they had realized. I hope these pages enact the same reaction in you.

ONE

Introduction

For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him *to reconcile to himself all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Colossians 1:19–20

“The Quest is achieved, and now all is over. I’m glad you are here with me, Sam. Here at the end of all things.”¹ J. R. R. Tolkien puts these apocalyptic words in Frodo’s mouth just after the destruction of the Ring of Power in *The Return of the King*. Frodo immediately perceives that everything will change, even his remote and cherished Shire. (The books make that clear. Sadly, the film does not.) With the Ring’s destruction, Middle Earth’s reclamation and restoration are at hand. It takes time to unfold, bringing the demise of elves, dwarves, wizards, and even hobbits, and the rise of “the Age of Men.” Tolkien perceptively reckons the end of the Third Age and the beginning of the Fourth two years later to the day: March 25 on our calendar.

March 25 is the Feast of the Annunciation, the day that commemorates the conception of Jesus Christ as described in Luke 1:26–38, a decisive event at the *true* end of all things. The annunciation was the moment God invaded his own rebellious world and began to take it back from within. As March 25 began the denouement of Middle Earth’s Third Age and the dawn of its Fourth, so March 25 began, in essence, the Age of the New Adam. All

1. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (1955; repr., New York: Ballantine, 1986), 241.

the elements of the old age would still exist—for a while anyway—but totally rearranged, “fall[ing] and rising” (Luke 2:34). Jesus put an end to “all things”—a biblical term for all creation²—and brought a new beginning for them. Do you believe that? You might not. Look out the window, at a newspaper, or even in a mirror. What’s so new? Sadly for Tolkien, “the Age of Men” would prove too depressing to write about. He soon abandoned his attempt to imagine the Fourth Age. Human hearts were the same as before; not enough had changed after all.

When 2 Peter was being written, skeptics were making similar observations. Creation seemed to be creaking along just as before (2 Pet. 3:4). Those skeptics were underestimating Jesus’s transformative power. Countless others have ever since. Even many Christians have traded the apostles’ far-reaching vision of total transformation for the much more modest claim that our *souls* were all Jesus renewed. Salvation was *spiritual*, they supposed. The material part of creation hadn’t changed and wouldn’t. Human families, cultures, histories, and politics were not the Lord’s focus and would last only until his return, to then be consigned to the lake of fire or unceremoniously dropped into history’s rubbish heap. This pattern of thinking was powerfully reinforced whenever the mood of the times ran in a pessimistic direction.³

But Christians face an opposite temptation: to overestimate the transformation. The apostles had expected the old world’s kingdoms to topple like dominoes at the Messiah’s coming to “restore the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6). That obviously didn’t happen, as it had not happened in Middle Earth or the Shire. Christians have reconciled themselves to this disappointing development for the most part, but we haven’t entirely abandoned the dream. Our perceptions of Christ’s renewal can get carried away into wishful thinking. When the signs seem to be pointing in the direction of a Christian Rome, a Christian Russia, a Christian America, a Christian Korea or Africa or China, or when the zeitgeist shifts global consciousness toward justice or prosperity or freedom, we who would love to see such breakthroughs can extrapolate the trend too optimistically and imagine the Lord’s hand in it.⁴

Our day offers plenty of warrants for both pessimism and optimism. One of this book’s purposes is to untangle the apostolic faith from both and to examine Jesus’s transformation of all things for what it really is.⁵ If you’re

2. Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010).

3. In Republican circles in 2009 and in Democratic ones in 2017, for instance.

4. In Democratic circles in 2009 and in some Republican ones in 2017, for instance.

5. I don’t know whether to be optimistic or pessimistic about our times. I’ve been on the pessimistic side for some time now. My pessimism may be as much a function of bad information as a reflection of reality. Bradley R. E. Wright’s *Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites*

turned off by Christian visions that are excessively modest or grandiose, don't dismiss this one too quickly. I try to be carefully realistic and to put biblical claims about Jesus's vast ministry in honest conversation with the twenty centuries of often sobering and occasionally intoxicating reality that follow it. To do that in a simple and memorable way, I've taken the liberty of inverting a biblical trope.

Jesus—the Alpha and the Omega

In the book of Revelation, the Lord—God the Father and Jesus Christ as well—is described several times as the “alpha” and the “omega.”⁶ That might be familiar language to you. You might have heard it in sermons, in songs, or in people's prayers, or you might have seen it on a banner in your church sanctuary. Alpha and omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. So Jesus Christ is the beginning and the end and everything in between.

The Gospel of John begins with the same startling claim that Jesus was in the beginning with God. He's the alpha. The church had to defend this claim against a heretical school of thought called Arianism, which claimed that only God the Father was the true alpha. Arians considered Jesus the “beta,” so to speak, a second-class deity whom the only true God created and then worked with to create everything else. Fourth-century church leaders labored to convince even many of their fellow Christians that Jesus wasn't a second-tier archangel, but that he along with the Father and the Holy Spirit was and is the one, coeternal God of Israel.

Jesus is time's omega as well. His Kingdom will have no end. Jesus lasts, and anything else that lasts does so in and because of him. His life is eternal life. The church had to defend this claim, too, against those same Arians, who treated the incarnation of the Word as only temporary. Arians thought of the divine Word shedding Jesus's human body on the cross and returning to its earlier spirit form. Trinitarians eventually convinced their fellow Christians that Jesus was the Z, not just an X or Y; that his human existence was

... and *Other Lies You've Been Told* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2010) provides a refreshing statistical corrective to widespread conventional wisdom that Christian faith makes little or no difference to the way Americans live. He shows that active Christian faith makes a broad and significant difference. It hardly matters if my pessimism is unwarranted though, because Christ's transformation doesn't depend on passing feelings or minor historical trends. If we stand on the precipice of doom, it'll pass. If we stand on the threshold of technological singularity or a great awakening, it too will pass.

6. To get a sense of how the writer of Revelation associates this language with both God the Father and Jesus Christ, see Rev. 1:4, 8, 17; 2:8; 4:8; 11:17; 16:5; 21:6; and especially 22:12–13.

eternal, so that we can have an eternal existence too; that the same one who died and rose reigns today from heaven and is coming to bring all creation to the perfection that the Father has always intended.

That is the way that we normally use the phrase “alpha and omega.” You can see how vital this compact claim from Revelation 1:8; 21:6; and 22:13 is. Those chapters begin and end the book; they are its *A* and *Z*. Jesus Christ frames and dominates the imagination of John, the prophet who wrote the book of Revelation. John isn’t simply coming up with a clever structure. He is passing on the whole structure of his life and thought, which he received from Jesus himself (Rev. 1:1).

And yet, that alpha implies more than *just* the source of creation’s beginning, and that omega implies more than *just* the eternity in which creation finds its eternity. Here is what else we hear in Revelation along with alpha-omega language:

1:18: “*I died*, and behold *I am alive* for evermore.”

2:8: “The words of [him] . . . who *died* and *came to life*.”

11:17–18: “You have taken your great power and *begun to reign*. . . . Your wrath has come, and *the time for judging the dead . . . and for destroying those who destroy the earth*.” (NRSV)

16:5–6: “You are just *in your judgments*. . . . It is their due.” (my translation)

21:5–6: “Behold, I make *all things new*. . . . *It is done!* . . . To the thirsty I will give from *the fountain of the water of life*.”

22:12–14: “Behold, *I am coming soon, bringing my recompense*. . . . 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*.”

Those alphas are generally *new beginnings*, not some lingering original past. And those omegas are generally *definitive endings* of things that never make it into that new and eternal future. This is why this book switches the order. Jesus Christ is also the *Z* and the *A*, the last and the first.

Jesus—the End and the Beginning

After all, the biblical story doesn’t unfold smoothly from beginning to end like alphabets do: *a, b, c, d, e*. History doesn’t follow an orderly sequence right to the end. It is punctuated by disruptions in which an old order is swept away and a new order is begun. And Jesus is the fundamental disruption of all cosmic history.

Let me suggest an analogy. Geologists for the past two hundred years or so have debated two visions of the earth's history. Did the earth come to be what it is through extraordinary dramatic events such as massive volcanic eruptions⁷ and meteorite and comet collisions? The “catastrophists” thought so. Or has the earth been shaped primarily by gradual processes such as sedimentation, erosion, and continental drift? “Uniformitarians” insisted on it. Each side made valid observations over the course of their long academic conflict. Most geologists today refuse to wholly endorse one side or the other. Both gradual processes and extraordinary events interact to shape our planet.

History, too, has elements of continuity, gradual change, and shattering disruptions. Return to a place you haven't visited in years and you may be shocked by the change that happened day by day—perhaps the locals barely noticed. But some dates are etched into the world's collective memory because nothing could be the same afterward (*Z*) and people had to pick up the pieces and start again (*A, B, C*).

The crux of the biblical story is one of those catastrophes. Indeed, *crux* means cross. Jesus's crucifixion was an omega: an end of the sequence. “It is finished,” he said when he breathed his last. Yet it wasn't *just* finished. After that *Z* came a new *A*. Not just a return or revival of some past *A*, but a *whole* new *A*. Many philosophies and religious traditions think of history as a great wheel that turns, placing the world back in a spot it had occupied before. That is not what happened on the third day after Jesus was murdered. God answered Jesus's demise by creating something totally new: Christ's risen, eternally embodied life. The resurrection's new beginning marked the ushering in of a whole new order. This was so staggeringly unprecedented that, as theologian Lesslie Newbigin notes, the apostles had to retrieve Israel's word for the *first* unprecedented beginning: creation.⁸ Jesus's resurrection had inaugurated a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17).

Inverting the letters captures another element of Jesus's central role in everything: his indispensable role in putting an end to whatever doesn't belong in the new creation. The Bible's creation stories portray God originally granting humanity a privileged role in further developing creation—in moving from *A* to *B* to *C*, so to speak—and equipping human beings for the task. In making all things, God had a mysterious goal in mind. That goal, it turns out, is Jesus (Col. 1:15–20), the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24). As Wisdom says in the book of Proverbs:

7. The highest category on the eight-point Volcanic Explosivity Index that geologists use is termed “apocalyptic,” which tells you something.

8. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 11.

The LORD begat me, the beginning of his way, his acts from eternity.
 Forever I was appointed, at the first, from before the earth.
 When there were no depths I was brought forth,
 when there were no springs abounding with water . . .
 when he established the heavens, I was there, . . .
 when he assigned to the sea its limit, . . .
 when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
 then I was beside him, like a master worker;
 and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,
 rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

(Prov. 8:22–31, my translation)

A beautiful picture of God’s alpha and ours. Wisdom then beckons us not to miss out on this golden opportunity to become full partners in the Lord’s project. In fact, Wisdom hints at something beyond partnership: we are called to be *sons*, her full heirs, who stand to inherit their mother’s wisdom somehow in some unprecedented way:

And now, my sons, listen to me:
 happy are those who keep my ways.
 Hear instruction and be wise,
 and do not neglect it.
 Happy is the one who listens to me,
 watching daily at my gates,
 waiting beside my doors.
 For whoever finds me finds life
 and obtains favor from the LORD.

(Prov. 8:32–35 NRSV alt.)

Sometimes we hear Wisdom’s call and answer back: “How many are your works, LORD! In wisdom you made them all” (Ps. 104:24 NIV). Sometimes we are humbled by this unparalleled and undeserved vocation, and we are moved to jubilant worship and to insight into God’s deeper purpose in crowning us with glorious dominion (Ps. 8:4–6). Sometimes.

However, Genesis 3 depicts a more common contrary. The story of the Garden of Eden portrays a *coup d’état*, a hijacking, a human commandeering of God’s project (Ps. 14:1–3) just as the human task was ready to get under way. God had laid out a space and then commissioned us to be its developers (see Gen. 2:5, 15). In that garden we humans put our own goals ahead of the Creator’s goal. We asserted our own glory rather than his. We grasped at wisdom as if it were something we could usurp (Gen. 3:6) rather

than finding it by faithfully waiting, listening, and watching. Having received unique authority on God’s earth, we made ourselves the earth’s tyrants. And we have kept doing so to this day.

The story of Eden closes with the man and the woman ejected from the garden and facing harsh consequences, leaving the garden unmaintained and undeveloped. We have attempted to invert things, and in a sense we have succeeded, if only in ruining them. Our irresponsibility has spawned three challenges, not just one.⁹

God’s creation goes undeveloped, and is even ruined, because the servant-rulers have refused the task that God has created them for. Someday Jeremiah will prophesy a sadly similar future:

Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard,
they have trampled down my portion,
.....
The whole land is made desolate,
but no one lays it to heart.

(Jer. 12:10–11 NRSV)

This is the first problem: God’s project has stalled because his workers have walked off the job and been banned from the premises.

The workers themselves are the second problem. As Paul puts it, although creation’s caretakers knew God (not necessarily well), “they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools” (Rom. 1:21–22 NIV). God’s designated agents prove themselves to be both incompetent and malevolent. The man and woman are distrustful of God, one another, and God’s other creatures (Gen. 3:7–19). We who are “crowned with glory and honor” are also “foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (Rom. 1:31). This has to stop. God has to rectify his appointed servants and reconcile them to their roles in his creation so they “image” or point to him as he intended. Theologians call those acts *justification* and *redemption*, respectively.¹⁰

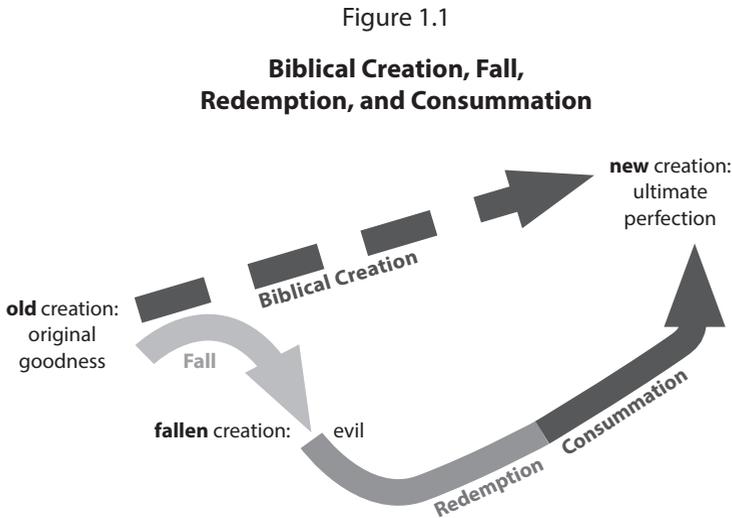
Third, work has to get back on track. God has to bring creation to its goal. That’s called *perfection* or *consummation*, and it involves more than just a building-out of creation’s original potential. Even if humans had not rebelled, more needed to happen than the original creation’s smoothly unfolding

9. This is the case whether one reads Gen. 1–3 literally or figurally. If these chapters use imaginative literary devices, they still depict a promising beginning that we have ruined.

10. Redemption of creation and its creatures can also be used as a broader category that includes justification of its sinners.

A-B-C. This is only hinted at in Genesis’s opening chapters—for instance, in the not-quite-redundant parallelism between “image” and “likeness” in 1:26, and in 2:9’s two mysterious trees. What they signify becomes clearer in the course of God’s reclamation effort, because that effort brings much more than just justification and redemption. Jesus’s ministry did not return him or his followers to where Adam and Eve were in Genesis 2. His transfiguration introduced *glorification* into creation, and his bodily resurrection introduced a new and eternal imperishability.

The following chart relates the distinct tasks involved in salvation:



Jesus’s coming is an alpha in that it both *reverts* creation and *converts* it. It ends all that’s wrong with original creation, inverting our earlier inversion so to speak, and ends all that was never meant to last anyway by inaugurating its long-awaited new version. Jesus is the Z and the A. The author of Hebrews, too, cannot help but see Jesus as the resolution of the contradiction between humanity’s calling and humanity’s condition:

It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. But there is a place where someone has testified:

“What is mankind that you are mindful of them,
a son of man that you care for him?
You made them a little lower than the angels;
you crowned them with glory and honor
and put everything under their feet.”

In putting everything under them, God left nothing that is not subject to them. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them. But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (Heb. 2:5–9 NIV, quoting Ps. 8:4–6)

Isn't that marvelous? What Psalm 8 celebrates in advance, we get to celebrate in review. Jesus the Son of Man met our end, took on our humiliating omega, and thereby authored and pioneered our glorious alpha. And he did it in a way that we can see and appreciate even in the midst of an old world still tumbling toward its omega.

That's how this logic works. You'll hear it all through the New Testament. "I died, and behold I am alive for evermore," Jesus tells John in Revelation 1:18. *I ended, and behold, I am begun*. The goal of this book is to examine some ways that Jesus alone brings about the end of the world's evils and sufferings and frustrations, and begins eternity's new creation.

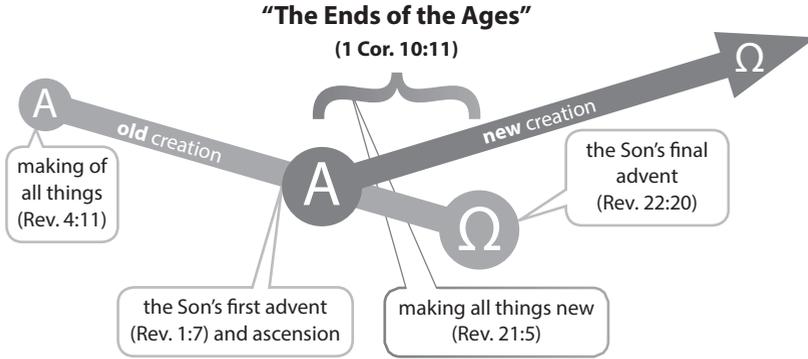
The Ends of the Ages

Paul is utterly convinced that Jesus has done all this. In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul warns the church in Corinth by appealing to a horrible event in Israel's early history: the day the Israelites lost their patience with God and Moses on Mount Sinai and turned to a golden calf (1 Cor. 10:7, quoting Exod. 32:6). Reminding them of the plague that followed their idolatry, Paul says, "These things happened to them as a warning, but they were written to instruct us, upon whom *the ends of the ages have come*" (1 Cor. 10:11, my translation). That last phrase is the tip of an iceberg. Few Bible translations honor the plural *ends* in that verse. Paul's imagery is that of two coinciding ages, and we stand at the hinge. We live in the meeting place of the new and the old. Paul doesn't develop that point in this passage, but elsewhere it's developed very well indeed (e.g., Rom. 8:18–25; 1 Cor. 7:29–31; 2 Cor. 5:16–17).

The figure on page 10 depicts the two overlapping ages, which Ephesians terms "this age" and "the age to come" (Eph. 1:21 NRSV). Both ages have to do with the same creation. Each age has an alpha and an omega, and Jesus is both alphas and both omegas, as the verses from the book of Revelation affirm.

We live in the time marked by the bracket in the following figure, in the midst of the old and in the midst of the new. We occupy a moment of history—two thousand years long so far—where the new is breaking in on the old, the old is suffering its omega, and the new is undergoing its alpha.

Figure 1.2



Between Times

I’ve been sketching the forest. The same passage in 1 Corinthians 10 zooms in on one of its trees. It demonstrates how being at “the ends of the ages” guides Paul as a church leader in specific situations and ways. Paul reminds the Corinthian church of the episode recorded in Exodus 17 when “our fathers,” camping in the wilderness and lacking water, quarreled with Moses and with God. God graciously answered by offering himself: “I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it” (Exod. 17:6 NIV). Our fathers, Paul says, “drank from the spiritual rock” (1 Cor. 10:4 NIV).

From his apostolic vantage point, Paul sees a deeper significance in this scene, something Moses and the Israelites could not: “the Rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:4). As the alpha of both ages, the Messiah was sustaining even those who preceded his incarnation. And the Corinthians now faced their common omega. “With most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness . . . destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages has come” (10:5, 10–11). Christ, the Lord who judges (11:32) and who destroys every enemy (15:25–26), was already putting abominations to an end in the wilderness. So will he do in Corinth.¹¹

11. Ever wonder why “biblical” disasters don’t happen today like they used to? Paul’s analogy suggests an answer: the Hebrews in the wilderness had to learn without an example. Like children today who suffer the mixed blessing of being firstborn, they had to live under stricter rules and live out the consequences of breaking them. In the old age, God proved again and again that he was serious. He thereby acquired a lasting reputation among those who will pay attention. Rules backed by real-life examples are more compelling than rules alone, so the stiff-necked Hebrews became the powerful example for their younger siblings to remember and heed. Perhaps one reason the church age is not marked by the same spectacular plagues is that

To us this may not feel like an everyday example, but to Paul it sure is. It frames all his pastoral actions, in 1 Corinthians and elsewhere. What distinguishes the old and new ages is the same as what links them: the Lord Jesus Christ and specifically his comings. He is the first one to inaugurate the age to come and to put the present age on notice and the final one to end the present age and to fully establish the age to come. Paul immediately connects the dots between ancient Israel's wilderness wanderings and the Corinthians' struggles: "*Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry*" (1 Cor. 10:14 NKJV). Old Testament Israel shared the Lord's altar; Christians now share the same Lord's one bread and cup. Both privileges make idolatry—sharing with demons, Paul calls it—unthinkable, provoking our ever jealous Lord (10:16–22). Israel's old life is of pressing relevance to the church's new life, because Christ is their common currency.

Paul expects his readers to connect these dots themselves, and he's disappointed when they don't. First Corinthians 10 is full of rhetorical questions and appeals to the Corinthians' common sense (vv. 15–16). Paul is thinking, "Why don't they *get it*?" Many Christians today scratch their heads at Paul's reasoning. We can't even follow it, let alone assimilate it, if we, like the Corinthians, don't understand *how* Jesus is the omega and alpha. But once we *get it*, we'll be able to do more than just follow puzzling New Testament passages. We'll be able to discern Jesus's relevance to matters ranging far beyond the Bible's original concerns.

This book aims to help you really *get* that Jesus is the omega and alpha of all things: of God (chap. 2), of the cosmos or "world" (chap. 3), of humanity (chap. 4), of Israel (chap. 5), of the nations (chap. 6), and of individual lives (chap. 7).

A Nuptial Analogy

Paul can be hard to understand (2 Pet. 3:15–16). Scripture's more brilliant authors can just be a challenge. Ordinary life offers illustrations of omega-alpha logic that are more intuitive for many of us.

One everyday example of what it's like to be at the hinge of two ages is the drawn-out events that make up a wedding. American weddings often involve a rehearsal, a rehearsal dinner, bachelor and bachelorette parties,

ancient Israel's example is enough. Jesus suggests as much, in the punch line of his story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:27–31). We are blessed in ways our fathers were not. (And as the youngest of three siblings and the father of four, all I can say is that life isn't fair. My heart goes out to the world's firstborn, along with my admiration and appreciation.)

day-of preparations, the tradition of bride and groom not seeing each other before the ceremony, a ceremony, a reception and first dance, toasts and blessings, cutting of the cake, a send-off, the couple's exit, and the wedding night. Regardless of a culture's particulars, though, a wedding is an omega to the individuals' old lives ("forsaking all others") and an alpha to a new and even more intimately shared one ("to have and to hold from this day forward"). Both ages hang over the whole occasion. In fact, old and new both exert a strong pull not just during these intense few days but throughout the whole stretch of time from engagement to the honeymoon and newlywed year and, indeed, over the years or decades that follow. Those days now loom over the couple's courtship and earlier lives in singleness, which turn out to have been preparations for their own end in marriage.

Of course, it is no accident that a human marriage is an analogy to Christ's redeeming and consummating work: "We are members of his body. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:30–32, quoting Gen. 2:24). Sometimes people fail to remember the *leaving* of the old family that's involved in the *cleaving* that brings into being a new one. The old comes to an end, and the new comes into being "at last" (Gen. 2:23). So "do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready," the Song of Songs warns us (Song 8:4 NRSV). Yet once it comes, why delay? "Make haste, my beloved" (8:14). "Our Lord, come!" (1 Cor. 16:22).

A Constitutional Analogy

Let me give you another concrete illustration of what it means to be at a hinge like this. Consider living in the final months of 1787, between the writing and the ratification of the Constitution of the United States.

The Constitution had a prehistory in the abuses of George III and American fatigue with kings in general. The backstory of tyranny is essential if you're going to understand why the Constitution limits power so deliberately in each branch of government and then sets them over one another in relationships of checks and balances. It structures American government so there is never one top dog. This strange feature mystifies people from nations that have parliaments and prime ministers, as well as Americans who don't know their own history. Why do we structure frustration and gridlock right into our system? Because our founding fathers were afraid of top dogs. They had had their fill of monarchs and didn't trust people with that kind of power. The Constitution is meant to put an end to it.

The Constitution was also the result of the failure of the United States' *first* constitution. After gaining independence, America's leaders were so averse to dictators that they drew up a loose confederation of states, with weak federal power. It wasn't enough to hold the country together against its enemies and to get things done internally. So the Constitution is also meant to be an end to the kind of weakness that happens when power is fragmented and dispersed. How can we have it both ways? How can a people organize itself around a center without that center becoming a tyrant? That dilemma, keen and fresh in the founders' minds after years of experiencing both evils, is the root of the Constitution.

Our Constitution, then, is an ending and a beginning. Its omega is the ending of the first unsuccessful draft of the American project, and its alpha is the beginning of the second draft of the American project. Its ratification sums up and closes earlier events that led up to it and begins a whole new trajectory of all that proceeds from it. This account in which the Constitution is a decisive turning point is how we learn American history. In fact, as a turning point, it focuses American history like no other event, not even the 1776 Declaration of Independence.

This may seem hard to believe. We celebrate July 4, but Americans don't have a big day to celebrate the Constitution. Yet July 4 is only something to celebrate because the founders' project has succeeded. I'm not that excited about Bastille Day—not so much because I'm not French, but mainly because the French Revolution didn't go all that well. Nor is March 8, the date of the February Revolution in Russia in 1917,¹² an inspiration to me. That day feels more like Genesis 2, forever overshadowed by the October Revolution it preceded. The significance of American independence from England all depends on what follows it. The Constitution is our turning point. *It* is the focus of American loyalty, not just independence. It's what the president, the military, the judiciary, and our legislators all swear to uphold. The Constitution is America.

To live at the end of 1787 was to live “between the times”—in the unraveling of America's first union and the approach of the second. The old arrangement was still formally in force, but its days were numbered; the new one already ordered the imaginations and preparations of the states that were ratifying it one by one.

Other peoples around the world have similar turning points—perhaps even more than one.¹³ The exodus is the Jews' omega and alpha: Passover is the

12. The February Revolution began in March?! Not by the reckoning of the “Old Style” Julian calendar in use in Russia at the time. For them it was still late February.

13. My analogies of American history apply to Christian history as well. Historian Donald McKim treats the development of the core convictions of Christian theology, from the Trinity to

day on which Israel remembers both its emancipation—its July 4—and its constitution at Sinai. Both make up God’s covenantal arrangement, which makes Israel the people it is. Muslims have a similar omega and alpha in the *Hegira*, when Muhammad gained political power in Medina. Other communities have no such omega and alpha. Some indigenous peoples know a kind of beginning in primordial mythological history. They have an alpha, and at least as far as they remember, they have always lived in that beginning without turning points.

If we take the Constitutional sensibility, which is intuitive to Americans who grow up with it, and use it to grasp this far more important event—the coming of the King, the eternally reigning Son of David, the only Son of the Father—we can see how it really is *the* turning point of the ages. Many Americans can’t imagine a world without the United States of America. But the world without the United States wouldn’t be a *speck* as different as the world without the Messiah. I don’t know how many Americans really believe that. Sometimes we act as if the Constitution’s ratification is more important than the coronation and ascension of the risen Jesus Christ as King of kings.¹⁴ But the fact that Jesus really is the hinge of the ages puts all other stories in perspective. In light of Jesus’s *Z* and *A*, the Constitution’s ratification is more like a *J* and a *K*: a significant event, to be sure, but not the fundamental turning point of human history that some of the founders envisioned.

This is good news for Americans because it puts all other events at the disposal of Jesus’s overriding end-and-beginning. His story conditions and humbles the American story, awakening us to the realization that our rather brilliant republic is just a wrinkle, just a blip. The apostles reacted that way concerning their own heritage: they came to realize that the exodus from Egypt, as significant as it was in its own right, was much more significant in pointing forward to the true exodus at Calvary (Luke 9:31). If the Constitution has any *lasting* glory, it lies in its relationship to the world’s true turning point.¹⁵

the incarnation to the character of both the church and salvation, as a series of decisive turning points. Of course, the foundational turning point of Jesus’s death and resurrection dominates and drives them all. See Donald K. McKim, *Theological Turning Points: Major Issues in Christian Thought* (Atlanta: Westminster John Knox, 1988).

14. Some of us do, anyway. Others, going back at least a century (for instance, Woodrow Wilson’s progressives), have viewed the Constitution as an inconvenient relic. They’re ready for a new omega and alpha. While they generally do not have Jesus’s Kingdom in mind, Wilson saw his own progressive policies as “a practical scheme to carry out [Christ’s] aims,” as Jesus had neglected to supply the means himself. See Patricia O’Toole, *The Moralist: Woodrow Wilson and the World He Created* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 347.

15. Perhaps a sign of such eternal significance is the Constitution’s refusal to grant absolute power to any human institution, including a church—and even itself, since it provides a process for it to be amended—out of respect for the conviction that human beings are incapable of

The gospel has similarly affected all people who truly appreciate its import, including communities that had no turning point—because in Jesus’s cross and resurrection they now do. Now that their identities are secure in the identity of Christ, they regain a human purpose that can line up with God’s purpose.

“All Things”

You will find the phrase Tolkien appropriated, “all things,” occurring again and again throughout the Scriptures.¹⁶ “Behold,” Jesus says, “I am making all things new.” That proclamation of his alpha is in Revelation 21, at the canon’s very end. His church *has* beheld and has faithfully reported what it has seen in joy and hope. *All things* are reconciled to him. That means nothing is detached from Christ’s reign. He is not the Savior of *part* of creation, even the “spiritual” or “religious” part. He is the *whole* creation’s Savior. Israel’s. America’s. France’s. Russia’s. Even heaven’s (Rev. 12:7–11)! There is no other name, no other domain, and no other comprehensive omega and alpha.

I still find it striking that the New Testament witnesses say this about a human being—and one from an obscure family in ancient, small-town Galilee at that. Jesus is just, as one writer puts it, a marginal Jew¹⁷ in a marginal town of a marginal area of a Roman Empire that was on its way out anyway. It’s astonishing that Christ’s life receives such a sweeping interpretation. Either these writers are right, or they are the greatest exaggerators of all time.

Allow me to draw your attention to some of the places where this core conviction surfaces in Scripture. Let this tour help you recognize it in the worship of our churches, the fabric of our lives, and the substance of our mission. Hear the astonishing claims that are being made again and again. If you’ve heard them already, then hear them afresh, because many of us have heard them so many times that we have forgotten how shocking and renewing they are meant to be.

Chapter 2 explores the extraordinary development at theology’s heart: Jesus ends and begins God. Sure, this is true of our *opinions* of God: our

wielding such power as well as we imagine, even when we do it in God’s name. Some Americans may idolize the Constitution, but in its modest genius the Constitution refuses to idolize even itself. This leaves at least theoretical room for implicit acknowledgment of a true God above all political idols.

16. Tolkien, *Return of the King*, 241, 244.

17. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

old ones put Jesus on the cross, so they suffer the Father’s verdict that we misjudged his Son. The resurrection kindles new and truer opinions of God. But Jesus ends and begins God in more radical ways. A “god” is what we call one end of a certain kind of relationship. Since Jesus’s coming terminates our old relationship with YHWH and pioneers a new one, Jesus changes who God is to us. In taking on our relationships as his own—“my God, my God,” he says on the cross (Matt. 27:46, quoting Ps. 22:1)—his coming does more than just *express and reflect* his own eternal triune relations. It takes our relationships and makes them his own. The three persons of the Trinity are one another’s eternal beginning and end, and Jesus’s ministry expresses this, as well as fulfilling and transforming—ending and beginning—it by including us. Through him the Father becomes the Father of many and the Spirit the resident of a whole multitudinous temple. So the Son is the omega and alpha of all three persons: the end of their relational exclusivity (Matt. 11:27) and the beginning of them as Father, Bridegroom, and Spirit of the church. Jesus is how the God of old has chosen to be God anew. This is heady stuff, and liable to being misunderstood and poorly articulated, so we’ll need to be careful.

Chapter 3 describes a change in the cosmos—our world—the created order that we’re a part of, which we interpret and indwell according to our many different understandings of it. Jesus has been concluding the old one—the whole order, and our cloudy “worldviews” of it—and has inaugurated the new one. At the eye of this revolutionary storm is his engagement with the mysterious “ruler of this world” who acts decisively in the events leading to Calvary, and who is overthrown with his realm as the Son is lifted up.

Chapter 4 narrows our focus to humanity. Jesus’s coming brought the end of what it meant to be human “under the sun” (a futility that Ecclesiastes describes, which rose out of humanity’s original traits, divine calling, and then sinful depravity) and the beginning of what humanity will mean forever: a life characterized by the Holy Spirit’s eternal presence, gifts, and virtues. His mother, Mary, exemplifies both old humanity at its best and new humanity at nearly its earliest, so her life will help us sketch these two pictures with more detail and specificity.

God’s chosen people were a fresh start for old humanity, so chapter 5 highlights Mary’s nation, Israel. Jesus travels, then blazes, its tortuous path to glory. God promised Jacob’s descendants the gifts of belonging to God and vice versa, enjoying earthly power and prominence, and displaying God’s wisdom. Israel did truly receive a measure of these gifts but not the wholesale rescue humanity needed. Jesus was, is, and will be its necessary renewal. Each gift comes into its own in the Messiah’s ministry, bringing about a surprising

new way to be God’s people. We will focus on the apostle Paul as an exemplar of Israel on both sides of Christ’s transformation.

Israel’s fellow nations are the topic of chapter 6. “All flesh is grass” (Isa. 40:6), and human flesh comes in communities and ethnicities that rise and fade like grass patches. They don’t perish and rise like individual human beings, and they aren’t unique as Israel is, so the pattern here is different. However, Jesus is still the omega of their old rivalries and oppositions to his reign. They simply will not domesticate or defeat him. And Jesus is the alpha of new ways of life and nationhood—*international* ones—that spring up within them. Timothy’s mixed ancestry (Acts 16:1) anticipates the gospel’s revolutionary impact on nationhood and on contemporary identity politics.

Last but certainly not least, chapter 7 takes up the most obvious way that Jesus is an omega and an alpha. Our world of humanity, Israel, nations, and families is composed of *persons*—beautiful, beloved, wretched, sin-ridden persons. Their only true end and new beginning is Jesus Christ. By every biblical measure, he himself personifies the good life that God intends for human creatures. He took on the so-called life that we have fashioned that gift into, ended it in the only way that wouldn’t take us down with it, and began a new resurrection life that he’s made available to us. What this looks like in practice is every saint’s baptismal life. For brevity’s sake we will focus on Simon Peter, a figure who dramatically portrays both that doomed old life and that astonishing new one, sometimes in the very same scene. Yet we will cast sideward glances at the many lives that don’t look so exemplary.

I want a question to haunt you throughout these chapters: What is the turning point of *your* life? What is the hinge and identifier of your story, your people, your world, your solemn commitments? Is *your* omega and alpha Jesus Christ?

What has Christ put to an end? Or what are you holding on to that needs to go?

What has Christ begun in you? Or what are you trying to prevent him from bringing to life?

Into which unconsidered places of life and which unimagined dimensions of reality are Christ’s life, death, and resurrection reaching?

I hope the following chapters spark some fresh thinking, new awareness, and deeper appreciation. They have for me.