

Chapter 1

One Man's Visions, All Humans' Fate

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding why Revelation is important
 - ▶ Getting a big-picture look at Revelation
 - ▶ Discovering the five natural divisions of the book
 - ▶ Looking for clues to the chronology
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Many people love fantasy stories populated with strange apparitions. Others love a good mystery. And still others love an adventure story full of action and battle scenes. If you fall into one of those camps, you're in luck. The book of Revelation is all these and more.

But Revelation is a challenging book. Those fantastic beasts and creatures are symbols for individuals, nations, governments, and the like. The storyline of the book twists and turns in on itself, not following a straight, chronological narrative. And the whole package is a prophetic vision that's related to what's actually supposed to happen when the world comes to an end, at least from a biblical perspective.

This chapter doesn't try to explore the symbolism behind the events that are chronicled throughout Revelation (we save that for Chapter 5). It also doesn't pore over the details of these events, personalities, and issues (that's what's Part III is all about). In this chapter, we get you started in the right direction. We begin by painting broad strokes of the structure and content of the final book of the Bible. As we do so, we point you to parts of this book where you can find more details on each specific subject.

Why Read Revelation, Anyway?

Humans have always had an insatiable curiosity to know their future and what's going to happen in the "last days." That's at least part of the reason the *Left Behind* series was popular and why new Nostradamus documentaries show up almost every year. For many, the appeal in reading and understanding Revelation is, quite frankly, not altogether different from the desire to peek into a fortuneteller's crystal ball. Understanding how it all ends can give you a sense of what your purpose is now.

Revelation can be tough going because of its structure and symbolism and the many ways in which scholars interpret the book. You can easily become discouraged and wonder why you should read Revelation, anyway. Here are several reasons many people consider Revelation to be essential reading:

- ✔ **It helps explain the biblical view of God and his relationship with humans.** Many people turn to Revelation in search of definitive answers about what will happen. But Revelation is far more about grasping the nature of God and the close relationship that exists between God and people who believe in him.
- ✔ **It gives readers a glimpse of heaven.** The Bible offers few specifics on what heaven will be like. The Old Testament says very little. Jesus and Paul offer more in the New Testament. As if saving the best for last, the final chapters of Revelation offer a rare glimpse into the new heaven and new earth (see Chapter 14).
- ✔ **It offers a message of hope.** It's easy to be a little freaked out by the gloom and doom warnings of the book. But in spite of all of the battles and judgments depicted, Revelation is really all about hope. It portrays, in vivid detail, the biblical view of good triumphing over evil and suffering.

Taking a Whirlwind Tour through Revelation

A major challenge in reading Revelation is sorting out and identifying the overall themes and messages while images — seals, trumpets, bowls, beasts, witnesses, and so on — are ever coming at you. But if you take a step back and get a solid understanding of the big picture, you can begin to dive into the details and make sense of how they all fit together.

Although Revelation contains a lot of confusing symbolism and has many interpretations (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of these interpretations), the book actually divides up rather nicely. At the most basic level, you can split Revelation into five major parts, as illustrated in Figure 1-1. We discuss each of these parts in this section, so read on.

Figure 1-1:
The basic
structure of
Revelation.

Ch.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22		
	Introduction	Letters to the Seven Churches		Judgments and Vignettes																		New Beginnings		Epilogue

Introduction (Rev. 1)

The first chapter of Revelation serves as a prologue or introduction to the entire book. Its purpose is to provide a context to help you make sense of the rest of the chapters (also see Chapter 6). Within the first several verses, you discover that

- ✔ This is an unveiling of the plans of Jesus (from God) (1:1).
- ✔ The author is John (1:4).
- ✔ The audience is the seven churches of Asia (1:4).
- ✔ It was written on the island of Patmos, a Mediterranean island belonging to modern-day Greece (1:9).
- ✔ Its purpose is to give readers a sneak peek of what'll take place (1:1).

As Revelation 1:1 underscores, this book is Jesus's revealing of God's plans for the world. In this opening section, John provides explicit details about how his words came to appear in print: God gave the revelation to Jesus, who communicated the message to John through an angel, who was sent for this specific purpose. John wrote these series of visions as an extended letter, which he then sent to the seven churches in Asia (Rev. 2–3).

Today’s readers are a secondary audience for this book because the original readers passed John’s letter both to other churches and to their descendants. Figure 1-2 shows the chain of communication.

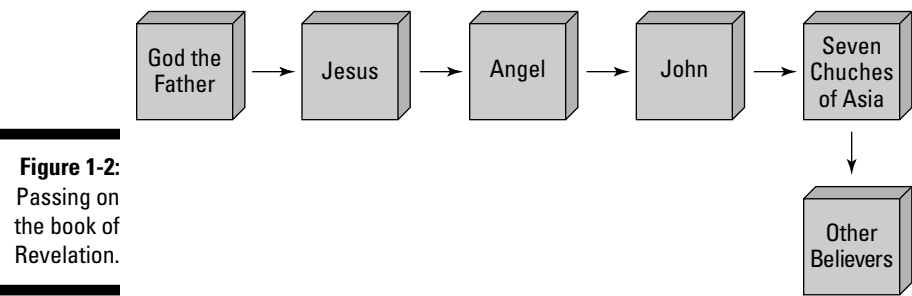


Figure 1-2:
Passing on
the book of
Revelation.



One of the keys to understanding Revelation is in 1:19. In this passage, Jesus instructs John, “Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now, and what will take place later.” Scholars offer various assessments on how to interpret this verse. However, the interpretation that seems to best fit the original grammar of the passage as well as the structure of the book itself is a three-fold timing of events: past tense, present tense, and future tense. In other words, Jesus tells John to write about

- ✓ The vision he has already seen (Rev. 1)
- ✓ The current state of the seven churches (Rev. 2–3)
- ✓ The events that will take place in the future (Rev. 1–22)

Figure 1-3 shows how Revelation 1:19 provides a broad chronology for looking at the entire book.

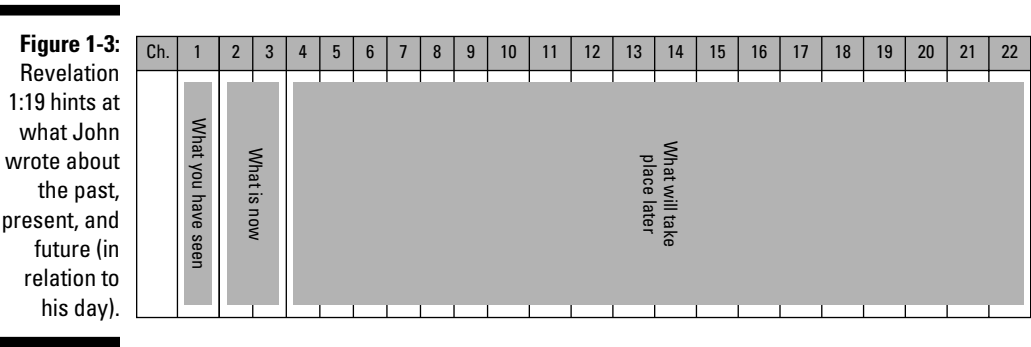


Figure 1-3:
Revelation
1:19 hints at
what John
wrote about
the past,
present, and
future (in
relation to
his day).

Letters to the seven churches of Asia (Rev. 2–3)

Revelation 2–3 details the individual letters that Jesus dictates for the seven churches in Asia (see Chapter 8). Each of these churches is in a different spiritual state. For the faithful churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia, Jesus offers only encouragement for their steadfast faith. For the churches in Sardis, Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira, he commends them for some aspects of their faith but also rebukes them for specific areas of failure. Finally, for the church in Laodicea, he offers no encouragement at all and simply calls for their repentance from a lukewarm, middle-of-the-road faith.

Judgments and vignettes (Rev. 4–20)

The primary plot of Revelation 4–20 is a series of progressively severe judgments that are unveiled through seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. These judgments climax with the return of Jesus, the ensuing battle of Armageddon, the Millennium, and the Last Judgment (see Chapters 9–14).



As you read Revelation 4–20, don't expect a single, linear storyline. The narrative includes a series of vignettes that make up a secondary plotline. These scenes help fill in the details of the main story, but they're not necessarily tied to the judgments that surround them. As such, commentators sometimes refer to these vignettes as *parentheses*, *interludes*, or *insets*.

Read on for an overview of the main plot and these interludes.

The primary storyline: Judgments and the last battle

The judgments in Revelation consist of three sets of seven judgments each, symbolized by the opening of seven seals, the sounding of seven trumpets, and the pouring of seven bowls. The three sets are tiered: The seals provide a partial judgment, the trumpets grow more severe, and the bowls show no restraint at all:

- ✓ **Seals:** Judgments begin in Revelation 6 when the Lamb (Jesus) opens seven seals on a heavenly scroll. As each seal is opened, a judgment occurs (see Chapter 9).
- ✓ **Trumpets:** As soon as Lamb opens the seventh seal, seven angels begin to play seven trumpets in succession. As each is played, a more severe judgment occurs (Chapter 10).
- ✓ **Bowls:** More judgments take place when seven angels pour out seven bowls of wrath on the earth (Chapter 12).

- Figure 1-4:**
The primary
storyline
from
Revelation
1–20.

- ✓ John encounters an angel and eats a little scroll (Rev. 10).
- ✓ Two witnesses prophesy for 3.5 years and are then martyred (Rev. 11:3–12).
- ✓ A woman and a dragon (Satan) appear, and a war in heaven occurs (Rev. 12).
- ✓ A beast out of the sea and a beast out of the earth arrive (Rev. 13).
- ✓ Jesus appears with 144,000 believers on Mount Zion (Rev. 14:1–5).
- ✓ Three angels proclaim messages of repentance and warning (Rev. 14:6–13).
- ✓ The harvest of the earth separates the believers from nonbelievers (Rev. 14:11–20).
- ✓ The saga of the great prostitute on the beast (Babylon) and her eventual fall unfolds (Rev. 17:1–19:3).

Figure 1-5 shows how these vignettes fit into the flow of the judgments.

New beginnings (Rev. 21–22:6)

The last you hear of Satan and nonbelievers is at the end of Revelation 20, when they're thrown into the lake of fire. Revelation 21, however, tells the flip side: the future that reportedly awaits those who believe in Jesus. It tells of the “new heaven and new earth” that God will create as the permanent home for his children. But this new world is more than an improved version of their current surroundings. It's a perfect world in which God will live alongside humans (Rev. 21:3–5). See Chapter 14 for details.

Epilogue (Rev. 22:7–21)

John closes out Revelation with an epilogue that marks the end of the prophecy (see Chapter 15). The major refrain in this final section of the book is Jesus's reiterating three times, “Behold, I am coming soon!” (Rev. 22:7, 22:12, 22:20). Each of these alerts precedes a call:

- ✓ **Obedience:** A call to “keep the words contained in this book” (22:7)
- ✓ **Action:** A call to act because he will “give to everyone according to what he has done” (22:12)
- ✓ **Faith:** A call to believe Jesus when he says he is coming and to be able to testify to that claim to the rest of the world (22:20)

Ch.	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
	SEALS	144k Multitude	TRUMPETS		Angel & Little Scroll	The Two Witnesses	Woman & The Dragon	The Two Beasts	144k On Mt. Zion3 AngelsHarvest of the Earth	BOWLS		Woman on the Beast Fall of Babylon	

Figure 1-5:
The context
of the
vignettes.

Getting in the Spirit

As you read through Revelation, the curious phrase “in the Spirit” may jump out at you. John uses *in the Spirit* to mark the specific visions he has when writing Revelation. The Apostle Paul actually uses that same phrase in his epistles (Romans 8:9), but the way in which John uses the term is altogether different. John is referring to the mysterious state that he’s in as he experiences these visions. In John’s view, God somehow frees him from his normal human limitations and enables him to tangibly experience these visions in his mind and spirit.

In the Spirit appears four times in Revelation: 1:10, 4:2, 17:3, and 21:10. Every time John uses

this phrase, he is documenting the details of one of these four visions (see the table). Each of these visions “transports” John to a new geographical location — the island of Patmos, heaven, a desert, and a mountaintop. John never clarifies whether these locations are part of the vision he has on the island of Patmos or whether he is somehow supernaturally beamed to these locales.

You can think of John’s in-the-Spirit experiences as something like a four-part miniseries. Each experience is a separate installment, but together, they form a cohesive storyline.

Verse	John's Location	Vision	Theme
1:10	Patmos	Hears a loud voice	Messages to the churches
4:2	Heaven	Sees a throne with someone sitting in it	Judgments on a sinful world
17:3	Desert wilderness	Sees a woman on a beast	Final victory over evil
21:10	Mountain	Sees the new Jerusalem in heaven	A new world order

Monitoring the Book's Timeline

One of the biggest problems most people have with the book of Revelation is that they expect a traditional, linear model of storytelling. A *linear story* begins at a particular point in time and then uses progressive scenes to move the characters to some sort of destination. Other stories start out with the characters looking back at something, tell what happened in the form of a flashback, and return to the present. For the vast majority of films out of Hollywood, these two tried-and-true formulas are almost always used, primarily because they’re a natural way to tell a story and are easy for audiences to understand.

However, once in while, a story comes along that — like the book of Revelation — doesn't fit into this storytelling model. *Snow Falling on Cedars* and *The English Patient* are two prime examples. Both have multiple storylines with flashback sequences involving different characters. If you don't want a mental workout, stories like these can be quite frustrating. But if you persevere and stick with them, you can find the increased texture worthwhile, adding to the overall experience.



As you read through Revelation, prepare yourself: The book of Revelation may start out linear for several chapters, but various vignettes or interludes interrupt the main story. When you equip yourself for that reality, you'll be in a much better position to deal with the timing of events.

As you consider the how the various pieces of the book fit together, keep in mind the following two topics: transition phrases and parallel events.

And then some: Interpreting transition phrases



Revelation is littered with scores of transition phrases that imply timing. The primary examples include “then I saw,” “and I saw,” “after this,” and “after these things.” Strictly speaking, these transitions may not always translate to the order of prophetic events. For example, you can find 53 instances of the word *then* in the book. Although some of them imply a connection between one event and the next, others reflect the author's technique of relaying his story, interweaving the content of his visions with his own experiences. In other words, the narrative has two layers:

- ✓ John's experience of having a vision while on Patmos
- ✓ The content of the visions — horsemen ride, beasts arise, angels fight, and so on

With this kind of setup, a transition may apply to the outer layer (the order of John's visions) or to the order of prophetic events themselves. For example, suppose I were to tell you, “I saw the season finale of *24*. Then I saw reruns of the rest of the episodes over the summer.” In this example, the *then* relates wholly to the timing in which I saw the episodes. It says nothing about the logical order of episodes for the series.

Although some transitions may be open to interpretation, you shouldn't just dismiss all transitions, either. In particular, the phrases “after this” and “after these things” are noteworthy. Combined, these two phrases appear just six times and don't always seem to relate to the order in which John received the visions. For example, its usage in Revelation 4:1, 15:5, 18:1, and 19:1 seems to

easily imply a logical sequence of events. However, its usage in 7:1 (which introduces the 144,000 believers of Israel) seems more of a writing device posed to answer the question raised at the end of chapter 6: Who can withstand the wrath of God? (6:17). John uses the term again in 7:9; in this context, the phrase seems to imply the order in which he received the visions rather than a sequential flow of events.

The four major interpretations of Revelation and the different perspectives on the Millennium all weigh in on the timing of events in the book. See Chapters 4 and 13 for details.

Parallelism: Watching things go down at the same time

Revelation has a flow of events, but how each section fits into the timeline isn't always apparent. Although commentators disagree on the particulars, most agree that at least a few of the portions of the book parallel each other. Perhaps the most obvious example is Revelation 12's story of the woman in the desert, which is told in two ways in different places in the chapter (12:6 and 12:13–17). A second example, though more contested, is the 3.5-year period mentioned several times throughout the book (11:3, 12:6, 12:14, and 13:5). Some hold that these references indicate that the associated sections parallel each other.

Many futurists (who believe Revelation describes real events that are going to occur — see Chapter 4) downplay parallelism. They think that, by and large, the book progresses in a linear fashion from beginning to end, except for the vignettes (see the earlier “Judgments and vignettes” section). Other futurists view Revelation 1–11 and 12–19 as parallel accounts of the Great Tribulation. Offering a different take, people who embrace a symbolic interpretation of the prophecy (once again, see Chapter 4) see up to seven parallel sections in the book.

The issue of parallelism is also key factor in the interpretation of the Millennium, which appears in Revelation 20:

- ✓ Premillennialists hold that all the events from Revelation 1–19 will happen before the Millennium.
- ✓ Amillennialists see the discussion of the Millennium as a parallel section that describes the entire church age; this church age goes from before Revelation 1:1 even starts up until the Second Coming of Jesus in Revelation 19.

Chapter 13 dives into the interpretations of the Millennium.

