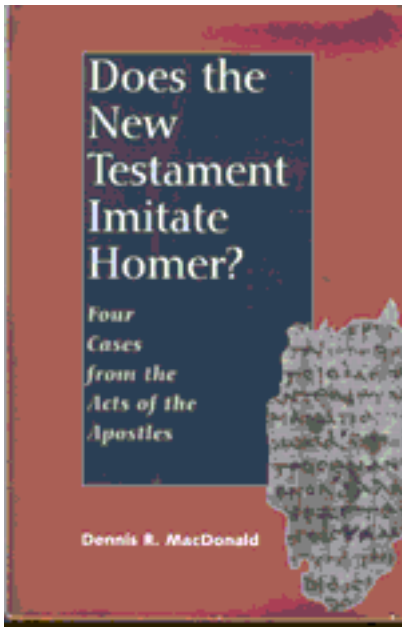


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**MacDonald, Dennis R.**

***Does the New Testament Imitate Homer? Four Cases from the Acts of the Apostles***

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In this book Dennis R. MacDonald provides a detailed argument in affirmation of the question. Although he frequently addresses the real and perceived objections of his critics, it is probable that the only serious critics to his basic premise would be those who hold that the New Testament writings, and specifically the Lukan writings, are *sui generis*. His premise, that the New Testament writings fit within the broader literary spectrum of the Hellenistic world, is not inherently objectionable.

The main issue behind MacDonald's book is the idea that many writers of the ancient world imitated the stories attributed to Homer. As he states at the beginning of his introduction, "no ancient intellectual would have doubted that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* informed the composition of prose" (1). Furthermore, not only did the works of Homer "inform" prose composition, but the writers of the ancient world actually imitated these works (2).

The book is organized around four parts, with an introduction and conclusion. In his introduction MacDonald, whose earlier work *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (Yale University Press, 2000) covers the same general theme, designates six criteria for his examination of literary imitation: accessibility, analogy, density, similar sequencing,

distinctive traits, and interpretability. After addressing the objections raised by critics of his earlier efforts, MacDonald contrasts his approach with that of Marianne Palmer Bonz, *The Past as Legacy: Luke-Acts and Ancient Epic* (Fortress, 2000) who views the Lukan material as “a prose epic modeled after not the *Iliad* but Vergil’s *Aeneid*” (7). By employing these criteria to study four episodes in the Acts of the Apostles, MacDonald hopes to “prove . . . that four passages in the New Testament not only imitate Homer, they notify their readers that they do so” in the hopes that it might “prod others to keep the epics in mind when studying early Christian texts” (14).

The bulk of the book consists of four parts where the six criteria are applied to four episodes in Acts: the visions of Cornelius and Peter (10:1–11:18), Paul’s farewell at Miletus (20:18–35), the selection of Matthias (1:15–26), and Peter’s escape from prison (12:1–23). Each part consists of chapters of varying length that deal with elements of MacDonald’s argument. Typically MacDonald retells the stories from the New Testament and the *Iliad*, highlighting their basic similarities and the first two criteria. The second pair of criteria are often discussed as MacDonald provides columns of text that highlight the density and similar sequencing of the stories. The last chapter discusses the fifth criterion to determine whether other sources might have been used by the author of Acts, and the final criterion is summarized at the end of that chapter.

The first episode is what MacDonald considers the “most significant” passage, the visions of Cornelius and Peter told and retold in Acts 10:1–11:18. These visions are compared with the dream sent to Agamemnon by Hera. The discussion of the visions and dream is given the most detailed and extensive treatment, entailing nearly one-third of the entire manuscript. It is also the most compelling of the four treatments. MacDonald should be given credit for making a complex and detailed argument so easy to follow. His consistent utilization of parallel columns and individual treatments of similar motifs are a real benefit to the reader. The English texts are MacDonald’s own translation; he provides the Greek and Latin in the appendix in their own parallel columns. The five chapters of part 1 are substantiated by 212 citations in the endnotes, whose location is a definite plus in helping the reader follow the argument. The “result” of the study, or criterion six interpretability, is clearly stated as “a threefold emulation: the virtues of Cornelius exceed those of Agamemnon; the vision to Cornelius was truthful. . . ; and the result of the two visions was the removal of hostility between East and West, not deadly warfare” (64).

In Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders, MacDonald argues against the traditional view of patterning Paul’s speech on the Jewish testamentary literature. By patterning this speech on Hector’s farewell speech to his wife Andromache given near the gate of Ilium,

MacDonald sees Luke again emulating the story from the *Iliad* to “serve a new interpretation of heroism” (102).

At only eighteen pages, part 3, the selection of Matthias, is the briefest study and, perhaps, the weakest case. However, because of MacDonald’s detailed research it is highly insightful into the practice of selection by lots in the ancient Hellenistic and Jewish worlds.

Part 4 demonstrates that MacDonald has used some editorial skill in selecting the order of presentation of these episodes. The escape of Peter functions as a conclusion to the first half of the Acts narrative (144) and to this study. Criterion five, distinctive traits, is important throughout the study to MacDonald’s assertion of imitation but is highlighted in this segment. In addition to Homer’s account of Priam’s escape from Achilles, MacDonald introduces another Hellenistic escape story to demonstrate the subtlety of imitation in the classical world. The story of Alexander’s escape from Darius in the *Alexander Romance* is used to illustrate an imitation of Homer based on the descriptions of the rivers crossed by each hero. In Peter’s escape, the link is between Cassandra and Rhoda, who share two qualities in common: their descriptions as unconvincing clairvoyants (143) and the association of their names with a rose (144).

MacDonald’s study demonstrates the growing revival among many in the academic community of the relevance of the Hellenistic corpus as an interpretive tool for the New Testament texts. He demonstrates a resurgence among many biblical scholars to rediscover their classical roots and the classical texts that were known to the New Testament’s initial audience. Our scholastic forefathers a century ago were well versed in the entire Greek literary corpus, and their contributions to the field were immense. MacDonald should be commended for this challenge to his colleagues to return to their roots in hopes of finding new insights.

*Does the New Testament imitate Homer?* is not without its challenges. MacDonald is accustomed to critics who question his criteria. There will be some who question his method as well. It is MacDonald’s underlying premise that by using a “scientific” method of analysis his study can be fully documented and his conclusion stand as fact: the New Testament did imitate Homer. However, his focus is entirely on the authorial side of the textual model, the side that is most difficult to prove. There will be some critics, focusing on the reader side of the model, who will ask for more discussion on his sixth criterion, interpretability. This criterion is the weakest section of his argument and serves as a springboard for further discussion in this area: If the New Testament literature utilizes Homeric stories, then what result does that have for its interpretation?

A second area to note is MacDonald's agenda. Not only does he seek to challenge form critics, all the while using an adapted version of their method, but he also seeks to challenge "conservative scholars" who defend Luke's historical reliability (146). In his singular attention to Luke's readers, MacDonald claims, "it is we, his readers, who have been naïve. He not only wrote up stories, he made up stories in the interest of advancing his understanding of the good news of Jesus Christ" (146–47). Alternative conclusions can be drawn from his evidence of the imitation of Homeric material and its use in ancient literature; not all imitation is necessarily fictional.

Dennis R. MacDonald has provided a book based upon meticulous research, documentation, and argumentation that challenges the standard approach to the narrative texts of the New Testament and should stimulate debate, not only in the study of Acts and the narrative texts, but throughout the New Testament as well.