Reading Revelation Romantically

Jon K. Newton*
Harvest Bible College, P.O. 1036, Waverley Gardens, Victoria 3170, Australia
jonknewton@yahoo.com.au

Abstract
This article proposes a romantic reading of Revelation. Building on the earlier work of Donal McIlraith especially, it explores the possibilities of reading Revelation in terms of a romance plot. Aspects of the plot structure of Revelation, such as its ending, and comparative study with other ancient literature (including ancient romance novels and ancient Jewish literature, especially Song of Solomon) are advanced in favour of this reading. The purpose or rhetorical function of this aspect of Revelation is viewed as serving to challenge the reader/hearer to more fervent discipleship of Jesus.

Keywords
book of Revelation, romance, plot, devotion, rhetorical criticism, literary criticism

Introduction
What kind of story ends with a wedding? Obviously, a love story or romance. This is hardly the genre under which we normally read the Book of Revelation. There does not seem anything very romantic about the violent blood and gore in much of its images, and yet the last few chapters of Revelation are full of the final wedding of the Lamb. Is this just incidental or is it a key to the structure and message of the Apocalypse? I want to explore the possibility that such a reading of Revelation may give a fresh perspective on how the original hearers understood this text and how we can read it today. Hopefully this reading of Revelation will stimulate devotion in Spirit-filled Christians, as opposed to this text being read as a precise prediction of future doom and gloom, as has often been the case in classical Pentecostalism.

* Jon Newton (PhD, Deakin University, Victoria, Australia) is a senior lecturer and head of biblical studies at Harvest Bible College, Melbourne, Australia.
In this exploration, I consider the following areas: first, the ending of Revelation; second, its plot structure; third, similarities to features of popular romances in the ancient world; fourth, allusions to the Song of Solomon and other parts of the Old Testament; and finally, the call for radical commitment to Jesus in the text.

Not many commentators on Revelation have given much attention to the romantic element in the text. Mostly they have been Catholics. The most systematic study of love terminology and imagery in Revelation in recent years is that of Donal McIlraith. He concludes that ‘the major use of the verbs ἀγαπᾶν and φιλεῖν is to describe the link between Jesus and the church’;2 ‘the nuptial imagery … is the point of arrival of the entire work’;3 and ‘the love terminology is used to describe this relationship from beginning to end’.4 Thus inter-woven into the story of the struggle between the Lamb and the dragon is a love story. My interest is in seeing how this is represented in the plot of Revelation.5

The Love Story Ending

For all the struggles, wars, cataclysms and destruction in Revelation, there is a happy ending (Rev. 22.5). And it is a romantic ending, climaxed by a wedding. This is first signaled to the reader in Rev. 19.7-9:

for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb’.6

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5 The nearest article to this perspective is that of Kevin Miller, ‘The Nuptial Eschatology of Revelation 19-22’ (*Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 98, 60.2, pp. 301-318), which links the themes of warfare and nuptial eschatology in Revelation, but mainly in theological terms.