

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Understanding why Revelation is important
- » Getting a big-picture look at Revelation
- » Discovering the six sections of the book
- » Looking for clues to the chronology

Chapter **1**

One Man's Visions, All Mankind's Destiny

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 a word of caution: Revelation is also a challenging book. It's full of grotesque creatures like a red dragon, two beasts, and demonic locusts. And rather than following a straight, chronological storyline, it's punctuated by backtracks, delays, and interludes. Further adding to the degree of difficulty, the whole package comes as a series of prophetic visions, each requiring decoding and unpacking — no small task!

This chapter doesn't try to explore the symbolism behind the events that are chronicled throughout Revelation (I save that for Chapter 5). It also doesn't pore over the details of these events, personalities, and issues (that's what Part 3 is all about). Rather, I get you started in the right direction by painting in broad strokes the structure and content of the final book of the Bible. Along the way, I 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 and end-of-the-world sci-fi movies 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 fortune teller's crystal ball. Domsday cults and survivalists thrive on supposed insider information about the End Times, some of it drawn from the book of Revelation!

Making sense of Revelation can be tough going because of its structure, symbolism, and divergent interpretations. You can easily become discouraged and wonder why you should even bother to read it. Here are several reasons why I consider Revelation essential reading:

- » **It provides a fitting conclusion to the entire Bible.** No one likes a cliff-hanger, and each part of the Bible offers an episode or theme in a larger, connected story. The story is one of redemption that begins with Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden (Gen 3) and culminates in a joyous return of the redeemed to a New Garden (Rev 22). In short, the book of Revelation offers the ultimate conclusion!
- » **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. Revelation does that, but it provides so much more. Above all else, God's majestic sovereignty, his impartial justice, and his amazing grace shine forth. The book of Revelation is good news because nothing in all creation "will be able to separate [God's people] from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:19).
- » **It gives readers a glimpse of heaven.** The Bible offers few specifics on what heaven will be like. The Old Testament gives only a few glimmers of what is popularly referred to as "heaven." Jesus and his apostles provide a few more details in the New Testament. But saving the best for last, the final chapters of Revelation offer a grand unveiling of the new earth God has prepared for his people. John's vision pictures that blessed state as a new city (the New Jerusalem) and a new garden (the Garden of Eden) both of which are pristine and perfect (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 despite all the battles, beasts, and bad things depicted, Revelation is really all about hope. It portrays, in vivid detail, the biblical view of good triumphing over evil and suffering.

Gaining a Bird's Eye View of Revelation

A major challenge in reading Revelation is sorting out and identifying the leading themes and primary storyline while a kaleidoscope of images leaps off the page. 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. It's somewhat like tackling a large puzzle. First you sort the pieces by color and pattern and then work on the borders. After that you're ready to assemble the centerpieces.

Although Revelation contains a lot of confusing symbolism and has many interpretations (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of these interpretations), the book falls into six sections, and I offer an overview of each of these parts in the following sections.

Prologue and inaugural vision (1)

The first chapter of Revelation functions as a prologue (introduction) to the entire book. It provides the context for understanding what follows (see Chapter 6), reveals the central character, the Son of Man (Jesus Christ), identifies the author, and states the purpose of the book. Within the first several verses, you discover that

- » Jesus Christ reveals “what must soon take place” (1:1 and 3).
- » The author is John, a servant of Christ and fellow sufferer with his readers (1:1, 4, and 9).
- » The initial audience are members of seven churches in the province of Asia (1:4).
- » John wrote his book on the island of Patmos (1:9 and 11).
- » The purpose of the book is to encourage readers by what they hear (1:3).

The prologue indicates how the book came to be written: God gave the revelation to Jesus, who communicated it to John through an angel sent for this specific purpose. John apparently received the content through a series of visions. After pondering these visions and their relationship to redemptive history in the Hebrew Bible, Jewish traditions, and early Christian traditions, he composed the present document. As you will see, however, many aspects of this document also reflect the Greco-Roman culture in which John lived. Finally, he dispatched a trusted messenger (or messengers) to hand-deliver it to seven churches of the Roman province called Asia (Rev. 2–3). See Chapter 7 for details.

Today's readers constitute a secondary audience for this book thanks to the original readers who copied and forwarded John's letter to contemporary churches. This process was repeated many times throughout church history up until the 15th century CE. Figure 1-1 shows the chain of transmission.

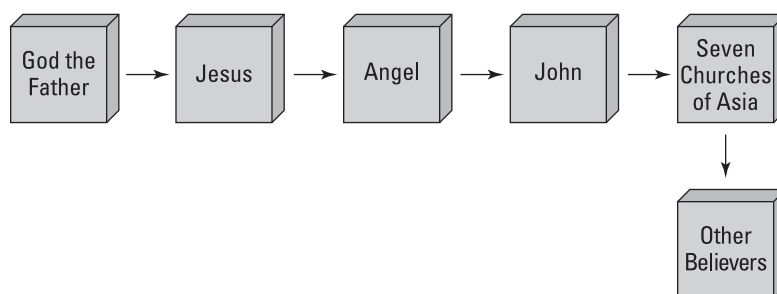


FIGURE 1-1:
Passing on
the book of
Revelation.



REMEMBER

One of the keys to understanding the basic structure of 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.” Although scholars offer various interpretations of the verb tenses of this verse, the grammar and structure of the book point to a threefold timing of events: past, present, and future. In other words, Jesus tells John to write about

- » The vision of the risen Christ he *has already seen* (Rev. 1)
- » The *current* condition of the seven churches (Rev. 2–3)
- » The events that *will take place* at some unspecified time (“after this”) in the future (Rev. 4–22)



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Some scholars hold that the first phrase in 1:19 (“what you have seen”) refers to the totality of what John sees as described in the entire book. The next phrase (“what is”) refers to the messages to the seven churches. The third phrase (“what is to take place after this”) refers to the series of visions in chapters 4–22.

Figure 1-2 shows how Revelation 1:19 provides a broad chronology for looking at the entire book.

The importance of the inaugural vision can hardly be overstated. The risen Christ assures John that death no longer holds believers in fear (1:17–18). That is precisely the message Christians in the seven churches needed to hear, a message of hope that has sustained Christians for nearly two thousand years.

FIGURE 1-2:
Revelation
1:19 provides a
broad overview
of the book.

Ch.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
		What you have seen	What is now	What will take place later																		

Messages to seven churches (2–3)

Revelation 2–3 contains individual messages that Jesus dictates for the seven churches in Asia (see Chapter 7). 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, there is no commendation, only rebuke. The church is urgently summoned to repent.

Ascent to the throne room (4–5)

John’s rapture to the throne room has immense significance for the rest of the book of Revelation. This awesome glimpse into the heavenly control room around which the entire universe revolves assures readers then and now that the sovereign God is in complete control of all things. John’s vision conveys visually and aurally what the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 8:28: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

End of everything old (6–19)

The old order doesn’t depart without a fight. The Dark Lord pulls out all stops to maintain his grip on planet Earth and the humans who inhabit it. Satan’s kingdom of darkness, however, is no match for the kingdom of light ruled over by the rightful King. The Lion of the tribe of Judah, who is also the Lamb of God (Rev 5:5–6), unleashes a series of judgments that bring it crashing down and prepare the way for a brand-new world.

Three heptads: Seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls (6–16)

Revelation chapters 6–16 move through a series of progressively severe judgments consisting of three *heptads*, which means a set of seven. The three sets are tiered: The seals affect one fourth of the earth; the trumpets are more extensive (one third of the earth) and intensive; the bowls are global in extent and catastrophic in intensity. I describe these heptads in the following list:

- » **Seals:** Judgments begin in Revelation 6 when the Lamb (Jesus) breaks seven seals of a heavenly scroll. As each seal is opened, a judgment occurs (see Chapter 9).
- » **Trumpets:** After the Lamb opens the seventh seal, there is a period of silence for half an hour. Then seven angels blow seven trumpets in succession. As each is sounded, a more severe judgment occurs (Chapter 10).
- » **Bowls:** The last judgments are unleashed when seven angels pour out seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth (Chapter 12). There is no escape and no shelter.

There is no consensus on how the seals, trumpets, and bowls are interrelated. Some scholars argue that the events are sequential, while others believe they occur simultaneously or overlap. Additionally, some interpret them in purely symbolic terms. In Chapter 9 of this book, I offer my take on the relationship between the heptads.



TIP

As you read Revelation 6–20, don't expect a single, linear storyline. The narrative includes a series of interludes that pause the action and zoom in on certain aspects of the main story.

Judgment on Babylon the Great (17–18)

Revelation 17–18 graphically portray the destruction of Babylon the Great. Unpacking the meaning of the city and the woman symbolically associated with it requires a broad-ranging synthesis of many biblical texts, as well as explorations into the trappings of Imperial Rome during the late first century CE. I reserve for Chapter 11 a discussion of the identity and catastrophic end of this mysterious city and the prostitute who ruthlessly rules over it.

Revelation 19–20 take up the counterpoint city and the woman who reigns there, namely, the New Jerusalem and the spotless Bride of Christ (see Chapter 14 for further explanation).

Triumph of the Crucified (19)

The three heptads and the fall of Babylon the Great set the stage for the grand finale, the second coming of Jesus (the first coming was his earthly life), and the battle of Armageddon, in which Jesus leads his angelic army to victory over Satan's forces (see Chapter 12). Satan is bound for 1,000 years, commonly known as the *Millennium* (see Chapter 13). During this time, Jesus and his faithful followers reign on earth. At the end of this period, Satan is loosed one final time to deceive the nations of the world. Jesus, however, decisively defeats the Satanic hordes and consigns Satan to the lake of fire forever (Rev. 20:10).

Beginning of everything new (20:1–22:5)

What a contrast for the church after King Jesus returns and installs his kingdom on earth! No longer buffeted by Satan's attacks, infiltrated by false teachers or weakened by lax and indifferent believers, the church reigns alongside her victorious king. It is at long last the fulfillment of the Lord's Prayer, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).



REMEMBER

A controversial aspect of this victorious kingdom on earth revolves around the meaning of the Millennium — is it literal or figurative? I take up this contentious issue in Chapter 13 explaining the options and allowing you to draw your own conclusion.

In Revelation 20:11–15 all stand before a great white throne. God judges each person impartially in accordance with two books: a book of deeds and a book of life. Believers in Jesus — those whose names are found in the book of life — are welcomed into the holy city (see Chapter 13). Those whose names don't make the guest list are thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:15).

Revelation 21:1–22:7 takes you on a guided tour of the New Jerusalem, the permanent home of all God's redeemed people. The holy city is situated in a new heaven and a new earth. This new world is more than just an improved version of the current one; it's a perfect world in which God himself dwells with his people (Rev. 21:3–5). See Chapter 14 for details.

Epilogue and concluding vision (Rev. 22:6–21)

Mirroring the inaugural vision, this brief section features encouragement, exhortation, and a warning. The story has been told. Redemptive history has arrived at its destination. Not all, however, will enjoy the blessing and bliss of the New Jerusalem. You read about those outside the city. They may not enter. That is all John says about it. Chapter 15 explains more about this difficult topic.

John closes out Revelation with an epilogue that marks the end of his prophecy (see Chapter 15). The major refrain in this final section of the book is Jesus's three fold reminder, "Behold, I am coming soon!" (Rev. 22:7, 22:12, 22:20).

Each of these announcements 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)

Delays and interludes

Inserted into the narrative flow of Revelation is a series of delays and interludes that amplify and augment the primary storyline. These interludes include the following:

- » **Interlude 1:** After the sixth seal, there is an interlude in which 144,000 believers from the twelve tribes of Israel are sealed and sanctified. These are joined by an innumerable multitude that come "out of the great ordeal" (see Chapter 9). At Revelation 8:1, after the seventh seal is broken, you expect the end. Instead, there's a slight delay of half an hour. Much more about John's masterful use of delay later.
- » **Interlude 2:** After sounding the sixth trumpet, an angel appears with a little scroll which John eats. Then two witnesses prophesy for 3.5 years after which they are martyred (Chapter 10).
- » **Interlude 3:** After the seventh trumpet sounds accompanied by an angelic anthem, God's Temple opens, and you expect the grand finale. Instead, John gives a rather lengthy interlude consisting of five zoom-in episodes. These episodes include:
 - A woman, a child, and a red dragon (Rev. 12)
 - Two bad-boy beasts of the Dark Lord (Rev. 13)
 - On Mount Zion with the Lamb (Rev. 14:1–5)
 - Three angelic announcements (Rev. 14:6–13)
 - End-time harvest and vintage (Rev 14:14–20)

» **Interlude 4:** After the seven bowls of God’s wrath are poured out, you once again expect the end. But John pauses the action and zooms in on five episodes before revealing God’s end game. These episodes include:

- Vision of Babylon the Great and the prostitute (Rev. 17)
- Lament over the fall of Babylon (Rev. 18)
- Hallelujah chorus over the fall of Babylon (Rev. 19:1–8)
- Invitation to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9–10)
- Return of the King (Rev. 19:11–21)

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 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 on 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 coming down from 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 most 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 a 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.



TIP

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

And then some: Interpreting transitional phrases



REMEMBER

Revelation is filled with scores of transitional phrases, such as “then I saw,” “and I saw,” “after this,” and “after these things.” But not all these transitions refer to a chronological sequence of prophetic events. For example, of the 53 instances of the word “then,” some refer to the temporal order in which John himself experienced visions. Others refer to a temporal sequence between events within a vision. In other words, one must distinguish between two aspects:

- » John's personal experience while receiving visions
- » The content of the visions — horsemen ride, beasts arise, angels fight, and so on

For example, suppose I were to tell you, “I saw the season finale of *Andor*. Then I saw reruns of all the episodes over the summer.” In this example, “then” refers to the timing in which I saw the episodes, not what happened in the episodes.

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 implies a temporal sequence of events. However, its usage in 7:1 (which introduces the 144,000 believers of Israel) answers 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 refers to the order in which he received the visions rather than a sequential flow of events.

As you will see, the four major interpretations of Revelation and the different perspectives on the Millennium have a significant bearing on how one interprets the meaning and timing of various events narrated in the book. I’ll discuss these matters more fully in Chapters 4 and 13.

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 6–22 describe future events — 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 6–11 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 a key factor in the interpretation of the Millennium, which appears in Revelation 20:

- » Premillennialists hold that all the events from Revelation 6–19 happen before the Millennium.
- » Amillennialists view the Millennium as a recapitulation of or a parallel to the entire church age.

Chapter 13 takes up the vigorously debated interpretation of the Millennium.