

The Book of Revelation FOR **DUMMIES®**

by Larry R. Helyer, PhD, and Richard Wagner



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Dedication

Larry dedicates this book in memory of his mother, Hazel M. Helyer (1916–2000). Her love for the Bible, large portions of which she knew from memory, left a legacy far beyond what she could have imagined.

Rich also dedicates the book to his mother, Carolyn, for her lifelong testimony of Jesus Christ as well as her tireless, selfless example of living as a disciple.

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Contents at a Glance



<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Part I: Revealing the End of the Biblical Story.....</i>	<i>9</i>
Chapter 1: One Man's Visions, All Humans' Fate.....	11
Chapter 2: Setting the Stage: The Apostle John and the World in Which He Lived	23
Chapter 3: The Prequels: Prophecies throughout the Bible	43
<i>Part II: Interpreting the Book of Revelation</i>	<i>61</i>
Chapter 4: Choosing a Perspective for Understanding Revelation.....	63
Chapter 5: Deciphering Symbols with Your Secret Decoder Ring.....	87
<i>Part III: Taking a Grand Tour of the Book of Revelation</i>	<i>99</i>
Chapter 6: Setting Up the Scope of the Book (1:1–20).....	101
Chapter 7: Reading the Seven Letters to Conflicted Churches (1:19–3:22)	119
Chapter 8: Peeking into the Throne Room (4:1–5:14).....	143
Chapter 9: Breaking Seven Seals (6:1–8:1).....	159
Chapter 10: Sounding Seven Trumpets (8:2–11:19)	181
Chapter 11: A Woman, a Dragon, Two Beasts, and More! (12:1–14:20)	205
Chapter 12: Seven Angels, Seven Bowls, and a Final Smackdown (15:1–18:24)	227
Chapter 13: Coming of the Kingdom (19:1–20:15)	251
Chapter 14: Seeing the New Jerusalem and a Triumphant Church (21:1–22:6).....	273
Chapter 15: Promising to Return (22:6–21).....	291
<i>Part IV: The Part of Tens</i>	<i>303</i>
Chapter 16: Ten Common Questions about the End Times	305
Chapter 17: Ten Tips for Interpreting Scripture and Prophecy.....	313
<i>Appendix: Glossary</i>	<i>319</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>325</i>

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

About This Book.....	2
Conventions Used in This Book	2
Apocalypse.....	2
Bible references	2
Christianity.....	3
Dates	3
Names of God	3
Prophecy and prophesying.....	4
Formatting	4
What You're Not to Read.....	4
Foolish Assumptions	5
How This Book Is Organized.....	5
Part I: Revealing the End of the Biblical Story.....	5
Part II: Interpreting the Book of Revelation	5
Part III: Taking a Grand Tour of the Book of Revelation	6
Part IV: The Part of Tens.....	6
Icons Used in This Book.....	6
Where to Go from Here.....	7

Part 1: Revealing the End of the Biblical Story 9

Chapter 1: One Man's Visions, All Humans' Fate 11

Why Read Revelation, Anyway?	12
Taking a Whirlwind Tour through Revelation	12
Introduction (Rev. 1)	13
Letters to the seven churches of Asia (Rev. 2–3)	15
Judgments and vignettes (Rev. 4–20)	15
New beginnings (Rev. 21–22:6)	17
Epilogue (Rev. 22:7–21)	17
Monitoring the Book's Timeline.....	19
And then some: Interpreting transition phrases	20
Parallelism: Watching things go down at the same time.....	21

Chapter 2: Setting the Stage: The Apostle John and the World in Which He Lived 23

ID-ing John Doe, Author of Revelation	24
Doubting the Apostle John's authorship.....	25
Defending the Apostle John as author	26
Understanding the Troubled Times in Which John Lived	28
Increasing Roman domination: Rise of the emperor-gods.....	28
Jewish population fleeing ancient Palestine	31



A widening gap between Jews and Christians	31
Growing persecution of Christians	31
Playing the Dating Game	34
The rebel rousin' 60's	35
Hip hoppin' in the 90's	36
Unraveling Revelation's Textured Style of Writing	38
Revelation as epistle	38
Revelation as apocalyptic literature	39
Revelation as prophecy	40
Revelation as extraordinarily inspired	41

Chapter 3: The Prequels: Prophecies throughout the Bible 43

Understanding the Old Testament Backdrop to Revelation	43
Peeking into Old Testament Prophecy	46
Isaiah	47
Ezekiel	48
Daniel	49
Zechariah	50
Jeremiah	50
Joel	51
Examining the 70 Weeks of Daniel 9	51
Having a long week: The dispensationalist view	52
Seeing time as relative: The traditional view	54
Avoiding the future: The critical view	55
Exploring the Olivet Discourse: Jesus's Prophecy	55
Noting the signs of the times	56
Witnessing Jesus's (second) big entrance	57
Keeping your guard up	58
Considering the "generation" gap	58

Part II: Interpreting the Book of Revelation.....61

Chapter 4: Choosing a Perspective for Understanding Revelation . . 63

Solving the Revelation Puzzle: Four Solutions throughout History	64
Early church views	65
The Middle Ages and Renaissance	65
Into the modern era	66
Futurist: Events Will Take Place at a Moment's Notice	68
Various futurist perspectives	70
Examining the futurist approach	72
Historicist: Covering the Entire History of the Church	73
The basic approach	73
Examining the historicist approach	74
Preterist: Explaining Historical Events from the First Century	75
Various preterist perspectives	76
Examining the preterist approach	77

Idealist: Identifying Themes, Not Literal Events	78
Various idealist perspectives	79
Examining the idealist approach	79
What's Your Angle? Evaluating the Four Approaches	80
Prophecy fulfillment: Literal or symbolic?	81
Are we there yet? or, How soon is "soon"?	83
Who is John really writing to?	83
Was first-century persecution really that bad?	84
Finding common ground	85

Chapter 5: Deciphering Symbols with Your Secret Decoder Ring . . . 87

Giving John's Readers a Heads-up	87
Why Use Symbols?	88
Following biblical tradition	89
Adding greater meaning than plain text	89
Getting people's attention	90
Reinforcing unity	90
Keeping some secrets	91
Understanding Common Interpretations	92
Discovering the meaning of the major symbols	92
Assembling the cast of characters	96

Part III: Taking a Grand Tour of the Book of Revelation.... 99

Chapter 6: Setting Up the Scope of the Book (1:1–20) 101

Declassified! Releasing God's Secrets in the Apocalyptic Press	101
Touring God's headquarters and giving away the ending	102
Choosing sides: Dualism	102
Being encouraged to stick with it	103
Probing the Prologue (1:1–3)	104
Unveiling the good guy	104
Checking out John's sources	105
Receiving blessings	106
Saluting the Saints in Asia (1:4–6)	106
From John with love: Revelation's writer	106
To whom it may concern: The recipients	107
Heaven says hello: Passing on the greeting	107
Singing Jesus's praises: Doxology	109
Sounding the Theme (1:7–8)	110
Initiating the Visions (1:9–11)	110
John's location	111
The significance of John's self-ID	111
Occasion	112
Angelic orders	112
Seeing the First and the Last (1:12–18)	113
Standing among seven menorahs	113
Meeting Jesus face to face	115

Charting the Course (1:19–20).....	116
Getting a commission to write.....	117
Decoding the mystery of the stars.....	117

Chapter 7: Reading the Seven Letters to Conflicted Churches (1:19–3:22)119

The Symmetry of the Messages	120
Surveying the structure of each letter.....	120
Considering the order of the messages.....	122
Asking about the Audience	122
Angels: Postmen or guardians?	123
The seven churches: Real or symbolic?	124
Getting to Know the Seven Churches Up Close and Personal.....	125
Ephesus: Down on love (2:1–7).....	127
Smyrna: Faithful under fire (2:8–11).....	128
Pergamum: Compromising convictions (2:12–17).....	130
Thyatira: Dirty dancing with Jezebel (2:18–29)	133
Sardis: Sleepwalkers in the city (3:1–6)	135
Philadelphia: Holding on 'til the end (3:7–13)	138
Laodicea: Don't drink the water! (3:14–22)	140

Chapter 8: Peeking into the Throne Room (4:1–5:14)143

Focusing on the “Someone” on the Throne (4:1–11).....	144
Seeing who takes the seat	145
Debating when believers go up, up, and away	145
Circling the throne	149
An ode to the one on the throne	152
Singing Praise to the Lamb with Scroll-Opening Skills (5:1–14)	153
Examining a mysterious scroll.....	153
Not your ordinary lamb.....	156

Chapter 9: Breaking Seven Seals (6:1–8:1)159

Unsealing the Beginning of the End	160
Exploring the relationship of the three series of sevens.....	160
Breaking the seals to gain access to the scroll.....	162
Scoping out the seven seals	162
Comparing notes with Jesus	163
The First Four Seals: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (6:1–8) ...	164
White horse and rider with a bow.....	165
Red horse and rider who removes peace	166
Black horse and rider with a pair of scales.....	166
Pale green horse and Death and Hades.....	167
The Fifth seal: The blood of martyrs (6:9–11)	169
The Sixth Seal: The Day of the Lord Has Come! (6:12–17)	170
Like Old (Testament) times: Going back to the Day of the Lord	171
In with the New (Testament): Looking to the Day of the Lamb....	172

Pausing for Effect (7:1–17)	173
Surveying the survivors	174
Identifying the 144,000	175
Observing the multitude standing before the throne.....	177
The Seventh Seal: Silence in Heaven (8:1–5)	178

Chapter 10: Sounding Seven Trumpets (8:2–11:19)181

Previewing the Seven Trumpets.....	182
Preceding the trumpets: Silence and prayer	183
Making a stormy appearance.....	183
Paralleling the plagues of Egypt	184
Admitting problems of interpretation	185
Honing in on the horns of old	186
The First Four Trumpets: Fire, Blood, and Hail.....	187
Trumpet 1: Plague on the land.....	188
Trumpet 2: Plague on the high seas	188
Trumpet 3: Plague on fresh water	189
Trumpet 4: Plague on sources of light	189
Wailing the Woes of the Last Three Trumpets	190
Trumpet 5: Demonic locust plague	190
Trumpet 6: Demonic cavalry.....	192
Trumpet 7: Not just yet.....	194
The First Interlude: The Angel and the Little Scroll	194
Looking at a mighty angel	194
Tasting a bittersweet book.....	196
The Second Interlude: Two Star Witnesses in Jerusalem	197
Measuring the Temple	198
Deciphering who or what the witness are	199
A rising beast, raptured witnesses, and a deadly earthquake	201
Beginning of the End: The Seventh Trumpet.....	202

Chapter 11: A Woman, a Dragon, Two Beasts, and More! (12:1–14:20)205

Heavenly Drama: The Dragon Falls, the Woman Is Saved (12:1–17).....	205
Meeting the cast of characters	206
Unpacking the plot and viewing the action	210
Two Beastly Boys Join the Dragon to Make Their Mark (13:1–18)	213
Monster mash: The Antichrist, beast of the sea	214
Head of PR: The false prophet, beast from inner earth.....	216
Beastly markings: 666	217
The Lamb and the 144,000 (14:1–5)	220
Three Angels with Three Messages (14:6–13)	222
Proclaiming an eternal gospel	222
Proclaiming the fall of Babylon.....	222
Proclaiming a warning with assurance.....	223
Harvesting and the Grapes of Wrath (14:14–20)	224
Reaping the earth	224
Treading the grapes (of wrath).....	225
Battle-spilled blood as high as a bridle	226

Chapter 12: Seven Angels, Seven Bowls, and a Final Smackdown (15:1–18:24)227

A Preamble to God's Final Wrath (15:1–8)	228
Preparing for the end	228
Fulfilling two covenants	229
Clearing out of the Temple	231
Pouring Out the Seven Bowls (16:1–21)	232
Interpreting the bowls: Four views	232
Checking out the bowls' contents	234
But First, a Word from Our End-Times Sponsor, the Lamb (16:15)	238
Exposing the Mystery of Babylon the Great (17:1–18)	239
Calling her names: Harlot on seven hills	239
Turning on her: The beast bites back	244
Loveless in the Ruins: Celebrating Babylon's Fall (18:1–24)	244
Singing stinging sarcasm	246
Fleeing the scene to safety	247
Shedding no tears for the fallen	248
Reeling from markets' collapse: Goods gone bad	248
Ding-dong! The witch is dead!	249

Chapter 13: Coming of the Kingdom (19:1–20:15)251

Returning as Promised (19:1–21)	252
Having a roaring good time	252
Avoiding angel worship	253
Making a grand entrance	254
Picking the bones clean and taking prisoners	257
Dawning of the Millennial Age (20:1–6)	258
Seizing the dragon	258
Reigning with the Lamb	259
Letting Satan Loose (20:7–10)	260
Reverting to form	260
Googling Gog	260
Standing at the Great White Throne (20:11–15)	262
Judgment by the books	263
Termination of Death and Hades	266
Sorting Out Two Theological Issues	266
Struggling to understand hell	266
Mulling over the meaning of the Millennium	268

Chapter 14: Seeing the New Jerusalem and a Triumphant Church (21:1–22:6)273

Exploring a New Creation (21:1–8)	273
Scrapping the old world	275
Reaching the end of the sea	275
Making a fresh start	276
Welcoming a city from the sky	277
Enjoying a new existence	282

Taking a Virtual Tour of the New Jerusalem (21:9–27)	284
Admiring the architecture: Walls, gates, and foundations	285
Considering dimensions and shape	285
Scoping out the building materials	286
Recognizing what’s not there.....	287
Coming Home to the Garden (22:1–6)	288
Dipping into the river of life	289
Recovering the tree of life	290

Chapter 15: Promising to Return (22:6–21) 291

Verifying the Source of the Message (22:6–8).....	291
Getting to the End on Time (22:7)	292
Knocking “Other” Worship (22:8–9).....	293
Leaving the Scroll Unsealed (22:10–15).....	293
Making your own choices.....	294
Looking to an eternal judge	294
Reaping reward.....	295
Facing punishment: The outsiders.....	296
And Now, In Conclusion (22:16–21)	297
Signing the message.....	297
Invoking and inviting.....	299
Warning against tampering	300
Getting a final word from the Lamb	300
P.S. Be blessed with grace!	301

***Part IV: The Part of Tens* 303**

Chapter 16: Ten Common Questions about the End Times 305

What Does Eschatology Mean?	305
What Do the Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls Symbolize?	306
What’s the Great Tribulation?	306
What’s the Rapture?.....	307
Who Are the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse?.....	308
Who Is the Antichrist?	309
What’s the Mark of the Beast (666)?.....	309
What’s the Significance of the Term Babylon?	310
What’s the Millennium?	311
What’s the Lake of Fire?	312

Chapter 17: Ten Tips for Interpreting Scripture and Prophecy 313

Don’t Depend on English Words for Sorting Out Hidden Meanings	314
Keep Verses in Context.....	314
Look to Other Scripture as a Guide	314
Remember the Target Audience.....	315
Look for the Original Meaning.....	315

Identify the Literary Style	316
View Fulfilled Prophecy as a Prototype	316
Don't Try to Pin Down Timelines for Fulfillment	317
Note that Biblical Prophecy Can Have Stages of Fulfillment	317
Consider that Some Biblical Prophecy Is Conditional	317
 <i>Appendix: Glossary</i>	 319
 <i>Index</i>	 325

Introduction

A common cartoon theme involves a person wearing a sandwich sign or carrying a poster that proclaims, “Repent! The end is near!” What’s implied is that some sudden, violent event is just around the corner and that people need to brace themselves for whatever’s coming. And usually, the end that’s near involves something nasty, if not totally devastating.

The idea of a dramatic and destructive end to the earth has been around for ages. It’s the stuff of some really great sci-fi movies, and a lot of the elements that go into these stories come right out of the Bible. In fact, terms such as *repent* and *Antichrist* and *Armageddon* are direct references to messages, characters, and events that make up the book of Revelation. When you examine these themes and images in the context of religion, faith, and biblical history, things get even more interesting.

But the book of Revelation is no easy read. Some people, after slogging through Revelation, seem to suffer from what we call PTRRD: Post-Traumatic Revelation Reading Disorder. Maybe you’ve had this experience. You start reading with a rush of enthusiasm, and all goes well through the first three chapters and their letters to the seven churches. Then things start to get hairy: visions from heaven, creatures with eyes covering their bodies, plagues, horses of different colors, angels everywhere. Seven seals are opened, seven trumpets are sounded, seven bowls are poured out, and things get really confusing. Throw in grapes of wrath, red dragons, giant hail, and something called the rapture, and, well, you get the idea. *Lost* becomes more than just the name of a television series — it’s the perfect descriptor of your mental state.

Our intent is to help you avoid PTRRD. We act as your tour guides to help you navigate the amazing book of Revelation. Even if you can’t figure out every single detail, clues that open up large chunks of the text abound. We promise you’ll come away with a better understanding of what Revelation is about, as well as a ton of cool information that you can sprinkle into conversations and impress your friends!

About This Book

The first thing you may discover is that there's no one dominant or right way to interpret the book of Revelation. About the only thing all serious students of Revelation can agree on is that in the end, good wins over evil. Theological views about what happens, when it happens, and to whom it happens vary widely. In *The Book of Revelation For Dummies*, we introduce the leading views and point you to some of the most likely meanings.

Revelation is arguably the most perplexing book in all the Bible, so our goal is to be clear and concise. Therefore, we aim for an easy-to-understand, approachable discussion, without trying to bombard you with a lot of theological gobbledygook.

The topics in the book are logically ordered, so you can read from start to finish if you want to. But this is a reference book, so don't feel you have to read it from cover to cover. You may prefer to browse the Table of Contents, flip through the pages, or thumb through the index to locate a topic that you find particularly engaging.

Conventions Used in This Book

To make sure you get the most out of this book, keep the following conventions and definitions in mind.

Apocalypse

The word *apocalypse* has become associated with a devastating event, including the end of the world. But the term actually means "to unveil" or "to reveal." And so, Revelation is a revealing (apocalypse) of the biblical view of how all things come to an end. People often refer to any literature that addresses the end of the world as *apocalyptic*.

Bible references

The Bible verses we quote are from the New Revised Standard Version translation, unless otherwise noted. We cite passages using the standard convention, *Book chapter:verse*. For example, John 3:16 refers to *John* as the book of

the Bible, 3 as the chapter of the book, and 16 as the verse of the chapter. If you don't see a colon in a Bible reference, the number refers to an entire chapter; in other words, Rev. 4–5 means chapters 4 through 5 of the book of Revelation.

When we refer to the *Old Testament*, we're talking about those sacred scriptures that Christianity shares with Judaism. Jews refer to these scriptures as the *Tanakh*, or Hebrew Bible. For Protestants and Jews, these scriptures consist of the same 39 books; Catholics include several additional books, collectively called the *Apocrypha*.

We occasionally refer to Jewish works that aren't part of the Bible, such as *1 Enoch*. If you're really interested in reading the book of *1 Enoch*, check out the English translation with introduction and notes by E. Isaac in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Volume 1. The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature & Testaments* (Doubleday).

Christianity

For the purposes of this book, *historical Christianity*, *biblical Christianity*, and *orthodox Christianity* are interchangeable terms. Each speaks of beliefs that the church has historically upheld for some 2,000 years. Simply, Christianity is monotheistic (believing in one God), is based on the teachings of Jesus, and embraces the entire Bible as truth.

Dates

When we refer to dates, we use the newer designations BCE (before common era) and CE (common era) rather than the more traditional BC (before Christ) and AD (*Anno Domini*, in the year of the Lord). If you're unfamiliar with the newer terms, no sweat. The year 34 BCE is the same as 34 BC, and 1050 CE is equivalent to AD 1050.

Names of God

Although God has many names, we generally use *God* and *Lord* in this book. Also, in accordance with historical usage, we use the traditional masculine pronoun *he* to refer to God.

Prophecy and prophesying

People often think of prophecy as being limited to future events. But from a biblical perspective, *prophecy* is a noun that refers to something more general: the act of speaking the mind and counsel of God. Biblical prophets were, in a sense, the mouthpiece of God, delivering important information to God's people. Biblical prophecy, among other things, addressed current events, offered guidance on behavior, revealed elements of the character of God, reassured God's people, and often predicted future events. Sometimes, prophecy about the future was conditional: If bad behavior continued, bad things would happen; if behavior was brought back in line with God's will, bad things would be averted. The point is that biblically speaking, all prophesy isn't just about foretelling the future.

Note that *prophesy* is the verb usage of the word: Prophets prophesy prophecy!

Formatting

In order to draw your attention to particular words and phrases, we use the following formatting conventions:

- ✓ *Italics* highlight terms that we define.
- ✓ **Boldface** indicates keywords in explanatory bulleted lists.
- ✓ When we provide a cross-reference to another chapter within this book, we capitalize the word *Chapter* before the chapter number; however, when we're referring to a book of the Bible, the word *chapter* is lowercased.

What You're Not to Read

Although we focus on what you need to know about the book of Revelation, we also include some additional topics that, although informative, you can skip during your first read-through of the book. These include sidebars, the shaded boxes that show up every so often throughout the book. Sidebars deal with subjects related to the chapter, but they aren't necessary reading.

You can also bypass text with a Technical Stuff icon beside it — this icon indicates technical, theological, or historical bits of info that's helpful but more advanced. If your eyes start to glaze over in reading them, you can pass over them without missing the basics.

Foolish Assumptions

In writing this book, we didn't assume any particular religious faith leanings for the reader. You may be a Christian, Muslim, Jew, or atheist. But regardless of your faith background, we believe you're generally curious about biblical prophecy and the book of Revelation.

Although we don't assume you have previous knowledge of the Christian Bible, we figure you have access to one — either in print or online — so you can check out our references to specific Bible passages.

How This Book Is Organized

The Book of Revelation For Dummies is divided into four parts. Here's a glimpse of each one.

Part I: Revealing the End of the Biblical Story

Part I begins with an overview of Revelation and its major themes, side detours, and often-confusing symbolism. You then explore who the book's author is and when he likely wrote it. Rounding out the discussion, Part I helps you better understand the prophecy of Revelation by diving into the Old Testament prophetic writings and exploring the characteristics of *apocalyptic literature*, a genre of Jewish and Christian literature that claims to foretell catastrophic events that'll transpire during the last days of the world.

Part II: Interpreting the Book of Revelation

In Part II, we introduce you to the sticky topic of interpreting Revelation. Within the Christian church, four views on how to understand Revelation have been long dominant. We explain each of these perspectives and compare and contrast them, noting their strengths and weaknesses. After that, we begin to show you how to make sense of all the symbolism that runs throughout the book's 22 chapters.

Part III: Taking a Grand Tour of the Book of Revelation

Part III is, in many ways, the heart of this book. In it, we take you on a guided expedition through each and every chapter of Revelation. We identify the key themes and explain the likely meaning of the underlying symbolism along the way.

Part IV: The Part of Tens

In the final part, we explain ten confusing terms that often stymie people when they read Revelation. We then give you ten practical tips to think about when you're reading and studying Revelation and the Bible as a whole. A glossary of terms follows the Tens chapters for easy reference.

Icons Used in This Book

The icons in this book help you quickly identify specific kinds of information that may be of use to you:



The Remember icon highlights important ideas for you to keep in mind to deepen your understanding of Revelation.



This icon draws attention to important points that help you make sense of Revelation's prophecy.



Steer clear of the pitfalls we flag in the Warning paragraphs.



The Technical Stuff icon indicates more-advanced or scholarly information about the topic being discussed. It's useful but not essential for an overall understanding of the discussion.

Where to Go from Here

Now that you're at the end of the introduction, you have your boarding pass and are ready to begin your travel into the apocalyptic world of Revelation. You have several routes to choose from as you begin your trip:

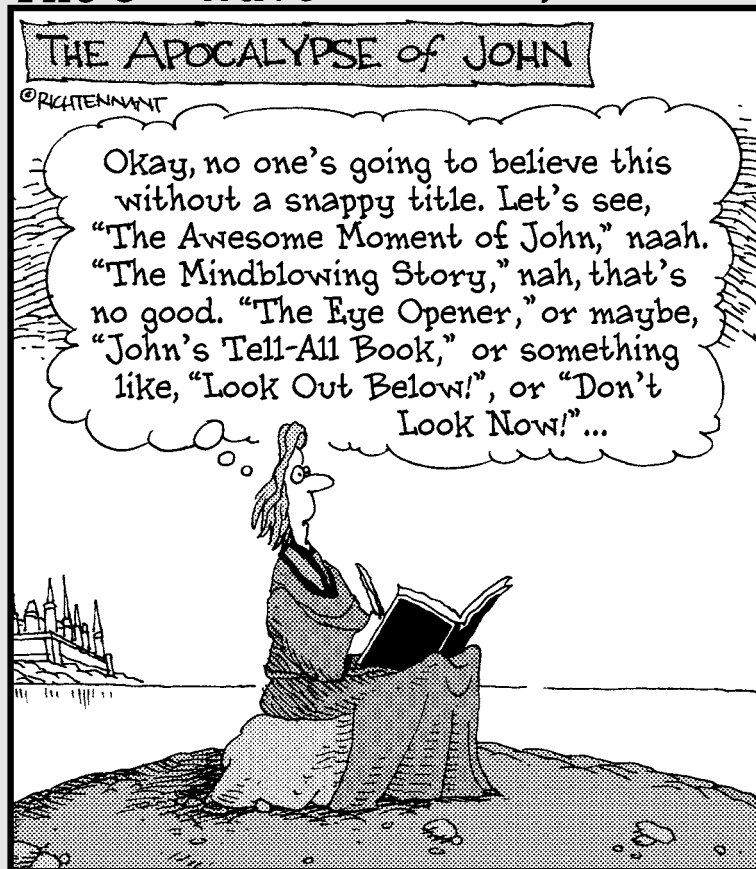
- ✓ If you're interested in reading the book from cover to cover, turn the page and proceed to Chapter 1.
- ✓ If you'd like to know who this guy called John is (who wrote the book), go to Chapter 2.
- ✓ To get a perspective on the major ways people interpret Revelation, check out Chapter 4.
- ✓ If you'd like to use this book as a companion guide as you're simultaneously reading your Bible, turn directly to Part III.
- ✓ If you like to read the last page of a novel first, then read Chapters 14 and 15. They tell you how it all turns out in the end!

Part I

Revealing the End of the Biblical Story

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



In this part . . .

The book of Revelation may be about the “end of all things,” but we have to start somewhere. This part gets your apocalyptic feel wet, so to speak, by introducing you to the book’s author, the original recipients of the book, and the world in which it was written.

After you’ve immersed your feet in the waters around Patmos (where the author wrote the book), you’re ready to dive into biblical prophecy, which is essential to a solid understanding of the symbolism in Revelation. We introduce you to biblical prophecy, taking it step-by-step so you don’t get the bends. After that, we provide a first look at Revelation, giving an overview of the book’s structure and timeline. So come on in, the water’s fine . . . though we do seem to recall a certain beast that may be lurking in the sea! (But you have to wait for Revelation 13 for that.)

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
-

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.